

Author: Paul F. Bosch [ [pbosch@golden.net](mailto:pbosch@golden.net) ]  
Series: **Worship Workbench**  
Issue: **Essay 144 + November, 2009**



Copyright: © 2009 Paul F. Bosch.

*This document may be freely reproduced for non-commercial purposes with credit to the author and mention of the **Lift Up Your Hearts** web site < [www.worship.ca](http://www.worship.ca) > as the source.*

## A CUSTOMARY FOR WORSHIP PRAYERS IN WORSHIP

1.0 Christian prayer has a long **HERITAGE**, building upon models of prayer forms from (chiefly) Jewish sources, and elaborated over the centuries into distinctly recognizable Christian liturgical traditions. This brief overview is intended to instruct leaders of worship in some of those traditions.

1.1 The most easily recognized of the Jewish **ANTECEDENTS** of Christian prayer is the so-called *berakah*. (The word is spelled variously in transliteration from the Hebrew.) It is a prayer of praise to God, frequently beginning "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, maker of all things..."

1.2 Note that the *berakah* is a prayer of **PRAISE** to God, reciting the reasons for our gratitude in God's abundant mercy. It often spells out these reasons at some length, and in some detail — as one might say, "telling God what God already knows" — precisely because, as with other Jewish prayer forms, this prayer assumes that others of the faithful are "listening in", so to speak. It is a mode of address, one might say, that combines at once both prayer and proclamation; it moves simultaneously in both liturgical "directions", to use an older terminology: the direction of "sacrifice" (addressed to God), and at the same time in the direction of "sacrament" (addressed to the people). The *berakah* form of prayer is noteworthy in Christian worship, therefore, as a model of the life of faith: the Christian life is to be a life of praise addressed to God, but always in the hope and expectation that other people are "listening in".

1.3 It is appropriate, therefore, in all Christian worship, that all prayer exhibit at least a measure of this **DOUBLE FOCUS**: addressed to God, but in the expectation that other people are both present and, at least in a sense, participating.

1.4 It will not be necessary, for example therefore, for worship leaders to turn toward the altar (to **ORIENT** to the altar) at all moments of prayer. The *berakah*-character of

all prayer, along with the architectural reality of a free-standing altar, suggests that prayer in our assemblies can appropriately be addressed to God wherever the leader is positioned: facing "eastward", facing "westward", or indeed facing "north" or "south". (See the notes on "Posture, Position, and Gesture" and "Orienting, Genuflecting, Reverencing, and Kneeling" elsewhere in this *Customary*.)

2.0 There are **FOUR** basic prayer-forms used in public worship: 1) the collect form, 2) the litany form, 3) the bidding prayer form, and 4) what might be called the "pastoral prayer" form.

2.1 The **COLLECT** type of prayer is derived from classic Latin roots; it is very simple, austere, compressed, and one might say elegant, with a five-part form: See prayer for Year B, page 34 in *ELWorship*, for the Sixth Sunday of Easter.

1. An address ("O God...");
2. the so-called "antecedent reason", or basis for presuming to pray ("...You have prepared for those who love you ...");
3. the petition itself, that is, what we are praying for ("...Pour into our hearts such love for you...");
4. often, the results desired ("...that... we may obtain...");
5. a concluding "oblation" or doxology ("...through Jesus Christ our Lord...").

2.2 Note that in collect-type prayers, the petition always addresses a **SINGLE ISSUE**; in a collect, one does not string together a series of thoughts or petitions, but focuses on a single issue or intention. This single thought may be somewhat elaborated; but classic collects are usually elegantly brief and eloquent in their modesty and simplicity.

2.3 Note that the **PRAYERS OF THE DAY** (*ELWorship* pages 18 ff) are all cast in classic collect form; so also are most of the prayers in the section titled "Additional Prayers", *ELWorship* pages 72 ff. Note also the similarity of the collect-type prayer with the classic Hebrew *berakah*, particularly when the "antecedent reason" is extended.

2.4 Note that the people's **PARTICIPATION** in collect-type prayer consists in a simple "Amen" ("So be it!") at the conclusion of the prayer — the oblation or doxology ("through Jesus Christ...") providing the "cue-line" for the people's "Amen". The people need not, indeed *should not*, be encouraged to read collect-type prayers along with worship leaders; it is sufficient for the people simply to assent to the leader's words with their own heart-felt "Amen".

2.5 Note, in addition, that the prayers at the conclusion of **MORNING PRAYER** (*ELWorship* page 298) are typically a series of short prayers in collect form with the people responding "Amen" at the conclusion of each prayer. Note also the option of utilizing The Great Litany, page 238, or Responsive Prayer, page 328.

2.6 Note finally that many of the collect-type prayers are beloved **CLASSICS** of

Western spirituality — and indeed of English literature. There will be Christians present, in almost every assembly of worshipers, who recognize these words and cadences; and almost always at least one or two people present who will be able actually to quote many of these classic prayers from memory. Worship leaders do well to keep in mind this beloved familiarity with the classic collects, and will not want to vary their wording or their form. Tampering with the words or rhythms of the classic collects — changing the endings, for example, from the familiar oblation ("...through Jesus Christ...") to the "Lord, in your mercy" litany-form — is a type of "literary vandalism" that worship leaders may attempt only at the risk of offending the pieties of many people present.

3.1 Various **LITANY** forms of prayer are a second prayer-type utilized in Christian worship. This prayer-form consists of a petition, thanksgiving, or intercession, spoken by the worship leader, to which the people are invited to respond with a brief affirmation, such as "Hear our prayer". The leader's petitions frequently end in a repeated refrain that functions as a kind of "cue line" for the people's response: the leader, for example, may conclude each petition with the words "Lord, in your mercy", and the people respond "Hear our prayer".

