

May a Christian Address Christ in Praise or Prayer?

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

“Is it ever appropriate to pray to Jesus? Did he not teach us to pray, ‘Our Father’ (Matthew 6:9)? Did he not instruct his disciples that the time would come when nothing would be asked of him (John 16:23)? And is it appropriate to sing praises directly to Christ?”

There appears to be a sincere but vocal minority within the brotherhood of Christ that opposes any form of communication on the part of the Christian with the resurrected and ascended Son of God.

Some allege that no prayer or praise of any sort may be directed to Jesus. Others suggest that while we may not pray to Christ, we are permitted to sing to him.

One leading advocate of this theory contends that words may be sung to the Savior, but those identical words become sinful if “spoken” rather than “sung” — even though singing is speaking (Eph. 5:19).

Still, others allege that one may “speak” to the Lord (without a melody), but he may not “pray” to him — though the distinction between the two has not been made clear.

In this study, therefore, we propose to address this issue.

Matthew 6:9

What about Matthew 6:9? Does it restrict prayer to the Father alone?

The fact that Jesus, in Matthew 6:9, was giving the disciples a brief and general outline of prayer, does not mean that such instruction covered **all** aspects of the theme. The sketch obviously is abbreviated.

For example, there is no mention in this model about praying for the sick. Other biblical texts (e.g., Jas. 5:14), however, allow for such.

The Expansion Principle

There is an interpretive principle which suggests that in related topical contexts, one passage may **expand** upon another.

Compare, for example, Mark 16:16 with Acts 2:38. The former text does not mention repentance, but who will deny that such is required for salvation?

If, therefore, there is **evidence** elsewhere in the New Testament that Christ was addressed in prayer — and that without censure — that should bring the issue into balance.

With reference to the model prayer, one scholar notes: “not all aspects of prayer are included in this pattern prayer” (France, 243).

In his esteemed work, *Dogmatic Theology*, William Shedd wrote:

“When men say, ‘Our Father who art in heaven,’ they do not address the first person of the Godhead to the exclusion of the second and third If a man deliberately and consciously intends in his supplication to exclude from his worship the Son and the Holy Spirit, his petition is not acceptable. ‘He that honoreth not the Son, honoreth not the Father’ (John 5:23)” (306-07).

John 16:23

The context of John 16:23 — “you shall ask me nothing” — is not dealing with whether or not one may “address” Jesus in prayer.

Rather, the Lord was emphasizing to the disciples that the questions bothering them **at the moment** (cf. Jn. 16:17), later, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, would be perfectly clear to them. Hence, there would be no need for inquiries of the type they were posing.

The fact that later on addresses **are made to the Lord** establishes the fact that John 16:23 does not speak to that issue.

“The Lord did not mean that no prayer must be offered to Him afterwards. They did address Him in prayer, Acts 1:24; 7:59; 9:13 etc.” (Vine 1961, 154).

The Nature of Deity

If deity is worthy of worship (cf. Psa. 18:3), and if Jesus is deity (Jn. 10:30), then he is worthy of worship.

Jesus himself said that the Son should be honored just as the Father is (Jn. 5:23). And yet, if Christ may not be worshipped, either in prayer or in song (as some allege), how is he to be glorified by his disciples?

Does it seem reasonable that we may tell others of his greatness, but we may not breathe one word of thanksgiving to him personally?

Then this point is worthy of serious reflection. If deity is worthy of worship and if Christ is deity, what position is the Christian in if he withholds all worship from the Savior and even opposes such?

One of the characteristics of the “man of sin” as described in Paul’s second letter to the church at Thessalonica is that he “opposes and exalts himself against all that is called God or that is worshipped” (2 Thes. 2:4).

Christ is designated as “God” (Jn. 1:1; Acts 20:28; Heb. 1:8), and he accepted worship (Mt. 2:2; 14:33; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 5:7ff). In whose company does this place those who oppose his worship today?

