



INTERCESSION

Extract from 'Awakening Cry' by Pete Greig

I looked for a man among them who would ... stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so that I would not have to destroy it, but I found none. (Ezekiel 22.10)

Intercessory prayer

The Old Testament priesthood attempted to bridge the gap between God and humanity using gory sin-sacrifices. Ordinary, sinful people knew that if they brought their sacrificial offering to the temple, a priest would offer it up to God and minister his grace to them in return. Many great Biblical heroes modelled this intermediary, priestly role bridging the gap between God and his people, from Moses and Joshua to David and Nehemiah.

The New Testament teaches that Jesus is the ultimate High Priest bridging the gap between us and the Father through the cross and interceding perpetually on our behalf. (Romans 8:26-34, Hebrews 7:25) As those who are "in Christ Jesus" and "ministers of his grace", the church takes on this priestly role, as the body of the Great High Priest. The ministry of every Christian therefore, is essentially intercessory: to present the world to God (1 Peter 2:5) and God to the world (1 Peter 2:9).

Presenting the world to God involves worship, sacrifice and prayer. Presenting God to the world is prophetic and evangelistic: proclaiming the wonders we have seen and heard to all the earth. Intercession, therefore, may be seen as the joining of prayer and the prophetic. "As Christ's body and his new Israel, the church is anointed to a priesthood in the world - a mediatorial service that declares the will of God to human-kind and bears human need before God's throne in prayer."

Identifying with sin

"The Word became flesh..." (John 1:14)

These four words are arguably the most astounding in the Bible. It is stupefying that the eternal Word, who was "with God in the beginning" and through whom "all things were made", should choose to become human. But Jesus knew that, in order to become our Great High Priest and bridge the sin-gap that divorces us from God, he would have to become flesh. It was not enough for him to remain at the right hand of the Father to plead on our behalf, he had to become his prayers. By the same principle, as we intercede for individuals, communities and nations, we too will have to identify with them and even be willing to bear their sins and wounds.

Like many churches we have planted a number of new congregations over recent years. But one of the things that often surprises people is the fact that when we do so every member of the plant-team will move house into the new community. This can have quite an impact on local Estate Agents, schools and curry houses, but such identification is vital to the success



of the plant. It shows that

we are not just driving in from afar for a weekly meeting, but that we are deeply committed to the community itself. It is the model of incarnation, an intercessory act of identification with lost souls and people groups. And so, for instance, if there is bullying in the local school, it becomes a concern we share first hand because it now threatens our children too, if there is crime on the streets it now affects us. Equally, however, we discover and benefit from the good, positive aspects of the new culture. Our prayers, and indeed our lives, now flow from personal experience rather than distant concern.

Intercessory prayer can only really flow out of a deep level of personal identification. Compare the way we pray for a starving child in Africa to the way we would pray if it were our own child. The difference is not so much the scale of emotion as the level of intimacy. When distant strangers become intimate neighbours our prayers for them find passion. The Bible is full of such identification. Jeremiah identified so strongly with Israel's pain that he wrote: "Oh my anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain. Oh, the agony of my heart... the whole land lies in ruins." (Jeremiah 4:19) Hosea was even called to identify with Israel's unfaithfulness to the extent of marrying an adulterous wife. When Nehemiah heard about the disgrace of Israel, "I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said:

O Lord... I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. (1:4&6)

Sins of the nation

As we seek God for national revival, we have a priestly duty to confess the sins of our nation. In scripture this is never a detached theological exercise, but a heart-cry, often accompanied by fasting, mourning and the wearing of sackcloth and ashes. In such prayer, we acknowledge that the filth of society infects and affects us too, and we cry out that in God's perfect anger, he would remember mercy and spare us. Daniel prayed a remarkable intercessory prayer for Israel, owning its disobedience as his own, although he himself was "highly esteemed" by God (Daniel 10:11). "While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making my request to the Lord my God for his holy hill... Gabriel came to me in swift flight." (Daniel 9:21)

Sins of the church

Sadly, we must also own the sins of the church since no one part of the body can detach itself from the rest and claim purity. The terrible truth is that Christ's body is riddled with sickness. There is institutional inflexibility, disregard for scripture, a quenching of the Spirit, gross materialism, sexual immorality and division. No local expression can ignore the bigger problems, nor can any denomination, network or group achieve theological purity and holiness by separating off. Unity means loving one another enough to appreciate our



differences, share our successes and even carry the shame of each other's sin.

