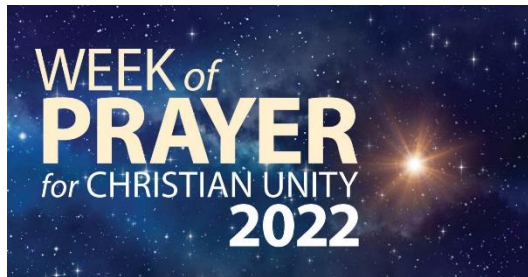


## SHOULD WE STOP SAYING PRAYER WORKS?

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity started this past Tuesday and extends to next Tuesday. These eight days – Co-ordinated by the World Council of Churches (of which the United Church of Canada is a founding member) – is sandwiched between



the Feast of the Confession of Saint Peter and the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul. It was first celebrated in 1908.<sup>1</sup> The intent is to pray for the enormous diversity of denominations to come together, working together toward a more common vision of how to live into the Way of Jesus.

Central to this celebration is the idea that prayer works – or does it? After all, most people who say prayer works, these days, mean “*God did what I wanted.*” It is that kind of attitude making prayer merely utilitarian. Push this button called “prayer,” and the vending machine will give you what you selected. As many people who storm the heavens in prayer can attest, that isn’t what happens. If that was the case, all disease would be cured, all enemies would be slaughtered, everyone would be gainfully employed, there would be no one who lacks for anything, each of us would look marvelous and everyone would perceive the world just as we do – the “right” way.

Instead, prayer isn’t a vending machine button to be pushed but a relationship to be nurtured. Christian theologian from the Quaker tradition writes, “For those explorers in the frontiers of faith, prayer was no little habit tacked on to the periphery of their lives; it **was** their lives. It was the most serious work of their most productive years. Prayer – nothing draws us closer to the heart of God.”<sup>2</sup> What Foster is trying to say is that our very lives are a prayer. It is through our living that we nurture and replenish our relationship with God.



However, how we live isn’t the only prayer in which we rightly engage. When Foster writes about prayer drawing us closer to God, he is suggesting that we need times of conversation with God. In fact, when I pray each night, I’m not always sure what my prayer will be. As I enter prayer, I also listen. I listen to what is troubling me, what emotions are bubbling up within me, what celebrations make we want to dance and what events require a time of contemplation to process. This is not, however, only

<sup>1</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Week\\_of\\_Prayer\\_for\\_Christian\\_Unity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Week_of_Prayer_for_Christian_Unity)

<sup>2</sup> Richard Foster, “Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home” (Nashville: Fortress Press, 1992) p. 37 (emphasis mine).

my individual pondering. Instead, it is a relational conversation between me and the divine. Indeed, I have repeatedly discovered the Spirit's abiding presence when I pray.



Disgraced Televangelist  
Jim Bakker of the former  
PTL Club

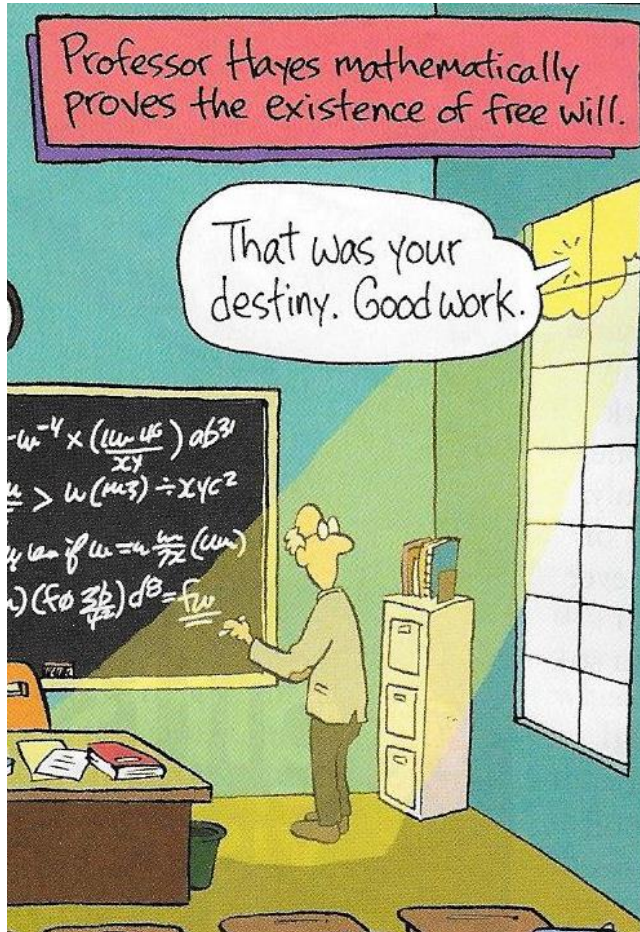
There is a very real danger in praying – especially if I allow my ego to twist my perception of the prayer relationship. I might believe that God has spoken to me, giving me direction to go and do what I wanted to do in the first place. You've heard this from far too many religious leaders when they say, "God told me to." I will never trust such a message – even if it is something I **want** to believe. Instead, I look to scripture and notice that the most effective and spiritually rooted leaders actually tried to reject what God wanted them to do.

