

# How to Open and Close Services with Prayer

***Are you terrified at the prospect of opening or closing services with prayer? Here are guidelines to help you if you are called upon.***

**One** of the most mind-shattering occasions to many men in God's Church is their first time to be called upon to lead in an opening prayer before the congregation. Some actually live in **FEAR** of being called upon!

A few have been known to skulk deliberately in the shadows of obscurity hoping to avoid notice. Others will sit behind larger people in order to "escape" being called upon. Grown men have been found trembling and quaking at the prospect of being asked to lead an opening prayer.

On the other hand, there always seems to be a small number of men in every congregation who can *hardly wait* to be called upon! They strive to be noticed — in hope they *will* be asked. They would relish the opportunity to lead the "prayer to end all prayers." (And it probably *would* end all opening prayers — at least for *them!*) But fortunately such individuals appear to be a minority.

To *most*, however, opening or closing a service with prayer for the first time is a somewhat traumatic experience, but one that can be taken in stride and made profitable for the entire congregation.

## **Why Opening Prayers?**

What, after all, is the object and purpose of having opening prayers? Is it merely to make services sound more

"religious"? *Would it make any difference if we did not have such prayers?* Is it simply part of a hollow, meaningless "ritual" which serves no worthwhile purpose? Not at all!

We are instructed in God's Word not to be given to "vain repetitions" (Matt. 6:7). An opening prayer should not be vain or worthless, nor should it be repetitious. It should not be a mouthing of mere words. Some have been known to repeat "our Father" or "Father" a dozen or more times in a short opening prayer. This certainly is vain repetition!

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.

## **What to Ask For**

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 the singing and 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, as the Apostle Paul says: "*Giving thanks always for all things* unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 5:20).

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*. Up to now, we have enjoyed relative peace in our services and little interference from outside sources. But times are *changing!* Violence, hatred, religious persecution and intolerance are on the increase.

Of course there are other things that could be appropriately mentioned in an opening prayer, depending on each local situation.

## **How to Pray**

Keep in mind that you *are* speaking to GOD — not the listening audience before you. Remember it *is* a prayer!

*Avoid "King James English"!* The

English of 1611 does not make a prayer any more effective. In fact, it tends to render a prayer downright sanctimonious! Jesus never used it, as some erroneously supposed.

Be *sincere!* Do not pray a “canned” or well-rehearsed prayer. Let God inspire your words and don’t worry about being grammatically perfect.

*Stick to the point!* An “opening prayer” is just that. It is a prayer meant to open the *services*. There is not time or need to cover the entire spectrum of current events, the forthcoming local election and Aunt Mini’s bunions! Remain in the realm of the apropos. Strive to avoid “pseudo-humility.” Humility is commendable, of course, if it is sincere and from the heart. But some have been known to bang their heads on the end of the microphone because they bowed too low! Try to speak *into the microphone* and not into your tie clasp.

When you are called upon, avoid making a “grand entrance.” There should be a minimum of noise and commotion. During the last song, arise from your chair and move discreetly to the outside isle, and walk *quietly* to the speaker’s area on the stage. As the last strains of the song are being sung you should be near the song leader (but out of reach of his arms). That way you are *ready* when the hymn is over.

Do not use the opening prayer as an opportunity to give a sermonette. It is not intended as a “witness” or “testimonial” or anything of that sort. Be **SINCERE**, straightforward and

unaffected! 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.

### The Closing Prayer

If you have been informed that you will be called upon to lead the *closing* prayer, follow the same procedure in getting to the stage as with the opening prayer.

Make an effort to indicate to God in the closing prayer that you did indeed comprehend the sermon and derive benefit from it. 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. Perhaps *mention some specific points* discussed in the messages and *briefly* ask God to enable all the congregation to apply *them* in their lives.

Of course, it is *not necessary to summarize*, or add an “additional point” to the sermon in the closing prayer! Primarily the closing prayer is intended to ask God to help the congregation achieve the object the speaker had in mind in delivering the message. Sometimes the sermon is to *educate* us on a point of knowledge. Occasionally it is intended to *correct*. Sometimes *encouragement* is the object. But *all* sermons are not meant to encourage. *All* are not intended to correct. Strive to understand what the speaker had in mind in this regard and

relate your request in the prayer to it.

It is also appropriate to *ask God’s protection* on the brethren traveling home following the services. Sometimes the minister may have a long, hazardous drive between churches and adverse weather conditions to cope with. So seeking God’s protection can be an important element in the closing prayer.

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. This is natural since the sermon often overwhelms it due to length and impact. But the sermonette is part of our spiritual food every Sabbath, and we ought to thank God for it.

If you have been profoundly moved or inspired by the messages it is not wrong to express this in your prayer. But do not writhe in paroxysms of emotions and create an embarrassing scene! Be *sincere*, but not overemotional. But the closing prayer, as the opening prayer, should not be overlong.

The *guidelines* in this article are given to *help* you, and are not intended as a “gnat-straining” set of rigid rules. 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!).