

# INTERCESSORY PRAYER

*A Ministerial Task*

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Originally delivered in two addresses to the  
Student body of Westminster Theological Seminary  
On their annual Prayer Day  
January 29, 1959

By  
Eugene Bradford



AVINGER, TEXAS

## FOREWORD

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**W**e live in a day in which there are encouraging indications that God is creating a hunger for and a commitment to thorough Biblical reformation in many of His people. Churches are being raised up, both in our country and abroad, in which Biblical views of preaching, worship, evangelism and responsible churchmanship are clearly manifested. For these things we ought to be deeply grateful.

However, if these tangible indications of a return to Biblical perspectives and practices are not wedded to an equally demonstrable reformation concerning intercessory prayer as a ministerial task and privilege, then much of what has been gained will become abortive. The central burden of Mr. Bradford's booklet is stated in his own words as follows:

It is a simple fact that apparent neglect of prayer, particularly by ministers and widespread spiritual deterioration are concomitants. Moreover, it is equally clear that the vicious cycle cannot be broken unless ministers and those who aspire to the sacred office fully realize that it is their office and calling to give themselves with utter abandon to the duty of prayer. There can be no doubt that the Holy Scriptures teach that intercessory prayer is a ministerial task. What is more, the Bible abounds with examples of such prayers offered by official servants of the Lord, careful study of which will highly reward the minister of the Gospel.

In addressing this crucial subject, Mr. Bradford sets forth a convincing Biblical case for the duty of ministerial intercession, using precepts and precedents of Scripture as his foundation. What he establishes from Scripture he then amply illustrates from the pen of eminent servants of God in past generations. Unless a man's heart is unmoved by the weight of Scripture and unless it is insensitive to the words of men who were burning and shining lights in their generation, one cannot but be moved to conviction, repentance and reformation by the prayerful reading of this brief treatise.

Few have seen the heart of this subject more clearly and addressed it more searchingly than did John Owen. In setting forth the specific duties of pastors Owen wrote, "I believe that no man can have *any evidence* in his own soul that he doth conscientiously perform any ministerial duty toward his flock, who doth not *continually pray for them*. Let him preach as much as he will, visit as much as he will, speak as much as he will, unless God doth keep up in him *a spirit of prayer* in his closet and family for them, he can have no evidence that he doth perform any other ministerial duty in a due manner, or that what he doth is accepted with God. I speak to them who are wise and understand these things."

If God will bless this booklet to lead all of us in the pastoral office to thorough Biblical reformation in the area of ministerial intercessory prayer, then the author will have attained his goal, and untold blessing will come to our churches to the praise of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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## INTERCESSORY PRAYER

### *A Ministerial Task*

The Form of Church Government adopted by the Westminster Assembly in 1645 lists eight duties which belong to the office of Pastors. It is not without significance that the first of these duties mentioned is prayer:

First, it belongs to his office, to pray for and with his flock, as the mouth of the people unto God, Acts vi.2, 3, 4 and xx.36, where preaching and prayer are joined as several parts of the same office. The office of the elder (that is, the pastor) is to pray for the sick, even in private, to which a blessing is especially promised; much more therefore ought he to perform this in the public execution of his office, as a part thereof.

That this duty extends beyond mere formal, stated prayers is evident from the fact that, at the service of ordination, the presiding minister is required "in the face of the congregation, [to] demand of him who is now to be ordained, concerning . . . his diligence in praying, reading, meditation, preaching, ministering the sacraments, discipline, and doing all ministerial duties toward his charge."

It is regrettable that this element of ministerial duty does not receive the same emphasis in Church Orders and in Ordination Forms in use by the churches today. For example, the Directory for Worship of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church states simply that the duties of the minister of Christ include

“the offering of prayer to the Lord on behalf of the congregation” (VI, A, 2). And the Form for Ordination of Ministers used in the Christian Reformed Church refers to the pastoral labors of the minister as the “proclamation of the gospel, accompanied with prayer and the administration of the holy sacraments,” while the Church Order states that “the office of the minister is to continue in prayer and in the ministry of the Word” (Article 16).

More regrettable still is the almost total lack of attention to the subject of the minister’s prayers in current discussion of the sacred office. Books and articles are written on the techniques of preaching, church administration, and counselling, but the banal comments on the pastoral activity in prayer serve only to point up how little importance is generally attached to this function. The standard works on Liturgics and Pastoral Theology give normal attention to public prayer, but virtually nothing is said of the necessity for the minister, as minister, to enter frequently into his closet to commune with God, to pray for those with whose spiritual care he is divinely charged, and to seek the indispensable blessing of the Spirit upon the labors of his office.

It is no accident that, at the same time, the acid of unbelief is burning its way into the churches and the rot of secularism is corrupting vast numbers of professing Christians, laymen and ministers alike. To distinguish here between cause and effect would serve no purpose. It is a simple fact that apparent neglect of prayer, particularly by ministers, and widespread spiritual deterioration are concomitants. Moreover, it is equally clear that the vicious cycle cannot be broken unless ministers and those who aspire to the sacred office fully realize that it is their office and calling to give themselves with utter abandon to the duty of prayer. There can be no doubt that the Holy Scriptures teach that intercessory prayer is a ministerial task. What is more, the Bible abounds with examples of such prayers offered by official

servants of the Lord, careful study of which will highly reward the minister of the gospel.

### DUTY

Perhaps it will be felt that one need not labor the point that it is the duty of ministers to engage in intercessory prayer, since all Christians are called upon to pray for one another. Some might even sense a danger in stressing this as a task of the ministerial office as such, feeling that such stress smacks of sacerdotal mediation. More of that later. While it must be readily admitted that the prayers of all believers have equal standing before God, and the prayers of no minister prevail with the Lord just because he is a minister, still it can be established from Scripture that the minister is called to pray as a part of his official duty.

The office of deacon was established by apostolic authority so that there might be a propitious distribution of labor in the church at Jerusalem. After the directive was given to select seven qualified men whom the apostles might appoint to care for the widows, the apostles stated, as recorded in Acts 6:4, “But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.” Their plea is that they must be relieved of their eleemosynary duties in order that they might give themselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the Word. “This is our task,” they say, “and it is not fitting that we should leave it, and serve tables.” Worthy though it is to care for the poor, the apostles must give constant attention to prayer and preaching. Their time and strength must be devoted exclusively to these duties. And notice, will you, that prayer is joined to the ministry of the Word as being of equal importance with it; indeed prayer is mentioned first. Is there not here the suggestion that the two functions are not to be separated? that ministering the Word must be joined to prayer? Calvin remarks:

They adjoin thereunto prayer, not that they alone ought to pray, (for that is an exercise common to all the godly,) but because they have peculiar causes to pray above all others. There is no man which ought not to be careful for the common salvation of the Church. How much more, then, ought the pastor, who hath that function enjoined him by name to labour carefully . . . for it. So Moses did indeed exhort others unto prayer, but he went before them as the ringleader. . . . We shall lose all our labour bestowed upon plowing, sowing, and watering, unless the increase come from heaven. . . . Therefore, it shall not suffice to take great pains in teaching, unless we require the blessing at the hands of the Lord, that our labour may not be in vain and unfruitful. Hereby it appeareth that the exercise of prayer is not in vain commended unto the ministers of the word.<sup>1</sup>

Stronger still is the language of Calvin in his comments on Isaiah 37:4:

it is the duty of a prophet, not only to comfort the afflicted by the word of the Lord, but also to offer his prayers for their salvation. Let not pastors and ministers of the word, therefore, think that they have fully discharged their duty, when they have exhorted and taught, if they do not also add prayer.<sup>2</sup>

This duty of the minister has its roots deep in Biblical history. The Old Testament contains the accounts of the intercessory activity of many of the leaders in the Theocracy. In some instances their prayers were accompanied by expiatory sacrifices, but, so far as the record goes, this element is lacking in many cases. Although the Aaronic priesthood was the formal intercessory office, it is abundantly clear that the occupants of the other offices considered intercessory prayer

<sup>1</sup>John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, 22 vols. (Reprint, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981), vol. 18, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Christopher Fetherstone, ed. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, n.d.), 1:236–7.

