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THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF  
INTERCESSORY PRAYER FOR THE CHRISTIAN

by

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Thesis submitted in part-fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of

BACHELOR OF DIVINITY

At Rhodes University, Grahamstown  
South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

'It is a difficult and even formidable thing to write on prayer, and one fears to touch the Ark. Perhaps no one ought to undertake it unless he has spent more toil in the practice of prayer than on its principle. But perhaps also the effort to look into its principle may be graciously regarded by Him who ever liveth to make intercession as itself a prayer to know better how to pray'. So wrote P.T.Forsyth in the opening chapter of his work on prayer,<sup>1</sup> and at the outset of this study of the meaning and significance of Christian intercession one finds oneself echoing and endorsing his words.

Intercession, of course, is only a single aspect of a far greater whole. The whole, to use Francis Thompson's phrase, is a 'many-splendoured thing'. No attempt to define and designate the limits of each of the elements which together make up prayer in its Christian fulness has ever been either entirely satisfactory or generally acceptable. But roughly speaking, there are seven colours on the palette of prayer or, to change the metaphor for one used by Leslie Weatherhead,<sup>2</sup> there are seven rooms in the house of prayer: Affirmation or Invocation of the Divine Presence; Adoration and Praise; Confession and the penitent seeking of Forgiveness, with the Positive Affirmation and Reception of that Forgiveness; Thanksgiving; Petition; Intercession; and Meditation. There are as well the more mystical forms of prayer admirably analysed and distinguished, for example, by Bede Frost.<sup>3</sup> In practice, no element can be isolated or divorced from the other elements which with it make up the whole. Affirmation of God's presence issues quite naturally in adoration, which in turn leads spontaneously into confession, and so on. Each aspect of prayer acts and reacts on the others. To single out Intercession (and, insofar as it is related to it, Petition) and to

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1. The Soul of Prayer, p.11  
2. A Private House of Prayer  
3. The Art of Mental Prayer

(2)

write on it alone would therefore seem to require some explanation.

Three considerations have prompted this study. It may be helpful to state them briefly:

(a) T.R.Miles, of the Department of Philosophy in the University College of North Wales, comes to a somewhat radical and provocative conclusion about Christian petitionary prayer.<sup>1</sup> His argument will be stated presently, but his finding is that 'one particular religious practice - namely, the use of petitionary prayer when the language is understood in a straightforward literal way - requires to be abandoned'. Such language must, he urges, be replaced 'by the language of commitment and dedication' alone.<sup>2</sup> On the face of it, this conclusion seems to be completely at variance with the plain teaching of our Lord, and requires further assessment.

(b) While there is much devotional literature on the subject of prayer, there is a distinct paucity of material dealing with the biblical and theological background to the subject. Thus, at the level of the ordinary member of a Christian congregation, there is much woolly and even semi-magical thinking about prayer, and particularly about intercession. Those engaged in the pastoral work of the Christian ministry find that requests for intercession are often coupled with the most profound and disconcerting ignorance of and unconcern with the real nature either of God or prayer. An attempt to formulate a doctrine of intercession, even at the rudimentary level of this work, is timely and necessary.

(c) Intercession (and Petition) present more inherent difficulties and questions than any other aspect of prayer. The practice of adoration, for example, involving the right alignment with and the commitment of the whole personality to God, may well be as difficult as the practice of intercession. But intercession excites many more problems for many more people than adoration ever does. It is of practical pastoral importance, therefore, that some of these problems should be uncompromisingly stated, and an attempt made to clarify the underlying issues and to try to answer them; and also to integrate into a comprehensive system what some of the more significant writers on prayer have said.

The chapters which follow generate directly from these three considerations. In Chapter 1, Miles's argument is stated and criticised, and alternative solutions are suggested. In

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1. Religion and the Scientific Outlook

2. *ibid*, p.185

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(3)

Chapter 2, a biblical and theological background to intercession is presented. In Chapter 3, the relationship of intercession to the Church is discussed. And in Chapter 4, some of the more frequently encountered problems in intercessory prayer are stated and elucidated.

Except where otherwise stated, New Testament quotations are from the New English Bible; Old Testament quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

CHAPTER 1INTERCESSORY PRAYER AND THE  
MEANINGFULNESS OF THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

The task Miles sets himself is to indicate what religious beliefs can be regarded as compatible with modern scientific knowledge and to rule out such theological language as is inadmissible. Pursuing this aim he examines Christian beliefs about petitionary prayer and the language used. He argues that some modification of the traditional Christian attitude to prayer is unavoidable, and concludes that the language of literal petitionary prayer requires to be abandoned in favour of the language of dedication and commitment. His argument will be stated in summary, and his position criticised.

He begins by saying that 'if "God answers prayer" is understood literally - and it is difficult to interpret the words in any other way - it is apparently similar to "Jones answers when you talk to him at meals", and both appear to admit in principle of being answered by empirical means'.<sup>1</sup> It might seem, therefore, that the assignment is the simple one of assessing the evidence. This, however, is not so. For purposes of discussion he breaks up 'God answers prayer' into two constituent assertions: (a) 'Prayers sometimes produce results', and (b) 'These results are caused by God', adding that if the prime assertion is true, then these constituent assertions must be true also. Whatever view we take of (a), he intends to argue that (b) must be rejected as meaningless.

He then proceeds to show that the truth or falsity of (a) may be determined simply by examining the evidence. He himself makes no attempt to take sides on this issue. Then he states his central argument. It concerns the claim that when prayers produce results, these results are caused by God, that it is God who answers the prayers. 'In "God answers prayer", as in "God inter-

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1. *ibid*, p.181, italics mine

vened at Dunkirk", we have an apparently empirical assertion, and yet no criteria which enable that assertion to be verified or falsified. As has been shown already, if we claim that this assertion is true, we are misleading ourselves with words. The most the evidence would establish is that by some unknown means prayers were (for example) affecting the weather. It adds nothing to say that the changes in the weather were "due to the activity of God"... Those who believe on empirical grounds that prayers produce results are logically justified in using prayer as a technique for producing these results. But it is no more than a technique. The suggestion that God is, in a literal sense, the cause of the results is to ascribe to God notions that are quite inappropriate. If it is then suggested that God is the cause of the results (or even their part-cause) in some extended use of "cause", this suggestion can be met only by the "way of silence". Our conclusion is that "God answers prayer", if interpreted as the language of qualified literal theism, must be regarded as meaningless'.<sup>1</sup>

Having drawn this conclusion, Miles goes on to consider its consequences for religious practice. He says that if 'God sends rain in answer to prayer' is a pointless form of words, then the prayer, 'O God, please send some rain' is pointless also. The intention of such a prayer is to cause results, but the causation is not genuine, since the causal agent is supposed to be what he calls a 'para-physical entity', and this supposition he has already dismissed as meaningless.

Not all forms of prayer-language, however, are vulnerable in this way. For example, the prayer, 'Thy will be done' is not an attempt to produce results by means of a para-physical agency. Rather is it an act of submission whereby we simply commit and dedicate ourselves but make no attempt to persuade an unknown agency to influence the course of nature.

He then asserts dogmatically that all prayers comparable to 'O God, please send some rain' must be abandoned while those comparable to 'Thy will be done' may be allowed. From this he draws his three-fold conclusion: '(a) The assertion "God answers prayer", if interpreted literally, is the language of qualified literal theism, and therefore requires to be abandoned. (b) "Pseudo-causal" prayer-language is vulnerable in a similar way. (c) "Performatory" prayer-language is not discredited. My general plea is for the replacement of literal petitionary prayers by "performatory" prayers - that is, by the language of commitment and dedication'.<sup>2</sup>

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1. *ibid*, pp.183f, italics mine

2. *ibid*, p.183

Such a conclusion seems too sweeping and far-reaching in its implications to go unchallenged. Common sense alone reacts violently to it, and even a glance at the New Testament reveals its contradiction of certain principles fundamental to the Christian conception of prayer. For example, in Gethsemane our Lord prayed not only a 'performatory' prayer, 'Yet not what I will, but what Thou wilt' but also an impassioned request in 'pseudo-causal' prayer-language, 'Father, all things are possible to Thee; take this cup away from me'.<sup>1</sup> Loyalty prompts one who is a follower of Christ to be guided by His practice rather than by the arguments of a modern philosopher. Yet, obviously, more than loyalty is required to meet the challenge presented by Miles.

Once his basic premise is accepted, viz., that Christians believe on empirical grounds that prayers produce results, his position is well-nigh invulnerable and unassailable except at one or two minor points. But it is his basic premise itself that must be called in question. Miles leaves himself wide open to challenge at this point because of a false assumption made in an earlier chapter.<sup>2</sup> This earlier argument we must quote in summary.

'I should like us now to consider the following assertions -  
 (a) Are there any prime numbers between fifteen and twenty-five?  
 (b) Are there any duties which are absolutely overriding? (c) Are there any dogs with pink spots? All these questions I should like to label "existential" questions. (a) is a mathematical existential question... (b) is a moral existential question... (c) is an empirical existential question...

'The challenge of modern philosophy to modern theology, I would say, is this. Modern philosophy forces us to ask the question, To what list does the word "God" belong?

'You will agree, presumably, that "Is there a God?" is not comparable with "Are there any prime numbers between fifteen and twenty-five?"... Similarly, I take it you would agree that the word "God" cannot be included in a list of duties?... The problem, then, is of trying to place "There is a God" in the right frame of reference. I am not of course claiming that "mathematical", "moral", and "empirical" is an exhaustive list of such frames of reference. But if anyone claims that "There is a God" belongs to some other frame of reference - not mathematical, nor moral, and not empirical - it is up to him to say what sort of frame of reference it is and by what methods arguments within that frame of reference are conducted. I think you will agree with me that in the case of "There is a God", it is the empirical frame of

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1. Mark 14:36

2. Chapter 14, Sentences Containing the Word 'God', ibid

reference which requires to be considered'.<sup>1</sup>

The last sentence has been deliberately italicised because it is just here that one disagrees emphatically with Miles. He admits that his list of frames of reference is not exhaustive, and he says that if anyone claims that 'There is a God' belongs to some other frame of reference it is up to him to say what it is. But then, disregarding the possibility that some other such frame of reference might well be nominated by someone standing within the camp of orthodox Christianity, he assumes that the valid frame of reference is the empirical. This over-hasty assumption is the mistaken premise upon which Miles builds his argument in his later chapters, including the chapter on petitionary prayer, of particular interest for this study.

Had he waited for an answer to his invitation to state an alternative frame of reference, he would perhaps later have been spared a great deal of trouble. For surely, if there are mathematical, moral, and empirical frames of reference, there may be an experiential category as well? And if such a category is valid, would not the meaningfulness of assertions like 'There is a God' or 'Falling in love is wonderful' then be experientially, rather than empirically verifiable?

Obviously, if we assume that such a frame of reference is permissible and that assertions about God and prayer properly belong to it, we shall have to heed Miles's proviso and show by what method arguments within that frame of reference are to be conducted. This we shall presently attempt to do. But assuming for the present that this can be done, then the fallibility of Miles's conclusions is evident. We shall as well heed the observation of John Baillie, that we must not say that faith is based on religious experience, because, if it is authentic it already contains faith.<sup>2</sup> But this is something we must do within the experiential framework itself.

We are thus indebted to Miles for the insights imparted by many of his arguments, and would side whole-heartedly with him in his endeavour to free the expression of Christian truth from much muddled thinking and loose terminology. But where he believes 'that some modification of the traditional Christian attitude to prayer is unavoidable',<sup>3</sup> we would assert that not the attitude to prayer, as set out in the New Testament, but merely the manner of its expression, is what requires modification. And this is a vastly different matter.

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1. *ibid*, pp.143f.

2. The Sense of the Presence of God, p.65

3. *ibid*, p.180

Leaving for the moment the question of what method to adopt within the framework of experiential verification, we draw attention to two weaknesses in Miles's argument as such, as distinct from the premise on which it is based.

Firstly, having rejected 'pseudo-causal' language as vulnerable and therefore meaningless, he suggests that such language should be replaced by 'performatory' language alone. The prayer, 'O God, please send some rain', he dismisses as meaningless, because such a prayer assumes intercourse with a person, God, of whom sentences in the language of qualified literal theism purport to be true. God is thus conceived as being a 'para-physical' Being, and it is expected that in answer to our petitions He will take 'para-physical' action. This belief Miles has already invalidated on empirical grounds in Part III of his book. On the other hand, prayers comparable to 'Thy will be done' are not similarly assailable.

If this is so, and if such prayers are in no-wise to be addressed to a 'para-physical' Being, then one would infer that he preserves the philosophical correctness of his prayer at the expense of emptying it of all religious value. For if the 'Thy' whose will is to be done is not anyone at all significant (at least as far as Miles is concerned), then his act of submission and dedication to Him is no more than a mere subjective psychological device which can never issue in the life-transforming personal relationship with God that results (and this is born out by Christian experience) from commitment to a living and personal Lord. His philosophical conception of God, however correct logically, is barren of those rich qualities which Christians for almost 2,000 years have claimed to be authentically discoverable.

And secondly, even if the act of submission for which Miles pleads is to a God who is real, in some sense of the word, and not just to an intellectual concept, the prayer 'Thy will be done', if taken at all seriously, is not without further difficulties. To say 'Thy will be done' is to assume that He who is being so addressed has a will. What then would be the consequences for Miles's argument if He wills that men should co-operate with Him, not merely negatively by way of submission and resignation, but also positively by way of earnest and costly acts of specific, literal intercession for others? What if impassioned pleading for others should be one of the ways whereby He chooses to accomplish His purposes of good for men? As we shall be saying in the following chapter, this is part of the Christian conception of prayer. Would Miles's act of submission and dedication then be real enough and extensive enough to constrain him to do God's will irrespective of what

might be the consequences for his philosophical theory? Or would he, out of loyalty to his theory, disobey or disregard what clearly is an important element in the purpose of God as the Christian understands it? If this second course is taken, then perhaps the meaning of the word Christian needs to be elucidated. Either way, it would seem that Miles faces an impasse.

We come now to the more positive (and more difficult) matter of stating a frame of reference to which we conceive an expression such as 'There is a God' to belong, and of indicating by what methods arguments within that frame of reference are to be conducted.

John Wilson argues the case we wish to present both cogently and ably.<sup>1</sup> We shall summarize his argument below. Since it is so closely reasoned, the summary is necessarily a long one.

He begins by specifying four features which most religions have in common: (i) certain beliefs which look like assertions of fact intended to convey true information, e.g., that there is a God, and that He had a Son who was born as a man (Miles confuses such statements of belief with statements of fact); (ii) the acceptance of some sort of authority, e.g., the Church, the Koran, or the words of Jesus; (iii) certain moral feelings, or the profession of a certain way of life which enjoins attitudes and actions towards other men of a certain kind, e.g., to love men, to forgive them, or to treat them as brothers; and (iv) the practice of forms of ritual and ceremonial, e.g., being baptised, facing the East when praying, or eating bread and wine. He decides that only two of these features are necessary conditions for a religion: beliefs or assertions about the supernatural, and moral feelings issuing in a way of life. He adds, as a third necessary condition, that these two be connected.

He then sets out (i) the psychological connection between these two conditions; (ii) what is supposed by religious people to be the logical connection between the two; and (iii) what is in fact the logical connection between the two. Of (iii) he says that the logical connection between beliefs and principles, between assertions of fact and assertions of value, would be of merely academic interest unless there were grounds for supposing the beliefs and assertions to be true, or unless commitment to them could be shown to be reasonable. It follows that the reasonableness of religious commitment stands or falls by the reasonableness of commitment to religious beliefs and statements of fact.

Two questions follow: (i) What must these assertions be

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1. Philosophy and Religion

like if they are to support anything we would want to call a religion, opposed to merely wishful thinking or a poetic vision? and (ii) What do religious believers regard as the logical status of their assertions? Philosophers may be able to demonstrate that religious believers give every appearance of asserting myths or expressing poetic visions, rather than giving factual information about the supernatural. But this would only make the religious believer try some other way of stating facts, so as to avoid this deceptive appearance. It is unlikely that he would make no further attempt at all to state what he believes. Only if philosophers can show that it is in principle impossible to do what believers try to do, or logically futile, will the believer give up the attempt to make genuine religious assertions.

Thus a rough division between the different types of religious assertions must be made in order to see what usage is needed to validate religious truth in the way already found to be necessary. Four groups of assertions may be distinguished. (i) Assertions of empirical fact: e.g., that there was a man called Jesus, who lived in the first century AD in a country called Palestine, who died, and was buried. (ii) Analytic assertions, concerned with the meaning or use of religious terms: e.g., that a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. (iii) Assertions which appear to be statements of empirical fact, but whose subject-matter is some supernatural Being or state of affairs: e.g., that there is a God, that the man called Jesus was His Son, and that we shall live on in another realm after death. Miles treats these as genuine empirical assertions, and thus is able to show without difficulty that statements such as 'God intervened at Dunkirk' or 'God answers prayer' are meaningless. (iv) Assertions of value: e.g., that it is wrong to work on the Sabbath, or that we ought to love all men as brothers.

Wilson contends that we must concentrate our whole attention on the third group, for whether religion as a whole is rejected or abandoned will depend on whether these beliefs are allowed or refuted. Miles rejects them because he insists that they belong in the framework of empirical existential questions. Wilson goes on to show how they may reasonably be allowed and given meaning and significance, by considering them within the framework of experiential existential questions.

He now goes on to demonstrate how such experiential existential questions may be verified. This is not easy because religious assertions do not seem to direct us to any specific and objective experiences which might substantiate them. Being subjective there does not seem to be any external reality which

could be said to correspond to them. Again, many believers would regard certain experiences as favourable to their assertions, even decisively in favour of them, and others contradictory of them. But it is difficult to find any religious believer who would agree to regard certain experiences as counting decisively against his assertions. Some believers regard their beliefs as completely certain, while others look upon them as merely probable.

To say that religious beliefs are probable, rather than certain, makes the religious position easier to maintain, since there appears to be no reason why we should expect certainty either way in a matter which bristles with difficulties and about which there is very little general agreement. In other words, by saying that religious statements of the type (iii) designated above are experientially verifiable, we must at the same time be prepared to run the risk of their being falsified. It follows, of course, that the more specific the information that religious statements purport to impart, the greater becomes their vulnerability, since they are liable to be refuted at a greater number of points.

He then provides the helpful analogy of a man who, instead of going to a public casino to play roulette, uses a private board at home, places bets on it according to his own local rules, yet still preserves the fundamental principles of the public game. Obviously, he could not make valid bets if he were playing by himself. But if he were playing with a group of friends the bets would be valid within that group, though not valid at the public casino. It follows then that while religious assertions may not be publicly verifiable, we should not conclude that they are altogether unverifiable and hence meaningless and uninformative. They may be both verifiable and informative within a limited and select group.

Group-verification is thus shown to be logically possible. But at the same time it is recognised that such verification cannot be accepted without reserve. Our experience might be hallucinatory, or it might be confused with sense-experience. However, provided we are cautious in formulating our conclusions, the basic position is sound. A far more real threat to this position is presented by the charge that religious experience does not necessarily indicate that the supernatural world or a supernatural Being really exists outside the mind of the believer. In other words, is religious experience really experience of anything? Here the onus of proof lies on the believer. And Wilson proceeds to argue that such proof is available.

The difficulties which confront us when we assert the

validity of our religious experience confront us logically just as much in the field of sense-experience. It is impossible to hope for complete certainty about the ultimate reality of physical objects. Yet for all practical purposes the ordinary data provided by our senses are sufficient and satisfactory. The question, however, which arises both in religious and in other contexts is whether we are justified in jumping from an experiential to an existential statement. Normally we should only be so justified if the experiences on which we base our existential assertion are generally and permanently available, at least to certain people under certain conditions, and we were able to distinguish genuine from illusory experience.

Wilson argues that the view that only sense-experience proves cognitive is either mere dogma or rests on a misunderstanding. Providing we are not misled by either it is possible to see how both religious and other experience might be called cognitive. Remembering the analogy of the roulette players, it will not be surprising to find that religious words like 'God' have different meanings for different groups, or that each group has its own way of verifying its assertions. We shall also be prepared to accept that the conditions for obtaining experiences that are genuinely religious are very stringent. But that is true of other fields as well. And such difficulties are practical, not logical.

Having established the logical possibility of making truly informative religious assertions, he goes on to describe how, in at least a general form, a testing-system for these assertions could be made to work. He shows that there is a close parallel between the way in which aesthetic assertions, based on experience, are tested and the way in which religious assertions may be verified. This testing-system would not be based on the immediate and untrained experiences of a majority, but on the experiences of those willing to submit themselves to the discipline necessary for obtaining them.

Two assumptions underly the construction of a testing-system for religious assertions: (i) that under certain conditions people would always have certain experiences, such as could be reliably expressed in existential statements; and (ii) that these experiences would be sufficiently interesting and important to make the testing-system itself worth-while.

However, the aesthetic analogy ultimately breaks down. There is an interaction between ourselves on the one hand, and other people and physical objects on the other, that there is not between ourselves and aesthetic qualities. All three can affect us: people can like us, objects can strike us, aesthetic

qualities can stir us. But the converse is not true. We can do things to both other people and physical objects, but we cannot do anything to aesthetic qualities. We can merely adopt certain attitudes towards them. But belief in the God of any religion involves this interaction between ourselves and Him. God is supposed to be real in a way that a person is real. He is someone who both acts and is acted upon. Thus our testing-system must be capable not only of building up an entity but of building up a particular kind of entity, an entity who is conceived of in personal terms. This entity must be like a person, with whom we can enter into a personal and reciprocal relationship. Unless such a personal relationship were possible the entity built up by the system could never in any way be reconciled with the God of religion.

There is no reason why the testing-system should not prove capable of showing the reality of such a Being. If there is a personal God, then in our relationship with Him we must be able to have experiences of a person, exactly those experiences which, in fact, religious people claim to have. Like any other experiences, these can be true or false, intermittent or continuous, sufficient or insufficient to justify existential assertions. We cannot decide this a priori, but only as the programme of investigation is carefully carried out.

In his final chapter, dealing with practical choice in religion, Wilson points out that it is not enough to know that the supernatural may be regarded as philosophically respectable; reason requires that we should adopt some framework to assist in our interpretation of it, just as reason requires that we should bet on some number if we are going to play roulette. And as it is reasonable to enter upon a specific framework of interpretation, so it is reasonable to fit specific problems to that framework. We quote his words: 'We are no longer in the timeless, non-decisive realm of pure philosophy: we have opted for a particular type of interpretation. This process is not only rational, but almost inevitable... To have accepted the authority, the map, the framework, the category of thought is, indeed, to have made a leap: though not an irrational leap, not a leap in the dark. We can always avoid making the leap, though a point may come when avoidance becomes more unreasonable than commitment'.<sup>1</sup>

We may add that if the framework of the Christian religion is the one chosen (and there is nothing logically to make this a more reasonable choice than, for example, the framework of

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1. *ibid*, pp.111-112

Islam or Hinduism), then part of the discipline within that framework is the practice of prayer in general and of intercession in particular. Both in the practice and teaching of Jesus Christ such prayer is fundamentally and inextricably part of the way of life to which He summons men. We may well have to ask what the teaching of Christianity concerning prayer really is. But that is a question to be answered from within the framework of the Christian religion. It may not be dismissed (as Miles has attempted to do) from without that framework. As far as this essay is concerned an inquiry is being made into the meaning and significance of intercessory prayer for the Christian. Thus all that is said is to be understood within the framework of Christian experience alone.

Wilson would thus appear to have satisfied Miles's requirement, 'If anyone claims that "There is a God" belongs to some other frame of reference - not mathematical, not moral, and not empirical - it is up to him to say what sort of frame of reference it is and by what methods arguments within that frame of reference are conducted'.<sup>1</sup> He has argued that 'There is a God' belongs to the experiential frame of reference; that while such a statement might not be publicly verifiable it is verifiable within a limited group; and that it is logically possible to make truly informative religious statements. He shows how a testing-system to establish the veracity of such statements could be made to work, using the analogy of aesthetic experience, which he finally rejects as being inadequate to establish the possibility of a truly personal relationship. And finally he argues that only by commitment to the discipline of a religious system will it be possible to test the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of its assertions.

Following Wilson's line of argument we may therefore conclude that 'God answers prayer' can stand, reinterpreted (but not misinterpreted à la Miles). A petitionary prayer, e.g., for strength, grace, or even rain, if backed by a spiritual state of which the petitionary language is expressive, can have a causal effect, by using 'supernatural' power to produce certain effects. At least, there is nothing logically to prevent this assertion. These effects can be described as merely psychological, or of rain, just telekinesis, but that does not devalue them. It is a fair representation of this process, in Christian terms, to say God 'answers prayer', because the process is more analogous to obtaining a request made to a person than to exploding an atomic bomb. Of course, God does not always answer prayer if

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1. op.cit., p.144

only the desired effect is counted as an answer. But this is like saying that you get no answer from a Frenchman if you speak in English, which is hardly the fault of the Frenchman. Our Lord's practice and teaching on prayer guide us, as Christians, in the deployment of this power. To be so guided is, in this work, our main concern. Having established that it is logically permissible and respectable to do so, we shall proceed to give it our attention.

However, before doing this, we are bound to make reference to an entirely different approach to the problem raised by Miles as set out by Peter Munz.<sup>1</sup> Munz contrasts the positive picture of the world, one drawn by making use of none but empirically verifiable observations, with the symbol picture. The symbol picture of the world is made up of meaningful facts and events, culled from everyday life, but often added to, distorted, embroidered, and finally described without overmuch regard for precision or accuracy. He carefully defines his use of the word 'symbol' as being descriptive of our feeling-state, the mode of our existence. Only such an enriched set of facts can fulfil the function of a symbol, for the feeling-states symbolised are themselves ill-defined, tenuous, vague, and fluid. A precise symbolisation will therefore be a picture that is lacking in precision and unequivocal outlines, but will at the same time be rich in symbolic content. 'The symbol, in other words, must remain somewhat undifferentiated. But it is just this undifferentiation, and not the lack of it, which produces the state of lucidity'.<sup>2</sup>

In the positive picture of the world a fact is considered real when its presence or its consequence can be located in space and time. In the symbol picture of the world, a fact is considered real when it corresponds to a feeling-state and when, in designating it as a symbol, one has a clearer impression of ultimate truth. There cannot be any reason why the first criterion of reality should be thought of as more absolute than the second.

The symbol represents a state of feeling brought about by the encounter between a man and ultimate reality, rather than the invisible subject-matter itself. Thus it is the symbol, and not any supernatural and external reality, which becomes the subject-matter of religious knowledge. The symbol-picture must, of course, be meaningful in all its parts in terms of feeling-states. Thus all behaviour, for example, and all stories about behaviour in the symbol picture must be meaningful behaviour and meaningful stories. But where this is so then the following

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1. Problems of Religious Knowledge  
2. ibid, p.55

formula may be propounded: 'the symbol picture emerges when one sees the world, or any aspect of it, sub specie essentiae'.<sup>1</sup>

This symbol picture is not so much the product of interpretation as the subject-matter of interpretation and consequently of religious thought. Religious speculation begins when an event that is experienced sub specie essentiae is interpreted as being the direct effect of a divine agent. Thus a forest of awe-inspiring sombreness may rightly be interpreted as being the abode of God. Were one dealing merely in propositions, one could never avoid asking whether they were true or false. But religion is properly concerned, not with propositions, but with actions and utterances seen sub specie essentiae and which thus become moments of divine revelation. It is the feeling-state produced by such a moment of revelation, and not the action or utterance which provokes it, that is the subject of empirical investigation.

While John Baillie uses terminology and phraseology different to that employed by Munz, his position is basically the same as the following passage will indicate: 'When we are asked to conceive and define a set of circumstances which would lead to a total dissipation of the faith that is in us, we can only remind ourselves of how that faith was first gained and how it has continued to be nourished. As we have already indicated, our faith was born within us through our divining a profounder meaning in certain encountered events than is evident to our ordinary senses. Through the impact of these events we found ourselves apprehending a reality which evidenced itself as such by setting a resistant limit to the free expansion of our own desires, constraining us to a recognition of its sovereign claim. It follows that faith would be lost only if this primary apprehension should itself utterly fail, if we were no longer able to discover any such meaning in any events but came to regard the whole of our experience and everything that has ever happened as a meaningless jumble'.<sup>2</sup>

At the risk of over-simplifying the respective arguments of Miles and Munz, it would appear that the difference between them arises at this juncture. Miles insists that theological utterances are about something, and that therefore, using empirical means, they can be shown to be false, or meaningless, or perhaps, provided they are guardedly formulated so as not to deviate from any straight-and-narrow philosophical path, even true. His chapter dealing with the language of literal theism

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1. *ibid*, p.69

2. *op. cit.*, p.73, italics mine (the sentence underlined only)

and qualified literal theism (which has a direct bearing on his discussion of petitionary prayer) illustrates his basic assumption, namely, that theological assertions are not events seen sub specie essentiae, but of factual propositions. Munz, on the other hand, asserts that the feeling-state which the symbol represents, and not the supernatural Being or divine agency who evokes the feeling-state, is the proper subject-matter of empirical investigation. The feeling-state may be found to be true, false, or meaningless. But that is no reason for relegating God to the status of a mere object, and deciding that He who initiates the feeling-state is liable similarly to be judged to be true, false, or meaningless. Miles seems clearly to have done this.

We have thus two entirely different ways of approaching the problem of religious knowledge and the expression of religious truth. We cannot help feeling that Miles's approach is the more naïve, and Munz's (supported by Baillie) the more sophisticated. But apart from our own judgement in this matter, the somewhat minimal conclusion may safely be drawn that the question is an open one. Miles's case is not nearly as watertight (and therefore formidable) as at first it appeared to be. Nor is his the only possible and valid approach to this matter of the meaningfulness of theological language. We may thus proceed with our study of Christian intercession without the embarrassment of thinking that what we are doing is logically disreputable, and without any fear that we are speaking of meaningless things or of things which a priori are to be discredited and discounted. On the contrary, following Munz's suggested way of approach, we assert that our discussion of prayer is a discussion of certain aspects of truth seen sub specie essentiae and expressed in symbols. The symbols we shall be using will include such phrases or words as 'Father', 'Will', 'Right hand of God', 'Holy Spirit', and so on. In using these symbols we shall not be attempting to draw an accurate picture of eternal reality, but rather we shall be attempting to express the feeling-states produced by that reality on ourselves as He is encountered within the context and experience of commitment to and trust in Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 2

INTERCESSORY PRAYER  
AND DOCTRINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Having specified our use of language, thus laying down the fundamental premises assumed in this work, we pursue our main theme. In this chapter we sketch in the indispensable background of Christian doctrine to enable us to look at our subject in proper perspective. Various elements compose this background, and these must be held in just balance. This is a task which must necessarily be left to the individual Christian under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We begin by considering what is perhaps the most distinctive and characteristic of all Christian doctrines.

(i) INTERCESSORY PRAYER AND THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

(a) Biblical basis. T.W.Manson writes, 'One has only to read the New Testament to realise that "the Father" was not a mere article in a creed or just a title for God, but a burning conviction, a spiritual experience which gave new meaning and value to life, and brought new peace and joy to human hearts'.<sup>1</sup> This is abundantly evident in the way petitions and intercessions are addressed to a God who is not only the Almighty, the King or Ruler, the Judge (to mention but a few of His characteristic qualities), but pre-eminently One who is a Father, and whose relationship with men, His children, is one of holy Father-love.

Because the consciousness of God as Father was more highly developed and a more overwhelming reality in the life of Jesus than in the lives of any of His followers, we should expect the connection between intercession and the Fatherhood of God to be more obvious in the sayings of Jesus than elsewhere in the New Testament. This proves to be so, as an examination of the synoptic

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1. The Teaching of Jesus, p.94

Gospels will reveal.

