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# PRAYING THROUGH *KENŌSIS*

## ABSTRACT

From the very beginning, the practice of intercessory prayer has been an accepted part of Christian life, yet it has often been felt to be in conflict with the Christian view of God. Even though prayer has been understood as part of a relationship with God, ascribing omniscience to him has been felt to render intercession superfluous. However, understanding God as limiting himself in *kenōsis* for the sake of relating to people, on the one hand, means that prayer is a reality as it really affects God, and changes the future, and, on the other hand, retains the traditional view of God as totally sovereign, which includes his omniscience. Then, if God's approach to people is kenotic, the response of people to God, especially in prayer, should likewise be in the humility of *kenōsis*.

## 1. IF GOD KNOWS EVERYTHING, WHY PRAY?

The practice of prayer must be at the heart of a Christian life. Christianity is not primarily adherence to a Christian lifestyle, following Christian ethics, although this is important. Christianity is not primarily attending Christian services of worship, although this is important, not least in the contact with other Christians, and mutual encouragement. Christianity is not just believing the right things, although this is also important. Rather the heart of Christianity is a relationship with God. Salvation is not just the granting of survival after death, but a present relating to God, both of which made possible by the forgiveness of the sins that separate us from God, enabled by the work of Christ to the depths of his sacrificial death. But this relating involves communication, and for Christians this means prayer, and not just the following of a laid down liturgy, helpful though it may be, but a real communicating with God. It is the developing union with God that is the essence of salvation (Pinnock 1996:155).

But even if the heart of a Christian life is prayer, the other aspects are also valuable in relation to it. It can hardly be possible to really pray if we are aware that we are doing things that God disapproves of, or of course, neglecting to do what he does want. It is true that sin is a major reason for failure in prayer (Fosdick 1960:144), and will at best distract (Wyon 1962:76). Jesus so correctly pointed out that prayer is pointless if there is a dispute with another

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person in the Church, or an attitude of hatred or lust (Matt. 5:21f.). “Prayer and a holy life are one” (Ravenhill 1961:72). It is amazing how people can habitually disobey God, then think that they can run to him in an emergency (Baughen 1981:15). However, awareness of imperfection need not detract from praying, indeed should do the opposite. Even if we should always only come to God with an attitude of confession and a desire to accept forgiveness, we cannot, dare not, wait until we are perfect before we pray.

Christian prayer must also be hindered if the wrong beliefs are held about the nature of God. After all, what we believe about other people naturally affects the way in which we communicate with them. It is here that the traditional Christian teaching about God can be very detrimental to intercessory prayer. Although some people have despised asking God for anything, seeing it as selfish or a distraction from real praying (Woolmer 1997:121), it has usually been part of Christian practice. As Macquarrie (1978:43) points out, the heart of Christian prayer is asking, not meditation. After all, Jesus encouraged it. But intercessory prayer has been problematic for at least two reasons, both relating to the omniscience of God. Firstly, if God knows the future, then it is fixed, and prayer, at least intercessory prayer, becomes futile. Why ask God to do something if it cannot happen, because the future cannot be changed? Among many others, Aquinas felt that God is unaffected by our prayers, although they were ordained by him as a means (Sanders 1998:153); they believe that God acts, never reacts (1998:162). Prayer is then simply an exercise in trying to reconcile oneself to what is inevitable, and even that is a waste of time, as one’s future attitude is also fixed!

The traditional understanding of God’s omniscience, although it can be a tremendous source of comfort in other respects, is then the cause of a big problem for many people. Not only does it result in the querying of God’s love when he is aware of our suffering, but it destroys the reality of prayer. This is what is reacted to by “open theism”, which says that God does not know the future; he cannot, simply because future actions are free. The future is “open” not fixed, because it has not yet happened. Then there is another very real problem, which also comes from a belief in God’s omniscience; why should we pray if God already knows what we want? Origen believed that God foreknows our prayers (Sanders 1998:144). This problem is not addressed by open theism; even if it denies that the future is knowable, it usually says that God, as omniscient, is totally aware of everything in the past, and, which is the issue here, in the present. This would again render prayer unnecessary. If God indeed knows everything, then prayer seems to be totally superfluous; we cannot tell him anything, for he knows everything, which includes all our problems, beforehand. “Before they call, I will answer” (Is. 65:24). The suspicion that God knows everything before we even ask must tempt us to simply

