

vision of Jesus alive, in action, and present in the midst of the church. By means of the vision, each church saw itself as part of church on a grand scale, worshiping God and watching as Jesus takes on the entire world of Satan and Balaam and Jezebel, the wiles of the devil, the present darkness, the forces of evil, "conquering and to conquer" (Rev. 6:2).

The vision was a tour de force. Ever since, it has played a major part in church through the centuries and all over the world in reimagining and reinforcing the central, exclusive, and irreplaceable place of Jesus Christ as the head of the church, which Paul had identified as Christ's body.

"I bow my knees before the Father"

The physical act of bowing "my knees before the Father" (Eph. 3:14) is an act of reverence. It is also an act of voluntary defenselessness. While on my knees I cannot run away. I cannot assert myself. I place myself in a position of willed submission, vulnerable to the will of the person before whom I am bowing. It is an act of retreating from the action so that I can perceive what the action is without me in it, without me taking up space, without me speaking my piece. On my knees I am no longer in a position to flex my muscles, strut or cower, hide in the shadows or show off on stage. I become less so that I can be aware of more — I assume a posture that lets me see what reality looks like without the distorting lens of either my timid avoidance or my aggressive domination. I set my agenda aside for a time and become still, present to God.

This posture is not in vogue in a world in which the media, our parents, our employers, our teachers, and, perhaps most demanding of all, our egos are telling us to make the most of ourselves. On his knees before the Father, Paul prays.

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Prayer is the lingua franca of humankind. Everybody prays. At least everybody starts out praying. So why is the practice of prayer in so-called

Christian America so sporadic and confused? Why is prayer for so many either a personal embarrassment or a political cause? I ask that question a lot.

As a pastor, much of my work involves encouraging and teaching people to pray. But I have never found this work to be easy. Why is the teaching so difficult? If prayer is evident virtually everywhere and, at least vestigially, in everyone, why is there so little fluency? The men and women I have worked with all my life don't mind being prayed for — in fact, they often ask me to pray for them. Why are people so ready to appoint a representative to do their praying for them? Why is there so much more talk about prayer than actual praying? Why are so many more doubts expressed and questions raised about this form of language than any other?

An adequate answer, at least the beginning of an answer, begins to take shape when we observe the way we use language when we are not on our knees. When we listen carefully to the language used around us every day as we go shopping, go to school, go to the bank, go to work, and boot up our computers, we can't help noticing that the primary use of language is impersonal.

Language can be used in a variety of ways: to name things, describe actions, provide information, command specific behaviors, tell the truth, tell lies, curse, bless. Language is incredibly and endlessly versatile. But in our heavily technologized and consumerized world, most of the words said and heard in most ordinary days have little or no relational or personal depth to them. They deal with a world of things and activities, machines and ideas.

But language at its core and at its best reveals. Using words, I can speak myself into relationship with another. I can tell another who I am, what I feel, the way I think. And by listening to words another speaks to me, I can become relationally involved with him or her. Language at its best initiates and develops personal relationships. It does all the other things I mentioned also, but it is as revelation that it comes into its own.

From infancy, all of us learn language in this personal, relational, revelational way. Before we can articulate words, the sounds we make

never individual. At prayer we are part of a great congregation whether we see them or not. Praying the Psalms gets us used to being in a praying congregation of men and women. We are never less alone than when we pray, even when there is no one else in the room. We are praying for others who don't know we are praying for them. Others are praying for us although we don't know it. This is important, for while prayer is language at its most personal, it is also inherently inter-relational — it is *church* language. The more intimately we are in relation to Christ, the more aware and relational we are with the body of Christ. When we pray, we are not self-enclosed. Praying the Psalms keeps us in a school of prayer that maintains wakefulness and an open ear, alertness and an articulate tongue, both to the word of God and to the voices of praise and pain of God's people.

“All the fullness”

Paul's prayer for his congregation is nothing if not exuberant. There is nothing cautious or restrained in his prayer. As he prays for the Ephesians, the intercessions exude generosity: “riches of his glory . . . power through his Spirit . . . rooted and grounded in love . . . power to comprehend . . . breadth and length and height and depth . . . the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge . . . filled with all the fullness . . . abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine . . .” We pray in a household of extravagance.

This is nothing less than astonishing, this prayer of intercession for the Ephesian Christians. Intercession usually takes its start in praying for someone who needs help: interceding for families who are grieving a death, interceding for the healing and health of the sick, interceding for wisdom on behalf of our political leaders, interceding for clarity and direction for the confused, interceding for peace in the Middle East, interceding for the hungry of the world, interceding for the homeless, interceding for an end to racial discrimination and strife, interceding for the jobless.

