

Receiving, Praying and Worshipping Together in the Body of Christ



**Edith M
Humphrey**

Edith M. Humphrey is William F Orr Professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

Twenty-first century people instinctively play off the individual against the corporate. We warm to the words of CS Lewis when he speaks about God the Son coming particularly for each one of us, but stretch when he calls on us to see ourselves as naturally conjoined: 'Human beings are not [separate]. They look separate because you see them walking about separately. But then, we are so made that we can see only the present moment. If we could see the past, then of course it would look different ... If you could see humanity spread out in time, as God sees it, it would not look like a lot of separate things dotted about. It would look like one single growing thing – rather like a very complicated tree. Every individual would appear connected with every other.'¹

Our immediate reaction – fear that true identity will be lost in a web of interconnections – may help us realise how deeply we have been infected by the bug of individualism. Most naturally, 'I' understand my identity in terms of who I am *over against* others, and as a self-contained unit. Women today cry out to be identified *not* in terms of their relationships, and men *not* by their occupations. There is, we assume, a core to each one of us that is independent of every other being and action. As with all compelling ideas, this is a half-truth. For our uniqueness is expressed and indeed nurtured by means of our relations with others. We become fully who we are through the roles that we take on or that come to us.

For Christians, this mystery should not come as a complete surprise. At the very onset of the Scriptures, it is revealed that we are made after the image of that God who, we later learn, is alone One yet also Three. Indeed, John 1.1 presents the Son as the Word who is 'towards'

(Greek, *pros*) God, not just 'with' God, as our English versions put it. Father and Son show their true being and life by facing one another, not in isolation.

All too often, we even interpret the 'us' of Scriptures as addressing all the little 'MEs' that there are in the Church. It may strike many of us as shocking that the Bible speaks more frequently of our life together, and that there is really no such thing as private prayer. The saint who prays alone prays not only before God, but also in the presence of the angels and the communion of saints, who offer our devotional incense before the throne (Rev 5.8). Nothing is hidden that will not be revealed! We are surrounded by an unseen host that prays with and for us. Moreover, our prayers, if healthy, will be directed not only to our own needs and wants, but to others whom we love or whom we must learn to love.

Three texts – 2 Peter 1–2, Ephesians and Hebrews – help us to see how the personal and the corporate are not in conflict, whether we are speaking of what we receive together, how we pray together, or why we worship together. This emphasis is attested to in the whole of Scriptures, which also show us the grave danger we face when we think we can 'go it alone'.

Receiving together

In speaking about our life together in Christ, 2 Peter details both what we have received and our worship of that One as matters in which we are involved together:

His divine power has granted to us all things that have to do with life and godliness, through the knowledge of

the one who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you (all) may become partakers of the divine nature ... For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith

our identity is in Christ, whose identity is in the Holy Trinity, and we are being joined into one body

NOTES

1. CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: Collins, 1977), p. 153.

2. All translations are my own.

3. My concern here is not in the question of authorship, which is debated. We need not ask, is this written by Peter or a deceiver? Regardless of who actually put marks on parchment (or vellum), the letter stands under the authority of that apostle, reflects an eyewitness understanding (with others!) of the Transfiguration, and has been received by the Church as an authentic testimony to the glory of the God-Man. My use of 'Peter' to describe the author is not intended to imply a precise judgment, but to recognize the general apostolic authority of the letter.

4. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, N. Y.: St. Vladimir's Press, 2000), pp. 15–16.

