



## Someone is praying for us!

On the topic of intercession, the first thing that comes to mind is the clear instruction we received in the New Testament: to pray for everyone (1 Tim. 2:2), for all those in authority (1 Tim. 2:2), for all the saints (Eph. 6:18), for those who are sick (Jas. 5:16) and for brothers who sin (1 John 5:16). The Lord Jesus commands us to even pray for our enemies and for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:44 ff.).

The Lord's prayer teaches us to which extent praying also means 'praying for'. The plural form that we use when addressing God as Our Father brings home to us that when we pray, we bring all of God's children with us to his throne.

However fundamental this intercession is to our prayer life, this is not the issue that I want to address at the moment. I want to call attention to another kind of intercession, namely the intercession of *our Saviour*. This is because little attention is often given to the prayers of our Lord in either preaching or in our walk of faith. A. Kuyper's complaint that the matter of Christ's intercession 'has been weakened and that it has been pushed from the first place to the last place to the detriment of the church', and has become 'some kind of appendix in the teaching of reconciliation'<sup>1</sup> and has still not been fully dealt with.

### **Christ's intercession**

Maybe you have never really noticed it, but answer 49 of the Heidelberg Catechism mentions that the *first* benefit of Christ's ascension into heaven is that He intercedes for us before his Father. Much can be said about the ascension. It is Christ's accession to the throne. He sat himself at the right hand of God. In Him, through the ascension, 'our flesh' entered heaven and made it possible for Him to send his Spirit to us.

But the most important issue is that in this way Christ has become our Intercessor before the Father. This reminds me of what Paul wrote in Romans 8:34: 'Christ Jesus, who died — *more* than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.'

The apostle preaches a progress in Christ's salvation work, a progress that results in Christ's intercession for us. For Paul, that is the climax: the Mediator in heaven!

We come across something similar in the letter to the Hebrews. The letter proclaims the life and work of Christ on earth (Heb. 2:14 ff.; 5:7 ff.; 9:14), but names as the gist of what it wants to preach 'that we do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle....' (Heb. 8:1,2). The meaning of this service is to be found in chapter 9:25: He lives forever to *intercede* for us.

H. Bavinck duly notes that in the letter to the Hebrews the earthly life of Christ (and therefore also his suffering on the cross!) is often interpreted 'as a preparation for the high-priestly work which He currently does in heaven.'<sup>2</sup>

The Heidelberg Catechism thus follows in the wake of the Scriptures when it attaches such great importance to the intercession of Christ. The Lord Jesus is able to 'completely save' us, for the very reason that He always lives to intercede for us (Heb. 9:25)!

## **Reconciliation**

The intercession of Christ is mentioned in different contexts in the New Testament.

In my opinion, the atoning power of the intercession of Christ remains paramount. John refers to it when he writes: 'But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense — Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins' (1 John 2:1,2). The apostle uses the Greek word *paraklêtos* to describe someone who speaks in another's defense.

For a long time this word was believed to have a typical legalistic tone to it. But upon closer examination the word was found to have a more general meaning in the sense of promoter, helper<sup>3</sup>. When we have sinned, the Lord Jesus assists us in our need before the Father. He helps us in the heavenly court. And He is able to help us, because He is just and righteous. He has fulfilled Gods' law and is totally blameless before God.

For Christ to be denoted 'righteous' is an indication to us that Christ's life and work on earth can in no way be separated from his work in heaven. He can be our advocate to the Father, because He poured out his blood on earth for the total forgiveness of all our sins (Matt. 26:28). Theologians have sometimes made a distinction between the mediation of the atonement and the mediation of the intercession. I do not consider this to be expedient. Atonement and intercession are inseparable from one another. The atoning work of Christ continues in heaven.

This does not imply that He still continues to offer Himself to the Father. That has been fulfilled once and for all on earth (Heb. 10:10,14). The atoning work continues in the sense that He lets his blood *speak* to the Father (cf. Heb. 12: 24 where it refers to the blood of our mediator Jesus that *speaks!*).

The extent to which the Savior is still our mediator of atonement in heaven as well is evident in the words of John when he writes about his intercession: '*and He is the atonement for all our sins.*' The apostle does not write 'was', but 'is'. The Savior is in his person still always 'an atonement'.

*'In his intercession his sacrifice continues to live and work. Not the sacrifice that has once been made on earth and has been separated from the person of Christ, but the exalted Christ, who is both the crucified and the atonement for all our sins...'*<sup>4</sup>

For 'atonement' the New Testament uses the words *kattalage* and *hilasmos*, each with its own connotation. John calls Christ a *hilasmos*, a word that has cultic origins. It refers to the covering of someone's sin with the blood of a sacrificial animal<sup>5</sup>. The fact that the apostle uses this particular word in the context of 'sin' is an indication to us of the extent to which our Saviour in his capacity as one who was crucified intercedes for us by the Father. Our sins continually disrupt the peace with God. We incite his wrath upon us. But Christ steps into the breach for us. He lets his blood speak in the heavenly court. And in this way He is a constant atonement, a covering for all our sins. There is forgiveness for those who confess their sins, because we have a Helper who is the atonement and the peace with God *in person* (cf. Eph. 2:14: 'for He himself is our peace') and *thus* lets his blood speak!

