

MOVING FORWARD ON OUR KNEES: CORPORATE PRAYER IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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I. PRAYER AND WORSHIP IN SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM

Even a casual reader of the NT will realize the ties between Judaism and Christianity. Jesus was born and raised in a pious Jewish home, and his parents participated in the sacrificial cultus (Luke 2:22–24) and most likely frequently went on pilgrimage to the festivals (Luke 2:41–42). Jesus likewise attended the festivals often (John 2:13; 5:1; 7:10). We must also note Jesus' attitude regarding the Temple. N. T. Wright has argued extensively that for Jesus Herod's temple was "part of the problem, part of the exilic state of the people of YHWH, rather than as part of the solution." Therefore Yahweh was no longer in Zion or the Temple and had to return.¹

Yet is it true that Yahweh had departed from the Temple? Jesus' condemnation of the Jewish authorities at the cleansing of the Temple did not mean Yahweh was no longer there. The presence of the daily burnt offerings and peace offerings and the participation by the populace, including Jesus and his disciples, would attest to the fact that they did not believe God had departed. Luke, for one, makes the Temple one of the points of continuity between the life of Jesus and the early church. Jesus was dedicated in the Temple, and there the prophecies of Anna and Simeon attested to his messianic nature (Luke 2:21–38). At the age of twelve he called the Temple "my Father's house" (Luke 2:49) and expected his parents to know he would be there. Moreover, Jesus frequently taught in the Temple precincts and attended feasts there according to John's gospel. At the cleansing he again called the Temple "my Father's house" (John 2:19), meaning he still considered God to be present there. Moreover, the primitive Palestinian church worshipped regularly in the Temple and prayed (Luke 24:52–53; Acts 3:1) as well as engaged in teaching and witnessing there (Acts 5:12, 21, 42). Paul offered sacrifices in the Temple at the advice of the church leaders (Acts 21:20–26).²

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¹ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 516.

² Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 20–23, notes there is no record of Jesus or the apostles participating in sacrifices and concludes that Jesus only participated in the external life of the Temple and the opportunity it provided for communion with God and prayer, yet the records show that Jesus' parents did so (Luke 2:22–24), as did Paul (Acts 21:20–26). It is more likely that the Temple played an important role in the life of Jesus and the early church. That, in fact, is a major theme in Luke-Acts.

It is clear the early church revered the Temple as a “house of prayer” (Mark 11:17 par), and the condemnation was directed against the “false shepherds of Israel” (Ezek 34:1–10) who had desecrated God’s house.

At the same time, the cleansing of the Temple combined with the tearing of the Temple veil (Mark 11:15–17, 15:38 par) indicated that the institution had ceased and been replaced by the new covenant in Jesus. A new level and direction of worship had been inaugurated in Jesus. As David Peterson says, the Gospels show that “God’s presence and God’s glory, so intimately connected with the tabernacle and temple under the Mosaic covenant, and consistently at the centre of Jewish expectations for the messianic era, are fully and finally experienced in Jesus Christ. . . . Jesus replaces the temple of Jerusalem as the source of life and renewal for the world and as the centre for the ingathering of the nations.”³

So Temple and synagogue were central to Jewish life and worship. Finkel calls the religio-political system of the Second Temple period a “theocracy” or a government that tries to make God sovereign and central in every area of life. The constitution was Torah, and the people sought to practice *Avodah* or “acts of service and worship of God” in their daily lives. The people sought to emulate God’s *hesed* or “lovingkindness” and this governed their “service” as worship (Rom 9:4, *latreia*). Prayer was a critical part of this *Avodah*.⁴ For pilgrims especially the Temple had an “awesome impact,” and as the priests and Levites led them in worship and prayers, the people would “seem to have experienced a mystical connection with angelic hymnology and enjoyed a spiritual sense of being in correspondence with the heavenly hosts.”⁵

The Jewish synagogue was a mainstay of Jesus’ ministry. He read from the Isaiah scroll and preached his inaugural address (Luke 4:16–30) as well as performed his first exorcism (Mark 1:23–28) in the synagogue at Capernaum. He frequently taught in synagogues (Matt 4:23; 6:2; 9:35; 13:54 pars.), and Paul began his ministry in every town he visited by preaching in the synagogues (Acts 13:5, 14, 42; 14:1; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4, 19; 26; 19:8). The early church called itself “the Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22) and viewed itself as the messianic sect within Judaism in fulfillment of Isa 40:3. In short, Jewish patterns of worship and prayer were the natural models for early church worship, and we must begin there if we wish to understand the patterns of early Christian worship.

Safrai tells us that worshippers would go to the Temple not only for sacrificial offerings but to worship alongside the priests and to pray during the liturgy and at the burning of the incense or the singing of the Levites as well as to cleanse themselves by being sprinkled with the “cleansing water.” They would wear white rather than colored clothing to signify their piety. Worship in the temple began with a whole-offering of a lamb in the morning

³ David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 101.

⁴ Asher Finkel, “Prayer in Jewish Life,” in *Into God’s Presence: Prayer in the New Testament* (ed. Richard N. Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 44–46.

⁵ *Ibid.* 48.

and ended with the same in the afternoon. The Torah does not mention accompanying prayers to the free-will and obligatory offerings, but both prayers and the reading of Torah were added in the Second Temple period. Hymns were sung during the libations. Music was introduced by trumpet blasts from the priests, and the singing was accompanied by lyres, harps, and cymbals. The Hallel (Psalms 113–118) was sung on feast days, accompanied by a flute.⁶

We do not know for certain the origin of the synagogue. Many accept the Talmudic statement that it began during the Babylonian exile as a substitution for the Temple (*b. Meg.* 29a),⁷ but there is little proof of this. The earliest archeological evidence stems from Egypt around 250 BC, and the main thing for this paper is that synagogues were numerous in the time of Jesus, with many in Jerusalem and throughout Judea and Galilee.⁸ While the Temple was cultic and run by the priests and Levites, the synagogue was civic and run by lay leaders and belonged to the community. The people participated as observers and as bringers of gifts at the temple, but in the synagogue the public virtually controlled the system. The elders who directed its affairs were lay, and those who read the Scripture and gave the homily were chosen from among the community, like Jesus in Luke 4:16–17 or visiting rabbis like Paul in Acts 13:16–17.

Synagogue worship consisted of praise, prayer, Scripture reading, and homilies. The reading of Scripture was considered the primary purpose of the synagogue. Torah was read on Mondays and Thursdays during the week as well as every Sabbath and at festivals.⁹ In the morning and evening service the Shema was recited antiphonally, beginning with Deut 6:4–9 (the one God) then adding Deut 11:13–21 (on rewards and punishments) and Num 15:37–41 (on obeying the commands). On working days there were to be three readers, and on Sabbath or feast days at least five readers (*b. Ber.* 6a; *m. Meg.* 4:1–2, 3, 6). With the reading there was often a targumic (in Aramaic) translation of the readings. It is debated how far back reading cycles went, but there developed a three-year cycle in Palestine for the Torah, and in Babylon a one-year cycle for completing the Torah, although it was often interrupted by special readings on the Sabbath, before the new moon, or on feast days.¹⁰

The reading from the prophets, exhibited in Jesus' reading in Luke 4:16–17, was called the *haftarah* or "completion" of the Torah reading. There is

⁶ S. Safrai, "Temple" in *The Jewish People in the First Century* (ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 876–77, 885–86.

⁷ See Eric M. Meyers, "Synagogue," *ABD* 6:252, who notes Ezek 11:16, "I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone," often taken as a reference to the synagogue in exile. But as Daniel Block says in *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 350, this passage is simply refuting the claims of the Jerusalemites that the land still belongs to them. God's glory has departed from the Temple because of the people's apostasy, and Yahweh now has "sanctuary" with his exiled people.

⁸ See S. Safrai, "Synagogue," in *Jewish People* 909–13.

⁹ Finkel, "Prayer" 57.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 915, 927.

further evidence that Scripture reading occurred on Mondays and Thursdays (market days) as well as Sabbath days. Hurtado adds, “In Diaspora synagogues it is likely that the Scriptures were read in Greek . . . to meet the desire of Greek-speaking Jews to read and study their scriptures” which “would also have enabled Gentile visitors to Diaspora synagogues to follow things and to learn about Jewish religion.”¹¹ The homily based on the reading would be delivered by a chosen member from the congregation or by a visitor chosen beforehand.

