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Common Prayer and Local/Global Mission

BRADLEY P. HOLT
Augsburg College, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Many pastors nowadays seek to vivify the concept of local/global mission to parishes lethargic in their outreach. How can churches become conscious participants in the specific call of God for their own neighborhood while not losing the vision of world-wide peace, justice, and evangelization? Many times congregations stare vaguely into the middle distance instead of addressing problems right at their doorstep or investing themselves in distant programs for the physically or spiritually hungry. Only the Holy Spirit can change hearts which do not want to see the needs of others, near or far. Yet specific steps can be taken to increase the possibilities for that work of the Spirit in the parish.

One of the frequently overlooked aspects of congregational life which directly bears on its vision of ministry is the prayer for the church and the world in the Sunday worship service. One learns to pray partly by hearing others pray. Jesus' prayers stretched his disciples' hearts and minds concerning the nature of the Father and his mission for Jesus and for them. That mission included the sick of heart and body, women and men rejected by their society, even Gentiles who had not shared in the promises of Israel! We do not have many prayers of Jesus in the Gospels, but we can be sure that his mission and that of his followers were prayed through (cf. John 17), and that after the disciples heard these prayers, they were able to pray and act for the Kingdom of God in new ways.

Although pastors are told, "the preparation of the prayers is no less important than the preparation of the sermon,"[1] the prayers may take a much lower priority, partly because the praise and blame of the congregation usually focuses on preaching. Furthermore, if the prayers come at the tail end of the service many parishioners will (in spite of the best of intentions) have their thoughts on the pot roast in the oven or the coffee cup in the foyer. The prayers may also be sacrificed to the demand that all worship services fit within sixty minutes.

In recent years there has been a great deal of change in the practice of general prayer from denomination to denomination. Those churches which

[1]Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli, *Manual on the Liturgy; Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 226.

traditionally practiced free prayer, such as Baptists and Methodists, now often use older, printed prayers. On the other hand, the practice of spontaneous prayer by members of the congregation is sometimes found among Catholic, Episcopalian, and Lutheran churches. Or, instead of saying a printed prayer, the pastor may be required to compose petitions and intercessions which are answered by responses from the congregation. The pastor in these traditions thus faces a

responsibility which may be new: to compose intercessory prayers which both express the needs of the people of the congregation and also expand and sharpen their vision of local and global mission.

Unfortunately these prayers may not accomplish their purposes for any of a number of reasons, including neglect, confusion, theological misunderstanding, narrow vision, or partisan pleading. Let us first consider some of the theological factors which may hinder or enhance the full exercise of common prayer, and then make some practical suggestions for improving congregational understanding and participation.

I. UNDERLYING THEOLOGICAL FACTORS IN COMMON PRAYER

1. *God.* The fundamental theological locus which underlies all prayer is our doctrine of God. We express more of what we really believe about God in what we pray (or do not pray) than we do in declarative statements. One may loudly preach that God is love, but show a cringing, unexpectant attitude when addressing God. One may write boldly about God acting in history (long ago), but never expect the life and death issues of our day to be proper subjects for prayer.

If anything is clear about the God of the Psalmists it is that this God hears the petitioner and is capable of making a difference. If God does not seem to hear, the Psalmist will let God know it! Whatever our theological school of thought, the interactive, personal nature of God is basic to the life of prayer.

One of the underlying factors in the lack of a vigorous common prayer is the belief that God has no effect on human life except the psychological: God makes people "feel better." The central doctrine of historic Protestantism, justification by grace through faith, can unfortunately be interpreted in a narrowly psychological way. It may therefore seem appropriate to pray only for forgiveness, as something invisible, affecting the "inner life." God is envisioned as someone far away who keeps lists of our sins, and on request cancels the lists, but who does nothing more than this bookkeeping of guilt.

In private prayer, people sometimes feel that their prayer "never gets above the ceiling." How often is this true of communal prayer as well? Isn't the question itself a statement of the assumption that God is far off? If there is a lively sense of God's presence in the nave (and not just in the chancel) the prayer will not need to get above the ceiling!

