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WHAT'S WRONG WITH PRAYING FOR THE DEAD?

By David Phillips

Many of the argument against praying for the dead were well set out by Church Association in some of the Tracts produced in the 19th Century, a summary of which accompanies this article. However, many at the time and since tried to argue that whilst they did not believe in purgatory they still felt it was right to pray for the dead since it clearly has strong roots in tradition. Many prominent early Christians, such as Augustine, said they prayed for the dead and they clearly did not believe in purgatory. Even though Scripture does not commend the practice, should we still pray for the dead on the basis of tradition?

We cannot ignore later history as if it never happened. The practice of praying for the dead naturally implies that we can influence the present state of those who are dead. This in turn developed over time into the full-blown medieval theology of purgatory. It has not been argued that prayer can spring the lost from hell but it does spring from a failure to believe the heart of the gospel message. We are justified by faith in Christ, and stand or fall on this as is abundantly plain from passages such as John 3.18 and Mark 16.16. If, as came to be taught, our salvation depends in part upon our works, and our own righteousness then naturally we are left wondering about those who die with some faith, but apparently lacking in righteousness. The doctrine of purgatory thus follows; some who have died in faith are nevertheless not yet pure when they die and thus there is a period of purification. This all makes logical sense if you fail to believe the basic fact that we are made righteous through faith in Christ, that His righteousness becomes our righteousness (what the reformers came to call - alien righteousness - it is not our own in origin).

In a time of great corruption the medieval Church turned this error into a means of gain; there was money to be made. It was taught that a mass said on behalf of a dead person (or a living for that matter) would help purify their soul, therefore the rich could endow chapels, churches and priests to perform this service both for dead relatives and for themselves when they died. It was taught that the saints, who had sufficient righteousness to go straight to heaven, also had some merit in reserve. This treasury of merit could be unlocked by the Church, and documents to this effect, called indulgences, could be bought. Thus sin was full grown, and it was against this gross teaching that the Reformers protested.

All this shows the folly of building on something which has no basis in Scripture and goes against what Scripture teaches. Later history shows that tradition cannot justify this practice.

But it also makes no sense to pray for the dead. Augustine was a clear and lucid theologian but he prayed for his mother Veronica and when he tried to explain why his argument lacked all clarity. The reason for his prayer was not reason, but sentiment and this is so often the case. People feel that they should pray for lost loved ones or even those, like Diana, whom they had never known. Whilst we can understand how in grief people might think like this, it is not something to encourage because it is to foster a lie, we cannot influence the state of those who die. Moreover if people think they can, then they have missed the heart of the gospel. We should not deceive people but gently and firmly teach them the right path.

Reformed Christians are perfectly content to thank and praise God for those who have gone before in the faith. We thank God for loved ones whom in his grace and goodness He has brought into our path, and we thank God for those individuals who maybe long dead but who nevertheless have been a help and inspiration to us. But this too is turned on its head by some. They will argue that all

speaking to God is prayer. Therefore thanking God for those who have died is prayer. So there is nothing wrong in prayer for the dead. This is a deceitful argument, but sadly it is used. The distinction of 'thanks for' and 'prayer for' seems lost and therefore sometimes for clarity it is necessary to state plainly that intercession for the dead is wrong.

The other common argument deployed is that we should pray for the dead because we are all part of the Communion of the Saints. It is even argued that protestants have lost sight of this concept and don't pray for the dead because of some deficiency in our idea of the Church. But this too is a specious argument. We do have fellowship with those in glory, but it is a different fellowship to those on earth. Those who have gone before are a cloud of witnesses, it is their example of faith that spurs us on. We are neither told to pray for them, nor that they pray for us. Rather it is faith that is set before us in Hebrews 11.

In all these arguments we need to return to Scripture. We believe in the sufficiency of Scripture, that it teaches us all things necessary for salvation (Article 6). Yet in all Scripture there is nothing that would make us think that prayer for the dead is necessary. Some would argue that though Scripture is silent we can justify the practice on the basis of tradition or reason. But both tradition and reason show us the contrary. It is not a neutral issue on which we are free to decide, rather prayer for the dead undermines the very heart of the gospel, that we are justified by faith in Christ alone.

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