

Amen!

Participating Biblically in Public Worship

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We hear a great deal today about the need for ‘participation’ in the public worship of God. No one will deny that all God’s people should be heartily involved in our acts of worship.

But the strange innovations that are being introduced and defended under the guise of promoting ‘participation in the public worship of God’, even in evangelical churches, are a great concern. Predominance of choirs, bands, drama, dance and ‘dialogue’, at the expense of minimizing congregational singing, public prayer, reading the Scriptures and sound and searching expository preaching, is surely a danger sign.

Have evangelicals forgotten that God is jealous over the kind of worship we give Him? Has the truth escaped them that worship rendered without the warrant of Holy Scripture is under God’s just displeasure? Are they unfamiliar with the stories of Cain, Nadab and Abihu, and Uzzah? Those men learned the hard way that to render to God worship that is according to man’s will rather than God’s is to court destruction. Or have we neglected to take seriously that word of our Lord Jesus Christ: *In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men ... laying aside the commandments of God* (Mark 7:7-8)?

In the light of these truths, much, if not most, of the so-called ‘participation’ in today’s public religious services is ‘wood, hay and stubble’ which will not stand the test of Christ’s burning eye. Evangelicals who promote these things have bowed before the gods of ‘relevance’ and ‘pragmatism’ - and all such idolatry is destined to be cursed.

“But, wait a minute,” someone says, “I thought you were *for* participation in the public worship of God.” Indeed, I am, and my criticisms are not directed against participation *per se*, but against human modes of participation that are not sanctioned by the Word of God. I am only concerned to promote that worship which is according to *spirit and truth*, according to ... *the spirit and ... the understanding also* (John 4:23-24 & 1 Corinthians 14:15). This demands a worship that is directed outwardly by the Divine Spirit. Therefore, innovations such as those above are immediately suspect, simply because they are founded on the former and unaided by the latter.

The words of Jesus and of Paul give us the *true criteria* on which participation in public worship is to be built and by which it is to be judged:

1. Worship must be according to **truth and understanding**, thus the intellect of the worshipper must be informed and engaged.
2. Worship must be according to **spirit**, therefore the whole inner-man in accord with the intellect must be engaged. ... *all that is within me, bless His holy name.* (Psalm 103:1-2)

Participation is ordained by God

Apart from unified praise and reading of the Scriptures, has God given a mode of participation in the public worship of His people? Does the worship stop when the responsive reading of Scripture is completed and the hymnals are closed?

God has ordained a mode of public participation in His worship to be employed in the praise, prayers, and preaching of the public worship service. **This mode of participation is the vocal ‘Amen’ of His gathered saints.**

From the beginning of the public worship of the Lord by His saints in the Old Testament, to the worship of the New Testament assemblies, to the worship of the Christian churches since the days of the apostles, the public ‘Amen’ has been the way in which God expects the rank and file of His people to participate in His public worship. This paper sets

out the Bible's teaching about the use of 'Amen' in the Public Worship of God.

I. *Biblical background.*

There are several key passages in the Old and New Testaments that are essential to the proper appreciation of this doctrine.

a. ***Deuteronomy 27:15-26***

Here we have the Divine establishment of the liturgy of the Old Testament congregation of the faithful. The curses are being pronounced upon the transgressors of the Law, curses that entail capital punishment, banishment, or the loss of inheritance. In this the holiness of God as well as the rigor of His law is being manifested. What is to be the response of God's people to this? v.15 ... *and all the people shall answer and say 'Amen!'*. God's people are here being instructed on the way they are to participate in matters pertaining to public Divine service, and at this early stage the 'Amen' is inaugurated. From this point on, it shall hold a prominent place in the public worship of Jehovah's people.

b. ***1 Chronicles 16:36***

In this chapter we read of the bringing of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem under the leadership of King David. David, exultant, dances before the ark and then recites in the ears of the people a psalm of praise vv.7-36. And what is their response? v.36 *And all the people said, "Amen!" and praised the LORD*. They participated in this grand and joyful act of worship with the utterance of the 'Amens' and 'Hallelujahs!'.

c. ***Nehemiah 8:1-6***

After the rebuilding of the fallen walls of holy Jerusalem, the Jews gather in one congregation to hear Ezra and the other scribes read, translate, and expound the holy Law. It is a high time and hunger of the people for God's Word is evident. Amidst all the other exercises of Divine worship, Ezra leads them in prayer, at the end of which the response of the people is immediate and

spontaneous: *Then all the people answered, "Amen. Amen!" while lifting up their hands.* v.6.

