

## THE PASTORAL PRAYER

By Donald N. Bastian

The pastoral prayer contributes significantly to the week's high hour of worship. It must not be an empty ritual that holds its place in worship only because of generations of tradition. Rather, the pastoral prayer is a sacred moment when a pastor intercedes for the well-being of the church and also gathers up their praises and petitions, offering them in humility to a listening Father.

The purpose of this article is not to encourage pomposity in public prayer, or literary artistry, or self-conscious striving for effect. We encourage pastors to pray public prayers that are authentic, ordered and fresh — heard not only by the Lord but also by the Lord's people in a way that quickens their faith. The writer of Ecclesiastes gives us an appropriate standard by which to measure our prayers: "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God" (5:2a).

Before plowing and planting a new field, a farmer clears away tangled brush and dead roots. In the same way, you may need to uproot inferior notions about the pastoral prayer and replace them with more deserving ones. For example, if you consider the pastoral prayer as less worthy of preparation than other parts of the worship service, you must examine that notion. Or if your prayers have come to lack passion and wander without clear purpose, this too deserves examination.

We begin by establishing the three major purposes of a pastoral prayer. It is first of all the pastor's exercise of a priestly function.

Moses interceded to God for mercy on behalf of His people at a time when they had been wayward (Exodus 32:11-14). The Apostle Paul prayed urgently for the churches in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13) and Ephesus (Ephesians 3:14-21). Above all, Jesus, on the eve of His own death, poured out His heart to the Father first for His immediate disciples (John 17:13-19) and then for believers of all times (17:20-26).

Pastors interact with their people throughout the week and by week's end are current on many of their hopes and struggles. This information will guide a pastor in deciding what to bring before the Lord on behalf of the entire congregation — but with careful discretion. Pastors will understand (1) what information to include in their public prayers, (2) what to present to the Lord in terms of universals, not specifics, and (3) what to carry in their hearts as ongoing private confidences.

For example, if a pastor learns that a parishioner's daughter has come down with mononucleosis at college and may not complete her semester, this, with permission, may be included explicitly in the pastoral prayer. But if the pastor has learned in confidence that a parishioner is on the verge of an unwanted divorce, this is not appropriate to include explicitly in the pastoral prayer. However, it may be included as a universal petition: "Bless those who are going through dark and painful times." There is no betrayal of a confidence in such a petition, but the people involved will recognize themselves in that prayer. In a nutshell, the experiences of the week will color the pastoral prayer in both praise offerings and urgent petitions.

The second purpose of the pastoral prayer is as a representative prayer — a prayer offered on behalf of the people. This prayer gathers up the interests and concerns of the congregation and voices them in a way every worshiper present cannot do individually. It is a corporate prayer.

For this reason, the pastoral prayer should always be offered with the first person plural pronoun, "we," not the first person singular pronoun, "I." Pastors who do not understand this propriety and who offer their prayers in the first person singular may have parishioners who feel as if they are listening in on the pastor's private devotions: "*I* pray this and *I* pray that." Pastors who are serious about leadership in public worship will be diligent in training themselves to use the plural pronoun when leading the congregation in prayer: "*We* ask that ... ."

The third purpose of the pastoral prayer is to include broad outreach concerns. These are matters that the congregation should be praying about but may not otherwise have thought to include. In a sense this teaches worshipers to offer prayers that go well beyond the bounds of the congregation itself: prayers for civic leaders, for community concerns, for military personnel, and for gospel ministries in distant lands.

The pastoral prayer, looked at in these three lights — as a priestly function, a representative ministry, and a guide to wider concerns — becomes a vital, even irreplaceable, part of the public worship service. It is a prayer *with* the people as well as *for* them. Henry Ward Beecher wrote, “Never in the study in the most absorbed moments; ... never in any company where friends are the sweetest and dearest; never in any circumstance in life, is there anything that is to me so touching as when I stand, in ordinary good health, before my great congregation to pray for them.”<sup>1</sup>

The pastoral prayer should be kept fresh and energized. If it becomes monotonous and predictable, the people will take their cue and treat the prayer time as some sort of intermission from real worship. If this worship element gets narrowly patterned, centering routinely only on those who are in the hospital and nursing home — as important as these concerns are — it will suffer from lack of scope and freshness, and the worshiping congregation will not participate. No pastor wants that to happen.

Therefore, you will find it helpful to organize your pastoral prayers (as well as your private prayers) around the following five great elements in prayer — not necessarily using all five in each prayer. They serve only as an order to assure that public prayer has both depth and breadth. Consider them in brief.

### **Adoration**

It is good to begin a pastoral prayer with some contemplation of God’s glory: “Eternal God, our Heavenly Father, we worship You because Your mercies are new every morning, and Your faithfulness never fails.” In other words, in adoration we pay homage to our God while asking for nothing. Adoration is “the homage of the creature to the Creator.”<sup>2</sup> In adoration we reflect on God’s mercies, His holiness, His glory, His love. If such reflections do not come spontaneously, we can get help from the Psalms. “I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever” (Psalm 145:1). To begin a public prayer with adoration saves us from rushing carelessly into God’s presence.

