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Prayer as a Weapon: Clasped Hands as Nonviolent Uprising



MORLING
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As an Anabaptist, Matt is focused on Jesus' radical call to faithful discipleship, especially in terms of peace, reconciliation, community and holistic justice. One of the things this has led to is his involvement in the *Love Makes a Way* movement where Matt has been involved since the beginning, and has been a regular participant in their sit-in actions, which are responses to Australia's current asylum seeker policies. Matt and Ashlee also live in a small intentional community in Sydney, seeking to put their convictions about community into practice in the midst of the mundane.

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“To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”¹ — Karl Barth

“You’re using prayer politically, and that’s wrong.”

On 21 March, 2014 a group of nine Christians, myself included, held a peaceful prayer vigil in the office of then-Australian Immigration Minister, Scott Morrison.² Calling ourselves *Love Makes a Way*, we were praying about and protesting the inhumane asylum seeker policies of the Australian government, in particular child detention and the then-recent murder of Iranian asylum seeker, Reza Berati inside the Manus Island detention centre. Five of the group were eventually arrested for trespassing, though the charges were later dismissed in court.³ Since then there have been 21 additional such public actions, with over 130 Christian leaders arrested so far.

Our act of civil disobedience, taking the form of public prayer, generated numerous responses. We have received much support—far more, in fact, than we expected—from church leaders, people of all different faith traditions, atheists, and

media. Our action also attracted its fair share of disapproval, and even attracted personal abuse and theological diatribes. Much of this centred on our use of prayer.

On the one hand, there were the fashionably cheap shots taken at us by some atheists, those who ridicule the practice of prayer without, apparently, understanding what prayer actually is. (This is in contrast to those atheists who have shown a deep respect for our action; some who have even attended our public prayer vigils, even though this stems from a worldview they do not themselves hold.) One contrarian, in a comment on a *Huffington Post* write-up of our first action, exemplified the kind of inanity I am talking about: “Well they should have been arrested for thinking that prayer was going to do anything at all.”⁴ Such a comment betrays a common assumption that prayer has only instrumental value for Christians, that it is simply a tool to get what we want.

On the other hand, there were those Christians who, in addition to acontextually quoting parts of Romans 13:1–5 and Matthew 6:5–8, asserted the private nature of prayer, to the exclusion of public expressions such as demonstrated by our action. (This is puzzling given that many of the same people would be dismayed by talk of the removal of the Lord’s Prayer from the opening of Parliament, but that is another issue.)

¹ Attributed to Barth in Kenneth Leech, *True Prayer: In Invitation to Christian Spirituality*, 68.

² See Stephanie Anderson, “Protesters arrested after praying in Morrison’s office”, *SBS News*, 21/03/2014.

³ See Stephanie Anderson, “Charges dismissed for praying protesters”, *SBS News*, 21/03/2014.

⁴ “Australian Protesters Arrested for Peaceful Prayer Vigil over ‘Cruel Treatment’ of Asylum Seekers”, *The Huffington Post UK*, 21/03/2014.

In what follows, I want to put forward a silhouette vision of the place of prayer in the public sphere as an alternative to both “unscientific” instrumentality and private piety. I then want to go on and paint a broader picture of prayer and its relationship to Christian mission and to politics.

I do not expect what I say will be convincing to everyone. This is obviously the case for atheists and others who do not share my worldview. After all, as Stanley Hauerwas has suggested, “Christians must live in such a manner that their lives are unintelligible if the God we worship in Jesus Christ does not exist.”⁵ It would be unreasonable to expect people with very different assumptions about the world to agree with me. Likewise, it would be equally unreasonable to subject prayer to a legitimating standard based on assumptions that those who practise prayer do not necessarily hold. This also applies to other Christians, though perhaps not to the same extent. Christians often disagree on so many foundational and secondary issues that it is sometimes difficult to say that they share the same worldview. I say this, not out of cynicism, but out of a recognition that those Christians who hold different hermeneutical, political and social assumptions to me will probably not agree with me, and that I accept this as legitimate.

What I hope to do is to open up a different conversation about some unknown, neglected or avoided aspects of prayer, and to attempt to offer an introductory way to

connect prayer to mission, Christian action and politics. These thoughts have partly germinated from my involvement with *Love Makes a Way*, not least because of the sharpening that has resulted from criticism we have faced from other Christians. I hope to show that prayer has significant public implications. I deem this to be a worthwhile conversation given the number of acts of prayerful protest in recent times, such as that undertaken by *Love Makes a Way*, those at Whitehaven’s new mine at Maules Creek, and the ongoing Swan Island Peace Convergence. I also deem it to be an important conversation in light of what I see as the ongoing polarisation of Christian social action and mission on one hand, and spirituality and worship on the other.

Prayer as alternative language

In George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, one of the values of the “Party” that governs the fictional nation of Oceania is “Ignorance is Strength”. Ignorance, proliferated by the Party’s ongoing falsification of Oceania’s history, becomes a value because of its ability to control subjects through destroying memory and thus independence. One of the ways in which such ignorance is achieved among the populace is the rewriting of language in the form of “Newspeak”. In this rewriting of language it is not that new words are invented, but rather that old words are destroyed, and retained words stripped of

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, “Church Matters: On Faith and Politics”, in *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflection on Church, Politics and Life*, 67.

any secondary meanings that are deemed to be undesirable (“unorthodox”) by the Party. The effect of such a reduction in language is the limitation of critical thought. This is made abundantly clear to Winston, the main character, by his friend Syme:

In your heart you’d prefer to stick to Oldspeak, with all its vagueness and its useless shades of meaning. You don’t grasp the beauty of the destruction of words. Do you know that Newspeak is the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year? ... Don’t you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought?⁶

In other words, inasmuch as thought itself is based on words and language, the redefinition and reduction of language suppresses thought. Control of language, then, has the very real potential to cause an epistemological crisis, not merely for an individual, but for a society.