5. CS Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), p. 249.

with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love ... For in this way, entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will be abundantly provided for you ... For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honour and glory from God the Father, and the voice was carried to him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased', we ourselves heard this very voice carried from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that every prophecy of Scripture is not self-interpreting. Indeed, no prophecy was ever produced by human will, but humans spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Pet 1.3–7, 11, 16–21)²

We see the list of strengths, from faith through to love, and immediately assume that the apostle is providing a recipe for individual spiritual growth. But we must notice that the 'you' in Greek is plural, not singular. Moreover, the last two virtues – brotherly affection and love – can only be expressed in community. We hear of those who share in the apostle's³ standing 'in Christ' and are reminded of the revelation we have received together through the apostles; indeed, what they saw is in line with what other prophets (plural) spoke, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Peter speaks about 'entrance' into God's own realm as something that we do together! Finally, the witness of some in the Church to others is a confirmation, a lamp that borrows its light from the Morning Star himself, and reminds us that God always has worked not through the pride of individual will, but through godly human beings whom he uses in concert.

We see God's light, and hear God's voice together. On Sinai, because of the terror of the people, only Moses basked in the glory of God; on Mount Tabor, Jesus took three with him, who camped around his light along with Moses and Elijah, sharing some glimpse of what God was doing and would do for his people. Though they were silent until the right time, they shared what they had witnessed and in this letter of 2 Peter the community is now urged to 'be attentive' to the apostolic testimony, for it shares of life itself! Even the

holy Scriptures are not self-interpreting, nor do they open themselves to the will of a single human being, but they have been given to the community, in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, as a light to the One who is the Light of lights.

Praying together

As we have received, so also we pray! The first chapter of Ephesians has a good deal to say about the 'you' plural and the 'us'. We have been blessed (1.3,6) we have been chosen (1.4), we have been adopted in love (1.5), we have been redeemed (1.7), we have been told the mystery (1.9–10), we have been sealed with the Spirit (whether Jew or Gentile, 1.10–13) and been taught to love (1.15); and so the apostle remembers the 'we' in his prayers (1.16). Our entire inheritance as children of God is not only as those who are 'in the Beloved One' (1.6–7) but 'in the saints' (1.18) – that is where the glory and the riches are found! The very one who has conquered death aims to join us all together, to knit together this entire cosmos that has come unravelled. He is the One who fills all in all (1.23). This grand scheme of the Father in the Lord Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, is expressed in the very mundane action to which we are called each day – indeed, each moment – when we pray, *our* Father who art in heaven! We have received life together, and so we pray together, even when we may find ourselves physically alone. For our identity is in Christ, whose identity is in the Holy Trinity, and we are being joined into one body, the mysterious oneness that Jesus prayed we might share, along with himself and the Father (and the Spirit!)

What Ephesians tells us is ratified by the Gospels and the very words of our Lord. How interesting that the disciples come to Jesus together, asking, teach *us* to pray: he gives them a prayer that both speaks of *our Father*, and addresses the Father personally (*thy* kingdom, in the intimate way of languages that distinguish singular and plural second person). Of course, Jesus did tell folks not to parade their piety (Mt 6.6) but his purpose in sending such hypocrites to the closet was to teach them authenticity, not to marginalise corporate prayer. For Jesus' own custom was to go to the synagogue to pray, and even when he prayed alone, his prayers were not private, for they concerned others at every step of the way (Lk 6.12, Lk 9.28, Mt 26.36–37). We too are called to pray together, and our prayers should concern not only ourselves, nor even the family of humankind, but the whole cosmos (cf. Eph 2.21–22; Rom 8.18–27). The very essence of prayer is that we are in Christ, energised by the Holy Spirit, and cooperating with the One who has called us to be his body. Personal prayers are part of the plan that God is unfolding before our very eyes! There are personal prayers, but no such thing as 'private' prayers in Christ – for *we* are the Temple of the living God, who is turning us towards each other and towards himself. As we have received together, so we pray.

Giving glory together

The most joyful mode of our prayers is not petition nor intercession, nor lament (though honesty makes these necessary), but the giving of glory. In one sense, of course, every breath that we take gives glory to him, for it bears witness to the One who is Life in himself, to the 'One who is,' and who causes to be, to the great *I Am*. Yet, human beings have a special calling in the natural world to give praise *consciously* to the Living God – not only to do it by being what we are, but to do it deliberately, and as a gift. As Alexander Schmemmann⁴ puts it, we are not simply *homo sapiens* ('knowing humanity') but *homo adorans* ('worshipping humanity'). Our entire calling is, Fr Schmemmann reminds us, priestly and eucharistic, as we receive what God has given, take it in our hands, and give it back to him with thanks.

