

Can You Tell Me?

Annual Day of Prayer

Question: *What is the history behind annual Prayer Day service held in Reformed churches? Is it mere tradition, or is there a biblical warrant for it?*

Answer: The Bible gives no mandate for an annual prayer day. However, in *The New Revised Church Order* Martin Monsma observes, "Yet the situation being what it is, the fathers before us were practical and wise in doing that what the Bible surely does not forbid and which can have a salutary effect, and which is generally appreciated by the churches." We can trace the roots for the annual prayer day service back to the 16th century Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church put great value on fasting and prayer. There was much externalism in the observance of these days in the church of Rome. The Dutch Reformation churches condemned this practice, as it seems to border on superstition. Yet they saw much good in special days of fasting and prayer. They believed that when circumstances and times were trying believers should humble themselves before God and pray for relief. When a fast and prayer day was proclaimed the congregation would come to the church upon the weekday appointed and would, sometimes remain in church all day at the same time refraining from eating and drinking. Two sermons would be preached and between the sermons passages from the Bible would be read to the gathering. During the 17th and 18th centuries the custom of fasting fell completely into disuse. When Christians of Reformed persuasion went to America, they took with them their ecclesiastical traditions. In 1869, the Christian Reformed Synod decided that an annual day of prayer is to be observed on the second Wednesday in March. The Synod of 1970 reaffirmed the annual Day of Prayer, declaring that Synod continues to maintain the second Wednesday in March as an annual Day of Prayer. It stated, "The Annual Day of Prayer is a day of prayer specifically set aside primarily for the purpose of requesting God's blessing upon crops and industry." Of course, this does not mean that individual churches may not set aside special Days of Prayer when they see fit to do so. The intention of Synod was not to duplicate a prayer meeting. Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma note in *The Church Order Commentary* that they do not believe the introduction of prayer meeting methods would be an advancement. They believe that the Prayer Service should have "an appropriate sermon and the Minister then leads the Church in prayer." They also observe, "It is to be regretted that we do not keep a day of prayer to invoke God's blessing on our agricultural endeavors. At most we keep an hour of prayer. The day of prayer has indeed shrunk to small proportions."

Although Scripture does not proscribe an annual prayer day, I believe that in our perilous times we need to gather for special prayer, not only for crops, but also for peace and wisdom for our leaders in a world at war against terrorism. As Martin Monsma puts it, "Large sectors of our nations no longer pray; we who by God's grace do, should pray and intercede all the more."

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