

CHAPTER SEVEN



PRAYER AS PARTICIPATION

The Middle Voice

"The assumption of spirituality is that always God is doing something before I know it. So the task is not to get God to do something I think needs to be done, but to become aware of what God is doing so that I can respond to it and participate and take delight in it"

Eugene Peterson

Most of us are easily able to conceive of two main types of prayer; one more active and the other more passive.

Active prayer might involve us asking God to do things which would help us, or make sense to us. These prayers might be full of words, petitions, intercessions and activity. They might be said in personal prayers, but equally are common in communal settings. At their best they express care and concern for situations and desperately seek the kind and powerful hand of God to intervene. At their worst they can spill over into noise, competitive effort or the belief that somehow saying the right words, saying them loud enough or with enough passion or belief will somehow unlock the attention and activity of the divine.

Passive prayers are the opposite. The aim is stillness and silence. The hope is to meditate, to empty ourselves of effort and words and instead to listen and to grow in peacefulness. Our hope would be that God would speak while we are silent. At their best these prayers are formational and profound, acknowledging the primacy of Gods voice over ours and an antidote to the noise and activity of performative culture. At their worst these prayers simply empty ourselves without refilling with anything of value and are indistinguishable from any other form of meditation.

Jesus, according to Staton, introduces us to a different form of prayer, which is difficult to understand grammatically in English, but which involves "The Middle Voice".

THE MIDDLE VOICE

"I give advice" - Active voice

I am the primary agent and origin of activity.

"I am given advice" - Passive voice

Someone else is the primary agent. I am a recipient.

"I take advice" - Middle voice

"I am an active participant, but the action did not originate with me. I am *joining* the actions of another."

"The assumption of biblical prayer is that God's action always precedes my part"

When we join in with this type of prayer, we jump into the moving flow of the activity and character of God. Just as jumping into a stream would make you wet, jumping into this 'flow' also transforms and affects us. It will form us and shape us in Christlikeness. As we become involved with God's will more, and our own will less, we grow in compassion, kindness and love. We often become living answers to the prayers and hopes which we have.

"Biblically speaking, inner prayer and outward compassion are inseparable. The Hebrew term for personal righteousness is *tsedaqah*, and the Hebrew term for outward justice is identical - *tsedaqah*"

"In ancient Hebrew understanding of righteousness, a community of pious, private spiritual practice without equal devotion to costly public compassion was not only dysfunctional but oxymoronic".