

Joanne Shetler spent 20 years doing Bible translation among the Balangao tribesmen in the mountains of the Philippines. It was difficult work, and when she returned to the USA for her first sabbatical, she was deeply discouraged: "I was frustrated. When I came home on my first furlough, after 5 solid years, only two people had believed in Jesus - not a very good showing, is it? I didn't know what to do. I dumped the whole load on my home church. And I found something out. You can't do the job by yourself. You have got to have people praying for you". Joanne Shetler was learning a crucial lesson about Christian ministry; spiritual work is not accomplished by might, ability, or technique, but by prayer.

1. Pray for Everyone

Praying is the most important thing we do as God's people. And so, having just charged Timothy to defend the faith (1:18-20), the apostle Paul gives intercession top priority in public worship: "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone ("all people")" (1Timothy 2:1). What Paul is saying is that all kinds of prayer should be offered for all kinds of people.

The kind of prayer that Paul especially has in mind is evangelistic prayer - intercession for the salvation of souls. This is clear from what Paul says in vv.2-7, which is about God's plan for the salvation of the world. Christians pray for everyone (vv.1-2): first, because God wants everyone to be saved (vv. 3-4); second, because Christ is a Saviour for everyone (vv.5-6); and third, because the gospel is preached to everyone (v.7).

The public prayers of the church should have a global perspective. Sadly many churches - even evangelical ones - have abbreviated the pastoral prayer (confining it to local issues) or eliminated it altogether. Pastoral prayers should include the great issues of the day and the vast nations of the world. Intercession should be made for renewal, revival and reformation in the church. Prayer should be offered for missionaries and church planters. The sufferings of the persecuted church and the desperation of unsaved humanity should be brought weekly before the throne of grace. The God who rules the world wants his people to pray for the world.

Praying for the world includes praying "for kings and all those in authority". When Timothy read this to the Christians in Ephesus, they may well have been surprised. When John Calvin surveyed the rulers of Paul's day he concluded that they were all "enemies of the Gospel, persecutors of the poor Christians, murderers and wicked men" - men like the Roman Emperor Nero, who threw Christians to the lions and used them as torches to light his garden. Nevertheless, the Bible commands intercession (with thanksgiving!) "for kings and all those in authority". Paul continues that we pray for our leaders "that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness". Like the Jews captive in Babylon, Christians are to pray for the peace and prosperity of their rulers, even when they are living among pagans. As we are seeing in our own society in these days, the church's reputation is in need of almost continual defence, with Christian involvement in public life so often greeted with scepticism and even hostility. Yet in the face of opposition, God wants his people to keep it quiet - they are to be respectful and respectable. Why? Because it is essential to the witness of the church.

One good reason to pray for the government is that a peaceful society is a good society. When the state protects the church and the church prays for the state, everyone lives in peace. John Stott in his commentary on 1Timothy puts it this way: "It is the duty of the state to keep the peace, to protect its citizens from whatever would disturb it, to preserve law and order, and to punish evil and promote good, so that within such a stable society the church may be free to worship God, obey his laws and spread his gospel. Conversely, it is the duty of the church to pray for the state, so that its leaders may administer justice and pursue peace, and to add to its intercession thanksgiving, especially for the blessings of good government as a gift of God's common grace".

Although Christianity no longer enjoys the favour it once did, Australians can still praise God for religious liberty and pray that it will be preserved.

2. Everyone is Invited (the Universal Offer of the Gospel)

Christians are to pray for everyone ("all people"), first, because God wants everyone to be saved. "This is good" - in other words, it is good for Christians to have a global prayer concern - "and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (vv.3-4). Here is the strongest incentive to pray for the worldwide work of the gospel - such prayers are pleasing to God. "To come to a knowledge of the truth" is another way to describe becoming a Christian, isn't it? To be saved is to know the truth about Jesus Christ - that he came to deliver his people from sin and death. God wants everyone to know that. The God who wants everyone to be saved is also the God who saves. He is "God our Saviour". In the New Testament it is usually God the Son who is identified as Saviour. But salvation is the work of the Father and the Spirit as well as the Son. Paul uses the phrase "God our Saviour" here to call to mind an important passage from the Old Testament: "And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Saviour; there is none but me. Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:21-22). Scripture teaches the universal offer of the gospel. The only God, the God who saves, invites everyone to come to him through Jesus Christ.

