

The anatomy of an Anglican service:

Why do we pray together?

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Someone once asked Charles Spurgeon, the prince of preachers, "What's more important, Bible reading or prayer?" Spurgeon replied, "What's more important, breathing in or breathing out?"

Scripture *along with* prayer are essential to the life of the Christian. If the God of the universe speaks to us by his word, the Scriptures, we speak to him by the precious gift of prayer.

But why should we pray *together*? Why do we pray as a congregation?

Unified dependence

There's much that could be said in response, but the primary reason we pray together is that it expresses our unified dependence on God.

Firstly, unity:

We swim in a culture that is highly individualistic. Because of this, we can miss just how much of prayer in the Bible is set in a corporate context:

In the Old Testament, think of the people of Israel singing a prayer to God after he saves them from Egypt; or Israel's prayer book, the Psalms, which would have been sung and prayed as a community; or the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah and their leadership of Israel through corporate prayer.

In the New Testament, there's even more evidence for how ingrained praying together is for the followers of Christ. It's

revealing that as Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray, the first word of the Lord's Prayer is "Our Father", not "My Father". We are united under one heavenly Father and we pray to him mindful that we do so as brothers and sisters in Christ. As we gather to pray, then, we are encouraged and strengthened as a family.

By the way, this is one of the reasons why we, just like Christians throughout the ages, regularly pray the Lord's Prayer in our gatherings.

Christians have prayed together since the very beginning. This doesn't diminish the value of private prayer, but we see that the church is called to pray together – they're marked by it and devoted to it. And in the end, we see the prayers of the saints rise like incense before God in the Book of Revelation.

Scripture and history show that praying together expresses our unity as God's people. We uphold one another as we pray. We teach one another as we pray. We model trust in God to one another as we pray.

Secondly, dependence:

Along with this horizontal element of praying together is of course, the vertical one – a conviction that prayer is a direct line to God the Creator and Sustainer of all things, whom (amazingly!) we call 'Father'.

You'll notice that the second half of the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6) is all about recognising our dependence on God for provision, for pardon and for protection. We depend on him for everything! So Paul tells the church in Philippi:

"in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Phil 4:6).

We are encouraged to bring everything to God in prayer because he provides.

We depend on him for pardon – that is, the forgiveness of sins. This is why we pray prayers of confession together. Importantly, this also why we pray for others, for the spread of the gospel and the salvation of the lost. It's in this context that Paul tells the young church leader Timothy,

“that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions” (1 Tim 2:1–2).

Together, we pray for governments and kings, individuals and nations, the harvest field and the workers, that amongst so many other important things, the forgiveness of Christ may be made known to all.

Finally, we depend on God for protection, that the church would not be led into temptation and that the evil one would not have his way. Having encouraged the church in Ephesus to suit up with the armour of God, Paul then says,

“Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert in this with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints” (Eph 6:18).

Paul goes on to ask for prayer that even *he* would have the words to speak and the boldness to share the gospel.

We have a privileged intimacy with God and with each other, expressing our unity in the gospel and, most importantly, expressing our dependence on the One who listens to and answers prayer.