Of the ten references in Matthew where intercession is specifically associated with Fatherhood, nine stress the privilege of petitioning a God who is Father, while the tenth<sup>1</sup> stresses the responsibility of interceding for others because He is the Father of all. We shall consider the first nine here, leaving the tenth for more apt consideration later.

Mt 6:6 - 'When you pray, go into a room by yourself, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is there in the secret place; and your Father who sees what is secret will reward you.'

All Christian prayer, including intercession, is to be free from self-consciousness; it calls for a personal and natural relationship with a Father-God, and an attitude of play-acting destroys its spirit and robs it of all spontaneity.

Mt 6:8 - 'Your Father knows what your needs are before you ask Him', and Mt 6:31-32 - 'Do not ask anxiously, "What are we to eat? What are we to drink? What shall we wear?" All these are things for the heathen to run after, not for you, because your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.'

Because He has a Father's care for and interest in the highest well-being of His children, God does not need to be endlessly informed, as if He were unaware of our needs, neither does He need to be wheedled into acting, as those who know Him not as a Father attempt to do. Rather He expects on our part an attitude of child-like trust.

Mt 6:9 - 'This is how you should pray: Our Father...'<sup>2</sup>  
As Dibelius points out,<sup>3</sup> the Lord's prayer consists basically of three petitions: for the coming of the Kingdom; for daily bread; and for forgiveness of sins in the past and in the future. The concept of God's Fatherhood underlies and inspires all these requests.

Mt 7:9-11 - 'Is there a man among you who will offer his son a stone when he asks for bread, or a snake when he asks for fish? If you, then, bad as you are, know how to give your children what is good for them, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things (Lk 11:13 - "the Holy Spirit") to those who ask Him!'

The attitude of confidence in our petitioning and interceding is enjoined upon us because He to whom we pray is no capricious deity, but One beside whom our best notions of earthly fatherhood seem weak and inadequate. It matters little whether 'good things' (Mt) or 'the Holy Spirit' (Lk) is read. The ground of our petition is the same.

Mt 18:19 - 'Again I tell you this: if two of you agree on

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1. Matthew 5:45  
2. paralleled in Lk 11:2  
3. Sermon on the Mount, p.75

earth about any request you have to make, that request will be granted by my heavenly Father.'

The unselfish spirit of brotherly affection and unfailing confidence in the wisdom and goodness of the Father, are to mark our intercession.

Mt 26:39,42 - 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by... My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to pass me by without my drinking it, Thy will be done.'

The prayer of our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane is petitionary rather than intercessory, yet it serves to show that for Jesus, prayer, even in the darkest possible circumstances, was always to God as Father. William Barclay writes: 'Abba is much more than father. Abba was the word by which a little Jewish child addressed his father in the privacy and the intimacy of the home circle, as jaba is in Arabic today. There is no way in which this can be translated into English without it appearing bizarre and almost grotesque, for the only possible translation of Abba is Daddy. This is the way in which we can talk to God... with the same intimacy, and confidence, and trust as a little child talks to his father. Because of what Jesus was, because of what He told us, because of what He did, no one is easier to talk to than God'.<sup>1</sup>

Mt 26:53 - 'Do you suppose that I cannot appeal to my Father, who would at once send to my aid more than twelve legions of angels?'

Again it is evident that Jesus thinks instinctively of petition in terms of the Fatherhood of God.

Whether or not the textual critic would assign all these sayings to Jesus as unquestionably authentic, and whether or not, as Manson suggests, Matthew emphasises the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God at the expense of literal accuracy in reporting the sayings of Jesus, is of no great consequence for this study. What is important is that for Matthew our Lord's example and teaching on prayer pre-supposed all the warmth, intimacy, confidence, and trust of a relationship with God who is above all else Father, and whose attitude towards His children is one of Fatherly care and concern.

There is but a single reference in Mark which relates petition or intercession to the Fatherhood of God.<sup>2</sup> This is paralleled in Matthew,<sup>3</sup> and has been discussed.

Of the six places in Luke where intercession pre-supposes God's Fatherhood, five occur in Matthew and have been reviewed. The sixth is peculiar to Luke.

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1. More Prayers for the Plain Man, pp.11-12

2. Mark 14:36

3. Matthew 26:39,42

Lk 23:34 - 'Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing".'

This prayer is omitted in several important MSS,<sup>1</sup> probably because it seemed inept in the light of subsequent Jewish history. That a persecuted Church let it stand at all would appear to be strong evidence for its authenticity. In any event, we have here one of the few recorded prayers of intercession attributed to Jesus Himself. It is significant that it is addressed to One whom He thought of and knew as Father.

The fourth Gospel has seven references we must examine. The last four are from our Lord's High Priestly prayer for His disciples, the first three occur at the raising of Lazarus, Christ's announcement of His impending passion, and the farewell discourses.

Jn 11:38,42 - 'Jesus again sighed deeply... then Jesus looked upwards and said, "Father, I thank Thee: Thou hast heard me".'

That Jesus thanks God for hearing Him pre-supposes an act of intercession, though it is not necessary to suppose that His prayer was formulated in words. Again, it is to the Father that intercession and thanks are offered.

Jn 12:27 - 'Now my soul is in turmoil, and what am I to say? Father, save me from this hour. No, it was for this that I came to this hour. Father, glorify thy name.'

While this is specifically a prayer of petition, the principle of coming to God as Father, the basis of prayer for Jesus, has application to intercession as well.

Jn 16:23 - 'In very truth I tell you, if you ask the Father for anything in my name, he will give it you.'

We shall consider this verse more fully later in section (iii). For our present purpose it is sufficient to note again the important connection between intercession and the Fatherhood of God.

The four references from the High Priestly prayer of Jesus are as follows:

Jn 17:1 - 'Father, the hour has come. Glorify Thy Son, that the Son may glorify thee.' Jn 17:5 - 'Father, glorify me in thine own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world began.' Jn 17:20,21 - 'It is not for these alone that I pray, but for those also who through their words put their faith in me; may they all be one: as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, so also may they be in us...' Jn 17:24 - 'Father, I desire that these men, who are thy gift to me, may be with me where I am, so that they may look upon my glory...'

Throughout the whole passage<sup>2</sup> and particularly in these four prayers of petition and intercession, the Father's care and concern for the Son and His children is the indispensable

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1. among them Codex Vaticanus  
2. John 17:1-26

foundation to all that is asked or said.

From the Gospel references we have examined it is plain that those who were followers of Jesus came to understand, from both His teaching and practice, that intercessory prayer was to be an activity between the children of God and their Father in heaven, carried on in that atmosphere of trust and love which the Father-child relationship demands.

Of the other twelve New Testament references in which the Fatherhood of God is the basis of intercession, only two call for individual assessment. The others<sup>1</sup> are all conventional greetings at the beginning of epistles. Yet even into the customary opening greeting of a Greek letter a distinctively Christian note is introduced. The desire for grace and peace to rest upon the congregation is centred in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is significant even if the expression of that desire does become habitual, which cannot too readily be assumed.

The two references we shall examine are from the letter to the Ephesians and the first letter of John.

Eph 3:14-17 - 'With this in mind, then, I kneel in prayer to the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name, that out of the treasures of His glory He may grant you strength and power through his Spirit in your inner being, that through faith Christ may dwell in your hearts in love.'

It is to the Father that this prayer for the spiritual growth and maturity of the Christians at Ephesus is addressed.

I Jn 2:1 - 'Should anyone commit a sin, we have one to plead our cause with the Father, Jesus Christ, and he is just.'

While this verse will come under review when we consider the work of the ascended Christ, nevertheless we may here note that the prayer of the Risen Christ is conceived to concur with the prayer of the incarnate Christ in being addressed to God as Father.

This completes the biblical evidence for our statement that intercession must be seen in the light of the Fatherhood of God. We now proceed to work out its theological implications.

(b) Theological basis. The late William Temple provides us with a starting point: 'The use of the term (the Fatherhood of God) was not new, but the intensity of meaning which our Lord put into it was so new that men felt bound to keep the Aramaic word that He used even when they were writing in Greek. That surely is the explanation of the phrase "Abba, Father". Everywhere we are to interpret our relations to God and His

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1. I Cor 1:3; II Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; II Thess 1:1; I Tim 1:2; Titus 4; Philemon 3.

dealings with us in the light of this family relationship'.<sup>1</sup>

Particularly is this so in intercession. Unless we have clearly understood that our prayer is to One whose Fatherhood is central and determinative to all His attributes, it will be a poor thing, devoid of the warmth, spontaneity, and freedom the family relationship offers and affords.

It may help us to define more clearly the nature of this family relationship to remember that in the New Testament there is a two-fold conception of the divine Fatherhood. W.R. Matthews makes this plain. He writes: 'In the widest sense God is the Father of the whole creation: His mercy is over all His works. This embraces even the lower orders of life, so that not a sparrow falls to the ground without the Father. But in a special sense God becomes Father to those who have responded to the love which seeks them and have become members of the Kingdom. In the Apostolic version of Christianity this second and more specific Fatherhood and sonship arises out of the new status into which the individual enters by being joined with Christ and sharing His life. The true Fatherhood is not of nature but of grace.'<sup>2</sup>

Intercessory prayer, then, at its highest, is an activity carried on in terms of the second conception of God's Fatherhood rather than the first. For only those who have received the Spirit 'that makes us sons, enabling us to cry "Abba, Father!"<sup>3</sup> will intercede with the purposes of the Kingdom of Christ most dominantly and clearly in mind. Only those who have come to terms with the absolute demand and the offer of final succour made explicit in the person of Jesus Christ will know the full joy and intimacy of the family relationship as sons and daughters of the Father. Only they will have come to know the liberty as well as the responsibility of interceding for others who both in the wider and in the special sense are with them members of the family.

John Mackintosh Shaw makes the point clearly that 'all other attributes of God are relative in their exercise to this central essential or absolute attribute (viz., Fatherhood). This is the significance of the old theological distinctions between the "absolute" and the "relative" attributes of Godhead. On the Christian view of God the "absolute" attributes of God are two - Holiness and Love; or, as we ourselves prefer to put it, they are the two in one, namely Holy Father-love. All other

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1. Christ's Revelation of God, p.59

2. God in Christian Thought and Experience, pp.59f.

3. Romans 8:15

attributes like His knowledge, power, justice, etc., His "omniscience", "omnipotence", "omnipresence", are the "relative" attributes; that is to say, they are exercised relatively to or for the sake of the ends of the absolute attribute or central essence, namely, Father-love.<sup>1</sup>

In the light of God's 'absolute' attribute of Holy Father-love, three things may be said about intercessory prayer.

(i) If God is Father, then He is interested in us individually. 'He loves us every one,' as St. Augustine expressed it, 'as though there were but one of us to love.' His care embraces the whole of our life, down to the least detail. There is nothing He does not know about us. Nothing can happen to any of us that will leave Him unconcerned and unmoved. This knowledge ought to give us boldness and confidence (tempered with humility and awe) to bring to Him the needs of others of His children in vicarious intercession. Though He be wholly other than us in all His 'relative' qualities, yet His gracious kinship with us in the one 'absolute' quality of Father-love kindles in us a spirit of ready sharing, trustful intercourse, and intimate conversation.

(ii) If God is Father, we may confidently believe that 'in everything He co-operates for good with those who love God.'<sup>2</sup> The good towards which He works and which is His purpose for us is determined by His Father-love, and includes not merely our physical well-being, but rather maturity and wholeness of personality. Accordingly, His power and sovereignty are exercised with this all-embracing wholeness in view. Appreciation of this truth possibly helps us to understand in part why so many prayers asking for bodily or mental healing are apparently unanswered. We often expect God to display His healing power in a way obviously beneficial to one aspect of our personality, and when this does not happen we begin to doubt His power and love. The truth of the matter may be that His power and love can never be divorced from His concern for the well-being of the whole personality (a higher love), and therefore a lesser blessing may need to be withheld for the sake of a greater. At the same time we need to remember that the restoration of one aspect of the personality may coincide with God's total concern for the well-being of the whole man, in which case the display of healing power for which we have asked may well be forthcoming. The more completely those for whom we pray love God, the more completely will He be able to realise His purpose of wholeness in terms of their entire personality.

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1. The Christian Gospel of the Fatherhood of God, pp.10f.

2. Romans 8:28

(iii) Because God is Father, not only may we turn to Him in intercession; more than that, we must so turn to Him. If there is between the Father and His children the possibility of an 'I-Thou' relationship, the realisation of that possibility demands dialogue - a free, uninhibited, and intimate sharing of longings, aspirations, joys, cares, and burdens. As Matthews has pointed out, the real uniqueness of the Christian conception of God's Fatherhood lies in that it is not merely passive but dynamically active, going out to men, seeking and saving that which is lost.<sup>1</sup> If that be true of Him who stands on one side of this personal relationship, there is laid upon us who stand on the other a binding obligation to respond, seeking Him in the fellowship of worship, service, and prayer. In this study we emphasise particularly the part played by intercession in closing the circuit of this personal relationship. Where we choose not to avail ourselves of this way to God, our relationship with Him may become less truly personal and real.

Intercessory prayer, seen against the background of the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God, is thus a glad opportunity, a means whereby many of the purposes of Father-love are accomplished, and also a responsibility almost frightening.

(ii) INTERCESSORY PRAYER AND THE BROTHERHOOD OF MAN

(a) Biblical basis. The logical corollary of the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God is the doctrine of the brotherhood of man. If God is the Father of all, then all are brothers, bound together by the bond of the family relationship. Jesus made this clear when He joined together Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 in His reply to the Pharisee's question: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind." That is the greatest commandment. It comes first. The second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself."<sup>2</sup> We should thus expect to find in the New Testament that one way to love men, incumbent on all followers of Christ, is to pray for them. Investigation proves this to be so.

Apart from two important passages little direct teaching in the Gospels relates Christian love to intercessory prayer.

Mt 5:43-48 - 'You have learned that they were told, "Love your neighbour, hate your enemy." But what I tell you is this: Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors; only so can you be children of your heavenly Father, who makes his sun rise on good and bad alike, and sends the rain on the honest and the dishonest. If you love only those who

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1. op.cit., p.59

2. Matthew 22:37-39

love you, what reward can you expect? Surely the tax-gatherers do as much as that. And if you greet only your brothers, what is there extraordinary about that? Even the heathen do as much. You must therefore be all goodness, just as your heavenly Father is all good.<sup>1</sup>

To pray for another is synonymous with loving him. It is to bear some portion of the cost Christian love invariably entails. Because it is costly, and because it is an expression of love, it involves praying even for one's enemies and persecutors, not merely those for whom natural affection and inclination make the task of intercession easy and attractive.

Mk 11:25 - 'And when you stand praying, if you have a grievance against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you the wrongs you have done.'

Only as we are in love and charity with all men can our prayer have value and worth in the sight of God. Real love, the love which forgives those who trespass against it, is thus indispensable for effective intercession.

Intercession is indirectly related to brotherly compassion and concern in the Gospels mainly in the example of our Lord Himself. He prays for the disciples,<sup>2</sup> for the Church,<sup>3</sup> for Lazarus,<sup>4</sup> for Peter,<sup>5</sup> and for those who crucified Him.<sup>6</sup> Each of these prayers is the outward expression and manifestation of an inward attitude of love.

In the Acts of the Apostles we do not find a number of precepts enjoining intercession as a proper demonstration of Christian love. But we do find a number of spontaneous and unrehearsed prayers of intercession which evidence a love for others that is genuine. The Apostles pray for the seven set aside to care for the widows.<sup>7</sup> Stephen reflects the charity of His Lord when he prays for those who stone him to death.<sup>8</sup> Peter and John pray for the beloved converts in Samaria.<sup>9</sup> Simon the Magician knew that the Church prayed for all men and requested such prayer for himself.<sup>10</sup> When Herod arrested and imprisoned Peter the whole Church began fervently to pray for its revered leader.<sup>11</sup> The Church upholds Paul and Barnabas in prayer before sending them out on the first missionary journey.<sup>12</sup> Paul and Barnabas in turn pray for the elders they had appointed to have oversight over the congregations they had established and which they regarded as their spiritual children.<sup>13</sup> Paul prays with the

1. paralleled in Luke 6:28

2. John 17:6-19

3. John 17:20-26

4. John 11:41

5. Luke 22:32

6. Luke 23:34

7. Acts 6:6

8. Acts 7:58-60

9. Acts 8:15

10. Acts 8:24

11. Acts 12:5,12

12. Acts 13:3

13. Acts 14:23

Ephesian elders at Miletus with a sense of paternal concern for the Church there.<sup>1</sup> Similarly he prays at Tyre.<sup>2</sup> And on the island of Malta Paul first visits Publius's father, a practical expression of his concern, and then intercedes for him.<sup>3</sup> The young Christian Church was a praying Church. Through its intercessions it embraced the world in love that was deep and true.

In the letter to the Romans Paul mentions, as he tells of his longing to be with them to share their fellowship, that he continually makes mention of them in his prayers.<sup>4</sup> He reveals that his deepest desire and prayer is for his own people, the Jews, to be saved.<sup>5</sup> And in a longer passage he asks prayer for himself, clearly associating intercession with Christian love:

Ro 15:30-33 - 'I implore you by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love that the Spirit inspires, be my allies in the fight; pray to God for me that I may be saved from unbelievers in Judaea and that my errand to Jerusalem may find acceptance with God's people, so that by his will I may come to you in a happy frame of mind and enjoy a time of rest with you.'

In the second letter to the Corinthians Paul is convinced that God will preserve him from earthly perils provided the Corinthian Christians continue to co-operate with God in prayer on his behalf.<sup>6</sup> In his appeal for financial aid for the saints at Jerusalem Paul says that generous giving will cause their hearts to go out to the Corinthians in prayer to an even greater extent than before.<sup>7</sup> And in closing this letter he tells how his own yearning for the Corinthian Christians is poured out in prayer.<sup>8</sup>

In the letter to the Ephesians Paul<sup>9</sup> assures the Church of the place it has in his prayers.<sup>10</sup> And he urges whole-hearted perseverance in the practice of intercession for all God's people because of the solidarity of their family relationship in Christ.<sup>11</sup>

In the letter to the Philippians Paul's affection for them is channelled in prayer.<sup>12</sup> He rejoices that their regard for him is similarly evidenced by intercession for him.<sup>13</sup>

Paul's prayer for the Colossian Church is a declaration of his longing for its highest spiritual well-being.<sup>14</sup> He urges the Church to persevere in prayer and requests prayer for himself because of their common bond in Christ.<sup>15</sup> He mentions

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1. Acts 20:36

2. Acts 21:5

3. Acts 28:8

4. Romans 1:9

5. Romans 10:1

6. II Corinthians 1:11

7. II Corinthians 9:14

8. II Corinthians 13:7,9

9. assuming him to be the author.

10. Ephesians 1:16-17

11. Ephesians 6:18-20

12. Philippians 1:4,9

13. Philippians 1:19

14. Colossians 1:9-12

15. Colossians 4:2-4

Epaphras's faithful intercession for his own Church, a Church which doubtless would have a very special place in his affections.<sup>1</sup>

Paul offers prayers constantly for the Thessalonian Christians.<sup>2</sup> Addressing them as brothers he asks them to pray for him to show that the love between them is real.<sup>3</sup> And in his second letter he again makes a similar request on the basis of their bond of Christian brotherhood.<sup>4</sup>

In a longer passage in I Timothy the Fatherhood of God is clearly seen to issue in the brotherhood of all men:

I Tim 2:1-4 - 'I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be offered for all men; for sovereigns and all in high office, that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in full observance of religion and high standards of morality. Such prayer is right, and approved by God our Saviour, whose will it is that all men should find salvation and come to know the truth.'

In a noteworthy passage in the letter of James one glimpses the care and concern of the whole Church for its members, which results in intercession and, where there is need, anointing with oil.

Ja 5:14-16 - 'Is one of you ill? He should send for the elders of the congregation to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer offered in faith will save the sick man, the Lord will raise him from his bed, and any sins he may have committed will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, and then you will be healed.'

Prayer and brotherly love go together in the first letter of Peter. The unconscious association of them is perhaps even more significant than a deliberate association would have been:

I Pet 4:7,8 - 'The end of all things is upon us, so you must lead an ordered and sober life, given to prayer. Above all, keep your love for one another at full strength, because love cancels innumerable sins.'

Finally, in the first letter of John, as a consequence of brotherly affection, the writer urges intercession for one who had gone astray:

I Jn 5:16 - 'If a man sees his brother committing a sin which is not a deadly sin, he should pray to God for him.'

It is interesting to speculate what advice the writer would have given had the sin been a deadly one!

Thus we conclude that while the New Testament has but little explicit teaching enjoining intercessory prayer as part of our Christian duty to love, yet indirectly and in practice the two are consistently related.

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1. Colossians 4:12  
2. I Thessalonians 1:2  
3. I Thessalonians 5:25  
4. II Thessalonians 3:1-2

(b) Theological basis. The implications of this are tremendous. No man lives unto himself. We are bound together by the bond of our common humanity; even more, we are bound together by the fact of the Fatherhood of God and the family relationship into which He graciously calls us. The inventions and discoveries of individuals can be used for the benefit and blessing of the whole of mankind. The waywardness, wilfulness, and folly of some react in the life of all. For better and worse our life is joined with the lives of others in inter-dependent, interacting relationships. For this reason prayer can never possibly stop short at petition for ourselves. Inevitably, in even the most self-centred life, there will be an instinctive concern for a small circle of dear ones and friends. The less self-centred is one's life, the wider that circle of concern becomes, until at the highest level of Christian love none are excluded from it. Intercessory prayer becomes an expression of this concern where men learn to accept the solidarity of the human family, and are willing to fulfil the obligations of that solidarity as well as accept its advantages. It is essentially a mark of the spiritual man, as distinct from the natural man (to use the terminology of St Paul), that the self should be so transcended. He who has most truly come to know God as Father will be most truly prepared to acknowledge all men as brothers. From this foundation, three truths follow.

To begin with, the dynamic of intercession that is effective must be that of love. Friedrich Heiler expresses this clearly: 'Intercessory prayer in the worship of the Christian congregation is thus the expression of universal, neighbourly love, which the Lord commanded the disciples, which the apostle to the Gentiles preaches and the primitive Church practised. Hence it is as wide and all-embracing as this love itself; living and dead, those present and those at a distance, friends and foes, Christian and heathen, orthodox and heretic, saints and sinners, strong and weak, healthy and sick, masters and slaves, spiritual leaders and worldly potentates - the congregation of brethren assembled in the Lord remembers them all in common prayer to the Father.'<sup>1</sup>

H.E. Fosdick also says, 'When trust in God and love for men co-exist in any life, prayer for others inevitably follows. Deepening intimacy with God, by itself, may find expression in quiet communion; enlarging love for men, alone, may utter itself in servicable deeds; but these two cannot live together in the same life without sometimes combining in vicarious prayer. Now, such prayer always has been offered, not as a formal expression

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1. Prayer, pp.332-333

of well-wishing, but as a vital, creative contribution to God's purposes for men. The genuine intercessors, who in costly praying have thrown their personal love alongside God's and have earnestly claimed blessings for their friends, have felt that they were not playing with a toy, but that they were somehow using the creative power of personality in opening ways for God to work His will. They have been convinced that their intercessions wrought consequences for their friends.'<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps it is because we love so imperfectly that our prayer for others is often such a poor tool in the hand of God. Were our love to be deep, real, and all-embracing, our prayer would have the dynamic and motive power effective intercession demands. How to achieve this greater love is suggested by Daniel T. Jenkins: 'It is our intercessory prayer... for our brethren and for the world, which is the fundamental act of Christian love, without which all its more "practical" manifestations "profit nothing"... Christian love is the expression of an unlimited concern for the true well-being of our brethren as in God's sight. But we cannot know that love unless we enter into the knowledge of the love of the Father for His Son and the love of the Son for His Father. And we cannot really love our brethren unless we see that both they and we hold our lives from God and for God and that unless our desire for their well-being is caught up into the intercession of Christ before the Father it is of no avail.'<sup>2</sup>

Intercession thus properly has its roots in adoration: adoration which is alive with a sense of the sheer undeserved grace of God in His dealings with us. We love Him and one another only because He first loved us.

The love inspired by God's love toward us which constrains us to intercede for others is both costly and sacrificial. Alexander Whyte brings this out very clearly. He writes: 'A dear friend of mine was sick and was seemingly nigh unto death. And I was much in prayer for him that he might be spared to his family and to his friends and to do his great work. And one night as I was in intercessory prayer a Voice suddenly spake and said to me - "Are you in real earnest in what you ask? Or are you uttering, as usual, so many of your idle words in this solemn matter? Now to prove the sincerity and the integrity of your love for your friend, and to seal the truth of what you say about the value of his life, will you give Me and yourself a solid proof that you are in real earnest in what you say?" "What is

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1. The Meaning of Prayer, p.179

2. Prayer and the Service of God, p.54

the proof?" I asked, all trembling, and without looking up. And the Voice said, "Will you consent to transfer to your sick friend the half of your remaining years? Suppose you have two more years to live and work for yourself, will you give over one of them to your friend? Or if you have ten years yet before you, will you let your friend have five of them?" I sprang to my feet in a torrent of sweat. It was a kind of Garden of Gethsemane to me. But, like Gethsemane, I got strength to say, "Let it be as Thou hast said. Thy will be done. Not my will but Thine be done." Till I lay down that never-to-be-forgotten night with a clean heart and a good conscience as never before both toward God and toward my much-talented friend.<sup>1</sup> Magnanimous love of this kind is the necessary dynamic of effective intercession. Without it one's prayer is a crippled instrument for the accomplishment of God's purpose.

Secondly, love must be a continuing characteristic of our intercession. Weatherhead writes, 'Another law of prayer concerns love for the patient on the part of those who pray for him. If the patient is really loved - and for that to happen he must be known - by a large congregation, prayer seems more likely to be full of healing power... If I have the permission of the relative, I mention the name of the patient, because where the patient is known and loved it seems to me that the faith and care of the congregation can be called out more potently. Here, perhaps, is one of the scientific conditions of availing prayer. I try to make an imaginative picture of what is actually happening...'<sup>2</sup>

From this it follows that while prayer by many for many must often be vague to be inclusive, yet a major cause of impotence in intercession would seem to be that prayer is far too often made in general terms. Because we seldom call forth directly the interest, sympathy, and understanding of the congregation for those prayed for, our prayer is seldom a continuing manifestation of love. It is very much easier to surround with love someone whose need and condition is vivid to the imagination, than 'the sick', 'the bereaved', or 'missionaries' in general. In order that love may be the continuing characteristic of intercession it is therefore desirable that those who pray be as fully conversant as possible with the whole situation in which prayer is asked. Anticipating what will be said in the next chapter, the practice of the primitive Church in early liturgies would support this contention.

Thirdly, love is the proper motive for intercession, it

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1. Thomas Shephard, Pilgrim Father and Founder of Harvard, pp.73f.  
 2. Psychology, Religion and Healing, p.237 and p.241

should be a continuing characteristic of prevailing intercession, and finally, it must itself issue in action and endeavour. This point will be made more fully later,<sup>1</sup> but let it here be stated that God is often pleased to use human agencies to answer the prayers of His children. It may be that a pre-requisite of a change in the condition of those for whom we pray is a change in ourselves which issues in practical deeds of thoughtfulness and compassion. We must be prepared, therefore, to pray and to work for the realisation of our prayer. The love which in the first place prompts us to pray and which ought continually to typify our prayer, should go on to express itself in deed and gesture. Only then will either our prayer or our love to be sincere.

To sum up, intercessory prayer is the outcome of Christian love, and it is an activity to be carried on in love. If this be so, we need then to be more thorough than we often are in preparing the people for the act of prayer. This could be done by describing the circumstances and needs of those for whom prayer is to be offered, either in a prefatory explanation before the prayer or in biddings. Then love, shown forth in thought, word, and deed, must follow as a necessary consequence of the prayer that is genuine.

### (iii) INTERCESSORY PRAYER AND THE WILL OF GOD

(a) Biblical basis. Because God is Father it follows that He knows, desires, and works for the highest and greatest good of His children. What we believe to be best for ourselves may be very different from what He knows to be best. 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.'<sup>2</sup> Our petitioning Him for ourselves and our interceding for others must proceed with a recognition of the finitude of our own knowledge and perception and an acknowledgement of His perfect knowledge of what is good for the children He loves. Intercession must therefore be in accordance with and subject to the all-seeing, all-knowing, all-embracing will of the Father-God. This we shall see to be the clear teaching of the New Testament.

In the synoptic Gospels the relationship between petition or intercession and the will of God is most obviously apparent in our Lord's Gethsemane prayer. But before we come to it there are several minor passages to be examined which point to the same relationship.

In Matthew's version of the Lord's prayer Jesus tells the

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1. in section (iv) of this chapter, and in Chapter 4 (iii)  
2. Isaiah 55:8

disciples to pray thus:

Mt 6:9,10 - 'Our Father... Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as in heaven.'

Luke omits these words from his version of the prayer, and most scholars regard them as a gloss on Matthew's part, albeit a gloss both early and accurate. However, the sentence is significant. The sovereignty of God's will is acknowledged, and even if the literary device of Jewish parallelism does equate God's kingdom with His will being done on earth, the prayer is still for God to rule absolutely the world and men. Where He rules, where His will is done, there alone can man's highest good be recognised and achieved.

Mt 7:7-11 - 'Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks receives, he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there a man among you who will offer his son a stone when he asks for bread, or a snake when he asks for fish? If you, then, bad as you are, know how to give your children what is good for them, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask Him!'<sup>1</sup>

While this passage could be construed as an unconditional promise that what we ask for we shall receive, surely the whole point is not that God will unreservedly grant all our requests, however foolish some of them may be, but that we should turn to Him as freely and naturally as a child turns to his earthly father. Even earthly fathers give their children what is good for them, which is not necessarily what they want. How much more will God, whose knowledge of our real needs is perfect, give good things (things which accord with His Fatherly purpose for us) to them that ask. Again, we do not need to choose between Matthew's rendering and Luke's. It may be that Jesus used both forms of this saying, and that in doing so He declared the Spirit to be God's greatest bequest to men and the Author of every good and perfect gift.

Mt 18:19 - 'Again I tell you this: if two of you agree on earth about any request you have to make, that request will be granted by my heavenly Father. For where two or three have met together in my name, I am there among them.'

While at first sight this again appears to be the promise of an unconditional and unlimited answer to prayer, a closer examination reveals this not to be so. The two or three to whom Jesus refers are met in His name. As we shall make clear in our treatment of passages from the fourth Gospel, this means that they are met in accordance with the mind and purpose of Christ. Coupled with the fact that praying with others invariably excludes selfish or unworthy prayers, Jesus is promising that prayer made in accordance with the will of God will alone not

1. paralleled in Luke 11:9-13

go unanswered.

Mt 21:22 - 'Whatever you pray for in faith you will receive.' Again we meet with an apparent promise that God will answer our prayer no matter what we ask of Him. The whole context of the passage, however, makes it clear that the phrase 'in faith', and not the word 'whatever', is being emphasised. Thus this verse does not contradict our contention that all prayer is to be subject to the sovereign will of God. Faith alone does not give a man carte-blanche to pray as he likes. But where he prays in faith and in accord with the will of God, he may expect his prayer to be heard.

That leaves for our consideration in the synoptists the Gethsemane prayer common to the first three Gospels.

Mt 26:39,42 - 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt...'<sup>1</sup>

This is petition rather than intercession, yet the underlying principle of the prayer applies with equal relevance to each. Jesus, in His hour of extreme anguish, trusts not His own wisdom, judgement, or predeliction, but unreservedly and at great cost subjects His supplication to the higher wisdom and purpose of the Father. It is reasonable to suppose that if He did this in an hour of supreme crisis, it would have been characteristic of His whole approach to prayer and typical of His prayer even in less critical times.

We turn now to the fourth Gospel.

Jn 9:31 - 'It is common knowledge that God does not listen to sinners; He listens to anyone who is devout and obeys His will.'

