



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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God's Dilemma

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I am God, and I am very sad.

I'm very sad because of what my people, whom I love with everlasting love, seem to believe about me, about prayer, and about what they expect me to do in response to their prayer. They create quite a dilemma for me. They seem to think that the purpose of prayer is to ask things of me – as if I didn't already know their every need and desire – and as if I were not already committed to caring for them in the wisest and most loving ways possible.

Not only do my people seem to believe that the main purpose of prayer is to ask things of me, but also that persistent asking by lots of people (Do they believe I must be manipulated for their prayers to be answered?) will pressure me to grant their requests. "If enough of us pray hard enough, and often enough, and long enough," they say, "God will answer our prayers." And they quote scripture to support their belief and their requests.

"Pray constantly." (I Thes. 5:17)

"Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication." (Eph. 6:18)

"The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effect." (James 5: 16)

"Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Phil. 4:6)

"Ask and it will be given you." (Mt. 7:7)

And because of the way my people understand and act on those scriptures, I am on the horns of a dilemma.

I wonder who my people see me to be. I wonder what kind of God I am to them. They tell me. At least they say words. They use titles and adjectives. By so doing, do they really tell me what they believe about me, or who they see me to be? Maybe they do, and then maybe they are anxious about saying and doing the right things so that I will answer their prayer requests.

Do my people believe that I want something of them – want them to do something or be some way – but keep it secret until they beg me to tell them what it is?

They must. They say, "Reveal yourself to us. Tell us what you want us to do. Show us your will." They pray, "Not my will, but yours be done."

What kind of God do they think I am? Do they just ignore all that I have disclosed to them? Have they not heard me? Or do they just not believe what I have said?

From the beginning of creation, I have been telling my people what my will for them is. I want them to learn of me. I want them to really get to know themselves. I want them to realize just how wonderful they are. I want them to discover and believe, and live the tremendous potential that is theirs. I want them to experience the full measure of being loved and loving. My will for them is that they find their fulfillment in living that love life. Why is that so difficult to know, or to understand?

I have given my people the capacity, and the ability, to decide for themselves how to live that love life. I don't need to – and I don't want to – write a script for each one with specifics as to what each is to do. I don't have that kind of will for anyone. I wouldn't be so unloving as to do that to them. I don't have any secrets. And I certainly have no desire to play some kind of life and death game with them while they try to guess just what my will for them is.

But that isn't my greatest dilemma.

My greatest dilemma centers in how to respond to what my people ask of me, and seem to want of me. Often they ask me to intervene to keep something from happening that they don't want to happen, or to cause something to happen that they do.

My people ask me to do all sorts of things. Things like providing them with a parking space. Keep them from hurting. Don't let a loved one die. Don't let the plane crash. Don't let the business fail. Stop the rain. Start the rain. Help us to win. Set normal processes aside, and, I suppose, prevent any unfavorable consequences from occurring. It seems that their idea of prayer is to ask – and pressure – me to act in the ways they want. They even pray for me to feed the hungry; heal the sick; guide the leaders; bring peace to the world; change the minds and hearts of those who do destructive things – as if their responsibility is to do the asking, and mine is to do whatever they ask. It appears sometimes that the asking is endless, and that they believe there isn't anything else for them to do.

When my people pray that way, it seems that they want me to have all the responsibility, to make all the decisions, and to set aside the order of my creation so that what they want will happen. Even though, in their asking, they want me to do it all, they rather insistently want me to do it their way – as if they had the wisdom about what was wisest and most loving. It is no wonder that I feel manipulated. They even quote from the Bible to support their position – “ask and you shall receive”, “if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed---”. They tell themselves – and me – they are doing it like I have told them to.

Among the most typical examples are the prayers for healing.

A child has leukemia. A beautiful teenaged girl is horribly mangled in an automobile accident caused by a drunken driver, and is still alive. A mother of four little ones is diagnosed having a brain tumor. No one wants them to die. I don't either, and that underscores my dilemma.

I want my people to pray. I want them to express their anguish and their suffering. I want us to have that kind of relationship. But I wonder what my people would do – or what the outcome would be for them – if I did what they tell me they want because they tell me? Do they think beyond the moment in either direction? Do they consider what the effect might be on other people and situations? Or the possible long-term effect on those who receive my special attention.

