

Kenneth Loyer

**Participating in the Saving Purposes of God:  
Theological Reflections on Charles Wesley's Hymns of Intercession**

The message was short but profound:

Ken,

I just wanted to send you a brief note to let you know I'm praying for you as the semester winds down. May you know God's strength, wisdom, love and presence as you finish this term.

Pax Christi,  
Robert.<sup>1</sup>

These words, in an e-mail message which I recently received, brought timely comfort to me as I sprinted, ever so frenetically, toward the finish line of another semester in graduate school. Somehow the knowledge that my friend was praying for me was deeply reassuring. When I read his message, I sensed the presence of God. It was, for me, a means of grace.<sup>2</sup> These were hope-filled words, recalling the grace and peace revealed in Jesus Christ, God-with-us (cf. Matthew 1:23), and pointing beyond themselves to one of the most fundamental spiritual disciplines, the practice of prayer. Yet they also raise some large-scale questions: What does it mean to pray? What is the theological significance of prayer?

While these sorts of questions can be, and have been, approached from many different angles,<sup>3</sup> among the resources which one might employ in pursuing them is a relatively obscure portion of Charles Wesley's vast hymn corpus: the hymns of intercession. Though they have attracted far less attention than hymns on other important topics, such as the Lord's Supper and the doctrine of the Trinity, these hymns are significant in their own right, and not least because of their theological content. With emphasis on the theme of prayer as a kind of participation in God's purposes for the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Moore-Jumonville to Kenneth Loyer, May 4, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. John Wesley's identification of prayer as one of the chief means of grace in his sermon "The Means of Grace."

<sup>3</sup> For a biblical and historical overview of intercession, see Robert Ellis, *Answering God: Towards a Theology of Intercession* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2005), pp. 1-91.

world—a conduit, in the mystery of grace, of God’s own presence and power—Wesley’s hymns of intercession give voice to a lively and fairly developed theology of prayer which may still today contribute to an understanding, and guide the practice, of this vital spiritual discipline.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas a number of Wesley’s hymns address at least some aspect of intercession, only a relatively small portion of them are explicitly labeled hymns of intercession as such. The hymns under consideration here come from three collections in particular: (1) volume two of *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749),<sup>5</sup> which includes a heading entitled “Hymns of Intercession”; (2) *Hymns of Intercession for All Mankind* (1758);<sup>6</sup> and (3) *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (1780)<sup>7</sup> under the heading “For Believers Interceding for the World.”<sup>8</sup> One of the noteworthy characteristics of these hymns as a whole is the way in which they illustrate the connection between the practice of intercession and the intention and action of God in salvation history. As these hymn texts suggest, and as some contemporary theologians<sup>9</sup> and missiologists<sup>10</sup> observe, the church’s calling

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<sup>4</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, in this study “Wesley” denotes Charles rather than John.

<sup>5</sup> *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, vol. 2 (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1749; reprinted in *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, George Osborn, ed., vol. 5 [London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office], pp. 228-250; in subsequent references to hymns reprinted in the Osborn edition, the page number[s] from the Osborn edition will be cited parenthetically).

<sup>6</sup> *Hymns of Intercession for All Mankind* (London: J. Paramore, 1758; reprinted in *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, George Osborn, ed., vol. 6 [London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office], pp. 109-145). Though this collection is not published specifically under Charles’s name, here it will be assumed that Charles is the principal writer of these hymns.

<sup>7</sup> *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (London: J. Paramore, 1780; reprinted in The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), pp. 71-721. The hymns included under the heading “For Believers Interceding for the World” appear on pp. 606-648 of vol. 7 of The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley. (In subsequent references to this section of the 1780 *Collection*, the page number[s] from The Bicentennial Edition will be cited parenthetically.) Though this collection is published jointly under the names of both John and Charles, here it will be assumed that Charles is the principal writer of these hymns.

<sup>8</sup> The 1780 *Collection* is a kind of compilation, in which the section on “believers interceding for the world” includes some hymns of intercession from these two earlier collections (e.g., no. 446, “Author of Faith, We Seek Thy Face” [*Hymns and Sacred Poems*, vol. 2, no. 94, vv. 1-5, 7 of 9, pp. 92-93]; and no. 429, “Let God, Who Comforts the Distressed” [*Hymns of Intercession for All Mankind*, no. 1, pp. 3-4 (pp. 111-112)]). It also includes thematically similar hymns from various other collections, such as *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures* (Bristol: E. Farley, 1762; reprinted in *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, George Osborn, ed., vol. 9-13 [London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office]; e.g., no. 435, “Messiah, Prince of Peace” [vol. 1, no. 960, p. 305 (vol. 9, pp. 373-374)]), *Hymns for Children* (Bristol: E. Farley, 1763; e.g., no. 461, “Come, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” [no. 40, pp. 35-36]), and *Family Hymns* (E.g., no. 460, “I and My House Will Serve the Lord” [no. 137, pp. 144-145]). Additional intercession hymns appear in Charles’s *Hymns of Intercession for the Kingdom of England*, printed in 1759, though the present study focuses on the three sources identified above.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Robert Ellis identifies the basis of human intercession as God’s purposes for and action in the world, and Ellis further posits that the participatory element of intercession—namely, the way in which prayer is a participation in God and

to intercede on behalf of the world is grounded in the triune God's mission in and for this same world. Therefore, human intercession for the world is ultimately a matter of participation in the saving purposes of God.

### God's Saving Purposes

Before exploring this concept of intercession as participation in the *missio Dei*, we must first consider what these hymns say about God's saving purposes. Their content in this regard accentuates two main points: (1) God's purposes are universal in scope; and (2) they are revealed and will ultimately be fulfilled in salvation history, especially in the Father's sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit for the redemption of the world. The first point, then, deals with the scope of God's saving purposes and the second with God's specific action in accomplishing these purposes.