This was a common conception in Jesus's day expressed simply as such by the man who had been healed of his blindness. But as many scholars have pointed out, John invariably writes with both a literal and an underlying meaning in mind. While on the surface this is a statement by one who thought in Old Testament terms, that John includes it at all inclines one to think that he himself believed it to be capable of a deeper and more discerning interpretation. It could be that John means us to understand that God heard and answered the prayers of Jesus because His life was inseparably one with the will of His Father. If this be so then it is true for us that only as we are disciplined to obeying utterly the will of God will our prayers be effectual.

We look next at six verses almost entirely similar.

Jn 14:13 - 'Indeed anything you ask in my name, I will do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.'

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1. paralleled in Mark 14:36 and Luke 22:42

- Jn 14:14 - 'If you ask anything in my name I will do it.'  
Jn 15:16 - 'I appointed you to go on and bear fruit, fruit that shall last; so that the Father may give you all that you ask in my name.'  
Jn 16:23 - 'In very truth I tell you, if you ask the Father for anything in my name, he will give it you.'  
Jn 16:24 - 'So far you have asked nothing in my name. Ask and you will receive...'  
Jn 16:26 - 'When that day comes you will make your request in my name.'

J.H.Bernard's comment is illuminating: 'In these passages the philosophy, so to speak, of Christian prayer is unfolded, as nowhere else in the New Testament.'<sup>1</sup> The key phrase, of course, is 'in my name'. Of this Alan Richardson writes: 'In the thought of the ancient world a name does not merely distinguish a person from other persons, but is closely related to the nature of its bearer... Christian prayer must always be prayer in the name of Jesus, i.e., in the character, spirit, and attitude of Jesus.'<sup>2</sup> Prayer in the name of Christ is to spring from an intimate communion with Him, from those depths of the soul in which He lives. It is prayer completely concordant with His nature, His mind, outlook, and spirit, and subject to the dominant intention, purpose, and will of God. This interpretation is admittedly subjective. It requires to be balanced by the more objective concept of the 'prevailing name' of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Jn 15:7 - 'If you dwell in me, and my words dwell in you, ask what you will, and you shall have it.'

Here it is even more explicitly stated that complete harmony of one's life with the mind and purpose of Christ is an indispensable condition for effectual intercession.

Two other Johannine passages may aptly be considered at this point.

I Jn 3:21-22 - 'If our conscience does not condemn us, then we can approach God with confidence, and obtain from him whatever we ask, because we are keeping his commandments and doing what he approves.'

The man whose conscience is attuned with and sensitive to the will of God and obedient to His direction is not likely to pray otherwise than in agreement with God's purpose. He may therefore pray boldly and trustingly, knowing that his supplications are likely to be answered.

I Jn 5:14 - 'We can approach God with confidence for this reason: if we make requests which accord with his will he listens to us.'

Here it is as distinctly stated as anywhere in the New Testament that availing prayer is prayer consentient with the ways of God.

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1. International Critical Commentary, St John, Vol.II, p.489

2. Theological Word Book of the Bible, p.157

3. c.f., the High Priestly work of the ascended Christ, pp.49ff

We turn now to the remainder of the New Testament.

Acts 3:6 - 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.'

While most commentators interpret the phrase 'in the name of Jesus' as an invocation of His authority and power, it is feasible perhaps to interpret it in the Johannine sense already discussed. Peter could be making his declaration of healing subject to the will and purpose of Jesus. It would thus be an acted prayer of intercession related to the will of God.

Ro 1:9-10 - 'God knows how continually I make mention of you in my prayers, and am always asking that by his will I may, somehow or other, succeed at long last in coming to visit you.'

However fervent Paul's longings and hopes may be, he subjects them continually to the higher wisdom and will of God.

Ro 12:2 - 'Let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God.'

While this verse has no direct relation to intercession, it does underline the truth that apart from a re-orientation of our life we shall be strangers to a right understanding of the will of God. Thus effective intercession demands the prior dedication of our life to God in Christ.

Ro 15:30-32 - 'I implore you by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love that the Spirit inspires, be my allies in the fight; pray to God for me that I may be saved from unbelievers in Judaea and that my errand to Jerusalem may find acceptance with God's people, so that by his will I may come to you...'

However ardently Paul may desire anything, he invariably subordinates his desire to the higher purpose of God. This same habit has come to be one of the devices of a certain spurious kind of piety in recent days. There are those who are unwilling to make even the briefest and most ordinary journey into the future without adding after the announcement of their intentions the letters D.V.<sup>1</sup> Yet at its noblest and least self-conscious this is a mark of the authentic Christian approach to intercessory prayer.

I Tim 2:8 - 'It is my desire, therefore, that everywhere prayers be said by the men of the congregation, who shall lift up their hands with a pure intention.'

The suggestion is made that our motives and aspirations in prayer need continually to be purged and purified to conform with the mind of God.

Ja 4:3 - 'You do not get what you want, because you do not pray for it. Or, if you do, your requests are not granted because you pray from wrong motives.'

James bears out our interpretation of the verse from I Timothy

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1. Deo volente - God willing

quoted above by stating the exact converse: unless there be conformity of our prayer with the mind of God we cannot expect it to be effectual.

This completes our survey of the New Testament evidence for relating intercession to the will of God.

(b) Theological basis. Having established the biblical connection between accordance with the will of God and the efficacy of intercessory prayer, two questions arise: What do we understand by the phrase, 'the will of God'? and, How are we to discern His will?

A clear, brief, and helpful exposition of the doctrine of the will of God is postulated by Leslie Weatherhead.<sup>1</sup> He divides the subject into three parts: the intentional will of God; the circumstantial will of God; and the ultimate will of God. The intentional will of God is used to describe God's initial purpose and plan for the life of man. Using the life of Jesus as an example, Weatherhead suggests that it was God's intentional will, not that Jesus should die on a cross, but that through His life and teaching sinful men should be brought into saving fellowship with God. But then, in the circumstances brought about by man's self-assertion and self-centredness, by the misuse and abuse of his God-given freewill, the cross became inevitable. In those circumstances it was the will of God that Jesus should go to Calvary rather than run away or compromise the principles upon which his life and ministry were based. In the conditions brought about by ignorance and evil, God's circumstantial will differed from His intentional will, and Jesus went to the cross. The third way the phrase 'the will of God' may be used is to describe God's ultimate achievement of purpose. Weatherhead conceives this ultimate will to be 'the purposefulness of God which, in spite of evil, and... even through evil, arrives, with nothing of value lost, at the same goal as would have been reached if the intentional will of God could have been carried through without frustration.'<sup>2</sup> Thus, at Calvary, God achieved His final goal not simply in spite of the cross, but through it. He achieved a mighty redemption and realised His initial intention in as full a sense as He would have done if His intentional will had not been temporarily defeated. Through the cross sinful men were and are brought into saving fellowship with God. Thus the original and the ultimate purpose are one.

When, in order to pray aright, we ask the question, What

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1. in a pamphlet entitled, The Will of God  
 2. *ibid*, p.10

is the will of God? our difficulty is not so much with the intentional purpose or the ultimate goal of God. These are fairly easily discerned from a careful examination of God's revelation of His nature and purpose in Jesus Christ. Our difficulty, and this was the problem Jesus wrestled with in Gethsemane, is to know God's purpose in the constantly changing circumstances caused by ignorance and sin. God's intentional will for every man may well be wholeness in every aspect of the personality: body, mind, and spirit; and perfect fellowship with Himself. God's ultimate will may well be the achievement of this wholeness of personality and perfect communion with Himself in the larger life of eternity. But in the circumstances in which our life is lived, where our walk with God is incon-  
tiguous because of our sinfulness and finitude, and few of us are anything like entirely whole even in one aspect of our being, God's will may deviate radically from His intention or His ultimate accomplishment. As men are constantly compelled to choose the lesser of two evils, so we may presume to say that often God chooses the greater of two possible benefits, that His intentional will may be ultimately realised. Thus it is hazardous to over-simplify any issue by asserting dogmatically that God's will in it is healing and restoration of the aspect of the personality affected. It is God's intention that men should enjoy mental and bodily health to the full. But other things constitute His intention as well, for example, perfect communion with Himself and other people. It may be that God elects temporarily (in the strict sense of the word) to sacrifice His desire to bestow a lesser blessing for the ultimate realisation of a greater and higher benefit.

How then are we ever to know the will of God, that we may pray in growing conformity with it? Before we attempt to discuss the lines along which a possible answer to this question lies, let it be said that so long as we are men and God is God we shall never know more than a very small area of God's will. 'Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face. My knowledge now is partial; then it will be whole, like God's knowledge of me'<sup>1</sup> We must frankly acknowledge our finitude and continually recognise our limitations.

As we have already hinted, God's intentional will may be discerned in the person of Christ. Christians believe that in God's revelation of His essential nature in Christ, we see as much of His will for men as we either need for this life or

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1. I Corinthians 13:12

can assimilate. From the life of Jesus we know that God intends every man to enjoy such friendship with Himself as is deep, intimate, and natural, and entire wholeness of the complete personality. Anything less than this is unworthy of the Christian conception of God.

God's circumstantial will, as we have said, is a very different matter, and has to be slowly and often painfully discerned in the day-to-day process of walking by faith and not by sight. There are, however, certain pointers to guide us in our seeking. Jesus said, 'If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine.'<sup>1</sup> Obedience to the known will of God in every other area of our life will help us to a right apprehension of His unknown will in our intercession. Weatherhead lists six others.<sup>2</sup> These are the sign-posts of conscience, common sense, the advice of wise spiritual counsellors, the wisdom enshrined in devotional and biographical literature, the guidance of the Christian Church, and what the Quakers call the 'Inner Light', another name for the leading of the Holy Spirit. To these six pointers we are bound to add a seventh, seemingly overlooked by Weatherhead, and as important as any already mentioned: Holy Scripture, containing as it does a progressively deepening understanding of God's ways and culminating in the record of God's perfect revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ. As Christian people we need to explore all these avenues if we are to discover the power which comes from intercession in harmony with the will and purpose of God.

One thing remains to be said. We shall never entirely know God's circumstantial will for our day-to-day life so clearly as to make it unnecessary for us any longer to walk by faith. This we said at the beginning. But that must not make us hesitant to pray for others. If we are to obey the constraint of love, nothing must so prevent us. Nor need we draw back from this sacred office of intercession. For surely God desires that we should come to Him with utter frankness and openness, to bring our problems and perplexities to Him with the confident trust that where we see but a portion of the picture, He sees the whole? Far better to do that, even if our requests are sometimes wrong, than to refrain from the office of intercession because we are in doubt as to His will. Having endeavoured to understand His will in the unideal circumstances of life without shirking our duty to think every issue through, and having arrived at few certainties and encountered many perplexities, we must then

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1. John 7:17, (A.V.)

2. *ibid.*

turn to prayer, entrusting the outcome into His keeping, believing in His wisdom, love, and power ultimately to accomplish all His purposes for the highest and most enduring good of His children.

(iv) INTERCESSORY PRAYER AND THE DOCTRINE OF WORK

(a) Biblical basis. To discuss prayer is easier than to engage in prayer, and most of us conversant with the theory of it fall lamentably short in the practice of it. The aim in this section is to show that in the New Testament intercession is thought of as hard work, calling for a number of strong and manly Christian qualities.

While it is implicit in the New Testament that intercession is one of the ways in which man is able to work with God, there is but a single explicit statement of this truth:

II Cor 1:11 - '(God) will continue to deliver us, if you will co-operate by praying for us.'

From this it is evident that in seeking God's blessings for others man has his own part to play, and that one way in which he may work with God is through vicarious prayer.

In the New Testament three clear characteristics of prayer as a means of co-operating with God are discernible. Intercession that is to be effective and used of God for the accomplishment of His purposes demands from those who engage in it real application, continuing perseverance, and strong faith. We shall consider the passages illustrative of each of these qualities in turn.

Effective intercession requires earnest application.

The Gospels record an occasion when Jesus, moved to pity at the sight of the people like sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless, said to His disciples:

Mt 9:37 - 'The crop is heavy, but labourers are scarce; you must therefore beg the owner to send labourers to harvest his crop.'<sup>1</sup>

The task of evangelism is urgent and great, with work enough to absorb their whole time, energy, and strength. They may begin working by applying themselves to prayer.

In his account of our Lord's Gethsemane prayer Luke records:

Lk 22:44 - 'In anguish of spirit he prayed the more urgently; and his sweat was like clots of blood falling to the ground.'

This was agonising in prayer, wrestling in prayer, the application of our Lord's total energy, effort, and endeavour in prayer,

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1. paralleled in Luke 10:2

until the sweat poured off Him, and His striving was awful to behold. We see here that at its most urgent prayer is hard toil for strong men, demanding rigorous concentration.

After his account of the healing of the epileptic boy, Mark adds these verses:

Mk 9:28-9 - 'His disciples asked him privately, "Why could not we cast it out?" He said, "There is no means of casting out this sort but prayer".'

Prayer marked by intensely applied effort was for Jesus a source of spiritual power, enabling Him to accomplish things impossible to His followers.

Three passages in the Acts warrant examination.

Acts 6:4 - 'We will appoint them to deal with these matters, while we devote ourselves to prayer...'

The Twelve set aside seven men to care for the widows in the congregation and to attend to other routine matters, so that they could give themselves whole-heartedly to prayer. Prayer was too important a task to be engaged in hurriedly or while bogged down with lesser pre-occupations.

Acts 12:5 - 'So Peter was kept in prison under constant watch, while the Church kept praying fervently for him to God.'

After Herod had thrown Peter into prison the whole Church immediately devoted itself to impassioned prayer on his behalf. The same chapter in the Acts records that its prayer was not without effect.

Acts 22:17 - 'I (Paul) was praying in the temple when I fell into a trance...'

The fact that he fell into a trance while praying indicates how rapt was his absorption and how complete his concentration.

A number of passages in the epistles may now be considered.

Ro 10:1 - 'My deepest desire and my prayer to God is for their salvation.'

Paul's prayer was never light or casual, but always an applied expression of what H.E. Fosdick describes as a man's 'dominant desire.'

Ro 15:30 - 'I implore you by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love that the Spirit inspires, be my allies in the fight; pray to God for me.'

Prayer is here depicted as a struggle, demanding the expenditure of much effort and energy if it is to prevail. The same thought is apparent in the following three verses:

Eph 6:18 - 'Give yourselves wholly to prayer and entreaty...'

Col 4:12 - 'Epaphras... prays hard for you all the time...'

I Thess 3:10 - 'We pray most earnestly night and day to be allowed to see you again and to mend your faith where it falls short.'

The office of 'widow' is described in I Timothy as one where the person concerned,

I Tim 5:5 - 'Regularly attends the meetings for prayer and worship night and day.'

This suggests consistent and constant self-giving to the work effectual prayer necessitates.

Ja 4:3 - 'You do not get what you want, because you do not pray for it.'

To pray casually is as bad as not to pray at all. To express a dominant desire through earnest prayer is very often to have it realised.

Ja 5:17 - 'When (Elijah) prayed earnestly that there should be no rain, not a drop fell on the land for three years and a half.'

Earnestness in prayer is here related to efficacy.

I Pet 4:7 - 'You must lead an ordered and sober life, given to prayer.'

Prayer is to be no occasional or sporadic activity, but part of a completely disciplined way of life consistent with a serious and determined endeavour to follow Christ.

Finally, there are a number of New Testament passages where prayer is associated with fasting.<sup>1</sup> Whatever may be the importance of fasting for Christian discipleship, the fact that it is often ancillary to prayer suggests the measure of earnest application deemed necessary for intercession to be effectual.

Effective intercession demands perseverance. There are two parables in Luke which enjoin perseverance in petitionary and intercessory prayer.

Lk 11:5-10 - 'Suppose one of you has a friend who comes to him in the middle of the night and says, "My friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine on a journey has turned up at my house, and I have nothing to offer him"; and he replies from inside, "Do not bother me. The door is shut for the night; my children and I have gone to bed; and I cannot get up and give you what you want." I tell you that even if he will not provide for him out of friendship, the very shamelessness of the request will make him get up and give him all he needs. And so I say to you, ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks receives, he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.'

And,

Lk 18:1-7 - 'He spoke to them in a parable to show that they should keep on praying and never lose heart: "There was once a judge who cared nothing for God or man, and in the same town there was a widow who constantly came before him demanding justice against her opponent. For a long time he refused; but in the end he said to himself, "True, I care nothing for God or man; but this widow is so great a nuisance that I will see her righted before she wears me out with her persistence." The Lord said, "You hear what the unjust judge says; and will not God vindicate his chosen, who cry out to him day and night,

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1. for example, Luke 2:37 and 5:33, Acts 13:3 and 14:23

while he listens patiently to them? I tell you, he will vindicate them soon enough".'

Both these parables contain more than just a single truth, yet nevertheless they both propound, as of cardinal importance, the need for importunity in availing prayer.

The teaching of these parables is supported by many almost adventitious references throughout the New Testament.

Lk 6:12 - 'During this time (Jesus) went out one day into the hills to pray, and spent the night in prayer to God.'

Remembering that on His return the following day Jesus chose twelve of His followers to be His intimate disciples, it seems certain that petition and intercession had a considerable place in that night of continuous prayer. Our Lord's own example would then suggest the need for both concentrated effort and persistent importunity in prayer.

Acts 1:14 - '(The disciples) were constantly at prayer together.'

This implies the patient perseverance of the disciples in prayer in the interval between our Lord's Ascension and the Day of Pentecost.

Acts 12:12 - '(Peter) made for the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where a large company was at prayer.'

On his release from prison Peter came to the meeting-place of the Christian community, to find his fellow-Christians persevering for him in intercession despite the unlikelihood of their prayer being answered (as we may infer from their reaction when it is announced that Peter is actually at the door<sup>1</sup>).

Ro 1:9 - 'God knows how continually I make mention of you in my prayers, and am always asking that by his will... I may succeed... in coming to visit you.'

And in Ro 12:12 he urges the Christians at Rome to 'persist in prayer.'

Both the precept and the practice of the Apostle indicate the need for persistent importunity in prayer.

Eph 6:19 - 'Keep watch and persevere, always interceding for all God's people.'

Here the need for perseverance in intercession is expressly stated.

Col 1:9 - 'For this reason, ever since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you.'

Col 4:2 - 'Persevere in prayer, with mind awake and thankful heart; and include a prayer for us...'

I Thess 1:2 - 'We always thank God for you all, and mention you in our prayers continually.'

I Thess 5:17 - 'Pray continually.'

II Thess 1:11 - 'With this in mind we pray for you always.'

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1. Acts 12:14-15

Jude 20 - 'Continue to pray in the power of the Holy Spirit.' Each of the five verses quoted above stresses the need for patient continuance in the work of intercession if it is to release the fulness of the blessing God ever seeks to impart.

Effective intercession depends on active faith. Robust faith, in the sense of unreserved trust in the power, goodness, and love of Almighty God, consciously exercised on behalf of him for whom prayer is offered, is indispensable if intercession is to be an effectual means of co-operating with God.

Towards the end of Matthew's account of the healing of the epileptic boy, we read:

Mt 17:17-20 - 'Jesus answered, "What an unbelieving and perverse generation! How long shall I be with you? How much longer must I endure you? Bring him here to me." Jesus then spoke sternly to the boy; the devil left him, and from that moment he was cured.

'Afterwards the disciples came to Jesus and asked him privately, "Why could not we cast it out?" He answered, "Your faith is too weak. I tell you this: if you have faith no bigger even than a mustard-seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there!', and it will move; nothing will prove impossible for you".'

Here the necessity for and the consequences of utter reliance on the loving purpose of God and His power to accomplish it is expressly stated and related to effectual intercession.

Mt 21:22 - 'Whatever you pray for in faith you will receive.' As was said in the preceding section, the whole emphasis of this verse is on the faith demanded by prayer which is truly co-operation with God.

Lk 18:8 - 'But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

This reference comes at the close of the parable which teaches perseverance as a necessary requirement of successful prayer, and would seem to suggest that even perseverance is unavailing unless it be complemented by a strong faith in the power and love of God.

Turning to the book of the Acts, towards the end of the account of the healing of Dorcas, we read:

Acts 9:40 - 'Peter sent them all outside, and knelt down and prayed. Then turning towards the body, he said "Tabitha, arise." She opened her eyes, saw Peter, and sat up.'

There was no hesitation or doubt on Peter's part about the outcome of his prayer. With unequivocal faith he petitioned God to raise Dorcas from the dead, and his faith was vindicated.

Acts 16:25 - 'About midnight Paul and Silas, at their prayers, were singing praises to God...'

A boundless trust that the whole of their life was in the keeping of the Father was the accompaniment of their prayer even in a situation as unfortunate as this. In the words of

Mary Peters's hymn, only 'Faith can sing through days of sorrow, All, all is well'. Again, this trust was not misplaced, and before very long the prison doors were opened.

That completes our survey of the New Testament evidence in support of the assertion that prayer is one of the ways in which God expects us to co-operate with Him; and that the prayer He is able to use most effectively is prayer in which our total energy is applied, in which we persevere no matter how little success we apparently achieve, and which is alive with an unconquerable faith in the greatness and power of Him who is Almighty.

(b) Theological basis. The question is often heard, If God knows the needs of His children, and loves them with a love greater and deeper than the best human love we can conceive, why does He wait for us to pray for one another before acting to alleviate our condition and answer our need? John Mackintosh Shaw answers this question with characteristic lucidity: 'God, being the God He is, namely, our heavenly Father, who has created the universe at the first and controls and governs it for moral and spiritual ends with His children, has provided in His universe of law a place for prayer, and further makes the bestowal of His blessing on ourselves and others dependent on prayer - this, when we consider it, so far from being arbitrary or strange, is in line with God's method everywhere. It is, indeed, itself a case of law. It is but one illustration or exemplification of a universal principle or law of God's working, a law or principle which may be stated thus: that God, being essentially and centrally Father, conditions the bestowal of His blessings on the co-operation or working along with Him of His children.'<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Leslie Weatherhead also says: 'We believe that it is God's plan to co-operate with man in this (intercession), as in so many other things. Concerning so many benefits in this life it is true to say (with Augustine) that God, without us, will not. We, without God, cannot. God gives men corn, but they must learn to make bread before they can eat. God puts iron into the mountains, but men must learn to make needles or locomotives or surgical instruments to carry out His will. God puts coal in the hills, but we must mine it and bring it to our houses for comfort and warmth. God makes sheep, but men must make clothes... We are quite sure that God will not magically make up for our laziness or ignorance. Medicine and surgery and psychology are necessary. We welcome them all. Everything that

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1. op. cit., p.55

the mind of man can think out, or the hand of man devise, must be done to co-operate with God. And many people die because our co-operation with God on the physical side is not adequate and complete enough. We lose them, though we may comfort ourselves by thinking that God still has them in His keeping and in His plan. They are as safe in heaven as on earth. But why co-operate with God only on the physical side? In Man and the Universe, Sir Oliver Lodge says: "Even in medicine, for instance, it is not really absurd to suggest that drugs and no prayer may be almost as foolish as prayer and no drugs".<sup>1</sup>

We may therefore regard it as established that God has ordained intercessory prayer to be one of the ways in which we may effectually co-operate with Him for the benefit of others. If this be so, it follows that the more earnestly and intelligently we work with God in this manner, the greater will be the benefit for our fellow-men. As we suggested when dealing with the biblical basis for relating intercession to the doctrine of work, to labour diligently and successfully with God in intercession requires the three qualities of application, perseverance, and faith. We shall now enlarge on what has already been said about each.

Our prayer is often unavailing because we do not apply ourselves to it as we ought, either individually or as a Church. We play at prayer. We seldom toil at it as we do for our daily bread. We rarely concentrate with undiminished intensity or intentness on the person for whom we are engaged in prayer and on Him to whom our prayer is addressed. We often content ourselves with the drowsily expressed, half-hearted, and vague desire that God will bless those around whom our thoughts are centred. This is not an exuberant rhetorical and homiletical flight. It is a sober assessment of the prayer-life of many Christian people, and many Christian churches. Moreover, it is a personal confession.

Such failure to bring to the work of intercession the earnest importunity it demands restricts its usefulness as an instrument for God to use in accomplishing His purpose. The consequences for the world's food supply would be disastrous if in one year all farmers decided not to apply themselves to the proper cultivation of the soil and left the harvest entirely to chance. Our own failure to apply ourselves to the work of prayer is equally disastrous. Instead of the Church being the power-house of healing and blessing which is surely God's purpose for it, it is often largely incapacitated.

It is therefore of pressing importance that Christian

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1. in his pamphlet, Healing through Prayer, p.8

people should recover, both in their private and corporate prayer, zeal to apply themselves unreservedly to the business of intercession. With our Lord, we must learn to sweat at prayer, re-discovering the truth that this is hard work for men in the prime of their strength, not just a pleasant if unusual past-time for the elderly and the very young. In our worship we must find a place for silent and corporate concentration on the needs of others and on Him who alone can answer their needs, constrained both by love for them and an awareness of the incomparable opportunity for blessing them it is in our power to apply.

A second factor making for ineffective intercession is a lack of perseverance. Most men are capable of being moved impulsively to compassion by the plight of others less fortunate than themselves. Very often this compassion results in intercession. But it is difficult to sustain this concern over a long period, especially where there is no close relationship between the person who prays and him whom he prays for. We soon forget to pray. We swiftly lose our sense of urgency in prayer. The apparent recovery of the person for whom we have prayed tends to lull us into thinking that prayer for him is no longer imperative. Of this, John B. Magee writes: 'Often we lose the battle for someone's welfare because we do not continue to pray after the initial and often dramatic events seem to indicate the desired change... we cease praying too soon. The surgical technique for internal cancer now calls for an exploratory operation six months after the initial surgery and before further symptoms would normally appear. If possible, remaining cancerous tissue is then removed. Other exploration continues at six-month intervals until at last no traces of the disease are found. Christian patience in prayer requires that we be as thorough as that.'<sup>1</sup> Few of us who engage in the work of intercession would claim to measure up to that standard.

Thirdly, our prayer often fails because we are deficient in faith. We shall return to a discussion of the place of faith in intercession later.<sup>2</sup> To have faith is, as Alan Richardson expressed it, to believe that 'the God of the Bible is He of whom alone it may with propriety be said: panta dunata, "all things are possible".'<sup>3</sup> We have in many areas of life ceased to believe this, and until the recovery of belief is complete we shall not accomplish by way of intercession all God means us to achieve. The aspect of faith required for availing

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1. Reality and Prayer, p.152  
 2. in Chapter 4, (ii) and (iii)  
 3. op. cit., p.152

prayer is that of trustful expectancy. Weatherhead writes: 'By faith... I mean trustful expectancy. I do not necessarily mean a faith filled with, and reinforced by, the intellectual content of orthodox Christianity, or that excellent quality of spirit which believes in a loving God whether recovery from illness takes place or not. Clearly, many who were healed by Christ, such as the woman with the haemorrhage, for instance, never thought of Him as divine, never dreamed who He really was, and believed few, if any, of the intellectual tenets now incorporated into the creeds of the Church. But with trustful expectancy, she believed that if she could get near Him she would be healed... The unexpectancy with which intercession for the sick is often offered is easy to understand. People cease praying for healing because prayer seems a hit-or-miss-in-the-dark procedure compared with the scientific, understandable ways of medicine.'<sup>1</sup>

In many services of public worship it is sometimes the practice, when inviting prayer for someone in special need, to describe his condition that those who pray may do so sympathetically. But often the description of the condition produces in the minds of those who pray feelings of horror, shock, and dread, antithetic of the trustful expectancy described above. We know, let us say, that cancer is often an incurable disease. Thus when we bespeak the intercession of a congregation for someone afflicted with cancer, the reaction caused by the mention of the disease often results in immediate sub-conscious feelings of hopelessness. We do not confidently expect God to deal with cancer, and the resultant prayer is really one of unbelief, no matter what noble words may be used for its expression.

It follows that in intercession the art of consciously cultivating the expectancy which not only prays for healing but visualises it as taking place must be learned. This requires imagination. Of this, Alexander Whyte writes, 'If, then, you would learn to pray to perfection - that is to say, to pray with all that is within you - never fail, never neglect to do this. Never once shut your bodily eyes and bow your knees to begin to pray, without, at the same moment, opening the eyes of your imagination.'<sup>2</sup> How imagination may be intelligently applied to intercession is well described by Weatherhead. He writes, 'I try to make an imaginative picture of what is actually happening. This is the kind of thing that was said in an actual case: "Here is Nurse So-and-so, a member of our Church, a girl of nineteen, who is studying at such-and-such a hospital. She is

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1. Psychology, Religion and Healing, pp.236-7

2. Lord, Teach us to Pray, p.244

suffering from such-and-such a disease. Her temperature is very high. She cannot sleep without drugs. She has not taken any food for some days. In imagination (I say to the people) go into the ward and stand with Christ next to her bed. Do not pray that she may become better, because that is putting her cure in the future. Believe that at this very moment Christ is touching her life, and that His healing power is being made manifest in her body now. Believe that He can more powerfully work in the atmosphere of our faith and love.<sup>1</sup>

Weatherhead is to be criticised, firstly, for describing the girl prayed for as a 'case' - no pastor should think of his sheep as 'cases', and he does this not infrequently - and secondly, for too readily assuming that the will of God in a given situation is physical healing. As has been said, this is not always certain. Yet this second criticism must be qualified. It is better to be precipitate in discerning the will of God yet positively expectant in intercession, than circumspect and timorous.

These then are three elements of prayer that is truly accordant with the purpose of God: determined and earnest application, sustained perseverance, and a bold expectancy that asks great things of God. Where these elements are present in intercessory prayer, the consequences of it may well be remarkable.

(v) INTERCESSORY PRAYER AND THE WORK OF THE ASCENDED CHRIST

(a) Biblical basis. While the New Testament evidence is here not as extensive as in some of the doctrines already examined, intercession is nevertheless manifestly referred to the work of the ascended Christ.

The most important Pauline passage is in the letter to the Romans:

Ro 8:33-4 - 'Who will be the accuser of God's chosen ones? It is God who pronounces acquittal: then who can condemn? It is Christ - Christ who died, and, more than that, was raised from the dead - who is at God's right hand, and indeed pleads our cause.'

Of this passage H.B.Swete writes: 'The "intercession" of Christ is here made... the very climax of His saving activities: death, resurrection, exaltation to the right hand, all culminate in this. Our hope does not rest on a dead Christ, but on One who is alive for evermore; nor again on a Christ who merely lives, but on one who lives and reigns with God; nor, once more, simply on

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1. *ibid*, p.241

the fact of His exaltation, but on the knowledge that this exalted person uses His opportunity to lay our case before God.<sup>1</sup> Behind this concept of Paul lies a word of Jesus Himself:

Mt 10:32-33 - 'Whoever then will acknowledge me before men, I will acknowledge him before my Father in heaven; and whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.'

The letter to the Hebrews includes much material relevant to this section. In it the concept of the High Priesthood of Christ recurs frequently.<sup>2</sup> William Barclay treats of two features of our Lord's High Priesthood important for an understanding of His heavenly intercession.<sup>3</sup> Firstly, he reminds us that in the Old Testament it is always thought dangerous to approach God. To enter into the nearer presence of God is to die, or to be in danger of death.<sup>4</sup> This belief left its mark on the ritual of the Day of Atonement. Only the High Priest could enter into the Holy of Holies, and he only on the Day of Atonement. Barclay writes: 'From this there emerges one conception of the function of the priest. It is the function of the priest to enter into the presence of God on behalf of the people. He is their representative to do what they cannot and must not do. In him they enter in.'<sup>5</sup> The writer to the Hebrews can thus say, 'Let us therefore boldly approach the throne of our gracious God, where we may receive mercy and in his grace find timely help.'<sup>6</sup> Boldness in intercession derives from God's Fatherhood and from the work of Him who is our eternal High Priest. Secondly, Barclay demonstrates how the covenant relationship between God and Israel depends on the work of the High Priest. Because of sin, the covenant relationship is continually broken. The High Priest, in whom the sacrificial system centres, effects the restoration of the covenant relationship. But the High Priest is himself a sinful man, and must offer sacrifice for his own sins before he can proceed to offer sacrifice for the sins of the people. And the offerings he makes must be endlessly repeated, for they deal with the fruits, not the root of sin. He writes, 'the grim conclusion is that the covenant relationship cannot but be broken and that the available means to restore it are in fact inadequate and unavailing. The necessity is for a new covenant, a new sacrifice, and a new priest.'<sup>7</sup>

1. The Ascended Christ, p.94

2. e.g., Hebrews 2:17, 3:1, 4:14,15, 5:1,5,10, 6:20, 7:26, etc.

