

Loving the Liturgy

Participation in the Public Prayers

Two Extremes of Public Prayer

Either the minister/priest reads in a monotone way a prayer book, or the pastor/worship leader spontaneously would pray the typical, “Father God, we just wanna...” prayer. The result is that we have not been trained to participate in the public prayers, but leave it up to the minister to do “his part” of the service, while we catch a few winks with eyes closed and heads bowed.

Catholic (Christian) & Reformed Practice

The history of prayer is one in which forms of prayer have been utilized either as forms to guide or forms to follow. For example, Justin Martyr speaks of the “president offering prayer according to his ability,” yet at the same time, he was able to recount what the prayers were because they followed a fixed form. In our Reformed history, forms of prayer have been used in these ways as well. D. G. Hart summarizes this history of Reformed liturgy, saying,

One searches in vain to find informality or room for individual expression in the Reformed liturgies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In fact, practically all the churches in the Calvinist wing of the Reformation produced and used written forms and followed a set order of service. In other words, liturgical unanimity prevailed as much among Reformed churches in the Netherlands or Presbyterian churches in Scotland as it did among English Protestants who followed the Book of Common Prayer.¹

Hart went on to say, strikingly,

The image of Reformed believers with their eyes open in prayer, because of the use of a prayer book, is one that would strike many contemporary Presbyterians as a sign of spiritual rigor mortis.

¹ D. G. Hart, *Recovering Mother Kirk: The Case for Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 23.

In many Presbyterian circles it is common to assume that real faith expresses itself spontaneously, without the props of formalism (i.e., “dead” orthodoxy).²

Why did the Reformers write out the prayers to be used in the public liturgies (and private family prayer as well)? In 1548 John Calvin explained in a *Letter to Edward Seymour, the Duke of Somerset*:

Indeed, I do not say that it may not be well, and even necessary, to bind down the pastors and curates to a certain written form, as well for the sake of supplementing the ignorance and deficiencies of some, as the better to manifest the conformity and agreement between all the churches; thirdly, to take away all ground of pretence for bringing in any eccentricity or new-fangled doctrine on the part of those who only seek to indulge an idle fancy; as I have already said, the Catechism ought to serve as a check upon such people. There is, besides the form and manner of administration of the sacraments; also the public prayers.³

Adopted prayers are for three reasons, according to Calvin: first, to help those ministers who are deficient in prayer as compared to others because some ministers pray better than others; second, set prayers unify the churches in liturgy; and third, the protect the congregation from the charisma and personality of the minister.

Our Participation

1) By having written prayers that have been used through the centuries, our worship is transcendent, not novel.

2) By having forms of prayer that are studied and well-crafted, we are not given to the spur of the moment.

3) By having the prayers in front of you, even knowing them, enables you to participate even more fully.

4) By having written prayers, we are helped our weakness to doze off and to wander.

² *Ibid.*, 26.

³ “Letter 229: To the Protector Somerset,” *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, trans. David Constable, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 5:191-2.