In all these Old Testament passages the importance of the public 'Amen' to the worship of the gathered congregation is evident.

"But", someone may ask, "what about the New Testament?" The evidence of the New Testament supports the same conclusion, as the following passages show.

d. 1 Corinthians 14:16

In this passage the apostle Paul is instructing the Church at Corinth in the whole matter of 'decency and order' in the way they worship in their public assemblies, as well as correcting some matters of indecency and disorder. In correcting their abuses of the gift of tongues in the gathered assembly, he gives as one reason for the need for an interpreter: *Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed* (that is, someone who has not been gifted with knowledge in the utterances given at that time by the Spirit) *say "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say*' v.16. It is apparent here that the utterance of 'Amen' was considered by Paul to be a normal facet of the public worship of all the New Testament assemblies.

e. Revelation 7:12

We are given here a glimpse of the worship of the 'glorified spirits in heaven', as Toplady called them. They are caught up in the glories of their great Redeemer-God and His salvation of them 'through the blood of the Lamb'. What is it that they cry out before His throne? *Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honour and power and might, be to our God for ever and ever. Amen.* (v.12). Does this not indicate that, even in heaven, the saints will give solemn and joyful utterance in their worshipful 'Amens'?

From these passages, it should be very clear that the 'Amen' is a vital part of God's will regarding His worship by His people. Those

who are not convinced by this evidence, just will not be convinced at all. Let us, therefore, now go on to consider ...

II. *The Biblical meaning of the term 'Amen'.*

The term itself has come to us from the Hebrew language, where the word means 'surely', from a Hebrew root meaning 'to be firm, steady, trustworthy'. From this, it came to have the connotations of 'true or faithful', and from that came the idea of 'so be it'. The word itself was transliterated from Hebrew to the Greek of the New Testament, and from thence to our language. An idea of the force which the Bible gives to the word can be seen in the following ways:

- a. It is used of God in the Hebrew of Isaiah 65:16. The *God of truth* of our English versions is literally 'the God of Amen'. This speaks of the faithfulness of God to His people.
- b. It is used as a title of the Lord Jesus Christ in Revelation 3:14. Christ designates Himself as *the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness*. This again points to the faithfulness and steadfastness of the Divine Son. The same faithfulness is commented upon in the relationship which Christ bears to the promises of God in Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:20: *All the promises of God are in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen*.
- c. Finally, the force of this term is seen in our Lord's use of it to confirm His most solemn statements. Christ frequently attests his statements with the word translated in our English bibles as *truly* (or *verily* in the AV). John, throughout his gospel, records our Lord's doubled use of the term. The Greek expression used in all these cases is *αμην αμην*, the literal translation of which would be 'Amen, amen'. Our Lord is thus pronouncing His weightiest saying with a term of faithful and steadfast confirmation. Furthermore, the fact that He doubles His use of it points still more powerfully to the truth of His Word.

These things point us to the power which the term should possess in the minds of the faithful. (Perhaps one of the reasons it does not is because it is used cheaply and thoughtlessly in the most glib and

superficial ways. Let us beware of ‘corrupt speech’ in our use of this term!)

The term, then, is confirmatory. It is used to **confirm utterances that are faithful and trustworthy**. In this sense, the ‘faithful sayings’ of the pastoral epistles (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus) are ‘amen’ sayings, and we might well imagine the responses to them in the early Christian assemblies to have been a loud and hearty ‘Amen!’. When the hearers in those assemblies heard anything in prayer, praise, or preaching that they considered a ‘faithful word’, they responded in just this way. In thus responding, they were saying, ‘It is a faithful saying ... so be it ... it is true.’

III. *Old and New Testament congregational worship*

Before we turn to consider practical aspects of the ‘Amen’ in the Public Worship of God, we need to understand how it was used among the Old and New Testament congregations of the faithful. From these we can derive principles for ‘Amen’ to be employed in the Church of Christ today.

The five Old and New Testament passages referred to earlier, as well as others which could be cited, show how the ‘amen’ was used in the public worship of ancient days. The uses may conveniently be placed into two categories without violence to the Word of God.

