

The history behind reading The Lord's Prayer at 12 Step meetings

It is mentioned in Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers that the prayer was used from the very beginning in the Fellowship, at least as early as 1938 and 1939. In those days there was no AA literature, so the early groups relied heavily on existing prayers, and on the Bible and Oxford Group literature, for inspiration and guidance. Bill W. commented several times in his correspondence about the early use of the Lord's Prayer. He wrote a letter to a member in 1959 in which he stated: "This practice probably came from the Oxford Groups who were influential in the early days of A.A. You have probably noted in A.A. Comes of Age what the connection of these people with A.A. really was. I think saying the Lord's Prayer was a custom of theirs following the close of each meeting. Therefore it quite easily got shifted into a general custom among us." Bill also wrote the following in a 1955 letter: "Of course there are always those who seem to be offended by the introduction of any prayer whatever into an ordinary A.A. gathering. Also it is sometimes complained that the Lord's Prayer is a Christian document. Nevertheless, this Prayer is of such widespread use and recognition that the argument of its Christian origin seems to be a little far-fetched. It is also true that most AA's believe in some kind of god and that communication and strength is obtainable through his grace. Since this is the general consensus, it seems only right that at least the Serenity Prayer and the Lord's Prayer be used in connection with our meetings. It does not seem necessary to defer to the feelings of our agnostic and atheist newcomers to the extent of completely hiding 'our light under a bushel.' However, around here, the leader of the meeting usually asks those to join him in the Lord's Prayer who feel that they would care to do so. The worst that happens to the objectors is that they have to listen to it. This is doubtless a salutary exercise in tolerance at their stage of progress." As Bill's 1955 letter indicates, recitation of the Lord's Prayer at meetings has clearly been controversial in some circles almost since the beginning. The GSO has responded to letters on this issue since the 1940s and 1950s. It is continually addressed in articles in Box 459 and the AA Grapevine, and has often been asked about at the General Service Conference. For example, at the 1962 Conference, in one of the Ask-It Basket questions, this subject was broached: "Question: What is the procedure for dealing with individuals who refuse to stand during recitation of the Lord's Prayer? Answer: Participation--or non-participation-in recitals of the Lord's Prayer should be considered a matter of personal conscience and decision."

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