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Myron W. Weaver

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Prayer: Letting the Lord Have His Way

MYRON W. WEAVER

Richard Foster's presentation brought back to me some words from a poem by Walker Knight, editor of the Southern Baptist *Missions* magazine: "a thought so true it took no time to think it." With gratitude, I hope to be able to express faithfully what Richard Foster's true thoughts have stirred within me.¹

In thinking about prayer, two items seemed to coalesce for me in a useful way. First I recalled the incident in the large, bustling lobby of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York when a small Middle Eastern boy dashed on a beeline for his father with these happy words trailing in his wake: "Abba! Abba! Abba!"

The second item was that not long ago I found this magic phrase: "Prayer has no other end than to beg God to make Himself irresistible."²

PRAYER DRIVES US INTO HOLY OBEDIENCE

Richard Foster's use of the word "drives" pricked my memory. As a Southern Baptist child and youth I managed somehow to learn that God was a distant God, capricious, sometimes terrible, and given to questionable logic. For example, he might — I learned at funerals — slam Billy's bicycle into the side of a fast-moving car to teach a lesson to Billy's parents, who were non-believers; he might also slam Johnny's motorcycle into a bridge abutment because he liked Johnny so much that he wanted him in heaven right away. I learned to sing about God's love for all colors of children of the world, but I also learned that Negroes were deserving of their abysmal lot because God had cursed their race. I was taught to memorize

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"God so loved the world" and to remember that God did not like Roman Catholics because they had something called a pope: somehow it made God angry if a pope told people what to do, but happy if a preacher did it. (If this sort of thing could be done in the green twigs of East Tennessee, what must have occurred in the brown of East Texas...?)

If my early experience was in any way normative, and I suspect it was, then somewhere down inside some of us Southern Baptists there may linger still an uncomfortable idea of God as an all-powerful being who exists above and beyond us, frequently as adversary to and mishandler of that which is dearest to us.

Who really *wants* to know a God like that? And what we *want* so artfully informs what we *become*.

To say "prayer drives us..." is an apt expression. To overcome some of our earliest lessons about God, some of us must be driven. At times I must still be driven in prayer out of the clutches of unfaithful theology, superstition, and unfortunate past experiences in order simply to want to interact with God at all. That irascible Southern Baptist preacher and counselor, Carlyle Marney, was right: "When we stop to pray, our past, like a cloud of dust we thought we had left behind, begins to overtake us."

We are beginning to recognize that in our life of prayer, there are things to be learned. Doubtless, there are things to be *unlearned* as well.

Having said that, let me hasten to bear witness in thanksgiving for God's continuing revelation of himself as love. With each year, God becomes more seductive. I imagine each of us can say a hearty "thanks be to God" who rewards our little efforts to persist in prayer with the graceful mystery of his irresistibility.

A part of this mystery is often experienced as a *driving absence*, a space, a rest in the music, a vacuum which pulls and propels from beyond us and within. This "divine Abyss" (Thomas Kelly) is not anxiety-producing; rather, it is like the careful emptiness inside a dulcimer where an old melody gathers new fullness. Without exertion there wells up a long-

ing to host God's visitation: "More, more about Jesus would I know" ceases to be just another hymn and becomes an expression of deepest yearning. At such times, our moments are lived with all spiritual sails unfurled, tacking easily, as a sailor might, hoping to catch the fresh and risky breezes of God's whereabouts, expectantly waiting to be driven out of control and into joy.