None of this is to make a case for or against a Wittgensteinian understanding of vocabulary and truth. (“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.”) Rather, it reminds us of the vast influence of language on thought and knowledge. Vocabulary, at the very least, forms a foundational framework for how we conceive of reality and, most pertinently for us, ethics.

The act of prayerful civil disobedience that my friends and I committed was in

response to an issue about which thought and knowledge have been co-opted by drastic shifts in language. Think of terms like “illegals” and “border protection” and “tougher policy”. What do these mean in the context of the asylum seeker issue, and how have they been altered for this purpose? The notion of tougher policy is an interesting example. When I was a child I was taught that to be tough meant to stand against bullies and perpetrators, not the weak and desperate. How language changes.

Much ink and many pixels have been taken up discussing these and other uses of language in regard to asylum seekers, and I will refrain from repeating such discussion. Wherever our language has come from, what we have now is a set of incoherent language forms—not unlike the absurd “Ignorance is strength”—that have shaped the very attitudes, the very conception of reality, of a good portion of the Australian population regarding asylum seekers.

Of course, such issues of language and epistemology are not restricted to the issue of asylum seekers. In his 1978 essay “Agricultural Solutions for Agricultural Problems”, farmer and poet Wendell Berry notes the industrialisation of our language:

Now we do not flinch to hear men and women referred to as “units” as if they were as uniform and interchangeable as machine parts. It is common, and considered acceptable, to refer to the mind as a computer: one’s thoughts are

⁶ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 53.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 88 (5.6).

“inputs”; other people’s responses are “feedback.” And the body is thought of as a machine; it is said, for instance, to use food as “fuel”; and the best workers and athletes are praised by being compared to machines.⁸

The effect of this “revolution of language” on our values has been profound according to Berry, since it has shifted our very images of life and work from being organic to mechanised. It is no wonder, he thinks, that our food systems have become polluted and exploitative.

The same problems of language could be exported, in one sense or another, to any of the major issues faced by humanity. Think of the implications of language like “Stronger Futures” and “Close the Gap” in the context of Indigenous Australia, where such language refers to responses that are fundamentally patriarchal and assimilationist in nature. What about the meaning of “development”, “effectiveness” and “poverty line” in the context of global poverty? What are the implications of such language for a global issue that requires the relational work of community building? Particularly pertinent in the context of the Tinsley Lecture, we might think of the range of understandings of language like “disciple”, “evangelism” or even “gospel”, and the implications of these understandings for Christian mission. Whatever the subject, how we use language in relation to it frames how we think about it.

What has this all to do with prayer? My contention is that prayer should not be viewed in a reductive way that sees it primarily in instrumental terms as a petitionary means to seek a desired outcome. While petition is indeed a component of prayer, at least as Jews and Christians understand it, it is not in the crude cause-and-effect sense assumed by most detractors of religious devotion. If we can speak of prayer having an instrumental element, it is almost the opposite of what is commonly assumed. The aim of prayer is not primarily to change things *out there*, since before we pray God knows what we need and God’s grace is abundant. Rather, prayer is instrumental inasmuch as it *changes the one who prays*.⁹

Prayer is, in part, a *retraining in language*. By introducing and socialising people into a new vocabulary, prayer shifts the framework of thought and perception, because to make a habit of some form of language necessarily changes our thinking and perception. Such habits are slow transformations, much as rocks on a beach smoothed by waves over time. Prayer is such a habit.

This in itself is not unique to prayer, since any new language set achieves an equivalent shift. But this is striking in regards to prayer for at least two reasons: first, prayer is rarely, if ever, thought of this way in the public sphere; and second, the language of prayer is, for Christians, fundamentally revelation. After all, Christians do not actually know

⁸ Wendell Berry, “Agricultural Solutions for Agricultural Problems”, in *Bringing It to the Table: On Farming and Food*, 19–20.

⁹ For a Jewish philosophical perspective that discusses prayer as an act that transforms the one who prays, see Avi Rabinowitz, “The Cosmology of the Mitzvot”.

how to pray. That is the scriptural testimony, at least. It is in fact the Spirit of God who knows how to pray (Romans 8:26), and, as Sarah Coakley writes, “The Spirit is always there, closer to us than we are to ourselves, closer than kissing, constantly begging permission to pray *in us*.”¹⁰ The language and habit of prayer are only possible because of the Spirit. This is important because it guarantees that genuine prayer is not the will-to-power.

Prayer as the seed of revolution

But it is not only that we do not know *how* to pray; we also do not know *what* to pray. What is the content of this new language? For Christians, what we are to pray is taught to us by Jesus in the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13). All genuinely Christian prayer is derived from the Lord’s Prayer—as Dietrich Bonhoeffer insisted, “A disciple’s prayer is founded on and circumscribed by it.”¹¹ In the context of the first century, this prayer represented language that was at once liberating and unprecedented—a unique habitual set of language.

To begin with, the address of the prayer to “Our Father” relativises all human relationships—before and above all other socially constructed roles, we are all siblings and therefore fundamentally equal. The “our” puts stress on the communal dimension of the prayer, which is not simply for private

use.¹² This address, “Our Father”, also thwarts any attempt to make the object of ultimate loyalty and devotion something less than the Father of *all* people, an obvious subversion of the *Pater Patriae*, the Roman emperor (“Father of the fatherland”) and the temporal political realities he symbolised. Indeed, “Our Father” is in heaven, and so God transcends our familiarity.

