

IN RESPONSE - "SEEK THE LORD" (Isaiah 55:6)

by Dennis Prutow

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The appropriate response to conviction and awakening and attendant fear is to seek the face God. This is the essence of Puritan evangelism. Isaiah 55:6 epitomizes the message. "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near." As we apply this text, we ought to remember the distinction between the image of God in the broad sense, the natural image, and the image of God in the narrow sense, the moral image. The former is defaced; the latter is effaced. Because remnants of the image of God in the broad sense remain, all human beings retain certain natural abilities. They are devoid of all moral ability in the sense of any ability to do spiritual good. Natural good is, however, in their grasp. Seeking involves the use of these *natural abilities*.

Such a notion should not seem highly unusual. For example, we encourage our children to memorize Scripture. Our procedure is to drill our unconverted little ones in the word of God. We want them to get that word in their little minds. We know once the word of God is in their little heads, there is a fertile field for the Spirit of God to work upon them and convert them to faith in Christ. We expect our children to use their natural abilities to learn the word of God. If they do not, we know the likelihood of our children coming to faith in Christ is diminished immeasurably. The use of natural ability is therefore important. The Westminster Confession of Faith says,

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the *ordinary means*, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them (italics added).¹

In one sense, the Bible is an ordinary book. You read it like an ordinary book. You grasp the meaning of the book by understanding the meaning of the words,

the grammar and syntax. On the *natural level* you can *formally* understand the message of the Bible using *ordinary means*. However, there is a far more important way to understand the Bible, this is *saving understanding*.

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, *we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the word...* (italics added).²

This means men and women ought to apply themselves to the word of God exerting their ordinary natural abilities to understand the Scriptures. It is only when men and women and boys and girls do this that they may expect the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit to come upon them and effectually work in them.

Jonathan Edwards discusses this in a sermon on Noah from Genesis 6:22 called, "The Manner in Which the Salvation of the Soul is to be Sought."³ Edwards gives this doctrine: "*We should be willing to engage in and go through great undertakings, in order to our salvation.*"⁴ He closes his exposition of the doctrine by saying of Noah, "Such an undertaking he engaged in and went through in order to a *temporal* salvation. How great an undertaking then should men be willing to engage in and go through in order to their *eternal* salvation."⁵ I have put it this way, in the negative, from my own pulpit. "Men and women will spare no exertion, financial outlay or amount of travel to find the

proper help and care for their bodies tormented by physical ailments but they will hardly walk across the street to receive care for their souls." This little walk across the street to hear the word of God might make all the difference, *eternally*.

Our Lord speaks in similar terms in Luke 13:24, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able." Christ calls us to exert much energy, even to agonize with regard to our salvation. If we strive for our temporal good, ought we not to strain all our natural abilities and strive for our eternal good?

We have already said, the prime motive for seeking God is fear. This is Holy Spirit induced fear. When we encourage men and women to seek God, their fear may indeed induce them to do so. John Gerstner points out this seeking is therefore motivated by self-interest and self-preservation rather than by love. "The principle of self-interest is the sinners' only point of contact with the gospel which they hate."⁶ Gerstner then says,

If men actually do become professing Christians from the principles of fear and self-interest alone, they are not true Christians. A man may start the search for conversion motivated by fear and self-interest, but he can never end it that way. Self-interest may lead him to seek for conversion, which conversion would supplant the principle of self-interest by God interest.⁷

Men and women may seek God *out of fear* but they must come to the place of serving God *out of love*. They love Christ and therefore obey Him. The love of Christ constrains them. This change in attitude and disposition from fear to love is therefore very crucial. Conviction producing fear promotes seeking. Only God can fill a fearful heart with love.

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⁶ Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards, Evangelist*, 64.

⁷ *Ibid.*

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, 1, 7.

² Westminster Confession of Faith, 1, 6.

³ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 2:51-57.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

IN RESPONSE - SEEK THE LORD USING THE MEANS OF GRACE

by Dennis Prutow

What does it mean to seek the Lord? The proper method of seeking involves man's doing all that is within his natural power. Hearing the word, being honest in his dealings with neighbors, living peaceably with all men—in fact, all Christian duties in so far as they fall within the power of the unconverted are included.¹

One Christian duty is attending the means of grace.

