

Touchstone

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EDITORIAL

*Resort to sermons, but to prayers most:
Praying's the end of preaching.*

Many would give nodding agreement to this counsel of George Herbert in “The Church Porch,” but it may be advice little heeded or perhaps adopted too late. Certainly, busy lives and the frequent lack of any practical guidance mean that prayer is an underused spiritual resource today. Calvin called prayer “the chief exercise of faith,” and the Christian tradition generally regards it as a means of grace. The act of prayer allows us opportunity, as few other actions do, to become present to God who is always present to us.

A year ago, the theme of the June 2018 number was Providence and Prayer. At least one author found that, although the themes indeed are interrelated, there was simply not enough space to deal well with both of them. This was a fair assessment, and, as a result, the editorial board decided that we should focus on prayer in a separate and future number. This is it.

In our first article John Buttars traces the development of prayer in his life and ministry—a lifelong, evolving vocation, from theological school to retirement. It is an astute, highly practical, and moving account of the life of prayer as a converting ordinance.

While Buttars speaks with a seasoned and senior voice, Sam Grottenberg offers the voice of a younger pastor in a New Testament article. He argues that the Epistle of James views prayer as “activating” authentic relationship with God, and also that prayer provides a way of avoiding the double-mindedness that so dismays James.

Of course, all is not perfect in the life of prayer. Is it awkward to admit that, despite serious practices and other, more ragged attempts, some of us find ourselves left baffled and uncertain? This was the experience of C.S. Lewis, whose experience Brenton Dickieson relates, having found in Lewis a fellow struggler in the field of prayer. Knowing that others, even the eminent, struggle in practising and understanding prayer can be a source of encouragement.

In “Nothing but Work,” Neil Young offers readers a look at his yeoman practice of public prayer. It is an idiomatic approach, reflecting his congregational context, as well as his own developed sense of liturgy. Providing us with instructive examples, his account of Sunday prayers at St. Andrew’s United Church in Toronto will assist readers in reflecting on their own contexts and practices.

Our Profile is also provided by Young—a sketch of the life and work of an early Methodist biographer, Mrs. R. P. (Jane Agar) Hopper,

author of *Old-Time Primitive Methodism in Canada*. Mrs. Hopper provides intriguing portraits of Primitive Methodists of her day, a time when camp meetings were held in Yorkville, near present-day Bloor St. in Toronto. Regrettably, there is no photograph extant of Mrs. Hopper.

After the Profile and before the usual five book reviews comes an exchange of letters on the theme of prayer between the editor and the chair of the *Touchstone* board. Readers are invited to join the conversation through contributing to the latest *Touchstone* blog.

We are grateful that the current moderator of The United Church of Canada, the Rt. Rev. Richard Bott, is contributing under our “From the Heart” banner. He tells us of some pivotal experiences in praying with others, and encourages us to reach out to others, in both conversation and prayer, especially with those whom we find challenging to engage.

Last, stimulation by an article in the June 2018 number led me to some reading in *Church Dogmatics*, and, as a result, I am contributing an article myself—on Karl Barth’s teaching about prayer.

* * * * *

A book that long languished on my shelf came to notice about a year ago, and I have been pondering its message since. *Praying the Kingdom: Towards a Political Spirituality* is by Charles Elliott, a former director of Christian Aid in the United Kingdom. Written in 1985 and re-printed several times in 1986 and 1987 (Darton, Longman & Todd), there are dated aspects to the book, but its central themes are more than pertinent to the present hour and to the theme of prayer.

Elliott observes that many concerned Christians in the first world are caught in the jaws of a trap. On the one hand, in the face of the profound material needs of millions of people, we can feel a sense of guilt for the material abundance that we enjoy and for the colonial depredations from which we have benefitted. On the other, in the face of the challenges of the world—its economic injustice, the power of its despots, and the violence that casts a pall of fear over so many lives—we can feel powerless. What to do—give up on our concern and content ourselves with an individualized form of religion, or jump into a hyper-activism designed to purge us of guilt and powerlessness?

Elliott’s prescription for this doubly daunting dilemma is the remedy of prayer, prayer that seriously seeks God’s kingdom on God’s terms. He defines this as “standing in all our weakness before God on the side of the poor, and offering our psychic energies in the great battle against evil in ourselves, in our environment, and in the whole cosmos”

(145). He believes that prayer is a means of releasing God's power in the world, thus affecting events in a more profound way than human power and action alone could do. Elliott was a political activist, meeting with political and economics leaders in the U.K. in his role with Christian Aid, but he is crystal clear about his view of the source of transformative power: "As long as we imagine that the world can be changed by our activities, our good works, our energy, we substitute our effort for the power of God. That is as ineffectual as it is blasphemous" (19). Elliott's bold claim is also that we will feel this power animating our prayer life and equipping us for service of God's reign.

Key to Elliott's recommended style of prayer is use of one's imagination to live into the situations about which one is praying. Engaging the stories of people affected by crisis is one aspect of this; another is living into biblical stories to deepen our understanding of the actual nature of the Kingdom.

As we wonder what we can do in the face of leaders intransigent in ignoring the human assault on the environment, or what we can do in the face of Armageddon brinkmanship as aircraft carriers sail toward the Persian Gulf, the challenge to "pray the Kingdom" presented by Charles Elliott is worthy of attention and practice.

* * * * *

This month marks the 100th anniversary of the Winnipeg General Strike, brought to an end when police charged the striking workers and their supporters. J.S. Wordsworth, still a Methodist minister, was one of those arrested as leaders. Among the legacies left by Wordsworth from those tumultuous days is his "Grace before Meat":

We are thankful for these and all the good things of life. We recognize that they are a part of our common heritage and come to us through the efforts of our brothers and sisters the world over. What we desire for ourselves, we wish for all. To this end, may we take our share in the world's work and the world's struggles.

Clearly, Wordsworth would fail Charles Elliott's test as to the source of transformative power. Still, it is a responsible "secular grace," attesting themes that seem inbuilt in the human spirit by the divine Spirit: to express gratitude for the good in life; to acknowledge the dignity and worth of all in the human community; and to accept responsibility for a fairer sharing of the resources of the Earth. *Gloria deo.*

THE VOCATION OF PRAYER: FROM THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL TO RETIREMENT

by John Buttars

Throw the word “prayer” into a brainstorming session and my first responses are decidedly negative. I have skeletons in my prayer closet where prayer is fake and useless, associated with self-righteousness, prissy formality, vapid sentimentality.

At the same time I intuited prayer as deep, fearsomely intimate. In the eighth decade of my life, part of my self-identity is as a man of prayer. And by “man” I mean the total specificity of this one human life. I may not pray well, whatever “well” means but I do pray, as in having intentional, regular, and consistent practices that engage my body, mind, and spirit, enabling me to be more conscious of my connection with all that is, here and now: around, within, transcending, connecting with the “All in All,” what we familiarly name “God.”

How did this self-identity as a man of prayer arise? It was certainly not chosen. It grew hidden, like a mustard seed, a sign that the Spirit has been praying within me long before I was conscious of it. The most obvious starting point was feeling disembowelled in the early years of paid accountable ministry: disembowelled by life, by being pulled in seemingly opposing directions in ministry, marriage, parenthood, and in my confused and confusing interior and exterior worlds. Before formal ministry, there were streaks of light pointing to the banquet that has come: wonder-struck as a child on a starlit night, moved by some of my father’s sermons, seeking to pray as a teenager, or being moved by beauty. Other than chapel worship, attention to the spiritual life was absent in my theological studies. If I prayed as a student or in early ministry it was to read other people’s prayers.

A few years after ordination I began to fear that if I kept at life the way I was travelling, rich and rewarding as it was, I would end an empty husk. A residency in hospital chaplaincy edged me into my inner world. Upon returning to the pastorate two unexpected processes began: facilitating and participating in congregational prayer/personal sharing groups and meeting with a Jesuit spiritual director. My academic and social gospel self was astonished, even embarrassed by these developments. Twenty years or so into this journey I said to my spiritual director that a phrase was stuck in my head, “The Rev. John Buttars is dead.” She asked, “What happened to the Rev.?” My inner identity had shifted. Yes, I remained a United Church minister, but now less a man of the church and more a man seeking to commit my life through physical, mental, and spiritual practices to a living of the Way, to the building of the commonwealth of God, to the unfolding, Christifying work of God.

At first I sought to learn practices, a challenging learning curve. My first spiritual director, John Haley, SJ, shared words and images foreign to my Protestant ears. He suggested I come to Loyola House north of Guelph for several hours once a month and simply remain in a bedroom. Just be. He guided me through the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, which was followed by initial training as a Spiritual Director. There were also events at the Five Oaks Retreat Centre (near Paris, ON) and the Toronto School of Theology, plus many books.

It felt like being invited to travel to, and live in, a foreign land—and it was exhilarating. Preparing sermons evolved as I incorporated gospel contemplation and *lectio divina* into the process. Pastoral Counselling reoriented into more of a guiding relationship, with my beginning to listen with an inner ear, seeking to discern what God was doing. Teaching expanded from primarily head knowledge to heart and spirit foci. John Veltri, SJ, organized the first Week of Guided Prayer in the congregation, and it continues in Guelph more than thirty-five years later, and has spread around the world.¹ I began to share my experiences with the congregation and members started to take retreats, engage the Ignatian Exercises, and even get training as spiritual directors. One layperson, Lorraine Dykman, began a covenanted relationship with the congregation as a Spiritual Companion and others followed. I also began to provide leadership: retreats, talks, spiritual direction (companionship). I was gaining new skills, and I had mentors upon whom to rely. I could see the lives of people in the congregation, even in the larger community, being transformed and enriched; mine was too. One colleague told me that he grieved that people's lives were being changed by the AA group in the church basement but nothing seemed to be happening upstairs in the sanctuary. That was not my situation. As challenging as ministry was, I was growing, even thriving.

Practices

Intentional, consistent, and regular practices gradually began to form. It was tough initiating and maintaining them. I experimented with reading for a half hour in the morning, going for a walk, using prayer workbooks. It was trial and error, sometimes feeling a failure, sometimes affirmed. There was lots of inner resistance. Slowly a more consistent lifestyle emerged, helped enormously by my life partner experimenting with

¹ For a history of the Week of Guided Prayer see [http://orientations.jesuits.ca/weekofguidedprayer\(1\).pdf](http://orientations.jesuits.ca/weekofguidedprayer(1).pdf).

similar practices. The lifestyle that started to emerge was something I began to see as “contemplative.”

Here is a brief overview of my constantly evolving practices. A detailed description would require a face to face conversation.

Daily. I have four periods totalling about sixty minutes, three of them very short, one of them outside. I engage my body, mind, spirit, memories, emotions, consciousness. Activities include movement, singing, writing (dominant and non-dominant hands), reciting, ritual, reading, art, and more.

Weekly/Monthly. Having intentional, regular, and consistent practices is work. I need a break. I practice them normally six days a week, but sometimes specific practices or a full day are missed. I am grateful for one guide noting that his practices shifted about every six months. I see a spiritual companion approximately every six weeks, finding them through referral or by choosing someone whom I trust. I attend monthly Taize services when available and Sunday worship about three Sundays out of four. I try to turn off electronic devices two consecutive days each week (and can go weeks in the summer without them).

Yearly. I attend Taize weekend retreats once or twice a year as well as have a silent retreat, normally eight or nine days in length. Most of them have been taken at the family cottage. Since ordination I have taken one yearlong study leave, three sabbaticals, and designated the first six months of retirement a sabbatical.

Holidays. I do not maintain my formal practices when on holiday or away from home for short periods. However, I find that elements of them creep into these times away, and for that I am grateful. A daily early summer morning kayak paddle can replace some of the more formal prayer periods.

Insights

What I have learned in this journey has been piece-meal, more like picking up jigsaw pieces than suddenly discovering a fully finished puzzle. The journey continues as a rich unfolding conversion story. What I have learned is specific to my personality, history, and orientation to life. Others might find similarities but experiences are always specific to an individual. Nothing that I write is prescriptive. Here is an alphabetical list of some topics.

Absence. My experience of God is often in absence. At one time the sense of absence fed my doubt and darkness. Now it provides space for seeking to love as God loves. I do not understand why the absence

does not bother me as much, nor how the absence can grow into a form of presence, but I treat it as one example of how God prays within me. The essential of a contemplative life is to show up. As Abba Moses (Egypt, 4th C), said, “Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”

Art. I have a school memory of being shamed for a drawing. One spiritual director encouraged me to try again. My first piece was a revelation. Occasionally with pastels I draw a mandala or print short phrases that particularly speak to me, all with my non-dominant hand. Doing so always draws me into the present moment, sometimes expresses hidden emotions or insights, and amazingly can provide a living Word. It always feels like prayer. I always feel better.

Breathing. Breathe deeply. My distractions are endless, my inner life like a nonstop soap opera, a boisterous cocktail party. It takes much effort to bring my attention to my breathing, to the present moment. However, only then can I meet my truest self and my Maker.

Circle of Love. Intercession is a mystery. Do our prayers make any difference? Shopping list prayers seem cheap. True, I have been changed by my praying for others. Now I practise intercessory prayer with the image of placing people and situations within a circle of love including those profoundly different from me (even Donald Trump), or the people for whom I write letters on behalf of Amnesty International, their persecutors, and jailers.

Desire. I try to pay close attention to my heart’s deepest desire. Sometimes I develop a prayer out of that desire. Twenty-five years ago, I began to seek a deeper intimacy with Jesus. It sounded terribly evangelical, and, in embarrassment, I kept it under wraps. Nothing seemed to happen until I realized I was reading voraciously about the misuse of power within the church, the ongoing crucifixion of Christ. This has become focused on a multitude of books on reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and others in Canada.

Discernment. “Do not judge,” said Jesus. Do not compare, condemn, or react. Pay attention, experience non-judgmentally. I try to use a threefold process. What am I noticing? What am I learning? In response to the noticing and learning, is there some small step I can take? This approach is in stark contrast to being reactive in life, a liberating gift since congregational ministry can be full of reactivity, and today’s social media is by its very nature reactive. The opposite of a contemplative life is not inactivity but reactivity.

Fallow time. Dryness and feeling lost have been companions in my journey, but I have found it helpful to reframe these times as fallow

time. The field may look dreary but it is resting, and in that resting there are things happening; I don't need to know what God might be doing below the surface of my consciousness. Nothing is wasted in the contemplative life, neither the shabbiest nor the most beautiful.

Formula. John Cassian (CE 365-435) emphasized the desert tradition of repeating a single phrase to move towards purity of heart and unceasing prayer. As a formula he recommended Psalm 69, "O God, incline unto my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me." This developed into the single word focus of Western Christianity (such as "Maranatha" of the John Main stream), or the Jesus Prayer of Orthodox Christianity. I try to use both, the word or a few words for my twenty minutes of silence in Centering Prayer or a form of the Jesus Prayer at other times to help keep me in the present or to deal with distractions. There is a lot more joy in repeating a short formula than going down the rabbit hole of self-condemnation or hyper reactivity. A contemplative life is fully active and has given me more focus for works of peace, charity, and justice.

Friends/Colleagues/Groups. I am grateful that in my first pastoral charge the Manitoba Conference and the University of Winnipeg set up pastor groups. There I learned the significance of being part of an ongoing collegial group that shares, prays, learns, and seeks to be open and honest. The focus was learning skills, speaking from the heart and hearing oneself into truth and abundant life. In retirement I continue to belong to collegial sharing groups.

Images. Theological school was a world of ideas. Now images are equally important and have been life-transforming. Contemplating Lazarus bound in the tomb, I found myself, between sleep and wakefulness, feeling bound and imprisoned in darkness, and hearing a voice cry, "Come out!" In a process of gospel contemplation and conversation with a guide I came to identify a primal life-long question, "Is there a place for me?" My fearful "I" believed there was not. I left the retreat shaken, deeply grateful for the experience and newborn alive.

Intentional/regular/consistent. These concepts are essential to the whole enterprise. Discipline is not a four letter word. A new practice needs to be carried out for at least three months before a fair appraisal can be undertaken.

Listening. Prayer is essentially listening. I wonder if God wants to respond to our wordiness with "Shut up!" Learning to listen has been a challenging discipline. It has to do with being in the here and now, paying attention, being "mindful," as Buddhists would say.