To pray “your kingdom come” is to reject the pretensions of all earthly kingdoms—structures with universalising ambitions that inevitably coerce and violate. It is to reject those orders that do not conform to the will of God. It is to be a person incorporated into a community shaped to participate in a new world that is unimaginable without revelation.

What is this new world? What is God’s will? Apparently its nature is reflected in daily bread for all and forgiveness of debts. Those shaped by such prayer over time learn to imagine an economics in which there is enough for all, as with Israel in the wilderness, and resources are shared and consumed accordingly. Moreover, to make forgiveness a form of habitual language, and thus a pattern of thought, revolutionises human interactions, subverting expectations of retribution and favouring humility and the offer of merciful embrace.

Lastly, to ask that God “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” recognises that we are not to cut ourselves off from the world—if we were to do this there would be no reason to pray this

¹⁰Sarah Coakley, “Ordinary within the Extraordinary”, 17.

¹¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 165.

¹²W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew: A Shorter Commentary*, 92.

phrase. Because God's kingdom is breaking into the world as in heaven, escape from the world is not an option. We remain in the world and we have responsibilities within it, but we are not to ignore or succumb to its evils. Prayer does not remove a person from the world. Rather, it makes them more present within it, since in the act of prayer they have taken the time necessary to have revealed to them how the world really is.

Such language as found in the Lord's Prayer is able to transform the one who prays it. They can come to embody an alternative reality to that reflected by nationalism, violence, greed and retribution. Prayer in the manner of the Lord's Prayer can never be a merely private affair: it always has public and political implications. Prayer rearranges our very desire,¹³ and in doing so reshapes our public presence and drives us to sanctified action. As Karl Barth says, "God resists the torrent of human injustice and evil, and therefore ... [Christians] cannot cease to oppose it as well in their own place and manner".¹⁴

When my friends and I prayed as an act of public protest against inhumane asylum seeker policies what we were partly attempting to symbolise is that we are complicit in the problem. We are those whose desires are in need of transformation through ongoing prayer. In seeking to publicly dramatise this we hope to invite others (including our political leaders) on the same journey—not for our sake, but for the sake of hundreds of human beings living in the inhumane conditions of indefinite

detention, and for the sake of God in Christ who is found suffering amongst them (Matthew 25:31–46). To criticise our actions as egotistical is to have misunderstood our concept of prayer, and to have conceived of prayer as an act of self-assertion rather than self-emptying and transformation.

If prayer is a weapon—"the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world," as Barth says—it is a weapon that we turn on ourselves as those disordered. In this sense, prayer is a public act since the world is witnessing a moment in the needed transformation of our world, and is thereby invited to take part. It is the seed of a nonviolent revolution.

If prayer as a weapon is ever turned on an enemy, such as when we pray for those who persecute us or others, it can only be used legitimately for their benefit, to pray for their healing and transformation according to God's merciful will, which is their humanisation.

I take Barth's insistence that prayer is the beginning of a kind of uprising to be true. The act of prayer—including forming an alternative set of language habits to the world and relinquishing the will to control—is indeed radical, a kind of uprising. But what is implied here by "uprising" is unique. Uprisings tend to imply a will-to-power, but prayer as uprising is the making of the purposes and will of another (namely, God) our own. Such an act of humility is a sign of openness to guidance and reconciliation.

¹³ So Barth, God "summons us to make His purposes and aims the object of our desire." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, 104.

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*, 234.

Prayer as alternative historical consciousness

The phrase from the Lord’s Prayer that I left unexamined above is the second petition: “Hallowed be your name”. The act of prayer is an acknowledgement that we are not *ultimate* in any sense. To pray that God’s name is hallowed is not for God’s benefit—God is already hallowed. Rather, it is for our benefit, and the benefit of the world.

If prayer is to acknowledge that we are not ultimate, this implies that it is not our responsibility to generate a plan for history. And this is indeed good news, since all such historical goals eventually escalate into coercion and violence for the so-called “greater good”. Genuine prayer, as a relinquishment of the necessity to assert such control, is the rejection of violence as a historical tool.

Prayer is, in a sense, an anti-weapon. It is the act of seeking to align ourselves to God’s plans for history, and inviting others to do the same, as Christ has done. And, like Christ, the one who prays must be willing to embrace suffering as the only way of determining the meaning of history. In the words of John Howard Yoder, “The relationship between the obedience of God’s people and the triumph of God’s cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection.”¹⁵ Or as Tom Wright puts it, in prayer we “resonate with the pain of the world”¹⁶ because the Spirit of God

who dwells in us also groans from within the heart of the world. In this way we get in touch with the living God who is doing a new thing. Prayer in the manner of Christ construes the meaning of history very differently to the powers-that-be.

Prayer is the willingness to be patient and to renounce imposing our own desires on others. It is part of what Yoder calls “the readiness to renounce our legitimate ends whenever they cannot be attained by legitimate means.”¹⁷ In other words, we are called first of all to faithfulness, not effectiveness, and prayer is perhaps the foremost expression of this. Such does not exclude the possibility of confrontation, though confrontation is always accompanied by a readiness to forgive. Prayer is the ultimate form of nonviolent action, and the foundation for any other form of it.