The universal offer of the gospel has implications for prayer. The reason the church prays for everyone is that God invites everyone - the gospel is for everyone. We do not have to guess whom God plans to save. Evangelistic prayer should be indiscriminate. Paul even told Timothy to pray for Caesar. However useless it may seem to pray for Nero or Kim Jong-Un, God wants them prayed for. This seems to create a theological problem. What does it mean that God wants all men to be saved when the Bible plainly teaches that not all will be saved (eg. Matthew 25:31-46)? Doesn't God get what he wants? How does this fit in with the doctrines of election and the sovereignty of God? One way to handle the difficulty is to draw a distinction between God's general and specific wills. God's desire - what God wants - is somehow less strong than what he wills. The apostle Peter used similar words to the apostle Paul when he wrote: "The Lord....is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). So perhaps there is a difference between God's desire and God's decree, which "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Ephesians 1:11). This solution is possible theologically, but there is a much better solution as we will see in a moment as we examine vv.5-6.

3. One Mediator - a Ransom for Everyone

The church is to pray for everyone because God wants everyone to be saved. Now Paul goes on to add two further reasons to pray: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (v.5). We are to pray for everyone because there is a God for everyone, and a mediator for everyone.

Verse 5 speaks first to the unity of God. There is only one God. This is the foundation of Old Testament theology: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). But, by itself, the statement that there is one God only proves monotheism, not Christianity. Perhaps there is one God, but more than one way to be saved, as many argue today. But Paul goes on to say that, just as there is only one God, there is only one way to God, through the only mediator between God and man. And who is that one mediator? None other than Jesus Christ. Why do we human beings need a mediator? It is because of our sin, isn't it? Our sin has alienated us from God - we cannot go to him directly. He is too holy for us to bear. But because Jesus is the God-man, he bridges the gap between the Creator and his sinful, rebellious creatures. He is fully God. Therefore, he is able to meet God's standards. But as "the man Christ Jesus", he is also fully human. Therefore, he is able to meet our obligations. The reason Jesus is the only mediator is that he is the

only one who has both a divine and a human nature. Jesus is able to represent and to reconcile both man and God because he has the most intimate sympathy with both parties. As a member of the Trinity, he has communion with the Father and the Spirit. As a member of the human race, he has union with us. As the Puritans loved to say, Jesus Christ is able to strike hands on both sides of the covenant of grace. Christianity is a thoroughly exclusive religion - it teaches that there is only one God, one Saviour and one salvation. Yet it is also broadly inclusive. It is just because there is only one God that the unique way of salvation is open to everyone.

Paul goes on in verse 6 to describe the mediator's work: "Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men - the testimony given in its proper time". The one mediator for everyone gave himself as a ransom. The fact that Jesus "gave himself" speaks to the sacrificial nature of his death on the cross. His crucifixion was a voluntary offering, a willing sacrifice. The fact that Christ did this for others speaks to the substitutionary nature of his death. Jesus died in our place, didn't he? His blood was the atonement for our sins. Tragically, this doctrine of substitutionary atonement has largely been forgotten in the contemporary church. But it is taught so clearly here and everywhere else in the Bible. The work of Christ on the cross is further described as a "ransom". This rich biblical term refers to the release of a captive by the payment of a price. When Jesus died on the cross, he was making an exchange for sin. It was not a price paid to Satan, but a payment made to satisfy the justice of God. Salvation could not have been done unless man paid what was owing to God for sin. But the debt owing was so great that, while man alone owed it, only God could pay it, so that the same person must be both man and God. Jesus had to be God and man to pay the ransom. And so when he died on the cross, Jesus paid the price that only man could owe and only God could pay.

