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# Exploring the Forms of Prayer

BY BRUCE ELLIS BENSON

**A quartet of books provide a systematic way of thinking about prayer, sensitive answers to our questions, and deep reflection on the significance of prayer.**

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Jesus' first disciples pleaded, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). That there are thousands of books on prayer today suggests that we are far from knowing how to do it. That we still use the Lord's *model* prayer as our default prayer may indicate, among other things, that we have not moved beyond the basics. Indeed, Thomas Merton sums up the situation for all of us when he writes, "we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!" (p. 37). Richard Foster opens his text by saying, "For a long time I have wanted to write on the subject of prayer. To do so, however, would have been to commit the sin of presumption. I was not ready" (p. xi). He goes on to admit that he is "still a novice."

This situation reminds me of Augustine's remark about the nature of time: "Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know."<sup>1</sup> We usually assume we know what it is to pray, but when we think about what is involved in prayer, we realize that we have a multitude of questions. On the one hand, we wrestle with what kinds of prayer are appropriate, when to pray, and how to overcome the myriad of distractions that either keep us from prayer altogether or prevent us from being focused while we pray. On the other hand, a primary question for many of us is the subtitle to Philip Yancey's book: "Does It Make Any Difference?" That is, does God "change his mind" when we pray, which seems to be the case in certain passages of the Old Testament, or is the change entirely within us?

The books reviewed here — Philip Yancey's *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* Steven Chase's *The Tree of Life: Models of Christian Prayer*, Richard Foster's *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, and Thomas Merton's *Contemplative Prayer* — form an excellent quartet, since each gets at something different about prayer, despite many points of overlap and agreement.



If you resonate with the questions mentioned above, then Philip Yancey's *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006, 352 pp., \$21.99) will be particularly helpful. He raises a string of questions. Why pray? Does prayer change God? Is there a proper "prayer grammar"? What do we do with unanswered prayer? Fortunately, he is also good at providing some answers to these questions, even if he (quite appropriately) only takes those answers so far.

Prayer, says Yancey, is about communing with God. But he makes it clear that this communing often takes the form of wrestling, pleading, and even expressing anger toward God. The result is a conception of prayer that is not exactly a tranquil "I come to the garden alone" and a demurring "They will be done." As to change, prayer certainly changes us, not just us as individuals but as communities. Yancey recounts some powerful instances in which Bishop Desmond Tutu uses prayer to quiet angry mobs. Taking on a much bigger challenge, Yancey wrestles with the conflict between the idea of a God who does not change and the idea that prayer could somehow change God. At one point, he quotes the Calvinist Andrew Murray, who claims that "God does indeed allow Himself to be decided by prayer to do what He otherwise would not do."

As to whether there is a special language of prayer, Yancey concludes that biblical psalms give us the model of a communication with God that is very much like how we communicate with anyone. What about written versus spontaneous prayers? Yancey cites Phyllis Tickle, who notes that those who grow up with prayers read from a book find spontaneous prayers refreshing, whereas those used to unscripted prayers find in written prayers a particular depth and thoughtfulness.

Regarding unanswered prayer, Yancey realizes that it is truly an unanswerable problem. How, for instance, could the prayers of twelve people applying for the same job all be answered? And Yancey wonders whether Jesus' prayer for Peter, that his faith not fail, is to be counted as an unanswered prayer of Jesus himself, since Peter's faith does indeed fail three times. Yancey's very nuanced account of unanswered prayer is truly helpful in working through the problem without trying to solve it.



Inspired by Saint Bonaventure (1221-1274), Steven Chase in *The Tree of Life: Models of Christian Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005, 304 pp., \$28.00) calls prayer "the tree of life planted in the soul" (p. 13). Using this metaphor, Chase develops five models of prayer as "a way of life," so that all we do can become a part of prayer. The idea is not that we "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17) in the usual sense of saying words to God, but that we become constantly aware of God's presence and thus always immersed in prayer. Chase wants to get beyond the "active" versus

“contemplative” conceptions of prayer (a point to which we will return when we consider Merton).

Chase sees the first model of *prayer as conversation* as analogous to the roots of a tree. Indeed, it is this model that “grounds all prayer in God” (p. 15). Chase reminds us of the startlingly different Latin translation that Erasmus gives of John 1:1. Instead of “in the beginning was the word (*verbum*),” he writes “in the beginning was the conversation (*sermo*),” a translation certainly justified by the many meanings of the Greek word “*logos*” in this verse. In describing what takes place in the conversational prayer, Chase more or less follows a formula – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication (ACTS) – though he adds a long section on silence and listening, which is only appropriate if prayer is to be a true *conversation*.

Turning to the second model, *prayer as relationship*, Chase likens this to the solid trunk of a tree. He turns to the subject of *hospitality*, for at the heart of a relationship must be receptivity, kindness, forgiveness, and reconciliation. What results is a friendship that leads to love. Chase points out that this is true even for someone who, like Julian of Norwich (1342-c. 1416), living in solitude establishes a close relationship with God.

Next, if we think of *prayer as a journey*, we immediately think of the branches of a tree. Just as branches grow in all kinds of shapes, sizes, and directions, so it is with this form of prayer. Chase considers various metaphors (journey, wandering, pilgrimage), patterns (linear, purgation, circular, narrative), and types of meditation (on nature, soul, Scripture, God). He concludes that there are many ways to measure our “progress” in prayer.

