

A Biblical-Theological Perspective on Prayer¹

Graeme Goldsworthy

Graeme Goldsworthy is a minister of the Anglican Church of Australia and has served in churches in Sydney and Brisbane. He is a graduate of the Universities of Sydney, London, and Cambridge, and earned his Ph.D. at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. He lectured at Moore Theological College, Sydney, in Old Testament, Biblical Theology, and Hermeneutics. Now retired, Dr. Goldsworthy continues as a visiting lecturer at Moore College to teach a fourth-year B.D. course in Evangelical Hermeneutics. He is the author of several books, including *Preaching the Whole Bible As Christian Scripture* (Eerdmans, 2000), *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (InterVarsity, 2002), and *Prayer And The Knowledge Of God: What The Whole Bible Teaches* (InterVarsity, 2003).

Introduction

I do not much like the word *spirituality* for two related reasons. First, it is not a biblical term which, of course, is not in itself a fatal objection. We have many theological words (e.g., *trinity*) that are not found in the Bible but which nevertheless stand us in good stead. But a word like *trinity* is ancient and has been honed by theological debate and given a shape agreed upon by church councils. *Spirituality*, at least in its modern usage, is a word of doubtful parentage, and there is no agreed orthodox meaning.

Second, the word *spirituality* has been hijacked by all and sundry.² It means anything people want it to mean, and its usage is so diffuse and diverse as to render it practically meaningless until pinned down by some clear definition—which it seldom is. It does seem that the further people get from the biblical revelation and the doctrines of the gospel, the more likely they are to use the term *spirituality* to refer to some vague religious or mystical feeling. Often it seems to mean nothing more than a sense of the aesthetic, a feeling of belonging within nature, or an intensified sense of self-worth. It is a rejection of the hard-nosed scientism of the twentieth century that cannot admit to the inexplicable. Rather than add one more definition to the many that exist, either explicitly or implicitly, I prefer not to use the word and look for some more biblical way to speak of the realities of the spiritual life particularly as they relate to

prayer. By the spiritual life, of course, I mean the Christian life as defined by the New Testament.

Prayer lies at the heart of what a lot of people refer to as *spirituality*. It is as diffuse as the term itself in that it belongs to everyone. It lies at the heart of religion in whatever form it comes. Prayer seems to be the instinct of all human beings even when it is almost totally neglected or called upon only in the direst of circumstances. Because prayer is a universal phenomenon we, as Christians, should try very hard to understand what it is about, and why it pervades all cultures and religions. But, because it is universal, the Christian pastor and teacher will find many problems and misconceptions about prayer even among the people of God, let alone among the unbelievers. This is partly because many Christians will have their ideas of prayer shaped by various influences that are not necessarily biblical.

Unfortunately, the subject of prayer has not always been dealt with well in the Christian literature. Furthermore, most of us will have heard sermons, convention talks, or Bible studies, that seem to imply or focus on our defective practices of prayer including how undisciplined we are, how lazy, and how lacking in resolve. The effect is to make us feel both guilt and discouragement. A terrible legalism seems to surround the subject of prayer. We are cajoled with examples of the great saints like Luther or Spurgeon who, it is said,

regarded two hours a day in prayer as the norm. We will hear sermons on prayer that remind us that Jesus got up very early while it was still dark and went into a solitary place to pray (Mark 1:35). There is no biblical indication that he prayed this early in the day as a regular habit, but the application is predictably made: if Jesus needed to get up before dawn to pray, how much more do we.

