

Improving Our Worship #1

Public Prayer

There are some things about our worship assemblies upon which we cannot improve. We know that God has authorized five acts of worship, two of which, giving and the Lord's supper are unique to the first day of the week assembly of the saints. As with the rest of the Word of God, we are not at liberty to add any additional acts nor diminish from (Rev. 22:18, 19; 2 John 9) those God has commanded by explicit and implied statements, and by accounts of action (example). Jeroboam brought the wrath of God down upon himself and caused the people of Israel to sin by changing the object of worship, the place of worship, the time of worship and the priesthood (1 Kings 12: 29:33). Let us take warning from the example of Jeroboam and Israel that the things God has ordained regarding worship, man is not at liberty to change.

Having pointed out that we may not change God's unchangeable instructions, there are things we can do to improve the quality of our worship. This article is the first of five in a series offering some suggestions to help improve our worship in our assemblies. In this article, we will address the act of public praying.

The second thing we must emphasize is that our prayers need to be according to the form of God's Word. This would include addressing the right person, the Father (Matt. 6:9; Luke 11: 2), and praying in Jesus' name (John 14:13; 16:26). In addition, we are to ask for those things that are according to His will (1 John 5:14). It would be inappropriate and wrong to pray that brother Jones would get what he has coming to him for being a mean and rascally snake! Furthermore, let us be sure that when we pray, our prayers are in harmony with the truth and not error. On this subject, brethren should consider and eliminate from public prayers the petition for the preacher to have a "ready recollection." That borders on Calvinism. Instead, let us pray that the preacher will carefully choose words that are in harmony with God's Word, and that we will all apply them to our lives.

As is true with the rest of the acts of worship, public prayers are to be led by the male members, and according to 1 Timothy 2:8, only by faithful men. God has not placed our women in a leadership role in the worship (1 Tim. 2:11,12). We have witnessed occasions when a man who has forsaken the assembly for weeks at a time has been asked to lead the congregation in prayer. This ought not so to be!

A brother leading the congregation in prayer needs to keep several things in mind. First, he must remember to whom he is speaking and do so with reverence. As noted previously, Jesus, in the model prayer of Matthew six, addressed God as our Father. We should address God reverently, also. To refer to God in any prayer, public or private, as "big daddy" or "big guy upstairs" are absolutely inappropriate ways to address the almighty God.

Second, since he is leading a public prayer the leader needs to speak loudly enough to be heard. Undoubtedly, the biggest complaint about some who lead in prayer is, "I couldn't hear him." Given the responsibility that goes with leading in public prayer it seems a man should speak up, use the microphone if there is one, or after several unsuccessful pleas to speak up not be asked anymore.

Third, a brother leading in prayer needs to remember that as he addresses God, he is doing so on behalf of the entire congregations. Consequently, he needs to address God in thanksgiving

and in common, not personal or private, petitions. Those should be reserved for one's private prayers.

Fourth, when praying for the sick, it would be good to at least pray by name for those who may have been mentioned in the announcement period or bulletin. It is certainly appropriate to include others who have not been mentioned. A general prayer for the sick is okay, but it is certainly a comfort and source of strength for family members who are present when they hear their loved one mentioned by name in our public prayers.

Fifth, when one is called upon to lead in a public prayer, he should not use the assignment as an opportunity to preach at an individual or the congregation. This is not to say there are not times of difficulty, struggle, or rejoicing in a congregation that ought to be addressed in our prayers, but prayer is not the time to vent a vendetta or deliver a sermon. Such actions call in question one's attitude as well as his understanding of the purpose of public prayer.

Sixth, avoid vain repetitions. Jesus gave this very warning in Matthew 6:7. It has probably been said more than once that the trite old phrase, "guide, guard, and direct" has achieved that status. It is likely that many of us who are reading these words knows someone about whose public prayers we can quote in advance of their words. Even if that is not the case, my guess is there are brethren leading in prayers that the congregation knows every item that will be included. What he prays and prays for never changes. This, too, is vain repetition. This is not to say one should be clever when called upon to lead in prayer, but since public prayers do not have to be thirty minutes long, can we not at least include some different petitions from time to time?

Seventh, our public prayers need to address more spiritual issues than they often do. Some brethren, without fail, will pray for the army of the United States, but never for the army of the Lord. Other brethren will always give thanks to God for the rain, but never for the sacrifice of the Son of God. Still others pray for the leaders in our government, but not for elders and elderships in the church. Certainly, we should give thanks for the blessings God has abundantly bestowed upon us, and it is fine to pray for those in harm's way or who are in governmental offices, but to do so to the exclusion or curtailing of thanksgiving for spiritual petitions may tell us where our focus is, and perhaps it is not in the right place.

Eighth, strive for improvement. Leading an effective public prayer reflects one's knowledge of the Word of God. Thus, any man who has the desire to improve his public praying (and all should) needs to be an avid student of the Word of God. God's Word teaches what is true as opposed to what is false, but it also serves to bring one closer to God. The man who is close to God will naturally do a better job of wording a public prayer than the man whose relationship to the Father is not what it ought to be.

There are things upon which God has ruled regarding our worship services that man does not have the authority to change, but there are ways we can improve the quality of our worship. Let us all strive to make our worship as meaningful for us and as glorifying to God as we can.

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