3.2 It is this ritual "**GIVE AND TAKE**" between leader and people which gives litany-type prayers their distinctive character; they have the "incantational" or ludic character of easily-memorized children's rhymes and stories. Litanies are at their best when their distinctive character is honoured. We rightly expect the leader's role to provide the literary — indeed, the literate — element in the equation, with the people's responses brief, memorable, easily appropriated by all, and, we might even say, "pre-literate".

3.3 Remember that in an earlier age, the leader alone had access to a prayer-book; indeed, perhaps the leader alone was literate. Worship leaders today do well to respect the "**PRE-LITERATE**" character of much of Christian worship; today no less than in the Middle Ages, it is an asset, not a liability.

3.4 Note that the **LEADER'S** portion of litany-type prayers may be addressed either a) to God, or b) to the people, inviting them or "bidding" them to pray. In the case of a), both leader's words and people's words function as prayer addressed to God; the *orans* posture is therefore appropriate throughout.

3.5 In the case of b), however, the leader's portion is often not, strictly speaking, cast in the form of prayer to God, but rather in the form of an invitation or bidding to the **PEOPLE** to pray. The leader's words in b), that is, are addressed to the people, and not to God, and therefore an *orans* posture is not appropriate. In b), it is the people's portion, not the leader's portion, that constitutes the prayer itself; therefore an *orans* posture is appropriate at the people's words only.

3.6 Still another **VARIATION** of b) provides words for the leader which are first addressed to the people ("Let *us* pray for...") and then conclude with an address to God ("Lord, in *your* mercy..."), and the people respond ("Hear our prayer"). In this case, the

words of the leader's invitation or bidding to the people to pray are not, strictly speaking, part of the prayer, and therefore should not be accompanied by an *orans* posture. The leader's refrain ("Lord, in your mercy"), together with the people's response ("Hear our prayer") constitutes the prayer itself; an *orans* posture is appropriate at these words.

3.7 Rule of thumb number one: If in these words you are addressing **GOD**, an *orans* posture is always appropriate. Rule of thumb number two: If in these words you are addressing the people, an *orans* posture is not appropriate. Rule of thumb number three: If in doubt, don't use an *orans* posture, but a reverent "neutral". (See the paragraphs on "Posture and Gesture" in this *Customary*.)

4.1 The so-called **BIDDING PRAYER** represents still another form of public prayer utilized among us: see the classic Good Friday bidding prayer in *ELWorship*, page 263. In a bidding prayer, the leader invites ("bids") the people's prayers for a specific cause or concern; there follows a brief silence, during which the people are presumably praying silently; and then the leader summarizes the people's prayer, usually in a brief collect-type prayer, and the people respond "Amen"; then the leader invites the people's prayer for a second specific cause or concern; this is again followed by silence; and then by a collect prayed aloud by the leader; and so on.

4.2 Two worship leaders may **SHARE** in the leadership of a bidding prayer. One voice (the Assisting Minister, for example) may announce the bids or invitations to pray, and a second voice (the Presiding Minister, for example) may offer the collect, in each case.

4.3 Note that, in utilizing the bidding prayer form, the (silent) prayers of the people are "collected" or summarized in the leader's prayer, which, again, is cast in classic collect form, to which the people announce their assent by means of the concluding "**AMEN**". Litany-type responses are not necessary or appropriate when using the bidding prayer form; congregations should be instructed that their heart-felt and vigorous "Amen" is always a sufficient and appropriate response to prayer offered on their behalf by worship leaders.

5.1 The final prayer form used in Christian worship is familiar to worshipers from a so-called "free-church" tradition as the "**PASTORAL PRAYER**". This form of prayer has the character of an extended "solo" by the worship leader. Unlike a collect, the scope of a pastoral prayer is unlimited; it may range over a wide variety of topics, issues, causes, and concerns. It may be read from a book or manuscript, or it may pour forth spontaneously, *ex corde* ("from the heart") and even *ad lib* ("freely invented in the moment").

5.2 Note that the people's **RESPONSE** to a "pastoral prayer" is a simple and vigorous "Amen".

5.3 Note further that "pastoral prayer" forms are not appropriate at **MORNING PRAYER** or Responsive Prayer, where a series of collect-type prayers is traditional,

since these are more suited to the meditative and communal nature of these Offices.

5.4 Note that in services of Holy Communion, **ANY** of the four types of prayer (a series of collects, a litany, a bidding prayer, or a "pastoral prayer") may be utilized at the time of the Prayers or Intercessions (*LBW* page 65, rubric 22). But simple prudence suggests that prayer-forms not be mixed during the Intercessions.

5.5 Note finally the sweep, the **SCOPE** and **SEQUENCE** of prayer concerns in the Prayers or Intercessions of the Holy Communion, *ELWorship*, page 105. Whether cast in collect form, litany form, bidding prayer form, or pastoral prayer form, the Prayers (Intercessions) should include petitions for 1) the whole church, 2) the nations, 3) those in need, 4) the parish, and 5) special concerns. Note that the people may be invited to offer prayer, as well. And note that, following the peoples' prayers, the final prayer is always for 6) the faithful departed.

#### 5.6 **RECAPITULATING:**

For Morning Prayer: The Prayer of the Day  
Other *collect-type* prayers  
The "office prayer"  
The Lord's Prayer

For Evening Prayer: The "short litany" of evening prayer  
The "office prayer"  
The Lord's Prayer

For Night Prayer:  
"office collects" page 326  
The Lord's Prayer

For Responsive Prayer:  
The Prayer of the Day  
Other *collect-type* prayers  
The "office prayer" page 330

For The Holy Communion:  
A "pastoral prayer"  
OR  
A "litany type" prayer  
OR  
A series of collect-type prayers

+ + +