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In Memoriam



Dr. William Stewart
1941–2003

ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ ἐν τῷ θεῷ . . . ὅταν ὁ Χριστὸς φανερωθῇ, ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν, τότε καὶ ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ.
Colossians 3:3–4

Dr. William (Bill) Wayne Stewart, son of Roy and Gladys Stewart, was born June 8, 1941, in Austin, Texas, where he died on December 4, 2003. Bill graduated from the University of Texas, Texas Tech University, and the University of Southern California.

Bill had a lifetime interest in education, serving as a director at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. He was especially interested in Christian education, serving on the Board of Brentwood Christian School and as an adjunct faculty member of Austin Graduate School of Theology.

Bill is survived by his wife Becky, his son Landon and daughter-in-law, Lana, two grandsons, Christian and Casey, and his sister, Jan Colley. Bill's first wife, Daphren, died in 1986.

From 1973 Bill was a member of Brentwood Oaks Church of Christ where he taught classes and for several years faithfully composed prayers for the order of worship. He was a man of deep personal faith who was sensitive to all those around him. He viewed all life as God's gift and sought to live in a manner showing gratitude for those who have gone before and concern for those who follow.

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Confession and Intercession
Two Spiritual Disciplines

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Michael R. Weed

In his love for his creatures, God gave them the possibility
of prayer, that great gift which allows us to share in his love.

Oscar Cullmann

Anyone visiting bookstores over the past several years will have noticed that the section titled “Spirituality” has steadily grown. Looking closely at the publications offered in such sections, one finds books ranging from Buddhist to Wiccan “spiritualities”—even “food spiritualities.” By anyone’s judgment, it is clear that many modern Americans are interested in spirituality. Whether, as some suggest, this interest merely expresses curiosity born of boredom, or, as others contend, it discloses a growing sickness of heart brought by a world grown too rational and mechanical¹—a world without transcendence and mystery—it is safe to say that there is a wide range of “spiritualities” being marketed to satisfy growing demands.

¹ See Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 1998, orig. 1950), 58.

We also see many modern Christians interested in being more spiritual. While this interest no doubt reflects that some of the same cultural forces are at work among Christians as in the wider population, it may also indicate neglected areas in our churches. Clearly, it does pose both a problem and an opportunity. On the one hand, there is every likelihood that in the present climate a sincere but uncritical quest for “spirituality” or “spiritual growth” may lead Christians into spiritualities that are damaging to Christian faith. On the other hand, not only does the desire for “spiritual growth”—however understood—offer opportunities for teaching, but also perhaps it is well that we live in an age that is more attentive to diet and exercise disciplines than any previous generation. Conceivably modern Christians may grasp that living the Christian life requires no less time and energy than physical health routines, professional responsibilities, and family obligations. Undoubtedly, present interest in spirituality provides both challenges and opportunities for the church.

In the following, I want to commend two basic and simple Christian “spiritual disciplines,” both dimensions of prayer. By “basic,” I mean that they are not part of a generic spirituality, but are fundamentally rooted in and reflective of Christian faith. By “simple,” I mean uncomplicated, easy to understand and practice. In commending these disciplines, I want to look at 1 John. And I think it is significant that, like today, 1 John addresses a situation in which the church is struggling with a false spirituality.

First John: Christian Spirituality as Perfection in God’s Love

First John is written near the end of the first century to a church struggling to survive a painful division caused by a gnostic-type spirituality.²

²Robert Kysar cautions against viewing the separatists as “pure docetists” or “antinomians,” but suggests that they were predecessors of later gnostic Christianity. Robert Kysar, “John, Epistles of,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (vol. 3; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 905.

Some who were questioning the incarnation (and crucifixion) as compromising Christ's divinity (4:2; 5:6-8), had withdrawn from the church (2:19) and were attracting favorable attention from outsiders (4:5).³ Those who had left were claiming "to be in the light" (2:9), to "know Christ" (2:4), and to be "without sin" (1:18). Possibly, given the several times 1 John uses the term "perfection," the separatists may have viewed themselves to have achieved "spiritual perfection."

Encouraging the church not to be deceived by exponents of this false spirituality (2:26; 3:7), 1 John charges that the separatists are in the grip of the Antichrist (2:22; 4:3). They do not practice love of the brethren (2:9-11), are without moral restraint (3:4-10), and are guilty of mortal sin (5:16). Further, perhaps in opposition to separatist views dismissing the importance of actions done "in the flesh," 1 John asserts that "sinlessness," or perfection, is received through God's forgiveness secured through the death of Christ (in the body) and the confession of one's sins:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar . . . (1:8-10)

Further, true spiritual "perfection" is perfection in God's own nature as disclosed in Christ. First John exhorts:

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, . . . that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. . . . if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (4:9-12)

Clearly, love for one another is one of the most fundamental ways in which Christians demonstrate that they are born of God, have entered into his love,

³"It may be that we should imagine a parent body with a number of smaller gatherings of Christians (perhaps house churches)," Kysar, "John, Epistles of," 905.

and visibly manifest his love in their lives (see 4:7, 16). And it is in this context that 1 John leads us to an understanding of prayer.

