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# DE-WEAPONISING IMAGES OF PRAYER

RONALD T. MICHENER

Prayer is powerful, we often hear. Believe in the power of prayer! Prayer is a spiritual weapon and churches recruit 'prayer warriors' to fight in spiritual battles.<sup>1</sup> In the album *This Means War*, the 1980s Grammy award winning Christian rock group from the U.S., Petra, included a song, 'Get on your knees and fight like a man'.<sup>2</sup> A weaponised application of prayer has become popular especially in evangelical circles, where there is a

highly militarized discourse and set of rituals for doing 'spiritual battle' and conducting 'prayer strikes' on the 'prayer battlefield'. [...] Spiritual warriors are aggressive prayer intercessors who can pray openly in 'prayer walks' through public spaces, often in urban neighborhoods where poverty and crime are rife.<sup>3</sup>

Elizabeth McAlister suggests that some of this may be traced to the spiritual warfare initiatives of the Third Wave charismatic movement represented by C. Peter Wagner, who taught that 'God is calling prophets and apostles to become intercessors and usher in the return of Jesus and the Kingdom of God through warfare prayer'.<sup>4</sup>

Is this warfare imagery fitting and helpful for the follower of the Jesus who calls Christians to be people who practice and advocate reconciliation?<sup>5</sup> Metaphors, after all, are more than simply rhetorical devices, they have 'semantic power' and 'are cognitive and conceptual

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief history and development of the use of militarised prayer metaphors, for example, in the United States, see Elizabeth McAlister, 'The Militarization of Prayer in America: White and Native American Spiritual Warfare', *Journal of Religious and Political Practice*, 2 no. 1 (2016), 114-130. See especially pp. 119-121. This warfare sensibility is also seen in titles such as: E.M. Bounds, *The Weapon of Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 1991), and John Bornschein, *A Prayer Warrior's Guide to Spiritual Battle: The Front Line* (Bellingham, WA: Kirkdale Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Petra, 'Get on Your Knees and Fight Like a Man', in *This Means War* (Star Song Communications, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> McAlister, 'The Militarization of Prayer', p. 116.

<sup>4</sup> McAlister, 'The Militarization of Prayer', p. 121.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, E. Janet Warren points out, 'warrior imagery is never applied to Christ or the Holy Spirit. Jesus arrives as a helpless babe and is described as gentle. He teaches love for enemies, prayer for persecutors, and willingly submits to death. And he drives out demons by the 'finger' or 'Spirit' of God, not by warfare. Even in apocalyptic passages, it is the angels who battle, not

[...] frequently unconscious, guiding our thoughts, not just our language'. Warfare imagery, of course, is violent, and may 'evoke the fear, anger, and hatred associated with war'.<sup>6</sup> If this is so, it is important to think about how such metaphors shape a Christian worldview and an understanding of the nature and purpose of prayer, rather than simply uncritically adopting warfare imagery as the accepted norm.

McAlister notes that spiritual warfare language may be 'discursive', but it nonetheless reflects 'cultural and ideological politics' of evangelicals desiring to impact society.<sup>7</sup> The language of spiritual warfare is not whimsically pulled out of a cultural hat; it does have some background in the language of the Bible. After all, the Bible is replete with stories and images of battle and combat. McAlister refers to Ephesians 6:12, that speaks to wrestling not against 'flesh and blood' but against 'principalities and powers'. But the question remains: Must prayer itself be considered the tool or weapon by which to implement this struggle?

The issue of military imagery in Christian speech in general has not remained unaddressed. In June 2000, Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California held a consultation of missiologists, mission leaders and theologians. They concluded

military-oriented language (words like 'target', 'conquer', 'army', 'crusade', 'mobilize', 'beachhead', 'enemy', and 'battle'), while biblical in many cases, and powerful as mobilizing tools, carry too much downside baggage and need to be replaced by other biblical, descriptive, and powerful terms.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of this initiative, however, the proliferate use of weaponry images for prayer continues to remain popular among Christians worldwide.

When prayer is weaponised it is instrumentalised as a means by which to access the power of God. All applications of power in the context of spirituality and prayer are not necessarily pejorative, but often the verbi-

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Christ'. E. Janet Warren, "Spiritual Warfare: A Dead Metaphor?", *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 21 (2012), 289.

