

BUT I CAN'T PRAY ALOUD!

For those who can't, those who pastor them – and others too!

Part 1 - Introduction

I have written this article because of the enormous guilt some Christians may feel about not being able to pray aloud off-the-cuff, and also because of the wrong pressures to do it that other Christians may unwittingly impose.

In some Christian circles folk do not even expect their leaders to be able to pray extempore; while in others it seems almost to be a requirement for Christian membership.

What follows will help you understand much more about praying off-the-cuff, and it will help your attitude to those whose experience of it differs from your own, whatever your present position.

How should Christians regard the ability to pray off-the-cuff ('extempore')?

Is it essential?

There is an important distinction between being **essential** and being **desirable**. For example, the ability to swim is, I feel, *desirable*, it is obviously not *essential*.

Is the ability to pray aloud **essential**? Is it among the Christian essentials?

Well, there aren't many Christian essentials, and it is certainly not one of them!

According to St. Paul *if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* [Romans 10:9] That's what we mean by a Christian 'essential'.

Christians sometimes unwittingly seem to extend the list of so-called 'essentials' into countless requirements of behaviour, all of them far beyond that required by God. Scripture does not teach us that such praying-abilities are required to be a Christian. It does, however, record the disciples' question *Lord, teach us to pray.* So Jesus' response is particularly relevant.

Jesus said: *Pray then in this way:*

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one.

[New R.S.V. translations throughout this article. See Luke 11:1, and Matthew 6:9-13.]

Even praying like this is only *desirable*, it is not an essential. It is particularly relevant to the subject of this article because it shows how practical and kind Our Lord's advice was.

Jesus did **not** advise his followers to pray informal, off-the-cuff prayers which they had first to think up and then put into words. He knew that that was difficult. It is! [Hence this article].

Jesus kindly and wisely opted for a simpler and more reliable foundation. He did not expect us to work at creating it, he created it for us.

Our Lord's suggestion was a prayer that was -

- short
- simple
- easy-to-learn
- balanced in content
- easy to use

It was designed to be easily learned by heart

[In English, verse often rhymes. In the Bible, poetry in Hebrew (O.T.) or Greek (N.T.) was based more on the play of ideas than the play of sounds.]

If you cannot pray off-the-cuff, do not feel guilty, especially if you know that you do pray as Our Lord taught us.

Do not lose sight of our Lord's basic teaching as you read on. It keeps the demands of other Christians and one's difficulties and abilities at praying in their right perspective.

Is it an optional extra?

The ability to pray 'extempore' is obviously not essential for the Christian life. In fact it is opposite in style to that which Jesus suggested when his disciples asked him to teach them.

But having stated that we must not consider the matter 'closed'. In the Christian life most matters are never 'closed'. For we are commanded to grow-up in the spiritual life and what we could not do yesterday quite often we should be able to do tomorrow!

[Ephesians 4:15, But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,...

I Peter 2:2. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation.]

Growth, life, is characterised by change and movement. We are not entitled to stand still generally, but it may well be that God is more concerned with change in another area of our lives, and that the ability to pray extempore is not high on his agenda for you at the moment.

Is it a sign of spiritual maturity?

No! Don't get the impression, from me or anyone else, that the ability to pray extempore is a hallmark of holiness or maturity! I've heard some of the most immature Christians do it exceedingly well, and some holy saints of God show no flair for it.

Of course there is always the temptation (and I use that word deliberately!) to regard God's freely-given abilities as self-generated achievements. Each of us is different, and God gives different abilities and gifts to each and makes different demands of each.

PART II - Common Reasons Why Folk Cannot Pray Off-the-Cuff

Whether this praying-aloud is our own problem or the problem of someone whom we pastor, it is equally useful to review the most common reasons why folk feel they cannot do it. Usually there will not be a single reason but a combination of factors. My list will cover the most common ones.

1. Optional

We face many demanding and embarrassing situations in which we are *required* to speak – at school, at the chemist, at the doctor's, answering a phone, and so on. In these difficult situations we cannot opt out, but have to grit our teeth and get on with it! At such times our heart beats a hundred-to-the-dozen and our mouths dry up, but we do it because we have no choice. If it happens often enough it generally gets easier for us.

One of the difficulties about praying off-the-cuff, is that in most churches and homes such praying aloud is *optional*. If we had had no choice in the matter, we would have mastered it years ago! Because we've never been *made to*, we constantly put off mastering today what we can get-away-with leaving until tomorrow. [Some folk indefinitely postpone learning to ride a bike, drive, or cook an egg.]