Praise would open the service, in keeping with *b. Ber.* 32a, “Man should always first utter praises, and then pray.”¹² This consisted mainly of psalms chanted by the congregation at appropriate points. Closely connected is prayer, and there is evidence that the earliest term used for the synagogue (3d century BC) is *proseuchē*, “house of prayer”¹³ (possibly taken from the Temple, called “house of prayer” in Isa 56:7). So corporate prayer was at the heart of synagogue worship. Safrai says, “prayer in the synagogue was definitely orientated to divine worship as such, whereas the prayers mentioned in the Bible, whether connected with sacrifice and Temple or not, were mostly petitions for some definite human need.”¹⁴ Most synagogues were arranged so that prayers could be uttered facing toward Jerusalem.¹⁵

In Judaism people prayed in every position—standing (Luke 18:11, 13), sitting (2 Sam 7:18), kneeling (Luke 22:41), and prostrate on the ground (Matt 26:39). Standing with hands upraised was the normal form, while they kneeled or prostrated themselves in time of serious need. There were three main types of prayers, all recited by members from the congregation with the people saying “Amen” at the end of each. First, there are four blessings, with one stated before and one after the Shema in the morning (third hour) and again in the afternoon (ninth hour). The first is *Yōtzēr* (“he who forms” light), stressing divine renewal in creation and redemption. The second is *‘Ahāvāh* (“love”) emphasizing God’s unchanging love for Israel. The third is *‘Emet w^o-Yatziv* (“true and constant”) thanking God for his true and faithful word. The fourth is *Hashivēnū* (“cause us to lie down), praising God for protecting his people.¹⁶

Then there is the Qaddish prayer, probably developed about the time of Jesus, with surprising echoes of the Lord’s Prayer and perhaps used by Jesus to formulate his master prayer: “Exalted and hallowed be his great name in the world, which he created according to his will. May he establish his kingdom in your lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetime of the whole household of Israel, speedily and at a near time.” Most believe this and

¹¹ Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 33–34.

¹² Martin, *Worship* 24.

¹³ Meyers, “Synagogue” 252.

¹⁴ Safrai, “Synagogue” 915.

¹⁵ Hurtado, *Worship* 36.

¹⁶ Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006) 361–62.

other prayers demonstrate a developing tradition of corporate prayer, with prayers and hymns continually being written during that period (e.g. the Thanksgiving Hymns of Qumran, the Psalms of Solomon, the Qumran Daily Prayers [4Q503]),¹⁷ and with new prayers being encouraged (*m. Ber.* 29b). The early church is part of that vibrant growth in the Jewish-Christian prayer life and worship.

Best known of all are the Eighteen Benedictions (the *Shemoneh Esreh*), containing mostly praise and thanksgiving to God. While the final form probably came after the destruction of the Temple (AD 70–100), several were in use in Jesus' day. Ross says there were six used on weekdays and seven on Sabbaths and festivals.¹⁸ Safrai says that daily prayers consisted of the first three (praise) and the last three (thanksgiving), and that on Sabbath or feast days a seventh was added in the middle, while on working days six more were added. The first three praise God for his greatness and for his gift of resurrection, the last three thank God for his gift of faith to Israel. The prayers were considered sacrifices of the heart.¹⁹

II. PRAYER AND WORSHIP IN THE MINISTRY OF JESUS

Jesus was more than anything a man of prayer. As a pious Jewish Yahweh worshipper, he would have prayed three times a day (at the times of the morning and afternoon sacrifices and in the evening) as well as saying the blessing at meals. He prayed at the critical moments of his life—at his baptism, the heavens split apart while he was praying (Luke 3:21). When he chose the twelve, he spent the entire night on a mountain in prayer (Luke 6:12–13). At Peter's confession, Jesus queried them about who he was after prayer (Luke 9:18). At his transfiguration, he took the inner circle (Peter, James, John) up on a mountain to pray, and his appearance changed while he was praying (Luke 9:28–29). At Gethsemane, he prayed so earnestly that "his sweat was like great drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44), and there he won the victory over his "overwhelming sorrow" (Matt 26:38). It was in prayer that Jesus' greater desire to see the will of God accomplished in his vicarious drinking of the cup of wrath won out over his personal desire to avoid that terrible ordeal. Finally, Luke brings out that the cross itself was a time of prayer, as Jesus first prayed for his father to forgive his enemies (Luke 23:34) and second for his Father to receive his spirit (Luke 23:46). Luke turns the horror of the Passion into a worship event!

Jesus was also a man of prayer who communed with the Father on a regular basis. At the very beginning of his ministry in Mark (1:35), Jesus early in the morning (which was unusual) slipped away to a solitary place to pray. After the feeding of the 5,000 he sent his disciples across the lake

¹⁷ J. D. G. Dunn, "Prayer," *DJG* 617; James H. Charlesworth, "Prayer in Early Judaism," *ABD* 5:449.

¹⁸ Ross, *Recalling* 362.

¹⁹ Safrai, "Synagogue" 917.

and intended to spend the night on a mountainside in prayer (Mark 6:46). Note that he prayed well before the normal times for prayer (before daybreak) and well after the normal times (after dark). In Matt 19:13, Jesus laid hands on little children and prayed for them. Luke adds in 5:16 that "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." Jesus' prayer life went way beyond Jewish expectations. He did not merely pray two or three times a day; he spent entire nights with God. He did not just pray in home or synagogue; he went out in the wilderness like Moses or Elijah to commune with his Father. At the levels of time and intensity, he went way beyond the norm and becomes the archetype of the prayer warrior.

Jesus is not just a model of personal prayer but of corporate prayer as well. He spent a great deal of time in both temple and synagogue, as stated above. Since his visit at the age of twelve was at the time of Passover, it is quite possible that he amazed the rabbinic teachers with the depth of knowledge and insight into Passover texts.²⁰ This was in fact a precursor of a Markan comment that at the later event in Capernaum as he began his ministry the people, too, were "amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law" (Mark 1:22). He may already have been thinking of his destiny that was to fulfill the Passover liturgy. In his many Temple visits, he certainly participated in the Temple prayers. He frequented the synagogues in Nazareth (Luke 4:16; Mark 6:2 par), Capernaum (Mark 1:21; Luke 7:5; John 6:59), and Galilee (Matt 4:23, 9:35; Luke 4:15; John 18:20). Undoubtedly this means he participated in synagogue piety and prayers. Corporate prayer was a critical part of his life and worship, and he made it an essential aspect of the new community, the new Israel, that he inaugurated.

Jesus' teaching on prayer was as corporate as it was personal. An interesting introductory note on the importance of corporate prayer comes in Luke 1:8–10 at the time when Gabriel told Zechariah of the coming birth of his son John. This was the most sacred moment of his life when he was chosen by lot to burn the incense (the twenty-four orders of priests took turns caring for the sanctuary, and the one privileged to care for the Holy Place was chosen by lot). Luke tells us that at that very time "all the assembled worshippers were praying outside." While at one level that is related to the meaning of the incense as bearing the people's prayers and sacrifices up to God, at another level it means that the actions inside the Holy Place with the angelic herald announcing the good news to Zechariah was the answer to the people's prayers for a messianic deliverer. The eschatological hopes of the people were coming to fruition.

We must begin with Matt 18:19–20, "Again I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." The first thing that must be understood is that this is not a gloss, an isolated logion artificially added to its context, and thus it must be interpreted by the context of the church in discipline according to Matt

²⁰ Ross, *Recalling* 373.

18:15–20. So it means that the church's decision is being guided by God, and the "two or three" are the witnesses of verse 16 regarding the wrongdoing. At the same time, it is also a prayer logion, so it is also saying that every church decision must be bathed in prayer and be done "in Jesus' name." Behind all church discipline is the promise of Jesus' omnipresence (see also Matt 1:23; 28:20) and guiding power. Thus at the secondary level (and the biblical theology behind it) this passage affirms that corporate prayer is the means by which God's presence is felt in the church and God's will is done in the church. It is clear that it makes a difference whether one prays and the whole body of Christ is at prayer (more on this later).

In his prayer life and teaching, Jesus introduced his followers to a new level of intimacy with God via his *Abba* theology. In actuality this flowed out of his Son of God theology, the unique filial relationship that he shared with his Father. Jeremias made this well known,²¹ but he and others went too far when some of his followers interpreted it of God as our "Daddy," and James Barr strongly criticized this,²² saying that this was a common Jewish prayer, and the intimacy was wrongly stated. Yet most today recognize the depth of the intimacy conveyed, and "Abba, Father" became one of the earliest creedal confessions in the church (Mark 14:36; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). The thrust is that God's people are part of his family, and the early church celebrated it as an astounding new reality. Corporate prayer in this sense is the communication of God's children with their loving and attentive Father.

