

Leading in Public Prayer

Let us teach our people that if they do not agree with the prayer, let them keep silent, but if they agree then let them at the close say loudly, Amen!

1. Our theme is public prayer.

Public and private are intimately linked. If you do not pray in private but pray like an angel publicly you are a hypocrite and God hates hypocrites. We pray in private and that puts us in the spirit for public prayer. In private we offer our own prayers and confessions to God - I, my, me, mine - but in public the language is different - us, we, our, ours. Private prayer can also be silent, and groaning. Public prayer cannot be silent nor can it be groaning. It must be audible, in a language understood by all, at a speed accessible to everyone, with phrases that do not jar, and at a length everyone can sustain. It can only be done well by someone who knows the congregation and its needs.

2. Public prayer is didactic.

We are teaching our people something when we pray. If we fill them with sickly repetitions they will think that that is OK. If we do not pray in the Holy Spirit then they will not learn. If we can lead them into the glory then that will encourage them to pray. If we pray in public for certain themes then they will pray the same. Also when they see and hear you emotionally engaged in prayer that will teach them much about Christian experience. If the spirit of adoption is running through your prayer that will affect them. Their theology will be challenged by your whole praying, so that praying is a kind of evangelism. So public prayer is for the spiritually mature.

3. Public prayer is pastoral.

It is one of the means we lead the people into holiness and comfort. We must think of the various needs of the members of the congregation, and we think of them as we pray. There are the various officers and church leaders. It is a fantastic encouragement to them to be led in prayer even when they are not mentioned in the body. Prayer does things: we bring down blessings on people. It makes people more loving and understanding. It restores the backslider. It takes up all the needs of the congregation.

4. Public prayer must be fresh.

That is the challenge. We can prepare our prayers without preparing them. A few notes and then surrender to the Spirit - as we do in preaching. We can build our prayer on written prayers in the Bible. We can consciously include every main element of biblical prayers - adoration and confession and thanksgiving - and we can choose the doctrinal content of our prayer making great truths the subject of our prayers on every occasion.

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By Stuart Olyott