

How kenotic alignment reframes spiritual warfare prayer

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Abstract

This paper is partly autobiographical in its examination of the author's theological shift as a prayer leader in the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement engaged in the practice of prayer as spiritual warfare to overcome obstacles to the kingdom of God. This popular form of prayer draws on Paul's statements "the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but are mighty to the destruction of strongholds" (2 Cor.10: 4) and "put on the full armour of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil" (Eph. 6: 11). It is typically expounded in C. Peter Wagner's *Warfare Prayer: Strategies for Combating the Rulers of Darkness* (1992). The paper is testimony to my initial engagement with the practice and the ensuing dramatic events that took place at a meeting of international prayer leaders from some 120 or more nations in South Korea in 1993. Intending to engage in spiritual warfare for the world, we ended up identifying and aligning with those damaged by colonial violence between nations. These events and some of the subsequent implications are spelt out in *The Sins of the Fathers* (Roger Mitchell and Brian Mills. Tonbridge, Kent: Sovereign World, 1999). This experience fundamentally reconfigured my understanding of the nature of both God and the kingdom of God and helped reorient my interpretation of biblical metaphors, such as those used by Paul, away from oppositional warfare to kenotic alignment with God's loving identification with the perpetrators of past sin. In tracing this process, the paper will expose key elements of my developing theology leading up to that point and draw on three seminal gospel texts; John's story of footwashing, Paul's Philippian hymn and Jesus' wilderness encounter with Satan. Supportive reference will be made to the theology of Thomas Jay Oord, Giorgio Agamben and kenotic feminists such as Catherine Keller and Anna Mercedes in consideration of the ontological implications for our theology of prayer and its strategic role in the coming resurrection of all things.

Introduction

In order to make clear where I am coming from, I first embarked on the serious study of religious practice as an undergraduate in the late nineteen sixties in the then innovative Religious Studies Department at Lancaster University headed by Professor Ninian Smart. His methodological approach was phenomenological and mine remains so. After thirty years of work as an evangelist, experimental church planter, prayer leader, reconciler and peacemaker, I returned to the Religious Studies Department at Lancaster for my doctoral research into the historical relationship between

Church, Gospel and Empire in 2005 in the hope of finding the same phenomenological stance. Professor Linda Woodhead was head of department at the time and I was delighted to find it still welcome. That is to say, I take the experiences I investigate at the face value of those who share them and do not attempt to redefine them as something else. My ontological stance is one of freedom and love, and my epistemology is trinitarian and incarnational. I attempt a truly reflective and inclusive axiology. I received my PhD in Religious Studies in 2011.

Spiritual Warfare

The term ‘spiritual warfare’ is a common catchall description of a particular manner of prayer associated with the ongoing Pentecostal-Charismatic movement. This popular way of praying draws on Paul’s statements, in particular “the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but are mighty to the destruction of strongholds,”¹ and “put on the full armour of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”²

Although a subset of the general category of spontaneous prayer common to the practice of evangelical churches rather than more traditionally liturgical and contemplative forms, it is sometimes known as the majority world manner of praying to distinguish it from the calm and more democratic “after you” spontaneity of the English middle class at prayer. However, the difference is not merely a question of style, but a matter of the intercessor’s posture in relation to God. Namely, spiritual warfare does not see prayer primarily as petition but rather as collaboration with God in the overcoming or removal of spiritual forces opposed to the perceived kingdom of God in the contemporary geographical world. I say perceived here, because, as we shall see, there is an important connection between the way we pray and how we understand the kingdom of God. This collaborative understanding of prayer draws strongly both on the Old Testament prophetic scriptures and their interface with the history of Israel and the input of acknowledged contemporary prophets from within the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement.

Two main assumptions are involved in the practice of spiritual warfare. Firstly, there are actual demonic forces at work against the kingdom of God, and/or the church, which is often seen as indistinguishable from it. Secondly, the way to dislodge these is by using the power of words and

¹ 2 Corinthians 10: 4.