Our prayers mirror our actual beliefs about God. The God of the Scriptures hears, loves, acts, and is present; sometimes our own concept of God makes God deaf, uncaring, powerless, and distant.

2. *The World.* Is the world a closed system of cause and effect? Is genuine knowledge of the world limited to empirical data ? Insofar as a secularist account of the world has restricted our sense of God's presence or power, it has had a

"chilling effect" on our prayers. We become timid about asking for anything which could be verified, which could make a difference in the world.

For example, our view of human health has sometimes become unscientifically "scientific." We may think that only chemicals or surgery can heal physical problems, that the human animal consists only of molecules. This pseudo-scientific viewpoint "chills" our prayers for healing, for it leaves no basis for intercessory prayer. It seems to be "scientific" because it

accepts a materialist world view. But it is not genuinely scientific because it does not take into account the dynamic unity of spirit, mind and body, the whole psychosomatic person present in wellness and illness alike.

3. *Prayer.* Scriptural prayer includes many modes of relationship with God, including praise, thanksgiving, meditation, and confession of sin. These are all "invisible" prayers, in the sense that God may respond to the prayer in a way that the observer may not perceive. Clearly, however, the dialogue in prayer, both public and private, includes the call for God's help and the hope in his deliverance. That deliverance, as we observe it in Scripture, includes an impact on the real world.

If one looks at the Psalms, for example, it is clear that the writers of the laments, the most numerous type of psalm, expect a response from Yahweh. When there is no response, they let God know how it feels to be left in expectation without any change in the situation. Comparing this tradition of intimacy and frankness with his observation of contemporary prayer, Roland Murphy wonders "if we have lost the art of complaining *in faith* to God in favor of a Stoic concept of what obedience or resignation to the divine will really means."[2]

When we turn to the New Testament, we find Jesus teaching his disciples to address God as "Father." The Lord's Prayer in Luke is clearly intended to be a communal prayer, and is in fact a model on which our intercessions can be molded. It is for the sake of the Kingdom that we pray for the church and the world. We pray focusing our attention first on God and his Name. We pray in the awareness of our own need for forgiveness, and the readiness to forgive others. Our need for daily bread, as Luther pointed out, is our need for all good things in this life, including work, peace, love, and health. This wholistic approach to the model prayer should show itself in our intercessions. We pray not only for the saving of souls but for every aspect of *shalom.*

Paul's letters contain few of his specific prayers, but manifest an extraordinary, vivid style shaped by prayer, and frequently call on his churches to pray for his mission. He thanks the Philippians for their prayers, for example, and urges them on to further intercession.

In the Pastorals we find the clearest exhortation to the kind of general prayer which is part of our present worship services:

> First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be offered for all people; for sovereigns and all in high office, that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in full observance of religion and high standards of morality. Such prayer is right, and approved by God our Savior, whose will it is that all people should find salvation and come to know the truth. (I Tim 2:1-3, *NEB*)

[2]Roland Murphy, "The Faith of the Psalmist," *Interpretation* 34 (1980) 236.

This instruction beautifully combines "secular" and "religious" aspects of mission and prayer. It calls for prayer for all people and for leaders in the context of a desire for peace and proclamation of salvation to all.

4. *Liturgy.* The center of Christian worship is the meeting between a God who freely creates and redeems and God's people who respond with praise and obedience. There is a movement both trinitarian and circular, which "begins with the Father sending his Word and

giving his Spirit to the assembled believers, and in this Spirit, through the risen Christ, the movement returns to the Father in praise and glory."[3]

It is in this context that prayers of intercession were offered as far back as we have written records. By the time of the third century there was a general prayer for the church, those in affliction, travelers, prisoners, magistrates, and the Emperor. During the Middle Ages, a continuous general prayer was gradually lost, only to be restored by Luther in his German Mass of 1526. "Luther laid the foundation for one of the significant and characteristic features of the later Lutheran liturgy, namely the General Prayer (Prayer of the Church), with the Lord's Prayer as its proper summary and conclusion."[4]

Could our worship be complete without remembering the needs of the church and the world before the God who created and redeemed all things? As surely as the Word and the Eucharist point the worshippers outward to serve the needs of all, the prayers of the faithful down through the centuries have included not just those present but the spiritual and material needs of humankind. The circle of movement in the liturgy is not complete without this final element.[5]

II. PRACTICAL PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS

1. *Common Prayer.* These prayers are for all the congregation, and therefore are broad in sweep. They lift the consciousness of the participants to the wide world, starting at the doorstep of the church and reaching to Timbuktu and Tibet.

