

Public Prayer in our Public Worship

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It was over 20 years ago that Gordon MacDonald changed my understanding and practice on the subject of public prayer in worship (“The Cleansing Power of Public Prayer” in *Leadership*, Winter Quarter, 1987). Since then I have read a number of books and articles on the subject (see suggested books below) and am more convinced than ever that prayer should have a significant role in our public worship services. In a previous article, I wrote about the lack of the public reading of Scripture in many evangelical churches, likewise I have discovered there is a lack of public prayer. Prayers when offered are but a few sentences (or less) and seem either obligatory or as mere segues in the order of service. **In too many churches, thoughtful, pastorally-significant, biblically-based prayers are infrequent.**

In a well-intentioned attempt to create greater intimacy and genuineness in public prayer many pastors/worship leaders have reduced public prayer to inviting all people to pray their own private prayers at the same time (usually silently). It is as if the intention is to create a private devotional experience in a corporate setting. Obviously, private prayer is very important in the life of the Christian but that is (or ought to be) a different subject than the corporate prayer in public worship about which I am here writing. Certainly Christianity is very personal but it is not private. The Bible has much more to say about our life together as the people of God than it does about our private experiences. Even the prayer the Lord taught his disciples is corporate (note the plural pronouns and context).

While intentionality should be exercised in prayers of invocation, confession, thanksgiving and benedictions I am here speaking mostly to what was once called the “pastoral prayer” – that usually longer, substantively-inclusive prayer offered in the main body of the worship experience. For that “pastoral prayer,” I am now an advocate for carefully crafted prayers that accomplish several important objectives:

- Lead the people into the presence of the living God in a respectful and thought-filled way. The pastor's words and demeanor should communicate that we are on holy ground.
- Express our corporate gratitude and plead our corporate cause. The pastor should speak on behalf of his people and himself.
- Teach the people how to pray. Our private prayers can tend to be spontaneous, self-serving and short. The public worship service is an excellent time to demonstrate prayers that are thoughtful, centered on God and his kingdom and long enough to be obviously substantive (but short enough and eloquent enough to hold one's attention). The pastor can model the appropriate full range of prayer – adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication (though not necessarily in every prayer).

You will notice I presuppose the pastor leads such prayer. I clearly believe that such prayer can be effectively led by women as well as men and by non-elders as well as elders (pastors). But as a pastor I am jealous for that weekly opportunity to “pastor,” in this unique way, the people God has given to me as his under shepherd.

Leading such intentional prayers require that we give greater than usual attention to preparing both our hearts and our words. I found that it took upwards of an hour to carefully determine **what** should be prayed for in a particular prayer and **how** it should be worded so that my words became the people's words; they were following me into the presence of God.

For help in how to lead in public prayer I suggest the following works some of which are instructional and others illustrative:

Leading in Prayer Hughes Oliphant Old

The Pastor's Public Ministry Terry Johnson

Mother Kirk Douglas Wilson

A Method for Prayer Matthew Henry

A Guide to Prayer Isaac Watt

Valley of Vision Puritan prayers edited by Arthur Bennett

The Prayers of John Wesley