

What the Little Word “Amen” Says, Does and Gives

“Amen...and Awoman”

On January 4th, 2021, Congressman Emmanuel Cleaver (Representative from the Kansas City, MO area) opened the 117th session of Congress with a prayer. Congressman Cleaver’s “day job” is as a pastor in the United Methodist Church. Pastor Cleaver closed his prayer with the following: *we ask [this prayer] in the name of the monotheistic God¹ ...Brahma...and God known by many different names and many different faiths. A-men...and a-woman.*

Uhh...hmmm. If you haven’t seen this, take a moment and “YouTube” it. It’s good entertainment. Now, besides the totally pluralistic prayer that is said by a “man of the cloth” (the God of the Scriptures is the Triune God—The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit), praying to *multiple gods*...besides that “issue”...I address the conclusion to his prayer—**a-men and a-woman**. To put the best construction on it, Congressman Cleaver says he was “punning” the conclusion of the prayer to recognize the record number of women serving in the House of Representatives. Okay...*but the word “amen” has nothing to do with gender*. Amen is not originally an English word, and does not signify the biological male. While I appreciate his attempt at drawing attention to God’s good BINARY in the creation between male and female(!), I believe Pastor Cleaver is a bit confused. But his “faux pas” gives rise for a conversation I’ve been wanting to have for a while—**what does the word “amen” mean and how is it used in the Church?**

What Does This Little Word Mean?

As many of you know, “amen” is the way we end prayers. It is the conclusion to many phrases and sequences in our liturgy (more on that below) and is even common in the secular realm to mean something like, “Right on brother (or sister)!” And in a sense, that’s what amen means. Luther puts it this way in *The Small Catechism* (The Lord’s Prayer, Conclusion, Explanation), “Amen, amen means ‘yes, yes, it shall be so.’ Amen is essentially a word that means “what was just said is true and will be true.” But there is more to this little word than “let it happen”.

How Is Amen Used in Scripture

The word “amen” is used over 30 in the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament). The first occurrence is **Deuteronomy 27:15**: *Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the Lord, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret. And all the people shall answer and say, ‘Amen.’* Amen is mainly used in doxologies (hymns of praise; see **Psalms 41:13**) or in liturgical contexts affirming what the leader had spoken (see **Nehemiah 8:6**). The Hebrew word amen (pronounced ah-main) is related to the verb אָמַן

¹ I don’t know what this term means when applied to God. I think he means something like “the one and only God”? Monotheism would apply to people’s conception of God, but not God Himself.

(pronounced ah-man), which means "to confirm, establish, support". Related nouns are the words for "trust" and "sure, lasting". One of the most profound usages of amen in the OT is **Isaiah 65:16**. The context is a speech by the Lord, the God of Israel, who speaks in clear terms of judgment and salvation. He promises that He will offer Himself to another people (**65:1**), for He has been repeatedly rejected by His own. YHWH, the God of Israel is determined to be found...even by those who "do not seek Him" (see **Luke 14:21-23**). The contrast is between *those who the Lord will bless due to repentance and faith and those who the Lord will judge due to rebellion and apostasy*. God speaks of "his servants"...people who "sing for gladness of heart" and rejoice in His name. **The people who seek the Lord are the ones who become His chosen people**, regardless of ethnicity (foreshadowing Paul's argumentation in *Romans* and *Galatians*). This is what the Lord says to those who reject Him:

You shall leave your name to my chosen for a curse,

and the Lord God will put you to death,

but his servants he will call by another name,

so that he who blesses himself in the land

*shall bless himself **by the God of truth**,*

and he who takes an oath in the land

*shall swear **by the God of truth**;*

because the former troubles are forgotten

and are hidden from my eyes.

It is the phrase "the God of truth" that is of interest, which is literally "the God of Amen" It is the God of Amen by which people are blessed and who *swear by His name*. In this context, to say "amen" is **to pledge fidelity to the "God of Amen"**. Amen, then, is shorthand for swearing according to *God's faithfulness to His promises, contrasted with the fickle falseness of those who worship other gods*. **Amen points to what God has done, is doing and will do again.**

In the New Testament, this Hebrew word is transliterated into the Greek and carries over the same connotations. Upping the ante, **it is Jesus who time and again uses the word "amen" as a sort of formula of what He will do to redeem and save His people**. Amen underscores the veracity and importance of what He is saying. For example, Jesus gives His inner circle some bad news. *And when it was evening, he came with the twelve. And as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me."* (**Mark 14:17-18**). This of course refers to Judas. A little later during the same setting, Peter gets more bad news. *"Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times."* (**Mark 14:30**). The word "truly" is the translation of the Greek "amen".

