

Bending the King's Ear: Intercession to an Immutable God

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Abstract: *This paper seeks to reconcile the concept of an immutable God, as formulated by Thomas Aquinas, with the practice of intercessory prayer. It argues that though God is indeed immutable, and prayer cannot in any sense "change God's mind," intercession does accomplish God's work in the world. Prayer is a secondary cause like any other, and Christians have a duty to pray for others in the same way they have a duty to feed the hungry and spread the Gospel. The key is to change the way in which we intercede—we ought not to demand specific results, but rather, lift up our petitions to the care of a loving, acting God.*

Key Words: providence; Thomas Aquinas; intercession; petition; intercessory prayer; free will; immutability; classical theism

"Please let my mother live." "Please let me get this job." "Please let me win this game." Our intercessions to God come in many different forms, some more urgent than others, but as Christians, we affirm that these prayers somehow "make a difference." What that difference means, though, we cannot say. Are these intercessions only effective in bringing us closer to God and each other, or do they change God's mind, altering God's original plan? If not, is there a purpose in petitioning God at all?

The question is especially important for those of us who believe in the image of God upheld in classical theology, expressed by Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas' God is constant and unchanging, and our petitions cannot affect the divinely pre-ordained design. Nevertheless, Aquinas maintained that we must petition God, and that these petitions are agents of change in the world. They are agents of change, though, because God has decreed that they be so. It is God the Holy Spirit, in fact, who makes us pray—our prayers are a means to God's ends.

Our private prayers often reflect a God who can be swayed, cajoled, and coaxed into giving us what we want. God becomes like a king, and we are "like courtiers in the king's palace." Our prayers are effective because we "have the king's ear."¹ This way of thinking and praying diminishes God. It makes God just another being that we can manipulate and control. If God can be swayed, then God is not perfect and complete within God's self. If God is incomplete, then God is lacking; if God lacks or needs anything, God is just a bigger, more powerful version of ourselves.

It is my argument that: a) it is vital that Christians maintain a conception of God as immutable—that is, unchangeable in essence and will; and b) our methods of prayer, both

1 C. H. Spurgeon, *Intercessory Prayer* (Boulder, Colo.: NetLibrary, 1999), 6.

communal and private, should conform to this classical conception of God. By making our words match our theology, we avoid engaging in a kind of cognitive dissonance in which we believe one thing about God but simultaneously pray in a way that subverts that belief.

CLASSICAL THEISM'S CONCEPTION OF GOD—THOMAS AQUINAS

In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas argued that there is no way to know naturally what God is—we can only conceive of God by realizing what God is not. Using this method of negative theology, Aquinas established five basic statements about the essence of God: God's *simplicity*, which means God cannot be divided into composite parts; God's *perfection*, which refers to God's goodness but also to the completeness of God—God is perfected in God's self, and the perfections of all things have their basis in God; God's *infinity*, which is God's boundless existence in all things as their creator and sustainer; God's *unity*, which means God's essence is identical to and cannot be divided from God's existence; and God's *immutability*, which means that God's will and essence are unchangeable, and that God exists outside of time—God knows all that has been, is, and will be as an eternal present.

Aquinas argued that, despite this image of an all-powerful God, human actions are not determined by God. Though God knows exactly what we will do, we are still free to do it, and our actions fall within God's providential order. This is because, even when our deeds are reprehensible to God, we are able to do them only because God has created a world in which people make free actions. Further, though it will in no way change God's will or plan, we are free to make intercessory prayers. God knows our prayers before we do, and in fact has ordained them to be causal agents in the universe.²

The critics of classical theism have three basic disagreements with Aquinas' arguments about God and prayer, all of which hinge on the question of immutability.³ First, how can an immutable God respond in any meaningful way to intercessory prayer? Second, if God's immutable will is already determined, how can a free act of prayer make a difference in divine providence? Third, if God has complete knowledge of the future, and has in fact ordained it, do we live in a deterministic universe where our prayers are ultimately pointless exercises to make us feel good?

