

BIBLICAL PRAYER IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Biblical prayer is linked up with the whole of theology. Edna Mary has grasped this well when she says: "Prayer cannot be divorced from theology . . . inadequate or distorted devotion has always been the result of inadequate or distorted theology. Prayer is not something that can be parcelled into a neat little package on its own; it is inextricably bound up with our whole attitude to God and his world, and it is not limited to certain times or words, but is the context of the whole of life."⁽¹⁾

This is already sufficient reason to claim an essential place for a systematic treatment of prayer in Dogmatics, that theological discipline which deals systematically with the whole range of Biblical doctrine. In a thought-provoking German article called "Prayer as

Object of Dogmatics"⁽²⁾, H. Beuckert claims that, after all the unity of all doctrinal statements consists in this, that God, whose very being is glory and grace, brings about, through the intercession of the Holy Spirit in us, that glorification of God and that thanksgiving to God which we refuse to give him. In its locus on prayer Dogmatics should point out that the whole Christian message is somehow concentrated in it. When this is neglected, he says, Dogmatics may easily become a system of *abstract* truths which for that very reason will be equal to dogmatic falsehoods.⁽³⁾ Bearing this in mind, it may be asked whether in the past teachers of Dogmatics have paid sufficient attention to prayer.⁽⁴⁾ In this

(1) Sister E. Mary: *This World and Prayer, Here and Now Series*, London, 1965, pp. 6-7. The author is a member of the Deaconess Community of St. Andrew and is on the staff of the Church of England Chaplaincy to the University of London.

(2) H. Beuckert: "Das Gebet, als Gegenstand der Dogmatik," in *Evangelische Theologie*, vol. 15 no. 12, Dec. 1955, pp. 535-552.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 552.

(4) One may regret that the Dutch dogmatician dr. Herman Bavinck in his masterful 4-volume work *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Reformed Dogmatics) of over 2500 pages pays hardly any attention to prayer (see vol. 2, 1928, p. 363, and vol. 3, p. 378). The same could be said of A. G. Honig's *Handboek van de Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Handbook on Reformed Dogmatics), Kampen, 1938, of 867

paper we will attempt to give a step by step definition of Biblical prayer, while at the same time attempting to establish prayer's relation to different biblical doctrine in their (more or less) salvation-historical sequence.

1. *Prayer is a speaking of man to his Creator*

This implies that God is, that He is personal, and that he can therefore be addressed. God's existence as well as the personal character of His existence are implied in Heb. 11:6(b): "For whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him".⁽⁵⁾ That this personal God can be addressed, is seen in the many prayers in the Bible in which believers speak to Him, as well as in the different biblical commands that man should pray to God (Ps. 50:15, Isa. 55.6, Jer. 29:12, 33:3, Matt. 7:7, John 16:24, Phil. 4:6, I Thess. 5:17). Speaking of prayer in the O.T., Herrmann in an article on *euchomai* says that Israel's faith in God "reaches its true dimensions

only as faith that this Yahweh . . . is not just the God of Israel but also the one true God who is the Creator and Sustainer of the whole world That this Lord is not a theological construct but a wholly personal reality is what makes prayer in Israel so vital."⁽⁶⁾

2. *Prayer is a speaking to God by man who has been made in God's image (Gen. 1:27)*

Whatever this image may mean in all its fulness, one thing is very clear, namely that the way God created man enabled man to have special communion with his Creator. Man was made to live in conscious communion with his Maker. No attempt to define the "essence" of man's being can ever succeed without taking into account this basic revelation that man has been created in such a way that he is essentially related to God. Thus man should always be defined in terms of this basic relationship with God, his Maker.⁽⁷⁾ This would seem to imply that man's conversation with God was to be something unique in the whole of creation.

3. *Prayer is an asking from God according to His will, on account of the fact that God in his grace has already spoken to man.*

The initiative lies with God. In his *Institutes* Calvin correctly points out that an investigation into the prayers of the Bible shows

(6) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (=TDNT), vol. 2, 1964, p. 791; cf. C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, pp. 692-693.

