For Reading Group in July, 2021

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HOW A

PROPHET'S

PRAYER

FORGIVE US MY OUR THEIR SINS

ANSWERS

OUR

OUTRAGE.

BY JEFF PEABODY

LAST FALL,

A FRIEND FROM CHURCH was distraught. She forwarded me a video that has since gone viral and left her confused and alarmed. When I viewed it, I understood why.

In the controversial clip, John MacArthur shares his thoughts about popular speaker and author Beth Moore, declaring she should "go home" and citing the dangers of "women preachers." His theological differences with her came as no surprise, but the sharp personal disdain—all in the name of sound doctrine—undermined any gospel message that was there.

Perhaps even more unsettling than his tone was the response of his audience, laughing in the background as if they relished his vitriol.

Such unfortunate images of Christian infighting and meanness are all too common, and they cause confusion and hurt. The trope "I love Jesus but hate the church" is contradictory, but the sentiment behind it resonates with many.

It saddened and angered me to see such an unloving attack being made in the name of Christ. At the same time, I confess I felt an unease about the ugliness it stirred up inside me. I found myself judging and assigning all kinds of motives to those people in the video. I had to wonder: Was my reaction to them any better than their reaction to Beth Moore? Of course, I felt my own indignation was warranted and reflected God's heart. But MacArthur seemed equally confident he was the one on the side of truth.

It's never been easy for followers of Jesus to embrace that we're all part of the same big family. And today, Christians who strike us as exhibiting un-Christlike behavior have a constant public platform on social media and elsewhere online. The power of their voices in shaping society's understanding of the church makes us want to distance ourselves and scream that WE are not THEM.

What do we do when we know we're called to unity but feel justifiably outraged by our brothers and sisters? How can we keep the peace and our integrity at the same time? And how do we hold the tension of addressing the shortcomings of others while at the same time remembering our own?

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

The prophet Daniel might seem an unlikely guide in these matters. Yet his famous prayer, in Daniel 9, speaks directly to our times.

Daniel was taken into captivity along with thousands of other Israelites during the Babylonian exile. There he was confronted with the complexities of living out his faith in a foreign culture while working for a pagan king. His prayer comes after decades of service to a foreign nation.

You do not have to read very much of the text to recognize the prayer as a confession. Daniel finds just about every way imaginable to ask for forgiveness. And he fully identifies himself with his people: *We have sinned. We have rebelled. We have not listened. We have done wrong. We have been wicked. We have transgressed. We have turned away. We have been unfaithful. We have refused to obey. We have not sought the Lord. We have not turned from our sins. We have not given attention to your truth.*

You would be hard-pressed to find a more comprehensive acknowledgment of guilt, which is a little mystifying because, up until this point, Daniel hasn't exhibited any obvious moral lapses. He's been the very model of a faithful servant of God.

There's a disconnect between his exemplary behavior and his humble confession. It makes you want to protest and say, "Daniel, you don't have to do that. You didn't do anything wrong. It's those who were unfaithful who should be apologizing!"

Daniel's approach is so opposite from my own. When it comes to collective sins—whether those of the church, the clergy, or the nation—I want to distance myself from the offense. I want to point out why "they" are not "me." And I want to denounce what I see "them" doing.

I'm not alone in this. There's a long history of line-drawing within the church, going all the way back to Paul and Barnabas parting company over whether John Mark was fit to serve (Acts 15:36–39).

Martin Luther condemned the Anabaptists as heretical for their rejection of infant baptism and called for their execution or banishment. The Puritans went to war with the Church of England over reforms they saw as nonnegotiable. George Whitefield and the Wesley brothers fought bitterly over predestination.

Entire movements and countless church plants trace their origins to a moment when insurmountable differences seemed to call for breaking fellowship. Today, we are at another cultural flashpoint, where divisions within the faith are particularly severe. And God-fearing people of all persuasions are certain they hold the moral high ground.

In her book *Disunity in Christ*, Christena Cleveland writes, "As much as we'd like to believe that Jesus is the author of our Right Christian and Wrong Christian distinctions, we can't because it is simply untrue. By pursuing *us* with great tenacity in spite of our differences with him, he shows us that he doesn't have need for those distinctions."

When what we consider sin or error is unashamedly embraced by other Christ followers, what do we do? It's painful to see people who claim the same Savior showing utter disregard for core tenets of his teaching. How do we maintain the unity of the body of Christ without looking as if we're endorsing values we find offensive?