Suppose, in response to my people's prayers, a cripple is healed. When he is suffering, very limited and in need, and a major care, I certainly understand why he – and they – want healing, or some kind of relief. I wonder, though. Will the rest of his life be richer or better – more satisfying – more fulfilling – if he is healed by my intervention? Will one time of healing mean his spiritual maturity? And what about somebody else that was crippled, or sick, or beset with some other kind of need? Do the requests on behalf of one person require that everyone be healed and all suffering be taken away?

Why do my people want me to alter one particular thing without thought for the over-all? Why do they want me to take all the responsibility – do all the doing? How can they be so sure that granting their request is really going to make anything better – or different – even for them?

Suppose I intervene, and the child whose life they want spared does not die? Do they also want me to take such complete charge that every aspect of that child's life is without danger, or threat, or difficulty? Do they want me to control every aspect of that child's life so that no harm will come to him? If I did, what kind of life would that be for the child?

But it is pretty evident to me that my people do not want me to take complete charge. They only want me to intervene at their request in the way they want. They seem to want me to do the things that will keep their lives from being upset or unsatisfactory, and to make their lives easy and good. Even when they press me to intervene and do what they want, I don't get the impression that they want to surrender any control to me. Rather, they want to tell me what to do, so that they are exercising control but without the responsibility.

Do you begin to see my dilemma?

If I give my people what they seem to be asking, I will destroy them. I will make them into little puppets that crumple into a heap when I stop pulling the strings. I hear the anguish in their asking. I feel it as well. They even put requests in terms that my doing as they ask is the measure of my love for them. They remind me of what I have promised, and then demand that I fulfill the promise in the way they prescribe.

I want to help my people. I want to bring them relief. I also want them to understand that I cannot set the order of things aside – no matter what they ask nor how desperately – if I truly love them. And I do.

What I want my people to understand is that what they ask is often asked in isolation without regard for what went on before, or what may come after. Suppose I do what they ask, and intervene to heal the man of his cancer. What will he – or they – learn from the healing? What real difference will it make in their lives? And what will they do, or expect, when the next difficulty comes in their lives?

As much as I might want to intervene in the specific situation, I cannot do so – not if I take all my people into account. On what basis would I decide to step in and alter the order of things for one of my people without doing the same for all of them. It might not make much difference if I intervened occasionally and in particular situations, except that it really would. Those who didn't get the intervention would wonder about my love. To take care of everyone equally by intervening and manipulation what happens could only create chaos. There would be no security. No one could count on anything for sure.

I want my people to pray, and I want them to really understand what prayer is. The scriptures they quote are accurate, but not as they are interpreting them. I do want them to pray without ceasing – to open and disclose themselves fully to me. I want them to express what they want, and how they want things to be. I want them to share their joys and sorrows, the good and the bad, their freedom and imprisonment, their suffering and healing, their disappointments and their gratitude. I want them to share the total of themselves with me. That's what a true unconditional love relationship is all about.

It isn't that I don't already know all about them. And it isn't that my people have to conform to some particular way of being. It is that they are my beloved people, and that the full and free disclosing of themselves is an important part of prayer, and a way of affirming the deep relationship between us.

In that relationship, I suffer with my people. I rejoice with them. I feel anguish with them. I am glad – and sad – and hurting – and upset – and calm – and serene. I identify with them. I feel what they feel. I weep and I laugh. It is a wonderful love relationship, and I want them to know it as completely as I do.

So what about my dilemma?

The world that I have created isn't just sweetness and light. Nothing is perfected in it. My people are created in my image, and that means, among other things, that they are always growing and becoming. Difficulties and hardships are a part of life. Things go awry. People get sick. People are hurt. There is suffering. Also, people both stay well and get well. They overcome often incredible difficulties. They experience many beautiful things, and have many blessings. Even when things are going badly, they have the strength of our relationship.

I love my people with an everlasting love. I listen to their anguish and suffering and desire for things to be different in their lives. I feel all that they feel. I want a prayer relationship. But I do not want the dilemma.

The way out of the dilemma for me is for my people to really understand that my will for them is that they take charge of their lives, knowing that I am always with them, and keep on growing toward the full and complete being I have created them to be. In that setting, they will pour out their prayer all that is going on with them. They will know that I already know, and am already at work in their lives. They will know that I cannot intervene and alter how things are even though, in their suffering and anxiety, they want things to be different. They will recognize their source of strength because I am with them and in them, and will enter into the situation, whatever it may be, fully confident of their ability to weather the storms and to make the most of all the times when there is no storm.

Together, we will have a good life – as I intended from the beginning.