(7) Whatever the criticism to be charged against Prof. Berkouwer's *Man: the Image of God* (Gr. Rapids, 1962), it is to my mind one of its greatest merits, that it stresses this fact so strongly and untringly.

pages. On the other hand C. Hodge's *Systematic Theology* does contain a beautiful chapter on prayer in vol. 3, while Dr. G. C. Berkouwer's series *Dogmatic Studies* are full of references to, and brief discussions of, prayer, with a beautiful chapter on perseverance and prayer in the volume of *Faith and Perseverance* (Kampen, 1949, ch. 5). Cf. also Dr. G. C. Niftrik, *Kleine Dogmatiek* (Dogmatics in Brief), Nijkerk, 1961, ch. 37. K. Barth has devoted much attention to prayer in his *Church Dogmatics*, e.g. in III. 3., 49. 4 and III. 4., 53. 3. The most recent example to this effect is Hendrikus Berkhof's one-volume *Dogmatics* called *Christelijk Geloof*, Nijkerk, 1973, with a striking paragraph on Prayer, pp. 512-519.

(5) Unless otherwise stated, all scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

us that grace is the basis thereof.⁽⁸⁾ Some are aware of God's grace as the basis for prayer to such an extent, that they insist on defining prayer as *asking*. Perhaps this may be called the general view of the Reformers. This way or that way, it is in asking from God that man realises his lack of grace, reveals his desire for it, and proves his direction towards it.⁽⁹⁾

To define prayer in terms of an asking only may perhaps be termed one-sided, but it contains a basic truth which may never be forgotten. A quick glance at the Biblical words for "prayer" and "pray" proves this: The most common word for pray in the Old Testament is *hitpalêl*, the *hithpaël* form of the verb *pâlel*. The verb is used 72 times (e.g. Gen. 20:7, 17; Num. 12:2, 21:7, Dut. 9:20, I Sam. 1:10, Jer. 7:16), and the noun *tepillâh* more or less 75 (e.g. 2 Sam. 7:27, Ps. 4:1, 6:9), while the context shows that in most cases they definitely mean asking something from God - either for oneself or for others. The same holds true for the most common Greek word for prayer in the N.T.: *proseuchomai*, *proseuchê* (e.g. Matt. 21:21, Luk. 22:45, Rom. 1:10). In addition to this there are a number of Hebrew words expressing a cry unto God for help (Ps. 28:2, 31:22, 88:14), a request (Ps. 27:4, 122:6), a supplication for grace (I Kings 8:33, 47, 59). At least 8 different Hebrew verbs are used in connection with *waiting* upon the Lord and even these are used in such a way that they definitely imply obtaining something from God on

account of His grace (cf. Ps. 37:7, 59:10, 62:2, 69:3, 123:2, 145:13, Is. 40:31, 64:4). The same may be said of the Hebrew expression "to seek (the face of) the Lord" (Ps. 27:8, 2 Sam. 12:16, 2 Chron. 20:4). In the Greek New Testament we find words implying asking in prayer like *aiteô* (Matt. 7:7), *deomai* (Luke 22:32), *erôtâô* (I John 5:16), *euchomai* (2 Cor. 13:9, Acts 26:29, James 5:16).

When prayer is defined in terms of asking, it goes without saying that no selfish asking is meant, but an asking that agrees with God's will, as revealed in His grace (cf. I John 5:14). Thus, for example, man should abandon all thought of vengeance if he himself seeks forgiveness. "Self-seeking desires separate from God. When expressed in prayer, they cannot expect to be heard . . ." ⁽¹⁰⁾

However, it is good to note that all the elements of prayer rest upon the *revelation* of God in His glory and grace. Whether prayer is seen as adoration and worship, whether as confession of God's Name or confession of sins before Him, whether as thanksgiving to, or rejoicing in, the Lord, whether as supplication or intercession, it always presupposes the glory and grace of God as its cause and foundation and reason. After all, prayer is concerned with the basic question of the reality of a living, personal God, who *has truly revealed* himself to man in His glory and grace. Because Immanuel Kant could not accept this divine revelation, he defined prayer as a conversation with oneself, although

(8) *Institutes*, III:20:8-9.

(9) K. Barth: *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, Edinburg 1961, p. 98.

(10) Cf. H. Greeven in TDNT, vol. 2, p. 805.

it may be added that he wanted to value this positively. Because Ludwig Feuerbach did not accept this divine revelation, he stated that man could only find consolation within his own being. Because Schopenhauer could not accept this divine revelation, he defined prayer as a fantastic interview with an imaginary spiritual world⁽¹¹⁾. But for him to whom the secrets of the Kingdom of grace have been opened up by the Holy Spirit, it has become something natural to call upon God. He has been brought to see things clearly and distinctly and in prayer breaks through the walls of the stuffy little room of his own sinful self⁽¹²⁾.

