

Roots of Reformed Worship

A Publication of Echo Hills Christian Study Center
P.O. Box 543 Indian Head, PA 15446-0543
No. 8, © January, 2000

Presbyterian services commonly begin with a prayer entitled the invocation. The Westminster *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* also instructs the minister to begin the service with a prayer. The character of this opening prayer is to be: “in all reverence and humility acknowledging the incomprehensible greatness and majesty of the Lord (in whose presence they do then in a special manner appear), and their own vileness and unworthiness to approach so near him, with their utter inability of themselves to so great a work; and humbly beseeching him for pardon, assistance, and acceptance, in the whole service then to be performed; and for a blessing on that particular portion of his word then to be read: And all in the name and mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

These instructions follow the pattern set by the earlier Reformed liturgies in which the opening prayer of the assembly was a prayer of confession of sins. In Bucer’s and Calvin’s liturgies this opening prayer of confession was relatively brief but very intense. In Knox’s *The Forme of Prayers* the confession of sins is much longer. Two prayers are given as alternatives. The second was of considerable length because it was structured around the ten commandments. Though somewhat broader in theme, the opening prayer prescribed by the *Directory* includes confession and an appeal for pardon. Such terms as “vileness” and “unworthiness” indicate that what was prescribed was in keeping with the strong language of confession found in Calvin, Bucer, Knox and other Reformed liturgies of the Reformation era.

Calvin’s liturgy has this prayer of confession. “O Lord God, eternal and almighty Father, we confess unfeignedly before thy holy majesty that we are poor sinners, conceived and born in iniquity, prone to do evil, incapable of any

good, and that in our depravity we transgress thy holy commandments without end or ceasing: Wherefore we purchase for ourselves, through thy righteous judgment, our ruin and perdition. Nevertheless, O Lord, we are grieved that we have offended thee; and we condemn ourselves and our sins with true repentance, beseeching thy grace to relieve our distress. O God and Father most gracious and full of compassion, have mercy upon us in the name of thy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. And as thou dost blot out our sins and stains, magnify and increase in us day by day the grace of the Holy Spirit: that as we acknowledge our unrighteousness with all our heart, we may be moved by that sorrow which shall bring forth true repentance in us, mortifying all our sins, and producing in us the fruits of righteousness and innocence which are pleasing unto thee; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”* It is doubtful the *Directory* intended something more watered down and vague than this prayer. Yet in current practice such a prayer is not common in Presbyterian worship. When was the last time you heard a pray of such theological clarity and forthrightness in a Presbyterian service?

Bucer’s liturgy and Calvin’s Strassburg liturgy followed the prayer of confession with words of comfort and pardon. Calvin dropped the pardon at Geneva due to opposition and Knox followed Calvin’s Genevan pattern. Likewise, the *Directory* does not include any instruction for the minister to read words of comfort and forgiveness from scripture or to offer any sort of a ministerial declaration of pardon. As a result Presbyterian worship with its roots in Scotland and England does not have a strong tradition of ministerial declaration of pardon. In contrast the continental liturgies continued to have such words of assurance. Calvin’s

Strassburg liturgy provided these words for after the prayer: “Let each of you truly acknowledge that he is a sinner, humbling himself before God, and believe that the heavenly Father wills to be gracious unto him in Jesus Christ. To all those who repent in this wise, and look to Jesus Christ for their salvation, I declare that the absolution of sins is effected, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”* Interestingly, Richard Baxter’s Savoy Liturgy a century later would restore the ministerial declaration of pardon.

An innovation of the *Directory* was the inclusion of a request for illumination in this opening prayer. In the earlier Reformed forms there was some sort of intervening activity between the opening prayer and the scripture readings such as the singing of the ten commandments or a psalm. The prayer for illumination followed this material and immediately preceded the scripture lessons. In the *Directory* the service moved immediately from the opening prayer to the reading of scripture requiring that the prayer of illumination be attached to the opening prayer of confession.

What is significant for our day is that, not only has the ministerial declaration of pardon been lost in Presbyterian worship, but the practice of beginning the service with a confession of sins is neglected. The opening prayer in a Presbyterian service, commonly called the invocation, often has no confession of sins included in it. This is a significant loss that greatly distorts contemporary Presbyterian worship. This distortion persists even if the concern for the confession of our sinfulness does appear later in the mislabeled “pastoral prayer.” (It is not the pastor’s prayer, but the prayer of the whole Church or at least it should be.)

