

Theology on *the Web.org.uk*

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes.
Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit
or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the
copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the
ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the
links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbadshaw>

A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php

Reformation
& Revival



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 1, No. 3 • Summer 1992

Prayer: The Prelude to Revival

Roger R. Nicole

It is in keeping with Reformed thought that revival should be grounded in prayer, because in prayer we acknowledge God's sovereignty. God alone is the One who can dispense revival. So, revival is not something that is within the reach of human beings; it is something God alone can provide.

Sometimes people have expressed the attitude they think we ought to have in a motto which goes like this: "You ought to pray like a Calvinist and preach like an Arminian." That is, pray as if everything depended upon God and preach as if everything depended on you. I would like to suggest a change in this formula which will improve it by fifty percent: "You ought to pray like a Calvinist and preach like a Calvinist." Do not pray *as if* everything depends on God. (There is no good reason to have an "*as if*" in that motto, because things do depend on God. He is the One who sovereignly ordains and blesses.) Then preach like a Calvinist, because there, too, the results depend on God. Do not imagine that either prayer or preaching are activities in which we suddenly take leave of the doctrine of God's sovereignty.

25

What Does Prayer Change?

When we consider prayer, there are questions which often are disturbing to the minds of some people. The first question is: "Do you think that you can really change the mind of God? That is, can prayer make God modify His sovereign plan?" There are people who feel that unless you are prepared to say this, there is no great value in prayer. I do not know what the reader's particular idea on this subject may be, but I would like to say that if you believe you can change the mind of God through prayer, I hope you are using some discretion. If that is the power you have, it is certainly a most dangerous thing. Surely God does not need our counsel in order to set up what is desirable. Surely God, whose knowledge penetrates all minds and hearts, does not

need to have us intervene to tell Him what He ought to do. The thought that we are changing the mind of God by our prayers is a terrifying concept.

I will be frank to confess that if I really thought I could change the mind of God by praying, I would abstain. I would have to say, "How can I presume, with the limitations of my own mind and the corruptions of my own heart—how can I presume to interfere in the counsels of the Almighty?" It is almost as if you were to introduce somebody who is utterly ignorant of electronics to a weapons plant in which, by pushing certain buttons, one might precipitate an explosion. You say, "Go ahead and push buttons. Never mind what happens." Oh, no! There is comfort for the child of God in being assured that our prayers will *not* change God's mind. This is not what is involved in prayer, and we are not in danger of precipitating explosions by some rash desire on our part.

But then people say, "If you cannot change God's mind, what is the point of praying? If prayer does not change things, prayer is worthless."

Here you have perhaps noticed that I have changed the formula. I did not say, "change the mind of God," but "change things." I never said that prayer does not change things. Prayer does change things, but it does not change the mind of God. The reason prayer changes things but does not change God is that He has appointed prayer as an effectual means for accomplishing His own purpose. This effectual means is essential for this accomplishment. When we have a right understanding of the sovereignty of God, we recognize that God has established a plan in which not only the effects but also the causes are ordained. We cannot disconnect the causes from the effects or the effects from the causes.

For example, I lift a book in your sight. Because the book has risen into the air, I am in a position to say, "God has ordained that it should get to this particular place." He must

have ordained it because that is where the book is. But notice, God did not ordain for the book to rise all by itself. He ordained that it should rise at the end of my hand. He ordained that I should have strength in my arm to lift it. He ordained that I should choose this particular book in order to illustrate this particular point. There is a connection between the book's rising and the subject I wish to develop. All these things are tied up together. If there were no lecture, there would be no point of illustrating the power of second causes. If there were no desire to illustrate the power of second causes, my hand would have remained at my side. If my hand had remained at my side, the book would not have risen. I think we can argue in this way.

God, however, ordained that there should be this lecture, that there should be a desire to show the correlation of causes and effects in His sovereign plan, that this particular illustration should come to my mind, and that I should implement it by the strength that He has given me. One cannot say, "If you hadn't touched it, it would have risen anyway," because God did not ordain that it should rise anyway. He ordained that it should rise through my hand.

That is exactly the case with prayer. Prayer is an effectual secondary cause that God has related to the effects involved. Just as the activity of human beings on earth is related to the effects that are produced, just as the book rising is related to the hand lifting, so are the effects of prayer related to the prayer that is offered. So although prayer does not change the mind of God, it does change things. God has appointed change through prayer, even though the way in which the cause is related to the effect is not perfectly clear to us.