Waiting to be driven... I am only beginning to have a life of prayer. For years my praying could most succinctly have been critiqued by my grandfather's maxim: "You can't use a short rope to draw water from a deep well." Much of what helps me in the practice of prayer these days I have learned from Quakers — reading their writings, listening to them, visiting where they live and work. I do not know much about waiting, waiting *expectantly* upon God, and I do not readily have a suitable language for the term "holy obedience." I tend to think of obedience in stern, by the numbers, you-really-aren't-going-to-like-this terms. And so I am greatly attracted to the language of Carol Murphy who defines obedience as sensitivity and readiness to answer to the leadings of the holy. She says "these leadings are not the result of intellectual calculus; they are as subtle as the balance of a bicycle rider as he responds to the forces of physical laws."³

I suppose each of us has memory of at least one time when we wanted quite clearly to do God's word, only to discover that in our rush to act we misheard, talked when we should have listened, moved when we should have waited. It is good for us to remember that the word "obedience" stems from the Latin *ob-audiens* meaning "to listen thoroughly." It is good to think of obedience — first and foremost — as expectant waiting, soul-on-tiptoe readiness to answer to holy leadings. Simone Weil once defined prayer as "attention." After noting that Pascal said that our greatest spiritual enemy is inattention, drowsiness, the "Gethsemane sleep," Friend Douglas Steere says, "prayer is wakefulness, attention, intense inward openness. In a certain way sin could be described... by noting that it is anything that destroys our attention. Pride, self-will, self-absorption, doublemindedness, dishonesty... over-

activity of any sort, all destroy attention and cut the nerve of effective prayer.”⁴

It is good to remind one another that the first step toward holy obedience is no step at all. We are called to clip away the dead tallow, trim the wick, and then wait in the darkness for Spirit to bring the flame. “Silently now I wait for Thee, ready, my God, Thy will to see.”⁵

We pray for God to make himself irresistible so that we can learn in our life of prayer to make a happy beeline to our Abba, to move with authentic joy toward “such a life of communion with the Father that we are conformed into the image of his Son” (Richard Foster).

PRAYER DRAWS US INTO TRUST

If we were to ask a Southern Baptist congregation to choose its favorite hymn on the subject of trust, more than likely it would be number 409, “Trust and Obey.”⁶ We can be reasonably sure that when John Sammis composed those lyrics back in 1887 he did not mean to propose a specific order — trust, *then* obey. And yet somehow there exists around the edges a way of being which seems to say that perhaps we believe trust to be distinct from obeying; that we believe our “trust level” should rise, rise, rise, until, reaching some imagined, ideal, and distant brimming point, it quite naturally will overflow as this new substance called obedience. . . . Seeking to validate this premise, we observe that a gusher of holy obedience rarely seems to break out among us. Our trust level infrequently brims.

One of the reasons for this may have to do with the high premium we place on something we tend to label “humility.” If trust in God must somehow attain Titan proportions, must come in like a newly-tapped oil well *before* obedience can happen, most of us can safely, acceptably, avoid any risk of obedience altogether by hiding in our humble house — “I’m no spiritual saint. I won’t embarrass or challenge anyone. I know my place. I’m just a sinner saved by grace, asking nothing, expecting nothing, giving nothing.” Someone noted: “Southern Baptists are a humble people, and proud of it.” This humbler-than-thou attitude, this trivializing of holy obed-

ience, has far-ranging acceptance. It is so strong in some quarters that anyone who dares to make some holy, obedient motion only sets herself up for accusations of a kind of pridefulness — “how dare she claim to have sufficient trust in God to attempt *that!*!”

We see that trust-in-God is not very much the issue; it is, rather, the lack of trust in our brothers and sisters. It is hard to pray for the radical trust Richard Foster calls us to, not only for fear that God might hear us, but for fear that, should obedience to his holy leading take the form of something out of the ordinary, original, or difficult, there will not exist for us a supportive, understanding community. Emotionally we cannot afford to pray with fervor that glorious ancient Irish hymn-prayer, “Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart; naught be all else to me, save that Thou art.” In our church, if someone attempted to live at that level of intensity, I fear he would be kept at arm’s distance, looked upon as being entirely too droll.

When we pray for the breaking in (and out) of holy obedience, we remember how important it is to pray for trust to abound within the fellowship; how important it is to pray for myself, that I will have a nurturing, tendering heart for all responses to obedience, whether my own or others, whether great or small, whether traditional or unique.

