

Questions of Faith and Practice

Introduction

Let us pray.—

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings by your most gracious favor, and further us with your continual help; that in all our works, begun, continued, and ended in you, we may glorify your holy Name and, finally, by your mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Welcome to this second discussion of "questions of faith and practice." I thank all of you for your presence and your willingness to participate in our discussion; and I especially thank those among you who took the initiative in helping to give shape to it by submitting written questions in advance, thereby allowing me time to think about them and to prepare my responses accordingly.

Because the questions we are to consider are about *Christian* faith and practice, I naturally assume that the answers they call for are the answers to be given to them by an adequate Christian witness and theology. Of course, this can only mean, in practice, the answers given to them by particular Christians and theologians who take, or, possibly, *mistake*, the answers to be adequately Christian. Therefore, I shall offer my initial responses to the questions as what, in my own best judgment as a Christian and as a theologian, are the answers called for by any adequate Christian witness and theology. This means, among other things, that I will be arguing more *from* my own positions as a Christian and as a theologian than *for* them. So there is all the more reason for you to appropriate my answers critically in the light of your own best judgment about how the questions are to be answered if they are to be answered Christianly, from the standpoint of adequate Christian witness and Christian theological reflection on it.

I should also say that, since my written answers to the questions discussed last year are conveniently available at the church's website, I advise consulting it to any of you feeling the need for more of a response to some of the questions before us this evening than I shall take time to give in my initial

answers here. More than that, a couple of questions submitted this year are close enough to some asked last year that I shall say very little in responding to them here and simply refer the questioners as well as the rest of you to my earlier responses. If any of you needs or wants access to my written answers otherwise than electronically, let me know, and I'll arrange to send you a hard copy.

Finally, I stress that the purpose of my initial response to any of the questions is solely and simply to focus our discussion, by setting forth at least one possible answer that can be responsibly given to it, which we can then all critically appropriate—both directly, by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of my answer, and indirectly, by suggesting and considering other, arguably more adequate answers that can and possibly should be given to the question.

1. *Where is God in tough times?*

In answering this question, I simply assume, for reasons I've just given, first, that by "God" is to be understood the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and so the One implied by "the greatest and first commandment," which reads, according to the formulation of Jesus' teaching in Mt 22:37 f., "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." God is to be understood, in other words, as *the all-worshipful One*, the one reality worthy of unreserved trust and unqualified loyalty, and hence *the all-surpassing, unsurpassable reality*, "than which—in Anselm's words—none greater can be conceived." And I assume, second, that by "tough times" is to be understood times that, for anyone trying to lead a human life, and for causes either more generally natural or more specifically historical, happen to be bad times rather than good, unfortunate rather than fortunate, and therefore troubling or demanding times, hard or difficult to live through.

My answer to the question, then, summarily is: *God is where God is in all times, tough or not tough—doing what God unfailingly does in every time*. I shall now briefly unpack this summary answer.

God unfailingly does mainly two things. First, God makes whatever comes to be really possible, in fact as well as in principle; and, second, God

makes whatever comes to be both really real and abidingly significant. In doing the first thing, God may be said to create and emancipate, or providentially order, all things; and in doing the second thing, God may be said to redeem and consummate all things. Because, in both cases, God's doing extends to *all* things, God is rightly said to be, in the one case, *the* Creator, and, in the other case, *the* Consummator—all other things being, in their myriad different ways, also creators and consummators, although always only of *some* things, never of all.

But if God in tough times is where God is in all times, doing what God alone unfailingly does in every time, two implications follow necessarily.

First, there is no more reason, logically, to ask where God is in tough times than in any other times, there being no logical connection whatever between the times of our lives, tough or otherwise, and the whereabouts of God. This is true, at any rate, if God is to be understood as we assumed at the outset, i.e., as *the all-worshipful One* of "the greatest and first commandment," and thus as *the unsurpassable One*, "than which none greater can be conceived." To worship is to trust and to be loyal—ideally, to trust unreservedly and to be loyal unqualifiedly. But worship in this sense is authorized as a proper response only if the object of worship, of trust and loyalty, is worshipful—ideally, *all-worshipful*. And this the object of worship can be only if it is unsurpassable: absolutely unsurpassable, or unsurpassable by itself as well as all others, in all the respects in which anything can be so; and relatively unsurpassable, or unsurpassable by all others although not by itself, in all other respects. Although, for any believer in God conceived as all-worshipful and therefore unsurpassable in these senses, good times are rightly accepted as tokens or signs of God's reality and favor, they are in no way evidence, logically, of God's existence and activity and may not be taken, logically, to "prove" them. By the same token, bad times, or tough times, are in no way evidence logically of God's nonexistence or inactivity and "disprove" absolutely nothing that Christian witness and theology have any stake in affirming.