Turning to *prayer as transformation*, we move to the leaves of the tree. Leaves bud, grow, and then die. We are thus reminded that prayer involves change and that there are seasons of prayer. It is a cycle of life and death, in which death to the self is absolutely essential to produce life.

Finally, Chase sees *prayer as presence* as analogous to the flowers and fruits of a tree. Here centering prayer helps us to sense both the presence of God and our presence to God, what the author calls “the Immanuel quality of prayer” (p. 209). The goal is to open our entire selves to God’s presence. However, this requires moving into a different kind of consciousness in which we are aware of God’s beauty, truth, and goodness.



Richard J. Foster’s *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1992, 288 pp, \$23.95) can rightly be called a modern “classic” on prayer. In this comprehensive work Foster covers twenty-one different kinds of prayer, grouped into three spiritual types: movement inward, corresponding to the Son; movement upward, corresponding to the Father; and movement outward, corresponding to the Spirit.

Moving inward, we can practice what Foster calls “simple prayer,” which he claims “is the most common form of prayer in the Bible” (p. 9). So

many of the great biblical figures – Abraham, Moses, David, Ruth, John – pray in this way, a form of address without pretense, and that is where Foster suggests we begin. This quite naturally leads us to prayer of the forsaken, for we all experience times of dryness and a sense of being forsaken by God, as well as to the prayer of *examen*, in which we take time to dwell upon the state of our souls. In both moments, we take stock of how we feel, how we perceive ourselves to be connected to God, and our innocence or guilt. Here Foster rightly recommends steering between the extremes of rationalization and flagellation, since it is all too easy to misinterpret ourselves as either exemplary or irredeemable. Quite naturally, we move on to the prayer of relinquishment. It is here that we learn to move from struggling with God's will – trying to turn God toward *our* will – to releasing our will and trusting in God.

As we move upward, we pray the prayer of adoration, which is our most basic way of relating to God. Just as God pours out his love toward us, so we respond in return. Adoration for Foster has two sides: thanksgiving and praise. His point is that in Scripture these attitudes are really interchangeable. "The Prayer of Adoration must be learned," Foster counsels, "It does not come automatically" (p. 87). Perhaps even more difficult is the prayer of rest, in which we come to have a sense of calm in the midst of the storm of life. We can move into such a state by way of solitude, *silencio*, and recollection or focus. From here we move to various types of prayer, culminating in meditation and contemplation. In meditative prayer, we meditate upon Scripture and listen for what God would say to us, and thus the Bible becomes "words of life." In contemplative prayer, we attempt to pray without words. Although we will return to this kind of prayer when we turn to Merton, it is worth noting here that this may well be the most difficult and demanding type of prayer.

In moving outward, Foster first speaks of "praying the ordinary," in which we pray about ordinary experiences and see God in them. Although we experience great triumphs and deep valleys, most of our lives are simply ordinary. Once we have come to grips with God in the ordinary events of our lives, then we can move on to those moments that are other than ordinary. Foster closes his book with what he calls "radical prayer," in which we catch a vision for how the church, society, and each of us *could* be. It is a kind of prophetic prayer that proclaims that the church or the world as we know it must change, a prayer calling for justice to the very least members in society. Perhaps this is the most difficult prayer of all, for we are often unable to see *how* things really could change and are often *unwilling* to call for a change that may upset our status quo. Such prayer is truly *radical*.



Thomas Merton's well respected *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Books 1971, 128 pp., \$10.95), which is by far the shortest book in this quar-

tet, has an almost Zen-like quality. (Indeed, the edition listed has an introduction by a Buddhist monk.) Many of its sentences are worthy of long and careful reflection. Merton relies the simple, direct way of prayer of the first monastics, the Desert Christians of the fourth century. This appreciation for simplicity is something that Merton shares with Foster. One Desert Father gives the following advice: "It is not necessary to use many words. Only stretch out your arms and say: Lord, have pity on me as you desire and as you well know how! And if the enemy presses you hard, say: Lord, come to my aid!" (p. 20).

Merton sees the *meditatio* of meditative prayer as closely related to *psalmodia* (singing psalms), *lectio* (spiritual reading), *oratio* (spoken prayers), and *contemplatio* (contemplation). In the unified life of a monk, these activities work together. Similarly, he emphasizes that "the term *mental* prayer is totally misleading in the monastic context," since prayer involves all of one's being (p. 30). Merton's discussion of the distinction between public and private prayer is particularly helpful, for he points out that this is a thoroughly modern problem that depends upon a highly individualized sense of self. As such, it is really just a pseudo-problem, since there can be no hard and fast distinction: when we pray alone, we always pray together. Finally, we must recognize that contemplative prayer is really a way of living and so is strongly connected to action and all that we do. Here Merton and Chase are saying much the same thing, but that is because the monastic tradition has long recognized – centuries before either – that, lived appropriately, life itself is prayer.

As should be clear, each of these books has something to offer. If you have questions about prayer, read Yancey. If you want a systematic way of thinking about prayer, Chase is very helpful. If you want an overview of the many sorts of prayer, Foster is excellent. And Merton is superb in providing deep reflections on prayer. While each of these books can easily be read alone, read together they form a rich tapestry.

#### NOTE

† Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.14, translated by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 230.



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