It may be good method to start with our problems, to scratch where it itches so to speak, and then to seek a solution. But legalism and emotional blackmail are not the way. A spiritual “big brother” of mine many years ago said to me, “If you want to get your theology right, always start with God and work down to us.” Sound wisdom! So, as Arthur Pink says,

In the great majority of books written, and in the sermons preached upon prayer, the human element fills the scene almost entirely. It is the conditions which we must meet, the promises we must claim, the things we must do, in order to get our requests granted; and *God's* claim, *God's* right, *God's* glory are often disregarded.³

In what follows, I want to approach the subject from God's end. In giving this article the title that indicates a biblical-theological perspective, I do not want to suggest that this can be achieved without a broader theological perspective. Biblical and systematic theology belong together in that neither can be done properly without the other. They are interdependent disciplines. However we look at it, the theology of prayer is largely neglected in the literature. Instead, the practice of prayer, the power of prayer, the imperatives of prayer, and the potential of prayer all seem to predominate. It is time to take a different approach; one that will lead to encouragement and greater devotion

to the God who is pleased to allow us to call him “Our Father.”

The Foundations of Speech

A simple definition of prayer is that it is speaking to God. But why is it a universal instinct that we want to speak to some superior or divine being? The obvious answer is that such being is more powerful than we are! Paul reminds us that even in the situation of suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18) sinners continue to call upon and worship their alternate gods (Rom 1:25). They may worship the creature rather than the Creator, but they still pray. This raises for many the question of whether God listens to the prayers of pagans, or Muslims, or Hindus, or Buddhists. Does God hear any non-Christian who shoots a despairing word to “the Man upstairs”? And if he hears anyone's prayers, what sort of prayers are acceptable to him?

It may seem to be stating the obvious to say that God is a speaking God. He created all things by a word. Why a word? Why not a thought or a (metaphorical) snap of the fingers? We can say with certainty that he chose both to create and to communicate with his creation by his spoken word. If there is a discernible reason for this word-centered activity of God, it lies in the fact that it is his attribute to be a speaking God. That is, just as it is God's nature that he is Trinity, uni-plurality, so it is his nature that within the “community” of the Trinity (and here we struggle for words that will not mislead) there is communication by word. Vern Poythress has referred to this in his Trinitarian approach to hermeneutics as an essential consideration when thinking about human word communication.⁴ The Trinity is eternally, ontologically com-

munal and communicating before ever there were human beings to speak to. The fact that God's speech is not formed by air passing over vocal chords does not change anything. The essence of language is not vibrating air. Such communication, both intra-Trinitarian and in humans as created in the image of God, is not merely instinctive. It is rational. It is integral to personhood.

We have probably all been in the social situation where we speak to someone and they snub us, refusing to acknowledge that we spoke to them. We count it an insult if someone turns their back to us instead of responding to our address. Why then do we wonder at the wrath of God revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (Rom 1:18), even when they go on being "religious"? Our common instinct as those created in the image of God is to respond with a word—to pray. But, as rebels, we turn our back on the Creator and address the creature. Religion, then, is not mankind seeking God. Rather it is the expression of our rebellion against him—our determination to snub him and to address substitutes that we mold in our own image.

Speech begins with the ontological Trinity as the Father addresses the Son and Spirit and they address each other and the Father in turn. Consistent with this is the biblical assertion that God speaks his "let us" words into nothingness and creates all that exists. He speaks into the chaos and creates the ordered universe. He then speaks into this ordered universe and creates its ruler in his own image. Finally, he speaks to the humans and orders their relationships with every thing that exists. After this there are only two ways that God speaks to us: first in judgment against human rebellion and

second in grace as a plan of salvation is revealed by prophetic word.

It is against this theological backdrop that we must seek to understand prayer. Our first task will be to try to understand the role of the Trinity in prayer.

The Trinity and Prayer

If we are examining the roles of the persons of the Trinity in prayer, it may seem logical to start with God the Father. But there is another logic to the gospel in that our spiritual life begins subjectively with our being subdued by the gospel of Christ. Thus, God speaks to us by the word of his incarnate Word. We are converted by the message about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus *for us*. Faith in Christ has its primary expression in prayer. It begins with our looking to Christ, and then faith grows as we receive the word of Christ and respond in prayer and godly living in the world.

