

COUPLES PRAYING TOGETHER

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Part I - Introduction

Why this article?

It is a common problem for Christians in families or in other small groupings to experience real difficulties in trying to pray together. This article is written primarily for those who feel that they would like to make a go of their praying together - whether couples or not.

I shall be taking a fresh look at the subject, at its difficulties, and questioning some of the common assumptions held about it. Then I shall give some helpful and realistic guidelines for praying together.

This article was initially published as a printed pamphlet, and its popularity then shows that having difficulties when praying together is a common occurrence. The simple one-minute, four-point programme presented at the end of the article is a unique approach to tackling the problem and one which many have found helpful.

Don't skip to the conclusion! This article is short enough to reach the end easily!

Part II – Understanding the Problem

What is the problem?

This is not the silly question it first appears to be!

Praying together can be a problem, but not *the* problem.

Difficulties between people are often like the tip of an iceberg – they are the noticeable bit of something far bigger. For example: if two people have a problem about their different social backgrounds, then a dropped aitch, or how a knife is held can become the small symbols of the much bigger problem. In the same way, in a tense situation between workers and management, the colour of one’s collar can indicate the opposing group.

Praying together can be for some just the visible tip or symbol of a much bigger difficulty. For example, the wife who resents her husband’s late call to the ordained ministry is likely to find that his attempts to start or lead a time of prayer together trigger-off all the deep anger and frustration of her feelings about his ministry.

Attempts to pray together may highlight other common religious differences or points of tension. If one person’s spiritual tradition leads them to believe that the other is only a ‘nominal’ Christian who lacks a real ‘saving faith’, then a different approach to praying together, or an inability to pray aloud, can highlight a deep spiritual division which is the real problem. [See the articles *But I Can’t Pray Aloud! – Pastoral Insights* and *Praying & the Life of Prayer*, both on this website.]

It is important, therefore, to ask – ideally together – what is the real problem, and, hopefully, to talk it over. Problems have to be recognized before they can be solved.

‘Talk it over’ he writes!

‘If we could talk it over – we’d have no problems!’ some readers will mentally respond.

Let’s look briefly, then, at coping with the problems. The first is fear.

Fear

Fear lies at the root of most of our difficulties in life, even in praying together it may be one of them. It helps us if we can understand it.

There are two main ways we cope with fear – we try to protect ourselves either by *attacking* or *escaping*; ‘fight’ and ‘flight’ as they are often labelled. This leads to the bully and the coward: the bully is not better or stronger than the coward – each is dealing with fear in a different way.

These reactions may be physical or verbal; an attack or an escape; the cutting-remark or the stony silence. Do we ‘explode’ or retreat into silence? Or is our natural ‘explosion’ stifled for fear of hurting the one we love, opting instead to smoulder-away quietly?

Which way?

It is helpful when tackling any problem between individuals to know which way we ourselves tend to cope with fear and which way the other(s) copes with it. Two ‘attackers’ will have a verbal or physical ding-dong. If a couple consists of one ‘attacker’ and the other who ‘runs away’ mentally, then a different tension is created. The tension one experiences will be because the other says too much (‘Oh shut up!’), while the other experiences the tension of too little being said (‘Why don’t you say something!’).

If both tend to ‘retreat’ rather than attack, the situation may be outwardly ‘better’. But in avoiding all experience of conflict or pain, the couple will remain immature and not grow.

In praying together (or in any other problem) the first thing to do is to recognise the way oneself and the other(s) copes with fear, and to realise that neither ‘fight’ nor ‘flight’ is a ‘better’ solution than the other. Each reaction shows that a person feels unable to cope, vulnerable, afraid and out-of-their-depth. Such a person needs the greatest love, understanding, sympathy and patience that God can give to us and through us.

Do you want to be healed?

Our Lord’s pertinent question in John 5:6 to the man who had hardly moved for thirty-eight years, applies here also.

It is possible to cling to a problem and enjoy it while at the same time complaining about it, or using it to degrade another or as a weapon against them. ‘Of course, I just can’t pray with my husband/wife’ can be a sad and confidential comment, or it can be a weapon of arrogance. What is claimed to be a problem can be hung on to, to boost our own spiritual pride over another.

Penitence

Penitence is the first step towards any real growth, healing, reconciliation or understanding. ***‘But what have I got to be sorry about! God knows I’ve tried ...!’***

Perhaps so, but there must be real sorrow for all that we have done by our insensitivity/blindness/arrogance/apathy to increase the fear in the other. If you are not willing to move in this direction, then there is probably little point in reading further, because your real problem is not an inability to pray together, but a lack of love, respect and humility from which true sorrow and reconciliation can spring.

