

*Editor's note: Readers are invited to join the conversation on prayer through the Touchstone website at [www.touchstonecanada.ca](http://www.touchstonecanada.ca). Write your letter to fellow readers!*

## **CAN GOD WRITE STRAIGHT WITH A CROOKED PEN?**

### **AN EXCHANGE OF LETTERS ON PRAYER**

**Peter Wyatt and Rob Fennell**

Dear Rob,

After twenty-five years in pastoral ministry, I moved to a position at the General Council Office of the United Church, and then on to serve as principal of Emmanuel College. After the shift out of congregational ministry I still had opportunity to preach occasionally as a guest, and sometimes even to lead worship as a whole. As you will know since taking up your teaching position at Atlantic School of Theology, worship is a different experience when one is not leading it, but participating from the pew.

I wonder what your experiences have been. The longer I am present at worship in a pew, the more restless I have become with certain features of our common worship. The wordiness, for one thing. Our prayers, oral and printed, seem to imply that we think we will be heard through our much speaking. How often a few sentences with an apt controlling image, or a series of clear images, would suffice as a prayer to open a service. To illustrate, I offer an example from my file that may be entirely or only partly of my composition:

Blessed, enlivening Spirit of God, we look to you!  
As people have gathered in this appointed place  
for a hundred years and more,  
so we have gathered,  
seeking rendez-vous with you  
and power to live well.  
Mixture of clay and spirit, we amaze ourselves;  
we look within and see  
struggle between generosity and greed,  
confusion of lofty sentiment with petty resentment,  
skirmishes between confidence and fear,

and hunger for intimacy set amid defensive walls.  
As we reach out to you,  
reach out to us, unfailing Friend,  
Grasp our hands so that we may advance at least a pace forward in our journey.  
We pray in Jesus' name. Amen

I set the prayer out as poetry rather than prose because that is how prayer needs to be spoken, in breath-friendly units, and with enough space between images for them to gain traction in our imagination. It may be that this prayer has too many images to be effective, whether spoken by the minister or the congregation together. It would be interesting to ask the congregation afterward: what happened for you when I/we offered the opening prayer?

One of my special peeves is finding a unison prayer in the bulletin that has been printed with no apparent thought as to how it would be spoken by the congregation. No doubt the congregation will manage to get through it, but it is not clear that it will have been an experience of prayer rather than of uncertain choral speech. As well, since the congregation has likely not ever seen the words before, they are just catching up to the meaning of the words rather than having a chance to offer them as heart-felt prayer. In an Anglican service the prayer-book unison prayers are well known (even by heart), and thus could be prayed from the heart, making them truly participatory *as prayer*. If our goal with printed unison prayers is congregational participation, then we need to construct them so that they function as prayer.

One more thing before I give you a chance to respond, or to set your own course—part of the wordiness of much of our worship derives from our avoidance of silence, moving from one spoken or read or sung part of worship to the next as if we had to avoid radio silence. When does the still small Voice get a chance to speak? When leading services recently I have been providing silences before uttering prayer and also allowing two minutes of reflective silence after the sermon—a kind of quiet altar call.

I look forward to your reflections on common worship today.

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Dear Peter,

Thanks for all this. Like you, I experienced a certain disorientation after leaving full time congregational ministry and taking up an academic post. Not least of these disorientations was trying to find anchorage in a weekly rhythm. I had been so deeply tied and cued to the Sunday by Sunday rituals of time that I wasn't nearly as sure of where things fit together. And like you, I was given the mixed blessing of being a worshipper, and rarely a worship leader. From time to time I have the opportunity to serve with a congregation for a few weeks when a minister is on sabbatical, but most Sundays I am "on the other side of the pulpit." It is not always a comfortable place. I think there is an expression in French: *déformation professionnelle*. I have been deformed

by my profession! I long to lead worship still, and still love doing so, but regrettably have become too much of a critic of those who lead me in worship. I am trying to repent of this. Some weeks are better than others (both in the leadership and in my repentance).