3. Jesus as They Saw Him, Chapter 31

4. e.g., Exodus 33:20, Deuteronomy 5:24, Judges 6:22,23, 13:22

5. *ibid*, p.348

6. Hebrews 4:16

7. *ibid*, p.350

Jesus establishes the new covenant.<sup>1</sup> He is the perfect offering for sins.<sup>2</sup> And He is the perfect Priest. Thus, as William Milligan says, 'the work of Intercession on the part of our heavenly High Priest seems to be that, having restored the broken covenant and brought His Israel into the most intimate union and communion with God, He would now, amidst all their remaining weaknesses, and the innumerable temptations that surround them, preserve them in it. And He would do this by keeping them in Himself; so that in Him they shall stand in such unity of love to the Father that the Father will love them as His own sons, will need no one to remind Him that they are so, and will directly pour out upon them, as very members of the Body of the Eternal Son, every blessing first poured out upon the Head.'<sup>3</sup> The High Priesthood of Jesus Christ is thus both creative of a filial relationship between men and God and its continuing guarantee.

Heb 7:25 - 'He is also able to save absolutely those who approach God through him; he is always living to plead on their behalf.'

Of this verse B.F. Westcott writes: 'The very end of Christ's life in heaven, as it is here presented, is that He may fulfil the object of the Incarnation, the perfecting of humanity... Whatever man may need, as man or as sinful man, in each circumstance of effort and conflict, his wants find interpretation by the... effective advocacy of Christ our (High) Priest. In the glorified humanity of the Son every true human wish finds perfect and prevailing expression.'<sup>4</sup> James Moffatt comments: 'The function of intercession in heaven for the People, which originally was the prerogative of Michael the angelic guardian of Israel, or generally of angels, is thus transferred to Jesus, to One who is no mere angel but who has sacrificed himself for the People. The author deliberately excludes any other mediator or semi-mediator in the heavenly sphere.'<sup>5</sup>

Heb 9:24 - 'For Christ has entered, not that sanctuary made by men's hands which is only a symbol of the reality, but heaven itself, to appear now before God on our behalf.'

Westcott's exposition of this verse is helpful: 'The manifestation of Christ before God is "on our behalf". In Him humanity obtains its true harmony with God, and in Him it can bear the full light of God. He can be therefore, in virtue of His perfect manhood, our Advocate.'<sup>6</sup> In Him, and through His

1. I Corinthians 11:25

2. Hebrews 10:1

3. The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of our Lord, p.158

4. The Epistle to the Hebrews, pp.193-4

5. The International Critical Commentary, Hebrews, p.100

6. ibid, p.275

heavenly intercession, we are given close and continuous access to God such as no cultus could effect.

A notable feature of our Lord's High Priesthood is its intransiency:

Heb 7:24 - 'The priesthood which Jesus holds is perpetual, because he remains for ever.'

It follows that as His priesthood is permanent and eternal, so too is His work of interceding for men a continuing aspect of His Ascension.

There are a number of references in the letter to the Hebrews and elsewhere in the New Testament where Jesus is said to be sitting (in His ascended glory) on the right hand of God.<sup>1</sup> Of this symbol Ethelbert Stauffer writes: 'What the primitive Church celebrated on Ascension Day was not just Christ's accession to power. The Church's intercessor had taken his place before God's throne! This is the soteriological significance of the ascension. From now on Christ is our advocate at the right hand of God, our High Priest who has passed into the heavenly places and intercedes for us before God's face. But who is it that stands on the left of God's throne? It is Christ's counterpart, Satan, who accuses us before God. Christ and Satan - these two engage each other before God's throne for the future of the Church. But Christ has the last word - that much is certain to the whole NT.'<sup>2</sup>

Another important verse is found in the first letter of John:

I Jn 2:1 - 'Should anyone commit a sin, we have one to plead our cause with the Father, Jesus Christ, and he is just.'

He who shares our humanity, who knows our weakness, our sorrows, our temptations, and who carries our humanity into highest heaven, stands continually within the presence of God to uphold us by His intercession.

One further passage is cognate to our Lord's heavenly intercession. In John 17 we have what is known as the High Priestly prayer of Christ. While this prayer was uttered on the night before His passion it does suggest some of the things that form the subject of His eternal intercession on our behalf. Of this prayer H.B.Swete writes: 'He desires for His Church not segregation from the world, but safe-keeping from the evil power that works within it. He asks for her such present oneness of faith and love as may convince the world of the Divine mission of the Christ, and in the life to come the endless

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1. e.g., Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, 10:12, Acts 5:31, 7:55f., Rev 12:5  
2. New Testament Theology, p.139

vision of the glory of God in the face of the Incarnate Son.'<sup>1</sup> Milligan comments: 'Our Lord is before us, not in the position of One who, surrounded by the sufferings of earth and in the immediate prospect of death, is praying for His people, but in that of One who prays for them as if He were already at the right hand of the Father, in His heavenly abode. At the moment when He utters this prayer He is less the humbled and dying than the exalted and glorified Redeemer. He has passed onward in thought to the accomplishment of His work, and to the time when He shall be engaged in the application of it to those for whom He died. In the other parts of the fourth Gospel and in the earlier Gospels we follow Him amidst the sorrows of His earthly state, and see Him drinking the "cup of trembling" which had been put into His hand. Here we are permitted to follow Him within the veil; and these words of His are not so much words which He pours forth while the shadow of the cross is resting upon Himself and His disciples, as words which rise from Him to the Father when, no more in the world, He prays for those who are left in the world to carry on His work. How true is the instinct which has always led the Church to designate this prayer the High Priestly prayer of Jesus! In heaven only is He perfect High Priest, and the words of the prayer belong at least in spirit to that upper sanctuary. They are the concentration of all the prayers of the heavenly Intercessor, as He bore on earth, as He bears now, and will bear for ever, the wants of His people before the Father, who is both able and willing to supply them.'<sup>2</sup>

(b) Theological basis. James Denney has pointed out that the Apostles speak of the Risen Christ's sacred function of intercession 'with a kind of adoring awe which is quite peculiar even in the New Testament.'<sup>3</sup> Their minds rest on it, he says as 'one of the unimaginable wonders of redemption - something which in love went far beyond all that we could ask or think.'<sup>4</sup> Where men lose this sense of 'adoring awe', and their hearts fail to kindle at the thought of the Lord of life continually interceding on their behalf, their own intercessions are inevitably weaker and poorer.

We must not crudely conceive of His intercession as being only with words. Milligan writes: 'It was not indeed imagined by the fathers of the Church, nor has the idea been entertained by later theologians, that this intercession necessarily takes

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1. *ibid*, p.96

2. *ibid*, pp.155-6

3, 4. Studies in Theology, p.162

the form of spoken words... His very presence in His humanity is enough to secure the hearing and answering of His prayers... It ought to be understood in a much wider sense, as including the whole series of transactions in which one person may engage with another on behalf of a third.<sup>1</sup> What is the nature of these transactions, and what is the relationship between the Son and the Father when our Lord intercedes on our behalf, are questions that must remain unanswered and unanswerable for this life at least, because of the finitude of our knowledge and understanding. But from the fact that these transactions are taking place, that our Lord is 'always living to plead on our behalf',<sup>2</sup> we may draw certain conclusions.

Firstly, the work of Christ's atonement is not ended. In the light of His historic experience He strives in God for man and for his redemption. C.M.Chilcott writes, 'As in history He interpreted God<sup>3</sup> to us, so in eternity He interprets us to God. That historic experience, far from being a loss, was an enrichment of the life of God, and by it the life of man was once and for ever lifted up to God. We conceive of the spirit of Christ as eternally present in God, and yet because He is Man, as one of us - capable of realising our needs as He realised them on earth and presenting them to the Father, His work of mediation has no end.'<sup>4</sup> The yearning which sometimes possesses us for the realisation of wholeness of personality in the life of our fellow men, is but a faint reflection of that yearning which is eternally in the heart of Christ and which expresses itself in His heavenly intercession. In our own intercession, not only do we reach out to Him who is the Father of all on behalf of others of His children; we also follow in the steps of One who is Himself engaged in this work. We are not alone in our concern for our fellow men. Our Lord's concern prefigures our own. We are called not to pioneer, but to follow.

Secondly, it is the Christian's joy to share with Christ in completing in every age the work historically completed on Calvary. Christ seeks to accomplish this through His heavenly intercession. We may work with Him through our earthly intercession. Not only is this our joy. It is also our duty. R.C. Moberley phrases this well: 'What Christ is, the Church, which is Christ's mystical body, must be also. If Christ is Prophet, the Church is prophetic. If Christ is King, the Church is royal.'

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1. *ibid*, pp.150-151

2. Hebrews 7:25

3. It would have been more accurate to say 'the Father'.

4. writing in Adventure, ed. Streeter, Chilcott, MacMurray, and Russell, p.240

If Christ is Priest, the Church is priestly. And if Christ's priesthood is, in relation to men, fundamental even to His royal and prophetic aspects, then whatever tends to suppress or undervalue the essentially priestly character of the mystical body of Christ, obscures a most fundamental conception of the truth.<sup>1</sup> The full importance of intercession thus becomes apparent. It is a permanent and necessary constituent of our Lord's eternal work for men. In this holy office He both invites and commands us to share with Him. It is not therefore 'by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God.'<sup>2</sup> Only a right awareness of the glad opportunity and the immense responsibility presented to us in intercessory prayer will provide us with a continuing incentive to spend ourselves in its practice. As we respond to that incentive we shall be drawn more closely to our Lord, for we shall be doing His will and sharing in the realisation of His purpose.

And thirdly, our own imperfect intercession for others is incorporated into His perfect intercession. We pray sporadically; He prays unceasingly and unites our prayer with His. We pray with a love that fluctuates in depth and strength; He prays with a love that is always to be measured by a Cross. We, by reason of our finitude, cannot but exclude much of the world and its needs from our prayer; He includes the whole world in His. We pray with an imperfect understanding of the will of God; His knowledge of the Father and the needs of His children is perfect. In prayer we walk by faith; He proceeds by sight. Not only does the Holy Spirit aid us in our intercessions, but the Ascended Christ receives them and conjoins them with His own, according to them a usefulness and merit they could never have apart from Him. A just appreciation of this truth would remove much timorousness, unexpectancy, and hesitancy from our prayer. For though our prayer be ill-conceived, weak, and deficient in a spirit of sacrifice, One greater than us prays on behalf of His brethren as well, and prays perfectly. He is graciously pleased to embody our prayer in His. And as on earth He multiplied a few fish and a little bread for the blessing of many, so in heaven we believe He multiplies what we in sincerity offer to Him, making of it a dynamic and decisive agency for good.

There is little else to be said with certainty. We move here in the realm of mystery. Much theological research needs yet to be done into the heavenly intercession of our Lord (the

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1. Ministerial Priesthood, p.251

2. from the Marriage Service, Methodist Book of Offices

most recent writer in English on the Ascension dismisses the subject in a sentence.<sup>1</sup>) Yet we may not inappropriately close by quoting the words of H.R.Mackintosh: 'For the soldier of righteousness it is a very fount of power to reckon on the interest and companionship of the Captain of salvation; to the humble believer it is everything to rest in the love of that unseen Friend whose faithful care is unaffected by change of time or dignity. It is part therefore of the best Christian conviction that as our Lord now lives in God, and God in Him, His thought and power are constantly directed to all believers, and that in these most real relations with men He acts, as it were, from within the very being of God Himself. His right and ability to act, moreover, are grounded morally in the abiding value of His sacrifice, in which our interests were completely and finally identified with His. The succouring love our prayers draw forth is not created by our prayers. Rather its validity is the steadfast background and potency of all we now receive.'<sup>2</sup>

(vi) INTERCESSORY PRAYER AND THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

In considering the work of the Holy Spirit in intercessory prayer we shall be summing up and collocating all that has been said so far. For it is the work of the Holy Spirit to realise and integrate all the other aspects of intercession we have treated of separately. It is the Holy Spirit who prevents the background doctrines so far dealt with from being merely academically significant, who actualises them within the consciousness of the praying Christian, and who thus makes of his prayer a vigorous instrument in the hand of God. Our purpose then in this section is to relate the work of the Holy Spirit to each of the doctrines already discussed.

It is the Holy Spirit who enables men to call God Father. God's Fatherhood cannot be discerned with indiscriminate universality. Neither is the discovery of their filial relationship to the Father inevitable or automatic for all men. Only by way of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, made possible in every age through the activity of the Holy Spirit,<sup>3</sup> may God be truly known as Father. God's realised Fatherhood is dependent on a renunciation of all rebellious ways, and involves both the acceptance of all He so freely offers and a free yielding to Him

1. J.G.Davies, He Ascended into Heaven

2. The Person of Christ, pp.377-8

3. it is the function of the Holy Spirit to point men to Christ, c.f., John 15:26

of all He so definitely demands. So Paul can write in the letter to the Romans:

Ro 8:14-17 - 'For all who are moved by the Spirit of God are sons of God. The Spirit you have received is not a spirit of slavery leading you back into a life of fear, but a Spirit that makes us sons, enabling us to cry "Abba! Father!" In that cry the Spirit of God joins with our spirit in testifying that we are God's children; and if children, then heirs. We are God's heirs and Christ's fellow-heirs, if we share his sufferings now in order to share his splendour hereafter.'

In commenting on this passage William Barclay writes: 'It is through the Spirit that we learn to call God Father, and to know that we are His children. In the ancient world adoption was the most final of all processes. The previous parents completely abandoned all rights and claims to the child, and in the new family the child ranked as a real and genuine son, with full rights of inheritance... It is that way with us and God. He accepts us fully into His family; our past is past and done with; we enter into the full inheritance of the saints; we become children of God. Instead of fearing God we learn to call Him Father. Behind all this process is the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who puts into our heart the desire to become one of the family of God; it is the Holy Spirit who assures us... of the love of God, and of our welcome into that new family; it is the leading of the Holy Spirit which brings us out of the possession of the world and into the possession of God.'<sup>1</sup>

The same concept forms the substance of two passages, one in the letter to the Galatians, and the other in the letter to the Ephesians.

Ga 4:6-7 - 'To prove that you are sons, God has sent into our hearts the Spirit of his Son, crying "Abba! Father!" You are therefore no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then also by God's own act an heir.'

Eph 2:18 - 'For through (Christ) we both (Jews and Gentiles) alike have access to the Father in the one Spirit.'

Without this 'revelation of God through Christ and His Spirit, the name "Father" would have been contradicted by the hard and tragic world in which His creatures had to live.'<sup>2</sup>

It follows then that the child-like confidence and uninhibited sharing which ought to characterise our communion with God are not to be painfully and laboriously self-evoked in order to pray in the proper attitude of naturalness and spontaneity. These qualities are the fruit of the Holy Spirit working within our life, making us bold to approach God, not

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1. The Promise of the Spirit, pp.69-70

2. The Interpreter's Bible, Vol.X, p.527

as slaves cringing before their Master, but as sons joyously entering the presence of their Father, of whose love and goodness there can be no question.

The words of Marcus Dill are apposite: 'Prayer, it has been said, is the very breath of the Christian's life; and this is the kind of prayer - the lifting up of our desires in the Son by the Spirit to the Father. "Father, Our Father" - such an address to God was not reached by the most advanced of the saints of the Old Testament. They could, at most, say with a psalmist, "Like as a Father", or predict that the coming Son of David shall say to God, "Thou art my Father"; they did not themselves know God in this dear relationship. But "our Father" is the first word of Christian prayer - the first word, and the last word too - "Father, I have sinned," "Father into Thy hands."

'The "Spirit of Adoption" is the Spirit of Christ Jesus. He is, therefore, in us first of all the Spirit of a filial interest in, and zeal for, whatever concerns the glory of our Father, teaching us to offer first the First Petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Hallowed be Thy NAME", and carrying us with the interests of Jesus throughout the world - "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is done in heaven", teaching us to look to God, not to ourselves or to the world, for the sustenance of life; to ask forgiveness in the spirit of forgiveness, to be "tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven us", and, conscious of our feebleness and frailty, to pray for continual protection and deliverance from that Evil One, "out of whose kingdom of darkness" God's love "translated us into the Kingdom of His dear Son".

'Thus, while there is uplifting in the Christian's fellowship with God, there is no pride. The spirit of Christian devotion is a spirit of humility, even as it is one of thanksgiving and joy. It is so, just because it is the filial spirit, wrought in us by the Spirit of the Son.<sup>1</sup>

Intercessory prayer thus begins with God, not with us. For it is He who, by the Holy Spirit, moves us to the work of intercession, to revel in the liberty of it and delight in the discharge of the obligation it imposes on all who follow Christ.

It is the Holy Spirit who generates brotherly affection. As the Fatherhood of God can be known only within the trust-relationship of commitment and obedience to Him, so too the bonds of charity and love between man and man are truly forged

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1. writing in The Pentecostal Gift, chapter VI (b), pp.106-107

only in the supernatural realm of grace. In the natural realm of self-centred living, many are the barriers which separate one man from another and prevent all from enjoying the unity of the family relationship bestowed by Him who is over all and in all. It is the Holy Spirit, working within the life of all who acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, who destroys these barriers and replaces them with an out-going, universal love. 'There is no question here of Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, freeman, slave; but Christ is all, and is in all.'<sup>1</sup> To yearn for the well-being of others (even though they be strangers) with the love that is normally associated only with the intimate family circle (and is not always found even there), and to express this yearning in terms of selfless intercession, is possible only by the supernatural compulsion of the Holy Spirit.

The surprising thing about the story of Pentecost<sup>2</sup> is not that there were ecstatic utterances and unusual audible and visible phenomena, but that men of some fifteen different nationalities should have been unified as a result of their common experience of the Holy Spirit. True, they were previously united as Jews and proselytes in Judaism, but only to a limited degree. Between the Jew and the proselyte there were certain rigid restrictions preventing full religious equality.<sup>3</sup> But the strong wind of the Spirit swept even these away. Similarly, the dying Stephen was able to echo his Lord's last prayer of love, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them,'<sup>4</sup> only because he was 'filled with the Holy Spirit.'<sup>5</sup>

Paul acknowledges the divine origin of Christian love when he writes in the letter to the Romans, 'God's love has flooded our inmost heart through the Holy Spirit He has given us.'<sup>6</sup> And again, 'I implore you by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love that the Spirit inspires, be my allies in the fight; pray to God for me...'<sup>7</sup>

In the celebrated hymn to love found in I Corinthians 13, this charity towards others is represented as the supreme gift of the Spirit. After the various gifts of the Spirit have been listed,<sup>8</sup> we read:

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1. Colossians 3:11, c.f. Galatians 3:28
  2. Acts 2:1-13
  3. particularly in matters of eating, worship, and marriage
  4. Acts 7:60
  5. Acts 7:55
  6. Romans 5:5
  7. Romans 15:30
  8. I Corinthians 12:4-11

I Cor 12:31-13:3 - 'The higher gifts are those you should aim at.

'And now I will show you the best way of all.

'I may speak in tongues of men or of angels, but if I am without love, I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal. I may have the gift of prophecy, and know every hidden truth; I may have faith strong enough to move mountains; but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may dole out all I possess, or even give my body to be burnt, but if I have no love, I am none the better.'

After describing some of the characteristic qualities of this love, Paul continues:

I Cor 13:13 - 'In a word, there are three things that last for ever: faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of them all is love.'

Love, in Paul's estimation, is the supreme gift it is in the power of the Spirit to bestow.

Again, in II Corinthians, love is depicted as the gift of the Spirit:

II Cor 6:6 - 'We recommend ourselves by the innocence of our behaviour, our grasp of truth, our patience and kindness; by gifts of the Holy Spirit, by sincere love...'

And in Paul's inventory of those qualities which are the fruit of the Spirit, love ranks first of all:

Gal 5:22 - 'The harvest of the Spirit is love...'

Finally, in writing to the Christians at Colossae, Paul rejoices in their 'God-given love.'<sup>1</sup>

It is explicit in the New Testament that Christian love is never conceived of but as the gift of the Holy Spirit, even the greatest of His gifts. It follows that the love of which we spoke as being the dynamic of intercession, the continuing constituent of intercession, and the expression of intercession in deed and action, is a love engendered by the secret and silent activity of the Holy Spirit. If intercessory prayer is to be an efficient and effective means for the accomplishment of the purposes of God, then those who engage in it should covet and fulfil the conditions necessary for receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

It is through the guidance of the Holy Spirit that we come to discern the will of God. We have spoken of the difficulty of being entirely sure of the will of God amidst the constantly changing circumstances of life, and the consequent problem of knowing precisely how to formulate our petitions. What we did not speak of, except in passing, is the Holy Spirit's function of leading us into a growing and deepening apprehension of God's mind and purpose. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us

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1. Colossians 1:8

to approach as close to certitude in discerning the will of God as our human finitude will allow.

In the fourth Gospel the Holy Spirit is constantly described as the Spirit of Truth, whose office it is to guide us into further truth at each gradation of our spiritual development:

Jn 14:16 - 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another to be your Advocate, who will be with you for ever - the Spirit of Truth.'

Jn 14:26 - 'Your Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and will call to mind all that I have told you.'

Jn 15:26 - 'When your Advocate has come, whom I will send you from the Father - the Spirit of truth that issues from the Father - he will bear witness to me.'

Jn 16:13 - 'When he comes who is the Spirit of truth, he will guide you into all the truth.'

The truth into which He is to lead us as we are able to bear and receive it will surely embrace the truth which is God's purpose both for our own life and the life of those for whom we pray.

In the Acts we read that God's will in particular situations was revealed to the Apostles through the guiding of the Spirit.

Acts 13:2 - 'While they were keeping a fast and offering worship to the Lord, the Holy Spirit said, "Set Barnabas and Saul apart for me, to do the work to which I have called them." Then, after further fasting and prayer, they laid their hands on them and let them go.'

God's purpose for the missionary strategy of the young Church is thus arrived at as a result of the Spirit's leading.

Acts 15:28-9 - 'It is the decision of the Holy Spirit, and our decision, to lay no further burden upon you beyond these essentials: you are to abstain from meat that has been offered to idols, from blood, from anything that has been strangled, and from fornication.'

Here a most difficult, controversial, and far-reaching decision is arrived at through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

It is perhaps a passage in the letter to the Romans that tells us more explicitly than any other of the Spirit's essential role in leading us into a right understanding of God's will:

Ro 8:26-27a - 'In the same way the Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness. We do not even know how we ought to pray, but through our inarticulate groans the Spirit himself is pleading for us, and God who searches our inmost being knows what the Spirit means...'

Of this passage J.S.McEwan writes: 'The difficulty of shaping the prayers of the sinful human mind into a form acceptable to God is suggested by the unutterable groanings of the Spirit. The necessity of this form of intercession is to be found in

human ignorance. While we know in a general way that God's will for us is the perfecting of our salvation, we are ignorant of what this may involve in daily living, so that we might easily pray contrary to God's will. The Spirit, however, knows not only our mind but also the mind of God, and is therefore able to frame our prayers in accordance with the divine purpose.<sup>1</sup>

The same principle is suggested later in the same epistle:

Ro 9:1 - 'I am speaking the truth as a Christian, and my own conscience, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, assures me it is no lie...'

And in the first letter to the Corinthians Paul again acknowledges the capacity of the Spirit to lead a man into a right perception of the mind of Christ and the purpose of God:

I Cor 2:15,16 - 'A man gifted with the Spirit can judge the worth of everything, but is not himself subject to judgement by his fellow-men. For (in the words of Scripture) "who knows the mind of the Lord? Who can advise him?" We, however, possess the mind of Christ.'

The inference is that this is so only because of the counsel of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, there is a passage in Galatians. While written without reference to the subject of intercession, it may, without undue distortion of meaning, be happily applied to it.

Gal 5:16-18 - 'If you are guided by the Spirit you will not fulfil the desires of your lower nature. That nature sets its desires against the Spirit, while the Spirit fights against it... but if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.'

Intercession is essentially an activity to be carried on by the higher, more spiritual nature, as distinct from the lower nature Paul refers to here. It is the Holy Spirit who alone makes possible the predominance of this higher nature, sensitive to the will of God, over the lower, ruled by our own selfish and base desires. Thus it is the Holy Spirit who is responsible for our prayers being in accordance with the will of God.

H.J.Wotherspoon's words on this subject are illuminating: 'It is perhaps in the act of Intercession, the typical and supreme form of Christian prayer, that such care and submission (in the petitions we bring in His name) are most requisite. For intercession is not, as sometimes would seem to be thought, an urging of human desires upon the divine intention; it is not a conflict of our will with that of God, nor an effort to change the current of the Eternal purpose. This will be evident if we consider that to intercede is the distinctive office of Christ, Who is the express image of the Father with Whom he intercedes,

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1. writing in A Theological Word Book of the Bible, p.171

and to Whom He is constantly offered in perfectness of delight in the Father's will. Intercession is the expression of the divine will. It is the endeavour to set out before God the fulness of His own intention; which lingers of accomplishment until it has gained our conformity, until it is put in our mind and written in our heart - until God sees it reflected back from us to Him as comprehended and loved, His will become our prayer. Then the Spirit rejoices in us; for "His groaning" is to find utterance in earth as in Heaven for the mind of Christ, teaching us to pray for all that the Father purposes in Christ. It is therefore in knowledge of the mind of Christ, as identical with the purpose of the Father, that our intercession must find both its liberty and its limitation - both its self-restraint and its scope. It may utter all that it knows of the travail of Christ's soul. It may say after Him whatever it knows that He says, as He pleads before the Mercy Seat. It may spread itself wide as the shelter which He throws over His own, and far as the hope in which He waits the time which the Father has kept in His own power. It dwells in the light, as Christ is in the light, and may not look into the outer darkness. But it must know no self-will. Outside of Him it can do nothing. It is a voice repeating, as best it may, the heavenly Intercession. Beyond Christ's prayer it has no prayer. It abides in Him, and His word abides in it; it asks and receives, and its joy is full - in measure as it recognises itself as a divine activity of the Spirit of the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

It is therefore manifest that the Holy Spirit has an irreplaceable part in intercessory prayer in bringing us into ever-closer kinship with the mind of Christ, so that our prayer becomes identified with His nature and spirit. Without this direction our prayer, even at its most eloquent, would consist only of meaningless babblings and vain repetitions.

It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to co-operate with God. As in much of our thinking about God and His ways, we are here presented with a paradox. It is we who work; yet it is also God who works within us by His Spirit, enabling us to do that which He desires. So Paul writes, 'You must work out your own salvation in fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you, inspiring both the will and the deed, for his own chosen purpose.'<sup>2</sup> It is this paradox, of God inspiring both the will and the deed, which predisposes us to believe that it is the

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1. writing in The Pentecostal Gift, chapter VI (a), p.100

2. Philippians 2:12

Holy Spirit who enables us fully to work with God.

We have established that for our effective co-operation with Him God has need in us of qualities of application, perseverance, and faith. In large measure each is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

It is the Holy Spirit who begets within us the will to apply ourselves to intercession with all diligence and potency. Whereas our natural inclinations work counter to the spirit of sacrificial and unremitting application which effective intercessory prayer demands, yet, 'if you are guided by the Spirit you will not fulfil the desires of your lower nature. That nature sets its desires against the Spirit, while the Spirit fights against it.'<sup>1</sup> It is the Holy Spirit who introduces the steel into a man's soul which fits him for the work of earnest supplication: 'I kneel in prayer to the Father... that out of the treasures of His glory he may grant you strength and power through his Spirit in your inner being.'<sup>2</sup> It is the Holy Spirit who moves us to devote ourselves unreservedly to the toil of prayer: 'Give yourselves wholly to prayer and entreaty; pray on every occasion in the power of the Spirit.'<sup>3</sup> And it is the Holy Spirit who fortifies us for the demanding action of intercession: 'Continue to pray in the power of the Spirit.'<sup>4</sup> Only the man who through faith in and commitment to Jesus Christ is possessed of the Holy Spirit will be capable of applying himself unintermittingly in the way **availing prayer** demands.

In like manner, it is the Holy Spirit who helps us to persevere in prayer, often in the face of much discouragement and little obvious success. In describing the love which is the gift of the Spirit, Paul writes, 'there is no limit to its... endurance.'<sup>5</sup> As love is the Spirit's gracious gift, so too is the endurance which is a constituent of it. In Paul's catalogue of the lovely qualities which are the fruit of the Spirit, three fit a man for perseverance in prayer: 'The harvest of the Spirit is... patience... fidelity... self-control.'<sup>6</sup> To continue in the vocation of intercession a man will need limitless patience, regarding time not from the human but from the divine point of view; he will need inexhaustible reserves of that faithfulness to his self-chosen assignment which alone will preserve him steadfast when the way is uphill and arduous; and his inner life will need to be rigidly disciplined, marked by increasing self-

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1. Galatians 5:16,17  
2. Ephesians 3:14,16  
3. Ephesians 6:18

4. Jude 20  
5. I Corinthians 13:7  
6. Galatians 5:22

mastery and self-control. And in one further passage we see that not only the faculty for applying oneself in prayer, but the power to endure as well, is the gift of the Spirit: 'Pray on every occasion in the power of the Spirit; to this end keep watch and persevere, always interceding for all God's people.'<sup>1</sup> It will be characteristic of the man whose life is truly indwelt by the Spirit that he is unflagging in his devotion to the ministry of intercession.

Thirdly, that faith which is alive with a sense of the omnipotence of God and which boldly besieges the ramparts of heaven in fervent prayer, is a gift of the Holy Spirit. In a passage where Paul is tabling the gifts of the Holy Spirit, he states this expressly: 'Another, by the same Spirit, is granted faith.'<sup>2</sup> In the passage quoted earlier dealing with Christian love, one of its distinguishing characteristics is faith: 'There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith...'<sup>3</sup> And again, faith is specified as being among the three gifts of the Spirit that always endure: 'there are three things that last for ever: faith...'<sup>4</sup> The faith which we have described as being indispensable for effective intercession is directly dependent on the assurance of God's Fatherhood mediated to the believer through the activity of the Holy Spirit.

Because He is the source of our resolve to apply ourselves wholeheartedly to sacrificial prayer on behalf of others; of our indefatigability in continuing with unflinching importunity; and of that faith which refuses ever to disbelieve that with God all things are possible, we assert that it is the Holy Spirit who empowers us to co-operate effectively with God in bringing the forces of healing, goodness, and creative energy to bear upon men in their varying circumstances and needs. Marcus Dill has this in mind when he writes: 'Christian prayer is thus (like the work of sanctification, of which it is indeed an instrument and part) essentially a divine activity - a joint work of the divine and of the human in the person of the believer in Christ. The Spirit comes to us from God - "which we have of God", says the Apostle; He regenerates, awakes, enlightens us: He speaks in us; not we whom He has regenerated speak, desire, and pray with Him; it is our desires, though He hath implanted them, that He utters and develops. By the purity, the strength, the clearness of our response may

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1. Ephesians 6:18b,19  
 2. I Corinthians 12:9  
 3. I Corinthians 13:7  
 4. I Corinthians 13:13

our individual advancement in the Christian path be measured. But our goal is indicated by the direction in which, under His manuduction, we are journeying. The Spirit who is our Helper now wills not to leave us till He has done that which He hath spoken to us of, and changed us from glory to glory after the image of Jesus Christ. The fellowship begun on earth will be perfected in heaven, and all the desires of our soul will be satisfied in that day.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, it is the Holy Spirit who does subjectively within us what the ascended Christ does objectively for us. It is not easy to draw an unambiguous distinction between the work of the Holy Spirit for men, and the work of the risen, ascended Christ. This is a subject awaiting further theological research. Perhaps the most we are able to say at present is that the work of the ascended Christ is performed objectively, external to and independent of our life, whereas the work of the Holy Spirit is transacted subjectively, within the heart and mind of the believer. Each is a requisite complement of the other: the Holy Spirit mediates to and realises in the life of men that which Christ does eternally on their behalf in the heavenly places. Apart from this subjective mediation and realisation the objective work of Christ could never take on personal significance; but for the objective work of Christ the subjective work of the Spirit would be devoid of all content. Therefore, in intercession, what Christ does extrinsically for and with us, the Holy Spirit does within and through us. And both functions are but complementary aspects of a single whole.