<sup>2</sup>Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 8, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1850), 3:111.

to be in the line of official duty. Obviously, apart from the Levitical system of mediation which looked to Christ, the Great High Priest, none of these prayers would have been offered, much less accepted by God. But it still remains that prophets, judges, kings and other leaders felt constrained, by virtue of the office to which they were divinely called, to call upon God on behalf of the covenant people.

Perhaps the most outstanding examples of prayer for God's people are found in Moses' life. The majority of his prayers implore God that he would stay his wrath from the people who had sinned. In Numbers, chapter 11, it is recorded that "when the people complained, it displeased the Lord: and the Lord heard it; and his anger was kindled; and the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and consumed them that were in the uttermost part of the camp. And the people cried unto Moses; and when Moses prayed unto the Lord, the fire was quenched."<sup>3</sup> Again, at the time of Korah's rebellion, when God commanded Moses and Aaron to separate themselves from among the congregation ere His consuming wrath fell on the people, "they fell upon their faces, and said, O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and wilt thou be wroth with the whole congregation?"<sup>4</sup> That the people expected it of Moses to pray for them, and that God signally honored such prayer is demonstrated especially in the episode of the fiery serpents. "The people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord, and against thee; pray unto the Lord, that he may take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people."<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, by divine arrangement, their salvation was granted through looking at the Christ-typifying brazen serpent lifted up in the wilderness.

<sup>3</sup>Numbers 11:1, 2.

<sup>4</sup>Numbers 16:22.

<sup>5</sup>Numbers 21:7.

In quite different circumstances and with a different objective, Moses, with deep compassion, prays that God would raise up a successor who would carry on after his death: “Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, which may go out before them, and which may go in before them, and which may lead them out, and which may bring them in; that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd.”<sup>6</sup> Again, the prayer rising from Moses’ lips on the people’s behalf is honored by God, and Joshua the son of Nun is singled out as God’s choice to be leader of the covenant flock.

And Moses’ spirit rests upon Joshua, particularly the spirit of merciful intercession. How impassioned is his prayer after the defeat at Ai! “And Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads. And Joshua said, Alas, O Lord God, wherefore hast thou at all brought this people over Jordan, to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites, to destroy us? would to God we had been content, and dwelt on the other side Jordan! O Lord, what shall I say, when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies! For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land shall hear of it, and shall environ us around, and cut off our name from the earth: and what wilt thou do unto thy great name?”<sup>7</sup> Here also, the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availed much. Joshua was directed how to find the one who had sinned at Jericho, the accursed thing was put out of the camp, the sinner destroyed, and finally victory over Ai was realized.

Another example of intercession honored by God is that of Deborah who, at the conclusion of her song of thanksgiving, prays, “So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord: but let them that love him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his

<sup>6</sup>Numbers 27:16, 17.

<sup>7</sup>Joshua 7:6–9.

might.”<sup>8</sup> And God graciously granted a forty-year period of rest to the land.

After the people of Israel realized the enormity of their sin in asking a king, they said to Samuel, “Pray for thy servants unto the Lord thy God, that we die not: for we have added unto all our sins this evil, to ask us a king.”<sup>9</sup> To this petition Samuel responds with the reassuring promise that if they serve the Lord and turn not aside to other gods, God will not forsake them for his great name’s sake, for it has pleased the Lord to make them his people. And, in reply to their specific request for prayer, he says, “Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way.”<sup>10</sup> Like the apostles to come, Samuel recognizes the indissoluble connection between the ministry of prayer and the ministry of the Word. Indeed, were he to neglect intercession, he would be forsaking his office and sinning against God.

There are many other examples where the leaders of God’s people prayed, and the answers granted are divine testimonies that the prayers were honored. When, after the sinful numbering of the Israelites by David, 70,000 died of the plague sent by God, David prayed, “Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done?” And he built an altar, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. “So the Lord was intreated for the land, and the plague was stayed from Israel.”<sup>11</sup> Likewise is the tender faithfulness of Hezekiah honored. When he proclaimed a Passover in Jerusalem there were many present from Ephraim and Manasseh, Issachar and Zebulun who had not cleansed themselves, yet ate of the Passover contrary to law. “But Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, The good Lord pardon

<sup>8</sup>Judges 5:31.

<sup>9</sup>I Samuel 12:19

<sup>10</sup>I Samuel 12:23.

<sup>11</sup>II Samuel 24:17,25.

every one that prepareth his heart to seek God, the Lord God of his fathers, though he be not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary. And the Lord hearkened to Hezekiah, and healed the people.”<sup>12</sup> A somewhat different immediate answer to intercessory prayer may be observed in the case where Ezra, upon being informed of the people’s sin, rent his garments, fell on his knees, and spread out his hands unto the Lord, and prayed the beautiful prayer commencing with the words, “O my God, I am ashamed, and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God.”<sup>13</sup> After the completion of his prayer, a very great congregation assembled unto him, acknowledging their sins, and resolving to make a covenant with God to forsake their iniquity.

The moving intercession of Nehemiah, prompted by the evil tidings that the remnant of the Jews in Jerusalem were in great affliction, and the wall of the city was broken down, is answered very clearly when four months later Artaxerxes sends him with letters and a commission to build again the wall of Jerusalem. In the case of Daniel’s matchless prayer for the people and for the city, recorded in the ninth chapter of his prophecy, the answer is unique. Gabriel informs him of the coming of Messiah the Prince to confirm the covenant.

It is obvious from this brief survey that the servants of God under the Old Covenant considered it their duty to pray for the people, that the people expected it of them and depended on them for this exercise of compassion, and that God honored their prayers in various ways.

Against this background it is not surprising that when we come to the New Testament we find the apostles deeply conscious of this duty. The more complete revelation under the New Covenant must surely bring a greater understanding of the relation of the covenant people to their Saviour and

<sup>12</sup> II Chronicles 30:18–20.

<sup>13</sup> Ezra 9:6.

Lord and a more profound concept of their needs as strangers and pilgrims in a world of sin. Moreover, Christ having appeared as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, the undershepherds, who derive their office from his, can be expected to have a greater sense of obligation to the people for whom he died than the leaders of the Theocracy could have had. What is more, their spirits must surely be kindled to love and compassion as their hearts throb with the knowledge that the Saviour who redeemed them was moved with compassion as he beheld the multitudes fainting and scattered abroad as sheep having no shepherd. Under the Old Covenant the true ground of intercession was known only by means of the shadowy adumbrations provided by the Levitical system. Moses and Aaron, Samuel and David, Ezra and Nehemiah, these all made intercession pleading upon the covenant promises. But they could not pray with the same fulness of knowledge nor the same strength of confidence with which Paul could pray. The typical sacrifices must give way to “the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” before the Lord’s servants can know with full assurance that their prayers on behalf of their brethren will be answered. The Aaronic priests stood daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices which could never take away sins, but Christ, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God. Consequently, the brethren now have boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he has consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh. The net result is that, since believers under the New Covenant have a great Priest over the house of God, they should draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, having their hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and their bodies washed with pure water.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Hebrews 10:10ff.



