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# PRAYING WITH PAUL

*Discover what Paul can tell us about praying,  
through both his teaching and his personal practice*



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————— *Chapter One* —————

## APPROACHING PAUL ON PRAYER

Most of us, when we think of prayer, do not immediately think of Paul and, when we think of Paul, do not immediately think of prayer. For many Christians, prayer has its problems and its failures, but we acknowledge its claim upon us, the challenges with which it confronts us and the intriguing possibilities and promising opportunities it offers.

With Paul it is quite another story. We are more impressed by his incomprehensibility than by his greatness. We latch on to his purple passages like the great hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13 and read them on all possible occasions, but when it comes to the theological heart of Paul's writings—Galatians, Romans, Colossians—we tend to agree with the writer of 2 Peter when he said of the letters of 'his beloved brother Paul', 'there are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction' (2 Peter 3:15–16).

Not wishing to expose our own ignorance or instability, we are very happy to leave Paul's expositions of the mysteries of election and justification to those who are theologically competent while we pass quickly on to more immediate and practical concerns. Add to this the reputation for misogyny that hangs around Paul and it is not hard to see why he often has a bad press even among the churchgoing public and why he will not be the first source to which we turn when we are looking for help with our prayers.

## PAUL AND THE PUNDITS

Even sophisticated New Testament theologians differ over how congenial and accessible they find Paul's writings. Archbishop William Temple once recalled a saying of Bishop Lightfoot of Durham, a very eminent 19th-century New Testament scholar, who said that for him the Gospel of John was strange, unfamiliar territory, but he always came back to base and felt at home with Paul. Perhaps it is something about the northern air, sharp in Durham and even sharper north of the border (where I come from), that makes me say the same, and I suppose that is partly why I am trying to persuade you to give Paul a fresh hearing now.

For Temple, however, it was the other way round: John was home territory and Paul a man of jagged peaks and rugged landscapes, so that to explore him was always a challenging and even daunting adventure. As Temple knew, however, it was an adventure well worth embarking on, because of the great if hidden treasure waiting to be discovered among the high rocks and mysterious caves.

## GIVE PAUL A CHANCE

For that very reason I am inviting you to explore with me what may be unfamiliar Pauline territory in search of one particular treasure that may until now have been quite hidden, namely his teaching on and his practice of prayer. Like any good guide, I have sussed out the landscape and had a look at the map and can assure any reluctant fellow travellers that the journey will be well worth the effort. In this first chapter we shall look at some of the influences that shape contemporary Christian spirituality in the largely post-Christian West to help us to see how and why what Paul has to tell us about our praying is specially relevant to the problems and difficulties besetting us today. In the following chapters we can then, in closer relationship to particular scriptural passages, fill in

the details and draw out the implications of what he is saying to us.

## OPPOSITES MEET

Karl Barth and Thomas Merton both died on the same day in 1968, the one from old age in his native Switzerland, the other as the result of an accident with an electric fire during a visit to India, and people have speculated about what these two might have said to each other when they met for the first time at the gates of heaven. Although they were both committed Christians, they were located at opposite ends of the spiritual spectrum. At one end was Barth, the Reformed theologian, standing by common agreement in the very highest rank among the teachers of the Church down all the Christian centuries, the man whose life's work was the production of 15 very fat volumes on the whole range of Christian doctrine. Meeting him from the other end of the spectrum was Merton, the Catholic monastic mystic, also a prolific writer, whose central concern was the exploration of the whole vast area of spirituality and devotion. On the one side was Barth, the careful thinker, the detailed definer and the controversial debater with all the 'i's dotted and all the 't's crossed, the man of the head who could be relentless with opponents and frequently came across as hard, dogmatic and divisive. On the other side was Merton, the man of the heart, more aware of indefinable and transcendent mystery than of revealed truth, finding God more in silence than in speech, more concerned with techniques of devotion than with definitions of doctrine—in danger, at least towards the end of his career, of losing his hold on what is unique about the Christian faith and on the crucial differences of basic faith commitments between his own tradition and that of the Buddhist monks with whom he was in dialogue at the time of his tragic death.

These two, in their different lives and their companionship in

their dying, are relevant to us now because they symbolize a divide between theology and spirituality that is a threat and danger to much of Western Christianity today. Certainly in the Anglican circles with which I am most familiar, the proponents of the devotional life have been much closer to Merton than to Barth. For their models and their structures they have often looked more to analytical psychologists than to any theological authority. As a result there has been the constant danger of a disastrous divorce between our thinking and our praying.

