

# “32 Principles for Public Prayer”

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Those who regularly bear the solemn responsibility of leading the congregation in public prayer are here again encouraged to study and reflect on this important matter. The consistent devotional use of such helps as Matthew Henry's *Method for Prayer* should be a helpful aid in preparing for such an awesome privilege and duty. In the introduction Samuel Miller's *Thoughts on Public Prayer* has already been commended, but perhaps an enumeration of some of Miller's main principles and admonitions will whet the reader's appetite for more and prove useful in evaluating our own efforts in corporate prayer.

Miller detected the following common faults in the public praying of the church in his day and they remain applicable to our own.

## **FREQUENT FAULTS IN PUBLIC PRAYER**

1. Overuse of certain favorite words and set forms of expression. This can

become monotonous if one leads in pastoral prayer week after week. Too much repetition of God's name ("Lord," "Father," "Heavenly Father," etc.) should also be diligently avoided. This is often simply a matter of habit and lack of forethought.

2. Hesitation and apparent embarrassment in articulation. Long, awkward pauses and grasping for words detract from the power of public prayer.
3. Ungrammatical expressions in prayer. Rules of grammar and syntax should be studiously observed lest our poor form of speech become a stumbling block to those congregated for worship.
4. A lack of order and certain important elements of prayer. Disorderliness is a distraction for people who are trying to pray along with the one leading in prayer. During our public worship every biblical element of prayer (such as adoration, confession, thanksgiving, petition, and intercession) should be employed. If there is only one comprehensive prayer in the service it should exhibit each part of prayer. If the various parts of prayer are divided into multiple prayers then each element should be given due prominence within the service. Corporate prayer which ignores or neglects any one of these elements is essentially defective.
5. Too much detail in particular elements of prayer. We should aim for proportion between the various parts of the prayer.
6. Praying too long. Excessive length in public prayer should be avoided. "Long prayers are for the closet." In Miller's day, when attention spans were much
7. longer than our own, he recommended 12-15 minutes at the most. The reader may judge what is appropriate for his own situation.
8. The employment of allegorical style in prayer. Overuse of highly figurative language is to be discouraged and simplicity of form commended.
9. Introduction of allusions to party politics, and personalities in prayer. These are serious faults in public prayer. On the matter of prayer and politics the wise and learned Dr. Miller, toward the end of his earthly course, said, "I resolved, more than thirty years ago, never to allow myself, either in public prayer or preaching, to utter a syllable, in periods of great political excitement and party strife, that would enable any human being so much as to conjecture to which side in the political conflict I leaned." With regard to alluding to specific personalities in prayer, it may be noted in passing that it is never appropriate to pray "at" someone in public worship.
10. Usage of unsuitably affectionate or intimate language in prayer. The

inappropriate use of amatory language (particularly when directed toward the persons of the Trinity) ought to be avoided in public devotions. This language, no matter how well intentioned, often has the appearance of being artificial or quaint.

11. The injection of comedy into prayer. The practice of indulging in wit, humor, or sarcasm in public prayer is absolutely inexcusable and should not be tolerated.
12. Use of prayer to expound on a point of teaching. Miller says, “the excellence of a public prayer may be marred by introducing into it a large portion of didactic statement.” The purpose of prayer is not to provide an outline of the text, the sermon or some topic in Christian doctrine, but to lead sinners to the throne of grace.
13. Careless over-emphasis of doctrines which are particularly repugnant to unbelievers. Those who are prone to discoursing on doctrine in their praying may also tend to be “studious of introducing, with much point, those doctrines which are most offensive to the carnal heart and which seldom fail to be revolting to our impenitent hearers.” While no Scriptural doctrine should be deemed unsuitable for and excluded altogether from public prayer (even difficult and offensive teachings: the atonement, original sin, predestination, etc.) we should not become disproportionate in our emphasis or thoughtless in our language.
14. Casualness or over-familiarity in our speech with the Almighty. The High and Holy One is often addressed with too much familiarity (and sometimes almost flippancy). This is both distracting and disturbing to devout persons and ought to be studiously avoided.
15. Inappropriate display of pastoral “humility.” Many ministers, before they preach, are wont to confess their unworthiness to proclaim the gospel and abase themselves before God. Miller warns, “there is such a thing as expressing unseasonably and also as carrying to an extreme the profession of humility.” Public avowal of our ministerial humility (even in the form of prayer) carries with it certain spiritual dangers for which we all must be on guard.
16. Flattery in prayer. Anything even approaching flattery in public prayer is a serious matter. As Miller said, “flattery in any man and on any occasion is criminal.” Yet, particularly when there are visiting dignitaries present in the congregation or preaching in the pulpit, this is a temptation to which ministers often succumb. We pray to God not to men. The Lord Almighty is our audience. Let us seek our approval of Him.