The best-known prayer, of course, is the Lord's Prayer, found in two forms in Matt 6:9–13 and Luke 11:2–4. I believe these were separate traditions;²³ there is no reason why Jesus would fail to deliver this critically important prayer on more than one occasion, and the two different contexts in Matthew and Luke make sense. Marshall makes the interesting observation (taken from Jeremias) that the long form in Matthew may be "instructions on how to pray for people who do pray," while the short form in Luke may be "an encouragement to people who do not pray to do so."²⁴ It is also essential for the purpose of this paper to note that in both Matthew and Luke the prayer is given in a corporate context and has corporate prayer in mind. The last set consists of "we-petitions" rather than "I-petitions," and it is clear that in the early church it was viewed in a way similar to the Eighteen Benedictions in the synagogue, as the heart and life of the service.

In Matthew 6, the Lord's Prayer is part of the Sermon on the Mount, primarily of the central section on Jesus' relationship to Torah (5:17–6:18). It is part of the pericope (6:1–18) that provides a second example (after the antitheses of 5:21–48) of the deeper righteousness Jesus demands as the final interpreter of the Torah and the one who is here providing "the Torah

²¹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1967) 54–62.

²² James Barr, "Abba Isn't Daddy," *JTS* 39 (1988) 28–47.

²³ Contra Dunn, "Prayer" 620.

²⁴ I. Howard Marshall, "Jesus—Example and Teacher of Prayer in the Synoptic Gospels," in *Into God's Presence* 115, taken from Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Scribner's, 1971) 193–95.

of the Messiah.” In 6:1–18, Jesus addresses the three basic aspects of Jewish piety (almsgiving, prayer, fasting) and challenges a pseudo-piety done to impress others rather than to worship God. Wright calls this “the ‘true Exodus’ prayer of God’s people. Set originally in a thoroughgoing eschatological context, its every clause resonates with Jesus’ announcement that God’s kingdom is breaking into the story of Israel and the world, opening up God’s long-promised new world and summoning God’s people to share it.”²⁵

The formal structure of this prayer demonstrates far more than simply its main points. At the deepest level, this is a prayer to be prayed. Yet at the same time it is a model for what true prayer must entail—a total God-dependence and a complete God-centered approach to life. Further, it is a philosophy for the Christian life, demonstrating the priorities that the children of the kingdom should live by—first worship (Matt 6:9a = Luke 11:2a), celebrating the fact that our home is with the heavenly Father; then God-centered concerns (the thou-petitions; Matt 6:9b–10 = Luke 11:2b), demonstrating that the things of God are our first priority; and finally intercessory prayer (the we-petitions; Matt 6:11–13 = Luke 11:3–4), in which we show the absolute surrender of all our needs—material as well as spiritual—to God. The order is critical—God and worship provide the utmost priorities for our lives, and personal concerns are sublimated to serving him. In short, this provides the basis for personal and corporate prayer (thus these three should be the ultimate goal of the service) as well as the guide for the daily decisions of every Christian.

For the teaching of Jesus about prayer, we can do no better than to study the emphases in the Gospel of Luke. One of the primary themes is persistent prayer in light of God’s gracious willingness to respond to needs. In Luke 11:5–13 Jesus begins with the parable of the friend at midnight. The meaning of this parable hinges on one word, *anaideia*. The consensus view is that it means “shameless boldness,” and thus the “sleeper” will get up and help his neighbor, the “knocker,” because of the man’s persistence.²⁶ However, the term itself centers on the issue of shame rather than of tenacity, and it is better to see it applying to the “sleeper.” The man will get up and help his neighbor due to his desire to “avoid shame.”²⁷ Thus the parable applies more to the prayer preceding and to the sacredness of the name of God. It is saying that God will hear our requests because the very honor of his name is at stake.²⁸ The idea of persistence is found in verses 9–10,

²⁵ N. T. Wright, “The Lord’s Prayer as a Paradigm of Christian Prayer,” in *Into God’s Presence* 133.

²⁶ See Klyne R. Snodgrass, “*Anaideia* and the Friend at Midnight,” *JBL* 116 (1997) 505–13; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 1059–60.

²⁷ See Alan Johnson, “Assurance for Man: The Fallacy of Translating *Anaideia* by ‘Persistence’ in Luke 11:5–8,” *JETS* 22 (1979) 123–31; Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 124–33.

²⁸ Bock, *Luke* 1059, argues against this as “dishonoring the gracious God,” but I do not find that to be the case. This is an example of litotes, where a thing is emphasized by bringing out the opposite. The desire of the sleeper to avoid shame stresses the desire of God to maintain the honor of his name.

where the present tense imperatives command the church to “ask, seek, and knock” continually because the people know God will respond.

The importance of persevering in prayer is even more central in Luke 18:1–8 in the parable of the persistent widow. Here it is connected with a second theme, prayer for the coming Kingdom. In this parable, the unjust judge is similar to the sleeper in 11:5–8 in that he is the opposite of God, a man who cared nothing for the needs of petitioners. He only accedes to her demands for justice because of her pesky tenacity. The point is that if this evil man will adhere to persistent cries, how much more will a loving God. The context is that of the apocalyptic discourse which precedes (17:20–37, alluded to in 17:8) and the oppression of the saints during that period (17:22, 33). So these are especially cries for vindication and justice, but the theme again is that God’s people engage in ongoing prayer knowing that God will respond. Involved in this is the realization that final justice will not take place until the Parousia. Thus in verse 8, Jesus says that they will receive justice “speedily,” but this quick response will occur “when the Son of Man comes,” and the question for the church is, “will he find faith on this earth?” This is a challenge to the church regarding its own faithfulness to God, and the answer depends on the depth of the church’s prayer life.

Prayer for the kingdom is especially present in the God-petitions of the Lord’s Prayer in Luke 11:2, in which both petitions (“may your name be kept sacred, may your kingdom come”) relate to the Parousia. It is at the arrival of the kingdom when his glory would be known among the nations. The Parousia and coming of the kingdom are a critical emphasis in Luke, with two eschatological discourses (17:22–37; 21:5–33). Chapter 17 is more apocalyptic, centering on the coming of the Son of Man, while chapter 21 deals especially with the destruction of Jerusalem, but both stress the final coming of the kingdom. The ancient rabbis said that no prayer is a true prayer that does not mention the coming of the kingdom, and Jesus would agree.

The third prayer theme in Luke is spiritual vigilance. We begin with Jesus’ question at the end of the parable of chapter 18, “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” *Pistis* here has a double meaning. At one level, it prepares for the following prayer parable (18:9–14) that centers on whether people will “trust” (a different term, *peithō*, but related) in themselves, like the self-righteous Pharisee, or in God, like the humble tax collector. At another level, and the one emphasized in 18:8, Jesus is asking whether he will find “faithful” people who are vigilant in living for him. The purpose of prayer is not just for vindication but also for strength to remain faithful to Christ.

This is the theme in the final prayer passage, Luke’s version of Jesus and the disciples at Gethsemane (22:39–46), another corporate prayer scene with second person plural “you” throughout (signifying “pray for each other” not just “pray for yourselves”). In Luke’s rendition the command to “pray that you will not fall into temptation” frames the episode (22:40, 46) and is a primary emphasis, while in Matt 26:41 and Mark 14:38 it takes place in the middle of the episode and the main stress is on Jesus’ request to “stay here and keep watch with me.” Moreover, Luke omits the three cycles of the

others and presents a single truncated scene contrasting the failure of the disciples to overcome temptation (i.e. to pass the test) with Jesus' triumphant submission to his Father's will. Jesus becomes a model of successful prayer for the disciples to follow.

The emphasis in Luke is on a cosmic battle, a "struggle with Satan," as seen in the use of "test/temptation" (*peirasmōs* in 22:40, cf. 4:13; 8:13), and as such it has a "paraenetic edge" in which "the way to stand the test—intense, submissive prayer—is exemplified by Jesus."²⁹ The idea of the disciples being "tested" by Satan both replicates Jesus' own testing narrative (Luke 4:1–13) and goes back to Jesus' warning to Peter shortly before (Luke 22:31–32, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail." Jesus' prayer here and his challenge at Gethsemane go back to two Lucan passages, first the query in 18:8 noted above, "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" and second, the final petition of the Lord's prayer (11:4), "lead us not into temptation," again with *peirasmōs* reflecting both negative temptation and a positive test. The people of God (as above on the Lord's Prayer, this is corporate prayer) must be in constant prayer for strength not to yield to temptation and to successfully pass through the tests that God allows into their lives. In all of this, they are to pray for one another, not just to pray for themselves.