These are fair questions, but they indicate a lack of understanding of Aquinas' arguments. Leaving aside a more general discussion of classical theism, I shall engage Aquinas' concept of immutability more deeply, and in doing so, will defend the practice of intercessory prayer to an unchanging God.

GOD'S IMMUTABILITY

According to Aquinas, God is *actus purus*, pure act.⁴ The essence of God's being is always to be acting. This essence is crucial to keep in mind when considering God's involvement in

2 ST I q 3-11.

3 We will discuss some of these later in the essay.

4 Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* I, 8,3,1, ad 2, discussed in Michael J. Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love: Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Theology on Divine Immutability*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 48.

creation. It means that, in creating the universe, God did not accomplish a single act and then retreat from God's handiwork, as deists would argue. Instead, God's dynamic activity is eternally preserving and sustaining creation. Rowan Williams compares it to an electric current that powers a light bulb. "The light [of the bulb] is shining now because the electric current is flowing now. In the same way, it is the current of divine activity that is here and now making us real."⁵ We know God acts in creation because if God did not act, then nothing would be.

Actus purus also means there is no potentiality in God preceding God's action. In other words, we cannot think of God as formulating a plan for creation by "hammering out details." God does not have a rough idea of a provident plan and then finesse the imperfections. God acts, and acts according to God's being. Because God's being is perfect, everything God does and makes is as God intends.⁶ Though we Christians believe that creation is in some way fallen, this fact does not mean that God has made a mistake in creating and has been trying to repair the damage that humanity has done.

Many critics of this position argue that the scriptural tradition does not support it. They cite many examples of changes God makes in creation—not the least of which is creation itself. In the beginning, there was nothing, and then God created the universe. Vincent Brümmer argues that this textual tradition is proof that God changes. "At one moment he wills that something does not exist, and at a subsequent movement he wills that it does exist. Is this not a change in his will?"⁷ Similarly, Nicholas Wolterstorff contends that "Scripture represents God [as having] a history, where there are changes in God's actions, responses and knowledge."⁸

To say that God's design for creation is unchanging does not mean that God does not will that certain things change. For instance, in the biblical account of the Flood, God repents of creating humans ("I am sorry I have made them," Gen. 6:7). This expression of regret, according to Aquinas, is metaphorical language. Aquinas affirms that although humans were (nearly) wiped off the earth, this is not an expression of God's having changed plans—rather, the flood is part of God's eternal plan. Scripture shows that "God [does not have] a will that changes, but that [God] sometimes wills that things should change."⁹ In other words, evidence of change within the world or in Scripture is not proof that God's self has changed in any way. As I write, it is October, and anyone who might see my house later in the month would not think that because it has changed into a spooky, cobwebbed nightmare, that this is evidence that my plans have changed—I have, in fact, planned since January for my house to look like that, although the change itself occurs

5 Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 35.

6 This does not include evil, because according to Augustine, and Aquinas after him, evil is a privation of the good, and is not created by God. The problem of evil is a discussion too large for the scope of this paper, but if the reader wishes to pursue further study, Brian Davies, *Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2006) or Cynthia Crysdale and Neil Ormerod *Creator God, Evolving World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013) both discuss the issue.

7 Vincent Brümmer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray? On Prayer and the Nature of Faith*, rev. ed. (Burlington, Vt: Ashgate Press, 2005), 40.

8 Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Unqualified Divine Temporality," in *God & Time: Four Views* ed. Gregory E. Ganssle (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 188.

9 ST I, q. 19, a. 7, ad 3.

rather suddenly around the 31st. So it is with God's immutability. It is not God who changes, but only creation.

If we grant that the biblical tradition does not refute the concept of God's immutable nature, but rather analogizes it, what does this say about the biblical images of God's concern for the world? These images depict God as passionately involved in creation—constantly contravening the natural order, grieving over human sin, hovering over the world like a mother hen. Are these images truthful, or does immutability demand a God who is detached and uncaring?

