

# Praying in Public

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## INTRODUCTION

Some of our compatriots who serve as chaplains and are not in the ministry have requested some help regarding public prayer. In order to help in this request the following information and some model prayers are recorded. Public prayer has some pit falls and other kinds of difficulties for Christians. Then Confederate Chaplain R. L. Dabney, when writing about the blemishes in public prayer said they can be traced to two sources: deficient piety and deficient preparation.<sup>1</sup> He noted that there should be preparation for public praying as in public preaching.<sup>2</sup>

The need for instruction on public praying is universal. All Christians need help here. Why? There is the danger of dishonoring God and unduly honoring our fellows. We must never address those about us in prayer for our heavenly Father alone should receive our prayers. Remember in the Model Prayer the Lord Jesus taught His disciples to begin, "Our Father which art in heaven."

"Stonewall" Jackson comes to mind when considering those having difficulty with "public prayer." Not long after Major Thomas Jackson became a member of the Lexington Presbyterian Church his pastor Dr. William S. White urged the flock in a sermon to be more faithful in attending the weekly prayer meeting. He also declared that the men of the congregation, especially those who were church officers, should consider their duty of leading in public prayer. Hearing this, Major Jackson called on his pastor to inquire if he was among those who were admonished to this duty. He confided that he had not been use to public speaking; he feared his public prayer would not turn out well. However, he insisted "You are my pastor, and the spiritual guide of the church; and if you think it my duty, then I shall waive my reluctance and make the effort to lead in prayer, however painful it may be." Jackson authorized Pastor White to call upon him when he thought proper, and sometime later the pastor called upon him to pray. The embarrassment was so great that the attempt was almost as painful for the congregation as it was for Jackson. Weeks passed and Pastor White did not call upon him again. Yes, you guessed right, the major again called upon his pastor to see why he had not called upon him again. Was it due to his previous distress in public prayer? Pastor White admitted that he was reluctant to call upon him due to the embarrassment he had experienced. Also, the pastor thought Jackson's own enjoyment of the meeting would be destroyed. Thomas Jackson's reply was: "Yes, but my comfort or discomfort is not the question; if it is my duty to lead in prayer, then I must persevere in it until I learn to do it aright; and I wish you to discard all consideration for my feelings." The next time he was called upon he did much better in controlling the agitation, and in the course of time he was able to pour out his heart before the Lord his God with as much freedom in the public meeting as at his own family prayers.

## WHAT SHOULD CHARACTERIZE A PUBLIC PRAYER?

Public prayer should be an humble act of a contrite believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. In prayer we approach God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit (these three in one Godhead) in confession of sin, adoration, praise, thanksgiving, intercession and supplication. What should

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 347.

<sup>2</sup> Dabney, 346.

characterize our praying whether public or private? Prayer should be reverent, humble, Scriptural, direct, earnest, persistent and submissive to God. Study the prayer Jesus taught his disciples (Matt. 6:9-15). Dr. Samuel Miller explained that the Lord's Prayer, also called the Disciple's Prayer,

Furnishes no proof whatever of either the *necessity* or the *duty* of prescribing set forms of devotion. That it was never designed by our Lord to be adopted as a permanent and precise form of prayer, but only as a general directory, intended to set forth the proper topics, or appropriate matter for prayer, will appear evident...<sup>3</sup>

Public prayers should be simple, succinct, precise and to the point as was the Lord's Prayer. Our public prayer should not aid weariness. There should not be a wandering from Dan to Beersheba (what some have called "Magellan praying" or praying around the world). John Newton the writer of "Amazing Grace" in his message on "Public Prayer" said, "The prayers of some good men are more like preaching than praying. They rather express the Lord's mind to the people, than the desires of the people to the Lord. Indeed, this can hardly be called prayer."

Prayer is "an offering up of our desires to God, for things agreeable to His will, in the name of Christ, by the help of His Spirit, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies."

#### *WHAT POSITION SHOULD WE TAKE IN PUBLIC PRAYER?*

"A prayer truly spiritual and acceptable may be offered up in any posture."<sup>4</sup> Thus a Christian soldier wounded and attending a public gathering may not be able to even rise, but he may publicly pray. One has said, "The bodily attitude assumed in prayer reflects the attitude of the soul." There is some truth to this unless providence orders it otherwise. Remember to whom you are praying! In the Bible there are four postures in prayer: being prostrate, kneeling, bowing the head or standing erect. We stand with our head bowed for we are in the presence of God. The bowed head represents or expresses our reverence of the holy God (we are like the Publican in Jesus' lesson). There are times when one might be led to do as Paul, "I bow my knees" (Eph. 3:14). Kneeling in prayer expresses humiliation and lowly supplication. Careless and unconcerned attitudes in prayer to the one true and living God are not proper. Position in prayer should never be for public display or attention! Remember Jesus' admonition, "When thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray ... that they may be seen of men" (Matt. 6:5).

#### *HOW SHOULD WE USE THE VOICE IN PUBLIC PRAYER?*

Public prayer to our Lord God is on behalf of those gathered. Thus, we are speaking to the Lord in the presence of and for those congregated. Chaplain R. L. Dabney gave a warning,

He who speaks to the Searcher of hearts should beware how he indulges any exaggeration of words, lest his tongue should be found to have outrun his mind and to have 'offered the sacrifice of fools.' Both the words and the utterance should express profound but affectionate reverence. The enunciation of prayer should be softer, more level, less marked by *ictus* (rhythm), less vehement, more subdued. Every tone should breathe tenderness and supplication.... Study to make these tones your own. It is difficult to say which is most unsuitable to this sacred exercise--a hurried, perfunctory

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel Miller, *Thoughts on Public Prayer*, 50. If you would like to more extensively read on this subject Miller's book would be a good volume to read on the subject of Public Prayer. Sprinkle Publications has reprinted it. Chaplain R. L. Dabney said of it, "It is a manual of the highest merit for its piety and excellent taste" (361).

<sup>4</sup> Miller, 116.

utterance, as of one who reads some tiresome or trivial matter, a violent and declamatory manner, as though one had ventured upon objurgation (scolding) his Maker, or a headlong and confused enunciation.<sup>5</sup>

Public prayer is the making of a group request, and it should be done with dignity. First, [1] our words should all be pronounced distinctly, and ought not to be made shorter by cutting off the last syllable, nor longer by the addition of long breaths, nor should there be affected groaning and useless sounds, etc. [2] Every sentence should be spoken loud enough to be heard, yet none so loud as to frighten or offend the ear. Some persons have a habit of beginning their prayers so loudly that they startle those assembled and we must remember God is not deaf; others begin so low in a large assembly that it looks like devotional or secret worship thus conveying the idea that those present are shut out. Both these extremes may be avoided by prudence and moderation. [3] We should observe a due medium between excessive swiftness and slowness of speech, for both are faulty in their way. If we are too fast, our words will be hurried, and will be mingled in confusion; if we are too slow the prayer will be tedious to those present, and will make the time of prayer appear heavy and dull. We should be distinct and remember we have been called upon to pray to the Lord God in behalf of the entire group. Also remember, no perfect person outside of our Lord Jesus Christ has ever prayed. We do not have to be perfect to pray and the above remarks are only meant to be positive. Reflect upon the fact that you as sinner are speaking to the eternal and almighty God who is holy. He hears penitent sinners who embrace His Son Jesus Christ by faith.

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<sup>5</sup> Dabney, 358.