Novice. My first spiritual director was adamant I would always be a novice. Experiences are collected, insights gained, maybe even some

wisdom. There is no graduation but an invitation to life-long learning.

Reading. This activity is a life-giving practice but contains a temptation. It is easy to think that, if one reads about prayer, one has prayed. You haven't. And a lot of my "secular" reading speaks deeply to my life of prayer, inter-penetrating and deepening my contemplative life.

Repetition. In school I learned that repetition happens when I behaved badly or failed. However, in a contemplative life repetition is to deepen the experience. This continues to be a challenging insight as my ego cries, "Boring!" always craving new experiences.

Self-care. I cannot separate self-care from my contemplative life. Life is a whole, its parts inter-connected. Physical exercise, nutrition, contemplative practices, reading, attitude, and self-talk interweave into the quilt of life. I seek to be in more authentic relationship with myself, others, the natural world, and God. I see all of life as simultaneously secular and sacred.

Self-emptying. This is at the core of my daily prayer, seeking to empty myself of all the stuff in my inner and outer life, and to take on the mind of Christ even though I am not sure what this entails. The practice of self-emptying, particularly in Centering Prayer, has led me to ponder whether God emptied God's self and made space for creation so that we and all reality exist within God. This theological journey has been intensified by doing the Ignatian Exercises a third time through the lens of evolution and the thought of Teilhard de Chardin. To have one's theology shaped by prayer is profoundly satisfying.

Self-knowledge. A saying from one of my mentors was, "I know what I know only when I say it." I have learned that for me to know myself truly I need to speak, write, or draw what is within; externalize it in some fashion. Thus, hearing myself, and being heard, helps keep me honest about myself, my motivations, attachments, attitudes, and enables me to own my own truth. Christian mystics have always seen self-knowledge as inseparable from knowing God. "May I know myself that I may know Thee," St. Augustine prayed.

Silence. It was only in silence that I discovered that my inner world was peopled by "demons," particularly free floating anxiety, specific fears, and shame, some having their origin in early childhood experiences. To allow these some room to surface and speak required more courage than I could ever have anticipated. There is a nakedness in silence, in withdrawing from the regular routine. Insights can transform: I lived without a clock for a week in retreat, discovered my natural bodily rhythm, and returned home never to use an alarm again. Gradually I have noticed increasing joy and gratitude for beauty and small mercies.

Vocabulary. Just as a patient can feel “better” when given a diagnosis because now one knows what is being faced, so learning a tradition’s vocabulary can be extremely helpful. Ignatian terminology and rules of discernment have been particularly useful, as was the Celtic Christian naming of two scriptures, Bible and Nature. Personality orientations through the Myers Briggs Type Inventory, Spiritual Types, and Enneagram have been illuminating.

Words. We in the United Church are wordy. In leading public prayer, I have fewer words. Yet words can become a living Word. A transforming Word can come in a phrase or image, from a book, poem, or sermon. A Word can also be heard within, like biking home on a cold Sunday afternoon after leading two services and sharing in a seminar; unbidden, I heard, “It’s time to set down this full-time responsibility” which led into months of discernment around retirement.

Conclusion

I visualize my inner world like a watershed with rivers and creeks, some larger, some smaller, draining into a lake or maybe several lakes. The streams vary in health, turbidity, length, width, depth, biodiversity, and so on. However, they all contribute, sometimes more helpfully. A lake can be inaccessible, my life too cluttered with anxieties, tiredness, hunger, loneliness, to-do lists. Sometimes a lake is rough with storms, sometimes beautiful to behold. In the depths of these waters, the Holy One is present and at work. Exploring the watershed continues.

When I heard a call to retire I was not burnt out or cynical. Although the routine of ministry vanished, the backbone of my life was intact because I carried on with all of my practices except one, the annual week of retreat. After eighteen months, I booked another retreat discovering that my wellbeing depended on continuing to live with a full complement of intentional, consistent, and regular practices of body, mind, and spirit.

The contemplative life continues with joy and gratitude. It has been and continues as a pilgrimage of conversion.

PRAYER IN THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

by Samuel P. Grottenberg

Introduction

The Epistle of James contains several recurring theological themes, which have been enumerated variously over the years.¹ Although different studies have used different terms to describe these themes, there exists a general consensus around eight of them.² Prayer is one theme that is consistently agreed upon because it is directly or indirectly discussed at various points throughout the letter (e.g., 1:5–8,³ 4:2–3, 5:13–18, and possibly 4:6–9⁴). In each of these sections, prayer is portrayed by the author as an essential practice for the pursuit of devotion to God.⁵ According to James, a humble life of prayer is necessary for the true Christian in order that he or she may grow in wisdom and single-mindedness. This essay seeks to draw out what may rightly be called a Jacobean theology of prayer.

As a beginning framework for this discussion, one may appeal to the analysis of James' teaching on prayer presented by Ronald Parks. He identifies three "distinctives" of prayer in the Epistle of James: "right asking," "faith," and "righteousness."⁶ First, "right asking" refers to a person's motivation for prayer. In James' view, the model believer

¹ E.g., Martin Dibelius and Heinrich Greeven, *James*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 42–43, 48–49; Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 34–56; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John*, NT Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 12–17; Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 254–261; Bruce A. Lowe, "James," in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the NT: The Gospel Realized*, ed. Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 443–450.

² They are: Christology, testing, prayer, faith/works, wealth/poverty, speech ethics, eschatology, and the Law.

³ Note that the NRSV renders v. 8 as part of v. 7, whereas the Greek text and most other English translations render them separately. Because I am quoting from the NRSV throughout this essay, I will use its numbering from this point forward.

⁴ The sense in which 4:6–9 may refer to prayer is in its focus on repentance: "Drawing near to God . . . is about a person's inner repentant disposition of vulnerability to God's will . . ." Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 350.

⁵ The question of the Epistle's authorship is beyond the scope of this article and thus I will simply use "James" to refer to its presented author.

⁶ Ronald W. Parks, "Distinctives of Petitionary Prayer in the Epistle of James" (Master's thesis, Regent College, 1981), 6, 20, 34, 47.

petitions God based on God's will, not his or her own whims or selfish desires.⁷ The pattern of prayer that he envisions in his letter is one in which a person's *motivation* to pray is something beyond his or her self. Second, "faith" refers to a kind of deep trust that, for James, is placed in God's identity and ability to act in the world, rather than in the thing one is asking for.⁸ This is not to be confused with the expectation of a particular outcome, but is to be understood as robust confidence in God's character. In line with his Jewish-Christian sensibilities, James views God as the good gift-giver (cf. 1:17) and prayer as a means of communing with that God for the purpose of affecting material reality. This kind of true faith is prayer's proper *orientation*. Third, "righteousness" is connected to James' thesis about holistic Christian living: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (Jas 1:27 NRSV). "Righteousness," in this context, is not about strict adherence to a particular set of behaviours, but refers to James' contention that the true believer's life is on a *trajectory* of conformity to the single-minded nature of God.

With these three touchpoints derived from Parks' analysis in mind—about prayer's motivation, orientation, and trajectory—James' comments about prayer may be rightly understood as a core part of his practical wisdom instruction.⁹ Prayer is discussed in the epistle within the context of the Jacobean vision of a holistic and integrated Christian life. In this vision, faith and works (or belief and action) are completely aligned in single-minded devotion to God. In this article, I contend that prayer is the "antidote" to the double-mindedness with which James is so concerned. I also seek to demonstrate how the three touchpoints mentioned above come into play when one considers James' specific teaching on prayer in the lives of individuals and in the gathered Christian community. Special attention is given to James' treatise on prayer in 5:13–18. Finally, I propose that, for James, the practice of prayer "activates" the human relationship with God, and is thus essential to the pursuit of authentic discipleship to Jesus Christ in and for the world.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17–18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹ On James as an example of wisdom instruction, see esp.: Richard J. Bauckham, "James and Jesus," in *The Brother of Jesus: James the Just and His Mission*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner (Louisville: WJK, 2001), 152–155.

Prayer as an Antidote to Double-mindedness

James' chief concern throughout the epistle is the lack of integration between faith and action that he observes in the lives of believers. One way in which he addresses this problem is by drawing on the "Two Ways" tradition that is frequently used by ancient writers as a vehicle for moral instruction.¹⁰ In this motif, there are two possible ways of living: one that leads to life, and another that leads to death.¹¹ The primary narrative element James uses to confront this reality is the prototypical "doubter" of 1:5–7, who is called διψυχος ("double-minded"). James' use of this word is unique in the New Testament and LXX; it only occurs elsewhere in extra-biblical literature.¹² By using this term, he is referring to those people who are divided in their belief about God's character, faithfulness, and ability to answer prayer. The "double-minded" person is in a divided state. In contrast to the double-minded tendencies of humankind, however, stands the perfect model of *single-mindedness*: God. True prayer is essentially an attempt to embrace and practise single-mindedness and therefore acts as a kind of "antidote" to double-mindedness. The two instances in which James uses the term διψυχος exemplify this connection and point back to the touchpoints of motivation, orientation, and trajectory.

In Jas 1:5–7, an imperative is issued to those lacking wisdom to petition God for it. This imperative is qualified, however, by a warning against the wrong kind of asking, which James notes is characterized by severe doubt and a divided heart. The person who asks in this wrong manner is called "double-minded and unstable in every way" (Jas 1:7). His or her prayer will not be effective; it will be merely another expression of the divided nature of the human heart. One's prayers, therefore, should be motivated by the single-minded, generous nature of

¹⁰ For the most comprehensive survey of Two Ways texts to date, see: Margaret M. McKenna, "'The Two Ways' in Jewish and Christian Writings of the Greco-Roman Period: A Study of the Form of Repentance Parenesis" (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1981), 257–274, accessed December 15, 2016, PQDTG, <http://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI8117811>. On the Two Ways motif in James, see: Darian R. Lockett, "Structure of Communicative Strategy?: The 'Two Ways' Motif in James' Theological Instruction," *Neot* 42, no. 2 (2008): 276–286.

¹¹ One clear example of this motif can be found in *Didache* 1:1–6:3.

¹² See esp.: Stanley E. Porter, "Is Dipsuchos (James 1:8, 4:8) a 'Christian' Word?" *Biblica* 71, no. 4 (1990): 473–496.

the God to whom one is praying.¹³ This kind of prayer, which James advocates, is an antidote to double-mindedness in the sense that it is motivated by the right kind of asking and cultivates a sense of joyful submission to the will of God rather than to one's own desires.

Jas 4:8 contains two additional imperatives related to prayer.¹⁴ The first is to "draw near to God," who, it is promised, will draw near in response. This is a different kind of take on prayer, one that is not about petition but about the proper *orientation* one ought to have for prayer. Here, James sees prayer as a means of communing with the one true God, who is alive, active, and able to respond. This first section of chapter 4 is more broadly about divisiveness, quarrelling, and sinfulness in the life of the Christian community, which all arise from an improper orientation—towards the double-mindedness of the human self, rather than the single-mindedness of God. James' command to draw near to God (in prayer and in action) is a call to pursue the latter course.

The second imperative of Jas 4:8 may also be read as a call to prayer; in this case, it is one of confession. James uses the plural *δίψυχοι* in the vocative case to address his readers directly. Whereas one's motivation and orientation are under scrutiny in 1:7 and 4:8a, here James is addressing the *trajectory* of one's prayers. If those who claim to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ continue to live in the way of death—the "double-minded way"—they will eventually be met with eschatological judgement (a theme that James will pick up in chapter 5). This third call to prayer as an antidote to double-mindedness is a call to repentance. It is an imperative intended to solicit a change in one's trajectory towards a life of righteousness/single-mindedness.

These imperatives to pray are complemented by James' well known diatribe about faith without works in chapter 2, as well as by his comments about the power of the tongue in chapter 3. While these sections do not directly address the practice of prayer, they do help the reader understand James' vision of holistic integration between belief and action at a deeper level. If what is at stake for James in his comments about prayer has to do with one's internal motivation, orientation, and

¹³ Cf. Mariam J. Kamell, "The Implications of Grace for the Ethics of James," *Biblica* 92, no. 2 (2011): 278.

¹⁴ The primary sense of the imperatives in 4:8 is in reference to cultic and ritual purification, but the concept of confession/repentance involving prayer is probably also in view. See, e.g.: Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, HNTC (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 183–84; McKnight, *Letter of James*, 349–53.

trajectory, his diatribe in 2:14–26 and treatment of speech ethics in 3:1–12 address these same issues as they pertain to one’s exterior life. Just as one can be double-minded in the thoughts of one’s heart, so too can one be double-minded in the way one interacts with the world. Since God is the perfect model of single-mindedness, true discipleship, for James, is an attempt to embrace that single-mindedness, and thus avoid the double-minded ways of the world. As it relates to the exterior life, this finds expression in the notion that “faith without works is dead” (cf. 2:17, 2:26). The true sign of a disciple of Jesus, in James’ milieu, is a “faith-with-works,” which is necessarily integrated.

This life of integration, however, is not merely external. In the interior life, the idea of faith-with-works informs James’ calls to prayer; one’s prayers ought to be lived expressions of the holistic Christian life in the same way that one’s professed beliefs and worldly actions ought to be aligned. The passages examined above illustrate this: (1) the person who asks for wisdom ought to be undivided in his or her belief in the single-minded, generous nature of God; (2) one’s orientation in prayer ought to be one of drawing near in intimacy with God, not one of transactional expectancy; and (3) the practice of repentance will lead to a life rooted in the kind of righteousness that God desires (cf. 1:20). In this way, James teaches that true prayer serves as the primary mechanism for pursuing integration in one’s spiritual life and as an antidote to the destructive way of double-mindedness.

James’ Treatise on Prayer

The passage of this epistle that most explicitly addresses prayer comes at the end, in 5:13–18. Although there is some debate as to the place of this section in relation to the structure and conclusion of James, it remains the richest part of the letter as it pertains to the topic of prayer.¹⁵ James makes three assertions about prayer in this final paragraph: (1) that prayer is appropriate in all circumstances of life; (2) that prayers for healing and prayers of confession ought to be core practices of the Christian community; and (3) that prayer has the power to affect material reality (*vis-à-vis* the prophetic exemplar, Elijah).

The ecclesiological framework and communal call to prayer expressed in 5:13–15 begins with three rhetorical questions involving

¹⁵ The structure of the Epistle is a perennial problem in Jacobean scholarship.

For a survey of the various schemes that have been proposed, see Mark E. Taylor, “Recent Scholarship on the Structure of James,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 3, no. 1 (October 2004): 86–115.

suffering, emotional status, and sickness—meant to represent “all of life” in its diversity.¹⁶ The three hypothetical individuals implicit in these questions are each commanded—via James’ characteristic use of the third person imperative—to pray/praise in response to their circumstances. This passage reveals that James believes prayer to be the appropriate posture for Christians in all the situations of life. He does not see prayer as an auxiliary practice in the lives of believers; it is necessary and warranted in every circumstance. This observation fits well with the idea already explored above about prayer’s proper *orientation*. To pray to God in any given situation is to be motivated by a single-minded kind of trust in the character of God and the divine presence in one’s life.

James also gives instructions to the elders of the church to gather and pray for those who are sick. Notably, this is the only allusion in the epistle to church leadership or ritual, and it is definitively linked with a command to intercede for one another. James states that “the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up” (5:15), hinting again at what he believes is the proper *motivation* for prayer. In continuity with the earlier part of the letter, this imperative to pray for healing is not rooted in a transactional kind of asking, but in the *right* kind of asking, where one’s motivation to pray is the assurance that God can and will answer the prayer. At the end of verse 15, James implies that some of these illnesses are related to sin, though it is not entirely clear why he says this and he does not expand upon the thought.¹⁷ The effect of this clause, however, is similar to that which precedes it: God can and will forgive, just as God can and will heal. Whatever the connection between sickness and sin, James’ point stands, that this is a trustworthy God to whom one need not and ought not be double-minded in one’s petitions.

James rounds out his discussion of prayer with an imperative to the community to confess their sins and intercede for one another (5:16). This call to confession has the *trajectory* of the believer’s life in view. If the vocation of Christian discipleship includes a call to model God’s righteousness in belief and in action, then confessing one’s sins is surely paramount in that vocation. James paints a picture wherein healing is the end result of faithful and righteous prayer. Without a robust practice of prayer and repentance, this end result will not be achieved; instead, one’s life will descend down the path of double-mindedness.