² Ephesians 6: 11-12.

declarations to assert the superiority and dominance of God and the church over the demonic forces. While it remains a very strong and normative kind of prayer within many African, Asian and South American Pentecostal churches, it was taken up in the final decades of the twentieth century by several highly influential initiatives particularly associated with Dr. C. Peter Wagner.³ During this time it began to be systematised and became highly influential across the Pentecostal and Charismatic spectrum alongside the practice of 'spiritual mapping' through which it was deemed possible to identify the strategy and operation of malign territorial spiritual forces against which warfare prayer could be directed.⁴

Among the most popular and influential practitioners alongside C. Peter Wagner were Eduardo Silvos, Cindy Jacobs, and George Otis Junior. It is important to recognise that these were primarily prophetic prayer leaders applying apparently successful principles rooted within a movement largely focused in Argentina where Ed Silvos hosted large annual conferences of hundreds of pastors and ministry leaders from all over the world. These events featured personal testimonies from mature and inspirational leaders on the ground such as Eduardo Lorenzo, Omar and Martha Cabrera, Claudio Freidzon and Carlos Annacondia all of whom pointed to spiritual warfare as an explanation for the dramatic increases in the growth of their churches and ministries. Many on-site visits were organised to these churches and movements in Buenos Aires, Resistencia, and La Plata where the prison church was a remarkable feature. While many books and writings were associated with the practice, they flowed out of these experiences and related strategic prayer initiatives and conferences. In accord with Pentecostal/Charismatic practice, referencing Peter's exegesis of Joel on the day of Pentecost,⁵ they were, or claimed to be, "this is that" explanations for tangible spiritual and social transformations that were actually happening.

The Dutch Christian Historian René Holvast provides a remarkably comprehensive overview of this late twentieth century movement in his book *Spiritual Mapping in the United States and Argentina, 1989-2005: a Geography of Fear*.⁶ In my view, as someone who was on the inside, it is an

³ There is a plethora of books on this subject, among the earliest of which is C Peter Wagner. *Territorial Spirits: Insights on Strategic-Level Spiritual Warfare from Nineteen Christian Leaders* (Chichester, UK: Sovereign World, 1991) and Cindy Jacobs. *Possessing the Gates of the Enemy: A Training Manual for Militant Intercession* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Chosen Books, 1991).

⁴ Classic later examples are George Otis Junior. *Informed Intercession: Transforming Your Community Through Spiritual Mapping and Strategic Prayer* (Ventura, California: Renew Books, 1999); and Ed Silvos. *Prayer Evangelism: How to Change the Spiritual Climate Over Your Home, Neighbourhood and City* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 2000).

⁵ Acts 2: 16.

⁶ René Holvast. *Spiritual Mapping in the United States and Argentina, 1989-2005* (The Netherlands and Boston Massachusetts: Brill, 2008).

impressive research study. Nevertheless, from my perspective, it depicts the Spiritual Warfare movement too narrowly as issuing from The American Dream, Manifest Destiny and commercial motives. While some of these aspects were no doubt present and played out in the failure of the so-called 40/70 window prayer initiative⁷ to take off in Europe, none of these motivations was primary. The generosity and servant-like attitudes of the leaders involved were, in my experience, exceptional. Their openness to progressive revelation, not least at the 1994 GCOWE⁸ conference on which this paper focuses, was exemplary in the consequent acceptance of identificational repentance and the accompanying recognition of corporate sin and its impact on the land. Rather, it was the underlying theology of God, and the kingdom of God, that tended to undermine the strategy and approach.⁹

For the purposes of this paper, I have no wish to criticise popular aspects of this manner of praying. Praying individually but in unison can be an economic, uplifting, intercultural manner of prayer. Praying against evil surely cannot be bad, nor can the sense of collaborating with rather than pleading with God. The concern of this paper is with the underlying assumptions of this way of prayer for our understanding of the nature of God and our engagement with divine power. Basic to this is what is meant by the kingdom of God. The spiritual orientation that warfare prayer invokes is often more akin to the dynamic of the demonic forces against which it is directed than it is to the power of God manifest in both incarnation and creation. In my experience, a hierarchical sense of spiritual authority was more characteristic of our corporate exorcisms than a humble expression of the truth in the context of loving identification with our fellow humans in their local situation. The conclusion of my subsequent research is that it often proceeds from mistaken understandings of both church and nation consequent on the partnership of church and empire.¹⁰ Given the at times apparently positive effects of such praying, it may also indicate that the grace of God is so Christ-like and kenotic that God relates to us on the basis of the attitude of our hearts more than our underlying theology. Something that should not surprise us, given the gospels accounts and the radical content of Paul's Philippian hymn, as we shall see.¹¹