#### *A Universal Mission: The Scope of God's Saving Purposes*

First, these hymns strike what is a common note throughout Wesleyan hymnody, namely the universal scope of God's offer of salvation.<sup>11</sup> For Wesley this universality is related to the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of sin. In the 1780 *Collection* Wesley begins hymn number 455, a hymn for parents, by naming God as the source of all life: "Father of all, by whom we are, / For whom was made

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in God's work—holds promise for the task of developing a theology of Christian prayer (*Answering God: Towards a Theology of Intercession*, pp. 178ff.). Cf. Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), in which the theology of prayer is considered from the standpoint of the liturgy (e.g., pp. 40, 355, 429, 460).

<sup>10</sup> E.g., In *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (ed. Darrell Guder [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998]), the missiologist Darrell Guder joins with others in articulating a fresh approach to evangelistic mission that they call "missional ecclesiology" (p. 11). They describe a shifting dynamic away from the old model of the church sending missionaries into the world and toward a new model in which God sends the church to do mission in the world. This new model moves the church from the position of sender to the object of God's sending, from doing the sending to being sent, as part of God's mission. Just as Christ sends the disciples, so the triune God sends forth the church to be in mission in the world. This continuity between God's mission and the church's mission applies also to the subject of intercession, which might be considered a subunit of mission. Cf. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of this theme in *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (1780), see Teresa Berger, *Theology in Hymns?: A Study of the Relationship of Doxology and Theology According to A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists (1780)*, transl. Timothy Edward Kimbrough (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), pp. 109ff. That the universality of God's will to salvation receives so much emphasis in this collection, which is arguably the most comprehensive and influential book of Methodist hymns to have ever been assembled, is indicative of the prominence of this theme in Wesleyan hymnody as a whole.

whatever is....”<sup>12</sup> Wesley considered God to be the giver of life, in whom all creatures live and move and have their being (Acts 17:28). Having created human beings in his image (Genesis 1:26-27), God has made us for himself. Basic to Wesleyan theology is the claim that God, who is the Creator of all, desires salvation for all (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4). The scope of this offer of salvation is as expansive as the need for it. Through the ubiquitous reality of sin, infecting all human beings personally as well as socially, all fall short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23), and therefore all stand in need of redemption from God. The entire human race is implicated in the catastrophe of sin. It is very nearly what Wesley calls “a ruined race,” “by sin eternally undone.”<sup>13</sup> Surely sin would cause the downfall of humankind save God’s pardoning grace. And so Wesley hastens to qualify these words with a crucial exception:

Unless thou magnify thy grace,  
And make thy richest mercy known,  
And make thy vanquished rebels find  
Pardon in Christ for all mankind.<sup>14</sup>

According to Wesley, God’s pardoning grace makes all the difference. It saves humanity from self-destruction. It prevents the eternal ruin of the entire human race. Out of his rich mercies God has provided the remedy for a sin-infected world. The cure is Christ, in whom God offers pardon for all. In Christ God bids the fallen race, and each member of it, to arise.<sup>15</sup> Another indication of the cosmic extent of God’s soteriological dream is found in Christ’s high-priestly prayer in John 17. Here the incarnate Son prays to the Father for the full and perfect unity of his disciples so that the whole world may believe (John 17:21). Picking up on both the transformative power and the truly global implications of our Lord’s prayer, Wesley appeals for the fulfillment of the divine will:

The soul-transforming word  
In us, ev’n us fulfil [sic]:

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<sup>12</sup> *A Collection of Hymns*, no. 455, v. 1 (p. 634).

<sup>13</sup> *Hymns of Intercession*, no. 1, v. 3, p. 3 (p. 111).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 1, v. 3, pp. 3-4 (pp. 111-112).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 1, v. 4, p. 4 (p. 112).

Join to Thyself, our Common Lord,  
 And all Thy servants seal;  
 Confer the grace unknown,  
 The mystic charity:  
 As Thou art with Thy Father one,  
 Unite us all in Thee.

So shall the world believe  
 Our record, Lord, and Thine,  
 And Thee with thankful hearts receive  
 The Messenger Divine,  
 Sent from his throne above,  
 To *Adam's* offspring given,  
 To join, and perfect us in love,  
 And take us all to heaven.<sup>16</sup>

As Wesley's poetic prayer suggests, the ultimate aim of work for Christian unity is precisely the salvation of the world in accord with Christ's stated intention in his own prayer—"so that the world may believe" (John 17:21).<sup>17</sup> Here the Son's very words of intercession to the Father ring with a globally evangelical tune. Moreover, even creation itself has a place in God's vision of renewal in the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21:1). Until that time when God will truly be all in all (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:28), the world as a whole eagerly longs for redemption from God (Romans 8:22-23). In Wesley's words, "All creation / Travails, groans, and bids [Christ] come!"<sup>18</sup> Wesley's hymns of intercession, saturated with Scripture, unambiguously describe God's will to salvation as universal, encompassing every human being and even all of creation itself.

### *The Economy of Salvation: God's Action in Salvation History*

Along with their universal scope, a second characteristic of God's saving purposes according to these hymns is that these purposes are revealed and will ultimately be fulfilled in salvation history.

<sup>16</sup> *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, vol. 2, no. 65, vv. 7-8, pp. 94-95 (p. 236). Italics original.

<sup>17</sup> All Scripture quotations come from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>18</sup> *Hymns of Intercession*, no. 38, v. 6, p. 32 (p. 143).

