

**Praying for the Christian Departed  
in Scottish Episcopacy**

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## 1. Introduction

Praying for the Christian departed has been an established, canonical part of Scottish Episcopalianism since the Scottish Liturgy first appeared in 1764. It has been a part of the doctrinal tradition of Scottish Episcopacy since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Five Episcopalian writers from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, four of them bishops, published works on the subject. (*See the appended Bibliography.*)

When the Scottish Liturgy was adopted in 1764, it was the only non-Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox liturgical text specifically to pray for the Christian dead; prayer for the departed is officially still not permitted in the Church of England or the Church of Ireland. The question is: ‘why do we here in Scotland pray for the dead, and why do we have a long tradition of doing so?’.

## 2. Brief Historical Background

Doctrinally Scottish Episcopacy has from the beginning occupied a particular theological ground: the teaching of the Bible as interpreted by the Church Fathers. This orientation first found learned and articulate advocacy by the ‘Aberdeen Doctors’ at King’s and Marischal Colleges, Aberdeen from about 1620 to 1640. This tradition defined Scottish Episcopacy certainly until in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when other influences arose. It is because of Scottish Episcopacy’s dedication to the teaching and practice of the early church that we pray for the Christian departed. The practice is rooted in Holy Scripture, and is testified to by some of the earliest Christian writers.

The Protestant churches’ rejection of prayer for the dead is based on the rejection of the Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory and practice of Indulgences, which doctrinally we also rejected. William Forbes in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century set out, in his book on the subject, why the Roman doctrine of Purgatory cannot be sustained by either the teaching of the Bible or the Church Fathers. He also explained why the early church prayed for the dead, and why support for their practice can be found in the Bible. Basically, his stance has been followed ever since.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, two Scottish bishops wrote learned works on the subject of praying for the Christian departed; also, the Scottish Liturgy of 1764, which offered prayer for the departed, came into being. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century two books on the Scottish Liturgy were written, each with substantial comment on prayer for the departed as contained in the Liturgy.

### **3. Scriptural and Doctrinal Basis**

It is commonly thought by Protestant Christians that when we die we go straight to heaven or hell, and that's it. However, that is not what the New Testament teaches; it makes it abundantly clear that Jesus will return in glory to judge the world; that on that day the dead will be raised and given resurrection bodies; that everyone will be judged and will receive their reward of either eternal life or eternal punishment.

But what happens between the time of a person's death and the Day of Resurrection? About these things the Scripture says very little, but it does disclose enough for us to have a reasonable picture.

**First**, when we are conceived we are not two things, a body and a soul, but one thing: a person with both body and soul. The two are a unity; neither the body without the soul is a person, nor the soul without the body is a person. Bishop Alexander Jolly wrote:

*'By partaking of the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Eve suffered a two-fold death; as the original [Hebrew] language expresses it, "dying thou shalt die," [Gen. 3: 3] ...the death of the soul, by its separation from God, ...and the death of the body, by the separation of the soul from it.'*

In death then, even though created as a unity, the soul and the body are separated; the body returns to the dust (Gen. 3: 19).

**Second**, what happens to the Christian soul? In Romans 6: 3–9 St Paul says that the baptised person has been crucified with Christ in His death, and has been raised with Him in his Resurrection. Jesus says in St John 11: 25, 'Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die'. The Christian soul

does not die, but lives with the Lord – about that the New Testament is clear. Jesus' words to the repentant thief were, '...today you will be with me in Paradise' (St Luke 23: 43). Obviously, the thief faces the Day of Judgement as do we all, and yet he was promised Paradise that very day. Paradise, then, is the 'abode' for the thief between his death and the Day of Resurrection and Judgement. The Fathers reckoned, and so also the Episcopalian writers, that:

- 1) the souls of all of the Faithful, after the separation of the soul from the body in death, are held in some unknown 'place' until they are reunited with their bodies at the Resurrection of the Dead;
- 2) during this time (and it is recognised that the departed are still in time awaiting, with the living, the Last Day) the departed are at peace, without pain, and in a blessed state of union with Christ, receiving the ministrations of his Angels;
- 3) in that state the departed are being perfected and prepared to face the final Fire of Judgement of I Corinthians 3: 11–15; and
- 4) the Divine Mercy is still available at the final Judgement.

#### **4. Prayer for the Departed**

Bishop Alexander Jolly wrote:

*'...that... prayer for the dead, even in Apostolic antiquity cannot be denied. It results from the intimate fellowship or communion that subsists between the members of the same Body, everyone wishing and endeavouring for that full and finally perfect consummation and bliss, for which we solemnly pray at the burial of the dead, but which is not attained before Christ's second coming, when He, who begins the good work in this life, will perfectly accomplish it (Phil. 1: 6). Till then, the souls of the faithful, although in the hour of death transported to joy and felicity inexpressible, are, in a state of progression, waiting and longing, but in divine tranquillity, for the redemption of their bodies by the resurrection in the day of judgement. Then all, even the holiest, shall stand in need of mercy, according to St Paul's prayer for his beloved Onesiphorus, "The Lord grant unto him, that he may find mercy of the Lord in that day," (II Tim. 1: 18).'*

There are two points in the quotation from Bishop Jolly that deserve further comment.