Part III - Wrong Assumptions

If you wrongly assumed that half-a-mile is usually walked easily in five minutes and acted on it, then you'd miss your bus. Similarly most of the disappointment and difficulty about praying together arise because of quite wrong assumptions and expectations. Let's look at just three of them.

1. Worship in church together is easy and satisfying for us both, therefore worship at home must be.

For countless reasons this assumption is wrong! Praying together at home is largely a DIY activity, in church it is not. A church service has – or should have – a rich and varied feast of spiritual devotions. At home only two or three items make up the ‘meal’.

A husband and wife who leave a service satisfied are unlikely to do so because they each absorbed the same things at the same level. Their satisfaction will have been due to the way that by temperament and spirituality they were each nourished more on different things. In addition God has enriched men and women by giving them largely complementary ways of perceiving: women tend to perceive more deeply and intuitively and are not embarrassed by the reality of the invisible. Men, in contrast, tend more to assess the reality and worth of something by the more limited equipment of the intellect and the senses (contrast Judas and the woman in John 12:1-7).

[See also the article ‘*Politically Correct – Our Friend or Foe?*’ on this website.]

2. Any really committed Christian must be able to pray aloud.

This is the second wrong assumption. [But see the article on this website written both for those who can and those who cannot, entitled *But I Can't Pray Aloud! – Pastoral Insights*]. In certain Christian traditions there is a very real pressure to conform to a common group language/style/ability etc. before one can really feel accepted. Often, although such groups declare that it is our faith alone which has saved us and not our ‘works’, it seems that in practice our faith by itself does not merit real acceptance in the group unless it is supported by, e.g. the ability to pray extempore.

Such an ability, like all God's gifts, is desirable, but – in common with all his other gifts – the pattern of distribution is his not ours! It is quite evident that the gift of being able to pray extempore is no measure whatever of Christian sanctity. Many godly saints cannot and even those who have the gift seem not automatically to be protected from ruining it by triviality, repetition or sheer boredom!

3. Praying together is a natural, simple and easy part of Christian living.

Many also make this wrong assumption, and when it does not work out quickly give up altogether! A victory for the devil! Just as the overwhelming majority of marriages mature only by really working at them, so with praying together. For most it is not ‘natural’, not ‘simple’ and not ‘easy’!! (The few for whom it is, will not be reading this article!)

So, stop feeling guilty that you find difficult what *is* difficult. Rid yourself of these three wrong assumptions which your experience (confirmed by my writing) has shown to be false. Now we’ll start afresh with our feet on the ground rather than our heads in the clouds!

Part IV – Some Common Difficulties

If we can highlight some of the usual difficulties, it will be easier to tackle this problem.

- **Holding the three assumptions outlined in the previous section.**
 1. That there is a direct parallel with corporate worship.
 2. That God gives the gift of praying aloud / extempore to all.
 3. That praying together is ‘natural’ or ‘easy’.
- **Failure to recognise the uniqueness of the other(s).**

This results in assessing the other as if he/she was oneself. It takes no account of personal differences, nor of the fact that no two people’s spiritual journey and abilities are identical.
- **Assuming that what one cherishes spiritually is automatically better than one’s partner’s and necessary for them.**

Because we put a thing first it is easy to assume that others should do so. This leads to a ‘mine-is-the-only-way’ attitude, which often does not reflect God’s respect for the other person. This brings disunity to home and church alike.
- **Failure to understand different authentic Christian responses.**

God is both ‘above’ us in majesty and ‘alongside’ us in humility. To encounter him in his majesty evokes a quieter, more orderly response than that evoked by an experience of his nearness, which is rekindled by a much friendlier style. Christian traditions tend either to celebrate (like Protestantism) God’s nearness, or (like Catholicism) his majesty. A Christian’s response to God that differs fundamentally from our own often shows not that they are ‘wrong’ but that they have encountered what we, so far, have missed.
- **The urge to impose ‘our’ spirituality on another.**

It follows from the last point that our differences should enrich and complement one another. In practice, because of our insecurity, we feel threatened by such differences. We have to beware of seeking to change another because of our inability to cope with such differences, and the tendency to try and conceal the fact by wrapping it all up in Biblical, spiritual and theological language. Spiritual blackmail is not uncommon!
- **The problem of equality versus leadership.**