It is precisely because of the redemptive work of Christ that Paul can pray for the church. This is very clear in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Colossians: “We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints, for the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel.”<sup>15</sup> It is because they have come to faith in Christ and have manifested that faith in love to all the saints that Paul gives thanks to God and prays for the Colossian Christians. The report of their faith in Christ prompts him to prayer on their behalf, and he is thankful for the hope laid up for them in heaven, which hope is theirs because they have heard it in the word of the truth of the gospel. There is no other basis upon which he may pray or give thanks for them. The actual prayer of Paul for them demonstrates that the confidence with which he prays is based upon the redemption accomplished through the work of Christ. After praying that they might have wisdom, moral uprightness, increase in the knowledge of God, and strengthened patience, longsuffering and joyfulness, Paul concludes by “giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>16</sup> From this passage, then, there can be no doubt that all of Paul’s thanksgiving for them could be summed up in the fact that they have come to the experience of faith in Christ Jesus which brought them the forgiveness of sins and a heavenly inheritance. For this reason also he was warranted in supplicating God that all the Christian graces would adorn

<sup>15</sup> Colossians 1:3–5.

<sup>16</sup> Colossians 1:9–14.

their lives; and furthermore he has been constrained to pray for them ever since the day he heard of their faith.

In his Epistle to the Ephesians the warrant for, and the duty of, intercession for the church by the apostle Paul are implied even more fully. Here again, noting that he has heard of their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love to all the saints, he assures them that he unceasingly gives thanks for them and makes mention of them in his prayers. The specific petitions he makes for them are expressed in language similar to that used in the Colossian prayer, but he adds his desire that they may know “what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe.” But what is so impressive is his description of that power in terms of its historical manifestation in the resurrection of Christ from the dead and his exaltation to the right hand of God. He prays that “ye may know . . . what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come; and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.”<sup>17</sup> To paraphrase, “May you experience the same power which was demonstrated in the resurrection of Christ and in His exaltation to heaven, for indeed, Christ was exalted just so that He might be head over all things for the eternal welfare of his church.” What confidence is implicit in this prayer! Christ raised from the dead by the power of God! Christ set at God’s own right hand in the heavenly places! Christ exalted far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named! Christ having all things put under his feet! And Christ given to be

<sup>17</sup> Ephesians 1:19–23.

head over all things to the church, which is his body, the mystical complement of his person. Since Christ has thus been triumphant over all other power in order to bring about the good of his church, which is his body, surely Paul is warranted in praying that all the members of the body may experience the power of God which was the instrument in the exaltation of the head. The head and the body are inseparable. There is a mystical, vital, union which has been effected by the power of God and experienced in the members of the body by faith. As surely as God's power exalted the head, so surely will the body and all the members thereof experience God's power. At this point let it be observed that the intercession for his people which God requires of ministers must be sharply distinguished from the erroneous doctrine of Rome, namely, the doctrine of sacerdotal mediation. That the Word of God ascribes no special efficacy to ministerial intercession above the intercession of other believers is clearly implied in the doctrine of Christ's intercessory work. Under the Old Covenant there were many priests of the order of Aaron. They were not able to continue because of death. But Christ's priesthood is of another order. Springing out of the tribe of Judah, Christ exercised his mediatorial office after the similitude, not of Aaron, but of Melchisedec. He is a priest, not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life. Because of the weak and ephemeral character of the Aaronic priesthood it has been disannulled, and the old order, with its succession of priests one after the other, has given place to Christ who, because he continues forever, has his priesthood inviolable, unchangeable, absolute. His office is not given to another. "Wherefore he is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 7:25.

The Epistle to the Hebrews teaches, then, that Christ is our only priest. Even the Aaronic priests were not real priests, but only types. Much less, then, can Christian ministers be called priests, and to assign to them priestly functions and prerogatives is only to deny the immutability, absoluteness and efficacy of Christ's priesthood. Never once does the New Testament apply the term "priest" to ministers. Charles Hodge aptly remarks:

Every appropriate title of honour is lavished upon them. They are called the bishops of souls, pastors, teachers, rulers, governors, the servants or ministers of God; stewards of the divine mysteries; watchmen, heralds, but never priests. As the sacred writers were Jews, to whom nothing was more familiar than the word priest, whose ministers of religion were constantly so denominated, the fact that they never once use the word, or any of its cognates, in reference to the ministers of the gospel, . . . is little less than miraculous. It is one of those cases in which the silence of Scripture speaks volumes.<sup>19</sup>

It is worthy of note that in the one place where Paul prescribes the duty of intercessory prayer he designates the basis of it as the mediatorial work of Christ. He writes to Timothy: "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time."<sup>20</sup> Supplications and intercessions should be made because God will have all men to be saved; they can be made only because there is one mediator who gave himself a ransom. We may

<sup>19</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1871-73; reprint, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 2:467.

<sup>20</sup> I Timothy 2:1-6.

and should intercede because there is one, and only one, mediator through whose work our prayers can be honored.

Moreover, it is important to notice that no priestly functions, not ascribed in the New Testament to all believers, are ever ascribed to Christian ministers. Bishop Lightfoot, in his dissertation on “The Christian Ministry,” writes eloquently on this subject:

The kingdom of Christ . . . is in the fullest sense, free, comprehensive, universal. It displays this character not only in the acceptance of all comers who seek admission, irrespective of race or caste or sex, but also in the instruction and treatment of those who are already its members. . . . Above all, it has no sacerdotal system. It interposes no sacrificial tribe or class between God and man, by whose intervention alone God is reconciled and man forgiven. Each individual member holds personal communion with the Divine Head. To Him immediately he is responsible, and from Him directly he obtains pardon and draws strength. . . . The priestly functions and privileges of the Christian people are never regarded as transferred or even delegated to these officers (of the Church). . . . The only priests under the Gospel, designated as such in the New Testament, are the saints, the members of the Christian brotherhood.<sup>21</sup>

To the same intent are the words of Patrick Fairbairn:

In such a kingdom as Christ’s, where every real member is a priest, there can be room only for ministerial functions; which are required in this, as in every community, for the maintenance of order and the promotion of mutual edification. But in spiritual privilege there can be no essential difference, since all have access to God by faith, through the grace wherein they stand and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.<sup>22</sup>

But he carries the thought a bit farther in his *Pastoral Theology*:

<sup>21</sup>J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1913), 181, 184f.

<sup>22</sup>Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture* (Philadelphia, 1852), 2:209.

The service which it (New Testament Scripture) associates with the ministry of the gospel is one that employs itself not with presenting a sacrifice for men, but in persuading them to believe a sacrifice already offered, and through that promoting in them a work of personal reconciliation with God, and growing meetness for His presence and glory. Hence the ministry of the gospel as set forth in Scripture has the revealed word of God in Christ for its great instrument of working; and according as this word is received in faith, and brings forth in the lives of men the fruits of holiness, the end of the ministry is accomplished.

