**Public Prayer in the Assembly**

*by Harry Osborne*

The New Testament church engaged in prayer to worship God. Jesus taught the disciples that prayer was an act of worship and reverence to God (Matt. 6:5-13). The entire chapter of John 17 records a prayer of Jesus to the Father on the night before the crucifixion. Our Lord's example in public and private prayer is instructive to us as well (Matt. 11:25f; Lk. 3:21; 5:16; 9:18; 22:41f; Jn. 11:41f). In fact, the express purpose of one parable spoken by Jesus was “that men always ought to pray and not lose heart” (Lk. 18:1-8). Thus, our Lord expects prayer to be a frequent, even constant, part of His disciple’s life.

Scripture records Christians fulfilling that expectation, in part, through individuals offering prayer to God. Such prayers expressed the reverent thoughts of their own heart to God. Paul prayed for his own needs for healing from his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7-8). In almost every epistle, Paul also makes it clear that his individual prayers constantly sought the benefit of others as well as his thanksgiving for them. When individual saints pray to God, they express their inward thoughts of reverent praise, thanksgiving and solicitation directly to Him.

However, all prayer is not intended to be individual in nature. In Colossians 4:2-4, the church is commanded to pray. The Bible says the early church prayed together in worship:

*Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers* (Acts 2:42).

*So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: “Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: ‘Why did the nations rage, and the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His Christ.’ For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus”*  (4:24-31).

Churches following the approved example as a pattern in their worship will give attention to do as they did. But what do we know about 1st century churches and prayer?

1) **They "continued" in prayer (Acts 2:42).** This suggests that prayer was not an occasional act with them, but a continual practice. By inspiration, Paul instructed the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17). If Christian men must be "lifting up holy hands in every place," they must do so in the assembly of the saints (1 Tim. 2:8). The remainder of Acts as well as the epistles show clearly that Christians assembling to worship God in places other than Jerusalem and long after the first Pentecost following the resurrection also engaged in the practice of prayer as they gathered.

**2) They were steadfast in prayer (Col. 4:2; Rom. 12:12).** Steadfastness not only implies continuation of a practice, but also an unwavering effort that abides regardless of the situation, surroundings or opposition faced. This characterized all work commanded of Christians (1 Cor. 15:58). It was done "at all seasons" and with "all perseverance and supplication for all the saints" (Eph. 6:18). Even when civil powers were persecuting saints, the inspired writer said it was "good and acceptable" to keep on praying for them and all men (1 Tim. 2:1-4).

**3) Their prayers addressed the deep needs of the time (Eph. 6:18-19).** They prayed for the furtherance of the gospel and for the boldness of those who preached it (Col. 4:3). In sending men to preach that gospel, they prayed (Acts 13:3). By prayer, they were "helping together" with those who preached the word (2 Cor. 1:11). They gathered expressly to pray for Peter when he was imprisoned for preaching the truth (Acts 12:5,12). In appointing both elders and deacons, they prayed (Acts 14:23; 6:6). Elders prayed and wept when the beloved apostle left them saying he would see them no more (Acts 20:36-38). In all needs and blessings, they prayed (Phil 4:6).

**4) They prayed for the forgiveness of sins on behalf of their brethren (Jas. 5:16).** Notice the instruction to "confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another" is followed by a promise: "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." Prayer by the church on behalf of brethren guilty of sin was both authorized and effective in N.T. times. It is one way that “spiritual” ones seek to restore those “overtaken in any trespass” (Gal. 6:1-2).

**5) They prayed in faith (Jas. 1:5-8).** Since faith comes from the word of God (Rom. 10:17), their prayers were in harmony with truth. Faith also dispels doubt which makes any act of worship, prayer included, unacceptable to God.

**6) They prayed in a way that was decent, orderly and unifying so that all could say “Amen” at the end (1 Cor. 14:15-17).** By inspiration, Paul gave this instruction to a church misusing spiritual gifts in tongues and prayer in a way that brought attention onto the speaker rather than the need for edification. The effect of their actions was divisive and disorderly. Paul’s words were given by the Spirit in order to correct the problem:

*What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified* (1 Cor. 14:15-17).

While Paul was addressing the misuse of spiritual gifts and how to correct it, the end effect he instructed is as binding today as it was then. A prayer that puts emphasis upon the speaker, rather than the whole congregation, may not achieve this end. A prayer rich in individual uniqueness and fad expressions common in the denominational world is likely to make it difficult for many faithful brethren to give a united “**Amen**” in the end. When leading public prayer, we need to give thought to these principles.

When first century saints prayed acceptably to God, their prayers went up as sweet incense to His throne (Rev. 5:8; 8:3-4). We have the same opportunity today if we pray acceptably as they did. Let us never look lightly upon approaching God in prayer as we assemble together. We come before the Almighty when we do so. Let us address Him in reverence and praise, casting our needs and petitions before the heavenly Father, knowing that He cares for us (1 Pet. 5:7).