It is at this point that certain problems arise for many. They are persistent problems that demand pastoral care and nurture. Why should we have confidence that God hears our prayers? How does the pastor counsel the Christians who do not feel that their prayers go anywhere or achieve anything? What is the meaning of the signing-off phrases that are handed down from one generation to the next as the acceptable way to conclude a prayer; phrases like, "through Jesus Christ our Lord," or "we pray these things in the name of Jesus," or "for Jesus' sake we pray"?

The Basis of All Prayer: The Sonship of Jesus.

If God made us to hear his word and to respond to it both in word and action, it follows that prayer is an impulse created

in us by God. We can say, then, that prayer belongs to the children of God because they are made in the image of God. But we also have to acknowledge the rebellion of mankind that puts us under judgment for repudiating our true sonship and degrading the image. The idea of the true “son of God” is expounded in Luke 3. Jesus, at his baptism, is declared to be God’s true Son in whom the Father is well pleased. Luke, as if to clarify this assertion, then follows with the genealogy of Jesus in terms of sonship. Jesus is son of Joseph, the son of Heli, and so on all the way back to Adam, the son of God. Adam, the first son of God, rebelled against this status. God’s purpose of election finds its focus in Israel who is declared by God to be “my firstborn son” (Exod 4:22-23). God called his son out of Egypt in the exodus (Hos 11:1). Within the context of the covenant promises to David, the son of David is declared to be the son of God (2 Sam 7:12-14).

The baptismal approbation of Jesus, the Son of David, thus takes on added significance. God’s sons Adam, Israel, and David’s descendants, all repudiated that privilege. Now, one can almost hear heaven sigh with relief because at last here is a true Son in whom God is well pleased. Such a Son is able to say with confidence to his Father, “I knew that you always hear me” (John 11:41-42). Christology, then, is vital to our understanding of prayer. What belongs to the true humanity of Jesus now belongs to all who trust in him. This is the ground of our justification. It is the source of our confidence in our own eventual resurrection to glory (Rom 8:10-11). Christ has become for us our alter-ego so that we have been crucified with him, baptized into his death, made alive with him, raised up with him, and made to sit with him in heavenly places (Gal 2:19-20;

Rom 6:3; Eph 2:5-6). In this sense he is our life (Gal 3:3). Paul’s description of our “in Christ” and “with Christ” existence indicates that nothing hinders our access to the Father. The intercession of Jesus is the continual reminder of this (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25). If it belongs to the risen Jesus to have access to the Father, it also belongs to all who are in union with Christ by faith (Heb 10:19-22).

In summary, the basis of true prayer is the Sonship of Jesus which we share in union with him. The acceptance he has with the Father is the acceptance we now have. That is the essence of our justification by faith. If the Father always hears the Son, then he always hears those who, in Christ, are sons. Women should understand that this is not a gender thing. It is a matter of participating in union with the sonship of Jesus; a participation where there is neither male nor female. Inclusive language translations by making it a gender matter are in danger of blurring this Christological point in passages like Gal 4:6—“And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba, Father!’”

The Source of All Prayer: The Fatherhood of God.

I do not think it is a distortion of the facts to say that many, perhaps most, Christians will think about prayer in terms of what we do and what we need to do. It is a cliché that prayer changes things. It has also become popular in some circles to assert that, in effect, anything we ask for will be granted if we have enough faith. Faith seems to be conceived of as something we squeeze out of ourselves like toothpaste out of a tube. Even in more traditional evangelical circles it seems that the popular view of prayer is a process

that largely begins with us. Of course it is recognized that our agenda for prayer is in some way controlled by Scripture. But, the pattern easily develops into something like this: (for whatever reason) we decide to pray and ask God for something; God hears us (we hope); God rewards our faith by answering our prayer. If we ask people what it is that is changed by prayer, few would feel comfortable in saying that we change God's mind. Yet, that is almost the implication of the approach. It is as if God is unwilling to do good things in us, for us, and in the church and world until we have done enough praying to convince him that he should. The focus on our responsibility in the matter is of course not entirely misplaced. The question is whether or not the conceptualizing of the motive and method in prayer in this way is biblical. I suspect that it is not.

