

Prayer and Politics

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It seems likely that in their private prayers many Christians pray about political matters. But in the corporate prayers of the gathered congregation, how is that to be managed? It is a subject of such difficulty that many leaders of worship shy away from it altogether. It is one thing to agree with Karl Barth that we ought to do theology with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. It is quite another thing to attempt to lead public prayer in that way.

The biblical warrant for public political prayer is clear enough. The Psalter, the great prayer book of the Bible, is full of prayers that may be legitimately described as political. Almost all of the Psalms that are usually classified as "laments of the community" contain petitions regarding political matters (e.g., Psalms 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 90, 123). The Royal Psalms are patently political (e.g., Psalms 20, 72, 110). The wonderfully antiroyal Psalm 146 is one of the most political of all. Brief political petitions are scattered throughout the Psalter, often introduced by the phrase "Arise, O Lord."

The Psalter material can be quickly analyzed into (1) prayers for the political ruler, (2) prayers against political enemies, (3) prayers for the public well-being of God's people, and (4) prayers for the nations (Gentiles).

The early church clearly engaged in public political prayer. Examples can be found in Acts 4:24-30 and Revelation 11:17-18. Such prayer is expressly commanded in the Pastoral Epistles: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way" (I Timothy 2:1-2).

Jesus' command—"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"—is often applied only to interpersonal relationships. But the context rather clearly indicates that the enemies, the persecutors, are the Roman occupation forces. This, too, is a political prayer.

The difficulties involved in offering political prayer in the gathered congregation are obvious, despite the biblical warrant for doing so. The leader in worship is supposed to speak for all. But in the congregation there may be, and often are, decided and bitter political differences. Ideally, the individual worshiper's response should be: "The one praying aloud is putting into words what I deeply feel." A specific political petition may well produce a response of anger and resentment instead.

The dangers of not engaging in political prayer are not so obvious. *Theologically*, we are in danger of suggesting to the congregation that God is not really interested in political matters. God is a cozy suburban God, interested in family matters, nice social occasions, and of course the church, but politics is entirely too messy for God to deal with. *Pastorally*, we are in danger of

encouraging people to deny and suppress some of their greatest fears and deepest problems, because obviously such matters should not be mentioned in church or brought to God in prayer.

How then do we do it? How do we honor the biblical warrant, avoiding the difficulties on one side and the dangers of not doing it on the other?

Compassion for those who suffer is a matter on which most Christians can readily unite. When the Sunday newspaper carries headlines about the crash of an airliner or an earthquake or a tidal wave or a nuclear disaster like Chernobyl, people expect the minister to pray for the victims and their families. When suffering has political causes, prayer can still be offered for the sufferers: for the homeless in our streets, for farm families losing their farms, for orphaned children in Central America. Of course, compassion is not enough. God calls for justice, for the correction of those policies and systems that make people homeless, that make families lose their farms, that make children orphans in Central America. How do we pray about that?

The open admission of differences is one way to go. Christians, united in compassion for sufferers, may differ deeply as to the real cause of the suffering and/or the necessary changes in political policies and structures. If this disagreement is openly expressed in the congregation's prayer, the prayer will not be nearly so divisive as if only one point of view is offered; no one can "pull out" of the prayer saying, "That's all wrong; that's not what I think at all."

"True believers" on one side or the other need to be reminded that equally sincere Christians believe otherwise. This reminder creates readiness for further prayer: that God will open our minds to deeper truth and correct us where we are wrong, that our unity in Christ may be strong enough to embrace deep political disagreement.

Prayer for God's rule is so traditional and customary that we may fail to recognize it as the heart of political prayer. Biblical phrases used by my grandfather as he led our family prayers are indelibly stamped on my memory: "Rule and overrule in the affairs of nations and make the wrath of men [human wrath] to praise thee." That kind of prayer relativizes all human politics. You cannot pray for God's rule and make a false god of any particular political party or economic system. God's rule is justice, and biblical justice is the righting of wrongs suffered by the poor and the powerless. The church's most revolutionary prayer is made Sunday by Sunday:

Thy name be hallowed,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Confession of trust in God is an essential element in political prayer. Political activists, above all others, need the reminder that no candidate, no platform, no bill before the Congress, no foreign policy is the final solution. To put ultimate trust in such things is to court disaster and disillusionment. Yes, Christians should be politically involved. Yes, we should seek approximate justice by political means. But our ultimate trust must be in God.

Put not your trust in princes,
in a human being, in whom there is no help.
When his breath departs he returns to his earth;
on that very day his plans perish.
Happy are they whose help is in the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them,
who keeps faith for ever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry (Ps. 146:3-7).

Some examples follow. They are certainly not perfect models of prayer, but they are designed to illustrate the principles discussed above. The first is a full-length prayer on the political hot potato of nuclear arms. It is not often that an entire prayer should be political in nature, but occasionally there are issues of such life-and-death importance that it is justified. The other three are simply paragraphs to be included in more comprehensive prayers that would include petitions for the sick and sorrowing, matters of congregational concern, confessions, thanksgivings, adoration, and so on. Generally, public political prayer is best done in this kind of setting.

