



Extemporaneous Prayer

SPENER'S INSISTENCE ON PRAYER, NOT POLITICS

Extemporaneous prayer is spontaneous and usually non-formulaic verbal praise, confession, thanksgiving, and/or petition that we offer to God in silence or out loud.

Ideally, impromptu prayer allows us to talk to our Creator intimately and comfortably, like an innocent child (Matt 6:6, 8–9). However, many of us have grown up in traditions that either never prayed or employed rote prayers and recitations. Others of us feel so at ease with extemporaneous prayer that we downplay the magnitude of the One to whom we are speaking (Amos 5:23–24).

Philip Jacob Spener (1635–1705) saw a trend toward the latter among the early Lutheran churches he pastored. Reformation controversies over doctrine and religious wars had bogged down the unfettered link to God, which Martin Luther had advocated a century before. The agenda-laden pronouncements of the new church had little to do with holiness in everyday life. Instead of theological and political debate, Spener sought moral and spiritual change for his congregation.

He started a small group that met in his home to discuss the Sunday sermon, study the Bible, and pray. He preached new birth (John 3:3–8), a personal Christian experience (John 15:14), and cultivation of the Christian virtues (Jas 2:26). He published these ideas in *Pia Desideria* (“pious longings,” 1675). Practitioners became known as Pietists.

Spener and the Pietists sought reform in the larger church through reform of the inner person. If motives were holy, they argued, then outward corruption would be swept away, replaced by good works. Spener encouraged people to “lay the right foundation in the heart,” because “what does not proceed from this foundation is mere hypocrisy.” “Work,” he told them, “on what is inward—awaken love of God and neighbor through suitable means—and only then . . . act accordingly.”¹ One of these suitable means was spontaneous prayer. “It is [not] enough,” he said, “to pray outwardly with our mouth, but true prayer, and the best prayer, occurs in the inner man, and it either breaks forth in words or remains in the soul, yet God will find and hit upon it.”²

Furthermore, he insisted that everyone, not just the clergy, the educated, or persons of means, was responsible to God and to the church to be a person of prayer. “Every Christian is bound,” he wrote, “to offer himself and what he has—his prayer.” And “with the grace that is given him, to . . . pray for all.”³

Forty years later, his godson the count of Zinzendorf established a village on his land for religious refugees, many of them Pietists. This community devoted itself to prayer and Bible study in small groups. They held one another accountable to living out their faith in obedience, hoping to continue reforms of the young Lutheran church from within. They studied the Bible, established

¹ Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria* (1675; trans. Theodore G. Tappert; Seminar Editions; ed. Theodore G. Tappert; repr. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 116–17.

² *Ibid.*, 117.

³ *Ibid.*, 94.

orphanages, and sent missionaries to India, Iceland, and America. They met for prayer so regularly and for so many years that the group became known as the Hundred-Year Prayer Meeting.

Their emphasis on everyday people, praying freely and honestly, comes down to us through the Wesleyan revivals and the Great Awakening. These in turn became spiritual streams with which we are familiar today. Methodist, Holiness, Pentecostal, Fundamentalist, and Evangelical traditions all emphasize extemporaneous prayer.

Some of us are new to prayer without form. Speaking to God the same way we talk to friends and family may feel disrespectful. Our language may seem stilted, silly, or uncomfortable. We may doubt our right to address God or our ability to find words that express what we mean. For us, the transition into extemporaneous prayer may be gentler if we permit some level of formality in the beginning, such as sticking to a prayer guide. As we follow these leads, eventually our own prayers come to mind more easily and the hope that God hears without judging our performance overcomes our awkwardness (1 Sam 1:14–17).

For others this method of prayer has become so habituated that we pay only partial attention to the conversation we are having with God. We may tick through prayer lists without asking God what he thinks and without entering a waiting posture for his answer. We forget whom we are talking to (Job 40:6–9). If we fail to open ourselves to him, hope in his power to answer and his willingness to forgive is sucked away (Ps 51:1–2; Rom 8:25–26).