The fourth theme is that of the new prayer power Jesus gave the church. In Mark 11:24–25 par. ("whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours") after the cursing of the fig tree, Jesus promised his authority to his followers, providing they come in faith-empowered prayer. As Evans says, Jesus "offers those who put their faith in God the opportunity likewise to become participants in God's redemptive, mountain-removing activity" and adds, "prayer gives expression of one's relationship with God and makes possible the impossible, if God is the agent (cf. 10:27)."³⁰ This theme is expanded in the Farewell Discourse of John 14–16, where Jesus gives seven all-embracing promises to his people in prayer (13:13, 14; 15:7, 16; 16:23, 24, 26), promising "I will do whatever you [again, plural "you" for corporate prayer activity] ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father" (14:13). "Through prayer we participate in the glory of the Godhead,"³¹ yet it is clear this is not a promise for all the materialistic plenty we wish. The key is "in my name," which means the prayer must be in union with the person and perspectives of Jesus. Yet at the same time it is a new dimension of oneness and participation in the Father and the Son, experienced through corporate prayer.

For those who are asking whether we have departed from the theme of this paper, let me remind you that corporate worship is much bigger than just worship services. We are talking about the church at prayer, and these are the mandates that Jesus has placed before our corporate prayer life. For

²⁹ Joel B. Green, "Gethsemane," *DJG* 267.

³⁰ Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (WBC 34b; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001) 190–91.

³¹ Grant R. Osborne, *John* (Cornerstone; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2007) 213.

Jesus, the new community must move forward on its knees, and every aspect of the church life must be bathed in prayer. Worship is at heart not simply an activity that is experienced in assembly (though that is a critical element of it) but something lived out in life as “service” (*latreuein* in Luke 1:74; 2:37; 4:8). For example, the Lord’s Day service is not simply a time for worship. It is the fulcrum for worship and the prayers of the people, as the corporate worship and prayer of the family of God in Christ builds upon each member’s worship of the previous week and launches the people into the worship and prayer of the following week. Worship is not just an activity engaged in on Sunday morning; it is a *life-style* that must permeate every area of the believer’s life. The purpose of prayer in the service is to stimulate and enhance that daily prayer-life which becomes a “practicing the presence of Christ” (Brother Lawrence) that should come to characterize the lives of God’s people.

III. PRAYER AND WORSHIP IN THE EARLY CHURCH ACCORDING TO ACTS

Prayer was much more central in the life of the church in the first century than it is today. Prayer meetings today are a thing of the past, and even the pastoral prayer has been jettisoned in many churches. The average Christian today considers prayer almost entirely a private activity, while the early church reversed that and thought first of corporate prayer and then of individual prayer. The early Christians formed a worshipping community, with their worship and prayer in Temple and in house church much more explicitly described in Acts than that of the apostolic band in the Gospels. As stated above, the community praised God and prayed often in the Temple (Luke 24:52–53; Acts 3:1), and they also proclaimed Christ there (Acts 5:12, 21, 42). In 3:1, Peter and John were going to the Temple at the time of prayer in conjunction with the afternoon sacrifices; and in chapter 5 they were frequently in the Temple courts sharing their faith. Clearly the Temple was the focus of worship and of witness at the earliest period. For a lengthy period they worshipped in the Temple every day (Acts 2:46), in synagogues every Sabbath and then in their house churches on Sunday the “Lord’s day” (1 Cor 16:2; Rev 1:10; cf. Acts 2:46b, 20:7).³² Their worship was strongly influenced by synagogue patterns and probably reflected a similar blend of praise, singing, prayer, reading of Scripture, and instruction.

From the beginning, corporate prayer was the core of the early church’s life. During the ten days in the upper room between Christ’s ascension and Pentecost, we are told that the 120 “joined together constantly [lit. ‘of one mind’] in prayer” (Acts 1:14). The emphasis is on the harmony of the group and the unceasing nature of its prayers. In that time of transition between the ages, they were fulfilling Jesus’ command to “stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49) with continual prayer for

³² See Richard J. Bauckham, “The Lord’s Day,” in *From Sabbath to the Lord’s Day* (ed. D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 221–50.

the very power promised there and in Acts 1:8, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.” This same kind of prayer for Spirit-presence and guidance is found in 1:24 when before casting the lots they prayed, “Lord . . . show us which of these two you have chosen.” The Book of Acts should not be called “The Acts of the Apostles” but “The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles.” A large percentage of the prayers in Acts are for the Spirit to impart his wisdom in directing the church and its mission strategy.

In 13:2–3, while the leaders of the church at Antioch (prophets and teachers) are in a type of “prayer meeting” (“worshipping and fasting”), the Spirit makes known to them that Paul and Barnabas are to be “separated” or “set apart” for a special “work” (*ergon*) of God that would become the first missionary journey. The prayer for guidance here is deepened with fasting, and this leads to the leaders “laying hands” on the two, commissioning them for their Spirit-appointed new work. Prayer is at the heart of a new vision as well as providing the power to work that vision out in acted mission. Then, in 16:6–7 on the second missionary journey as the team travels west they first want to go southwest to the province of Asia and then wish to go north to Bithynia, but in both cases “the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them” to do so. We are not told how the Spirit made his will known, but elsewhere Luke states directly when supernatural revelation is involved. It seems likely that prayer and the internal leading of the Spirit were behind Paul’s decisions.³³ The leading of the Spirit is the critical factor in Paul’s mission (13:2, 4, 90; 19:2, 6), and prayer is the means by which he and his team discover that leading.

In chapter 27, as Paul is a prisoner led on board a ship bound for Rome, a critical change of perspective takes place. At the start, he is just another worthless captive taken for trial, but as the ship is caught in the “northeaster” and almost certainly about to sink, Paul progressively gains in stature. At first the centurion listens to everyone’s advice but Paul’s (27:9–11), but in the midst of certain death Paul is revealed as a prophet (27:23–25) whose prayers they follow (27:29) and whose orders they immediately obey (27:31–32). Prayer and guidance by the Spirit are intimately connected.

The primary worship passage in Acts is 2:42–47, and in verse 42 Luke provides the “four pillars” of the earliest worship—teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. It says the believers “devoted themselves” to these things, a critical concept in Acts (1:14; 2:42, 46; 6:4; 8:13; 10:7) that stresses both unity in pursuit of a goal and serious persistence in attaining these things. Fitzmyer speaks of “an idyllic description of the life of the primitive Christian community in Jerusalem, its spontaneity, harmony, and unity, its devotion to prayer and temple worship.”³⁴ The apostle’s “teaching”

³³ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 478.

³⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostle: An Introduction with Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) 268.

refers to the didactic instruction that was at the core of church life, not only regarding the death and resurrection of Christ and the salvation that resulted but also about the ethical results in Christian living. Fellowship or *koinonia* occurs only here in Acts but is common in Paul for the relational side of church life, seen in the “holding everything in common” of verse 44. The “breaking of bread” is probably general, referring both to the Eucharistic celebration of the body and blood of the Lord and to the “love feasts” the believers shared together (Jude 12). The “prayers” (with the definite article) may also be broad, referring both to the prayers at the Temple and the prayers at the Christian services. Mainly, it is corporate rather than private prayers that are in mind.

For Luke, prayer is the distinguishing mark of true discipleship, and churches that make a difference will be churches that are oriented to prayer, including both set prayers and spontaneous prayers as in the synagogue. In Acts, the verb occurs sixteen times and the noun nine times, and it refers both to praise and intercession. When the apostles turned the practical needs of the church over to the seven in 6:1–7, they did so in order that they could dedicate themselves to “prayer and the ministry of the word,” what they felt was their main calling. Prayer was at the heart of the Samaritan Pentecost (8:15, 24) and the Gentile Pentecost (10:2, 4, 9, 30).

Prayer is often emphasized in times of persecution. At Stephen’s death in 7:59–60, he replicated Jesus’ prayers of Luke 23:34, 46 by praying both “Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit” and “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” In 16:25, Paul and Silas in Philippi have been beaten, manacled, and thrown into prison, but with bloody backs they are not moaning in despair but are “praying and singing hymns to God.” No wonder the power of God descended and broke up both their prayer meeting and the very jail in which they were incarcerated! In the midst of oppression, prayers for deliverance are to be expected. In Acts 12, Herod Agrippa I, undoubtedly to curry favor with the Jewish people, martyrs James and imprisons Peter. Since the arrest occurs too close to Passover, Herod has to wait to execute Peter and places four squads of four soldiers each in around-the-clock surveillance of Peter to ensure he cannot be rescued. Meanwhile, the church is engaged in “earnest” (*ektenōs*, “energetic, fevered”) prayer for God to deliver him. Then ensues a humorous and very realistic scene. Peter and the church are engaged in prayers for deliverance, but neither actually expects it. God answers their prayers, but when the angel is escorting Peter through the prison he thinks he is experiencing a vision (12:9) and does not wake up to the reality until the angel is gone (v. 11). Then Peter goes to Mary’s home (the first house church), and in the midst of the prayer meeting all the intercessors refuse to believe it is Peter and think it is his “angel,” probably a guardian angel who resembles him, meaning they think he has just been executed. How often does the church pray without expectation, so that even when God grants the request we virtually cannot believe it has taken place? Luke’s point is that intercessory prayer should have more expectation attached to it. God is sovereign and can say “no,” but we should not expect God to reject our requests.

