

**Prayer of the Heart**

An Examination of the Baptist Practice of Extemporaneous Prayer and an Argument  
for Preparation and Conceived Prayer

Daniel Blake Hulse

ST 698: Prayer: Theology and Christian Life

April 25, 2016

## Introduction

“God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for our food. By his hands we all are fed. Thank you God for daily bread, amen.” This was the prayer of my family’s dinner table every night. It was a prayer we could say as children. It is a good contextual prayer suitable for giving thanks for the food provided. It is also so engrained in my memory that I often pass over it without any pause to reflect on what I am actually praying. Baptists over the course of history have generally rejected such set prayers arguing that they do not arise out of the heart. However, is that always true? Must we always pray spontaneously out of the heart? The Baptist tradition of extemporaneous prayer is born out of good intentions; but Baptists could benefit greatly by preparing for public prayer in the tradition of Isaac Watts’ conceived prayer, which provides the opportunity to take advantage of our rich history and positively shape the prayers of the congregation.

### The Murky History of the First Baptists

The history and primary influences of the Baptist denomination are murky at best. The denomination clearly has one foot in the English Separatist tradition. Baptists represent a left wing of the Separatist movement. The earliest English Baptist congregation coalesced under the leadership of Cambridge educated John Smyth. The group developed hostility toward any formal liturgy and formed a dramatic democratic polity in which every member bore responsibility for preaching, prophecy, and prayer.<sup>1</sup> Sometime in 1607/8, John Smyth and his

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists, 1603-1649* (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2006), 32.

separatist congregation fled persecution in England for Amsterdam. In 1609, Smyth baptized himself and his followers establishing the first known Baptist church. Smyth would eventually leave that church for a Mennonite community. His associate, Thomas Helwys, would take the remaining congregation back to England and establish the General Baptist Church.<sup>2</sup> Independently of those General Baptists, another Baptist group emerged out of the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessy church in Southwark.<sup>3</sup> By 1644, seven congregations had organized from this congregation into a network of Particular Baptists.<sup>4</sup> These two Baptist groups lived an uneasy coexistence, but both arose out of the milieu of English Separatism. Like all separatists, these early Baptists lost faith in the ability of the state church to reform itself and they desired to worship God “more purely” in independent congregations.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in terms of worship and direct influence, the Baptist denomination is a product of the separatist movement and desired the pure worship of a free church from its beginning.

The Baptist denomination also has another foot in the Radical Reformation. The influence continental Anabaptists had on the earliest Baptists is a controversial topic. Smyth’s congregation quickly moved to Amsterdam to avoid religious persecution in England. In Amsterdam, Smyth came into contact with a Mennonite community. However, the most reliable historical sources point to the Baptist

---

<sup>2</sup> The term “general” refers to the church’s Arminian beliefs as opposed to Calvinist soteriology.

<sup>3</sup> “Jacob-Lathrop-Jessy” is a designation created by historians that utilizes the names of the first three prominent pastors of the group. It is used in the absence of any known name for the congregation.

<sup>4</sup> The term “particular” refers to the church’s Calvinist soteriology.

<sup>5</sup> David W. Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 21-22.

congregation coming under the influence of the Mennonites after their baptism.<sup>6</sup> However, early Baptists were not unaware of Anabaptist ideas. These early Baptists certainly shared an affinity in theological values with Anabaptists even if the direct influence of Anabaptists is difficult to establish.

As heirs of both the Radical Reformation and English Separatism, Baptists adopted “principles of punctilious loyalty to the word of God, of passionate desires to worship the Almighty correctly, and of willingness to restructure the church in accordance with God’s precepts.” As such, “Baptists were the people who took Reformation principles to their ultimate conclusions.”<sup>7</sup> This judgment by the historian David W. Bebbington is a negative value judgment that implies other groups stopped short of fulfilling the promise of the Reformation. However, it does represent the convictions of the early Baptists. They felt they were radically following the precepts of God and engaging in a pure form of worship.