pray something like, “God, you know already the needs that I have and the desires of my heart, please answer them”. Is it just that he likes to be asked (Bonhoeffer, in Foster 2000:192)? Does God just insist that we actually verbalise our prayer for it to be heard? Does he even want us to say it out loud? As C.S. Lewis said, delight in another is incomplete until expressed (Woolmer 1997:102). Even if we do need to ask people for things simply because they may not be aware that we need them, this is not true for God.

How many have then stopped praying, just for these reasons? Prayer is after all hard work, and if it is also a waste of time, why bother?

It must be observed at this point that even if this were the case, Christians have usually felt that prayer is still worth doing. Even if they feel that God is totally omniscient, and therefore their prayer cannot actually achieve anything, and that in any case God already knows, many still pray. After all, if the essence of salvation is having a relationship with God, that relationship is not just something static, but, as any relationship, is always developing, always needs nurturing; it needs communication, and communication is far more than just imparting information. The fact of unanswered prayer is irrelevant when the key feature is relational (Barry 1987:71). The closest relationship that we know of is the bond of marriage, and many couples testify to knowing each other so intimately that they hardly need verbal communication. They do not need to express their love; it is known. Quite often they do not need to ask the other for something; the need is known, and more than likely already met, without a word being said. Telling one’s partner something new must actually be quite a small part of what is said. They know full well that one highly significant aspect of the relationship is the speaking to each other which is totally incidental to giving information. This must be the case with a relationship even more intimate, that with God. If prayer is relational, the telling is secondary (Barry 1987:15).

## 2. PRAYER NECESSARY DUE TO *KENŌSIS*

However, even if these thoughts still make praying worthwhile, the basic point remains that just because God knows before we ask, what is being done is nonsense, that intercessory prayer is really unnecessary. Or is it? I want to suggest that the answer to this lies in the idea of the *kenōsis*, or self-limitation, of God. This has indeed provided a solution to the issue for some without questioning omniscience. One traditional suggestion is that God has consistently limited himself by acting through people for the extension of his kingdom, and, very significantly, has usually chosen to act only when people pray (Hallesby 1948:127).

Particularly if prayer is essentially an aspect of the relationship between God and the Christian, it would then naturally be connected with the means by which that relationship was established. Salvation was enabled by the incarnation of the second Person, then by his death on the cross, both of which are kenotic in nature. In fact, the main *kenōsis* passage, Philippians 2:5f., is usually understood as a hymn, so a prayer. Taylor (1972:214) also suggests that it is the result of a prophecy, so again an aspect of God's communication with people.

It must be emphasised here that the *kenōsis* of Christ is not an "emptying" of aspects of his divinity, as was proposed by advocates of the notorious "kenotic" theory of the incarnation. This engendered a number of well-known objections, and proved unacceptable to orthodox Christianity. However, these objections are met if it is understood as a self-restriction, not using abilities which are nevertheless still available. This also means that it is possible both to confess the full sovereignty of God, as has been presented in traditional Christian theology, but also to recognise a measure of human free will. It is well-known that convincing Biblical evidence can be presented for both poles. The kenotic act of Christ should also not be seen as unique to the second Person, but, as an act of his deity, can also be attributed to the Father and to the Spirit (cf. Williams 2004). Thus it has often been noted that the act of creation involved the self-limitation of God. It is this point that particularly applied to prayer.

Moreover, if *kenōsis* also includes God's deliberately limiting his knowledge of us, so that it is in fact necessary for us to tell him of our desires, then prayer is more reasonable. It makes a lot more sense to pray if it is really a matter of communicating what we need to God. If he has indeed chosen not to know our inward thoughts so that he is in fact unaware of what we need and want, then it is necessary to tell God, or he simply will not know. If the privacy of our thoughts is something that is real, because God has given us freedom, then we do need to pray. Indeed, it is because of *kenōsis* that prayer is necessary at all, for God has limited his manifestation to the world to give it freedom. This of course immediately suggests that human activity is similarly kenotic, and also, incidentally, that God may well limit his response to our prayers, even refuse them; perhaps in many cases that is an act of love for us! As P.T. Forsyth once observed, God's refusals are often his real answers (Foster 2000:194). C.S. Lewis once remarked that we would be in a mess if God answered all our silly prayers (Foster 2000:194)!

I visit the local prison once a month to conduct a service for the inmates. I like to do quite a lot of singing, and present a short message usually based on a visual aid. But my concern is also to be practical; I do not just want to inform, or even just to worship, but I believe strongly that my faith is effective,

that God does help us in our lives if we are his children. This means that God does answer prayer, and so I want the prisoners to bring their needs to him in faith. But how to do this? I cannot pray for each person individually, nor do I feel that people want to spill out their inner desires and problems before everybody else. And yet, we do need to ask ...

So what I do is to urge anybody who has a particular need to bring to God to raise their hands while all our heads are bowed in prayer. I tell the prisoners that by raising their hands they are asking God to look into their hearts and to see their needs. I am affirming that God is able to see our inward thought, but usually respects our privacy, and does not intrude; however, he can and does if we ask him. In this way the prayers of all who want are brought to God without a word being said. And so many people have testified that God has indeed responded to the prayers that they have offered in this way.

But, and of utmost importance, a connection between prayer and *kenōsis* means that even though God has indeed chosen to limit himself, this is not an inherent limitation in God, but a restriction that he has laid upon himself for the sake of our real freedom. This means that if he wants to, he can indeed override that limitation, and see into our hearts. He will not do so uninvited, for that is a negation of the freedom that he has given, but if we ask him to, then he will do it, and so receives our prayer and may then respond to it.

It is the fact that God can still intervene that answers the problem that is so often expressed in relation to *kenōsis*, the self-limitation of God. If prayer seems pointless if God already knows what we want, it is equally pointless if God is not able to do what we ask. This, incidentally, does not demand actual omnipotence, but adequate power. In fact even creating does not require infinite power, simply because the universe is not itself infinite. Likewise, omniscience is not necessarily infinite, but the ability to know all there is. This is not an irrelevant distinction as infinite ability cannot be limited without losing its essential characteristic of infinity; adequate knowledge, on the contrary, is restrictable without any essential change in God's nature. However, on the contrary, the limitation of God is a self-imposed restriction, which he is totally able to leave aside if he so desires. Rather, aspects of his attributes which do not affect the free will of people need not be restricted. An example of this in relation to omniscience is that God's knowledge, unlike that of people is both immediate, so there is no delay in being able to remember anything, and distinct, so that there is no confusion. The latter is relevant to prayer, insofar as God would not grant a request to the wrong person! It has after all happened in human circles that a person has even undergone the wrong operation in a hospital. Even more relevant is the aspect of simultaneity, whereby God can be aware of many things at once (I sometimes remark that this is one of God's maternal characteristics!). Its application to prayer is not so

much of knowledge, but that God is able to attend to several prayers offered at the same time, which is actually a common practice in African churches.

The freedom that God gives to people might be felt to render the future uncertain and result in a loss of security for them. This would indeed be the case if the self-limitation of God was an absolute loss; however, in God's *kenōsis*, he remains totally sovereign, able and willing to act for human well-being, which of course he did in the kenotic act of the incarnation.

The way in which God limits himself can be seen by means of the example of a very common reason for coming to God in prayer, that of sickness. In general, God allows the ordinary action of viruses and bacteria, the possibility of accidents and of deliberate injury. These are all the result of the sort of world that God created, and are possible because God has given it at least a measure of freedom. Of course God just does not want to see people suffer due to the effect of any of these, but even more importantly, he does not want to over-ride the freedom which he gave to the world. They continue, not because God inherently cannot deal with them, but because he respects his gift of freedom to people, who must then really experience the results of that freedom.

But then if people, in their freedom, ask for God to act, there is no inherent reason why he should not, and if he chooses, he may well act outside the bounds of normal happenings. In this case, healing which is inexplicable by any other way than the action of God may well occur. God has transcended his own self-limitation, which he has the ability to do. *Kenōsis* is not an inherent limitation in God; he is not unable to help; miracles are possible.

This means that God does respond to our praying, that things are different due to our prayer. This affirmation has caused hesitation, as it implies that God changes, and also that God has to some extent yielded his sovereignty to our desires. The Baptist preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, wrote that prayer is able to bend omnipotence (Foster 2000:242). It may be observed that even such a staunch upholder of the idea of God's sovereignty as A.W. Pink accepted such an idea (Wilson 2001:63). In fact there is no suggestion that prayer in any sense forces God to do what he would not want (Killinger 1981:74). Boyd (2001:239) holds that prayer is effective; he suggests that it adds to the likelihood of events. Indeed, it is commonly felt that the Greek idea of a static immutability is not consistent with the Biblical witness, so that immutability should rather be understood in the sense of faithfulness and consistency (Pinnock 2001:76). Because people change, God has to change in his relationship to them. Effectively, he has to change to be unchanging! Prayer, at least intercessory prayer, is a request for God to act outside of the normal limits which he has imposed upon himself. Nevertheless, God's answer will

always be within limits, it is always kenotic; for example he would not do what is sinful. Jesus did indicate that even mountains could be moved in response to prayer (Matt. 21:21), which indicates that the limitation is perhaps less than we often assume, but there will still be limitation. Prayer is then asking God to change within the limits that he has set himself. The future may not be fixed in detail, but the possibilities are still restricted. Helpfully, Woolmer (1997:81) suggests that praying cannot affect the ultimate future, but it can change the process by which it comes; even the advocates of an "open future" insist that while the future is indeterminate, God still intervenes in the world, so that some future events can be treated as certain. Prophecy will then be fulfilled, which includes a statement such as the expectation of the *parousia*.

A further example of this is the matter of salvation. In the normal course of events it just does not happen, for "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), and "all have sinned" (Rom. 3:23). As a consequence of human freedom, all are naturally lost. But again, if we freely choose to respond to him, God transcends that limitation, and grants something that people in themselves do not naturally have. Only God is by nature eternal (1 Tim. 6:16), and so people naturally die. That is unless God chooses to act otherwise, which he will do if he is asked. We negate our freedom by asking God to negate his self-limitation, which he is so graciously happy to do!

Indeed, that is what God was doing in Jesus. Whereas he had limited himself in the act of creation, he did not want to just ignore the world that he had made, but acted to solve that need. But this action was consistent with his *kenōsis*; hence Jesus acted himself in *kenōsis*. And when we pray, we are in effect asking God to act further.

Why otherwise would Jesus pray? We are not speaking just of a religious man, trying to obey God and to teach others about him, we are speaking of God himself, the second Person of the Trinity, one who has a closer relationship to his Father than we can conceive of. It is easy to assume that because Jesus was the Son of God, he did not need to pray (Knowles 1985:41). Such as a Luther or a Francis of Assisi prayed, but Jesus said, "Did you not know that I am in my Father and my Father is in me?" (Jn 14:11). What human friendship, or blood relationship, can even claim to approach such intimacy? So was he only praying as a lesson for us, doing something just for our benefit, providing an example? That would surely not be consistent with the character of Jesus. This would be docetism, rightly rejected by the early Church. His praying was no sham, but a genuine exercise, essential for him.

The fact that he prayed must then mean that he was really communicating with God, really informing him, and that if he had not done that, what hap-

pened would have turned out differently. In this case, for him, prayer must have been constant, as he needed to constantly relate to the Father, to receive from him constantly. This is part of what is meant by *perichoresis*, the interaction of the Persons of the Trinity, their constant giving and receiving from each other.