In such a service there is, no doubt, a priestly element, since it requires those who would perform it aright not only to deal with men on behalf of God, but also to deal with God on behalf of men, to accompany all their ministrations of word and doctrine with intercessions at the throne of grace.<sup>23</sup>

These words remind us of those of the apostles: “But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.”<sup>24</sup> The conclusion is inescapable, then, that, although there is no peculiar efficacy attaching to the prayers of the minister of the gospel, he dare not take up the ministrations of his office without unceasing prayer that God would seal his efforts with heavenly blessings. Perhaps no one will take serious issue with Vinet when he says, “the prayer of a pastor is *sacerdotal prayer*, and as such it is a function.” For he continues:

It has been said that he who works prays; how much more true is it that he who prays works! Prayer is a work like that of Moses in the mount. Intercession is what remains to the ministry of the priesthood. It was practiced immediately by the Great Pastor and by his apostles, who, without ceasing, made mention of their flocks in their prayers, at the same time that they claimed intercession from their flocks.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Patrick Fairbairn, *Pastoral Theology*, 48f.

<sup>24</sup>Acts 6:4.

<sup>25</sup>Patrick Fairbairn, *Pastoral Theology*, 116.

It has been established beyond any doubt that the minister is not in any sense a mediator. Furthermore, it should be evident that he has no special call to engage in intercessory prayer in disjunction from the other duties of his office. Like all Christians, he should pray for his brethren and for the unsaved. But unlike other Christians, he has been called to a special office and must engage in special duties which cannot be performed acceptably unless he regularly engages in prayer on behalf of those toward whom his official duties are directed. This is so because of the nature of the invisible church and because of the grave importance of the minister or pastor within the framework of its visible manifestation on earth. In this connection Fairbairn writes:

Everything in the several sections of the Church on earth should be framed and regulated so as in the most faithful and efficient manner to carry out the revealed mind of Christ. It ought to be so, in a very special manner, with respect to the Christian pastorate, to which belongs for all ordinary ministrations and results the highest place. Christ Himself is the Shepherd of the entire flock; and the pastors whom He promised to provide, for whom He received gifts on finishing the work given Him to do, are the under shepherds who have to tend the flock in subordinate divisions, and distribute in due season the materials of life and blessing committed to their hand. It is their part to stand and minister in His name; to give themselves to the defense and propagation of His gospel; to cause His voice, in a manner, to be perpetually heard and His authority respected; in a word, to direct the operations and ply the agencies which are fitted to bring those that are afar off near to Christ, and to carry forward their advancement in the life of faith and holiness. Whatever private members of the Church may, and also should, do toward the same end . . . those who are formally set as pastors and teachers in the various Christian communities must, from the very nature of their position and calling, have the

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 4f.

chief responsibility resting on them of doing what is needed to enlighten, and edify, and comfort the souls of men.<sup>26</sup>

Who, then, dares to take up the shepherd's staff without frequently and regularly lifting his eyes to the Great Shepherd of the sheep? Who dares to wear the prophet's mantle and not look for blessing upon his work from him who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, whose word alone can cause men's hearts to burn within them? It is only because the preacher and pastor is a minister of Christ that he can expect to accomplish anything among men. He really has no office of his own. He is only an undershepherd; his voice is only the mouthpiece of Christ. He can prevail nothing with men. He must ever pray in regard to both his preaching and his pastoral activity that his speech and his preaching be not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, remembering always that the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. The judgment is inescapable that the minister who does not pray for those to whom he is called to minister is, indeed, no minister at all. He is proud, conducting his labors as though he can succeed without God's power. He is cold and lacking in compassion toward the flock, not realizing what is the deepest need of his people, namely, the blessing of the Lord. God forbid that we should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for his people! Would that our Lord could say of all his ministers what Paul said of Epaphras, his dear fellow-servant who was a faithful minister of Christ to the Colossians: "Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in the will of God. For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis."<sup>27</sup> Apparently Epaphras considered praying one of his major duties. As an associate of Paul, he had originally instructed the

<sup>27</sup> Colossians 4:12f.

Colossians, but now was no longer with them. He reported to Paul their love in the Spirit. In conveying his greetings to the church, Paul feels it will greatly encourage them to know of his continued interest in them, which interest is specially manifested in his striving for them in his prayers. The verb has the flavor of contending, of struggling under difficulty. In this case it must certainly mean that he faithfully and earnestly intercedes for them, regarding this function as a solemn duty not to be neglected at any cost.

The example of Epaphras, a minister of Christ, but not an apostle, gives warrant to the judgment that the devotion of the apostles to prayer and to the ministry of the Word carries over to the perpetual office of the minister and is not to be considered tied to the extraordinary apostolic office. Intercession is no more peculiar to the apostolic office than to the permanent office of minister. It is clearly a part of the minister's task to give himself to prayer for his flock. In this age of activism, of programs and meetings and drives, it is easy to by-pass this activity which is to be performed largely in secret. But the ministers who neglect this function, together with their congregations, will pay a very high price.

Ministers of the gospel, and those who aspire to the sacred office, would do well to capture the spirit of a voice out of the past, that of John Smith, one of the ministers of Campbelton, who wrote in 1808:

Prayer is the life and soul of the sacred function. Without it, we can expect no success in our ministry. Without it, our best instructions are barren, and our most painful labors idle. Before we can strike terror into those who break the law, we must first, like Moses, spend much time with God in retirement. Prayer often gains a success to little talents, while the greatest, without it, are useless or pernicious. A minister who is not a man of piety and prayer, whatever his other talents may be, cannot be called a servant of God, but rather a "servant of Satan, chosen by him for the same reason that

he chose the serpent of old; because he was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God has made." . . . What a monster, O God, must that minister of religion be, that dispenser of the ordinances of the gospel, that intercessor between God and his people, that reconciler of man to his Maker, if he himself is not a man of prayer! . . .

As we, my brethren, are ministers of reconciliation between God and man, prayer is one of our principle duties. God often grants the grace intended for the people to the prayers of the minister; of that minister, who, like one of the angels who ascended and descended on Jacob's ladder, not only pleads the cause of God with the people, but the cause of the people with God. It is our business to lay before Him constantly all the needs of those of whom we have charge. It is our part to lament before him their sins; those sins which our care and zeal cannot prevent nor remove. It is our part to solicit for them the riches of his mercy, and to deprecate his deserved indignation. It is ours to pray that the sinner may be converted, that the saint may be confirmed, that the weak may be strengthened, the diffident encouraged, and the presumptuous alarmed. The more numerous the wants and sins of our people are, the more frequent and fervent should our prayers be on their behalf. Not only their general state, but their particular cases, ought to be spread by us before the throne, and to be recommended, pleaded, and earnestly urged, before the Father of mercies.<sup>28</sup>

## MOTIVES

The supreme consideration which impels a minister to prayer on behalf of those to whom he addresses his work is consecrated obedience to God who has called him. The Apostle Paul, in the Epistle to the Romans, refers to himself as "a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God."<sup>29</sup> He has been apprehended of

<sup>28</sup> John Smith, *Lectures on the Nature and End of the Sacred Office* (Edinburgh, 1808), 35ff.

<sup>29</sup> Romans 1:1.