Confusion about leadership is a major difficulty and I will cover it in more detail below.
- **Having good intentions – but no plan or purpose.**

No house was ever built by good intentions unless with them went planning, purpose and hard work. Building a satisfactory time of praying together into a home situation requires all these. I hope that this article will help you to add plan and purpose to your intentions.
- **‘Pray as you can; don’t pray as you can’t!’**

This classic advice on prayer applies particularly when more than one is involved. Attempting spiritual pole-vaulting before spiritual walking shows commendable enthusiasm, but little sense! Swallow your spiritual pride and the desire to impress (yourself, another or God), and begin at the beginning. Details are given below.

- **Lack of flexibility.**

This happens when all this gets taken too seriously. Eternal life is a **free** gift; successful praying together is not an entrance exam or membership requirement! Spiritual food, like ordinary meals has its disasters as well as its highlights. Relax and laugh about both!! If you use a book, don't play it by one; play it by ear!

Some leadership problems

Viewed spiritually, praying-together is gathering together as children before a common 'Father'. It is essentially an activity of *equals*. Viewed domestically, however, it consists of two or three people arriving at the same place at the same time to do the same thing. Every home demonstrates that such a thing can never happen by chance! Such events usually only occur when one individual has convened others. Even getting everyone to their meal generally requires one to hit a gong for, or shout at, another! This is a temporary 'leadership' role.

Another aspect of 'leadership' is what we would feel if we were expected to play Steve Davis snooker, or cook a meal for Delia Smith! Most of us would mentally have 'failed' before we ever attempted it, being crushed by our knowledge of their professional experience. Similarly, Christian ministers need to be aware that their 'professional' position can crush the spirits of those around them.

Sometimes this happens because of insensitivity. It takes considerable courage to offer aloud a simple request to God to help Johnie with his homework, if it follows a five-minute leader's prayer full of the theological depth of St. Paul and the balanced phrases of Cranmer!

Praying together is, for these reasons, often more of a problem for 'ministers' and their families than for others. Amateurs are expected to be amateurs; but the mix of what is felt to be the 'trained professional' with 'ordinary folk' can be a real cause of difficulty.

The fact that an individual minister in a situation is not *actually* sitting in judgement is not always enough to free others from the *feeling* and conviction that they are on trial.

Failure on the home-front at this level can easily become a thorn in a minister's life. We joke about 'Do as I say, not as I do...', but an apparent failure at this level is often a terrible guilt-burden and pain to any conscientious pastor.

There is a trap here! His/her desire to make things better, may result in a heavy-handed use of 'leadership' to rectify matters, and this may increase the tension caused by his/her 'professional' presence!

There are ways in which this problem can largely be overcome as you will see from the approach and suggestions that follow.

Part V – Getting It Right

A better approach – better results

You and your situation are different from every other. What follows will only be of any use if it is changed and adapted to suit **you** in your situation. Pray that the Holy Spirit would make known to you God’s particular word on these matters.

- Assume that praying together is desirable but difficult.
- Know that God would not have implanted the desire within you to pray together unless he was offering you the gifts and graces to accomplish it.
- Put aside your former concept of what ‘praying together’ means and entails. Substitute for it:
A TIME SET-ASIDE CONSCIOUSLY TO BE WITH GOD.
- Remember that such a time together is not the backbone of your spiritual life. It is just one activity among many. Your corporate Sunday worship could be central.
- Prayer is a living relationship, and a life of prayer can be lived without verbal expressions of prayer taking place. Don’t equate your ‘life of prayer’ together merely to the times when verbal prayers are shared. [See the article *Praying & the Life of Prayer* on this website].
- If you have a living relationship with God, recognise that only a small fraction of this time will be spent praying together.
- You are probably already sharing a ‘life of prayer’ together as you share common concerns and needs. This article is about whether this life of prayer can have a visible, tangible focal point.
- Such a focal point should be a positive expression and experience of the Christian faith that is held **in common**, (not a tense expression of differences!)
- If a ‘leader’ is involved, a freedom, ease and growth may only be possible if he/she is willing to empty him/herself for others, as Christ did for us. [Philippians 2:5-7, cf. Revelation 1:17]
- The natural rhythm of our encounters with God and each other is dialogue, i.e. alternative speaking and listening. In prayer this is us-to-God and God-to-us; two

different and necessary directions. Silence is valuable because it imposes no ‘direction’. It can be a common activity but containing different things for different people.