Our discussion thus far about the source of our speaking to God is relevant. The biblical picture is of the internally speaking God (Trinity) who also speaks out from himself and brings the creation into being, creates humans in his own image and then speaks to them to provide for them the framework for their understanding of reality. There are at least two implications of this for prayer. The first is that, if prayer is not addressed to God in terms of what is real, it is a fantasy. True prayer is not asking God to do magic or to create mythical worlds. As Christians we should have a view of reality that is drawn from, and is entirely dependent upon, God's revelation in the Bible. When we pray for conversions, for healings, for world peace, for each other's ministries and welfare, we do so with a sense of the reality of God, his creation, and his sovereign rule over all things, even over the future. Thus the prior word of God is

established from the outset as the ground for any human understanding of reality.

The second implication of the creation is that, both before and after the fall of man, God must address us first, if we are to address him within the bounds of reality. The biblical account of reality is that the ideal situation of creation came under judgment because of the rebellion of mankind against God and his good order of things. Because of our rebellion we have no right of access to God, and no desire to approach him (Rom 3:11, 23; 5:12). The biblical picture of prayer is given within the framework of our fallenness and of the grace of salvation: God made the first move towards us and any move we make is a response to this.

Salvation is God's eternal plan that is expressed in his unilateral commitment to his people. In other words, God's promises and acts to save us were done without our consent or co-operation. God sovereignly makes covenant with his people, that is, he commits himself wholly to them (Gen 12:1-3; Rom 5:6-10). But, as God carries out his eternal plan of salvation he does so in the context of a revealing and redeeming word. In the process of saving us God reveals his purposes for the whole creation. The most important thing that God reveals about his creatures is how he is saving us and what he is saving us to (Rom 8:19-23, 29-30; Eph 1:3-10, 18-20). The gospel event (Jesus' life, death, and resurrection) reveals to us what God wills for all who turn to him in repentance and faith, and how the whole universe is involved. We do not yet see or understand the full glory of what is coming, but we do know of it truly (1 John 3:1-2).

What does all this imply for our conception of prayer? Who changes what through prayer? The notion of a God who

needs to be convinced by our prayers that he should act in a particular way really does not sit well with the biblical evidence. I am aware, of course, that there are some biblical texts that may seem to support such a view because they look at the matter subjectively, that is, from the human end. The popular misconceptions often result from the malaise from which we all suffer—our cursed self-centeredness, in which our legitimate subjectivity becomes sinful subjectivism.

The implication of all this is that the foundation of prayer is “thinking God’s thoughts after him.” Prayer is, of course, more than mere thinking, but thinking God’s thoughts as he has revealed them is the basis for addressing God in prayer. Having revealed his purpose God allows us to be involved in the carrying out of his will as his dear children. He gives us the privilege of identifying with his will by asking him to do it. This is part of the process he has chosen to use in order to carry out his plan for the whole universe. If we are to ask for anything “according to his will” (1 John 5:14), then we must refer to his will as revealed in his word. Faith in prayer is not what we dream up but is engendered by hearing the word of Christ (Rom 10:17).

This principle of God’s word prior to our prayer is amply illustrated in some biblical passages. David’s prayer in 2 Sam 7:18-29 is essentially to ask God to do the very things he has just promised to do (vv. 9-16). Solomon’s prayer of dedication of the temple centers on the request that God would do what he had promised to do for David (1 Kgs 8:22-26). Jeremiah’s letter to the Jewish exiles in Babylon (Jer 29:1-17) explains the logic of prayer in vv. 10-14. First, God tells them what he will do; then they will pray that he will do it;

the outcome is that God will do it. Ezekiel is similarly specific in saying that God will let the exiles pray for what he reveals he will do (Ezek 36:37).

The Enabling of All Prayer: The Power of the Holy Spirit.