If it was right to worship Jesus while he was on earth, why is it **now** wrong? Did his nature somehow change by virtue of his entrance into heaven, so that now he is less worthy than he was during his earthly ministry?

If one may communicate directly with only the Father, and the Son is thus completely excluded, how does Jesus function in the role of our “mediator” (1 Tim. 2:5)? Does a mediator have any real purpose if he merely stands on the sideline, and is not an active participant in the exchange of the two parties between whom he mediates?

If a mediator is functioning on my behalf with another party, may I not communicate with the mediator personally? If not, of what significance is the term “mediator”?

G. C. Brewer once noted: “The groanings we can not utter are borne by the Spirit which dwells in Christians up to the Savior and he intercedes for us” (135).

If our unutterable groanings are taken to the Savior by the Holy Spirit, can it be sinful for our “utterable” petitions to be dispatched to him?

New Testament Precedent

Aside from the scriptural and logical points listed above, there is ample New Testament precedent for communication with Christ. Note the following:

John 14:14

In John 14:14, Christ, speaking in anticipation of his ascension back to the Father, promised the disciples:

“If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” (ESV).

The pronoun “me” is omitted in some Greek texts, but, as Bruce Metzger has noted, “The word **me** is adequately supported.” He cites some of the oldest and best manuscript witnesses, and adds that “**me** seems to be appropriate in view of its correlation with *ego* [“I”] later in the verse” (Metzger, 244).

For further discussion see: Hovey, Robertson, Lenski, Hendriksen, Morris, etc. See also the following translations: NKJVfn, NRSV, NASB, Beck, Goodspeed, McCord, Phillips, Weymouth, Wuest; cf. also the Greek Texts of Lachmann, Tischendorf, and the latest text of Aland, *et al.*

Some claim it would be absurd for Christ to authorize a prayer “to” him and yet instruct that such be “in Jesus name” (Workman, 123). This quibble reveals that the author does not understand the significance of the phrase “in Jesus’ name.” It is the equivalent of “by my authority” (cf. Mt. 10:1; Mk. 16:17; see also Col. 3:17).

There is nothing at all absurd about the Lord asking us to pray consistent **with his authority** when approaching him in prayer.

Others allege we must “pray through Christ” not “to him” (Hoff, 34). The writer has not studied the meaning of the phrase “through Christ.”

There is nothing in that expression that nullifies addressing the Lord in prayer. “Through Christ” is a common phrase that merely acknowledges the role of Jesus in Heaven’s redemptive plan. It was through “the agency of Christ” that the way to God was achieved (Danker, 225). It acknowledges the “kindness of Christ” in making prayer possible (cf. Thayer, 133).

Would “praising” and “glorifying” God “through Jesus Christ” (Heb. 13:15; 1 Pet. 4:11) imply that the Christian must never praise or glorify the Lord Jesus himself?

Acts 1:24

After the ascension of Christ, Peter guided the brethren toward the selection of a new apostle to replace Judas, who had committed suicide. Certain qualifications were imposed, and two names were set forth as candidates, Barsabbas and Matthias.

But which one of these was best suited? The disciples sought divine counsel. Luke writes:

“And they prayed, and said, You, Lord, who knows the hearts of all men, show of these two the one whom you have chosen” (Acts 1:24).

The crucial question is this. Who is the “Lord” to whom the petition is addressed?

The most reasonable answer is that the term refers to Jesus. McGarvey noted that the disciples did not make the selection themselves “because they thought it proper that the Lord, who had chosen Judas, should also choose his successor” (22).

Christ was the one who had “chosen” the apostles originally (cf. Acts 1:2, where the same word is used). He is most often ascribed the term “Lord” in the New Testament (unless a text is being taken from the Old Testament). In fact, Jesus is so designated in the immediately preceding context (vv. Acts 1:6, 21).