If God's very nature is to be eternally acting in creation, then when classical theism speaks of God as immutable, this is not to say that God is static or, as Jürgen Moltmann would argue, that God is indifferent.¹⁰ Likewise, Brümmer misunderstands the concept of divine immutability when he argues that "if God's intentions are immutably fixed from all eternity, he would not be able to react to what we do or feel, nor to our petitions ... [God would not be] the sort of being with whom we could have a personal relationship."¹¹

It is true that God does not "respond" to creaturely activity in the same way humans might respond. God does not wait to act until God knows what humans will do, nor does God have a certain plan of action and then change course based on activities within creation. God's will, which is eternal, already takes into account all human actions within God's eternal act of creation, so that we cannot think of God as ignoring what we do, what we suffer, or what we beg. God regards them fully, so much so that they are already incorporated into God's providential plan.

Nor does God "sympathize" with us in the way our fellow humans sympathize. When we sympathize with a person, we suffer with them (*pathos*=suffer, *syn*=with). God knows what I suffer—more than I do myself—but, unlike my fellow humans, God's concern for me does not drive God to abandon the divine will for the good. God's immeasurable love never falls into despair or suffering. God's care for humanity is not the sort that will ever lead to hurt or evil.

Compare this loving concern to the ways in which humans often deal with their sympathy—horrible atrocities we commit in response to the hurt we feel for ourselves or another. A huge Israeli air assault on Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip killed more than 200 Palestinians and wounded at least 400. This attack was in retaliation for rocket and mortar attacks on Israel from Hamas.¹² In South Africa, a father stalked and butchered three men with an axe because he thought they had raped his daughter.¹³ On September 15, 2001, Balbir Singh Sodhi was shot and killed outside of his Mesa, Arizona, gas station by Frank Roque. Roque wanted to "kill a Muslim" in retaliation for the attacks on

10 See Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 146.

11 Brümmer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray?*, 40.

12 Harriet Sherwood, "Israel Launches Gaza Air Strikes in Retaliation for Eilat Attacks," *The Guardian Online* 8/18/11. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/aug/18/israel-air-strikes-gaza-eilat-attacks> Accessed 05/04/12.

13 Stewart Maclean "Ex-South Africa rugby star 'murders at least three people with an axe in revenge for gang-rape of his daughter.'" *The Daily Mail Online* 3/30/11, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1371485/Ex-South-African-rugby-star-murders-3-axe-gang-rape-revenge.html#ixzz1tw12zk07> Accessed 05/04/12.

September 11. Sodhi was a Sikh.¹⁴ The sympathy we feel for wrongs committed against our loved ones can lead to (perhaps righteous) anger. This anger, in turn, can lead to terrible acts of violence and evil. God is not subject to the frailties that lead to this kind of violence; instead, God is the being who is able to bear the burden of all the hurt and suffering in the world within God's self.

The immutable nature of God not only bears this burden, but repairs the hurt, too. God is eternally and dynamically acting according to God's unchanging will and, no matter what free actions humans make, God's intention for creation will ultimately prevail. For Christians, the complete expression of this conviction is in the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. "The future of God has already found irreversible expression in Jesus. His resurrection is both the promise and the beginning of the absolute future, which is the transformation of human beings and the whole of the universe."¹⁵

GOD'S ETERNITY

God's immutable nature is closely tied to God's relationship to time and divine foreknowledge. There are some theologians who argue that God cannot be said to respond to the free actions of humans and events within creation if God is not also experiencing time in the same way God's creatures do.¹⁶ Therefore, God must exist within time. William Lane Craig argues that because the world "is in constant flux, so must also God's knowledge of what is happening be in constant flux."¹⁷ For these theologians, the alternative is a universe in which all human actions are already determined, not free, and hence ultimately pointless. "Nicholas Wolterstorff notes, "An implication of the traditional orthodox view is that none of God's actions is a response to what we humans do ... nothing at all in God's life is a response to what occurs among God's creatures."¹⁸