The fact that the way this happens is not clear does not give us grounds for denying the relationship. We pray for healing. If God provides healing, we cannot say, "There would have been healing whether I prayed or not; I would have gotten well anyway." God provided healing in relation

to prayer.

We pray for an increase in the knowledge of God and earnestness in His service. If God is pleased to bless our lives in this way, we cannot say, "This would have happened whether I prayed or not." God provides His blessing in relation to the prayer.

We pray for the salvation of someone we love, someone God placed on our hearts to intercede and plead for. That person is born again by the work of the Holy Spirit. We cannot say, "This would have happened whether I prayed or not." It is related to our prayers. God, who has appointed the salvation, has also appointed prayer as the means to that salvation. We cannot omit any link in that chain and say that the chain will exist whether the link is there or not.

A final question is: "How can I pray if I do not see how prayer works?" That is not a wise way of handling the matter, since it is God who tells us that prayer is part of His plan for us. It is not necessary that we have an understanding of the ways in which God's purposes are implemented. God has put this means at our disposal. He encourages us to pray. In 2 Chronicles 7:14 He says, "If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and *pray* and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." To insist that we must have an understanding of how this works is a very unreasonable attitude.

Even in affairs of daily life we do not have this attitude. I am sure you have used a touch-system telephone. Do you understand how it works? Do you have that consummate knowledge of communications to know exactly what goes on when you press those little buttons? Do you know how those numbers are changed into binary code and used to track down the particular telephone you wish to call? Experts may understand this. But I must say, as far as I am concerned, when I am calling, I do not think of any of those

things. I just pick up the phone and touch the buttons. I do not worry about how this happens. I am interested only in whom I am going to reach and what I will say.

It is the same with prayer. We do not have to know how it works. It is enough to know that it does work. Prayer is part of God's sovereign plan and is an effectual means by which we can share with God in the fulfillment of that plan. When we pray, we are cooperating; we are working together with God in the work to which, in His own mercy, He has been pleased to call us.

Since prayer is part of God's plan, we are not forcing God's hand at any time by praying. We are not intruding our own will in a way that is disagreeable or uncomfortable to God. We do not need to fear that we are finagling with buttons about which we know nothing, which might bring disaster on ourselves and others. We are praying in line with the great purposes of God. Without prayer there are many things that would be different. It is by virtue of prayer that they are what God has planned them to be.

Prayer and Revival

In Scripture, prayer is presented as a prerequisite for revival. It is a prelude. If you study the history of revivals, you will find that they are best documented not only in their effects but also in their preparatory prayer periods. This was true of the revival in New England under the ministry of Jonathan Edwards. It was true in the revival in Wales under Evan Roberts. It was true of the revivals attending the ministry of Charles Grandison Finney in the United States. Revival that is worthwhile is bathed in prayer. When He wants a revival, God is pleased to lead His people to pray that revival might be forthcoming.

The prayer that leads to revival must be *believing* prayer. This is the point the apostle James makes in his Epistle (James 1:5-7). When we come to the Lord we must come

with the expectation that He is able and will do great things. If we come vacillating, wondering whether God is able to accomplish anything, whether the situation is really so desperate that even God cannot touch it, then obviously our prayer is lacking in fervency. We are just going through the motions, as it were. We are not really praying.

God wants us to come to Him in faith. Indeed, prayer is an exercise of faith in which we are steeped in the supreme greatness and ability of God, and have our eyes fixed on the majesty of His purpose and the superlative quality of His resources. Nothing is impossible for our God. Our God is able to move mountains. He is able to transform hearts, break resistances, reach out even underneath the conscious lives of people to transform them. So we should never say, "Here is somebody beyond God's reach. The hardness of heart is so great, the wickedness of life is so manifest, that this cannot possibly be a candidate for acceptance into the kingdom of God. We might as well give up on this person."