Reflections centered on Jesus Christ call forth our adoration most compellingly. He is the Good Shepherd who saves us from all predators; the light who dispels our darkness; the express image of the invisible God, so that when our enlightened spiritual eyes see Him, they see the Father. He is our at-one-ment with God, our solace in times of trouble and our joy in times of elation. As James Hastings writes, “He that perceives Christ every day is continually engaged in adoration.”<sup>3</sup>

Our God is no megalomaniac who must be praised from morning to night, being constantly reminded of His greatness. Our adoration is as much for us as it is for Him. His glory is of the very essence of His being. It has been said that “God’s glory is the external manifestation of His [holiness].”<sup>4</sup> We need to remind ourselves of His majesty, His greatness, His glorious being, in order to get our prayers focused correctly. When we begin our prayers with words of adoration we set our compass, whether in our private devotions or our public prayers.

### **Confession**

When lived at the optimum, the Christian life is one of joy. Therefore, whether in private or public, the mood of prayer should be confident, full of faith. Our God is both holy and loving. We are His children, redeemed from sin and spiritual death at an immeasurable price. His grace is mightily at work in us.

Yet, within that context of confidence, our prayers should have in them a place for confession. We stand ready to confess our weaknesses, failures, sins and regrets. Only if confession is an element in our own prayers can we be sure to empathize with our people over the sins and regrets they bring to the Lord. Let us not forget that there are always some congregants who feel they have failed miserably during the past week.

While the element of confession in our prayers keeps us from coming to think lightly of sin, it should not lead us to morbid self-examination: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). When we confess, we embrace the assurance of sins forgiven and we go on.

## **Petition**

It is appropriate that confession be followed by petition. In confession we want to do more than merely acknowledge our offenses; we want to be delivered from continuing to offend. Thus, in petition we pinpoint such special requests. In this way the pastoral prayer joins together confession and petition.

Our petitions should also include our fundamental needs. The prayer our Lord taught His disciples to pray began with an address elevated in its tone; in a sense, spoken in adoration: “Our Father which art in heaven” (Matthew 6:9b, KJV). But before His model prayer ended it included a petition for daily bread. We treat bread here as a metaphor for life’s most fundamental needs — our sustenance. When we pray prayers of petition we ask that the basic needs of the congregation be met, whether physical or spiritual. Petitionary prayer is personal and specific.

Jesus taught His disciples, “Ask and it will be given to you” (Matthew 7:7a). To make His point clear He gave the illustration of a father who responds generously to his children’s requests. He closes with a rhetorical question: “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:11). Petitionary prayer is offered in faith. It should quicken the faith of the worshipers.

## **Intercession**

We can say that petitions are for ourselves, while intercession is for others. In intercession we stand in the presence of the Eternal God and from that privileged position offer earnest requests that reach well beyond our own needs and horizons. We are intermediaries. We stand in the gap — the breach in the wall — as a protector (Ezekiel 22:30). In the pastoral prayer, intercession widens the scope of our requests. First Timothy instructs us to pray for “kings and all those in authority” (2:2). That is a command for the church at prayer. We can certainly extend this duty beyond presidents and governors to those in other high positions of authority.

For example, it’s good from time to time to pray for local officers of the law, for medical staff in local hospitals, for mission workers who distribute food to the hungry, for school officials, and so

on. The list of possibilities can get long. And the pastoral prayer can draw in the people as they anticipate its unfolding from week to week — first adoration, then confession, petition and intercession. It is especially urgent to offer intercessions for the salvation of those to whom the church reaches out. Our number one concern is for the efficacy of the gospel in needy lives.

### **Thanksgiving**

Before ending the prayer, it is appropriate to offer words of thanksgiving. Again, there is need to reflect on this so that thanksgiving does not become predictable. Whatever else the list includes, it is always important to offer thanksgiving for the great gift of salvation through the sacrificial death of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is appropriate to mention the providences of God, particularly detectable providences of the past week. Beware of becoming so thankful for the good weather, the loveliness of nature and the well-being of our families that we forget the center of all Christian thanksgiving — Christ, our crucified, risen, ascended and coming Savior.

Note that the five elements of prayer briefly covered here do not need to be treated as a checklist for the pastoral prayer. Nor must they be followed in the order given. There may be other sequences a pastor feels more comfortable with. And they do not all need to be included in the same act of prayer. Some pastors may have more than one place for prayer in a service. But it is good to keep the five elements in mind to give our public prayers the breadth they should have.

There will always be a correlation between pastors' public prayers and those practiced in private. To pray well publicly, one must pray well privately. If the personal prayer life is rich and growing, a discipline earnestly maintained, this will be evident in the pastoral prayer. If the discipline of private prayer is allowed to grow cold or even barely existent it will be difficult to conceal this in public praying. Eventually the disciplines of the private life seep through for good or ill into one's public ministrations.