Our theology has been in one compartment and our spirituality in another. Theology has been seen to belong to the academic classroom as the specialist province of a professional guild of experts who have skills of scholarship. This puts the whole enterprise beyond the reach not only of most lay Christians but also of many ordained clergy, who, having been subjected to it briefly during their ministerial training, have abandoned it for more immediately relevant pastoral and managerial concerns.

#### THE TALKERS AND THE SILENT

On the level of ordinary church activities the same potential divide between those who think and those who pray comes out in the contrast between those who frequent the typical parish house group, with its Bible study or its discussion of issues of current Christian concern, and those who prefer a meditation group where the chief ingredient of the gathering is largely unbroken silence. The often highly vocal members of the house group will become silent with embarrassment only when it is suggested that corporate debate might lead on to corporate prayer, whereas the meditators will use their silence to avoid disputable issues of Christian truth and practice that they feel incompetent or afraid to handle. As a result, the lay theologians remain prayerless and the silent pray-ers pay little attention to the theology on which the authentication of what they are doing depends.

## PRAYER AND THEOLOGY

In the 1960s and 1970s, as part of a charismatic version of the same anti-theological stance, some people who were rejoicing in a new experience of the Holy Spirit that brought them into a very close and personal relationship to God imagined that they had passed beyond the endless arguments and debates of the theologians into an area of direct and first-hand experience of God with its own sense of certainty and assurance. If you even said the word ‘theology’ in such circles, you were met with titters and sniggers, the signs of a very unattractive smugness and self-congratulation, hiding a deep nervousness within.

With the second generation of charismatic leaders, the situation has greatly improved in this regard. Untested spiritual experience runs into excess and exaggeration in all kinds of ways, as experienced charismatics and Pentecostals well know; for Christians the test of whether or not our experience has its source in the Holy Spirit is to measure it by the given scriptural gospel, which is the business of any decent theology to expound and explore.

I can remember how during my own charismatic honeymoon in the mid-1960s, when theological reflection was not at the top of my agenda, a wise old Pentecostal minister counselled me, ‘Hold on to all your good theology. You are going to need it more than ever now.’ How right he has proved to be!

## THE PERILS OF PRAYERLESS THEOLOGY

This revolt against theology was to a large extent due to the kind of theology that has sometimes been on offer. That was certainly the case in the charismatic revolt we have been describing, where the prevailing theology that was rejected was often dominated by a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’: the authenticity of scripture and the basic affirmations of Christian orthodoxy were either attacked or so modified that they were incapable of sustaining a living relationship with a living God.

I think for example of a sermon by Paul Tillich, one of the theo-

logical gurus of the time, in his book *The Shaking of the Foundations*.<sup>1</sup> In the sermon, he expounds Psalm 139 in such a way that the intensely interpersonal relationship with a living and active God, which informs the scriptural text, is explained away in terms of a completely impersonal relationship with an inert and lifeless ground of being or ultimate reality that totally lacks the outgoing love and concern of the God of the Bible. This therefore undermines the personal relationship that makes Christian prayer possible. The same loss of living relationship with a personal God was the chief defect of John Robinson's *Honest to God*,<sup>2</sup> which popularized Tillich and was highly influential in the 1960s in England. No wonder the charismatics wanted none of it!

More generally, the perennial danger of academic theology is that God can become just a subject for endless debate, a debate that undermines our approach to him as the source of our faith and the object of our worship and adoration. The late Colin Gunton used to say that he could always spot a theologian who had stopped preaching, and we could add that it is equally possible to spot a theologian who has stopped praying, if the understanding of God presented by such a person's theology will be one in which prayer is inhibited or indeed excluded.

#### THEOLOGY NEEDS SPIRITUALITY

It is of course true that any theology worthy of the name has to be academically rigorous and unflinching in its dealings with the doubts and difficulties that always assail Christian faith and never more so than in our own day. In a culture where the gospel is under constant attack from rival religious systems and an influential sceptical secularity, Christian theology has to assert its claims to truth in debate with them.