St. John has a special use of “amen”. Throughout his Gospel, Jesus gives a sort of formula using the “double amen”. You will recognize these examples:

(John 1:49-51) *Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “**Truly, truly, I say to you,** you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”*

(John 3:1-5) *Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered him, “**Truly, truly, I say to you,** unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “**Truly, truly, I say to you,** unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*

(John 5:25) *“**Truly, truly, I say to you,** an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.”*

Those are just a few. As you can see, the word “amen” carries the weight of confirming something that is profoundly true, underscoring the work of God in the midst of His people.

“Amen” is also used by the people in the NT. It concludes many doxologies and prayers. Some examples are **Galatians 1:5; Ephesians 3:21; Philippians 4:20**. Early in the Church, amen was used as a liturgical acclamation (reflecting one of the usages in the OT). A great example of this is **1 Corinthians 14:13-16**:

*Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, **how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving** when he does not know what you are saying?*

Paul is correcting the use of “tongues” as a sign of their “spiritual-ness”. It was instead causing chaos and disruption in worship. As Paul reminds them—God is a God of peace and not of disorder. So, we see that the word “amen” is put on the lips of the people to affirm what was being said in worship. Another example is **2 Corinthians 1:17-20**:

Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we

*proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. **That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.***

One of the best “sneaky good” passages in the entire Bible! But for our discussion, we see, “amen” is something indelibly linked to God...to His work, promises, Son...and now is on our lips to affirm THAT. The ultimate affirmation of the Christian Amen is seen in the final chapter of the Bible, **Revelation 22**. We pick it up with verse 12:

*“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price. I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. He who testifies to these things says, “**Surely I am coming soon.**” **Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!** The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.*

The Role of Amen in Worship and the Life of the Church

So, the Christian Amen has retained its worshipful, praiseworthy character, both in corporate worship and private prayer. When we utter, “Amen” we are joining our voices to the choirs of the saints and affirming what God has done for His people in His Son Jesus Christ. We are saying that the Word of God, which was spoken, which was heard, which was uttered in the name of Jesus is TRUE. This is way more than, “Right on, man!” **We are confessing that God Himself is the God of Amen and what He does is perfect, righteous and good.** Amen is the “people’s response” to the mighty acts and words of the Lord. Seen in this light, in the context of the Divine Service, the word “amen” is the “people’s word”.

This is important to consider. The role of the celebrant (the pastor who leads worship) is very often to “speak the things of God” to the people, or to utter the words of the people to God. The pastor has his speaking part; the people have theirs. Very often, the people are given a more substantial role, and sometimes the pastor and the people speak the “amen” together. To be sure, the pastor is part of the people! But in a liturgical setting, *the pastor is also speaking the part of God*. This might sound audacious to you...and it is! It’s why pastors seek to be very careful

when conducting worship. They are not simply “play-acting” but are given the task of putting the Word of Christ on their lips. But in this division of parts, so to speak, the pastor is to say his part with reverence and awe and the people likewise their words. **The amen is the chief word the people speak.** It is not the pastor’s word in a worship context! This is why you will notice me pausing after the sermon (the public proclamation of the Word of God) to allow the people to say, “amen”. It has nothing to do with whether the people think the sermon “was good”. It is that the people acknowledge that the Word of God was proclaimed faithfully and the Gospel was preached into the ears of the people.

There are two great examples of the use of the “amen” spoken by the people during the Service of the Sacrament. One is a private, personal amen and the other is corporate. When the body and blood of Jesus is distributed by the pastor to each person, the simple statement is made: *The Body of Christ given for you/The Blood of Christ shed for you*. This is the “God of Amen” pouring His forgiveness, life and salvation into the earthly elements of bread and wine. The response of each person to this gift of God is “amen”. The proper place for that amen is **between the phrase “the Body of Christ” and the prepositional phrase for you**. In other words, you say “amen” to the truth of that bread you are about to eat, confessing it is indeed the true body of Jesus. Upon your confessional “amen”, the pastor then says that due to your faithful amen, this is given FOR YOU.

The second, corporate amen is after the distribution of the Supper. The celebrant says the following blessing of dismissal: *The body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen and preserve you in body and soul to life everlasting. Depart ~~✠~~ in peace*. The response of the people is a resounding “amen!” For you are confessing that what has just happened is a gracious act of Gospel, that God has worked and you have received by faith. It is, of course, true for the pastor too. But he is speaking the blessing. The people are speaking their amen.

What Amen Says, Does, and Gives the Believer in Christ

The little word “amen” packs a big punch. It is not frivolous; it is not to be used for puns by progressive, woke politicians signaling to the world how enlightened they are. **Amen is a profound word of truth, and affirmation of what God has done in Jesus for the world, for your congregation, for you personally.** It is a gift of the Triune God, the God of Amen, to the people that we may faithfully respond to His mighty work and incredible grace. Amen says: it is true; it is good; it shall be so.

May I get an “amen”? In the name of Jesus...