These are not the prayers of private or small group worship, where intimate matters can be laid bare before the warm, understanding Lord: As Christians we need all three contexts, the solitary, the face to face support group, and the wider congregation. Each of these settings has its own role to play in the life of prayer. Certainly the congregation's public prayer will be enriched by what the members pray during the week, in silence at home, in families, and in prayer groups. Each setting supports the others, the Sunday congregational prayer summing up for all the hopes and aspirations of individuals and groups. The common prayer can also serve to instruct and inform the prayers of individuals and small groups.[6]

2. *Language.* The style of the prayers is very important to their ability to

[3]Joseph Gelineau, "The Concrete Forms of Common Prayer," *Studia Liturgica* 10 (1974) 148.

[4]Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1947) 344. For a discussion of the history of the Prayer of the Church, see pp. 315-320.

[5]Cf. Harry N. Huxhold, "What is the Place of Pastoral Prayer in the Context of Worship?" *Encounter* 43 (1982) 395-400.

[6]Charles M. Olsen, "The Closet, the House, and the Sanctuary," *Christian Century* 98 (1981) 1285-89.

engage the spirit of the congregation. If the words are too flowery or the sentences too convoluted, most people can only admire or endure. Their attention is drawn to the language rather than to the meaning of the prayer.

On the other hand, some prayers, especially if they are not written beforehand, can be so flat and uninteresting, so filled with cliches, that the attention of the congregation will wander.

It is best to aim at a conversational style which both reflects reverence for God and has a structure simple enough to be understood when heard. Attention should be given to metaphors and images which the listener can envision. Sometimes an individual known to the congregation

can embody a general need. For example, missionaries of the church can be mentioned individually in rotation instead of rolled together in the lifeless request to "bless all of our missionaries." Praying for specific missionaries and national church leaders requires, of course, a program of education in the congregation about the situations where they serve. It appears from national surveys that we Americans are almost illiterate in geography, and this will hinder the meaningfulness of our prayers unless we do something to correct it.

3. *The Holy Spirit.* Whoever prepares the prayer needs to recognize the role of the Spirit of God in all Christian prayer. Implicitly or explicitly all of our requests are flawed by our sin and blindness, and therefore depend on God dwelling in us for their inspiration and formation. The one who prepares needs information about the state of the parish and the world, but also the spiritual maturity and insight to choose what really needs prayer this week. The Holy Spirit can convict us of the shabbiness of some of our prayers—their lack of confidence in God, their self-centeredness, their deliberate blindness—but can also reassure us of the Father's acceptance of a humble petition. There is a sort of editing process which the Holy Spirit can accomplish if the composer takes time and opens her heart.

4. *Vertical and Horizontal.* There are two dimensions in public prayer, and both are legitimately worthy of attention. The first is communication with God. The prayers do not inform God of what he does not know; they rather seek to open up the situation to divine action by expressing the concerns of the people. Prayer aligns the hearts of those who pray with the purposes and intentions of God. The Lord's prayer is the model for this dimension of our intercessory prayers. Everything is related to the *Kingdom;* and *everything* is related to the Kingdom.

It is foolish to forget this first dimension and compose "homiletical" prayers. If the message hasn't come through in the sermon, it is too late to play catch up in the prayer. Everyone resents being preached to in the guise of praying.

Yet the act of praying in public is a social act of human communication too. All who hear are learning how to pray, who God is, and how wide is the scope of the Christian gospel. If the prayers never direct the attention of the believers beyond the boundaries of the USA, their vision is likely to be shortsighted. If the prayers remember the starving of Africa, but never the hungry across the street, they can produce spiritual escapism. If the prayers only touch on the "saving of souls" but never on ordinary human needs, the world of the prayer gets split between sacred and secular. If the prayers never touch on evangelization but only

social issues, the congregation is not likely to speak of their faith to their friends and neighbors. To sum up, the intercessory prayers do mirror the vision of the church's God, gospel, and mission. They can also be legitimately written to expand that vision.

