

Some Practical Suggestions on Prayer

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Introduction

We will always need to periodically review the Scriptural elements of acceptable prayer (i.e., to the Father, through the Son, in faith, according to God's will, etc.). However, it is not these matters which I wish to discuss at present, but I rather wish to offer some observations relating to the prayers that are led in our worship assemblies. My aim is not to find fault, but to call attention to (1) some of the practical aspects of these prayers that we may sometimes overlook and (2) some Scriptural principles that may apply to them. I am not offering my comments as "law," but rather as brotherly suggestions, which I hope will be helpful.

The Lord warned about using "vain repetitions" (Mat. 6:7)

Jesus said that the motive of some was to be "heard for their much speaking." They apparently piled up the same words and phrases time after time, thinking "the longer the better," to impress the hearers. Such mindless repetition was worthless.

I believe I have heard some prayers over the years that might qualify for this description. This might be occurring when the same brother prays the same prayer invariably each time he is the prayer leader. It is hard not to conclude that such a memorized prayer could be prayed with one's mind far away. It might be happening also when a brother repeats a single phrase several times in the same prayer (e.g., "We just pray that...").

Constant repetition in prayer may evince a lack of preparation, contemplation, concentration, or even extreme nervousness. The obvious cure for this problem is for the prayer leader to invest some sincere thought in advance of his time to lead, if possible. Among other things, such forethought will give him confidence and help dispel any nervousness he may have.

Mere repetition in itself is not vain. Our Lord prayed the same prayer three times in a very short time span in Gethsemane (Mat. 26:39-44), none of which were in any wise vain.

The Lord warned about "long prayers" for pretense (Mark 12:40)

Long is admittedly a relative term, but most recognize a "long" prayer, as compared with one of "ordinary" length. I have heard some prayers that were of such extended length (and of such verbiage) that they appeared to be addressed more to men than to God. One brother where I preached several years ago would ramble on and on, inventing some words

each time he led a prayer (an affected British accent, specially reserved for his prayers, made the sincerity of his prayer further suspect). Some members of that congregation thought his prayers were grand, so perhaps he achieved his goal.

All who lead public prayers need to remember as we pray that it is God, not men, Whom we are wanting to impress and Whose attention we seek. Prayers, like sermons (as I have been told more than once) need not be eternal to be immortal. However, a prayer is not rendered unacceptable merely because it is long. Jesus prayed at least one “long” prayer (John 17). The most important issue just here is not the length, but the **motivation** of the prayer. Short prayers can also be prayed from the wrong motivation and thus be a mere pretense.

Private prayers and public prayers are sometimes confused

The leader of a public prayer should remember that he is not bringing only his personal petitions before God. He is **leading the entire congregation** in its combined petitions. Obviously, the prayer leader has failed to bear this in mind when he uses the first-person singular pronoun, *I*, instead of the first-person plural pronoun, *we*, in his prayer. Each pronoun of a public prayer that refers to the petitioners should be the first person plural (i.e., “We [not I] thank Thee...,” “We [not I] ask Thee...,” “Please bless us [not me]...,” et al.).

Ironically, preachers are sometimes the worst offenders on this point. I have heard preachers lead long prayers in their own behalf before beginning their sermons. Never mind that some brother may have led a prayer only three minutes earlier that included the preacher. If I were that prayer leader, I would infer from the preacher’s compulsion to pray that he must have thought my prayer was insipid. The preacher would do well to do his personal praying in private.

Without wishing to judge motives, this practice smacks of pseudo-piety and of a superior air that seeks to call attention to oneself. When I am invited to preach, whether at home or elsewhere, I assume the brethren want me to preach. If they want me to lead a prayer or a song or serve at the Lord’s table, I assume they will ask me to do so.

Some fail to remember Whom they are addressing

This reminder applies to those who lead prayers at the Lord’s table. It is common to hear a prayer similar to the following: “Father, we thank Thee for this bread/fruit of the vine, which represents **Thy** body/blood.” Of course, it was not the Father’s body or blood (He never had either), but that of His Son, Who “became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). We should

rather say: “Father, we thank Thee for this bread/fruit of the vine, which memorializes the body/blood **of Thy Son,**” or something similar.

Another instance of this failure is one’s expression of thanks to other human beings in a prayer to God. More than once before potluck meals, I’ve heard the prayer leader say, after thanking God for the food: “We thank these ladies who prepared and served this food.” I am sure that what he meant to do was to thank **God** for those hard-working ladies, but he thanked the ladies instead! One can/should certainly thank them directly, but in a prayer to God is not the place to do it.

We should avoid the “just” syndrome

As I travel and visit congregations in various places, I frequently hear prayer leaders using the word *just* repeatedly, some before almost every request (e.g., “We just pray that Thou wilt bless...,” “We just thank Thee for...,” “We just beg Thy forgiveness...,” et al.). Webster gives two synonyms for this usage of *just*: “only” and “merely.” If *just* is used in such phrases in the sense of *only*, as in “I have just (only) a nickel in my pocket,” I fail to see the appropriateness or even the sense of such usage. To thank or ask God for “just” one thing and then in the same prayer thank Him for “just” one or more additional things is actually contradictory nonsense.

It makes no more sense to use *just* in the sense of *merely*, for Webster defines it as “apart from anything else” — identical to the sense of *only* as illustrated above. However, *merely* has also taken on the connotation of *no more than*, or something small or insignificant (e.g., “I merely asked you to give me a nickel”). Surely, the prayer leader does not mean this when he prays, “We just [merely] ask for the forgiveness of our sins.” Is our forgiveness, which cost the blood of God’s sinless Son, of no more significance than *just* implies in this context?

My guess is that brethren who use this term in their prayers have not considered its implications. I am not aware of any prayer in all of the Bible in which this or similar terminology is employed. I have noticed over the years, as I have attended funerals in which denominational preachers (especially Baptists) led prayers, that they frequently use this wording. Only in very recent years have some of our brethren begun using it. I suggest that those who have picked up *just* in their prayers “just” take it back to where it came from — denominational jargon — and leave it there.

We would do well to discard the “ready recollection” verbiage

It is common to hear prayer leaders ask God to give the preacher a “ready recollection” of what he has studied. It is one of those several memorized, habitually used phrases that have crept into our “prayer language” over the years. I have long had difficulty with this wording for

two reasons: (1) what the prayer leader means by it is ambiguous at best, and (2) it could easily be misinterpreted in favor of a serious false concept.

In no case of which I am aware did the brother thus praying believe that the Lord was going to give the preacher special powers of memory or preparation, beyond whatever preparation he had made for the occasion. The Lord gave the apostles this very power: “Be not anxious beforehand [premeditate, KJV] what ye shall speak: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye; for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Spirit” (Mark 13:11b). This promise is unalterably tied to the miraculous age when the Holy Spirit directly and immediately provided this and other wonderful powers — an age long-since passed with the completion of God’s revelation.

On many occasions I have wished for (and needed) such memory help, but I knew that it would be futile to pray for it. In a day when some are claiming such direct help and strength from the Spirit, the “ready recollection” terminology could easily be inferred as agreement therewith.

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