<sup>6</sup> Warren, "Spiritual Warfare: A Dead Metaphor?", 284; 291. Warren refers to the work of I.A. Richards, Lakoff and Johnson, and others. Warren's article is helpful in identifying problems with spiritual warfare metaphors, while also suggesting alternatives.

<sup>7</sup> McAlister, 'The Militarization of Prayer', p. 121.

<sup>8</sup> 'Biblical Language and Military Metaphors: Sticks and Stones Revisited'. Unnamed editor. Available from <<https://missionexus.org/global-report-sticks-and-stones-revisited-consultation-on-mission-language-and-metaphors/>> [accessed 7 October 2021]. An earlier PDF file indicates this originally appeared in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, October 2000, np.

age of power is applied to prayer indiscriminately. Hence, it is important that we 'give attention to prayer and power because the consequences can be significant, from potential abuse of power to possibly missing out on a way to manage suffering and empower the broken'.<sup>9</sup> In any case, this essay submits that prayer is not a weapon, nor should it be construed as a weapon metaphorically. Further it suggests that prayer is not 'powerful' in the sense that it is often used, as an instrument or tool to implement human desires, however noble those desires may be. It is important to deconstruct the all-too-common posturing of 'power in prayer' to recover and emphasize the Christian discipline of prayer as relational engagement with God.

### PRAYER AS A WEAPON?

Does the idea of prayer as a 'weapon' come from Scripture? Prayer as a response to threats of military aggression is where some have drawn their understandings of prayer as an instrument by which to defeat their enemies.

#### *Old Testament Examples*

Throughout the Old Testament we see examples of prophets calling upon God with respect to conquering or overpowering those who set themselves up against God's people or did not acknowledge the God of Israel. Samson prays to receive renewed strength to demolish the Philistines (Judg. 16:28); In 1 Kings 8:44, Solomon asks the LORD to 'maintain' the cause of his people in answer to their prayers, when they 'go out to battle against their enemy' (NRSV). When adversaries came upon Elisha, he prayed for the LORD to strike them 'with blindness', which the Lord did in response (2 Kgs 6:18). Jehoshaphat calls upon God in prayer when the army approaches from Edom, and God hears and delivers the people (2 Chr 20:2-15). But simply because we see multiple accounts of God's people praying to God in their distress and hopelessness in times of battle require us to view prayer itself as the weapon of destruction?

#### *Battle Imagery in Paul*

The common 'prayer as a weapon' metaphor likely stems from enlarging the focus of the metaphorical 'weapons' of the spiritual warrior described

<sup>9</sup> See Rodney A. Werline, 'Prayer, Politics, and Power in the Hebrew Bible', *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 68 no. 1 (2014), 7-8. Werline provides helpful insights on the relationality of power as 'a human's ability to act on another human or to influence the actions of another human'. It can be 'abusive and destructive' or 'beautiful and life giving' p. 6. Cf. also p. 16.

by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians chapter 6. While Paul is in chains, he nevertheless exhorts his readers to find strength in the power of the Lord, standing strong against the devil and the powers of empire. The irony of Paul speaking these words from prison cannot be missed, as they represent his practice of power reversal, seen for instance in his words about the power of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18). The believer is to put on the armour of God with belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, and sword, all of which are ironic metaphors (considering the Roman occupation) of Christian essentials (truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, word of God) to fight a battle that is beyond 'blood and flesh' (Eph 6:10-17). When the armour is assembled and put on, Paul puts aside the weapon imagery and asks the readers to pray prayers of all sorts and kinds, and to keep on praying for each other and for Paul himself. Paul does not include prayer as one of the weapons to take or put on. Rather it seems that prayer is what one does in, with, before, after, and around everything (Eph 6:18-20). Nevertheless, with Paul's injunction to pray immediately following the armour metaphors for the spiritual battles at hand, it is easy to see why prayer is often added to the arsenal.

