Q&A

Church of the Eternal God
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Do you have any guidelines for opening and closing prayers?

The Church of the Eternal God in the USA, the Global Church of God in the UK, and the Church of God, a Christian Fellowship in Canada, conduct their weekly and annual Sabbath services by opening with prayer (usually after singing three congregational hymns), and by closing with prayer (after singing a final congregational hymn). These prayers are given by baptized men who have been selected by the song-leader--sometimes after consultation with or direction from the presiding minister. On occasion, and subject to the discretion of the presiding minister, baptized visitors and guests from other Church of God organizations, who might not regularly attend our fellowship, might be asked to give the opening or closing prayer.

To clarify at the beginning of this Q&A, it is not against biblical commands to have baptized men conduct opening or closing prayers in services. We explained the following in our free booklet, "Teach Us to Pray!," on page 5:

"The Bible shows us the proper way to pray, both publicly and privately. For instance, when we pray in public by giving an opening or a closing prayer in Church services, we must not pray to be 'seen by men' (Matthew 6:5). Our motivation must not be to please men, but rather to please God. On the other hand, heart-rending, intimate prayers should be communicated to God the Father privately (Matthew 6:6)."

The Church of the Eternal God and its corporate affiliates trace their roots to the Worldwide Church of God under the late Herbert W. Armstrong (who died in 1986). During his lifetime, Mr. Armstrong established the way in which Church of God services should be conducted, and we have substantially adopted these procedures. As a consequence, we are hereby reproducing and quoting with approval excerpts from an article of the Worldwide Church of God's monthly magazine, "The Good News," dated August 1971, titled, "How to Open and Close Services With Prayer." Of course, the following is not a rigid outline or formula that must and should be adhered to EVERY time, but it is meant to give valuable guidelines.

Beginning with the discussion of opening prayers, the article stated the following:

"What, after all, is the object of having opening prayers?... We are instructed in God's Word not to be given to 'vain repetitions' (Matt. 6:7). An opening prayer should not be vain and worthless, nor should it be repetitious... Nor should an opening prayer be overly long. Simply because a prayer is short does not mean it is ineffective. The Bible contains examples of very brief prayers that resulted in powerful miracles being performed.

"An opening prayer to one of God's Sabbath services should also be prayed in earnest, believing FAITH! You should expect that prayer to MAKE A DIFFERENCE in the service that follows...

"The primary purpose of this type of prayer is to ask for God's guidance and inspiration on the entire service. This includes both the hearing and the speaking. It takes in... even the announcement period. It would be appropriate to begin by THANKING God for the opportunity to meet in peace and harmony. Gratitude could be expressed for the hall or the fine weather or various other favorable conditions the Church has been blessed with...

"The most important thing is to ask and expect God's inspiration on the sermonette and the sermon. You could request that Jesus Christ actually be present in spirit to guide and direct the proceedings. Ask God to speak through his human instruments and lead them to say what is most needful and profitable for the whole congregation. As the world becomes more and more violent and Satan's wrath is increasingly intensified, it becomes

more necessary also to ask God for protection...

"Keep in mind that you are speaking to GOD--not the listening audience before you. Remember it is a prayer! ... Be sincere... It is a prayer meant to open the services. There is not time or need to cover the entire spectrum of current events...

"Do not use the opening prayer as an opportunity to give a sermonette... Get your mind OFF SELF and say what you have to say. Be confident without conceit. Be humble, but not groveling. Use a normal, clear voice and avoid any form of theatrics."

Similar guidelines apply to a closing prayer at the very end of the Church's worship services. The article in The Good News continued:

"Often, closing prayers are so general that they are totally unrelated to the message that preceded them! Express gratitude for the spiritual food God has provided."

One word of caution here is in order! It would not be appropriate to try to evaluate the contents of the messages--either directly or indirectly--or to give a lengthy repeat of the contents of the sermonette or the sermon. Remember that the opening and the closing prayers should be SHORT. For instance, when a sermon discussed seven points, it would be unnecessary to repeat them in the closing prayer. It might be perhaps beneficial to very briefly mention one or two points, which had the biggest impact on you.

But beware that the closing prayer is not supposed to be a sermonette--rather, it is a SHORT prayer to God. On the other hand, a closing prayer which has no relationship to the sermonette and the sermon would probably not be most effective. As in all aspects of Christian life, balance is the key. If you have specific questions in this regard, or in regard to anything else which is mentioned in this Q&A, please ask your local minister.

The article in The Good News went on to state:

"Of course, it is not necessary to summarize, or add an 'additional point' to the sermon in the closing prayer!... It is also appropriate to ask God's protection on the brethren traveling home following the services...