The work we have to do is not an obedience to only some, but to all the commands of God; a compliance with every institution of worship; a diligent use of all the means of grace; a doing of all duty towards God and towards man.²

John Gerstner explains seeking.

Now this is what you do. This is what anybody talking to me if I were in this state of a seeker would be telling me, "Read this book." Faith comes by hearing. That doesn't mean every time you hear the message from this book, or read it, faith is generated. But what it does mean is that when God gives faith it's always in connection with the hearing of the message of this book....

A seeker would also be where you are now, in the house of God, in a Reformed church, on the Sabbath Day, paying attention to the exposition of truth, encountering God as the Spirit works with you. If you are converted, it's almost inevitably in connection with this Word and most usually in connection with the exposition of this Word in the house of God, as the Puritans would observe time and time again. This is the most likely place for a person to be converted....³

The Puritan Thomas Shepard exhorts, "'Seek the Lord and his strength, seek his face evermore;' in all means, at all times,

but seek his strength then...."⁴ The outward and ordinary means are God's ordinances, primarily the reading and preaching of God's word and prayer.⁵ "O, labor for more of Christ in his servants, in his ordinances, in his providences, in his saints...."⁶ Matthew Henry adds, commenting on Romans 12:2,

But be you transformed, that is, "use the means which God hath appointed and ordained for it." It is God that turns us, and then we are turned; but we must frame our doings to turn, Hos. v. 4. [That is,] "Lay your souls under the changing transforming influences of the Spirit; seek God for grace in all the means of grace."⁷

Matthew Henry refers to Hosea 5:4 which, in the Authorized Version, reads, "They will not frame their doings to turn unto their God: for the spirit of whoredoms [is] in the midst of them, and they have not known the Lord." What does it mean that the people would not frame their doings to turn to God?

They would not *consider their ways*, nor dispose themselves into a serious temper, nor apply their minds to think of those things that would bring them to God. It is true we cannot by our own power, without the special grace of God, turn to him; but we may by the due improvement of our own faculties, and the common aids of his Spirit, *frame our doings* to turn to him. Those that will not do this, that *prepare not their hearts to seek the Lord* (2 Chron. xii. 14), owe it to themselves that they are not turned....⁸

Rehoboam reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem. "He did evil because he did not set his heart to seek the Lord" (2 Chronicles 12:14). The Authorized Version says, "And he did evil, because he prepared not his heart to seek the Lord." Psalm 78:8 says something similar. Israel

was to teach their children. We too must teach our children to "not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not prepare its heart and whose spirit was not faithful to God." J. A. Alexander affirms *this* type of preparation. "To prepare the heart is to dispose or devote it to God's service."⁹ In what sense? In that sense already described by Matthew Henry. Men and women ought to use their *natural abilities* under the constraints of conviction and the fear of eternal destruction, to avail themselves of the means of grace and thus prepare themselves to meet with God. Again, Edwards notes, "It is in your power to attend all the ordinances, and all the public and private duties of religion, and to do it with your might."¹⁰ In other words, awakened sinners, persons under conviction, ought to use their hands to read the Bible rather than pornography. They ought to use their feet to go to a place of worship rather than to a tavern or brothel. They ought to use their ears to hear the gospel rather than gangster rap. They ought to use their minds to understand the gospel rather than ply the pages of worldly literature. The motive is fear, fear of judgment. Edwards says in the same sermon, "Such a manner of seeking is needful to prepare persons for the kingdom of God."¹¹ Such seeking is primarily a use of the means of grace.

As Edwards also tells us, this seeking "is the ordinary means that God makes use of to bring persons to an acquaintance with themselves, to a sight of their own hearts, to a sense of their own helplessness, and to a despair of their own in their own strength and righteousness."¹² If the appropriate response of sinners under conviction is to seek the Lord, we ought to give them that message and encourage them in this process.

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¹ John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 3:50-51.

² *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 2:52.

³ John H. Gerstner, *Reformed Evangelism* (Sterling, KS: The Sterling Pulpit, 1996), 7-8.

⁴ Thomas Shepard, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990), 245.

⁵ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Answer 88.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁷ Matthew Henry, 6:456.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4:1147.

⁹ Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Psalms Translated and Explained* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 328.

¹⁰ Edwards, 1:657.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 656.