Battle imagery, for Paul, however, is not restricted to Ephesians 6. We also see such imagery in Romans 13:12; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, and 1 Thessalonians 5:8.<sup>10</sup> In Romans 13:12, Paul writes with reference to Christian moral living: 'Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light' (NRSV). In 2 Corinthians 10:1-5, following Paul's appeal to the Corinthians with 'the meekness and gentleness of Christ' (vs.1) he submits that the weapons used by Christians are 'not merely human' (vs. 4). Again, these words appear to contrast the way of 'empire' with the weakness of the way of the Cross' that will 'destroy strongholds' (vs. 4). Later, in 1 Thessalonians 5:8, in the context of waiting for the coming of the Lord, believers are encouraged to show self-control, and in this self-control (reminiscent of the armour imagery in Ephesians 6), they are to wear 'the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation' (NRSV).<sup>11</sup>

It is fascinating how Paul appeals metaphorically to this battle imagery to highlight the counterstrategy of the way of Jesus, which is non-violent 'battle' against personal corruption and the corruption of powers and authorities set against the love of Christ. Yet, in each of these aforemen-

<sup>10</sup> See Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 2004), p. 105.

<sup>11</sup> In Ephesians 6:14, however, the breastplate (*thōraka*) is 'righteousness' (*dikaioynēs*) and the shield (*thyreon*) is faith, while in 1 Thessalonians 5:8, the breastplate is of faith and love (*pisteōs kai agapēs*).

tioned examples, prayer itself is not mentioned as one of the metaphorical weapons used. Furthermore, the armour metaphors in Ephesians 6 are chiefly items for protection and defence, rather than offensive weaponry per se. The only explicit offensive weapon mentioned is the 'sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God' (Eph 6:17), which essentially puts any acts of offense into the hands of God, rather than into the hands of humankind.

The battle and warfare imagery used by Paul is understandable in view of his personal context, being in chains under Roman guard and living under Roman occupation. He understood that the power of Rome would never bring the peace it promised. Rome used armoured guards with swords to demand submission. Rome thought it had the final word using terrorism, torture, and death to convince anyone who thought otherwise. But Paul knew that Caesar was not ultimately Lord and would not, ultimately, have the final word. He also understood that the Kingdom of God does not fight on the same terms of dominance and military power; it rather subverts this power and turns it inside out through the humble life, death, and resurrection of Jesus: the power of the cross. If Paul *had* included a metaphorical, subversive application of prayer as weaponry in this context, it would have been understandable, but he does not use prayer in this manner. Since Paul immediately gives instructions to pray following his use of the weaponry imagery in Ephesians 6, one may argue that this implicitly connects prayer to such weaponry, and hence justifies current applications of weaponry images to prayer. However, this seems unfounded, at least for most Western Christians, as our contexts are clearly dissimilar to the threatening, oppressive context of Imperial Rome and its pervasive military presence. Further, it seems questionable that the pervasive contemporary use of weaponry, battle, or military images to prayer are being used in a subversive, ironic manner similar to that of Paul.

This being said, another perspective may be that it does not matter if we directly draw upon Paul or any explicit reference in Scripture to use the 'prayer as weapon' metaphor, as it is a Christian cultural metaphor just the same. This then brings us to another issue. Is there any harm in using such imagery?

### ***The Dangerous Edge to the Weapon of Prayer***

Unfortunately, when we 'weaponise' prayer, it takes on a more instrumental meaning, detached from its relational connectivity to God. In its 'instrumentality' as a militarised tool, prayer is the means by which the conquering of our enemies is made possible. It is a thing used, rather than a disposition of heart in communication with God. Prayer 'warriors' are

called upon to conquer opposing forces by committing to pray frequently, fervently, and for prolonged periods. Theologian J. Todd Billings poignantly addresses this when discussing prayers from others for himself while he was going through cancer treatment:

At times, I received prayers that seemed to make the one praying the hero of the prayer—as if the ‘prayer warriors’ were the primary actors in prayer, with God filling an ancillary role. I recall one card that I received with a poem about there being no power on earth ‘greater’ than the power of prayer. But the eloquent poem made no mention of God. Ouch. Do we believe in God or in the ‘power of prayer’?<sup>12</sup>

Praying fervently for a certain cause in the church or for particular ministries or persons in need is certainly important and beneficial to the body of Christ. But we must question the appropriateness of those called as ambassadors of Jesus’ gospel of reconciliation applying a ‘warrior’ metaphor to themselves and others when it comes to prayer.