Christ and is now his bondservant. He is not his own. He has been called apart, and separated unto the gospel of God. To that, and only to that, he must devote himself exclusively and intensively. He is not engaged in a profession; he has no career; he is not employed in an ecclesiastical task. He has been laid hold of; he is a slave, an ambassador in bonds, if not yet literally, surely in figure. After having thus introduced himself to the Romans as a bondslave of Jesus Christ, he assures them of his sincere interest in them: "First, I thank God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers."<sup>30</sup> It is as though he cannot conceive of serving God without also praying for the Roman Christians. The most basic thing about this assertion of his faithfulness in prayer for them is that he solemnly calls God to witness. Paul would certainly not lightly employ the oath. The form of the oath indicates that he is willing to put at stake his whole apostolic service to God along with his prayers for this church. "I call God to witness," he says in effect, "that as surely as I serve him with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, I faithfully and constantly pray for you." If it were not enough to employ the oath, he uses the expression "whom I serve with my spirit," referring to his sincerity. He asserts that there is no sham to his ministry. He is not simply performing duties. As he says in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, he has "renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."<sup>31</sup> How gross would be the sin of the Apostle Paul if he had made the assertion about his prayers for them falsely! The life and writings of Paul combine in

<sup>30</sup> Romans 1:8, 9.

<sup>31</sup> II Corinthians 4:2.

grand testimony that he was not vain or pretentious, but utterly sincere. We may legitimately conclude, therefore, that Paul, being a bondservant of Jesus Christ and separated unto the gospel of God, was moved by an irresistible inner compulsion, to pray unceasingly for the church. Appealing for witness to God whom he serves sincerely in the gospel of his Son, he assures the church that he bears them regularly to the throne of grace. He can no more neglect prayer for them than he can lay down the apostleship to which he had been called. We cannot doubt that he considered faithfulness in prayer an act of obedience to his Lord to whom he had been consecrated and whom he loved.

What of us? Do we similarly conduct ourselves in our office, or do we aspire to such conduct when we shall enter into the sacred office at some future time? God forbid that the office of the minister should be thought of professionally, that is, in the sense that it is simply a job to be done, adeptness and success therein being judged by some outward standard. It is our duty, as Paul says, to "preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake."<sup>32</sup> In our service to men we are responsible to God who has called us in Christ to the sacred office of the ministry. In the last analysis, the minister is judged not by the elders or the congregation he serves, nor by the presbytery within the bounds of which he labors. They can criticize his preaching, they can judge his pastoral ministrations, fairly or unfairly. But as Paul says, "As we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts."<sup>33</sup> But if the minister's basic responsibility in his preaching is not to men, how much less in his prayers, concerning which they can know so little. However orthodox and forceful the minister and others may judge his preaching to be, however assiduous and skillful he may be

<sup>32</sup> II Corinthians 4:5.

<sup>33</sup> I Thessalonians 2:4.

considered to be in the performance of pastoral labors, he is not obedient to the Lord if he neglects to accompany all his labors with faithful prayer. In such a case, he is laboring in his own strength, he is guilty of pride in acting as though he could succeed without God, and of taking very lightly the most solemn task to which man may put his hand. Obedience to God in performing the duties of the office of minister is the most fundamental consideration which should move him to prayer on behalf of his flock.

A second motive may be discovered in the attitude of the faithful minister toward his people. The pastor is not to be an hireling, unconcerned with the welfare of the sheep. He must never forget the spirit of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. He must identify himself with the sheep, Christ having done so in his humiliation and death. Their lot must be his. He dare not be as the hireling who, in the midst of danger, fleeth, caring naught for the sheep. If the minister of the gospel is concerned about the sins of his people, if he is sensitive to their spiritual needs, if he loves them, he surely will be moved to pray for them.

Consider Moses' involvement with Israel. After the destruction of the golden calf, "Moses returned unto the Lord, and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin—; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written."<sup>34</sup> Be they ever so sinful, he loves the Israelites so dearly that, in his prayer for their forgiveness, he is willing to bear the judgment along with them should God not show them mercy. Likewise should the faithful pastor himself feel the displeasure of God against his people's sin and experience the opprobrium attaching thereto. Only then will he intercede importunately and compassionately for them in their deepest need.

<sup>34</sup>Exodus 32:31f.

On another occasion when the judgment of God was impending, Moses and Aaron are so concerned over the welfare of the congregation that we detect a note of near indignation: "O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and wilt thou be wroth with all the congregation?"<sup>35</sup> How dearly these pastors loved their flock! How fervently they prayed!

And what of David? "Lo, I have sinned, and have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done?" he asks. "Let thine hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father's house."<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps there is no more notable example of the tender love of a minister impelling him to prayer for the church than that of Paul in his regard for the Philippians: "I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now; being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ: even as it is meet for me to think of you all, because I have you in my heart; inasmuch as both in my bonds, and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers of my grace. For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ. And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment."<sup>37</sup> He rejoices for their fellowship in the gospel, he has them in his heart because of their past loyalty, he longs after them with Christ-like compassion, calling God to witness. After this tender and moving expression of affection, he says, "And this I pray . . ." In commenting on these words, Robert Johnstone says:

<sup>35</sup>Numbers 16:22.

<sup>36</sup>II Samuel 24:17.

<sup>37</sup>Philippians 1:3–9.

The mode of expression assumes that the Philippians did not need to be informed that the apostle often presented special prayer to God for them. He tells them what was his state of feeling in these prayers; but the fact of the prayers being offered is taken as a matter of course. The responsibility which rests upon a minister with reference to the spiritual welfare of his people, and the affections which arise out of the relations and intercourse between him and them, cannot but lead every spiritually-minded minister to bear his flock often on his heart before God.<sup>38</sup>

The teachings of the Bible, therefore, lead to the conclusion that the minister who knows himself called to be a bondservant of Jesus Christ, and thus answerable to him for the ministrations of the gospel among men, will feel himself in bounden duty to pray faithfully not only for himself, but also for those to whom he ministers. The pastor who is concerned about the sins of his flock, and is sensible of the depth of their need, will humbly, before God, identify himself with them in their sin and need, and pray fervently for pardon and grace that as pastor and people they may lead penitent, chaste and godly lives. The pastor who rejoices in the labor in which he engages jointly with his people will love them, and will frequently pour out his heart to God in thanksgiving for their faithfulness and in supplication for the continuance of heavenly blessing upon the activity of the brotherhood.

## CONTENT

In considering the content of the minister's prayers there is a danger of which the Lord's servants must beware. The minister must guard against injecting his pet ideas and projects and aims into his prayers. Wilfulness and pride, self-esteem and ambition, should find no entry into his prayers. How easy it would be to pray that such and such a brother

<sup>38</sup> Robert Johnstone, *Lectures on the Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, 24.

may be elected elder, or that the budget for the coming year may be approved—that budget with the increase in the pastor's salary. What a temptation there is to pray that the sermon in which you inveigh against some minority group will really go over big. The only way to keep prayer on the high plane of devotion to God and love to the flock is to pattern it after the prayers recorded in holy Scripture. To those prayers let us now turn our attention. We shall not, of course, attempt a thorough analysis of them, but we shall simply survey the contents of a few of the more notable ones.