What does it mean to pray in faith? It is certain from what we have already examined that we cannot be God’s children or pray to him without faith. It is sometimes suggested that when our specific prayers are not answered it is because we do not have enough faith. People who talk like this point to passages such as these:

- “According to your faith, be it done to you” (Matt 9:29).
- “Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith” (Matt 21:22).
- “Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will” (Mark 11:22).

This often puts people in a guilty bind if they are not healed or their friends are not converted. We need to remind ourselves of what faith is and what it is not.

Faith is our Spirit-empowered response to the Christ of the gospel. The Holy Spirit enables us to respond with faith and repentance to the Jesus of the gospel (John 1:12-13; 3:3-8; Acts 13:48; 16:14). Faith is a part of the process by which God draws us to himself and saves us. We would not believe if the Spirit of God did not remove our blindness and our hatred of God’s truth (John 6:37, 44-45; 16:8-11; Eph 2:8-9). Thus, prayer can be spoken of as the Spirit of Christ within us crying to the Father (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6).

Our recourse to prayerful petition depends on the fact that God gives us all things through the gospel. Faith must be defined by its object, not by the fervor of the subject. To have faith is to believe

in and place trust in a trustworthy and faithful God who has revealed his will in promises of blessing and salvation. The work of the Spirit is to connect us to the Christ of the gospel. Word and Spirit are not divided. Thus, faith and the word are not divided. The word of the gospel defines our destiny and our inheritance. As God's children we inherit every blessing, and we already possess this by faith (Rom 10:12; Eph 1:3-6; Col 1:4-5).

Authentic prayer is an expression of gospel-based faith. The gospel reveals God's will for us. When we pray we are asking God to bring us, and others, to the goal that he has revealed to us. God has only revealed to us the big picture of our salvation, not the details of how he is bringing us to that goal. As we pray for the means to the end (safety, food, material needs, healing etc.), we must be prepared for God's gracious "no" while we trust him for the best. Remember that we have already reached the ultimate goal by our union with the risen and glorified Christ. It is not faith to demand something that God has not revealed as his will for us. It must also be said that it is not a lack of faith if, in praying for specifics not clearly revealed by God, we use the qualification, "If it is your will."

In summary then: all prayer is conditioned by the nature of the gospel. True faith always looks to its object: the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Pastorally, the problem of "weak" faith is not dealt with by introverted self-examination so much as by looking to the object of faith. The question is not, "Have I enough faith?" but, "Is my faith placed in a trustworthy and faithful God?" The gospel defines God's will for my life which is to be conformed to the image of Christ. The detailed path to that goal is not shown

us in advance, but it is amply stated in Scripture that the One who is bringing us to that goal is faithful. To pray in the name of Jesus is to pray according to what he has revealed of himself as our mediator and savior.

This Trinitarian perspective on prayer that we have now considered in outline, is well summed up in Paul's assertion in Gal 4:6, "Because you are sons, God has given us the Spirit of his Son, the Spirit who cries 'Abba, Father!'"

Biblical-Theological Overview of Prayer

The Old Testament

Up to this point I have pursued what might be called a biblico-dogmatic theological approach to our subject. In our study we have been steered by systematic theological concepts specifically relating to the Trinity. Biblical-theological method also involves the diachronic approach of following a particular theme or theological concept as it develops in the salvation-historical framework of revelation. One advantage of this method is that it frequently unpacks the antecedents of a full-blown New Testament or gospel understanding of the subject. I have favored the approach taken because it reinforces the fact that we come to the Old Testament as Christians with certain dogmatic presuppositions already in place. We need both to be aware of these and take advantage of them.

We began with the working hypothesis that prayer is speaking to God. We examined the origins of human speech in the fact that God is a speaking God. How then does God's speech to his people unfold, and what is the nature of their responses to his speech? Jesus shows us that the human being who is the image

of the Father and the true Son of God is a receiver of God's word and a responder to it. Jesus' response is in stark contrast to that of the first humans. The first record of Adam speaking to God is a word of defiance and self-justification. The same can be said of Cain. There is a destructive futility in this sinful reaction to God's word. But the lineage of humans under God's grace, Adam and Abel (who was replaced by Seth) is one which is marked by the fact that, "At that time people began to call on the name of the Lord" (Gen 4:26). In a number of places where we would expect prayer, the narrative seems to assume it, for example in Noah's response to God's commands and in his offering sacrifice.