A great host of respectable scholars (my survey revealed an overwhelming majority) contend that Christ is the object of this prayer in Acts 1:24 (see Alexander, Barnes, Bloomfield, Bengal, Bruce, Kistemaker, Larkin, Knowling, Williams, Zahn, etc.).

Acts 7:59-60

Stephen’s prayer to the Lord is presented unambiguously with the obvious endorsement of Jesus himself (as evidenced by the vision).

“And they stoned Stephen, calling upon the Lord, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59)

Attempts to nullify this example (by suggesting that the case is miraculous, or that Stephen is merely “speaking with” the Lord, not “praying”) are unconvincing.

Is one permitted to do that which intrinsically is **wrong** — just because the circumstances associated with the event are miraculous? And how can Stephen’s **requests** be considered a mere conversation, rather than elements of prayer?

Guy N. Woods characterized the “view that a person cannot address a petition of any kind to Christ” as “absurd” and as a reflection of “nit-picking.” He cited the example of Stephen’s prayer as contrary evidence (Davidson, 272; cf Woods, 39).

Nigel Turner, one of Great Britain’s most respected Greek scholars, contends that this case is a powerful argument for the deity of Christ. He notes: “A pious Hellenistic Jew would not pray to one less than God” (Turner, 14; see also Grudem, 380-381).

1 Corinthians 16:22

Paul concludes his first Corinthian epistle with this word: “Marana-tha.”

The term is Aramaic, and can be rendered (depending upon how it is divided) as either “our Lord came,” or “O Lord, come!”

Most Greek scholars (cf. Balz & Schneider, Danker) and the best English translations believe the latter is preferable. See Revelation 22:20, which definitely reflects the latter sense.

2 Corinthians 12:8

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul recounts being afflicted with that mysterious “thorn in the flesh,” because of the glorious revelation he had experienced 14 years earlier. He states that on three occasions he had begged “the Lord” to remove it (2 Cor. 12:8).

Who was the Lord?

Let the context speak. The response to Paul’s prayers had been a firm “no” (implied) — with the extension, “My grace is sufficient for you.” The apostle then gloried in the fact that the “power of Christ” would be sufficient for him (2 Cor. 12:9).

Alford Plummer says that the term “besought” (*parakaleo*) is frequently used of those who asked of Christ’s help, but not when referring to the Father (Plummer, 353; see also Barnett, 571).

1 Thessalonians 3:11

In his first letter to the brethren at Thessalonica, one of Paul’s prayers is recorded:

“Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way unto you” (1 Thes. 3:11).

The subject of the sentence is compound, “Father” and “Jesus,” yet the verb, “direct,” is singular. W.E. Vine notes that “this prayer is addressed to the Lord Jesus conjointly with the Father” (Vine 1997, 78).

Other commentators, drawing the same conclusion, are far too numerous to mention (see: Lipscomb, 42).

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17; 3:5

There is a similar prayer recorded in the second letter to the same church.

“Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word” (2 Thes. 2:16-17).

Again, the subject is compound, yet both verbs (“comfort” and “establish”) are singular.

Scholars are virtually unanimous in the view that the apostle’s prayer is **jointly** addressed to both the Father and the Son — and what is most unusual in this case is the fact that **Jesus is placed first**.

See also 2 Thessalonians 3:5, where “Lord” is generally viewed as a reference to a prayer to Christ (Morris, 250).

William Woodson commented on this passage saying that Paul:

“offers two requests, i.e., that Jesus and God the Father would/will ‘comfort your hearts’ and ‘stablish you in every good word and work.’ The point here has to do with the two Greek words translated ‘comfort’ and ‘stablish’ respectively. Both Greek verbs are aorist optative active 3rd person singular of the respective verbs. How can this be: plural subjects, singular verbs? It is clear to me that Paul specifically called on the Father and the Son in the prayer and presented them as so closely identified but distinct in personhood, that he can unite them in the two singular verbs that express the petition he makes for the Thessalonians (*Personal Note*, June 30, 2010).