Reformed worship is, on the whole, too wordy. We who live within that tradition rely too much on words and especially on printed text. It can be a race to get all the words said (just as it was a race for the minister to have them all written in advance). The wordiness can distract us from a patient encounter with God, who desires our hearts' attention more than our clever turns of phrase. I have fancied myself a bit of a writer of prayers, and I do love a well-written prayer (like yours, above). But I am still caught, now and again, by this dynamic of too much reliance on words. A little space, a little silence, a few sung refrains, a gesture or two—any of these might broaden our liturgical repertory. I know that there are many ministers in The United Church of Canada and other related denominations who are quite good at this breadth, and indeed expand it well beyond what I have listed. But there are just a many who are bound by customary practices (and I include myself in this).

As you note, it would indeed be daring to ask a congregation what they experienced in and after a prayer that one has written and invited them to pray together in public worship. It would be revealing, I think. John Wesley's diaries, as decoded by Richard Heitzenrater,<sup>1</sup> evidently demonstrate how preoccupied Wesley was with his spiritual experience in each element of the liturgy—how well he was attending to God, how alert he was to the Holy Spirit, and so on. Do our wordy prayers invite this sort of attention? Or do they become a sort of linguistic-spiritual Olympics, dashing to get the words uttered before our sixty minutes are up?

I have another thought I would like to run by you. To what extent, would you say, is the effectiveness of public prayers a function of the spiritual health of the one who composes them? I don't mean to say here that ministers must always be exemplary spiritual athletes. It is perfectly OK to borrow and adapt the work of others. What I do mean is that I have an intuition that a healthy and humble prayer practice of one's own will deepen the meaningfulness of our public worship leadership. Again, I am no hero in this: I have had plenty of spiritual dry times. But it's a question that might relate to our conversation.

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Dear Rob,

I was heartened to hear from you and to listen to your thoughts. I sense that you are a gentler critic of the foibles of our worship customs than I. And—dear me!—I intended to say that I have been as guilty as anyone in practising the wordiness and excessive dependence on words that

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<sup>1</sup> <https://divinity.duke.edu/faculty/richard-heitzenrater>

seem to limit the reverence and power of our worship. The great advantage of preparing prayers for worship each Sunday is, of course, that they can reflect the immediate social and cultural context, as well as the themes of Scripture passages appointed in the lectionary. We were educated to value this opportunity for contextual immediacy, and found ourselves eager to try out creative wings. The shadow thrown, of course, is that we have to be creative every week, not only in sermon but also in prayers. It's a lot to undertake each week, and suddenly we have to produce all those words.

There is another thing I wish I'd said about printed unison prayers. If I compose them, then I am putting these words of my composition into the mouths of the worshippers that day. Compliant as most congregations are, those present will speak the words—whether they find them to be apt or not; true to their own experience or not. Again, knowing the content of unison prayers before they are to be spoken, democratizes the leadership of prayer to a degree: the people become a little more responsible for the uttered content of the prayers.

I think that you are right: there is a connection between one's public praying and one's personal prayer life, between the quality of one's public prayers and one's own spiritual health. Though this connection is real, I don't think that it can be absolute. This is so because, even in an egregious case, God can "write straight with a crooked pen." Graham Greene illustrates this in *The Power and the Glory*, in which a priest, addicted to whiskey and companioned by a woman "friend," is nonetheless the means by which the gospel of Christ continues to console believers in a time of persecution in Mexico. The connection is real but not absolute also in more mundane instances of dryness, doubt, and distraction.

I recall a time of clinical depression in my own life when I felt both unable and unworthy to carry out the responsibilities of pastoral ministry. A sense of decay and defeat crowded in upon me, and I wondered where the God of deliverance was. How could I preach faith to people on a Sunday morning when I doubted whether I had faith myself? Would I now add the sin of hypocrisy to my misery? In those bleak days the conference personnel minister visited me, and he said that I should keep going. "Just because a doctor is depressed, she doesn't stop practising, or a teacher from teaching." Then he said: "You have carried members of your congregation when they have been dispirited and depressed, doubting and demoralized. Now let them carry you." Somehow I got through those painful months, and experienced healing and personal growth. The decision to continue in the pastoral office without breaking stride (hobbling though I was) afforded a sustaining dignity.