**The first** is his statement that praying for the departed ‘*results... from the intimate fellowship or communion that subsists between the members of the same Body, everyone wishing and endeavouring for that full and finally perfect consummation and bliss*’. Bishop Jolly is saying that all baptised persons, both the living and the dead have the same relationship to Christ, and therefore to each other: we have all died to the old life of sin and have been raised to ‘newness of life’ in Jesus’ resurrection. We who are alive in Christ have a far stronger bond with the departed in Christ than we do with those who are alive, but not in Christ. Charles Wesley’s great hymn, ‘Let Saints on earth in concert sing with those whose work is done/ for all the servants of our King in heaven and earth are one’, expresses that idea very well.

**The second** is his citing of II Timothy 1: 16–18, ‘*May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chain; when he arrived in Rome he eagerly searched for me and found me – may the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that Day! And you know very well how much service he rendered in Ephesus*’. The question at issue in this passage is whether Onesiphorus is dead or still alive. Bishop Jolly determines from the passage that Onesiphorus is dead. He says:

*‘...reason[ing] from the blessed Apostle’s affectionate salutation of his family only, and sending good wishes for its beloved head into the state of eternity; using the [the Greek simple past tense] to express his grateful sense of the good offices he received of him when he was in Rome.’*

The point of whether Onesiphorus is dead, is that St Paul’s desire that Onesiphorus ‘may find mercy from the Lord on that Day’ is a prayer, and if Onesiphorus is dead, then St Paul is praying for his departed friend.

There is one other point to comment on in this text – that there is mercy to be found on the last day. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Bishop Thomas Rattray wrote:

*‘Prayer for the dead... is founded on that plain Scripture-Doctrine of an intermediate state between Death and the Resurrection; and that the Righteous are not to receive their Crown of Reward (II Tim. 4. 8), nor to enter the joy of their Lord in the Kingdom of Heaven, till the Resurrection and Judgement (Matthew 25. 19, 20–31, 34). And that they are to be judged according to their works, yet there is mercy to be found of the Lord in that Day (II Tim 1. 18).’*

## **5. What do we pray for the departed?**

In the Scottish Episcopal Church we pray for the departed especially at the Eucharist and in the 1929 Prayer Book funeral service. The content of the petitions that we offer are specific and not vague. The petition in the Prayer for the Whole State of Christ’s Church in the Scottish Liturgy prays that ‘all thy servants departed this life in thy faith and fear’ may receive ‘everlasting light and peace’. The Funeral service prays for the departed person at five points:

- 1) in the responses for ‘eternal rest’ and ‘perpetual light’;
- 2) in one of the optional prayers, that the Lord will ‘Multiply... to those who rest in Jesus... manifold blessings, that the good work begun in them may be perfected unto the day of Jesus Christ’;
- 3) in the penultimate prayer of the service, that the Lord grant his departed servant that, ‘increasing in knowledge and love of thee, *he* may go from strength to strength, and attain to the fullness of joy in thy heavenly kingdom’;
- 4) in the final prayer we pray for ‘those whom we love but see no longer’ that they may have peace, perpetual light, and that ‘the good purpose of thy perfect will may be accomplished in them’; and
- 5) finally we pray ‘that the souls of the faithful departed may rest in peace’.

In both instances our prayer to the Lord for the faithful departed is clear and specific; we ask for peace, eternal light, blessings, the increasing knowledge and love of God, the fullness of joy, the final perfection of the good work which began in them at Baptism, and the fulfilment of God's perfect will in them. As Bishop Rattray wrote, our prayer for the Christian departed is:

*'an acknowledgement that their present happiness is the free gift of God... to congratulate the same; and to wish the increase of it; and the final consummation of their bliss in the last Day.'*

## **6. Conclusion**

We Scottish Episcopalians have a long history of praying for the Christian departed. Our practice is founded on the teaching of the Bible and Christian practice from the early days of the Church, as attested to by the Church Fathers. We pray for them particularly at every Eucharist, but also at every funeral:

- 1) Our prayer for them is an expression of love for them.
- 2) Our prayer for them is an acknowledgement that they and we are bound together in Jesus Christ, and that even though they have passed from this earthly life, they are alive with Jesus and that we and they share the same life in him.
- 3) We pray that in this time between their deaths and the Resurrection of the dead at Jesus' return, that the good work (i.e. transformation into the likeness of Jesus Christ (1<sup>st</sup> John 3: 3) that was begun in them will be brought to completion.
- 4) Finally, we pray that they may have a happy Judgement, and hear the Lord's summons, 'Come you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the beginning of the world' (St Matthew 25: 34) and enter into the fullness and bliss of the Vision of God in his New Creation.

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