As for the so-called problem of evil, understood as being in some way a disproof of God as Christian faith understands God, it is, in point of fact, a pseudo-problem. It arises from a conception of God's "omnipotence" that is self-contradictory and therefore a pseudo-conception only, altogether apart from the

fact, or the extent, of evil in the world. Moreover, the only God about whose whereabouts the reality of evil could logically raise even the least problem, anyhow, is not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, not the God of "the greatest and first commandment," but an idol, a fetish, a non-God, or, what Paul dismisses as a "so-called god."

It follows, second, then, that our possibility as human beings before God is exactly the same in tough times as in any other times. Because God remains present and active in every time, we have the same possibility in tough times as in any other times—the possibility that I speak of, following Paul, as obedient faith, which is to say, entrusting ourselves unreservedly to God's pure, unbounded love and then living in unqualified loyalty to the cause of God's love, loving God with the whole of our being by loving all whom God always already loves, to whom God is always already loyal—by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

I conclude by remarking that, if what I have said is at all correct, perhaps the most appropriate prayer for the present tough times, as for any other times, is the so-called serenity prayer commonly attributed to the great American theologian of the last century, Reinhold Niebuhr:

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.
Amen.

On which I comment only that, if faith is what I've interpreted it to be—namely, the "obedient faith" of unreserved trust in God's love and unqualified loyalty to it—then it is, in its essence, submission to God as God. But if Niebuhr is right in assuming, as I judge him to be, that there are "things that *should* be changed" as well as "things that *cannot* be changed," then, clearly, to obey God, and thus to submit to God as God, cannot be singular, but only dual. To act courageously and loyally to change the things that should be changed is no less to obey God, and so to submit to God as God, than to act serenely and trustfully to accept the things that cannot be changed.

2. *Who are God's "chosen people" today? What does that term mean in today's world?*

I shall answer these two questions in reverse order. So, first, what does the term "chosen people" mean in today's world?

As I've already explained, I can answer this question here only by taking the qualifying phrase, "in today's world," to mean, "from the standpoint of an adequate Christian witness and theology today." On this assumption, and in my own best judgment as a Christian and a theologian, I should say that the term "chosen people," used normatively, rather than merely historically or descriptively, is to be understood as designating any people—which is to say, any group of human persons—who, having been somehow called by God, have accepted God's call, and have therefore also been chosen by God through their own choosing. This assumes, of course, the scriptural distinction between being "called" by God and being "chosen" by God—as in the hard saying familiar to all of us from Matthew's account of Jesus' own preaching, "Many are called, but few are chosen" (22:14). Whereas the calling of human beings to obey, and thus to submit, to the gift and demand of God's pure unbounded love is, in all its modes, entirely God's work alone, God's choosing of human beings is not solely God's, because it is and must be mediated through each of their own free and responsible decisions to accept God's call. The term "God's 'chosen people,'" then, designates the people who are chosen by God, if they are, only through their own choosing.

Thus—to respond now to the first question—"God's 'chosen people' today" can only mean any and all persons today, here and now, *although only such*, who, having somehow accepted God's call to obedience, however it may have come to them, have thereby also been chosen by God. Of course, the only way in which God's call can be accepted, whatever the mode of its coming to any of us as an individual person, is through obedient faith—through unreserved trust in God's love and unqualified loyalty to its cause. Simply to believe certain propositions to be true, or to perform certain actions that are good, is not to have faith in the sense required to accept God's acceptance. Therefore—as Jesus' parable of the missing wedding garment, according to Matthew, makes all too clear—it is always possible even for those who earlier responded to God's call to

fail to accept it anew when it comes to them again, and thus *not* to be chosen through their own choosing, or, if you prefer, through their failure to choose positively. So the "chosen people" in one sense of the term may very well not be the "chosen people" in another sense—and, from my standpoint, the only sense that really counts, Christianly and theologically.