This is understandable. In any congregation, on any given

develop intimate affections, basic trust, promises, and comfort. But too soon we learn to name and demand things. Language objectifies both the world before us and the people around us. As we become increasingly proficient in the language of naming and defining and describing, the personal, relational aspects of language recede as we learn to talk our way competently through a world made up mostly of things to arrange and work to do. In the process, sadly, we “thingify” persons. More often than not, the words we use and listen to are in the context of the roles that we are given to play: students, customers, employers, workers, competitors, all of whom could just as well be, and often are, nameless. Gradually, our early language instinct with intimacy erodes, and along with it the very capacity for intimacy. Before long, most of our language is used, as Wordsworth lamented, in “getting and spending.” As language becomes impersonal, the world becomes depersonalized. By the time we decide to get married we hardly know how to say “I love you,” and so we go out and buy a Hallmark card with doggerel verse to do it for us.

But here's the thing: prayer is personal language or it is nothing. God is personal, emphatically personal: three-personed personal. When we use impersonal language in this most personal of all relations, the language doesn't work. And when we listen in Scripture and in silence to what the personal God has to say to us in our unique personhood, anticipating information or answers and not hearing anything remotely like that, we don't know what to make of it. We walk away saying or thinking, “God doesn't speak to me . . . He never even listens to me.” The language we are really fluent in, the language we are most used to, deals with impersonal data and functionalized roles. The practice of prayer, if it is going to amount to anything more than wish lists and complaints, requires a recovery of personal, relational, revelational language in both our listening and our speaking.

The classic textbook for recovering the personal language of prayer is the Psalms. A thorough immersion in the Psalms is the primary way that Christians acquire fluency in the personal, intimate, honest, earthy language of prayer and take our place in the great company of our praying ancestors. For while prayer is always personal, it is

wrong in our lives. Our problems don't define us; God defines us. Our problems are neither the first nor the last word of who we are; God is.

* * *

Two friends, Fred and Cheryl, went to Haiti twenty-five years ago to pick up a child they had adopted. Addie was five years old. Her parents had been killed in a traffic accident that left her without a family. As she walked across the tarmac to board the plane, the tiny orphan reached up and slipped her hands into the hands of her new parents whom she had just met. Later they told us of this "birth" moment, how the innocent, fearless trust expressed in that physical act of grasping their hands seemed almost as miraculous as the times their two sons slipped out of the birth canal 15 and 13 years earlier.

That evening, back home in Arizona, they sat down to their first supper together with their new daughter. There was a platter of pork chops and a bowl of mashed potatoes on the table. After the first serving, the two teenage boys kept refilling their plates. Soon the pork chops had disappeared and the potatoes were gone. Addie had never seen so much food on one table in her whole life. And she had never seen so much food disappear so fast. Her eyes were big as she watched her new brothers, Thatcher and Graham, satisfy their ravenous teenage appetites.

Fred and Cheryl noticed that Addie had become very quiet and realized that something was wrong — agitation . . . bewilderment . . . insecurity? Cheryl guessed that it was the disappearing food. She suspected that because Addie had grown up hungry, when food was gone from the table she might be thinking that it would be a day or more before there was more to eat. Cheryl had guessed right. She took Addie's hand and led her to the bread drawer and pulled it out, showing her a back-up of three loaves. She took her to the refrigerator, opened the door, and showed her the bottles of milk and orange juice, the fresh vegetables, jars of jelly and jam and peanut butter, a carton of eggs, and a package of bacon. She took her to the pantry with its bins of potatoes, onions, and squash, and the shelves of canned goods — tomatoes

Sunday, it doesn't take long to look around and locate and name a dozen people whose identity is **synonymous with need**: a single mother of three with a newly diagnosed inoperable cancer; a father who has just placed his teenage drug-addicted son in rehab; a grandmother recently abandoned by her husband of thirty-five years; a scruffy stranger who doesn't "fit" here in *this* congregation, an obvious misfit. There is not a pew in any sanctuary that does not reserve space for needs that require and receive prayers of intercession.

