

Prayer, healing, and God-with-us

Josh Wallace

Seven weeks into the COVID-19 pandemic, I was called to a hospital bedside. Tina, an aged member of Prairie North Mennonite Church (PNMC), was dying. So, masked and gowned and sanitized, I sat beside her.

Through tears, Tina voiced thanksgiving. She gave thanks for the hospital, for her children, for my visit. Most of all, she gave thanks for prayer: “You always taught us to say the Lord’s Prayer. I’ll never forget that.” That particular prayer—*Our Father who art in heaven*—was her stay amid heart failure and an aging mind, the roar and crash of coronavirus reports and changing protocols. “We prayed it every Sunday.”

I sat at Tina’s bedside, wishing that I could reach out to hold her hand.

Instead, minding the hospital’s protocols, I read Scripture. I told her how her congregation loved her, how Jesus loved her. And we prayed. We prayed the words Jesus taught us. We prayed for her children. We prayed because we knew death was near.

The Epistle of James concludes its wisdom for the suffering with exhortation to prayer:

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. . . . Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up. (5:13–15)

I did not pray for Tina to be raised up—at least not this side of resurrection. Instead, I prayed that she know that Jesus was near and that he is kind. Ten days later, Tina died.

Horizons of hope

My prayers rarely expect healing. This horizon of expectation finds affirmation in the widely used *Minister’s Manual*. In a section pointedly placed *after* liturgical forms for burying the dead and mourning tragedy, prayers for healing appear carefully hedged as a way of committing suffering to God rather than a means of physical healing. The liturgy is styled as “historic symbolic acts,” which may yet be “meaningful.” Through the

reminder of the community's care or of God's compassion, the manual notes, "healing sometimes follows because of the peace of spirit and climate of love."¹ Significantly, in the "Private Anointing of the Sick," hope for healing is voiced only once, and then rather obliquely.²

I feel at home with this way of praying and hoping. Expectations are not raised too high. All the disorder that attends hope and longing is sufficiently managed. This sort of prayer abides by protocol; it keeps hope in check.

Alan Kreider, in *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, portrays prayer beyond what I or the *Minister's Manual* usually expect. Within a rich ac-

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count of Christians' distinctive habitus in the first three centuries after Jesus, a picture emerges where prayer gave real "power to powerless people."³

Unlike their contemporary pagan religionists to whom "verbal precision was of the essence" and a "monitor listened . . . to ensure that [their] praying was faultless," Christian prayers were unscripted.⁴ Their supplications—which the third-century theologian Clement of Alexandria styled "seizing life from God"⁵—did not remain within pre-

scribed expectations. The bishop Cyprian, another third-century voice, noted his congregation's calling out to God with "uncouth voices" and "turbulent loquaciousness."⁶

Kreider summarizes this early Christian prayer as "gutsy and practical, passionate and immediate."⁷ These early Christians met their own illnesses, hardships, and personal tragedies with prayer, but they also were "enabled . . . to do joyfully the risky things . . . to travel to new places, to

1 See John Rempel, ed., *Minister's Manual* (Newton, KS: Faith & Life, 1998), 206–207.

2 Rempel, *Minister's Manual*, 212.

3 Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 207.

4 Kreider, *Patient Ferment*, 207.

5 See Clement of Alexandria, *Quis dives salvetur*, 34, 21.

6 Kreider, *Patient Ferment*, 207.

7 Kreider, *Patient Ferment*, 207.

touch plague victims, to see enemies as potential brothers.”⁸ Early Christian prayer was no magic. Often those who prayed continued to suffer; some succumbed to disease, loss, tragedy. But Christians persisted in prayer because these prayers made a difference, to the extent that Christians “became known to their contemporaries as healers.”⁹

Some early Anabaptists prayed fervently, seemingly within a similar horizon of expectation. C. Arnold Snyder narrates one such account of a 1545 clandestine meeting of Anabaptists near Strasbourg. The gathering climaxed in communal prayer, where the believers “prayed with great earnestness, with cries and tears.” Other Anabaptists were reported “‘falling on their faces’ during prayer,” sometimes with “great sighing and weeping.”¹⁰

A subtle redirection of expectation, however, took place over the centuries. The early Christians requested and expected of God physical healing. Clement describes his contemporaries putting “sickness at its height . . . to flight by the laying on of hands” and, in prayer, shattering “the violence of demons . . . by confident commands.”¹¹ They believed their prayers, through the power of Jesus’s cross and the outpouring of the Spirit, changed the world. But thirteen hundred years further into what Charles Taylor narrates as the development of “inwardness” and the “buffered self,”¹² the sixteenth-century Anabaptists prayed not for the world to change but for the sustaining of the self, of the heart, and of the church in faithfulness amid this world’s tribulations.

In 1589, the imprisoned Joost de Tollenaer wrote a letter instructing his daughter Betgen to pray with these words: “O Lord, my Lord, direct

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8 Kreider, *Patient Ferment*, 204.

9 Kreider, *Patient Ferment*, 111.

10 C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 125, citing an account in Abraham Hulshof, *Geshiedenis van de Doopsgezinden te Straatsburg van 1524 tot 1557* (Amsterdam: J. Clausen, 1905), 208–211.