Beginning with the act of creation itself, when God made all things and called them good (Genesis 1-2), God's work has a distinctively soteriological arc:

For Thou hast bid the creatures be,  
And still subsist to pleasure Thee,  
From Thee they came, to Thee they tend,  
Their gracious Source, their glorious End!<sup>19</sup>

The very God who gives life in creation sustains all human beings in existence and draws them to true happiness in himself. Just as all have come from God so they tend toward God, who is their Source and End. This movement from God as Source to God as End outlines the basic trajectory of human salvation or humanity's grace-empowered return to its Maker. It thereby signifies the union with God which is itself made possible by God's redemptive work, above all in the Father's sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit to gather up the faithful into the life of the Trinity.

In these hymns of intercession, as in other Wesleyan hymns, Jesus Christ is central. The Trinity's action in salvation history reaches its pinnacle in Christ, the Father's eternal Son who became incarnate of the Holy Spirit for us and for our salvation.<sup>20</sup> In Christ's life, passion, and resurrection the triune God has redeemed the world. Wesley embraces this basic orthodox teaching and places particular emphasis on the passion of Christ, the saving merits of which are applied by faith to the Christian believer.<sup>21</sup> Christ's passion, the source of human happiness and holiness, is like a fountain, out of which flow the healing streams of God's abundant grace:

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<sup>19</sup> *Hymns of Intercession*, no. 38, v. 6, p. 30 (p. 141).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

<sup>21</sup> While for Wesley the image of the blood of Christ summarizes everything important for human beings about Christ's atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world, as his frequent use of blood imagery in these hymns and others implies, it would be a mistake to conclude that he espouses a truncated view of Christ's saving work, as if he thought it were somehow limited to the event of the cross. Wesley's use of various Christological titles, such as Prince of Peace (e.g., *A Collection of Hymns*, no. 435, v. 1 [p. 611]), Good Shepherd (e.g., *ibid.*, no. 436, v. 3 [p. 613; here Wesley uses the phrase "Great Shepherd," but the allusion to John 10 is clear]), and Light of the World (e.g., *ibid.*, no. 432, v. 2 [p. 609]), with attention to their inherent soteriological import, suggests that for him Christ's passion cannot be understood in theological isolation from either his life and teachings or his resurrection, the latter point being clearly established, for example, in his *Hymns for Our Lord's Resurrection* (London: W. Strahan, 1746; reprinted in *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, George Osborn, ed., vol. 4 [London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office], pp. 127-150). (Though this collection is not published specifically under Charles's name, here it will be assumed that Charles is the principal writer of these hymns.) So

To His meritorious passion  
 All our happiness we owe,  
 Pardon, holiness, salvation,  
 Heaven above and heaven below;  
 Grace and glory  
 From that open Fountain flow.<sup>22</sup>

Elsewhere Wesley makes explicit that what pours from this fountain is specifically the blood of Christ, the bleeding Savior.<sup>23</sup> Wesley locates extraordinary power in Christ's blood, power to pardon, to cleanse from the stain of sin, and to transform the believer in holiness. Indeed, he uses blood language as a kind of soteriological shorthand for the entire saving work of Christ. Christ's blood, he says, "...shall wash us white as snow, / Present us sanctified to God, / And perfected in love below."<sup>24</sup> Wesley issues a frequent appeal in these hymns and others for the application of Christ's blood to the stained and lifeless hearts of sinners: "That blood which cleanses from all sin, / That efficacious blood apply, / And wash, and make us throughly [sic] clean, / And change, and wholly sanctify."<sup>25</sup> In the mystery of God's saving economy, the blood of Christ, applied to the Christian through faith, has redemptive power and is truly life-giving, even to the point of entire sanctification.

While Wesley generally concentrates on Jesus's suffering and death as the basis for human salvation, he sometimes explains the saving work of Christ in terms of his quite lively sense of eschatology. For Wesley, the consummation of Christ's redemptive action will come at his return, a promise which excites in the faithful an eager yearning for the beatific vision:

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it seems that for Wesley, Christ's life, death, and resurrection are all intrinsically related as part and parcel of the message of redemption in Jesus. Cf. hymn 7 of *Hymns for Our Lord's Resurrection*, which is based on a litany from the *Book of Common Prayer* recalling a vast array of episodes in the life of Christ, covering virtually everything from his nativity to his resurrection. That Wesley finds saving significance at numerous points throughout this sweeping overview of Christ's life suggests that he understands human salvation to consist in the whole work of Christ—his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection—and that he understands them ultimately to cohere. The prayer reads: "By the mystery of thy holy incarnation; by thy holy nativity and circumcision; by thy baptism, fasting, and temptation; by thine agony and bloody sweat; by thy cross and passion; by thy precious death and burial; by thy glorious resurrection and ascension; and by the coming of the Holy Ghost, Good Lord, deliver us" (*Hymns for Our Lord's Resurrection*, preface to 7, p. 10 [p. 138]).

<sup>22</sup> *Hymns of Intercession*, no. 38, v. 2, p. 31 (p. 142).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, vol. 2, no. 61, v. 5, p. 87 (p. 228): "Let all their bleeding Saviour know..."

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 62, v. 5, p. 88 (p. 229).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 62, v. 6, p. 89 (p. 230). For more on this notion of the application of Christ's blood in Wesley's hymns, see Berger, who describes "the blood applied" as a formula for salvation effected (pp. 120-125).