Two final comments. First, you may have noted that I've expressly allowed for there being plural modes, or ways, of God's calling human beings. In my view, simply to be a human being at all is already to have been called by God in one mode, what I distinguish as the "original," if also only the *implicit*, mode of God's calling. But, then, any human being who is, in any way, religious, or has a live option to become such, is to be reckoned among the specially called, meaning by that the *explicitly* called—any and all who have not only received God's original though only implicit call, but also God's explicit call, as represented, more or less adequately, through *some* religious concepts and symbols. Finally, then, there are those whom God has called not only implicitly, and even explicitly, also, but *decisively* as well—this being the claim that Christians make or imply for the mode of their own calling and also for that of any and all persons who have ever had a real option of becoming a Christian. Why? Well, because, to be a Christian is to understand oneself and lead one's life decisively through Jesus, and, for Christians, Jesus is, as they confess, the Christ—by which they mean, simply, the decisive re-presentation of God's call to all human beings, and thus of the gift and demand of God's all-encompassing love of everyone.

But—to come now to my second comment—if there are at least these three distinct modes in which human beings may be and have been called by God; and if, accordingly, there are at least three main types of peoples, or groups of persons, who could, in their different ways, be said to be "chosen people," the principle still stands, that no one is chosen, whatever the mode of one's calling, or the group to which one thereby comes to belong, except through one's own choosing. And this means, as Kierkegaard liked to say, that we are chosen, if we are, always and only retail, never wholesale—not as any group, but always and only as single individuals, one at a time, each through

her or his own free and responsible decision to accept God's calling, whatever the mode or modes through which God may call us.

3. *To experience a full and right relationship with God, is it necessary to be part of a religious community? Is there a difference in answering this question as between the Old and the New Testaments?*

This double question, which I've taken the liberty of rephrasing slightly to bring out what I understand to be the questioner's intention, is obviously closely related in certain ways to the one I've just responded to. So this seems to be a good place to try to answer it.

This I do summarily by saying Yes to both parts: *Yes, it is necessary, in an important sense, to be part of a religious community in order to experience a full and right relationship with God. And Yes, there is an important difference as between the Old and the New Testaments in answering this question.* I shall now briefly elaborate this summary answer—beginning, once again, with the second part of the question and then proceeding to the first.

In talking about the relevant difference between the Old and the New Testaments so as to answer the first part of the question, we are in particular danger of oversimplifying certain things that are more complex than we allow, thereby furthering misunderstanding rather than understanding. But fully recognizing this risk, I still think one can speak truly about an important difference between the Old and the New Testaments as they bear on answering our question. The difference, very simply, is the difference between being part of a religious community that is, in principle, at one and the same time, a national or political community—in the case of the Old Testament understanding of Israel—and being part of a religious community that is, in principle, distinct from *all* other historical communities, national or political very much included—in the case of the New Testament understanding of the church, which is sometimes spoken of there, significantly, as "the *new* Israel." It was just this difference, of course, that occasioned the first great controversy in the early Christian community over whether it was necessary for gentiles—which is to say, all

members of nations other than Israel—first to become Israelites before becoming Christians, just this being the significance of circumcision.

But allowing that this difference remains, and that the church's long-standing, if not always wholly consistent, recognition of it is certainly relevant to answering our question, I would nonetheless argue that being a part of the religious community rightly identified as the Christian church is, in a sense, necessary to experiencing a full and right relationship with God. This is true, at any rate, if "God" means, as I simply assume, the One whom Christians speak of as "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Still, there is necessary, and there is necessary—and being part of a Christian church is necessary to a full and right relationship with this God only if—in a phrase of John Wesley's—there be "time and opportunity." In other words, it is necessary in a *conditional* sense only. Wesley drove home this distinction by appealing to the condition of the thief dying on the cross, for whom there simply was no "time and opportunity" to become a part of any religious community, including the religious community that is the visible church of Jesus Christ. But, then, was Jesus' promise to the thief vain? No, Wesley insisted; for all that was necessary in an *unconditional* sense was the thief's obedient faith, his obedient trust in God and loyalty to God in accepting Jesus' promise. Being part of a religious community—by constantly making use of its distinctive means of salvation through faith and then joining in continually administering these means to others through bearing witness—being part of a religious community in this sense follows necessarily from the obedient faith through which alone anyone is saved solely by God's grace. But the necessity in this case is always conditional only—always provided that there be "time and opportunity"—and it is in *this* sense, although *only* in this sense—that I answer Yes to the first part of the question, also.