4 *Because grace which is prayer's foundation, is always covenant grace, it follows that prayer is a most intimate dialogue form of covenant communion with God*

Communion with God constitutes the essence of the covenant of grace made with Abraham and his seed, and in them with us⁽¹³⁾. To quote only from Lev 26, where Yahweh says "And (I) will confirm my covenant with you and I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people" (vss 9 b, 12, cf. also 2 Cor 6 16, Rev 21 3). Thus prayer, which is a speaking

to God on account of His gracious speaking to us, is an intimate dialogic form of covenant communion with the God of the Covenant

5 *Prayer as dialogic covenant communion with God is founded on the life and work of the Messiah of the Covenant, Jesus Christ, in whose Name we therefore pray*

With regard to the incarnation of the Son of God we may say with John J Mitchell "The covenant God made with the man from Ur is the union God has established with his own in Jesus Christ, himself the epitome of covenant as the incarnate God-and-man, Immanuel. There is no more glorious concept given to men than this God with us!"⁽¹⁴⁾

As concerns Christ's offering on the cross, we know that through this unique sacrifice we have access to the sanctuary of covenant communion with God. "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Heb 10 19-22)

With regard to our Lord's work in heaven, the writer to the Hebrews says "But he (Christ) holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (7 24-25)

(14) J J Mitchell op cit , p 48

(11) Cf H Beuckert op. cit , p 538

(12) Cf R C Harder De Heilige Geest en het Gebed (The Holy Spirit and Prayer) in De Heilige Geest, Kampen 1948 p 389

(13) Cf John J Mitchell Abraham's Understanding of the Lord's Covenant Westminster Theol Journal, vol 32/1 (Nov 1969) pp 42 43 48 On the relationship between Covenant and prayer, cf H Berkhof Christelijk Geloof, 1973 p 513

Our Lord's life and work on earth and in heaven form the one complete basis on which our prayers rest. This is why every prayer may be, and should be, offered up in the *Name* of Jesus Christ (John 14 13, 14, 15 16, 16 23, 24, 26). His Name here means his self-revelation in his works, particularly in the sphere of redemption⁽¹⁵⁾. His Name is the key and the door-way to the Father's House

6 *The life and work of the Messiah, on which prayer is based, are themselves one great act of prayer to God*

His incarnation

Referring to David's words in Ps 40, the writer to the Hebrews says (10 5-7) "Consensuently, when He (Christ) came into the world (the incarnation!) he said, Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me. then I said, Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God, as it is written of me in the roll of the book." According to the writer to the Hebrews, therefore, the words from Ps 40 are spoken by the pre-incarnate Son to the Father at the moment of his coming into the world (*eiserchomenos eis ton kosmon*), thereby presenting the incarnation -as well as the Messiah's whole earthly life⁽¹⁶⁾ -

in the form of a prayer of dedication to the Father⁽¹⁷⁾

His baptism

Jesus' baptism, a most momentous occurrence whereby he was to accept finally and in public his ministry of redemption through suffering and death,⁽¹⁸⁾ was for him an act of prayer, as one can see from Luke's account "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened." (Luke 3 21). He was now praying as he often did subsequently before or during or after important moments in the course of his ministry.

His public ministry

During all these day of his public ministry Jesus lived and worked in constant communion with his Father, teaching the people about prayer, teaching his disciples how to pray (the Our Father!), praying in public, spending much time in lonely prayer (Luke 5 16, 9 18, 9 23, 11 1 etc), sometimes even all through the night (Luke 6 12)⁽¹⁹⁾

Gethsemane

Here, at the commencement of our Lord's great Passion, we see the final prayer drama of his voluntary and complete self-surrender to God as the Eternal

(15) Cf Wm Hendriksen *A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, London 1964 on 14 13

(16) Cf B F Westcott *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, London 1914 p 311. The words "When He entereth into the world" are not to be confined to the moment of the Incarnation though they found their complete fulfilment then. They apply to each manifestation of Christ in the realm of human life. Cf also H van Oyen *Christus de Hogepriester* (Christ the High Priest the Letter to the Hebrews) Nijkerk 1954 p 162

(17) This exegesis is further confirmed by the fact that the introductory words of vs 5 may also be translated "Consequently, by coming into the world he says". See e.g. Dr F C Fensham *Die Brief aan die Hebreërs* (The Letter to the Hebrews) Pretoria no. date p 116. The Son's coming itself is his speaking to the Father.