We may need to break the flow of extemporaneous prayer and examine what we are doing to renew its power as a spiritual discipline. Have you ever played the “what are you thinking?” game where you are obliged to say whatever was in your head at the moment you were asked? It can be surprising to discover your intersection of ideas or train of thought. In a similar fashion, observing the mechanics of prayer and how we sound when speaking with God allows us to hear old praying and notice its answers in a new way. Then with intention we can reengage the meaningful conversation to which God calls us and lead others in calling out to him (Deut 4:27, 29–31).

Practice

1. Begin where you are. Speaking to God as though he is sitting next to you, tell him what is on your mind.
2. Start now. Do not put it off until everything is in order. There is no need to prepare, to become a better person first, to speak in appropriate tones or formal language, to get your theology straight, to go to a holy place, or to change yourself or your circumstances.
3. Be honest with God. He is your Creator. He sees in you the “division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow” (Heb 4:12 RSV). He knows your secrets, whether or not you reveal them to yourself, to others, or to him. Attempting to hide from him only wastes *your* time. God has eternity at his disposal. You have some urgency or you would not be considering prayer. Be sure that he sees and receives you just as you are. He longs for you to come.

4. Some people follow guides such as the ACTS acronym (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication/requests) to prompt them. For example, for adoration they ask themselves, “What quality or characteristic of God do I want to rejoice over?” Then they turn their third-person statement into a second-person address: “I’m glad God is a merciful god even though he’s also demanding,” becomes “I’m glad you love me even though you also seem pretty demanding sometimes.” (See also Practice Together below.)

Others use prayers in Scripture as templates for their own prayers. For example, where the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:9–13) reads “Our Father,” they ask themselves which of God’s many names fits their sense of him and use that instead of “Father.” Some of his names from Scripture include:

- I AM (Exod 3:14)
- Advocate (1 John 2:1)
- Alpha and Omega (Rev 1:8)
- Commander (Josh 5:14)
- Counselor (Isa 9:6)
- Healer (Exod 15:26)
- Holy One (Acts 3:14)
- King (Zech 14:9)
- Life (John 14:6)
- Light (Isa 60:1)
- Pioneer (Heb 2:10; 12:2)
- Provider (Ps 68:10)
- Redeemer (Jer 50:34)
- Rock (Gen 49:24)
- Savior (1 Tim 2:3)
- Servant (Phil 2:7)
- Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4)
- Teacher (Job 36:22)
- The Way (John 14:6)

When it says, “Thy Kingdom come,” they think about the small bit of God’s kingdom they need in their own work, family, or school and ask for that. For example, “Help my mother make good choices about the men she brings home,” or “Transform my job into a place of integrity.”

5. Consider offering to God issues outside yourself. What is most important to you right now? Perhaps your friends or family have a need or there is an issue at your work, apartment, or school? What one request or praise would you like to pray for your small group, your church, its ministers, committees, or services? Could you lift your own country, state, or city to God in thanks or petition? Maybe a government leader or a political difficulty will come to mind. Is there a country that you would like God to help today? Perhaps it was in the news. Perhaps it is the home country of someone you know from church or work.

6. Consider issues of your inner person. What do you long for? Can you offer that hope to God? What saddens, angers, wearies, or cheers you? How would you like God to involve himself in those circumstances? For what do you feel guilt or shame? Can you tell this to God? Can you allow him to wash it away and give you strength and wisdom for making amends? Where in your life have you seen God's blessings? Can you thank him for those?

7. When you are finished, wait for a moment. Prayer is conversation. Allow God to respond. He does not always speak in an audible voice like someone on the other end of the telephone, but he does respond. Listen for that. Look for it. What picture arises in your mind's eye? What word or song repeats in your head? Could this be part of his answer?

8. Make a written note of how your conversation progressed. Share how your prayer developed. If there seemed to be a response immediately or as you listened throughout the day, write that down or share it with a friend. Some people keep short notes on a 3x5 card in their pocket. When they say something to God, they write a two-word summary. Similarly, when an answer or part of an answer presents, they note that, whether it is a phrase from Scripture, the moral of a TV show, or something a friend says. At the end of the day they look through the conversation, reminding themselves of the themes and being encouraged that God was present with them.