2. No Shallow End

It is at home that we are first loved; where we first fail; where we are first forgiven, and where we know ourselves still to be loved. At best, parents (a) restore our faith in ourselves and so (b) enable us to master new skills. When speaking with God off-the-cuff is part of the home scene, we learn it as we learn to speak with others. It is much more difficult if we have not been brought up with it due to the absence of Grace and/or Family Prayers.

When we begin to learn something we are like children – whatever our age! There is no other route to acquiring skills. Would-be swimmers are thoughtfully provided with a 'shallow end'. Unfortunately the church is often less kind and would-be pray-ers find themselves plunged into the terrifyingly deep end of the average Prayer Meeting!

3. Cushion Syndrome

Another reason why praying aloud can be difficult might be termed 'cushion syndrome'.

'Keeping one's religion to oneself' is a particularly British trait, (and is quite contrary to Scripture!). It breeds dangerous assumptions. One of the worst is that neither God nor anyone else has any right to make religious demands of me.

The pub sign **The Cushion and the Crown** has been taken to symbolize this view of Christianity – a Cushion in this life and a Crown in the next! This view is very common indeed, and God's blessing misunderstood in terms of comfort (see the article **Blessings – Helping to Retain Them**).

Unfortunately parsons have, in the past, tended to reinforce this, and given the impression that they are paid to talk to God instead of us.

The view that ‘religion is one’s own affair’ can lead to a non-verbal faith, based on deep feelings but the actual content of which is not known to the person concerned, and cannot be communicated to others.

4. Self

We become embarrassed when we are aware of ourselves; when we are not, we are not embarrassed – it is as simple as that! The mother whose child is in danger can rush into the street in her nightie without a second thought, because at that time the child has become all important and there is no room left for her to be aware of herself. *Perfect love casts out fear* as we read in 1 John 4:18, to which the writer added *and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.*

Children are not self-conscious: it is something we acquire as we get older, and – if we are to inherit the Kingdom of God [Matthew 18:3] – it is something which as Christians we need to recapture.

Embarrassment should not be thought of as a permanent injury! We didn’t start life with it, and with God’s grace, we’ll hope not to end life with it either! The New Testament shows that it was a *lack* of embarrassment that was the hallmark of the early Christians, and one of the fruits of Pentecost.

5. ‘Children who ask ...’

Another cause of difficulty when praying aloud is that some readers may have grown-up under the domestic rule that ‘Children who ask *don’t get!*’ It was invented by grown-ups to avoid the spoilt and pestering child. Whatever the short-term merits of such teaching, its long-term results can be disastrous!

Our experience of our parents provides some of the basic building-bricks of our spiritual lives. If ‘asking’ is wrong, and we dare not ask Mother or Father, we will later have difficulty in asking our Heavenly Father. It is the very opposite of the Gospel [cf. Mt. 7:7, Jn. 16:24]. Jesus taught [Mt. 7:11/Lk. 11:13] –

If you, being evil, know how to give good things to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give good things / the Holy Spirit *to those who ask him?*’

The spoiled child is not the child who *asks*, but who has the misfortune to have parents who can only say ‘Yes’! It is natural to ask. Rather than restrict this, it is better to let children ask and to learn early that Love does not always say ‘Yes’, but quite often ‘Wait’ or ‘No’. In this way the experience of Love denying us what we want – yet still loving us – is a very positive element in our later religious experience.

(It may not be too far-fetched to see that the ‘children-who-ask-don’t-get’ teaching may show itself in a tendency in certain Christian traditions to think that the intercession of others, whether priests or saints, will be ‘better’ and ‘more effective’ than our own.)

6. Worth-less?

Our sense of our own worth can be another reason why praying aloud is difficult.

Much of what I have written above is tied-up with our ‘worth’ and our image of ourselves. Embarrassment stems from an anxiety about our worth in the eyes of others. If we are not

bothered what others think of us we will not be embarrassed, if we are bothered – we will be! The child whose requests are snubbed is led to feel that he/she and his/her feelings and hopes are of no value. ‘Clearly I’m not worth listening to; my requests are not worth heeding ...’ ‘Wor-ship’ equals ‘*Worth*-ship’. As ‘friend-ship’ is the experience of friends, so ‘*wor*-ship’ is the experience of our *worth*.

That which denies our worth is contrary to Christ.