All the way to Paul's final Passover visit to Jerusalem, the trip and its consequences are bathed in prayer. He has asked at the start of that trip while in Macedonia (Acts 20:1–3) in his epistle to the Romans (15:30–31) that they “join me in my struggle by praying to God . . . that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea.” At the end of his farewell speech to the Ephesian elders, “he knelt down with them and prayed” (20:36). Then later as they stopped at Tyre, Paul and the believers knelt on the beach in prayer as he left (21:5).

An interesting aspect of prayer takes place at Tyre and at Caesarea. Luke tells us that the Christians at Tyre “through the Spirit . . . told Paul not to go on to Jerusalem,” and after Agabus's prophecy at Caesarea that Paul would be bound and delivered over to the Gentiles, his own associates pleaded with him not to go (21:4, 12). Luke uses phenomenological language when he says they spoke “through the Spirit”; they thought they were doing so. But Paul had already told the Ephesian elders he was “compelled by the Spirit” to go to Jerusalem (20:22) and that possible imprisonment awaited (20:23). Note that Agabus's prophecy only told Paul what would occur in Jerusalem and not that he should refuse to go.³⁵ As in 16:6–7 (see above), through prayer we receive a leading from the Spirit, but that leading still must be interpreted. Paul and his associates differed in terms of what the leading meant, and in this case Paul was correct. He was to go to Jerusalem, and imprisonment awaited him there. When a church is at prayer seeking wisdom for a critical decision, there will often be differences in understanding as to just what the Spirit is indicating. Obviously, further prayer and reflection are mandated in such circumstances.

The longest prayer in Acts is that of 4:23–31, and Luke says that afterward “the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit: (4:31). Clearly, the worship service focused on people's corporate prayer. Many of the themes noted above coalesce on this passage. The first great persecution has just occurred, as Peter and John have been arrested and warned by the Sanhedrin to desist from their public proclamation of Christ (4:1–22). As they return to the church, Luke records the prayer as a united invocation of the whole group, a true corporate prayer. “Sovereign Lord” (*despota*) addresses God as absolute “Master,” looking upon him as absolute Lord and every human being as his slave (the regular use of the term in the Hellenistic world). He is the Creator God who is ruler over every part of his creation, including the Romans and the Jewish leadership. They are the subject of the quote from Ps 2:1–2 in 4:25–26. The Sanhedrin “rages” and joins the Romans in “taking their stand” against God and his chosen people, the church. But in this prayer and in the Psalm all such plots are “in vain,” for God is sovereign over his enemies. In verses 27–28, then, the plots of Herod and Pilate, of the Gentiles with the Jews to “conspire” against God's “anointed” is interpreted as part of God's predetermined will. All opposition is part of God's “will” or “plan” (*boulē*), and it will in the end come to naught. The actual petition is found in 4:29–30, a prayer that in the midst of such God-

³⁵ See Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 638.

allowed rejection and persecution his people would respond with "bold" witness, and God's powerful "signs and wonders" would magnify the wondrous "name" of Christ. Corporate prayer is made up of praise and worship of the Sovereign God in the midst of hard times, for every crisis is an opportunity to let go and watch the Spirit work! For Luke prayer is the distinguishing mark of true discipleship, and churches that make a difference will be churches that are oriented to prayer, including both set prayers and spontaneous prayers (as in the synagogue and early church).

IV. PRAYER AND WORSHIP IN THE PAULINE EPISTLES

I am an elder at my church, and two days ago we anointed a very godly woman with oil in the name of the Lord. She is seriously, perhaps terminally, ill, and as we read the words of James 5 and prayed, we tried to pray expectantly and at the same time added to the scene the Gethsemane prayer—"your will be done." In light of this, the best place to begin this section is with Paul's magisterial presentation of his philosophy of prayer in Rom 8:26-28a. He begins with the statement of the situation: "the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for." O'Brien says there are two aspects of this: we do not know whether what we are asking for is in accordance with the will of God, and even if we know what we want, we do not know whether it is in line with God's purposes.³⁶ Yet while the church cannot know God's will in the situation, it can know that none of us are alone in our trials. In the midst of our "groaning" (8:23), we have the joy of knowing that the Spirit himself is interceding and is "groaning" for us more deeply than we are groaning for ourselves. Moreover, the Spirit is praying "in accordance with God's will," and it is for that reason that "all things work for good." No child of God is ever alone in her infirmities, for the Spirit is always present and is more concerned than we are that we experience God's "best" in that difficult situation. There is no need to complain like Israel did in Isa 40:27, "My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God." As Isaiah says, "the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth" is with us, and his power is watching over us.

We do not have space to investigate all of Paul's prayers³⁷ or even to do a detailed study of the themes,³⁸ so we will have to center only on a few

³⁶ Peter T. O'Brien, "Romans 8:26-27: A Revolutionary Approach to Prayer," *Reformed Theological Review* 46 (1987) 65-73 (especially pp. 67-68).

³⁷ See Rom 1:8-10; 9:3; 10:1; 15:5-6, 13, 30-33; 16:25-27; 1 Cor 1:3-9; 11:4-5; 14:15-17; 16:22, 23; 2 Cor 1:2-4, 11; 2:14; 9:15; 13:7, 14; Gal 1:3-5; 6:16, 18; Eph 1:2, 3, 15-19a; 3:14-21; 6:18-20, 23-24; Phil 1:2-5, 9-11, 19; 4:20, 23; Col 1:2-4, 9-12; 4:2-4, 12, 18; 1 Thess 1:1-3; 2:133:10-13; 5:17, 23, 28; 2 Thess 1:2-4, 11-12; 2:13, 16-17; 3:1-2, 5, 16, 18; 1 Tim 1:2, 12, 17; 2:1-8; 6:16, 21; 2 Tim 1:2-3, 16-18; 4:14-16, 18, 22; Titus 1:4; 3:15; Phm 3-6, 25. I have built upon the work of Donald Coggan, *The Prayers of the New Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1967).

³⁸ W. Bingham Hunter, "Prayer," *DPL* 730-33, lists eleven themes: (1) a theocentric worldview; (2) a creaturely obligation; (3) thanksgiving motivated by salvation; (4) essential to service; (5) the role of the mind; (6) essential to perseverance; (7) offering converts to the returning Christ; (8) the spirit of adoption; (9) the will of God; (10) the intercession of the Spirit; (11) focus on the eternal rather than the temporary.

critical areas. Formal studies of the Pauline prayers normally divide them into “prayer reports” (those which describe his prayers for the readers in descriptive or second person style); and “wish prayers” (using the optative “may” and present Paul’s desire for them, “May God do . . .”).³⁹ I prefer Longenecker’s breakdown into three categories: thanksgiving, worship and adoration, and petition.⁴⁰

(1) Corporate prayer is modeled strongly in the opening thanksgiving and prayer in Paul’s epistles. O’Brien tells us that Paul discusses *eucharistein* more line for line than any other writer, pagan or Christian, using the word group forty-six times in his epistles. It is similar to “praise” and is the basic Christian “response to God’s saving activity in creation and redemption.”⁴¹ The formal thanksgiving in his letters (Rom 1:8; 1 Cor 1:4; 2 Cor 1:11; Eph 1:16; Phil 1:3; Col 1:3, 12; 1 Thess 1:2; 2 Thess 1:3; Phm 4) is closely connected with his introductory prayers for the recipients and play a dual role: (a) presenting the basic theme and paraenetic challenge embodied in each letter; and (b) establishing the tone as well as being directed to God as an actual prayer in which Paul wants his readers to participate and demonstrates his pastoral concern for the lives of his readers. The outflow is experiencing the “Christian triad of faith, love, and hope,” namely the grace of God and his loving work among the saints.⁴² The church is called to the activity of giving thanks at all times and in all circumstances because God is graciously active especially in the hard times (see Col 3:15–17; Eph 5:20; 1 Thess 5:18). Thanksgiving is a critical component of corporate prayer.

