

A Theological Response to Dr. Khoo's Conference Paper on The Never-Ending Offering of Prayer

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I render my wholehearted appreciation to the theology committee of WFCMC to read Dr. Khoo's paper on John Wesley's theology of prayer. It is rather a refreshing experience for me to read this paper. It gives me not only an insightful interpretation of John Wesley's theology of prayer but also a contextual reflection of Christian life in relation to Wesley's theology today.

Too often, we use prayer as a tool for our expedience to demand what we have requested from God. Too often, we use prayer as a tool for our expedience to conceal our hypocrisy, which means, we pray with superficial form and without sincere content. And too often, we use prayer as a tool for our expedience to obtain our personal salvific benefits. Too often, we pray without knowing its theological meaning.

Nevertheless, Dr. Khoo's paper has convincingly reminded us that prayer was not merely an expedient means of religious benefits and does not function as such. Rather, prayer, as John Wesley saw it, is a means of grace and the Lord's Prayer should be the fundamental of all prayers [7-10].

Dr. Khoo has carefully structured his paper to help readers comprehend John Wesley's theology of prayer by leading readers going through 1) what had influenced John Wesley's life of prayer; 2) the prayer pamphlets published by John Wesley; 3) the theology of prayer as John Wesley defined it; and 4) its spiritual inspiration to today's Methodists. Being organized in this way, this paper gives readers sufficient information with regard to what has shaped John Wesley's theology of prayer from both historical and theological accounts and its possible inspiration to today's Methodists.

At the end, Dr. Khoo reminds readers to renew their understanding of prayer by stressing God's transformative power in prayer, both individual and communal prayer. He emphasizes that prayer is a creative means of grace in which God restores *Imago Dei* in human life. In prayer, both we and God, both we and our neighbors, are open to each other. Most importantly, God invites us to participate in God's new creation in prayer. By citing John Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* and the process theologian Marjorie H. Suchocki's work on prayer, Dr. Khoo echoes their theological viewpoints and also envisions the mutual penetrating and transformative power of prayer as a way in renewing our understanding of prayer.

The notion of mutual penetrating and transformative power of prayer is indeed worthy of our attention in renewing our understanding of prayer today. While Wesley emphasizes that salvation is the renewal of creation through the restoration of the image of God in humanity, prayer is indeed a creative means of grace mediating God and humanity in which salvation via new creation occurs.¹ While Suchocki points out the openness of prayer in receiving the transformation power of God, prayer is indeed a means whereby we open ourselves for conformity to God's purposes for the well-being of the world.²

Modern theologian, Paul Tillich, also interprets this notion from a systematic theology perspective. For Tillich, prayer is a revelatory event in which God as the ultimate ground of being is united with the person as the created being who renders prayer.³ Thus, it is also a possible "ecstatic" event in which the person's subject-object structure is overcome.⁴ In other words, prayer should be theonomous, namely, in prayer the person is willing to participate in his own depth and to be united with the depth of his being, which is God.⁵ Moreover, in prayer, God's directing creativity occurs, God is asked to direct the given situation toward fulfillment. Every serious prayer contains power because of the faith in God's directing creativity – a faith which transforms the existential situation.⁶

Nevertheless, such seems too individualistic in the interpretive orientation of the theology. The notion of mutual penetrating and transformative power of prayer bears its points of social reference. For example, the coming of God's kingdom as

¹Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 8.

²Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God Christ Church*, New Rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 224.

³Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951), 127.

⁴Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963), 120.

⁵*Ibid.*, vol.1, 85.

⁶*Ibid.*, 267.

Wesley and Suchocki (Tillich as well) have commonly envisioned should not be overlooked. For Wesley, the end of new creation is not simply God's restoration of *Imago Dei* in human life but also the image in the society and the world. It is clear that Wesley boldly emphasized the social religion and social holiness of Christianity in his sermon *Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount Discourse IV* and the coming of God's kingdom in his analysis of the Lord's Prayer in *Discourse VI*. These sermons, including others as we often know, jointly deliver a message that the purpose of God in creation is to renew God's image in both individualistic and societal terms. As Wesley stated, "we pray that his kingdom . . . may come. . . so it is the kingdom of God begun below, set up in believer's heart. . . We pray for the coming of his everlasting kingdom, the kingdom of glory in heaven, which is the continuation and perfection of the kingdom of grace on earth."⁷

For Suchocki, a Process theologian, the *telos* of the world is the coming of God's kingdom and prayer is vital to the coming of God's reign. Prayer is a channel of union between the reign of God that is in God, and the reign as it is reflected in history. It is obvious, for Suchocki, this world is the historical locale for the realization of the reign of God. Prayer changes the world and leads to such realization. As she points out, as we pray, we change the world by changing ourselves in our deepest orientation. Prayer releases the power of God to lead the world toward the reign of God.⁸ That is to say, God does not change the world by God alone but by changing us to change the world and lead the world to the reign of God. We act to change the world via prayer as a way to participate in the realization of the reign of god in this world.

In summary, prayer is a creative means of grace which penetrates God and the person, God and the community, who renders prayer to be united with their ultimate ground of being, and which transforms the person's and the community's existential situation to take on actions to change the world and lead the world to its final fulfillment in God's reign. The notion of mutual penetrating and transformative power of prayer shakes and awakens us from the lifeless prayer often used as an expedient tool for beneficial supplication. Thanks to Dr. Khoo for his insightful paper in delivering such an awakening.

⁷Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *John Wesley's Sermon: An Anthology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 230-1.

⁸⁸Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God Christ Church*, New Rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 217-24.