

Prayer In The Modern World

Allen C. McSween, Jr.

Trinity Presbyterian Church, Laurinburg, N.C.

“We are living through one of the great hours of history. The false gods are crumbling, and our hearts are hungry for the voice of God.”

Abraham Heschel

He was 27 years old and dying of cancer. His parents and wife had come by the house one Sunday afternoon to ask that I visit and have prayer with him. I did, but as I was leaving after a brief prayer, the young man grabbed my arm and with a look on his face that I will long remember asked, “Preacher, is all that true. . . is it really true for me?”

A person cannot serve long in the pastoral ministry without facing a similar situation and similar question. Do our prayers really make any difference? It may be easy enough to see how prayer can be of some help to the one praying, but what about intercessory prayer? Do our prayers for others have any real effect?

No issue focuses more sharply one’s basic theology (or lack of it) than the question of intercessory prayer. Here what one believes about God and his relationship to his people and his creation becomes inescapably personal and practical. During this Easter Season it would be well worth a minister’s time to give serious attention to the nature and effect of Christian prayer. It is to stimulate and aid in such reflection that this article is offered.

I

PRAYER IN OUR CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

“Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire. . . the Christian’s vital breath, the Christian’s native air.” So we occasionally sing in the words of James Montgomery’s old hymn. Perhaps that ought to be the case, but for a great many people today it simply is not. Once it was more or less taken for granted that prayer was at the very heart and center of the Christian’s life in the world. But that day has long since passed. Prayer has become a problem to all sorts of people, clergy and laity alike.

Many of us are not unlike the French philosopher Voltaire, who, while going down a street in Paris with a friend, stopped and removed his hat as a religious procession went by. The friend, surprised by his seeming reverence, asked, “What, are you reconciled with God?” With fine irony Voltaire replied, “We salute . . . but we do not speak.”

The same thing could be said for many of us and our contemporaries. “We salute”—we acknowledge the reality of God, and perhaps even seek to serve his

cause in the movements of our day for justice and liberation, but “we do not speak”—not in any deeply personal sense.

So we find a curious paradox today. On the one hand we know that for a great many people, including many in the church, prayer has become a lost art. Jim Angel, in his book *Put Your Arms Around the City* states the issues bluntly and accurately: “Most of us, if we are really honest, have to confess that we pray infrequently, unsatisfyingly, and on many days not at all.” For many of us prayer has lost its essential meaning and reality.

And yet, the terrible irony is that at the very same time there is in our culture a deep hunger for authentic spirituality, for religious meaning and value. People who no longer, or perhaps never, found Christian prayer meaningful, are all too eager to pay \$125 for a course in Transcendental Meditation, or worse. Books of serious theology collect dust on bookstore shelves while accounts of spiritual experience, even of the most egotistical and bizarre forms, become instant bestsellers. The sense of wonder and awe at the deep mysteries of life that has gone out of the life of the church has come back in through the local movie theater in such films as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*,

There is clearly a deep and persistent hunger for religious reality today. If traditional forms of the life of faith and prayer leave us empty, we find other things to fill the void. When people cease to believe in the living God, as G. K. Chesterton pointed out, they do not cease to believe in something. They are likely to believe in anything. Anyone who thinks we live in an Age of Unbelief is simply out of touch with the contemporary situation. It is not unbelief, but over-belief that is most striking today. Modern men and women for all their supposed sophistication, are still incurable believers. They do not gain or lose faith—they merely change the object of it. One way or another they believe: in astrology, health foods, U.F.O.’s, “salvation by grope through feeling,” “It,” free enterprise, a Buick, the Spirit. Like it or not believing is as integral to our humanity as breathing. The question is whether the object of our belief is true, trustworthy, and saving.

In this time both of too much and too little prayer, when the Christian community is caught between reductionistic views of prayer that would reduce it to pious monologue and superstitious views that would make prayer an “Aladdin’s lamp,” it is imperative that we seek to clarify for our people the nature of *Christian* prayer. The late Abraham Herschel was right, “We are living through one of the great hours in history. The false gods are crumbling and our hearts are hungry for the voice of God.”