(2) Worship and adoration are, of course, at the heart of all prayer, as noted above with relation to the Lord’s Prayer. It is popular today to consider all worship trinitarian in character, and there is some truth in this. Yet I find myself intrigued and somewhat convinced by Larry Hurtado’s argument that early Christian worship was essentially binary in character, that is, worship primarily of the Father and the Son. This recognizes that the Trinity is clearly taught in Scripture (1 Cor 12:4–6; 2 Cor 13:14 in Paul, cf. Matt 28:19; Eph 4:4–6; 1 Pet 1:2; Jude 20–21; Rev 1:4), and that the Holy Spirit is definitely God (along with the trinitarian passages above, see John 3:5–7; Acts 5:3–4; 1 Cor 2:10–11). Hurtado himself says “our practical worship as well as our profession is genuinely Trinitarian.”⁴³ Yet at the same time the Holy Spirit was seen by the early church as the “agent of divine power” and “the mode of divine enablement and presence” in worship, while the recipients of adoration were the Father and the Son.⁴⁴ Prayer is offered to “the God and Father

³⁹ Paul Schubert, *Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1939); Gordon P. Wiles, *Paul’s Intercessory Prayers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

⁴⁰ Richard N. Longenecker, “Prayer in the Pauline Letters,” in *Into God’s Presence* 213.

⁴¹ Peter T. O’Brien, “Benediction, Blessing, Doxology, Thanksgiving,” *DJG* 69.

⁴² *Ibid.* 70. See also his *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul* (NTSS 49; Leiden: Brill, 1977); and David Pao, *Thanksgiving: An Investigation of a Pauline Theme* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002).

⁴³ Hurtado, *Origins of Christian Worship* 109.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 63–64.

of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:3; Col 1:3), and the Father and Son are often invoked together (1 Thess 3:11–13; 2 Thess 2:16–17, 3:5), as also in the case of the "May grace and peace" invocations (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:3; Gal 1:3; Phil 1:2; 2 Thess 1:2). In the grace benedictions that conclude Paul's letters, Jesus tends to be invoked by himself (Rom 16:20; 1 Cor 16:23; Gal 6:18; Phil 4:23; 1 Thess 5:28; 2 Thess 3:18). Prayer directly to Jesus comes in 2 Cor 12:8–9.⁴⁵ In short, God and Jesus are the focus of worship, while the Spirit is the means of worship.

Longenecker finds two types of Jewish adoration-prayers reflected in Paul. First, there is the "*berakah*-formula prayer," where God is blessed at the start, and God's activity on behalf of his people is described. Examples are 2 Cor 1:3–4a ("Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . who comforts us in all our troubles") and Eph 1:3 ("Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing"). The second is "the eulogy-type prayer" where God is extolled at the end of a long prayer. Examples are Rom 11:36 ("To him be the glory forever"); Rom 16:27 ("To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ"); Gal 1:5 ("To whom be glory forever and ever"); Eph 1:21 ("To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever"); and Phil 4:20 ("To our God and Father be glory forever and ever").⁴⁶

(3) Prayers of petition occur frequently in the thanksgiving sections where Paul says "I remember you in my prayers at all times" and then tells what he is asking of God on their behalf (e.g. Rom 1:9–10; Eph 1:16; Phil 1:4; Col 1:9; 1 Thess 1:3; 2 Thess 1:11; 2 Tim 1:3; Phm 4). Paul's prayer reports also contain intercessory petitions (Rom 10:1; 2 Cor 13:9; Eph 3:16–19), as do Paul's wish-prayers (Rom 15:5–6; 15:13; 2 Cor 13:14; 1 Thess 3:11–13; 5:23; 2 Thess 2:16–17; 3:5, 16; 2 Tim 4:16). Paul regularly prayed for specific needs in his churches and extolled the churches to do so as well.⁴⁷

It is clear that Paul had the same priorities in prayer that we found in Jesus and in the early church. Prayer is primarily communion with God, consisting of worship but also of sharing ourselves with our heavenly Father and simply basking in his presence. Second, it is a presentation of our needs to him in petition, but in doing so it is not primarily asking God for material things but relinquishing control of our earthly things entirely to him.

V. PRAYER AND WORSHIP IN THE GENERAL EPISTLES

Hebrews contains two central themes that relate closely to our topic. The first is the importance of community for maintaining the Christian walk. The central issue in the book is the danger of apostasy (agreed upon by Reformed as well as Arminian scholars), and one of the key ways to ensure one does not fall away is the involvement of a caring community that will

⁴⁵ Ibid. 74–76.

⁴⁶ Longenecker, "Prayer in the Pauline Letters" 215–17.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 219–23.

“admonish one another daily” (3:13) and that “strengthen” its “weak” members when necessary (12:12–13). To achieve this level of corporate solidarity, Hebrews warns the community never to “give up meeting together” (10:25), which Lane calls “the importance of the regular gathering of the local assembly for worship and fellowship,” because “they provide a communal setting where mutual encouragement and admonition may occur.”⁴⁸

One of the most beautiful pictures of corporate worship in the NT occurs in 12:22–24, which contrasts the terrifying experience of the old covenant people of Israel at Mt. Sinai (18–21) with the joyous experience of the new covenant people at Mt. Zion. The pictures of “the thousands and thousands of angels in joyful assembly,” of “the church of the firstborn, enrolled in heaven,” and of “the spirits of the righteous made perfect” are not just an apocalyptic picture of eternity in heaven but at the same time provide a picture of the joyous, festive worship of God’s people right now (the perfect “have come” is stative, referring to the constant state of worship the community of the saints can experience). Thus the prayer mandate that ensues in 12:28–29 commands the believers to “be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.” In 13:15–16, this specifically refers to prayer, “let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name.” This picture should be in our minds and hearts every Sunday, as we realize the eschatological reality of our worship. Truly the Lord’s Day is an anticipation and a foretaste of our eternal worship in heaven.

The second theme that relates to prayer is the central theme of Jesus as high priest who gave himself as the once for all sacrifice for sin and then is “able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (7:25; cf. Rom 8:34). In other words, as a result of his sacrifice on the cross, Christ’s exaltation means he constitutes a “permanent priesthood” in heaven. Christ’s continuous intercessory ministry in heaven is the basis for the “bold” prayer life of the community (3:6; 4:16; 10:19, 35). This is also the basis of the final prayer in the book, 13:20–21, which follows the “collect” form of Jewish invocation and sums up many of the themes of the book. It is a “wish-prayer” that asks “the God of peace” on the basis of the “eternal covenant” established by Jesus’ death and resurrection to both “equip” his beleaguered people and “work in us what is pleasing to him,” namely that we do his will and live for him.

There are three major prayer passages in James, a Jewish Christian epistle dealing with a series of ethical and moral issues in the church. The central theme is probably “the undivided mind,” namely thoughts and actions that resonate against “friendship with the world” (4:4) and that follow God and his Word.⁴⁹ The central problem is a series of “trials” that

⁴⁸ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13* (WBC 47b; Dallas: Word, 1991) 289–90.

⁴⁹ Grant Osborne, *James* (Cornerstone; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, forthcoming), using Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 500.

the church is going through—poverty and wealth, prejudice, dissension, persecution, illness. In each of these the answer is prayer, both corporate and individual. The first section, 1:5–7, is private prayer, but it is a *propos*. When believers lack wisdom to handle their trials (cf. 1:2–4), they must “ask” (*aitein*) their “generous God,” but the key is to ask “without doubt” (*diakrinesthai*), referring to a “wavering mind,” namely spiritual instability. This is closely connected to *dipsychos* in verse 8, a key term in James (see also 4:8) that refers to a “divided mind” which trusts God one minute, self and the world the next. This is why the person is like a “wave of the sea, driven by the wind and tossed”; they are up and down, one minute praying, the next worrying about how they are going to get out of their dilemma. “Doubt” does not mean uncertainty as to whether God is going to grant the request (for this see Rom 8:26–28 above) but rather a lack of focus and “faith” (another primary term in James) in God.

The second prayer passage is more corporate and becomes a negative picture of how prayer is endangered when conflict and dissension take over the life and affect the worship of the church. 4:2–3 is part of the central section on the problem of the tongue, an ABA structured unit describing the tongue as an instrument of evil (3:1–12) and as causing conflict in the community (4:1–12). This frames the solution for the tongue—using it via wisdom from above (3:13–18). The problem is conflict in the church and the fact that prayer comes from the tongue, with repercussions for corporate worship as the dissension affects both the worship and life of the family of God. In this, the tongue is too easily controlled by “your desires that battle within you” (4:1) the result of which is that the tongue is so engaged in “quarreling and fighting” (4:2a) that it is not centering on God or “asking” him for a thing. Therefore the church has received nothing from God. The members cannot pretend to “bless God” in prayer when at the same time they are “cursing” their fellow believers (3:9–10). There is no worship because there is no corporate prayer in the community. At the same time, even when the church does get around to asking, it does so “with wrong motives” that are controlled by a desire for “pleasure” (*hēdonē*, 4:3, as in 4:1). There is a kind of step parallelism here—they rarely pray, and even when they do, their prayers are negated by evil desires. A church at prayer is a church centered on God and on pleasing him rather than herself. When that occurs, there is no atmosphere of conflict possible. The God of peace will be in charge.