In the earlier stages of the Old Testament we find two major emphases with regard to prayer. The first is that it is tied to the covenant relationship between a gracious God and his people. The second is the emphasis on the role of the key representative ministries as intercessors. In both of these the foundations for the Christological perspective are laid. It is vital to recognize the link between these offices and the ministry of Christ if we are to avoid unfruitful exemplary deductions being drawn from the great covenantal figures to the Christian. Whatever the exemplary value of the practices of Abraham or Moses or David (and they are many), the Christological value is much nearer to the heart of the gospel. In other words, while Christians may learn much from the heroes of the Bible about the life of faith, our true example is Jesus who establishes the integrity of our faith and practice by being more than an example. Without the grace of justification our attempts at the imitation of Christ are futile and, in fact, godless.

In layman's terms, we grow as Christians, not by becoming more like Abraham or Moses, but by becoming more like Jesus. And we can only grow more like Jesus when we are depending on the grace of justification.

Abraham intercedes for Sodom (Gen 18:22-33), and as intercessor he is called a prophet (Gen 20:7). Little more is said about intercession until Moses, who is also the definitive prophet. What emerges is that the prophetic role is not only to speak the word of God to people, but also to represent the people in speaking an intercessory word on their behalf to God. Of the prayer life of the ordinary Israelite we have little information at this stage. We can only infer that it existed, especially in connection with the cultic rites such as offering of sacrifices. It would seem that the biblical concentration on the role of the key representative offices in intercession is deliberate. This is the emphasis in Joshua and it continues into the period of the Judges. Joshua's role has clear indications that he carries on the intercessory role of Moses (Josh 7:7-9, cf. Exod 32:30-34; 33:7-23; Num 14:13-19; 21:7-9)

When we come to the Book of Samuel the prophetic role as intercessor is again evident. The prayer of Hannah may seem to highlight the prayer of an ordinary Israelite, but it turns out to be anything but. To be sure, she is portrayed initially as having no cultic role and, therefore, as representing "lay" piety in prayer. However, her prayer is linked with the temple, and is clearly given the prominence that it has because it leads to the gift of a child who becomes the great prophet Samuel. Hannah's prayer is recalled in Mary's *magnificat* at the annunciation (Luke 1:46-55), which suggests that Mary understood that the theological significance of both

events was linked. Samuel is portrayed as both proclaimer of God's word, and as intercessor for a wayward people (1 Sam 7:8-9; 8:6-22; 12:16-25).

If we accept the ascription of many of the Psalms to David, we must acknowledge that once again the emphasis is on the role of the representative officer as the praying Israelite. This in no way takes away from the inference that ordinary "lay" Israelites would also learn to pray. Nevertheless, we must ask why the inspired Scriptures emphasize that the ones whose distinct role is to represent the many (prophet, priest, king) were above all the intercessors. The only conclusion that we can reach is that it points to the foundational role of Jesus, the true prophet, priest, and king, as the human intercessor upon whose prayers the efficacy of all prayer is dependent. I would suggest that, above all, it is this prophetic role as intercessor that is fulfilled by Jesus as the one who enters the presence of the Father and makes intercession for the saints.

In the narrative literature, a key prayer is that of Solomon at the dedication of the temple (1 Kgs 8). We must not put this in the category of a dedication of a church building. It is nothing of the sort! The temple was the visible representation of the presence of God among his people. Solomon knew full well that God was not confined to this temple made with hands. Yet it was the place where God was pleased to make his name to dwell. The building of the temple was the prime expression of Solomon's wisdom. In that fact alone we see the doctrine of creation, as well as the covenant of salvation, being given expression in the temple. The temple and the ministries of atonement, reconciliation, and sanctification that

were rightly performed there, were what made sense of life and of the universe for the believing Israelite. Solomon's prayer recognizes this. The covenant of grace, with its promise of salvation, is the basis of this prayer (1 Kgs 8:23-24). Solomon expresses the legitimate nature of prayer in that he asks that God will perform what he has already promised to do (vv. 25-26). The temple is the means of approaching God in heaven where his true dwelling is (vv. 27-30). Solomon's insights thus foreshadow the truth that the true temple, the risen Jesus, is the gateway to the presence of the Father in heaven.