The problem is that these theologians, along with most ordinary believers, think of God's divine knowledge as "foreknowledge." Foreknowledge expresses the idea that God is situated in a moment of time and can see future events before they occur. This view completely misunderstands the concept of eternity held in classical theism. It also fails to take into account what modern science attests about time. The idea that God exists within time rests on the assumption that time is universally experienced in the same way. Einstein's theories of relativity show that we can no longer hold that assumption:

[Einstein's theories show that] events that are in the past for some possible observers are in the future for others. There is no universal present ... in relativistic theory, space and time become simply part of the created order and are affected by other aspects of that created order.¹⁹

14 BBC News Online "US 9/11 revenge killer convicted" 10/01/03
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3154170.stm> Accessed 05/04/12.

15 Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 146.

16 Brummer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray?*, 47.

17 William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), 97, 241, quoted in Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 185.

18 Wolterstorff, "Unqualified Divine Temporality", 205.

19 Christopher C. Knight, *The God of Nature: Incarnation and Contemporary Science* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 125.

Based on modern scientific understanding, we can assert that Aquinas was right when he argued, with Augustine, that time is created. God, being the Creator and independent of all creation, is therefore not subject to time. Instead, God is eternal. When Aquinas and others use the word “eternal,” they do not argue that God is “absolutely outside of relation to past, present, and future” but that God is “present to all times and embraces all times.”²⁰ As Christopher C. Knight puts it, “God’s knowledge is neither in advance, nor in retrospect. It is simply knowledge from the perspective of eternity: *sub specie aeternitas*.”²¹ Paul Tillich used an analogy from human experience—“the unity of a remembered past and an anticipated future in an experienced present ... the eternal present is moving from past to future but without ceasing to be present.”²²

What this view means in terms of God’s activity within creation is that God is able to know everything fully at all times and also be active fully at all times. It is not that God can see the future but do nothing about it, nor is it that human beings are only free to act because God is ignorant of the future.

FREE WILL AND SECONDARY CAUSATION

God has knowledge of what free agents choose to do at any given time, but this knowledge does not limit free agency. And yet both the biblical tradition and classical theism argue that “everything that happens does so in accordance with what God intends ... God makes [all things] to be and [God] orders them to their end.”²³

Does this view of divine action and providence preclude truly free human action? If, for instance, it is God’s intention that all should come into communion with the divine Trinity, is it a contradiction to say that it is also God’s intention that human beings have the free will to refuse that communion? Correlatively, is my free act of prayer free at all?

It is helpful to think of “free will” as distinct from “free action” or agency. Human will is not free (in the sense that people today tend to think of the word, that is, to make choices arbitrarily), because in fact God “creates the will with a natural inclination to the good as such, or happiness.”²⁴ Humans have free agency to choose among particular (i. e. imperfect) goods and also among the means by which they obtain them,²⁵ but it is against the nature of the human will to refuse the universal good (God’s self) if offered. Thus “the closer creatures are to God, the more they become themselves.”²⁶ To be confronted with, and then reject, communion with God, involves a denial one’s created nature, and essentially a failure to be fully human. None of us on this side of death has encountered God in God’s infinity, and so none of us has had the opportunity to reject that universal good. Refusal, though, would not be an exercise of the will but a privation of it.

20 Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 108.

21 Knight, *The God of Nature*, 132.

22 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 275

23 Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 159.

24 Kevin M. Staley, “Aquinas: Compatibilist or Libertarian?” *Saint Anselm Journal*, 2/2 (2005): 73-79, at 74.

25 ST I-II, q. 10, a. 2

26 Edwards, *How God Acts*, 48.

The argument that we humans can somehow stymie God's intentions by our actions assumes a false dichotomy between God's will and human freedom. The fact that humans have free agency at all is because God allows us to have it. I am able to act freely because God sustains my being, desires that being to have freedom to choose the good, and "has arranged that [I] function independently of the determining agency of other created things."²⁷ Thus, every free action I make is inescapably part of God's providence.