4. *In our society, both sacred and secular, we generally speak of life and death separately, e.g., life is one thing, death [an]other. Is there a more correct way to think of them in Christian theology? Is life one thing and death [an]other?*

Although I happen to have had the opportunity to talk about this question briefly with the person who has submitted it, I must confess I'm still perplexed by it and fearful of missing its point. But, for what use it may be, I'll make three points of my own by way of response, and then leave it to the general discussion to produce a proper answer.

First, it's one thing to speak of things "*separately*," something else again to *distinguish* them. In both cases, one's point in speaking, presumably, is to deny that the things in question are simply identical, or one and the same. But it's being misled and misleading to suppose—as even the philosopher David Hume once notoriously allowed himself to do—that any things that can be distinguished can also be separated. That people in our society, sacred and secular, generally speak of life and death as *distinct* I, too, would take to be true. But that they thereby take them to be *separate* seems to me to be another, and distinct, claim for which I find no compelling evidence.

On the contrary—and this is my second point—anyone in our society who has been educated in the so-called life-sciences as they're conventionally taught, for the most part, in our schools, colleges, and universities will surely have learned that, although life and death are certainly distinct, they are also inseparable, since to live is to die, dying, and so death, too, being entirely of a piece with living. Consequently, wherever Christian witness and theology have critically appropriated the Christian tradition in the light of modern scientific understanding, including that of the life-sciences, there is a recognition, however consistently or inconsistently worked out, that death, for all of its difference from life, is insofar an integral part of it, all prescientific notions to the contrary notwithstanding. I have in mind, for example, the notion that we find in the stories of human origins in the Book of Genesis that death is not properly of a piece with, or a part of, life, but is rather utterly contrary to it, being a divine punishment arbitrarily called down upon the first human beings (and, curiously, all of their progeny as well!) because of their disobedience to God's command.

As I see it, then, if there is a more correct way to think of life and death in Christian theology today, it is almost certainly due to theology's having allowed itself to learn from the best scientific knowledge now available to us, instead of being content simply to hand on the prescience of earlier human generations. In

other words, it is to science, more than to theology, that we owe the corrections that some Christians and theologians, also, may have eventually learned to make in traditional Christian teaching on this whole subject.

Even so, my third point is that the ultimate justification for any such revisionary theological understanding as the questioner would presumably take to be "more correct" cannot be simply that it agrees with modern scientific understanding about the inseparability of life and death, or, if you will, of living and dying. No, this revisionary theological understanding is finally to be justified, if it is, only by the kind of properly religious, indeed, Christian, understanding of life and death to which Paul bears witness in at least some—although certainly not all!—of the things he has to say about them. I'm thinking not only of his powerful assurance in Rom 8:38 f. that "neither death, nor life," any more than "anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"; I'm thinking, above all, of what he says to the Romans in the fourteenth chapter of that same letter: "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord of the dead and the living" (vss. 7 ff.).

5. So much is said about Christian forgiveness. I believe in a loving and forgiving God, but the extent and capacity of God's love is beyond human comprehension. Does God want me, a human being created in the image of God, to forgive those who have hurt me, continue to choose evil over good, and are unrepentant? Does God? What if I won't—or can't?

On my analysis, there are two closely related questions here. I shall take them up in order, as follows.

First, Does God want me to forgive those who have hurt me, continue to choose evil over good, and are unrepentant? My response, unhesitatingly, is Yes, God does want you to forgive those who have hurt you, and so on, and God wants this precisely because you are, as you say, a human being created in God's

image. I have no hesitation in giving this answer because to give any other would require me to contradict what I take to be essential elements in the normative witness of the Christian community. If anything is clear to me from the gospels' accounts of Jesus' preaching, it is that forgiveness is always in order toward those who have sinned against us, and that the forgiveness we owe them has no limits. The love of our neighbor as ourselves to which we are called is consistently expounded to include both love of our enemies and the willingness ever to forgive any and all who have need of our forgiveness.

