

The Centrality of Prayer Part 4

Canonical Prayer

We will now turn to the topic of Canonical Prayer. What is meant by “Canonical”? The word “canon” refers to a ruler or tool of measurement. We have a canon of Scripture, for example, which is a list of authoritative books called the Bible. There are also Church Canons which regulate the life of our Orthodox Church. These are standards by which we measure ourselves to see if we are following the right path. These standards give structure to our life and help us live within the Community not simply as individuals but as *members of the body* of Christ.

The best kind of prayer is always the one that God prays through us. Remember “Thine Own of Thine Own we offer unto Thee” from the Liturgy! The Psalmist says, “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise” (Psalm 51:15). The Psalmist wants the Lord to open his lips. What does this mean? Does this mean that the Psalmist at this point in his prayer, at the end of verse 15, will cease praying and wait patiently for God to pull the invisible puppet strings moving his mouth and miraculously make sound come forth? No! From the time the Psalmist started praying “Have mercy on me, O God ...” in verse 1, God was already active and all that needed to be done was for him to go with the flow and continue with verses 16-19. To put it another way, when he started reciting God’s Word, God was simultaneously opening his mouth. The Psalmist’s opening of his mouth was God opening his mouth. His mouth was opened by God by the Psalm itself. Canonical Prayer measures all prayer and forms and indeed transforms the one who prays. At the beginning of Genesis, we read “And God said, ‘let there be’ and ‘there was’ (Gen 1:3). God’s Word has the power to bring into existence what did not exist before it was uttered. When God’s word proceeds from our mouths, as God opens them, we are experiencing that same creative power. Through practice and the alignment of our will to His, we move closer to being, in practice, what we are by creation, God’s image. This is the path: from our selves as we imagine them to be (a false image) toward God our Creator and ultimately back to the Image of God (our true selves).

“Personal” prayers, as defined earlier, may or may not be said. That is, they can be considered optional. On the contrary, Canonical prayer is enjoined on every believer. This is so because God expects it and because we cannot bear spiritual fruit without it. For example, Jesus told his disciples to turn away from “individualistic” prayer toward canonical prayer when he said: “when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven ...’ This prayer which Jesus commands is called the Lord’s Prayer. Notice Jesus puts *specific* words into the disciple’s mouths. Indeed, he opens their mouths. The Lord’s Prayer is not the only Canonical prayer, of course, but it certainly is at the top of the list. God initiates the Conversation of prayer; this is his Call and he also puts in our mouths the appropriate Response. The Call and Response, both are his.

The Lord’s prayer should be a part of regular daily prayer, at the very least in the evening and morning. In the next installment we will look at important characteristics of canonical prayer.