17. Lack of a sense of occasion. Some prayers so disregard the circumstances of the service, that they are virtually generic and would be as suitable for one occasion as well as another. Public prayer ought to be fitted for and appropriate to the circumstances of the service in which it is rendered.
18. Lack of reverence in the conclusion of prayer. Often the sentences or words of a prayer are spoken in such a way which gives the impression that the one praying is more concerned about what he must do following the prayer than he is with reverently addressing the Almighty. Our conclusions to prayer should be as worshipful as our beginnings.
19. Excessive volume and rapidity in prayer. Sometimes, as an expression of deep and ardent feeling, a person will pray very loudly and/or rapidly. Not only is this distracting in and of itself, but also makes it difficult for the congregation to follow along.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD PUBLIC PRAYER**

After his discussion of common weaknesses in public prayer, Miller suggests a number of marks of suitable public prayer. The following synopsis is drawn from that discussion.

1. Public prayer should abound in the language of Scripture. This is “one of the most essential excellencies in public prayer,” said Miller. The language of the word of God is always right, safe, and edifying. Furthermore, in God’s word there is a simplicity and tenderness which is very powerful and particularly suited to captivate the heart. Finally, it enables the listener to follow the prayer more easily.
2. Public prayer should be well-ordered. Regular order is helpful to the memory of the one who is leading in prayer and assists the worshippers who are joining in it. Furthermore, it helps keep the prayer at a proper length. Of course, this does not mean that the same order must be used every time.
3. It should be general and comprehensive. Miller observes that “a suitable prayer in the public assembly is dignified and general in its plan, and comprehensive in its requests, without descending to too much detail.” This will better suit the prayer to the general petitions that need to be rendered up by the congregation as a whole.
4. It should not be too wordy or lengthy. This will involve care not to attempt to pray on too many topics, or in too great detail.
5. It should be appropriate to the occasion on which it is offered. This is a Scriptural pattern, a help to the worshippers, and a good way to keep

pastoral prayers from becoming too tedious or lengthy.

6. It ought to contain a good dose of gospel truth. Without turning into a sermon, Miller suggests that “It is an important excellence in a public prayer that it include the recognition of so much gospel truth as to be richly instructive to all who join in it, as well as who listen to it.”
7. It should manifest variety. There is so much that is suitable for inclusion in the petitions of corporate prayer in the Lord’s church, that only laziness can lead us to pray over the same content, in the same pattern, week after week. A desirable degree of variety in prayer can be a great help to holding the attention of those worshippers who are seriously attempting to join in offering prayer to God.
8. If prayer is routinely closed with a doxology from Scripture, the doxology should be varied. This practice was standard in Miller’s day and is to be commended to the Christian public in our own.
9. It should contain petition for the advance of the gospel. Miller says “a good public prayer ought always to include a strongly marked reference to the spread of the gospel, and earnest petitions for the success of the means employed by the Church for that purpose.”
10. The names of the Lord should be appropriately employed in the various parts of prayer. Instead of simply employing one title of God throughout a prayer it is appropriate to change this title from one segment of prayer to another.
11. It should be marked by the spirit and language of hope and confidence. “Our gracious covenant God loves to be taken at his word; to be firmly and affectionately trusted; to have his exceeding great and precious promises importunately pleaded; and to be approached as a willing, tender Father, not only ‘mighty to save,’ but ready and willing to save; more ready to bestow the gifts of his grace than earthly parents to give good things to their children” said Miller.
12. The prayer after the sermon should be solemn and impressive. Miller suggests that “it ought to be formed upon the plan of taking hold of the conscience and the heart most deeply and effectually.”
13. The frequent use of the Lord’s prayer is proper, but not mandatory. We should not feel constrained to use the Lord’s Prayer every Sunday.
14. The voice and tone in which we offer prayer should be suitable to the solemn activity. “It is important to add, that the whole manner of uttering a public prayer should be in accordance with the humble, filial, affectionate, yet reverential spirit which ought to characterize the prayer itself throughout,” said Miller. For a sinner to offer a prayer to Almighty God in a

“pompous, dictatorial manner” is incongruous with our status as sinful men and the very activity of prayer (which is an acknowledgment of our creaturely dependence and an exercise of humble reliance).

In conclusion, we may note Miller’s pithy description of an acceptable public prayer. He said “Words `few,’ `well considered,’ and `well ordered,’ are the inspired characteristics of a good prayer.”