To retain, for whatever reason, wrong estimates of our own worthlessness is to deny all that God has revealed in Jesus. Kneel before a representation of Christ on the Cross and say aloud (if you can) ‘**You endured this for me, but I will still live as if I am of no worth to you!**’

To retain worthlessness when our worth has been so demonstrated is not humility but arrogance, not piety but pride. Such blasphemy serves the Devil well, for it demolishes the foundation of true worship and true witness, and renders us non-combatants in Christ’s Army.

‘There is now *no condemnation* to those who are in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 8:1ff. see the whole chapter!) As we grow into the Gospel and reflect on the Cross, so our true worth dawns upon us.

In view of what God has done for us, we have no right to hug to ourselves our worthless image like the ‘comforter-blanket’ we had at the age of three! For, believe me, we can use it to avoid many costly and demanding things. As the Spirit leads us into all Truth he will not long allow us to believe that we have no worth to God, that our requests are of no interest to him, or that our faltering prayers of no joy to him.

7. Professionalism

Most of us have grown up in churches of ‘pyramid’ structure with the holiest, strongest and most effective seemingly at the top and average and useless at the bottom! Many religious activities: witnessing, taking part in worship, praying aloud, etc., seem to be the exclusive activity of those at the ‘top’. The ‘top-people’ usually dress differently in church and sit in a special and usually ‘higher’ place.

This means that lots of us tend to measure our abilities by the ‘professionals’ – and lose heart immediately. [Although sometimes the professionals do things so badly it must be a great encouragement to all – but that’s another story!]

8. Pride

If folk are feeling guilty about not being able to pray extempore, the very last thing I would want would be to make them feel even more guilty. But as I have pondered this subject and determined to treat it as kindly as possible I cannot get away from the necessity of this heading – ‘Pride’. Pride tarnishes everything we do and praying and praying aloud is no exception.

One of the reasons for the inability to pray aloud may be simple old-fashioned Pride :

I have too much pride to risk making a fool of myself ...

I have too much pride to risk exposing myself in this way ...

You may have lived with this so long and wrapped it up in so many theories to protect yourself that neither you nor others are aware of the place of pride in the problem.

It is possible that you have used some of the customary diversions to avoid your pride being uncovered:

Prayer is nonsense. If prayer worked – why Auschwitz?

Those who go to prayer meetings are no better than I am!

I have theological problems with intercessory prayer ...

The best means of defence is always attack. If you find yourself attacking others on this or related areas, ask yourself what it is you are having to defend in yourself or protect so harshly.

9. Wrong Theology

Another cause of difficulty when folk pray aloud may be their personal 'theology'.

Some people will not be able to speak to God because for them he is not real. Others will not be able to speak to him aloud in prayer because he is *wrongly real*, in other words they have wrong ideas about him. If they think him to be impersonal, angry, or distant, then their wrong beliefs about him will make spontaneous talking with him difficult. They will not think of themselves as theologians or even having a 'theology', but what we think about God *is* our 'theology', and it profoundly influences us.

The New Testament theology of God in relation to prayer was well illustrated on the occasion when a Vicar's child was in church.

'Let us pray ...' said the Vicar.

'Oh my *Daddy!*' exclaimed the child, as her heart leaped up in recognition and love!

Adults will know that the spiritual equivalent of this can only come about by the Spirit being poured into our hearts whereby we cry 'Abba, Father', and by the Holy Spirit testifying within us that we are God's children [Rom 8:15-16].

10. Leading God astray

There are those who feel that only 'correct' prayer is allowed, and are so filled with the fear of praying wrongly that they do not pray aloud at all!

This belief can be dismissed at once as nonsense, since it turns everything up-side-down! God is not a puppet on the strings of my prayers – and if he were he would not be God! Our prayers can never dictate his action; he is not at our mercy. A wrong prayer might cause him to smile, but not to act wrongly!

A great fear of praying wrongly implies that the results lie in our hands not God's. Children don't hesitate to chat to their parents about the things they'd like. They do not hold-back for fear their requests are 'wrong'. They make their requests first, and wait for the parental response!

PART III - Practical Advice

I have above, listed ten reasons why folk find praying extempore difficult. I hope that the pastors of those who find this difficult will be sensitive to the very real fear that folk have and why they may have it.

Before concluding with practical advice both for such individuals and their pastors, something needs to be said about liberty.

Liberty?