### **The Worship of the Early Baptists**

The element that connected all separatist groups in worship, and indeed life itself, was a thoroughgoing, rigorous Biblicism.<sup>8</sup> There was a consistent desire that worship should be scriptural. There was also a preference for liturgical decisions to be made within the local congregation. The combination of these factors exhibits an inherent instability. Different congregations will interpret Scripture differently. However, there was a hope that agreement would eventually be reached as people

---

<sup>6</sup> Bebbington, 37.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>8</sup> James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 118.

earnestly follow Scripture.<sup>9</sup> The disagreements between the earliest Baptists and other separatists would arise out of Scriptural convictions primarily concerning the ordinances and polity.

Using primary sources from William Kiffin, Matthew Ward argues that early Baptists separated from the Church of England specifically because “there was no freedom of worship, and there was limited participation on the part of the congregants.”<sup>10</sup> Worship must be free in order that human endeavors not quench the movements of the Holy Spirit. John Smyth argued, “The Spirit is quenched by set forms of worship, for therein the spirit is not at liberty to utter it self, but is bounded in.”<sup>11</sup>

This desire to eliminate all set forms of worship while clinging to a rigid Biblicism leads to one surprising aspect of early Baptist worship. All books were laid aside in the free worship of the early Baptists. This actually includes the use of the Bible itself. Smyth writes that “that books or writings are in the nature of pictures or images and therefore in the nature of ceremonies: and so by consequent reading a book is ceremonial.”<sup>12</sup> Scripture reading was included in a kind of preamble to

---

<sup>9</sup> White, *Protestant Worship*, 119.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Ward, *Pure Worship: The Early English Baptist Distinctive* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 60. Ward ultimately argues that pure worship was an early Baptist distinctive. I would contend that the early Baptists actually shared this concern with other separatists. Actual Baptist distinctives such as believer’s baptism and regenerate church membership represent different conclusions arising out of a shared concern for pure worship.

<sup>11</sup> John Smyth, *The Differences of the Churches of the Separation: Containing A Description of the Leitovrgie and Ministerie of the visible Church*, in *The Works of John Smyth fellow of Christ’s College, 1594-8*, vol. 1, ed. W.T. Whitley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 277. Spelling in the quotes from this work are modified to adhere to modern norms.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

worship in early Baptist meetings. After the reading and discussion, all books were laid aside so that what followed in worship flowed spontaneously from the inspired heart.<sup>13</sup> This practice would gradually fade as the seventeenth century progressed, but it highlights the kind of dedication to free and pure worship the early Baptists exemplified.

Despite the potential for chaos inherent in the concerns of Separatists, predictable patterns emerged in their worship services.<sup>14</sup> Baptists are no different. Christopher Ellis describes six patterns that emerge in early Baptist worship. First, there is an almost paradoxical need for structure and order. However, the structure is general and allows for spontaneity within that structure. Secondly, there is a willingness to change any practice to better conform to Scripture and the standards of pure worship. Scripture can critique any practice or tradition of the community. Third, there is a concern for simplicity and freedom. Nothing can be ritual. Fourth, congregational singing eventually became important, especially in Particular Baptist congregations. Fifth, there is a deep structure of the worship that moves from addressing God to proclaiming God's Word and ends with a response to that proclamation. Related to the previous point, the final aspect of Baptist worship outlined by Ellis is that preaching takes up the largest portion of the service.<sup>15</sup>

Ellis also presents a number of different orders of worship among different early Baptist groups.<sup>16</sup> It is not important to enumerate all aspects of their worship

---

<sup>13</sup> Christopher J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 47.

<sup>14</sup> White, *Protestant Worship*, 120.

<sup>15</sup> Ellis, *Gathering*, 67-69.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-62.

here. It is enough to maintain that prayer significantly features in every service prepared by those Baptist groups. The service began and ends with prayer, and it is interspersed throughout.