But having said this, I would be the first to insist that nothing is more essential theologically than to have a right understanding of what is, and is not, meant by the "forgiveness" to which we are called as well as by the "love" of which it is an expression. On what I take to be such a right understanding, for one to love another—whether we're talking of God's love of others or of the love to which God calls all who are created in God's image—for one to love another, always involves two things: first of all, to accept the other unconditionally, for what she, he or it actually is, thereby allowing the other to make a difference to oneself and what one is to do; and then, secondly, to act toward the other, on the basis of such acceptance, so as to realize, as far as possible, consistently with one's similar obligations to all the others affected by one's actions, the other's own true good. Forgiveness, then, is simply loving in this same twofold way any and all who have acted hurtfully and unrepentantly against one, not allowing their offenses to qualify in any way one's accepting even them unconditionally for what they are and then acting so as to bring about, so far as possible, what is good for them, too.

This, stated all too briefly, is the understanding of "love" and "forgiveness" on the basis of which I have responded unhesitatingly, Yes, God does want you to love your neighbor as yourself and, as an essential expression or form of such love, to forgive anyone and everyone who, for whatever reason, stands in need of your forgiveness. But, given the fact that the terms "love" and "forgiveness" may be understood in other, sometimes very different senses from those I've tried to clarify, I have no trouble understanding how my response to the question might appear more problematic than I take it to be.

But what about the second question? Granted that God does indeed want me to forgive any and all who are in need of my forgiveness, what if I won't—or can't—forgive them? On what I take to be an adequate Christian theological understanding of human existence, there is good news and bad news. The bad news is that, notwithstanding God's call to each of us, in some mode or modes, to live as God's beloved children—which very much includes God's wanting us to love our neighbors and to forgive without limits any who may have offended against us—notwithstanding our all having been thus called by God, we have each always already rejected God's call, freely choosing to live contrary to it. Consequently, it's true of everyone of us that we won't—i.e., *will* not—love our neighbors as ourselves, including our enemies, and hence *will* not forgive any of them who stands in need of our forgiveness. Moreover, as long as we persist in our disobedient choice, we not only *will* not love and forgive others; we also *can* not love and forgive them. Because we *won't* love and forgive, we *can't* love and forgive, either. But, of course, the good news of the gospel, as Christians understand it, is that what is impossible for us is nevertheless possible for God—that because God has always already loved and forgiven all of us, each of us, despite her or his persistent disobedience, ever remains God's beloved child who, as such, ever has the possibility of trustfully accepting God's love and loyally loving in return. In other words, each of us, although a sinner, is always already a *forgiven* sinner, who therefore needs only to accept her or his being forgiven through obedient faith in order to be able to love and to forgive others, as God wants us to do. In this sense, God's demand is but the flip side of God's gift. And not the least of the ways in which we accept God's gift is by obeying God's demand that we forgive one another as God has forgiven us all.

6. I resent noisy fundamentalists hijacking the name "Christian" and wonder whether they don't do more harm than good in communicating the Christian gospel.

The question here, I take it, is this: Is it possible that those who hijack the name "Christian" do more harm than good in communicating the Christian gospel?

My answer—again unhesitatingly—is, Yes, it certainly is possible that those who hijack the name "Christian" do more harm than good in communicating the gospel. I'm assuming, naturally, that what is meant in context by "hijacking the name 'Christian'" is claiming explicitly or implicitly that one's own way of being Christian is the only way rightly so named. But you'll have noted, I'm sure, that both my reformulation of the question and my answer to it allow for the possibility—which I trust the questioner, also, would wish to allow for—that "noisy fundamentalists" are by no means the only, even if, perhaps, the noisiest, Christians who make or imply any such exclusivistic claim.

More than this, however, I will not say here by way of responding to the question, since it is one of the questions close enough in meaning to a question I responded to at some length last year that I have no hesitation in referring all of you to that question and to my response. The question I refer to is Question 3 (on pp. 7-11 of my written answers): *How does one express [one's] faith to others when "Christian" has been kidnapped and no[w] means a very narrow view?*

7. Many "fundamental" Christians seek the Kingdom of God as a physical place after death. Many who attend mainline churches also struggle with the concept of what occurs after death and how our living "now" impacts what happens "then." Can you speak to your understanding of "The Kingdom of God" and its impact on us as a people of faith and/or the emphasis the Christian religion should place on "the afterlife"?