(18) Cf N Geldenhuys *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, in *The New London Commentary on the NT* 1969 p 146

(19) Cf H Bavinck *Geref Dogm*, vol 3 p 376 note 3

Expiatory Sacrifice on our behalf⁽²⁰⁾

The Cross

No less than three of the seven words on the Cross are prayers: the first, the fourth, and the last. These prayers are an integral part of his unique sacrifice on our behalf. Note how even his deepest suffering - being totally forsaken by God for our sins - takes the form of a prayer: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). At the hour of prayer (Acts 3:1) there came a cry from the depths of hell - Jesus' prayer-cry to his Father which meant heaven for us⁽²¹⁾

Prayer summary of His days on earth

The writer to the Hebrews seems to summarise Jesus' whole earthly life in terms of prayer when he says (5.7) "In the days of his flesh Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears" "There can be little doubt," says B.F. Westcott, "that the writer refers to the scene at Gethsemane; but the mention of these details of 'the loud cry' and tears' (John 11:35 . . . Luk. 19.41 . . .) no less than the general scope of the passage, suggests the application of the words to other prayers

(20) Cf N Geldenhuys *op. cit.*, p 573

(21) For the exegesis that Christ was really separated from God, see e.g. C E B Granfield, *St. Mark*, in *The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary*, 1966, p 458 "The burden of the world's sin, his complete self-identification with sinners, involved not merely a felt, but a real, abandonment by his Father" Cf also A Cole *Mark*, in *Tyndale N T Commentaries*, 1969, pp 243-244 For a thorough-going exegesis in Dutch, cf H N Ridderbos, *Mattheüs in Korte Verklaring der Heilige Schrift*, Kampen, 1946, pp 238 240, and F W Groscheide *Mattheüs*, in *Commentaar op het N T*, Kampen 1954, pp 435 436

and times of peculiar trial in the Lord's life."⁽²²⁾

His heavenly intercession

On account of our great High Priest's perfect work on earth, performed, as it were, as one great act of prayer to God, he now makes intercession for us and saves us for all time (Heb. 7:24-25). In the O.T. the daily ministrations at the temple culminated in the burning of incense, as a symbol of the ministry of intercession, while the annual ritual on the great Day of Atonement reached its climax when the high priest passed beyond the veil with the atoning blood. The fundamental point to remember, says Louis Berkhof, is that the ministry of intercession and the atonement "are but two aspects of the same redemptive work of Christ, and the two may be said to merge into one."⁽²³⁾ As intercessor "Christ continuously presents His sacrifice to God as the ground of all necessary blessings for His people, persistently claims these blessings for them according to their need, answers all accusations preferred against them by Satan, by the law, and by conscience, secures forgiveness for everything that is justly charged against them, and presents to God their worship and service, rendering it acceptable through His own righteousness."⁽²⁴⁾

Though this implies that Jesus Christ's intercessory work includes much more than intercessory prayer, yet *in and through all the*

(22) *Op. cit.*, p 128 Cf also F W Groscheide *Hebreëen*, in *Korte Verklaring der Heilige Schrift*, Kampen, 1966, p 61

(23) *Systematic Theology*, p 402

(24) L Berkhof *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, Gr Rapids, 1960, p 205

abovementioned there is the definite element of prayer for the people of God, as is also evident from the intercessory prayer in John 17, where Christ explicitly says that He prays for the apostles and for those who through their word will believe in Him.⁽²⁵⁾ "It is a consoling thought that Christ is praying for us, even when we are negligent in our prayer life; that He is presenting to the Father those spiritual needs which were not present to our minds and which we often neglect to include in our prayers; and that he prays for our protection against the danger of which we are not even conscious, and against the enemies which threaten us, though we do not notice it. He is praying that our faith may not cease, and that we may come out victoriously in the end."⁽²⁶⁾

7. *The intercessory atonement of the Messiah of the Covenant calls forth a justification by faith, in the form of a prayer, worked by the Holy Spirit in the lives of the elect.*

We know that the Holy Spirit applies Christ's work of redemption to the hearts and lives of God's elect: calling, regeneration, faith, conversion, justification, sanctification, perseverance, glorification. Now these, we may say, have their focal point in what may be called *justification by faith in prayer form*: "Abba! Father! Dogmatically speaking justification includes, negatively, the forgiveness of sins on the basis of the imputed

righteousness of Jesus Christ, and positively, the adoption of the believer as God's child, that is, placing him in the position of a child and giving him all the rights of a child.⁽²⁷⁾ Now this virtually includes everything. Thus the prayer . . . "Abba, Father" (Phillips: Father, dear Father) forms an integral part of the sinner's justification, and implies our whole salvation. To quote Gal. 4:4-7: "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba! Father! So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir" (cf. Rom.8:14-17).⁽²⁸⁾

In his study on "Abba" Joachim Jeremias has drawn attention to the significant fact that Jesus - with the exception of the cry from the cross: My God - always addressed God as "Abba", whereas in the literature of Jewish prayer there is not a single instance of God being thus addressed.⁽²⁹⁾ Referring to the two Abba-passages in Rom. 4 and Gal. 3, he says: "Both remarks show how the cry of 'Abba' is beyond all human capabilities, and is only possible within the new relationship with God given by the Son . . . It is effected by God himself through the Spirit and actualizes the divine

(25) Cf. L. Berkhof *Sys. Theology*, p. 403.

