

COMMON QUESTION NO. 1

HOW SHOULD WE PRAY IN PUBLIC?

Many Churches today have a lengthy time of 'praise & worship' which is made up of singing followed by a time of prayer in which everyone prays their own prayer aloud, usually making much noise. This is a new practice which was not there 50 years ago. Is it to be encouraged? Is this the right way to praise and worship our God? What does the Bible teach? We shall deal with the question by giving a series of propositions.

The real question is not 'How would I like to worship God?' but 'How does God want me to worship Him?'

1. God must be praised and worshipped only as He has commanded! Throughout the Bible praise and worship are offered to God alone. The Psalms have many exhortations for us to worship the Lord with our whole soul (Psalm 103). The real question is not 'How would I like to worship God?' but 'How does **God** want me to worship Him?' We dare not come before Him in any other way than He instructs us in the Bible, His word. There is abundant instruction throughout the Bible (read John 4:24, Hebrews 10:19-22, 12:28-29), and so many examples of such worship as in the Psalms. Remember what happened to Nadab and Abihu as they offered "unauthorized fire" (Leviticus 10:1-3); and to Uzzah when the ark was carried on a cart instead of on the shoulders of the Levites (1 Chronicles 15:12-15). Remember what happened to Ananias and Sapphira when they lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3-4); and to Christians who ate the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner (1 Corinthians 11:29-32).

2. There are no examples in the Bible of such 'praise and worship' where everyone prays out loud their own individual prayer. In Acts 4:24-30 it says "they lifted their voices together" but because only one prayer is recorded it must have been one person praying and all joining with their 'Amen' at the end (as 1 Corinthians 14:15). In fact Paul imagines everyone speaking in tongues at the same time, and an unbeliever entering and pronouncing the assembly mad (v. 23).

3. In all our Christian assemblies we are to strive to edify one another. 1 Corinthians 14 is a great chapter about worship and the one principle that should guide everything done is *edification* (see especially vv.12,26). This is why a tongues' speaker had to be interpreted or keep silent (vv. 27-28). We do not assemble as God's people to do our own thing, but to use our gifts to benefit our brethren. There are those who are more gifted to pray publicly and they should lead and be heard by everyone. The congregation then responds with 'Amen' which means 'I agree with this prayer, may the Lord answer.' "All things should be done decently and in order" (v. 40). Why are the clear instructions of this chapter of the word of God so consistently ignored?

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4. Our Lord instructs us how we should pray in the Sermon on the Mount. There is the Lord's Prayer which is given to us as a pattern prayer, not just to be repeated but as an outline of what we ought to be praying for (Matthew 6:9-13). This is the way to overcome that temptation to pray for the same thing over and over and get louder and louder as we do so (v. 7). We must remember that we are coming to God who is our Father in heaven. Would

you keep on repeating yourself with increasing volume to your earthly father? It would be taken as great disrespect.

5. Our Lord clearly tells us the kind of worshippers His Father is seeking, those who worship “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24). The Samaritan woman wanted a debate about the proper place at which to worship. But with His coming what matters is “spirit” = the proper attitude of the heart in dependence upon the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:18), and “truth” = worship that follows all the teaching of the Bible, and so is in conformity with who God is in His holiness, and with who man is as a creature in his sinfulness. Any worship that suggests God is like one of us, or that tries to manipulate God by noise or repetition or by a group agreeing on something, is false. Any worship that seeks to use another mediator than Christ (1 Timothy 2:5), such as Mary, is an abomination. What is most important in worship is the truth, not ‘having an experience’. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17, 15:26, 16:13). How do you know that your emotional experience is of God if it is not on the basis of the Scripture? You may have participated in ‘praise & worship’ and feel good, but that is no evidence that God is pleased. Did you approach God with reverence, were you depending only on Christ’s sacrifice to bring you into His presence, and were you praying for requests that the Bible tells us we may pray for?

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6. ‘Praise and worship’ is more like the prophets of Baal than Elijah. This is shocking but look at 1 Kings 18 and you will see the truth in it. It is the prophets of Baal who prayed for hours repeating the words, “O Baal, answer us!” “They limped around the altar that they had made.” After Elijah mocked them, “They cried aloud and cut themselves” and then “raved on...” Elijah in contrast simply told the people to come near him and he spoke a few words of prayer. God does not need to be shouted at as if He is deaf; there is no need of endless repetition as if He has to be persuaded against His will; we do not need to throw our bodies around to add weight to what we are praying. We come as a servant to his Master whom he loves and respects; and as a son to his father.

7. We have forgotten who God is. Even the pure angels who dwell in God’s presence cover their faces and feet in deep respect before God who is thrice holy (Isaiah 6:1-3). Yes, God is to be worshipped with great joy, with all the heart, but a joy which is characterized by reverence (see Psalm 96:1-6). Both joyless and irreverent worship are alike unacceptable to our God. Let us never forget that we come as creatures before the Almighty Creator (Ecclesiastes 5:1-2); and we come as unworthy sinners before an infinitely holy God, and only through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ. In the presence of God the godly prophet Isaiah cried out, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, ...” (Isaiah 6:5); Peter exclaimed, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). Even Jesus addressed His Father as “Holy Father” (John 17:11).