⁷ This was an initiative of C. Peter Wagner's Global Harvest movement for the first decade of the 21st century following their 10/40 window initiative of the last decade of the 20th century. The windows refer to the people groups located between these latitudes.

⁸ GCOWE: Global Consultation On World Evangelisation

⁹ Holvast's research would also have benefitted from a more phenomenological methodology and a deeper historical theological understanding of the significance of the three generational moves of the Spirit for neo-Pentecostal/Charismatic eschatology, something that I attempt to explore in my research and set out in chapter five of *Church, Gospel and Empire*.

¹⁰ Roger Haydon Mitchell. *Church, Gospel and Empire: How the Politics of Sovereignty Impregnated the West* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

¹¹ Luke 22: 25-27; Philippians 2: 1-11.

My lived experience

I have been and remain identified with the Pentecostal/ Charismatic expression of faith, and have regarded it to be essentially aligned with justice and the poor since my encounter with it in my late teens. From 1974 until 1995 I was part of the core leadership of the Ichthus Christian fellowship, an experimental New Church expression of ecclesia positioned at that time in the inner city suburbs of south east London and also in the Middle Eastern world in Istanbul, Izmir, Cairo and Nazareth. In 1990, our interest in revival, justice and the poor in urban contexts led me into relationship with C. Peter Wagner, Eduardo Silvoso, Cindy Jacobs and others in their engagement with the Argentinian Revival. There is no space here to spell out the extraordinary experiences that I had then, as well as in my own context in South East London and in the Toronto Outpourings in 1994.¹² Suffice it to say, that in general terms I do not question the validity of the religious experiences that characterised those events and am of the view that they signalled something very significant for the world Christian movement. When I was invited to participate in the pre-GCOWE South Korea 1995 preparation event in October 1993, organised by C. Peter Wagner's Spiritual Warfare Network and known as Gideon's Army, I went gladly.

The plan was that representatives of the 120 or so nations that were present would briefly share a report of what they saw as the main obstacles to the advance of the kingdom of God after which we would pray together for them in the manner of spiritual warfare. At least that was the plan. However, as the South Korean host began to welcome us, Dr Paul Ariga, a senior Japanese Christian leader, interrupted the events by running onto the platform arms outstretched towards the South Korean host. With tears rolling down his face he cried out, "I repent on behalf of the Japanese people for our hatred and violence towards you in the Japan - Korean war." Then he flung himself spread-eagled face down on the platform shaking with uncontrollable sobbing, which within a few minutes spread throughout the whole auditorium. After eventually helping Paul to his feet, the Korean host said, "Thank you, thank you, we accept and we forgive." The rest of the event continued in the planned order, but the content now changed as each delegation spontaneously repented for their nation's sin against other people groups external or internal to their own.

Apartheid laws were legally repealed in South Africa in 1991 and the first free election was due to be held in the April following our conference. The next day, before the South African delegation were due to share, Gerda Leithgob, an Afrikaans prayer leader came to me. Her

¹² For an insiders perspective see John Arnott: *The Father's Blessing*. Orlando, Florida: Creation House, 1995.

grandfather had been one of the founders of apartheid in 1948. “Could you possibly repent to me for the sins of the British in the Boer War between 1899 and 1902? I need to repent for apartheid to my African brothers and sisters but I’m not able to do it unless I can forgive the British genocide of my people.” Such was the heightened milieu of the event that I agreed even though I had no knowledge at the time of the genocide to which she referred. As I began to say sorry, it was as if a runaway train of combined divine and human emotion overtook me. I realised that just about everything that everyone was repenting for we British had a hand in. By the time it came to the UK’s turn to share, we could only begin to allude to some of the issues involved. In consequence we were pretty much continuously in tears for the rest of the event. As a result, the British delegates were inundated with invitations to take teams to the many nations on the receiving end of British colonialism, something that took us a decade or more to do. Some of the major questions of my doctorate cohered in response to those visits.¹³ In accord with the Pentecostal theological practice of putting experience before theology, my experience in Korea and the ensuing events meant that I embarked on a rigorous reappraisal of my theology to account for what was happening. It was not so much a complete turn-around, but a culmination of shifts that had been progressing since my youth.

