

Prayer Should Lead From the Courtyard of Praise To The Temple of His Presence!

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There is a next step in worship that our people are anxious to take. It is the step from the courtyard of praise into the temple of His presence. That step is taken by prayer.

No matter how strong your desire to worship, haven't you found yourself daydreaming during congregational prayers? This is a problem in contemporary services as often as traditional. In fact, I've been in services where prayer seemed to be an interruption. The problem is that no prayer leader can pray out loud what you need to say to God in the privacy of your own spiritual temple.

A real prayer time is the hearts' desire of many pastors and worship leaders, but many struggle to find a way to do it in a meaningful way that works in the average church. A few years ago, I made a change in the way I lead prayer that made a dramatic improvement in our congregations' prayer life.

Recently, a deacon in a church where I had preached several times said, "The way you do the pastoral prayer; I like it, that's the way it ought to be done."

I am going to share with you how I lead public prayer, but first let me remind you of a Biblical truth about prayer that we all know, but seem to have a hard time putting into practice! It is this; since Jesus died on the cross, God's people can enter the temple and encounter God for themselves. **They don't need a priest, but they often need a guide.**

As pastors and worship leaders, we often find ourselves acting more like Old Testament priests than guides when it comes to public prayer. Once we say, "Bow your heads," we feel locked into some invisible 'public prayer mode'. It's like we have to keep talking out loud until we say 'amen' or God will be offended. We become 'priests of the pulpit' and enter the presence of God as we pray, but the people in the pew just sit and listen.

The Jerusalem Temple was surrounded by walls that separated the people from the presence of God. There were courtyards for Gentiles, Jewish men and women, and a small inner courtyard where the priests carried on the sacrifices. Only a few of the priests entered the temple itself, and only the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies. The vast majority of folks never got past the outer courts! All they could do was bring their offering to the priest and watch from the courtyard as he went into the temple.

There was a spiritual 'distance' between God and man. The death and resurrection of our Lord changed that. Now all of God's children are New Testament priests and welcomed into His presence. The veil was torn open and we all can enter the Holy of Holies! If, as prayer leaders, we enter His presence without even trying to bring the congregation with us, it is a wonder He doesn't slam the door in our face! Maybe He does.

Years ago, I sat near the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem on Friday evening at sun-down, the beginning of Jewish Sabbath. I listened as a hundred or so young men from a Jewish seminary marched into that courtyard. As the rams' horns echoed across the ancient city, they were singing Psalms in the Hebrew language. It was beautiful and very moving!

However, my worship was mingled with sadness because these sincere young men were trying to worship in the courtyard of a temple long gone and now unnecessary. Their worship did not bring them into a personal encounter with God! In many churches, I fear

In our earnest desire to lead God's people to praise Him, we often neglect to lead them to communicate with Him.

We enter the courtyard with thanksgiving and praise, but we need to go on into the temple for a personal encounter through prayer.

that God's people are coming into the courtyard with praise, but not being led to encounter Him personally in prayer.

Psalms 100 says that we "enter into His gates with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise." Notice the word 'enter'. Thanksgiving and praise is only the 'entry' point. God's people need to do more than praise Him.

God's people need to talk with Him, experience the ministry of His Holy Spirit, and hear what He has to say to them personally. Many worship leaders today are trying to accomplish this with music. That's like digging a hole with a shovel handle. It can be done, but put the shovel blade on the handle and it works much better. **Real congregational prayer is the part that is missing in most worship services.**

The concept of leading congregational prayer is usually this; the prayer leader prays, and the people are expected to pray silently what the leader is praying out loud. That's fine for a short prayer before the offering or benediction, but the prayer time during the worship service should be more than that. It should give every person in the congregation the best opportunity they've had all week to encounter the living God up close and personal.

When Jesus 'cleansed' the Jerusalem temple, He said that it should be a house of prayer, but that they had made it a den of thieves. None of us sell sheep in our sanctuaries, but how many people leave our worship services saying, "That is a House of Prayer!"