¹⁶ Cf. Davids, *Epistle of James*, 192.

¹⁷ See: McKnight, *Letter of James*, 442–44.

Finally, James links his vision of single-minded devotion to God with “righteousness,” and describes this kind of powerful and effective prayer as coming from a righteous person (5:16). His primary support for this assertion is the biblical character of Elijah as a prophetic exemplar.¹⁸ Much ink has been spilled in debating why James employs an example from Elijah’s ministry having to do with drought and rain rather than the more obvious one wherein he raises a boy from the dead (1 Kgs 17:17–24).¹⁹ Recently, Mariam Kamell Kovalishyn has proposed that James’ use of Elijah as an exemplar is meant to direct the reader to the prophet’s larger story, not merely the specific incident of the drought:

Within the three-and-a-half-year period to which James alludes, Elijah enacts a prophetic denunciation of a wandering people, cares for a starving widow, raises a child from the dead, challenges the double-minded people of Israel and their king to purify their hearts and hands, and exemplifies the prayer of active faith in accordance with the will of God. Rather than a single reason for this exemplar, invoking Elijah also calls to mind a rich array of intertextual parallels.²⁰

This analysis fits well with the above observations about James’ earlier comments on prayer. If James does indeed view prayer as an antidote to double-mindedness, then appealing to the broader ministry of the prophet Elijah makes sense. Not only does he raise a dead boy (1 Kgs 17:17–24) and effect changes to the weather patterns (1 Kgs 18:41–46), he confronts misplaced religious devotion and divided loyalties within the nation of Israel and its monarchy (1 Kgs 18:1–40). As Kamell Kovalishyn puts it, “Elijah’s prophetic act of withholding rain serves as a biblical model for James of God’s opposition to the double-minded, for the double-minded are covenantally unfaithful, hence the strong *μοιχαλίδες* (‘Adulterers!’) in 4:4.”²¹

Elijah’s ministry serves as an example of the kind of single-minded devotion to God that James has been arguing for throughout the

¹⁸ A full treatment of Elijah as “named exemplar” in James may be found in Robert J. Foster, *The Significance of Exemplars for the Interpretation of the Letter of James, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*, Series 2, vol. 376 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 165–91.

¹⁹ For an excellent survey of modern discourse on this point, see Mariam Kamell Kovalishyn, “The Prayer of Elijah in James 5: An Example of Intertextuality,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 4 (2018): 1036–40.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1044–45.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1044.

epistle. The “prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” inasmuch as it is rooted in this Jacobean vision of prayer as an antidote to double-mindedness and an expression of faith-with-works in the life of the believer.

Conclusion

In the Epistle of James, prayer is, indeed, a central and important theological theme; it is one crucial element that contributes to James’ holistic vision of the Christian life. The instructional tone of the letter offers readers practical wisdom when it comes to the necessity and power of prayer. It has been demonstrated that James’ understanding of prayer is core to his argument about the need for single-minded living and the integration of faith and works. The practice of prayer has been explored as the primary method by which human beings may avoid double-mindedness in their approach to living lives of devotion to God. The three touchpoints discussed above—motivation, orientation, and trajectory—have been helpful in showing how James’ teachings on prayer address both the internal reasons for praying (e.g., trust in God’s character and authentic faith) and the external benefits of participating in prayer (e.g., wholeness, healing, and nearness to God). Prayer of the kind that James advocates is the devotional equivalent of living a life of faith-with-works; it is through prayer that the human relationship with God is “activated,” in contrast to the human tendency towards double-mindedness.

James views prayer as an efficacious activity that is crucial to both the individual believer and the corporate Christian community. Without it, believers have no hope of conforming to the pattern of single-mindedness that has its source in God. Just as James calls his readers to a prayerful life of petition (1:5–7; 5:13–15), intimacy (4:8a), and confession (4:8b; 5:16), so too must twenty-first century Christians wrestle with the call to take prayer seriously as a tool of formation and witness.

Prayer is neither a morally therapeutic practice nor an expression of supernatural consumerism; prayer is, according to James, a relational activity that is essential to the pursuit of authentic discipleship to Jesus Christ. The prophetic exemplar of Elijah in Jas 5:17–18 is a model of the “righteous person” whose prayers are powerful and effective and serves to illustrate what that righteousness looks like in the life of a human being; one cannot live a life of faith-with-works without first aligning one’s will and way with the single-minded heart of God. Furthermore, the church’s mission of service and witness to the world can only be

accomplished via the holistic, integrated vision of faith that James presents.

The topic of prayer in the Epistle of James is, therefore, a key element of the letter's practical wisdom instruction. It is portrayed as the effective antidote to double-mindedness, the avenue towards healing and intimacy with God, and the interior expression of what it means to live a life of faith-with-works. James' instructions on prayer are worth taking seriously by anyone who desires to live a deeper and more holistic life of faith.

AN AWKWARD LOOK AT PRAYER, AND C.S. LEWIS'S *LETTERS TO MALCOLM*

by Brenton Dickieson

Many moons ago, with fresh university diplomas in our hands, and nothing more than student loan bills in our pockets, Kerry and I set off on a honeymoon funded mostly by wishes, prayers, and sock-drawer savings. During a school trip to Toronto, I had filled out a ballot for a “free cruise.” Lo and behold, I got a call to say that I had won said free cruise, provided I buy a particular travel package. After giving the nice man on the phone all my money via my roommate’s credit card number, our honeymoon was set.

It wasn’t the disaster you might suppose. We set out in our three-cylinder hatchback for the thirty-hour drive from Charlottetown to Cape Canaveral. With Boston traffic, antiquing in New Jersey, the Blue Ridge Mountains, and fire ants in Georgia, the trip was everything we could imagine. When it came to amenities, the “free cruise” was worth every penny. We slept on metre-wide iron slabs in cabins with the space and decorative aesthetic of a meat locker. Adorned with gold chains, the lounge singer looked weary enough to have been on the ship since the days when it was still fashionable to have lounge singers. And, if I recall correctly, most of the safety procedures were written in Russian. We wondered if the life rafts had been purchased at the Titanic salvage sale.

Still, it was our honeymoon, and the only cruise we ever had, so we were pretty determined to enjoy our two nights on the open seas.

The one area where the cruise excelled was in the food. In our forty hours on board, there seemed to be an endless supply of beautifully prepared, delicious food served in elaborate displays. As it was just the two of us on a romantic honeymoon, the Maître D’ decided to sit us at a table with a Black family from the U.S. south, a sprawling collection of children, parents, grandparents, and an uncle who seemed perpetually surprised to be there. All pretense of a romantic meal was gone as the Murphy family embraced us as long-lost Canadian cousins.

Once we had determined that, yes, we were related to L.M. Montgomery, but no, they didn’t know if Elvis was really alive, the father of the family asked if he could bless the meal. Though I was a theology student, the request threw me. To be fair, the Prince Edward Island of those days was hardly the epi-centre of Canadian diversity, and all I knew about Black spirituality derived from when I watched a group of Kenyan women dance in church as a child, or from what we get from Hollywood films. So, when we were asked to join them in prayer, I blustered as little as possible before saying “Absolutely!” with over-stressed enthusiasm—as if I had been waiting for them to ask.

With Grandmother Murphy holding my left hand and the surprised uncle holding Kerry's right, our table host led what I imagine to have been a beautiful and fulsome prayer of thanks for fellowship and the gift of new friends. I have to imagine this part because the prayer itself was far from my mind. I know the prayer was beautiful because when we said "Amen," my wife had tears on her cheeks and Grandmother Murphy said in a soft voice, "This meal is properly blessed." But the prayer itself is gone from my memory.

In that brilliant moment—a playful invitation of Providence, a divine meeting that would shape my life in quiet ways—I was focused on my own nervousness and the awkwardness of it all. I was intensely self-aware. I felt the eyes of the other guests in the gigantic dining room list toward our table as the Murphy relations murmured their agreement in prayer. A chattering waiter came to the table, only to stutter, stop, and wait at the table's edge. I felt Grandmother Murphy's grip. I fidgeted in my seat. I heard a kitchen worker joke in Spanish in the spreading silence of the crowded room. I wondered if Mr. Murphy was going to speak in tongues, or ask me to pray next. Then there was the Amen, and the tears and laughter over a good meal.

A big, beautiful moment of connection was there for me, but all I could think about was the awkwardness of prayer, and my own awkwardness in the midst of it.

Prayer itself is awkward: knees bent at bedsides, hands clasped in pew and at table, church prayers that are mini-sermons or someone else's verses, words that don't seem to come out in the right order, angry shouts and cries of desperation and, at times, hope that is only an inch away from fear. Sometimes we pray because we must, because we are moved by beauty or need. Other times it feels as if our prayers only hit the ceiling; as if the architecture of our lives makes heaven a million miles away. Or maybe it is the architecture of the universe, "the haunting fear that there is no-one listening, and that what we call prayer is soliloquy," as C.S. Lewis says in his *Letters to Malcolm*.¹

And so, it's often true that talking about prayer is awkward. Even this paragraph just written will have, for some readers, no meaning. These readers are moved continually to prayer, finding it a mother tongue in a world of confused speech. I don't think that's the majority of us, though. For most of us it is awkward to talk about prayer. It is awkward because it is such a basic Christian practice, organic and expected, and

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 67.

yet so difficult to weave artfully into our everyday lives. It is awkward because a child can pray with full confidence and little knowledge, but thinking adults can fuddle the whole experience. I know of no other topic that is as likely to invite so much confusion, anger, frustration, guilt, and bumper-sticker advice as prayer.

Frankly, talking about prayer is awkward because as teachers, mentors, ministers, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and good neighbours, we struggle to admit that we find prayer alienating, frustrating, elusive, or perhaps even useless.

And as a teacher of theology, how do I tell you that I struggle with prayer? I am an expert, after all—whatever that means. Yet after all these years, I still find it difficult to draw prayer into the intimacy of daily life.

Prayer really is one of those areas where I find traditional expertise not terribly helpful. I suspect that many of those best able to understand the deepest realms of prayer are the least capable of telling us about it. “I have never met a book on prayer which was much use,” Lewis admits.² I am tempted to agree as I look at my shelf of books on prayer. There is one here that tells me that whatever I ask for, if I believe it fully and fiercely, I will get. That author seems to think that, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus, asking God to take his cup of pain, was either pantomiming prayer or lacking full belief. Another author tells me that when he prays for something once, praying for it again is a waste because God is trustworthy. Has he not read the parable of the judge and the insistent widow? Another book tells me that I am not good at regular prayer times because I lack commitment. At least that one is hitting the mark.

Not all the books are terribly bad. I have some beautiful books that invite me to pray with the saints or Hebrew poets, or that walk through Jesus’ prayers, or bring me into the rhythm of creation, or treat the Lord’s Prayer with great wisdom and acuity. And even those books that make me cringe were each given to me by people who found something life-changing in them. If I am honest, the books that I don’t find intellectually frustrating often leave me in a haunting place of hollow guilt and painful inadequacy about prayer.

There was one book, though, that finally helped me move past my awkwardness on prayer to begin to see things a little differently. Partly because of who I am, and partly because of what he does in the book, I have come to appreciate the book I’ve already noted for

² *Ibid.*, 62.

expressing frustration about books on prayer, C.S. Lewis' *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (1964).

Letters to Malcolm is, quite honestly, a pretty awkward little book on prayer. It is the last Christian book that Lewis wrote. In 1949, an American reader suggested his next book should be on prayer. Lewis declined, saying "I don't feel I could write a book on Prayer: I think it would be rather 'cheek' on my part."³ But that letter must have triggered something in Lewis, for his letters and talks of 1953 show he was struggling with both philosophical questions about prayer and the process of writing about it. At the end of the year, Lewis spoke to a group of ministers about a sticky prayer problem, ending with this question: "I come to you, reverend Fathers, for guidance. How am I to pray this very night?"⁴

All of that activity in 1953, but no book. In early 1954, Lewis wrote to a friend, Sr. Penelope, admitting that he had to abandon the project because "It was clearly not for me."⁵ In the decade that followed, Lewis finished his academic *magnum opus*, wrote an autobiography and a dozen other books, became a recognized author for Narnia, fell in love with and married a dying woman, and then lost that love—even after a miraculous healing. It is a lot of life to live through, and as his body was starting to give out on him, he returned to the topic of prayer.

Lewis said that it would be "cheek" for him to write on prayer, and *Letters to Malcolm* is a cheeky book. For one thing, Lewis returned to the letter style of writing that worked so well for *The Screwtape Letters*. The entire book is a one-sided fictional conversation with someone close enough that he can give advice to, and someone he cares enough to spar with, knowing that if they come "to blows" their friendship will be stronger for it.⁶ "Nothing makes an absent friend so present as a disagreement,"⁷ Lewis writes, and a give-and-take, back-and-forth style continues throughout the book.

Many of the chapters are a kind of battle, fighting out ideas that

³ *Books, Broadcasts, and the War 1931-1949*, vol. 2 of *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 965.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, "Petitionary Prayer: A Problem without an Answer," in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 151.

⁵ *Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy 1950-1963*, vol. 3 of *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper (HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 428.

⁶ Lewis, *Malcolm*, 92.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

Lewis thinks get to the heart of the problems over which people struggle about prayer. If God is good, can our prayers really work to make the best happen? Would not God already be doing the best? Can God be moved at all—and if not, do our prayers make any difference? We are commanded to pray with faith that we will receive what we ask for, and yet Jesus himself is the model for saying, “Thy will be done.” If God doesn’t answer Jesus’ deepest prayer, what does it mean when I offer up my frivolous one? What is happening to us when we pray? If we were created to be intimate with God, why do we find prayer such a duty?

Letters to Malcolm is a big ideas book, and although Lewis wanted to root himself in classic Christian teaching, he is remarkably open. Instead of perfecting each idea, he floats a topic, and then uses his imaginary dialogue partner to say, “That’s very nice, but have you thought about it from this angle?” Sometimes this allows Lewis to poke fun at his own positions or those of others in edgy ways. When his friend “Malcolm” is struggling with the value of “ready-made” prayers written by other people, Lewis challenges him to see things from a bigger perspective:

The other reason, as I have so often told you, is that you are a bigot. Broaden your mind, Malcolm, broaden your mind! It takes all sorts to make a world; or a church. This may be even truer of a church. If grace perfects nature it must expand all our natures into the full richness of the diversity which God intended when He made them, and Heaven will display far more variety than Hell.⁸

And though Lewis wants to navigate carefully between narrow fundamentalism and extreme skepticism, he comes off as humorously self-deprecating with phrases like these: “I don’t at all know whether I’m right or not,”⁹ “However badly needed a good book on prayer is, I shall never try to write it,”¹⁰ and “If I ever see more clearly I will speak more surely.”¹¹ While some might balk at an author who undercuts his own book, it gives *Malcolm* a real-life feeling that I appreciate. Rather than a book on prayer from an expert, with a robust consciousness and a healthy self-image, Lewis is able to write that “I haven’t any language weak enough to depict the weakness of my spiritual life. If I weakened it enough it would cease to be language at all. As when you try to turn the

⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁹ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰ Ibid., 63.

¹¹ Ibid., 73.

gas-ring a little lower still, and it merely goes out.”¹² It is, after all, a book about honest prayer, where Lewis reminds us that our job in prayer is never to fake it, but to “lay down” before God what *is* inside us, not what should be there.¹³

Malcolm is not all caveats, questions, and self-deprecation. His reflection on the Lord’s Prayer is fresh and surprising. He speaks of “patches of Godlight,” and reminds us to follow Blake and kiss the joy as it flies.¹⁴ He warns that we can make God a kind of mental fabrication, a “bright blur” rather than a piercing strength.¹⁵ Lewis speaks of “grisly fears,”¹⁶ of “perpetual plannings, puzzlings, and anxieties,”¹⁷ and a silence from God that is “emphatic.”¹⁸ For Lewis, “All ground is holy and every bush (could we but perceive it) a Burning Bush.”¹⁹ Lewis can speak of the “art of worship”²⁰ passionately, and yet never forgets that “Emotional intensity is in itself no proof of spiritual depth.”²¹ He can talk about structures of prayer and liturgy and habit, but remembers that “God sometimes seems to speak to us most intimately when He catches us, as it were, off our guard.”²²

There are practical moments within this book. Lewis believes in the “secret doctrine that pleasures are shafts of the glory as it strikes our sensibility”; so he talks about making “every pleasure into a channel of adoration.”²³ And he recognizes the sheer difficulty of prayer, which is difficult in two ways. First, we will fight any fight to get the kids to school on time or to make a mortgage payment without delay, but we are pretty open to reasons to skip prayer. The real “labour” of prayer, Lewis says, “is to remember, to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake.”²⁴ Second, prayer can often become an excuse to avoid harder things. “It’s so much easier to pray for a bore than to go and see

¹² *Ibid.*, 113.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 77-87, letters XV-XVI.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

²² *Ibid.*, 116.