The prayer of Daniel recorded in the ninth chapter of his prophecy is one of the most beautiful portions in all of Holy Writ. Every time the believer reads it he is solemnly impressed with the exalted language which gives expression to the concept of the divine majesty as contrasted with the sinfulness of his people. "O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments," begins Daniel.<sup>39</sup> It is essential that, in addressing God, we bear in mind this covenant relationship which exists between God and his people. God is the great and terrible one, and God also keeps the covenant and mercy to them that love and obey him. This is the true basis of prayer. The sovereign God has entered into a relationship of grace toward men. This is the only explanation of why sinful creatures may approach him. But we must also remember, as we draw near unto him, that he dispenses his covenant blessings and manifests his mercy only as we love him and keep his commandments. We ought never to approach him, therefore, while we cherish sin. Whenever we go to the throne of grace it should always be with a firm resolution to forsake our sins and to be completely obedient to him who has made us his people through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Daniel next acknowledges the sin of the children of Judah, readily identifying himself with it: "We have sinned, and have

<sup>39</sup> Daniel 9:4ff.



committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments.” The fifth through the tenth verses contain no less than ten distinct acknowledgments of the transgressions of the people and their leaders. Here is no vain repetition, but the importunate outpourings of a troubled heart deeply conscious of national guilt. Daniel makes no exception for himself. Remarkably pure of character, he nevertheless speaks in the first person plural in nine of these ten places. In the next five verses the punishment of God is recognized: “The curse is poured upon us . . . because we have sinned . . . and he hath confirmed his words, which he spake against us . . . by bringing upon us a great evil.” He further acknowledges that God is righteous in all this. The plea for mercy begins with verse fifteen, and builds up in intensity and earnestness as it moves along. It is based upon the deliverance from Egypt and the fact that the Lord had made a name for himself over against the heathen gods. He bewails the fact that Jerusalem and the people have become a reproach, and the Lord’s sanctuary is desolate. He appeals not to the righteousness of the people as the ground of this supplication, but rather to the mercy of God, and concludes with one of the most earnest pleas that could be uttered by the lips of man: “O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God: for thy city and thy people are called by thy name.”

This prayer may well serve as a model for the pastor as he brings his sinful flock before the throne of grace, for it excels in humility, earnestness, importunity and faith.

Ezra’s prayer, in the ninth chapter of the book bearing his name, springs from his grief and disappointment that the people, only so recently favored by God in being permitted to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, have in large numbers contracted marriages with the heathen. It is the prayer of a heart-broken pastor, but one who is nevertheless

trusting in God’s forgiving mercy. But here again, as in the case of Daniel, he does not excuse himself. He also speaks in the first person. And who can forget the heart-rending words of the opening: “O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens.” It is easy for the minister to become so discouraged as to lapse into cynicism. He preaches, instructs, counsels and leads; he endeavors to be faithful to his calling in every respect. He spends much time on his sermons, and tries to be present wherever pastoral help is needed. He sees the young people and the old alike respond with joy to the gospel message. The elders labor faithfully with him. God’s blessing seems indeed to be upon the people. But then, perhaps without any warning, strife arises in the congregation, apathy sets in, the people are not responsive. Compromise becomes the order of the day, and the elders cease to be co-operative. This cannot be sloughed off by the sensitive minister. He is deeply grieved. But he can pray like Ezra. And this is the first and absolutely necessary thing to do. The answer came speedily to Ezra, and it was a happy answer. And it will come to all who pray like Ezra.

Very different are the prayers of the apostle Paul. In an earlier connection some attention was given to his prayers recorded in the first chapter of Ephesians and the first chapter of Colossians. Let us now notice first that most beautiful prayer found in Ephesians 3:14-21: “For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth

knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus, throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”

The burden of this prayer is that the Ephesians may be strengthened with might in the inner man through the agency of the Holy Spirit; or that Christ might dwell in their hearts by faith. He envisages as the effect of this inner strengthening by the Spirit, or of this indwelling by Christ, their being established in love. The result of that establishment in love, in turn, would be a greater capacity to comprehend the infinite love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, and thus to enlarge their capacity for the reception of the perfections and excellencies of God. His closing doxology is expressive of his confidence in God’s ability to grant this petition, and it is to him, therefore, that all glory must be given in the church through Christ Jesus.

What is most striking about this prayer is the blending together, in one petition, his desire for their understanding and for their piety. To be strengthened in the inner man by the Spirit, to be indwelt by Christ, cannot be realized without bringing increased spiritual discernment. And that same strengthening and indwelling will establish them in love and add to their character a plentitude of divine perfections. These are not two petitions, but one. And the Christian minister, in his intercessory prayer, and indeed in all his activity, does well to remember this. There can be no real growth in spiritual discernment that does not bring advance in love and piety. Conversely, there is no reason to expect development of love and piety without increase in spiritual discernment. Let the minister supplicate God that his people may be strengthened by the Holy Spirit and indwelt by Christ, so that they may grow in knowledge, love and godliness. Let him also realize that God will honor such

prayer since he is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think, according to the power that works in us. The minister who accompanies all his labors with such confident intercession may expect the blessing of the Lord.

In the third chapter of his First Epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul voices the prayer that “God himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you. And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: to the end he may stablish your hearts unblamable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.”<sup>40</sup> In the tenth verse he had told them that he was praying exceedingly night and day that he might see them, and perfect that which was lacking in their faith. Although their understanding of Christian eschatology was imperfect, and Paul may well have had that in mind when he spoke of that which was lacking in their faith, nevertheless, in the verses which follow, he expresses his concern about their walk, specifically their love. He voices the same concern in the first half of the succeeding chapter. While he waits, then, for God to make possible his visit to them, his deepest concern seems to be that they increase and abound in love toward one another, and toward all men. And for this grace he makes intercession. He realizes that where love does not prevail, believers are not being established in holiness before God. And that turns his attention to the impending coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. His ministry to them, including his prayers, is eschatologically oriented. His idea may be put thus: “May you increase and abound in love to the brethren and to all others, so that you may be established unblamable in holiness before God the Father when Christ comes again.” Imperfection of love within the church should be viewed by the Christian minister in the light of the approaching advent of Christ, and, of course, also in the light

<sup>40</sup> I Thessalonians 3:11–13.

of the certainty of death. How sad that bickering, strife, and jealousy should ever characterize those who profess the name of Christ and who will soon be called into the presence of God! And we know not the day nor the hour. The Christian virtue which is the sum of all other virtues, namely love, is often most seriously lacking within the churches. Tennyson remarked: "Christian love among the Churches look'd the twin of heathen hate."<sup>41</sup> Viewed in the light of the cross and of the great reckoning that is to come, how inexcusable is this deficiency! Let all ministers, like Paul, pray fervently for increase and abundance of love toward one another within the church, and also toward those who are without.

In a short prayer in II Thessalonians, Paul proves himself to be very sensitive to the sorrow of the believers who had been confused by false teaching concerning the eternal welfare of their brethren who had passed on: "Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work."<sup>42</sup> Following the Pauline example, ministers should never omit from their prayers those who sorrow, especially those whose sorrow is accentuated by lack of doctrinal knowledge. Even among those whom we might expect to be better informed, there is much ignorance and fear regarding the life to come. This is a deficiency not readily detected, but probably always present in some. There is often a gnawing sorrow, a disquieting grief, which Christians bear alone. The kind and tender pastor should regularly bear to the throne of grace, both in his public prayers and in his private prayers, the dear souls of his flock who carry the heavy load of sorrow, whether it is a normal sorrow, or one based on misunderstanding.

<sup>41</sup> Alfred Tennyson, *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After*.

<sup>42</sup> II Thessalonians 2:16f.