1 Timothy 1:12-13

In his first epistle to Timothy, Paul uttered these words:

“I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent” (1 Timothy 1:12-13 ESV).

The words “I thank” represent the combination of a noun and verb. The noun is **charis**, “gratitude” or “thanks.” The verb is **echo**, in the present tense, which can represent either a sustained state or an intermittent activity. The Greek pronoun **to** is rendered “to him,” a dative case form that has Christ as the indirect object.

Robertson translates it: “I have gratitude to” (563). D. Edmond Hiebert notes that Paul’s gratitude “is directed toward” Christ (39).

This is not merely a statement **about** the apostle’s gratitude to the Lord, but an expression of thanksgiving **to** the Savior. How do you suppose this thanksgiving was conveyed **to the Lord**?

Gordon Fee has observed that while it usually is the case that Paul directs his prayers to God, here his gratitude is directed to Christ (Fee, 50; see also Earle, 354).

Revelation 5:8, 9, 13

In Revelation chapter 5 — the entire section of which is designed to exalt the glorified Christ — John records that the “twenty-four elders” fell down “before the Lamb.” They each had “golden bowls” which, symbolically, contained “incense.”

John informs the reader that this incense represented the “prayers of the saints” (Rev. 5:8). Clearly, these prayers were ascending to Christ.

Furthermore, in a song of worship, the Lord Jesus was directly addressed, “Worthy are you” (Rev. 5:9).

In verse 13, the entire creation offers praise to the Father and Son equally.

Hebrews 1

In the first chapter of the book of Hebrews, the sacred writer argues for the superiority of Christ over the angels (in pursuing his case that the New Covenant is superior to the Mosaic Covenant).

In presenting his cause, he quotes from several different psalms (songs) from the Old Testament. In some of these psalms, the author, by **divine inspiration**, directly addresses the Messiah in praise. See Psalms 2:9; 45:6ff; 102:25ff.

In Psalm 2, David praises the Anointed One with these words:

“You shall break them [Jehovah’s enemies] with a rod of iron; you shall dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel” (Psa. 2:9; cf. Rev. 2:27; 19:15).

In Psalm 45:6ff, the singer extols:

“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; and the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated iniquity. Therefore, God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows.”

Psalm 102, which is both a “prayer” (Psa. 102:1) and a song, the lyrics are:

“You, Lord [Christ], in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of your hands” (Psa. 102:25ff).

Incidentally, this demonstrates that one can **sing a prayer** (cf. Acts 16:25 Greek text).

Now here is the intriguing question. Since the design of Hebrews, chapter 1, is to establish the deity of Christ, would the inspired writer have employed arguments that involved inspired men singing praises (prayers) to Christ, if he knew that, in point of fact, **Christians are not permitted to praise the Lord in song? Or speak to him in prayer?**

Such would have undermined the writer’s entire case. Clearly, he took for granted the fact that praise to the Lord Jesus was an integral part of Christian worship.

Ephesians 5:18-19

To the saints in Ephesus Paul penned these words.

“And be not drunken with wine, wherein is riot, but be filled with the Spirit; speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:18-19).

To whom does the term “Lord” refer in this passage? While a few writers assign it to God, the Father, by far the most contend (on the basis of the most common use of “Lord” in the New Testament and the context) that the allusion is to Christ.

H. Balz & G. Schneider catalog twenty-six cases in Ephesians where **kurios** is used of Christ. In no instance, they contend, is **kurios** used of **Yahweh** (Jehovah) in this epistle (Vol. 2, 329-330).

Since verses 18-19 are in the form of a command, this would suggest that not only is singing to Christ permissible, it is absolutely **required!**

It is no compelling rebuttal that in a parallel passage (Col. 3:16) the singing is directed to “God.” Passages that are substantially parallel may vary in particulars and thus **supplement** one another.