(26) *Loc. cit.* Berkhof's paragraph on the nature of Christ's intercessory work is in my opinion one of the highlights in his *magnum opus* (pp. 401-403).

(27) L. Berkhof: *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 257-258.

(28) With regard to the Abba prayer in Gal. 4, cf. *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 4, London, 1967, pp. 267-268.

(29) Cf. J. Jeremias: *The Prayers of Jesus in: Studies in Biblical Theology*, Second Series no. 6, S.C.M., London, 1967, p. 57.

sonship whenever it is spoken Or, to put it more simply whenever you cry *abba* - Paul says to his readers in each passage in the same way - God assures you that you can be absolutely certain that you really are his children The mere fact that the communities accepted this alien word into their prayers shows how conscious they were of the new element which had been given them in the cry of 'Abba' For them, the privilege of repeating Jesus' 'Abba' amounted to an anticipation of the fulfilment of the promise 'I will be your father, and you will be my sons and daughters' (II Cor 6 18, II Sam 7 14, free quotation) ⁽³⁰⁾

We see at once how the past, present and future of God's grace for us have their focal point in this *abba*-cry "Abba, Father" is therefore an *eschatological* cry as well, anticipating future glory (Rom 8 18-30) ⁽³¹⁾

Through this prayer, says H Beuckert, God includes the believing sinner in his righteousness In fact, he says, two things happen man justifies God (cf Rom 3 4), i e he recognises God's righteousness, and right to rule him, and God justifies the sinner ⁽³²⁾ In this prayer, man becomes real man again, in that he becomes *man of God*, son of God, man with a future Whereas previously in his unregenerated state, in his running away from God, he would speak of God only in the third person, as an object among other objects, perhaps even as an impersonal

"It", he has now turned and addresses God in the second person, as *Thou*, as the One who is never scientifically to be analysed and objectified, because as Creator and Saviour he is always and everywhere *Subject*, One to be spoken to before He can really be spoken of

8 *The intercessory work of Jesus Christ and, on account thereof, the indwelling of the Spirit of adoption in the lives of the elect, give rise to prayer as a means to their sanctification and perseverance in faith*

This great turning to God in prayer, this justification by faith in the form of an *Abba* cry in the lives of the elect wrought by the Spirit on account of the Son's life and work, constitutes such a turning-point in the sinner's life that it may truly be said that it qualifies his whole further life as a prayer of thanksgiving and adoration and praise to God Thus, to hear God and believe, means to pray (H Beuckert) F B Meyer has somewhere said that "devout men, as their life unfolds, increasingly turn to prayer - not prayer in the plural, but prayer in the singular" ⁽³³⁾ Furthermore - is this not the fulfilment of Paul's word to the Thessalonians "Pray without ceasing" (I Thess 5 17)? Paul does not here advocate an attitude which suppresses ordinary life In fact, in their unbalanced expectancy of the return of the Lord, he warns them against the risk of forgetting ordinary life "He urges them to go back to their work in their seaport commerce,

(30) *Ibid.*, p 65

(31) Cf H Beuckert *op cit*, p 551 also H Greeven TDNT vol 2 p 805

(32) H Beuckert *op cit*, p 549

(33) Cf also O Halesby *Prayer*, IVF London 1963 p 139

loading and unloading their ships. It is in their daily round that they are to pray without ceasing."⁽³⁴⁾

It is such persevering prayer which the Lord would like to find in the lives of believers at his return (Luk. 18:1, 8)!⁽³⁵⁾

9. *Prayer as dialogic communion with the Covenant God has its rise and deepest source in the very being of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

This may be derived from much that has been said so far. Indeed, being a personal God, a God revealed as three Persons who live in eternal, divine communion with each other, prayer may be said to have its deepest source in this revealed mystery. Speaking of the communion between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the relationship of Trinity to man's salvation, Dr. Andrew Murray said. "It is in the daybreak light of such thoughts that the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity no longer is an abstract speculation, but the living manifestation of the way in which it were possible for man to be taken up into the fellowship of God, and his prayer to become a real factor in God's rule of this earth. And we can, as in the distance, catch glimpses of the light that from the eternal world shines out on words such as these: "Through Him (Christ) we have access by one Spirit unto the Father" (Eph. 2:18)".⁽³⁶⁾

(34) G. C. Berkouwer: *Faith and Perseverance*, Gr. Rapids, 1958, p. 129 (from the chapter on "Perseverance and Prayer").