The action of my friends and I was hopefully a genuine expression of such patience. We did indeed engage in a confronting act, though we sought to invite rather than coerce those who were most responsible for the evil being protested. For us, prayer was the most pertinent act in this circumstance because to protest on the basis of our own historical desires would indeed be coercive. Praying was a sign that we did not ultimately represent ourselves *qua* agents of change, but rather as those trying to be obedient to the will of God.

This, somewhat ironically, gets at the heart of Matthew 6:5–8, a passage that has been

¹⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 232.

¹⁶ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 139.

¹⁷ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 237.

continually lobbied at us in response to our public prayer actions. The problem Jesus addresses here is not praying in public per se (after all, Jesus prays in public, e.g., Matthew 11:25–30, John 11:41–42), but rather the use of prayer as an instrument for attaining social honour. To do such would be to seek after a reality where the one who prays is esteemed, rather than God and God’s reign over history. If, however, public prayer genuinely seeks the will of God and not the one who prays, then it becomes part of the activity of what Bonhoeffer called “the Visible Community”—a community that seeks to display to the world a life of good works that glorify God (cf. Matthew 5:13–16).

The impossibility of prayer-less mission

All that I have said above about prayer as the surrender of our plans for history is pertinent for Christian mission more generally. After all, perhaps the most foundational aspect of Christian mission is that it is not actually our mission; the mission is God’s, we are only invited to participate.

Mission is of course difficult to define, perhaps even impossible, hence Bosch’s comment that “mission remains undefinable; it should never be incarcerated in the narrow confines of our own predilections.”¹⁸ Given this reality, and the scope of this lecture, I will not try to define mission in any

comprehensive way, but rather I will opt for a shortcut description: *mission is whatever God, in Christ, by the Spirit, is doing*. The purpose of such a statement is in part to remind us that mission is not defined by the doctrinal preferences, particular actions or political imaginations of Christians. In other words, mission is not evangelism. Nor is it social justice, reconciliation, church planting, or nonviolence. Nor is it prayer for that matter. Rather mission is the *missio Dei* (God’s mission), the self-revelation of God and God’s ongoing redemptive activity in and for the whole of creation.¹⁹ The mission of the church—as a whole, as localised expressions, and as individuals—is to witness with the fullness of its existence “to the dynamic relationship between God and the world.”²⁰ In other words, the church’s mission is, in the language of Bosch, to be a sacrament and sign: a sacrament in the sense of mediating and representing God’s reign, and a sign in the sense of being a pointer and a model of it.²¹ Or as Lesslie Newbigin put it, “The church is God’s sending.”²² Particular acts of evangelism, justice, reconciliation, church planting, nonviolence, prayer, or anything else can only ever be expressions of faithfulness to the *missio Dei*, and not actions in and of themselves constituting this mission.

I will soon attend to the role of prayer in all of this, but before doing so I must spell out a couple of implications of my understanding of mission. First, because God’s activity in history is moving toward an eschatological goal, namely the restoration of all creation

¹⁸ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²² Lesslie Newbigin, “Church, World, Kingdom”, in *Signs amid the Rubble: The Purposes of God in Human History*, 95.

(Acts 3:21; Rom 8:18–25; Eph 1:10; Col 1:20), we must say that the *missio Dei* is eschatologically oriented. It goes without saying, then, that the church’s mission is also eschatological in nature, but it should also be said that the church’s mission is not that of working towards an end that humanity can achieve by way of human progress. The human pretension to objective progress would destroy us rather than save us. The eschatological reality, to which mission points, is not a utopia constructed by way of human ingenuity.²³ On the contrary, *God* is making all things new.

Second, mission, if it is the activity of the triune God, is not beholden to a particular political ideology. That is to say, mission does not fall into the category of Left or Right, progressive or conservative, or whatever. (That this even need be stated should be a cause of grief, but here we are.) The contrasting sides of such political binaries are deficient substitutes for a Christological politics, a politics defined by and reflected in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Such contrasting positions posit

that we already know what the world *should* look like, if only we could find our way there. Christian mission, on the other hand, rests partly on the premise that we do not find our own way; it is we who have been found—and invited to participate. The fact that many Christians are all too willing to label themselves and others as “progressive”, “conservative”, “liberal”, etc. is a problem, not because these labels are evil—sometimes the language can be helpful for brevity in everyday speech—but because they reveal the horizons of our political imaginations, and the way in which they have often been defined by forces other than, and in tension with, the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

These assertions no doubt require far more attention,²⁴ but to give them such would be tangential to my main concern of prayer. What I have been saying up to this point is that prayer is a habit and a language that shapes us into the image of Christ. It is, then, unfathomable to imagine faithfully participating in and embodying the mission of God without developing a

²³ Enlightenment ideas of human progress need not include a concept of utopia, as for example in the thought of Mill: “It is my belief indeed that the general tendency is, and will continue to be, saving occasional exceptions, one of improvement; a tendency toward a better and happier state.” John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive; Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation*, 576 (Book VI, Chapter 10, §3). I do note, however, the common pairing of faith in human progress and utopia, as in Marxist thought. See Krishan Kumar, “Aspects of the Western Utopian Tradition”, in *Thinking Utopia: Steps into Other Worlds*, 17–31. In either understanding the pretension of objective progress by human ingenuity is present. The seemingly ubiquitous presence of this kind of thinking today may explain the apparent inability of contemporary social scientists to comprehend the insincerity of Oscar Wilde’s oft-quoted and celebrated aphorism, that “[a] map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at.” See Matthew Beaumont, “Reinterpreting Oscar Wilde’s Concept of Utopia: *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*”, 13–29.