### **Prayer in the Worship of the Early Baptist Church**

Like the worship service, prayer in the early Baptist church was free of set forms or liturgies. John Bunyan, an early English Baptist, wrote a significant pamphlet on prayer entitled *I Pray with the Spirit and with the Understanding* while serving a prison sentence for his religious views. For Bunyan, “Prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the heart or soul to God, through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>17</sup> There is an emphasis on sincerity and a centrality on what is felt in the heart. Bunyan’s piece is also highly polemical (he was serving a prison sentence for his views). He argued against the “wise men” of his day that were “setting such a prayer for such a day, and that twenty years before it comes.”<sup>18</sup> Using Romans 8:26-27, Bunyan argues that we do not know how and for what we should pray. He argues that planning prayers does not account for the current context of the congregation and does not allow for the free expression of the heart praying with the Spirit.

John Bunyan begins his prison pamphlet saying, “Prayer is an ordinance of God, and that to be used both in public and private; yea, such an ordinance as brings those that have the spirit of supplication into great familiarity with God.”<sup>19</sup> Prayer is

---

<sup>17</sup> John Bunyan, *I Pray with the Spirit and with the Understanding*, <http://www.mountzion.org/johnbunyan/text/bun-prayer.pdf> (accessed April 15, 2016), 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

more than just the heart of the worship service for Baptists. It is both personal and public. E.Y. Mullins, probably the most influential Baptist theologian of the twentieth century, believed “religion is the supreme expression and completion of the relationship between God and man” and “prayer is the central and most characteristic mark of religion.”<sup>20</sup> Prayer is at the heart of a personal relationship with God.

Given the above, Baptist life begins with personal prayer. This is the foundation of any further extension of religious life.<sup>21</sup> The effectiveness of corporate prayer is built upon the personal prayer of its members. It has always been expected and encouraged of Baptists to engage in personal prayer.

Baptists also have a tradition of family prayer. The personal prayer extends into devotion among those in the same home. In many ways, this is a difficult practice to maintain, which is evidenced by the numerous complaints of Baptists concerning its neglect.<sup>22</sup> In Baptist life, prayer life has a layered structure beginning with personal prayer building into family prayer and culminating in public prayer.

Public prayer is the primary focus of this study. Historically, there have been two primary venues for public prayer in Baptist life. One is the prayer meeting, which generally happens midweek. Typically, the purpose of this meeting is to address the needs of the community in prayer. Requests and praises are taken and prayed over. While this meeting is often perceived as inwardly focused, it took on

---

<sup>20</sup> Edgar Young Mullins, *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1917), 274.

<sup>21</sup> Charles W. Deweese, *Prayer in Baptist Life: A Historical Survey* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1986), 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

significant importance in the mission movement and revivals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. One representative that highlights this aspect of public prayer is John Sutcliff. Reading Jonathan Edwards, Sutcliff placed emphasis on the gathered community of the church praying for revival and the opening of doors for the sharing of the gospel.<sup>23</sup> Prayer was outwardly focused on evangelization among the nations. This illuminates an important aspect of Baptist prayer life in that it can bring the congregation outside of its own boundaries and make it aware of the social needs of the wider community.

The apex of the prayer life of the Baptist church is the public prayer featured in the worship service. At their best, Baptists take seriously their responsibility in offering prayers for the congregation. In his *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, John A. Broadus, a very influential Southern Baptist of the nineteenth century, addressed the importance of praying before the congregation. “The prayers form the most important part of public worship. He who leads a great congregation in prayer, who undertakes to express what they feel, or ought to feel, before God, to give utterance to their adoration, confession, supplication, assumes a very heavy responsibility.”<sup>24</sup> Offering the public prayer is a matter of great import.

The public prayers of early Baptists are difficult to study because almost all public prayer was extemporaneous and very little was ever transcribed. Compiling the scant historical data, Ellis finds three prayers present in the earliest Baptist worship service. There was an opening prayer, probably invoking God. There was a

---

<sup>23</sup> Michael A.G. Haykin, *Ardent Love for Jesus: Learning from the Eighteenth-Century Baptist Revival* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bryntirion Press, 2013), 68.