In spite of the fact that the early church had seen God do many great things, it undoubtedly thought this way about Paul. The early Christians thought, "This one is lost. There is no way God will bring Paul into the kingdom. He is a persecutor, an enemy, an opponent. There is no hope for him." When Paul tried to join the church, they gave him the cold shoulder (Acts 9:26). They said, "We can't trust this man. He will be spying on us and then use his knowledge to annihilate the church." It took Barnabas to reason, "God saved me; maybe He can save Paul, too." He went close to Paul and befriended him at great danger to himself. He made sure that Paul truly was a child of God. Then he brought him to the apostles (Acts 9:27). We, too, might think, "What less likely a candidate for election than Paul?" Yet God was pleased to reach him and change him. God made him the great apostle of the Gentiles, the benefit of whose ministry is still with us to this day.

We need believing prayer, prayer that does not concentrate on the obstacles. We must not say, "He is hopeless," or "Our country has gone to the dogs," or "Our church has gone liberal." Prayer must recognize that God is all-powerful and can do wonders. If anyone prays and does not believe, that one is unstable (James 1:6-7). He cannot expect anything. But if we come with faith, accepting the reality of the power of God, we will experience that effective prayer which changes things in keeping with God's purpose.

If It Be God's Will

The second characteristic of the prayer that brings revival is submission. It must be *submissive* prayer. That is, we must be prepared to submit our own ideas, aims, and ambitions to the sovereign God. We must not intrude with our outlook, pressing it on God, as it were. Rather, we must come with a desire to understand God's outlook and subordinate our desires to what He has ordained.

Some people say, "That kind of prayer is not really effective. If you start by saying, 'If it be Your will . . .' you are attempting to give God an out in case He is not going to do it. You are not believing." That is not the point at all. We do not need to give God an out. God does not need an out. What we are doing when we say, "If it is Your will . . ." is articulating the principle that we are not telling God what should be done but are actually identifying with His purpose and asking to work together with Him in fulfillment of that purpose.

We have a moving example of this kind of prayer on the lips of our Lord Himself. In Gethsemane He said, "If it is possible . . . Yet not as I will, but as You will" (Matt. 26:39). This is mysterious to us, for it indicates that at that point of His human consciousness, our Lord was left in suspense as to what the will of God was. "Not as I will, but as You will." That is the condition of effective prayer—that we should be

willing to accept what God has ordained in order that His purpose might be accomplished.

Sometimes it is hard for us to pray that way, because our will is so strong, and our understanding of what God should want is so clear that we do not even feel like saying, "Your will be done." When we pray for revival, especially, we say, "We do not need to introduce conditional clauses. The very fact that God leads us to pray is an indication that He wills that some form of revival should come." Still, the very essence of a consecrated prayer is that it should be in keeping with the will of God.

This is what is meant by praying in the name of Jesus. To pray in the name of Christ is not simply to have a little addition to your prayer, in which you use those words almost as a magical formula to insure success. To pray in the name of Christ is to identify yourself with Christ, with His aims, His purposes, His ministry. It is to say, "I am with Jesus, I am for Him and His purposes." The one who prays in the name of Jesus does not need to fear disappointments, because unity with the purpose of God protects him from that. There is a submission to God which acknowledges with gratitude the way in which God is pleased to answer.

This prayer must be God-centered. It must relate itself to God's glory rather than to our private desires. Of course, God permits us to present our private desires as well. There is nothing wrong in asking God to give us good weather for mountain climbing if good weather is important for it. But here again, it would be wise to say, "If it be Your will," because there are also people, such as farmers, who need rain. Since the desire of the mountaineer may conflict with the desire of the farmer, it would be good for both of them to be submitted to whatever God is pleased to send. God permits us to present our desires, but we must have a supreme desire, especially in the prayer for revival, to see the glory of God manifested.

Some of the most effective prayers in Scripture do this. They are even argumentative at this point. Think of the prayer of Abraham when he prayed for Sodom and Gomorrah. He even argued with God, saying, "Is it right for You to destroy those cities if fifty . . . forty-five . . . forty . . . thirty . . . twenty . . . ten righteous people live there?" (Gen. 18:24-33). God blessed that prayer. So we can say that if Lot and his family were saved, it was because of the faithful intercession of Abraham, who did not relent, even though, in the end, the number he cited was not sufficiently small to warrant salvation of the wicked cities.

Think of the prayer of Moses who argued, "If You destroy Your people, what will happen to Your name? Your glory is at stake. Don't do it" (Ex. 32:11-13). God blessed that glorious intercessory prayer of Moses, who disregarded his personal ambitions in order to identify with the purposes of God.