### IS PRAYER *POWERFUL*?

A parallel notion to the weapon imagery of prayer is the notion of the ‘power of prayer’. Congregations are encouraged to pray because ‘prayer is powerful’. Again, this seems to be using prayer in an instrumental sense. Prayer is a tool used to manipulate orders and systems. By doing ‘prayer’ we change things. We are challenged to pray because of the inherent power in the tool of prayer. Power accomplishes things, and since prayer is powerful, we must use it for our purposes. After all, there is no disputing James 5:16. It says the prayer of a righteous person is ‘powerful and effective’. That is, prayer is able (*ischyei*) to effectively bring about results. But does this mean prayer is something to be used as a means of power to manipulate circumstances or persuade God? What then is prayer effective to accomplish?

Prayer is not ‘powerful’ in and of itself as an instrument, but prayer is ultimately a way to acknowledge the power of God in our humble posturing before him. God is powerful, we are not. The preceding context of James 5:16 refers to the believer in trouble, illness, or in sin. Believers are called upon to pray for each other with respect to such matters ‘in the name of the Lord’ (vs. 14). When someone is sick, we see that the ‘prayer of faith will save the sick’. But this is clearly not reducing prayer to a mere instrumental tool. In this context it is only after prayer of the elders, with

<sup>12</sup> J. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2015), 117.

faith in God, that ‘the Lord will raise them up’ (vs. 15). Further, this is not an outright guarantee of healing, no matter what, if such a prayer is uttered. As Douglas J. Moo points out: ‘A true prayer of faith, then, always includes within it a tacit acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty in all matters; that it is *God’s* will that must be done. And it is clear that is by no means always God’s will to heal those who are ill (cf. 2 Cor. 12:7-9).’<sup>13</sup> The only reason prayer contains an ability or power to accomplish things is because of the way by which we, in our weakness, call upon God to help, heal, and guide. This does not seem to be ‘power’ in the sense of a tool or weapon, but power in terms of ability or strength to point toward and rely upon God’s power to intervene.

#### PRAYER AS POSTURING HUMILITY: PHENOMENOLOGICAL INSIGHTS FROM MEROLD WESTPHAL

Prayer must not be reduced to an instrumental activity of a human being and must not be construed as containing some inherent power within itself. Prayer is rather about placing ourselves in a position of weakness before a God who is indeed powerful beyond our comprehension and control. Rather than looking at prayer through the scope of a weapon or using it as tool of power, it is better suited to understand prayer as a human posturing of weakness. Prayer provides the occasion to express our weaknesses, needs, and our ultimate reliance on God’s power. The strength of prayer lies in the weak, selfless ‘power’ of the cross. In this sense, the notion of power is not completely absent from prayer, but it is a subversive power, a power of embracing the power of God’s self-giving love. As Stanley Hauerwas aptly says: ‘[W]e are about *power*, and there is no need for a false humility among Christians about our lack of power. Servanthood is power insofar as it is obedience to the One who is the way, the truth, and the life.’<sup>14</sup>

Merold Westphal refers to the humble positioning of prayer, calling it ‘a deep, quite possibly the deepest decentering of the self, deep enough to begin dismantling or, if you like, deconstructing that burning preoccupation with myself.’<sup>15</sup> Westphal develops this thesis phenomenologically

<sup>13</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *James: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1985), p. 187.

<sup>14</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1989), p. 167.

<sup>15</sup> Merold Westphal, ‘Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self’, in *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, ed. by Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 15.



by reflecting on the prayers of Samuel, Mary, and surprisingly, but not irreverently, Elvis.

Recounting the prayer of Samuel in 1 Samuel 3, Westphal reminds us that this is a prayer of response to God's initial call to Samuel. In this instance, we do not see prayer as a request to God for some personal want or need, but as a responsible turning of an ear toward God, listening to God's call.<sup>16</sup> The content of Samuel's prayer to the Lord may be simply summarized as 'I'm here, speak Lord, I'm listening'. In this act of acknowledging God, there is a decentring of the 'transcendental ego' — it is not about 'me' or my intentions, but about 'a reverse intentionality in which I am the intended one rather than the intending one'. God is the one first beckoning me, and prayer is the decentred self, responding and continuing to listen to the God who calls. This is not something that is mastered by simply expressing agreement to listen to God, but something that is, as Westphal puts it, 'the always unfulfilled task of a lifetime'.<sup>17</sup> This points to the need of silence in prayer, for we need silence before God in order to practice the discipline of listening to God.<sup>18</sup>

