

Holy ground, shaky ground, common ground

Public prayer in rhetorical perspective

Juanita Weaver

The worship leader was praying in a loud voice. Five-year-old Jenny whispered, “Mommy, if he was closer to God, he wouldn’t have to holler, would he?” This child’s naïve question connects with more sophisticated criticisms of our worship prayers. While her comment focuses on the relationship between the leader and

Anyone can engage in the private act of talking and listening to God. But not everyone offers effective public prayers, focused not only on listening to the mind of God but also on group communication.

God, a more common complaint about public prayer speaks to a lack of connection between the leader and the human listeners. When listeners say that a prayer wasn’t good, they are usually pointing to a communication gap. The first time I saw a reproduction of Michelangelo’s painting of the creation of Adam, I was drawn to the slight gap between the finger of God reaching down, and the human finger reaching up. I wanted those fingers to touch! We want our prayer to make that connection. We don’t speak just to hear

our own voices but also to connect with our audience. And for public prayer, our listeners are both divine and human.

Common ground

Anyone can pray. Anyone can engage in the private and personal act of talking and listening to God. But not everyone offers effective public prayers. Such prayers are focused not only on listening to the mind of God but also on group communication. The role of the leader is to express the group’s mind to God. Effective public prayers empower the group by conveying its collective emotions and thoughts to God, an act that in turn intensifies the participants’ private desires into actions.

Imagine the leader as the one who is charged with connecting the hands of the group with the hand of God, through the vehicle

of public prayer. One way of knowing that such prayer has achieved its aim is this kind of response from participants: “That prayer really moved me.” The rhetorical concept of common ground addresses the importance of making this connection. Our goal when leading public prayer should be to select words that will enable our listeners to understand the message we want to communicate to them. When the speaker selects words to say for a group, she does so with the intention of accurately interpreting the meaning listeners will assign to her words. The meaning listeners give to those words is derived from their interpretation of the experience. When the speaker’s intended meaning and the listeners’ interpreted meaning are in agreement, a powerful connection is established between speaker and listeners and God.

Holy ground

I want to acknowledge the discomfort some have about being critical of public prayer. Perhaps such people understand any conversation with God as being like God’s conversation with Moses—as taking place on holy ground. God is holy, God’s message is holy, and therefore God’s human messenger becomes holy in the moment of prayer. The humble, obedient leader simply becomes the vehicle to carry the words of God directly to the hearts of the listeners.

No wonder that it would seem inappropriate to evaluate prayer so conceived; in this view, the leader is simply speaking God’s mind to the people. Given these assumptions, leaders would have no reason to learn to pray better, because that process would entail putting human words in place of God’s, inserting the human between God’s words addressed directly to the group. In this view, attention to and analysis of corporate prayers seems to reduce them to human constructs void of holy ground, so much rhetorical method and verbal technique.

Another objection I’ve heard states that it is God who ultimately decides if our worship is pleasing, so leaders should be concerned about what God thinks rather than about what human listeners want. If God’s judgment is our only criterion for deciding what is good, how will we know if our prayers are good?

Speaking as one trained in rhetoric, I find it more useful to shift our focus from offering good prayers to offering effective

prayers. I do not wish to imply that *good* and *effective* are mutually exclusive values, but I want to focus on pragmatic considerations. In public prayers the relationship between leader and human audience is often undervalued, overlooked, or assumed. Yet, when leaders agree to lead public prayers, they take on the responsibility of representing the particular group. In reality, listeners do play a major role in determining the effectiveness of communal prayers, and their responses therefore deserve our attention.

Shaky ground

Making this rhetorical shift in focus toward connecting with the human audience for public prayer may feel like stepping on shaky ground. It's true that history shows this ground to be constantly shifting, and some believe the soil beneath us has been undermined to the extent that we risk collapsing into chaos, where no connections can be made. Because our society lacks social, religious, political, and moral cohesion, keeping our balance on such ground is a daily struggle, with many stresses and strains.

Living well in such a world will entail recognizing our common humanity and our need to converse with God. We want to know

When we value practical wisdom, when our understanding is shaped by human experience, when we are open to mutual participation, we also open ourselves to accept some things that challenge our traditional understandings.

how to ask questions and hear God's replies. Some argue that a dialogical approach to public prayers puts the community on shaky ground. But when we genuinely value the role of practical wisdom, when our understanding is shaped by human experience and activity, when we are open to mutual participation, we also open ourselves to accept some things that challenge our traditional understandings.

Religious audiences have been called "elite audiences," because religious people tend to believe they have access to transcendent and infallible knowledge, and that (at least sometimes) they possess supernatural revelation or mystical knowledge that they believe puts them on solid ground. Mennonite history and traditions also have an impact on our current understandings and situations. Even though our sense of separation from our society may locate us on more stable ground, we shouldn't confuse being an elite audience with

being perfect or above benefiting from guidance from rhetoric. Elite audiences still require an understanding of their need to communicate and to forge connections between their daily and their spiritual concerns.

Finding common ground within holy ground and shaky ground

If we understand God as an outside force directing the chaos in our experience, it is difficult to make the connection. In a rhetorical sense, as believers, we come together in worship to give meaning to our experiences through speaking with God and one another, in scripture, song, prayer, and proclamation. Worship is the place where we reconnect with God and one another, where we find common ground.

“Shared meaning,” “common ground,” and “fusion of horizons” are rhetorical expressions used to describe various aspects of this connection. The connection is never completely under the control of any conversational partner, nor is a complete connection possible, but the worship leader’s role in public prayer is to help the worshipping congregation find common ground within holy ground and shaky ground. As a result of such prayers, God acts and we act.