²³ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

him,”²⁵ Lewis jokes, but if we can translate that to our own setting, we see that the scalpel cuts close.

Most readers find parts of this book troubling. It is a very local book, and the language was probably dated before it was finished. It requires “translation” for us as readers, but it is also full of ideas that will make *someone* upset, as topics range from incarnation to purgatory, resurrection to liturgy, sex to unanswered prayer, and the intellectual pressures of trying to think “Christianly” in a post-Christian era. I think the best way to approach *Letters to Malcolm* is to imagine we are joining the debate rather than just sitting at Lewis’s feet.

This works well because of the way Lewis creates the fictional dialogue. Just as he is tuning up for high-minded argument, Malcolm’s son gets a terrible health scare that makes everything Lewis has said seem like “froth and bubble.”²⁶ Throughout the entire book there are personal moments like these that bring the discussion home. The book ends with plans to go to see Malcolm on a train that we know Lewis won’t live to take. It is fitting, I think, that Lewis’ last topic is new creation, the resurrection of the body, and the hope of heaven.

This is why I love this book: a rambling, flawed, peculiar book of big ideas that is still grounded in the hopes and struggles of real life. While there are more professional books, this is the one that most matches my cast of mind. And unlike many of the books and sermons I have read or heard, this one leaves me yearning to pray.

Perhaps this is because we keep looking away from prayer, or perhaps it is because the faults of this book are so obvious, that Lewis knows he is offering such a pale little thing. But I think it is more. I think what draws me into this little book of prayer, unlike all the books that leave me feeling guilty and frustrated, is that Lewis understands the awkwardness that some of us—I at least—feel about prayer. C.S. Lewis talks about the “irksomeness” and “backwardness” and “bewilderments” of prayer, inviting a realism that is refreshing without opening a door to cynicism. It is a book that laughs at itself—and takes a few swipes at me that somehow makes me feel as if natural prayer can grow in me with maturity.

It is intriguing that *Letters to Malcolm* ends with an invitation unfulfilled, much like my invitation to God’s work in the Murphy prayer so long ago. Thanks to books like this one, though, I have come to embrace the awkward, irksome, bewildering mandate of prayer.

²⁵ Ibid., 66.

²⁶ Ibid., 40.

NOTHING BUT WORK: ON THE USE OF PUBLIC PRAYER

by Neil Young

For pastoral ministers, public prayer is weekly work. There is grace at meals, where the organizers often forget to ask beforehand—but that is usual; so we are ready. There are intense private prayers with one or a few persons we are visiting in hospital, or at home. This is a different kind of work. It is “public prayers” that are a structural part of Sunday worship services that will be my focus.¹

More or less, a Sunday worship service will have: 1) Opening Prayer, 2) Prayer of Confession, 3) Prayer with the Scripture readings and/or sermon, 4) Offertory Prayer, and 5) Pastoral Prayer. Titles and forms vary widely. There will be several other bits of prayers used in the conduct of a service. I always offer one or two lines at the close of a sermon, delivered *ex tempore*.

In preparing and delivering prayers for Sunday worship, our practices vary as widely as possible: using resources, composing our own, offering *ex tempore* prayers in the moment.² Why contend over which is better? Likely you have experienced each kind of prayer used very well by someone.

We may, though, comment on the small point of which is “more work.” Henry Beecher advises: “Sometimes, indeed, one may be called to preach off-hand—*ex tempore*—and may do it with great success, but all such sermons will really be the results of previous study. The matter must be the outgrowth of research, of experience, and of thought . . . All who ever speak well must, in some way, have prepared for it.”³

With prayer also, it is just as much work without a text as to write one, or find one in a prayer resource. We think it through, every Sunday brings its own needs, and we carry a people and events with us into the pulpit—for sermon and for prayer. Nothing but work will deliver

¹ By this same kind of calculation, 33 years, about 1500 Sundays, must yield about 10,000 prayers delivered (when the multi-point Sundays are considered). This is plenty of ground to cover in one article.

² The *Wikipedia* entry, *Ex Tempore*, notes that in jurisprudence a judgment given immediately in a case, and not reserved for later written judgement, is *ex tempore*, a legal term that means *at the time*. Such judgments help manage heavy caseloads, but are not binding on other courts. It is understood that another court dealing with a case of similar facts can reach a different conclusion.

³ Henry Ward Beecher, *Yale Lectures on Preaching, first, second, and third series* (New York: Fords, Howard & Hurlbert, 1892), 211.

the prayer we want, whether choosing from printed resources, or composing our own words.

Nor are there many odds against the prayer not fitting. A prayer from a printed resource, or a prayer written on Friday for Sunday use, or praying in the moment, all will hit the mark only by action of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the worshippers.

A prayer printed in the service bulletin lets voices pray in unison, which is a fine worshipful experience. *Ex tempore* prayer gives a different experience, no less valuable—but no more, either. Using prayers written by others gives wordings you might not have thought of; using your own words shares your heart and faith.

Lead worship long enough and you will use all these methods. Beginning in 1986, I wrote some prayers and took others from resources. It seemed natural on a multi-point charge to print some unison prayers in the bulletin. As the years advanced, I grew more confident in writing my own texts, often based on a line or a thought from another prayer. These days, I use more and more *ex tempore* prayer.

At some churches I brought in variations, such as the congregation calling out names and words (when invited). This can be a good way of offering the pastoral prayer—yet in my current congregation it yielded nothing but crickets. Just because something works in one place does not mean it will work in another.

Currently, at St. Andrew's United Church in downtown Toronto, the regular service has an Opening Prayer and a Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession. Several smaller prayers are also used. Let me say something about each: how the prayer is composed, what is in it, why it is used that way. Simply, how I do the work.

Opening prayer

Upon reflection, I find that my Opening Prayer, which I used to call a Prayer of Approach, has always been a larger prayer than a seeking of God's presence, including reflection on who we are and where we are, in that day and week. At St. Andrew's, this prayer, as I inherited it, needed that larger range and length. The prayer is divided into three parts, with a responsive petition and a sung piece between each.

Part 1

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, Creator of the Universe,
to you be glory and praise for ever and ever;
God, the Eternal, whose presence fills Creation,
who has given us life and brought us to this day,

Lord of beginnings, Remover of obstacles,
the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, show us the straight path.
God of glory, source of grace,
giving and forgiving, you gift us with the joy of living;
you teach us how to love each other;
in the midst of strife you make us to be victors.
All your works give you praise, and yours is the very song of life:
accept what we add to that great chorus today with this, our
worship.

One: O God, hear our prayers:

All: And in your love, answer. (sung response)

Part 2

In the wide world there is Venezuela, Brexit and an upcoming
election in Israel.

Looking across Canada makes us think that we all make
mistakes, when we think of the Humboldt Broncos, of the grief
of families, of a truck driver.

Chinese hi-tech or Netflix: we hear we are being colonized;
it is freezing and it is melting, and Warton Willie did his thing.
Possible kindergarten cuts, a guilty plea by a multiple-murderer:
in the wide world and our own city there are so many
complicated prayers to pray that we ask for the words to match
our thoughts and flesh-out our caring.

O God, hear our prayers:

All: And in your love, answer. (sung response)

Part 3

Now that the cold is broken for a spell,
we do not forget those who live on the streets around this church,
nor those poorly housed—even a family our church champions,
but who had to tough it through no water, no heat, no power.
We do not forget that there are those who feel forgotten,
and those who have not much community in our community.
We pray that we may do more, care more, have more good effect,
that we may be a church, build a church, and offer a church
outward;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.⁴

⁴ This prayer was used at the regular morning worship service of St. Andrew's
United Church, Toronto, on 3 February 2019. I use it just for example—

The First Six Lines

These are used every Sunday. They have a tone of Invocation, and the wording is taken from other faiths, to import some of that richness. My reasons for doing this are mainly personal. I first heard most of these words at services of other faith communities, and the idea of using them formed gradually.

The first four lines are Jewish—thanks to the Solel Congregation in Mississauga, Ontario, for the times I have worshipped there and to their excellent prayer book. Here is a core concept for my creation of prayer: the experience of it in worship services other than ones I am leading is probably my richest source of ideas. These first lines appeal to me because some of their wording—“glory and praise”—can reach comfortably as far as the evangelical side of our own house, and some of the invocations of God—“Creator” and “the Eternal”—seem akin to the phrase that I most preferred in my early years of ministry, “Almighty God.”

The last line of the six is inspired by the first *sura* of the Holy Qur’an. The text is from an older English translation,⁵ but that volume was given to me by the Imam of a Brampton congregation, with whom I had some happy association in ministry, and so, again, experience was a primary source for my chosen form of prayer.

The fifth line of this invocation is the most recent addition. I hoped to widen the prayer beyond the Abrahamic faiths, but neither did I make any specific search. When I found these phrases in a book by the Dalai Lama, “beginnings” and “obstacles” seemed to be immediately applicable to the lives of congregational members.

The rest of the first part takes bits out of the first hymn for the service. You may recognize the footprint of “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee” in the above. Often that opening hymn has language of invocation, and provides additional naming and attributes of God. Here “God of glory” and “source of grace” are poached.

While writing this prayer, I thought of capitalizing “Source,” but in the hymn text the word was capitalized as the first word of a sentence and seemed not to be intended to invoke God’s name, so I stayed with the

there is nothing unusual in it.

⁵ *The Glorious Qur’an: bilingual edition*, with English translation by Marmaduke Pickthall (1930), second edition (Istanbul, 1999).

lower case. Composing within a standard structural framework is no barrier to thoughtful work.

The Second Part

This part drives my habit of composing the whole opening prayer on Friday morning. It aims at issues of the world and the community, understanding well that eight or ten lines can touch only on a few of many things noted when I scan news sites for local, Canadian, and world issues of that week.

I almost always say, in the prayer, that our prayers are small among the clamour of the world. Here, I touched on an issue in the news: the Huawei Corporation may or may not (who knows?) be infiltrating the Canadian security apparatus. What to make of such a thing in prayer? Yet, naming suspicions of foreign infiltration resonates with the news/fake news worries that people are facing each day.

Sometimes events are so big that they must be named. In this week, the driver responsible for the Humboldt Broncos tragedy was in the news, but conversations seemed to revolve around our own capacity for mistakes, even catastrophic ones. Folk understood the need for the sentencing, but were reluctant to condemn. That seemed worth echoing in prayer.

Sometimes something happened last month that is already slipping from memory, and recalling it through prayer is something we can offer people. This can help remind people of their own prayers—that they really do care about such things. Warton Willie got a mention because I served in Bruce Presbytery.

The Third Part

This part strives to be more local and to touch the immediate experience of congregation members: many will know from seeing, perhaps that day, that there is a population who live on the sidewalks outside St. Andrew's. Here is a place to name issues of our own church. The lines about having no power or heat recall an emergency of the week before: a refugee family partly sponsored by St. Andrew's had to leave their apartment because of a broken pipe that knocked out heat and power.

The prayer ends with the very traditional words, "through Jesus Christ our Lord." This has been my unvarying usage throughout my ministry. It is, simply, my choice. I hope we are allowed some of our own choice in doing this work. The Opening Prayer is completed with the Lord's Prayer in a traditional wording. Such wording, known by memory

by most worshippers, provides a participatory opportunity for those who cannot read well or whose eyesight is failing.

This Particular Prayer

In this prayer for 3 February 2019, you will have noted wordings that could have been better, issues that were not raised and some that should have been addressed differently. I cannot but agree: I wrote this prayer on Friday, Feb. 1st, having had meetings and events that week already, and while preparing for a funeral the next day and a worship committee meeting on Sunday. You know, ministry.

The prayer is itself a thing of minutes. I prepared as well as I can, and with all the intentionality and structure named above. Including the responses, it is over in about four minutes and the worship service proceeds. On Tuesday morning, it goes from my binder to the recycling bin, and is not thought of again. But, next Sunday is coming, and I have found over the years that nothing will stop or delay it.

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

The other main prayer will get shorter shrift in this article, but more often receives comments afterward from worshippers. This prayer is offered *ex tempore* in the true sense: I spend no time in the week before considering it. This is an easier method than you might think—once it has been used for a while.

I use two main building blocks for this prayer. The first is mood and inspiration drawn from the service underway. This can be something echoing the sermon I have offered, but as likely it will draw from the hymns and other music parts of the service. It is not useful, and maybe not possible, to try to discern beforehand what will inspire, but the experience of worshipping will always yield something.

The second building block is talking to people before the service to hear who is sick, who is worried, who is away, how caring for an aging parent is going for someone. This will mix with such conversations, emails, and connections through the week. Here is some of that before-work that Beecher was talking about. Digesting it all makes me want to pray for some people.

Though *ex tempore*, I have prayer points that I repeat—if not all in each prayer: that we pray for each other, that we go out from worship having been prayed for, that we have natural prayers which well up in us through the week, that we rarely know the right words, that we always forget somebody, etc.

One advantage of this prayer is that it allows a few words of introduction. I will reflect, just briefly, on some widely-known thing of the week, or on some struggle or happiness, or I will remind us that we are better than we think at praying—God filling in the right words for the ones we stumble over. It seems a good place in the service to bring a word of encouragement and one of recalling that we are far from alone in praying.

Offertory Prayer

I offer a few lines *ex tempore* upon receiving the offering. Usually, these are based on a line or even just a word out of the Offertory verse sung as the plates are brought forward. “What Can I Bring?” asks a good rhetorical question. “Go Make a Difference” almost demands an “ask” for help to do so. “With Gratitude and Humble Trust” raises the point that we don’t do “humble” very well.

Sacraments

I have also omitted from this article the prayers we use for Communion and Baptism, and say only that the same method applies: they can be taken from a resource, written by ourselves, or offered *ex tempore*. I always use written prayers.

Why No Prayer of Confession?

I had one in my first three pastoral charges, but later the Confession and Assurance of Pardon fell out of my usual usage. I intend that personal penitence, feelings of corporate responsibility, and the conviction of the saving grace of Christ be present in all my prayers, and the rest of the service besides. Leaving a prayer out can also be a thing of work and careful consideration.

Conclusion

Using structure and framework for prayers on a Sunday controls my service length, and forces me to say what I mean to say. Year by year, my practice has changed, and it is the Sunday by Sunday flow of it, with each new Sunday coming fast, that both makes it into work and gradually drives the changes. Maybe it is only by praying that we learn how to pray. I am lucky to have praying as part of my job.

Nothing here is meant to direct or call into question your own practices, but rather to say that mine are much like yours, and all to the glory of God and for the fruitful worship of our congregations. May God ever add, as God has always done, the Holy Spirit to our efforts.

THE ASTONISHMENT THAT FOSTERS PRAYER: KARL BARTH ON PRAYER

by Peter Wyatt

A remark by Anna Case-Winters on Karl Barth's use of the doctrine of divine accompaniment of the creation in the June 2018 *Touchstone* sent me to reading Barth on providence. I have been plowing through *Church Dogmatics* 3/3 since, marvelling to find in it not only Barth's teaching about divine providence, but also about prayer, evil as *das Nichtige* (Nothingness) and—eat your heart out, Dan Brown—angels and demons. Of particular importance for this article, of course, is the section on prayer, which Barth sets forth in the context of the human creature's response to, and participation in, the divine lordship.