The only theology able to do that with any degree of credibility will be one that is an expression of the faith it is expounding and defending, that does not stand outside the Christian circle looking

in from some mythical position of superior neutrality but stands inside this circle looking out, in order to proclaim a truth that will make sense *of* and perhaps sometimes even *to* the unbelieving world that faith seeks to address. It will, to use the language of Augustine and Anselm, be faith seeking understanding rather than some modern or postmodern understanding wondering about faith. Such a theology will have a creedal ‘I believe’ at the head and at the heart of it, and the object of that belief will be the living God to whom the scriptures witness.

Because that is so, it will be a theology that not only satisfies the mind but also warms the heart. Good theology will always be both proclamatory and praiseful—both in fact highly characteristic of Barth’s own theology. In other words, when you have grasped it, you will be motivated to proclaim the gospel on which it is based; when the wonder of what God has done for the world in Christ comes home to you in its teaching, you will want to fall on your knees in his praise and invoke that mercy upon the world and on yourself in your prayer. It was this kind of theology that set Charles Wesley singing, and one of the earliest expressions of this theology is, as we shall see, the letters of Paul. Far from being an alternative or threat to prayer, it offers a structure for prayer to prosper and grow.

#### UNTHEOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY

There is another side to the coin: if theology needs to start with faith and end in prayer, spirituality needs to be grounded in the sort of proclamatory and praiseful theology we have just been describing. When that grounding is ignored and neglected and the prayer of the Church pursued in even relative isolation from the creed of the Church, the resulting compartmentalism can indeed be dire. Decline is guaranteed all the way to pious people indulging in childish gimmicks in an attempt to find God!

Theology—meaning here not so much an academic discipline as

a basic understanding about the nature, character, promises and requirements of the God to whom we seek to relate and respond—is by definition constitutive of any act of prayer. How you pray is entirely dependent on your ideas about the God to whom you are addressing your prayers. The more you know about God, the more you will know what you can expect from God. If you do not know who God is, you will not know what to say to him. An unknown God will inspire only an empty silence and ultimately a despairing prayerlessness.

It is good liturgical order when the reading of the word, its exposition in the sermon and its public articulation in the creed go before the prayers of intercession as the context that makes these prayers possible and meaningful. It also makes sense if those prayers precede the sacrament of Holy Communion in which we engage further with the God of the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So also in personal and private prayer, giving attention to God's word through the reading of the Bible provides the proper context for the prayers in which we respond to what God is saying to us. As we shall see in greater depth when we turn to Paul later, our listening will condition our asking at every point. There are some desires deep within us that it is impossible to present to the God of holy love who reveals himself in the gospel except in the form of confession and repentance; other desires so accord with his nature and character that we can offer them to him in expectant confidence that in his own time and way he will fulfil them for us. All the way through, our praying will be shaped by our believing, our asking by our knowledge of the one to whom our requests are directed.

#### WORD AND SILENCE

It is especially important to understand this when, as in the meditation groups already mentioned, the chief ingredient of prayer is silence. There are, in fact, many different kinds of silence and one

of the ways of distinguishing them is to ask how the silence of prayer is related to the speaking of the word.

The idea exists in some contemporary circles that the prayer of silent meditation is in some way superior to the prayer of verbal penitence, intercession and praise, and so speaking and silence are presented as somehow in opposition to each other. Such a divorce is in fact very destructive. A silence that excludes or banishes the words from and about God that form the substance of the Christian faith will be an empty silence, and spiritual vacuums, like physical ones, never remain empty for long. If we are no longer using the silence to listen and speak to the God of the gospel, we can find ourselves listening and speaking to other voices with very different messages or even abandoning a two-sided dialogue with God in favour of an internal monologue in which we are listening and speaking to ourselves.

A silence that is empty of God's word and so open to all sorts of voices from alien sources outside us or self-originated voices inside us is quite different from the rich silence that is informed by the word of God and uses its quietness to contemplate this word in all its depth—indeed to use the word to relate to the mystery of God who has spoken it. His being and love are far beyond what any word can define or contain and it is in such a silence that we can use the knowledge of God given to us by his word to come face to face with the love that surpasses knowledge. That is in fact what Paul prays for the church in Ephesus, that 'you may... know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God' (Ephesians 3:19).

The true, faithful and God-given knowledge that comes from God's word can lead us, in the very presence of the God who is beyond all the knowing that words can express, into a contemplation of his presence and a reception of his fullness that is beyond the power of any words to encapsulate; it can only be received in an adoring silence of wordless prayer.

