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Prayer is Worship

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The New Testament church was dedicated to prayer. In fact, prayer is so essential to the spiritual health and well-being of the children of God, it is not only to be enjoined during the corporate worship of the church on the first day of the week, but prayer is to be exercised continually, Paul urging Christians to "pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:17, 18). Accordingly, the worship of the church involves prayer. From the day the church began on Pentecost, even until the present, prayer has been a constant companion of the church in worship (Acts 2:42).

In the same manner that worship is directed only to God (Deity), prayer should only invoke the name of Deity. We do not pray to angels, or to the departed dead, but prayer is addressed to God (Luke 6:12; Romans 15:30). When His Jewish brethren asked Jesus about prayer, He gave

them a model prayer opening with the words, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name" (Matthew 6:9). Since the singular name of Deity is shared equally by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19), prayer is properly petitioned to all three Persons of the Godhead. It is unfortunate that many within the church have failed to realize the scriptural truth concerning the unity of the Godhead, and that knowing God, i.e., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one Deity, is an essential doctrine of the New Testament church (II Thessalonians 1:3-8).

Too many in the church are of the opinion that only the first Person of the Godhead may be addressed in prayer. However, bowing in prayer to God, we address the fullness of Deity. We must understand that even when prayer is addressed solely to the name "Father," the petition is not excluding the Son and Holy Spirit. Jehovah God is the "Father" of humanity in the sense that He is the Creator of mankind, having fashioned man in His own "image" and "likeness" (Genesis 1:26, 27). Yet the plural pronouns of this primeval declaration are indicative of all three Persons of the Godhead being involved in the creation of man.

As Paul asserted, "He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth...in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His offspring.' Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man" (Acts 17:26-28). Luke's genealogy of Jesus concludes with "the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God" (Luke 3:38). The term "God" is not used in the Scriptures as a synonym for the first Person of the Godhead, but encompasses all three divine Persons of Deity.

In that God is one essence (Mark 1:29; John 10:30), and God created mankind, all three Persons of Deity are properly understood in association with the term "Father." This is why the Word who became flesh also wears the name "Eternal Father" (Isaiah 9:6), and the Holy Spirit is personally involved in the new birth (John 3:5). The fullness of the Godhead may properly be addressed as Father, for God is the Father of mankind, including both the physical race of men through Adam, as well as the new spiritual race of men who are born again through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:12-21; I Corinthians 15:20-22). James Coffman offered excellent insight into the model prayer given by Jesus, stating, "God is man's Father because He created him, sustains him, and provides all that man needs. In this petition, God's Fatherhood is presented on a higher level, namely that of the new birth" (1974, p. 79).

Under the Old Covenant God is primarily addressed in prayer as Lord, i.e., Jehovah (Psalm 3, 6, 7, etc.), Great or Mighty God (Nehemiah 8:6; Jeremiah 32:18), Creator or Maker (Psalm 95:6), King (Psalm 5:2; 44:4), but most frequently, prayers were addressed simply to God (Psalm 4:1; 43; cf. Luke 18:10-14). The Law made servants of men, but in Christ Jesus, men are accounted more than servants, we are in every sense "the offspring of God" (Acts 17:29), crying out as sons, "Abba! Father!" (Galatians 4:6). For this reason, Jesus began teaching His disciples to pray differently than they were predisposed to do (Matthew 6:5-15). Yet a significant difference also exists in the

manner in which Christ Himself often prayed. Whereas the disciples were taught to pray "Our Father," Christ prayed uniquely as the only begotten Son, invoking the name of God with supreme intimacy, saying, "My Father" (Mathew 26:39, 42).

Regarding the formal opening of Christ's model prayer, William Shedd wrote in his esteemed work, *Dogmatic Theology*, "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 any man deliberately and consciously intends 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)" (1971, pp. 306-7).

The Pharisees claimed to worship only God as their Father (John 8:41), but Jesus explained how they were not the sons of God, affirming they were in fact sons of the devil because they refused to love Jesus and listen to His words – the words of God (John 8:42-47). It is not possible to worship the Father without worshiping Christ, yet we have those among us today – even in the church – claiming that Christ may not be personally addressed in either prayer or songs of praise.