The final prayer passage is the best known—5:13–18—on the prayer of faith for healing. Prayer is the central theme of this passage. We rely on God rather than ourselves and surrender every situation (including ourselves!) to him. The situation here centers upon people in the church who are desperately ill and ask the elders (those with pastoral oversight in the congregation, here functioning as guardians of the flock) to pray over them and anoint them with oil (as in Mark 6:13). The oil is not so much medicinal as a symbolic anointing (similar to the anointing of kings etc.) to show God’s special blessing, power, and status placed upon the person. The sick are consecrated and set apart for God, and his healing presence is brought into the situation.

The emphasis, though, is not just on physical healing but on spiritual healing as well, and that has important ramifications for a theology of corporate prayer. Three things are said on this. First, there will be forgiveness if they have sinned (v. 15b). As in Jesus' healing miracles, God comes upon the person both physically and spiritually, and those healed will often get right with God and experience forgiveness of sin through the experience. Second, in the church people must "confess your sins to each other" (v. 16a), inferring that the spiritual state of the entire congregation is a factor in the healing presence of God in situations of illness. The mutual involvement of Christians in the spiritual growth of each other is a critical component in the struggle with sin, and prayer power demands a church that is right with God. Third, "the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (v. 16b). A "righteous" believer is one whose life demonstrates victory over sin and God-centeredness, and the prayers have incredible effect. James stresses two aspects of this effective prayer: (1) it "is powerful" connoting the ability of prayer to accomplish much; and (2) it is "effective," stressing the great results of prayer as it goes to work on behalf of others.⁵⁰ In terms of the debate on whether prayer changes situations, I stand on the affirmative side. There is mystery here. God is absolutely sovereign and guides our affairs, but at the same time the Bible universally teaches the power of prayer to accomplish things. Things will happen that would not if God's people failed to be in prayer.

First Peter is an epistle especially centered on the problem of suffering and persecution, addressing discouraged Christians who are at wits end. As in James there is material on hindrances to prayer. First, the husband must show understanding and honor to his wife, "so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (3:7). The relationships we have with others, especially our spouse, are an important part of our relationship with God, so failing to honor one's wife is failing to honor God. The result is hindered prayer resulting from a broken relationship with God. Second, in 4:7 prayer is especially important in light of the imminence of "the end of all things," one of the primary themes of this epistle (1:7, 13, 17; 2:12; 4:5, 7, 13). Michaels says, "Prayer in 1 Peter, even more in James, is eschatological prayer. The goal is 'the end of all things' (4:7) that will bring to us 'the revelation of Jesus Christ' (1:7, 13), the 'grace of life' (3:7), and the 'marvelous light' (2:9) to which we are 'called.'⁵¹ The first implication of this in 4:7 is the necessity of disciplined, earnest prayer. Peter has corporate prayer in mind, the church on its knees together, and the two imperatives call for a clear-headed sensibility (*sōphroneō*) and a clarity of thought (*vēphō*) behind this community prayer (cf. also 1:13). The minds of the believers must be clear of all encumbrances, focused, and under the control of the Spirit as they move the church forward on its knees.

⁵⁰ See J. Ramsey Michaels, "Finding Yourself as Intercessor: New Testament Prayers from Hebrews to Jude" in *Into God's Presence* 238–39.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 244.

Third, Christians are to “cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (5:7). In 5:5b–11, the emphasis is on humility, and the paragraph functions as a conclusion to the letter, describing the relation of Christians to God, the devil, and outsiders (paralleling Jas 4:6–10). The verb “cast” is a strong action verb for “throwing” that pictures the follower throwing every single anxiety (*pasan*) on God’s shoulders one at a time. The “worries and cares” (*merimnan*, a collective singular) are life’s problems that cause us to worry. We do not need to fret unduly about our difficulties, for God is more concerned about our needs than we are, and he knows far better what we need (see also on Rom 8:26–28 above). Again, there is a sense of expectancy when the church prays, for prayer makes a difference.

Second Peter and Jude are written to warn the church against a group of pernicious false teachers who are threatening God’s work there. Both have the regular wish-prayer or greeting (2 Pet 1:2; Jude 2), and 2 Peter has a closing wish prayer and brief doxology at the close (3:18), but there is very little in 2 Peter on prayer otherwise.⁵² There are two passages in Jude. Jude 20, “pray in the Holy Spirit,” is part of a paragraph (17–23) contrasting the ungodliness of the false teachers (17–19) with the godly behavior of Jesus’ followers (20–23). In the Greek “pray” is the second of two participles (building up, praying) modifying the main verb “keep yourselves in God’s love.” Most likely, it is a participle of means telling how we maintain ourselves before God. To “pray in the Spirit” could be charismatic praying accompanied by speaking in tongues,⁵³ but the contrast with the heretics in verse 19 who “do not have the Spirit” makes it more likely this is more general, referring to praying that is infused, guided, and empowered by the Spirit, similar to Eph 6:18, “pray in the Spirit on all occasions.”⁵⁴ Michaels adds that this “certainly includes mutual intercession—just as ‘building up yourselves (*heautous*)’ . . . is equivalent to ‘building up one another’ and ‘keeping yourselves’ (*heautous*) is equivalent to taking responsibility for one another in the community of faith.”⁵⁵ The point is that this is corporate prayer for the corporate life of the community.

The doxology in Jude 24–25 is one of the truly magnificent corporate prayers of the NT and one of the best known since it so frequently is used as a liturgical benediction to end the service (which is fitting, for that is exactly its function in Jude). In an article this size we cannot give it justice, but there are two parts, verse 24 celebrating what God can do for his people, and verse 25 worshipping God for who he is. There are two things he has the power (*dynamai*) to do; first he “keeps” or “guards” (cf. vv. 1c, 21) the believer to ensure that they do not “fall” or “stumble” (cf. Rom 11:11; Jas 3:2; 2 Per 2:10), which obviously pictures God giving his people strength so that they can overcome temptation (as in the Lord’s prayer, Matt 6:13 = Luke 11:4). Second, he will “present” us to himself “faultless” at the last

⁵² See Michael J. Wilkins, “Prayer,” *DLNTD* 945–46.

⁵³ So Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1983) 113.

⁵⁴ See also Wilkins, “Prayer” 946 and most commentators on 2 Peter.

⁵⁵ Michaels, “Intercessor” 248.

judgment, another statement of the security of the believer due to God's strengthening presence in their lives (cf. 1 Thess 3:13, "May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless"; or 1 Pet 1:5, "kept by the power of God for a salvation ready to be revealed"). Corporate prayer has as one of its purposes asking for God's strength in the midst of troubles and false teachings all around us.

Finally, the Johannine epistles echo several themes we have already seen. The first is the confidence of a church at prayer that God hears and will respond. In the area of the Christian life, "confess our sins" in 1:9 (cf. Jas 5:16, "confess to one another") probably entails confession to each other as well as to God.⁵⁶ When we do so, we can be certain that God will "forgive" and "purify" us. Also, since Christ is our "advocate" or "defender" (2:1), we can be "confident and unashamed" before him now and at his coming (2:28). Second, in 3:21–22 there is a parallel to Mark 11:24–25; John 14:13–14; etc. on the new prayer power the church has, as we are told that we "have confidence before God and receive from him whatever we ask." This new boldness comes because Christ's death for us (3:16) and our belief in Christ (3:23) has led us to rest in him (3:19) and to rely on the Spirit in our lives (3:24). The point is repeated in 5:14, stressing again the "boldness" or "confidence" we have as we approach God, knowing that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us" and thus "we have what we asked of him." As before, the plurals mean John is thinking of the church at prayer. God will always respond with love whenever his people come before him on their knees. Worship centers upon basking in the presence of God and celebrating his grace and love, and here as in the rest of the NT that worship is especially expressed in corporate prayer.