We have by no means even approached doing justice to the numerous intercessory prayers contained in Scripture. We have considered the contents of only a small percentage of them, and that very sketchily. But we have observed certain elements which should find a place in the prayers of every faithful minister of the gospel as he tends the flock of God's covenant. The devoted pastor will faithfully and humbly lay before God all of his sins and those of his congregation, making no excuses, but pleading trustfully the covenantal promise of pardon which has been sealed by the blood of Christ, the mediator and surety of the covenant. He should ever pray that the Holy Spirit may strengthen and that Christ may indwell the faithful to the end that they may excel in love to God and to one another, and thus be able to manifest all the excellencies of God capable of possession by man. He should compassionately remember the sorrowing, the ignorant, the wayward and the sick. Ministers of Jesus Christ and those who aspire to that high office should search the Scriptures where they will find other patterns which will help in praying for the people to whom they are sent. As they give themselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word, they ought to remember that their prayers can find no better examples than those recorded on the pages of Holy Writ. Following such examples, their prayers will be void of all selfishness and party spirit. They will increase in devotion and effectiveness, and will be offered more regularly.

### CHARACTERISTICS

The exhortations to engage in intercessory prayer which are found in the Scriptures, as well as the actual examples of such prayers, point up certain characteristics which should describe the pastor's prayers for his congregation.

Faith should characterize such prayers. They must never be offered up mechanically or merely out of a sense of duty,

but always with the belief that, as we lay hold of God and claim his promises to his people, he can and will answer according to his riches in glory. The faithful shepherd of God's flock must remember that "He who spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all," will "with him also freely give us all things."<sup>43</sup>

Humility should always adorn the minister's intercession. His own worthiness to engage in such prayer should always be denied. Like Moses, he should pray: "If now I have found grace in thy sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray thee, go among us."<sup>44</sup> It is well to remember the injunction recorded in Joel 2:17: "Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people, O Lord," and the examples of Daniel, who fasted and prayed with sackcloth and ashes, and Nehemiah, who sat down and wept, and mourned certain days and fasted. There will always be sin to confess, and also because of his own sins no minister ought rashly to rush into God's presence.

Whenever it is warranted, our prayers should be offered with joy. Paul assures both the Philippians and the Thessalonians that his prayers for them are always with joy. We also should be quick to express our joy to God for the manifestations of his blessings. And even when we approach the Lord with great burdens on our hearts, we should rejoice that we can come boldly to his throne and leave our burdens there.

As far as necessary, importunity should mark the intercession of the minister. By this we do not mean simple repetition, nor do we necessarily refer to length of time spent in prayers. We should remember, of course, that there is nothing to be condemned in praying long, or in praying repeatedly any single petition. Daniel repeated some ideas

<sup>43</sup> Romans 8:32.

<sup>44</sup> Exodus 34:9.

over and over; Joshua prayed until evening; Paul prayed day and night, and also without ceasing. But we mean something more than mere repetition or lengthiness. It is the idea of "giving God no rest." It is the claiming of God's promises. For Zion's sake let us not hold our peace, and for Jerusalem's sake let us not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth. Calvin remarks that we should "require the blessing at the hands of the Lord." Let the minister be earnest, and persevere in prayer until the answer comes forth. This is prayer indeed. And yet there are distractions. Against these distractions we must do our best, in the spirit set to poetry by Richard Trench:

If we with earnest effort could succeed  
To make our life one long connected prayer,  
As lives of some perhaps have been and are,  
If never leaving Thee, we had no need  
Our wandering spirits back again to lead  
Into thy presence, but continued there,  
Like Angels standing on the highest stair  
Of the sapphire throne, this were to pray indeed.  
But if distractions manifold prevail,  
And if in this we must confess we fail,  
Grant us to keep at least a prompt desire,  
Continual readiness for prayer and praise,  
An altar heaped and waiting to take fire  
With the least spark, and leap into a blaze.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, the minister's prayers should be God-glorifying. His sovereignty should always be recognized, and our prayers should be devoid of complaint or rebellion. However importunately we may pray, there should always be a holy submissiveness, remembering that his ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts our thoughts.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Chenevix Trench, *The Story of Justin Martyr: and Other Poems* (London, 1862), 256.

## EFFECTS

Thus praying, the faithful minister of the gospel will experience rich reward. He will begin to receive answers to his prayers. Some answers may be long in coming. Some petitions may be denied. But whatever the answers, however long they be delayed, they will surely come.

Answers to our specific prayers are only the most obvious effect of a faithful ministry of prayer. But there are other inestimable benefits.

The minister's own spiritual life will be greatly enriched. Such enrichment of soul will obviously make him a better minister in every sphere of his work. The more devoutly he prays, the less there will be in him of pride and ambition and willfulness. He will walk more discretely and uprightly as he goes about his work in the community, and thus will adorn with a godly life the gospel which he would bring to men. His words, not only, but also his life will be known and read of all men. Thus his living witness to the gospel will greatly enforce and strengthen his ministry. The congregation will more readily receive the Word from his lips when, through constant communion with God and intercession for others, he lives what he preaches.

We may also expect material improvement, year after year, in his ability and effectiveness in preaching the Word. Not that prayer is a proper substitute for parsing Hebrew verbs or exegeting a Greek text. It is no short-cut to a good sermon. Calvin's words on Ephesians 3:14 are to the point:

Let pastors learn from Paul's example, not only to admonish and exhort their people, but to entreat the Lord to bless their labours, that they may not be unfruitful. Nothing will be gained by their industry and toil,—all their study and

<sup>46</sup>Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 21, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1854) 259.

application will be to no purpose, except so far as the Lord bestows his blessing. This ought not to be regarded by them as an encouragement to sloth. It is their duty, on the contrary, to labour earnestly in sowing and watering, provided they, at the same time, ask and expect the increase from the Lord.<sup>46</sup>

Certainly the task of proclaiming the gospel is too momentous to be taken up by one who does not seek God's blessing in the preparation of the sermon, in its delivery and in its reception into the hearts of the listeners. But by the same token, we may expect that the sermon prepared in much prayer will be presented in power, and in the Holy Ghost and in much assurance. Study itself will be less and less a chore, if we pray, and we shall become more proficient in it. Prayer and faithful study of the mysteries of God are handmaidens.

It may also be expected that the minister's ability to perform the day-by-day duties of the shepherd of the flock will be tremendously increased as he prays devoutly for those whom he is called upon to comfort, instruct, admonish and rebuke. If he first bears the sorrowing to the throne of grace, he will surely be able to comfort them more tenderly. If he first prays for light, he will certainly be able to catechize more effectively. If he first confesses his own sins and humbly prays for the Spirit's guidance to be understanding, yet firm, he will be able more effectively to admonish or rebuke the wayward without censoriousness than if he should attempt these solemn tasks in his own wisdom and molded solely by his own temper.