²⁴ Particularly the second assertion, since it could be construed in a way that interprets my perspective as fideistic, or at least ignorant of the postmodern critique of the neutrality of all discourse, including religious and political discourse, and the epistemological reality of (political) situatedness. I acknowledge that one’s political ideology can never be purely Christ-centred since it is necessarily influenced by external political thought and social realities (besides, the nature of Christ-centredness is itself contested). But my assumption is that part of the task of Christian discipleship is to continually discern the truth about ourselves and our situations, and to move towards wholeness (*teleios*, often translated as “perfect”, e.g., Matt 5:48; Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 2:6; 14:20; Eph 4:13 Phil 3:12, 15; Col 4:12). This necessitates the emptying of political ideology that is not compatible with the way of Christ. The impossibility of this task is only a problem if we do not believe that God, through the Spirit, can and is guiding the Church into all truth.

habit of prayer and, more broadly, worship.²⁵ Mission without prayer ceases to be mission. I say this not because the church needs more of a “balance” between activities that are “internal” and “external”, or “gospel-centred” and “socially-oriented”, as if such dichotomies were somehow theologically valid. Rather, I say this because genuine mission can only be embodied by a people who have laid down their own historical and political ambitions for the sake of God’s eschatological plan in Christ.

If we retain such ambitions, our attempts to participate in *missio Dei* become expressions of *missio homo*, our own mission. We use God to baptise our own projects, which are determined according to the horizons of some political ideology foreign to the way of Jesus. Our Christianity becomes that where Christ is no longer at the centre. But Christ himself prayed, “not my will, but yours be done”. His entire mission was conducted according to the will of the Father. A number of the Gospel pericopes suggest Jesus spent intensive time in prayer at points of tension or uncertainty, such as in Gethsemane. For Jesus it seems that faithful embodiment of God’s will required a living relationship with his Father. It also required his self-emptying (Philippians 2:6–8); even Christ had to undergo the renunciation of self. Like Christ, the missionary’s prayer is “your will be done”, because “the missionary can never effectively carry out the mission of God unless he or she has first totally submitted to the will of God who sends.”²⁶ How else can we submit if we do not pray?²⁷

Does this mean that the act of prayer will automatically generate genuine mission? Of course not. After all, Matthew 6:5–8 reminds us that prayer can be disingenuous. If you make a pancake with a rotten egg the pancake will be putrid. But that does not change the fact that you need an egg to make a pancake. That prayer can be misused does not alter the fact that genuine mission requires genuine prayer.

It is the case that attempts at mission without prayer will be bad for the world, since we will attempt to dominate others with an agenda that is our own rather than God’s. But it is also true that mission without prayer is fundamentally bad for the attempted missionary. I do not simply mean this in a pious sense that failing to conform to the image of Christ is bad for humans, though this is of course true. Too often I have seen activists and self-proclaimed radical or missional Christians who have experienced the burn out and cynicism that often accompany fierce opposition and failure. If prayer is a sign that faithfulness trumps effectiveness as I have said, then a lack of prayer is likely a sign of the opposite. And if effectiveness is primary, then the question “what happens when we fail?” becomes critical. How can one sustain mission in the face of defeat, even ongoing defeat? Perhaps this question relates to why, generally speaking, the demographic of activists tapers off with age.²⁸ Activism, and mission more generally, that is rooted in an orientation towards faithfulness to God’s will

²⁵At this point I think of the well-known maxim that “you become like what you worship”.

²⁶Joseph D. Galgalo, *African Christianity: The Stranger Within*, 34.

²⁷Surely not by sheer willpower, since the very attempt at doing so would be an expression of the very ego we are seeking to lay down.

²⁸Pippa Norris, Stefaan Walgrave and Peter Van Aelst, “Does Protest Signify Disaffection? Demonstrators in a Post-industrial Democracy”, in *Political Disaffection in Contemporary Democracies: Social Capital, Institutions and Politics*, 296.

expressed in Christ will outlast that which is rooted in historical efficacy because it is rooted in a reality that transcends reliance on human ingenuity and historical contingency. As I have argued, prayer is a substantive difference between action rooted in the desire for success and action rooted in the trust that God is making all things new.

Prayer as an uprising against disordered time and space

It is one thing to say that prayer is a *sign* of faithful mission, but in what way is prayer the *substance* of mission? This distinction is of course not completely legitimate since the sign is also the substance of mission, as when the act of prayerful surrender of one's own will to God is itself the embodiment of God's own kenotic self-revelation and thus the first step of participation in what God is doing in the world. Or—a simpler example—prayer and worship more generally are inherently missional since to pray is to participate in what God is doing in Christ through the Spirit, namely bringing glory to the Father.

Still, I want to briefly turn my attention to aspects of prayer that I have, up until this point, neglected. I have so far spoken of prayer as a language, and this could be taken as an indication that I only see prayer as intelligible spoken word. This is not true, for I also practise other forms of prayer that do not fit this description. Contemplative

prayer and praying in tongues come to mind. Both are missional activities, and I would argue that they embody an uprising against the world's disorder.

The contemplative tradition was articulated by Gregory the Great in the sixth century as “resting in God”.²⁹ The pray-er begins to experience what it is they have been seeking, but not through an act of will—it is the gift of God. All the pray-er can do is to open themselves to God. Such an act, the nurturing of stillness, stands in stark contrast to the speed of our world, both temporally and spatially.