Instead of using God as a cudgel to subdue any opposition, spiritual leaders like Moses, like Deborah, like Jeremiah, like Amos, like the woman at the well, like Paul – all of them tried to run away from, or at least to refuse, God's direction. Even Jesus asked God to spare him the ultimate self-giving on the night before his crucifixion. Our ego will try to persuade us that our desire is God's desire, that our will is God's will. The true test for me is whether that action is self-giving, compassionate, life-giving, mutual and loving. If such is not true, then it is not from God but merely my own desire.

Prayer as relationship works because, as we listen to God, God also listens to us. I know when I have a conversation with someone I completely trust, their listening prods me to discover the roots of my concerns, of my thinking and of my emotions. I may not resolve the problem, but I am much more comfortable within myself and with how I feel. A calm settles upon me so that I can figure out what path I need to take. It is then that I believe God can speak to us within these calm, spiritually anchored moments. I say that because I have experienced it, but I always test what I "hear" with scripture and with the standards of wholeness I believe Jesus modelled.



Some people believe that trusting in God means faith is all about the supernatural. While prayer can certainly be a mystical connection with God, I would



agree with what activist Stephen Mattson writes in his book “The Great Reckoning: Surviving a Christianity that Looks Nothing Like Christ.” He writes, “Some people mistakenly believe that trusting in God requires them to distrust science, history, art, philosophy, and other forms of education, information, and truth. But intelligence is a friend of faith, and ignorance its enemy. God loves knowledge and truth, and any faith that objects to either is terribly misguided.”<sup>3</sup> We don’t discover transformation and direction **only** through the power of prayer. We use our God-given gift of intelligence to help us discern what is life-giving, mutual, self-giving, compassionate and mutual. Using our intellect while spiritually connected to God in prayer is the calling of our faith.

As I indicated earlier in this post, I **do** feel God’s mystical presence when I pray – at least some of the time. There are,

however, at least as many times when I don’t feel that imminent presence. I don’t believe, therefore, that God’s presence is only evident when I **feel** it. The evidence is not what I feel. Indeed, feeling God’s presence is not an emotion. I can get that emotional “high” when my favourite song is played, when I’m surrounded by my family’s love, when I am happy in my quiet time or when I have achieved a long-anticipated goal. In my life I have noticed that, when I feel most distant from God, it is when God reaches out to me through others. God is always there even when we don’t feel it.

God is there in the powerful prayer of a nurse holding a tablet for physically distant family to say their goodbyes to a dying patient. God is there in the person who drops off a meal without warning just because they had been thinking of you through their prayers. God is there in the



<sup>3</sup> Stephen Mattson, “The Great Reckoning: Surviving a Christianity that Looks Nothing Like Christ” (New York: Herald Press, 2018) p. 174.



prayer-sustained worried exhaustion of teachers endeavouring to create an environment for learning despite the pandemic raging around us all. God is there in the warehouse worker who, despite an aching back, sore muscles and far too much work, goes to work each night to keep the supply chain going – a prayer of solidarity and of commitment.

Therefore, we **should** keep saying that prayer works – but it works very differently than we'd often like. It works deeply within us in relation with the divine. As the ancient Celtic Prayer of Saint Frances poetically reminds us:

Christ be with me, Christ within me,  
Christ behind me and before me.  
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,  
Christ to comfort and restore.

Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ in hearts of all who know me.  
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger,  
Christ in quiet and in roar.

Love, blessed Trinity of three,  
Bound in unity  
Who guides my journey.  
I will arise with strength of heaven  
Trusting in Your light  
To guide my journey  
Shine before me  
Lead me home.

Power to guide me, might to hold me,  
Wisdom teach me, watching o'er me.  
Ear to hear me, hand to guard me,  
Love to conquer every fear.

I pray it may be so for all of you this week.