Prayer in the eschatology of the prophets takes on some new emphases. Here the prayers of the faithful remnant of Israel that is being saved come into some prominence. This broadens the emphasis that we have seen to date in that it is presumably ordinary Israelites that are involved (e.g., Isa 55:6-7; 58:9; Jer 33:3; Zeph 3:9, 14-20). Yet, even here we should note that the theme of the remnant of the true Israelites is fulfilled primarily in the person of Jesus who comes as the only true Israelite. Thus, the praying nature of the congregation of the faithful is also stamped with Christology. The outworking of the theme of the remnant that is to be saved is clearly focused on Jesus. Once again, it is his prayer that establishes the basis of our prayer. The focus of these Old Testament prayers is predominantly on God as the savior and Lord of his people. It is also significant that the restored temple is perceived as the place of prayer, since the New Testament locates this new temple in Jesus (e.g., Isa 2:2-4; 27:12-13; 56:7). We must suppose that the concentration on Zion in prophetic eschatology is due to the fact that it is the city of God in which the temple constitutes the place where he

meets his people.

The New Testament

It is not necessary to try to deal with all the prayers of the New Testament. We must be content with a few observations. First of all, it may seem strange that a group of Jewish men who presumably had been taught to pray from their earliest childhood should approach Jesus with the request to be taught to pray (Luke 11:1). We can only conjecture that Jesus' own example and the growing recognition that he represented some very significant movement of God led to the request. It has been suggested that at least two aspects of the Lord's Prayer would have surprised them: that they could call God "Father," and that the petition should predominate. Calling Yahweh "Father" is rare in the Old Testament, which may partly account for the strange preservation of the Aramaic vernacular "abba" in the New Testament (Mark 14:36; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). It is possible that petitionary prayer had largely fallen into the background in Judaism. Certainly, modern Judaism seems to focus more on praise than petition in its liturgies.

It is obvious that Jesus would address the Father in his prayers and teach his disciples to do the same. What, then, can we say about prayer addressed to the risen Christ and to the Holy Spirit? From the theological angle we recognize the Trinity as one God. The unity of God means that all three persons of the Trinity are involved in any divine action, including listening to our prayers. The distinction in God, however, means quite simply that the three persons are ontologically distinct though not separate. The ontological distinctions also affect the roles in that they cannot be interchanged. The

Father sends the Son, the Son is sent and is incarnated to live, die, and rise for our salvation. The Father and the Son send the Spirit and make themselves present to the people of God by the Spirit.

When we examine the evidence of the New Testament we find that almost all the prayers recorded after the ascension of Christ are directed to the Father. The exceptions are unique and hardly prescriptive for all time. The first such event recorded is Stephen's prayer to Jesus because, as he dies, he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Acts 8:55). So he prays, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (v. 59). Second, there is Paul's address to Jesus in response to the risen Christ's challenge to him on the Damascus road (Acts 9:4-5). Paul does not know whom he addresses and asks, "Who are you Lord?" The reply, "I am Jesus whom you persecute," indicates that Paul addresses the Son by default. Finally, the closing words of the New Testament include the prayerful expression, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20). This is in response to the words of Christ, "Surely I am coming soon (v. 20).

Once the Christology of the New Testament is set in place in that Jesus of Nazareth is portrayed as the one in whom all the promises of God are affirmed (2 Cor 1:20), the broader perspective of prayer becomes evident. It belongs to those who, in Christ, are sons of the Father. It is always directed at the fulfilling of God's revealed purposes in the gospel. In Acts we find a young church that prays. When we study the content we find prayers for guidance, for help in times of danger, for healing and welfare, and for outsiders. We also find praise for the marvelous blessings of God.