Barth discusses God's providential work under three headings—the divine preserving, accompanying, and ruling of the universe of creatures. These actions all arise from God's turning to the creature in love; in all the perplexities and challenges of life, God acts "in the almightiness of His mercy and in the mercy of His almightiness." For Barth, God faithfully directs and disposes all events of world-occurrence.¹

Having set this providential scene, Barth turns to consideration of the human creature, a creature that not only experiences God's world-government, but also is capable of recognizing this guidance and rule, and of responding to it. While Christians willingly take their place alongside and in solidarity with all other creatures, they do so with an understanding and affirmation of God as Creator and Ruler. This understanding is not the possession of a key to the mystery and riddles of the "world-process," but rather is that of a child's trust in a caring parent. Belief in providence is not a speculative exercise, but one that grasps believers holistically.

Barth sees this existential grasp by and of Providence resulting in a three-fold Christian attitude of faith, obedience, and prayer. All three are interconnected and integral to a single dynamism of the Christian life, each presupposing, or expressing itself in relation to, the other two. Thus, faith includes within itself the mandates of obedience and prayer, while obedience presupposes faith and expresses itself in prayer. The relationship of prayer to faith and obedience is the most intriguing in

¹ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich, vol. 3/3 of *Church Dogmatics*, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 187. For the purposes of this article, I am limiting myself to Barth's teaching in CD 3/3.

Barth's account of the three; he describes prayer as "the simple and basic form of the first two."²

Prayer as the Basic Form of Faith and Obedience

In explaining how faith includes prayer, Barth speaks of the Christian's surprise to find herself in a living relationship of nearness to God. Faith is an awakening by the Word of God in which the awakened human comes before God with empty hands, offering herself utterly to God in praise and thanksgiving. She is amazed before the divine goodness—amazed that she believes in it; amazed that she is the recipient of so great an unmerited gift as that in Christ; and amazed that all she must do is to ask and to seek and to knock.

It is as transported by astonishment at this filial intimacy that the Christian turns to the varied kinds of prayer. Faith in the redeeming and provident God opens hearts and lips in prayer—to praising and thanking, to asking, to the "humiliation" of confessing sin, and to interceding for others.³ Barth says that in prayer the Christian "makes use of the freedom to answer the Father who has addressed him."⁴

Obedience also is integrally related to prayer, for "prayer is the most intimate and effective form of Christian action."⁵ While acknowledging that "prayer is the renewing and inward empowering of the Christian, a breathing of the soul,"⁶ Barth insists that it is also an action, "the true and proper work of the Christian." Prayer is a matter of obedient discipleship in that it has "a sequence the end of which brings us back to the beginning"—yet in a different spirit than when we began:

When the Christian wishes to act obediently, what else can he do but what he does in prayer: render to God praise and thanksgiving; spread himself before God in his weakness and sin; reach out to Him with all that impels him; commend himself to Him who is his only help; and again, *and this time truly*, render to Him praise and thanksgiving.⁷

The phrase "this time truly" makes clear that something transpires in undertaking the sequence of prayer; the Christian's spirit is affected through this discipline of fundamental obedience.

² CD 3/3, 265.

³ CD, 3/3, 252-3.

⁴ CD, 3/3, 265.

⁵ CD 3/3, 264.

⁶ CD 3/3, 265.

⁷ CD 3/3, 264, *emphasis added*.

Prayer as Petition

It is well known that Barth possessed strong political convictions and was active in his social context, including preaching and praying with prisoners. Yet he underscores the importance of prayer by drily observing that in prayer a Christian “presents himself to God, the God whom he can always avoid in his activity.”⁸ While all aspects of prayer are vital components of the intimacy with God that is prayer, in the first instance prayer is petition. If one takes the Lord’s Prayer as the standard of prayer, as does Barth, this is indubitably true. Prayer is simply asking—because everything that we could ever seek, or hope for, is already on offer. Barth asserts that it is a gift given before we ask. How is this so?

First, as we have seen, there is the astonishing willingness of God to draw near to human believers who know themselves to be insignificant and undeserving—except for God’s mercy. This is a relationship of intimacy, as between Parent and child, and no one need be afraid to ask of God what it is that she hopes to receive.⁹

Second, “to all the true and legitimate requests that are directed necessarily to God, there is one great answer. This one divine gift and answer is Jesus Christ.” He is the one answer because it is through him that “God concerned Himself in the world and man.” It is through Jesus Christ and his election to be the Redeemer that the world came about in the creative purposes of God, and that God established a covenant with the world and with a holy people. As incarnate, Christ worked salvation and peace. As the One through whom God has created all things and through whom they will be perfected, he is “the one great gift and answer in which all that we can receive and ask is . . . actually given and present and available to us.”¹⁰

Third, Jesus Christ is anything but a solitary figure; in him and to him is gathered a people: his election as Mediator is also the election of a community of faith. It is this belonging in Christ as the Christian community that gives the Christian perspective to see a victory that exists *already*. Already possessing the inheritance and citizenship of heaven, the community of faith sees, as from proximity to the divine throne, a world that has not been abandoned to its own devices:

From God it looks back and down upon all that is not yet ordered, all that is not yet solved, all that is not yet liberated; all the disturbances and obstructions and confusions and

⁸ CD 3/3, 265.

⁹ CD 3/3, 268-69.

¹⁰ CD 3/3, 271.

devastations which we still find in the world-process, and all the darkness which still tries to obscure, and actually does obscure for us, the fatherly rule and determination under which the process stands. In Him it already sees it unobscured. In Him, it already lives by all the goodness and wisdom and perfection of this rule. In Him it already breathes at the heart of God.¹¹

Christian petition draws such breath in the assurance that “the full divine gift and answer is already actualized and present.”¹²

The First and Proper Suppliant

The centrality of Jesus Christ in Barth’s theology is affirmed again in his assertion of the pre-eminent role of Jesus in the life of the community that prays:

The first and proper suppliant is none other than Jesus Christ Himself. The Gospels tell us that He taught his disciples to pray, and that he did so by repeating a prayer with them, by being their Leader in prayer . . . As the Son of God, He was the divine gift and answer, but as the Son of Man he was human asking . . . Jesus Christ asks, that is, He takes up towards God the position of One who has nothing, and has claim to nothing, who has to receive everything from God . . . This is how he lives. This is how he loses his life. This is how He gains and saves it.¹³

With the imagistic power so characteristic of Barth’s prose and so faithful to his service of Christ, he continues: “God triumphed in this man. But he did it because this man actually asked, and asking took and received; because this man sought, and seeking found; because this man knocked, and as He knocked, it was opened to him.”¹⁴

As leader in the life of faithful prayer, Jesus Christ invites the community that gathers in his name to join him in prayer. Barth observes that the Christian community lives by the intercession of Jesus as its great high priest. How then, he asks, if it accepts this intercession on its behalf, can it not pray *with him*—in intercession for others, indeed for all creation?¹⁵ Thus, asking with Jesus, the community of faith will always

¹¹ CD, 3/3, 272.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ CD 3/3, 274-75.

¹⁴ CD 3/3, 275.

¹⁵ CD 3/3, 277-79.

pray “in his name.”

Barth points out that even when Christians pray as individuals, they are praying “We” prayers, of and for the community of faith. Such is the unequivocal guidance of the Lord’s Prayer.¹⁶ The “We” task of intercession is for sake of the whole community, but not for the existence of the community as such—rather for its existence in the service of Christ.¹⁷ This service includes “praying for those who are outside, for those who do not so far pray, or who no longer pray, but can only groan. [The Christian] will, in fact, pray for all men and all creation.”¹⁸

Participation in Universal Lordship

Following his discussion of prayer as offered in union with “the first and proper suppliant,” and thus as “participation in the asking of the Son of Man,” Barth now proceeds to draw a remarkable conclusion. Because prayer is not a matter of self-edification or circumscribed within the experience of the believer, but rather a participation in the intercession of Jesus for the world, it has consequence, or objective bearing, for the world that is under divine governance. As a petition for the gift of the divine goodness in the midst of creaturely occurrence, “it acquires a share in the universal lordship of God.” This is not within the power of a creature, of course. It is the result of asking, and thus of participating through faith and obedience and prayer in the one gift and answer, the fundamental and astonishing goodness of God in Jesus Christ.

God wills to enter into relationships: “He is not alone in His trinitarian being and He is not alone in relation to creatures.” These relationships are real and have their effect on God; moreover, God welcomes the co-operation of creatures in the divine ruling and overruling of events through petitionary and intercessory prayer. “[T]here is the freedom of the friends of God concerning whom He has determined that without abandoning the helm for one moment He will still allow Himself to be determined by them.”¹⁹ Sinful humans redeemed by Christ are called “not merely to the humility of a servant and the thankfulness of a child but to the intimacy and boldness of a friend in the immediate presence of the throne, His own presence.”²⁰ Through prayer, believers are called to the side of God, “living and ruling and reigning with Him.”

¹⁶ CD 3/3, 280.

¹⁷ CD 3/3, 278.

¹⁸ CD 3/3, 282.

¹⁹ CD 3/3, 285.

²⁰ CD 3/3, 285-86.

But, Barth hastens to say that “the power to rule and reign with God” is possible only through and in Christ, as a participation in the kingly office of Christ.

The actions of humans in faith and obedience and prayer remain genuinely creaturely in nature. Yet in and through them God is at work, ever directing world-occurrence:

[W]henver the Christian believes and obeys and prays there does not take place a merely creaturely movement. But concealed within the creaturely movement, yet none the less really, there moves the finger and hand and sceptre of the God who rules the world. And what is more, there moves the heart of God, and He himself is there in all the fullness of His love and wisdom and power.²¹

He concludes by saying that, through the divine rule, God “directs everything that occurs in the world for the best: *per Jesum Christum, Dominum nostrum.*”

Concluding Reflections

What is frequently bracing in Barth’s theology is his frank insistence on the lordship of God over all of life; and his doctrine of providence certainly ascribes unambiguously sovereign power to God in preserving, accompanying, and ruling creaturely existence. This insistence on the active deity of God first excited and motivated me as a seminary student in reading his commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans*. Let God be God! However, as the years have passed, I find an element missing in this approach—the relation of claims about the divine direction of all events in the cosmos to other disciplines of human learning, especially scientific discovery.

It is not enough to assert the Bible’s most thorough-going claims about God’s providential control and care, and then to argue, as Barth seems to, that to go any further would be a theological misstep. Keeping theological discourse at a distance from the implications of scientific and philosophical research in a universe that actually exists as a unity seems illogical rather than faithful. Moreover, the sometimes grotesque realities of our world make it far from clear that everything that happens in the world is for the best. Surely it is not faithless to ask questions about divine justice and mercy in relation to human suffering. The psalmists seem to have asked them.

As well, Barth’s assigning to the believer a role of *ruling* with

²¹ CD 3/3, 288.

God through prayer is unsettling. Even though framed as an aspect of the believer's participation in the grace and reign of Jesus Christ, it seems to place believers in an imperial role—or at least to set before them a terrible temptation not unlike that in Eden. It is significant that Barth does not adduce Scripture in support of this particular teaching, while, in contrast, Rev 22:5 tells us that it is only in the context of the New Jerusalem that the saints “will reign forever and ever.”

Having offered these criticisms, I highlight the following as fruitful and encouraging aspects of Barth's teaching on prayer:

That petition is the main form of prayer. As Barth points out, the example of the Lord's Prayer shows that petition should be at the heart of our understanding of prayer. While we ought not to create unrealistic expectations when we teach or lead in prayer, neither should we undercut the scriptural examples of, and admonitions to, prayer. A friend's phrase lingers with me: “Pray fearlessly.” However God works in the world, we should ask in faith for what we need and what the world needs.

That we pray within a community of faith, and pray in union with Jesus Christ. Barth's assertion that, even when praying as individuals “in our closet,” it is as a “we” that Christians pray. Again, the Lord's Prayer is our teacher in this. We live in a time when “church” is disparaged, even by those who are members of it. We rarely think of the church as the beloved community or a divinely founded institution, worthy of our best service and love. To remember ourselves as church when we pray is good counsel for our careless attitudes to the *ekklesia*. We also have the privilege and incentive to remember ourselves as companioned by Jesus Christ, “the first and proper suppliant,” the great Intercessor.

That the one answer and gift to prayer is Jesus Christ. Christian conviction about the divine identity and self-offering of Jesus, taken at their full value, should provide believers with joy in times of fulfilment and consolation in times of sorrow. He is Saviour in all seasons, and we might find enough in his company for any eventuality. Even in suffering we may find him God's ultimate response to our need. Deeper union with Christ will also bring us to living with deeper realization of the Already dimension of God's coming, perfect reign.

FROM THE HEART

PRAY FOR ME?

by **Richard Bott**

I was ten years old the first time I remember experiencing it. A group of musicians playing what would become known as “Contemporary Christian Music” came through our town, sponsored by the local Pentecostal Assembly. At the time, they didn’t have a building, so the concert took place in the worship space of St. John’s United Church. As it was on well-known territory, when invited by some of my Pentecostal friends, I decided to attend. The music was amazing—it was like no church music I had ever heard. At the end of the concert, the leader let us know that the musicians would be happy to have conversation and prayer with anyone who wanted to chat. I took them up on that invitation. The next fifteen minutes were some of the most bewildering of my life. While the conversation was similar to what I had experienced with adults, their prayers for me were not. I remember multiple people around me, calling on the power of the Holy Spirit to fight the demonic forces that had me in their grip. I remember being profoundly terrified—both by the content and the form of the prayer.

Twenty-two years later, I was studying for my D.Min., in a joint program between an Anglican college in Canada, and a Brethren seminary in the United States. Students in the program came from a wide spectrum of Christian denominations. During one of the residential weeks, I received difficult news from back home. As my table group gathered, they could see that I was upset. As we had developed a deep level of trust, when they asked what had happened, I was able to explain the situation. The group listened with compassion and care, and offered words of love and wisdom. Then one of the group said, “We need to pray for our brother.” As I thanked them, and accepted their offer, what I expected was that everyone would hold me in their prayers on our various drives home and in the days that would follow.

Instead, hands were offered—some clasping mine, others laying gently on my shoulders. Then, words were offered—words that I hadn’t been able to say for months. As others in the class realized what was happening, they came over to place a hand on the shoulders of those closest to me, joining in prayer. As people offered what was in their hearts in the language of prayer that was theirs from their own faith lives (even some that challenged demonic forces), I was held in a web of love that brought me into the presence of God in a way I had never quite experienced before. I remember being profoundly changed—both by the content and the form of the prayer.

As both a lay person and a member of the order of ministry in The United Church of Canada, the majority of my experience of prayer had been in the context of the worshipping community. Even prayers that were specifically for me were in a ritual form—when I was recognized as a candidate for ministry, or ordained, for example. Those prayers, like many of our communal prayers, had a set liturgical form, or used prepared words.

In small groups, at Bible studies or at meetings, prayer tended to “book-end” the gathering. While those prayers might touch on some of the personal situations that had been shared during the time together, they tended to touch very lightly. In my experience in the United Church, this held true not only in groups that were primarily lay people and groups that included both lay people and ministry personnel, but also in groups composed entirely of ministers.

For my D. Min. work, I explored the effect of peer-supervision groups on the stress levels and coping abilities of ministry personnel in the United Church. That study suggested that getting together in peer groups did help, as long as clergy went past venting about situations in their ministries and lives, and helped each other answer the questions, “What is your responsibility in this situation?” and “How can we help you to live out that responsibility?”

While I continue to believe that those questions, and the support offered through them, are vital to ministry personnel’s ability to cope with the stressors in their lives, more pertinent to this paper was the participants’ response to the inclusion of one-on-one, interpersonal prayer as part of the small group practice. Both by anecdotal report and by measure, there was a correlation between people’s coping abilities and being prayed for in the group. In short, praying with one another, for one another, helped.

While we could, and I hope we will, have great discussions about the mechanism by which the practice of one-on-one, interpersonal prayer was helpful, it *was* helpful. Be it divine intervention, simply taking time to sit and be with the issues in one’s life, a sympathetic “placebo” effect, a combination of these, or something completely different, praying together for one another was efficacious. It changed people’s lives.

As ministry personnel in the United Church, what keeps us from praying with one another? Interpersonal prayer was an important part of all of the denominations who came together in our various unions. Communal prayer continues to be a part of the ongoing worship life of our congregations. Our siblings in other denominations, from those quite similar to us to those quite different, share in interpersonal prayer at

various places and times. Why do we find it difficult?

In discussions with colleagues, there are a few reasons that are often offered.