A prayer for revival should be centered, not in the desire that we should have more money for our church (because there will be more people coming), not that there should be a new vitality in our denomination (as compared with other denominations), nor that any other of our human desires and ambitions should be satisfied, but rather that the glory of God might be manifested. We should pray that His name might be exalted, that His kingdom might be made evident, that His glorious reign might be established even more widely in the hearts of men and women.

Do Not Give Up

Our prayer must be persistent. The Scripture emphasizes that we ought not easily be discouraged in prayer (Luke 18:1). If we do not receive at once the answer we are looking for, we ought not to reason, "Well, God just doesn't want me to have that; I guess I'll give up." There are people who have been wonderfully persistent in prayer—for husbands or wives, children or parents—and God has blessed their

persistence. Do not give up too soon. Do not conclude too rapidly that God is uninterested. So long as you have a burden on your heart, keep praying.

In the church in which I am a member there is a man who has moved me profoundly in this respect. It is a wonderful church now. We have a preacher who is a wonderful expositor of the Word of God. I never attend a service there at which my soul is not blessed. But some 40 years ago this church was exceedingly small—there were about 10 or 12 people on a Sunday morning—and it was passing through a veritable desert from the point of view of biblical ministry. I understand that at one time one of the pastors was actually a practicing Christian Scientist. Throughout this bleak period this man, Deacon George Day, was praying. He did not say, "This church gives me nothing. There is nothing to be expected here, nothing to be hoped. I am going to find another fellowship that will be more fruitful for me." No! This man said, "This is my church. I am not going to give up. Since I do not get any spiritual nurture from the sermons, I will get it from the Bible directly. I will attend some other meetings in other places, but I am still going to be in my own church on Sunday morning, and I am going to pray for this ministry." Deacon Day kept praying for that church for years. Now he is an old man, more than 80. There is hardly any strength left in his body. When he can come to church he uses an earphone, because he is very deaf. But there is joy in his heart which moves one to tears. Whenever I see Deacon Day, I see the power of God to answer persistent prayer. I see a warrior who did not allow himself to be defeated, but who stayed at his post, pleading for his church and asking God's blessing upon it.

Pray and Work Also

Finally, the prayer that leads to revival must be *consistent* prayer, in which we are prepared also to do what we can to

achieve what we are asking. If we pray for the conversion of our loved ones, somehow we must give out witness, too. We must witness by life and words, when they can be effectually presented. If we pray for revival, we must be prepared to open our hearts so that God may revive them. We ought never to take prayer as a means of avoiding the actions God challenges us to.

My father had an experience which I would like to relate to illustrate this point. As a young minister he had been an assistant in a large church which had only two pastors in 50 years, one ministry of 25 years, followed by another of 25 years. After having been in that church, my father became pastor of a very small church in a little village in southern France. Prayer meeting was on Wednesday evening, and there was usually a very limited attendance. One Wednesday there was a frightful storm. The wind was blowing. Rain was falling in buckets. My father thought, "There is not going to be anybody at the prayer meeting tonight. If I go, I will only drench myself. I might as well stay home." My father was very interested in Hebrew and was studying the song of Deborah in the book of Judges. The temptation was great to stay in his cozy home and deal with that.

As my father was wrestling with this, there came to his memory a sermon given at the time of his ordination. It was on the passage which says, "Go out and make them come in" (Luke 14:23). Most of the time we think about the expression "make them come in." But on this occasion, the preacher had focused on the phrase, "Go out." He had said, "'Go out' means to reach out for people; it means, do not stay in the coziness of your study. You must go out and reach out." While the gales were blowing and the wind was hitting the windows, my father remembered that and concluded, "Well, I guess God wants me to go out. I do not expect many people. I do not expect very much of anything at this prayer meeting. But if God has told me to go out, I will

go out and speak at the prayer meeting." This was the meeting in which revival started in his church!

Prayer is the prelude to revival. Do you want revival? Then be prepared to pray. "If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray . . . then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and will heal their land."

Author

Dr. Roger R. Nicole, formerly Professor of Theology, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, is a Baptist minister and the author of numerous books and articles.

This article was originally an address given at the 1982 Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology, Philadelphia, PA. It is used with permission of *Tenth*, a publication of Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA.