

Special Section: Pray

The True Radical

By Jacques Ellul

Issues: The world believes that radical change in society can come only by forceful action. The Christian, however, has another, more powerful weapon: radical prayer. But this kind of prayer involves risk and commitment.

JACQUES ELLUL is a distinguished lay theologian of the Reformed Church of France and a professor of law and government at the University of Bordeaux. He is also a social critic who has earned a wide hearing for his warnings that modern technology has eroded moral values. He is among a group of social observers who contend that the pursuit of better means for solving man's problems has become an end in itself, a force out of control, an idolatrous influence that pervades every aspect of Western life and threatens even the supremacy of prayer in the life of the average Christian. The following article is adapted from his book Prayer and Modern Man, in which he presents his case that the god of this age—self-escalating technical progress—cannot truly change men and society. He cries out for a return to dependence on the efficacy of God in a wilderness of abortive human action that he believes is sending Western culture into moral oblivion. At times, Ellul's language seems strong, even strange to the ear that is unaccustomed to hearing exhortations to pray for the salvation of an entire society. But as you read, consider Ellul's passion for moving thoughtful men and women back to absolute dependence on God as the one who alone has power to lift our energies out of the mire of "useful" but prayerless activism.

WHOEVER wrestles with God in prayer puts his whole life at stake. In the combat in which man has no reservations, God will also have no reservations, and if God has already given everything in his Son, then he expects man both to take him with complete seriousness in prayer and also to conduct himself responsibly.

To take him with complete seriousness means to put him to the test. We never dare enough in petitioning God, in putting him to the test of what he can do (and of what he has already wanted to do, since we have the promise).

It is not resorting to magic or uncivilized acts to demand something of God, as when Elijah asked that the sacrificial victims be burned, or when Jesus asked that the fruitless fig tree wither. It is, rather, the audacity of knowing that God can do that, and of committing oneself to asking him. It is a commitment of the self, because what a blow it is if God remains silent! What doubt and what ridicule can result!

If our prayers are prudent and empty, that is because we have become incapable of putting God to the test. We are afraid of risking our reputations. We are anxious about spiritual things, in which we can never be certain of being answered or denied, and we are anxious about good

theology (the good being the latest). We treat the demand for a miracle as the mark of a backward mind. We are afraid, both that God might manifest himself and that we might be committed unreservedly and without limit.

If a person does not have the courage to go the limit, it is best in that case to stay with the prudent and untroubled request, which has no importance and which guarantees psychological tranquillity. The warnings which Jesus gives us apply as well to prayer. To engage in prayer is to perform the basic act of a disciple, and at that moment one is radically alone before God.

A DECISIVE COMBAT

So it is important to know whether one is ready to go all the way in the combat and the commitment. God does not tolerate lukewarmness. We must know that genuine prayer is infinitely simple and radically serious. It is impossible to take prayer lightly, for there is where we meet the radicalism of faith. As long as we are not engaged in the combat of prayer, our radicalism is necessarily a discourse only. The radical begins where man takes God by force, where God himself is present. Radicalism is not really produced by some procedure of the intellect, or of the will to action, whatever it might be. It is brought about by the presence of God alone. The whole Bible, from beginning to end, attests that.

Prayer is the precise point at which this radicalism is brought about in the unhindered meeting between God and man. That is why it is a decisive combat and a final commitment.

If a person thinks of prayer as a way of not getting involved, of not acting, of avoiding risk, if he supposes that prayer lets him escape fatigue and danger, assures him of tranquillity and a good conscience, gives him all-around protection, then we can say not only that he has not understood the reality of prayer, but also that he is stepping into the most dangerous enterprise of all for that is the point of the prophecy of Amos (1 Tim. 5:18–20), “Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! . . .”