In the New Testament, Hebrews pictures us surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses, after having recalled many past note-worthies, not simply to inspire and instruct, but to make them present to our imaginations: 'God provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect' (Heb 11.40). In other words, the whole point of the story is that we are part of a household of faith, learning what it means to worship in the midst of an enormous assembly that comprises members of the old and new covenant, and even unseen worshippers:

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in celebratory assembly and to the gathering of the firstborn whose names are inscribed in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb 12.22–24)

What word is spoken by his blood? Why, forgiveness, yes, but also the union of brothers and sisters, in contrast to the murder that marred the communion of the first siblings. Hebrews is enriched by Revelation 4–5, where we see the entire cosmos around the throne of God and the Lamb, the elders inspired by the Spirit to present the incense of prayers, and the whole assembly delighting to cast their own crowns before the king of kings, unconcerned about who is more dignified than the other.

We have received together, we pray together, we worship together! Indeed, all the Scriptures confirm this, from Genesis 12 where Abraham is called to bring forth a great nation by which all families on earth will be blessed, through Exodus 3.6 where God identifies himself as the God of the patriarchs, through Exodus 40.38 where God is present before the eyes of all Israel, through the Psalter where even the 'I' is a corporate word that calls out to the 'we' (e.g. Ps 122.1 and 51.10, 13), to Jeremiah 31 and 34, where new covenant is for the whole house of God's people, and not individualistic. Then there is the New Testament witness, from Luke 17.21, where the rule of God is 'among you', through Jesus' teaching that the 'Father seeks such *people* (plural) to worship him' (Jn 4.23), to Paul's teaching that

we are *together* the temple of the Lord (1 Cor 3.16–17), and so there is no place for pride or worship of individual apostolic gurus. None of this takes away from our *personal* relationship with the Lord, but enhances it!

Especially today, we need to recognise the danger of individualism, of privatisation. Both in Ezekiel 28.2 and Revelation 18.7, proud characters who sought to establish themselves as the 'I Am' lose everything. The probability of a tragic fate for one who would be all-in-himself or herself is sketched in the figure of Orual, found in the novel of CS Lewis.⁵ At the end of that character study, disappointed by life, jealous

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of the gifts of others and jaded by experience, Orual prays to the 'God of the Mountain' what she intends to be a strong, brutally honest, courageous prayer of resistance. The more she indulges her pride, defiantly nursing her wounds, the more she becomes a swirling mass of whining, self-seeking rhetoric. The deity permits her this verbal passionate fury, until, with words flowing over and over, speech fails her and she dwindles into silence. What could have been the death of her spirit, the swallowing of her whole self down the drain of self-indulgence, does not occur. For she is lifted out of herself to see things, and to see others, as they really are. It is not all about her, though she has had much to bear. Her life is intertwined with the lives of those whom she loves. Somehow, truth breaks into her cycle of inward-seeking death, and Orual, like Job, comes to herself, which means to be reconciled with those dearest to her. Finally, she has a face, and faces are made to face others!

Thanks be to God who can even save each one of us from the abyss of 'myself' and can lead us to understand that the reception of life, the context of prayer, and the direction of worship, are other-centered and not self-absorbed or self-defined. Our faith, our prayer and our worship are not a private exchange between me and God. No, these things concern and involve all of us together, in communion with the Lord! 'We all, with unveiled faces, behold the glory and are transformed together from glory to glory' (2 Cor 3.17–18). Toddlers engage in 'parallel play', but it is time for us to grow up. May our practices inhabit the 'we' aspect of the gospel – all of us in symphony together, glorifying the holy Trinity. Sometimes one speaks, sometimes another, sometimes a few, sometimes all – in harmony. For we have it on the very best authority that it is not good for man to be alone.