This, as anyone who was here last year may have guessed, is the other question I take to be close enough in meaning to a question I responded to at length then that an extended answer now hardly seems called for. So I simply refer the questioner and all of the rest of you to Question 6 and my response thereto (on pp. 17-21 of my written answers). Whereas that question asked, "Would you *like* to speak about the afterlife?" (italics added), the present question asks whether I *can* speak about it. And, of course, I should like to think that what I said in answering the earlier question is sufficient evidence that I indeed can—that I *am* able to speak about the afterlife, however adequately.

But you perhaps noted that there's one thing the current question asks about that I did not specifically go into in my response a year ago—namely, how I understand the concept/term, "the Kingdom of God." So just a brief further word on my understanding of how "the Kingdom of God" is understood by normative Christian witness and an adequate Christian theology.

The Greek term translated by our English phrase, "the Kingdom of God," is, as is said, "*systematically* ambiguous," in that it can express both of two different, if also closely related, in fact, correlative, concepts. It can thus refer both to the rule or dominion exercised by God and to the reign or domain over which God rules. On my understanding of how these two concepts are to be used normatively by Christian witness and theology, the *rule* or dominion of God is simply God's pure, unbounded, all-encompassing love of all things, whereby anything that is becomes possible both in principle and in fact and whereby anything that is is really real and of abiding significance. Correlatively, then, God's *reign* or domain is simply *all things*—everything whatsoever, both possible and actual, that is embraced or encompassed by God's love.

So, on my understanding, to ask, as the questioner does, about the "impact" of "the Kingdom of God" on us as a people of faith, is to ask about nothing else than the "impact" of God's boundless, all-embracing love on us as people who trustfully accept God's love and loyally live accordingly, loving God and all that God loves, which, of course, is everything—and everyone. In the same way, to ask about "the emphasis the Christian religion should place on 'the afterlife'" can only be to ask about the emphasis Christians should place on God's all-encompassing—and never-ending—love, for to be embraced everlastingly by that love is, as I understand it, the only "afterlife" that Christians have either the right or the responsibility to emphasize.

8. *If you have been taught that intercessory prayer works if you have enough faith, why is it that it seems a magical incantation and not really faith—especially when nothing happens?*

This question raises several important theological issues—from What is the right course to follow when what you've been taught proves to be either patently false or unfalsifiable and therefore meaningless? to What is really faith, as distinct from magic? and, not least, What is the point of intercessory prayer if, on at least some understandings of it, it seems to be quite pointless and/ or a matter of practicing magic instead of really living by faith? Obviously, we could spend our entire time this evening on any one of these issues—to say nothing of the others the question also raises. So I shall respond to it by saying only a few things about just one of them—leaving it to the subsequent discussion to bring out anything else that can and should be said to respond to the question.

The issue to which I shall speak is the third I specifically mentioned: *What is the point of intercessory prayer?* The issue of the point of prayer is probably most commonly raised when persons ask, Does prayer work? and, in the case of intercessory prayer, Does petitioning God on behalf of others work? The answer the questioner confesses to having been taught—along, I suspect, with many of the rest of us—was, "Yes, intercessory prayer works if you have enough faith and keep on praying." But wherein, exactly does the working of prayer consist? Supposing that, if one has enough faith, one's prayers for others *will* work, what would be the evidence that, in point of fact, one *has* had enough faith and that one's intercessory prayers *have* worked? Would the evidence be that the others for whom one had prayed actually received what one had asked for on their behalf? And is this why, when "nothing happens," as the questioner puts it, it seems that one's incessant intercessory prayers *haven't* worked and are therefore pointless and/ or just a magical incantation?

If the answer is, Yes, then the underlying theological issue, clearly, is what is the point of intercessory prayer. If it's not effective as, in William James's memorable words, "an effort to lobby in the courts of the Almighty for special favors," then what, exactly, is its point, and why do we continue to engage in it—and to enjoin one another (not to mention bringing up our children!) to do so? If intercessory prayer is not a reliable means of getting what we want, what good is it?