5. *Peace and Justice.* Social and political issues can become difficult for common prayer. Laity and clergy often do not see eye to eye on specific issues, such as apartheid in South Africa and Namibia, or the Palestinian refugee situation in the Middle East. If this area is totally avoided as a compromise solution, the congregation's sense of the meaning of Christianity will be abridged. A way of praying for the world, its peoples and its leaders must be found which can be honestly shared by all.

For example, the Central American situation is perceived in widely different ways. The

picture of the Sandinista government of Nicaragua depicted by the United States government is quite different from that of many American church members who have visited there. It would not do for the pastor to attempt to convince his flock of the truth of one of these pictures by means of his prayers; the lecture, the slide show, and personal conversation are the place for that. Yet prayers can be offered for the Nicaraguan people without being partisan. Whatever one's political stance, it is Christian to pray for genuine peace and justice in the region, and honesty and wisdom in United States officials.

It may be necessary to pray against certain government officials as well as for them. If Psalm 72 is a model of prayer for the king—emphasizing righteousness and justice, peace, and prosperity—I Samuel 15 is a model of prayer against the king. In our own century, one can picture Germans rightly praying against Hitler and Ugandans against Idi Amin. In such cases the prayer is not for long life of the ruler, but that the country may be freed from tyranny. It is not a prayer of vengeance but a prayer that the leader may be removed or change his ways.[7]

Our prayers for the president and congress should not drip with sentimental nationalism, but rather clearly support just policies which will help the hungry to self-reliance and lead to genuine peace.

6. *Health and Healing.* It is customary during the common prayer to pray for those of the congregation who are sick or hospitalized. These prayers are a reminder that God loves us not just as souls but as whole persons, physically as well as spiritually. We do not know exactly how to pray for each person who is sick, yet it is important to indicate that God is the source of our health and healing. Such prayers recall for us the ministry of Jesus, so much given to reaching out to make others well again. It is proper always to pray for healing, even though the exact form of that healing may not be known; sometimes a good death is the best health available in a given situation (until the resurrection).

Private pastoral prayer for the sick, with anointing, is becoming more common among Protestants. Perhaps the reform of the Roman Catholic sacrament formerly called extreme unction into the more biblical 'anointing of the sick' has stimulated the rethinking of this ancient practice. The pastor who has prayed for healing individually with the patient will have a better sense of the words to use on Sunday morning when standing before the congregation.

[7]Lon Fendall, "How to Pray For (and Against) Leaders in Government: A Guide for Citizens of Two Kingdoms," *Christianity Today* 27 (1983) 14-16.

Prayers for healing should not replace announcements about sickness or other needs in the congregation. The facts should be announced first before the prayer is offered.

7. *The Newspaper.* Connecting the events of the world and of the local community with one's congregational prayer is a sound practice. It is a practical demonstration of the relationship between Christian faith and the real world. We need to pray for the victims of disaster; for those rejoicing in achievement.

The newspaper can also be the source of another kind of prayer, however. We can pray for those who are hated by everyone else who reads the newspaper. As Charles Whiston has said in his speaking tours, those who are hated are most in need of prayer. This would include assassins, child abusers, racists, wife batterers, those charged with crimes, and public figures who lead unfriendly or dictatorial nations. Such prayers can demonstrate both the strength of God's

love and the practice of Jesus' teaching to reach out to those who are perceived as enemies.

III. CONCLUSION

The general prayers in congregational worship are an integral part of the worship offered by the people of God, but also mirror their sense of mission in the world. These prayers reflect the vision of the gospel in that group of believers and also educate them in the breadth and depth of their mission as people of the gospel. The leader of these prayers shares an important responsibility with all who pray in different settings in that congregation, to allow the Holy Spirit to shape the concerns for social change and evangelism voiced in worship.