Perspectives on Prayer

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It would be helpful if you read "How Can We Be Spiritual In The Modern World?" before you read this section on prayer. Because prayer is an essential ingredient of spiritual life it is important that we start with the same understanding of the nature of spirituality in order to discuss the nature and function of prayer

1. What is Prayer?

Libraries could be filled with the volumes that have been written attempting to answer this simple question. For our purposes it is sufficient to provide a simple answer: prayer is communion and communication with God. In our Christian context we understand that our prayers are spoken to the members of the Godhead: God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

2. Types of Prayer

There are as many different types of prayer as there are individuals who pray them. Jesus showed his disciples how to pray and the gospels record that prayer which we know as "The Lord's Prayer." However, his prayer was intended to be an example of the manner in which one may pray and was not necessarily prescriptive for all prayers for all time.

There are examples in Scripture of public prayers, of private prayers, of family prayers, of long prayers, of short prayers, of unacceptable prayers, of acceptable prayers, of prayers of thanks, of prayers of confession, of prayers of request, etc. The emphasis of Scripture is that regardless of the type of prayer, God is accessible. Since the human race was barred from the garden and denied direct access to God, prayer has been and will continue to be the process which facilitates, at least in part, the re-establishment of that access.

Dick Eastman has suggested some aspects of prayer which may be utilised in private or public prayer. They are:
1.Praise to God
2.Waiting on God
3.Confession
4.Scripture Praying
5.Watching
6.Intercession
7.Petition
8.Thanksgiving
9.Singing
10.Meditation
11.Listening
12.Praise
(Dick Eastman, *The Hour That Changes the World: A Practical Plan For Personal Prayer* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978]).

3. Aspects of Prayer

a) Prayer is Personal: Prayer is intended to be a personal communication. Whether one prays in the seclusion of the "desert" or in the midst of the hustle of the "marketplace," prayer is a personal communication between the individual and God. By its nature its privacy cannot be invaded by anyone who is not part of the circle of relationship that exists between God and the individual Christian unless that person chooses to include another. Of course, the person will choose to do that at times; in the congregation, in the family, with a spouse or loved one. But the strength of prayer is that it is available at all times and in all circumstances for the individual to communicate with God. No-one is excluded.

b) Prayer demands Authenticity: In Australia we have a great deal of respect for the person whom we perceive to be authentic. We call such a person "fair dinkum." In prayer we can be fair dinkum. In fact, there is not too much point to the whole exercise if we are not fair dinkum. God knows us better than we know ourselves, and we really do not impress him when we do not say what we think or when we do not tell the whole story.

It is just as important to be authentic in public prayer as it is in our private prayers. How many prayers have you heard in which you can almost predict what is going to be said next because the prayer is a succession of tired cliches which really do not mean anything at all. This is especially noticeable to those of us who have been Christians for many years.

I remember not so long ago going on a trip to the United States and attending a church where I could correctly predict the exact wording of each sentence of the prayer in advance as I listened to the first few words of the sentence. I discovered that they used exactly the same old cliches in the United States as we had been using in Australia since my childhood. While I know God reads the heart, one cannot help but wonder what is in the heart when it can't find any authentic language in which to express its thanks and its needs.

Such language may be termed **secondary language**. It repeats or reflects forms of expression that have been accepted or adopted from elsewhere. What we need in our prayers is **primary language**. That is, language which belongs to the speaker as an authentic reflection of the thought processes and experiences.

Suggestions for Prayer:
What follows is a list of practical hints for praying creatively. This list is meant to be suggestive only, because ultimately prayer is an intensely personal experience which cannot be legislated or orchestrated.

1. Pray through a passage of Scripture.
2. Include prayer songs in your prayer.
3. Compile a prayer list—keep a record of those for whom you are praying.
4. Pray for a colleague or friend unannounced and unexpected.
5. Pray with your spouse or special friend last thing at night or first thing in the morning.
6. Keep your eyes open and look at another person while you pray for them [This suggestion is very "heavy" but very powerful].
7. Pray through the Lord's prayer.
8. Keep a prayer diary—record your requests and God's answers.
9. Keep a journal—record the significant ups and downs of your Christian experience and prayer life.

c) Prayer is Life-Driven: In the previous chapter we made the point that spirituality is just as much a function of the experiences of life as it is of the "desert." With that important principle in mind it is vital that we realise that prayer cannot long persist if it does not comprise the events and experiences of life as it is lived every day.

Our Father in heaven is pleased when we are able to talk to him about everything. He does not mind if sometimes we are angry at him. We will not always understand what happens in the world around us and it is entirely appropriate to express our frustration and our sorrow to him. Do not feel that you have to soft-pedal with God. He has made you what you are and he knows your strengths and weaknesses. You can be yourself with God.

d) Prayer is Awesome: I don't mean awe-some in the popular sense. The way my teenage sons used to use the word "awesome" it was somewhere between "groovy" and "un-real." But I

mean that prayer is really awesome. Who are we talking to? He is a Friend. But he is also God. He is our Creator, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. Now that's really awesome. It never ceases to amaze me that God is interested in each of us as though there were no others. In fact I have a hard time working out how he can actually do it. But I know he does. I've seen too many direct answers to prayer not to believe. But you have to see that for yourself. I can't do it for you.

e) Prayer is Revealing: Prayer reveals God. It makes him available to us. But it also reveals something about us. It makes us available to him. It creates the prerequisite for hearing him speak to us. It brings us to the point where we are ready to do his will. In the final analysis prayer may just reveal more about us and do more to us than it does to God. No wonder Jesus knew how important it was to teach us to pray.

Exercise

Write out two prayers: one suitable for a public prayer in the church service, and one that you might pray in private. Cross out every sentence that is a cliche, and then re-write. You might like to try this for more than one of the types of prayer listed in the text box on the next page.

Conclusion

Prayer is not an alternative for the Christian. It is an imperative. To use the words of a well-known Adventist writer:

> Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend. Not that it is necessary, in order to make known to God what we are, but in order to enable us to receive him. Prayer does not bring God down to us, but brings us up to him.[138]