But when we speak of commitment on behalf of man, we are not thinking necessarily of political involvement, or of social reform, or of revolution. We must not forget that the combat on behalf of man is surprisingly characterized by Paul (1 Tim. 2:1–4) as a “prayer for the salvation of all men,” for God desires all men to be saved, and also as a prayer for the civil authorities, because we depend on them for being able to lead a “possible” life. So this initial aspect is a combat for the salvation of all.

It is a combat on behalf of men, but also, if need be, against them, insofar as this prayer involves the proclamation of the truth to the indifferent person. It is to this extent that there is no frontier between the Church and the world. The prayer for all men attests this difficult relation of love, which both gives of itself and makes demands. Prayer which rests on that faith and on that love for all men is in no way the expression of a vague and generalized humanitarianism. It is the commitment, without reservation, of all our strength to the single point of the salvation won for all in Jesus Christ. Apart from that, prayer is meaningless.

One can see that all the facets of the combat hang together, the struggle against my own feelings, against the indifference of others, against the incognito of God, all of which is made necessary by the fact that we must pray for all mankind. But we must pray also for the civil authorities. There again, I have to fight against myself (my servility toward the authorities, or, on the other hand, my critical and rebellious attitude), and against the authorities themselves (if I pray for them I should demand that they really carry out their functions) and against the seeming indifference of God in politics.

THE POWER OF INTERCESSION

We know that the image of this world is passing and is consigned to dust. Yet God commands us to pray without ceasing for this lowly dwelling place of earth, that it may be habitable, but also that it remain humble, and that we may not be tempted to exalt it as though it were the kingdom of God.

Prayer for society puts the latter in its place. In spite of all its strength and technical success, its scientific excellence and its "great society," it is a poor little commonplace, transitory reality, for which it is absolutely necessary to pray. Without that persistent prayer, this grandiose society will soon be nothing but a frenzy of pride and suicide. Without the intercession of the saints, its history will be nothing but "a tale told by an idiot." But the moment social action is based on this prayer, then that action can take on a lively versatility.

Since it rests upon the promise of God, prayer is the ultimate act of hope. Otherwise it has no substance. Because it is an act of hope, every prayer is necessarily eschatological. There is not one prayer for the present and another for the future. There is not a hope which is made tangible in terms of an answer to a present problem, and another hope for the end of time. There is not a prayer of petition for today and a prayer of petition for later on. Prayer is both the action which plants us in that end of the age, at the coming of the kingdom, and it is also the action which causes the kingdom to come. Just as all prayer begins with "Our Father," so it should also conclude with "Come, Lord Jesus." The field of force of prayer is exerted between those two poles. One does not go without the other. The current of the present is there. Thus prayer is given its meaning. If you pray, that means that those last days which are coming are present when you pray. You are making present what is promised for the new creation.

This relation between the end of the age and prayer is constantly indicated, either by the fact that prayer brings the end nearer or that it prepares the way for it. "The end of all things is at hand; therefore keep sane and sober for your prayers" (1 Peter 4:7). But let us beware of a misunderstanding. This passage does not refer necessarily to the negative aspect of the coming. The end is also the goal, the fulfillment. It is not a matter merely of the unfolding of history, or of a threat (the end of the world), but also of the fact that everything has reached its objective, which is also its fulfillment.

KINGDOM LIVING

It is both a fulfillment of what we human beings have wished for, hoped for, and striven for in our history, and a fulfillment of what God had willed, hoped for, and chosen. Hence, to speak of this "coming" does not mean, "the world will soon come to an end," but rather, "the kingdom of God has come near to you, it is within you, it is in your midst," which corresponds to the great affirmation, "It is finished." There is not some goal to be reached in a more or less distant future. The goal is already attained.

Our text is saying to us, "Since it is finished, since all is attaining its goal, you can already live as people who are in the kingdom, and you should do so." Now the first step in this life in the kingdom is that of wisdom and prayer. "Be sane and sober," that is to say, learn to discern the truth in which you are already living. Discern the truth of things and the truth of lives, of situations and of events. That implies a knowledge of the provisional and relative character of everything you do, of all that exists, yet of its indispensable and valid character at the same time. It implies a knowledge of the assured reality of the flowering, of the arrival at the goal, yet of its secret character also, reserved as it is for faith, for the time being.