This said, I know that, when I have been disciplined in exercising forms of personal prayer and meditation (including the reading of Scripture), I have felt greater confidence in my life as a Christian and in offering worship leadership. "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control" (2 Tim 1:7, RSV). In one of his discussions of prayer Karl Barth commends moving through the order of prayer mandated by Jesus' teaching in the Lord's Prayer. He observes that in this way we participate in "a sequence the end of which brings

us back to the beginning”—yet in a different spirit than when we began: “When the Christian wishes to act obediently, what else can he do but what he does in prayer: render to God praise and thanksgiving; spread himself before God in his weakness and sin; reach out to Him with all that impels him; commend himself to Him who is his only help; and again, *and this time truly*, render to Him praise and thanksgiving.”<sup>2</sup>

It is my experience that prayer, especially as combined with meditative silence, makes a difference in my composure, in perspectives and attitudes, and also in actions undertaken. Prayer does change us, and for the better. The more challenging issue with which I tussle is whether and how God through prayer changes things in the world.

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Dear Peter,

I hear you on that matter of the “shadow” of creativity when composing prayers for public use. I have known colleagues to be almost paralyzed by the pressure of it, or to borrow and adapt others’ prayers too readily without discerning if they are apt. It’s so strange, in a way, given the contrastingly “set” forms of prayer books traditions (e.g. Anglicans)—a pattern that has rarely found a happy home in the United Church.

Greene’s story of the priest in Mexico—and your own—remind me of that ancient principle (*ex opere operato*) that we hold in regard to the sacraments: that the efficacy of the act doesn’t depend on the righteousness of the presider. A minister can be in a state of sin (or dryness or despair) and even still God uses that voice, that heart, that mind, those hands, to convey the gospel. In the sacraments, as in prayer, it is finally the triune God who acts, not us (with “groans too deep for words” - Rom 8:26). We are always vessels, and only vessels. Recalling this has helped me many times when I felt unworthy, unable, or unprepared (!) for liturgical leadership—especially at funerals. I simply had to trust the Holy Spirit to do what she wanted to do through me, with me, or despite me.

In the film version of C.S. Lewis’s life, *Shadowlands* (Richard Attenborough, 1993), the screenwriter puts these words in Lewis’s mouth: “I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me.” Kierkegaard said something similar, a century earlier:

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich, vol. 3/3 of *Church Dogmatics*, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 264, *emphasis added*.

“Prayer does not change God, but it changes the one who offers it.”<sup>3</sup> Even so (and against the theological judgements of some of those who taught me and whom I revere), I am inclined to a slightly different view. Can prayer change God’s mind? Does God respond to our prayers? I am tremendously reluctant to say “no.” This is not born of a fantasy for a celestial fulfiller of wish lists. It is born of conviction about the sovereignty of God. Who am I, who are we, to say in advance that God can or cannot, will or will not, should or should not, respond to prayer in a particular way? It is for this reason that I once said to you, “Pray fearlessly.” Abraham was bold enough to try to change God’s mind (Gen 18:23-33), and apparently succeeded. In Phil 4:6, Paul advises, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” This is indeed the thing: Paul does not say, “Decide in advance what is appropriate to pray about,” nor “be sure that you predetermine the limits of God’s power to respond.” The doctrine of divine sovereignty forecloses on the possibility that we would foreclose on God’s power and will. In short, I cannot withhold certain prayers because it is not my decision about how God will respond.

None of this makes it easy to pray, nor does it resolve the dilemma of what seem to be unanswered prayers. Many times I have ended a public or group prayer with these words: “Gracious God, we lay all these prayers, spoken and unspoken, on the altar of our hearts, trusting that you hear us in love and will respond in your time and in your way.” To me, this captures our rightful dependence on a sovereign God. I know many of our contemporaries would differ from my perspective!