The preacher with clouded mind or halting tongue will rise up from prayer and be able to proclaim the Word with sincerity and conviction, if not always with eloquence. The timid, or perhaps bungling, shepherd will rise up from his knees with calm and poise because he is aware that he goes not alone to the sorrowing or the wayward. Again we quote from Trench as he extols the value of prayer and the strength derived from it:

Lord, what a change within us one short hour  
 Spent in Thy presence will prevail to make,  
 What heavy burdens from our bosoms take,  
 What parched grounds refresh us as with a shower!  
 We kneel, and all around us seems to lower;  
 We rise, and all, the distant and the near,  
 Stands forth in sunny outline, brave and clear;  
 We kneel how weak, We rise how full of power.  
 Why therefore should we do ourselves this wrong,  
 Or others—that we are not always strong,  
 That we are ever overborne with care,  
 That we should ever weak or heartless be,  
 Anxious or troubled, when with us in prayer,  
 And joy and strength and courage are with Thee?<sup>47</sup>

In conclusion, allow me to make a few practical suggestions. In the first place, in the seminaries and in the churches more should be said about this duty of the minister. I remind you again of the prominence given to prayer in the delineation of the duties of the sacred office in the Form of Government adopted by the Westminster Assembly. In the light of Acts 6:4 (“We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word”), there should be no objection to Vinet’s calling this a function of the ministry, in addition to its being a duty universally binding upon all Christians. Is it not proper to consider that ministers are called apart in order that, in addition to other prescribed duties, they might pray more than the average layman, and in order that they might seek the particular blessing of God upon their other labors? Is it right to take for granted, when a minister is ordained, that he will always feel it his official duty to engage in intercessory prayer? Would it not be legitimate that his attention be called to Acts 6:4 and to the example of Paul and others who excelled in this exercise? We lay great stress on orthodox and courageous preaching. We emphasize faithful catechizing and pastoral calling. But we

<sup>47</sup>Trench, *The Story of Justin Martyr: and Other Poems*, 259.

simply take it for granted that ministers will always pray. This might have been warranted in other days. But there is abundant reason to suspect that they do not pray as they should.

This leads into the second observation, namely, that far too many things are expected of the average pastor today. I am confident that I speak for the vast majority of pastors when I say that if we performed all the “practical” and often trivial duties expected of us, we would never pray, or else we would neglect study or some other necessary duty. There would simply not be enough time. Paul, of course, labored night and day as a tent-maker, and he also prayed night and day.<sup>48</sup> Admittedly, we could all find some additional time to pray if it were really our desire. Yet, I feel the point is still valid. The pastor is expected to teach several catechism classes each week, lead at least one Bible-study group, conduct the prayer meeting, conduct a funeral, perhaps as often as once a week, make at least a dozen pastoral calls weekly, attend one or two committee meetings, conduct the Vacation Bible School, canvass the community, run the mimeograph machine, *ad infinitum*. The performance of some of these duties is absolutely necessary for the minister. Some of them could be delegated to elders and other persons. Some of them could be eliminated, if the elders and the members of the congregation only realized that, when they all devolve upon the minister, he cannot faithfully pray for his flock. There is a shameful lack of concern on the part of most laymen as to how the minister apportions his time. So long as the sermon is interesting, so long as the minister faithfully teaches the Ladies Aid and does not neglect the sick, so long as the bulletin is nice and neat, so long as the minister drinks tea at all the social functions, everybody is happy and contented. “We surely have a faithful pastor,” you will hear them say. They never ask, “When does our minister ever get time to pray for

<sup>48</sup>*Cf.* I Thessalonians 2:9; 3:10.

us in our need?" In sermons and in periodicals, in meetings of sessions, consistories and presbyteries, this matter should constantly be held up before our laymen, and especially our elders. The church is the greatest loser if the minister is so actively busy that he can find no time to pray for the weak, the wayward, the sick, the discouraged.

One of the sorest needs of the church today is to have a higher standard for its ministers. It should be helpful to all Christians, especially ministers, to consider the picture of the ideal minister drawn many years ago by William Law:

Ouranius is a holy priest, full of the spirit of the Gospel, watching, labouring, and praying for a poor country village. Every soul in it is as dear to him as himself, and he loves them all as he loves himself; because he prays for them all, as often as he prays for himself.

If his whole life is one continued exercise of great zeal and labour, hardly ever satisfied with any degree of care and watchfulness, it is because he has learned the great value of souls, by so often appearing before God as an intercessor for them. . . .

He goes about his parish, and visits everybody in it; but visits in the same spirit of piety that he preaches to them: he visits them to encourage their virtues, to assist them with his advice and counsel, to discover their manner of life, and to know the state of their souls, that he may intercede with God for them, according to their particular necessities.

When Ouranius first entered into holy orders, he had a haughtiness in his temper, a great contempt and disregard for all foolish and unreasonable people; but he has prayed away this spirit, and has now the greatest tenderness for the most obstinate sinners; because he is always hoping that God will, sooner or later, hear those prayers that he makes for their repentance.

The rudeness, ill-nature, or perverse behaviour of any of his flock, used at first to betray him into impatience; but now it raises no other passion in him than a desire of being upon

his knees in prayer to God for them. Thus have his prayers for others altered and amended the state of his own heart.

It would strangely delight you to see with what spirit he converses, with what tenderness he reproveth, with what affection he exhorts, and with what vigour he preaches; and it is all owing to this, because he reproveth, exhorts, and preaches to those for whom he first prays to God.

This devotion softens his heart, enlightens his mind, sweetens his temper, and makes everything that comes from him instructive, amiable, and affecting. . . .

He now thinks the poorest creature in his parish good enough, and great enough, to deserve the humblest attentances, the kindest friendships, the tenderest offices he can possibly show them. . . .

He presents every one of them so often before God in his prayers, that he never thinks he can esteem, reverence, or serve those enough, for whom he implores so many mercies from God.<sup>49</sup>

May you who aspire to the ministry not make the mistake that many have made. Begin here and now—if you do not already—to set apart a certain period each day for intercession with God, and resolve to continue this throughout your ministry, come what may. Your prayers will be concerned with various matters, according to the state of your congregation at the moment. One time you will be praying for the sick, another time for that family recently come to sorrow, again you will be bearing to the throne of grace a delinquent youth. Every day, as you enter the study, implore the Lord for guidance so that you will study diligently and preach in such a way that the greatest spiritual benefit will be experienced by your congregation. Pray also for strength to those who labor with you, the elders, the deacons, the Sunday School teachers, so that they also may do their work to the glory of God. Be assured that you will be a blessing in feeding the flock of

<sup>49</sup>*Serious Call to A Devout and Holy Life* (Everyman's Library ed.), 295–7.

God which he purchased with his blood only as you also pray  
for that flock. Denis Wortman wrote this prayer-poem for  
men like you:

God of the prophets,  
Bless the prophets' sons;  
Elijah's mantle o'er Elisha cast.  
Each age its solemn task may claim but once;  
Make each one nobler, stronger, than the last.

Anoint them prophets.  
Make their ears attent  
To Thy divinest speech, their hearts awake  
To human need, their lips make eloquent  
To gird the right and ev'ry evil break.

Anoint them priests.  
Strong intercessors, they,  
For pardon and for charity and peace.  
Ah, if with them the world might, now astray,  
Find in our Lord from all its woes release!

Anoint them kings;  
Aye, kingly kings, O Lord.  
Anoint them with the Spirit of Thy Son.  
Theirs not a jeweled crown, a blood-stained sword;  
Theirs, by sweet love, for Christ a kingdom won.

Make them apostles,  
Heralds of Thy Cross;  
Forth may they go to tell all realms Thy grace.  
Inspired of Thee, may they count all but loss  
And stand at last with joy before Thy face.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis, 1941), 483.



*Intercessory Prayer*

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*The righteous are bold as a lion-Proverbs 28:1*