Blest in our returning Saviour,  
 When He hath prepared our place  
 We shall reign with Him for ever,  
 Folded in His love's embrace:  
 Come, Redeemer,  
 Show us all Thy heavenly face!<sup>26</sup>

Wesley thus expresses his earnest desire to see at Christ's long-awaited return the fullness of his glory as the Crucified and Risen One. "Once for favour'd sinners slain,"<sup>27</sup> Jesus is now confessed to be the living Lord whose authority will at last acknowledged by all, at the full disclosure of his everlasting reign:

Thee, Lord, let every tongue confess,  
 Let every knee to Jesus bow:  
 O! All-redeeming Prince of Peace,  
 We long to see Thy kingdom now.<sup>28</sup>

The regal language of terms like "prince" and "kingdom" indicates the significance which Wesley ascribes to the claim of Christ's lordship and its tie to his redemptive work. This one called "Prince of Peace" is the Redeemer of the human race and the King of a kingdom which is present already, at least in part, even as its consummation draws near. While more could be said about the Christological content of these hymns in relation to the message of salvation, the key point is to observe that what lies at the heart of the gospel lies also at the heart of these and other Wesleyan hymns, namely the claim that in Jesus Christ the triune God has acted decisively for the salvation of the world.

In keeping with classical Christianity, Wesley believed that the Trinity's action continues in the Holy Spirit through the Spirit's temporal mission. Promised by Christ (e.g., John 14:15ff.), the Spirit is sent by the Father into the world and poured out upon the church at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11). While it is traditional teaching that all the works of the triune God toward the outside are indivisible, Wesley

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<sup>26</sup> *Hymns of Intercession*, no. 38, v. 3, p. 31 (p. 142).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 39, v. 1, p. 37 (p. 143).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, no. 61, v. 7, p. 87 (p. 229).

follows the doctrine of appropriations in speaking about the Holy Spirit just as he does in speaking about Christ.<sup>29</sup> He attributes to the Spirit a particularly prominent role in God's ongoing activity in and through the church. In a hymn addressed to Christ, for example, the appropriated activity of the Holy Spirit dominates the first stanza:

Head of Thy church, whose Spirit fills,  
And flows through every faithful soul,  
Unites in mystic love, and seals  
Them one, and simplifies the whole;<sup>30</sup>

The Spirit of Christ fills Christ's body the church, unites its members in love, and seals them in the truth of the gospel. For Wesley, the Spirit's action is also personal: the Spirit flows through the soul of every faithful person.

An avid reader of Scripture, Wesley picks up on Paul's words about the Spirit's work in intercession in Romans 8:26. Wesley depicts the Spirit appealing for Christ's return and, in a sense, eliciting the groanings of those who already have the first fruits of the Spirit (Romans 8:23):

Come, Lord, the glorious Spirit cries,  
And souls beneath the altar groan;  
Come, Lord, the bride on earth replies,  
And perfect all our souls in one.<sup>31</sup>

Here the Spirit leads the bride on earth, the church militant, in a fervent appeal for the return of the Lord. It is an exchange that occurs as a kind of call and response, with the Spirit helping the souls in their weakness (cf. Romans 8:26a). The Spirit cries, souls groan, and the earth replies, all in view of the promised perfection of God's faithful in unity.

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<sup>29</sup> While Wesley shows flashes of a robust pneumatology in these hymns of intercession, on the whole he refers in these hymns far more to Christ than to the Spirit. Yet this observation is not meant to imply a pneumatological deficit as much as a Christological density. These hymns are thoroughly Christocentric, which suggests (as will be noted in more detail below) that Wesley believed intercession to be explicitly Christological in nature.

<sup>30</sup> *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, vol. 2, no. 61, v. 1, p. 87 (p. 228).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, no. 61, v. 3, p. 87 (p. 228).

In another hymn Wesley creatively interweaves this notion of intercession with the Johannine title of the Spirit as Comforter (cf. John 14:6):

Let God, who comforts the distress'd,  
 Let Israel's Consolation hear,  
 Hear Holy Ghost, our joint request,  
 And show Thyself the Comforter,  
 And swell th' inexplicable groan,  
 And breathe our wishes to the throne.<sup>32</sup>

Here the Spirit, addressed directly in line three, is asked to provide consolation and comfort befitting of the Comforter and indeed to convey by breath the desires of the faithful (cf. Romans 8:26).

In yet another allusion to Romans 8, Wesley relates the compassionate bleeding of the very heart of Christ (to whom the hymn is addressed) to the groaning of the Spirit, and pleas for the Spirit's prayer to be heeded:

Thy panting heart for sinners bleeds;  
 Thy mercies and compassions move;  
 Thy groaning Spirit intercedes,  
 And yearn the bowels of Thy love.

Hear then the pleading Spirit's prayer,  
 (The Spirit's will to Thee is known,)  
 For all who now Thy sufferings share,  
 And still for full redemption groan.<sup>33</sup>

The Spirit, as the third person of the Trinity, shares in the essential divinity of the Godhead, so that the mind of the Spirit is known intimately by God. This same Spirit intercedes for all who groan for redemption. Consequently, the Spirit's temporal mission, not unlike the Son's, serves as a means through which the saving purposes of the triune God are made known and realized unto final perfection on the day of full salvation.

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<sup>32</sup> *Hymns of Intercession*, no. 1, v. 1, p. 3 (p. 111).

<sup>33</sup> *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, vol. 2, no. 63, vv. 2-3, p. 89 (p. 231).

These hymns of intercession, therefore, have much to say about the saving purposes of God. To summarize, they rhapsodically report that these purposes are universal in scope and that they are revealed and will ultimately be fulfilled in salvation history, especially in the Father's sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit for the redemption of the world.

### **The Church's Participation in the Saving Purposes of God**

In view of the basic message conveyed in these hymns about the redemptive mission of the Holy Trinity in and for the world, some light can now be shed on the concept of intercession as participation and specifically the claim that the church's intercession for the world represents its participation in the saving purposes of God. Toward that end, the same two themes explored above, namely scope and action, will serve us well once again, with each theme amplified in light of the participatory nature of intercession as suggested by these hymns. There are, therefore, now two main points to be established and examined under the heading of intercession as participation: (1) the scope of human intercession, like that of God's mission, is universal; and (2) such intercession points to God's action in salvation history and in a certain sense contributes to the ultimate achievement of the world's salvation in God.