The kingdom of God

The nature of the kingdom of God has always been a primary focus of my theology, something that I wrote about in my first book, *The Kingdom Factor* as long ago as 1985.¹⁴ Several important findings informed this. The first of these was the Jesus hermeneutic central to the Anabaptists over the centuries and currently espoused by many writers among the most well-known of whom are probably Richard Rohr, and Derek Flood.¹⁵ This lens was extremely helpful to me as it exposed and resolved the obvious distinction between the gospel Jesus and the legalistic religion of some of my background experience growing up in the Christian Brethren. The second was the discovery of the biblical foundations of conditional immortality in the Genesis story, namely that humans are only mortal until they partake of the tree of life. In the terms of the story, once they had eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were removed from the garden and angels barred the way to the tree of life. This was “lest they put forth their hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever.” It follows therefore that fallen humans cannot be the subjects

¹³ See the previously cited Church, Gospel and Empire: How the Politics of Sovereignty Impregnated the West and The Fall of the Church (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

¹⁴ Roger Mitchell. *The Kingdom Factor* (Basingstoke, Hants: Marshall Pickering, 1985).

¹⁵ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/how-did-jesus-approach-scripture-2023-02-09/>; Derek Flood. *Disarming Scripture* (San Francisco, CA: Metanoia Books, 2014).

of eternal conscious torment, as they are only mortal until they partake of the tree of life through Christ, so the good news of the kingdom of God has to be about something very different to salvation from hell. This was and is no small thing, as from adolescence onwards it was clear to me that a God who allows people to be consigned to eternal conscious torment cannot be good, and is certainly not loving. Indeed, if such a God existed, good and loving people would need to be on the opposite side. Thirdly, there was my experience of South Pacific revival faith. From 1980-82, I was seconded to the University of the South Pacific Christian Fellowship together with my wife Sue and our then two small sons, working with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. Most of the student leaders had come to faith during the years of the Solomon Islands revival.¹⁶ They had a simple expectation that the good news of the kingdom of God applied today and that healing and other miraculous signs of the kingdom described in the gospels still happened. They set us up repeatedly to pray for their fellow students with a startling success that we had never previously experienced at such a level.

All of this led to my developing exploration and understanding of the kingdom of God. Simply put, based on the eighty or so separate references to the kingdom in the four gospels, my understanding at the time of writing *The Kingdom Factor* was threefold. That is to say, by definition Jesus and the kingdom of God amounted to the same thing. It was to be found firstly and most obviously in the incarnation of Jesus from birth to ascension. This was what was “at hand” in Mark 1:14. Secondly, it existed and still exists in the life of his followers (broadly defined, as those willing to do his will), in “there are some of those standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.”¹⁷ Finally, there will be a culmination when the good news of the kingdom has been heralded throughout the whole world system and “then the end will come.”¹⁸ My understanding of prayer as spiritual warfare back then was primarily limited to direct attempts to displace Satan and his demons from obstructing the advance of the kingdom. My then lived experience had given me serious reason to take this literally and seriously, something I still do. I used Jesus’ encounter with Satan as recorded by Matthew and Luke¹⁹ as a guide and viewed the temptations as indicating that desire, status and hierarchical domination were demonic powers both individually and corporately and could be directly addressed and displaced as such by resisting Satan with prayer. However, what I had barely begun to recognise was the extent to which these powers gave place to the demonic such

¹⁶ <https://revival-library.org/histories/1970-solomon-islands-and-pacific-muri-thompson/>

¹⁷ Luke 9: 27.

¹⁸ Matthew 24: 14.

