

Testing God: Prayer works on those who pray

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The meaning of intercessory prayer is often unclear to Christians, so it is not surprising that many outside the church also get confused about it. The confusion is evident whenever scientists seek to determine whether intercessory prayer has measurable benefits.

The latest such study, reportedly the most rigorous and comprehensive yet, concluded that prayer does not work (see [news story on the study](#)). The postsurgery health of heart patients whose recovery was the subject of systematic prayer turned out to be no better than that of those who were not prayed for (at least insofar as scientists could “control” for prayer). And those who knew they were being prayed for actually suffered more medical complications than those who didn’t know whether they were being prayed for. Scientists speculated that it might have been unsettling for patients to learn that strangers were praying for them; maybe it made them wonder: “Am I so sick they had to call in their prayer team?”

Overall, according to the *New York Times*, ten studies on the efficacy of prayer conducted over the past six years have yielded only “mixed results.” That’s probably exactly what honest Christians would say if asked about the empirical consequences of prayer. Christians would probably add, however, that results are hard to measure, and that their prayers were often answered in unexpected ways.

The basic theological confusion here is to think that prayer puts God at our disposal, that prayer is a lever we use to nudge God in a specific direction. A God who is at our disposal in that way would not be God.

A better account of intercessory prayer is to see it as the way Christians consciously bring others into God’s presence along with themselves. In prayer we see others as creatures loved by God and in need of God’s grace. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, in intercessory prayer one sees other people “in all their need, hardship and distress” and grants them “the same right we have received, namely, the right to stand

before Christ and to share in Christ's mercy." In other words, in prayer we put others in God's hands.

In putting others in God's hands, we begin to see them clearly. That's why for Bonhoeffer, as in the mainstream Christian tradition, intercessory prayer is intertwined with Christian community. It's noteworthy, by contrast, how this latest medical study of prayer was indifferent to community; the research made no reference to whether the patients wanted prayer or were part of a community of prayer. Such elements would only skew the results.

Bonhoeffer goes so far as to say that intercessory prayer is the "heartbeat" of community, and his reason is clear: "I can no longer condemn or hate other Christians for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble they cause me. In intercessory prayer the face that may have been strange and intolerable to me is transformed into the face of one for whom Christ died." Prayer, in this view, does indeed work—on the individuals and communities who pray.