

The New Being by Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich is generally considered one of the century's outstanding and influential thinkers. After teaching theology and philosophy at various German universities, he came to the United States in 1933. For many years he was Professor of Philosophical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, then University Professor at Harvard University. His books include Systematic Theology; The Courage to Be; Dynamics of Faith; Love, Power and Justice; Morality and Beyond; and Theology of Culture. The New Being was published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1955. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted & Winnie Brock.

Chapter 18: The Paradox of Prayer

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ROMANS 8:26-27.

This passage of Romans about the Spirit interceding for us "with sighs too deep for words" belongs to the most mysterious of Paul's sayings. It expresses the experience of a man who knew how to pray and who, because he knew how to pray, said that he did *not* know how to pray. Perhaps we may draw from this confession of the apostle the conclusion that those amongst us who act as if they knew how to pray, do not know how at all. For this conclusion we could find much evidence in our daily experience. Ministers are used to praying publicly on all kinds of occasions, some of which offer themselves naturally to a prayer, others only artificially and against good taste. It is not unimportant to know the right hour for praying and the right hour for not praying. This is a warning, on the periphery of what Paul wants to say, but a necessary warning, especially to ministers and laymen who are leaders in the Church.

The next step leads us nearer to the center of Paul's problem: There are two main types of prayer, the fixed liturgical and the free spontaneous prayer. Both of them show the truth of Paul's assertion, that we do not know "to pray as we ought." The liturgical prayer often becomes mechanical or incomprehensible or both. The history of the Church has shown that this was the fate even of the Lord's Prayer. Paul certainly knew the "Our Father" when he wrote that we do not know how to pray. It does not prove that we know how to pray when we make a liturgical law out of the example of praying which Jesus gave to his disciples.

But if we turn from the formulated to the spontaneous prayer, we are not better off. Very often the spontaneous prayer is an ordinary conversation with somebody who is called "God," but who is actually another man to whom we tell things, often at great length, to whom we give thanks and of whom we ask favors. This certainly does not prove that we know how to pray.

The liturgical Churches which use classical formulas should ask themselves whether they do not prevent the people of *our* time from praying as they honestly can. And the non-liturgical Churches who give the freedom

to make up prayers at any moment, should ask themselves whether they do not profane prayer and deprive it of its mystery.

And now let us take a third step, into the center of Paul's thought. Whether at the right time or not, whether a formulated or a spontaneous prayer, the question is decisive whether a prayer is possible at all. According to Paul, it is humanly impossible. This we should never forget when we pray: We do something humanly impossible. We talk to somebody who is not somebody else, but who is nearer to us than we ourselves are. We address somebody who can never become an object of our address because he is always subject, always acting, always creating. We tell something to Him who knows not only what we tell Him but also all the unconscious tendencies out of which our conscious words grow. This is the reason why prayer is humanly impossible.

Out of this insight Paul gives a mysterious solution to the question of the right prayer: It is God Himself who prays through us, when we pray to Him. God Himself in us: that is what Spirit means. Spirit is another word for "God present," with shaking, inspiring, transforming power. Something in us, which is not we ourselves, intercedes before God for us. We cannot bridge the gap between God and ourselves even though the most intensive and frequent prayers; the gap between God and ourselves can be bridged only by God. And so Paul gives us the surprising picture of God interceding for us before Himself. Such symbols—like all symbols concerning God—are absurd if taken literally. They are profound if taken as genuine symbols. The symbol of God interceding before Himself for us says that God knows more about us than that of which we are conscious. He "searches the hearts of men." These are words which anticipate the present-day insight, of which we are rightly proud, that the small light of consciousness rises on a large basis of unconscious drives and images. But if this is so, who else can bring our whole being before God except God Himself, who alone knows the deep things in our soul?

This may help us also to understand the most mysterious part of Paul's description of prayer, namely, that the Spirit "intercedes with sighs too deep for words." Just because every prayer is humanly impossible, just because it brings deeper levels of our being before God than the level of consciousness, something happens in it that cannot be expressed in words. Words, created *by* and used *in* our conscious life, are not the essence of prayer. The essence of prayer is the act of God who is working in us and raises our whole being to Himself. The way in which this happens is called by Paul "sighing." Sighing is an expression of the weakness of our creaturely existence. Only in terms of wordless sighs can we approach God, and even these sighs are His work in us.

This finally answers a question often asked by Christians: Which kind of prayer is most adequate to our relation to God? The prayer in which we thank or the prayer in which we beg, the prayer of intercession or of confession or of praise? Paul does not make these distinctions. They are dependent on words; but the sighing of the Spirit in us is too deep for words and for the distinction of kinds of prayer. The Spiritual prayer is elevation to God in the power of God and it includes all forms of prayer.

A last word to those who feel that they cannot find the words of prayer and remain silent towards God. This may be lack of Spirit. It also may be that their silence is silent *prayer*, namely, the sighs which are too deep for words. Then He who searches the hearts of men, knows and hears.

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