11 Clement of Alexandria, *Quis dives salvetur*, 34, cited in Kreider, 111.

12 On inwardness, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), Part II, 111–207; on the buffered self, see his *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 29–43.

me in Thy ways; . . . O Lord, strengthen me.” Joost also requested this inward strength for himself: “The Lord strengthen me by His Holy Spirit unto the end of my life.”¹³ In a 1571 letter, Paul Glock, also imprisoned, requests prayer that God keep him “faithful and true,” just as he earlier exhorted his wife, Else, in the pattern of Gethsemane: “‘Watch and pray so that you may not fall into temptation.’ Be firm and immovable for our work is not in vain in the Lord.”¹⁴

These *are* prayers for supernatural intervention but not for the breaking of prison bonds. Instead, in the words of Hans Schlaffer’s prison prayer, they seek only “the necessary valor to drink the cup.”¹⁵ Even when praying for the princes and magistrates who imprisoned him, his prayer remains keyed to the subjective: that God “would enlighten them . . . that they may not wrongly shed innocent blood.”¹⁶ The expected site of intervention is the self, the heart—not the world.

Prayers for the heart

Christian ethicist Kelly Johnson sketches many of our contemporary ways of praying under the broad heading “Prayer and Our Habits of Exchange.”¹⁷ We have prayer as welfare application, filled out and submitted to the divine bureaucracy, or prayer as a grant application sent to the divine philanthropist. Others resort to prayer as bargaining with God, trying to cut a deal on the promise to go to church every Sunday, reform a bad habit, stay on the straight and narrow.

A fourth model perhaps traces the path most closely from the early modern Anabaptists to the liturgical forms of the *Minister’s Manual*: prayer as therapy. It aims at the transformation of self, not the world. In this mode, “Prayer is not about getting something from God, but about encouraging oneself to obey God, about changing the self.”¹⁸

13 “A Testament from Joost de Tollenaer, to His Daughter,” in Braght, Thieleman J. van, and Joseph F. Sohm, *The Bloody Theater, or, Martyrs’ Mirror* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1987), 1076.

14 See Snyder, *Following*, 129–30, citing Glock’s letters of 1571 and 1563, respectively.

15 Cornelius J. Dyck, ed. and trans., *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism: Classic Devotional Resources* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995), 194, citing Hans Schlaffer’s prayers of 1528.

16 Dyck, *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism*, 194.

17 Kelly S. Johnson, “Interceding: Poverty and Prayer,” in *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 2nd ed., edited by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 240.

18 Johnson, “Interceding,” 241.

The gathered prayers of PNMC, Tina’s congregation, echo this therapeutic turn. The habitually expected locus of God’s activity is internal, subjective. Listening through twelve months’ recorded congregational prayers, I am overwhelmed by this consistent concern, requesting “a heart of grace,” “power to change our deepest habits, hurts, and hang-ups,” asking God to “open our eyes and ears,” to “strengthen us” and “lift us up that we might aspire to greater things.” Where does God work? In these prayers, PNMC expects God to work in our hearts.

Where does God work? In these prayers, Prairie North Mennonite Church expects God to work in our hearts.

During a “moment for children” in the service, Angie, the adult leader, tries to take a picture of the kids with her cell phone, but the battery is dead. It needs

to be recharged. She asks the kids how people can get recharged when they feel worn out. Just like we plug in our phones, she explains, we can “also plug into God to recharge.” How? “If we’re faithful to the Lord by praying and going to his Word,” she says, “we find that God recharges us as well.” Hank, in another children’s moment, compares prayer to “exercise for our spiritual selves.”¹⁹ Prayer works on the self.

Prayer and God-with-us

PNMC’s prayers also hint at something more. A pastor friend jokingly calls sharing and prayer time “organ recital”; this is also true of PNMC’s regular sharing of prayer requests. In three years of prayer requests, more than two-thirds petition God about broken hips, cancer, premature births, and deaths. What are PNMC’s members hoping for in these requests?

This is difficult to trace, in part, due to PNMC’s liturgical pattern. Members offer “thanksgivings and concerns,” but it is the pastor who translates them into praises and petitions. The congregation’s expectations are overwritten in this process. Do they expect miracles? Do they, as Kreider claims of the early Christians, expect “successful, prayerful combat with demonic forces”—including empires and plagues?²⁰ Or do they

19 These accounts draw on fieldwork and archival research conducted at Prairie North Mennonite Church between 2017 and 2019.

20 Kreider, *Patient Ferment*, 109.

offer up petitions, like Johnson pictures, where “no one is tempted to look out the window to see if the world has changed”?²¹

Tina’s deathbed thanksgiving for PNMC’s regular, corporate recitation of the Lord’s Prayer hints at her prayerful expectation, expectation formed by decades praying with PNMC. Full of pain, confused, concerned for family, Tina returned to the simple invocation of “Our Father.” Tina clung to the promise of God’s nearness, of God’s tenderness. These words reassured her that God loved her and was close by.

Johnson offers a final model of prayer, one from beyond our habits of exchange and consumption. This is prayer, she says, as “a kind of encore.” In Tina’s long life within PNMC, she had heard again and again God’s kindness. She had come to know God as one who welcomes her as daughter, who provides daily bread, who delivers from evil. And now, with these words Jesus taught her, she “prays for God to do again what God has been doing.”²² This, for Tina, is the gift of prayer: asking God again for what God delights to do.

The prayers of PNMC certainly, at times, bargain and barter with God. Many other times, they focus mainly on the self, the “strengthening of heart.” But alongside and below these ways of praying runs a more fundamental orientation to God’s love and God’s presence. In asking for healing with a “prayer of faith,” the congregation expects most of all that God be present and kind—what God already has been for them. In God-with-them, members of PNMC find hope even in the midst of illness, hurt, and death.

About the author

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21 Johnson, “Interceding,” 239.

22 Johnson, “Interceding,” 242.