Not only is prayer the natural result of the relationship with God that the Spirit produces, but it has been suggested that prayer becomes a very participation in the life of the Godhead itself, a relationship itself enabled by the Spirit (Taylor 1972:226). As adopted children, what we are doing is sharing in the praying of Jesus (Taylor 1972:226); we participate in *perichoresis*; we have access to God in his access (Wyon 1962:40). Prayer is participation in God (Leech 1980:8); it is then “something in which we join” (Wyon 1962:33). “Our prayer is only true prayer to the degree in which it is one with His” (Father Andrew, in Wyon 1962:32). Indeed, it is not going too far to assert that “None of your prayers is ever answered. Only God’s prayers are answered” (Glenn Clark, in Wyon 1962:86). Jesus is effective as our High Priest as his praying is in his divinity, part of his *perichoresis*.

In his *kenōsis* through his incarnation Jesus was especially dependent on God; he needed to receive from him, and to do so constantly. Here Origen, the great theologian of Arius’ native Alexandria, had realised that the generation of the Son from the Father was not at a point in time as Arius later taught, which would indeed be subordination, but was an eternal process. The Son constantly received. Thus in both his divinity and humanity, Jesus was dependent constantly on the Father; an attitude of constant thankfulness was therefore appropriate, a perpetual acknowledgement that pertains also to our inherent limitation. “Even though Jesus lived a perfect life, he did so only by looking to his Father for guidance and strength at each step” (Knowles 1985:40), the very method that we can use. The fact that he prayed is perhaps the best reason for us to do likewise (Wyon 1962:36). The constancy of his communication with God likewise shows our need to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17). Clement of Alexandria said that the perfect Christian lived in perpetual communion with God (Le Bruyns 2001:80), an echo of this, the shortest verse in the Bible (in Greek), and perhaps a reaction to the growth of liturgy.

Moreover, much of our praying shares his motive. He became incarnate to identify with needy humanity; praying followed from that. Jesus’ priority was humanity; what of ours? Nédoncelle (1962:32) believes that prayer is an expression of a dominant desire, so a good way of assessing priorities. Praying for others involves putting ourselves in their situation, feeling their needs (Knowles 1985:22).



### 3. PRAYER EFFECTIVE THROUGH *KENŌSIS*

If the reality of prayer is due to God's *kenōsis*, it should not be surprising that our response is similarly of *kenōsis*. It must not be forgotten that the context of Philippians 2 is Paul's plea that we follow Christ's example, so if he was willing to humble himself, so should we be. Not only is praying from a desire to change things, but "to pray is to change" (Foster 2000:5). Indeed humility is essential for real prayer (Ravenhill 1961:148); prayer is a yielding of control (Foster 2000:8). On the contrary, pride, the antithesis of *kenōsis*, hinders it (e.g. Is. 58:1-5). The reason for this is that *kenōsis* enhances the relationship that is at the heart of prayer; a good relation with others enhances the relation with God, and vice versa. "The best disposition for praying is that of being desolate, forsaken, stripped of everything" (Augustine, in Knowles 1985:54). Augustine also said that God gives where he can find empty hands (Foster 2000:199). Perhaps we tend to resist the idea of God's self-limitation not just out of respect for God, but also because it implies that in imitation of him we should also limit ourselves. Real prayer must be costly (Wyon 1962:62). One example of this is fasting; this may well be unfashionable today, but it has frequently been an accompaniment for intense prayer (Hallesby 1948:93f.). Even if the Hebrew word can just mean submission, fasting cannot just be spiritualised away, but in self-deprivation can express the submission of the entire person to God, which is the heart of prayer. It has been suggested that the idea in Matthew 17:21 is a later addition to Jesus' words (e.g. Spencer & Spencer 1990:102), but the principle is surely original. The fact that it is a voluntary act reflects the self-limitation of Jesus. For him, as for us, prayer, obedience and sacrifice are one (Wyon 1962:40). Fasting of course involves the body; so perhaps prayer should then include the body; it is not just a mental exercise (Ravenhill 1961:146). *Kenōsis* does not mean a limitation to the mind! Even more so, prayer must not be an emptying of the mind, a danger of the use of liturgy (Williams 2004:158).