The same thing happens in Paul's letter to the Romans, where,

after three chapters of close and often agonized theological argument about God's purposes in Christ for Jews and Gentiles, he throws up his hands and abandons the argument in a kind of adoring despair, which he has reached only by pursuing the argument into a realm of mystery where it could go no further: 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?' (Romans 11:33–34).

It is in the paradoxical relationship between word and silence that Christian prayer finds its distinctive depth and fecundity: the silence arises from the contemplation of the word and the word, in leading us to God himself, ushers us into the pregnant silence of his presence and the mystery of his surpassing grace.

Laurence Freeman makes the point memorably in an article in *The Tablet*,<sup>3</sup> writing out of a long experience of Christian meditation, 'It is a relief to drop the words and gestures, but one appreciates them more for their being drowned in silence... This silence gives language a fallow time, allowing it to be reborn from the eternal youth of the Word: the same old story longing to be known.' It is in that mutual interaction of word and silence and not in the espousal of the one and the exclusion of the other that Christian prayer has its depth and its flourishing.

#### HELP FROM PAUL

This false dichotomy of word and silence is, as we have seen, only one expression of the even deeper divide between theology and spirituality, between thinking and praying, that characterizes so much contemporary Christianity, at least in the West. We can now go on to see how Paul's approach to prayer is highly relevant to our situation precisely because he insists on holding together what we tend to separate. Before we immerse ourselves in the details of specific Pauline passages in the next chapters, we shall indicate

three central features of his theology of prayer which directly confront and correct the dualism that threatens us.

## PRAYER IS THEOLOGICAL

Prayer is *theological* in a sense that has been implied but not yet explored in what we have said so far. Statements about God in the Bible and in the classical Christian theology rooted in the Bible claim to represent not just the opinions of their authors but, rather, an objective reality with a life of its own, apart from the thinking of those who speak about it. What the Christian Church says about God claims to have at its heart not our theories and speculations about him but what he has told us about himself in the story of his dealings with his people in the Bible, supremely and definitively in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Of course the theology of the Church, like every other human enterprise, is both fallible and imperfect and has been subject to all kinds of distortions and inadequacies, but it lives or dies by its claim that Jesus Christ is the truth, the trustworthy and reliable revelation of ultimate reality, so that in so far as we are faithful to him, we are speaking the truth about God given to us by God himself. The conviction that the gospel he proclaims is not a speculative human theory but an authentic divine revelation is the driving force of the whole of Paul's mission. He is not recommending an inner journey into the ultimate reality at the heart of our own being, but an outward journey in which our attention is not turned in on ourselves but, rather, away from ourselves to events that are outside our competence and control, namely what God has done in Israel and in Jesus.

In these events in outer history there is hidden a true disclosure of the nature of ultimate reality and of its purposes with us and for us. To know God as he is, we have to open ourselves up to it and to that revelation and receive what it is telling us. When we do

that, what we know is the truth that we have to maintain and defend.

#### IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH

That is what lies behind the first two chapters of 1 Corinthians, in which Paul presents his gospel of the crucified Christ, which is incomprehensible and unacceptable both to Greek philosophy and its ideas about wisdom and to Jewish religion and its ideas about power: ‘But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory... But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him”—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God’ (1 Corinthians 2:7–10).

Through the Spirit, who comes to us from God, we are given access to the truth about the ultimate reality of God, something we could not have reached on our own but which has been made accessible to us through what God has done in Jesus.

Just because the gospel claims to be true, it has about it the exclusiveness of every claim to truth. If a statement is true, then any other statement that contradicts it is by definition untrue, so that if we make a claim for the ultimate truth as it is revealed in Christ, we inevitably question all other claims to religious truth that contradict the gospel, and we have to seek to validate our gospel against them.

It is this truth claim that has made the gospel controversial since it was first enunciated by Paul and the other New Testament writers and that makes it even more controversial in our own postmodern culture where all claims to ultimate truth, especially religious ones, meet with sceptical suspicion and unbelief. All of this has implications for our evangelism and our dialogue with other religions that we cannot pursue now.

## TRUTH AND PRAYER

It also has implications for our life of prayer, which, just at this point, leans heavily on our theology but at the same time is able to bring to it reinforcements and confirmations of its own. Our prayer life depends on the validity of the truth of our theology because, when we pray, we need to know that the God to whom we are relating is not a figment of our pious imagination but a reality out there independent of us, who has a life that infinitely transcends us and a life, a will and a purpose of his own that enables him to respond to us.

