

## PRAYERS AND PARLIAMENT

*“Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the Lord.*

Currently there are moves to abolish the prayers at the start of each sitting day in the Australian Parliament. There have been previous attempts to do so which have decisively failed. Like weeds in the garden they never give up. The prayers in Parliament are vitally important.

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At the beginning of each day when Parliament meets in Canberra, the Speaker, upon taking the Chair and a quorum of Members being present, leads in the following prayers:

“Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy blessing upon this Parliament. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of Thy glory, and the true welfare of the people of Australia.” The Speaker then follows on with:

“Our Father, which art in Heaven: Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil: For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.”

The same prayers are led by the President of the Senate at the beginning of each sitting day in the Senate. No better words for the well-being of Australia and its people could be spoken in Parliament House, and they are the first words to be spoken each sitting day, and that has been the case for the last 107 years.

These prayers have been read by the Speaker, and offered by members of parliament in attendance, every sitting day since 7 June 1901, when the House of Representatives agreed to the motion, “That the Standing orders should provide that, upon Mr Speaker taking the Chair, he shall read a prayer” which was subsequently acted upon. The Standing order was amended in 1918 when the initial Prayer or preface was amended and an additional prayer was added before the Lord’s Prayer for the duration of the war.

Why not join the Parliament in prayer? You can hear the prayers broadcast live on the parliamentary broadcast on ABC radio, whenever parliament is sitting, at 12.30pm Monday, 2.00pm Tuesday, 9.30am Wednesday, 9.30am Thursdays.

You may wish to continue in prayer adding, for example, that God’s will be done in:

- Advice given to ministers
- Bills and reports presented to Parliament
- Legislation drafted
- Legislation passed into law
- Questions and answers at question time
- The work of parliamentary committees
- The lives of members of parliament and their families

- The staff of members of parliament.

The tragic death by suicide of a member of parliament in the year 2000, and the high rate of family breakdowns among parliamentarians, are reminders of the suffering and sacrifice that parliamentary duties can impose on members and their families.

### **Should there be prayers?**

The daily prayers in Parliament last for about a minute, after which most members leave to return to work in their nearby offices where they monitor what is happening in the chamber on closed circuit television.

In its report of 21 March 1972, the Standing Orders Committee of Parliament considered a submission from a member that suggested a different form of prayer, and that prayers read once a week would suffice. The Committee decided there should be no change.

In October 1997, Greens Senator Bob Brown announced he would move a Motion to replace the Lord's Prayer in the Senate with some moments of reflection. It would, he said, "transfer the onus from God to we Senators for our actions." Opposing the proposal, Liberal Senator Eric Abetz said that the prayers were a timely reminder of "our position on this earth and the responsibility we have; that there is a higher authority than ourselves, or caucus, or even the party." Speaking on behalf of the ALP, Senator John Faulkner said that the ALP took the view, "that as prayers give comfort and inspiration to some senators, and many in the community, the practice should continue."

### **History of prayers in parliament**

The opening prayers are part of Australia's Christian heritage and Westminster system of government, and have been observed in the British and other parliaments for over 300 years. The prayers originated because of the first location of the British House of Commons in the Chapel of St Stephen. Because the atmosphere of the chapel still pervaded the place when the member of the House first settled down to work, they naturally felt it right to start their day's work in prayer.

For generations they and their predecessors had been coming to St Stephens for a special mass at the beginning of each parliamentary session. Now, in the reformation days of Edward VI, there was no mass. Instead, the Clerk of the Commons, at the beginning of each day, fell on his knees and recited the Litany, and the House of Commons on their knees responded. The Speaker added an elevating word, "such as he should think fittest for the time."

For years either the Clerk or the Speaker led the day's devotions. By 1650, 100 years after Parliament moved to the chapel, the House decided that the Governor of the College of Westminster should take care that some "fit and able person" attend to pray in Parliament, and that the members should attend accordingly. Nine years later,

the Speaker's chaplain was appointed, and ever since in the Parliament at Westminster his successors have begun each daily sitting of the House of Commons with the same prayer. That prayer is similar to the one read in the Australian Parliament. It is:

“Almighty God, by who alone Kings reign and Princes decree justice, and from who alone cometh all counsel, wisdom and understanding: we Thine unworthy servants here gathered together in Thy name do most humbly beseech Thee to send down Thy heavenly wisdom from above, to direct and guide us in all our consultations, And grant that, we having Thy fear ever before our eyes and laying aside all private interests, prejudices and partial affections, the result of all our counsels may be to the glory of Thy name, the maintenance of true Religion and justice, the safety, honour and happiness of the Queen, the publick wealth, peace and tranquillity of the Realm, and the uniting and knitting together of the hearts of all persons and estates within the same, in true Christian Love and Charity one towards another”.

In the early days of the House of Commons, this prayer was offered privately without officials or strangers being present, and the members would kneel facing the walls.

### **What do the prayers say?**

Jesus said, “I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” (1) With these important words in mind, the opening prayer in the Australian Parliament contains the equally important statement, “Direct and prosper our deliberations...,” because in the Bible it says, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.”(2) It is important that the Parliament gets it right.

In praying this way, MPs are hoping and believing that God, through His Spirit, will guide and direct their minds, through their consciences, experiences, the views of others, their knowledge of the Bible, in the still of the night, and so on. They pray this so that, by their decisions, what God wants will be reflected in the decisions and laws they make in Parliament and, consequently, will be for “the true welfare of the people of Australia.”

The opening prayer goes on to say, “... to the advancement of Thy glory, and the true welfare of the people.” This establishes the criteria to be used as a measuring rod. Does a bill advance the glory of God? And does the bill advance the true welfare of the people of Australia?

