WORSHIP THROUGH CORPORATE PRAYER

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To worship is “to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ,” words found in 1 Peter 2:5. Corporate prayer may be an element in worship, and deserves careful evaluation in days when much of what passes as worship lacks a sense of God’s majesty, and substitutes self-centered aspirations for a good time. Preaching on Psalm 2, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones highlights the difference:

Do you still believe in the wrath of God? There are people in England – evangelicals – who think modern man needs entertainment. There is a mania for singing, for drama, for mime. “People cannot take preaching,” it is said, “Give them singing, Teach them how to dance…” In the name of God I say that is to do violence to Scripture. The church is not here to entertain. It is here to call people to “be wise” to “be instructed” … We are not here to be popular, but to tell the naked truth: “Serve the Lord with fear, rejoice with trembling (v.11).”

This is not to imply that worship and prayer are merely cerebral, since the whole personality is to be involved, but it does suggest that a God-centered attitude of the heart is of prime importance.

What, then, of corporate prayer in worship? In the first place, this is clearly warranted from Scripture. John Calvin refers to Christ’s calling the temple ‘a house of prayer’:

For he taught by this term that the chief part of his worship lies in the office of prayer, and that the temple was set up like a banner for believers so that they might, with one consent, participate in it… the prayers of the church are never ineffectual, for God always furnishes his people occasion for singing with joy… For he, who promises that he will do whatever two or three gathered together in his name may ask [Mat.18:19-20], testifies that he does not despise prayers publicly made, provided ostentation and chasing after paltry human glory are banished, and there is present a sincere and true affection that dwells in the secret place of the heart… the chief use of the tongue is in public prayers, which are offered in the assembly of believers, by which it comes about that with one common voice, and as it were, with the same mouth, we all glorify God together, worshipping him with one spirit and the same faith.

On the Lord’s Day, every part of divine service is to be sanctioned and regulated by God’s Word, and each element is to be an act of worship, preaching no less than praying. In Reformed worship it was the minister who led in prayer, and ideally members of the congregation echoed wholeheartedly, though silently, the sentiments to which he gave expression. Ezra 9 and 10, and Nehemiah 8 and 9 are examples of such congregational involvement and response in worship. Such a practice imposed a heavy responsibility on the minister to prepare his own heart and to be familiar with the spiritual needs of his congregation if his ministrations were to be effective. Some excelled in this more than others, as this report of Thomas Hooker’s public prayers testifies:
He affected Strength, rather than Length; and though he had not so much variety in Publick Praying, as in his Publick Preaching, yet he always had a seasonable Respect unto Present Conditions. And it was Observed, that his Prayer was usually like Jacob’s Ladder, wherein the nearer he came to an End, the nearer he drew towards Heaven; and he grew into such Rapturous Pleadings with God, and Praisings of God, as made some to say, The Like the Master of the Feast, he reserved the best Wine until the Last.

What mattered most was the individual worshiper’s spiritual appetite and awareness. **Appetite** speaks of a hunger for God and a single-minded, one might almost say obsessive, desire for closer communion with Him. **Awareness** implies confession of sin, both personal and corporate, and a concern for the advance of God’s kingdom. Such a solemn exercise demands careful preparation, and in the days of the Puritan fathers, certainly, this involved time and effort on the Saturday evening. Chapter XXI of George Swinnock’s treatise, *The Christian Man’s Calling* has as its title, ‘How to exercise ourselves to godliness on a Lord’s-day.’ He counsels his readers about the need for preparation for this ‘market-day of the soul’:

The main preparation of the heart for a Sabbath, lieth in removing the filth of sin, and in quickening and awakening grace… “Prepare to meet thy God,” O Christian! Betake thyself to thy chamber on the Saturday night, confess and bewail thine unthankfulness for, and unfruitfulness under, the ordinances of God; shame and condemn thyself for thy sins, entreat God to prepare thy heart for, and assist it in, thy religious performances; spend some time in consideration of the infinite majesty, holiness, jealousy, and goodness of that God, with whom thou art to have to do in sacred duties… ponder … meditate … continue musing and blowing till the fire burneth… If thou wouldst thus leave thine heart with God on the Saturday night, thou shouldst find it with him in the Lord’s-day morning … When thou goest to prayer, let it be in hope to get thy heart nearer to heaven.

Without diligent preparation, the soul was in danger of deserving Christ’s strictures on the worshipers of his day, Mk 7:7-8 “This people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. And in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” William Greenhill comments on a similar passage in Ezekiel 33:31, ‘they come to you as people do, they sit before you as my people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain’:

What worshipping was this of God, to give him an ear, and the world their heart! … When men draw near to God in any duty of his worship, he principally looks which way the heart stands, whether that be real, and towards him.