## **Access to the Father**

Article 26 of the Belgic Confession that deals with 'Christ our only Mediator' begins by professing that we have no access to God except through the one and only Mediator and Intercessor, Jesus Christ the Righteous. We can only have access to the Father because Christ, who is 'an atonement', intercedes for us. Through this Mediator we have been given access (Eph. 2:18). The letter to the Hebrews calls particular attention to this aspect of Christ's intercession. In conclusion to everything the author tells us about the Christ's work as high priest, chapter 10 proclaims: 'Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus ... , let us draw near ... '

The way to God's throne was not yet open under the old dispensation (Hebr. 9:8). The high priest was allowed only once a year to very briefly come close to the throne of God. However, through his sacrifice Christ acquired the right not only to approach God's throne, but also to *remain* there. We have a High Priest who sat down forever at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven (Heb. 8:1). We are able now to 'come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for (us)' (Heb. 7:25). We may 'approach' (Heb. 4:16), 'enter' (Heb. 9:12), 'come' (Heb. 12:22), because Christ entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood (Heb. 9:12), because He now appears for our good in God's presence (Heb. 9:24) and always lives to intercede for us.

We discover here how substantially Christ's intercession is connected to our prayers. We can approach God only because He opened up the way with his sacrifice and continually pleads our cause. Without his intercession, our prayers, unworthy as they are, could never be heard by God. As Calvin writes touchingly: we need a mediator 'to appear in our name, to carry us on his shoulders and keep us bound to his chest, so that we may be heard *in his person*.'<sup>6</sup> In praying we approach the awesome heavenly Majesty whose eyes are too pure to look on evil (Hab. 1:13). But as we approach, our faithful Savior is there who raises his voice for us and makes the throne of this Majesty a throne of grace and help (Hebr. 4:16).

It is this aspect of Christ's intercession that is discussed in detail in Article 26 of the Belgic Confession. The background is unmistakable: the many mediators that the Church of Rome found in Maria and the dead saints. The confession firmly disposes of all these human mediators in heaven. I was struck by how emphatically we are urged to approach the Lord Jesus. The article emphasizes that 'the greatness' of this Mediator should not hold us back. In the Middle Ages this greatness was considered to be of prime importance. Christ was above all seen as the awesome future judge.

It is a view that differs from the familiar way in which many speak of 'Jesus' nowadays. Meanwhile we can benefit from keeping in mind that our confession does speak of the greatness! Our Saviour is indeed the Lord of Lords and the High Priest who is seated at the right hand of the majesty of God. When He appeared as such to John, the apostle fell at his feet 'as though dead' (Rev. 1:17). Talk about greatness ...

However exalted He is, we can still approach Him. And we do not need any mediators to approach Him. 'For when God gave Him to us He knew well that we were sinners' (Article 26 BC). We may then approach God *through Him* with confidence (Heb. 7:25). More so because He lived on earth as a man and knows our needs through experience. He can give us such excellent help because He himself suffered temptation and can therefore sympathise with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15).

## **Perseverance**

The intercession of Christ is also mentioned in the Canons of Dort with regard to the *perseverance* of the true believers. They can fall into serious sin. The Canons refer to David and Peter. But they neither forfeit faith and grace totally nor remain in their downfalls to the end and are lost. If they were left by themselves this undoubtedly would happen, but with respect to God it cannot possibly happen. And then the Canons refer to the *intercession* of Christ (V, 8). In the margin two passages from scripture are mentioned: Romans 8:34 and Luke 22:32. In my opinion the high-priestly prayer in John 17 is also relevant here.

In Luke 22 we come across Peter who is naively overconfident. Apparently he has some idea of the suffering that lies ahead for his Master. He talks about 'prison and death'. Should it come to that, the Master can count on him. Peter will not desert Him. He will stay with the Master, even if it becomes very dark. Maybe Satan will get hold of a fellow apostle, but Peter will not renounce Jesus: 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.' (Mark 14:31).

Calvin comments on this testimony of Peter that he commits a twofold sin. Peter overconfidently promises loyalty and at the same time does not take his own weakness into account.

That is indeed the case. Peter shall remain in Christ and persevere in the faith, not on account of the strength of his own love, but solely because Christ *prayed* for him that his faith would not succumb. What the Master proclaims shall come about.

Soon a terrible denial does take place. But this deep fall will not be the end of Peter, the Rock. He will repent and shed tears of remorse. That will be the *fruit* of Christ's intercession. In this intercession alone lies the secret of Peter's eventual perseverance in the love for and the faith in his Master!

In Romans 8:34 we discover the same secret. In the next verse Paul summarizes all the dangers that could threaten us as God's children: trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger or the sword. But there is no question of a *fatal* danger, because nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ, a Christ who intercedes for us. If it depended on us, we would come to grief in our walk of faith. But there is the saving power of Christ's intercession. And that is why we can rejoice: 'In all these things we are more than conquerors.'