SAME KIND OF DIFFERENT AS ME

I find myself desperately wanting non-Christians to know what I am not. And that seems to be the current trend. We decry the despicable brokenness of other believers and encourage the world to turn away from them and look at us instead for a more palatable, truer depiction of faith.

But adopting a wholesale separatist approach feeds the lie that we are intrinsically different sheep from the rest of the flock. It deludes us into believing that our proper theology, superior morality, or enhanced sense of justice make us the keepers of God's full perspective. We lean further and further into our own self-righteousness.

We think we need to pull away from others for the sake of holiness, so we adopt the pharisaical approach of building up more and more walls between us and those we deem less acceptable or legitimate. Our circle shrinks ever smaller until we are the only ones remaining within the rigid bounds of correctitude.

This is where Daniel's prayer is so jarring. Instead of recoiling from the wickedness he sees around him, he places himself squarely in the middle of other people's sin in addition to his own. There is no daylight between his personal failings and those of the larger community.

It's a strikingly uncharacteristic posture for a prophet. We've come to expect fiery rebuke from those in that role. We sometimes claim to have prophetic insight ourselves when we want to speak a harsh word with authority. Daniel undermines our assumption that pronouncing judgment is the most pressing prophetic responsibility.

Think of his situation: God had warned his people over and over again that if they continued in their relentless rebellion, he would bring terrible judgment on Jerusalem and send the nation into exile for 70 years. Even with that warning, they didn't listen, so God carried out what he said he would do.

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Now, Daniel stands near the end of long decades of exile, aware that if God keeps his word, he is about to restore his people to Jerusalem. The end of captivity is imminent, and nobody wants to go through that again.

Yet as Daniel looks around, what does he see? A people still steeped in sin. "The Lord did not hesitate to bring the disaster on us, for the Lord our God is righteous in everything he does; *yet we have not obeyed him*" (Dan. 9:14, emphasis added).

Israel is at a pivotal moment when you would hope everyone had learned the hard lesson. You would hope to see some contrition and humility and a readiness to commit once more to following the Lord. But Ezekiel, who lived in Babylon at the same time as Daniel, describes the ongoing attitude of the Israelites as rebellious, obstinate, stubborn, unyielding, and hardened (Ezek. 2–3). There's been no remarkable turnaround.

If ever there were a moment to disassociate yourself from the pack, this would be it. Had I been Daniel, I would have wanted God to know with absolute clarity that I was nothing at all like the corrupted masses around me. I would want him to treat me differently in light of my stellar performance in Babylon. I am not one of them, God. Don't hold their stubbornness against me.

DANIEL UNDERMINES OUR ASSUMPTION THAT PRONOUNCING JUDGMENT IS THE MOST PRESSING PROPHETIC RESPONSIBILITY.

Daniel, however, chooses solidarity with the hell-bent-on-rebellion group. As much as he may have wanted to highlight his distinctness from them—and had every right to do so—he not only comes alongside them, but he claims their sin as his own. He confesses on behalf of a people entrenched in their evil ways and far from repentant.

What makes his choice so profound and beautiful is what it foreshadows: We have our own Daniel in Jesus. Christ steps in on our behalf and picks up all the guilt that isn't his. Isaiah 53:12 says he was counted as a sinner, and he bore the sins of many, and he pled with God for sinners.

PRAYING IN UNITY

My natural self wants to pray that God will bring my wayward brothers and sisters in line, that he will see and correct their glaring faults. The thought of maintaining fellowship with them in the meantime is nearly unbearable. I feel I am on God's side in soundly condemning them, conveniently overlooking my own need for mercy. All the while, Jesus picks up our cross and prays that all of us may be one.

The way forward is not in distancing myself from the Christians I can't stand but in recognizing our shared need for grace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, hardly someone afraid of decisive action against injustice, brought this idea into sharp relief in his famous book on Christian community, *Life Together*:

> "Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the communal life, is not the sinning brother still a brother, with whom I, too, stand under the word of Christ? Will not his sin be a constant occasion for me to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ? Thus the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and Deed that really binds us together—the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ."

What a foreign concept—that the very thing I hate in "those" Christians is cause for me to remember my own ongoing dependence on the Cross. Rather than withdraw and separate, I can stand side by side with all other sinners who have responded to the offer of forgiveness, however imperfectly. In so doing, I embody the very message of the Cross.