¹⁹ Matthew 4: 1-11; Luke 4: 1-13.

that it could not be displaced without resolving the deeply embedded socio-cultural traumas that grounded its power. It was this lack that led to my frustration at the comparative failure of our intercessory efforts and urged me to look for more intensified means of resistance, such as those offered by the developing theology of spiritual warfare represented by C. Peter Wagner and the Argentinean friends with their systematisation of warfare prayer and spiritual mapping.

Kenotic alignment

It was with this background that I looked for an explanation of our experience at the Gideon's Army event and the many similar experiences of identificational repentance around the post-colonial world. For the purposes of this paper, I am focusing particularly on the initial image of Paul Ariga spread-eagled before us and exploring its ramifications. For his actions were by any standard a manifestation of kenosis. He emptied himself of his conventional formalism and patriarchy and took the lowest place in the auditorium. His countercultural posture portrayed the divine as imaged in Christ's foot washing²⁰ and traced by Paul's Philippian hymn.²¹ Instead of the self-righteous hierarchical power of an omnipotent deity, a new possibility opened up. In my recently published article in response to Bruce McCormack's *The Humility of the Eternal Son*,²² I draw attention to the singular way that the Philippian hymn identifies the characteristics of "self-emptying" ('*keno*'), and "taking the form of a servant" as being the definitive nature of God even before becoming human.²³ Given that this passage is generally recognised as the earliest written statement of the gospel, this is highly significant. God empties out divine power and pours out loving service irrespective of whether it is deserved or not but because it is essential to the divine nature to do so. When Jesus is "obedient unto death, even death on a cross,"²⁴ God is identifying with the consequences of sin and injustice on behalf of both victims and perpetrators. When Catherine Keller questions creation *ex nihilo* in *The Face of the Deep*, it is precisely because of its tendency to obfuscate this kind of potentiality in the depth of God.²⁵ If God creates and acts out of nothing, speaking and declaring the divine will aloof in impassable omnipotence, then our task in bringing about the kingdom of God may well only be to stand over against other humans and/or demons with words of declaration and domination. If however, it transpires that creation and divine activity comes

²⁰ John 13: 1-5.

²¹ Philippians 2: 5-11.

²² Bruce Lindley McCormack. *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

²³ Roger Haydon Mitchell "Kenosis or sovereignty? Christ Jesus and the disclosure of the divine mind" (The Theology Journal, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X241232103>).

²⁴ Philippians 2: 8.

²⁵ Catherine Keller. *The Face of the Deep* (Abingdon, Oxon UK: Routledge, 2003), CH 1.

from the deep of compassionate emotion and potential, if the divine can identify with our inhuman situations and corporate sins, then this *Imago Dei* has to be our posture too. It appears to be exactly what the incarnation demonstrates.

Jesus responded to his disciples' request to teach them to pray with the now famous pattern prayer.²⁶ I suggest that it is impossible to practice this prayer properly without a developing theology of the kingdom of God from its inception to its culmination. If we are to pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven," then we need a deep understanding of how the kingdom of heaven functions, what its eschatological implications are, and how this might affect our prayer. The question of how much this coming fullness depends on us, how necessary our collaboration is, cannot be ignored. Jeff Mears' lucid paper in this volume of the journal on the restoration of all things in the theology of Gregory of Nyssa is helpful here in alleviating pressure from our intercessory calling. If the present and final coming of the kingdom depends on our intercession and activism there is the danger of burn out or us thinking too highly of ourselves. If the actual fullness of the original intention is held in the divine intelligence and will, whatever happens in the space between the physical creation and the end of chronological history, then we can perhaps live in hope that whatever we do the fullness of the divine intention will be fulfilled in us and all things. Prayer in this context is more about our grateful collaboration in relationship with God rather than a necessary partnership. From this perspective there can be no ultimate loss, all will be restored. What a relief! There are, however, several crucial aspects of this that I wish to interrogate. First, Jesus' frequent warnings in the synoptic parables to stay alert²⁷ appear to suggest that much more is dependent on our human agency as sons and daughters of the kingdom than this kind of certainty might seem to imply. Second, it appears to me to be that in this scenario the cross is not actually necessary to the perfection of all things. To explain this point more clearly, it could imply a cruciform God who lays down their life, but not a God whose creation's very survival depends on the actual cross and resurrection in earthly history where the divine-human engagement with the effects of humankind's wrong choices is eternally resolved. Aspects of open theism and process theology may help us here. Whereas open theism seems more supportive of the possibility that the divine intelligence and will has everything wrapped up beforehand although we still get to walk it out through our mortal lives, process theology's view of God as fundamentally relational and constantly becoming alongside the universe leaves more room for love. Indeed a fully kenotic process