These two texts, in concert, simply show that the worship that is directed to the Father is likewise appropriate for the Son (cf. Rev. 5:13b).

In the Ephesian text “Christ moves more into the foreground of worship” (Balz, Vol. 3, 393).

1 Corinthians 1:2

In Paul's epistle, commonly known as 1 Corinthians, he directed his message to "the church of God which is at Corinth" and also to "all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place" (1 Cor. 1:2).

Of special significance is the phrase "call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." The term "call" translates the Greek *epikaloumenois*, a present tense, middle voice participle. The root form is *epikaleo*, which signifies "to invoke, adore, worship" (Thayer, 239).

One authority says that to "call upon" the name of Christ is to "worship his divine majesty and implore his sovereign protection" (Spicq, 350). The present tense form suggests an ongoing action, and the middle voice underscores the strong individual interest of each person who reveres the Savior. (See also Robertson, 69).

J. W. Shepherd declared:

"To call upon is to invoke his aid. To call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord is to invoke his aid as the Christ, the Messiah" (Lipscomb & Shepherd, 21).

To suggest that one may **not** literally "call" upon the name of the Lord Jesus in light of this passage is wholly inconsistent with the text.

There are at least twelve examples of prayers to Christ in the New Testament, in contrast to only some nine times where the Lord is designated as "God."

Why is it that some have such a problem with the former, yet none with the latter?

Praise "About" or "To" Jesus

Finally, there is this matter. Is there validity for the position that the Christian may utter praise sentiments **about** the Lord, but not **to** the Savior, as some allege?

This view does not have the support of Scripture.

First, we have demonstrated already that there is ample authority for praising Christ directly — both in prayer and song.

Secondly, the scriptures do not make this fine distinction between "about Christ" and "to Christ" that some have suggested.

Let us illustrate this in two ways.

In writing to the Romans, Paul makes it clear that his preaching ministry to the Gentiles has been an act of worship. This is suggested by the use of certain Old Testament sacrificial metaphors employed to emphasize his "ministering" (see Rom. 15:16; cf. ASVfn) on behalf of the non-Jewish nations.

When one preaches about Christ, extolling the Redeemer, he is **worshipping him**.

Consider also the great song that Moses and the Israelites sang after Jehovah's conquest over Pharaoh's army (Ex. 15:1ff). In the opening portion of the song, the Lord is referenced in the third person (i.e., he is being spoken **about**; such terms as "he," "him," and "his" are employed).

However, beginning at verse 6, Jehovah is addressed in the second person — "your right hand," "your Excellency," etc. The Lord is being addressed **personally**.

Then the psalm concludes with a third person usage again (Ex. 15:18).

It becomes clear that there is no **qualitative** difference between speaking **about** the Lord in praise and speaking **to** him. Take a look at the well-known Psalm 23 in this light.

If, therefore, all songs that speak to Christ are to be expunged from our hymnals, as some are attempting to do, if consistent we must likewise remove those that speak **about** the Savior.

And thus we shall be totally silent with reference to the Son of God.

The Church Fathers

The most learned scholar ever produced in the Church of England was Joseph Bingham (1668-1723). His classic work, *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities*, has never been surpassed, according to McClintock & Strong (814).

In this famous historical work, Bingham introduces passage after passage from the early “church fathers” which demonstrate that the primitive church unhesitatingly offered worship to Christ, in both hymns and prayers (Bingham, I.576ff).

For example, Ignatius of Antioch (c. A.D. 35-107), in his letter to the Ephesian Christians, petitions them to pray to Christ on his behalf (*Epistle*, XX). At the conclusion of his work called *Paedagogus*, Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 150-213) offered a prayer to “Son and Father, both in One, O Lord” (III.XII). He also has a “Hymn to Christ the Saviour,” which contains these sentiments:

“Your simple children bring,
In one, that they may sing;
In solemn lays, Their hymns of praise,
With guileless lips to Christ their King.”