I'm not suggesting we stop calling out sin as if accountability doesn't matter. Paul's exhortations to the Corinthians regarding church discipline

still apply; there are times to withdraw our fellowship from those who are entrenched in patterns of ungodliness. But the aim of such separation is always the restoration of the individual and the hope of repaired relationship.

Nor am I encouraging some artificial guilt complex, where we pretend we personally committed everyone else's misdeeds. We don't have to punish ourselves as if we did something we didn't.

Instead, what we confess to is being part of the same indivisible body as those who did what we find reprehensible. The moment I choose the pronoun "we" in my prayer, I am making a statement of solidarity with the rest of the church.

This is no secret. It's why many church traditions still retain a time of corporate confession as part of the standard liturgy in their worship services. Confession of sin on a corporate level does several specific things:

IT REFUSES THE DEVIL AN EASY WIN

Our battle truly is not against flesh and blood. The enemy is not the other Christian who infuriates me. When we remember that and stay grounded in our shared struggle, our confession becomes an act of defiance against forces that want to tear the church apart.

IT FREES US UP

At times I've acted as if I'm the corrector-in-chief, with the express duty of monitoring other people's okayness while at the same time worrying about my own to the point of distraction. That's exhausting. And it's not my job.

Psalm 37:3 says, "Trust in the Lord and do good." In confession, we leave all that we view as wrong in the hands of our merciful Judge. In so doing, we are released from our self-imposed burden of sorting the wheat from the tares.

IT HIGHLIGHTS THE REACH OF THE FALL

Our need for grace is not limited to the specific bad choices we make as individuals. It extends to our condition as humans. The concept of original sin says this is an intrinsic, human-race-wide state that cannot be simply cut out like a spot of mold. The problem is greater than the sum of our actions: By way of spiritual genetics, we were sinners before doing anything.

Participating in virtually any human system means participating in a system tainted by sin. No matter how careful and correct we may think we have been in crafting our own point of view, it will never be completely right in content or method or motive. We only "know in part" (1 Cor. 13:9), which means our own sins most likely exceed our awareness.

Charles Spurgeon made the observation that, in Leviticus 16, even the altar had to be sprinkled by the blood of the sacrifice before it was acceptable. Spurgeon wrote, "Many saints spend much time in hearty, earnest cries to God; but even on your knees you sin; and herein is our comfort, that the precious blood has made atonement for the shortcomings of our supplications." More simply, as my wife puts it, even our best is in need of mercy.

Our desire to put space between ourselves and evil is a good thing. But when it turns into cutting ties with entire segments of the church, we can find ourselves operating under the illusion that, because we're not directly involved in a particular behavior, we're less sinful. Corporate confession—voicing our connection to the universalness of our plight—reminds us that there is nowhere to run from what Adam and Eve bequeathed to all of us.

IT BRINGS THE CROSS TO GUT LEVEL

Taking responsibility for our own sin is painful enough. The thought of attaching ourselves to sins we can't stand sickens us. And it should. But that very revulsion can be useful because it gives us a tiny glimpse of the horror Christ endured on our behalf. Absolute holiness joined itself to utter depravity. We begin to sense in a visceral way the impossibility of what is being asked and why we so much needed someone else to carry our collective burden. Only Christ on the cross can hold the tension of right owning wrong.

When Daniel interceded for his people, he said, "We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy" (9:18).

That is our only hope. By identifying myself with the ugliness of sin in the church at large, I am forced to let go of the notion that I am somehow more worthy of God's love. I can begin to see that there is no longer any "other" among those whom God has called his own.

This gives us a sure path for prayer in the face of a dysfunctional global church. We can always ask for mercy. We can always ask God to work his will for the sake of his own name. As theologian Tokunboh Adeyemo wrote, "When a prayer is about nothing but God's own interest, it cannot go unanswered."

Can God glorify his name in those "other" Christians with whom I adamantly disagree? I'm sure he can, though at times I honestly don't understand how. I do know this: I myself can glorify him best when I choose humble ownership of sin—mine and the Christian community's—over separation and contempt. And that is where I begin to better see and love Christ, the sinless one who owned my sin and continues to stand with me despite all my ongoing forms of disobedience. **CT**

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