¹² *Ibid.*

IN RESPONSE - THE CHURCH, GOD'S MEANS OF SALVATION

by Dennis Prutow

One Sabbath evening a member of our congregation asked this question. What is the Session's vision for our congregation?" Here is my answer. I see the church as a special place in the world. It is a place where God dwells in a unique way. God is everywhere. But He is present among His people gathered for worship in special love and grace. He is present in a special saving way. My dream is to see our congregation be a special dwelling place of God so that when people enter our worshipping community they have a taste of heaven. When these people come into our midst, they ought to have a real taste of the age to come. This ought to be the case in the singing of praise, the offering of prayer, the reading of God's word, and the exposition of that word.

In the order of the application of salvation, we looked at the first element, conviction, along with its outworking, fear, and the proper response, seeking. My purpose is to place conviction, the attendant fear, and the impelled seeking in the context of the ordinary means God uses to accomplish salvation.

Conviction does not occur in a vacuum. It occurs in the natural course of life superintended by the providence of God. We cannot divorce God's specific acts of saving love and grace from the world around us. The stage upon which God works out our redemption is the created order. The theater within which God accomplished our salvation and in which He applies it personally to us is the world immediately surrounding us.

Within this context, how does God *ordinarily* apply His salvation?

The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.¹

Clearly, the Westminster divines understood the church as the *ordinary* place men and women come into contact

with the things of God in a saving way. I emphasize, the Confession says this is *ordinarily* the case.

Why would we therefore promote means of evangelism which are *out of the ordinary*? Why would we promote, *in the first instance*, individualistic, extra-church evangelism which is, from a biblical perspective, *not the ordinary way* God chooses to work? Ought we not to concentrate on God's *ordinary* means?

I offer an answer. We are so deeply influenced by the evangelism of parachurch organizations and the broad evangelical church we are blind to the need of a distinctly Reformed evangelism. We easily defend ourselves as Reformed and evangelize as though we are Arminian. We do not see a contradiction.

We hold to the Five Points of Calvinism and at the same time freely say to people, "God loves you and Christ died for you." We make no distinction between the elect and the reprobate in our evangelism. We see no contradiction. Do we fear we will lose conversions if we are distinctively Reformed in our evangelism?

We also fear we will lose conversions if we do not pressure people into a commitment. We therefore seek to close evangelistic appeals with a prayer of commitment. Do we fear the Holy Spirit will not do his promised work? Must we therefore attempt to do the work of the Spirit ourselves? Do we really believe in sovereign grace? Do we really believe the sovereign God uses the means He ordains? Is the preaching of the word within the pale of the worshipping community the ordinary means appointed by God for the saving of sinners? Or is the church, the worshipping community, the work of the Spirit within the church and the preaching of the word all rendered irrelevant by our modern culture?

Speaking of the preaching of the gospel in the church, David Englesma makes the following points. First,

[T]he church does not proclaim a love of God for all, a death of Christ for all, a will of God for the salvation of all, or a promise of God to all.

Second, this indiscriminate preaching of the gospel is strictly controlled

and carried out the sovereign predestination of God, His election and reprobation. God makes the preaching of His church his powerful, indeed effectual, instrument of salvation for every elect in the audience by the secret operation of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the elect. God withholds the Holy Spirit from the reprobate in the audience...in order that they not be converted by the preaching. Rather, He exposes their wickedness, renders them inexcusable, and hardens them in their sin, without infringing in the slightest upon their responsibility.²

What are the special privileges of the visible church? Here is the answer.

The visible church hath the privilege of being under God's special care and government; of being protected and preserved in all ages, notwithstanding the opposition of all enemies, and of enjoying the communion of saints, the ordinary means of salvation, and offers of grace by Christ to all the members of it in the ministry of the gospel, testifying, that whosoever believes in him shall be saved, and excluding none that will come unto him.³

Within the visible church men and women enjoy the *ordinary means of salvation*. This bears directly on our evangelism. It is incumbent upon us, first and foremost, to avail ourselves of the *ordinary* means God designed for the saving of sinners. It is within the context of these *ordinary* means we may *ordinarily* expect God to work in a saving way. We therefore urge men and women under conviction to repair to the church, the worship of the church, and the utilization of the means of grace within the church. What better place and under what better circumstances may people seek the Lord for salvation from sin and eternal death?

