



February 2019 – *CLOSEST PROXIMITY AND INFINITE DISTANCE*

C.S. Lewis's book *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* consists of a series of letters to a (fictional) close friend. One of the subjects he explores is the use of "ready-made" prayers, i.e., prayers written by other people, such as many included in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Lewis writes regarding prayer:

I find it best to make "my own words" the staple but introduce a modicum of the ready-made.

Writing to you, I need not stress the importance of the home-made staple. As Solomon said at the dedication of the temple, each man who prays knows "the plague of his own heart." Also, the comforts of his own heart. No other creature is identical with me; no other situation identical with mine. Indeed, I myself and my situation are in continual change. A ready-made form can't serve for my intercourse with God any more than it could serve for my intercourse with you... This is obvious. Perhaps I shan't find it so easy to persuade you that the ready-made modicum has also its use: for me, I mean – I'm not suggesting rules for anyone else in the whole world.

First, it keeps me in touch with "sound doctrine." Left to oneself, one could easily slide away from "the faith once given" into a phantom called "my religion." ... Secondly, it reminds me "what things I ought to ask" (perhaps especially when I am praying for other people). The crisis of the present moment, like the nearest telegraph-post, will always loom largest. Isn't there a danger that our great, permanent, objective necessities — often more important — may get crowded out? By the way, that's another thing to be avoided in a revised Prayer Book. "Contemporary problems" may claim an undue share. And the more "up to date" the book is, the sooner it will be dated.

Finally, they provide an element of the ceremonial. On your view, that is just what we don't want. On mine, it is part of what we want. I see what you mean when you say that using ready-made prayers would be like "making love to your own wife out of Petrarch or Donne." (Incidentally might you not quote them – to such a literary wife as Betty?) The parallel won't do.

I fully agree that the relationship between God and a man is more private and intimate than any possible relation between two fellow creatures. Yes, but at the same time there is, in another way, a greater distance between the participants. We are approaching – well I won't say "the Wholly Other," for I suspect that is meaningless, but the Unimaginably and Insupportably Other. We ought to be — sometimes I hope one is — simultaneously aware of closest proximity and infinite distance. You make things far too snug and confiding. Your erotic analogy needs to be supplemented by "I fell at His feet as one dead."

...A few formal, ready-made, prayers serve me as a corrective of – well, let's call it "cheek." They keep one side of the paradox alive. Of course it is only one side. It would be better not to be reverent at all than to have a reverence which denied the proximity.¹

How about you? Would including some carefully chosen "ready-made" prayers enrich your prayer life?

*"Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,
and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!"*

PSALM 141:2 (ESV)



¹ C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, 1992), pp. 12-13.