

Viewpoint: JAV393

## PRAYING WITH ALL THE SAINTS

by Michael F. Ross

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We live in an extemporaneous age; so much so that any calculated or prepared response to issues is assumed to be disingenuous at best or manipulative (i.e., dishonest) at worst. I suppose that such assumptions might be called for in the world of “spin” in which we live. Crafted government press releases, corporate marketing tools, university public relations, and the horribly low credibility the media has with the majority of Americans understandably create an environment of distrust of any prepared statements.<sup>1</sup>

**Authenticity in Prayer.** We also live in an age obsessed with “authenticity,” but we have defined authenticity in a most base and dangerous manner. We believe authenticity is being (and doing or saying) what comes naturally or spontaneously to us. This is the age of the extemporaneous soul, the unfiltered self. But this is not a wise age or even a responsible one.

I would like to apply this observation to the subject of prayer, both public (primarily) and private prayers. I am aware that spontaneous, extemporaneous, and “authentic” prayer is the rule of the day, but I am aware also that most extemporaneous public prayer is both mundane and inane. Unscripted prayer inevitably devolves into repeated platitudes, unnecessary repetition, and shallow sentimental language, truly unfit to be brought before a Holy God. We all need *much more* liturgical and written prayer in our spiritual diets.

The prayer book of the Bible is the Psalter: a book of 150 divinely inspired and humanly scripted prayers, written down to be prayed by the church until Jesus returns. Far from being “inauthentic,” the Psalter includes all the emotions the human heart can feel. John Calvin wrote of the Psalms: “I have been wont to call this book, not

inappropriately, an anatomy of all parts of the soul; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.”<sup>2</sup>

How many of us would admit anger toward God, profound doubt in our soul, a desire for evil men to be destroyed, a sense of the interpersonal pain and fallout due to our sins, or lament the state of our souls, asking God, “How long, O Lord, will you forget me”? The Psalter does! And it does so by the Spirit’s inspiration.

When these Psalms are both sung and prayed in corporate worship services on Sunday, a true authenticity emerges from our liturgies. The prolific nineteenth-century hymnist Fanny Crosby may well have been “happy all the day” as she stood in the shadow of the cross, but honestly, most of us are not. And we need the Psalms to reflect our genuine moods before God in words appropriate to public worship. What more appropriate words than those of the Psalter? Certainly, praying these written Psalms is far from disingenuous. There can be no more honest and genuine prayers than those composed by God Himself.

**Rich Tradition.** Our age of postmodernity also despises tradition. Anything old is perceived as irrelevant. Whatever was shared and passed down to successive generations is automatically deemed suspect. And, in our individualistic and pluralistic age, “tradition” is assumed to be the vehicle of archaic oppression and the archenemy of self-expression. But ours is an age more enamored with energy than power, political correctness than wisdom, and trendiness than tradition. But what if said tradition was rooted in an age of cultural development, scientific and moral improvement, and the age of Renaissance and Reformation, in contrast to our age of social, ethical, and spiritual disintegration?

There is great value in borrowing the published (and public) prayers of the church over the ages. The *Apostles’ Creed*, the *Nicene Creed*, the early majestic hymn of praise *Te Deum* (“To God”), ancient litanies, Anglican collects, and selections from prayer books have the capacity to greatly enrich our corporate and private prayer. The late John Stott (1921–2011) used to pray this lovely prayer at the start of each day—one composed by himself:

*Good morning, heavenly Father. Good morning, Lord Jesus. Good morning, Holy Spirit. Heavenly Father, I worship you as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Lord Jesus, I worship you, Savior and King of the world. Holy Spirit, I worship you, Sanctifier of the people of God. Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Heavenly Father, I pray that I may live this day in your presence, and please you more and more. Lord Jesus, I pray that this day I may take up my cross and follow you. Holy Spirit, I pray that this day you will fill me with yourself and cause your fruit to ripen in my life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Holy, mighty and glorious Trinity, three persons in one God, have mercy upon me. Amen.*<sup>3</sup>

Our confession of sin could be both better introduced and more reverently expressed to God by preceding our confession with this medieval prayer of confession: "O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended You, and I detest all my sins, because of Your just punishments, but most of all because they offend You, my God, Who are all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin."<sup>4</sup>