As we have argued in an earlier edition (No. 4, August 1998), the fundamental meaning of what we call public worship is the assembly of the Lord’s people in the presence of the Lord. Even a cursory knowledge of the Bible shows us that sinners cannot willy-nilly saunter into the presence of the thrice holy God. Rather, in a variety of ways the scriptures indicate that our entrance into God’s presence requires humility and honesty, which is to say, the confession of our sinfulness and unworthiness. In the Old Covenant this was indicated by the requirement of sacrifice in every gathering, and in particular by the sin and trespass offerings that preceded the whole burnt offering [see Leviticus 8

& 9]. Everyone coming into God’s courts was required to make confession of sin in the form of the sin and trespass offerings. The experience of Isaiah in the temple provides an historical example of this same principle. Isaiah was compelled by his vision of the Lord’s holiness to confess the sinfulness of his lips and of his people’s lips. In response the Lord sent an angel with a burning coal from the altar to cleanse his lips. This narrative illustrates the manner in which we ought to enter the presence of God.

In the New Covenant scriptures the Apostle John teaches us that we ought to confess our sins. “This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.”

In this passage the duty to confess sin is not relegated to the past. John does not say “if we have confessed” [εἰ with the aorist active indicative], but “if we confess” [ἐὰν with the present active subjunctive]. While in one sense all our sins have been forgiven in our justification, in another sense we need repeatedly to confess our sin and be cleansed by the blood of Jesus. Notice that both the confessing and the cleansing are in the present tense in this passage. There are three conditional statements in this text that mutually interpret one another. These are “if we walk in the light,” “if we confess our sin,” and “if we say we have no sin.” To walk in the light and so to be cleansed by the blood of Jesus requires that we confess our sin. If to the contrary we say that we have no sin then we deceive ourselves, the truth is not in us, we make him a liar and his word (the gospel) is not in us. In other

words, if we do not confess our sin we walk in darkness regardless as to whether we say we have fellowship with God. Fellowship with God (i.e., walking in the light) exists only if we confess our sins. And only if we confess our sins (and so walk in the light) does God forgive and cleanse us by the blood of his Son. Otherwise we walk, not in the light but in darkness.

Since worship is the assembly of God's people in his presence, it is "fellowship with him." But can we have that fellowship without confessing our sin? According to John we cannot. We are not suggesting that without a formal prayer of confession the assembly is really walking in darkness. If the hearts of the people are broken and contrite, then we are in the light. But ought we not to give clear expression to this is the public form of the assembly? If we do not confess our sin, is not our silence dangerously close to saying we have no sin? We establish the order and content of the assembly as if it is not necessary to confess sin. We act as if we can have fellowship with God without confessing our sins when we hold a service with no prayer of confession. It is better to follow the wisdom of the Reformers and the Westminster divines and begin our assembly with a prayer of confession as they did.

Such a prayer of confession at the beginning defines the nature of the worship assembly as the gathering of sinful saints in the presence of the holy God. When we neglect such an initial confession of sins we distort our worship for we act as if we are not sinners standing before the holy God who hates sin. We say by our neglect that we have no sin. We may claim fellowship with God but if we really knew ourselves to be standing in his presence, would not our hearts be struck by our vileness and our unworthiness? God-centered worship must of necessity be confession-centered worship. To behold his glory is to see at the same time our unworthiness. Given this essential theological truth, should we not order our service to reflect and express that truth?

Even the most ardent of believer is tainted by sin. Which of us can say that this week we have loved God and our neighbor as we ought? Which of us has outgrown the need for the mercy of God and the atoning sacrifice of Christ? Which of us can enter the presence of God and presume that we are better than others. Must we not rather be like the

publican who beating his breast cried out, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner." The practice of a public confession of sins (as Calvin's prayer illustrates) expresses in the "liturgy" three crucial biblical truths. First, that God is merciful to those who believe in his Son and forgives them when they cry out to him. Second, that such a faith in Jesus must be accompanied by a true repentance if it is genuine faith. In other words, we must come to God with a broken and contrite heart. Third, that even as believers we remain sinners who daily fall short of the glory of God and have no other hope but the mercy of God and sacrifice of Christ. Liturgy is theology. Good liturgy expresses and inculcates good theology. So what does poor and inadequate liturgy teach?

Now it might be objected that such a public prayer of confession could be done as a mere formality without a broken and contrite heart. Of course, this could be the case for an entire congregation on occasion. It is most probably the case for a few any given Lord's day in any given congregation. A public prayer of confession does not guarantee that the hearts of the people are sincere. But then the same is true for any public act of devotion. Singing Psalm 51 does not guarantee that those who sing about a broken heart have a broken heart. Shall we, therefore, ban all penitential psalms and hymns from the service? A public prayer of intercession cannot assure that people will pay attention to the words of the pastor let alone do so while believing that God is the rewarder of those who diligently seek him. So then, while we must guard against mere formality in all the acts of worship, we cannot omit a duty just because it might not be done from the heart. Otherwise we should all become Quakers and sit around in silence waiting for the Spirit to move us.