More than this, it may well be suggested that even intercessory prayer that is effective is that which originates not in the mind and heart of the one praying, but comes from God. Prayer of this sort does change things; it is not just the power of thought (as Jackson 1968:113). It is surely not a method of transmitting energy, as Killinger (1981:74) suggests, which would be magic, but a loving fatherly response to his children. It is prayer in his name, in accordance with his will (1 Jn 5:14), that will be answered. John 15:7 is not just a blanket promise for any whim (Baughen 1981:31), but "in his Name" means "according to his will" (Spencer & Spencer 1990:93). The faith that makes prayer effective (Mk 11:24) is not a psychological endowment, not a "positive confession", but a response to the will of God. This means that "Being aware of the presence of God is the beginning of prayer" (Topping 1981:9); effective

prayer is in the awareness of real communication (Barry 1987:16). It is then that it can become authoritative; there is a place for spiritual warfare (Foster 2000:244f.). Prayer is answered when our desires are placed secondary to those of God, when our will is emptied, when we pray in accordance with God's desire. Prayer is removing the hindrances that we have put there (Macquarrie 1978:45). This may well explain the otherwise enigmatic idea of agreement for effective praying (Matt. 18:18); this is not just a matter of two prayers being stronger than one, and definitely not a magical formula, but any agreement with another must involve a degree of self-limitation to accommodate the other. It will probably also involve the moderation, so limitation, of what is requested, when it is subject to the ears of another person! Thus effective prayer requires our submission to God; indeed, very often, the result of prayer is to change us, not God (Knowles 1985:22). Kierkegaard described prayer as a struggle with God, in which we win when God is victorious (Nédoncelle 1962:79); effectively when we acknowledge our need. Jesus' *kenōsis* was to "the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:7); our action in prayer is as slaves to God, so in obedience to him.

At the very least it takes effort; prayer is then not something to be rushed into lightly; it takes time, just as any relationship (Baughen 1981:43, 70). It requires some giving up of other activities; so praying is a form of *kenōsis*! Not only is prayer because of service, but it is service. Nédoncelle (1962:viii) cites the assessments of Maistre, that the value of a civilisation rests on the quality of its prayer, and of Toynbee, that it is the only foundation for human brotherhood. This of course applies particularly to the Church.

Just as for Jesus, the heart of our praying is an acceptance of our own *kenōsis*, that we are limited, that we need God's help. Prayer is something that we naturally turn to when we are conscious of our own inadequacy, that we need help from outside our strength. We often fail to pray just because we are not even conscious of our own inadequacy, or are too proud! Knowles (1985:22) asserts that the greater part of prayer is in learning how to receive. If we, as human beings, could grasp something of the total omnipotence of God, and at the same time, our impotence, it will then drive us to pray. We cannot save ourselves, and we cannot even exist in this world independently of God's provision. For people aware of utter dependence on God, prayer must become a way of life (Topping 1981:16). Perhaps nobody else could ever be so aware of the contrast between the power that Jesus had as a human being, and the divine power that he had limited in order to be human. He knew, as none other, the need of his Father's help. It is because he knew God's power and wisdom that he prayed (Fosdick 1960:78).

But contrary to popular belief, prayer is not primarily to receive, which is essentially a pagan idea (Hallesby 1948:125). Jesus after all had everything

available to him. It is rather a giving, a yielding, conformity to the mind of God. The *kenōsis* of Jesus was not for his gain (Phil. 2:6), except insofar as it was a gain of a fuller relationship with humanity. As *kenōsis*, prayer is then a liberation from isolation, a finding of one's real self (Leech 1980:6). Paradoxically, the aim of prayer is not the benefit of the one praying, but the transformation of life to God (Wyon 1962:147), which is then for the benefit of the one praying! In a real sense, prayer is an instrument to wholeness (Jackson 1968:54). In Augustine's well-known words, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee".

Is this after all not the purpose of Christ's own *kenōsis*? He went through all that agony not only for us, but also that he might gain the fullness of those in relation with him, the completion, or wholeness of his body. *Kenōsis*, after all, led finally to glorification and exaltation!

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*Keywords*

Free will

Omniscience

Petitionary prayer

Self-limitation

*Trefwoorde*

Vrye wil

Alwetenheid

Versoekende gebed

Self-beperking