II

TOWARD A THEOLOGY FOR INTERCESSORY PRAYER

Here let us move on to lay out a framework for considering some of the basic theological issues raised by prayer, especially intercessory prayer. In developing a proposal on intercessory prayer at least four basic points need to be taken into account.

THE NATURE OF GOD: God is conceived in Christian faith as the ground, sustainer and goal of all reality. It is he by whom and in whom all things “live

and move and have their being." He creates, governs, and sustains the world, not by sheer power, "naked sovereignty," but out of the love revealed in Jesus Christ, "without whom was not anything made that was made."

A Christian view of God takes as its center of focus the life, death, resurrection, and continuing presence of Jesus Christ, and thus finds its paradigm for God's activity in the world in the suffering love seen in the cross. The "living God" of the Bible is no remote, aloof deity, but a God who takes our suffering and sin into his own divine life. Such a God is best understood in terms of "personal, purposive love" (Gordon Kaufman), a love that is present and active in all events bringing good into being. He is one who can properly be addressed in the most intimate of human terms, *Abba*, dear Father.

THE NATURE OF THE CREATED ORDER: The best contemporary thought about the nature of the world sees it not as a closed, static, mechanistic system governed by immutable "laws of nature," but as a dynamic, inter-related process characterized by both order and novelty, contingency and indetermining, stability and freedom. Such a world-view looks at the universe less in terms of a complex machine (e.g. a watch) and more in terms of a living, evolving organism in which each part is involved in the life of the whole. This view does not deny contingency and causality, but it sees different forms of causality operating at the different levels of existence—matter, life, mind, and spirit. The higher one moves up the scale of subjectivity the greater is the freedom and the less direct the causality. (For a good summary of this contemporary understanding of the world, see Ian Barbour's *Issues in Science and Religion*.)

HOW GOD ACTS IN THE CREATED ORDER: The older, mechanistic view of the world left little room for speaking of how God acts in the created order. God is not a being among other beings who acts by physical causation. But the new organic, or "process" view of reality opens up a number of new ways of affirming God's active involvement in all of existence. It can be said that God acts in the created order in ways that are appropriate to the level of existence with which he is dealing. For example, with inanimate objects or forces (e.g. stones or gravity), he acts in terms of the maintenance of order, harmony, stability, ("While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease." Gen. 8:22)

With persons, however, God acts in terms of freedom, of spirit, of the persuasion of love, of human initiative and response. In the human realm, as Alfred North Whitehead has put it, "the power of God is the worship he inspires." We need to say more than that about God's sovereignty in history, but certainly God's primary action in human history is through the appeal of love, of hope, of creative trust.

But here we must come a step further and consider God's activity in that middle ground between the realms of nature and of freedom, for instance, in the processes of health and disease. It is in this area that our prayers of intercession most often fall. Is there a relationship between prayer and the physiological processes that lead to bodily wholeness?

With the recent discoveries in the area of psychosomatic medicine it becomes increasingly clear that there is a close relationship between the mental-

spiritual activity of prayer and the body's healing systems. Many physiological processes once thought to be automatic have been found to be subject to a considerable degree of self control. Through bio-feedback training, for example, a person can learn to control the rate of his heartbeat or skin temperature. The results in terms of treating stress-related disorders have been quite significant. It has also been found that even very slight changes in the body's electrochemical systems can result in significant alteration in cell growth.

Obviously, a word of caution is in order. Psychosomatic medicine offers a fuller understanding of how mental-spiritual activity is related to physical changes, but it should not be considered a new "proof of prayer." In our praying, as in our believing and living, we walk by faith not by sight. Yet, having said that, it is my belief that what we learn from psychosomatic medicine does offer a conceptuality, in accord with our best understanding of the nature of reality, that helps us understand at least one of the ways in which God, as Spirit and Love, effects change in the created order. With such conceptuality one does not need to argue for God's activity in the created order in terms of intervention, i.e. his setting aside of or violating its natural order. One can make a strong case for God's active presence and involvement throughout all of creation as Spirit and Love. In such manner God works "in, with, and under" (to use the Lutheran sacramental phrase) the created agencies of the world. He acts to bring healing and wholeness, not through coercive power, but through the influences of Spirit upon the self and thus the body of the person. Intercessory prayer need not ask God to disrupt the order of creation, but to act in and through that order which itself is ultimately an expression of love and open to love's service.