VI. WORSHIP AND PRAYER IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The Book of Revelation is not just the last of the canonical books; it is the consummation of all the hopes and prayers of the whole Bible. Every stage of the developing theme of corporate prayer, from Jesus to Paul to the General Epistles, has had as one type the eschatological prayer for the coming of the final kingdom and for the glory of God to attain full fruition at the eschaton. All three of the God-petitions in the Lord's Prayer center on this, and there is also a double meaning in the final two petitions, "do not allow us to yield to temptation/the test" and "deliver us from the evil one," for both are also a prayer for victory in the final test against the evil one at the end of history. Yet the Apocalypse is not just about the final judgments and the destruction of evil, for a central element is worship and prayer. As Ross says, "It is the vision of glory that inspires the people of God to persevere in their faith," but it is also "this glimpse of glory" that "also inspires and directs the people of God in their worship here on earth" which "foreshadows heavenly

⁵⁶ Michaels, "Intercessor" 245, says that since verses 8, 10 are public claims ("if we say we do not sin"), there must be a public dimension to the confession as well.

worship.”⁵⁷ Bauckham sees in the worship of chapter 4 “the two most primary forms of awareness of God: the awed perception of his luminous holiness (4:8, cf. Isa. 6:3) and the consciousness of utter dependence on God for existence itself that is the nature of all created things (4:11).”⁵⁸

In the Apocalypse, there is a distinct contrast between heavenly worship (*proskyneō* in 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 15:4; 19:4; 20:4) and earthly worship (*proskyneō* in 9:20; 13:4, 8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20) scenes. The heavenly scenes center on both angels and humans bowing in worship before the God of heaven. The earthly scenes center on the “earth-dwellers” worshipping the beast and the dragon. The imperial cult (the worship of the emperor as a god) is one of the key problems in the book, and even a so-called Christian group, the Nicolaitan cult, allows participation in it. One of the major purposes of the book is to warn these weak Christians that God alone is filled with majesty and glory (chap. 4) and that he alone is worthy of worship.⁵⁹

There are two primary types of prayer in corporate worship in this book, vertical prayer-worship of God himself, seen in the hymns of the book, and horizontal prayer-petitions addressed to God.⁶⁰ There are innumerable hymns in the book (4:8, 11; 5:9–10, 12, 13; 7:10, 12; 11:15, 17–18; 12:10–12; 15:3–4; 16:5–7; 18:2–3, 4–8, 19–23; 19:1–2, 3, 5, 6–8) and they are central to the ongoing narrative. Primarily, the hymns define the sovereign God in terms of both who he is (power, glory, wisdom, strength) and how his people must respond (honor, praise, thanks). This is of course the model we must follow in our own Lord’s Day worship (John received his vision on the Lord’s Day, 1:10). Further, the worship scenes take place at critical points in the action and become theological commentary on the significance of the events. Peterson states that they are used to interpret the events of the book and provide meaning as they celebrate God’s victory in the narrative sections in hymnic form.⁶¹ In this sense, worship provides the theological underpinning and shows that the judgments prove the justice and wisdom of God, thereby bringing glory to him.

The Hallelujah prayer choruses of 19:1–10 show this by praising God for both destroying the evildoers and rewarding the righteous. Both aspects of worship in the book are seen in these prayer-choruses: who God is (the worthiness and majesty of God and the Lamb), and what God does (vindicating the saints and punishing the sinners). The final scene of the new heaven and new earth does not contain any hymns, but it also contains no temple. The very meaning of worship permeates 21:1–22:5, basking in the presence of God. The longings of all of Scripture are fulfilled here. Moses could not look on the face of God and live; when we worship we look upon God spiritually. At that time “the dwelling of God will be with” us, and “he

⁵⁷ Ross, *Hope of Glory* 473.

⁵⁸ Richard J. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 32–33.

⁵⁹ For a good presentation of this see Peterson, *Engaging with God* 262–65.

⁶⁰ See Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 46–49.

⁶¹ David G. Peterson, “Worship in the Revelation to John,” *Reformed Theological Review* 47 (1988) 68–69, 75–76.

will live with" us (21:3). The new Jerusalem is first the Holy of Holies (21:9–27) and then the final Eden (22:1–5). Here we will join the angels as the priests of heaven who "serve him day and night" (7:15). To use a current metaphor, worship will be the very air we breathe!

There is one set of prayer-petitions in the book, and the three are inter-linked (5:8; 6:9–10; 8:3–4 where the prayers of the saints ascend to God). In 5:8, the twenty-four elders (celestial beings, possibly members of the heavenly court) and four living creatures from 4:4, 6 are holding harps (ten- or twelve-stringed lyres used in temple worship) and golden incense bowls, wide-necked saucers kept on the table of the bread of the Presence in the Holy Place that signified God's acceptance of the sacrifices ("a sweet-smelling aroma"). In the Temple ceremony, the morning and evening sacrifices would be when the people gathered to pray, so the incense also signified the prayers ascending to God. The incense here is identified with "the prayers of the saints," probably connoting both general prayers for God's kingdom to come⁶² and specific prayers for vindication and justice (preparing for 6:9–11).⁶³

In 6:9–11, the souls of the martyred saints are "under the altar," meaning they had been "slaughtered" (same verb as the "slain" Lamb in 5:6) sacrifices for Christ. In their agony they cry out in an imprecatory prayer, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood." They are reminding God of his covenant obligations and asking for vengeance, namely for the covenant curses to be poured out on those earth-dwellers who have rejected God and killed his people. The "scroll" in chapter 5 has its background in the doubly-inscribed Roman contract deed and may in part relate to God's contract or covenant with mankind.

Closely related to 6:9–11 is 8:3–5, where "another angel" (in a priestly role) as in 5:8 has a golden incense bowl, now filled with incense mixed with the prayers of the saints. As these prayers (most likely the prayers of 6:10 due to the proximity of the two passages) ascend to God, he clearly finds them pleasing because he has the angel place coals of fire in the censer and hurl it to earth, inaugurating the sevenfold trumpet judgments. The connotation of this is astounding. The trumpet judgments are in part God's response to the imprecatory prayers of the saints for vengeance fulfilling Deut 32:35 and Rom 12:19, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay." "Worship throughout this book produces judgment as well as joy. This is because God is characterized by both love and justice, and these are not separate but interdependent aspects of his being. Therefore judgment against God's enemies occasions the same worship as does the vindication and salvation of his people."⁶⁴

The final petition-prayer is in 22:20, but it could be a second set if the two invitations to "come" in 22:17 are seen as a cry for the Parousia.⁶⁵ But

⁶² Richard J. Bauckham, "Prayer in the Book of Revelation," in *Into God's Presence* 254–55.

⁶³ Osborne, *Revelation* 259; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 358.

⁶⁴ Osborne, *Revelation* 341.

⁶⁵ With Bauckham, "Prayer in the Book of Revelation" 268–69.

it is probably better to see them as an invitation to the readers to “come” to Christ.”⁶⁶ The plea for Christ’s return in 22:20b builds on the promise of Christ that he will return soon in 2:5, 16; 3:11; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20a as well as the extended passage on his victorious coming in 19:11–21. So this is the climactic prayer of the book, indeed of the Bible as a whole. God’s plan of salvation centers upon two climactic events, the Cross and the Parousia. Again, as the rabbis said, any prayer that fails to mention the kingdom is not a true prayer.

VII. CONCLUSION

Worship is the only proper response to a sovereign God who is personally involved in our lives, and prayer is the primary means by which we respond in worship. In both Judaism and the early church, corporate prayer was at the heart of their services. Thus it is sad that in the average church today so little prayer is uttered in the service, and so little time is given over to corporate prayer in church life. The two foci of biblical worship are Scripture and prayer, and both aspects are increasingly neglected in the popular church movement. There is a completely valid hunger for revival in the church today, but it will not come until the church gets on its knees. Leonard Ravenhill said, “We live in a generation that has never known revival God’s way. True revival changes the moral climate of an area or a nation. Without exception, all true revivals of the past began after years of agonizing, hell-robbing, earth-shaking, heaven-sent intercession. The secret to true revival in our own day is still the same. But where, oh, where, are the intercessors?”⁶⁷ Finney, speaking of the 1859 revival, mentions this: “When I was in Boston . . . a gentleman stated he had come from Nebraska, and he had found prayer meetings established throughout all the vast extent of country over which he had travelled. Think of that. A region of 2,000 miles, along which the hands and hearts of the people were lifted up to God in prayer! From North to South . . . a great and mighty cry went up to God that He would come down and take the people in hand and convert the souls; and he heard and everybody stood astounded.”⁶⁸ This is ever more our need today!

⁶⁶ With Beale, *Revelation* 1148–49; Osborne, *Revelation* 793–94.

⁶⁷ Leonard Ravenhill, *Revival God’s Way* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1986) 102.

⁶⁸ C. G. Finney, “The Prevailing Prayer Meeting,” via Gospel Truth Ministries at www.GospelTruth.net.