"The announcements may have contained news of a very sick person or some other crisis in God's Work. This could certainly be alluded to in the closing prayer. Many men neglect to acknowledge the sermonette in the closing prayer... the sermonette is part of our spiritual food every Sabbath, and we ought to thank God for it...

"Be sincere, but not overemotional. But the closing prayer, as the opening prayer, should not be overlong [sic].

"If you are called on to lead an opening or closing prayer, look upon it as an opportunity and a blessing. And be sure your prayer is one to which the whole congregation can sincerely say 'Amen' (so be it!)."

In addition, it would be appropriate to ask in the closing prayer for God's blessing on the meal which we might partake of after services, and to ask God for His blessing and protection for special activities which the Church might have planned for the time after the Sabbath, or for activities on days during the annual Feast of Tabernacles, which are not weekly or annual Holy Days, or for special occasions such as weddings or funerals.

We should not read from any notes when we give an opening or closing prayer. Rather, we should allow God to inspire us through His Spirit at the moment when we begin to pray aloud in front of others. Let God speak through you, and don't allow yourself to become distracted by any notes that you might have written beforehand. Have FAITH in God that He will inspire you when you are about to pray, and that He will put His words in your mouth, and then speak with confidence, knowing that God has heard you, and that He is answering your silent prayer to Him for inspiration. This includes, of course, that we pray habitually in private, so that we are not unprepared when we are to give a "public" prayer in Church.

This principle of allowing God's Spirit to inspire us,

when we pray, is clearly set forth in Scripture. For instance, note what Christ told His disciples regarding how to behave when they would be asked to explain their convictions, perhaps in the context of a court proceeding: "... do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speaks, but the Spirit of your Father [which] speaks in you" (Matthew 10:19-20, compare Mark 13:11, Luke 12:11-12).

Even though Christ is addressing here especially the time of arrest and the subsequent opportunity to testify for Him and God's Way of Life, the principle applies nevertheless in other circumstances as well. This is not to say that we should not prepare our messages and reduce our thoughts to writing and that we should not have any notes when delivering a sermonette or a sermon, but it is to say that speakers must not be too "note-bound" when they deliver their message. Rather, they should and must allow God to inspire them, while speaking. We will address this topic in more detail in a subsequent Q&A, dealing with the art of preparing and delivering powerful sermonettes.

However, insofar as opening and closing prayers are concerned, it is our belief that notes should not be used in that regard.

We would also like to explain here why we do not believe that women should give opening or closing prayers in Church services. We stated the following in one of our Q&As, answering the question whether women should preach and give sermons or Bible studies in Church. The following comments apply likewise to the biblical prohibition for women to give prayers in Church.

"The Bible is very clear that such conduct would be in violation of Scripture. We are setting forth below excerpts from pages 13-14 of our booklet, 'The Keys to Happy Marriages and Families':

"'Notice 1 Timothy 2:11-15 where Paul says, "Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence..." Notice, too, the parallel passage in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, "Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak... And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church."'

"These passages clearly teach that women are not to give sermons or Bible studies in church. Older women can teach younger women in private, but not from the pulpit (compare Titus 2:1-5). We also note that Aquilla and Priscilla took Apollos aside to explain to him the Way of God more accurately (Acts 18:24-26). Priscilla did not teach Apollos publicly, in front of others...

"'Rienecker's Lexikon zur Bibel points out, under "Women," "The relationship between man and woman, ordained by God, can also be seen in the role of service and function within the church... Paul does not allow the women to teach, that is, to fill the office of teacher in the church (1 Timothy 2:12). It is different when Apollos is introduced more fully, in a personal conversation with Aquilla and Priscilla, to the teachings of God (Acts 18:26)."'

"The message of Scripture is unambiguous: Christian women are not to teach Biblical or spiritual matters in church or in a public forum. It may be difficult for some to accept and apply God's Word on this issue..."

The biblical prohibition for women to preach or teach or "speak" in Church services--or to give "testimony," as is so common these days in certain Pentecostal services--applies equally to the prohibition for women to give opening or closing prayers in Church services. This is not to say, of course, that a woman should never pray; nor, that she should not pray at home with her children, or sometimes in private together with her husband; or, that she should not, on occasion, ask for the blessing of a meal at home, in the presence of her husband and their children. We are strictly addressing here prayers by women "in public," and we emphasize again that women should not give opening or closing prayers in Church services.

In conclusion, the opening and closing prayers are an integral portion of Sabbath services that invite God to be present in spirit and inspire them, and subsequently to thank Him for doing just that. Baptized members of God's Church, when called upon to give the opening or closing prayer, should not take this opportunity lightly, and they should carefully consider these guidelines that they may deliver a prayer in the correct manner and in a right frame of mind.

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