These are often difficult questions to answer and difficult criteria to apply. But MPs are not left in the dark. The Bible, which states it is the written word of God, is full of practical guidance on both criteria and, by reflecting upon what it says, MPs place themselves on God's wavelength, just as they do when they pray – particularly when they pray together in the House of Representatives and in the Senate. God promises that he will guide them (and us) with the spirit of truth, to all truth, if we genuinely ask and seek.

There is a third criterion by which legislation can be judged, and it is how will legislation affect the family? According to the Bible, God has ordained three institutions on earth. They are the church, the government and the family. By ordaining them, God delegates His authority to them. The family is God's building block upon which society is to be built. This is shown by God's act of creation with the first family of Adam and Eve, and is shown again by the holy family of Mary Joseph and Jesus. Throughout the Bible God is seen working through families.

### **God's will be done on earth**

The second prayer that is offered is the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples and is known as the Lord's Prayer. It contains the words,

"God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

We know God reigns in heaven, and He wants His will to be done here on earth. So why doesn't it work in practice? Often it does. But when it doesn't it is because of our rebellious nature, and our free-will choice of sin and evil over God's choice and recommendation.

There is no doubt it is God's intention that His civil governments will do people good. Speaking about those in authority The Bible says, "For he (the authorities) is God's servant to do you good."<sup>(3)</sup> That being the case, members of parliament are God's ministers for the promotion of the public good, public happiness and the prevention of evil, in just the same way as He has ordained clergy (ministers) for leadership of His church. This is where the term "government minister" comes from.

Under the Westminster system, members of parliament are held accountable to the people at regular elections. As God's servants in the Parliament, they are ultimately accountable to Him, whatever the opinion polls might say.

### **Other traditions**

Other important historical traditions can be traced back to the Royal Chapel of St Stephens. When the commons moved into that chapel in 1547 the furniture had been arranged in the form of choir stalls for the monks. The members made speeches from these stalls across the chapel. The seating arrangement in the Australian Parliament largely adopts this plan, particularly for the front benches. The seating plan leads to a House with two distinct sides. It encourages a Government and Opposition system.

When the English members of parliament first took over the chapel they could not help but observe it was a chapel. As all members entered it or left the chapel they would bow to the crucifix above the altar. Later, the Speakers chair was placed in front of the altar, so people thought that members were bowing to the Speaker whenever they entered or left. The tradition of members bowing to the Speaker when they enter or leave the chamber has passed down to the Australian Parliament of today.

### **Pray for those in authority**

The Bible makes it clear that we should pray for those in authority.

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”(4)

We have a lot to be thankful for, but when the Reverend Joe Wright from the Central Christian Church in Kansas was asked to open the new session of the Kansas Senate in prayer he focussed on confession and repentance. This is what he prayed:  
“Heavenly Father, we come before you today to ask your forgiveness and to seek your direction and guidance. We know your word says, ‘Woe to those who call evil good’ but that is exactly what we have done. We have lost our spiritual equilibrium and reversed our values. We confess that:

- we have ridiculed the absolute truth of your word and called it pluralism;
- we have worshipped other gods and called it multiculturalism;
- we have endorsed perversion and called it alternative lifestyle;
- we have exploited the poor and called it the lottery;
- we have rewarded laziness and called it welfare;
- we have killed our unborn and called it choice;
- we have shot abortionists and called it justifiable;
- we have neglected to discipline our children and called it building self-esteem;
- we have abused power and called it politics;
- we have coveted our neighbour’s possessions and called it ambition;
- we have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression;
- we have ridiculed the time-honoured values of our forefathers and called it enlightenment.

Search us, Oh God, and know our hearts today; cleanse us from every sin and set us free. Guide and bless these men and women (of the Senate), who have been sent to direct us, to the centre of your will. Amen.”

### **Please remember**

Members of parliament need all the help they can get. Your prayers for them are as important as their election to parliament, and are vital to the good performance of their duties, whatever personal belief in God that they may hold.

In the Bible it says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”(5) You might like to pray that MPs be God-fearing and recognise that they are accountable to him for each decision they make. Some other suggestions for prayers are that members of parliament will:

- See their own inadequacy, and will pray and seek the will of God(6)
- Be granted wisdom, knowledge and understanding(7)
- Be convicted of sin, transgression and iniquity(8)
- Value and regard the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus Christ(9)
- Respect authority and practice accountability(10)
- Be given Godly counsel and God-fearing advisers(11)
- Be honest and faithful to their spouses and children 12)

- Be honest in financial, tax and ethical matters(13)
- Be generous and have compassionate hearts for the poor and needy(14)
- Have courage to resist manipulation, bribery, pressure and the fear of man(15)
- Endeavour to restore the sanctify of life, families, divine order and morality in our nation(16)
- Desire humility and meekness and be willing to serve and cooperate.(17)

In the worldliness of Parliament, and in the exercise of power, it is worth remembering the adage that man proposes and God disposes, or as the Bible puts it:

“Not by might, nor by power, but my Spirit,” says the Lord.(18)

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- (1) Matthew 18:19-20
- (2) Romans 13:1
- (3) Romans 13:4
- (4) 1Timothy 2:1
- (5) Proverbs 1:7
- (6) Proverbs 3:5-8, Luke 11:9-13
- (7) James 1:5
- (8) Psalm 51:17, John 8:7-11
- (9) Psalm 19:7-11, John 8:31-32
- (10) Romans 13:1-7
- (11) Proverbs24:6
- (12) Malachi 2:15-16
- (13) 1Corinthians 6:10, 1 Timothy 6:6-10
- (14) Psalm 112:9, Luke 10:33-37
- (15) Proverbs 29:25, 2 timothy 1:7
- (16) Ephesians 5:22-28, 6:1
- (17) John 13:14, Titus 3:1-2
- (18) Zechariah 4:6