

# WITNESS



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# ASK THE ST. GEORGE'S SCHOLAR

Rev. Prof. Greg Bloomquist,  
Saint George's Scholar

## Action in Waiting

*"When we pray, how can we be sure that we're hearing from God and not just what we want to hear?"*

Prayer is one of the most characteristic actions of people who believe in some form of a personal God. Homer's heroes cried out to gods. Roman pagans sought relief from sickness in one of their many temples by appealing to the god of the temple. Muslims regularly cry out to God: "If you have belief, if you have courage that it is Allah that grants everyone's desire, then within a short time of coming here, your prayer will be answered," said Oriyomi Musbau Hussein, 31, who had asked his Muslim congregation in Nigeria to pray for his visa application to the US.<sup>1</sup>

And for all of these people, it is the same: if you pray and receive what you pray for, then it is proof that God heard you and you are now hearing God's answer.

The real problem arises if you do not receive what you pray for. Then either something is wrong with you,<sup>2</sup> or, as atheists have always argued, something is wrong with God.

In the mid-1800s and early 1900s, atheism and its atheist-lite sibling, liberal reformist Christianity, were slowly spreading through Europe. Each would eventually make its way to North America. Both arose because of many factors but there is one factor that is especially significant. European Christians, especially Protestants, were losing faith in a prayer-answering God and were beginning to proclaim that Christianity was mainly about reforming the social and political structures of the world to make it a better place to live. Why? Because, in the face of science that was beginning to be able to heal and a modern technology that was proving ever more able to secure our lives, why would anyone continue to rely on the hit and miss approach of prayer to a god who might or might not answer?

It was during this time that Johann Christoph Blumhardt, a pastor in a small town at the edge of the Black Forest, experienced

something that shocked him and his congregation out of their own drift toward a liberal abandonment of God. For some months, Blumhardt "had watched with distress the increasing suffering and torment of a young woman in his congregation. Feeling something dark at work which through the girl was attacking her life, he finally said, 'We have seen enough of what the devil can do. Let us now see the power of the Lord Jesus,' and threw himself into a fight with the demonic powers. The fight took two years; in the end he found that every resource failed him except Jesus alone." His state church



Photo: David Robinson

not only deserted but opposed him. But, his fight with demonic powers ended in victory with the words from the freed, young woman's lips, "Jesus is victor!"<sup>3</sup>

"What had happened?" people wanted to know. Hundreds began to fill his church in the hope of an answer to their own problems. But, Blumhardt continued to be opposed by other ministers

and authorities in his own church. So, he was forced to find a new place of ministry. He moved, with his congregation, to the residential complex of a former spa at Bad Boll. There he spent the rest of his life in

service to a growing number of people who experienced daily in answer to prayer the living and active power of Jesus Christ to save. Commenting on what made the ministry at Bad Boll so unique, the theologian Eduard Thurneysen noted that at Bad Boll the declaration that 'man belongs to God through Jesus Christ' was presented "with an unprecedented onesidedness, certainty, and childlikeness" and was made real in a community that consisted of "countless weary and heavy-laden men who gathered here".<sup>4</sup>

As a result, the Kingdom of God sparkled at Bad Boll, while the rest of Europe, which had embraced a cultured, reforming political liberalism, slouched toward the sad conclusion of their false reformist, liberal hope. It was a slouching that turned into a veritable rout as Europe plummeted into the abyss that awaited it: the horrors of WWI, followed by the slaughter of millions under Stalin, the Great Depression, and finally WWII and the Holocaust. Within one generation, the glory that was Europe was brought to nought. And yet, not content to destroy themselves, European intellectuals exported Europe's failed liberal experiment in 19th century godlessness to the East and watched as horrors on a yet larger scale unfolded in Mao's China and Pol Pot's Cambodia.<sup>5</sup>

But what about Bad Boll? It was another theologian, who, at the beginning of this cascade of 20th century horrors, saw prophetically the direction Europe would go unless the Kingdom of God were once again proclaimed and lived. The young, but soon to be world-famous theologian, Karl Barth had always been a conservative thinker, even though like most intellectuals he had toyed with liberalism; yet, he found his life changed forever by a visit to Bad Boll and by the

undeniable evidence of a prayer answering God.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the entire rest of his career was devoted to proclaiming this God and warning what would happen were people to ignore Him.

Let me draw three points from what Barth says in order to answer the question that I have been asked. "When we pray", what is most important is that we

- **Remain attentive**
- **Remain faithful**
- **Remain active**

**Remain attentive: look!**

Blumhardt expected God to be active before, during and after prayer. God was more than evident in the response to the community's

prayer for the young girl. Yet, Blumhardt taught, God is always at work; it is we who do not see Him. So, we need to be attentive to everything around us as we seek to know God and obey Him. We are to expect and look for God's signs and wonders. "If one is watchful, one is always able to say something about the works of God. They happen all around us... If one is not watchful, though, one does not see anything."<sup>7</sup> We are to be attentive because Christians are like servants who constantly watch the hands of their master, knowing that whatever the master does or asks requires the servant's immediate obedience.<sup>8</sup> Our action in waiting for God to act is never to be "wait and see" but always "wait and look", and then to see ... see what God is doing.

**Remain faithful: listen!**

The popular religious understanding of prayer is that it is our appeal to God. But, as Christians, we know that we are not primarily speakers, appealing to God, but listeners: it is God, the Word, who speaks to us! We are His servants and we echo His words with our own "Amen" -- a Hebrew-word that means "yes, we agree".