At the same time our prayer life resources our theology and the truth claims it makes, because it brings us into a relationship with God that is self-authenticating. Through the witness and work of the Holy Spirit to which Paul was referring in the passage we quoted, we are brought into touch with a reality other than and beyond ourselves; yet one that is not only open to us but is making its own gracious initiatives and approaches to us. It is in fact out of this self-authenticating relationship that we are given the conviction of the truth and reality of the gospel expressed by our theology.

Under the influence of the postmodern scepticism surrounding us there have been minority attempts within the Christian community to argue that the gospel might be devotionally helpful without being theologically true. Contemplation of the Christian story could be spiritually purifying and morally inspiring, even if that story was a myth that never happened and if the doctrinal claims built on that story, including its basic affirmation of the existence of God, had been exploded and shown to be unsustainable and unnecessary to our understanding of reality. The story of Jesus could help us to love one another even if it was clear that there was no God to love us. It could help us to liberate our true selves even if there was no divine Saviour to come and save us from ourselves. Anybody who has any experience of the reality of Christian prayer will very quickly see the impossibility of such a position. To be told

that we can go on praying when we know that there is nobody or nothing out there to pray to is to cut the throat of the devotional life, not allowing it to breathe or speak any more. It is to try to extract a positive from a negative, something sound and good from something we know to be false and deceptive.

The only credible reason for praying lies in a theology with the affirmation at its heart that there is a living God who can hear and respond to what we say to him. If the theology is tentative, the prayer will be tentative also—‘O God, if there is a God, help me now’, is more a cry of desperation than of faith, and the person who makes that cry knows that everything depends on whether or not there is any God to answer it. That such desperate cries are actually answered is a witness to the fact that there is such a God and that the measure of his grace towards us far exceeds the measure of our faith towards him.

#### UNBELIEVING WORSHIP

Even short of this extreme of denying God’s existence in our theological thinking and still trying to affirm the validity of our prayer, it is still possible to undermine our worship by a theology that is in blatant contradiction to it. If our thinking is basically an expression of our doubts, it will be hard for our spirituality to be an expression of our faith.

I remember attending a eucharistic service in an Episcopal church in the United States that was liturgically correct and theologically orthodox; assuming that you believed what was being said, you could be greatly helped by it. Afterwards, however, I went to brunch with the people who had been leading the service. In the informal conversation taking place around the table, it soon became clear that they did not believe personally what they had just been proclaiming liturgically. The leaders valued the Bible, creed and sacrament because they made people feel forgiven, affirmed and edified in their spirit, not because they stemmed from and reflected

faithfully what God had revealed in Christ; these things were valued because they helped people practically, not because they were ultimately true.

This position reminds me of a man who tries to ride the sea with each foot in a different boat. The courses of the two boats are rapidly diverging to the point where his legs can no longer span the ever-increasing gap between them, so that he is dragged out of both of them and plunged into chaotic waters to drown.

However congenial all this may be to postmodern culture, it is totally destructive of the integrity of the Christian gospel and of those who are lured into a devotional schizophrenia by trying to think one way and pray another way. The inevitable outcome is that the scepticism in the theology will result in paralysis in the prayer. Like Barth and Merton, the man who thinks and the man who prays will both have to go into heaven together or they will not go in at all.

#### PAULINE INTEGRATION

All of this brings us back to Paul, because in him we find an integration of his thinking and his personal dealings with God, an integration that can help us to identify and heal the disintegration we have been describing.

There is lots of new thinking in Paul; his thinking is one of the great creative influences on the whole Christian tradition from his day to our own. He had the kind of mind that could, in his own words, know the length and the breadth, the depth and the height of what God has done for the world in Christ (see Ephesians 3:18–19). He grasped the implications for the world, the Church and the human person of the way God had fulfilled his covenant with Israel in the coming, living, dying and rising of his Son. It is a thinking that has again and again proved its power to reform, refresh and redirect the life of the Church across the world and down the Christian centuries. But it is never dry thinking; it is undertaken in

a context of burgeoning new life, of missionary enthusiasm and personal commitment expressed and confirmed at every point. It does not weigh probabilities but proclaims certainties, because it is a thinking that arises out of and is sustained by the first-hand encounter with the living Christ that began for Paul on the road to Damascus and has been continued and deepened in the life of prayer ever since. The thinking and the praying are so closely interwoven that the one could not be what it is if it were to be disconnected from the other.