<sup>24</sup> John A. Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 23<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1898), 527-528.

prayer after the discussion of Scripture and before the prophesying. Finally, there was a concluding prayer after the period of prophesying.<sup>25</sup>

The exact content of these prayers are subject to speculation. The eighteenth century Particular Baptist John Gill wrote that prayer should consist of adoration of God, confession, petition, thanksgiving, denunciation of evils, and doxology.<sup>26</sup> It seems reasonable to view Gill's ingredients as a good indicator of the contents of the prayers of earlier Baptists. It is also reasonable to suspect that the prayers of early Baptist reflected upon the Scripture read during the meeting and the nature of the prophesying that preceded it.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Need for Extemporaneous Prayer and its Strengths**

The Baptist preference for extemporaneous prayer is rooted in history and theological conviction. John Smyth's first principle point of *The Differences of the Churches of the Separation* reads, "We hold that the worship of the new testament properly so called is spiritual proceeding originally from the heart."<sup>28</sup> Smyth's primary concern in worship is that nothing will quench the Spirit's influence over the heart. He believed that set forms introduce an external compelling force that could interfere with the motivations of the Spirit.

In Bunyan's definition of prayer cited above, prayer must be sincere and assisted by the Holy Spirit. The concept of extemporaneous prayer is a fence

---

<sup>25</sup> Ellis, *Gathering*, 104-105.

<sup>26</sup> John Gill, *Two Discourses: The One on Prayer, the Other on Singing of Psalms, from 1 Corinthians 14:15*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (London: G. Keith and J. Robinson, 1751), 13-21. Gill notes that he is not arguing for a precise form, but general ingredients. His only prescription is that prayer end with a hearty "amen" as a sign of assent to all that was said.

<sup>27</sup> Ellis, *Gathering*, 104-105.

<sup>28</sup> Smyth, *The Differences of the Churches of the Separation*, 273.

hopefully protecting prayer from insincerity. It removes variables from prayer that could possibly quench the Spirit and the ethos of pure worship.

Extemporaneous prayer does have specific strengths. Modern Baptist pastor Sharlande Sledge comments, “The task of the person offering the pastoral prayer is to gather the unspoken prayers of the people and give them voice.”<sup>29</sup> Sledge eloquently describes how she can look out over her congregation and know the situations of the individuals and families that have gathered together to worship. A good minister lives among her people and knows their joys and struggles. Free prayer in worship allows that connected minister to address the situations of his congregation explicitly. Of course, it is possible to find prepared prayers to address any number of situations. However, free prayer can be composed for very specific situations and has the potential of tapping into the emotional core of the congregation in addressing its particular needs in prayer.

This shared emotional experience of the congregation correlates to another strength of free prayer. Affections are connected to understanding. The Pietist August Hermann Franke wrote concerning the relationship between words and affections, “a man’s words are, in fact, the index of his feelings or affections.”<sup>30</sup> A complete understanding of a statement entails understanding the affection out of which it is uttered. Consider the statement, “it is raining outside.” If the person is planning a fun outdoor activity, then the statement is said in sadness. If in a season

---

<sup>29</sup> Sharlande Sledge, “Pastoral Prayers in Worship,” in *Gathering Together: Baptists at Work in Worship*, ed. Rodney Wallace Kennedy and Derek C. Hatch (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 52.

<sup>30</sup> August Hermann Francke, *A Guide to the Reading and Study of the Holy Scriptures*, trans. William Jaques (Philadelphia: David Hogan, 1823), 125.

of drought, the statement can be expressed out of joy. The physical situation of rain does not change, but a full understanding of the import of the statement is not possible without knowledge of the affections involved.

The reception of statements and situations can be different depending on the affectional orientation of the one receiving. The communication and reception of affections is pivotal to understanding. In prayer, one speaks to God. Don Saliers has pointed out that speech to God is also speech about God. Thoughts and emotions are a “single matrix.” Only when there is a misunderstanding does one typically separate thought and emotion. When we praise someone, we rarely follow that with an explanation of what we think about that person.<sup>31</sup>

John Smyth also understood this connection between the affections and understanding in prayer. In an early work entitled *The Paterne of true Prayer*, Smyth studied prayers found in Scripture. He believed the one praying with Scripture should “labor to insinuate ourselves as much as may be into the grace and affections expressed in the prayers by the makers thereof” in order to make the prayers one’s own.<sup>32</sup>

I would argue that the consonance between understanding and affection reveals a strength of free prayer composed within specific contexts. Sharlande Sledge eloquently noted the connection among those in a healthy congregation.