God can and does, in fact, work through free human actions to effect God's will, in accordance with Aquinas' argument that God chooses to work through secondary causes.²⁸ God is the primary cause of all creation, the source of existence for all things. God creates all other lesser causes within the created order. God works through these intermediaries "from the abundance of [God's] goodness imparting to creatures also the dignity of causing."²⁹ We can surmise that God works through created causes also because otherwise they would be superfluous. As Brian Davies points out, if created things have no causal power, "God [is] wasting his time."³⁰ We must conclude, therefore, that either God acts through secondary causes that have integrity themselves, or that God does, in fact, waste God's time—in which case we must dismiss the revelation of Scripture and the reality of the Incarnation.

The difficulty in conceptualizing God as working through secondary, or natural, causes is that natural causes sometimes seem random, and we tend to think of God's activity as being calculated and deliberate. In fact, those who deny the existence of God often appeal to this sort of argument: "There is no God because everything is just a random assortment of events." This approach runs into difficulties. For one thing, that assertion is simply not true—there are contingencies in nature, but there are also dependable laws that govern our world. If there were not, creatures would have no sense of stability or trust in the workings of the universe. We could not predict weather patterns, or raise crops, or build structures.

For another thing, the presence of contingent events does not in any way impede God's activity in creation.³¹ Just as God ordains the end of all things, so God ordains the means to that end, "acting sometimes through necessary causes to produce necessary effects, [or] through contingent causes that bring forth contingent events."³² Though "chance" exists (defined as an unexpected outcome rather than as a probability), it is not without cause or meaning. As Elizabeth Johnson affirms,

God works not only through the deep regularity of the laws of nature but also through chance occurrence, which has its own, genuinely random integrity. God uses chance, so to speak, to ensure variety, resilience, novelty, and freedom in the universe, right up to humanity itself.³³

²⁷ Davies, *Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 176.

²⁸ Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 189.

²⁹ Davies, *Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 163.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ The argument that God chooses to order creation within the system of both classical and statistical laws comes from Crysedale and Ormerod, in *Creator God, Evolving World*.

³² Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love*, 192.

³³ Elizabeth Johnson, "Does God Play Dice? Divine Providence and Chance," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 3-18, at 15, quoted in Edwards, *How God Acts*, 54.

God has created a universe that both holds to regular, scientific laws, and has room for contingent and chance events. There is randomness and there is change, and even destruction: nevertheless, traditional Christian theology affirms that God works eternally through all these contingencies to effect God's perfect intention.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERCESSORY PRAYER

This view of divine action has enormous implications for how Christians conceive of petitionary prayer—specifically, intercessory prayer. If God is always active, and if God is unchanging, do human petitions make any difference in the created order? Furthermore, if our free acts of prayer are a result of God's divine will, are they really our free acts at all?

God's immutability Wink, for instance, presents a common obstacle to faith in intercessory prayer. Walter argued that "there is no place for intercession with a God whose will is incapable of change."³⁴ The problem with this position is that it is not logical. Even if God's intentions were so imperfect and unformed as to be swayed by human influence, God's will would still be the deciding factor in any divine action. If two people make contradictory petitions to God, each appeals to the independent standard of God's divine will. Otherwise, God's answer to prayer is arbitrary and capricious. Take the American Civil War. As Abraham Lincoln said in his second inaugural address, the North and the South "both read the same Bible and pray[ed] to the same God, and each invoke[ed] His aid against the other."³⁵ Imagine—and remember this is picture-language, not meant to be definitive in any way—God sitting on a throne before these two supplicants, and judging their cases. Can we believe that either a Northern or Southern soldier is less earnest in his petitions for victory than the other? Can we believe that any kind of human rhetoric or logic—even that of Abraham Lincoln or John C. Calhoun—is impressive enough to sway God from God's chosen plan? Even if we were to grant that God's mind can be changed, how could we begin to change it? Our power to persuade must be so underwhelming compared to divine wisdom that it affects God not in the slightest. God may as well choose between the two supplicants by drawing straws. Thankfully, as Lincoln continued in his address, "The Almighty has His own purposes."³⁶ It is God's divine will that dictates God's action, not our petitions and intercessions. And yet, intercessory prayer still serves a purpose. We must simply redefine what that purpose is.