Unity

Charles Finney said that the two prerequisites for revival are prayer and unity. Without a commitment to work with other churches and bless other traditions, we cannot expect our prayers for revival to be heard. Unity must be our top priority, therefore, for at least three major reasons:

God commands unity.

Remarkably, Jesus only ever commanded us to do two things: "Preach the Gospel" (Mat.28.20) and "love one another" (John 13.34). It is the depth of our love for each other, not our doctrinal purity, that marks us out as Christians. Jesus' final prayer for the church was "that all of them may be one... so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (John 17.20-21). I suspect he knew that Satan's strategy against us down the years would be to "divide and conquer". He definitely knew that God bestows blessing wherever "brothers live together in unity". (Psalm 133)

Revival requires unity

The revival in Argentina is one of the longest and most documented in the history of the modern church. Its leaders, like Finney, place the issues of prayer (particularly spiritual warfare) and of church unity right at the heart of their model. Ed Silvoso, for example, lists unity as the primary step in "preparing an atmosphere for effective evangelism". As we pray for revival, therefore, it is essential that we allow God to convict us of any trace of competitiveness, jealousy or sectarian prejudice against other flavours of faith.

Unity is good for your health!

Unity does not require uniformity and it is actually a good thing that the church is made up of so many different denominations, streams and traditions. How sad it would be if we had to worship like clones, when God has made us all so different! The unity that "commands God's blessing" is relational, it involves loving - and liking - one another. We will never achieve unity around doctrine and I suspect God doesn't want us to all believe exactly the same things about everything anyway! Wesley, Whitefield and Edwards are excellent role models for us in this. They worked together wholeheartedly, spoke well of each other unreservedly and agreed to disagree on points of theology and practice. Fellowship with those who think differently is good for us, just as cross pollination is always healthier than inter-breeding. The prayer that prepares the way of the Lord goes far deeper than saying "please send revival" in a thousand different ways. It is moved by passion for the church and compassion for the lost. It identifies with the wounds and the sins of others and it wrestles, like Jacob, with God for the blessing. Jacob identified with Israel so completely that God gave it to him as his name. From



that moment onwards his

identity was utterly, perhaps terrifyingly, caught up in the promise of God for a nation. We too should embrace the name, the identity and the destiny of our communities. But priestly identification at such a level can cost a very great deal; having wrestled in prayer, Jacob limped for the rest of his life.

Praying the price

Prayer warriors will often carry scars that are righteous trophies of battle, the wounds of the faithful. I'm not talking about hurts and insecurities, which relate to the selfishness of others and need to be healed. I'm talking about the intercessory pain and anguish often experienced prior to breakthrough. The enemy will often target intercessors as they lead God's people into battle, and although they know the joy of breakthrough, they may also carry the scars of the fight.

Moving house is never easy. Lorraine Fenner, who heads up our church's intercessory team, has successfully prayed a number of people into houses that they had been struggling to buy. It is as though her prayers can cut through interminable legal red tape. But ironically, Lorraine's own family lived in cramped conditions for a number of years, unable to move as potential houses fell through at the last moment with depressing regularity. The apostle Paul experienced such frustration on an even bigger scale. Having been used to perform remarkable miracles, he lived his life with a 'thorn in the flesh' that God would not remove.

It is no coincidence that many prayer warriors have known a great deal of personal pain and this has somehow refined their faith and focused their eyes on eternity in a way that makes Satan tremble. Such intercessory warriors should be honoured and protected by the church because their ministry is probably the most sacrificial service Christians can give themselves to. That is why the church thrives in the blood of martyrs: martyrdom is the ultimate sacrifice, unlocking the purest power of the cross.

The price paid by those in revival is little compared to that of those who prayed it in and I suspect that particular honour awaits these faithful forerunners in heaven. "It may be that in the eyes of God it is a greater honour to be chosen prior to the outbreak of revival, to be an emissary and a channel of the living God in the preparation time, in the harder time, than in revival time itself. Masses of people then will benefit from the flooding of the rivers of God, but the honour of the battlefield, I suggest, is given to the pioneers who prepare the way for the later flood tides. It may be that you now live in the hour of greatest opportunity from God's standpoint. What an hour in which to be alive!"