It is the Holy Spirit who points us to Christ, who, in P.T.Forsyth's phrase, makes Him our contemporary. 'When your Advocate has come, whom I will send you from the Father - the Spirit of Truth that issues from the Father - he will bear witness to me.'<sup>2</sup> The term Advocate, *paraklētōs*, meaning one who is called to a man's side to lend him his assistance, suggests that He pleads within us the truth historically revealed in Christ (he will bear witness to me). This is the thought which inspired Alfred Vine when he wrote the hymn:

'Christ is our Advocate on high;  
Thou art our Advocate within:  
O plead the truth, and make reply  
To every argument of sin.'<sup>3</sup>

Not only does the ascended Christ intercede for men, yearning

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1. op.cit., pp.109-110

2. John 15:26, italics mine

3. The Methodist Hymn Book, hymn 285, verse 3

for them to find fulness of life in God, but the Holy Spirit exercises the same office within men, impelling them to respond to God and yield Him their loyalty, allegiance, and love. Thus in the passage quoted earlier from Paul's letter to the Romans, we see that what Christ prays for in the glory of the Father, the Spirit prays within our hearts, and both prayers are the same, for in each God's purpose is perfectly known: 'We do not even know how we ought to pray, but through our inarticulate groans the Spirit himself is pleading for us, and God who searches our inmost being knows what the Spirit means, because He pleads for God's own people in God's own way.'<sup>1</sup>

In our intercessions for others we are never alone. The ascended Christ is continually praying with us and for us, and He graciously owns us as fellow-labourers with Him.<sup>2</sup> The Holy Spirit is continually praying in us and through us, striving inwardly for the actualisation of those ends for which the glorified Christ strives at the right hand of God, and it is our joy to add the weight of our own endeavour to His. Apart from the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, fulfilling and complementing the work of one another, our labours in prayer would be unrewarding and barren.

To summarize the findings of this section, the Holy Spirit alone makes possible the ministry of intercessory prayer. He it is who assures us that God is Father, graciously permitting us to bring to Him with the confidence and freedom of children the needs of ourselves and of others. He it is who enables us to know one another as brethren, and to be so stirred with concern and care for one another that we gladly yield ourselves to this office. He it is who assists us to discern the will of God and pray in true accord with the nature and character of Christ. He it is who nerves us for our formidable assignment, investing us with the will to apply ourselves to it with all diligence, to persevere in it with all fidelity, exercising virile faith, as we co-operate with God to release the powers of heaven within the earthly lives of His children. He it is who does within those for whom we pray, and in our own life, what the ascended Christ does perpetually in the presence of the Father. Intercession that is begun, continued, and ended in the Holy Spirit is therefore prayer the effect of which will be incalculable.

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1. Romans 8:26b,27

2. this will be worked out more fully in the following chapter, section (i)

CHAPTER 3

INTERCESSION AND THE CHURCH

Consideration will now be given to the way in which intercessory prayer finds its full and proper expression in the life and worship of the Christian Church. The chapter is divided into four sub-sections:

- (i) Intercession is treated of as being supremely an activity of the Church, the Body of Christ;
- (ii) The position and function of the Intercessions in some of the representative classical liturgies are analysed;
- (iii) Some of the historic forms of Intercession in public worship are examined; and
- (iv) Present-day Methodist worship is compared with primitive practice and criticised in the light of the principles delineated.

(i) INTERCESSION IS SUPREMEY AN ACTIVITY OF THE CHURCH

'Christian prayer is impossible outside the context of the life of the people of God and without constant reference to the common life of the people of God. "The breaking of bread and the prayers" were the distinctive notes of the primitive apostolic community as we have it recorded in the Acts and the very notion of prayer in Christ involves the notion of prayer in and with and for His Body. Prayer in the Bible is, of course, always personal but it is never private. The modern idea that prayer is, in effect, simply a matter between the individual soul and God and that it can exist quite adequately independently of the believing community would have been completely unintelligible to a Biblical Christian, who accepted as axiomatic the "corporate personality" of the New Israel in Jesus Christ... That prayer and the life of the Church are inseparably bound up with each other is, of course, fundamental to Christian faith

in all centuries but the point has to be somewhat laboured because many people in these days, especially within Protestantism, have either explicitly denied it and have considered the Church a virtual irrelevance in the life of prayer or have, in practice, regarded it as of trivial importance.' These words of Daniel T. Jenkins<sup>1</sup> serve to underline the necessity of regarding intercession as the joy and duty, not merely of the individual Christian in his private devotion, but even more, of the Church in her public worship. That this should be is the logical implication of all that was said in the previous chapter. Each of the doctrines there discussed as related to intercession may and should be referred to the doctrine of the Church.

It is only within the Church and the kerygma, the diakonia, and the koinonia that are peculiarly hers, that the concept of God as One whose nature is holy Father-love, is realisable or attainable in its richness and fulness. The assumption that He can be so known as Father outside the life of the Christian community, for example through the Bible alone, is false. The Bible is the Church's book: written, preserved, translated, and expounded within the context of its life. Apart from the Church there would be no Bible. Alan Richardson writes, 'Jesus did not, of course, teach the liberal protestant notion that God is Father of all men qua men and that all men are therefore brothers; God is Father only of those who have by faith and repentance entered into his reign and accepted the obedience of sons.'<sup>2</sup> In the New Testament an inescapable obligation on the Christian requiring this obedience is that of taking his place in the corporate life of the Body of Christ. 'Just as you cannot say "citizen" without implying the State, so, the New Testament teaches, you cannot say "Christian" without in turn implying the Church.'<sup>3</sup> The doctrine of the Fatherhood of God, the basis of Christian intercession, is a doctrine discoverable within the Christian community alone, and the filial relationship is one that can be expressed within the Christian community alone.

The brotherhood of man, transcending all natural and man-made divisions and barriers, and issuing in that charity which is the dynamic, the continuing characteristic, and the expression of properly Christian intercession, is as well a reality attainable within the New Israel alone. It is within the family of the Church, where God is Father and the Son our Elder Brother, that our Lord's new commandment, 'Love one

1. op.cit., pp.80f.

2. An Introduction to the Theology of the NT, p.149, c.f.

Matthews' distinction, p.23 supra; a sounder view than Richardson's

3. H.R.Mackintosh, The Divine Initiative, p.89

another; as I have loved you, so you are to love one another',<sup>1</sup> becomes possible of fulfilment as nowhere else, for it is within that fellowship that this love finds its source and inspiration. 'When Christianity begins, we find men in the Church conscious of a new relationship to God and to one another, for which the most central and simple term was love.'<sup>2</sup> Outsiders, sensible of the warmth of their fellowship, instinctively said, How these Christians love one another! It is this family then, the Church, and not merely the individuals who compose it, that is called to manifest such loving concern and compassion for the world as issues in vicarious intercession on the world's behalf.

Prayer, in accordance with the will of God and in harmony with the mind, nature, and intention of Jesus Christ, is the vocation of the Christian community. Through his participation in the life of the Church each member of it grows in his understanding of the opportunities and obligations God offers to him and imposes upon him, and with his fellow members he learns to accept the one and discharge the other with faithfulness and discernment. It is with the Church in view that H.J. Wotherspoon writes: 'The mind of Christ... finds in us an imperfect organ. We who are quickened in the Spirit are being also transformed in the fashion of our thoughts; but not every thought, even in prayer, is as yet brought into captivity to Him. The Spirit helps our infirmity, He does not abolish it. We know not what to pray for as we ought; but the Spirit Himself pleads for us by our own lips - with groanings to which we can give no adequate interpretation nor any full utterance; yet He that searches the hearts - God who hears our stammering as one listens to the broken words of an invalid or child and gathers their sense - He knows the mind of the Spirit: knows, not only what we have said, but what Christ desired by our means to say. For the Spirit intercedes according to the will of God; and shall not God understand?'<sup>3</sup> If the Holy Spirit is most truly at work within the community of Christ's calling, then His function to aid men in their endeavours to harmonise their prayer with the purpose of God, is there most truly capable of fulfilment.

It is the chief commission of the Church to co-operate with God in establishing His Kingdom on earth in which sinful men are both reconciled to Him and come to be ruled by Him. 'Intercessory prayer is an aspect of this reconciling ministry.

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1. John 13:34

2. James Moffatt, Love in the New Testament, p.32

3. op.cit., p.98

We need to believe that God will work through His praying Church to heal and restore all life. Teams of intercessors should be trained to pray for the needy, the sick, the mentally distressed, the morally corrupt, and the spiritually dead. Intercession should become the climate of pastoral counselling, social service, evangelism, education, and the other spiritual services of the Church to the community. We have not realised the extent and range of prayer... It takes long training to pray with power for such leaders of distant affairs as Presidents, Congressmen, United Nations Assemblies, and foreign statesmen. It takes even greater intensity to bring all the suffering folk of the world, friend and enemy alike, before God in intercession. God is waiting for a Church which will do this. Through such a circulation of the Spirit the whole climate of the world might be changed. Then the other healing forces of culture, trade, negotiation, learning, and the rest will be released from the downward spiral of ruin.<sup>1</sup>

As we have seen,<sup>2</sup> the High Priestly prayer of the Incarnate Lord for those whom the Father had given to be with Him prefigures the intercession of the Ascended Lord. He who willed the Church to become His Body, He whose post-resurrection appearances were to the members of the new community alone, both shares in her corporate prayer and unites it with His own perfect prayer on behalf of the world He came to save. Again, Wotherspoon's words are a felicitous expression of this thought: 'The corporate ministry of the flock of God before the Father is a mode of intercession of our Lord; for the Church is the creation and habitation of His Spirit. It is His Body, inasmuch as it is vitalised by His soul, informed by His mind, and directed by His will to acts which are proper to Himself, and which it falls to the Church to perform, only because the life of the Church is actuated through the Holy Ghost by Christ, Who in the midst of the Church praises God. The presence of Christ in the Church which all Christians confess must not be interpreted to mean that by an ethical process the Church is permeated by His teaching, and exhibits His temper: it means the transmission to the Church through the Divine Spirit, as mediated by Christ, of the actual energy of that humanity which is taken into the Godhead. It means an objective extension of the personal consciousness and volition of the ascended Son of Man - an actual presence of His complete life, correlating to Himself and to each other the individual human personalities which this Divine-

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1. John B. Magee, op.cit., pp.7f  
2. chapter 2, pp.52f

human vitality seizes and assimilates to form of them for itself an organism - His Body... Our Lord, then, fulfils the ends of His Incarnation in both spheres of His activity, the Heavenly places and this world - there in that body in which He is ascended and glorified, and here in His Body, the Church, one mind and one will fulfilling the same acts there and here.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the sphere in which the Holy Spirit is especially operative is the Christian Church. 'Everywhere over the world the Spirit is seen hovering near to men, touching their wills, swaying their minds, guiding them, but nowhere is He seen in personal presence. This is the special glory of the Church; the indwelling presence of the Spirit - the Holy Spirit. The Church is His habitation: she is the temple of the Spirit of God.'<sup>2</sup> The Church is the fellowship of those living in and by the Spirit. So H.Wheeler Robinson writes: 'In the Epistle most directly concerned with the nature and purpose of the Church three metaphors are employed to characterise it, and in each of them the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit is stated or implied. The Church is the Temple of God, built on the foundation of (Christian) apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as its cornerstone and constructive principle, to be a habitation of God in the Spirit. The Church is the Body of Christ, Who is its head; the moral unity of its members should correspond with the unity of the animating Spirit, that it may grow into the fulness of Christ. The Church is the bride of Christ, loved by Him to the point of sacrificial surrender, cleansed by Him through a baptism resulting in unblemished consecration (a baptism of water which represents the inner baptism of the one Spirit)... These characteristics were not inherent possessions; they were all derived from her adoption by God the Father, to whom she had access through Christ in one Spirit.'<sup>3</sup>

It is therefore clear that each of the doctrines we discussed in the previous chapter as being an indispensable part of the background to intercession, is bound up inseparably with the doctrine of the Church. Intercessory prayer, it follows, is pre-eminently an activity to be carried on by and in the family of God's gracious calling in Christ Jesus. This prompts Gregory Dix to say, 'Many of the more devout of our laity have come to suppose that intercession is a function of prayer better discharged in private than by liturgical prayer of any kind, so unsatisfying is the share which our practice allows them. The

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1. op.cit., pp.93-94

2. A.Stuart Martin writing in The Pentecostal Gift, p.42

3. The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit, pp.140f

notion of the priestly prayer of the whole church, as the prayer of Christ the world's Mediator through His body, being "that which makes the world to stand", in the phrase of an early christian writer, has been banished from the understanding of our laity. Their stifled instinct that they, too, have a more effective part to play in intercession than listening to someone else praying, drives them to substitute private and solitary intercession for the prayer of the church as the really effective way of prayer, instead of regarding their private prayer as deriving its effectiveness from their membership of the church. So their hold on the corporate life is weakened and their own prayers are deprived of that inspiration and guidance which come from participating in really devout corporate prayer.<sup>1</sup>

Just how debased intercession can become when divorced from the corporate life of the Church, is illustrated by A.G. Hebert in a quotation from the 'This England' column of the New Statesman: 'Would any one like to send out Coué thoughts for the success of a girl who has just finished the opening chapter of her first novel? - HER MOTHER. Advt. in Morning Post.' His comment is: 'This represents the final degradation of Intercession, when it has been separated from Christian faith and the fellowship of Christian worship, and has come to be treated as a psychological method for promoting human well-being.'<sup>2</sup>

The reasons for this separation of intercession from the worship, fellowship, and teaching of the Church and for its being increasingly regarded as a private rather than a corporate activity are analysed with considerable penetration by David G. Peck.<sup>3</sup> He shows how, not only in religion, but also in what is sometimes described as 'social life', in work, in suburban and urban living, and even in government and politics, man has lost sight of the truth that 'all true personal life is social and all true social life is personalist.'<sup>4</sup> We are not presently concerned with the reasons for this situation (though we should do well to have a firm grasp of them), but with the fact that however debased and impoverished our present-day conception of intercession may have become, nevertheless, at its highest and best, it is an activity of the Church. Bearing in mind the distinction between 'private' and 'personal' we may well conclude this section with W.D. Maxwell's observation: 'Personal and corporate prayer together comprise the full Christian experience

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1. The Shape of the Liturgy, p.45

2. Liturgy and Society, p.185

3. in his Living Worship

4. ibid, p.66

of worship.<sup>1</sup> Personal prayer by each member within the corporate Body, and the corporate life of the Body surrounding, inspiring, and completing the personal prayer of each of its members, this is the full action of Christian prayer. Private intercession, in the individualistic and atomistic sense, is a regrettable modern aberration.

(ii) THE POSITION AND FUNCTION OF THE INTERCESSIONS  
IN SOME OF THE CLASSICAL LITURGIES

(a) Position. It would be highly convenient if the contention that intercession is primarily the responsibility and activity of the Church could be supported and substantiated by reference to the position of the intercessions in primitive practice. If, as certain writers suggest (and we shall presently criticise their suggestion), the intercessions in the earlier liturgies are not begun until after the dismissal of the catechumens, and are found either in the pro-anaphoral mass of the faithful or in the anaphora itself, then it could be said that intercession was primitively conceived of as being the vocation of the Church alone, and not of those who had not yet become members of it. In fact, the evidence for this supposition is not so neat and tidy as they would like us to believe. While the conclusion of section (i) above can be evidenced in the early liturgies, this cannot be done in any facile fashion. Thus, before attempting to argue our central point, we must pause to assess the contentions of three writers who tend to oversimplify the issue before us.

Firstly, Dom Gregory Dix writes: 'Thus far the synaxis had been in fact what it was in name, a "public meeting", open to all who wished to attend, jews, pagans, enquirers of all kinds, as well as to the catechumens preparing to be received into the church by baptism and confirmation. The church had a corporate duty to preach the Gospel to the world and to witness to its truth. But prayer was another matter. Thus far there had been no prayer of any kind, but only instruction.

'The church is the Body of Christ and prays "in the name" of Jesus, according to the semitic idiom which underlies the phrase, "in his Person"... The world has a right to hear the Gospel; but those who have not yet "put on Christ" by baptism and thus as "sons" received his Spirit by confirmation cannot join in the offering of prevailing prayer. All who had not entered the order of the laity were therefore without exception

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1. Concerning Worship, p.12

turned out of the assembly after the sermon.<sup>1</sup>

The evidence in the first four centuries AD is too fragmentary and slight, and what there is is too conflicting on several points (as might be expected, when practice had not become anything like uniform), to bear the weight of Dix's precise pronouncement. To assert that at the synaxis there was no prayer of any kind is to ignore the recital of the psalms, for example, the gradual, 'a psalm sung between the lections, so named because it was sung at the gradus or steps of the altar,'<sup>2</sup> which were always a vehicle of prayer. And that all who had not entered the order of the laity were without exception turned out of the assembly after the sermon cannot be substantiated by the early evidence, simply because there is so little of it.

The second writer is L. Duschesne. In describing a primitive service in the East as the Apostolic Constitutions enable the student to reconstruct it, he writes, 'After the homily the various classes of persons who are not entitled to be present at the holy mysteries are dismissed. The catechumens are sent away first... The same form is observed in regard to the energumens, the competents, that is to say, the catechumens who are preparing to receive baptism, and finally, the penitents.

'The faithful communicants, who are now alone in the Church, give themselves to prayer. Prostrating themselves towards the East, they listen to the deacon while he says the petitions of the Litany: "For the peace and welfare of the world... For the holy Catholic and Apostolic Church... For the bishops, priests... For the benefactors of the Church... For the neophytes... For the sick... For those who are travelling... For young children... For those who have gone astray, etc." The congregation join in these petitions by the supplication, Kyrie Eleison! The Litany is brought to an end by a special formulary: "Save us, restore us again, O God, by Thy mercy." Then the voice of the bishop makes itself heard above the silence, pronouncing in a grave and dignified manner a solemn prayer.

'Thus ends the first part of the liturgy, that which the Church borrowed from the ancient usage of the synagogue.'<sup>3</sup>

Two points made by Duschesne call for comment. He states that the prayers are only begun after the dismissal of the catechumens, energumens, and competents. Yet these 'dismissals'

1. op.cit., p.41, italics mine

2. W.D.Maxwell, An Outline of Christian Worship, p.44

3. Christian Worship, pp.58-59

in the Apostolic Constitutions, Book VIII, are accompanied by prayers for each group. It might, of course, with conviction be argued that these prayers, recited with the catechumens, energumens, and competents present, were really an act of the ministry of the faithful on behalf of those being dismissed, and were not shared by them. But even this is doubtful, for the deacon says, 'Pray ye that are catechumens...' and so in each class. But the rubric adds, 'Let all the faithful pray for them with devotion, saying, Lord have mercy.' Secondly, it is not known whether the faithful alone made the response, Kyrie Eleison!, nor can it be established. From other sources it appears that in some places at least the catechumens prayed kneeling and the faithful standing with hands outspread.<sup>1</sup>

Thirdly, we quote Neale and Littledale: 'And now, approaching the altar, (the Pontiff) begins the work of the prayers, manifesting himself to be the minister of the mystery. And forthwith the catechumens are dismissed, and the faithful are exhorted to remain; because that moment represents the season of the end of the world. "For", saith he, "the Gospel must first be preached throughout all the world, and then shall the end be." And again he saith, "He shall send forth His Angels, and they shall sever the wicked from the good." Thus also the Church doth when she commands the catechumens to depart, and the faithful alone to remain. Whence also we may learn how careful the faithful ought to be that they communicate not with them with whom there ought to be no communion; and this is more particularly the duty of priests. For if it is unlawful to associate in prayer, how much more the Sacrifice? Neither ought they to receive the oblations for the sacrifice of those faithful who are open and notorious sinners, but first to require from them penitence.'<sup>2</sup>

Maxwell thinks this cannot be established, and that if a canon existed forbidding the faithful and the catechumens to associate in prayer it must have referred to the Great Prayer of Consecration and Intercession.<sup>3</sup> All three of the writers quoted above assume that the disciplina arcani was universally practised. This assumption cannot be supported with evidence.

It is therefore hazardous to argue that before the fourth century AD there was no prayer in the 'Liturgy of the Catechumens'. This cannot be evidentially evinced. But the point we wish to argue, namely, that the intercessions in early

1. for example, the catacomb walls

2. Translations of the Primitive Liturgies, p.xxviii, Intro., italics mine

3. in private correspondence

liturgies were the work of the Church proper, can safely be centred on the 'Great Intercession', so-named not because it was the longest, but the most central and effective because it was bound up with the great act of consecration and offering. The 'Great Intercession', belonging to or closely associated with the Eucharistic prayer, was, as we hope to show, shared only with the faithful. This may be adduced from the liturgies translated by Neale and Littledale.<sup>1</sup> We shall look briefly at each.

The Liturgy of S.Mark has in it two sessions of intercessory prayer. The first, a fairly general prayer, is said in secret by the priest alone before the dismissal of the catechumens (but outside in the nave the deacon leads in intercessions).<sup>2</sup> Then, after the Sursum Corda, when only the faithful remain, the Church engages itself in the Great Prayer of Intercession before the Invocation of the Holy Spirit and the words of Institution.<sup>3</sup>

In S.James the Universal Litany of Intercession follows immediately after the expulsion of the catechumens and forms part of the mass of the faithful in the pro-anaphora, before the Invocation of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

S.Clement includes an intercessory prayer for the catechumens before their dismissal, probably prayed while they were present to impress upon them the high calling which was their's in Christ Jesus. But the Great Prayer of Intercession is begun only after they are dismissed and after the Invocation of the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

In the Liturgy of S.Chrysostom there are intercessions, included in a prayer of petition, before the catechumens are expelled, as well as a prayer on their behalf as in S.Clement. But after the dismissal<sup>6</sup> and the Invocation of the Holy Spirit,<sup>7</sup> the Diptychs of the Departed<sup>8</sup> and the Living<sup>9</sup> are read. After the Lord's prayer a comprehensive intercession follows, said in secret by the celebrant.

S.Basil follows the liturgy of S.Chrysostom almost exactly. The Great Prayer of Intercession is said secretly after the reading of the Diptychs for the Living and the Dead in the anaphora.<sup>10</sup>

The last of the liturgies translated by Neale and Littledale is that of the Church at Malabar. There is a prayer

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1. op.cit.

2. *ibid*, p.10

3. *ibid*, pp.14-21

4. *ibid*, pp.42-43

5. *ibid*, p.75

6. *ibid*, p.112

7. *ibid*, p.114

8. *ibid*, p.116

9. *ibid*, p.117

10. *ibid*, pp.137f

of intercession<sup>1</sup> before the catechumens are expelled.<sup>2</sup> The General Intercession follows after the dismissal and the Institution,<sup>3</sup> and there is another prayer of intercession after the invocation of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

Because other translations of primitive liturgies are not readily available in English, we quote W.D. Maxwell in further support of our position.<sup>5</sup> According to Maxwell, in the liturgy as reconstructed from the works of Justin (second century AD) the Intercessions form part of the liturgy of the Upper Room, and are begun after the Invocation of the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> In the typical worship of the late third and early fourth centuries, the Great Prayer of Intercession again is seen to form part of the liturgy of the Upper Room, following on the dismissal of the catechumens and the words of Institution.<sup>7</sup> In the Clementine liturgy, contained in Book VIII of the Apostolic Constitutions (about 380 AD), the Great Prayer of Intercession is comprehended in the liturgy of the Upper Room, after the dismissal of the catechumens, and after the words of Institution, but before the Epiclesis.<sup>8</sup> In the Gallican rite the reading of the Diptychs took place in the liturgy of the Upper Room after the dismissal of the catechumens,<sup>9</sup> and in some Gallican rites Intercessions followed after the consecration, but, says Maxwell, 'whether these belonged to the Gallican rite proper is not certain.'<sup>10</sup>

To sum up, we are bound to recognise that because there was no universally accepted practice no generalisation is invulnerable. In the second century it looks as if the intercessions were less complex than say in the fourth and fifth centuries, but became more extensive then<sup>11</sup> and were later reduced<sup>12</sup> by dropping the intercessions for catechumens, because (a) there were fewer catechumens who were adults, and (b) brevity was desired. However, it would seem that in the primitive Christian communities the Intercessions was regarded as being, at its climatic point, the office of the faithful alone, those who comprised the true Church, the Body of Christ. The Great Intercession would be begun only after the dismissal of the catechumens, either in the concluding moments of the Liturgy of the Word, or else in the Liturgy of the Upper Room. But from the fourth century onwards this position came to be modified by

1. *ibid*, pp.149-152

2. *ibid*, p.157

3. *ibid*, p.165

4. *ibid*, p.167

5. An Outline of Christian Worship

6. *ibid*, pp.12,13

7. *ibid*, p.17

8. *ibid*, p.26

9. *ibid*, p.49

10. *ibid*, p.51

11. e.g., Apostolic Const.

12. e.g., Ss. Mark, James, Chrysostom & the Roman Mass

two factors, the one sociological, the other theological.

The sociological architect of change was the alteration that took place in the discipline of the various orders (catechumens, energumens, competents, and penitents) when, under Constantine, Christianity became a religia licita. The doors of the Church were then thrown wide open to all who would enter, and gradually the rigid primitive discipline broke down as more and more people formerly antagonistic or merely indifferent to it came to embrace the Faith, even if only nominally. This had the eventual effect of fusing into a single rite the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Upper Room. Gregory Dix makes much of this, but as there is not sufficient evidence to show that from the beginning and everywhere only the faithful were admitted to the intercessions, and as he cites little evidence in support of his assertions, we quote his words with the reservation that they give only a probable and generally true reconstruction of this process. 'Strictly speaking, there was no conscious or deliberate process of fusion. As whole populations became nominally christian, there ceased to be anybody not entitled and indeed obliged as a member of the faithful to be present at both rites. Confirmation was now received in infancy along with baptism by the children of christian parents. In a christian population the only people whose attendance at the eucharist could be prevented were the excommunicated... It is not surprising that the distinction between the faithful and the excommunicate became too difficult to enforce as far as mere presence at the eucharist was concerned... The dismissal of penitents (i.e., those under discipline) vanished from most rites in the fifth-sixth century even in form, and was no more than an empty survival where it remained.

'The deacons continued to proclaim the dismissal of the catechumens before the intercessory prayers as in the pre-Nicene church, but there were ceasing to be any catechumens to depart. By the seventh century this, too, had become a mere form. But where the prayers were kept up in some way at their primitive position after the sermon, the deacon's dismissal of the catechumens was generally maintained as a sort of prologue to them, though the bishop's departure-blessing of the catechumens which preceded it usually fell into disuse. Where the precedent - set at Jerusalem as early as c.AD 335 - of transferring the intercessions from the synaxis to the second half of the eucharistic prayer had been followed, the deacon's dismissal of the catechumens was apt to disappear altogether from the rite...

'With the disappearance or toning down of the dismissals the most emphatic mark of division between fully "public" and specifically "christian" worship was weakened, and the two services held one after the other on Sunday mornings soon came to be thought of as a single whole, because the same congregation now attended the whole of both rites as a matter of course. This stage had been reached in many places by the end of the fifth century. By the end of the sixth the holding of either rite without the other had come to be regarded as an anomaly.'<sup>1</sup>

Dix begs the question in postulating a primitive and widespread separation of the synaxis and the eucharist. This cannot too readily be assumed.<sup>2</sup> But where they were separate rites, the intercessory prayers of the faithful would conclude the synaxis. This led to the insertion of further intercessions into the Eucharist where this was a separate rite, sometimes before, sometimes after, the Sanctus. Thus when the two rites became one, celebrated without any distinct break, the general result was a duplication between 'the old intercessions, the "prayers of the faithful", at the close of the synaxis, and the new intercessory developments within the eucharistic prayer. The old "prayers of the faithful" tended after a while to atrophy in most rites, or even disappear altogether, as at Rome and in the Syriac S. James.'<sup>3</sup> Thus a lasting change in the position of the intercessions was brought about by a process of sociological upheaval.

Working side by side with this sociological factor was the theological. According to J.H.Srawley, 'originally it seems likely that all the intercessions took place before the anaphora began. But the influence of the newer developments in Eucharistic beliefs and practices, by defining more clearly the moment of consecration, and suggesting the thought of a "localised" presence of the Divine Victim in the Church's midst, promoted the tendency to regard the moments which followed upon the consecration as specially suitable for intercession. The first reference to the practice is in Cyril of Jerusalem, who... speaks of "intreating God for the common peace of the Churches over that sacrifice of propitiation", while he justifies prayers for the departed at this point in the service on the ground that "it will be a great help to those souls for whom prayer is offered, while the holy and awful sacrifice lies before us". Chrysostom... has language to a similar effect, and

1. op.cit., pp.436-7

2. c.f. Clement's Epistle to the Romans, the Didache, & Justin

3. ibid, p.171

Martyr.

speaks of the efficacy of such intercession which he compares to the petitions addressed to an Emperor while seated on his throne, or to the procuring of the release of captives on the occasion of an imperial triumph, in each case the particular moment affording the opportunity for successful pleading. This point of view marks a new epoch in Eucharistic devotion, and was destined eventually to produce a type of devotion in which attention came more and more concentrated upon the moment of consecration and the petitions addressed to the "present Lord", whereas in the earlier stages represented by Hippolytus, the Roman Canon, and (in the main) Sarapion and the liturgy of Adai and Mari, the action of the rite moves steadily forward to, and is concentrated upon, the approaching communion, without any such interruption as was created by the interposition of the intercessions.<sup>1</sup>

While Srawley is open to criticism at two points, for too blandly assuming that originally all the intercessions took place before the anaphora began and for regarding the intercessions as an 'interruption' (the point is that intercession was not an 'interruption' but was seen to be a coherent part of the Great Action, for Christians thought not only of their Lord, and of themselves, but also of the redemption of the world - and prayed specifically for it), we are indebted to him for laying bare the theological reason for the changed position of the intercessions in many of the liturgies. With this transference of the intercessions to a point in the service as close as possible to the prayer of consecration, the nature of the prayer itself came to be altered. From being a prayer of the people, it now came particularly in the West (for in the East the deacon's litanies led the devotion of the people) to be a prayer of the celebrant, said often in secret, the people merely joining in at the ecphonesis. The people in the West, and especially at Rome, now came to have a largely passive part to play in the Church's prayers of intercession, a radical and retrogressive departure from the primitive concept of the Church, composed of those ruled by the love of Christ 'flooding their inmost hearts through the Holy Spirit',<sup>2</sup> interceding together on behalf of the society and world in which it was set.

(b) Function. The purpose of the Church in the intercessions was to lift up the total needs of the whole world in an all-embracing concern to Him Whose world it is. No part of life was

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1. The Early History of the Liturgy, pp.227-8

2. Romans 5:5

disregarded; intercession was never scaled down to a merely parochial level. There is a richness, a variety, and an extensiveness in the range of the Church's intercession that indicates the strength of its belief in the sovereignty and providential care of the Father.

This is clearly illustrated at the Oblation in the liturgy of S. Mark:

'We pray and beseech Thee, O Lover of men, O good God:

'Remember, O Lord, the holy and only Catholic and Apostolic Church, which is from one end of earth to the other end of it, all peoples and all Thy flocks. Vouchsafe to all our hearts the peace of this life.