#### *Universal Mission, Universal Intercession*

The call for human intercession on the world's behalf has a firm basis in the mission of God. Because God's mission is universal, embracing the whole human race and aimed at nothing less than the renewal of all creation, so the mission which God has entrusted to the church, including its work of intercession, is universal in scope. Wesley's hymns of intercession reflect that universality in terms of both title and content. The title of the 1758 collection is telling: *Hymns of Intercession for All Mankind*. This collection as a whole covers a wide spectrum of concerns—wide enough truly for all humankind in at least some sense—with individual headings including the following: for the church

catholic;<sup>34</sup> for the Church of England<sup>35</sup> and the ministers of the gospel;<sup>36</sup> for political leaders (e.g., King George,<sup>37</sup> the Prince of Wales,<sup>38</sup> and the King of Prussia<sup>39</sup>); for the British nation,<sup>40</sup> including in particular the magistrates,<sup>41</sup> the nobility,<sup>42</sup> the parliament,<sup>43</sup> the fleet,<sup>44</sup> the army,<sup>45</sup> and the universities;<sup>46</sup> for all who travel by land or by water;<sup>47</sup> for women in labor;<sup>48</sup> for all sick persons;<sup>49</sup> for young children;<sup>50</sup> for all prisoners and captives;<sup>51</sup> for orphans;<sup>52</sup> for widows;<sup>53</sup> and for enemies, persecutors, and slanderers.<sup>54</sup> While they vary in their specificity (e.g., from the British nation as a whole to the more limited group of women in labor), these hymns are all oriented in one way or another toward those things in which salvation consists, including provision, in particular for orphans and widows; release to the captives; and the healing of body and soul (cf. Jesus's self-described mission in Luke 4:18-19). Similarly, the heading in *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (1780) expresses the scope of intercession well: "For Believers Interceding for the World." As this heading implies, intercession has an all-encompassing focus. Put simply, according to Wesley Christians are to intercede on behalf of the world in its totality.

Wesley is so driven by a sense of the universal scope of God's salvation that he wonders why, if God has in fact redeemed the human race and even the entire cosmos in Jesus Christ (as Wesley

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<sup>34</sup> *Hymns of Intercession*, no. 3, p. 5 (p. 113).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 4-5, pp. 5-7 (pp. 114-116).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 6-9, pp. 7-10 (pp. 116-119).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 10, p. 11 (p. 120).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 11, pp. 11-12 (pp. 120-121).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 12-14, pp. 12-15 (pp. 121-124).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 15, pp. 15-16 (pp. 124-126).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 16, p. 17 (p. 126).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 17, pp. 17-18 (p. 127).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 18, p. 18 (pp. 127-128).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 19, p. 19 (pp. 128-129).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 20, pp. 19-21 (pp. 129-131).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 21-22, pp. 21-22 (pp. 131-132).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 23, p. 23 (p. 133).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 24, p. 23 (p. 133).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 25, p. 23 (pp. 133-134).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 26, p. 24 (p. 134).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 27, p. 24 (p. 134).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 28, p. 24 (p. 134).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 29, p. 25 (p. 135).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 30, p. 25 (p. 135).

clearly believes to be the case), this plan has not yet been brought to completion. He even asks rhetorically:

Lord over all, if thou hast made,  
Hast ransomed every soul of man,  
Why is the grace so long delayed,  
Why unfulfilled the saving plan?  
The bliss for Adam's race designed,  
When will it reach to all mankind?<sup>55</sup>

In the face of the apparent tension between God's purposes and circumstances which would seem to imply the delay or even frustration of the fulfillment of these purposes, the need for human intercession takes on a particular urgency. Hence Wesley continues in this hymn, emblematic (particularly in the final three lines quoted below) of the very essence of his understanding of intercession:

Art thou the God of Jews alone,  
And not the God of Gentiles too?  
To Gentiles make thy goodness known,  
Thy judgments to the nations show;  
Awake them by the gospel call—  
Light of the world, illumine all!<sup>56</sup>

Human intercession is, as Wesley here illustrates, a matter of recalling God's saving purposes in their fullest extent, in their widest range, and so a matter of calling on the One who is the Light of the world (cf. John 8:12, 1:9) to shine for all to see. Touching in at least some way on virtually all areas of human life, Wesley's hymns on intercession represent the liturgical practice of prayer for the human race in all its needs in the hope that all people will come to enjoy salvation in God's kingdom.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *A Collection of Hymns*, no. 432, v. 1 (p. 609).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 432, v. 2 (p. 609).

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Geoffrey Wainwright's description of the church's liturgical practice of intercessory prayer (Wainwright, p. 460).

*Saving Economy, Saving Witness*

While these hymns are characterized in part by a universal scope, they also suggest a direct connection between God's saving actions and the witness to those actions in the human practice of intercession. Here the participatory element of intercession hinted at already comes to the forefront. Of course this participation has its limits, which should be clearly acknowledged at all times. Intercession is not a matter of altering God's fundamental will regarding the world, for God's commitment to the world is shown in his creation of it, his ongoing sustaining of it, and his plan for the full and final salvation of the entire created order in Jesus Christ. Yet intercessory prayer is itself an action, a human action which is made possible, directed, and brought to completion by God's grace, and as such it is not without significance in the mystery of salvation. The faithful are not totally passive, for their intercession calls attention to God's intention and action in salvation history and even contributes in a certain sense to the achievement of God's purposes for the world. As Geoffrey Wainwright explains, intercession's character "as a plea for the triumph of the divine purpose in spite of contrary appearances, and perhaps actualities, is itself an increase in free human commitment to the purpose of God and may therefore be allowed, in the mystery of grace, somehow to contribute to the achievement of the world's salvation."<sup>58</sup> God's work in salvation history is not entirely external to the human race. Somehow, indeed in the mystery of grace, human intercession contributes to the realization of the world's salvation. In this sense, prayer is a matter of participation in God's action in the world.

