

*Saying What We Cannot Say*

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2 Corinthians 1:20-21

Revelation 3:14

Matthew 6:9-13

Cyrano de Bergerac had a big nose and women didn't like him. At least that is what he believed to be the result of his particular abnormality. And so in the famous play, written in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century but taking place in Paris in 1640, when Cyrano—a brilliant poet—falls in love with his cousin Roxane, he is afraid to confess his true feelings. Roxane is intelligent and beautiful and a sucker for poetry. Her presence is such that it is not surprising that another man has fallen in love with her, Christian de Neuvillette. He is handsome, but not smart—and particularly unpoetic. As the story unfolds, Christian enlists Cyrano's help to aid Christian in winning Roxane's heart through poetry. Cyrano writes love letters to Roxane under Christian's name, expressing his own true feelings while giving the credit, and the benefits, to someone else. Roxane falls in love with Christian, duped into believing that he is the world's most talented, most wonderful poet. Becoming too self-confident, Christian tells Cyrano that he no longer needs him and tries to speak fancy to Roxane himself. The results are embarrassing and offensive. All this leads up to that famous scene outside Roxane's window where Cyrano, hiding under the balcony, whispers to Christian what he should say, enabling Christian to speak eloquently and poetically, winning Roxane's heart again. As so many of these plays go, the rest of the story is tragic and depressing and if you don't already know it you can probably figure it out.

All of that is to make a fairly simple point. And because the point is simple, I want you to forget most of what I just said. Forget about big noses, poetry, romance, deception. All of that only makes the illustration fall apart. What I want you to remember is only this: Christian doesn't have it in him. It is only with help that he is enabled to say what he cannot say. He doesn't have it in him. It is only with help that Christian is enabled to say what he cannot say.

“Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For the kingdom and the power and glory are yours forever. Amen.” “Amen.” There is hardly a more ridiculous thing that we could say. It is not ridiculous because it is in itself foolish or silly or shallow or meaningless. It is ridiculous because of what it does mean. “Amen” is a loan-word from the Hebrew language which carries the meaning of something that is trustworthy, something that is certain. And so when we say “Amen” we are saying something like “So be it.” How can we end our prayer with this? “So be it.” It speaks of something that is sure, something that is reliable. The word itself does not have the meaning of a request: “Please, let this be.” It is a confirmation: “It is.” Among the most common uses of the word in the Old Testament (and really also in the New) is as a response to praise. And so in Nehemiah chapter 8, when Ezra praises God at the celebration of the rebuilding of the Temple, the people respond by lifting their hands and saying, “Amen. Amen.” This is not a request, it is a sure affirmation. But very slowly this statement of sure affirmation begins to be used at the end of prayer.

Do we feel altogether comfortable ending prayer this way? It seems presumptuous or over-bold. We pray and then we say, “So be it.” “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Amen. So be it.” Can you make God’s name holy? “Your kingdom come. Amen. So be it.” Can you make God’s kingdom come? What business do we have saying “So be it”?

Now, someone will rightly object to this, saying, “When we say ‘Amen’ we don’t say that we bring these things about, but that God brings these things about.” That is absolutely true. But even if we grant that with the Amen we are, in reality, affirming that it is God that makes these things so, are we comfortable declaring at the end of our prayer that God will do what we prayed? How can we say this?

What the “Amen” teaches us, then, is something of the seriousness of prayer. Not fearfulness –we should not be afraid to pray; the scriptures invite us into prayer, in the Gospels Jesus coaxes us into prayer –not fearfulness, but seriousness. In reality we generally use the Amen as a request, a deep longing, an affirmation of hopefulness. But even so, with what the Amen means, will we pray just anything and say, “So be it. God will do this.”? Even if we use it as a statement of longing, the Amen makes prayer serious business.

And this is what makes the Lord’s prayer ultimately important. If we are to say something so bold as Amen we need to learn how to pray. The Lord’s prayer is introduced differently in the Gospel of Luke than it is in Matthew. In Luke, Jesus is praying and when he is finished one of his disciples comes and says to him, “Lord, teach us how to pray.” I don’t believe that whoever this disciple was had no concept of what prayer is or how to do it. The disciple sees Jesus praying and says, “Teach us how to

pray.” Seeing Jesus praying, the disciple wants to know how to pray well. “Teach us how to pray so that we can pray well.” “Teach us how to pray so that we can end our prayer with Amen, so be it.”

And Jesus does teach them –Jesus does teach us –how to pray. Jesus does teach them and us how to pray a prayer that ends well with Amen. He says, “Pray in this way because God’s name *is* holy. God’s kingdom *will* come. God’s will *will* be done. God *will* give you what you need. God *will* forgive you your debts and you *will* forgive your debtors. God *will* rescue you. The kingdom and the power and the glory *are* God’s forever. Amen.” “Teach us how to pray so we can say ‘Amen.’” Jesus says, “Pray this way and you can always say ‘Amen.’” The “Amen” teaches us that prayer is serious business. The disciple in Luke understood that we do not have it in us to pray with such boldness –teach us how to pray so that we can say “Amen.” The Lord’s prayer is Jesus’ answer: “Pray in this way and you can always say ‘Amen.’”