For a start

- **Starting.** The kitchen pinger, alarm watch or chiming clock is best, or add the occasion to the end of an existing time together, e.g. meal/TV. This prevents any ‘leader’ tension arising from one summoning another.
- **Style.** ‘To experience the supernatural we must first learn to be natural.’ Each must allow the other to slouch, sit upright, kneel, etc. as they find most helpful. Sitting together on a settee will be most ‘natural’ for many.
- **Time/Place.** Any single time/place is likely to favour one at the expense of the other. If so, alternate between times/places which are best for the other. Then neither is regularly favoured at the expense of the other.
- **Content.** ‘K.I.S.S.’ might be an admirable way of starting (!) but it refers, here, to the advice often given authors ‘Keep It Simple Stupid!’ Don’t let personal/professional pride dictate the size or the content. A good short time can be satisfying and encouraging; a bigger but disastrous one the exact opposite. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he made them learn a very short, simple but profound prayer. The Lord’s Prayer is less than 30 seconds long!

As well as being simple, such times should be central, i.e. focused on the centre of Christian Faith. (It is not time to debate homosexuality, women priests or terrorism!) Looking together at the central elements of Gospel will unite. In addition, unity can be strengthened by e.g. sitting together in whatever way is most natural, perhaps sharing one book, and/or holding hands.

- **‘My’ thing or ‘our’ thing?** Praying together is not inviting another to share your favourite spiritual activity, or ‘your’ thing. Here you and another are to create a totally new –‘*Our thing*’. Previous failure may well have been due to attempts by one party to impose ‘their’ thing upon the other.
- **Time set-aside consciously to be with God.** Remember our revised concept of what ‘praying together’ is? We did not narrowly define it as intercession, or Bible Study, or worship, etc. This means that a WHOLE NEW RANGE OF ACTIVITIES IS OPEN TO US WHICH CAN SATISFY BOTH AND BECOME ‘OUR THING’ TOGETHER.
- **Take heart!** Neither Jesus’s disciples nor John the Baptist’s could pray without some teaching. You’re in the Apostolic Succession if you want a little help!

Part VI - A Simple Programme

We want something that avoids the ‘leadership’ problems mentioned above. It should also be:

- short,
- simple (but not trivial),
- unifying,
- central to the faith,
- grounded in Scripture,
- have the strength of liturgy and
- be able to be developed.

In addition it must be able to contain the differing responses of two people and be a satisfactory whole!

That’s a tall order! But below is a **one-minute four-point programme**, which if you examine it carefully meets all these requirements.

<p style="text-align: center;">PINGER THE PEACE SILENCE LORD’S PRAYER</p>

(The ‘Peace’ could be given either informally or formally / or alternating on each occasion.)

Some readers will at this stage be tempted to dismiss this as too simple. If so, reflect on Naaman [2 Kings 5] whom God wanted to heal, but who at first resisted what the Lord wanted him to do because it was not impressive enough!

Developing the programme

The programme can be deepened and enlarged almost infinitely.

- Make haste slowly
- Make changes only by mutual consent and for trial periods
- Keep to the style/items that bring and strengthen your unity
- Constantly resist the temptation to make it ‘your’ thing
- Work always to make it a new ‘our’ thing
- Use always the easiest and gentlest ‘way-in’ to new items [e.g. Silent intercession, names on a card (?), before verbal intercession; a Scripture verse and silence before discussing Romans 8; familiar items before new ones.]
- Come back weekly/monthly to this article to check on development and use as an oil in sticky patches!
- Relaaaaaaaaaax!

Take your pick

Provided the above eight points are borne in mind, the possible developments can incorporate any item which helps your joint encounter with God, for example –

Listening to sacred music – or to a short teaching or testimony tape – reading Scripture – using Bible reading notes – listening to Scriptural readings on record – incorporating all/part of religious TV or radio programmes – using ‘Sunday’ prayers to help in thanksgiving and penitential sections – using parts of ‘Offices’ – intercession lists – using liturgical responses – extempore prayers – etc. and etc. and etc. and etc.

End-Note

When this article was a printed pamphlet it was a best-seller. The problem is a very common one, but most Christians are scared to mention it! You are not alone. Many others will have the same difficulty. Take steps to bring it out into the open. Tell folk about the availability of this article, which – unlike so much advice on prayer – is pitched where so many of us really *are*! Tell them about the easy ‘**one-minute four-point program**’. I know God will bless you together.