Next, Westphal refers to the prayer of Mary, commonly called the Magnificat, found in Luke chapter one. Westphal submits that this prayer is dependent on the prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, and it is also linked to the prayer of Samuel previously mentioned in 1 Samuel 3. Mary's prayer is a humble response to God's initial call to her, similar to the 'I'm here Lord' of Samuel. By presenting herself to God and away from other distractions, she willingly decentres herself to be available to God.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Westphal points out that Mary's prayer manifests 'silence before the divine word' just as with the prayer of Samuel, as she 'treasured' and 'pondered' these things 'in her heart'.<sup>20</sup>

The final prayer he considers is that of Elvis, which expresses the 'I want you and need you' desire of prayer. Westphal, however, re-appropriates the egoistic eroticism of the Elvis 'prayer' and situates it within the context of Psalms 42 and 63, where the soul 'longs' 'thirsts', and 'faints' for God. The context of these passages is not about possessing God as an object to be taken, but about giving oneself fully to God in order to be fully available to him.<sup>21</sup> Again, this is the 'the posture of the decentred self' — the self that moves away from itself as the basis on which 'mean-

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-23.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 27. Westphal quotes from Luke 2:19 (NRSV).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-29.

ing, and truth, and goodness are defined'.<sup>22</sup> Jean-Louis Chrétien describes it in this way: 'All prayer confesses God as giver by dispossessing us of our egocentrism, and it does so with a word that the addressee alone renders possible in each moment of its enactment'.<sup>23</sup> It is only after God lays claim over the individual, that the individual may claim that 'He is mine'.<sup>24</sup>

In all three prayers, prayer is not about exerting personal authority nor is it strongly asserting one's individual requests towards God. In these examples, prayer is not the act of the individual with strong faith in order to implement actions or reactions from a God who is ready to perform according to our spontaneous whims and requests. It is rather a positioning or posturing of oneself in humility before the God to whom we must be disposed in our weakness and poverty. This posturing does not devalue the human being, but it situates the human being fully within the context of the *imago Dei*, where dependence upon God within creation allows the human being to fully flourish as intended by the Creator.

## PRAYING IN THE KINGDOM WITHOUT WARRIORS AND WEAPONS

### *De-weaponising the Battle Chief: A Weak and/or Vulnerable God?*

Perhaps the use of militarised prayer metaphors stem from, in addition to how we understand prayer, how we understand and characterize the God to whom we pray. The manner in which we think about God as 'All Powerful' affects the way we think of prayer as a means to harness power or used as an instrument of power. If God is consistently portrayed and understood as Warrior-Conqueror and Battle Chief, will this not affect our understanding of how we invoke such a God? In asking such questions, we are not denying God's power and might as described in the clas-

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 30, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Louis Chrétien, 'The Wounded Word: Phenomenology of Prayer', in *Phenomenology and the 'Theological Turn'* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 153.

<sup>24</sup> Westphal, 'Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self', p. 30. Jean-Louis Chrétien says it this way: 'One can be turned to God only in praying, and one can pray only by being turned toward God' ('The Wounded Word', p. 157). With the above focus on prayer as an individual, decentred response to God's call, it is important not to reduce prayer to the individual subject before God. We are Christians within a community of believers who pray by affirming 'Our Father in heaven'. Chrétien makes this point by referring to Cyprian, *De dominica oratione* 8, quoted in Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IIa IIae, q. 83, art. 7, ad 1um ('The Wounded Word', p. 155).

sical theological attributes. However, we are suggesting that the manner in which God as 'powerful' is rendered and applied requires further reflection, and perhaps, reconsideration. A philosopher/theologian who may help us with such reflection and reconsideration is John D. Caputo, to whom we now turn.

### John D. Caputo

Caputo's work, *The Weakness of God*, emphasizes a weak notion of God, a God which is not a metaphysical, supernatural being, but is rather an event. This event, as Caputo says, is 'of a call rather than of a cause, of a provocation or a promise rather than of a presence'.<sup>25</sup> Caputo appears worried about the hidden power structures (used to oppress others) associated with seeing God as a supreme 'Being' along with its historically contingent limitations.<sup>26</sup> God as an event, is not constrained by such limits. God as an event is carried out in the 'kingdom of God' — a 'weak force' calling us, nonetheless passionately, out of our comfort zones for the sake of that kingdom, where it is translatable and undetermined.<sup>27</sup> It is, Caputo says, a kingdom of weakness that shows ironic strength by a 'law of reversals' where the 'first is last, whatever is out is in, whatever is lost is saved [...] which confounds the dynamics of strong forces'. In the weak kingdom of Jesus, 'patience and forgiveness' reign and 'war and aggression are met with an offer of peace'.<sup>28</sup> It is not a kingdom of imperialism, force, and military power, but a kingdom that quietly subverts empire by turning things inside-out and upside down, ushering in a new way of being human.

