

## When we pray ...

### WHO OR WHAT IS AT THE OTHER END?

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In his book *Powerful Prayers* Larry King, the talk show host on CNN, writes, “My parents prayed, my wife, Shawn, prays and many of my close friends pray. Me? I don’t know to what or to whom I’d be praying so I have always left it alone.”

Larry is simply giving expression to the same uncertainty about ‘what’ and ‘whom’ that many people feel in spiritual matters. At the annual baseball camp, which our church co-sponsors with the local baseball league and Athletes in Action, campers were asked for their response to the following: “If you could ask God one question, what would you ask?” One young person wrote, “If we all are so different why do we have to follow one book?” Others express a similar relativism. “You pray to your god, I pray to mine. They both answer – or not - so it really makes no difference to which we pray.”

In a culturally pluralistic society such relativism is understandable, and on the surface at least, somewhat attractive. It is easy to buy in to the notion that one god is as good as another, one set of religious writings as valid as another. It is easy, in part because it requires minimal intellectual effort to adopt such a view, and in part because it’s a way of avoiding conflict.

But there is something unsatisfying about such a belief. It’s a bit like telling an avid sports fan that it really doesn’t matter which team he cheers for. Even if the person making that statement has no interest in the outcome of particular games or even of sports in general, the view that the participating teams or individual competitors are irrelevant doesn’t satisfy the human need to be on the side of something bigger and more important than one’s self. While the intent of the one making the statement may be to diminish the importance of partisanship, the end result is actually a diminishing of the individual sports fan. One cannot diminish the “what” or “who” that is cheered for, without at the same time diminishing the one who cheers.

There is something ingrained in the human psyche that leads us to make comparisons and to choose sides, whether in a simple game or a complex social policy. It leads us to work for some companies and not for others, to buy some products and not others, to frequent some venues and not others. Billions of dollars are spent annually on advertising to persuade us of the merits of particular products, and by implication of the inferiority of other products. That same desire to compare and to make choices is present in our spiritual lives as well and we can no more ignore it in spiritual matters than in any other part of society.

So to what, or to whom, does the Christian pray?

First, the Christian prays to a “who,” not a “what.” While He goes by many different names in the Old Testament, it is always the same God who is referred to. The Old Testament God desires to make Himself known to people, chooses a particular group of people with whom to be in intimate relationship, yet cares deeply for those outside the chosen nation, for people of other countries, nations, race. The role of His Chosen People is not to be exclusive but to be the means of salvation for the whole world.

From the opening verse of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, to the last verse of Revelation, the final book of the Bible, God is always referred to as a “who.” He is the Creator, the One who brings into being. He is personal, calling His people into relationship with Him. He feels deeply, intensely, compassionately, angrily, with a depth of love that is unfathomable. He is hurt by the indifference, hate, turning away of His creation and repeatedly strives to provide the means for setting things right with His people so they can be the blessing to others that they were meant to be. Being holy Himself, He cannot abide sin, and so finally withdraws His hand of blessing from the People He has chosen and allows their nation to crumble in defeat.

Yet even that is not the end of the story of this God who is a “Who” and not a “what.” Knowing that unholy, sinful, wilful, wayward people can never develop the relationship with Him that He so desires, He provides the means of restoration. If we will not - in fact, cannot, come to Him because the chasm between holiness and sin is uncrossable, He will come to us.

So we have the definitive revelation of the “who” to whom we pray as Christians. According to the New Testament portion of the Bible, God became flesh and dwelt among us or, as Eugene Peterson so colourfully states it in *The Message, the Bible in Contemporary Language*, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.” (John 1:14) In the flesh-and-blood Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ, we have the embodiment of God, God making Himself known in tangible ways to the creatures He so lovingly and longingly wants to be in relationship with.

The Christian takes Jesus at His Word when He says, “Don’t you know me, Philip [one of Jesus’ disciples who had accompanied Him throughout most of His public ministry], even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.” (John 14:9 – 11)

“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” It doesn’t get any more personal or clearer or unmistakable than that. When we pray to this God who invites us to call Him Father, we are praying to a “Who” who knows what it is to be human because in Jesus Christ His only Son, He experienced humanity. And we know the One to whom we pray, because in Jesus Christ people have seen God in human form, experienced first hand His compassion, His healing power, His desire for relationship, His holiness and abhorrence of sin and all that separates humans from God, and felt the transforming power of His forgiveness, cleansing them and transforming them into what the apostle Paul writing in the Bible refers to as “a new creation.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

The “Who” at the other end when we pray in the name of Jesus Christ is the One who created us, who loves us, who restores us to fellowship with Him, who desires the best for us. He answers our prayers, not according to our wishes but according to His great purpose for us.

One may choose to reject the claim that Jesus makes that to see Him is to see God the Father. One may turn away from acknowledging that human beings are separated from God, and refuse the forgiveness and the “life line” that is offered to us from God Himself through His Son Jesus. One may choose, as Larry King does, to not know “to what or to whom I’d be praying” and so leave it alone. Those are choices one makes, deliberate acts of the will.

But for the Christian, there is no doubt as to Who is at the other end when we pray.