

'What is true prayer?' asked Isaac Penington in *Naked Truth* (1674), and answered his own question by defining it as prayer which arises from, and is given by the Spirit. For him it was not a self-initiated activity but a gift from God - divine 'breathings' upon the soul. As there were no appointed times for these a constant watch had to be maintained, with a silent expectant waiting for 'the Father to kindle.. the living breathings towards himself'. These it was which constituted valid prayer, and Friends, having acknowledged their own inability, must make sure that their prayers were the result of this gift of the Spirit and not just a product of their own will - their 'natural part'.

At first what they received might be only inarticulate groans and sighs, but when these came from the Spirit they were more acceptable than any number of petitions, however earnest, of purely human devising. If, with the Spirit's assistance words grew from these, they were to be used as soon as they were received. To store them up for repetition on some future occasion was regarded as 'will worship', as was the reading of prayers from a book. Any use of the spoken word in prayer filled Penington with a profound sense of awe: '... it is a mighty thing to speak aright to God in prayer. Flesh must be silent before him, and laid still and low in his presence, that the spring may open, the pure breath breathe, and the pure voice issue forth...'.

A complete circle of prayer was formed from the prayer, whether silent or spoken, which arose from the breathing of the Father on the person praying, and was then returned by that person to its source. This constant flow of prayer which depended upon the acceptance of the biblical injunction to pray without ceasing was not necessarily expressed in outward gestures, but was always present through the internal practice of what Robert Barclay called 'a secret turning of the mind towards God' during the day's normal activities. For Penington the life of every Christian should be a 'continual course of prayer', a living prayer which united the soul to the Lord. That union was to be sought above everything else, for from its depths came not only true prayer but also the answer to it which would satisfy the needs, already known to God, of those for whom prayer was being offered.

Reading the writings of early Friends we may come across aspects of their thinking about prayer with which we are not in sympathy - like, for example, their condemnation of the use of written prayers, their objection to praying with other Christians, and their claim that all true prayer had been lost since the days of the apostles. But in their basic teaching and the accounts of their personal experience, there is, I believe, much to increase our understanding of prayer for wholeness, and to cause us to re-examine the strength of our own trust in the gift of the Spirit and its sufficiency to translate that understanding into practice.



Do not assume that Healing ministry is never to be your part. When prompted to offer healing wait patiently to know that the leading and the timing are right, but do not let a sense of your own unworthiness hold you back. Pray that your ministry arises from deep experience and trust that words and actions will be given you. Beware of acting predictably or too often and of persisting in adding embellishments to your healing when it were well left without.