To keep company with Paul when he is thinking and praying is to find a prophylactic against the separation imposed upon us by our cultural situation. It is to be called back to that integrated relationship with God in which, in relating corporately and personally to him, we at the same time grasp and are grasped by the truth on which our relating depends. It is that basis in truth and reality that our theology affirms and our prayer expresses.

### PRAYER IS DIALOGICAL

If Paul's approach to prayer is theological, in the sense we have been identifying, it is as a consequence *dialogical*. In other words, the theology he inherited from Old Testament Israel, which was affirmed and intensified in Christ, understood prayer as an interaction between two distinct parties: on the one hand a sovereign Creator whose being was constituted by his freedom and his love and, on the other hand, human creatures made in the image of the Creator and so constituted that they could relate to their God in a freedom and love reflecting his own. The history of Israel is seen in terms of a covenant made by a personal God who in his freedom commits himself in faithful love to this people and summons them in their human freedom to respond to him. The essence of that covenant is defined again and again in the Old Testament: 'I will be your God and you shall be my people' (Leviticus 26:12, Ezekiel

36:28). A divine initiative requires and prompts a corporate and individual human response, and it is within the covenant relation of these two personal realities, God and nation, that prayer becomes possible. We *can* pray because God has committed himself to us and so will hear our prayers; we *must* pray because all the concerns of our life have to be pursued within that covenant relationship and so have to be open and offered to God.

All of this is presupposed in the exhortation that Paul makes to the church in Philippi when he tells them that ‘the Lord is near. Do not worry about anything but *in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God*’ (Philippians 4:5–6). We shall be looking at this whole passage in more detail later on, but for the moment it is enough to note its personal tone, which implies a covenantal relationship between an approachable God and his people, who are invited to bring all their concerns to him in prayer rather than hugging them to themselves in worry, and who await his response to that prayer in expectation and hope. Prayer, in other words, is an ongoing dialogue between God and his people that presupposes their freedom to ask and his freedom to answer. To those of us who have been nurtured in a biblical framework, this approach to prayer is so obvious that it hardly needs explaining. But in our day it very much does need explaining, because it is constantly being challenged and watered down by contemporary ideas about spirituality that can seep into our minds without our noticing at once how different they are from the biblical notion of covenant that we have inherited from the Bible.

#### MONOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY

Put it like this: prayer is unambiguously dialogical, whereas much of what is said about spirituality nowadays is inherently monological. In other words, to pray means to make a journey out of and away from ourselves to a God who has a being, a will and purpose far beyond us, and to seek his help.

Spirituality, on the other hand, can be and often is taken to mean a human attribute that is not defined by a relationship with anything or anybody outside ourselves but consists of an exploration of the instinctive and mysterious depths of our own human being, discovered and stimulated by our life experiences and the devotional techniques we employ. This sort of spirituality is indeed a journey into ourselves on the presupposition that the divine is simply the depth of the human and that its resources are available to us in the inner mystery of our own being. Prayer, however, is dialogical because it needs a God to pray to; meditation outside a Judeo-Christian theological framework can become a monologue in which, in the end, we are speaking only to ourselves. There is a massive and profound difference between a divine that is an essential dimension of our own being and a personal God who calls us to go out from ourselves to him. This God promises that from him to us there will come his own Holy Spirit, who will do in us what we cannot do for ourselves and give us gifts and graces that we cannot give ourselves.

For Paul, the depth of our own being apart from God, far from being divine, is the place of our need, our weakness and our misery; help and salvation come not from that place but from the Lord to everybody who calls on his name. If we sit, as we are going to do, in Paul's school of prayer, we shall learn not the techniques of self-exploration or self-fulfilment, but how to relate outside ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ from whose hands we can seek and receive his Spirit, who can transform us and make us new.

The dialogical nature of Christian prayer is of great importance practically and existentially in the very act of our praying. In my daily intercessions I am constantly under pressure to mull over the perplexities and problems of the people and situations I am praying about and because I can often not understand them and certainly lack any competence to cope with them, the end result of the whole enterprise can be worry and distress.

That is exactly the situation Paul is addressing in the verse from Philippians that we have already quoted: 'The Lord is near. Do not

worry about anything but... let your requests be made known to God' (4:5–6). There comes a moment in every time of meaningful intercession when I have to remind myself that the whole point of the exercise is to get what is worrying me off my chest and give it into hands other than mine, the gracious and strong hands of the living God, so that from that moment and until he gives it back to me, it becomes *his* responsibility rather than my own.