This is the very setting of the life of prayer. It is part and parcel of daily living, yet it is a

request for the completion of the work of God, for its ultimate fulfillment. Only in prayer involved in (not detached from) the actual situation can we live concretely the life of the end of the age, and share in the presence of the kingdom. Thus, eschatological prayer necessarily brings us back to the life of current events, but for quite another purpose than merely to take part in these events.

Total involvement in prayer demands of us a participation in society, in the lives of those close to us, of those at a distance, of intimate friends, and of strangers. Prayer has no limits. But if prayer does not dispense from action, if it is the opposite to “rejection of the world,” if it must relate constantly to events (and not lose itself in mystical, vague, and diffuse effusions), we still find it hard to believe today that prayer is more important than action.

COURAGEOUS PRAYER

It is indeed true that the content of prayer should be supplied by the world (in which our action is to be manifested), and that it is vain to pray abstractly. That is to say that normally our prayers should be generated by concrete situations, and that in the degree to which it is linked with action, it involves specific concern. It is useless to pray for peace or for justice, unless one is specific about *what* peace or *what* justice. Prayer must involve the courage of unilateral action.

Yet, however important this active viewpoint may be, it is prayer which dominates. With respect to the world, prayer is the act of bringing reality into the presence of God. We agree spontaneously to action, and then to add prayer to it, but the order is the reverse of that, namely, to pray, and then to act because of having prayed, as a function of that prayer.

Prayer goes with action, but it is prayer which is radical and decisive. Every action will necessarily be taken over by the milieu in which it occurs. It will be turned aside from its purpose. It will be vitiated by circumstances. It will entail unforeseeable consequences and will drag misfortune in its train. Prayer, on the other hand, when it is genuine, cannot be taken over (since it obtains its import and substance from God). It attains its goal. It entails the consequences granted by God.

AUTHENTIC ACTION

Action really receives its character from prayer. Prayer is what attests the finitude of action and frees it from its dramatic or tragic aspect. Prayer bestows upon action its greatest authenticity. It rescues action from activism, and it rescues the individual from bewilderment and despair in his action. It prevents his being engulfed in panic when his action fails, and from being drawn into activism, when he is incited to more and more activity in pursuit of success, to the point of losing himself. Prayer, because it is the warrant, the expression of my finitude, always teaches me that I must be more than my action, that I must live with my action, and even that my action must be lived with by another in his action. Thanks to prayer, I can see that truth about myself and my action in hope and not in despair.

In this combat, the Christian who prays acts more effectively and more decisively on society than the person who is politically involved, with all the sincerity of his faith put into the involvement. It is not a matter of seeing them in opposition to one another, but of inverting our instinctive, cultural hierarchy of values. The action is not the test of prayer, nor is it the proof of its importance or the measure of its genuineness. It is prayer which is the qualifying factor, the significance, the foundation of the truth of the action.

Apart from prayer, action is necessarily violence and falsehood. Even technological action,

in spite of its appearance of neutrality and objectivity, is nevertheless in that category. Prayer is the only possible substitute for violence in human relations. Henceforth it is from prayer that one expects action to take its value. Action is no longer looked to for the immediate, visible, and expected result at any cost. In choosing violence we are participating completely in a world of violence, in a society in which violence reigns at every level and in all forms, in the ideology of the practical and of violence. As violent persons, we are fully conformed to the world. Violence is one of the “rudiments” of this world.

Prayer, by contrast, is a much more radical break, a more fundamental protest. In that decision, in that combat, the world can have no part, since we have a share in the prayer, the sacrifice, and the resurrection of the one Jesus Christ. Precisely because our technological society is given over entirely to action, the person who retires to his room to pray is the true radical.

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