It is customary to pray a prayer of thanks, a blessing, before each meal. Rather than rotely repeating the same one, rattled off so swiftly and with such slurred words that it sounds impertinent, why not draw on a set of prayers for the mealtime, like this one found in the *Methodist Book of Worship*? "O Lord, all creatures wait upon thee that they may receive their good. Thou openest thy hand and they are filled with good. Help us to remember always that we are dependent on thee and with thankfulness partake of the food before us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."<sup>5</sup>

Susanna Wesley was the mother of the famous founder of Methodism, John Wesley, and his hymn-writing brother, Charles. She was the daughter of a dissenting minister in seventeenth-century England and the wife of a minister. She bore nineteen children, but only eight were alive at the time of her own death. Nine died as infants, including two sets of twins. A maid accidentally smothered one child. She and her family survived two house fires. She was forced to place her children in different homes for two years while the rectory was being rebuilt. In all this, Susanna knew fear, but she also developed a powerful, daily devotional prayer life. What young wife and mother would not be fortified in soul by this prayer of hers?

*I thank Thee, O Lord, because never once in my life have I been unheard in what I feared, when I have approached Thee in a full sense of my own impotence of mind, with humility and sincerity to implore Thy divine assistance. I set to my seal that Thou art true, since I have ever found Thee so. Forbid that I should venture on any business without first begging Thy direction and assistance. So do Thou set a check on my mind when I would do anything that I know to be unlawful or dubious, and encourage me with hopes of success in my lawful undertakings. Amen.*<sup>6</sup>

**Collects and Community.** Finally, in many prayer books, there are prayers for special occasions and for the various seasons of the church year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. The Anglican (Episcopal) *Book of Common Prayer* includes dozens of these precious prayers called collects.<sup>7</sup> The following collect is written for Thanksgiving Day:

*Almighty and gracious Father, we give you thanks for the fruits of the earth in their season and for the labors of those who harvest them. Make us, we pray, faithful stewards of your great*

*bounty, for the provision of our necessities and the relief of all who are in need, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.*<sup>8</sup>

The inclusion of these types of prayers enriches corporate, family, and personal prayer by enfolding us into the rhythm of worship shared by millions of Christians around the world who “mark time” by the calendar centered on the life of Jesus Christ.

Fixed, formal, written, and liturgical prayers enhance our worship and enrich our lives in several ways. First, they force us to pray in ways we usually do not pray. Second, they deepen our prayers both scripturally and theologically. Third, their craftsmanship beautifies the sacrifice of prayer we offer God. Fourth, they pull us into the worshiping community and connect our prayers to the church universal. Fifth, they encourage our souls by introducing us to the prayers of those who’ve gone before us and prayed through our present struggles. Finally, they make our prayers more authentic, more genuine, by expressing the full and honest spectrum of human emotions and the spiritual issues confronting every real person. —*Michael F. Ross*

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## NOTES

- 1 Rebecca Riffken, “Americans’ Trust in Media Remains at Historical Low,” Gallup, September 28, 2015, [http://www.gallup.com/poll/185927/americans-trust-media-remainshistorical-low.aspx?g\\_source=americans%20trust%20in%20media&g\\_medium=search&g\\_campaign=tiles](http://www.gallup.com/poll/185927/americans-trust-media-remainshistorical-low.aspx?g_source=americans%20trust%20in%20media&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles).
- 2 John Calvin, *Commentaries: Volume IV; The Psalms, 1–35*, ed. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), xxxvi–xxxvii.
- 3 John W. Yates III, “Pottering and Prayer,” April 2, 2001, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/april2/4.60.html>.
- 4 “An Act of Contrition”; an old Latin prayer of the medieval church, still in use in Roman Catholicism. It can be found in most Roman Catholic prayer books.
- 5 *The Book of Worship* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1952), 366.
- 6 *The Prayer of Susanna Wesley*, ed. W. L. Doughty (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 54.
- 7 Collects are short liturgical prayers that “collect,” or gather, the people of God together around a theme, or season, or holy day, enabling them to pray together, even in unison, around a topic or occasion.
- 8 *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), 246.