There is much we wish to affirm about Caputo's rendering of the weak aspects of the kingdom of God. We strongly adhere to Caputo's notion of a 'weak' kingdom without accepting his view of a God who is reduced to an event rather than understood as a personal God. There is much to glean from a God who is vulnerable and works through weakness. These weak aspects of the kingdom of God are critical to a demilitarised perspective of prayer. However, in our view it is equally important to maintain belief in a personal, relational God to whom we pray. In order to highlight this

<sup>25</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 13, 34. These limitations lie in the cultural and contextual factors that name such a God.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11. See also my comments on Caputo regarding the humble aspects of the kingdom of God in Ronald T. Michener, 'The Kingdom of God and Postmodern Ecclesiologies: A Compatibility Assessment'. *Evangelical Review of Theology*, April 2010, 119-130.

<sup>28</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, p. 15.

more adequately, it will be helpful to contrast William Placher's 'Vulnerable God'<sup>29</sup> with Caputo's God of weakness.

### William Placher

Placher begins his book, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, by reminding us that God became human in Jesus, displaying for us the fullness of humanity 'not in quests of power and wealth and fame but in service, solidarity with the despised and rejected, and the willingness to be vulnerable in love'.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, Christians have often pitted the powerful God of the Old Testament against the Jesus of the New Testament, distorting both the notion of what it means for God to be powerful, and distorting the personal nature of God. Placher does not minimize the complexities of such distortions, however, since both images have been culturally and/or theologically emphasized. The God who is all powerful is invoked for political means to defend a nation's 'rights' for war. The Jesus who died on the cross is the esteemed example of servanthood, sacrifice, and humility in the face of suffering and injustice.<sup>31</sup> Explaining the multiple reasons for this frequent false disjunction between God and Jesus is beyond the scope of this present work. But we affirm that Jesus is God in the flesh, revealing 'God's own self in human form'.<sup>32</sup> Assuming this position, it is reasonable to say that we can interpret God's person and actions in view of how he expresses himself in the person of Jesus.

Placher refers to the book of Revelation, which contains images of power and conquest that are applied to the Son of Man (understood as the resurrected, returning Messiah, Jesus). He notes that the triumph of the Son is the triumph of the Lamb, the one crucified — the same God who has been in continual struggle with his people Israel through the ages. This is not to say that these are only pseudo images of power and warfare, 'but the victories are victories of the Lamb who has been slaughtered'. Placher points out that first century Hellenism sought deities that would triumph over their adversaries by conquering them with political or military power, much like today. Jesus manifests the full presence of God, yet equally displays 'human powerlessness'. Referring to the progression of events in the Passion Narrative, Placher's words remind us of Caputo's rendering of the kingdom of God, as 'the story implies an odd inverse proportion, for that moment when it seems that Jesus can do nothing at

<sup>29</sup> William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. xiv. Cf. also p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> See Ibid., pp. xv, 5-6.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

all is the culmination of his work as savior of the world'.<sup>33</sup> This is not the obliteration of power completely, but it is power reconstrued. It is power exercised by the weakness of the cross; but through this weakness, the world is changed.<sup>34</sup> God does not lack strength or power to accomplish what he wills in love, but the way in which we render God's power and seek such power in our lives must be nuanced through the suffering God on the cross.

Placher points out that humans seek of power because of the vulnerable fear of lacking control. We exercise power at our disposal because we fear damage, pain, or loss — whether persons, status, or things important to us. God's power, however, comes in his power of vulnerability and love, not in domination or manipulative control.<sup>35</sup> Placher notes this possible irony displayed by Thomas in John chapter 20, when he utters the words to Jesus, 'My Lord and my God'. Such words could have easily been applied to the emperor, but Thomas applies them to Jesus as he is confronted with Jesus' wounds — 'a reminder yet again of the challenge that the Gospels embody to the usual assumptions about power'.<sup>36</sup> Placher, like Caputo, highlights the ironic, upside-down power of weakness, compassion, suffering, and forgiveness as trademark attributes of God's restorative Kingdom.