Here it is important to remind ourselves that in distinction from heathen prayer, biblical prayer does not address gods or a god who exists within the cosmos.⁴ Biblical prayer addresses the Creator and Sustainer of all things who, through Christ, has disclosed the redemptive purposes which lie behind the entirety of the universe. Thus, in the first instance, biblical prayer shifts the attentions of the self-centered self to the reality of God to whom, as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer, the one praying owes his very existence and to whose purposes as disclosed in Christ he commits and orders his life. Further, prayer is itself understood as God's gift to us: a gift which enables us to share in God's love.⁵

Confession: "Daily Baptism" (Augustine)

Implicit in the very act of Christian prayer is the recognition that without this possibility, human life can only be lived in the service of finite and even destructive goals and desires. For it is in praying that we not only acknowledge and exercise our relationship with the Father; we also evidence and extend the Father's love to others whom the Father has created.

As prayer, confession recognizes our dependence on God as the Creator and Sustainer of all things. We remember that he creates out of no necessity and that none of us, and nothing around us, exists of necessity, nor has any "right" to exist. Our very existence is itself a gift—grace—and proclaims the generosity and goodness of the Creator and Sustainer of all things. In this very acknowledgment we are painfully aware that we each tend to pursue our lives as if we were our own creators.

⁴ Cf. Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (South Bend: Notre Dame Press: 1982).

⁵ Oscar Cullmann, *Prayer in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 132f.

To address God through Christ acknowledges that it is Christ who has restored the creation's torn relationship with its Creator. We acknowledge that we constantly depend upon the grace of the cross to make our way in the world without doing harm—much less to accomplish any lasting good.

Thus, prior to the explicit confession of sins, prayer itself recognizes our immersion in the immediate world and our preoccupation with its countless distractions—a world which 1 John reminds us “passes away” (2:15–17). The very act of prayer repositions our lives before God and recovers the true context in which our lives are shaped and pursued.

Prayers of confession are understood to involve repentance for specific sins and for aspects of our lives—thoughts and actions—not in keeping with God's purposes manifested in and through Christ. Nonetheless, confession may play an even more profound role in the Christian life than is commonly realized. The discipline of regularly examining one's conscience frequently leads to the recognition of character flaws, blemishes, and other unflattering characteristics of our innermost selves. On occasion, our self-examination penetrates behind particular sins we confess to the discovery of heretofore-unrecognized attitudes and desires hidden as much from ourselves as from others.

A classic example is found in Augustine's *Confessions* (ca. 398 A.D.). Looking back at his life, Augustine remembered that as a sixteen-year-old, he and friends had stolen pears. He asks, “What was it in that theft of mine that caused me such delight?” And he reflects:

Those pears were truly pleasant to the sight, but it was not for them that my miserable soul lusted, for I had an abundance of better pears. I stole those simply that I might steal, for, having stolen them, I threw them away. My sole gratification in them was my own sin, which I was pleased to

enjoy; for, if any one of these pears entered my mouth, the only good flavor it had was my sin in eating it.⁶

Continuing, Augustine contemplates the “shadowy beauty which attends the deceptions of vice.”

Such are the insights offered through confession’s inventory of the heart’s depths. In this fashion confession of sin offers crucial insight—however embarrassing or painful—into our capacities not only for being deceived but also for dishonesty with ourselves. Confession may even uncover subtle strategies of self-deception masking themselves behind forms of piety. At some point, we find ourselves entering a “hall of mirrors” and are forced to admit the limits of fully understanding our innermost selves. Here, we can only turn away from ourselves to the Father, acknowledging that we receive our lives from him who sees and understands all, confessing we are in many ways a mystery to ourselves, and entrusting our lives to him who receives those who approach with “broken and contrite hearts.”

