

Church Musicians Are Unintentionally Reviving Modalism In Prayer

Public prayers must be biblically sound since they are the outworking of the church leaders' theology, and the congregation learns about God from these corporate entreaties. Unfortunately, the theological accuracy demonstrated in public prayers has become alarming in recent years with the increase of untrained persons leading churches in worship. One of the most significant concerns is a weak understanding of the Trinity.

According to the doctrine of the Trinity, God exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. There is one God, and each person is fully God. The Bible teaches that each person of the Trinity is distinct, and that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each play different roles in salvation (e.g. Eph. 1:3-14). The members of the Trinity do not necessarily fulfill the same tasks, although each is equally deserving of praise. The importance of this doctrine is so vital to the Christian faith that one writer asserted, "Christianity stands or falls with the confession of the deity of Christ and the Trinity."

Musicians who have not been theologically trained are frequently prone to err toward the ancient heresy called modalism. (Most are probably unaware of this error and would not consider themselves modalists, however.) Modalists view the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as various forms, or modes, of one God. In their attempt to prevent the Church from becoming tritheistic, they fell to the other extreme, ignoring the personhood and co-existence of each member of the Trinity. Often modalists believe that the Old Testament God became Jesus Christ, and he later manifested himself as the Holy Spirit. This error is often inadvertently made in public prayers, particularly at Easter and when the worship service's theme involves the Atonement. Consider the following examples:

- Thank you, Father, for being our Prince of Peace and dying on the cross for our sins.
- Father, we praise you for the blood you spilled on our behalf.

Both examples wrongly ascribe the death on the Christ to the Father, a form of modalism called *patripassianism*. Some prayers are more subtle. In attempt to incorporate songs into prayer, musicians tend to muddle the persons of the Trinity. The chorus of "Jesus Paid it All" ends:

Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe.
Sin had left a crimson stain;
He washed it white as snow.

After singing this song, a music leader prayed, "Thank you for paying for our sin in full, Father."

The hymn rightly ascribes Jesus' paying the price for sin, but the prayer credited the Father. In my view, the main arena for unintentional Trinitarian errors is attributing the work of Jesus Christ to the Father.

Why Is This Important?

I am deeply concerned about the acceptability of worship to God when there are critical errors such as modalism coming from the pulpit in Bible believing churches on a regular basis. John 4:24 says that true worshipers must worship in spirit and truth. Modalist prayers such as these do not qualify as truth, and I fear that they are having an impact on the theology and worship of laypersons. The error in itself may not seem all that serious, but the implications are profound, i.e. minimizing and deconstructing the Atonement.

Pastors and musicians ought to consider several things when offering prayer in public. First, plan ahead with prayers. Don't have impromptu prayers without prior thought about their content. Second, clearly distinguish who you address when you pray in public. It is acceptable to change the person to whom you are praying, but be absolutely clear that you call them by name and attribute to them the correct attributes when in public. One could pray, "Lord Jesus, we acknowledge that we can only come to the Father by your merit, not our own. And Father, we trust that you find us pleasing to you through the work your Son accomplished for us on the cross." Fourth, pastors must call attention to this error, particularly when it is repeated over time. Not correcting such an error seemingly validates it. The correct doctrine must be taught from the pulpit, and this responsibility falls on the teaching elder or pastor. If the musicians continue to make the error in prayer, make necessary adjustments to minimize or eliminate it. Finally, spend time studying and developing a theology of the Trinity. Charles Ryrie's **Basic Christianity** or Wayne Grudem's **Systematic Theology** are quite helpful resources for beginners. Read the ancient creeds (i.e. the Athanasian and Nicene Creeds) and learn about the heresies they refuted. This will clarify incorrect assumptions and language.

The ultimate goal is that we will all know the Triune God more fully and worship him more acceptably. It is not simply an academic exercise, but something profoundly important to our worship and identity as followers of Jesus Christ.