AN INVITATION TO INTERCESSORY PRAYER: Someone has said that the real test of any theology of prayer is whether it leads one to pray. Here at the edge of all our conceptualities we come to the mystery of God's command and permission that we address him in prayer in the trust that we are heard and answered according to his infinite wisdom and love and our deepest need.

John Calvin speaks of the need for "reverence and moderation" in prayer "lest we give loose reign to miscellaneous requests and lest we crave more than God allows" (*Institutes*, III-20-16). But Calvin also insists that "if we would pray fruitfully, we ought therefore to grasp with both hands this assurance of obtaining what we ask, which the Lord enjoins with his own voice. . . . For only that prayer is acceptable to God which is born. . . out of such presumption of faith and is grounded in the unshaken assurance of hope." (III-20-12)

And so, even at the limits of our understanding, we offer our prayers of intercession for three basic reasons.

We pray as an expression of love. Fosdick called prayer "love on its knees" and so it is. Because we love and because that love is grounded in God, we cannot but pray for the well-being of a loved one. We find such prayers of intercession torn from our hearts almost in spite of ourselves.

No one has dealt more poignantly with this aspect of prayer than Peter deVries in his novel *The Blood of the Lamb*. The skeptical father, whose daughter was dying of leukemia, prays, despite his own rational objections, what is surely one of the most beautiful prayers in all literature.

I do not ask that she be spared to me, but that her life be spared to her.

Or give us a year. We will spend it as we have the last, missing nothing. We will mark the dance of every hour between the snowdrop and the snow: crocus to tulip to violet to iris to rose. . . We will seek out these modest subtleties so lost in the blare of oaks and maples, like flutes and woodwinds drowned in brasses and drums. When winter comes, we will let no snow fall ignored. We will again watch the first blizzard from her window like figures locked snug in a glass paperweight. "Pick one out and follow it to the ground!" she will say again. We will feed the plain birds that stay to cheer us through the winter, and when spring returns we shall be the first out, to catch the snowdrop's first white whisper in the wood. All this we ask, with the remission of our sins, in Christ's name. Amen. (p. 228-229)

We pray because Christ bids us pray. He invites us to offer to God all our deepest needs and desires. He does not guarantee that our prayers will be answered as we desire—that would be magic, not prayer—but he does assure us that "if you ask anything of the Father *in my name* (i.e. in accord with my sovereign purposes of love), he will give it to you." (John 16:23) Prayer in our acceptance of God's gracious invitation and command to bring before him all our concerns as a child to a parent, in the assurance that even before a word is on our lips, he knows and cares and wills to help. If one does not believe that, obviously prayer is seen as of no effect. But if one does believe that, prayer is inevitable.

We pray because through prayer we open ourselves and others to the working of God's Spirit in our lives. This is the great and essential mystery of prayer, that the sovereign Lord of all creation is open for our needs and that he calls us to be his loyal covenant partners, to share in the accomplishment of his just and loving purposes in history. That is something we dare not take for granted.

In prayer we share in God's sovereign governance of the world. As Karl Barth has put it, "God's sovereignty is so great that it embraces both the possibility, and, as it is exercised, the actuality that the creature can actively be present and co-operate in His over-ruling." (*Church Dogmatics*, III/3, p.285) Without abandoning his control of the universe, God allows himself to be influenced by his creatures. "He not merely permits but commands him to call upon Him in the definite expression that He will hear and answer, that his asking will have an objective as well as subjective significance, i.e. a significance for His own will and action." (p.286).

We do not pray as a means of "lobbying in the courts of the Almighty," nor as a magical technique to bend God's will to our own. We pray in the faith and bold persistence that comes from knowing that God has freely and unalterably elected to be for us in Jesus Christ, to stand with us, to share our suffering and make whole our brokenness. Intercessory prayer is never a substitute for the means God has provided for the healing and preservation of life. But prayer can effect significant change in the object of the prayer, so long as such prayer is an authentic expression of love and does not violate the freedom and integrity of the other.