I think the problem people have understanding prayer is that we tend to think of God as "responding" to our requests, when in reality it is only through the work of God the Holy Spirit that we are able to pray in the first place. It is God, always active in creation, who initiates the prayer in us—it is we who respond. The apostle Paul says "the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit

34 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 301, quoted in Philip Clements-Jewery, *Intercessory Prayer: Modern Theology, Biblical Teaching, and Philosophical Thought* (Burlington, Vt: Ashgate), 88.

35 Abraham Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*; endorsed by Lincoln, April 10, 1865. Transcribed and annotated by the Lincoln Studies Center, Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois. Available at Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division (Washington, D.C.: American Memory Project, [2000-02]), at <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=38&page=transcript> Accessed 02/11/2013.

36 *Ibid.*

intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26).³⁷ When we pray, we are not summoning God to contravene the natural order to accomplish our will—as if God were some kind of tool we can manipulate to get what we want. Rather, we allow ourselves to be responsive to the divine presence and to become instruments of the divine will.

Praying is not simply "therapeutic" in the sense of motivating us "to be righteous servants in the world, to enter into the struggle for justice through prayer and action."³⁸ The very act of prayer itself is efficacious not just for us but also for those on whose behalf we pray, because God has ordained prayer as one means to achieve God's ends. The writer of James exhorts readers "[to] confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (James 5:15). We have a biblical mandate, then, to pray for others. Just as God uses our hands to feed the poor and our voices to spread the Gospel, so God uses our prayers to work in the lives of others. When we pray, and our prayers align with God's will, we are allowing God to work through us.

If our prayers ultimately come from God, and must conform to God's will, what role do we have to play in this process? Or, rather, why does God ordain that certain events be caused by our prayer?

Vincent Brümmer has some useful insights to offer here. He argues that God knows all our needs and desires, and is capable of giving them to us without being asked (if they fall within God's will). "If God were to fulfill our needs and desires in this way, we would be like potted plants on his window-sill and not persons with whom he seeks to establish and maintain a relationship." God could *bring about* provision for our needs, but without our requesting, God cannot *give* us anything.³⁹ In either case, God's will is done, but if God did not allow us to participate in that will by asking, then we would not benefit from relationship with God.

Eleonore Stump expresses a similar idea. She argues that it may be that God does not provide some needs until petitioned because to do so would either "dominate" or "spoil" us, which would jeopardize our relationship with God.⁴⁰ Philip Clements-Jewery, following her, gives the example of good parents "[who] will sometimes not give their children what they need, but wait until [the children] recognize their own need and ask that it be met."⁴¹ In this way, the child is prepared to accept enthusiastically what the parent is already prepared to give. We can find an analogy here with petitionary prayer. As Augustine writes, "[God] wishes our desires to be exercised in prayer so that we may be able to receive what he is prepared to give."⁴²

37 All Bible quotations are taken from the NRSV

38 Jane Vennard, *Praying for Friends and Enemies* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 20.

39 Brümmer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray?* 53-54.

40 Eleonore Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16/2 (1979): 81-91.

41 Philip Clements-Jewery, *Intercessory Prayer*, 41.

42 Augustine, *Letters*, 130, quoted by Rachel Fulton Brown, "Oratio/Prayer," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 169.

God does not ordain the efficacy of intercessory prayer out of necessity; God freely wills that prayer cause certain events, in order that we might also come into closer relationship with God. In this way, though we accomplish God's will when we pray, we do not change God through our prayers. Rather, it is God who transforms us through the act of praying.