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² David J. Englesma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1994), 102-103.

³ Westminster Larger Catechism, Q& A 63.

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, 25, 2.

IN RESPONSE - SEEKING THE LORD AND THE VISIBLE CHURCH

by Dennis Prutow

J. I. Packer points out the significance of the worshipping community.

Worship is not only an expression of gratitude, but also a means of grace whereby the hungry are fed, so that the empty are sent away rich. For 'there is in worship an approach of God to man.' 'God's presence in his ordinances' is a reality; God is essentially present in the world, graciously present in his church.¹

God is present everywhere. "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there" (Psalm 139:7-8). God is present in heaven in all His grace, mercy and love. God is also present in hell, not in mercy, grace and love but in wrath. The church is an outpost of heaven. It is a temple. Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 2:19-22.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).

God is building believers into a dwelling place. When Paul speaks of believers "growing into a holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2: 21), he has the *whole* church in view. The *whole* church, the church universal, is vitally united to Christ. The *whole* church throughout the world is fitted together. The *whole* church is growing. The *whole* church is an *holy* temple, a dwelling place of God.

Paul then turns to the Ephesians and says to them. "You also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:22). The local body of Christ is a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. God may be present in the world in an essential way. He is also present in the church, the local church gathered for worship, in a gracious way.

Paul expresses this sentiment in 2 Corinthians 6:16 and connects the

thought with the Covenant of Grace. "We are the temple of the living God; just as God said, 'I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.'" Phillip Hughes attests "Paul's language indicates the corporate figure...."²

In this context, Paul quotes God's basic covenant promise to verify the truth of God's Spirit dwelling with His people in a gracious manner. Calvin explains,

[T]he Lord always covenanted with his servants thus: 'I will be your God, and you shall be my people' [Lev. 26:12]. The prophets also commonly explained that life and salvation and the whole of the blessedness are embraced in these words."³

John Murray then notes the following about the Calvin's comments.

Nothing could be more pertinent to the perspective which is indispensable to the proper understanding of covenant revelation than the recognition that the central element of the blessing involved in the covenant of grace is the relationship expressed in the words, 'I will be your God and ye shall be my people.'⁴

Christ fulfills the words of Leviticus. They come to expression in the dwelling of the Holy Spirit within the church, the covenant community, and within the members of the covenant community.

Again, with regard to Ephesians 2:21-22 Hodge says, "These two verses are parallel. The whole building grows to a holy temple. And you Ephesians are builded together with other believers so as to form with them this habitation of God."⁵ Francis Foulkes observes,

[W]e are reminded of how far removed the New Testament thought is from our individualistic concepts. In 1 Corinthians vi. 19 Paul does speak of the individual Christian's body as the "temple (*naos*) of the Holy Ghost", but his thought [here] dwells rather on the community of Christians as the temple of (2 Cor. vi. 16), or as the organism indwelt by the living Christ.⁶

If God the Holy Spirit is present in a special and gracious way within the worshipping community, where will a person most likely get a taste of the Spirit, come

under the saving influences of the Spirit, and come in contact with the ordinary means of salvation? It is within the worshipping community.

For this reason, the Puritans urged men and women to avail themselves of the means of grace *in the worshipping community*. J. I. Packer makes the point.

How then did the Puritans direct the unconverted to comply with the summons to repent that the gospel delivers to them? [Zachary] Crofton's answer, which is once again typical is as follows:

First. *Sit with care, constancy, and conscience under the word of truth, and the gospel of grace....*

The underlying theology is clear. We sinners cannot change our own hearts, but we can employ the means of grace (in this case, lines of disciplined prayerful thought) via which God changes hearts. God ordinarily gives faith, the mother, and repentance, the daughter, to those who are resolutely, self distrustfully, imploringly reaching after both.⁷

Seeking evangelism places high priority on the church, preaching God's word vigorously, calling people to seek the Lord using the means of grace, and trusting God to use his appointed means to convert sinners to faith in Christ.

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¹ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 252.

² Philip E. Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 252.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1:434-435.

⁴ John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1953), 4.

⁵ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 153.

⁶ Francis Foulkes, *The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 88.

⁷ Packer, 174-175.