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 263-339), known as the “father of ecclesiastical history,” tells of the martyrdom of a Christian whose name was Porphyry, who was burned alive for the Cause. With his final words, as he approached the flames, he was “calling upon Christ the Son of God, his helper” (*Ecclesiastical History*, “Martyrs,” XI).

Some suggest that quotations of this nature are “insignificant.” When J. W. Shepherd quoted the patristic writers profusely in his classic work, *Handbook on Baptism*, were those citations significant?

A Historical Source

It is well-known also that one of the charges of the pagan writers against the early Christians was their worship of Christ.

Pliny (c. A.D. 62-113) wrote a letter to the Roman emperor Trajan, inquiring as to what should be done with the “Christians” in Bithynia. He stated that these people were “accustomed to meet before daybreak, and to recite a hymn antiphonally to Christ, as to a god” (*Epistle* X, 96).

Conclusion

In this writer’s judgment, the allegation that it is inappropriate to speak to Christ by means of song or prayer is a position that cannot be sustained in light of the available evidence.

Thomas B. Warren

“Let us thank our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for the love which He manifested in teaching us how to pray ... O, Jesus, Thou Lamb of God—how deeply grateful we are for Thy love which resulted in the gift of Thy life for us! Help us, we pray to ‘see’ every day Jesus, the Lamb who is the Lion. Help us to pray as Thou hast taught us to pray!” (Warren, 201-202).

Wendell Winkler

“May we pray to Jesus? Let me tell you something about that, brethren: you be very careful about the position you espouse on that, and I’m going to tell you why. We’ve got brethren that do nothing but hear a few speeches on the lecture program, and then they start to go out and mouth it. We need to be careful about that. Primarily, our prayers are to God in the name of Christ. But when brethren become so adamant that they say that we cannot pray to Jesus, we need to be careful. Jesus is deity. If we’re not careful, we can take some absurd position over here and even reflect on his deity. I don’t have much sympathy for that kind of business.

“I’m going to tell you something that’s a little personal, but I think is illustrative. Can’t we thank Jesus during the Lord’s Supper? When I get through with my primary Lord’s Supper meditation, I conclude with a prayer, and here’s my prayer: ‘Father, I thank thee for thine unspeakable gift; and Jesus, I thank thee for being willing to die for me.’ Is there anything wrong with that? Tell me something is wrong with that” (Polishing the Pulpit).

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Matthew 6:9; John 16:23; Ephesians 5:19; James 5:14; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; John 5:23; John 16:17; Acts 1:24, 7:59, 9:13; Psalm 18:3; John 10:30; 2 Thessalonians 2:4; John 1:1; Acts 20:28; Hebrews 1:8; Matthew 2:2, 14:33; Hebrews 1:6; Revelation 5:7; 1 Timothy 2:5; John 14:14; Matthew 10:1; Mark 16:17; Colossians 3:17; Hebrews 13:15; 1 Peter 4:11; Acts 1:24; Acts 1:2; Acts 1:6, 21; Acts 7:59-60; Acts 7:59; 1 Corinthians 16:22; Revelation 22:20; 1 Corinthians 12:8; 1 Corinthians 12; 2 Corinthians 12:8; 2 Corinthians 12:9; 1 Thessalonians 3:11; 1 Thessalonians 2:16-17, 3:5; 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17; 1 Thessalonians 3:5; 1 Timothy 1:12-13; Revelation 5:8, 9, 13; Revelation 5:8; Revelation 5:9; Hebrews 1; Psalm 2:9, 45:6; Psalm 2; Psalm 2:9; Revelation 2:27, 19:15; Psalm 45:6; Psalm 102; Psalm 102:1; Psalm 102:25; Acts 16:25; Ephesians 5:18-19; Colossians 3:16; Revelation 5:13; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Romans 15:16; Exodus 15:1; Exodus 15:18; Psalm 23

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