Here again a word of caution is in order. While affirming that God does hear and answer prayer, we must also state clearly that his answer may not be at all what we expect or desire at the moment. God is simply not at our beck and call. Christian prayer is no guarantee that we will get whatever we want from God.

But that in itself is an expression of God's gracious gift of freedom and responsibility. Only in a world with rough edges, a world where risk and struggle and courage are woven into the very fabric of life, can the finest human qualities come into being. Because God's goal for us is the achievement of "full maturity in Christ," there are often times when he must refuse a specific request as an expression of his wise love. Just as we who are parents must often deny our children's requests for the sake of their long-term growth and development, so God, at times, must deny our petitions.

But what else should we expect—with our limited vision, our fragmentary understanding, our persistent sin and self-centeredness. How could all our prayers be answered without chaos in the world? Too often to grant what we ask would require that God play special favorites. In light of what we know of how interwoven our lives and destinies are with persons throughout the world, we can see how God must at times refuse our requests, lest in giving that which would be good for us, he bring harm to someone else.

Abraham Lincoln, in his magnificent Second Inaugural Address, the most theologically astute State paper in American history, has expressed well the attitude of mature faith:

Both sides read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes his aid against the other. . . . The prayers of both could not be answered, that of neither has been answered just as they intended. . . . Yet still it must be said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

At times God must refuse our specific requests, but even in so doing, he is still present and at work within us. He may not answer our petitions as we desire, but he does answer us. He gives us the strength and support for his love, and through it the courage and serenity to bear whatever may come our way, in the assurance that his grace is sufficient.

And so we do not let the cautions we must take into account cut the nerve of prayer. Scripture and Christian experience take seriously the reality of ungranted prayer, but they take even more seriously the gracious invitation and command of our Lord to offer to him the deepest intercessions of our hearts in the lively and reckless confidence that he answers our prayers in ways that are "just and righteous altogether."

In one of the most moving scenes in Augustine's *Confessions* he pictures his mother, Monica, praying all night in a sea-side chapel on the coast of North Africa, that God would not let her son sail for Italy. More than anything else in life Monica wanted her son to become a Christian, but she feared that if he went to Italy, with all its temptation, he would be lost forever. Yet even as she prayed, Augustine sailed for Italy. But there he came under the influence of the great Bishop Ambrose and in time became one of the greatest of all Christian theologians. Augustine "became a Christian in the very place from which his mother's prayers would have kept him." (Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer*, p. 120)

Even if God does not answer our specific requests in the way we desire, it is our faith and confidence that he does answer our deepest needs in accord with his own wise and holy love.

Finally, let us remember that in all our prayers we do not pray alone. Our prayers are a part of the intercession of the whole *communio sanctorum*. They pray with and for us. In so doing, all our prayers are caught up in the continual intercession of Christ himself. Again Barth emphasizes, "God is the Father of Jesus Christ, and that very man, Jesus Christ, has prayed and he is praying still. Such is the foundation of our prayer in Jesus Christ. It is as if God himself has pledged to answer our request because all our prayers are summed up in Jesus Christ; God cannot fail to answer; since it is Jesus Christ who prays." (*Prayer According to the Catechisms of the Reformation*, p. 22)

Having said all this, we return once more to the mystery of prayer. To speak of the mystery of prayer can be a cop-out. It can be a refusal to use our minds in the service and worship of God. But it also can be an expression of deep humility, reverence, and trust. L. Harold DeWolf, certainly no friend of obscurantism, puts it this way, "The ways and means He employs (in the answering of prayer) I cannot predict, but I know that it is He whose love impells me to offer intercessory prayer. His love will not let it fall back in vain." (*A Theology of the Living Church*, p. 362)

And so, even in the face of incurable illness, we pray for healing, out of love, out of faith, and in the trust that in ways beyond our understanding God accepts and uses our prayers in his providential governance of the world. Through prayer we act as channels of his sovereign love, the love at the heart of all reality, by which in the fullness of time "there shall be no more mourning or crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have all passed away."