The old beloved hymn *Hand in Hand with Jesus* has been deemed "unscriptural" by one poor misguided soul because the second stanza avows that "Jesus heard and answered prayer." If Jesus does not hear and respond to our prayer, in what sense does He operate as our intercessor (Romans 8:34), Mediator (I Timothy 2:5), and Advocate (I John 2:1)? In order to qualify as a mediator, one must be equally related, equally interested, and equally identified with both parties he is serving. Jesus Christ is the only One who qualifies for this important work, for He, alone, is the God-man. As Mediator, He must hear from both sides, or else His mediation is biased. Furthermore, who ever heard of a client that was barred from speaking to his advocate or intercessor?

The modern day Pharisee still seeks to honor the Father without honoring the Son, but Jesus has forthrightly declared such to be absolutely impossible (John 5:23). Is prayer to be offered only to God the Father to the exclusion of the Son and Spirit? Is it wrong under all circumstances and in all instances to petition Jesus Christ for help or to thank Him personally for salvation? When seeking authorization for Christian activities, the central question must always be: what do the Scriptures say? (cf. Romans 4:3).

In John 14:13-14, Christ, speaking with reference to the time following His ascension, promised the apostles, "whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask **Me** anything in My name, I will do it" (emp.added). Some English versions omit the pronoun "**Me**" in verse 14, e.g., KJV, but the oldest and most reliable Greek manuscripts contain the pronoun, and renowned Greek scholar Bruce Metzger affirms, "The word **me** is adequately supported" (1971, p. 244). This is evidence supplied by Christ's own pronouncement that the apostles were duly authorized to beseech Christ in prayer.

In fulfillment, the New Testament contains many examples of prayers being addressed to both Christ and the Holy Spirit. When the apostles were seeking to replace the apostolic office that Judas surrendered, two men were deemed qualified candidates, Barsabbas and Mathias. In order to place the best man, prayer was offered, beseeching, "Thou, Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show us which one of these two Thou hast chosen to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place" (Acts 1:24, 25). The pertinent question is this: who is the "Lord" to whom these men petition the selection?

The most reasonable answer is this prayer is addressed to the Lord Jesus Christ. In commenting on this verse, J. W. McGarvey opined that the disciples were unwilling to make the choice "because they thought it proper that the Lord, who had chosen Judas, should also choose his successor" (1863, Acts 1:24). Albert Barnes gives a lengthy explanation, commenting: "This was a matter pertaining especially to the church which the Lord Jesus had redeemed, and to his own arrangement in regard to it. He had chosen the apostles; he had given their commission; he had fixed their number; and what is worthy of special remark here, he had been the companion of the very men, and knew their qualifications for their work. If the apostles ever called on the Lord Jesus after his ascension, this was the case in which they would be likely to do it...And in this important matter of ordaining a new apostle to be a witness for Jesus Christ, nothing was more natural than that they should address him, though bodily absent, as they would assuredly have done if he were present. And if on this occasion they did actually address Christ, then two things clearly follow. First, that it is proper to render him Divine homage, agreeably to the uniform declarations of the Scriptures...Secondly, he must be Divine. To none other but God can religious homage be rendered" (1976, Acts 1:24).

The Psalmist long ago afforded a view of such homage being rendered to the Son, declaring, "Worship the Lord with reverence, and rejoice with trembling. Do homage to the Son, lest He become angry, and you perish in the way, for His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all those who take refuge in Him!" (Psalm 2:12). This is evidence that all men are to worship Christ, for the command "Do homage" simply means to "offer reverential worship." The title "Lord" was intimately attached to Christ by the apostles as all New Testament students are aware. During the first gospel sermon, Peter exclaimed that Jesus had been made "both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

These things being true, it is not surprising to hear Steven (not an apostle) invoke the name of Jesus Christ in prayer, saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" (Acts 7:59); further beseeching Him, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:60). Here is an indisputable prayer addressed to Jesus as God, and it comes at the most solemn of circumstances in which it could be offered, viz., at the point of death. If Steven had not perceived Jesus to be wholly God, could it ever be imagined that he would entrust his very soul into His hands? This incident satisfies every condition stated in Psalm 2:12 concerning the due reverence and safety afforded by the Son.