²⁶ Matthew 6: 9-13; Luke 11: 2-4.

²⁷ Cf. the wise and the foolish virgins: Matthew 25: 13; the man away on a journey: Mark 13:33; the men waiting for the wedding feast: Luke 12: 40.

perspective would have God continuing to become within the creation and not simply alongside it. This leads us to the nature of love itself. If, as Paul makes clear, love is not something that can insist on its own way, then the intent in the original intelligence and will of God cannot be ontologically determining but has to be refusable. In this respect, love is unconditional in the sense that God is unconditionally loving, but conditional in the sense that its reception is voluntary and free. This is surely the essential nature of love. You cannot force love. From this perspective, the pre-historical choice of the trinity to create in their own image was an altogether existential risk on their part. Once decided, it would change the divine reality forever. The opposite to the image of God had to be allowed to exist, at least in principle. This is why I cannot embrace universalism, even though it is what God would ideally want, and those who stand together with the persons of the Godhead in hope of this have my empathy and respect. It is also why, I suggest, our good and loving God made immortality conditional.

Perfecting love

In his seminal article in this volume of the journal, Spencer Thompson draws attention to the interplay between order and chaos in the operation of the cosmos, and exposes love as the means to universal harmony, or perfection of all things. He draws our attention to the centrality of the root word *teleios*, or perfect harmony, in multiple scriptures such as Paul's famous statement "when the perfect (*teleios*) comes the partial will pass away,"²⁸ and "put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony (*teleiōtētos*)."²⁹ The tendency for us theologians is to attempt to resolve conundrums like the restoration of all things in the face of the existence of evil and the fallenness of the world by resorting to the order of divine intelligence and will, whereas God seemingly really did unleash potential chaos and evil by their decision to create in their own image. Only immanent love can resolve this. John's account of the footwashing helps us here. Judas Iscariot was present having his feet washed by Jesus despite the fact that Satan had put it into his heart to betray him. Whether we regard the gospel accounts as positioning the incident at or before the last supper, it reveals the essential role of embodied love to progress the kingdom of God "on earth as it is in heaven" in relation to Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane. There he prayed, with sweat like great drops of blood, "Father if it be possible let this cup pass from me, nevertheless not what I want but what you want."³⁰ This is the heart of his world changing choice for the kingdom of God, and surely remains

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:

²⁹ Colossians 3: 14.

³⁰ Matthew 26: 39; Mark 14: 36; Luke 22: 42.

the way that the kingdom of God comes. As Jesus put it, "If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."³¹

This has enormous significance for our theology of prayer. Prayer is above all else an alignment with God's choice to love. There are three crucial aspects to this. Firstly, it is the fullness of Jesus' purpose to reconcile "all things to himself."³² This is the work of the kingdom of God manifest in the incarnation with the cross at its heart about which John quotes Jesus' words "and I, if I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all things to myself."³³ These "all things" are reconciled by alignment with the humble life-laying-down loving nature of God. Thomas Jay Oord configures this as essential kenosis. "Essential kenosis considers the self-giving, others-empowering love of God revealed in Jesus Christ to be logically primary in God's eternal essence."³⁴ This is what we have been configuring as Kenarchy; the seven gospel foci the practice of which led Jesus inexorably to the cross. It is impossible to divorce the divine purpose from these acts of loving justice. This has serious political implications. There can be no advancement of the kingdom of God through prayer, without an accompanying identification with women, children, the poor, the stranger, the creation, the prisoner and the sick.