Ineffective prayers sometimes fail to accomplish their goal of conveying shared meaning not because they were bad but because the speaker simply didn’t understand the complex role the congregation plays in shaping effective prayers. Often the speaker is unaware of—and therefore does not avail himself of—rhetoric’s systematic approach to reaching the goal of common ground.

Audience analysis

The discipline of rhetoric uses audience analysis as a first step in shaping public communication. Audience analysis is a formal method of taking the roll, of finding out who is present for worship. Empty rhetoric or pandering to the gathered congregation is not the goal of audience analysis. In public prayer, we don’t want to change the message so it flatters the human listeners and caters to their desires; we want to shape the means of presenting the message so it is more easily understood by the audience.

Audience analysis involves elements of both psychology and sociology. Two types of audience analysis that are particularly

helpful in this process are demographic and situational analysis. Demographic analysis considers factors such as the age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic composition of the group of listeners. Some congregations provide a congregational profile to aid worship leaders in their preparation. Using this profile helps worship leaders examine what the particular people in this congregation are reading, watching, doing, eating, enjoying, working at, worrying about, listening to. Knowing something about these

The worship leader's role in public prayer is to help the worshipping congregation find common ground within holy ground and shaky ground. As a result of such prayers, God acts and we act.

aspects of their group's experience can help leaders shape appropriate prayers.

Paying attention to these elements will influence language choices and delivery. What will communicate: a prayer that begins, "Our Father, who art in heaven," or the prayer I heard in a worship service a few months ago, which opened with "Yo God—you up there"? Each of these two forms of address appears appropriate to some listeners and completely inappropriate or even ridicu-

lous to others. What will connect with the experience of these particular listeners? Are they used to loud, long prayers or soft, short prayers? Do they expect prayer that stirs their hearts or prayer that calls them to correct behavior?

Situational analysis includes attention to expectations about formality, time of day, size of audience, attitudes toward the speaker, and the group's concerns related to the worship theme. A common complaint about many public prayers is that they are too long. The expression "praying around the world" identifies an impulse to string out our prayers to great length, when we may in fact have little to say, because we have failed to analyze or to fine-tune our analysis to the group and situation.

Of course there are aspects of our audience that we cannot analyze or anticipate, so we simply have to adapt. That said, as we seek to shape effective public prayers, we could usually consider much more than we do.

Public prayer as playful art

Public prayer is also a genre of artistic discourse, marked by a distinctive style, form, and content. Our intention in praying is

not to regulate human behavior but to dream of breakthroughs rather than breakdowns. As Mennonites embrace the visual arts and honor the ways artistic creation can take us out of our ordinary worlds and move us to new possibilities, we can also call on our verbal artists to create connections in playful, inviting ways through public prayers.

We probably don't think of our public prayer time as a trip to the playground, and we may regard playgrounds as childish places, not meant for adults. But remember these words of Jesus: "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3). The ability of children to be honest and humble is an innocence that we can reclaim in our prayers. Prayer as a linguistic art form helps us break free from our cerebral imprisonment and shed our pretenses.

Rhetorical studies focus on language as the creative force in public prayer, where words well spoken have power to change our world. Words are symbols that enable us to share our experiences and shape our perceptions and actions. Martin Luther King Jr. was known for his speeches, his words that created vivid word pictures that resonated in listeners' hearts and spirits. Public prayer needs to balance elegance with relevance, so it is as applicable and accessible as possible to our listeners. Our prayer words should be simple and specific. People have characterized Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as a communal prayer that changed a nation. It contains 271 words; 251 are words of one or two syllables. Mark Twain understood the power of simple and direct language when he said that the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.

Sometimes we sing our prayers. Poets and musicians have given every word and every note of our hymns careful thought and consideration. What musician would simply look at a piece or hum it in his head and never actually sing it out loud before sharing it? Certainly some occasions call for impromptu prayers in public. Called on to pray in such times, most of us feel anxiety about being put on the spot. It's not easy, under the circumstances, to stay sharply focused and be concise. For most of us, offering impromptu public prayers elicits not our best words but a case of nerves. And the resulting prayer may display a relaxed

familiarity more appropriate to a private conversation with God than a public gathering.

If we give care to crafting words but do not practice speaking them aloud, we do something akin to quilting a quilt and leaving the edges unbound, or painting a picture and leaving the canvas unframed. Many a powerful prayer has been ruined by poor delivery. The notion that not needing to practice our prayers is a sign of spiritual maturity seems like nonsense to me. For any important conversation with another person we would rehearse our words in advance; not to do so with public prayer is a manifestation of human ignorance or arrogance.

For the most part, worship services are planned in advance, and worship leaders have enough time to prepare and practice. Many write out their prayers and proceed to deliver them from a manuscript. Unfortunately the message of many written prayers is lost in ineffective delivery, because they weren't polished by practice, aloud. "Too fast" and "too monotone" and "unnatural tone" and "annoyingly loud" are common complaints about such prayers. Ultimately, we strive for a sense of rehearsed spontaneity that connects with listeners.

Conclusion

Public dialogue with God is a rhetorical activity that deserves our attention. Considering public prayer as a genre of rhetoric helps us understand it as a speech act that requires focus on common ground. Two rhetorical elements can fuse holy ground and shaky ground into common ground that invites listeners to God's playground of possibilities. These are the systematic science of audience analysis and the art of language choice and delivery. By using audience analysis and choosing appropriate language, we can craft public prayers that can be used by the Spirit to shape listeners' thoughts and actions and shift the gathered congregation's patterns of thinking from separation to solidarity, from chaos to cohesion. The next time we say, "Let us pray," may our listeners sense that we are giving voice before God to their deepest desires.

About the author

Juanita Weaver is an alumna of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, now teaching communication at Villanova University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.