FOR HIROSHIMA DAY

Creator God, you made the far reaches of space, too vast for our minds to imagine; and you made the mysteries of the atom, too small for our eyes to see. How manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all.

Once again we are reminded of that day when the enormous power of the atom was revealed for all to see, when our nation took that power in its hands and in the course of war destroyed a Japanese city with a single bomb. How do we dare pray about this?

Compassionate God, we pray for those who still mourn their dead, for those who still suffer from radiation sickness, for new generations who may still bear the marks in genes and chromosomes and DNA of that awful day. Wartime enemies they may have been, but they are nevertheless human brothers and sisters, and we pray your mercy upon them.

Strong God, whose word for us is "Fear not," we confess to the constant, numbing fear of nuclear destruction which the memory of this event stirs up in us. We cannot live every day with the fear of weapons which can wipe out cities, leave earth barren, destroy civilization, perhaps end human life on this planet. So we practice denial; we pretend they do not exist; we bury our fears so we can go on living. But our fears are there: there in older people who shudder to leave such a world to their grandchildren; there in young people who hesitate to plan careers, marry, and have children; there in little children who dream terrible dreams they cannot talk about.

God of unity and understanding, the Bomb not only terrifies us; it divides us. Some of us feel that the invention of the Bomb and its use at Hiroshima

and Nagasaki are national sins for which we should be in continuous repentance. Others feel that their own lives were probably spared by the quick conclusion of the war with Japan. Some feel that even the possession of such destructive weapons is immoral. Others feel that nuclear deterrence has held off another world war for over 40 years. We seldom speak to each other about these things, seeking to avoid strife and division. But we need to hear and understand each other, and to find in you a unity that does not depend on political agreement or political silence.

God of the nations, we pray for the President of the United States, the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the military commanders in the field—all who bear the awesome responsibility for decisions about the use of such weapons. Give them sane minds, good judgment, warm humanity. Enable them to continue to avoid the unleashing of such destruction. Spur them to find practical and workable ways to reduce and ultimately eliminate our nuclear arsenal. We pray also for the rulers of the Soviet Union that they may continue to avoid the use of these weapons, continue to feel they must never be used. Spur them to seek disarmament through honest negotiation. Enable them and our rulers to find other ways to defend their people, other ways to settle the very real differences between us, other ways to maintain peace on earth.

God of peace and justice, help us to live in peace in our homes, in this church, in our community and nation, and in the world. Teach us to seek justice, which is the foundation of peace.

Almighty God, rule and overrule in the affairs of nations, and cause human wrath to praise you. For our trust is in you and not in weapons. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FOR ELECTION DAY

God of all nations and our nation, guide the people of this land as they vote next Tuesday. We shall not all vote alike, but may we vote with care and conviction. Lead us to choose representatives and leaders who will direct this nation in ways of justice and peace. May the poor and powerless have their champions, as well as the rich and powerful. Shield us from cynicism that would distrust and ridicule all politicians, and from romanticism that would regard our favorite candidate as a new messiah. Let us not put our trust in human leaders, mortal and fragile, but in You, O God.

FOR NICARAGUA

God of large nations and small, the conflict in Nicaragua divides our land, pitting President against Congress, neighbor against neighbor. Within our congregation opposing viewpoints are deeply held. We pray for more light on the realities of that situation. We pray for the common people who suffer so greatly while their leaders battle a military force supported by our leaders. We pray your mercy on the children there who have known nothing but war. May

there be a willingness on both sides to soften hard positions and to find the way toward a Nicaragua that is dominated by no outside powers, poses no threat to its neighbors, and preserves freedom for its own people.

FOR THE SOVIET UNION

O God, through your son Jesus Christ you have told us to pray for those whom we call our enemies. We pray for the people and the rulers of the Soviet Union. Allay their fears as they look out on a hostile world from behind long, long borders that are difficult to defend. Assist them in their battle against alcoholism. Grant them bounteous harvests that they may not be hungry. May the arts flourish, enriching their lives with meaning. Bless your church there as it celebrates 1,000 years of Russian Christianity. Give the church's leaders wisdom and courage.

There are differences among us as to the possibilities for peaceful coexistence. We would be neither naive nor hopeless. Have mercy on victims of oppression. May the tensions between our nation and that nation not break out into a final nuclear holocaust. May hatred and suspicion decrease. May justice and freedom increase. May the way to lasting peace, despite real and serious disagreements, be opened.

A final word. Prayer and preaching go together. Only if there has been earnest and careful preaching on compassion, on the biblical idea of justice, on the necessity of political involvement, on the kingdom of God, and on the unity and diversity of the body of Christ will a congregation be prepared to join in political prayers.