The participatory nature of intercession finds vigorous expression in Wesley's hymns. As these hymns indicate, the practice of intercession bears witness to God's saving economy, and this witness is itself significant in the achievement of God's salvation. Through prayer, the effects of God's work in salvation history are in some mysterious sense deepened and extended. So, for example, with stunning emphasis on forgiveness, a theme which touches the center of the gospel, Wesley prays for those who slander and persecute him and his friends in the faith:

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<sup>58</sup> Wainwright, p. 40.

Who hunt our souls with cruel scorn,  
 Who hate and vex us without cause,  
 Our bitterest persecutors turn,  
 Like those that nail'd Thee to Thy cross;  
 Freely by Thee, by us forgiven,  
 O let us meet our foes in heaven.<sup>59</sup>

Wesley's prayer is that even the enemies of the faithful, including his own foes, might receive forgiveness both from the One who cried out on the cross "Father, forgive them..." (cf. Luke 23:34) and from the disciples of this Crucified God. Through such forgiveness, as Wesley implies, enemies become friends, and those who were once alienated from God and from one another are thereby placed on the path to heavenly reunion. It is a prayer, in other words, to the reconciling God (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17-21) on behalf of those who need reconciliation, in the hope that Christ's followers, extending the free forgiveness of God which they themselves have received, might play a role in the spreading of God's salvation. Also, Wesley is bold to pray, in one of the many robustly Christological hymns of intercession (which is worthy of a full quotation), that Christian believers might by God's grace embody the truth of the gospel and thus promulgate its message for the world to see and believe:

Jesu, the word of mercy give,  
 And let it swiftly run;  
 And let the priests themselves believe,  
 And put salvation on.

Clothed with the Spirit of holiness  
 May all thy people prove  
 The plenitude of gospel grace,  
 The joy of perfect love.

Jesus, let all thy lovers shine  
 Illustrious as the sun;  
 And bright with borrowed rays divine  
 Their glorious circuit run.

Beyond the reach of mortals, spread  
 Their light, where'er they go;

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<sup>59</sup> *Hymns of Intercession*, no. 30, p. 25 (p. 135).

And heavenly influences shed  
On all the world below.

As giants may they run their race,  
Exulting in their might,  
As burning luminaries chase  
The gloom of hellish night.

As the great Sun of Righteousness  
Their healing wings display,  
And let their lustre [sic] still increase  
Unto the perfect day.<sup>60</sup>

This hymn establishes a connection between the practice of intercession and God’s past and ongoing work in the world. The Christological basis is evident from the start, with an appeal made directly to Jesus that he might give the word of mercy—resounding from his saving incarnation, death, and resurrection—“and let it swiftly run” (v. 1). The priests, presumably the clergy, are then mentioned, in the hope that they might themselves believe and thus be clothed with God’s salvation. In stanza two the scope is widened to include not only the priests but all Christ’s people, wearing the Spirit of holiness, by whose power they prove the abundance of “gospel grace” and “the joy of perfect love” (v. 2). Claimed by God out of his infinite love, disciples of Jesus Christ respond by grace in love, and thus become Christ’s lovers, filled with his light and life so that as Wesley prays they might shine “[i]llustrious as the sun” (v. 3). With the divine rays illuminating their path, and permeating their very lives, they run the “glorious circuit” set before them (v. 3). Through Jesus Christ, the light of the world (John 8:12), they are transformed into beacons of God’s light, which they are called to spread “where’er they go,” and thereby to emit gleams of heavenly glory “[o]n all the world below” (v. 4). Wesley prays further that Christ’s followers might finish the race in triumph, by bringing light into the darkness and vanquishing “the gloom of hellish night” (v. 5). As the “Sun of Righteousness” (v. 5; cf. Malachi 4:2), Jesus is identified to be the source of this light, through whom it is prayed that the luster of his people will increase unto the end, unto that day of perfection in the inexpressible brightness of

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<sup>60</sup> *A Collection of Hymns*, no. 434 (pp. 610-611).

the beatific vision. The witness of God's people, infused with divine light, serves to perpetuate the dawning of the gospel and its glory. As a plea for the full effects of this illuminating grace to be realized in and through Christ's messengers, intercession is a kind of participation in God's purposes in the world.

Wesley also expresses the participatory nature of intercession in these hymns in pneumatological key. In a two-part hymn, altered from Henry More's "On the Descent of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost,"<sup>61</sup> he refers frequently to the Spirit, invoked to promote such gifts as holiness, unity, and zeal among the faithful for their witness to the power of God in the world:

Father, if justly still we claim  
To us and ours the promise made,  
To us be graciously the same,  
And crown with living fire our head.

Our claim admit, and from above  
Of holiness the Spirit shower,  
Of wise discernment, humble love,  
And zeal, and unity, and power.

The Spirit of convincing speech,  
Of power demonstrative impart,  
Such as may every conscience reach,  
And sound the unbelieving heart.

The Spirit of refining fire,  
Searching the inmost of the mind,  
To purge all fierce and foul desire,  
And kindle life more pure and kind.

The Spirit of faith, in this Thy day,  
To break the power of cancelled sin,  
Tread down its strength, o'erturn its sway,  
And still the conquest more than win.

The Spirit breathe of inward life,  
Which in our hearts Thy laws may write;  
Then grief expires, and pain, and strife—

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<sup>61</sup> This detail is provided in The Bicentennial Edition of *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984—), vol. 7, p. 623. In the 1780 *Collection*, the two-part hymn is separated into hymns 444 (subtitled "Part I") and 445 ("Part II").