'The King, the military orders, the princes, the councils, the boroughs, every neighbourhood, our comings in and our goings out, set in order in all peace.

'O King of Peace, give to us Thy peace in concord and love: possess us, O God; beside Thee we know none other: we are called by Thy Name: quicken all our souls, and the death of sin shall not have dominion over us, nor over all Thy people.

'Them that are sick, O Lord, of Thy people, visit in Thy pity and mercies, and heal.

'Avert from them and from us all sickness and infirmity, drive away from them the spirit of weakness; heal them that are vexed of unclean spirits, them that are in prisons, or in mines, or in courts of justice, or with sentence given against them, or in bitter slavery, or tribute, have mercy on all, free all: for Thou art our God, He that sets free the bound, He that raises those that are in misery, the hope of the hopeless, the succour of the defenceless, the resurrection of the fallen, the harbour of the tempest-tost, the avenger of the afflicted. To every Christian soul that is in trouble, and that is a petitioner to Thee, give mercy, give remission, give refreshment. Furthermore, O Lord, heal the diseases of our souls, cure our bodily weaknesses, O Physician of souls and bodies; overseer of all flesh, oversee and heal us by Thy salvation.

'To our brethren that have departed from us, or are about to depart, in whatever place, give a fair journey, whether by land or rivers, or lakes, or highways, or in whatever way they may be travelling, restore them all everywhere to a tranquil harbour, to a safe harbour; vouchsafe to be their fellow-voyager and fellow-traveller. Give them back to their friends, rejoicing to the rejoicing, healthful to the healthful...

'Send down richly good showers on the places that need them and desire them; rejoice and renew by their descent the face of the earth, that in their drops it may be made glad, and may spring up. Raise up the waters of the river to their full measure; rejoice and renew by their ascent the face of the earth: water her furrows, multiply her increase. Bless, O Lord, the fruits of the earth. Preserve them continually whole and unhurt; preserve them to us for seed and for harvest. Bless also now, O Lord, the crown of the year of Thy goodness, for the poor of Thy people, for the widow, and for the orphan, for the proselyte, for all of us who have hope in Thee, and who are called by Thy Holy Name: for the eyes of all wait upon Thee, and Thou givest them their meat in due season. Thou that givest meat to all flesh, fill our hearts with joy and gladness, that we always, having all sufficiency in all things, may abound unto every good work, in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>1</sup>

1. Neale and Littledale, op.cit., pp.15ff.

It is manifest that for the primitive Church no realm of life was outside the purview of the Church's intercession. Friend and foe, good and bad, faithful and wayward, high and low, rich and poor, weak and strong, are all alike remembered before Him who is the Father of all. So too are the dead. 'The intercessory "prayers of the faithful" at the synaxis, like the petitions of the later litany which replaced them in the East, were general prayers - i.e., they spoke of classes of people... without specifying individuals. The congregation were no doubt expected to particularise silently those in whom each was personally interested during the pause between the bidding and the collect. The only names publicly mentioned seem to have been those of the Roman emperor and the local bishop. But while this public intercession "by categories" sufficed at the synaxis, the eucharist even in pre-Nicene times was felt to require something more personal, as the domestic gathering was the household of God.

'It may be that the need for particularisation was first felt at that peculiarly personal occasion, the eucharist offered for a departed christian, when S.Paul's teaching that the eucharist is always an anticipation of the judgement of God takes on a special poignancy. At all events, the earliest mention of the naming of an individual in the prayers of the eucharist proper, in the first epistle of S.Cyprian of Carthage, occurs in this connection.'<sup>1</sup>

Thus as early as AD 240 it was already the custom in Africa to name individual dead persons in the course of the Eucharistic prayer, at least at requiems and funerals. By the fourth century the names of the living were being read out as well, at least in Spain, in what Dix describes as 'practically a roll-call of the faithful',<sup>2</sup> and by the end of the fourth century the names of the living were being read out at Rome. These lists of names, whether of people either living or dead, would be of purely local composition and would personalise and particularise the more general intercessory prayers on behalf of each different category.

The Diptychs in the East were very different. These were not so much personal lists of local personages, either dead or living, whom the Church remembered parochially in its intercessions, as officially drawn up lists of important people, living and dead, whom the Church was officially urged to commemorate and remember in its prayer, very often because of

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1. Gregory Dix, op.cit., p.498

2. ibid, p.499

some political or diplomatic motive. The Diptychs of the East were thus more formal in composition than the more spontaneous lists of names in the West. But in both, it was believed that the dead as well as the living came within the orbit of the Church's concern and that prayers of intercession on behalf of both were equally necessary and efficacious.

And just as prayer was made for both the living and the dead, it was as well offered in a fellowship of both living and dead. The Church on earth was cognizant of its oneness with the Church in heaven, and of being joined together with it in union with her living Lord and great High Priest. As an example of this perception, we quote the prayer immediately before the priest's commemoration of the living and the dead in the liturgy of S. Basil the Great:

'That Thou wouldest unite all of us, who are partakers of the one Bread, and of the Chalice, to one another unto the fellowship of one Spirit, and not cause any of us to partake of the holy Body of Thy Christ unto judgement or condemnation, but that we may find mercy and grace with all Thy Saints, who have pleased Thee from the beginning of the world, Forefathers, Martyrs, Confessors, Teachers, and every just spirit, perfected in faith...'<sup>1</sup>

To recapitulate the findings of this section, the position of the Great Intercession, and sometimes of the intercessions ancillary to it, in the primitive liturgies is evidence that the work of interceding for the whole world was conceived as being something to be undertaken only by those constrained by the presence of the indwelling Christ within their heart and life, namely, those who were literally 'members' (organs or limbs) of the Church, militant on earth and triumphant in heaven. The Church's vocation was understood to entail the lifting up in faithful prayer to Him who is Lord of all the needs of both the living and the dead.

### (iii) THE FORMS OF INTERCESSION IN PUBLIC WORSHIP

The intercession of a Christian engaged in his personal devotions requires little or no form. In the secrecy and privacy of his own room, with the door shut behind him, he will plead with God as the Spirit moves him. He may pour out all that is upon his heart in a torrent of impassioned supplication; he may sit in concentrated silence for long periods, directing his thought of the love and power of God to the needs of those for whom he is moved with compassion; he may groan inarticulately with a concern too overwhelming to be expressed in any words;

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1. Neale and Littledale, op.cit., pp.136f.

he may even utter his prayer in tears and with crying. Each man will discover and apply that way of interceding appropriate to his personality, his mental and spiritual condition, and the situation for which he is praying. To expect personal intercession to be strictly formulated would be to stifle its spontaneity and fetter its freedom.

But intercession in public worship is another matter. Public worship, writes W.D.Maxwell, 'in one aspect is the act of worshipping believers showing forth in community what the Church believes concerning God. As public worship is public, it is part of its essential nature to do this... The Church on earth in its worship must unite with the Church in heaven and show forth to the world unmistakeably by ritual word and ceremonial action the glory and power it ascribes to God. Reverent and humble adoration in word and act must dominate worship that is fully Christian, and thus exhibit before all men the true nature of God, wonderful in glory, and gracious in mercy, the Lord and Father of all. The world, beholding the Church at prayer, must be in no doubt about what the Church believes concerning God.'<sup>1</sup>

In order to be clothed with the dignity proper to public worship it is necessary that all public prayer, including that part of prayer we are presently concerned with, should have form. No prayer worthy of the public worship of Almighty God can be allowed to be formless, for in practice this is synonymous with being unapt and sloppy. No public prayer need be formless: a precious heritage of prayer forms has been handed down by the Church over the centuries. This heritage has been developed in the workshop of practical experience in the art of worship, and those forms which have been proved apposite vehicles of communion with God in prayer have persisted and been woven into the great liturgies. We shall now distinguish some of these forms, with particular reference to their usefulness for the work of intercession. Maxwell's classification<sup>2</sup> is employed extensively.

(a) GENERAL PRAYER. 'The adjective "General" refers to the contents, which are not particular but general.'<sup>3</sup> Examples are the Lord's prayer and several prayers contained in the Book of Common Prayer, among them the General Confession, the General Thanksgiving, and the prayer for the whole estate of Christ's Church militant on earth. This prayer may or may not

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1. Concerning Worship, pp.9f.

2. ibid, Appendix A

3. ibid, p.112

be said by the people, depending on the usage of particular congregations or denominations. The General Prayer can be a useful means of intercession. In the prayer for the whole estate of Christ's Church, the Church, its confessing members, Christian Kings, Princes and Governors, those in authority, Bishops and Curates, those in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or any other adversity, and those departed this life are embraced.

Maxwell comments on this form of prayer: 'The General Prayer is a straightforward and natural form, but it must be remembered that it is difficult to sustain for very long. The minds of the worshippers are liable to wander unless the prayer is relatively brief, and skilfully composed in concrete language arranged in ordered sequence. Often it fails in unity and direction. Like all forms of prayer, or perhaps more than other forms, it can be rendered ineffective when ill said.'<sup>1</sup> Unless it is said by the people the General Prayer can fail to express the intercession of the whole Church, and because of its general nature it needs to be used in conjunction with some other form in which the needs of the world may be particularised.

(b) THE COLLECT. Probably so named because it was a prayer of the priest or minister to "collect" and present before God the united, but unuttered supplications of the people, who do or should pray together in the collects as truly as in the litany or responsory prayers.'<sup>2</sup>

The Collect falls classically into five parts, one or more of which may be omitted or interchanged: Invocation, Relative clause indicating the grounds of approach, Petition, Statement of the purpose of the petition, and the Conclusion or Doxology. The most perfect examples of English Collects are those compiled chiefly by Cranmer included in the Book of Common Prayer.

The Collect would seem to be used more frequently for petition than for intercession. Of the Collects of the day comprehended in The First and Second Prayer Books of King Edward VI and in the Book of Common Prayer, only very few are specifically intercessory in the clause relative to either petition or intercession. However, where the Collect is one of intercession, and where it is used together with biddings and silent prayer, this form felicitously unites and sums up the unspoken prayer of a congregation.

(c) THE BIDDING PRAYER. This form is well suited to intercession. In the bidding, 'the minister bids the congregation

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1. *ibid*, p.114

2. Evelyn Underhill, Worship, p.110

pray for the subjects of intercession, a short period of silence following each bidding.'<sup>1</sup> The Collect would ideally follow after the silence. It is possible, with this form, to concentrate the concern and love of a whole congregation on the needs of those particular people and classes of people for whom duty and compassion have impressed it to pray. Thus the ideal of a praying Church, as distinct from the praying minister or priest in the Church, becomes attainable. Maxwell comments: 'Bidding prayers, by their flexibility, diversity, and adaptability, as well as by their long history, earn for themselves the right of revival in modern worship. The people should be instructed in their use. For example, the silences, if used, should be short, and the people taught during the pause to make a silent response in their hearts.'<sup>2</sup> Special requests for the prayers of the Church could be happily acceded to by the use of this form.

(d) THE LITANY. 'The litany was probably derived and adapted from the synagogue worship; in any event, it is one of the earliest forms of Christian prayer. It appears in all Eastern liturgies from the Apostolic Constitutions onwards, and is undoubtedly earlier. In the simplest form in which it first appears it comprises a series of intercessory clauses, each followed by the people's response, Kyrie eleison. Originally in Christian use it was a form of free prayer, though the petitions soon became traditional; the people knew when to respond by the tone of the leader's voice.'<sup>3</sup>

In form the litany is akin to the bidding prayer, the difference being that in the litany the people make some simple response to the leader's bidding, without there being any pause for silent prayer between the clauses. It is 'a true corporate devotion, so devised that even the least instructed members of the congregation can take their part.'<sup>4</sup> It is a form particularly pertinent for the exhibition of the corporate intercession of the Church, though not employed today as extensively as it might be. Maxwell writes, 'the revival and restoration of the litany should be encouraged, and experiments made in the older responsorial form. This gives the people a continuous vocal part in the prayer, and the constant response of many voices to one creates an atmosphere of supplication often regrettably absent from modern worship. Moreover, the informality and flexibility of its language makes the litany a

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1. Raymond Abba, Principles of Christian Worship, p.92

2. *ibid*, p.123

3. W.D.Maxwell, An Outline of Christian Worship, p.175

4. Evelyn Underhill, *op.cit.*, p.102

highly adaptable and useful form.'<sup>1</sup>

(e) VERSICLES AND RESPONSES. A form in which there is a liturgical dialogue between minister and people, it 'requires greater knowledge and closer co-operation in those who use it (than the litany): and also produces in them a far more intimate sense of common action. This is probably the most antique type of ordered Christian prayer, and has been traced back to the first century... The versicle and response seems to have been suggested by the parallel structure of the psalms, which from early times were frequently recited in this manner; either by cantor and choir, or by two groups of singers. It is a form which can be adapted to many purposes, both of praise and supplication, and is capable of great poetical development.'<sup>2</sup>

It is thus eminently suited to intercession, and the use of versicles and responses would unquestionably enrich both the worship and the intercession of the reformed Churches. It is a form that serves to bind into a harmonious praying fellowship the individual members of a congregation.

(f) EUCCHARISTIC PRAYER. 'This is the most dignified and noble form of prayer. It emerged at an early period as the distinctive form of the Prayer of Consecration at the Eucharist. Invariably introduced by the Sursum corda, it began by echoing the last response of this call to prayer and moved into exalted thanksgiving.'<sup>3</sup> It is a form used almost exclusively for thanksgiving or consecration, particularly at the Eucharist, but often on some high and solemn occasion as well. It is hardly an appropriate form for intercessory prayer.

(g) EXTEMPORANEOUS PRAYER. Discussing the primitive, pre-Nicene Church, Dix writes, 'What was expressed in the local tradition of the eucharistic prayer could not be an entirely static thing, because the celebrant-bishop was to a considerable extent free to phrase the prayer as seemed to him best... Liturgical texts were becoming more fixed in the fourth century, but the traditional freedom of phrasing allowed to celebrants ensured a certain elasticity in the prayer until well after AD 350 in most places.'<sup>4</sup>

Thereafter, the use of extemporaneous prayer declined, and it was only at the Reformation that its importance was re-discovered and emphasised, so much so that until recently it displaced almost completely the traditional forms of liturgical

1. Concerning Worship, p.136

2. Evelyn Underhill, op.cit., p.103

3. W.D.Maxwell, An Outline of Christian Worship, p.174

4. op.cit., pp.6f.

prayer in the worship of the reformed Churches.

Although free or conceived, it should nevertheless have definite and discernible form. Length is no criterion of its worth, and all homiletical or informative elements should be rigorously excluded from it. 'Extemporaneous prayer makes the most exacting demands upon those who would use it. It is a gift that requires to be patiently cultivated, through discipline and knowledge. Only the skilled musician, possessing a wide and accurate knowledge of the science and art of music, can successfully extemporise on his chosen instrument. Similarly, there is no short cut to skill in extemporaneous prayer. It achieves perfection only when composed by one whose mind is well stored with a knowledge of Holy Scripture and the devotional literature of the Church.'<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally in reformed worship the intercessions have been expressed largely through the conceived so-called 'long' prayer of the minister. It is the only form of prayer in our reformed order which gives regular expression to what should be the concern of the people of Christ for 'all sorts and conditions of men.' But the very freedom of utterance which is its genius is often in practice its most serious shortcoming, especially when used by those who are reliant upon the inspiration of the Holy Spirit far more when upon their feet in the pulpit than when engaged in honest and careful preparation in the study. In the hands of such men this form of prayer can easily degenerate into a series of clichés which neither evokes the compassion and love of the congregation nor deals in any systematic fashion with all the needs of all the world.

(h) SILENT PRAYER. Where silence is carefully directed so that it becomes part of a corporate action, and where the period of silence is not so long as to allow the attention of the people to wander or become an embarrassment, this can be a most creative form for the presentation of the Church's intercession. Silence may be used with biddings or within a general prayer. Where it is guided by the minister, the concern and sympathy of a congregation can be called forth in one or two brief sentences, thus assuring its direct interest in the well-being of those for whom prayer is to be offered. 'It should be used sparingly at first, until the people become accustomed to it and learn how to utilize it. No other method of public prayer so perfectly combines individual and corporate expression. The restoration, also, through the use of silence; of a mystical quality to the services of the reformed Churches

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1. W.D.Maxwell, Concerning Worship, p.53

would be of permanent value, enriching and energizing the spiritual life of the Christian community.<sup>1</sup>

(i) THE PEOPLE'S AMEN. Dix believes that when the Christian Church perpetuated the Jewish custom of responding 'Amen' at the close of doxologies and other prayers, it did so with a considerable alteration of emphasis. 'What for the Jew was a longing hope for the future coming of God's truth, was for the Christian a triumphant proclamation that in Jesus, the Amen to the everlasting Yea of God, he had himself passed into the Messianic Kingdom and the world to come. It was the summary of his faith in Jesus his Redeemer, and in God his Father and King.'<sup>2</sup>

Be that as it may, it is certain that in Christian worship the Amen, meaning 'So be it', came to be used by the people to give assent to the prayer and praise led by the minister or priest. This custom has regrettably languished, until now it is commonly said by the minister alone as an indication that his prayer has ended.

This tendency should be resisted and discouraged, and the use of the Amen restored to the people. It is a means of identifying those who worship with the prayers that are offered in such a way that though the prayer be perhaps offered by one on behalf of all, it is all who pray. It should be used not only at the conclusion of a long prayer, but as well at the end of the various shorter sections which compose the whole. A recovery by the people of the use of the Amen would be a step towards the actualisation of the reformed Churches' much-vaunted, but little practised, doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

(j) THE PRAYER MEETING. A Church truly concerned to lift the needs of the world to God in intercessory prayer will be alive to the fact that this cannot adequately be done in the limited amount of time available for intercession in public worship. The importance of the prayer-meeting, concerned almost predominantly with intercession, cannot be too much stressed. Those who meet for the purpose of vicarious prayer in this way will inevitably be drawn from the faithful core of a congregation. They will be members of the Church in the proper sense of that word. They of all people will be disposed to regard God as Father, and all men as brethren; they of all people will be eager to discover and do the will of God; they of all people will be aware of their freedom to share on earth their Lord's heavenly work of intercession by the aid and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The prayer meeting affords the Church the opportunity

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1. W.D.Maxwell, *ibid*, p.73  
2. *op.cit.*, p.130

of discharging its divine obligation to intercede systematically on behalf of the world.

Yet, however useful, the prayer meeting can readily deteriorate into something rather less than its ideal potential. Where people pray aloud because they believe it is expected of them; where people pray aloud because they imagine they have a reputation for fluency in public prayer to uphold, and not because they are under the irresistible compulsion of their compassion; where silence becomes almost unbearably self-conscious and must be relieved at all costs by outbursts of fresh eloquence, then the prayer meeting has ceased to fulfil its true function. Unhappily, it would seem that these and other factors have all but killed the prayer meeting in most of the churches of Christendom. Yet patient and frank teaching on how to pray can obviate this kind of malpractice; where this is done the prayer meeting can become the vital centre of effective intercession in the Church.

Something of the rich variety of forms of prayer which is our Christian heritage will by now have become apparent. The commission laid upon the Church today, particularly the reformed Church, is to avail itself of this heritage, experimenting boldly, thoughtfully, and reverently with all forms, that her intercession may more perfectly reflect the ideal of the whole Church praying sacrificially for the whole world.

#### (iv) A CRITIQUE OF INTERCESSION IN METHODIST WORSHIP

Three typical orders of service are used, with varying degrees of frequency, in Methodist public worship. The central act of worship, though by no means the most generally employed, is the order for the celebration of Holy Communion. A service corresponding to the liturgy of the Word, at which the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is not administered, and described as the Order for Morning Prayer, was introduced and used extensively by John Wesley, but is utilized with considerable infrequency today. Thirdly, there is the service which Methodism has in common with most of the reformed Churches, a flexible and simple order in which the reading and preaching of the Word have a central place, and at which the Sacrament of Communion is not normally celebrated, except as an addendum after the main service has drawn to a close. Our purpose is not to assess the merit or demerit of these services in terms of worship. This has been ably attempted by J.E.Rattenbury.<sup>1</sup> We are concerned merely to

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1. The Vital Elements of Public Worship

determine in what measure the place, function, and form of intercessory prayer in them accords with primitive principles and practice.

The Order of Service for the Administration of the Lord's Supper, almost identical with the 1662 Anglican office, is being increasingly used in many Societies regularly once a Sunday in addition to or in place of the more typical service in which the Word, as read and expounded, is central. We cannot but commend this move towards a full celebration of the Eucharist once a week. But as we examine the order of service in the Methodist Book of Offices, the poverty of its intercessions is at once obviously apparent. There is but a single prayer of intercession in the whole office, a General prayer which we cite below:

'Almighty and ever-living God, who by Thy holy Apostle hast taught us to make prayers and supplications, and to give thanks, for all men; We humbly beseech Thee most mercifully to accept our alms and oblations, and to receive these our prayers, which we offer unto Thy divine majesty; beseeching Thee to inspire continually the universal Church with the spirit of truth, unity, and concord: And grant, that all they that do confess Thy holy Name, may agree in the truth of Thy holy Word, and live in unity and godly love.

'We beseech Thee also to save and defend all Christian Kings, Princes, and Governors; and especially Elizabeth, and the President of this land, that under him we may be godly and quietly governed: And grant unto all that are put in authority under him that they may truly and indifferently administer justice, to the restraining of wickedness and vice, and to the maintenance of Thy true religion and virtue.

'Give grace, O heavenly Father, to all the Ministers of Thy Gospel, that they may, both by their life and doctrine, set forth Thy true and lively word, and rightly and duly administer Thy holy Sacraments: And to all Thy people give Thy heavenly grace; and especially to this congregation here present; that with meek heart and due reverence, they may hear and receive Thy holy word; truly serving Thee in holiness and righteousness all the days of their life.

'And we most humbly beseech Thee of Thy goodness, O Lord, to comfort and succour all them who in this transitory life are in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or any other adversity. And we also bless Thy holy Name for all Thy servants departed this life in Thy faith and fear, beseeching Thee to give us grace so to follow their good examples, that with them we may be partakers of Thy heavenly Kingdom: Grant this, O Father, for Jesus Christ's sake, our only Mediator and Advocate. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

This may be compared with the General prayer from the liturgy of S. Mark quoted earlier.<sup>2</sup> Its range will be seen to be far more limited and restricted. There is no attempt to embrace the whole world and all its needs. This deficiency would be less serious if this General prayer were supplemented by other forms of prayer in the order of service which could supply variety and extensiveness to the intercessions. But it is not. Not

1. The Book of Offices, pp.66-67

2. p.82

one of the Collects for the Day is intercessory in character. If, as is the ideal, the service for Holy Communion were to be employed once a Sunday, the poverty of Methodist intercession would be disconcertingly made manifest. The Church, as we have said repeatedly, is bound to intercede for the entire world, in all the varied and many-sided aspects of its life. For Methodists to do this in their central act of worship, the Christian heritage of forms of prayer must needs be appropriated and judiciously incorporated into this order of service.

The Book of Offices includes an alternative Order for the administration of the Lord's Supper. This is a shorter service, and is commonly used to celebrate the Sacrament after the more normal preaching service. There is not a single prayer of intercession of any kind in this order. No doubt the reason for this omission is that in the preaching service which normally precedes this service the intercessions will already have been made. To this there are two not inconsiderable objections. Firstly, there will still be no liturgical prayer of any kind to give the people an articulate place in the Church's intercession, since, as we shall see later, in a normal preaching service the intercessions are comprehended in the minister's 'long' prayer. Such extempore prayer has intrinsic disadvantages, as will be enumerated later. Secondly, the concept of the faithful interceding on behalf of the world languishes. Very often, those who remain after a preaching service to a service of Holy Communion are, quite literally, the faithful. They are the people for whom Christian discipleship is a meaningful, vital, and serious activity. And these true members are given no work of intercession, such work being pursued in that larger company of people which includes, not only the faithful, but many casual seekers and enquirers as well.

The Order for Morning Prayer is a more fruitful source of included and additional intercessory forms. There is a Collect of intercession for the Queen's majesty, now replaced in this country by a less felicitous Collect for the President of the Republic of South Africa; there is a Prayer for the Royal family, now commonly (though not invariably) omitted because of our Republican status; there is a Prayer for Ministers and People; and a Collect for the High Court of Parliament, now replaced by a Prayer for the Government of South Africa. Following these Collects there is a General Prayer for all men, cited below:

'O God, the Creator and Preserver of all mankind, we humbly beseech Thee for all sorts and conditions of men; that Thou wouldest be pleased to make Thy ways known unto them, Thy saving health unto all nations. More especially,

we pray for the good estate of the Catholic Church; that it may be so guided by Thy good Spirit, that all who profess and call themselves Christians may be led into the way of truth, and hold the faith, in unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life. Finally, we commend to Thy Fatherly goodness all those who are any ways afflicted, or distressed in mind, body, or estate; (especially those for whom our prayers are desired...), that it may please Thee to comfort and relieve them, according to their several necessities, giving them patience under their sufferings, and a happy issue out of their afflictions. And this we beg for Jesus Christ, His sake. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

While the range of this General Prayer is no more extensive than the prayer in the Order of Holy Communion quoted above, it does at least make provision for supplementary biddings with silent prayer wherein specific topics and names for the prayerful consideration of those assembled may be introduced. This order is thus somewhat richer in intercession than either of the two orders for Holy Communion. Yet it ignores as well many of the other forms of intercession which constitute the Church's heritage in prayer. This order of service is in these days used so rarely that it is doubtful whether the added quality of its prayers of intercession is of much practical advantage.

We come now to the third and most common order of service employed in Methodist public worship, in which the reading and preaching of the Word is central. This order is often productive, yet just as often barren, of vital intercession, according to the temperament, experience, and skill of the minister conducting the service. While there is considerable freedom allowed each minister to order the service as he deems seemly, a not untypical order would be:

Call to worship  
 Hymn or Psalm of Praise  
 Prayer of Adoration, Confession, and Invocation  
 (usually extempore), followed by the Lord's Prayer  
 Old Testament Lesson  
 Hymn, Psalm, or Canticle  
 New Testament Lesson  
 Children's sermon  
 Anthem  
 Prayer of Thanksgiving, Petition, and Intercession  
 (usually extempore)  
 Offertory  
 Hymn, often of Invocation of the Holy Spirit  
 Sermon  
 Hymn, often expressing a response to the Sermon  
 Benediction.

The Great Prayer, which includes intercession, not infrequently follows the sermon, and is now generally preceded by a space of silent prayer, directed by the minister.

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1. *ibid*, pp.28-29

In theory, the place given to intercession in a service such as this is adequate for the Church to discharge its obligation to the society in which it is set. In practice, however, this is seldom so, for three reasons.

Firstly, the intercessions are invariably extempore. While there are those men who know that praying extempore and praying without preparation are not synonymous concepts, and whose intercessions are designed to cover systematically the multitudinous facets of life in the twentieth century, there are others who have not so seen the light. For them, extemporaneous prayer is prayer thought out only in the moment of utterance. Thus the scope of their intercessions is severely restricted. Old, hackneyed phrases are integrated into some abortion of a form which dulls the desire of many who worship to intercede vigorously or intelligently, and which satisfies the desire of those it does not dull with the opiate of familiar ecclesiastical jargon. Extemporaneous prayer is the most difficult form of prayer. Because so few are aware of this the results, or lack of them, are not surprising.

Secondly, the lack of systematic intercession is exposed even more blatantly by what in Methodism is known as the Circuit system. In the economy of the Circuit organisation, most ministers occupy their own pulpit normally only once a Sunday, morning or evening, with an almost completely different congregation at each service, and move about the rest of the Circuit for their other appointments. In such a system, no man knows what the preacher at the same service the previous Sunday prayed about, nor does he know what the preacher at the other service on the same Sunday has included or will include in his intercessory prayer. To play it safe he thus prays in general terms for those who are ill, anxious, and bereaved. The countless other day-to-day needs of the world of men, no less clamant, are largely disregarded. If Methodism is to continue to employ an itinerant ministry (as seems likely) it is important that a method of systematic intercession should be devised corresponding to the Lectionary, which sets out Old and New Testament Lessons, morning and evening, for each Sunday in the Christian year. This would ensure that every part of life would come within the purview of the Church's intercession. The method could be made flexible enough to allow the parochial needs of each Society to be remembered. At the same time parochialism would be transcended in a universalism worthy of the prayer of the people of God.

Thirdly, the forms of prayer discussed in section (iii) of this chapter, evolved and cherished over the centuries by the Church, are but scantily employed. Also the prayers tend

to become the active work of him who leads the service only, except where biddings are used with periods of silent prayer. The people's part in prayer becomes largely passive, and often is reduced to a half-hearted and scarcely audible 'Amen'. In many places even this lone word is no longer heard. This is a most unhappy departure from the lofty ideal of the Church working unitedly on behalf of the realm in which it is set through the office of intercessory prayer in its diverse and many forms.

Present-day Methodist worship thus appears to give to intercessory prayer a position far inferior to that afforded it in the primitive Christian communities. This is clearly not intentional, and the deficiencies of our corporate intercession are by no means widely appreciated. But they are none-the-less felt. They are felt in terms of a Church that is steadily ceasing to make any dynamic impact on the society and in the community in which it has its life; in terms of a Church that can be perfunctorily dismissed as irrelevant and unnecessary for the life of modern people. This surely is reason enough for us to discover afresh a sense of the importance of intercession, to accord it a place in our worship comparable to the place it held in the primitive Church, to explore and avail ourselves of the rich heritage of forms of prayer that is ours, and to devise some method whereby the needs of the entire world are methodically remembered by all who compose the Church before Him who is Lord of all. Lest this criticism be thought too negative, let it be said that until we are honestly aware of our weaknesses and have resolved to remedy them, it is premature to discuss how this shall be effected.

One further topic remains to be reconsidered. It was said in the preceding section that the prayer meeting has all but died a natural death. This is true particularly of Methodism, where once it was a characteristic feature. However, something far better has been raised up within our communion to take its place. The Home Missions Department of the British Conference under the leadership of the late W.E.Sangster and now Leslie Davison, has instituted and organised what is known as the Prayer-cell Movement. It is not associated with the public worship of the Church, but rather replaces and fulfils the now antiquated prayer meeting. The movement has spread through Methodism in lands the world over, including our own. The aim is to create numerous cells in each Society whose specific office is prayer, and to educate progressively the members of each cell in the principles and practice of availing prayer, emphasising intercession particularly. The

text-book of the movement<sup>1</sup> sets out in terms readily intelligible to the layman the need for prayer and suggests methods to be followed in answering it. It can confidently be predicted that the Church's real work of intercession will be done more effectively by organised cells of prayer such as are envisaged by this movement than by the Church in her public worship as it is presently ordered. Thus there is the hope that the flame of vicarious intercession will continue to burn, though for a while it be placed in a different window of the building which is the Church than the one it formerly occupied and ought properly to occupy today.

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1. The Pattern of Prayer, W.E.Sangster and L.Davison

CHAPTER 4

INTERCESSORY PRAYER  
AND PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Intercession presents more inherent difficulties than any other aspect of prayer. Perhaps this is because in intercession alone is some change in the circumstance or condition of a person other than he who prays looked for or expected. Adoration is strictly a matter between the man or group that prays and God. So is thanksgiving, though the blessings which God mediates to men through other men will be recognised and acknowledged. Confession as well is an affair which concerns those who pray and God alone, though it may involve confession and restitution to others who have been wronged. Petition refers only to a change in the attitude, outlook, temper, character, or situation of the person who prays. But the very nature of intercession requires that people other than those who pray be involved in it; some change in their life is prayed for, and whether or not such change is effected is in practice often regarded as a measure of the efficacy of such prayer. George Merideth's oft-quoted words, 'Who rises from prayer a better man, his prayer is answered', may be relevantly applied to every constituent of prayer except intercession. Here it is not the man who prays, but he who is prayed for, who is expected to rise a better, stronger, healthier, holier, or happier man. And because such an improvement is not always discernible, the practice of prayer becomes open to question at this very point.