---

<sup>31</sup> Don E. Saliers, *The Soul in Paraphrase: Prayer and the Religious Affections*, New ed. (Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 2011), 63.

<sup>32</sup> John Smyth, *The Paterne of true Prayer*, in *The Works of John Smyth fellow of Christ’s College, 1594-8*, vol. 1, ed. W.T. Whitley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 277. Spelling in the quotes from this work is modified to adhere to modern norms. This work is from 1605 and at this time Smyth still believed that an immature Christian could use the prayers of other people in lieu of one’s own.

Ideally, a congregation should be generally aware of the strife and joys in each other's lives. There is less chance of confusion regarding the affection expressed in prayer. There is the potential in free prayer of an intimate understanding of the prayers offered because the one praying and the congregation passively participating share overlapping affectional contexts. There is less chance of confusion concerning the words uttered and the affections out of which they arise.

These are some of the strengths of extemporaneous prayer at its very best. However, free prayer is often not given with the attention and intentionality that it demands. It is not prepared like the sermon or musical performances of the service. Though few would admit it, the spontaneity of free prayer can lead to its denigration subconsciously. It is easy to assume something that takes no preparation is not important. This typical lack of preparation in free prayer leads to a suggestion for improvement and a way forward.

### **Conceived Prayer: A Potential Way Forward?**

The essential conviction behind a preference for extemporaneous prayer is fencing off the possibility of external forces inhibiting the expression of a heart enflamed by the Spirit. However, there is also a desire for order. The Baptist church has always displayed a preference for one person praying on behalf of the whole congregation (multiple people may pray, but never audibly voicing prayer at the same time). It is important to note the difference between active and passive participation in prayer. Active participation in prayer is actually voicing the prayer. Passive participation involves hearing the prayer. In both active and passive participation, the presence of the worshippers is important and they are formed by

conscious and unconscious elements in the service and in the prayers specifically.<sup>33</sup> Even if one is not actively praying, participation is still realized through mere presence.

However, Christopher Ellis argues that the practice of extemporaneous praying is still an “impressive prayer” in which the one actively praying shapes the communal prayer and the experience of the passive hearers.<sup>34</sup> Public extemporaneous prayer does not escape from the possibility of an external force manipulating the heartfelt expressions in prayer. In this way, extemporaneous prayer is no different than written prayers. However, the language of interference or manipulation has negative connotations. There is a possibility of the one praying positively shaping the experience of the hearers and drawing them into a more intimate and intense cooperation with the Spirit.

Since all public prayer in which one person offers a prayer for the congregation is “impressive” prayer, Ellis argues that one should devote time to prepare for prayer in order to positively shape the congregation’s experience in public prayer. Ellis is a modern British Baptist. A considerable number of British Baptist churches have shifted to more liturgical forms of worship (though their number still constitute a minority). However, he is not alone in calling for more premeditation in prayer. John S. Hammett, a Southern Baptist theologian, notes that pastors who have spent hours preparing sermons will feel that it is incorrect to

---

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of active and passive participation see White, *Protestant Worship*, 17-18.

<sup>34</sup> Christopher J. Ellis, “Written Prayers in an Oral Context: Transitions in British Baptist Worship”, in *The Collect in the Churches of the Reformation*, ed. Bridget Nichols (London: SCM Press, 2010), 146.

prepare for public prayer in worship. Hammett counters, "Preparation doesn't make sermons or music less heartfelt; neither should it have any effect on prayer but to make it a more helpful and positive aspect of worship."<sup>35</sup>

In arguing for more preparation in prayer, Ellis draws on a distinction made by Isaac Watts between "extemporary" prayers and "conceived" prayer.<sup>36</sup> In *A Guide to Prayer*, Isaac Watts argues that two extremes should be avoided. One should never restrict oneself to only using set forms of prayer. Watts does allow for situations where prayer books and set forms may be used. However, restricting oneself to only using a prayer book would be "quenching the Holy Spirit."<sup>37</sup> The other extreme to be avoided is extemporary prayer where we "without any reflection or meditation before hand, address ourselves to God, and speak the thoughts of our hearts, as fast as we conceive them."<sup>38</sup> Watts does allow for extemporaneous prayer in certain occasions and for seasoned Christians, but argues that the public prayers of most should be conceived prayers, which are premeditated and prepared for.