So far so good as to their compatibility. But Placher's God is explicitly revealed personally in Jesus, unlike Caputo's God of the event. Jesus is significant for Caputo, but not as the second person of the Triune God. Jesus is rather 'a prophetic teacher and enactor of the 'event' that breaks open the horizons that hem us in or bind us up, a parabolic figure of breaking with the dead works that kill, thereby letting something new, unforeseen, and unanticipated break in'.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, for Placher, God is not simply a way of naming the event of the kingdom, but God reveals himself as a loving, relational, personal being in Jesus, who truly is God in the flesh and extends his love to us.<sup>38</sup>

With such de-emphasis on strength and power (at least in terms of power as the exercising of control) we may nonetheless be drawn to ask

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 9 (cf. also p. 8); pp. 9-10; 16 (cf. also p. 15); p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 17. Here Placher cites Daniel Migliore who claims that God's power 'is a strange power' that 'is made known above all in the weakness of the cross of Jesus', in Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 52.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 18-19.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>37</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, p. 129.

<sup>38</sup> See Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, p. 20.

how a God of vulnerability and suffering may truly help or deliver us.<sup>39</sup> Placher submits that God's suffering and vulnerability stem from God's loving action; power itself does not guarantee loving action or redemption.<sup>40</sup> Placher insists that the loving, vulnerable God remains able to be loving and vulnerable through all time, although remaining 'neither timeless nor in time in the same way we are'. At the same time, he also presumes this God is 'a personal God' who is engaged in 'at least some of the following things: remembering, anticipating, reflecting, deliberating, deciding, intending, hoping, sympathizing'.<sup>41</sup> God's power to rescue is clearly power, but it is power that works weakly through 'strong' traits of vulnerability and love. Such traits can only be manifested in God who is obviously different than humans, yet ironically and clearly reveals himself through humanity in the incarnate Christ Jesus.

Placher's insights help us consider how our thinking about God as all-powerful influences the way we think of prayer as an instrument of power, or as the means to harness power for personal ends (even if those personal ends are for the sake of others). This is not to imply that God is not powerful and almighty but should leads us to consider how the notion of power is rendered and applied to God.<sup>42</sup> Prayer then would not be about harnessing warriors and weapons, but about peace-making postures, positioning ourselves (individually and in community) humbly before the God who sacrifices for us and seeks relationship with us.

### **Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)**

There are some insightful thoughts in this regard from a sermon of Friedrich Schleiermacher: 'The Power of Prayer in Relations to Outward Circumstances'<sup>43</sup> from Matthew 26:36-46 (Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to his arrest). With an initial glance at the title, it

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 18. Placher refers to Joan Northam on this point, as she reflects on the need for a God who can rescue her if she were in a pit with a broken arm. She says that she would want 'a Rescuer with a very bright light and a long ladder, full of strength, joy and assurance who can get me out of the pit, not a god who sits in the darkness suffering with me'. Joan Northam, 'The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory', *Expository Times*, 99 (1988): 302.

<sup>40</sup> Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, p. 18.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 31 (cf. p. 27); p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> That is, if God is rendered 'powerful' apart from the weak 'power of the cross' then the nature or characteristics of the attribute of 'power' may be misconstrued.

<sup>43</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, 'The Power of Prayer in Relations to Outward Circumstances', in *Selected Sermons of Schleiermacher*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, The Foreign Biblical Library (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 2010), Kindle edition, pp. 38-52.

may seem ironic to refer to this sermon to enhance our position. Schleiermacher, however, formulates his comments in such a way that his message supports our aforementioned concerns. Near the beginning of the sermon, he affirms that if we have been protected from evil as a result of our prayers, this is indeed due to the 'power of prayer'.<sup>44</sup> He continues, however, to ask whether there is another sort of power to prayer — for example, using prayer as a means to fulfil our wishes. This is where he exhorts his listeners to not expect more from prayer than that which was gained by Christ in Gethsemane.<sup>45</sup> He insists that where Christ's prayer 'could not prevail neither will ours succeed'. Of course, 'success' in this context is relative to the expectations or personal desires of the one praying. For Schleiermacher it is good, and in fact, a 'privilege' to express our personal desires to God that are in accordance with 'the thought of God',<sup>46</sup> but the request(s) for which one asks will not necessarily take place simply because one prayed. Our prayers must always defer to God's will, just as Jesus in the garden. Jesus desired to avoid suffering, but his desire was qualified by his acceptance and surrender to God's will.<sup>47</sup> We must follow this pattern of submission to God in our prayers as well.