'Tis nature all, and all delight.<sup>62</sup>

In this first part, Wesley asks the Father to send the promised Spirit to “crown with living fire” the heads of God’s people (no. 444, v. 1). The signs of the Spirit’s descent, among them holiness, love, and convincing speech, are requested, so that “every conscience” may be reached, and “the unbelieving heart” won over by God’s display of power through the faithful (vv. 2-3). The Spirit’s work in purging “all fierce and foul desire,” breaking “the power of cancelled sin,” and breathing “inward life”—all this is invoked, in view of the realization of genuine delight in God (vv. 4-6).

The second part continues the basic theme of dynamic interaction between the Spirit and the believers in the co-operative extension of God’s work in the world:

On all the earth Thy Spirit shower,  
The earth in righteousness renew;  
Thy kingdom come, and hell’s o’erpower,  
And to Thy sceptre [sic] all subdue.

Like mighty wind, or torrent fierce,  
Let it opposers all o’errun,  
And every law of sin reverse,  
That faith and love may make all one.

Yea, let Thy Spirit in every place  
Its richer energy declare,  
While lovely tempers, fruits of grace,  
The kingdom of Thy Christ prepare.

Grant this, O holy God, and true!  
The ancient seers Thou didst inspire;  
To us perform the promise due,  
Descend, and crown us now with fire!<sup>63</sup>

Wesley here reiterates his understanding of the universal scope of intercession by asking God to shower the Spirit “[o]n all the earth,” and to subdue all that would hinder the coming of God’s kingdom (no. 445, v. 1). It is further prayed that the Spirit would obliterate sin, promote the unifying

<sup>62</sup> *A Collection of Hymns*, no. 444 (pp. 623-624).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 445 (pp. 624-625).

virtues of faith and love, and demonstrate “in every place” spiritual fruit-bearing capacity in preparation for the reign of Christ (vv. 2-3). The final stanza, peppered with two exclamation points, pulsates with energy. In particular, the closing line underlines the participatory goal of this prayer. Reminiscent of stanza one in this two-part hymn, here another appeal is made for God to crown the faithful with fire—the fire of the Holy Spirit. Wesley intimates that with this fire, God’s people are enabled to testify to the revitalizing power of the Spirit, and thereby to participate with God in the world-renewing work of salvation under Christ’s supremacy.

As Wesley suggests in these hymns of intercession, the practice of intercessory prayer can be understood as a kind of participation in God’s purposes for the world, a co-operation on the part of the faithful with God, both in the act of praying itself and beyond this practice in the commitment to corresponding action. While God is clearly given priority in this way of understanding prayer, for the hearing and answering of prayer are wholly God’s prerogatives, the act of intercession is nonetheless genuinely participatory or co-operative. Human intercession is a free human response to the divine invitation to communicate, and indeed commune, with God; as such, intercession is itself of significance in the achievement of the world’s salvation, for it aims at the extension of God’s work in and through the faithful. Not only does the act of intercession give witness to God’s saving economy, by recalling it and pointing to it, but the divine economy is somehow extended through this act and God’s answering of it.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, the value of prayer ultimately lies beyond the prayer itself, in God’s decision to respond in a certain way (a matter which is finally impenetrable to the human mind) and in the human commitment to corresponding action (a matter over which human beings have infinitely more control).<sup>65</sup> The call for Christians to intercede for the world entails both prayer and faith working by love, in complementary fashion. Genuine intercession leads to a certain way of action

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. the title of Ellis’s study, *Answering God*, as well as p. 200 in particular.

<sup>65</sup> Wainwright identifies such commitment as “[t]he task of sincere intercession”: “If the liturgy is an assembly-point, it is also a dispersal-point. . . . the dispersed witness of Christians takes place in ‘life and work’. Worshipers may glimpse the character and purposes of God and learn and experience the value-pattern of his kingdom in the Christian assembly. Their testimony is then to be borne in word and deed before their fellow human beings” (Wainwright, pp. 355-356).

in the world, that is, action guided by the spirit of Christian prayer, which at its root is an appeal for the coming of God's kingdom.<sup>66</sup> To reverse the old adage, *orare est laborare*. To pray is to work because to pray is to direct one's energy toward a goal, namely God and the achievement of God's design. Thus, in prayer humans present themselves to God and are even given the opportunity to share with God in his saving work in the world—to become, in Wesley's vivid language, “burning luminaries” of light divine, agents of God's grace who are crowned with the fire of the Holy Spirit.<sup>67</sup>

### **Conclusion: Principles of Participatory Intercession**

In his hymns of intercession, Wesley grounds the church's mission of intercession in the triune God's mission to redeem the world. In terms of scope, aim, and overall expression, human intercession mirrors the very intention and activity of God. God's offer of salvation is universal, and so too is the mission of intercession entrusted by God to the church and its members. The aim of such intercession is precisely the salvation of the world, as secured by the Trinity in the economy of salvation, and especially in the temporal missions of the Son and the Spirit, which these hymns of intercession vigorously recall.

To borrow and slightly adapt St. Paul's metaphor on the planting, watering, and eventual growth of seeds (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:6-9), these hymns, given their theological richness and depth, may be thought of as fertile theological soil. They constitute soil which has more or less been plowed over the years, with the early Methodists no doubt tilling diligently, and with a great harvest, in their frequent singing of these hymns (and others) and in their grace-empowered work of spreading scriptural holiness all across the land. Many seeds were planted, the fields were watered diligently, and God gave the growth (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:7). By the grace of God, much fruit has been borne through

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. Wainwright: “All intercession for the world must be governed by the prayer ‘Thy kingdom come’, because the values of the divine kingdom are, for human beings, salvation: love is concretized as justice, peace, health, freedom, life” (Wainwright, p. 355).