Accordingly, most ministers find that the ordinary people committed to their pastoral care, many of them comparatively uninstructed in the finer points of Christian theology, ask the most penetrating, discerning, and difficult questions about intercessory prayer. Typical of the questions asked are the following: Does not prayer look for a violation of the laws of nature? How can one person's prayer affect another? Is prayer

by a group more likely to be answered than the prayer of one person alone? Do prayers fail because faith is wanting? What does one ask for someone whom a medical practitioner has pronounced to be suffering from an incurable disease?

The purpose of this chapter is to attempt an answer to questions of this nature. We shall consider the relationships between Intercession, Science, and 'Law', between Intercession and those for whom it is made, and between Intercession and the Intercessor; we shall ask whether Intercession should be made in general or specific terms, and we shall state the limitations of Intercession.

(i) INTERCESSION, SCIENCE, AND 'LAW'

'No modern treatment of prayer is complete without some clarification of its relationship to prevailing scientific notions, especially those we call "laws of nature". Living in these times automatically infects us with certain dominant philosophical and scientific ideas, many of which are hostile to the life of prayer. These assumptions about life and the universe lie deeper than consciousness and emerge in numerous ways to block our devotion. We ask such questions as: How can I expect God to answer prayer in a universe ruled by mechanical law? Does not our control of nature through science make prayer unnecessary? Why should we ask God for things we can secure for ourselves through intelligent action? Science seems to have made prayer both absurd and unnecessary.' In this paragraph John B. Magee introduces the problem we now face.<sup>1</sup>

The sciences indeed dominate our life in this latter half of the twentieth century. The comforts and conveniences we enjoy come to us largely at the hand of scientific technology. Medical science has prolonged our expectancy of life far beyond our fathers'. The sciences make it possible to feed the world's expanding population, and to keep that population within necessary limits. Each year scientists uncover many new facts about the world in which we live and the universe and system of universes of which it is but a minute part. The number of men engaged in scientific work increases at a rate proportionally higher than that of the population growth, and the influence of the sciences thus becomes correspondingly greater.

This dominance of the sciences affects our outlook and attitude towards prayer. Unfortunately, most layman lag far

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1. op.cit., p.11

behind scientists themselves in understanding of their work (as most laymen lag behind the scholars in their appreciation of theological and biblical truth). They use as axioms basal to their thinking concepts which reputable scientists have long abandoned. It is this 'hangover' in scientific knowledge that to a large extent creates the problem of the relationship between the sciences and religion.

Whereas the layman may speak of 'laws of nature' or of nature as a 'self-enclosed' and 'self-explanatory' system, most scientists have advanced far beyond such misleading expressions. However, before we attempt to describe the positions commonly held by scientists today, we must pause to examine the outmoded terms just referred to and their implications for intercession. These are well described by J.M.Shaw and D.S.Cairns.

Shaw writes, 'In this scientific age, the idea of law, of "natural law", has got between us and the Father-Creator. God seems to be pushed away off and back and tends to be thought of as the Divine Artificer who may have made this world at the start but now stands afar off, leaving the machine to run by its own laws.'<sup>1</sup> To use H.E.Fosdick's figure, God is represented as 'an engineer who started this locomotive of a world, pulled the throttle wide open, and then leaped from the cab' leaving the world to run its own unguided course ever since on the rails of law.<sup>2</sup> Cairns writes, 'What is meant by the term "self enclosed" and "self explanatory"? That view seems to many to imply that nature is absolutely rigid to any influence beyond itself. In other words, the entire realm of nature, by which I here mean the world to which we have access through the senses, is a self-enclosed and self-explanatory system, in which every event can be explained in terms of its physical antecedents and physical consequents. It is, of course, clear that if nature be of this type, it is absurd to suppose that there can be any intervening influence from a spiritual world deflecting or influencing any physical event whatever.'<sup>3</sup> It is obvious that intercession can have little place in such a world of mechanical natural law functioning within a self-enclosed and self-explanatory system. Karl Heim makes this point well: 'As long as natural science postulated a continuous causal nexus which excluded any freely governed power of will, there was no breathing space for belief in God except for those who dared, despite natural science, to claim boldly that the

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1. The Christian Gospel of the Fatherhood of God, p.35

2. The Meaning of Prayer, p.89

3. The Faith that Rebels, p.96

almighty God could at any moment tear open the causal nexus like a piece of cloth.<sup>1</sup>

But such conceptions belong to nineteenth rather than to twentieth century scientific thought. A.D.Ritchie has since pointed out that the sciences are concerned with generalisations, which are reached by means of the inductive method. 'Laws' are simply generalisations of high probability, 'hypotheses' are generalisations of lower probability, and 'theories' stand somewhere between the two.<sup>2</sup> Few scientists today would say that they are able to predict with absolute certainty the pattern of future events on the basis of past observations. At most, they would say that their predictions have a high degree of probability. Karl Heim has masterfully shown how the concept of absolute determinism in natural events has been replaced in modern physics by the a-causal concept.<sup>3</sup> As Shaw puts it, 'Law of itself has no governing or controlling power. Law is not a being, or entity, an ens; it is not a self-acting force or thing. It is simply a formula descriptive of nature's observed method of behaviour or procedure, a term expressing the observed regularity or uniformity of nature's sequences.'<sup>4</sup>

The self-enclosed and self-explanatory way of regarding nature can be described only as obsolete. Remove the concept of absolute 'law', and the watertight and neatly ordered way of regarding the world must be removed as well, leaving instead a far more thrilling and hazardous, but no less reasonable or logical, conception of reality. As Heim says, 'The point is simply that behind what happens, whether it be entirely natural or miraculous, there stands at every moment the living God who makes Himself known to us in conscience. One of the most significant points about the Scriptures in accordance with which Christ lived is that the word "causality" never occurs in them, nor does the word "fate" or "destiny". All these unpersonal expressions, which are constantly in use in philosophy, and also in science, are entirely absent from the Bible, and in place of them there is always the one all-sovereign personality of the living God who guides all things. God's omnipresence is the space filling everything, into which the relative spaces of this world are fitted. No conflict can therefore arise between the rule of God and any natural laws which we are able to establish by observation. For biblical man everything is reduced to the

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1. The Transformation of the Scientific World View, p.170

2. The Scientific Method

3. ibid, chapter IV

4. ibid, p.42

fact that behind all events and behind all the orders of the world there stands the living God as the directing power... From all this it appears that the final absolute which plays its part in philosophy and science, namely the absolute determination of events through an iron law of causality which may assume many forms, is from the biblical point of view an idol erected by the human mind in opposition to the sole sovereignty of the living God.<sup>1</sup> For the Christian, all nature is to be regarded as subject to the will of God, and directed to His own ends by His power and intelligence.

An attempt must now be made to describe the way in which scientists in this mid-twentieth century commonly regard their work. It is apparent that a new climate of thought is emerging far more favourable both to the theory and the practice of intercession than was so some years ago. J.B.Magee deals at length with three changing points of view largely responsible for this happier relationship between the sciences and prayer.

'The first of these major developments in scientific and philosophical thought promises to modify fundamentally the picture of iron mechanistic law and to replace it with a view of reality that is organismic. According to this view the universe is composed of living substances organised within other living substances.'<sup>2</sup> Progress made in atomic physics has led scientists to revise radically the causal explanation of the movements of the ultimate particles of matter and to explain them instead in terms of 'wholeness', whereby each part of the atomic event is regarded as being in organic connection with the others. It is now an established fact that prediction of an event is not possible until the event is passed, because the last moment in an event has as important an effect as the initial moment. The direction a particle is travelling in is as important as the direction in which it has already travelled. Determinacy has thus given way to a conception of nature in which every force and particle seems to behave, at least to some extent, in a self-determined fashion.

Naturally, for the Christian, this state of affairs has value only as an indication of the possibility of intercession. It would be hazardous to rest the basic argument of this section on scientific facts which further knowledge may modify. The foundation of our confidence in prayer is that the God with whom we have to deal is not enclosed by His system; He has power not only over persons and ideas, but also over things.

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1. *ibid.* pp.160f.

2. *ibid.*, p.13, italics mine

Using this changed scientific approach as merely an indication of the possibility of God's active intervention in His created order, the important point is that now the borderline between living and non-living substances becomes very difficult to define. Non-living substances appear to obey living rather than mechanistic laws, and to have, in however rudimentary a form, a subjectivity corresponding vaguely, dimly, and minutely, to our own human consciousness. The organisms of nature would thus be controlled in part by their own inherent mode of function, and in part by the mode of function of the more inclusive organism of which they are part. It was St Thomas Aquinas, of course, who, in a period when Aristotle's causal theory was accepted in Church theology and served as a starting point for dogmatic formulations, saw to the heart of the matter. He writes: 'We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end... Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence, as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer.'<sup>1</sup> Aquinas would say, and this is our own view, that even the mode of function of the organisms in nature is created by God, and that while it ordinarily obtains, even within it God is not bound and may act.

When this organismic concept is applied to the universe, the same terms are valid: it is controlled in part by a mode of function inherent in its order (and created by God), and in part by some living Will greater than it and of which it is a smaller part. Who or what this Will is science has no means of saying. The Christian would affirm that it is the living God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Modern scientific thought thus appears to support the prior Christian contention that the power of will over substance may be regarded as something not in the least unnatural or unusual, and that prayer may legitimately be said to be one of the ways in which this power of mind over matter is expressed.

The second development dealt with by Magee concerns the method by which scientists formulate the principles which are the fruit of their work. The method is that of selection. The scientist selects from the whole of reality that particular segment with which he is directly concerned. The question of how prayer can be answered in a world of law arose from the uncritical assumption that physical science (and the methods of physical science) has complete priority over all other methods of rational enquiry, and that unless an event can be explained

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1. Summa Theol. I, Q.13, Art.ii

in terms of physical science, it is inexplicable. The demand of the logical positivist for empirical evidence in support of a statement of belief stems from the same basic fallacy, namely, that empirical verification is the one valid and acceptable method of arriving at truth. In an earlier chapter we were concerned to establish that experiential verification may be no less valid and useful a way of arriving at truth in its particular field than empirical verification is in other fields.

It seems that most scientists today are willing to recognise that the number of ways in which the real world may be approached is potentially infinite; that no one method of analysis has the right to claim special priority over the others; and that the separate ways of looking at the world can neither by themselves nor even together give us a complete picture of reality, for all are abstract (necessarily so because of the structure of the human intellect) and what is abstract cannot ultimately be equated with the real world.

These admissions are a tacit recognition that there may be laws other than the laws of physical science. This paves the way for the meaningful use of concepts such as providence, miracle, and prayer. Even if such admissions had not been forthcoming we would still maintain the absolute freedom of God as personal and not bound by what He creates and the fact that He can always intervene, and need not do so by the operation of any law, whether of physical science or of any other discipline, though He ordinarily works through 'laws'. But that such admissions have been forthcoming makes the problem of communication between the sciences and religion less formidable than it would have been without them.

The third development which makes the prevailing mid-century climate of thought hospitable to the Christian's belief in prayer is a recognition by scientists themselves that in the past the sciences have been thought of in terms too narrow to allow for their successful continuance in the world of today. The sciences themselves are now seen to proceed by faith: faith in the rationality of the world order and in the reliability of the human mind; by intuition: the creative 'break-through' of those who have been responsible for the greatest scientific discoveries is not unlike the intuitive insight on which great music, art, literature, poetry, and religious truth so heavily depend; and with the humble acknowledgement that scientific activity itself is highly purposive although in its practical and segmentary study it may exclude purpose from its purview. Furthermore, scientists have come to see that for the successful continuance of the sciences there is need, not only

of intellectual power, but also of qualities of self-sacrifice, courage, goodwill, imagination, and moral integrity. The sciences are placing into the hands of men such immense forces for good or evil; that more and more the world needs men of sufficient moral and spiritual stature to use these forces under God with wisdom and with the desire to promote the highest well-being of every man. Of themselves the sciences cannot produce such men. But it is the claim of religion, and of the Christian religion in particular, that the production of such men is one of its chief concerns. Scientists, afraid perhaps of the forces they are unleashing, are undoubtedly readier than hitherto to turn to religion, asking of it men the quality of whose life will ensure that these forces are used beneficially and constructively. The alternative is the stark possibility of the extinction of the whole human race. Magee summarises the position as follows, 'This survey makes clear the need of science for the spiritual renewal which can come through profound prayer: an experience of spiritual immediacy which restores depth to reason; recaptures glimpses of beauty, truth, and goodness to refresh the roots of enquiry; revises the image of wholeness, from which the scientific picture was first torn by its method of abstraction; and restores the whole man to his place in a holy universe.'<sup>1</sup> If it is true that scientists are now, generally speaking, sympathetic to rather than critical of religion, then this changed attitude can only have a clarifying and beneficial effect on men's understanding of the value and range of intercessory prayer.

Having established that the inharmonious relationship between the sciences and religion which has its roots in Bacon (Hume and Kant also unwittingly contributed to it) is today generally the result of obsolete scientific assumptions, and that the recent scientific spirit is more conducive to a restoration of an harmonious relationship by regarding the scientific and religious world views as complementary, we may come down from the theoretical to the practical level. An example that clearly focuses the relationship between physical science and religion is the question, Is it any good praying about the weather? In a book published as recently as 1948, Leslie Weatherhead gave his considered answer to this question.<sup>2</sup> We shall summarise his position, and then criticise it in the light of what we have said above.

His opening paragraph gives us his answer: 'Let me say

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1. *ibid*, p.29

2. When the Lamp Flickers, chapter 15

at once, quite bluntly, that I don't think it is. I think today's weather on the Yorkshire moors, where I am writing these words, was fixed and determined long before Yorkshire existed, and probably as soon as the contours of the earth had settled into anything like their final form. If I thought otherwise, I would have prayed for a fine day and avoided this driving rain from lowering skies, keeping me under a roof when I want to search for dipper's nests and get healing for spirit, mind, and body from the sunshine and peace of a spring morning. At the same time, I will not write with intolerant dogmatism. I am sure a man can be as good a Christian who believes in praying about the weather, as a man who does not. And if bad weather makes you pray when good weather would leave you prayerless, it could be argued that it is a good thing to pray whatever you pray about. It is a good thing for a child to talk to his father about anything that worries him.<sup>1</sup>

Having magnanimously given us this comforting reassurance, Weatherhead goes on to substantiate this opinion. He tells us that he assumes God is power; that He who made the elements can control them, that He who determined the weather could alter it; but that we are not concerned with what God can do so much as what He does do. And God does not answer prayer for the weather because in this matter there is no interplay of minds. 'In the area of health there is an interplay of minds, and for this reason I most fervently believe in prayer for the sick... My mind, as I pray for Tom Jones, reaches out to God Who is Mind, and also links up with the mind of Tom Jones, even if he is unconscious of being prayed for, or too ill to be told... But when you ask me to pray for good weather, I wonder how it can be imagined that my mind, in contact with God's, can shift a thing that can make no mental response - like a depression over Iceland... If you say, "God's mind created weather in the first place and can alter it now," I am forced to ask what He was thinking about in the first place to create conditions less ideal than I can now suggest to Him in my prayers.'<sup>2</sup>

He concludes that prayer is not the relevant way of co-operating with God when it is desired to change the weather, but that rather meteorological research must be engaged in and used to warn people of what weather is coming so that they can avoid disaster, and scientific methods of producing rainfall must be encouraged. 'In the meantime, bad weather has to be accepted. Until scientific resourcefulness can change it, we

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1. *ibid*, p.185

2. *ibid*, pp.189-190

have to bear it without losing faith because we cannot change it through prayer. We must learn to cope with its seemingly hostile treatment of our plans. Such coping is part of man's age-long attempt to be the master of the world... So don't pray it may not be wet. Take your umbrella and grin!<sup>1</sup>

Weatherhead's argument may be rebutted at a number of points. To begin with, to regard as trivial an occupation as searching for dipper's nests as a sufficient reason for asking God to change the course of the weather is to disregard what we have seen to be a fundamental principle of prayer, namely, that it be in accordance with the mind and spirit of Jesus Christ. Surely in as important a matter as the ordering of our weather, God is bound to consider far weightier matters than our innocuous pleasures and pastimes!

Weatherhead's 'scientific' view of nature is thoroughly deterministic: 'to-day's weather on the Yorkshire moors... was fixed and determined long before Yorkshire existed, and probably as soon as the contours of the earth had settled into anything like their final form.' Thus, in his opinion, nature is a self-enclosed system wherein physical happenings are determined by inflexible laws. We have seen that scientists themselves have turned from this view, rendering it obsolete. And quite apart from this Weatherhead is saying that God is bound by His own laws, a supposition indicative of a somewhat timorous and insipid faith for a Christian.

Then he says, 'We are not concerned with what God can do. We are more concerned with what God does do.' He goes on to say that God does not answer prayer for the weather because there is no interplay of minds. Surely, if his assumption that nature is self-enclosed, with the weather determined from the beginning of time, is correct, then the question is not what God does do but what He can do. In any case, how do we know God does not alter the weather in answer to prayer? We neither know nor do not know. Weatherhead is unwilling to recognise that God can act even in a world of mechanistic law, and seeks to move the ground of his argument. Either way, his position is untenable.

This brings us to the question of the interplay of minds: 'I wonder how it can be imagined that my mind, in contact with God's, can shift a thing that can make no mental response - like a depression over Iceland.' Is God able to act only on minds? Surely not! To concede this would be to exclude Him effectively from the greater part of His creation. Incidentally, the new organismic view of physical reality assumes that non-

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1. *ibid*, pp.193-194

living substances like wind, cloud, and water share with the whole of nature in having a rudimentary subjectivity. Even if it were true to say that God can only act on something that can make a mental response, and it is not, then on the basis of this rudimentary subjectivity theory He would still be capable of acting.

The argument is curiously inconsistent. In one place Weatherhead writes, 'If you say, "God's mind created weather in the first place and can alter it now," I am forced to ask what He was thinking about in the first place to create conditions less ideal than I can now suggest to Him in my prayers.' He thus assumes that God knows better than we do what kind of weather we should have, and that it is almost blasphemous to do anything but leave the ordering of the weather to Him. But then, in another place, he writes, 'In the meantime, bad weather has to be accepted. Until scientific resourcefulness can change it, we have to bear it without losing faith because we cannot change it through prayer.' Here he assumes that man lives in unideal conditions, but that through the sciences - and only through the sciences - he has the power, and must use that power, to change them for the better. One would then expect that the scientist who does this will be acting blasphemously against God (which is the view adopted at the present time by certain of the Afrikaans-speaking Churches in South Africa). I am sure that Weatherhead would himself be the last person to say such a thing, yet this is what his argument implies. Besides, prayer does not exclude scientific research, but is complementary to it.

Two further points may be made. He says, 'It is a good thing for a child to talk to his father about anything that worries him.' We ask, Is this so, if the child is convinced the Father cannot do anything about it? And again he writes, 'Prayer for health is recommended in the New Testament, but never prayer for good weather.'<sup>1</sup> Surely James offers precisely that recommendation when he says, 'A good man's prayer is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man with human frailties like our own; and when he prayed earnestly that there should be no rain, not a drop fell on the land for three years and a half; then he prayed again, and down came the rain and the land bore crops once more.'<sup>2</sup> We remember as well the incidents of our Lord stilling the storm<sup>3</sup> and St Paul in a storm.<sup>4</sup> In both the intervention of God when weather conditions were

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1. *ibid*, p.191

2. James 5:16b-18

3. Mark 4:36-41; c.f. Mt 8:23-27, Lk 8:22-25

4. Acts 27:13-44

adverse is apparent.

We conclude then, contrary to Weatherhead, that there is nothing either illogical or contradictory of present-day scientific teaching in praying for the weather, and that not so to pray is a denial of the Christian belief in the sovereignty of God. We agree with Weatherhead that we must use every device physical science affords to control the weather which forms part of our environment - the churchmen who condemn the use of rain-rockets as blasphemous and who yet condone the building of irrigation dams, the sinking of boreholes, and the fertilising of crops are surely ludicrously inconsistent. But it is not a matter either of praying for good weather or of using the techniques of physical science to produce it, but, as in so many other spheres, of doing both together. And when we have done everything in our power to modify the weather and thus prevent calamity or disaster, may we not confidently expect our heavenly Father, who knows the needs of all His children, to heed our prayers and answer them according to His all-seeing wisdom and gracious will? The Israelites believed that at least once in their history, when they fled Egypt under the leadership of Moses, God so acted on their behalf. How much more may we, for whom the Yahweh who revealed Himself to Moses has assumed the face of a Father through the revelation afforded us in Jesus Christ, expect and believe the same?

(ii) INTERCESSION AND THOSE FOR WHOM IT IS MADE

The questions now before us are, Is it possible that one person's prayer can affect the life, health, or well-being of another? If it is, then is not intercession a subtle way of undermining the freewill of others? Does efficacious intercession depend on faith in the person for whom prayer is offered?

As we prepare to answer these questions we would do well to remember the fact of the social solidarity of the human race. We are not self-sufficient, self-contained individuals, able to live in independent detachment and isolation from one another. Our lives are inextricably bound up, for good or ill, with the lives of others. We are members one of another. Our growth in personal self-consciousness is dependent on the possibility of other centres of self-consciousness acting and reacting on our own. Our physical well-being is directly related to the efforts, skills, and achievements of others: in this age of specialised occupations, no man is any longer sufficient for the satisfaction of even the simplest of his physical needs. Our mental and cultural achievements are the product of the interplay and

interaction of mind on mind. And so, also, on the highest level of all, the spiritual, it is a Christian conviction that the same interrelatedness of one person with another prevails, it being impossible to isolate the individual from the community. A good man's life or a bad man's life has consequences and repercussions in the community, for good or evil, far beyond the individual concerned. We all know people whose lives have inspired us to follow after goodness and have sustained us in that quest; we know others who bring out in us all that is base and unworthy.

If, unconsciously, as part of our membership one of another, our lives are bound together on the spiritual plane as on every other, then it is not unreasonable to suppose that they may be consciously so bound together as well. Experiments in mental telepathy support this supposition. J.B.Rhine writes, 'Through laboratory experiments at Duke University we who have laboured there for seventeen years know that communication from one mind to another without the aid of the senses is an established occurrence.'<sup>1</sup> The work of men like Prof. Price of Oxford, W.Carrington, and G.N.M.Tyrell has led them to conclude that the human mind is not a spacially separate entity, but is open to influence and suggestion, conscious or unconscious, from the minds of others. Rosalind Heywood writes, 'The result of Carrington's work led him to think that our individual minds are less isolated from one another than we assume. In fact he came to a conception which resembled Jung's of a common unconscious.'<sup>2</sup>

We may say then that there is nothing, either logical or evidential, to prevent us from asserting that the conscious outreach of one person's mind in intercessory prayer does, under God and to a certain extent, affect the life, health, or well-being of the person prayed for. We shall return later to the phrase italicised. We must admit that we do not understand how our prayer can affect another: experiments in telepathy and psychokinesis and progress in the relatively young science of psychology will perhaps in time be able to clarify for us some of the mechanisms of such influence. On this point J.B.Rhine writes, 'If prayer is effective, and if the thoughts of men do reach out to other personalities in the universe beyond the range of the senses, it must be through the medium of extra-sensory perception. If, originating in any personal agency anywhere, celestial or mundane, there is an effect produced

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1. The Reach of the Mind  
 2. The Sixth Sense, p.157

upon the physical world in answer to prayer, it would have to be a psychokinetic effect, a psi phenomenon. Psi, then, would be the scientific concept of the operations underlying any demonstrable spiritual manifestation involving either cognitive or kinetic effects. If this is true, then it would be obvious wisdom to study the mechanism, the conditions affecting its operation, and the purposes to which its use may be extended. There is a belief, of course, that a divine personal agency exists to which prayer is directed. The co-operation of this agency itself could in all sincerity and propriety quite well be included in the research plan.<sup>1</sup>

Once it is accepted that one mind in relation to God can influence the conscious, sub-conscious, or unconscious mind of another, albeit in a way not yet clearly understood, then it is not difficult to accept that the consequences of this in terms of health and healing may well be tremendous. Medical science is coming more and more to recognise that many bodily disorders are the product of an inharmonious mental relationship between the person concerned and his environment. Of this Weatherhead comments, 'The British Medical Journal actually printed these words: "No tissue of the human body is wholly removed from the influence of spirit," and... brilliant specialists in their own field are willing to admit that the primal cause of such troubles as gastric and duodenal ulcers, some forms of skin affections, of asthma and paralysis, and much of what is called functional disease, may be not only psychological in origin, but spiritual.'<sup>2</sup> Heim corroborates this. He writes, 'Lieke, who is a doctor, ventures to write this far-reaching sentence: "There is no functional disturbance in the living organism, no illness, whether we call it functional or organic, which is not amenable in a greater or less degree to influence brought to bear on the soul. This, to take a most grim example, is true even of cancer".'<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the views of men like F.W.Bailes,<sup>4</sup> who believes that all disease has its origin in mental and spiritual causes, seem to be carrying this insight too far, using it to supply an over-simplified solution to what is a highly complex problem. The important point is that many physical afflictions have non-physical causes. Once this is recognised, it is reasonable to go on to say that many physical conditions may be materially improved or even cured through

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1. New World of the Mind, p.197

2. Psychology, Religion, and Healing, p.50

3. op.cit., p.184

4. Typical of his books is Your Mind can Heal You, Allen & Unwin

prayer, through the interaction of the mind of the intercessor in conjunction with the Mind of God upon the mind of him who is afflicted.

We said earlier that there is nothing logical or evidential to prevent us asserting that this can happen to a certain extent. This brings us to a second question, If it is possible to affect the lives of others through prayer, is not such prayer then a subtle way of undermining their freewill? Can a will be changed by prayer? We are here confronted with a paradox. On the one hand it seems that we are able to influence others through prayer only to the extent that they themselves allow. Where the will of someone prayed for is out of sympathy with the prayer offered on his behalf, it would seem that the effectiveness of the prayer is limited. I shall illustrate this with a scrap of my own pastoral experience. I was once called in to visit a man whom the doctors said was dying of cancer. His wife, a woman of blind and unswerving faith, believed implicitly that he would be healed in answer to the many prayers that were being offered on his behalf, both privately and in the public worship of the Church of which they both were members. The man himself was supposed not to know the gravity of his condition, and all sorts of untruths and half-truths were being told him to keep him ignorant. It was obvious, however, that despite these efforts he had guessed the truth and had given up all hope of being healed. Cynicism, disillusionment, defeat, and hopelessness were plainly written on his face. Subsequent events showed that he was indeed aware of his condition: he had made certain secret arrangements on the assumption that he was going to die. Praying with him and for him was extremely difficult. No matter how hard one tried to bolster his faith, he was unamenable to suggestion. He was convinced that he was going to die. He died not long afterwards. I am convinced that had his mental outlook been sympathetic to the prayers being offered on his behalf instead of opposed to them, the outcome might have been different.

The work of J.B.Rhine supports this. He writes, 'There is another problem awaiting research attention that may be a touchy one. It is the question of whether telepathic intrusion or coercive thought transference is possible, and, if so, under what range of conditions. Can a sender influence a receiver with whom he has had no preparatory contact? If he can, what is the effect (if any) of common experience, acquaintance, friendship, love, linguistic barriers, doubt, and many other states and factors? The problem is one that has considerable significance for many fields, and it especially concerns the

field of mental health. It is one into which parapsychologists have not as yet been ready to plunge. However, the problem cannot be put off indefinitely. The mentally ill individual can be assured that telepathy has never yet been found to have been used reliably by anyone to persecute or harm another person.

But many psychiatrists have suggested that there are constructive and beneficial possibilities that need to be explored in the interest of psychotherapy and mental hygiene.<sup>1</sup> We shall presently state certain objections to this. One further point must be made. Psychological tests indicate that there must generally be some harmonious acceptance of the will of the agent by the subject if hypnosis is to be effective. Resistance at any level of the mind does frustrate the intention to induce a hypnotic state.

On the other hand, it is a dogmatic over-simplification to say that prayer can never over-ride the freewill of a person prayed for. Given enough time, could not even the negative attitude of the dying man mentioned above have been changed through prayer? Time is the all-important factor; for him there was not enough of it. J.B.Rhine's statement above is also open to question. We do not really know that telepathy has never been found to have been used reliably by anyone to persecute or harm another person: (a) we cannot accurately measure telepathic influence, and (b) we do not know all who have been influenced by telepathy. If it were between two evil and malicious men how do we know it would not work? Does the medicine man of different primitive peoples provide some examples of this? All we can say is that while telepathy might conceivably be used maliciously, it is impossible that prayer should be so used. That prayer is to be 'in the name of Christ', in accordance with His mind and spirit, effectively precludes this. In prayer the question is whether or not a beneficial influence can be exerted on someone in spite of his being opposed to such influence.

Given the right conditions, and time seems clearly to be one of them, even a stubborn will might be changed through prayer. Our prayer adds to the silent pressure of the Holy Spirit that is ever being exerted on the life of every man, seeking to lift us on to a plane of full co-operation with God in terms of our whole personality, creating a mental and spiritual atmosphere conducive to such co-operation. Every man is free to decide whether to work with God or not. Each man must say his own yes to God, otherwise his yes would be worth nothing. But at the same time our prayers and the persuasive

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1. *ibid*, pp.88-89, italics mine

influence of the Holy Spirit together may surely be a contributory and hastening factor in bringing about a right response to God. Until the right response is made the benefits mediated through prayer cannot be fully bestowed. This is what makes prayer such an exhausting and wearying enterprise. The saintly Monicas of this world must learn patience, persistence, and perseverance if they would have their prayers answered for the Augustines laid upon their hearts. But they may be sustained in their arduous office by the knowledge that in the end even the most stubborn and apparently unmoveable of wills have been known to yield to the insistent call of the living God.

This brings us to the third question, Does efficacious intercession depend on faith in the person for whom it is made? We must begin by defining what we mean by faith. Three definitions may be offered. E.J.Hawkins says that faith 'is the identification of ourselves, morally, with God. This means not that we presume to say we are as good as God, but that His will is to us the sum of all goodness, so that the aim of our will is the perfect realisation of His. We reach up, as it were, unto Him: in our complete delight in Him we strive to come to His point of view, to think His thoughts, to act as He acts.'<sup>1</sup> Weatherhead suggests that for the Christian 'faith is the response of the whole man, thinking, feeling, and willing, to the impact of God in Christ by which man comes into a conscious, personal relationship with God.'<sup>2</sup> Heim says that 'to have faith does not mean to be in possession of any kind of peculiar source of power, but rather to have access to another sphere which lies beyond all earthly powers.'<sup>3</sup> On the basis of all these definitions we may say that for intercession to be effective the person prayed for need not display, as a necessary and indispensable condition, this quality of faith. There are many who have displayed such faith, and who, despite the fervent prayers of Christian people, have not recovered from the ailments and maladies that have afflicted them. There are others who have been without such faith, who have not identified themselves morally with God, or responded to the impact of God in Christ, or had access to another sphere which lies beyond all earthly powers, and who have been healed in response to prayer. The Gospels themselves mention many persons who were healed, not in response to their own faith, but in response to the faith of

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1. writing in The Power of Prayer, Ed. Paterson & Russell, p.149

2. *ibid*, p.429

3. *ibid*, p.163

those who brought them to Jesus or came to Jesus on their behalf.<sup>1</sup>

It is a grave and even stupid mistake to suggest to people who have not been healed in response to prayer that this is because they have been lacking in faith. While recognising the importance of faith, and we shall return to this point later, we must also recognise that the faith which is a pre-requisite of effective intercession may be present elsewhere than in the heart of him for whom healing is asked.

