

Celebrating Presbyterian Worship Part 2. Prayer

This morning we are talking briefly about the roll of prayer in our worship service. Our services begin and end with prayer – not just to invite God to be with us, but to acknowledge that he already is here.

We have several prayers during our service; most of them are spoken by the Pastor. But regardless of who actually says the words, we all adopt each prayer as our own when we say “**Amen**”. The word “Amen” comes from Hebrew and means “so be it.” So by saying “Amen,” we are embracing the words of the prayer as our own.

I’m going to focus on the two longer prayers we have: the **Prayer of Confession** and the **Prayers of the People**. These two prayers have very different purposes and an interesting history in the development of our worship tradition.

Early in our service we say a **Prayer of Confession**. In the reformed tradition, we confess the reality of sin, and of our own sin in particular. This prayer offers us a chance for some self-examination – we have an opportunity to reflect on what we’ve done that we shouldn’t have, or what we’ve failed to do – those sins of commission and omission. Usually the prayer of confession will have a period of silence to allow for that reflection.

After recognizing and confessing our sin, we are reminded of God’s grace and redemption through Christ. We receive an **assurance of pardon** and we accept God’s forgiveness of our sin.

Following the Sermon we have the **Prayers of the People**. This, like our **Affirmation of Faith**, is part of our response to the Word, which we have just heard in scripture and sermon.

In the **Prayers of the People**, we acknowledge God’s presence in the world and in daily life: We lift up the church universal, the world and its nations and powers, and all of God’s people. We pray for the world because God created it and loves it – our prayer should be as broad as God’s love.

The **Prayers of the People** is a prayer of **intercession** because we pray for worldwide and local concerns and we ask that God intercede and that peace and justice will prevail. Often the prayer is formatted to move from the world, to our county and community, to our church and our neighbors, to our family, and, lastly, to us. We use this prayer to especially lift up those we know who are in distress and need. We end our **Prayers of the People** by praying specifically as Jesus taught us to pray using the **Lord’s Prayer**.

The early Christian church was well-practiced in both of these forms of prayer: During the first several centuries, the church used a “Great Prayer of Intercession”

regularly, also called “The Prayer of the Faithful,” which sought God’s intercession on all matters: it included specific petitions for virtually every group of people one could imagine, from civil government to the church’s hierarchy, to married people, to women expecting children, to the sick, to those in prison. However, later in the Middle Ages the church moved away from expressing such specific petitions about these common, everyday issues.

The reformers in the 1500’s brought radical reform to public prayer. Two basic prayers were developed.

The “Prayer of Confession and Supplication” included a lamentation or confession of sin, and then a supplication or a request for God’s forgiveness. This was followed by the pastor proclaiming the assurance of pardon and the congregation singing a psalm of thanksgiving. Sound familiar?

The other basic prayer was a comprehensive Prayer of Intercession delivered following the sermon. The pastors in those early reformation years discovered that prayer tended to flow pretty naturally following their sermon. In John Calvin’s view, the prayer of intercession helped move the congregation from the Word to the World.

The use of these two prayers was adopted early in the Reformation by the church in Strasbourg; John Calvin adopted this structure in the Geneva Psalter of 1542, and then John Knox carried them to the Church of Scotland where they were used in the Book of Common Order.

Today our **Prayer of Confession** and our **Prayers of the People** continue. They differ in their direction: The **Prayer of Confession** turns inward while the **Prayers of the People**, is more expansive and outward-focused. Both have a long history in our Presbyterian tradition of worship.