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Public Prayer

CARL COFFMAN

THE ACT of praying in public is quite an awesome responsibility. The fact that we actually are permitted to enter into the presence of God as we privately engage in prayer fills our hearts with gratitude. But to seek the Creator of the universe on behalf of an entire congregation—such seems almost presumptuous for a human being to undertake. Add to this an understanding of what comprises true "worship" as we defined it in the last article—the bringing together of God and man in a living, conscious, spiritual fellowship—and the responsibility of praying in the church service becomes awesome indeed.

Four prayers are usually included in the eleven o'clock service: The invocation, the offertory prayer, the pastoral prayer, and the benediction. All of these are customarily offered by a church elder, with the exception of the invocation in some churches. Often the pastor, or the visiting speaker, offers this opening prayer.

Invocation

What about the invocation? What is its purpose at the beginning of the worship service? One dictionary says that the word implies a prayer or solemn entreaty, especially for a blessing, aid, or intercession (see *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, fifth edition, 1947). This is quite helpful. It is a brief entreaty near the opening of the service, which, if made clearly and meaningfully, can serve to unite every person present in the sincere desire to receive the aid of the great Teacher of truth, the Holy Spirit, in order that God's richest blessings may be gained throughout the service. It also helps us to understand the critical

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need that every worshiper has for the continual intercession of his Lord with the Father.

There is one point in connection with this prayer of invocation that both minister and elder should understand. Let us not pray for the presence of the Holy Spirit in the worship service. That has already been promised in Matthew 18:20. Rather, let us pray that we will be aware of His presence, and open our minds fully to His teaching and prompting. We need also to be reminded that both the Father and Son are present with us by virtue of the fact that the Holy Spirit is present.

Offertory Prayer

What about the prayer that is offered in connection with the offering? Is it a prayer that can become an appeal for the worshiper to give a larger amount for the offering? Is it a prayer of thanks for what has been or will be given? Have we brought guilt to the minimum giver or the nongiver as the result of this prayer? If giving is a real part of true worship, a response of love to a loving God, if our heart is to be given before and with our gifts, how would this affect what we say in the offertory prayer?

A correct understanding of Biblical stewardship demands that the giver whose gifts are acceptable to God must previously have formed, and daily continues, a right relationship with Him. Some who attend church have this relationship, some do not. *All* who have it *will* give as they have means to give, those who do not have such a relationship may or may not give.

In light of this fact, a meaningful offertory prayer might move in this direction: "Our generous Father, Thou hast given each of us life, and salvation, and continued strength to labor to supply our daily needs and the needs of Thy church on earth. Help us, in this worship service, to see our need for making a total dedication or rededication to Thee. As dedicated sons and daughters, and witnesses, cause us willingly to place the needs of Thy cause first, knowing that thou wilt also help us to meet all of our personal needs as we exercise the good judgment of

faithful stewards in the use of what we earn from day to day. Help us to accept again God's great Gift, Jesus, and let these gifts express our love for all that Thou hast done for us. In Jesus' name, Amen." The point is to pray in terms of the motivating factor, not just in terms of church needs. Then gifts will increase.

Pastoral Prayer

The pastoral prayer is considered to be the central and major prayer of the service. First, invite the congregation to kneel. In light of what has been said about the prayer for the offering, let your objective be to lead the congregation to bow their hearts in submission to the will and ways of God. Bowed knees alone are Pharisaism. Bowed knees *and* hearts reveal a devoted Christian.

Prepare for your pastoral prayer ahead of time. Attempt to lead the congregation to express gratitude for all that Heaven has done for them. Then petition God for the special needs of those who are present. Lead the congregation to supplicate God for their neighbors, for straying members of their families, for unconverted friends, for those leading the great worldwide work of God. Include a prayer for the speaker, that the Holy Spirit will help him and every person present to really see the main point of the sermon. Ask the pastor for that main point earlier in the week. Conclude earnestly, "In Jesus' name, Amen." We omit that quite often these days, forgetting that it is the only avenue through which any prayer from the lips of any mortal can ever be acceptable to God.

Benediction

The benediction should be brief, and should never be a summary or an attempt to clarify some part of the sermon. Rather, let it be a simple entreaty that the message of the sermon and the spirit of the worship service—the hour when God and man have met—might remain with us and serve to move us one step nearer the kingdom.

The elder who is much in prayer privately can be used of God to bring a congregation and its Lord very close together during and following the worship service. ☛