Our current predicament in industrialised societies is that time is increasingly scarce and commodified. It would be impossible to explore here why this is so, but certainly the dominance of the market, expressed in the form of advertising, planned and perceived obsolescence, and “push notifications”, contributes to an unprecedented level of time poverty. The commodification of time “as something we can use, spend, allocate or fill”³⁰ means that no part of our lives is not subject to the dehumanising and dominating effects of the market. When time is equated with money, then our existence is literally quantified in financial terms. Time thus becomes a source of stress and fear. This may explain the proliferation of time travel themes in contemporary film—we wish to become dislocated from time because of our disorientation within it.³¹ Of course, time itself is not the problem since time is a gift, but we have distorted time such that we wish

²⁹ In Thomas Keating, *Manifesting God*, 132–33. Keating says this was “the classical meaning of Contemplative Prayer in the Christian tradition for the first sixteen centuries”.

³⁰ Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 73.

³¹ Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 74.

to reverse it, or at least save it by creating new gadgets of “convenience”. Ironically, we only succeed in further speeding up time, or at least our perception of it. The result is that we are rarely present, always fixated on some moment other than that which is current—thus we are displaced.

Likewise with space, we have become displaced. As Michael Northcott explains in his book *A Moral Climate*, our modern “speed machines”—trains, planes, cars etc.—have conferred on us a sense of mastery of the landscape, of the very horizons of the planet.³² We have become addicted to this sense of power, addicted to speed. The result is, as with time, our displacement.

In moving at great speed through or over a landscape the human being loses bodily and sensual connection with the organic rhythms of life on earth. This loss is important in the construction of the modern imaginary of conquest over, and independence from, the forces of nature.³³

But “to exist”, as Virilio suggests, “is to exist *in situ*, here and now, *hic et nunc*”.³⁴ Consider for a moment the consequences of the kind of displacement we are seeing; they are all around us, from sexualisation and suicide, to slavery and soil erosion. What alternative is there to such a spiral of destruction?

If we live in a world of destructive displacement, then surely God is seeking to *re-place* us. Moreover the church, in the collected wisdom of its tradition, has the resources it needs to resist such self-destruction in the ancient practice of contemplation—as is often the case, “I like your old stuff better than your new stuff”. Contemplative prayer is the radical act of stopping in a never-ceasing world. It is the subversive act of reflecting on the gift of beauty, and giving thanks for it. Thomas Merton puts it this way:

Contemplation is the highest expression of man’s [sic] intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source... To enter into the realm of contemplation one must in a certain sense die: but this death is in fact the entrance into a higher life.³⁵

This act leads to detachment, but not in the sense normally understood. Detachment does not mean distancing ourselves from things, nor seeing them as evil—nothing God created is evil.³⁶ Rather it means becoming detached *from ourselves*, and our own egotistic will to control, and attaching

³² Michael S. Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming*, 213–31.

³³ Northcott, *A Moral Climate*, 217.

³⁴ Paul Virilio, “Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm!” in *Reading Digital Culture*, 24.

³⁵ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1–2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

ourselves to God.³⁷ By doing so we see all things, including ourselves, in their right place, namely as things to use in and for God.³⁸ The mundane becomes a source of life and joy because its sacredness is perceived. The truth of divine life can only be perceived in stillness and rest. So Northcott points out, “This is why, for the Hebrew, Sabbath is not just the end of the week but the day which gives all the actions of the week meaning”.³⁹

We may recall Irenaeus’ well-known phrase, “For the glory of God is a living man [*sic*]; and the life of man consists in beholding God”.⁴⁰ Contemplative prayer, the radical act of resting in God, leads us to experience the fullness of life that brings glory to God since it is in itself an expression of God’s mission of restoring creation. This is more radical than public prayer as an act of nonviolent protest. Contemplative prayer is also a witness to the world of the life it could experience if it surrendered to God, and of the judgement it currently experiences because of its collective addiction to self-destruction. Anyone who carries a Smartphone already knows the judgement of which I speak.

Prayer as an uprising against dehumanising hyper-rationality

If contemplative prayer is an expression of the substance of *missio Dei*, and of what

Barth calls an uprising against the disorder of the world, so too is the act of speaking in tongues, albeit in a very different way.

I recognise that the subject of tongues is controversial. I make no apologies for raising it, though I respect the opposing views of cessationists and those who may have other reservations. I wonder, though, whether we might temporarily set aside such qualms, if only for a short while, in order to consider some of the public implications of tongue-speaking, as well as other non-intelligible forms of prayer.

The problem of conceiving of prayer solely as an articulate and coherent use of language is that such an approach can easily become a reflection of modern hyper-rationality, just as much as it is a product of a Christian tradition. By hyper-rationality I am referring to a worldview in which there is an unquestioning and excessive belief in the effectiveness of (objective) human reason.⁴¹ I realise that this worldview is not universal in the Western world, and that in some Christian contexts the opposite is true, such that “anti-rationality” might be an apt description. Nonetheless, I view hyper-rationality as being a defining characteristic in much of the West’s public discourse. I also observe that many sections of the Western church have uncritically absorbed this worldview, or parts of it.

³⁷ Ibid., 23.

³⁸ Ibid., 23–27.

³⁹ Northcott, *A Moral Climate*, 185.

⁴⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.*, 4.20.7.

⁴¹ Obviously I am not referring to hyper-rationality in the sense of Ritzer’s formula using Weber’s four forms of rationality (Formal rationality + Substantial rationality + Intellectual rationality + Practical rationality = Hyper-rationality), nor am I referring to the theoretical deductive powers of a super-intellect, such as future computers.