The opposite of bondage is liberty – not compulsion. If you cannot pray aloud do not automatically assume that those who can are enjoying a liberty which is denied you. It often happens that Christians pray aloud not as a joyful exercise of spiritual freedom, but under a group-compulsion to ‘produce the spiritual goods’, and to behave out of *fear* of those around. There are always pressures upon us to conform to group behaviour, and to meet group-expectancy. To pray extempore because you are too fearful not to is not liberty! (It is a pity that Christians have never encouraged saying ‘pass’ at certain prayer meetings in which the group motivation to verbalize intercession seems to creep stealthily around the room!)

Practical Advice

I will not separate my advice to leaders and to those for whom such prayer is difficult, since each will be helped by what is addressed to the other!

1. There are, as Paul Tournier has helpfully pointed out, not strong Christians and weak ones. All Christians have strengths: all Christians have weaknesses. Individuals must not compare their weaknesses with the strengths of others, and fellowships must be more ready to recognise unfamiliar strengths.
2. The essence of Christianity is to be ‘in Christ’, we do not forfeit that position by our weaknesses. Our ‘standing’ does not depend on religious abilities. Fellowships should be exclusive in terms of their allegiance to Jesus as Lord, but not in terms of styles of behaviour, class, education, abilities, dress, etc.
3. The condemnation felt by those who lack the ability to pray aloud off-the-cuff is often not their fault but it comes from the attitude of other Christians. God does not create spiritual look-alikes, and we must be alert to the tendency for groups to find their security by a uniformity of behaviour, style and language. God has created our differences for our growth and enrichment.
4. When an individual is made to feel second-rate, the weakness is often due not to that individual but to the group who want the security (and deadness) of a monochrome uniformity. A fellowship that cannot lovingly accept those whose pattern of Christian spirituality differs from its own is failing badly.

5. Sensitive leadership will ensure that there is a ‘shallow-end’ available for the blossoming of prayer-life. A Prayer Meeting can be very rich by, eg. encouraging just the mention of one-word topics among its members and forbidding longer prayers.
6. Prayer is *Godward*. If it is in a group and aloud, it is overheard. This factor can give it for some a ‘horizontal’ element. No Christians should emphasize this, since it is not the ‘direction’ of prayer. ‘What others will think’, ‘How others will judge me’ ought not to be factors before, during or after such praying. I recall at one gathering a very handicapped person praying. I don’t think any of us could understand a word, nor did that matter for he was not addressing us, but God – and *he* understood! It was a source of enormous joy to us all that the fellowship was *real* enough and loving enough for this to happen. Unlike many prayer meetings, I felt that this, at last, was the ‘real thing’!
7. The arrangement of those present should therefore minimize the ‘horizontal’ element. In this connection sitting in a circle may not be ideal.
8. If praying aloud is a problem, re-read this pamphlet, and over a period of a fortnight or so ponder prayerfully the points made. Ask the Holy Spirit to highlight what is relevant to *you*.
9. Take special note of anything here that makes you angry or upset. This may be the key point and take you a long time to face and come to grips with.
10. If you feel condemned about this. Recall those who have reinforced this; forgive them, and ask God’s blessing upon them. (Often things have to reach a certain degree of pain or difficulty before we take steps to right them. Thus God may use those who make things ‘worse’ to contribute to our healing.)
11. Share your thoughts or feelings and this pamphlet with a Christian friend or minister.
12. Confess to God if there has been any unwillingness to grow and get stronger in the spiritual life, or if you have been hugging your inability as a device to use for opting-out.
13. Soak yourself daily in the Scriptures. Learn to see yourself as you are ‘in Christ’. Pray for yourself to decrease and God to increase in your consciousness.
14. Pray for the Holy Spirit to pour into your heart daily and afresh a new love of God. (Praying aloud is not a social accomplishment but an overflow of love. That is why an experience of the Holy Spirit in blessing can often solve this problem in one go, since an authentic experience of the Holy Spirit makes God ‘bigger’.)
15. Guard against assuming that condemnation is ‘normal’. It is contrary to the Gospel and needs to be fought, not accepted.
16. Our spiritual growth does not operate at every level all at the same time (relief!!!). God generally deals with one aspect at a time. What matters most is that he is at work in an area of

your life. He has a time and a place for you in which he might want to deal with this. Retain a patient impatience with your weaknesses. Let God write the agenda of your growth.

17. Don't pray very much about this as a 'problem' – that will make it grow! Increase your thanksgiving instead.

A Prayer

Dear Father,

I thank you for Jesus my Lord,
and for all that he shows me of your love for me.
Kindle afresh your Holy Spirit within me,
that I may love you, praise you, and serve you more.
Through Jesus Christ.

Amen.