To be prayed for requires us to make ourselves vulnerable. If someone is going to take what is going on in our lives and reflect on it in prayer, we need to be able to share with them what is going on in those lives. To do that, we need to have built relationships of trust with one another, relationships that allow for honest sharing of our brokenness and our failures, as well as joys and successes. In a system where it was our colleagues to whom we were responsible for oversight and discipline, as well as support, it was difficult to be vulnerable with them. I hope that the new changes to our structure will offer the space to reconsider our collegial relationships, and the depths to which we can be vulnerable with one another.

As it is with much of our doctrine and theology in the United Church, we have a variety of understandings about how God interacts with creation. Does God intervene in the world? If so, what does prayer have to do with it? How does prayer “work”? If my understanding of God is panentheistic, and my colleague has a traditional theistic theology, can we pray together? The breadth of our theological understanding in this area invites discussion between colleagues. These discussions can work to build trust and understanding. They can also make us feel very vulnerable.

On a number of levels, we are afraid of giving offence, and of being rejected. Each of us has our own language for prayer. When we are preparing communal prayers, we often work to provide wider imagery, or seek ways to include words or forms that speak to a range of people. In interpersonal prayer, which is often spontaneous and focused on one person, we tend to use our own prayer language and structure. People are often concerned that their language may not be heard as motivated by the good will intended.

As someone for whom prayer is a central part of my ongoing work in loving God, my neighbour, and myself, my response to all of these concerns might sound a bit callous. Just do it. Call up a colleague with whom you already have a trusting relationship, and ask if you could meet with them. Sit down over a beverage; explore what prayer means for them and for you. Have a frank conversation about your life and ask them to pray for you. You already know that they have goodwill for you. If their language isn't your language, let that good will act as a translator. Let yourself be held in their love, and in God's love in that time together. Offer them the same space to be vulnerable, and to be held in prayer.

Take some time to reflect on what changes receiving and offering prayer have made in you.

After a while, you might want to consider branching out. Call a colleague you don't know quite as well. Spend some time getting to know them, and letting them get to know you. See if prayer for one another can be a part of that collegial relationship, as well. Keep on going.

I believe that God is intimately intertwined with every part of creation. When creation moves, God responds. Because of that understanding, I believe that prayer does make a difference to the heart of God. But, whatever prayer does to God, I am certain that it changes us. For the better.

PROFILE

Mrs. R. P. Hopper (18 February, 1845 – 5 April, 1922)

To find the story of Primitive Methodism in Canada one needs either some assiduous archive-diving, or looking at a few long out-of-print volumes.¹ To know the life-dates of Jane Agar Hopper, and her name besides, we must go to her headstone in Toronto's Mt. Pleasant Cemetery. There, too, we will find the only mortal trace of her daughter, "Baby Annie Louise, Died Feb. 16, 1881."

Yet, as Mrs. R. P. Hopper, in *Old-Time Primitive Methodism in Canada*,² she is silent about her own loss, while reporting for that same season on the death of the Rev. John Lacey, pioneer Primitive Methodist minister in Canada from 1836 to 1865.

This is a serious person. What cannot be in doubt is the value of her very personal history of Primitive Methodism in Canada, because without her we should know very little about it, and nothing of its flavour. But with her, we hear: "In this work I shall merely endeavor to rescue from oblivion the names of some of the men and women, their walks and their ways, their talks and traits . . . whose record is one of personal faithfulness, undaunted perseverance, and heroic self-sacrifice."³

That is, so long as we can suspend our incredulity at her classic Methodist-style expression, and listen to her at face value. This, I freely admit, needs some getting used to, but another age of our faith is open to us here. "Primitive Methodism is one of the original spokes in the wheel of Canadian Methodism, which is rolling on, with Almighty Power behind it, to crush sin out of this land."⁴

As I say, a serious person. In this article, we will stick close to Mrs. Hopper, but to assist that purpose, let us look at one brief introductory overview.

In the year 1829 three godly men—William Lawson, Thomas Thompson and Robert Walker, Primitive Methodists from the Old Land—met in Little York, formed a class and began open air services . . .

¹ For instance, W.F. Clarke and R.L. Tucker, *A Mother in Israel: or Some Memorials of The Late Mrs. M.A. Lyle* (Toronto: W.C. Chewett & Co., Printers, 1862), or, John Petty, *The History of the Primitive Methodist Connexion from its Origin in the Conference of 1860* (London: John Dickenson, 1880).

² Mrs. R. P. Hopper, *Old-Time Primitive Methodism in Canada, 1829-1884* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1904).

³ Hopper, Preface, v.

⁴ Hopper, 15.

the congregation and society increased . . . (and) enlisted twelve local preachers and four exhorters, preaching in Scarboro, Woodhill's, Blue Bells, Smith's, Centre Road, Churchville, Streetsville, Switzer's, Four Corners, Clarridges, Paisley, Don Mills, Thornhill, Nicholl's, Humber, Halton, Hogg's Mills, etc., with an aggregate of 132 members by March 1832.⁵

And, not to make this into a Toronto thing, but "Hogg's Mills" is today called "York Mills," and is a subway stop on the University-Finch line. Remembering the 1850s, Mrs. Hopper reports: "When I see the electric cars of the Metropolitan Railway whizzing past my childhood's home, I recall how often I heard the opinion expressed that "no cars would come up Yonge Street, for Hogg's Hollow could never be filled up and no cars could climb Hogg's Hill."⁶

All this is important, because, "between my father and mother, the Thompsons, Lawsons and Walkers, there existed a lifelong friendship . . . [T]heir names are fragrant, and ever to be remembered for piety, benevolence and usefulness."⁷

Mrs. Hopper was born Jane Agar, and her family was at the church-hub of Primitive Methodism. She met many of the persons named in her book and had their stories at first hand or as family legend. Though she wrote later in life, it is the voice of the child, Jane Agar, we hear as she recounts the heroic days when her family home was located on Yonge St. at Hogg's Mills:

Living right on the street, with accommodation for a horse and a welcome for all, our house was a continual stopping place of all the ministers who travelled the road to and from Toronto. What a continual coming and going there was, and such earnest religious conversations on the progress of the work.⁸

Seldom was a child more suited to listen-in at table and in the evenings to these earnest religious conversations. We acknowledge that it was the done thing for Methodists of a former age, but how startling to hear the voice of such a one:

From my first consciousness I felt the wrath of God abiding on me, but I did not sue for mercy. I wished I had died in infancy. I never wanted existence; why was I born since I was sure to be

⁵ J.A. Sanderson, *The First Century of Methodism in Canada*, vol. 1 (Toronto: William Briggs, 1908).

⁶ Hopper, 229.

⁷ Hopper, 21.

⁸ Hopper, 230.

eternally lost? . . . I was not more than four years old when these thoughts worried me.⁹

It is a bit difficult to frame exactly what we think of a faith-style that shapes a small child so, and we could wonder at the recollection, but Jane Agar, the young girl, is hardly an anxious little soul, meek and slavish to a religion foisted upon her:

We had to commit ten verses to memory each week from the Gospel of Matthew, and I can well remember how I wished the gospels had never been written. I thought it would have been better if Matthew, Mark, Luke and John had died in infancy, since what they had written was of no particular use, only to punish children.¹⁰

The authenticity of Mrs. Hopper's general account of primitive Methodism is surely to be the more trusted, given how well she captures Sunday School—*New Curriculum* or no. If as former wee scholars we might not have phrased it quite so well, still we can allow that she captures the essence of the experience. Wit notwithstanding, these were serious people, formed in serious families, and raising serious children. It may be that our instant response is to suspect that this was a bad thing, but then the values and picture can be suddenly startlingly modern:

Frills and flounces were avoided in Primitive Methodist families . . . My mother stands in my memory as the central figure in our home . . . She was intensely energetic, a good house keeper, and kept everyone moving. We were counselled to “watch the clock” and see how the time was going . . . Mother had little respect for girls who sat with their toes in the fire waiting for some man to take care of them. Above all things she desired godliness for her children. After godliness came industry and education.¹¹

Say finally that this was a solid Methodist household of the mid-nineteenth century, and that the young daughter of the house, Jane, was a person of her times, and most definitely the right person to chronicle that age of faith.

My first and only doll; cost a penny; it was a wooden one with a painted face, and it had joints. It was handsomely dressed in black glazed lining, and was a beautiful object. The only disappointment I felt as I looked at it was, that it could not

⁹ Hopper, 233.

¹⁰ Hopper, 74ff.

¹¹ Hopper, 255.

think. We turn from these pages of lighter vein, and once more consider the progress of the connexion . . .¹²

And what valuable records she offers of the work, and of the flavour of the work and of its people.

Of camp meetings and revival services:

. . . My joy was in the old-time singing. How they did sing in the revival services, and you knew every word . . . One hymn was always to the fore . . .

*O ye young, ye gay, ye proud, Ye must die and wear the shroud;
Time will rob you of your bloom, Death will drag you to the tomb.*

*Chorus: Then you'll cry and want to be Happy in eternity.*¹³

Of preachers: (from Journal of Rev. W. Summersides, 1831) “The last thirteen days I have preached sixteen times, led two classes, rode fifty and walked seventy miles. At night everything around us has been frozen, and the white rime and frost have lain very thick upon our beds in the morning.”¹⁴

And of events: “Mr. Summersides preached beside the jail, in York. The jailer swore much, and caused the window to be put down so those inside might not hear. That night he took the cholera, and the next day died. The cholera was raging at that time and many died every day.”¹⁵ (July 1832)

In the times that she relates from old journals, York was not yet Toronto (1834). It would be a dozen years before John Snow advanced the theory that cholera was a waterborne disease.¹⁶ Other records confirm that it really did kill that fast. Mrs. Hopper tells how it was, and of the response of religion in the midst: “Thursday January 3rd, 1849, was a day of public thanksgiving, in accordance with the proclamation of the Governor General, for the deliverance from the cholera, and Mr. Davidson preached in the town hall of Galt from Mark 7:37, ‘He hath done all things well.’”¹⁷

But, much of her account is of people—those names she promised to rescue from oblivion:

Mr. Daniels was a gardener in Yorkville . . . [W]hen the camp

¹² Hopper, 233.

¹³ Hopper, 96.

¹⁴ Hopper, 26.

¹⁵ Hopper, 28.

¹⁶ For a good account, see Steven Johnson, *The Ghost Map* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006).

¹⁷ Hopper, 88.

meetings were held on Bloor Street West, his house was an open door . . . Mr. and Mrs. James Weatherald were among the prominent members of the Bay Street church. They had both been Quakers . . . Mrs. Weatherald wore her drab shawl and bonnet, and with the “thee” and “thou” in her conversation, evinced a strong personality. They were very lovable people . . . I must not forget the name of Mrs. Stoneham and her son Job, who lived in the basement of the Bay Street Church, and were the caretakers. She generally spoke first in the love-feast, then closed her eyes and had a refreshing time.¹⁸

Many of us can do this same, and relate name after name with word portraits of the faithfulness we have seen. This is my point: Mrs. Hopper gives us such a picture of Primitive Methodism and of a time when camp meetings were held on Bloor Street West near Yorkville. Nor are some of her accounts what we might first expect:

Mrs. Isaac Wilson thought nothing of riding thirty miles on the saddle, preaching two or three times on the Sabbath. Toby, her horse, should not be forgotten, for he carried his gifted and consecrated mistress thousands of miles to proclaim the ever-blessed gospel of peace and good-will to men.¹⁹

While the chronicling of women preachers was not her issue, Elizabeth Muir quoted from Mrs. Hopper’s work fourteen times in her 1989 doctoral thesis, *Petticoats in the Pulpit, Early Nineteenth Century Methodist Women Preachers in Upper Canada*, published as a book of the same name.²⁰

As Mrs. Hopper said, her issue was to chronicle the saints, and to this end her own receive scant mention. Her parents are noted, having been so full of usefulness, Baby Annie Louise is unmentioned, and R.P. Hopper—whose Christian names we never do learn, they are not even on the Mt. Pleasant headstone—does appear, but the tale is purely of his usefulness to the connexion:

The roads at this time were at their worst. (April 1859). Very few of them were graveled; the frost was out and the mud to the wagon hubs. R. P. Hopper, a boy of fifteen, drove nearly twelve miles in a double waggon to Richmond Hill station to meet the Conference delegates. For some cause, none of them were

¹⁸ Hopper, 41ff.

¹⁹ Hopper, 100.

²⁰ http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/R/?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=39216&local_base=GEN01-MCG02.

there, and he had to measure the distance back again.²¹

Her stories of being the church in that time ring familiar to our experience of the work today. We also have our “discouragements numerous and formidable,”²² and we continue with the open questions of how and whence the challenges of the day shall be met.

In the Conference address of 1856 by the Rev. John Davidson we read as follows:

No intellectual or physical superiority in our ministry, no liberalism in our church polity, no executive cleverness in applying recent acts of Conference or discipline will save us or give stability to our enterprise without more religion. Let us be ever more devoted to knee work, private pleading with God.²³

Sometimes her observations may as well be taken right out of minutes or articles discussing our own church projects, how they go, and what is their fallout—with the same worldly contentiousness of opinion, preening of vision presenters, and plain worry at the local level. In the early 1840s she wrote: “Some ministers build churches, and contract such heavy debts, to be met after they leave, that depression quenches the spiritual life of the membership, who are oppressed by burdens they feel unable to carry.”²⁴

She does not neglect that which is detail, but far from trivial for ministers, then and now: “At this time a minister on a country station received a salary of three hundred and twenty dollars per year, an allowance for horse keep and a parsonage, and each child under sixteen was paid thirty two dollars per annum out of the children’s fund.”²⁵ (Ca. 1855)

And, if she never intended her telling about the experience of being church to speak as far as to our times, still it does pretty well.

Thanking God for a “comfortable” business meeting was quite proper. They were not always seasons of unalloyed happiness. It was said by one official in the early days, who had come home from the business meeting with his mind very much hurt, as he sat with his face in his hands all forlorn, “Well, I don’t wish any man’s death, but if it pleased the Lord to take Brother _____ to himself before the next business

²¹ Hopper, 225.

²² Hopper, 168.

²³ Hopper, 203ff.

²⁴ Hopper, 55.

²⁵ Hopper, 175.

meeting, I do not think I could honestly grieve about it.”²⁶

That might ring familiar to meeting-goers of today. And, though full of Methodist zeal and seriousness, the life of the church is not without its moments:

. . . The hat passed round had seen service. Some things are not made for heavy responsibilities and that hat crown was one of them. As the hat was being carried to the minister the vessel gave way at a point unthought of, and the coins, copper and silver, rattled and rolled on the boarded floor. The pulpit felt the need of more grace and extra staying properties to preserve proper decorum.²⁷

Nor is the account very far from the issues we face, if seen through the proper prism. Aside from its value, which is considerable, in that Mrs. Hopper relates an event in the community (which is, I will guess, unrecorded elsewhere), this next puts paid to our ideas that the church of today faces unprecedented competition from secular entertainments of all kinds: “They held a missionary meeting at Cayuga, but attendance was poor, owing to the exhibition of a learned pig at the tavern. A few, after witnessing this great treat, came to hear what the missionaries had to say.”²⁸ (late Dec. 1848)

Maybe this article was all prologue to that last story, but why not? The days are all but unbelievable to us. The “learned pig” sounds like the stuff of fiction—but apparently you can’t make this stuff up. To read of old Methodists who could meet death with “shouts of victory,”²⁹ even in the face of their weeping family, would be incredible without Mrs. Hopper and a few others to whom we must owe a vast debt.

Yet here she is, with name after name, story after story, telling of an age of “black squirrel pie,”³⁰ an age we hardly can believe existed. There is plenty that is cribbed from old yearly District Reports (one suspects she had piles of them, treasured and well-read). In lists of names she outdoes, for us, old Leviticus and Chronicles.

Mrs. Markham—Much power accompanied by her prayers and experience, and not uncommonly an exhortation. She was

²⁶ Hopper, 113ff.

²⁷ Hopper, 233.

²⁸ Hopper, 87.

²⁹ From *Sermons by the Rev. James Spencer, M.A., of the Wesleyan Conference, Canada* (Toronto: Anson Green, Conference Office, 1864). More of him anon, in *Profiles*.

³⁰ Hopper, 110.

highly esteemed by all who knew her.

Mrs. Real—a very devoted woman with many gifts and graces.