- The ‘amen’ was employed as a **public confirmation in the praise and worship of God**. This is patently the way it is used in 1 Chronicles 16:36, Nehemiah 8:6, 1 Corinthians 14:16 and Revelation 5:5-14. God is being worshipped in prayer, praise and thanksgiving and, at the end of such worship, the unified and spontaneous response of God’s people is ‘Amen!’.
- The ‘amen’ is employed as a **public confirmation of the Declaration of Divine truth**. This is apparent from what we see in Deuteronomy 27:15ff. The awesome truths of Divine Justice and Judgment are being set forth by the prophet of God, Moses – and these were to be reiterated by other spokesmen when once the

people entered the Land. The response of the people to these declarations is to be an unreserved and emphatic ‘Amen!’. The same use is seen in the response of the people to Nehemiah’s declaration concerning the poor of the land and those who had wronged them in Nehemiah 5:1-5.

IV. *In the church today*

Since both of these elements entered into the worship of the ancient people of God in both Testamental epochs, we may conclude these categories are also basic to our understanding of how and when the ‘amen’ is to be employed by the modern Church. The Church today must express its own confirmation of praise, thanksgiving and belief in the truth in the very same manner.

- a. It is proper for the ‘amen’ to be employed by the **whole congregation at the end of public prayer**. This is strongly implied in 1 Chronicles 16:36, Nehemiah 8:6 and especially 1 Corinthians 14:16, in which the Apostle employs the Greek *αμην* with the definite article *το* - which is literally, therefore, ‘the amen’. This suggests the unity of practice in both Testamental periods. In public prayers and praises of God’s people it is proper that the people should publicly participate in God’s worship through the use of ‘amen’.
- b. It is proper for God’s people to employ the **public and vocal ‘amen’ in hearing the truth proclaimed**. When His Word is read, it is proper for the people of God to testify to its truth, and to their faith in it, by saying ‘amen’. Moreover, it is not only proper, it is desirable! It is equally proper for the saints to repeat this during the preaching of that same Word. When God’s appointed spokesmen correctly and powerfully declare the truth, it is proper and desirable for the elect to respond in this manner.

To be sure, there are cultural differences within the Holy Catholic Church. The Scot or the American New Englander may be less expressive than the South American or the southern American! During the days of the Commonwealth in Britain there were marked

differences of expression within the various churches. The Irish Puritans expressed themselves in the public worship with a shrill sound, while some of the English Puritans did so with a kind of grunt! But, while there may be regional differences in expression, there ought to be unanimity among us as to the employment of the ‘amen’ in prayer, praise, and hearing the Word read and preached.

In doing so, the people of God participate in the public worship without transgressing the bounds of decency and order. To do so properly demands that the whole man be engaged in worship. The mind must be diligently engaged, for it would be a terrible thing for a person to set his seal by saying ‘amen’ to a declaration that is false, whether it be in singing or preaching. Thus we worship God *in truth* and *with the understanding* because we are worshipping according to the truth. And too, we worship God *in spirit* and *with the spirit* because the ‘amen’ is the vocal expression of the heart and soul of the hearer and worshipper. My concern is that the Reformed Churches may recover this principle of true worship and may influence the Church of Christ the world over to be done with cheap and carnal methods of participation in worship, and replace them with those which God Himself has ordained!

v. *What to avoid.*

Even the best of God’s gifts can be abused, and this matter before us is no exception. It can be abused - and it *has* been abused. What then should be avoided in the public ‘amen’ in the worship of God?

- a. We must **avoid self-seeking** in the use of the public ‘amen’. That is, we must avoid here what our Lord in Matthew 6:1 ff has taught us to avoid in *all* our acts of piety. How easily we can go wrong just here! The remaining sin which cleaves to our best services will cling to this one as well. It does so in a deplorable manner when we begin to use the ‘amen’ in a way that draws attention to ourselves rather than to the truth of the statements we are confirming. Those of us who have been in the work of God for any length of time have seen this happen. It can be done when our ‘amens’ are loud for the purpose of singling us out. It can

even be done through the way in which we say ‘amen’. I have heard the word ‘amen’ pronounced in a multitude of ways, from “A-a-a-amen!” to “A-meeeeen!” to “Amennnnna!” Now all of this can be a snare and therefore must be watched!