Christ's intercession as the secret of the perseverance of those who belong to Him is also strongly evident in the high-priestly prayer of John 17. It is primarily a prayer for the disciples (cf. v. 8), but it expands to all of those who will come to believe through their message (v. 20). This prayer is surprisingly full of Christ's care for his own whom He leaves behind in the world. It is about deliverance from evil, about sanctification and being one with God.

The prayer ends with a powerful declaration of intent regarding the future of his own: 'Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory....'

The Savior can speak with such certainty because He completed the work that the Father gave Him to do (cf. v. 4). He says this in the hearing of his disciples to show us how concerned He is about our future and that we can be certain that we will partake in his glory. In John 17 we hear his dearest and last wish! This prayer is included in the gospel to proclaim to us *how* Christ prayed for his own and still intercedes for them.

It is apt that the Canons of Dort refer to the intercession of our Lord in the same chapter that deals with the perseverance of the saints. The purpose thereof is not to lead us to sinful nonchalance: we can be careless, since we will be preserved anyway! The Canons gives such an attitude no quarter. They state that God proclaims the perseverance of the saints for the comfort of the godly (V, 15). God's faithful children need not be afraid to stumble fatally and be lost forever. A deep fall might happen. But the Lord will bring them to repentance and sincere remorse, as in the case of David and Peter. Because Christ's intercession cannot be nullified (V,8). His 'Father, I will' transcends all the force of the Satan and all the evil of our hearts. His pleading voice *preserves* our faith and prevents it from succumbing.

## **John 16:26**

Now that we have explored the contexts in which the New Testament speaks about Christ's intercession, we encounter a problem when we read what He tells his disciples in John 16:26: '*In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you.*' How can these words be reconciled with the comfort we found in everything that was said about the constant intercession of the High Priest in the courts of heaven?

A lot has been said in the exegesis regarding these words. J. van Andel believes that what is meant here is that by praying in Jesus' name a 'particular intercession' is made superfluous. 'The disciples here on earth, to the same extent that their union with Christ is complete, will already be exalted to the state in which the perfected exist, who no longer need an Intercessor.'<sup>7</sup>

P.H.R. van Houwelingen believes that the statement of the Savior relates entirely to the future. 'In that day' refers to Christ's Second Coming. 'At the time of His return, prayers are still made in His name. But He would no longer need to intercede with the Father. The time of His intercession is past.'<sup>8</sup>

I choose for the explanation that Herman Ridderbos offers<sup>9</sup>. 'In that day' refers to the time of *the Spirit* who will guide the disciples 'into all truth' and in that way glorify Christ (John 16:12 ff.). Through the Spirit, Christ shall speak 'freely' of the Father. Every misunderstanding and concealment will be removed. The disciples will understand the meaning of their Master's work. And in that way it will become possible for them to pray in Jesus' name: with an appeal to his work and his proxy.

They have not yet prayed like this (John 16:24). They have not yet been able to, having been held in thrall by misunderstanding and ignorance. It was also not yet possible because Christ still had to complete his great work.

But the coming of the Spirit of truth will make a new way of praying possible! The disciples would soon be able to approach the Father by invoking Christ and his work. He will then truly be the way to the Father. As Calvin says: *we conquer the heart of the Father when we call upon the name of his Son*.

The word of the Lord assures us that we have *direct* access to the Father. It makes our position clear: the Father Himself loves us because we love his Son (John 16:27). Christ does not need to ask everything for us. He does not need to make our needs known to the Father for us. We can and are allowed to do it ourselves as the Father's beloved children, because the Spirit teaches us to call upon the Father (Gal. 4:6).

As far as asking is concerned, we can approach the Father ourselves. At the same time it is also true that our prayers are heard solely on the basis of Christ's intercession, in which He time and again lets His blood speak on our behalf. His intercession remains necessary.

We may not lose sight of the fact that what He says about *Him* 'not asking' stands in the context of the praying 'in his name'! It means that when we ask, it is accompanied by an appeal upon His work and intercession. We do the asking ourselves, but we come to God *through Him* who lives forever to intercede for us. The Father Himself loves us, but it is and remains a love which is 'in Christ Jesus, our Lord' (Rom 8:39).

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*Translated by Lize Kampman*

### Endnotes:

1. G.C. Berkouwer, *Geloof en volharding*, Kampen 1949, p. 118
2. H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, III, Kampen 1929, p. 473.
3. Also see A.N. Hendriks, *Die in de waarheid leidt*, Heerenveen 2002, p. 144ff.
4. H. Bavinck, *idem.*, p. 477.
5. J.P. Versteeg, *Bijbelwoorden op de man af*, Kampen 1983, p. 31.
6. *Institutes*, III, 20, 18.
7. J. van Andel, *Johannes' evangelie aan de gemeente toegelicht*, Leiden 1900, p. 327.
8. P.H.R. van Houwelingen, *Johannes*, Kampen (1997), p. 328.
9. Vgl. Herman Ridderbos, *Het evangelie naar Johannes*, II, Kampen (1992), p. 197.