

## Extemporaneous and Written Prayers: A Case of Both/And

A review of Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision. A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions*. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975; reprinted 2002. 405 + xxvi pp. Leather, \$26.00

Traditionally, Evangelicals have been very wary of written prayers. Many of our Evangelical forefathers in the Puritan era strenuously objected to the liturgical format of the Church of England, in which the corporate recitation of set prayers was a major element. For instance, a prominent item at the trial of John Bunyan (1628- 1688) in 1661 was Bunyan's adamant opposition to the use of the Book of Common Prayer (which contained the order and prayers of every Church of England service). Genuine prayer, he maintained, could only come from "the motions of the Holy Ghost within our hearts." Indeed, one of Bunyan's earliest works was his *I will pray with the Spirit*, written in 1662, in which he developed at length the position he had maintained at his trial. Set forms of prayer, Bunyan argued, hampered and impeded the Spirit's work in the believer's heart. Rightly he asserted that only "the Spirit can lift up the soul or heart to God in prayer"! By and large Bunyan's plea for extemporaneous prayer has been heeded by successive generations of Evangelicals.

However, while Bunyan was certainly right to stress the need for the Spirit to generate genuine prayer, even extemporaneous prayer has a way of becoming rote. Who among us has not had the experience, sometimes for a number of days, or even longer, of stale, lifeless prayer that repeatedly expresses itself in the same way and manner? Although we as Evangelicals do not have a formal liturgical tradition, our individual prayer-lives all too frequently do, for often they fall into the same patterns of expression and petition, patterns that easily can become ruts.

It is at times like these that we could use some outside help, a boost to get moving again. Arthur Bennett's *The Valley of Vision* is ideal in this regard. In print since 1975—and reprinted twice, most recently in 1983—it has just been reprinted, this time in a handsome cabra bonded leather edition that is the perfect size for carrying in one's jacket pocket. Subtitled *A collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions*, it contains prayers from the works of fourteen Puritan and Evangelical authors, including, surprise of surprises, Bunyan!

The word "Puritan" in the subtitle is clearly not meant to be taken in a strictly chronological sense. For Puritanism was historically a phenomenon of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Rather, Bennett employs this term to refer to a form of spirituality that dominated English-speaking Christianity from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, in which there was "the same spiritual language...the same code of values,...the same attitude towards the Christian religion,...the same God-centred aspirations" (Preface, page ix).

Bennett emphasizes that the book is not intended "to be read as a prayer manual." The prayers are best used as springboards for a believer's "communion with a transcendent and immanent God who on the ground of his nature and attributes calls forth all the powers of the redeemed soul in acts of total adoration and dedication" (Preface, page xi). The division of the prayers into a number of categories, such as "Redemption and Reconciliation," "Holy Aspirations," "Service and Ministry," and the fact that each prayer is given a title, greatly facilitates the use of the prayers. Moreover, Bennett has structured the prayers in such a way that they easily become the

springboard for deeper reflection and worship that he desires them to be. As Dallas Theological Seminary historian John Hannah has commented about the book: “A wonderful aid in expressing our personal thoughts to God, a spiritual classic, both sober and inspiring.” It is little wonder that this book has been the Banner of Truth’s best-selling volume in North America.

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