There's an old position on this issue that I take to be—or, at least, to point to—the right theological position; and I want now briefly to develop it by way of

focusing our discussion. Simply put, the position I'm prepared to defend is that *prayer generally, and petitionary and intercessory prayer in particular, are a means of salvation, or, if you will, a means of grace.*

The difficulty with this simple formulation, of course, is that there are so many things that have been said to be "means of salvation." If the term is most commonly applied to such things as preaching the word and administering the sacraments, it has also been applied to the faith by which the grace mediated by both word and sacraments alone becomes effective in our lives. But then it is also often applied to the representative ministry of the church and, by further extension, to the visible church itself, which, in the well-known formula of the Roman Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council, is defined as "sacrament of the salvation of the whole world" (*sacramentum salutis totius mundi*). More than that: in much contemporary theology, the application of the term has been extended still further to include Jesus Christ himself, who is said to be the *primal* sacrament, or means of salvation, the church then being distinguished as the *primary* means, and all other such things as the church's word, sacraments, and ministry being distinguished as *secondary* means. My own way of making essentially the same point is to say that faith in God through Jesus Christ, although in its own way a *means* of salvation and therefore not constitutive of salvation, but only representative, of it, nonetheless *is* the constitutive such means for Christians—which is to say, the means that constitutes anything and everything else as properly Christian—while all other so-called means, be they the primary means of the visible church or the secondary means that the church in turn constitutes, are in no sense constitutive but rather *representative* means of salvation even for Christians.

Now, clearly, "prayer," as we ordinarily understand it, is—if a means of salvation at all—but one of many such representative means that we as Christians recognize and use. I say, "as we ordinarily understand it," because, as we all know, the term "prayer" can also be used in extended senses—so extended, indeed, that Paul can exhort the Thessalonians, "Pray constantly," or, as the *KJV* has it, "Pray without ceasing." In the same vein, the great theologian of the ancient church, Origen, can say that "the whole life of the saint [is] one great unbroken prayer," and Bishop John A.T. Robinson can write in our own time, in

Honest to God, "Prayer is the responsibility to meet others with all I have, to be ready to encounter the unconditional in the conditional, to expect to meet God in the way, not to turn aside from the way. All else is exercise towards that or reflection in depth upon it." Clearly, "prayer" is being used in all these cases in so broad a sense that it covers the whole of our Christian existence as an existence in faith working through love and love seeking justice, and is thus merely another word for our proper worship, or service, of God. But, as we most commonly use the term, "prayer" has the much narrower meaning illustrated paradigmatically by what goes on, or should go on, in the corporate worship of the gathered church. Far from referring to the whole of our existence and activity as Christians, it refers to one activity alongside others, the significance of which—as of all such special "religious" activities (which, of course, are the "all else" of which Bishop Robinson speaks)—is in some way to re-present the ultimate reality understood and responded to in different ways through Christian faith and witness. In that sense, prayer is the re-presentation through appropriate concepts and symbols of the understanding of God, our neighbors, and ourselves to which we are brought insofar as we understand them in the light of God's decisive word to us through Jesus Christ. Prayer in this sense, in other words, is our response or "Amen" to the truth disclosed to us through God's decisive revelation through Christ as mediated through the visible church and all of its other secondary means of salvation. Prayer is our acknowledgement in an outward visible way of the reality of God, our neighbors, and ourselves as this ultimate threefold reality is decisively re-presented to us through Christ and the church.

Thus our prayers of adoration primarily re-present our understanding of God, while our prayers of confession primarily re-present our understanding of ourselves before God, in face of God's liberating judgment against our sin. On the other hand, our prayers of thanksgiving explicitly express both—both our understanding of God as the primal source and final end of all that we are and have and our understanding of ourselves as the grateful recipients of all God's gifts—while our prayers of petition further re-present our understanding of ourselves, and our prayers of intercession re-present our understanding of our neighbors. In the second of the two evangelical commandments, you'll

remember, we're charged with loving our neighbors as ourselves. Well, I hold that petitionary prayer, in the usual sense, is one of the ways we go about fulfilling the commandment to love ourselves, even as intercessory prayer—which is really only petitionary prayer for others—is one of the ways we go about loving our neighbors.

But how so? *Why* do we pray for ourselves and our neighbors? *To what end* do we pray? Here is where I always remember one of my favorite theologians, Martin Luther, who was the first to help me answer these questions, although I have since learned that essentially the same teaching is to be found already in Augustine (from whom Luther may very well have learned it) as well as in the sermons of the chief teacher of my own church tradition as a Methodist—John Wesley. In his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, and specifically on Mt 6:7-13, Luther writes (and I quote him at length):

Therefore Christ says now: 'Your heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask for it' [vs. 8]. It is as if he would say: 'What are you up to? Do you suppose that you will talk [God] down with your long babbling and make him give you what you need? There is no need for you to persuade him with your words or to give him detailed instructions; for he knows beforehand what you need, even better than you do yourself.' . . .