The worship of the assembly is by its very nature a corporate activity and thus very different from private devotions. Private devotions are the place for each of us to confess our individual sins individually. Prayer in the assembly is the place for us to corporately confess our sinfulness in words that are true for all Christians all the time. The first step in improving Presbyterian worship is the reinstatement of a theologically rich and pointed confession of sins at the head of the service. We may come into worship (figurative walking up Zion into the courts of the Lord) with praise and

adoration. But when we have entered his presence, and seen (by faith) his holiness, we must confess our vileness and unworthiness and cry out to him for pardon. Is there any other basis of our standing before him but the confession of our sins and the cry for his mercy to us in Jesus Christ our Lord?

Such a confession can take a number of forms. We are not suggesting a fixed and inflexible prayer book, but a fixed and inflexible theology which can be expressed in a variety of forms. The easiest way to include the confession of sins in the opening prayer of the service would be for the worship leader (usually the Pastor or a Ruling Elder) to use a prayer of the sort that Calvin used. There are many prepared prayers of this sort available if the leader is not comfortable with his ability to phrase the prayer extemporaneously. An alternative would be to use a brief prayer of confession said in unison by the congregation. A penitential psalm or psalm portion could be sung as a corporate prayer of confession. There are a number of hymns that could be used in this way. And all of these options could be combined in various ways. For example a prayer of confession said by the Pastor on behalf of all could be concluded with the congregation singing several appropriate verses from Psalm 51.

Experience suggests several pitfalls to avoid. First the prayer if said by the Pastor (or Ruling Elder) should be of moderate length and of a general character. Public prayer is no place for the confession of private sins that are best kept between God and the sinner. Long prayers are not needed theologically (Matthew 6:7) and make it difficult for the congregation to maintain their attention. Second, the prayer should not be wishy-washy. It should be clear and pointed. If a unison prayer is used, it should have a memorable phraseology so that after a few weeks the congregation will learn it by heart. Likewise if a sung response is used it should not be changed too often so the congregation can learn it. [Echo Hills has available several samples of an opening liturgy of confession and pardon using responses from the Trinity Hymnal.]

What should follow an initial prayer of confession of sins? As we said above, The Westminster *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* makes no provision for words of comfort or for a ministerial declaration of pardon. However such a practice is worthy of being re-instituted. First of all,

without something of this sort the gospel is not brought to bear on the congregation. If the people have confessed their sins they need to hear that there is forgiveness in Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ alone. Second, the minister needs to fulfill his duty to forgive and remit sins by declaring the terms of the gospel and applying them to his listeners (John 20:23, Heidelberg Catechism #84, Westminster Confession 30:2). Keep in mind, such a declaration of pardon as we saw in Calvin was really a mini sermon, a brief preaching of the gospel. This is what we are suggesting for today. By the way, if a form of declaration of pardon is included it ought only to be performed by someone whose office is invested by Christ with authority to so do.

As with a prayer of confession, a liturgy of comfort and pardon can take a variety of forms from something as simple as the reading of a few appropriate scripture verses to a more complex form including scripture, ministerial declaration and congregational sung response. But by all means keep it both short and theological pointed.

What we are suggesting, then, is the transformation of the standard invocation in Presbyterian worship into a theologically clear and strong prayer of confession of sins preferably with some sort of words of assurance following. The opening prayer in the earlier Reformation liturgies was only this. The Westminster Directory broadened the prayer to include both a request for assistance in the performance of worship and a prayer of illumination for the scripture lessons. The prayer of illumination should be kept out of this opening prayer today and placed directly before the scripture lessons. Though one should never say never, this writer has never seen a contemporary service where the scripture readings immediately followed the invocation. As to the prayer for assistance in the performance of worship, one common practice should be avoided. The invocation ought NOT to be a request that God would be present in the Church's assemble. It is not our assembly but his. He is the host and we are his guests. It is his courts that we enter and his temple that we are. We are not asking God to attend our meeting. God is summoning us to his meeting. And when we come into his presence, we ought like Isaiah to cry out that we are sinners who need to be cleansed by the blood of Jesus.

Dr. Jack Kinneer

www.wso.net/echohills
jkinneer@a1usa.net

*Citations of Calvin's liturgy are from *Liturgies of the Western Church*, Bard Thompson, editor, Fortress Press, Philadelphia.