Paul's prayers of intercession add another dimension, the huge reservoir of plenitude out of which the intercessions flow. His prayers of intercession flow out of the plenitude of God. The plenitude of God, not the penury of the human condition, undergirds the intercessions. Paul is certainly not unaware of the neediness of the congregation to whom he is writing — he is, after all, a pastor. But his prayers do not arise out of pity or desperation over the human condition. These intercessions are shaped and energized by God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The eight God-detonated "rocket verbs" in his opening prayer (Eph. 1:3-14), the resurrection-created "saint" identity that he gives thanks for as he remembers his congregation in prayer (1:15-25), the "immeasurable riches" of salvation that replace anxious effort with amazing grace (2:1-10), the wall that Christ broke down in order to give access to everyone everywhere to "our peace" (2:11-22), the "manifold wisdom" — the "in-scape" and shadow work of church — all give us eyes to see and ears to hear what is going on in the world, *really* going on.

Herman Melville once wrote to a friend, "I love all men who *dive*." Paul dives. He goes deep and explores the conditions that keep us afloat. He is not unaware of indifferent to what takes place on the surface, but in his intercessions he dives, listens for and names what God is and is always doing beneath us — and as he comes up from the depths, he prays that "he may grant . . . power through his Spirit" (3:16), "that Christ may dwell in your hearts" (3:17), "that you may have the power to comprehend" (3:18), and "that you may be filled with all the fullness" (3:19). Here are four intercessions, praying us into the presence of and participation in God, the God who is previous to who we are and what we are doing, the God who is previous to what has gone

and peaches and pickles. She opened the freezer and showed Addie three or four chickens, a few packages of fish, and two cartons of ice cream. All the time she was reassuring Addie that there was lots of food in the house, that no matter how much Thatcher and Graham ate and how fast they ate it, there was a lot more where that came from. She would never go hungry again.

Cheryl didn't just tell her that she would never go hungry again. She showed her what was in those drawers and behind those doors, named the meats and vegetables, placed them in her hands. It was enough. Food was there, whether she could see it or not. Her brothers were no longer rivals at the table. She was home. She would never go hungry again.

My wife and I were told that story twenty-five years ago. Ever since, whenever I read and pray this prayer of Paul's, I think of Cheryl, gently leading Addie by the hand through a food tour of the kitchen and pantry, reassuring her of the "boundless riches" (Eph. 3:8) and "all the fullness" (3:19) inherent in the household in which she now lives.

"The inner man"

Prayer is attentiveness to God, which Paul has certainly been diligent in doing. But prayer is also the practiced cultivation of what we sometimes designate our inner life. That is to say, there is far more to God than just knowing about him and "the riches of his glory" (Eph. 3:16). Prayer weds what we know of God to a personal responsiveness to God. And so Paul prays — that the Father "may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts" (3:16-17).

The phrase "inner being" is literally, in Paul's Greek, "inner man," and it is translated as such in the King James Version and Revised Standard Version. Most students of this text take the meaning to be our inner life, our heart, the life of the soul. But Markus Barth sets out a comprehensive (and to me convincing) case for keeping to the literal rendering, "inner man," and then goes a step further by capitalizing it

"Inner Man" as a title for Jesus. He translates, "... grant that through his Spirit you be fortified with the power to grow toward the Inner Man that through faith the Messiah may dwell in your hearts." Inner Man is synonymous with Messiah, who dwells in our hearts.²

Earlier Paul used similar language in writing to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God" (Gal. 2:19-20).

* * *

The attractiveness for me of Barth's exegesis of the Inner Man as Jesus is the protection it provides against the danger of divinizing our inner lives quite apart from Jesus. Hyper-subjectivity in prayer threatens the very nature of prayer, the *relational* core of prayer. While I am on my knees before the Father, Christ is praying for me (John 17) and in me, strengthening me with power through his Spirit. In contrast, the translocation "inner being" is sometimes seen as a colorless spiritual abstraction that I am free to color in with any or all of the colors of the rainbow. But if "Inner Man" is specifically Jesus — God revealed in words that I can ponder, actions that I can participate in — my prayers are rooted in real history, in actual incarnation, and are not controlled by my moods or fantasies, guilty fears or wishful thinking.

Prayer is subjective; it *does* have to do with my inner being, my heart. But there is so much more than that, so much more to what is within me than "me." There is God, revealed in Jesus. There is the "interior castle" celebrated and elaborated by Teresa of Avila that necessarily includes me, all of me — body and soul, emotions and thoughts, memories and dreams, parents and family, and all the people who have played a part in my life story. But the "castle," the person at prayer, includes so much more: there is also all of God, in all the operations of the Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At prayer I am not myself by

2. Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 34 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), p. 391.

Practice Resurrection

A CONVERSATION
ON GROWING UP IN CHRIST

Eugene H. Peterson

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