Further, it is not only the case that confession and pardon lead beyond our sins and enable us to go forward into a future unburdened by the guilt of our sinful pasts. As important as this is, it still may leave us overwhelmed with by a sense of guilt and by burdensome memories of embarrassing, regrettable, or shameful deeds and undeniable harm done to others. Addressing the “weight of the forgiven past,” Jacques Ellul suggests that through confession of our sins we do not merely receive release from our past, as if it had never existed. Rather, Ellul observes:

If I am freed and delivered from my past, this is not because it has disappeared. Quite the reverse! Nothing has disappeared. The past is not a finished past. It is a regathered past. God has regathered it. He grasps it, assumes it, takes charge of it, and recapitulates it in Christ. My past, fortunately, is no longer my own. But it has not been obliterated. It has come into the hands of God where the totality of my life is accumulating bit by bit and being built up in

⁶ Augustine, *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion* (trans. Albert C. Outler; Library of Christian Classics 7; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 56.

the truth. Thus the past lives, not in the hell of my unconsciousness, but in the holiness of God.⁷

Ellul's observations call to mind Joseph's words to his brothers, "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good . . ." (Gen. 50:20). Ellul suggests that God is able to "regather" our confessed pasts, including those intentions and actions we meant for evil, and in the mystery of his own ways to incorporate them into the advance of his redemptive purposes. This appears to be the sense of a Portuguese proverb: "God writes straight, but with crooked lines."⁸ Our honest prayers of confession enable God to transform the "crooked lines" our lives and gather them into his history of reconciliation and transcendent purposes.

Intercession: "Loving our neighbor on our knees"⁹

A second discipline which is also enjoined in 1 John is that of intercessory prayer. First John 5:14–15 reads:

And this is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.

Then, following immediately upon "if we ask anything" and "whatever we ask," 1 John directs his readers' attention not to petitions regarding themselves; rather, he directs them to others: "If you see your brother or sister . . . ask, and God will give him life . . ."¹⁰ Notice that intercession here does not wait upon an invitation; it does not depend upon requests nor upon a full awareness of the circumstances of the neighbor. In 1 John 3:22 we read, ". . . we receive whatever we ask because we obey his commandments . . ." Verse

⁷ Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 140.

⁸ Cullmann, *Prayer in the New Testament*, 134.

⁹ Louis Cassels, *Christian Primer* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 58f.

¹⁰ Whether the qualification regarding prayer for "mortal sins" designates the "separatists" whom 1 John associates with the Antichrist or the sin of unbelief (John 16:9) is uncertain. Presumably the readers of 1 John understood the reference.

23 then states, “And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he commanded us.” As appropriate as requests for prayers and informed prayers are, 1 John suggests that the underlying initiative for intercessory prayer arises from within the heart of the Christian—a heart being shaped and perfected in God’s love (cf. 2:5).

Regarding intercessory prayer, Oscar Cullmann states:

If we pray for our fellow human beings, we come close to entering into God’s loving will particularly clearly. For God equally loves those for whom we pray, and does so far more than we are capable of. God’s will is that by our intercession (made possible to us through him) our love shall unite with his, and thus we shall contribute to the bulwark of love with which God surrounds our fellow men and women.¹¹

A fundamental sign of God’s love in the believer’s life is love for one’s neighbors: “. . . if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” (4:12).

John’s “if you see your brother” attributes to believers an intentional awareness or alertness to the needs and interests of others. This is a fundamental manifestation of God’s own nature being realized in and among those being drawn into and perfected in fellowship “with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3).

Significantly, 1 John suggests that the community of believers, whose fellowship participates in and reflects that of the Father and the Son (1:3), is now entrusted with the responsibility and privilege of making intercession on behalf of one another. In Jewish piety, intercession was offered by Moses, by certain prophets, and (in late Judaism) by martyrs. First John suggests that all believers are united with God and are entrusted with the ministry of

¹¹ Oscar Cullmann, *Prayer in the New Testament*, 133.

intercession as an expression of the life of God in which the church participates and which it represents to the world.¹²

The Interdependence of Confession and Intercession

We have suggested that prayers of confession and prayers of intercession are much more closely related than is commonly recognized. The soul-searching self-examination evoked by prayers of confession brings to consciousness an awareness of the depth and complexity of human perversity. In addition, it may awaken a consciousness of the extent of the damage done by our selfish and rebellious thoughts and actions.

Garrison Keillor vividly—perhaps too vividly—captures the dawning realization of this fact in one of his Lake Wobegone stories. On the verge of having an affair with a colleague, Jim stands in front of his home, struggling with his conscience as he reflectively surveys his neighborhood:

All these houses and all these families—my infidelity would somehow shake them. It will pollute the drinking water. It will make noxious gases come out of the ventilators in the elementary school. . . . If I go to Chicago with this woman who is not my wife, somehow the school patrol will forget to guard the intersection and someone's child will be injured. A sixth grade teacher will think, "What the hell," and eliminate South America from geography. . . . Somehow my adultery will cause the man in the grocery store to say, "To hell with the Health Department. This sausage was good yesterday—it certainly can't be any worse today."¹³

We never sin alone; there are no private sins. Even our most secret sins have far-reaching social consequences. Any sin injures the lives of others and has repercussions extending across generations.

As confessional prayer brings us to an awareness of the interconnectedness of our lives with the lives of countless others, we are also made aware of the damage to others—past, present, and future—wrought

¹² Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1992; German original 1975), 248f.