Secondly, there is always a future fullness in view. There will be a final resurrection of the entire creation of which the risen Christ is the first fruits.³⁵ Paul makes this the unequivocal lynchpin of his gospel. The choice to love hastens the coming resurrection of everything and aligns us with the coming reality when all the families of the earth are blessed, where nation no longer goes to war with nation and the lion lies down with the lamb. The resurrection of all things is also where the final judgement is a reality because this is where the decisions of every human heart will be exposed and ratified.³⁶ This will ultimately mean extinction for any who choose mortality over Christ and his kingdom in my understanding. Might there be a second chance beyond death? Of course, in every way possible, God is love. However, ultimately, love requires a real choice to love. A life of faithful, prayerful alignment with this future hope is the outworking of cruciform love. This future vision is central to Paul, and his famous chapter on resurrection, as we have already seen. How do we align with God's desired future for the creation in its fullness? As someone well beyond the Psalmist's

³¹ John 13: 14.

³² Colossians 1:20.

³³ John 12: 32.

³⁴ Thomas Jay Oord. *The Uncontrolling Love of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois, 2015), 160.

³⁵ 1 Corinthians 15: 20.

³⁶ Romans 2: 16.

celebrated “years of man,”³⁷ I am eager to lay hold of the telos of prayer and the kingdom. Giorgio Agamben’s insightful tongue in cheek exploration of some of the church fathers’ understanding of this in his essay “The Glorious Body,”³⁸ intentionally shines light on the glorious potential of bodies in the present. This is what alignment with God’s image must surely be about. Bodies, and the whole body of creation, are not utilitarian, extractive. Rather their very being is ostensive.³⁹ That is to say, they have ontological worth in themselves. They point to the fullness of everything God could possibly achieve in the cause of love. They are God’s image, beauty, and art, ultimately to be displayed, not utilised. Hence, our intentional chosen acts of love, our decision to promote overall wellbeing as an end in itself at all times and in all places directly or indirectly is the kenotic alignment that inextricably accompanies prayer.

Finally, there is real satanic as well as human opposition to this purpose, but our cooperation with the divine in prayer will take this on kenotically, not in the same evil spirit of domination. To return to the gospel accounts of Jesus’ confrontation with the devil, it is crucial to recognise that it was first deliberate. The Spirit is variously described as leading, driving, carrying Jesus into the wilderness for this encounter.⁴⁰ The conflict was temporary, “until an opportune time.”⁴¹ However, the clear implication is that we are called into such seasons in order to align with the work of the kingdom in our time and location and we need to be sensitive to these when they happen. Jesus’ way of handling the devil’s temptations was to respond in an opposite spirit, not the same one, simply stating the scripture truth inherent to the image of God. Matthew does add a “Go Satan,”⁴² after which the devil left. There is no dominating shouting match but simply the word of his testimony and his commitment to fulfil the work of the kingdom of God. As the writer of Revelation sets the ultimate defeat of Satan out for us, it is in the same manner, “they overcame him by the blood of the lamb, the word of their testimony and they loved not their lives even unto death.”⁴³

So, where does all this loving potential leave us? Reading the Genesis narrative through this lens, this is the face of the deep.⁴⁴ Once again, in incarnation, when darkness threatens, and the spirit of God moves, God speaks, not through domination and omnipotence but in the choice of love

³⁷ Psalm 90: 10.

³⁸ Giorgio Agamben. “The Glorious Body,” in *Nudities* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), 91-103.

³⁹ Agamben, 98.

⁴⁰ Matthew 4: 1; Mark 1: 12; Luke 4: 1.

⁴¹ Luke 4: 13.

⁴² Matthew 4: 10.

⁴³ Revelation 12:

⁴⁴ Genesis 1:2.

and gift out of all the potentiality of the divine nature from which Jesus proceeded. Anna Mercedes describes this kenotic power as “Power For.”⁴⁵ This is not power to dominate or collaborate with unbridled force. Rather it is the potential to choose to love that the *Imago Dei* gives us. In an earlier volume of this journal, Latasha Hazlett points us to the way that the later Augustine was arriving at this understanding of human becoming. “In this view, humanity is invited to recognize and live into our identity as image bearers.”⁴⁶

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