When Paul speaks of Christ as "a ransom for all men", what does he mean? Does he mean that Christ died for each and every human being who ever lived? That is the Arminian view. But other passages in the Bible teach a more limited or definite atonement. They teach that when Jesus paid for our sins he knew what he was paying for, and for whom, and he actually paid for it. He did not die simply to make salvation possible, but to make salvation actual (a reality) for those whom the Father had given him. The angel said to Joseph: "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). In John's Gospel, Jesus says: "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.....and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:14-15).

The question is this: when God's Word in 1Timothy 2:6 says Christ "gave himself as a ransom for all men", does it mean that he atoned for the sins of each and every human being who ever lived? The answer is "No". To understand this, we need to know that "all" does not always mean "each and every single one". Sometimes "all" means "all kinds". For example, in recounting the final week of Jesus' earthly ministry, Luke says that "all the people came early in the morning to hear him at the temple" (Luke 21:38). Clearly this cannot mean that every inhabitant of Jerusalem (including the tens of thousands of pilgrims there for the Passover) heard Jesus early in the morning at the temple. Clearly, the word "all" is being used in a looser sense to refer to people in general.

Indeed, that seems to be the way that "all" is used in 1Timothy 2. The phrase occurs not only in v.4 ("who wants all men to be saved") and verse 6 ("a ransom for all men"), but also in verse 1 ("prayers.....for everyone - all people"). In the case of verse 1, the Bible does not command every Christian to pray, name by name, for every individual in the entire world. This would be practically impossible, wouldn't it? Rather, Christians are to pray for all kinds of people. This also helps explain what Paul meant when he said that God wants "all men" to be saved. As Calvin put it: "the apostle's meaning here is simply that no nation of the earth and no rank of society is excluded from salvation, since God wills to offer the gospel to all without exception". In the same way, Jesus paid a ransom

for all kinds of people. He does not discriminate on the basis of race, colour, gender or economic status. He died for all men, all human beings, regardless of social, national and racial distinctions. Whatever country or neighbourhood you come from, Christ is the Saviour for you. He is accessible to everyone. He has promised to save anyone who comes to him in faith and repentance. In that sense, he is the Saviour of the world.

4. One Gospel for Everyone

Any lingering doubts about Paul's meaning are put to rest in the final verse: "And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle - I am telling the truth, I am not lying - and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles (v.7). Christ's ransom for all men leads naturally to the church's mission to all nations, Gentiles as well as Jews. This is the commission, you will remember, God gave to Paul when he was converted. He appointed him to be "his witness to all men" (Acts 22:15). Notice "all men". Obviously God did not intend Paul to evangelize each and every human being who ever lived. Rather, when God called Paul to witness to all men, he made him a missionary to the Gentiles (Acts 22:21), so that all people everywhere could hear the gospel. The salvation first given to the Jews is now extended throughout the whole world. This commission is not just for Paul - it is for every Christian. John Stott summarizes the first half of 1Timothy 2 this way: "It is the unity of God and the uniqueness of Christ which demand the universality of the gospel. God's desire and Christ's death concern all people. Therefore the church's duty concerns all people too, reaching out to them both in earnest prayer and in urgent witness.

Paul also preached the gospel with prayer. He was always asking the churches in his letters to pray for his proclamation of the gospel (Ephesians 6:19-20; Colossians 4:3-4). We, and all God's people, each congregation, must pray for its missionaries the same way. We began with the story of Joanne Shetler, who learned to depend on the prayers of her congregation back home. She went on to describe what happened when her supporters accepted the responsibility to pray for her ministry: "They took up the burden. And when I went back after furlough, things started to happen". The Balangao began to respond to the gospel. This started with the Biblical genealogies, which impressed them because they wanted to know more about their ancestors. They began to ask how they could become God's children. When a few of them received Christ, they asked if it would be alright to tell everyone else about him. Eventually, the Balangao came by the hundreds to put their faith in Jesus Christ.

God's plan is to build his church by the prayers of his people. Gospel workers in our own church, in our nation and missionaries at home and abroad stand and wait for the Holy Spirit to bless their labour in the gospel. The Spirit waits only for the church to pray. He is urging that "requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people". Let us lay hold of that crucial ministry in this Prayer Week and indeed every week in the life of our church.

Amen