Paul's prayers included in his epistles

illustrate the point that prayer is always towards the goals of the saving event of Christ as proclaimed in the gospel. Paul also gives much instruction about prayer that reveals something of his own practice. He instructs his readers to pray because he understands the difficulties in perseverance in prayer (e.g., Rom 12:12; 1 Cor 7:5; Phil 4:4-6; 1 Thess 5:16-21; 1 Tim 2:1; 5:5). He notes the effects of prayer (e.g., Rom 10:13; 2 Cor 1:11; Phil 1:19; 1 Tim 4:5). Prayer is important to him for his own ministry and he requests others to pray for him. It is a primary means of fellowship with those who are absent (e.g., Rom 15:30-32; 1 Thess 5:25; 2 Thess 3:1). Paul also penned two important passages on the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian prayer (Rom 8:19-27; Gal 4:6). In all this Paul's Trinitarian theology is clear.

Paul tells us something of the way he prays concerning his own ministry. He prays that he might visit the Christians in Rome (Rom 1:8-10), and revisit the church in Thessalonica (2 Thess 3:10). His special concern for the Jews, an expression of his understanding of the role of the Jews in the covenant purposes of God, leads to his heart-felt prayer for them to be saved (Rom 10:1). Paul's prayers for the Christians to whom he writes is that the gospel will have its outworking in their lives and witness. The eschatological goal is always in his mind: the presenting of the saints mature and perfect on the day of Christ. In short, Paul always prays with the purpose and goals of the gospel in mind.

The writer to the Hebrews makes one request of his readers to "pray for us" (Heb 13:18). He refers once to Jesus' prayer while here in the flesh (Heb 5:7). The most significant statement is his reference to Jesus' ongoing and eternal priesthood and the fact that he lives to make intercession

for his people (Heb 7:24-25). This representative role is the enabling of our prayer, by implication, and the exhortation for us to "draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Heb 10:21-23).

The Book of Revelation makes three references to the prayers of the saints (Rev 5:8; 8:3, 4). Each of these indicates that the prayers of the saints have come up before God and the Lamb. The prayer utterances recorded in Revelation are hymns of praise (4:8, 11; 5:9-10, 12, 13; 11:17-18; 15:3-4; 16:5-7; 19:1-3, 5, 6-8). These all belong to the visions of the heavenly regions and express the eschatological consummation of the gospel. Petition has been transformed into praise for the glory now revealed. It seems appropriate that the only petition on behalf of the suffering church on earth is in response to the promise of Christ to come soon: "Amen, come Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20).

Conclusion

I have concentrated on two main aspects of the theology of prayer in this discussion. First, the doctrine of the Trinity provides the dogmatic framework for the Christian understanding of prayer. The three persons of the Godhead in their unity and distinction establish the parameters of prayer. Prayer comes from the Father and is given its perfect utterance by the Son through the fellowship of the Spirit. Theologically speaking, prayer only becomes an aspect of our Christian existence because of our union with Christ the intercessor. That union with Christ is possible through the gracious work of the Holy Spirit.

The second emphasis of this discussion is the role of the Old Testament in laying the foundations of the theology of prayer in the New Testament. This theology

includes the Christology of vicarious and mediatorial intercession. The Reformation emphasis on the offices of Christ in terms of the Old Testament roles of prophet, priest, and king, is sound and underpins the important fact that our only way to be heard by our heavenly Father is “through Jesus Christ, Our Lord.”

ENDNOTES

¹This subject is dealt with in greater detail in the author’s book, *Prayer and the Knowledge of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003).

²See Michael Raiter, *Stirrings of the Soul: Evangelicals and the New Spirituality* (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2003).

³A. W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1961), 109.

⁴Vern S. Poythress, *God Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1999), 16-25.