¹³ I am indebted to an article by Jim Forest for this reference. See his "Rest for Our Souls," *Touchstone* 16 (October, 2003): 29.

by both our carelessly indifferent and our calculatedly willful actions. We are moved not only to confess our own sins but also to make intercession to the Father on behalf of others whom we have injured.

As confession leads to intercession, intercession may turn or return us to confession. Being entrusted with the privilege and responsibility of making intercessory prayers on behalf of others may lead us to confess sins in our own lives. Not infrequently, out of concern for those for whom we would intercede, we find ourselves concerned that no obstacles in our own lives limit our petitions for the Father's care for those on behalf of whom we intercede. Not surprisingly, confession of our own sins often enters our intercessory prayers as a prelude to approaching the Father on behalf of others.

Conclusion

We have reviewed two basic and simple Christian disciplines, confession and intercession. A word of clarification is now in order. While these disciplines are basic and fundamental, they also presume and are reflective of an almost incomprehensibly profound reality. In Christ, God is now taking us into his own life.

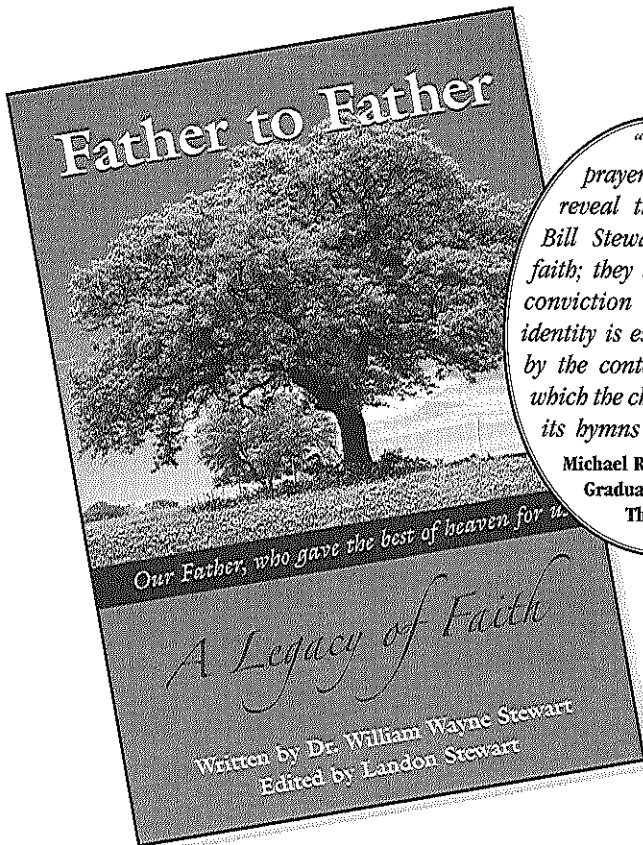
First John indicates that our fellowship with one another is reflective of our fellowship with the Father (1:3, 7). More specifically—and more importantly—through the incarnation, the Father is incorporating us into his own life, exemplified in the self-expending love seen in the cross (3:16; 4:10).¹⁴ Succinctly, Christian spiritual growth is perfection in God's love (2:4; 4:12, 17).

¹⁴ The underlying conceptual framework of this Trinitarian theology is more fully reflected in the Fourth Gospel. See, for example, 17:20-23 “. . . that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us . . . I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one . . .”

It is in this underlying reality that Christian prayer is grounded and by which it is guided. Our prayers of confession sustain us in the life which is God's love, a life which we can never deserve and can only receive from the Creator and Sustainer of all things, the Father of Jesus Christ. Intercession entails our taking before the Father the needs and concerns of others who are, like ourselves, created, sustained, and redeemed in Christ.

There are times in life when prayer is needed, but the words just won't come. We know it's appropriate to cast all our cares on Him—as well as our thanksgiving and praise—but we struggle to find the words. To that end, the prayers in *Father to Father* are offered as models of thoughtful, contemplative prayers to assist us in our own prayer life.

– from the Foreword by Landon Stewart



"These prayers not only reveal the depth of Bill Stewart's personal faith; they also convey his conviction that Christian identity is essentially shaped by the content of the faith which the church affirms in its hymns and prayers."

Michael R. Weed, Austin
Graduate School of
Theology

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Craig Bowman is Associate Professor of Old Testament at Rochester College.

Allan J. McNicol is A. B. Cox Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology.

Jeffrey Peterson is Jack and Ruth Wright Associate Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

J. J. M. Roberts is William Henry Green Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary

R. Mark Shipp is Pat E. Harrell Associate Professor of Old Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology.

Michael R. Weed is Billie Gunn Hocott Professor of Theology and Ethics at Austin Graduate School of Theology.

David Worley is Chancellor of the Austin Graduate School of Theology and Professor of Bible.