### **Some Do's and Dont's**

#### **1. Make Preparations in Advance**

During my pastoral days, my practice was to go to the pastor's study early Saturday morning when the church was quiet. There I would reflect on the week as I prepared the pastoral prayer. I

outlined it on a 4" x 6" index card. I spent some time considering how to begin the prayer so I would not slip into a predictable routine. I filed the cards. Although I tried to include each element I've outlined here, I did not necessarily dwell on each with the same intensity or duration. Praying an edifying pastoral prayer is as much a learned art as preaching is. Those who would be "full-service" pastors will take this to heart. And the advanced preparation and filing of prayers is one way to keep public prayers fresh and the congregation involved in them.

## 2. Frame the Pastoral Prayer

It is disconcerting, even shocking, in some cases to hear the closing "Amen" of the pastor's prayer followed in almost the same breath by an announcement about the upcoming potluck. This gives serious worshipers the feeling, *Well that's over with, what's next?* Here are suggestions to avoid this poor transition. Precede the prayer with a prayer hymn or chorus. Then go directly to the prayer without introductory words. "The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?" (Ecclesiastes 6:11). At the outset, let the hymn or chorus set the tone. Then, at the close of the prayer, have an instrumentalist follow the prayer with a short, quiet interlude, giving the congregation opportunity to settle and reflect before moving on. During this interlude, pastors themselves should sit down to be seen as also reflecting or meditating.

Many Free Methodist and other evangelical churches need to restore a sense of reverence and awe to their worship services. Framing the pastoral prayer is one way to encourage God's people in that direction. An urgent pastoral prayer framed to emphasize its importance can call a congregation to honor the holiness of God and the respect in worship that God is due.

## 3. Be Creative

Even though it is wise to keep the pastoral prayer at the same place in the sequence of the service because people are creatures of routine, there are ways, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to be creative. Some pastors open the altar so people may come and kneel during the prayer. It is inspiring to see the altar lined with people young and old bringing thanksgiving or supplication to the Father. (It is good to keep a supply of tissues behind the altar for those who may need them.) Some pastors keep a small vial of oil at the pulpit so they are prepared if someone asks to be anointed in the presence of a praying congregation.

#### 4. Don't Preach in Your Prayers

The pastoral prayer must be more than simply talking to the people with your eyes closed. Here's how you can ensure that the prayer is a serious time of communion with the Father for both you and the congregation: fix in your mind the image of this prayer as a straight vertical line of communication with the Almighty, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is listening. When this understanding is set in your mind the pastoral prayer will indeed be a genuine prayer. Check on yourself periodically by listening to the recording of the prayer at a later time.

#### 5. Don't Tell God Things He Already Knows

If there is information about the subjects of prayer that the congregation needs to know, tell them briefly before the prayer hymn or, if no prayer hymn, before the prayer begins. God already knows what hospital room the parishioner is in, or how the accident happened, or what scripture the parishioner is finding helpful. Adding these features into the prayer is like editorializing. This distracts from the petitions themselves.

#### 6. Be Sensitive to the Customs and Needs of the People

In days gone by, it was the custom of Free Methodist congregations to kneel for the pastoral prayer. This changed during the 1950s and '60s. Now, some congregations stand, and some remain seated. Such customs are affected somewhat by the culture of the congregation: formal, informal, youthful, elderly, rural, urban, blue collar, white collar, etc. Local preferences should be treated with respect. If you feel the need to effect change, do so with sensitivity. Seek the counsel of the church board, and introduce change gradually to avoid surprise or unnecessary resistance. The objective is always the same: make the pastoral prayer a vital and holy experience.

#### 7. Seek the Unction of the Spirit in Your Prayers

Uction is more than increased volume, or a clerical tone, or an elevated emotion. It is the anointing of the Holy Spirit giving a peculiar energy to the words uttered and at the same time quickening the congregation with confidence that the Father is hearing and will answer. At times, the Spirit's unction may be gentle, at other times, impassioned.

After all else has been considered, the pastor should be sensitive to the Spirit's direction. If, for example, the Spirit prompts intercessions that were not planned, be obedient to this direction. Sometimes the most effectual prayers are those that go beyond the advanced planning to respond to the promptings of the moment. Seek always to pray under the Holy Spirit's anointing.



The pastoral prayer is much more than it may appear to be at first reflection. It calls for spiritual energy and dedication, serious thought, prayerful planning and preparation. It calls for the anointing of the Holy Spirit. If a review of the subject has made you feel humbled at the challenge, that is for the good. One should never feel completely adequate for the priestly assignment of leading God's people into the Presence, summarizing their petitions and bearing their burdens with them.

Jesus said, "My house will be called a house of prayer" (Matthew 21:13a). The more conscious leaders become of the place and importance of the pastoral prayer, the more likely we are to preserve a sense of God's holiness when God's people gather to worship.

---

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Henry Ward Beecher, *The Study: Helps for Preachers* (London: R.D. Dickinson, Farringdon Street, E.C. 1873), 356.

<sup>2</sup> James Hastings, *The Christian Doctrine on Prayer* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1916), 48.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Elwell, Walter A. "Entry for 'Glory.'" "Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology." <<http://www.studylight.org/dic/bed/view.cgi?number=T294>>. 1897.

Unless otherwise noted, scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.