(35) L. Morris: *The Epistles to the Thessalonians in: The New London Commentary on the N.T.*, 1959, p. 173. On prayer as means of grace, especially for the believer's sanctification, cf. C. Hodge: *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, 1891, p. 708.

10. *Prayer is an act of covenant communion with God by the whole Church as the people of God and the body of Christ.*

When the pious Old Testament Israelite prayed, he prayed as a member of the people of Yahweh, the Covenant God. He did not pray individualistically. Even so, when the New Testament believer is at prayer, he prays as member of the body of Jesus Christ, made up of people from amongst all nations. "There is here . . . an organic whole", says Abraham Kuiper, "even the body of Christ under Him the Head. It is not one converted person independent of another, and the two united by the mere outward tie of sympathy: nay, but a multitude of branches all springing from the same root of Jesse; growing from the one vine . . . saved and redeemed by the same ransom of his blood . . ."⁽³⁷⁾ Prayer has therefore been well defined by A. Maillot as "the movement of the members towards the Head."⁽³⁸⁾

Thus even when one prays alone, one should pray as Jesus has taught his people to pray: *Our Father . . .* It is a prayer of a *covenant community* to the Covenant God.

11. *The praying of God's Covenant Community, the Church, is a*

(36) A. Murray: *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, Pickering and Inglis, 1953, p. 127. (From the chapter: "Prayer in Harmony with the Being of God").

For an extensive discussion of communion with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, cf. *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 2, London, 1966.

(37) A. Kuiper: *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, Gr. Rapids, 1956, p. 645 (his italics).

(38) A. Maillot, art. "Prayer" in: *Vocabulary of the Bible*, ed. J. J. von Allmen, Lutterworth Press, London, 1967, p. 334.

supreme act of obedience, performed in faith, love and hope

The praying of the Church is an act of obedience. We must pray, because we are commanded to pray. However - this obedience is always the obedience of the covenant community to the God of the Covenant. "The biblical doctrine of prayer emphasises the necessity of a man's being in saving or covenant relation with Him, and his entering fully into all the privileges and obligations of that relation with God"⁽³⁹⁾ In other words, it is an act of obedience performed in faith, love, and hope, for faith, love and hope operate within a covenant framework - the covenant framework of God's grace.

With regard to FAITH. Faith and prayer, someone has well said, are related to each other as the fire to the flame. To quote James 1:6 "But let him ask in faith, with no doubting." Calvin, therefore, calls prayer the most important exercise of faith, without which our faith is not real.⁽⁴⁰⁾ But then, as R S Wallace has said, prayer must be founded upon, and controlled, formed, and inspired by, the Word. The faith that gives rise to prayer is created by the Word and is even aroused to fresh life and vigour by listening to the promises of the Word.⁽⁴¹⁾

With regard to LOVE. "Prayer, in all its exacting costliness, is like nothing so much as it is like faith and love" (Alexander Whyte) In

his important article on prayer A Maillot calls prayer "the edification of the Church - the perfect realization of the work of God in us, the *chief expression and formulation of love*"⁽⁴²⁾ - love for God and love for the neighbour. In other words, prayer to God may be called a supreme sign of man's love to God, and prayer to God on behalf of the neighbour a supreme sign of one's love for both God and the neighbour.⁽⁴³⁾ Concerning the latter to make intercession for man is a most powerful and practical way in which we can express our love for them.⁽⁴⁴⁾ This is part of our mission to the world. "Since we cannot think of the Spirit's action being split up into a number of disparate and unrelated activities, we must not separate intercession and mission, which are both aspects of the Spirit's work in us for the world"⁽⁴⁵⁾

The Church's giving of herself in intercession and mission imply *suffering* in one or other form, because it presupposes union with Him who died for us on Calvary. There is such a thing as wrestling in prayer on behalf of others, as in the case of Epaphras, who was 'always wrestling (agonizomenos) on your behalf in his prayers' (Col 4:12, Weym). There is such a thing as a God-given burden on

(42) A. Maillot *op cit*, p 335 (my italics)

(43) Cf A. Kuyper *op cit*, pp 642-646. Cf also H. Uerter, 'Fürbitte (Intercession) in Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart', vol 2, Tübingen 1958, col 1171-1172. J. D. Quinn, 'Apostolic Ministry and Apostolic Prayer', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* vol 33/4, 1971, pp 479-91.