Watts gives four primary arguments for conceived prayer (which he also calls free prayer). First, solemn occasions such as prayer demand our upmost care. Secondly, it is scriptural that the heart should be prepared for prayer. Also, a person

---

<sup>35</sup> John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 242.

<sup>36</sup> Ellis, "Written Prayers in an Oral Context", 150-151.

<sup>37</sup> Isaac Watts, *A Guide to Prayer*, in *The Works of the Reverend and Learned Isaac Watts, D.D.*, vol. 3 (London: J. Barfield, 1810), 125-126.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

will never learn how to pray without preparing to pray. Finally, prayer is an occasion that calls for our best efforts to honor God in public prayer.<sup>39</sup>

A knee-jerk Baptist reaction to Watts' notion of conceived prayer will be the familiar refrain of "quenching the Spirit." However, Watts answers that critique. He argues that a prepared person could go to pray for the congregation and the Spirit leads in a direction different from what was prepared. That person should follow the direction of the Spirit.<sup>40</sup> Preparation can only help.

Thoughtful Baptists have never rejected any method of prayer. Devout persons everywhere have used numerous methods of prayer to their advantage.<sup>41</sup> In fact, I would argue that shutting off any form of prayer, written or oral, would inhibit the Spirit from working freely.

I contend that Watts' notion of conceived prayer can take advantage of Baptist heritage in order to lead the congregation into a more meaningful prayer experience. In *The Nature of Doctrine*, George Lindbeck proposes studying religion from a cultural-linguistic viewpoint. The cultural-linguistic viewpoint studies religions as "comprehensive interpretive schemes...which structure human experiences and understanding of self and world."<sup>42</sup> Lindbeck is looking at religions as a whole. I would like to use his vocabulary and concept to address a denomination and argue for a Baptist form of conceived prayer that structures the experience of the congregation in prayer.

---

<sup>39</sup> Watts, *A Guide to Prayer*, 129-130.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>41</sup> See Deweese, *Prayer in Baptist Life*, 25 for an example.

<sup>42</sup> George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 18.

Christopher Ellis argues that all forms of public prayer in which one person prays on behalf of the congregation is an impressive prayer (see above). John Hammett goes further than his comments cited above. He argues, “thoughtful prayer *should* lead worshipers to adore, confess, intercede, and thank God.”<sup>43</sup> I believe that conceived prayer gives the one who prays time to consider their expression. It allows for a preparation of the heart and of the mind. It gives time to be selective and intentional about one’s vocabulary and the use of symbols that have deep meaning in Baptist life.

Baptists have a diverse cultural-linguistic vocabulary that can be taken advantage of in order to shape experience in prayer. John Broadus, the nineteenth century Southern Baptist cited above, argued for significant preparation for public prayer. A critical component in his prescribed preparation was familiarity with Scripture. Broadus believed that Scripture supplies the “most appropriate and affecting language of prayer.”<sup>44</sup> Perhaps because of the rigorous biblicism of their founders, Baptists have a deep relationship with Scripture. The right passage at the right time can take advantage of that relationship and intimately inform the prayer experience of the congregation.

Sharlande Sledge recalls the significant Baptist history with hymns. Eventually, congregational singing became an important part of the Baptist worship service. Sledge believes that one should build up a library of language from poetry,

---

<sup>43</sup> John Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 242. Emphasis mine.

<sup>44</sup> John A. Broadus, *Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 528.

Scripture, and hymns.<sup>45</sup> These hymns can invoke feelings and memories that shape experience.