Stephen Charnock has some searching questions to ask each would-be worshiper:

Do we resign our spirits to God, and make them an entire holocaust, a whole burnt-offering in his worship? … When God holds out his golden sceptre to encourage our approaches to him, stands ready to give the pardon of sin and full felicity, the best things he hath, is it a fit requital of his kindness to give him a formal outside only, a shadow of religion, to have the heart overswayed with other thoughts and affections…? If
apprehensions of his excellency did possess our souls, they would be fastened on him, glued to him… Were our breathings after God as strong as the pantings of the hart after the water brooks, we should be like that creature, not diverted in our course by every puddle… Nourish right conceptions of the majesty of God in your minds… We honour the majesty of God, when we consider him with due reverence, according to the greatness and perfection of his works; and in this reverence of his majesty doth worship chiefly consist.⁶

Examples of special occasions for corporate prayer are found in both Old and New Testaments. Ezra called the exiles to fast and pray for a safe return to Jerusalem (8:21-23). Daniel called his friends together to “seek mercies from the God of heaven concerning” king Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams (2:17-18). In Acts 4, when Peter and John had been charged “not to speak at all or teach in the name of Jesus,” verse 24 reports that the company of believers “raised their voice to God with one accord,” acknowledging God’s sovereign control and power in seeking boldness to speak God’s Word. A short time later, according to Acts 12:5, 12, the church was gathered to offer earnest prayer for the release of Peter from prison. Heartfelt concern for the prosperity of God’s Kingdom is collectively expressed in such Psalms as 44, 79, 80, 85. Precious promises are to be pleaded by God’s people when they seek His face for the restoration of His favor after declension, as in Deut. 4:29-31 and 2 Chron. 7:14. Daniel’s pleading with God, recorded in chapter 9, is based on promises he found in Jeremiah (29:10-14). In this Gospel Day, the material blessings of the Old Covenant, progeny and land, are transposed into spiritual blessing, conversions and graces.

Compared with earlier generations of Reformed Christians, today’s evangelicals are grossly individualistic. Something of collective responsibility and aspiration has been lost. The peace of Jerusalem is seldom prayed for as a corporate blessing, in the way Psalm 122 portrays so powerfully. Yet Joel 1:14 is still part of Holy Writ: “Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.” The British Parliament instituted in the 1640s a monthly Fast Day from the conviction that

…we are likely to be blessed by the providence of God, bringing good out of evill, with twelve Nationall, solemnne, publike Fasts every yeare, which (if rightly kept) will be as the twelve Gates of the New Jerusalem, spoken of, Revel. 21. Every Fast will be as a Gate to let us in, into a part of the New Jerusalem of Mercy, and happiness promised to the people of God, here upon earth.⁷

A sermon by Gilbert Tennent on 2 Chron.20:3-4, preached at Philadelphia, January 1748, draws attention to this:

Another duty included in fasting, as it respects the soul, is prayer. Fasting and prayer are frequently joined in Scripture. Prayer contains not only petition for the mercies we need but praises for mercies received. Our petitions should be both believing and vehement and, therefore, we are bid on a day of fasting to cry unto the Lord (Joel 1:14).⁸
Who will say that the cause of God today does not call for such measures? With so much confusion about claims that are being made for experience-orientated movements, the need for a genuine outpouring of God’s Spirit is greater than ever. Elements of subjectivism, emotionalism, mysticism and post-modernism pervade the thinking and practice of so much contemporary religion. Only a recovery of the sense of God’s ineffable greatness and glory will remedy the situation. When this prevails, the corporate prayers of God’s people will take on fresh urgency and effectiveness. It was this kind of conviction that motivated Joseph Sewall of Boston in 1742. Preaching on the text, Ez. 36:37, “Thus says the Lord God, “I will also let the house of Israel inquire of me to do this for them,” he said:

We are assembled to ask God for the plentiful effusion of His Spirit upon His people and more particularly, for the flock who usually worship God in this place. We are gathered to bless His name for spiritual blessings already received in the remarkable revival of His work among us and in many other towns. We are also met together to entreat the Lord that He will preserve us and His people from everything that has a tendency to quench His Spirit and obstruct the progress and success of His good work and that it may go on and prosper until the whole land shall be filled with the blessed fruits of the Spirit. This is an important errand indeed! O that there was a Spirit in us to cry mightily to God for this great blessing while we humble ourselves before the Lord for our past unfruitfulness and all those sins whereby we have grieved the Spirit of God! We have formerly once and again observed such days of prayer to seek the Lord for spiritual blessings, the comprehensive sum of which is the gift of the Holy Ghost. And may we not hope that God is now giving a gracious answer to those supplications which have been in this way offered to Him in years past? And ought not this encourage us now to pray more earnestly? Yes, most certainly!

Little more than a century later, such an answer to prayer was realized in Charles Spurgeon’s London congregation:

Spurgeon came to London conscious that God had been hiding His face from His people. His knowledge of the Bible and of Christian History convinced him that, compared with what the church had a warrant to expect, the Spirit of God was in a great measure withdrawn, and if God continued to withhold His face, he declared to his people, nothing could be done to extend His kingdom. It is not knowledge, nor talent, nor zeal, he would say, that can perform God's work. “Yet brethren, this can be done — we will cry to the Lord until He reveals His face again.” “All we want is the Spirit of God. Dear Christian friends, go home and pray for it; give yourselves no rest until God reveals Himself; do not tarry where you are, do not be content to go on in your everlasting jog-trot as you have done; do not be content with the mere round of formalities.” Before many months had passed ... what a change took place in the prayer meetings! Now instead of the old, dull prayers, “Every man seemed like a crusader beseeching the New Jerusalem, each one appeared to storm the Celestial City by the might of intercession; and soon the blessing came upon us in such abundance that we had not room enough to receive it.”

While corporate prayer that honors God calls for preparation and discipline, it also holds out the promise of great blessings for God’s people.
9 Ibid., p. 255.