PETITIONING OUR UNCHANGING GOD

As an Episcopalian in our Eucharistic Liturgy every week, we pray the Prayers of the People, in which we petition for our needs and the needs of others. These petitions come from the American *Book of Common Prayer*, and our theology is reflected in them. In revising the prayer book in 1979, the Standing Liturgical Committee affirmed the classical position that our prayers do not change God, and for the most part, this assertion is clear in the petitions.⁴³ Our pleas are broadly generic—we “pray for” the sick, the suffering, leaders, and loved ones, without specifying any particular result we demand or expect. Instead, we simply offer our prayers into the care of a loving and omnipotent God.⁴⁴

How then do we as Christians conform our own prayer life to our theology as we do in the prayer book? First of all, we must always remember that our agency in prayer is to make room for the Holy Spirit to act within and through us. D. Z. Philips, in *The Concept of Prayer*, discusses the implicit “Thy will be done” within a prayer.⁴⁵ Instead of keeping this implicit, I think it is important to state it explicitly in every petition we make to God as a reminder of our role in this prayerful action. Our will is always in service of the divine will.

Likewise, before any act of petition, we must engage in deep and prayerful discernment. Where do I find God at work within my desires, and where do I find my wishes to be contrary to God's will? Perhaps my request to win a baseball game comes from an unhealthy and destructive competitiveness; perhaps my prayer to win the lottery speaks to my inclination toward greed. This kind of examination can become a powerful catalyst for personal change. We can humble ourselves and our desires to conform to, and trust in, the will of God.

Second, we must remember that we are not alone in our prayer. If we believe that God works through our prayer, we may feel enormous pressure, and prayer could become burdensome. What if I forget to pray? Will a hurricane hit because I did not pray for seasonable weather? Will something terrible happen to a little girl across the world because I did not pray for the poor and the oppressed? While it is true that God has commanded us to pray (and thus we have a duty to do so), we cannot forget that we are part of a universal church. There is never a time when someone, somewhere, is not petitioning God, either for our sake or for the world's. There is great comfort in that kind of solidarity, and also great strength. Further, we must remember that we do not “summon” God when we pray, but that God is always present, and already with us when we pray.

43 Ormonde Plater, *Intercession: A Theological and Practical Guide* (Cambridge, Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995), 3

44 *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 383-393.

45 D. Z. Philips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), 122.

Third, we must rethink what we believe constitutes “petitionary” or “intercessory” prayer. Most people bristle at the idea that God answered my prayer when I got a great parking spot, but would affirm God’s work in curing my mother’s cancer. Is one of these any less a prayer than the other? Not necessarily, but I would maintain that neither of these is the “real” prayer that I made to God. Perhaps my prayer for a good parking space was not about walking a shorter distance to the elementary school, but subconsciously a prayer that I pick up my children on time so that they feel cared for and loved. My prayer for God to cure my mother’s cancer is also, on a deeper level, a prayer for my mother’s ultimate healing and happiness.

It is important to identify our deeper prayer when we petition God. Too often, we say our prayers as if they were incantations, magic spells meant to bend God to our will. When we do not get our way, we blame God or we blame ourselves for not praying in the right way. I think this this pattern comes from our being too specific in our prayers. We say, “Please cure my mother’s cancer,” or “please get me that job,” or “please let me pass this test,” but these problems we want God to fix are only symptoms of a deeper need: we seek security, safety, love, acceptance, health.

The Lord’s Prayer is the perfect example of pure, authentic petition: Jesus tells us to pray for our physical needs—“our daily bread”—and to pray for our safety and security—“save us from the time of trial, and rescue us from evil.” Above all, though, our petition is that all things be in right relationship with God, that we ourselves and the whole creation become united to the will of God—“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done” (Mt 6:9-13).

In the end, petitionary prayer is about what all other kinds of prayer are about: coming into closer relationship with God. We may not have a God like the king whom we can influence to our will like favoured courtiers. We have something far better. We have a God with whom we will all be in union. We pray knowing that God has already answered that deepest supplication with an unqualified yes through Jesus Christ: “I will be with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20).

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