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Dear Rob,

I like your summary prayer very much, and may well use it! Your advice to pray fearlessly is also appreciated, and in situations of actually praying for some good, including healing, I do not hold back from asking for what we need. There is, of course, a good deal of resistance these days to expecting God to intervene in the regular operation of the laws of nature. Someone has observed, though, that it is absurd to speak disdainfully of God *intervening* in the operation of the universe; isn’t it God’s universe and isn’t God engaged with it at all times?

Still, in an age of stunning scientific discovery, one can wonder just where and how God is present in the world and might be at work in it. Just yesterday all the news programs were heralding the amazing image of a “black hole,” or of its penumbra, this image apparently another confirmation of Einstein’s theory of general relativity. We have learned so much about the way

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<sup>3</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, Chapter Two of *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing [1847]*, trans. Douglas V. Steere (Seaside, OR: Rough Draft Printing, 2013), 34.

the universe works, and we are learning more all the time. It is helpful for me in coming to prayer to remember that the two apparently distinct worlds of faith and science are integrally connected. The One in whom we have faith as Creator and Redeemer is in fact Creator and Redeemer of the universe of marvels that science seeks to understand.

I have been reading some contemporary Thomists who are working in the science and theology dialogue. From them I learned that it was Thomas Aquinas who first spoke of “God in all things”; in fact, who said, “God is in all things, and innermostly.” He also spoke of God as “Being itself,” a concise way of saying that in every creature, God is present intimately as the very power of its existence. God thus works consistently through natural causation, or instrumentality, in whatever other special ways that God also may work. I am intrigued that at least one of the theologians writing on science today regards natural evolution as an expression of the continuing creative and providential work of God. Might this, then, be one way that God works in the world, through the natural processes of an evolving cosmos, ever drawing the creation toward an ultimate goal?

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Dear Peter,

As a child I was consumed by scientific fascination, but today I am more agnostic about scientific processes. Still, I’m terribly grateful for those who continue to research and bring forward such wonderful new understandings and applications (like biomechanical engineering that can rebuild arteries and hearts). My own experience of the natural world is more mystical now, I suppose, though I hesitate to claim that I am a mystic. Prayer in words, in thoughts, in journaling, and so on has always been so important to me. Ecstatic prayer has overtaken me within music and singing, too. I’ve also had prayer moments aplenty in contemplating the stars, sitting on a dock by the lake, and walking in the woods. Those are more preverbal times of prayer, I suppose. These are often the times in which I sense that Kierkegaard was right, in that prayer changes me more than it changes God. I wonder if we need to expand our repertory of prayer in public worship with this kind of contemplation, or more silence, or more encounters with art and movement, which I know are so meaningful to many.

How far is all of this from Thomas and Barth, whom you have mentioned in your letters? Probably not far, I suspect. Those of us who theologize about things like prayer do a disservice when we let that reflection stay at a distance from the lived experience of connecting and communicating with God in various ways. Even Thomas and Barth prayed, of course. So prayer itself is much more universal than theology, as it were! I remember a sermon I offered once in which I spoke of prayer as “natural, normal, and necessary.” Then there is that waggish proverb: “there are no atheists in foxholes.” At some level, most of the human family experiences the cry of the heart, longing for a God who hears and responds.

It's this last note that sums things up for me, both personally and theologically: we cry out for God, and God answers. I am convinced of this, even in the midst of much air time given these days to those who are sure that there is no God, or at least there is no God who answers. I am convinced of the goodness of the One who hears, who makes our hearts to have a God-shaped hole (as Augustine put it), who knows our needs before we utter them, who responds with active grace and love. I am indeed convinced, and trust that it is so. The close binding of hearts that emerges through our prayer practices, even in their imperfections, is one of the great joys of the Christian life.

Thank you for this conversation. I hope that readers of *Touchstone* will share with us their perspectives and experiences, and that the conversation will continue!

In peace,

Rob