

## ARE PUBLIC PRAYERS AUTHORIZED?

A brother writes: "I have much enjoyed recent WATCH TOWERS. I see that the theme will be continued: Please say something in regard to Public Prayer. The brethren here are not one on that subject, some claiming that Christians should never pray in public.

OUR Lord, after reproofing the custom of the Pharisees, of standing on the street corners to pray, to be seen of men and to be thought pious, said, "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet [private place], and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." (Matt. 6:6.) From this, and from the fact that our Lord himself frequently retired for prayer to the mountain solitude, quite a few earnest souls have concluded that other than private prayers are disapproved if not sinful: and thus they have, we believe, done themselves injury.

Our Lord himself set us the example of offering prayer in public; not only in the presence of his disciples frequently, but also in the presence of unbelievers at least once – at the tomb of Lazarus. (John 11:41,42; See Luke 10:21.) That which is generally termed "The Lord's Prayer" was not only uttered in the presence of the disciples, but is a sample of a *collective* prayer. It addresses "Our Father," not My Father; it requests forgiveness of "*our* sins," not my sins; as "*we* forgive" others, and not as I forgive others. It is a sample of a collective prayer, specially.

The prayer recorded in the 17th chapter of John was evidently a public prayer, before the disciples at least, else it could not have been recorded by one of them as it is stated. – John 18:1.

The apostles, guided by the same holy spirit, not only prayed to the Father in secret, but also prayed publicly before the Church and exhorted and instructed others respecting such public, congregational prayers.

Frequent mention is made of the gathering of the Church for prayers, when it is not stated that they prayed audibly, and where the fact is not proved by the narration of the petition, but it is not reasonable to suppose that they gathered for prayer and that each then prayed privately and secretly. Besides, in some instances the prayers are recorded. – See Acts 1:14,24; 12:5,12; 16:13; 20:36; 21:5.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Church at Corinth, clearly teaches that prayer and giving of thanks before the Church is to be done in an audible voice and in a common tongue, in order that the hearers of the prayer may be edified. – See 1 Cor. 14:14-17.

However, we have no sympathy with the custom of some of pretending to pray to God, while really addressing the congregation. Although our prayers be distinct and intelligible to the audience, in order that the hearers may all be profited by being able to join sympathetically in a possibly more full and fluent petition [R2023 : page 197] than the majority could express, yet it should never be lost sight of that it is God, and not men, that is addressed.

Neither have we any sympathy with the custom of opening Political Conventions, and Legislative Assemblies and Schools and Lodges with prayer. Since these are not meetings of the Church they can (as meetings) have no recognition from God. If delegates to a Convention or Legislature or Congress, or attendants at college or school be Christians they as such always have access to God by prayer, and they should not be found in any place where they could not ask and expect God's blessing with them. If a teacher be a Christian, he or she might without special impropriety offer an audible prayer, for wisdom and grace to instruct aright; and any of the pupils who are Christians might say, Amen. But school-children should not be taught to repeat the "Lord's Prayer:" It was given for no such purpose. Nor should teachers be *required* to offer prayer; for many are not Christians. And the children? Although innocent of personal crimes, they are still under Adamic condemnation, and are permitted to approach God only through faith, on the terms of

the New Covenant; – *except* the children of such as have entered into covenant relations to God. – See 1 Cor. 7:14. [R2024 : page 197]

The evil effect of promiscuous public praying is growingly manifest on every hand. Men who know that only as a great favor through influential friends could they gain an audience with the potentates of earth, and then only with great formality of dress, etc., have gotten the idea that anybody at any time and in any filthy rags of his own righteousness can rush into the august presence of the King of kings and have an audience with him. And Christians, ministers and educators, have sanctioned this hurtful folly. As a consequence, thousands do not truly come to God, but delude themselves that they are "all right" and "as good as the average Christian;" while really, not having come to God in his appointed way, they have neither part nor lot in his Church, nor in the exceeding great and precious promises made to it.

"God heareth not sinners." (John 9:31; Job 27:9; Prov. 1:28,29; 28:9; Psa. 66:18; Isa. 1:15.) Christ is the way, the truth and the life, and no man cometh unto the Father but by him. (John 14:6.) While father Adam was created a son of God and then had access to his Father, yet this relationship and its privileges were cut off when he rebelled and was sentenced as a sinner to death; – all relationship was severed, all rights and privileges were forfeited. True, God has mercifully provided a great sacrifice for sin, and reconciliation through the precious blood of the Redeemer, and through him a return to all the privileges, communion and favors lost in Adam; but this provision is *restricted*: it is not for everybody; it is open only to those who, desiring to flee away from sin, come to a knowledge of the Savior and accept the favor of God on the conditions of the New Covenant.

Provision is made for these, that they may divest themselves of the filthy rags of their own righteousness and put on the robe of Christ's righteousness through faith; and thus prepared they may be introduced to the Father as redeemed and restored sons – reconciled to God by the death of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Then, and not until then, should

we expect that their prayers would be anything else than an abomination before God. None will be heard and accepted by the Father, while rejecting the New Covenant and the only name given under heaven or among men whereby we must be saved.

But to those who realize their sins and, repenting of them, accept the Redeemer and the New Covenant as the only way back to sonship and fellowship with the Father, the Apostle says, –

"Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God." "For through him [Christ] we both have access by one spirit unto the Father." – Eph. 2:18,19.

"Having *therefore*, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus,...let *us draw near* with a true heart in full assurance of faith." (Heb. 10:19-22.) "Let *us* therefore come boldly unto the throne of the heavenly grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." – Heb. 4:16.

Here, then, is what we hold to be the Scriptural line on this important subject. (1) Prayer is the privilege of "*believers*," reconciled children of God, only. (2) It is appropriate for such children of God to pray collectively as well as individually and privately. (3) At a meeting of God's children, the fact that unbelievers might be present would not make prayer improper, because it is a meeting of the Church and not a meeting of the unregenerate, nor under their control. (4) Prayer is wholly improper at Political, Legislative, Social, Educational, and other meetings which are not meetings of the Church of Christ. Even though some of the regenerated sons of God be present, the meetings are world-meetings, not directly amenable to the Word and Spirit of God. If Christians find it expedient to attend such meetings, let them attend as citizens and not as saints, and let their prayers be offered in secret.

"Unto the wicked God saith, What hast thou to do to declare my statutes, or that thou shouldest take my covenant in thy mouth – seeing

thou hatest instruction and castest my words behind thee?" – Psalm 50:16,17.

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