Of course there is a place for speaking, but it follows listening.

Alf Rees was pastor of Banfield Memorial Missionary Church in Toronto in the 1970s when I attended. At an evening service, Alf said, in words reminiscent of Blumhardt, "I sense there is a need of a different dimension here; feel free to come forward." A missionary, who had returned from Nigeria where she had contracted filaria, and who was taking strong, prescribed medication though not getting better, attended the service that evening. She said later that when Alf spoke she felt that "the Holy Spirit was drawing

me to go about my vision, and I whispered this to my husband. He said, 'Go', and go I did. When Brother Rees asked why I had come, I quickly gave him the basics of my struggles. He stepped back a couple of steps and bowed his head. When ready he stepped forward again, placed his hand on my head and prayed, 'Lord, clear the blood stream.'" Afterwards, when she contacted an eye surgeon to determine her next course of treatment, "a sample of fluid was taken and sent to Montreal for testing. Report came back that the blood stream was clear." To date, she still has 20/20 vision.<sup>9</sup>

Before speaking, Alf faithfully listened to God. Our action in waiting for God to act is not first of all to fill the waiting with our talk but rather to listen faithfully, and then, when we have heard, to echo in our own

speech and in our lives the word that the Lord speaks.

**Remain active: be holy!**

When life becomes too complex for us, we often want to ask for the world to stop, even for just a moment, or for a time-out. Unfortunately, the world does not stop and any time-outs are very short-lived! We have no choice but to remain active. But activity might sometimes mean "getting on with things", as when God spoke to Alf Rees about the missionary on her knees before him or as when God spoke to the Israelites and told them to pack their tents and move on. Or, activity might mean active waiting, as when God commanded the Israelites to make camp and to be attentive and faithful, watchful and listening for His call to them to move on.

Yet, both activity and active waiting require not only watchfulness and listening but also holiness, which is the lifestyle of one who actively waits for and is prepared for the coming of God's holy Kingdom.

Here is how Barth describes the kind of holiness he saw at Bad Boll:

"[to] represent God's cause in the world yet not wage war on the world, love the world and yet be completely faithful to God, suffer with the world and speak a frank word about its need and at the same time go beyond this to speak the redeeming word about the help it waits for, carry the world up to God and bring God into the world, and be an advocate for men before God and a messenger of God bringing peace to men, pleading unceasingly and unwaveringly before God and to God 'Thy Kingdom come!' and waiting and hastening with men toward this coming."<sup>10</sup>

Action in waiting means God's holy people constantly crying out "Lord God, make new! Make us new! Make new everyone who calls to Thee, for otherwise all is in vain!" Barth learned the lesson well: "To [wait] means just the opposite of sitting comfortably and going along with the old order of things. [It is] as if God were standing at our door saying all the time, 'Open the door! Open the door!'"<sup>11</sup>

You know as well as I do that newness is never easy for us. We are essentially creatures of habit.

As well, to "open the door" to God is, as we

have seen in Isaiah's experience (*Is 6*), to come face to face with God in whose presence one can only honestly say "Woe is me!" Yet, God calls us to open the door to Him.

Prayer is to open the door. If all you see or hear when you open the door is what you want to see or hear, what you expect to see or hear, something that leaves you unchanged, it is probably not God but a mirror! It is very unlikely that you have heard the voice of God, much less seen what Isaiah saw, the Lord high and lifted up, or heard the voice of the Lord, a voice that breaks the cedars of Lebanon, strips the forests bare, and shakes the very foundations of the earth (*Psalms 29*).

**"... both activity and active waiting require not only watchfulness and listening but also holiness ..."**

No, it is much more likely that, when we are attentive and look,

when we are faithful and listen, and when we are actively waiting in holiness, what we shall see, hear, and be called to act on will be something that we will be overwhelmed by, for it will be something that will be far more than we could ever have asked or imagined, or even than we can easily bear. And that is as it should be... when we pray.

Ready to open the door?

1. Somini Sengupta and Larry Rohter, "Where Faith Grows, Fired by Pentecostalism," NY Times, October 14, 2003, pages A1, A12.
2. David Watson charted the course of his own questioning in David Watson, *Fear no Evil: One Man Deals with Terminal Illness* (Wheaton, Ill.: H. Shaw Publishers, 1984).
3. From the introduction by Arthur Wiser to Karl Barth and Christoph Blumhardt, *Action in Waiting* (ed. and trans. Society of Brothers; Rifton, N.Y.: Plough Pub. House, 1969), 2-3.
4. Quoted in the introduction by Arthur Wiser, *ibid.* 6-7.
5. It is likely that over 70 million Chinese perished under Mao's revolt and eventual rule according to Jung Chang and Jon. Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York: Knopf, 2005).
6. Karl Barth, "Action in Waiting for the Kingdom of God," originally published in *Der freie Schweizer Arbeiter*, September 15 and 22, 1916 in *Action in Waiting* (by Karl Barth and Christoph Blumhardt; ed. and trans. Society of Brothers; Rifton, N.Y.: Plough Pub. House, 1969), 19-45.
7. Quoting Blumhardt in *ibid.* 24.
8. Noted in the introduction by Arthur Wiser, *ibid.* 11.
9. Wayne F. Shirton, *Tried, Tested, Triumphant: The Eventful Life of Alf Rees* (Markham, ON: Stewart, 1997), 180-81.
10. Barth, "Action in Waiting for the Kingdom of God," 22-23.
11. *Ibid.* 40-41.