Mrs. Holdershaw—She knew of the deep things of God, original, wise and good.³¹

Alas that, even for a profile, we shall never know R.P.'s name. He outlived her by four years, and was of the Primitive Methodist connexion, so we can hope that they had happy years together—nor if they had any other family. We have no photograph or image of her.

But we do have a picture that makes the old faith ring true, and even familiar. We live in times of our own ageing and of a changing church, and we, too, know a little of the hope and the lament that both come with and are gifts of faith.

All who bore the name of Primitive Methodist in Canada will soon have crossed the river. The last Canadian Conference has met; the die is cast; there is nothing of us any more as a separate body . . . All the earnestness of the Bible Christian, all the solidity of the Canada Methodist, all the dignity of the Episcopal, all the burning zeal of the Primitive Methodist, has combined to rear a structure with open doors for humanity, and into it anyone may enter who possesses in his heart a desire to flee from the wrath to come.³²

³¹ Hopper, 102.

³² Hopper, 331ff.

AN EXCHANGE OF LETTERS ON PRAYER

CAN GOD WRITE STRAIGHT WITH A CROOKED PEN?

by Peter Wyatt and Rob Fennell

Dear Rob,

After twenty-five years in pastoral ministry, I moved to a position at the General Council Office of the United Church, and then on to serve as principal of Emmanuel College. After the shift out of congregational ministry I still had opportunity to preach occasionally as a guest, and sometimes even to lead worship as a whole. As you will know since taking up your teaching position at Atlantic School of Theology, worship is a different experience when one is not leading it, but participating from the pew.

I wonder what your experiences have been. The longer I am present at worship in a pew, the more restless I have become with certain features of our common worship. The wordiness, for one thing. Our prayers, oral and printed, seem to imply that we think we will be heard for our much speaking. How often a few sentences with an apt controlling image, or a series of clear images, would suffice as a prayer to open a service. To illustrate, I offer an example from my files—containing elements of invocation and confession—that may be entirely or only partly of my composition:

Blessed, enlivening Spirit of God, we look to you!

As people have gathered in this appointed place
for a hundred years and more,
so we have gathered,
seeking rendez-vous with you
and power to live well.

Mixture of clay and spirit, we amaze ourselves;
we look within and see
struggle between generosity and greed,
confusion of lofty sentiment with petty resentment,
skirmishes between confidence and fear,
and hunger for intimacy set amid defensive walls.

As we reach out to you,
reach out to us, unfailing Friend,

Grasp our hands so that we may advance at least a pace forward
in our journey.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen

I set prayer out as poetry rather than prose because public or communal prayer needs to be spoken in breath-friendly units, and with

enough space between images for each of them to gain some traction in our imagination. It may be that this prayer has too many images to be effective, whether spoken by the minister or the congregation together. It would be interesting to ask the congregation afterward: what happened for you when I/we offered the opening prayer?

One of my special peeves is finding a unison prayer in the bulletin that has been printed with no apparent thought as to how it would be spoken by the congregation. No doubt the congregation will manage to get through it, but it is not clear that it will have been an experience of prayer rather than of uncertain choral speech. As well, since members of the congregation likely have not ever seen the words before, they will be just catching up to the meaning of the words rather than having a chance to offer them as heart-felt prayer. In an Anglican service the prayer-book unison prayers are well known (even by heart), and thus could be prayed from the heart, making them truly participatory *as prayer*. If our goal with printed unison prayers is congregational participation, then we need to construct them so that they function as prayer.

One more thing before I give you a chance to respond, or to set your own course—part of the wordiness of much of our worship derives from our avoidance of silence, moving from one spoken or read or sung part of worship to the next as if we had to avoid radio silence. When does the still small Voice get a chance to speak? When leading services recently I have been providing silences before uttering prayer and also allowing some moments of reflective silence after the sermon—a kind of quiet altar call.

I look forward to your reflections on common worship today.

Dear Peter,

Thanks for all this. Like you, I experienced a certain disorientation after leaving full time congregational ministry and taking up an academic post. Not least of these disorientations was trying to find anchorage in a weekly rhythm. I had been so deeply tied and cued to the Sunday by Sunday rituals of time that I wasn't nearly as sure of where things fit together. And like you, I was given the mixed blessing of being a worshipper, and rarely a worship leader. From time to time I have the opportunity to serve with a congregation for a few weeks when a minister is on sabbatical, but most Sundays I am "on the other side of the pulpit." It is not always a comfortable place. I think there is an expression in French: *déformation professionnelle*. I have been deformed by my

profession! I long to lead worship still, and still love doing so, but regrettably have become too much of a critic of those who lead me in worship. I am trying to repent of this. Some weeks are better than others (both in the leadership and in my repentance).

Reformed worship is, on the whole, too wordy. We who live within that tradition rely too much on words and especially on printed text. It can be a race to get all the words said (just as it was a race for the minister to have them all written in advance). The wordiness can distract us from a patient encounter with God, who desires our hearts' attention more than our clever turns of phrase. I have fancied myself a bit of a writer of prayers, and I do love a well-written prayer (like yours, above). But I am still caught, now and again, by this dynamic of too much reliance on words. A little space, a little silence, a few sung refrains, a gesture or two—any of these might broaden our liturgical repertory.

I know that there are many ministers in The United Church of Canada and other related denominations who are quite good at this breadth, and indeed expand it well beyond what I have listed. But there are just as many who are bound by customary practices (and I include myself in this). As you note, it would indeed be daring to ask a congregation what they experienced in and after a prayer that one has written and invited them to pray together in public worship. It would be revealing, I think. John Wesley's diaries, as decoded by Richard Heitzenrater,¹ evidently demonstrate how preoccupied Wesley was with his spiritual experience in each element of the liturgy—how well he was attending to God, how alert he was to the Holy Spirit, and so on. Do our wordy prayers invite this sort of attention? Or do they become a sort of linguistic-spiritual Olympics, dashing to get the words uttered before our sixty minutes are up?

I have another thought I would like to run by you. To what extent, would you say, is the effectiveness of public prayers a function of the spiritual health of the one who composes them? I don't mean to say here that ministers must always be exemplary spiritual athletes. It is perfectly OK to borrow and adapt the work of others. What I do mean is that I have an intuition that a healthy and humble prayer practice of one's own will deepen the meaningfulness of our public worship leadership. Again, I am no hero in this: I have had plenty of spiritual dry times. But it's a question that might relate to our conversation.

¹ <https://divinity.duke.edu/faculty/richard-heitzenrater>

Dear Rob,

I was heartened to hear from you and to listen to your thoughts. I sense that you are a gentler critic of the foibles of our worship customs than I. And—dear me!—I intended to say that I have been as guilty as anyone in practising the wordiness and excessive dependence on words that seem to limit the reverence and power of our worship. The great advantage of preparing prayers for worship each Sunday is, of course, that they can reflect the immediate social and cultural context, as well as the themes of Scripture passages appointed in the lectionary. We were educated to value this opportunity for contextual immediacy, and found ourselves eager to try out creative wings. The shadow thrown, of course, is that we have to be creative every week, not only in sermon but also in prayers. It's a lot to undertake each week, and suddenly we have to produce all those words.

There is another thing I wish I'd said about printed unison prayers. If I compose them, then I am putting these words of my composition into the mouths of the worshippers that day. Compliant as most congregations are, those present will speak the words—whether they find them to be apt or not; true to their own experience or not. Again, knowing the content of unison prayers before they are to be spoken, democratizes the leadership of prayer to a degree: the people become a little more responsible for the uttered content of the prayers.

I think that you are right: there is a connection between one's public praying and one's personal prayer life, between the quality of one's public prayers and one's own spiritual health. Though this connection is real, I don't think that it can be absolute. This is so because, even in an egregious case, God can "write straight with a crooked pen." Graham Greene illustrates this in *The Power and the Glory*, in which a priest, addicted to whiskey and companioned by a woman "friend," is nonetheless the means by which the gospel of Christ continues to console believers in a time of persecution in Mexico. The connection is real but not absolute also in more mundane instances of dryness, doubt, and distraction.

I recall a time of clinical depression in my own life when I felt both unable and unworthy to carry out the responsibilities of pastoral ministry. A sense of decay and defeat crowded in upon me, and I wondered where the God of deliverance was. How could I preach faith to people on a Sunday morning when I doubted whether I had faith myself? Would I now add the sin of hypocrisy to my misery? In those bleak days

the conference personnel minister visited me, and he said that I should keep going. “Just because a doctor is depressed, she doesn’t stop practising, or a teacher from teaching.” Then he said: “You have carried members of your congregation when they have been dispirited and depressed, doubting and demoralized. Now let them carry you.” Somehow I got through those painful months, and experienced healing and personal growth. The decision to continue in the pastoral office without breaking stride (hobbling though I was) afforded a sustaining dignity.

This said, I know that, when I have been disciplined in exercising forms of personal prayer and meditation (including the reading of Scripture), I have felt greater confidence in my life as a Christian and in offering worship leadership. “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim 1:7, RSV). In one of his discussions of prayer Karl Barth commends moving through the order of prayer mandated by Jesus’ teaching in the Lord’s Prayer. He observes that in this way we participate in “a sequence the end of which brings us back to the beginning”—yet in a different spirit than when we began: “When the Christian wishes to act obediently, what else can he do but what he does in prayer: render to God praise and thanksgiving; spread himself before God in his weakness and sin; reach out to Him with all that impels him; commend himself to Him who is his only help; and again, *and this time truly*, render to Him praise and thanksgiving.”²

It is my experience that prayer, especially as combined with meditative silence, makes a difference in my composure, in perspectives and attitudes, and also in actions undertaken. Prayer does change us, and for the better. The more challenging issue with which I tussle is whether and how God through prayer changes things in the world.

² Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich, vol. 3/3 of *Church Dogmatics*, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 264, *emphasis added*. This text of Barth’s is also quoted elsewhere in this number.

Dear Peter,

I hear you on that matter of the “shadow” of creativity when composing prayers for public use. I have known colleagues to be almost paralyzed by the pressure of it, or to borrow and adapt others’ prayers too readily without discerning if they are apt. It’s so strange, in a way, given the contrastingly “set” forms of prayer books traditions (e.g. Anglicans)—a pattern that has rarely found a happy home in the United Church.

Greene’s story of the priest in Mexico—and your own—remind me of that ancient principle (*ex opere operato*) that we hold in regard to the sacraments: that the efficacy of the act doesn’t depend on the righteousness of the presider. A minister can be in a state of sin (or dryness or despair) and even still God uses that voice, that heart, that mind, those hands, to convey the gospel. In the sacraments, as in prayer, it is finally the triune God who acts, not us (with “groans too deep for words”—Rom 8:26). We are always vessels, and only vessels. Recalling this has helped me many times when I felt unworthy, unable, or unprepared (!) for liturgical leadership—especially at funerals. I simply had to trust the Holy Spirit to do what she wanted to do through me, with me, or despite me.

In the film version of C.S. Lewis’s life, *Shadowlands* (Richard Attenborough, 1993), the screenwriter puts these words in Lewis’s mouth: “I pray because I can’t help myself. I pray because I’m helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn’t change God. It changes me.” Kierkegaard said something similar, a century earlier: “Prayer does not change God, but it changes the one who offers it.”³ Even so (and against the theological judgements of some of those who taught me and whom I revere), I am inclined to a slightly different view. Can prayer change God’s mind? Does God respond to our prayers? I am tremendously reluctant to say “no.” This is not born of a fantasy for a celestial fulfiller of wish lists. It is born of conviction about the sovereignty of God. Who am I, who are we, to say in advance that God can or cannot, will or will not, should or should not, respond to prayer in a particular way?

³ Soren Kierkegaard, Chapter Two of *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing* [1847], trans. Douglas V. Steere (Seaside, OR: Rough Draft Printing, 2013), 34.

It is for this reason that I once said to you, "Pray fearlessly." Abraham was bold enough to try to change God's mind (Gen 18:23-33), and apparently succeeded. In Phil 4:6, Paul advises, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." This is indeed the thing: Paul does not say, "Decide in advance what is appropriate to pray about," nor "Be sure that you predetermine the limits of God's power to respond." The doctrine of divine sovereignty forecloses on the possibility that we would foreclose on God's power and will. In short, I cannot withhold certain prayers because it is not my decision about how God will respond.

None of this makes it easy to pray, nor does it resolve the dilemma of what seem to be unanswered prayers. Many times I have ended a public or group prayer with these words: "Gracious God, we lay all these prayers, spoken and unspoken, on the altar of our hearts, trusting that you hear us in love and will respond in your time and in your way." To me, this captures our rightful dependence on a sovereign God. I know many of our contemporaries would differ from my perspective!

Dear Rob,

I like your summary prayer very much, and may well use it! Your advice to pray fearlessly is also appreciated, and in situations of actually praying for some good, including healing, I do not hold back from asking for what we need. There is, of course, a good deal of resistance these days to expecting God to intervene in the regular operation of the laws of nature. Someone has observed, though, that it is absurd to speak disdainfully of God *intervening* in the operation of the universe; isn't it God's universe and isn't God engaged with it at all times?

Still, in an age of stunning scientific discovery, one can wonder just where and how God is present in the world and might be at work in it. Just yesterday all the news programs were heralding the amazing image of a "black hole," or of its penumbra, this image apparently another confirmation of Einstein's theory of general relativity. We have learned so much about the way the universe works, and we are learning more all the time. It is helpful for me in coming to prayer to remember that the two apparently distinct worlds of faith and science are integrally connected. The One in whom we have faith as Creator and Redeemer is in fact Creator and Redeemer of the universe of marvels that science seeks to understand.

I have been reading some contemporary Thomists who are working in the science and theology dialogue. From them I learned that it was Thomas Aquinas who first spoke of “God in all things”; in fact, who said, “God is in all things, and innermost.” He also spoke of God as “Being itself,” a concise way of saying that in every creature, God is present intimately as the very power of its existence. God thus works consistently through natural causation, or instrumentality, in whatever other special ways that God also may work. I am intrigued that at least one of the theologians writing on science today regards natural evolution as an expression of the continuing creative and providential work of God. Might this, then, be one way that God works in the world, through the natural processes of an evolving cosmos, ever drawing the creation toward an ultimate goal?

Dear Peter,

As a child I was consumed by scientific fascination, but today I am more agnostic about scientific processes. Still, I’m terribly grateful for those who continue to research and bring forward such wonderful new understandings and applications (like biomechanical engineering that can rebuild arteries and hearts). My own experience of the natural world is more mystical now, I suppose, though I hesitate to claim that I am a mystic. Prayer in words, in thoughts, in journalling, and so on has always been so important to me. Ecstatic prayer has overtaken me within music and singing, too. I’ve also had prayer moments aplenty in contemplating the stars, sitting on a dock by the lake, and walking in the woods. Those are more preverbal times of prayer, I suppose. These are often the times in which I sense that Kierkegaard was right, in that prayer changes me more than it changes God. I wonder if we need to expand our repertory of prayer in public worship with this kind of contemplation, or more silence, or more encounters with art and movement, which I know are so meaningful to many.

How far is all of this from Thomas and Barth, whom you have mentioned in your letters? Probably not far, I suspect. Those of us who theologize about things like prayer do a disservice when we let that reflection stay at a distance from the lived experience of connecting and communicating with God in various ways. Even Thomas and Barth prayed, of course. So prayer itself is much more universal than theology, as it were! I remember a sermon I offered once in which I spoke of prayer as “natural, normal, and necessary.” Then there is that waggish proverb:

“there are no atheists in foxholes.” At some level, most of the human family experiences the cry of the heart, longing for a God who hears and responds.

It’s this last note that sums things up for me, both personally and theologically: we cry out for God, and God answers. I am convinced of this, even in the midst of much air time given these days to those who are sure that there is no God, or at least there is no God who answers. I am convinced of the goodness of the One who hears, who makes our hearts to have a God-shaped hole (as Augustine put it), who knows our needs before we utter them, who responds with active grace and love. I am indeed convinced, and trust that it is so. The close binding of hearts that emerges through our prayer practices, even in their imperfections, is one of the great joys of the Christian life.

Thank you for this conversation. I hope that readers of *Touchstone* will share with us their perspectives and experiences, and that the conversation will continue!

Readers are invited to join the conversation on prayer through the website blog at www.touchstonecanada.ca. Write your letter to fellow readers!