But you may say: 'Since [God] knows and sees all our needs better than we do ourselves, why does he let us bring our petitions and present our need, instead of giving it to us without our petitioning? After all, he freely gives the whole world so much good every day, like the sun, the rain, crops and money, body and life, for which no one asks him or thanks him. He knows that no one can get along for a single day without light, food, and drink. Then why does he tell us to ask for these things?'

The reason [God] commands it is, of course, not in order to have us make our prayers an instruction to him as to what he ought to give us, but in order to have us acknowledge and confess that he is already bestowing many blessings upon us and that he can and will give us still more. By our praying, therefore, we are instructing ourselves more than we are him. It makes me turn around so that I do not proceed as do the ungodly, neither acknowledging this nor thanking [God] for it. When my heart is turned to [God] and awakened this way, then I praise him, thank him, take refuge with him in my need, and expect help from him. As a consequence of all this, I learn more and more to acknowledge what kind of God he is.

...

You see, a prayer that acknowledges this truly pleases God. It is the truest, highest, and most precious worship which we can render to him; for it gives him the glory that is due him. . . . [A] Christian heart is one that learns from the word of God that everything we have is from God and nothing is from ourselves. Such a heart accepts all this in faith and practices it, learning to look to [God] for everything and to expect it from him. In this way praying teaches us to recognize who we are and who God is, and to learn what we need and where we are to look for it and find it. The result of this is an excellent, perfect, and sensible [woman or] man, one who can maintain the right relationship to all things.

"By our praying, therefore, we are instructing ourselves more than we are [God]. . . . [P]rayer teaches us to recognize who we are and who God is, and to learn what we need and where we are to look for it and find it." Or, as John Wesley puts it, "[T]he end of your praying is not to inform God, as though he knew not your wants already; but rather to inform yourselves. . . . It is not so much to move God, who is always more ready to give than you to ask, as to move yourselves, that you may be willing and ready to receive the good things he has prepared for you."

In sum: we pray because we are human beings who, as Paul says (Rom 8:26), do not know how to pray as we ought. We pray because in this way, through the means of salvation that prayer is, we may be saved from the unbelief—or, if you will, the unfaith, the lack of obedient trust in God and loyalty to God and to all to whom God is loyal—to which we are continually tempted by our life in this world.

But here I would remind you that the primary emphasis in the classical Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is not that we are each our own priest before God, but that we are each to be priests of God *to and for one another*. Therefore, when I say—following Luther and Wesley—that we pray to instruct ourselves, I mean also, and primarily: *we pray to instruct one another*—wherein, incidentally, the reason is to be sought for learning how to pray in the church's school of prayer, through her treasury of prayers and her prayer book. In this sense, *we pray to bear witness*—to re-present to one another and to all the truth decisively disclosed to us through God's word in Jesus, so that, again and again, we can each make this truth our own through faith. We pray for ourselves

and our neighbors to bear witness —to re-present to one another the truth about our existence disclosed to us through Jesus Christ. God gives us both ourselves and our neighbors to love in and through God's love, and, in God's decisive word to us through Jesus, God discloses both ourselves and our neighbors in the light of God's all-encompassing love, under its gift and demand. By means of our prayers of petition and intercession, we re-present our reception of God's gift of ourselves and our neighbors, so as to make it really ours, so as to take full responsibility for it, so as also to obey God's demand.

But if prayer is rightly understood, not as an ineffective means of lobbying with God for special favors, but as, in this sense, a means of salvation, how effective a means is it? Otherwise put: Does prayer used as such a means work? Does *something* happen, after all? I deeply believe it does; for when we learn to pray as we ought, making use of prayer as the means of salvation it properly is, it is bound to be effective for us as the pray-ers, and we have every reason to hope and pray that our prayers may also become an effective witness, and so an effective means of salvation, for others.

Conclusion

Let us pray.—

Bless, O God, all our attempts to do theology and enable them to bear rich fruit. Help us, above all, both to speak and to listen to one another in love: to say what we mean and to mean what we say; and, not least, to hear what is meant, not just what is said; for Jesus's sake. Amen

Nederland Community Presbyterian Church
9 September 2009