Sledge goes so far as to suggest that the prayer be composed beforehand and practiced exactly (with a microphone if available). I am not arguing that this level of preparation is necessary. My principle argument is that public prayer in Baptist life is important enough to demand preparation when possible. This preparation benefits the congregation in many ways, including the intentional incorporation of cultural-linguistic symbols important to Baptist life.

### **Conclusion**

My family has a new prayer at the dinner table. We do not follow a set prayer as in my own youth. However, we do have patterns. Our toddler son likes to hold hands as we pray. He generally repeats after his mother or myself the petitions of the prayer. We typically end with “thank you for Jesus.” He anticipates the ending and throws his hands in the air and yells, “Amen!” It is a pattern he recognizes, but it is not arising out of his own experience. His experience is being shaped by our prayer patterns. It is not arising spontaneously out of his heart, but I am convinced that it is prayer. In examining prayer life in the Baptist tradition, I believe that we should take advantage of our freedom. The strength of free worship should not be perceived as spontaneity, but rather the freedom to follow any form or pattern of prayer as we seek the guidance of the Spirit. If prayer lies at the heart of our relationship to God, then it demands our attention and diligence. The importance of the public prayer of the congregation calls for preparation, but preparation does not

---

<sup>45</sup> Sharlande Sledge, “Pastoral Prayers in Worship”, 56.

necessarily cancel spontaneity. At its best, preparation conditions the mind and heart to follow the lead of the Spirit in shaping the experience of the congregation.

## Works Cited

- Bebbington, David W. *Baptists Through the Centuries: A History of a Global People*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010.
- Broadus, John A. *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*. 23<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1898.
- Bunyan, John. *I Pray with the Spirit and with the Understanding*. Accessed April 15, 2016. <http://www.mountzion.org/johnbunyan/text/bun-prayer.pdf>.
- Deweese, Charles W. *Prayer in Baptist Life: A Historical Survey*. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1986.
- Ellis, Christopher J. *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition*. London: SCM Press, 2004.
- , "Written Prayers in an Oral Context: Transitions in British Baptist Worship." In *The Collect in the Churches of the Reformation*, edited by Bridget Nichols, 139-156. London: SCM Press, 2010.
- Francke, August Hermann. *A Guide to the Reading and Study of the Holy Scriptures*. Translated by William Jaques. Philadelphia: David Hogan, 1823.
- Gill, John. *Two Discourses: The One on Prayer, the Other on Singing of Psalms, from 1 Corinthians 14:15*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: G. Keith and J. Robinson, 1751.
- Hammett, John S. *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005.
- Haykin, Michael A.G. *Ardent Love for Jesus: Learning from the Eighteenth-Century Baptist Revival*. Grand Rapids, MI: Bryntirion Press, 2013.
- Lindbeck, George A. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009.
- Mullins, Edgar Young. *The Christian Religion in its Doctrinal Expression*. Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1917.
- Saliers, Don E. *The Soul in Paraphrase: Prayer and the Religious Affections*. New ed. Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 2011.
- Sledge, Sharlande. "Pastoral Prayers in Worship." In *Gathering Together: Baptists at Work in Worship*, edited by Rodney Wallace Kennedy and Derek C. Hatch, 51-62. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013.

Smyth, John *The Differences of the Churches of the Separation: Containing A Description of the Leitovrgie and Ministerie of the visible Church*. In *The Works of John Smyth fellow of Christ's College, 1594-8*, Vol. 1, edited by W.T. Whitley, 269-320. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915.

-----, *The Paterne of true Prayer*. In *The Works of John Smyth fellow of Christ's College, 1594-8*. Vol. 1, edited by W.T. Whitley, 67-268. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915.

Ward, Matthew. *Pure Worship: The Early English Baptist Distinctive*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014.

Watts, Isaac. *A Guide to Prayer*. In *The Works of the Reverend and Learned Isaac Watts, D.D.* Vol. 3, 111-202. London: J. Barfield, 1810).

White, James F. *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989.

Wright, Stephen. *The Early English Baptists, 1603-1649*. Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2006).