Sometimes this can be done in a felt awareness of his presence, sometimes in a lack of any apprehension of presence, in simple faith that he is there and is listening. The doctrinal expression of such a faith is the dialogical and covenantal understanding of God that we have been expounding. Without it, Christian prayer cannot be itself.

### PRAYER IS DOXOLOGICAL

Paul's theology of prayer is fundamentally *doxological*, a way of thinking about the God of the gospel that cannot help bursting into praise. We may indeed say that praise and intercession are the twin pillars upon which the life of prayer rests, provided we see the prayer of confession and penitence as a particular kind of intercession in which we ask God in his mercy to restore our relationship with him, a relationship that has been clouded and frustrated by sin.

A glance at the beginning of all the Pauline letters shows that Paul's prayer for his churches is fundamentally one of combined thanksgiving and intercession. Both stem from the grace of God in Christ, whose generosity in the past provokes praise and whose promised generosity in the future gives intercession confidence. The opening verses of Philippians are typical: 'I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you... And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help

you to determine what is best...' (Philippians 1:3–4, 9–10, compare 1 Corinthians 1:4–8, Ephesians 1:15–19).

More generally, when Paul is in thinking mode, so to speak, he talks about 'God', but when his thoughts take wing and turn into joyful acclamations of praise, as they often do, he speaks not of 'God' but of 'Father' or, more specifically, of 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. The point is that 'Father' is a relational word. You can talk *about* God, but you must talk *to* the Father, and Paul keeps going from the one to the other, because his objective thinking about God and his personal relationship to his heavenly Father are built into each other.

It is good to read through the first chapter of Ephesians from this perspective. From its third verse the chapter takes the form of a *berakah*, a formal blessing that Paul would know from the Hebrew liturgies in which he had been reared: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...' (1:3). This *berakah* starts with the exclamation of praise and is punctuated by continual outbursts of praise, so that all that he says is 'to the praise of his glory' (1:6, 12, 14). At the same time it contains some highly innovative theological teaching about divine election and that is what prompts the praise. The same *berakah* form with its combination of thinking and blessing is used in the opening verses of 2 Corinthians (1:3ff.)

Such passages are typical of Paul's combination of a rigorous and daring thinking through of the gospel and the prayer that is, both in its intercession and thanksgiving, a doxology of praise. They are together all the way, Barth and Merton, revealed truth and ultimate mystery, the word and the silence, the thinking head and the worshipping heart.

## RECLAIMING THE INTEGRATION

The integration offered by Paul could not be more relevant to the spiritual schizophrenia that threatens to disrupt our relationships

with God today. It is of course true that, in the differentiation of our personalities and in the distribution of the Spirit's gifts in the body of Christ, some of us will take more easily to the thinking and others to the praying; some of us will latch on to the truth questions and work away at them for a whole lifetime; others will be more on our knees than at our books and will engage in the disciplines and silences of the life of devotion. That is as it should be and each group can immensely enrich the other.

The trouble comes when, in the rush and practicalities of modern living, Christians stop thinking and stop praying, with all the superficiality and deprivation that involves. This book will be of value if it helps even a little to call us back to the hard thinking and praying required by a mature relationship with God.

Those who think need to pray and those who pray need to think if our discipleship is not to go out of shape and become lopsided. Before we go on to the next chapter, it would be good to think about the issues that have been central to this one, very specifically in relation to our churches and ourselves as members of them. Is the balance right between cerebration and celebration, between burrowing for the truth and glorying in the gospel, between measuring the message and meditating on the mystery, between working for God and relying on God? If that balance could be better, what steps need to be taken corporately and personally to make it so?

Most of us, when we think of prayer, do not immediately think of Paul and, when we think of Paul, we do not immediately think of prayer. After all, wasn't Paul the first theologian of the Church, expounding such mysteries as election and justification? We may be tempted to stick with some favourite bits of his letters—the 1 Corinthians 13 hymn to love, for example—and look elsewhere in the Bible for lessons on how to pray.

This book invites us to explore what may therefore be unfamiliar territory: to discover what Paul can tell us about praying, both through his teaching and through his personal practice. In his letters, he gives us a trustworthy map that we can use as we explore and make discoveries for ourselves. Under his guidance we can set out on our own journey into deeper relationship with the God who reveals himself to us in Jesus and through the writings of his apostle.

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