BOOK REVIEWS

This Incredibly Benevolent Force: The Holy Spirit in Reformed Theology and Spirituality.

Cornelis van der Kooi. Foreword by Daniel Castelo. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018. Pp. xvii + 157.

Cornelius van der Kooi is professor of systematic theology and director of the Herman Bavinck Centre for Reformed and Evangelical Theology at Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. A central theme of these 2014 Warfield lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary is the relationship of the Holy Spirit to Jesus Christ. Van der Kooi begins by reflecting on the process of salvation described in 1 Tim 3:16, which sees the glory and praise of Christ spreading around the globe and throughout the heavens. The Spirit is the driving force behind this.

First, the Spirit brings life. It is present in all living things. Yet as a driving force in history that expresses God's judgment it can also bring an end to cultures and communities. Second, the Spirit is the power of liberation. Third, its activity is directed towards eschatological renewal. Fourth, the Spirit empowers people to be fully human. Fifth, the Spirit grants creation and humanity space, and brings into being new realities. Kooi does not mention that the Holy Spirit brings the gift of peace.

The second chapter addresses his central theme by outlining two different ways of understanding Jesus Christ: Spirit and Word christologies. Both are present in the New Testament and in the United Church's *A Song of Faith*. The third chapter attempts to combine them by arguing that the Son is generated from the first person of the Trinity by the power of the Spirit, and loves the first person.

Van der Kooi then examines how Reformed theologians John Calvin, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Abraham Kuyper understood the Holy Spirit to be at work throughout the world for the renewal of all things. He discusses Calvin's understanding of Christ's threefold office as prophet, priest, and king as a means of discerning where the Spirit is at work. He correlates the royal office of Christ with baptism and public worship. The Spirit is present where salvation is proclaimed, and where people give thanks to God and their lives are transformed and renewed. The priestly office relates to the forgiveness of sin. The Spirit is present where Christ's mercy takes concrete shape in the world. The Spirit is at work where the world is evaluated in light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

These broad rubrics are then supplemented by seven criteria for discerning the Spirit's presence: 1) agreement with the Apostles' Creed, 2) recognition of the distinction between God's Spirit and the human

spirit, 3) acknowledgement that the Spirit does not point to itself but to Christ, 4) recognition of the distinction between good and evil, 5) recognition that the eschatological fulfillment for the church and creation is yet to come, 6) recognition that it often takes time to discern the Spirit's presence, and 7) recognition that such discernment often requires prayer and mutual consultation.

Van der Kooi invokes the Apostles' Creed as the rule of faith which summarizes the church's understanding of the gospel. But he does not discuss how this understanding can change as the witness of the Spirit in the present gives rise to a new reading of Scripture. The Reformed churches give evidence of this in the many confessions of faith that they have produced. While the rule of faith works as a criterion for discerning the presence of the Spirit on one level, on a deeper level it is the ministry of Jesus, his cross and resurrection, that serves as a criterion for discerning the truth of a church's rule of faith.

This book's discussion of the Holy Spirit from a Reformed perspective has its share of thought-provoking insights, such as the conclusion that where the Spirit is present, it looks for recognition of the Son and love towards God. While the Spirit is at work throughout the world, it seeks release from anonymity through the witness of the church. The book's solution to the differences between Word and Spirit christologies is brief but insightful. Unfortunately, its attention to the liberating work of the Spirit did not lead to concern for inclusive language in theology. Still, this will be useful for clergy, seminary students, and theologians studying the Holy Spirit.

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***Preacher: David H. C. Read's Sermons at Madison Avenue
Presbyterian Church***

**David H. C. Read. Edited by John McTavish. Eugene, OR:
Wipf & Stock, 2017. Pp. 289.**

One of the great challenges of being in solo ministry is the fact that you rarely hear another person preach. That is sad because exposure to others' sermons is a great tool to reflect on one's own preaching. This is why books like this can be so helpful.

In some circles David Read is likely a big name in preaching. Certainly, John McTavish thinks highly of him as "the preacher who has

most nourished my soul and stimulated my mind” (1). However, since he retired almost 30 years ago, it is very likely that a large number of people have never heard of him or have any familiarity with his work. For this reason, it is very helpful that McTavish starts the book with an introductory preface that includes a brief biography. McTavish places Read as a theological centrist and suggests that this may be why he is less well-known than people like William Sloane Coffin or Billy Graham, because “crowds tend to gravitate to simplistic extremes” (2). It is likely that many in The United Church of Canada would not find Read to be a centrist by 2018 standards, but that may well be because thirty years have passed, and, more importantly, the centrist position of the worldwide church is quite different from the centrist position in the United Church.

David Read is a product of the early 20th century. He was ordained in 1936 at age 26, and served as a chaplain in World War II, becoming a prisoner-of-war after his capture during the fall of France in 1940. Theologically he was a follower of Karl Barth and the neo-orthodox school of theology. In 1955, a chance event led to an invitation to take up ministry at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York, where he would remain until his retirement in 1989. The earliest of the forty sermons in the collection dates from 1970 and the latest from 1989, the year he retired.

The forty sermons McTavish has selected for this volume are arranged according to the church year, allowing the reader to follow a “year in the life of a faith community.” The downside is that they are not arranged chronologically so it is harder to trace how Read’s theology may have grown and evolved between 1970 and 1989. In an epilogue McTavish has included a list of books written by Read as well as a few reviews. McTavish includes a brief introduction to each sermon, setting the time period and context of each sermon.

Is it worthwhile to read sermons from another city, another country, and another era? After all, the youngest sermon in this book is 29 years old and we know that much has changed in the last 29 years. If sermons are intended to speak to the current context, what is the value of sermons from another, very different context. People still read and quote from sermons by John Chrysostom, John Wesley, Martin Luther, and Charles Spurgeon (to name a few). Good preaching can be contextually sensitive yet with a timelessness about it. And, sadly, humanity keeps repeating the same mistakes. So many of the issues that Read addresses appear again in the 2019 news. The sermons continue to speak to the soul trying to follow Christ.

This is a worthy addition to the preacher’s bookshelf. The reader

may not follow the same theological path as Read, may not come to the same conclusions, and may even argue strongly against Read's point of view. But the thought process helps to make the preacher a better one.

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Preaching Adverbially

**F. Russell Mitman. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018.
Pp. 184.**

Mitman opens this text with an apt query: "Why another book on preaching?" (1) After all, many a minister's shelf is stuffed with tomes on the act and art of preaching. But Mitman's text is different than other books on preaching, focusing not on the how or why, or even the what, but instead meandering down eleven different adverb-ed paths to philosophize, generally, about preaching and liturgy.

At its core, this text is grounded in the assumption that a collection of essays ruminating on the art of preaching, thoroughly researched from texts predominantly written prior to 2000, is necessary and engaging. Additionally, this work makes clear that preaching must be considered part and parcel of the entirety of a worship service, not an isolated act (2).

As a series of essays, it is difficult to discern an overarching narrative to this book, aside, perhaps, from the opening question. The essays included cover a wide variety of preaching adverbs—from the expected (preaching biblically, evangelically, and contextually) to the esoteric (preaching multisensorily, and doxologically). Overall, each chapter is an easily digestible morsel, ideal as a jumping off point for further consideration, reading, or discussion.

By way of summary, it is instructive to consider how Mitman describes, in the briefest of terms, his various understandings of preaching.

Preaching biblically, for Mitman, "involves the hermeneutic of oralizing and re-oralizing" (15). Preaching liturgically, creates an experience where the liturgy preaches, and the entire worship service is "a unified event of the Word of God" (23). Preaching sacramentally sees preaching as another sacrament—a way to open "the assembly to the mystery of God" (43). Preaching evangelically is equated with preaching

prophetically, and allows the preacher to speak for God (54). Preaching contextually requires the preacher to consider both “who are the hearers? And what is heard?” (60). Preaching invitationally “invites people into a mystery greater than themselves,” and is not about church growth or other ulterior motives (82). Preaching metaphorically entails more than the use of symbols, but instead “re-describes ordinary reality in order to disclose a new and extraordinary possibility for our lives” (92). Preaching multisensorily for Mitman is accomplished primarily through the elements of a eucharistic liturgy (104), as well as, for example, making the sign of the cross either on our own bodies or on the forehead of another (116). To preach engagingly is to preach carefully (133) and passionately (141). To preach doxologically is to engage in a sort of praise-speaking (145), to preach in order to glorify God (148), and also to allow “Scriptures to shape every expression in the liturgy as an organic whole” (148). Finally, preaching eschatologically is preaching which enables “the assembly to participate in the already-but-not-yet-ness of the word of God” (168).

This is a book for those who are well-read, and seeking new ways to look at or speak about preaching. It is a challenging read, particularly for those concerned with issues of preaching while disabled, or preaching to an assembly that includes disabled people—those that don't have “ears to hear,” for example. And while it may well be true that “the whole liturgy preaches” (104), this text does not.

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St. Paul for the perplexed. Making sense of the man: his life, his letters, his story (Revised Edition)

Charles P. Anderson. Self-Published, 2017. Pp. 430.

Anderson explores who Paul was and what he taught. His is a critical apology of Paul. Anderson writes:

The reality is that in modern times Paul has not had a sympathetic press among the general public. Indeed, he has been portrayed as uncritically accepting some of his society's worst practices such as slavery, oppressive government, and male dominance, and as one who disapproves marriage. However, when what he actually wrote is delineated from what

has been falsely attributed to him, and contextually interpreted, such accusations are exposed for what they are, half-truths and inaccuracies (15).

Anderson shows great expertise as a New Testament scholar even though he claims that

[T]his is not a book for other scholars . . . it is written for anyone with a curious and open mind who might appreciate an overall introduction to Paul, his writings, his ideas and especially his gospel—college and university students, pastors, and other church folks, and the curious in general public (20).

Paul's driving force, Anderson argues, is a mystical experience that led him to conclude that a profound illness had descended upon humanity. This malady (sin) affected all spheres of human life. Sin is the original socially-transmitted disease to which no one has immunity (10). Paul's experience had convinced him that the only healing was to be found in Jesus Christ.

The book has fifteen chapters, each dealing with a specific topic of Paul's story of spreading "his gospel." The first chapter deals with Paul's earlier life in Judaism. It studies his name: Saul or Paul? In his letters Paul does not refer to himself as Saul. He prefers the Greco-Roman *Paulos*, probably because he liked its Latin meaning, "little" or "small," which favoured his gospel that God's grace is manifested in weakness (25). The second chapter deals with the mystical experience that changed his life. Chapter three deals with how Paul formulated his story after his life-changing experience. The title of this chapter "For the healing of the nations" captures well the formulation of Paul's story and its progression thereafter. "Paul's story or drama of sickness and healing focuses on four main characters: Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus" (100).

Anderson dedicates the following four chapters to how each character fits into Paul's story. Through Adam the disease (sin) entered the world. Through Abraham God initiates the recovery process necessitated by Adam's sin (130). Moses brought the Law, which was useful until Jesus' arrival (140). Jesus brings the full antidote. Now, "life with freedom from sin is available to all, Gentiles as well as Jews" (141). This is the story that Paul undertakes to tell.

In chapters 8 to 12, Anderson follows Paul as he spreads his gospel to different cities, from Arabia to Antioch, Antioch to Corinth, to Ephesus in two trips, and then from Ephesus to Rome. Anderson identifies five phases of Paul's missionary career instead of the traditional

three missionary journeys (348). Chapter 13 explores the reasons behind Paul's success: his thoughtful articulation of the triad of faith, hope, and love; his passionate interest in his founded communities (churches) which acted as therapeutic clinics where the malady was identified and healed; his interest in specific groups like slaves and women; his own personality that he used as a model to be imitated; and signs and wonders connected to the story of Jesus.

Chapter 14 deals with the technical aspect of deciding what sources to use for the story of Paul. Anderson gives primacy to the seven usually recognized authentic letters of Paul. He however notes that "there are numerous unresolved issues which require decisions based on the best judgment one can muster" (386).

Chapter 15 deals specifically with the Acts of the Apostles. Anderson argues that Acts is to be considered an important source for the story of Paul, but cautiously. He advises readers "to accept the account in Acts except where there is demonstrable reason to conclude otherwise" (413).

It is not easy to find criticism for such a fine scholar. But here is one. Anderson notes that by the time Luke was writing Acts, "the Jerusalem Church no longer" existed. I thought this needed a little expounding. Is it because of 70 CE destruction of the Temple? How certain is this claim?

This book is a great addition to Pauline studies. It is good even for scholars who are looking for a simplified, easy to read book with minimal footnotes. I would also recommend it for use in Bible studies.

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Resilient Gods: Being Pro-Religious, Low Religious or No Religious in Canada.

Reginald Bibby. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017. Pp. 280.

In *Resilient Gods*, sociologist Reginald Bibby continues his earlier work on the religious landscape in Canada, arguing that the reality here is one of "religious polarization" with the poles being what he terms the "pro-religious" (about 30% of the population) and the "no-religious" (approximately 25% of Canadians). Bibby shows considerable interest in those who fall in between these two poles, the plurality of Canadians

(45%), or the “low-religious.” According to his analysis, they are the majority in every region of the country. The “low-religious” are open to religion if they feel a particular religious community has something valuable and worthwhile to offer. Bibby also situates the trends toward religious polarization within a global context, concluding that all “three inclinations will always be with us” (211). Yet, *Resilient Gods* has quite a bit to say about “the fire of secularization [that] has devastated much of what, through the early 1960s was a flourishing religious forest” (7). In summing up the regional effects of the accompanying shifts, Bibby writes, “in Ontario, western Canada, and the north, the blaze torched mainline Protestantism, in particular” (8).

He continues to display his fondness for analogies, arguing that, in part because of changing flows of migration, Mainline Protestants in Canada, and the United Church specifically, are suffering from the results of a “Great Religious Recession” (18), and have been the big losers in terms of acting as “suppliers” to the pro-religious. They have failed to foster a brand loyalty as a further result of low birth and retention rates, and are losing absolute and relative numbers. This situation stands in contrast to the stickier nature of Canadian Catholic identity, evident in the desire for last rites that act as bridge to the afterlife. The United Church is perceived as being too focussed on this life. Yet, he also notes that many low-religious people continue to identify with the United and Anglican Churches. This situation may be an opportunity, Bibby suggests, for Mainline Protestants to recover numbers from among the “60% of the Canadian population [who] will be in the market for Christianity” (221). The issue, he surmises, is merely which groups will respond effectively to this market demand.

Despite the popularizing potential of his analogies and his assertion that he is more interested in ideas than numbers, there is a lack of in-depth interaction with the contributions of cited relevant authors and their thought. The dearth of consistency in the tying together of ideas and facts will leave many humanities scholars wanting more. Of course, survey data geared toward situating large scale trends will necessarily be reductionist (for example, requiring people to fit their experiences into a limited set of answers). However, Bibby has compounded this tension by collapsing distinctions that are frequently held as important from theological and religious studies perspectives. For example, Bibby’s work lacks the necessary nuances in his assumptions about the connection of religious identities to faith and practice, which are more variable than his language use suggests, or naming the United Church as a religion rather than a denomination. Moreover, the analogies can at a minimum be

counted as distracting in terms of the book's larger goals. Bibby invokes notions of identity formed in opposition to illustrate the resilient nature "of the gods" when he writes that "Canadian Catholics are not going to limp to the sidelines just because Muslim franchises are springing up across the country. We would expect no less of Mainline Protestants" (218).

Nonetheless, this book is striking, precisely because it is candid in laying out a vision of the significance of demographic religious trends in Canada. Those involved in pastoral and social justice ministries will undoubtedly find *Resilient Gods* stimulating reading that can inform their work. It also challenges some of the stereotypes presented in contemporary academic literature on religiosity in Canada, which, if Bibby's assertions are taken at face value, are overly dependent on the theoretical frameworks developed by long dead Europeans who never set foot in Canada, and, as a result, are too rarely backed by demographic data despite the availability of a growing body of relevant work employing the quantitative methods of social science. Finally, lay people may be interested in reflecting on how they fit into the larger demographic trends and features presented in this volume. They may also consider whether, as per Bibby's aspirational framing, they can locate themselves in this research. As such, this book will be of interest to a wide audience and a welcome addition to congregational, parish, public, and academic libraries.

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