(44) Cf R. S. Wallace *op cit*, 288.

(45) Davies, J. G. *Worship and Mission*, S. C. M. London, p 125.

(39) J. G. S. Thomson, 'Prayer', in *The New Bible Dictionary* (ed. J. D. Douglas), I.V.F. London, 1968, p 1019 (my italics).

(40) Cf *Institutes* 3:20:1. Cf H. Greeven, *TDNT* vol 2, p 804.

(41) Cf R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, Gr Rapids, 1961, p 276.

behalf of others (46) True intercession is costly (J O Sanders)

With regard to HOPE We have already seen how strongly the Abba-prayer in Rom 8 and Gal 3 is eschatologically directed, and we can only agree with H Greeven when he says that Paul certainly sees in prayer an intimation of coming glory (47)

12 *The praying of the Church is a Kingdom task for the sake of the Kingdom*

From what has been said in the previous paragraph it will be clear that prayer is truly a Kingdom task, for faith, obedience, love and hope are most intimately linked up with the Kingdom, the *Basileia*, the kingly rule of God which in faith we obey and love, and hope for in all its glorious fullness. Indeed, to the extent that obedience, love and hope have come to full fruition in the lives of God's people, to that extent the Kingdom has become visible in their lives. The prayer of the Church is a prayer for the coming of the Kingdom, intensively in the lives of all believers, and extensively among all nations of the world.

Moreover, our Lord's Prayer, which sets the pattern for the praying of the Church, is basically a Kingdom prayer, in which every petition reveals an aspect of the

Kingdom. Wherever God's Name is hallowed, there the Kingdom has come. Wherever God's will is done, there the Kingdom has come. Wherever God gives daily bread in answer to the prayers of his people, there something of the Kingdom is revealed in the fulfilment of the needs of the body - the body of man for which Jesus died as well. Whenever our sins are being forgiven, the Kingdom has come. Whenever temptation has been overcome and whenever we have been delivered from evil and the Evil One then the Kingdom has come.

So strongly did the Jews feel the importance of praying for the Kingdom, that they had a saying to the effect that "any benediction in which *malkuth* ('kingdom') does not occur is no benediction" (48). Our Lord did not only use the word kingdom in his prayer, but gave us a *Kingdom Prayer* in the fullest sense of the word, meant to be used by us until he comes again.

13 *In the execution of his counsel for the world, God, through his covenant grace, gives a powerful place to the prayers of his Church*

By the covenant grace of God there is great power in the prayers of his Church. This may be gathered from what has just been said above about praying as *Kingdom* praying. Speaking of the second petition in the Lord's Prayer, Prof Berkouwer makes the remarkable statement that it is no exaggeration to say that this prayer releases powers, and that we are often unconscious of what we are really doing when we pray for the

(46) On burden and prayer in general of the booklet *Burden and Prayer* by Watchman Nee who suffered so much for his faith in Communist China. On prayer proclamation and suffering of the doctoral thesis of a minister and lecturer of the Reformed Church in Indonesia Rudi Budiman *De Realisering der Verzoening in het menselijk bestaan* (The Actualisation of the Atonement in human Existence) Delft 1971 ch 5

(47) TDNT vol 2 p 805

(48) Berakoth 40 6 as quoted in A H M Neale *The Gospel according to St Matthew*, Macmillan Co Ltd London 1961 p 78

coming of the Kingdom⁽⁴⁹⁾

Scripture is full of references to the power of true prayer. Who, on reading this, is not reminded of James 5:16-18? Indeed, "The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects." The prayers of Rev 5:8 (proseucha) call to mind the supplication and intercession of believers (cf Ps 141:1, 2, and also Rom 15:30). In Rev 8 such prayers are seen as some of the most potent instruments in God's merciful judgements of grace on nations in answer to the prayers of His people, sent up to Him in anguish, the trumpets of judgement, one after the other, are sounded the world over as a call to repentance (cf 9:20-21). Something similar is found in Rev 11:6, where the action of the two witnesses is similar to that of Elijah who also could, through prayer, close or open the heavens in a mighty witness against all unbelief.