Several years ago, I became convicted by Jesus' words and began to search the heart of God for how He wanted me to lead His people to pray. I took a two month sabbatical and traveled the country attending many great churches. One of my objectives was to get some great ideas about leading a praying church. I heard great preaching and experienced high praise, but no real congregational prayer. All had great prayer ministries during the week and some had prayer times before the service in which some came to the front, but none had any significant prayer time during the worship service. I was disappointed. (I have since learned that they don't pray much during their services because prayer doesn't 'televise' well. Isn't that an indictment of our times?)

I came home and began to experiment with my 'pastoral prayers'. My goal was simple. Get the congregation to pray. **I soon realized that I didn't have to motivate people to talk to God. They wanted to. I just needed to show them how and give them the opportunity.** Since then, many have expressed appreciation for a real prayer time in the worship service and so far I have had no negative response.

I knew I was on the right track when a young father said to me, "Pastor, I'm sorry, but I don't listen to your pastoral prayer any more. You lead me to start talking to the Lord, and I just don't hear anything else."

So how can you lead God's people from the courtyard of praise into the temple of His presence? **Try leading people to pray by making 'suggestions'**. A typical public prayer might include this phrase, "Lord, we bring our burdens to you." That gives the congregation an example of how they might pray, but they don't actually do it because it's not specific to them and the prayer leader immediately goes on to the next sentence of his or her prayer. If the person in the pew really needs to talk to God about a burden in their life, the rest of the prayer leader's prayer actually becomes a distraction.

Try leading people to pray by suggestion!

How much better if you 'suggest' to the congregation, "As we continue in prayer, why don't you talk to the Lord silently right now about that burden in your life that is troubling you the most." Then in a quiet atmosphere, with soft background music, you give them ten to thirty seconds to do it. Then you make another suggestion and so on.

Leading prayer by suggestion may not seem like a very dramatic change, but try it. I think you will find that the people you lead in prayer will thank you for guiding them into God's presence. I have listed several practical ideas that may be helpful. Remember, in most congregations there are people that will never be led to sing, but there aren't many that you can't lead to pray!

Suggestions for having a real prayer time in your worship service.

1. Plan the prayer time as earnestly as you do the praise time. Lead it differently each week.
 - Have a prayer time at the heart of the worship service. Make prayer the focus of worship rather than a 'book-end'.
 - Try to have at least 20 minutes of uninterrupted praise and prayer.
 - Try starting the service with upbeat songs and then more meditative songs right before and after the prayer time. Then close conclude the song service with celebrative songs.
 - The songs should flow into and out of your prayer time seamlessly. The music never stops. Eliminate the 'dead' silence that often precedes and follows prayer.
 - If you're leading prayer, be on the pulpit standing behind the praise leader as he or she finishes the song. Step to the microphone instantly as they move aside. Don't say anything that distracts the people's attention from the Lord.
 - Try using other words for prayer like 'communicate', 'talk to', etc.

2. Guide the congregation to pray by suggestion rather than example.
 - Try beginning the prayer time by asking the congregation to visualize. You might ask them to close their eyes and see themselves in the heavenly throne room, at the foot of the cross, in the garden of the empty tomb, or entering the Holy of Holies.
 - Try beginning the prayer time by asking the congregation to meditate on the words of a short scripture as you read it two or three times.
 - Not every time, but often lead them through the whole sequence of prayer: repentance, praise, thanksgiving, kingdom needs, supplication for others, forgiveness of others, and finally personal needs.
 - Suggest specific things for them to pray about, like: each person seated around them, their Sunday School teacher, church staff, missionaries, government leaders, etc.
 - Don't be afraid to have a time in which you encourage them to listen to God.
 - Try to keep God's people in the habit of talking with the Lord about Kingdom needs and other people more than they do about themselves.

3. Don't forget Who's presence you are in.
 - Listen to your own prayers. Is that really what you would say in the throne room of the Heavenly Father?
 - Make corporate prayer special. When the congregation needs to pray as one, tell them. Say something like, "There is something we all need to talk to the Lord about now, please pray silently what I pray out loud."
 - Never corrupt prayer by using it to make an announcement or preach a mini-sermon.