If we take an overly rationalistic approach to the world, ambiguity and mystery are unacceptable, or at least undesirable. It is not difficult to imagine how this pathology might become violent. Reason has an important place, of course. But reason can never exist neutrally, but must exist within the context of an individual's inherited traditions, location and concrete historical circumstances.⁴² Hyper-rationality is an unconscious attempt to remove human reason from the bounds of such contexts, above the very substance of life on earth, and thus above the relationships, circumstances and histories that have given our lives meaning.

In a world that has become increasingly hyper-rational we find that compassion becomes less common because it requires a presence of being and suffering that we are constantly trying to avoid. Rationality is a gift, but a focus on rationality at the expense of other human faculties is to erode humanity, both within ourselves and in our perception of others.

In such a world, the act of speaking in tongues is one of resistance to the excesses of rationality. This is perhaps nowhere better described than in Romans 8:26—"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we

do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words". While we cannot know for sure what Paul was referring to, numerous commentators have suggested that tongues, or "glossolalia", is in view.⁴³ Dunn speaks of this verse as referring to "the only form of prayer left to the believer when he [sic] comes to the end of himself".⁴⁴ Tongues is no doubt strange to us today, especially given our hyper-rationalistic context. For Paul, however, glossolalia was a manifestation of the Spirit of God, and a kind of prayer.⁴⁵ The act of praying in an unintelligible language, perhaps even groans, inspired by the Spirit, is for the apostle an act of communion with God. Paul claims that tongues edifies the one who prays, and no wonder—the one who prays in tongues communes with God in a way that is not subject to any dehumanising standard, and thus they express their true humanity. Any narrow obsession with a singular human faculty is foregone in favour of undignified communion with the source of all life. As a personal discipline this is an uprising against any forces that would seek to truncate human life.

But there is also a universal missional sense to the act of glossolalia. It lies in the fact that, as the Spirit prays through the believer

⁴² Helpful on this subject is Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre deals thoroughly with a selection of rival forms of rationality, which he says are socially embodied in particular traditions, as are all such rationalities. Indeed, one of the main theses is in his book is that all rational inquiry is undertaken within a tradition, even if the inquirer is unconscious of this reality.

⁴³ These commentators are divided over whether tongues is intended in a private or public sense. Ernst Käsemann, "The Cry for Liberty in the Worship of the Church", in *Perspectives on Paul*, 135; Krister Stendahl, "Glossolalia—The Holy Evidence", in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 109–24 esp. 111; Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, 580; Frank D. Macchia, "Groans too Deep for Words: Towards a Theology of Tongues as Initial Evidence", 149–73.

See also James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament*, 241–46; Dunn says Paul is speaking of charismatic prayer in Rom 8:26, and while not confining such prayer to glossolalia, he neither excludes it.

⁴⁴ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 241.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 245.

according to God's will, the Spirit intercedes for the world. Let us remember that God's will has already been revealed by Paul in Romans 8—the liberation of the whole creation. The God who by speaking creates the world now speaks by the Spirit through the believer in a heavenly language. We could only speculate by faith what effect such an act might have, but surely it is missional since God is doing it, and surely it is re-creative since the Creator's voice is heard. The act of praying in tongues lets the Spirit loose into the world to stand in solidarity with its groaning; in doing this we participate in what God is doing in the world.

As we join in those prayers, groaning along with the world, our act of solidarity changes us, making us more human as we embody the divine, and in doing so we further liberate a small part of the creation, namely ourselves. A truly liberated self cannot help but stand in solidarity with the suffering of the world, as did Jesus the truly Human One.

Of course, praying in tongues is unlike intelligible prayer or contemplative prayer in at least one important aspect, namely that one cannot simply choose to receive the gift of tongues. It is given out of the depths of God's grace.⁴⁶ In light of this, we must obviously admit that tongues is not necessarily a form of prayer to be practised by everyone. Still, other forms of non-intelligible prayer, such as groaning that may come with grief, or shouts of joy and celebration, may work similarly to the way I have described glossolalia.

Prayer as a political act

It should hopefully be clear from all of this that prayer is a political act. To suggest otherwise is to misunderstand prayer, or politics, or both.

Part of the problem alluded to in such a statement is that within the modern Western tradition life has become compartmentalised. One of the results of this is the truncation of our understanding of politics. Nowadays when people describe something as "political", the assumption is that this refers to the realm of elite power that has been the domain of governments for some centuries now. This is problematic in that it reduces the nature of politics to only one of its traditional forms. Let us remember that our word "politics" derives from the Greek *politikos*, which simply means that which relates to the affairs of the *polites* (citizens) or *polis* (city). In ancient Athens politics was understood as seeking the common good of the city. This had implications for structures of authority, of course, but it had other equally important implications, including regarding social organisation, justice and economic relationships, as well as other, less tangible elements such as ethics, culture and the rhythm of the calendar.

If politics takes on this wider meaning, then all expressions of mission are political in nature, since all Christian mission is wrapped up with the wellbeing of the world by way of God's eschatological plan to renew all things.

⁴⁶ The word *charismatic* is derived from the Greek word *charis*, translated "grace".

Such Christian mission of course includes prayer. We have already seen how prayer interacts with public realities—with language, violence, historical ambition, time, space and intellectual fashions—and it is right to say that each of these realities has distinct political implications.

This leads us to be able to understand why a statement like “you’re using prayer politically, and that’s wrong” is so unintentionally malignant. The truth is that prayer can never be apolitical, just as mission and theology cannot be. The question is not “is prayer political?” but rather “what kind of politics is represented in our prayers?”⁴⁷ When we assume that prayer (or mission or theology) is not political, we remove from our prayer any role in the formation of our politics. This allows us to hold to and embody a political reality in the world that is detached from the practice of faith. The irony is that this is the kind of dualism—humans in political control, God removed from sight—that detractors of religious faith wish for; religious devotion is fine, as long as it is kept in private. By rejecting the political nature of prayer, and indeed of the entirety of our faith, we simply capitulate to the Enlightenment myth of secular neutrality.

