

## **PRAYER WITH ONE VOICE: THE WISDOM OF WRITTEN LITURGICAL TEXTS**

**Thesis: It is wise to utilize written texts to enable the people of God to speak together to God and one another with one voice.**

### **1. Church history**

Much of the Christian liturgical tradition consists of fixed liturgical texts and traditions. When we pray with written forms, we can easily incorporate even the very words prayed by our fathers and mothers in the faith and thus pray together with them in a very direct way. When we draw upon the rich texts of prayer and praise from our great heritage of Christian worship, we honor our fathers and mothers in the faith by learning from them, and we take our place within that heritage in a concrete way.

### **2. Active corporate participation**

Written prayers and responses enable the whole congregation to participate very actively and directly in a corporate fashion. This is not only the ideal set forth in numerous Scriptural examples (e.g., the book of Psalms, the Lord's Prayer, the many prayers in the Book of Revelation) but also the Reformation ideal in reaction to medieval developments that eliminated the church's corporate involvement in the liturgy of the Lord's Day. Praying a written prayer together allows for the whole congregation to pray in unity in an active fashion.

### **3. Theological balance**

Because preparing written prayers and responses permits more time for reflection, the church can maintain a balance and breadth of theological content so that our corporate prayer and praise reflects the whole range of biblical themes and concerns appropriate for corporate worship. The necessary preparation involved permits the church to be more intentional and thoughtful about embodying the fullness of biblical prayer and praise in the liturgy and can avoid the narrow, idiosyncratic habits of individuals repeatedly falling back on a few familiar themes or expressions.

### **4. Training in mature and beautiful prayer**

Written prayers teach us how to pray. We don't naturally know how to pray any more than we naturally know how to do anything else in the Christian life, and therefore we need instruction. Because written prayers are (or ought to be) prepared beforehand with careful thought, these prayers provide us with good models that instruct us how to pray in a mature and biblically faithful fashion. When we pray prayers taken directly from Scripture as well as new prayers based on biblical themes composed by wise and mature pastors and teachers (both living and dead, i.e., church tradition), we are submitting ourselves in humility to Christ's school of prayer. These precomposed prayers almost invariably have more theological substance as well as beauty of form than any prayer composed and delivered spontaneously. These qualities of good content and form are most fitting for the Lord's Day liturgy, where God instructs us through biblical examples to conduct at a higher level of language than the ordinary informality of daily conversation (e.g., the book of Psalms). Just as we do not sing songs that are invented spontaneously on the spot (because prepared songs are always higher in quality), so also prepared prayers and responses are wise because the crafting that occurs in preparation hones and glorifies the quality and the communication level of the prayer and praise.

5. Predictability and repetition permit a unique kind of devotional freedom:

“The advantage of a fixed form of service is that we know what is coming. *Ex tempore* public prayer has this difficulty; we don't know whether we can mentally join in it until we've heard it—it might be phony or heretical. We are therefore called upon to carry on a *critical* and a *devotional* activity at the same moment: two things hardly compatible. In a fixed form we ought to have “gone through the motions” before in our private prayers; the rigid form really sets our devotions *free*. I also find the more rigid it is, the easier it is to keep one's thoughts from straying. Also it prevents getting too completely eaten up by whatever happens to be the preoccupation of the moment (i.e. war, an election, or what not). The *permanent* shape of Christianity shows through. I don't see how the *ex tempore* method can help becoming provincial, and I think it has a great tendency to direct attention to the minister rather than to God.” (*Letters of C. S. Lewis: Revised and Enlarged Edition*, ed. by W. H. Lewis [Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993], p. 420.)

“Every service is a structure of acts and words through which we receive a sacrament, or repent, or supplicate, or adore. And it enables us to do these things best—if you like, it ‘works’ best—when, through familiarity, we don’t have to think about it. As long as you notice, and have to count, the steps, you are not yet dancing but only learning to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don’t notice. Good reading becomes possible when you need not consciously think about eyes, or light, or print, or spelling. The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God. But every novelty prevents this. It fixes our attention on the service itself; and thinking about worship is a different thing from worshipping.” (C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*)

6. Predictability and repetition fosters participation of children and the non-literate.

Our baptized children are members of the church, and therefore they have a rightful and necessary place in the church’s corporate worship. Written prayers and responses used consistently over long periods of time can be memorized easily, which permits young children (and others who may not be able to read) to participate actively in the worship of the whole church. This participation conveys a profound sense of belonging, which forms the Christian identity of children in powerful ways.