More than twelve prayers could be cited that address Jesus, and this number does not include the benedictions that are frequently written either at the opening or the close of many Epistles. Each and every benediction is a prayer, invoking the Person (or Persons) petitioned to provide a source of comfort or help on behalf of others. Paul closes many of his letters with words precisely similar, e.g., "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all" (I Corinthians 16:23; cf. Galatians 6:18; Philippians 4:23; etc.). These benedictions are prayers requesting grace from Jesus Christ. In closing the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul petitions all three Persons of the Godhead, requesting, "The grace of Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all" (II Corinthians 13:14). Prayer is only addressed to God, and the Bible evinces unequivocally the identity of the Persons constituting the nature of God.

The historical record of the patristic fathers provides evidence that the early church followed the commands and examples given by the apostles in this matter. One of the greatest works ever assembled on church history was compiled by Joseph Bingham (1668-1723). In his famous volume, *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities*, he introduces quote after quote from the early "church fathers" which demonstrates the church of the first few centuries unhesitatingly offered worship to Christ in the form of both prayers and songs. One of the earliest examples is found in a letter written by Ignatius of Antioch (c. A.D. 35-107) to the Ephesians, requesting they pray to Christ on his behalf (Epistle, XX). Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 150-213) concludes one of his writings with a prayer addressed to the "Son and Father, both in One, O Lord" (*Paedagogus*, 3:7).

Addressing the Divine Nature appropriately, our prayers must be uttered in harmony with the will of God (I John 5:14). It is wrong, therefore, to petition God in our current day for things like miracles (the miraculous age ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and the completion of the written word in A.D. 70) or for the salvation of the lost independent of their obedience to the gospel. The church must learn the will of God by studying the Scriptures, offering up prayers which are in accordance with the divine will. Christ left us an excellent example of praying according to the will of the Father (Luke 22:42). Even in hardships and times of great despair, we must realize that the will of God is working in the lives of His true servants to accomplish the most for His eternal purpose, bringing glory and honor to the name of Jesus Christ through His work of reconciliation of fallen man (Ephesians 3:8-11; Colossians 1:9-22).

When the church assembles for worship, it is the male Christians who are authorized to lead the congregation in prayer. Paul declared, "Therefore I want the men in every place to pray" (I Timothy 2:8). He continued by instructing the women to receive instructions "with entire submissiveness," remaining quiet under the authority of the men (2:11, 12). Since it is clear from his address to the Corinthian church that women may pray in the assembly (I Corinthians 11:5), it becomes obvious that while the apostle instructs that women may pray, their prayer is made in silence; it is Christian men who are to lead the congregation in audible prayer (cf. I Corinthians 14:34, 35).

While correcting the abuse of spiritual gifts that were temporarily available to the infant church through the hands of the apostles (I Corinthians 13:8-13; Acts 8:14-18), Paul mentions the necessity of praying with the proper attitude and with words that are intelligible. Prayer was a part of the worship of the church, but Paul insisted the verbal prayers must be capable of being understood that the church may be strengthened and edified (I Corinthians 14:15-19). This indicates the need for speaking clear, audible prayers. Mumbled or whispered prayers in the church would be no better than the unknown languages Paul refuted.

The church of Christ must pray in worship. Every individual needs to pray. We need to pray fervently and persistently, making our petitions and requests known to God. The church needs to pray with great reverence and respect, beseeching God for spiritual growth, for wisdom in understanding his will, for those who are lost or who have fallen away, for those with whom we are studying, for our elders, deacons, and ministers, for our own weaknesses, for our own forgiveness, and for the providence of God to use each of us as is best for the kingdom of Christ. Through frequent and persistent prayer, the church lays hold of God's highest willingness to bless those who truly depend upon Him. In the troubled world in which we live, it is always the right time to pray.

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