Worse than this, we reject the politics of Jesus,⁴⁸ surrendering the formation of our communities, our bodies,⁴⁹ and our imaginations⁵⁰ to forces other than Christ, in particular the state. It is my wholehearted conviction that the church must recover the politics of Jesus. This politics is demonstrated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Here we see that Jesus chooses not to violate or kill to achieve his ends, but rather insists on using means that are consistent with the ends he seeks, even if this means suffering and dying. An example of this is the episode of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. Jesus is offered, by way of earthly power, the means to achieve his goal of inaugurating God’s kingdom. But such means are inconsistent with his goal, and he rejects them. Instead he chooses a path that is obscure to the powers:

His Kingdom came in the form of an invitation, overpowering no one, and was to be built only by those who freely and thankfully gave over heart and mind to the task. He taught, he demonstrated, he prayed, he forged together, and everything he spoke of he did himself.⁵¹

⁴⁷ I have adapted this question from Hauerwas’ reflection that, “I have always assumed that any theology reflects a politics, whether that politics is acknowledged or not. The crucial question is: what *kind* of politics is theologically assumed?” Stanley Hauerwas, “Can Democracy Be Christian? Reflections on How To (Not) Be a Political Theologian,” *ABC Religion and Ethics*, 24/06/2014.

⁴⁸ This statement is of course borrowed from Yoder’s classic work, *Politics of Jesus*. What follows in the remainder of this section is clearly indebted to Yoder’s thought.

⁴⁹ Daniel M. Bell, Jr., “State and Civil Society”, in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 423–38 (433).

⁵⁰ “...intrinsic to [the organisation of human communities], to politics, is an act of imagination. Although always concerned with the arrangement of bodies, every politics involves the (re)production of a vision, a mythos, of community.” Bell, “State and Civil Society”, 423.

⁵¹ Jonathan Cornford, “...Longing for a Better Country”: *Christianity and the Vocation of Social Change*, 15.

In all these things Jesus embodied an alternative politics to the world, a mission of love and mercy where the ends *and* the means were faithful to God's will. Such faithfulness requires not a big stick to dominate the world, but a true witness that seeks to win hearts and minds. And in all this Jesus calls us to follow him: "As the Father sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21).

If we seek to embody the alternative politics of Jesus, our hearts and minds must be conformed to his image. This is why prayer is *always* a political act—whether in the quiet of our bedrooms or the bustle of a protest—because it leads to the transformation of witnesses in the world. More than that, it is a sign to those who watch that the God of Jesus Christ is the God of history, and that the world is destined for both judgement and renewal. To suggest that prayer is not political is simply to submit to some other form of politics, and to relegate Christian faith to the status of a privatised commodity. In other words, rejecting the political nature of prayer in the context of a modern democracy is probably to be an Enlightenment liberal.

We can see prayer as the beginning and means of a reorientation of human relationships around divine love and freedom as embodied in Christ. If this is so, then it makes sense that Christians pray in relation to asylum seekers, or any social issue facing humanity. It is only in recognising and confessing our own complicity in evil and the taintedness of our very desires that we can hope to be freed from these forces. A will conformed in prayer to that of the loving, suffering, nonviolent Christ, and a

political imagination that is animated by his life, death and resurrection, are required to work towards the transformed relationships necessary for sustainable, non-coercive social change.

Finally, if I have neglected the petitionary nature of prayer, I make mention of it now. Praying that God will change things, either immediately or eventually, is always political because it properly locates the true lordship of the world. It is to witness to a different order to that which apparently rules the world, and to proclaim that the current order can never facilitate daily bread for all and forgiveness of debts, let alone cosmic renewal. In other words, to pray is to declare the finitude of the powers. What greater political act could there be than the worshipful act of admission that we are in desperate need of God, who is all in all?

Conclusion

If there is a challenge arising from this lecture it is that to be a people committed to God's mission means to be a people of prayer. This is not a matter of guilt, since guilt is a poor motivator, and in any case a faithful prayer life is possible only by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit. Rather, the call is to take the time necessary to stop and open ourselves to the transforming presence of God that already awaits us, and to make such openness a habit—grace and discipline do indeed work together.

Prayer is never simply a private act. Whether in the form of an alternative language, the act of contemplation, speaking in unintelligible utterings, or some other form, prayer transforms the one who prays into the likeness of the One to whom they pray. Thus even prayer enacted alone has public consequences since the one who prays faithfully can never be passive in the face of evil, as the God of Jesus Christ is not. They will be a witness to God's will and eschatological plan of renewal for the world, as Jesus was, whether they pray alone or as they are arrested. To disparage public prayer as egotistical or whatever is potentially to misunderstand the public nature of Christian faith, to have compartmentalised and syncretised it with other political loyalties, and to have conceived of prayer solely as an act of self-assertion rather than self-emptying and transformation.

The fact that prayer transforms us into the image of Jesus means that prayer is essential to Christian mission and to a genuinely Christian life lived in such a way as to be an uprising against the disorder of the world. This uprising will necessarily have different implications depending on the context. For us it is nothing less than the subversion and disruption of language, violence, history, time, space and imagination.

In other words, prayer is a weapon that turns upside down the very notion of weapons, the very notion of history, and the very notion of what it means to be human.

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