Another hurdle in our prayerful trusting is our general lack of knowledge of historical role models. Many of us are not schooled in the literature of great Christian souls who dared to live out their lives in radical trust. Lacking these images, it is hard for us to imagine a life of prayerful holy obedience as normative. St. Francis, Martin Luther, and Annie Armstrong simply cannot constitute for us a believable trend, a normal pattern. If I check myself against the stature of a Lottie Moon, *of course* I am going to be discouraged. Lacking the knowledge of multiple role models, one naturally infers either that the quality of trust that is the stuff of holy obedience is only visited upon an elite corps, or that holy obedience is *only* holy obedience when it is of the bold face, white-hot spotlight, variety.

Faced with such inferences I may become disheartened. I may fall victim to what Kenneth Leech calls “spiritual promis-

cuity." I am careless, irregular, indiscriminate, confused, inattentive, unfocused. Some little voice within me repeats what I already know: I was meant for the mighty deeps of life, and here I am drowning in the shallows. This depressing contradiction creates an awful anxiety, and although I may not know why, I see that such anxiety breeds greed and gluttony.

In this disheveled state I have no time or energy for compassion. In my promiscuousness, I no longer seek after my first love. I become easy prey to the whim of fad. I grasp for order, status, accoutrements which might lend the appearance of direction or accomplishment. Should the spirit groan from within me I am likely to muffle it with a new suit, or with the accolades of another denominational appointment, or the securing of a bigger church. Fearing to trust the urge to pursue the one thing needful, I go away from the Presence, out to my kitchen to whip up some important "busy-work" and to rattle feverishly some newly-acquired pots and pans.

In her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard said: "There is always an enormous temptation in all of life to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end. It is all so self-conscious, so apparently moral... we are making hay when we should be making whoopee: we are raising tomatoes when we should be raising Cain, or Lazarus."

... we never can prove the delights of His love
until all on the altar we lay;
for the favor He shows and the joy He bestows
are for them who will trust and obey.

... for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus...

PRAYER INVITES US INTO COMPASSION
PRAYER LEADS US INTO CONQUEST

Varied hues of dusk colored the room. It was a sumptuous meal, meant to impress. Conversation passed easily enough around the low-slung table, but everyone was more interested in what the special guest might do. Suddenly, a gate-crasher — who falls weeping at the special guest's feet! The host mutters something derogatory about this scandal of a woman and

about the poor judgment of this itinerant preacher who is so shamelessly sensitive to her. It is from this scenario that the Christ challenges us all with his words to the host: "Do you see this woman?" (Luke 7:44). Do you see as I see?

In Thomas Berger's novel *Little Big Man*, the boy, after a lengthy absence, is visiting his adopted Indian grandfather, Old Lodgeskins. At length the boy notices that although the old man's eyes are open, he is now blind; he has been wounded in a battle against U.S. cavalry. Old Lodgeskins says: "the rifle ball did not strike my eyes but rather passed through the back of my neck, cutting the tunnel through which the vision travels to the heart."⁸

In his exceptional book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster said this: "In prayer, real prayer, we begin to think God's thoughts after Him: to desire the things He desires, to love the things He loves. Progressively we are taught to see things from His point of view."⁹

So much has been said about the Baptists' addiction to things such as "bigger 'n' better," rugged individualism, prideful denominationalism, that we need not labor that here. We know that at times this addiction has blinded us to the vastness of evil that contorts our world. We know that from spiritual discernment springs prophecy, and that we have not always truly prayed for discernment. We rejoice, however, that God has not given up on us, or we on each other, and — as one example — we note with much happiness our denomination's response to the world's hungry. In 1980 we contributed approximately six million dollars towards the alleviation of hunger, and although someone has calculated that per Southern Baptist that amounts to giving the equivalent of the price of a small bag of popcorn at the movies, the budding of a compassionate response is indeed an eye-opener, and we are beginning to suspect that only as we tenders and keepers of the Good News lavish it blindly upon the captive poor, only then will we receive our sight — the ability to see with eyes connected to the heart and mind of Christ. We have not yet — as Elisha did with the Shunamite boy — gone eye to eye, hand to hand, belly to belly, with the poor — but it is clear that we are beginning to *see* the need to.