When we make intercessions and supplications to God, we are looking for God to accomplish things seemingly beyond our abilities, understanding that God's power surpasses our inabilities. So regrettably, prayer's power lies in one's supposed access to God's power in such a way that this power works in a manner that is favourable to our requests. But, as Schleiermacher says, 'there lies at the bottom of this a defective idea of God. If we called to mind what should always come most readily to our thoughts — His holiness and wisdom — our wish would quickly take the form by which the prayers of pious men must always be distinguished'.<sup>48</sup> Schleiermacher makes clear in this sermon that our prayers, just as Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, are not to be used as instrumental tools; they are instead honest expressions from the heart, rooted in the desire for relationship with God.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 39-40.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 40, 41, 39.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 42, 43-44.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-50.

***De-weaponising Prayer through Confession, Adoration, Thanksgiving, and Lament***

The notion of prayer as ‘powerful’ or prayer as a ‘weapon’ seems typically applied to prayers of intercession or supplication. When invoking God, prayer has power to ‘do things’ for others or ourselves as we ask God to intervene, functioning as a *Deus ex machina*. That is, prayer functions to bring about an intervention from God to accomplish that which otherwise could not be accomplished with our own devices. Interestingly, prayer does not seem to take on weaponised or utilitarian metaphors when applied to forms of prayer such as confession, adoration, thanksgiving, or lament. How often do we hear of one saying we ought to give thanks to God for his mercy in our lives because of the ‘power of prayer’? Likewise, personal or community expressions of sorrow and grief to God do not seem to refer to prayer as a force or weapon. Yet, such ‘weak’ postures of prayer, such as confession and lament, are salient aspects of prayer.

Again, this highlights that prayer must be construed relationally, rather than instrumentally as if it were a tool or weapon to accomplish things. When we are offering praise for God’s being and works or expressing thanks to God, the motive is not to accomplish something for ourselves or others; it is to express gratefulness.<sup>50</sup> Rowan Williams aptly speaks to this when he describes worship as that which ‘ascribes supreme value, supreme resource or power, to something other than the worshipper, so that liturgy attempts to be a “giving over” of our words to God (as opposed to speaking in a way that seeks to retain distance or control over what’s being spoken of)’.<sup>51</sup>

Prayers of confession may be indirectly construed as asking God for a personal response of forgiveness, but this would not typically be construed as an act of ‘power’ for the sake of oneself or others. This is not to say that gratefulness or confession do not accomplish something within the human person, such as developing a spirit of humility and respect. But the basic assumption behind the act of confession is that personal change has already been implemented, or has begun to be implemented, before such prayers are offered. Personal change itself, however, does not seem to be the primary motive for prayers expressing words of thanksgiving and confession.

<sup>50</sup> Schleiermacher submits that our petitionary prayers must be like our prayers of thanksgiving in that they must ‘replace eager desire with quiet submission’; *ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>51</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 7. Cf. also Ashley Cocksworth, *Prayer: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, T&T Clark, 2018), p. 67.



So not only are weaponised understandings and expressions of prayer often misguided when applied to intercessions, supplications, and confessions, they also do not appear to fit meaningfully into primary areas of prayer that are exemplified in the book of Lamentations or the Psalms. Prayers of lament and sorrow are also not demonstrative acts that are usually associated with the 'power of prayer' vocabulary. They are instead utterances of the human person's suffering, weakness, and anguish before their Creator — it is prayer acknowledging power apart from oneself.

Is there power in prayer? Perhaps if power is the act of our will to submit to God in our weaknesses and vulnerabilities understanding we cannot manipulate the outcomes — then indeed, there is power in prayer.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This essay has provided a cursory attempt to deconstruct a militarised view of prayer. Prayer is not a weapon, and it is not inherently powerful as some sort of instrument to manipulate circumstances. Admittedly, we have not advanced a 'constructive' theology of prayer or provided guidelines for the practice of prayer. Regardless, it is our hope that by resisting weaponised images of prayer, we may learn more constructive postures of humility before God and others as we struggle to practice prayer amidst of our weaknesses in a broken world. If that is all we can do, this is no small part of prayer.