9. Many people designate a half hour or more, sometime during the day, to read the Bible and to pray, but find a never-ending series of interruptions thwarts their efforts. One way they limit outside interruptions and keep themselves on track is to write that half hour into a date book or PDA. Something about the date-book lends cultural legitimacy to the practice of prayer. If someone asks for a meeting during that time, they simply work around their "quiet time" as they would any other scheduling conflict.

Sample the Prayer

If this level of discipline seems too much to achieve right now, consider picking a regular point in the day when you will stop for one minute, ask God's help for one thing you need that day and thank him for one thing that you appreciate. It would probably be best to choose a minute that is likely to be less hectic, not during the morning rush to get out the door, for example.

Practice Together

If there are others praying with you, remember that they are joining you in what you say. You are speaking to God on behalf of a group.

If praying aloud in the presence of other people is too intimidating in the beginning, consider writing down your silent prayers and then telling one another what you prayed.

Or think through the topics your prayer will cover ahead of time. When you are with a small group of people, this often occurs naturally as people share needs or reasons for being thankful. Alternatively, the group may choose to plunge into prayer, each lifting up the needs he or she is

aware of while the others add their silent or verbal agreement. Often people signal this agreement by saying “amen” during and/or at the end of your prayer. This means “it’s true” or “let it be true.”

Sometimes groups add structure to their prayers by following the ACTS acronym (see above). During the adoration period, members limit their prayers to praises of God and his character. During confession, members ask God to remove sin, either their own or that of the larger group. When it comes time for thanksgiving, members express their appreciation for what God has done. Supplication is often easiest, for we are most accustomed to calling out for help when we are in need. As they move through each section, groups focus on that sort of prayer only, giving each one time to speak what is in her heart before moving on. One person takes responsibility for shifting to the next section when the group reaches a lull or when the allotted time expires.

When the group is large enough that you need to stand so that all can hear you pray, you can think through topics on your own ahead of time. Even experienced public pray-ers lose track, repeat filler words (“we just pray,” “thank you for this day,” etc.), and feel nervous. They may simply make a mental note of petitions, praises, and reasons for thanks, or they may jot themselves a written note. Some type out the full prayer to organize their thoughts even though they do not intend to read directly from the script.

If you are concerned about the undue formality of typing out your prayer, consider the entire process—from your initial thoughts to your spoken word—as your prayer. Invite the Holy Spirit to guide your words and to receive even your preparation. If you worry that practice eliminates spontaneity, make a list that you wish to cover, but allow your spoken prayer to flow extemporaneously as the Lord leads.

Even though others are listening to you, remember that you are all addressing God. He is the audience. This is not the place to lecture him or others on a theological topic or pet peeve.

Air requests of your own with prudence and ask permission before revealing in public what others have shared in private. God handles everything we place before him with perfect care, but those listening may not be able or ready to act on what they hear with mercy and grace.

Have compassion on those you are leading. Remember that some of them have short attention-spans, feel fidgety from aches and pains, or are new to sustained periods of prayer. There are seasons when your group will endure long talks with God, pouring out everything inside. At other times, the group may share briefly with God, trusting that he understands without an extended explanation. Know the difference, and limit your praying time accordingly.

Consider

1. What are some of the challenges to praying spontaneously or without more planning than a simple list of needs and praises? What are some of the benefits?
2. What do you like most about praying aloud in this fashion? What is most difficult?
3. Some traditions emphasize spontaneous prayers, while others employ tried and true liturgies. Some encourage members of the group to respond verbally to others’ prayers as they are being prayed. Others focus on an orderly approach to God. What sort of traditions are you accustomed

to? How does the conversational prayer experience change your view of God or your individual relationship to him?

4. If spontaneous prayer is new to you or someone you know, it may be difficult to speak naturally. What are some steps you could take to relieve the discomfort of talking with God in this conversational fashion?

Study Further

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