<sup>67</sup> *A Collection of Hymns*, no. 434, v. 5 (p. 611); no. 445, v. 4 (p. 625). On the relationship between work and prayer, see Wainwright, p. 26.

the efforts of our<sup>68</sup> spiritual ancestors called Methodists. Surely hymns like these have helped cultivate that good fruit, and in that way they are like soil.

As we reflect today on these hymns, written about two hundred fifty years ago, some questions might come to mind. Can this once-fertile soil yield another harvest? Do these words have anymore life to give? What, if anything at all, might we contemporary Christians in the global Methodist/Wesleyan family glean from these hymns of intercession as we seek in our various cultural contexts “to serve the present age”?<sup>69</sup>

I would like to suggest that there is something vital to glean from these hymns, and that with a critical reception they may have more fruit yet to bear. In their stress on God’s universal offer of salvation, actualized in the Father’s sending of the Son and the Spirit, they bring into focus several principles of participatory intercession which might contribute to an understanding of prayer as participation and inform the practice of this spiritual discipline still today. Three such principles stand out.

First, Wesley’s hymns of intercession attest to the importance of knowing the story of God’s redemptive mission. To participate through prayer in this mission requires, first of all, an understanding of it. These hymns evince such an understanding, predicated upon the universal scope of God’s audacious dream for the world’s salvation and his specific action in making this dream a reality, especially in the Father’s sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit into the world. This is the great saga of salvation, the scriptural and traditional story of Christian faith. Effective intercessory participation in the Trinity’s ultimate achievement of the divine design necessitates an immersion in this story.

Second, these hymns urge their audience to keep the story straight. They are thoroughly Christocentric, which indicates that Wesley believed intercession to be explicitly Christological in

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<sup>68</sup> Here, and in what follows, I am addressing specifically the anticipated audience at the Oxford Institute: fellow members of the global Methodist/Wesleyan family.

<sup>69</sup> Wesley, “A Charge to Keep I Have,” in *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures*, vol. 1, no. 188, v. 1, p. 58 (p. 61).

nature. It is to be done in the name and Spirit of Jesus Christ, the sole Savior of the world. Wesley was aware of the temptation to modify the essential doctrines of the faith—to let go of Christ, as he put it—but he prayed that Christ would keep his followers so that they might remain with him and thus be grounded in the truth of sound teaching:

Companions to the Man of Woe,  
O! let us still with Thee abide;  
Tempted, alas! to let Thee go,  
And start from the command aside,  
By every wind of doctrine driven,  
To seek a broader way to heaven.<sup>70</sup>

Against the winds of contrary teaching, Wesley confessed Christ to be God's way of salvation. This is the same message which he heard and received, a message handed down over the years from one generation in the faith to the next, through the heralds sent by Christ himself:

Thou thy messengers has sent  
Joyful tidings to proclaim,  
Willing we should all repent,  
Know salvation in thy name,  
Feel our sins by grace forgiven,  
Find in thee the way to heaven.<sup>71</sup>

As Christ's messengers make explicit in their proclamation of the good news, and as Wesley here recalls in intercessory fashion, the forgiveness of sins and the promise of full salvation are offered in Jesus Christ. To stray from Christ is to stray from the faith, and thus to do by definition something other than Christian intercession. Positively, to hold fast to Christ in faith and prayer is to discover abundant life in him and to share with him in making manifest here below a foretaste of final salvation in heaven. The practice of intercession, like the faith as a whole, has for Wesley an unequivocal and inalienable basis in Jesus Christ, as well as a spirited pneumatological element which also finds

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<sup>70</sup> *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, vol. 2, no. 71, v. 4, p. 101 (p. 243).

<sup>71</sup> *A Collection of Hymns*, no. 451, v. 2 (p. 631).

expression in these hymns. To participate through prayer and work in God's purposes in the world requires not only knowing the story of God's salvation but also keeping that story straight.

Third and finally, Wesley's hymns of intercession are aimed at getting the story out. They indicate the fittingness of intercession, in response to God's invitation, and indeed command, as a basis for Christian service in the world.<sup>72</sup> The work of ministry in the name of Jesus Christ, whether it be specifically evangelistic ministry, social justice ministry, or (as would be ideal) ministry which encompasses aspects of both, has the same overarching goal which Christ decreed to be for his followers the focus of prayer: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Christian ministry is directed, as is all intercession in general, toward the final achievement of the world's salvation in the eternal reign of God. Therefore it would not be a stretch to suggest that ministries of evangelism and social justice, and no doubt all ministries, are designed to be rooted in prayer. For as a means of grace, prayer amounts to a way of communion with God, of preparation for the promulgation of the gospel, and ultimately of participation in God's purposes in the world.

This participatory element, as highlighted in Wesley's hymns of intercession, might thus be summarized as follows: when Christians know the story of God's salvation in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit, keep the story straight, and get the story out through embodied ministry directed toward the consummation of God's action in and for the world, then they come by grace to participate, in prayer and in prayer-undergirded work, in God's saving purposes. Such participation is itself life-giving because it points and in some sense even contributes to the fulfillment of the gospel promise of a new heaven and new earth, which is precisely what this present world, groaning in its entirety for redemption, longs to see. To pray in this way, with keen attention to God's work in salvation history

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<sup>72</sup> E.g., Matthew 6:5-15, especially the connection between prayer and the practice of forgiveness made explicit in vv. 14-15: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." It is significant that this statement of Christ comes immediately after the Lord's Prayer, in which he instructs his followers to pray: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (v. 12). Receiving forgiveness from God through prayer is related in important ways to the act of forgiving others; hence, prayer and work go together.

and with a corresponding commitment to action informed by prayer, is to share through Christ and the Holy Spirit in the Father's mission of redemption, and thus to serve as a means of grace, a conduit of God's presence and peace, in a world on its way to full salvation in the triune God.

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