And Jesus has the authority to instruct his disciples –to instruct us –in “Amen.” In our lesson from 2 Corinthians, Paul writes, “For in him (Jesus Christ) every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes.’ For this reason it is through him that we say the ‘Amen,’ to the glory of God.” Here “Amen” is –like in its normal use in the Old Testament –a sure affirmation connected with the praise of God. But Paul goes further in identifying Jesus as the ultimate source of our “Amen.” “In him every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes.’” Jesus himself is the affirmation of God’s promises. Jesus himself is the sure proof of God’s promises. “For this reason it is through him that we say the ‘Amen,’ to the glory of God.” As the proof of the certainty of God’s promises, as the one who himself is the affirmation of God’s promises, Jesus enables us, emboldens us to say “Amen.” As

Christians, when we say “Amen” to the good things of God, we are not saying that we make these things so, we do not just affirm that we would like these things to be so, we are saying that we have seen Jesus and so we are convinced that these things are so: God’s name *is* holy. God’s kingdom *will* come. God’s will *will* be done. God *will* give us what we need. God *will* forgive us our debts and we *will* forgive our debtors. God *will* rescue us. The kingdom and the power and the glory *are* God’s forever. Amen. We have seen the love and the justice of God in Jesus Christ and through him we are sure that these things are true. “Teach us how to pray so that we can say “Amen.” Paul says, “Know the one who has taught you how to pray and you will be bold to say ‘Amen.’”

The New Testament message connecting Jesus and the “Amen” doesn’t stop there. In our lesson from Revelation chapter three, John, the one having the revelation vision, is writing the last of seven letters to seven churches while Jesus himself is dictating to John what is to be written. Jesus tells John to describe Jesus in this way at the beginning of this letter: “The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation.” Jesus doesn’t just teach us a prayer to which we can say Amen. Jesus doesn’t just enable us to say Amen as Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians. He is Amen. He is not just the affirmation of God’s goodness, he is God’s goodness. He is the origin of God’s creation –he is what God is about. He is Amen.

What we begin to see is that “Amen” is not ours. We have to be taught a way of praying through which we can say “Amen.” We have to be enabled to say “Amen.” When we say “Amen,” we point to Jesus Christ as Amen himself. Amen is not ours. Throughout the Gospels Jesus says again and again, “Truly, I say to you....” Or, in the Gospel of John, “Truly, truly I say to you....” Other versions will have it as “verily” or

“I tell you the truth.” What we have in our English translations as “truly” is, in the original language of the New Testament, “Amen.” Instead of concluding statements with “Amen,” Jesus begins statements with “Amen.” What this does is tell us as readers before Jesus says anything that what he is about to say is sure and true. The prophets would say, “This is the word of the Lord,” meaning a word that the prophet has received from an outside divine source –not originating from the prophet. Jesus says, “Amen. *I* say to you.” It is a statement of his authority. “Amen” is his word. By my count Jesus says this about seventy-five times in the Gospels, mostly in Matthew and John. Seventy-five times: Amen is his word; it is not ours. When we pray and say “Amen” as Christians, we say what belongs to Jesus. And now we can take full advantage of the fortunate coincidence that the name of that character in *Cyrano de Bergerac* –that character who doesn’t have it in him, who is enabled to say what he cannot say –that that character’s name is Christian. Big noses, romance, and deception aside, the point is that Christian is made able to say what he cannot say in and of himself only through the one who really owns the words. That is the point, Christians. When we say “Amen,” we say what we have been given. We say that we know Jesus Christ, that he is the Amen, and that because of him we are convinced that God’s kingdom will come, that our debts are forgiven, that the kingdom and the power and the glory belong to God forever, Amen.

The presumptuous certainty of the Amen reveals to us our need for the Lord’s prayer. We must be taught how to pray if we are going to say Amen to the prayer. We cannot be this certain; he gives us the ability to say what we cannot say by teaching us a way of praying that can always end with Amen. How can we say this? We can say it because the Amen himself has taught us how to pray. This prayer is *his* prayer and we

say Amen because *he* has said that it is so: A holy God whose will will be done; needs provided; debts forgiven; rescue; kingdom, power, and glory to God alone forever.

Amen. So be it. This is most certainly true.

The earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew don't end the Lord's Prayer with the Amen. But the early church very quickly realized that we have to end this prayer with Amen. We have to end the prayer with Amen because Jesus taught us this prayer and so there is no other way to end this prayer except with an affirmation of the one who has given it to us –the Amen himself who has convinced us that these things are true because he has the authority to say it is so. “Lord, teach us how to pray.” Pray this way and we can always say “Amen.”