Indeed, the prayers of the Church have not merely a psychological effect, in that we receive a certain relief because we have expressed our need, they are *not* only an *inner* history of the Church's communion with God, no, they *make* history on the world scene.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Prof Hodge is quite right. Queen Mary of Scotland was not beside herself when she said she feared the prayers of John Knox, more than an army!⁽⁵¹⁾

Of course, powerful praying never suggests a titanic attempt

- (49) G. C. Berkouwer *The Return of Christ*, Eerdmans Gr Rapids 1972 p 452
 (50) Cf H. L. Kulp *Gebet Kirchen geschichtlich* (Prayer Church historically viewed) in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, vol 2 col 1221
 (51) C. Hodge *op cit*, p 709

whether with selfish or unselfish motives - to manipulate an unwilling God to obtain something from him or to rouse him into action.⁽⁵²⁾ Powerful praying is the praying of the Covenant Community to its *Covenant* God, who, in complete freedom, binds himself to his covenant promises (cf Ex 2:23-25). It is an asking in submission to his will so that in everything his Kingdom may come, his will be done. It is *such* praying that may be called "as vast as God, because He is behind it as mighty as God, because He has committed Himself to answer it."⁽⁵³⁾ If John Knox had prayed, "Give me success!" we would perhaps never have heard of him. But, says Leonard Ravenhill, "he prayed a self-purged prayer - 'Give me Scotland or I die' - and his prayer scored the pages of history."⁽⁵⁴⁾

Thus when the Christian believes and obeys and prays as member of the body of Christ, as member of God's people, there does not merely take place a creaturely movement. For, as K. Barth has well said, "concealed within the creaturely movement, yet none the less really, there moves the finger and hand and

- (52) G. C. Berkouwer *Faith and Perseverance*, p 128
 (53) L. Ravenhill *Why Revival tarries*, Minneapolis Minnesota 1970 p 156
 When C. Hodge in a paragraph on the power of prayer (*System Theol III* p 709) says that the Supreme Power is roused into action by prayer in a way analogous to that in which the energies of man are called into action by the entreaties of his fellowmen, he does not sufficiently take into consideration the covenant context in which the initiative lies with God and leaves one with the impression that an inactive God has to be made active by our prayers
 (54) *Why Revival Tarries*, p 158

sceptre of the God who rules the world And what is more, there moves the heart of God, and He Himself is there in all the fulness of His love and wisdom and power”(55)

14 *Finally - the praying of the Church is essentially an act of joyful thanksgiving and praise, to the glory of the Triune God of the Covenant*

In the preceding paragraphs of this paper, we have time and again emphasised the basic truth that prayer is a divinely inspired answer to God's speaking to man in covenant grace and glory And because man's whole life is now set within the context of thanksgiving and praise to the God of so great salvation,(56) his prayers will breathe the same spirit and will in turn enable him, in complete dependence upon God, to live this life of thanksgiving and praise

We may take any other element of prayer confession of sins before God, petition, intercession , basic to them all is the joyful assurance that the gracious God has spoken and acted unto our salvation in Jesus Christ And this assurance implies and leads to thanksgiving and praise Therefore not only when we deliberately thank and praise God, but all our praying, as all our life, should breathe thanks to God for what He has done, and praise Him for what He is In this sense, I believe, we may say with Abraham Kuyper that "prayer without praise and thanksgiving is no prayer"(54)

(55) Cf Heidelberg Catechism, Q and A 86

(56) Church Dogmatics, vol III/3 Edinburgh 1961 p 288

(57) A Kuyper op cit , p 620

In a study on the praise of God in the Psalms, Claus Westermann(58) has shown how emphatically the Psalms look upon the praise of God as a mode of existence, and not as something which may or may not be present in life For us the word "praise" has a much too greatly altered, weakened sound, but in the Old Testament the Hebrew word *hōdāh* has only *Yahweh* as object Whenever and wherever this praise is directed to a man, an institution, or an idea, it disturbs and finally destroys life itself The Psalms say that only where death reigns, there is no praise of God, but where life is, there is praise, and where praise is, there is life Paul's letters are interspersed with outbursts of praise, and the book of Revelation, which is so full of the persecution of God's people, is equally full of victorious hymns of praise Indeed, the last book of the Bible is one great doxology to Him who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb

Never is the Church more powerful,(59) never does the Church realise its calling better than when its whole existence, and therefore its whole prayer, may be characterised as one of thanksgiving and praise to the Triune God of the Covenant, to whom through Jesus Christ be the Kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever - amen!

(58) *The Praise of God in the Psalms*, John Knox Press Richmond Virginia 1960 esp pp 155 161

(59) On power through praise see Merlin R Carothers *Prisoner to Praise*, but especially *Power in Praise*, Logos International Plainfield New Jersey 07060



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