- b. We must **avoid mindless and thoughtless use** of this word. What some people say ‘amen’ to is sometimes a mystery. It makes you wonder if they heard what was said! The thoughtless and mindless use of the ‘amen’ is diametrically opposed to the principles of John 4:23-24 and 1 Corinthians 14:15. The *truth* is integral, the *understanding* is vital in the use of the ‘amen’ in public worship. We must, therefore, avoid using it without regard for the truth of God. Shall we confirm an expression of folly or falsehood? God forbid!
- c. We must **avoid over-use** of this term. Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones speaks of preaching before certain Baptists. They were so profuse with their ‘amens’ that the good doctor says that he could tell when he was finally getting through to them, because they stopped saying them!! It is not only Baptists who may err here! To use the term for everything is soon to make it mean nothing. I have been in meetings that went something like this:
- Pastor: “We are going to have a fellowship meeting tonight.”
People (certain ones in particular!): “Amen.”
Pastor: “There will be food and drink.”
People: “Amen!”
Pastor: “All are invited.”
People: “Amen!”
- Now surely this is over-doing a good thing and profaning a holy thing. Avoid over-use.
- d. We must **avoid not using the ‘amen’ at all**. God has ordained the use of the ‘amen’, and we must not despise this aspect of His revealed will for us. To neglect it is to neglect what the Lord has ordained for our participation in His worship. It is to fail to confirm by testimony the worship and truth of God. We must avoid, therefore, neglect in this matter.

VI. So when should I use ‘Amen’?

We cannot prescribe in detail when it would be right to use the ‘Amen’ in public worship. However there are some principles which make for good order in the church (1 Corinthians 14:33) and will help to *stir up love and good works* within the congregation of God’s saints – which is one of the reasons we meet together (Hebrews 10:24-25).

- a. **Joyfully proclaim ‘Amen’ in your heart whenever you hear the truth of God proclaimed.** Knowing what the term ‘Amen’ means should encourage the believer to use it in private response when-ever God’s eternal truth is read or heard. You can do this without opening your lips, and therefore without the people around you even being aware of what you are doing. And God, who sees in secret, will openly recognise your devotion and service of Him (Matthew 6:4).
- b. **Discretely voice ‘Amen’ during public worship when it would not distract other people.** The audible but discrete use of ‘Amen’ to show that we recognise God’s truth when it is preached, and to express our fellow-feeling in matters of prayer, is both encouraging to the congregation and can help us to concentrate on what is being said. But do not let your aid to concentration and participation in worship become a distraction to other people!
- c. **Clearly affirm ‘Amen’ at the end of prayers, scripture readings and the faithful preaching of God’s truth.** There are times when we should not be restrained at all in the way we say ‘Amen’. Those times when we join in unison as a congregation – at the end of prayers, after the Bible is read, and when a closing benediction is given – are particular opportunities for everyone to participate in the worship, and to testify together to God’s truth and grace.

VII. *Why is the use of the ‘Amen’ important?*

Why have we gone to all the trouble of emphasizing this matter? Is this just a ‘hobby horse’?

No, for the following reasons:

- a. **Because God Himself has instituted the use of the ‘amen’ in His worship.** This is apparent from Numbers 5:22 and Deuteronomy 27:15ff. It is further confirmed by the use of the ‘amen’ in the worship of the congregation of the faithful in the Old and New Testament, as well as by its use in the early post-apostolic Church. The ancients were far too jealous over God’s worship to employ anything in it that was not ordained by God. It is therefore important that we employ the ‘amen’ for the same reason.
- b. **Because it serves as a public testimonial and confirmation of the truth of God in His worship.** This is vital. The gathered churches have a responsibility to *confess* the truth and *confirm* the truth in their public assemblies. And they have a duty to do so in a united fashion. The ‘amen’ enables them to do so, and thus to carry out the general principle of 1 Corinthians 14:24-25, though the express mode by which this is done has changed. The believer and the unbeliever who attend our worship services should be convinced that what is being done is not only the sentiment of the one who leads in the public worship, but is shared by the whole congregation. This can be done by everyone in the church - including those without gifts of utterance as well as those with them - through the intelligent, spontaneous, and exuberant use of the ‘Amen!’.
- c. **Because it serves as a legitimate vehicle for the participation of all the saints – male and female, young and old – in the public worship of God.** (Deuteronomy 27:15ff; Nehemiah 8:3, 6; *et. al.*) This is important because the Church is one and is, therefore, to be one in its worship. It is important because God has made the hearts of His elect to cry out in praise for the grace shown to them, and has given them a medium whereby their lips

may express their hearts in the ‘amen’ as well as the singing of His praises.

Therefore, let us give ourselves to the worship of the Great and Dreadful Triune God, the God who has loved us, saved us, called us, and keeps us for His own great praise in all ages, forever and ever!

Amen and Amen!

The call for participation in public worship has never been louder, and the methods promoted for doing so continue to multiply.

But does the Bible have anything to say about the congregation's part in public worship activities?

Is it possible for everyone to participate heartily while maintaining 'decency and order'?

This booklet outlines the Bible's model for the whole congregation to participate in worship
– by properly understanding and using

'Amen'

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