And we are seeing our way into a deeper dimension of our practice of intercessory prayer. In a more vital way we are coming to see that intercession means to become involved in the conflict. Perhaps for the first time, some of us are getting some wear out of our whole armor of God. In the truest spirit of Christ's reconciliation, we are interceding, we are "standing between" the press of evil and the oppressed. We are *becoming* intercessory prayer. This is a sign of hope among us. And as William Sloan Coffin, Jr., has said, "Hope arouses, as nothing else can, a passion for the possible." It is possible that the day will come when we may say together in Richard Foster's words: "In place of the stifling preoccupation with self . . . We do not have to be liked. We do not have to succeed. We can enjoy obscurity as easily as fame. We begin to understand the meaning of self-denial . . . We begin to walk in holy obedience."

One of my father's brothers raises homing pigeons, and Uncle Dale's pigeons are top-hole in the pigeon world. They fly faster and truer than all the other birds, and this is why: As you know, most pigeons must ingest a certain amount of gravel to aid in the digestive process. One day, as he was waiting for his birds to finish eating, while he read the ingredients of the package of Purina Pigeon Feed, Uncle Dale was startled by the word "pre-digested." He realized that the common practice of giving gravel to racing pigeons was not only unnecessary, but detrimental. It seems that when you take two ounces of worthless rock off ten ounces of homing pigeon what you create is eight ounces of flaming feathers.

It is my earnest hope that our little flock of birds — you and I — can encourage one another to seek the one thing needful; that we might home-in more tightly on God the irresistible; that we will pray for one another for the courage to kick off the leg-holds of impatience, false humility, and greed, to drop from our clutches all the weighty, worthless ground clutter, and, trusting the updraft of the Breath of God, soar risky and free in our life of prayer, following the call of the holy.

Richard Foster's presentation stated: "The primary purpose of prayer is to bring us into such a life of communion with the Father that we are conformed into the image of his Son, Jesus Christ. We are taken over, changed, transformed

inwardly." We Southern Baptists know what Richard wants to see happen; we sing it frequently:

Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!
Thou art the Potter, I am the clay!
Mold me and make me after Thy will
While I am waiting, yielded and still.

Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!
Hold o'er my being absolute sway!
Fill with Thy Spirit till all shall see
Christ only, always, living in me.

— Adelaide Pollard

May it be so.

Notes

1. Several members of the Wilton, Conn., Southern Baptist congregation read Richard Foster's paper and an early draft of my response. Their ideas and criticisms were immensely helpful in preparing the final draft. I suppose that in the standard terms of Quaker and Southern Baptist theology I can say that I "equipped" and "enabled" them to help me.
2. Odette Baumier-Despeigne, *The Breath of God*.
3. Carol Murphy, *Holy Morality: A Religious Approach to Modern Ethics*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 169 (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill, 1970), p. 21.
4. Douglas V. Steere, *Prayer in the Contemporary World* (New York: publ. for United Church Women, 1966; Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill, reprinted 1980), p. 4.
5. Clara H. Scott (1841-1897). The words occur in each of the four stanzas of the hymn, "Open My Eyes, That I May See," which she both authored and composed.
6. The opening words of this hymn written by James H. Sammis (d.1919) are "When we walk with the Lord in the Light of his word."
7. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Bantam, 1975), p. 276.
8. Thomas Berger, *Little Big Man* (New York: Fawcett, 1978), p. 226.
9. Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 30.