What does seem to be important, even indispensable for effective intercession, is a certain suggestibility or openness of mind on the part of him for whom intercession is made. The man we spoke of earlier seemed entirely devoid of this suggestibility to thoughts of health and healing. His mind was made up and closed. Had he been suggestible, even without being possessed of faith in its Christian fulness, the outcome of the prayers offered on his behalf might conceivably have been different. As Weatherhead writes, 'Some of the laws of prayer seem to be slowly emerging. One seems to be that prayer is more effective when it is made for a little child than when it is made for an adult, possibly because a child's mind, especially his unconscious mind, is more vulnerable to the invasion of the forces which flow from the minds of others. A child's mind is less walled in by prejudices, preconceived ideas, doubts, fears, and inhibitions. It is less hardened by cynicism and disappointment. An adult has predetermined what he regards as possible and impossible. He has his settled mental habits, and probably a closed system concerning what he "believes", and his mind rejects ideas which do not fit in with his general scheme of thought and belief.'<sup>2</sup> Again, in the Gospels Jesus healed many persons through their suggestibility rather than their faith.<sup>3</sup>

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1. The Paralytic at Capernaum, Mt 9:1-8, Mk 2:1-12, Lk 5:18-26; the Daughter of the Syro-Phoenician Woman, Mk 7:24-30, Mt 15:21-28; Jairus's Daughter, Mt 9:18-26, Mk 5:21-43, Lk 8:40-56; the Centurion's Servant and the Nobleman's Son, Mt 8:5-13, Lk 7:1-10, Jn 4:46-54; and the Epileptic Boy, Mk 9:14-29, Mt 17:14-21, Lk 9:37-43.

2. *ibid*, p.237

3. the Cleansing of a Leper, Mk 1:40-45, Mt 8:1-4, Lk 5:12-14; the Cleansing of the Ten Lepers, Lk 17:11-19ff; the Cripple at the Pool of Bethesda, Lk 5:1-16; the Woman in the Crowd, Mk 5:25-34, Mt 9:20-22, Lk 8:43-48; the Blind Man at Bethsaida, Mk 8:22-26; the Man born Blind, Jn 9:1-41; Blind Bartimaeus, Mk 10:46-52, Mt 20:29-34, Lk 18:35-43; the Man with Dropsy, Lk 14:1-6; Peter's Mother-in-law, Mk 1:29-31, Mt 8:14-15; the Woman Bound by Satan, Lk 13:10-17; and the Man with the Withered Hand, Mk 3:1-6, Mt 12:9-14, Lk 6:6-11.

It would seem also to be unimportant for efficacious intercession whether or not the person prayed for knows he is the subject of loving prayer, provided he is amenable to the influence of such prayer and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Naturally, a suggestible attitude may be more easily produced where the person knows that prayers are being offered on his behalf, particularly where the depth and quality of the devotion of those who pray are such that their personalities generate a spirit of confidence and trust in others. This would answer the difficulty many people feel about prayers for others not known personally to those who pray: missionaries in far-off parts, doctors and nurses in general, those in authority over us, and those who teach, to give but a few examples. Prayer on behalf of such people can be a useful means of mediating God's benefits to them; they need not necessarily be known to those who pray or be aware that they are being prayed for, particularly if their lives are sensitive to the direction of the Holy Spirit. For then they are likely to be suggestible to thoughts which coincide with what is already the general direction of their life. Their suggestibility, however, is likely to be heightened when they not only know that people, but which people, are praying for them.

We conclude that there is nothing unreasonable in supposing that prayer can have a profound influence for good on the life of those prayed for, although we have as yet no clear and precise knowledge of how this happens; that the unsympathetic will of the person prayed for can impose a limiting factor on the efficacy of intercession, but that given time and other necessary conditions, even a stubborn will can be changed for good through prayer; and that we should hesitate to say to anyone that except he have faith, he cannot be healed: the all-important factor is suggestibility.

### (iii) INTERCESSION AND THE INTERCESSOR

Certain questions, centering around the intercessor, are commonly encountered in practice. Typical questions are, Is prayer by a group more efficacious than the prayer of an individual? What is the effect of faith, or the lack of it, on prayer? Does the course and quality of the life of him who prays for others bear any relationship to his prayer? To these matters we now turn.

Beginning with the question of the relative efficacy of group prayers and the prayers of individuals, let it be said immediately that the mere fact that a number of people are

praying is no guarantee that their prayer is of the depth and quality which prevailing intercession demands. Our Lord's promise, 'If two of you agree on earth about any request you have to make, that request will be granted by my heavenly Father. For where two or three have met together in my name, I am there among them,'<sup>1</sup> places the emphasis not so much on the two or three who are gathered together as on the fact that Jesus Himself is present, that they are met in His name, that they are agreed (having a common mind and purpose), and that together they seek to ally their own concern with His. Far from numbers alone being a warranty of the efficacy of the prayers offered, the reverse could easily be so. It is not easy to achieve a common mind and purpose among a heterogeneous company of people. The larger the group, the more difficult this is. All sorts of personal considerations tend to hinder the realisation of that goal which is, as we have seen in a previous chapter, a necessary condition for prevailing prayer, namely, a common concern on the part of those who pray for him who is the subject of their prayer. Unless the group begins by trying to accept and realize the presence of Christ, their unity and prayers will be less real. Unless the group is carefully directed and trained it will not easily become a team making united intercession with love and faith, but will be merely an amorphous assembly of individuals, each busy with his own private thoughts, thoughts not always either altruistic or in any way related to the common end.

But where the group is not a disconnected collection of individuals, but a team of intercessors, schooled, disciplined, intelligent, compassionate, under the common constraint of the Holy Spirit, and conscious of the presence of Christ in their midst, it seems reasonable to suppose that their united prayer will be of more effect than the prayer of an individual, however devoted, interceding privately.

The obvious quarter from which confirmation or rejection of this supposition may be expected is the field of extra-sensory perception. If experiments here could establish that a number of minds concentrating on a common object have a greater telepathic influence than an individual concentrating by himself, then we should be provided with a very useful analogy. While it would prove nothing, for intercession can never be equated with telepathy, it might give us an interesting insight into an analogous mechanism.

But in fact no such experimentally-verified result has

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1. Mt 18:19-20

been forthcoming from parapsychology. While the possibility of telepathy seems to be established, very little has been proved. Because the object of investigation is the human mind, it is far more difficult to obtain empirically-verifiable evidence than it is when some physical or inanimate object is under the microscope. Objectivity is extremely hard to achieve. The thoughts of the observer can easily be confused with those of the subject under observation. Monotony and boredom, the inevitable accompaniments of endlessly-repeated experiments in which the human mind is involved, affect not only the enthusiasm but also the efficiency of the experimenters. The emotional relationship between those who are conducting the experiments and their subjects have a pronounced bearing on the results obtained. Rosalind Heywood, writing about the work of G.N.M. Tyrell done with Miss G.Johnson, with whom he had a very close affinity, compares their work with the work done by other combinations: 'The combination Tyrell-Johnson stood out a mile. It must be remembered that although the monotonous "guessing" could hardly fail to get dull in the end, conditions were as easy and pleasant as possible for G.J. She was working with a loved companion and was never asked to guess unless she felt in the mood, whereas the twenty-nine outside percipients naturally had to come by appointment, whether they were in the mood or not.'<sup>1</sup>

It is thus doubtful whether much work has really been done to establish whether the effect of a group concentrating on a common object is greater than that of an individual. This suggests a potential field of research which could help us enormously in our understanding of the mechanism of intercessory prayer.

Our supposition would need to be substantiated by more evidence before it could be said to be established. But while we may not be able to offer proof, or even analogy, we may at least adduce four points which tend to the conclusion that group prayer at depth is inherently more effective than the prayer of a solitary individual.

Historically, Christian intercession has been practised by the Church in its common worship to a greater extent than by Christians in their private devotions. While tradition cannot guarantee the rightness of a custom it may indicate that a basic truth which as yet cannot be proved has been intuitively grasped.

Secondly, it could be said that apart from those truly devout souls for whom the world is their parish, and whose compassion, expressed through their intercession, includes the

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1. *ibid*, p.157

whole of life, most Christians pray earnestly only for those close to themselves. Very often such prayer, however passionate, is accompanied, perhaps unconsciously, by feelings of anxiety, apprehension, doubt, despair, or resentment. Such feelings negate the prayers offered. On the other hand, a group constrained by love alone to join together in the work of intercession is not as bound up emotionally with those for whom it prays. While this might render the group's prayer less earnest or passionate than it would be where someone close is involved, it does have the beneficial effect of setting its prayer free from negative and negating feelings. This objectivity in prayer leads to increased faith. And if faith is as important as we believe it to be, then the objective prayer of a group will be of more value than the subjective prayer of an individual.

Thirdly, our experience in other areas of life shows us that where men work as a team, inspiring and encouraging one another, they achieve greater things than when they work in isolation. The conquest of Mt Everest or the reaching of the South Pole overland, the launching of a space probe or the conquest of poliomyelitis through medical research, are examples of what the team can do where the individual would be helpless. In mining, industry, and agriculture men working co-operatively with their fellows achieve results impossible for the isolated individual. Even the accomplishments of outstanding figures like Charles Lindberg, Roger Bannister, or Malcolm Campbell were due to the teamwork of others. We are thus not proposing anything contradictory to everyday experience when we say that a thousand people, radiating courage, hope, love, and a trustful expectancy in the power of God to succour His children, will achieve more through their united prayer than one man could achieve by himself.

Lastly, the Bible reveals a God who is concerned as much with the corporate personality of His people as with the individuals who compose it. We moderns have stressed the individualistic nature of man almost at the expense of his societary allegiance. God, surely, desires not merely that those who have acknowledged His sovereign Fatherhood should pray individually, but that the society of the redeemed, of which they are part, should perform this action. If that be indeed His purpose, can it be doubted that the prayer of that society shall be of greater avail than the individual prayer of those who are members of it? Moreover, even the solitary prayer of an individual Christian is the prayer of one who is conscious of belonging to a praying community with a great High Priest in the heavenly places.

We must now examine the effect of faith, or its lack, on the prayer of the intercessor. Having already said that faith, as defined, need not always be exigently present in the heart and mind of the person for whom prayer is made, but that suggestibility is the important factor, we must go on to assert that for the intercessor faith is indispensable. 'If the trumpet-call is not clear, who will prepare for battle?'<sup>1</sup> Speaking from the human side, it is obvious that the cures wrought by Jesus were wrought only in response to faith. Doubtless they were the work of the Spirit of God often through the faith of man, and in particular always through the faith of the Son of Man, 'on whom faith depends from start to finish.'<sup>2</sup> Faith was always present. And if faith need not be present in the person for whom some blessing is desired, it must be present in the person who prays. To think of prevailing prayer without faith is as preposterous as to think of forgiveness without repentance. The divine activity pre-supposes a corresponding and complementary human activity, and without it God chooses not to act.

Obviously, it is better that both the person who prays and the person prayed for should have faith, than one alone. But if one alone has faith, he must be the intercessor. The words of D.S.Cairns are apposite: 'What man inspired by the true spirit of science will set any boundary to his aspiration to discover the secrets of the earth and the heavens? Why should religion accept limits to the power and love of God and the possibilities of prayer? Against all such limits set by man's unbelief stands Christ with His incessant call for faith... His one fear seems to have been not that the men of His time should believe too much, but that they should believe too little in the power over evil of believing, loving, and hoping prayer.'<sup>3</sup>

Finally, in thinking of the intercessor, we must consider the relationship between the course and quality of his life and his prayer. It goes almost without saying that the two must be integrated. Unless one's prayer focuses and reflects the whole direction and tenor of one's life, it will be unreal. This is as true of the praying individual as it is of the praying Church. Daniel T.Jenkins expresses this forcibly: 'Is a Church which intercedes for the world only at her altars effectively interceding? Will not, as experience proves, the

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1. I Corinthians 14:8  
 2. Hebrews 12:2  
 3. *ibid*, p.246

world think such intercession a sham and will not God think such intercession a sham and will not the Church herself in the end come to think such intercession a sham? The Church's intercession for the world has to be expressed in service of the world for the sake of the Gospel, in identifying herself with the world in its need and misery and waywardness and guilt even as our Lord identified Himself with sin-stricken humanity, that the world may be truly caught up in her intercessions and they prevail on its behalf.<sup>1</sup>

To pray only in words may be easy and costless; such prayer is worth little. To pray not only with words, but with words which are the expression of a whole way of life, can be costly indeed. Because not merely one's words but one's whole way of life is closely identified with the purpose of God, one's prayer becomes incalculably effective. 'A good man's prayer is powerful and effective.'<sup>2</sup> To pray at cost for the poor means that no longer will the greater part of one's time and energy be devoted to the acquiring of wealth. To pray at cost for the sick means that one will give time to visiting them, imparting by one's presence a spirit of courage, cheerfulness, and confidence. To pray that the scourge of cancer be finally removed, may involve the costly consequence of devoting some proportion of one's income to cancer research. To pray at cost for the sinner means to take upon one's heart and shoulders something of the burden of his sin. All this brings us closer to God. The closer to God we are, the more effective will be our prayer.

Where intercession does consist of bringing to the level of conscious and clear expression concerns, longings, desires, and hopes for the total well-being of others that are part of the intercessor's unconscious behaviour, outlook, and way of life, then it will be real and will have what is humanly speaking one of the prime requirements of prevailing prayer. But where what is expressed bears no relation whatever to that which underlies the expression, prayer is futile and hypocritical. The wise words of P.T.Forsyth are worth quoting: 'Prayer is one form of sacrifice, but if it is the only form it is vain oblation. If we pray for our child that he may have God's blessing, we are really promising that nothing shall be lacking on our part to be a divine blessing to him. And if we have no kind of religious relation to him (as plenty of parents have none), our prayer is quite unreal, and its failure should not

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1. op.cit., p.91  
2. James 5:16b

be a surprise. To pray for God's kingdom is also to engage ourselves to service and sacrifice for it. To begin our prayer with a petition for the hallowing of God's name and to have no real and prime place for holiness in our life or faith is not sincere. The prayer of the vindictive for forgiveness is mockery, like the prayer for daily bread from a wheat-cornerer. No such man could say the Lord's prayer but to his judgement... To begin the day with prayer is but a formality unless it go on in prayer, unless for the rest of it we pray in deed what we began in word.<sup>1</sup> Were this generally understood, the problem of unanswered prayer would not loom so large as it often does in the minds of those who pray.

The intercessor will thus be a member of a team as well as one who prays in private, believing that men can do together and with God more than they can do on their own. He will be a man of faith, for faith is the human quality God has chosen to elicit His gracious response. And he will be a man whose prayer is an extension of his life, and whose life is an extension of his prayer.

(iv) INTERCESSION, GENERAL OR SPECIFIC?

There are times when the good sense of Christians can be relied on to tell them whether to ask of God in prayer a specific blessing for another, or whether to commend him to God merely in general terms. H.H.Farmer has this in mind when he writes, 'Most Christian people do as a matter of fact instinctively set certain limits to their prayers, and always have done so... They pray for recovery from pneumonia, but not for the growing of a new limb in place of one that has been amputated. They pray for rain, but not for the sudden upstanding of the crops when once they lie black and dessicated on the parched earth, nor for a multiplication of the half-loaf still left in the pantry. They pray for a loved one's safety, but not for his resurrection from the dead when once he has been killed. They pray for courage to face failure, yet not for skill to write a play like Hamlet or a symphony like Beethoven's fifth... The source of these distinctions can be found only in the fact that there is given to mankind, and supremely to the man whose inner life is being cleansed and reconciled to God by Jesus Christ, an insight into those limits which the divine love has itself set, at least for the time being, upon the open possibilities of this world in any

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1. op.cit., p.28

situation.<sup>1</sup>

In the examples mentioned by Farmer, and in others similar to them which could be adduced, it is not really difficult to decide whether to ask of God a specific or a general blessing for the person for whom one prays. But there are other situations in which it is very difficult to decide whether to pray particularly or generally, and not only common sense but faith is needed, for the answer is beyond the reach of reason alone. An illustration, drawn again from the writer's pastoral experience, may bring this problem into sharp focus.

A woman, a divorcee whose life has been a hard one and who is not closely associated with the Church, is anxious about the indifferent health of her 15-year old son. The medical practitioner to whom she takes him decides, after a thorough examination, to ask the opinion of a specialist physician. After exhaustive tests, covering a period of some weeks, the woman is very gently and carefully told the truth about her son's condition. He is suffering from leukemia. The prognosis is very grave. Because of his age the disease will spread through his blood at a much faster rate than it would in an older person. Step by step, the physician outlines to the boy's mother the probable progress of the disease. He warns her of what to expect at each stage and then, very tenderly, tells her that she must expect to lose her son in six months' time. She accepts the news bravely, and resolves immediately that her son shall not know what is really wrong with him, so that his last six months of life will be as happy as possible.

The minister is now called in. To him the mother unburdens herself completely, adding at the end of the story the words so often heard, 'We can only pray for a miracle to happen.' The minister finds himself in a real dilemma. There are certain things which deter him from asking God for the miracle which the mother so earnestly desires. For one, he cannot ask for healing in specific terms when praying with the boy himself: he is not supposed to know how gravely ill he is and any **prayer with him** must be so phrased as to give him no hint of his condition and yet give him courage, hope, and a strong sense that he is in the care of a loving Father in the face of his progressive physical deterioration. There is inevitably a sense of unreality about such prayer. For another, not only is the prognosis for this boy grave, but the minister, in his own limited experience, has seen this prognosis confirmed in three others by the eventual deaths of young people suffering from

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1. The World and God, pp.267-268

the same disease. They all had Christian friends praying for them, and one at least was a young woman of radiant Christian faith, yet step by step the grim prophecy of the physicians was fulfilled. Dare he ask God specifically for a miracle with these other young people in mind? Dare he ask for a miracle when it seems to him (who is supposed to exercise unswerving faith in a situation such as this) that God chooses to combat diseases like leukemia more through the slow and often unspectacular medium of medical research than directly in answer to prayer? And if he does ask God specifically to heal the boy, what will happen to the mother's faith if the looked-for miracle is not forthcoming? Will she accept the suggestion that it is not God's will for her young boy, with life opening out before him, that he should live?

The minister does not therefore find it easy to pray specifically that the boy be healed, either privately, or with the boy himself, or with his mother. But neither is he content to pray merely in vague and general terms. To ask God simply to bless the boy according to his need and His will would surely be an indication of the timorous quality of his own faith? Certainly, the mother could well construe it as such. And if he who prays lacks faith, of what efficacy can be his prayer? Should the boy die, as the physicians expect him to, will there not always be at the back of the minister's mind the thought that if only he and those who joined with him in intercession had been possessed of that faith which Caird described as the faith that rebels the boy might have been restored?

The dilemma is obvious. What is not so obvious is how it is to be resolved. Each man must find his own answer to such a problem. Again Farmer has a timely word: 'Nor is it of great concern that different Christians will draw the limits (between specific and general prayers) in different places, provided only that in every case the decision not to pray for this, that, or the other thing is only the negative side of a positive endeavour to grasp every situation in love, and to share, both in heart's desire and in active deed, whatsoever they can understand of God's austere purpose of love within it. The essence of the magical idea, it should be clearly understood, is not in praying for things that will not happen, but in praying for things out of a merely egoistic idea of bending the will of God to one's own purposes. We might say, love God, and pray for what you like.'<sup>1</sup>

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1. *ibid*, p.268 (paraphrasing St Augustine)

My own way out of the dilemma, immature and unsatisfactory as it may be, is as follows. As the physicians have told the mother the medical facts as clearly, yet as gently, as possible, so the minister must do the same with the facts about prayer before engaging with her in the work of intercession. This is not now easy to do. It should have been done before such a crisis arose. But the woman concerned has had little to do with either the worship or the fellowship of the Church, where such instruction is given. Her present emotional state is one in which she is more receptive to what she wants to hear than the truth. Nevertheless, she must be told with tenderness and frankness as much as she can understand about Christian intercession.

Then, it can with truth be pointed out that there have been those suffering from diseases such as leukemia whose recovery and restoration could only be attributed to prayer. Many authoratively attested healings through prayer are on record, and if relevant may be quoted.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, it must be explained that while it is undoubtedly God's intentional will (to use the phraseology of Chapter 2) that the sick should be healed and that diseases like leukemia should be overcome, His will in any particular situation is far from being openly declared. Often it would appear that His circumstantial will has been that the affliction should be accepted and creatively used to declare His glory and the victory which He gives, not by removing the afflicting circumstances, but in and through them. The classic example of this is St Paul: 'I was given a sharp pain in my body which came as Satan's messenger to bruise me; this was to save me from being unduly elated. Three times I begged the Lord to rid me of it, but His answer was: "My grace is all you need; power comes to its full strength in weakness".'<sup>2</sup> A more modern example is Margaret (her surname is not given), described with incredible impact and force by James Davidson Ross.<sup>3</sup> Margaret, a young girl of fifteen, was afflicted with a form of cancer pronounced medically incurable. Because of her youth the disease was expected to spread through her body far more rapidly than it would in an older person. At first the truth of her condition was withheld from her, at the cost of much deception, tension, and strain, But after a remarkable personal experience in which

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1. Heim, in his book already cited, and Weatherhead, in his Psychology, Religion, and Healing, both provide examples.  
 2. II Corinthians 12:7-9  
 3. Margaret, Hodder and Stoughton

the author came clearly to understand the will of God, Margaret was told the truth. The moment of truth not only brought release from the almost intolerable strain under which all concerned had been living, but it called forth in Margaret herself the positive, creative, and, strange to say, joyous acceptance of the facts of her condition and the probable course of the disease until the end came, as God's plan for her life. From that moment Margaret began to exert the most dynamic spiritual influence over all who in any way came into contact with her. Through her courage, her unfailing cheerfulness and humour, her steady confidence in the goodness and love of God, she achieved more in her two-and-a-half months of dying than many achieve in the course of a full life span. There were many people, including James Ross, who had been an avowed agnostic, and the doctor who attended her, who were converted to Christian discipleship through this young woman's radiant faith and complete acceptance of the way God had chosen for her. It is impossible to do justice to her story in so few words, but the point it illustrates is that God's will is not always what we imagine it to be, and that where His will, and not what we assume to be His will, is positively accepted in a spirit of co-operation and trust, He is able to accomplish mighty things.

Thirdly, the importance of praying for the whole person must be stressed. The story of Margaret makes this plain. We are to concern ourselves before God not only with the sick person's physical condition, but with the total personality. It may be that God chooses to use physical disease, even if it issues ultimately in death, as a means of bringing about a more all-embracing wholeness.

Fourthly, we know that through medical research God has enabled man to overcome many of the diseases that have afflicted mankind. Those who are engaged in this activity must therefore be upheld and remembered in the intercessions of Christian people, that their probing and seeking for answers to diseases that defy even the most dedicated medical skill may be blessed by the guiding of the Holy Spirit. It may be that prayer for the healing of a boy suffering from leukemia will be answered by a break-through in medical research which will enable not one, but many suffering from the disease, to be healed.

Fifthly, the nature of faith must be made plain. True faith is not in the magical properties of prayer and its power to work miracles where medical science is baffled and impotent; it is faith in God, a trustful dependence on His wisdom and love. Heim expresses this aptly: 'We have to do with a living God whom we cannot compel by our prayers if He Himself has not

already made His sovereign decision. Prayer (in examples he has mentioned) became a perilous risk, a death-leap, whose outcome we do not have in our power. It depends entirely on God whether we, who have renounced earthly securities, are caught in the arms of God, or whether we crash broken to the ground... The way to God has properly been described as "letting oneself fall", and has been compared with the first flight of a baby eagle, pushed out of the nest by its parents, and then discovering to its amazement that the invisible ocean of light in which it is dropping is capable of bearing it up. The presence of God which surrounds every one of my readers is like this invisible ocean which bears us up more surely than do all visible means of security. The marvellous peacefulness in God which comes upon us only in such a situation is the secret of all genuine acceptance of prayer. Jesus makes it clear, in His saying about the removal of the mountain into the sea in response to believing prayer, that this acceptance has nothing to do with magic, black or white, but rests solely on the fact that the man who prays becomes, at the moment of his praying, an instrument of the active God in whose hands he rests.<sup>1</sup>

Having made these points plain, the prayer that is subsequently offered will be both specific and general. It will be specific in that it will affirm and invoke the power of God to act redemptively for His children, in terms of wholeness for their total personality. Where there is the irresistible compulsion of the Holy Spirit healing of a particular condition may be spontaneously requested, as in an example cited by Heim.<sup>2</sup> It will be general in that it will not presume to know all God's will in any given situation, but will be content to ask that the whole will of God for the whole man be accomplished. Prayer will then consist of bringing to a Father who is perfect in wisdom, love, and power one of His children whose physical need is known, but whose total need is not known, confidently trusting Him to work out His purpose in His own way.

Bearing in mind the story of Margaret unfolded by James Ross, and in particular the way her story shows how remarkably God is able to work where the person afflicted not only knows the truth of her condition but seeks God's purpose in it and co-operates with Him for its realisation, one wonders whether we do not nowadays too readily accept the current physicians' dictum that the patient must not be told, so as to have as

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1. *ibid*, pp.167-168

2. *ibid*, pp.193ff, the story of Marie Hesse

happy and carefree a time as possible before death finally comes. One knows that this is done from the best motives and with the noblest intentions. But is it not based on the materialistic notion that the time left on earth is what matters most? And do we not limit God's power to use even the illnesses of His children to His glory when we withhold from them the opportunity of giving to God the positive co-operation He surely seeks? It is impossible to generalise on the basis of one example, but it may be that we have been too much afraid of the truth, especially where young people are concerned. Young people, as is well known, have an enormous capacity for rising to heights of idealism, heroism, and sacrifice. In withholding the truth from them, as we do more often than not, do we not frustrate the manifestation of qualities which, in God's sight, might be of more value than a healthy body alone? Do we not at the same time limit the efficacy of intercession because we have not gained the fullest possible co-operation of the person for whom we are praying? These questions must be honestly faced if we are to apprehend the answers to the deeper problems associated with the practice of intercessory prayer.

(v) THE LIMITATIONS OF INTERCESSION

The Christian faith is constantly being brought into disrepute by misguided people who profess some truncated and sectarian form of it and who often hold, as one of the chief tenets in their beliefs, the notion that medical practitioners are evil men directly engaged in doing the work of the devil. Recently widely publicised was a man who allowed his wife to bleed to death rather than give a doctor permission to administer a simple injection to save her life. He justified such grossly sub-Christian behaviour by quoting the text, 'Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his arm, whose heart turns away from the Lord.'<sup>1</sup> With curious inconsistency, trusting the skill and experience of a highly qualified medical practitioner is singled out as being the kind of behaviour that calls forth the curse of Jeremiah, while the fact that one trusts in man every time one eats a meal, posts a letter, puts on a suit, gets into a motor-car, or boards a bus is ignored. The Christian Science movement similarly believes that doctors and those who collaborate with them are iniquitous people, and that disease and sickness are merely sinful fictions of misdirected minds which can be dispelled simply by thinking

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1. Jeremiah 17:5

the thoughts propagated by the movement. Mary Baker Eddy writes, 'The less we know about hygiene, the less we are pre-disposed to sickness.'<sup>1</sup> Weatherhead comments: 'In India I remember a village in which cholera broke out. It was found that the discharges from the bodies of cholera patients seeped into the common well from which the whole village took its drinking water. Real science, finding this, took steps which checked the epidemic. Ignorance of hygiene, continuing, would have decimated the whole community. Is the word "nonsense" too strong? Is it not clear that Christian Scientists could not live in a society that practised their own beliefs? They are parasitic on a community that has developed a security which their teachings would destroy.'<sup>2</sup> Similarly, to illustrate the point again, the Jehovah's Witnesses are well known for their utter aversion to blood transfusions. They base this aversion on the decision of the Council of Jerusalem about Gentile converts to the Christian faith, 'You are to abstain from meat that has been offered to idols, from blood, from anything that has been strangled, and from fornication.'<sup>3</sup> They believe in more spiritual methods of saving lives than methods as grossly amoral and materialistic as blood transfusions, in spite of the millions of lives they have saved.

There are other religious groups with similar beliefs. We mention these simply to draw attention to the fact that in all of them a sharp distinction is drawn between physical, material, or common-sense methods of healing and spiritual methods. The one is cursed and rejected of God; the other is blessed and used by Him. The one, where it produces results, does so only because Satan himself is pleased to work through it; even where the other does not produce results this failure is rationalised by the assertion that there has been insufficient faith for God to act.

This sharply-drawn distinction between spiritual and material means of healing is paralleled by a widespread belief among ordinary people in the semi-magical efficacy of prayer. Perhaps it is because of this prior belief that the sects flourish as they do. According to this belief prayer is a universal panacea for all ills which whosoever has faith enough (and faith is thought of as believing the impossible to be possible) may use to find healing of body, mind, and spirit, even where medical practitioners are powerless to help. Prayer

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1. Science and Health, p.389

2. ibid, p.175

3. Acts 15:29

and faith are opposed to doctors, hospitals, and medicines.

The truth missed completely, even sometimes by Christians who are not sectarian, is that the various means of healing, physical, mental, psychosomatic, and spiritual, are not opposites but complements. Furthermore, no one method of healing is universally effective. Each has its particular and limited sphere of usefulness. Weatherhead explicates this point: 'All illnesses are not curable by prayer (we might add, just as all illnesses are not curable by surgery). Prayer is only one way of co-operating with God to bring health to men... Medicine, surgery, nursing, psychology, dentistry, are other ways, and we must find the way which is relevant... To give a very simple illustration, if a man has a thorn in his foot which is suppurating, prayer is clearly not the relevant way of healing his foot, and Jesus certainly would not have attempted it. The thorn must be removed. It should be remembered that there are many cases in this category, although they do not appear to be so to us. Again and again prayer is resorted to only because all other means have failed. But it can hardly be expected that prayer will be a substitute for painstaking research to understand the cause of illness, and God called in, as it were, to make up for the ignorance or lack of skill of the doctor or surgeon. Again and again men cry out that their prayers are not answered, when the truth is that had they understood the situation, they would never have expected healing from prayer alone... Prayer certainly has a value in every... illness, but not necessarily a curative value, and it has a value not because it is in the same category as other forms of treatment, but because it is a means of establishing harmony with God, on which the welfare of the soul, and often of the body, depends.'<sup>1</sup>

It has been the purpose of this essay to set out some of the underlying principles of one of the most important ways given to men of co-operating with God, the way of intercession. Where these principles are understood and practised, prayer becomes one of the chief weapons in the Christian's armoury for the fight against sin and disease, ignorance and suffering. We must always be aware that it is only one of the weapons in the armoury, somewhat neglected some may think; not an entire armoury in itself. Intercessory prayer, even where it is practised with intelligent understanding and whole-hearted devotion, has definite limitations. The soldier who is aware of both the strong points and the limitations of the weapon he wields is likely to be a very dangerous adversary. The soldier

1. *ibid*, p.246, italics mine

of Christ who has come to appreciate both the potentialities and the limitations of intercession, is likely to be a man the impact of whose life will visibly diminish the forces of evil and disease.

We may conclude our survey with a warning. If Jesus Christ whom we follow is the Way, the Truth, and the Life,<sup>1</sup> then we must follow the Way of Him for whom sacred and secular, spiritual and material were not rigidly separated and opposed. We therefore discountenance the suggestion that one means of healing is holier or more seemly in His sight than any other. All means of healing are God's. Because He is Truth, then all truth is from Him, whether it be surgical, allopathic, homeopathic, psychological, or religious. As Christians we must be prepared to follow truth wherever it is found; we must pray earnestly that those who follow after truth in every field may do so under the direction of Him who is the Spirit of Truth<sup>2</sup> and whom Jesus promised would lead men into all truth. And because He is Life, and has given to men the gift both of physical life and life eternal, that which is necessary for the sustenance, preservation, and restoration of physical life has its assured place in His economy as well as that which sustains, **preserves**, and restores in the soul of man the gift that is spiritual and eternal.

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1. John 14:6  
2. John 16:13

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