

TEACH US TO PRAY
Prayer in the Bible and the World

edited by
D. A. CARSON

*Also produced by the Faith and Church Study
Unit of the Theological Commission of the World
Evangelical Fellowship:*

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND THE CHURCH:
Text and Context

THE CHURCH IN THE BIBLE AND THE WORLD:
An International Study



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Preface

This is the third volume to be produced by the Faith and Church Study Unit of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship. The first two (also published by The Paternoster Press and Baker Book House) dealt respectively with hermeneutical issues relating to the doctrine of the church (*Biblical Interpretation and the Church*), and with the doctrine itself (*The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study*).

As was the case with the first two volumes, so also the preparation of this one proceeded according to a set plan. Members of the Study Unit agreed to contribute essays on the subjects represented by the chapters in this book, and then meet together to go over the results. The papers were circulated, and the meeting took place in November 1986. Discussion and mutual criticism were interspersed with sustained periods of prayer. Detailed notes of the discussions were kept, and summaries went out to each contributor. The papers were eventually revised and returned to me, some as early as the Spring of 1987, others not until the Spring of 1988. The papers were then edited and prepared for the press.

For various reasons, three contributors were unable to attend the meeting: Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, Dr Tite Tiénou and Mr David Wang. Some contributors wrote under exceedingly difficult conditions. Eight of us are not living in the land of our birth. Special thanks go to Dr David Peterson, who undertook two chapters in the book. Although notes of personal thanks to individual members of the Study Unit might be invidious, since all contributed considerable time and energy to the project, I cannot fail to mention three or four members who were especially diligent in sending in written critiques of the various papers, and in offering many useful suggestions for the improvement of the work.

The meeting in November 1986 again took place in Cambridge, England, in the excellent facilities of Tyndale House, so generously put at our disposal. Members and friends of Eden Baptist Church provided most of the hospitality, and one of the elders, Mr Stan Blake, saw to the logistics. Without their help, the convening of this Study Unit would have been much less joyful a task than it was.

At this writing, the projected topics for the next two meetings of the Study Unit, slated, respectively, for November 1988 and November 1990, are 'Justification' and 'Worship'.

Once again it should be made clear that any profits from the three books in this series will be put aside to facilitate the translation and publication of any part of these books in areas of the world where the church has little money. Applications from recognised Christian institutions may be made in the first instance to the Publications Working Group of the World Evangelical Fellowship.

I cannot too strongly stress that the earnest desire of all who so kindly contributed to this volume is that these essays should prove more than a Christian theology of prayer, more indeed than an attempt to understand Christian prayer within the framework of a world-wide debate on the meaning of 'spirituality'. Certainly this book attempts to take the first steps toward a theology of prayer; certainly it seeks to engage other perspectives firmly and courteously. But our intention is that it should also serve as a call to pray. For what good is yet more talking and writing about prayer, if there is not more and better praying?

Soli Deo gloria.

D. A. CARSON

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Learning to Pray

D. A. CARSON

One of the most startling truths about prayer is this: prayer can be taught and learnt. Once the disciples have enjoyed the opportunity to observe Jesus at prayer, they ask him to teach them how to pray, as John the Baptist once taught his disciples to pray. The Master does not rebuke them for their impertinence; still less does he deride the *naïveté* that dares to think prayer can be taught. Instead, he provides them with a model prayer, designed less as a piece of ecclesiastical liturgy than as a teaching device to foster their own praying and provide them with a standard (Luke 11:1ff.).

In this light, one of the more useful things we might have attempted is a systematic and practical exposition of all the prayers (or at least the major ones) found in the Scripture. If the Word of God is to reform our lives, it should also reform our prayers. All that is important about prayers can be found in the prayers of Scripture: appropriate petitions, the ground for approaching God, the kind of reasoning that is used, the mix of petition, praise, intercession, adoration, the variety of human contexts and postures, the range of emotions, the nature of fervency, the connections between prayer and faith, and much more. But others have attempted such expositions, and it seemed better in this book to focus on the *theology* of prayer — that is, not only on the biblical prayers themselves, but on the connections between their immediate meaning and the rest of the revelation of God in the Bible. To be sure, this ensures that there will be some close study of certain prayers. But there will be something else: an attempt to understand these prayers in the contexts in which they are found, and to link these findings together. What place does prayer have in the Old Testament narrative? In the writings of, say, Paul? And how should these various strands be woven together into a synthesis that is faithful to the Bible and comprehensive enough to lend insight and power? How should praying, distinctively Christian praying, be tied to a robust Trinitarian faith?

These are the kinds of questions addressed in chaps. 2–8 of this book, culminating in the synthesis of Edmund Clowney. Thought there is in these chapters an implicit (and sometimes explicit) call to prayer, that call does not turn on energetic manipulation, but on the power of models and on exposure to biblical truth that will automatically prove attractive and compelling to every Christian who wants to grow in holiness and (however imperfectly) to think God's thoughts after him.

One cannot long discuss prayer without probing the much larger and currently popular subject of spirituality. But 'spirituality' turns out to be a notoriously slippery word. The government of the Republic of China can speak quite eloquently of 'spiritual culture', but 'spiritual' in such a context has nothing to do with the Holy Spirit, nor with the Bible, but with psychological well-being and aesthetic values. Even if we restrict ourselves to the dominant world religions, 'spirituality' turns out on inspection to mean very different things in different contexts. To some, it has to do with an ill-defined but intense mysticism; to others, it is bound up with the pursuit of transcendence in a monistic universe where God and the creation cannot be differentiated; to still others, it is a state of mental dissociation achieved by breathing and other ritualistic disciplines that have gained religious value.

But if prayer cannot be discussed at much depth without probing spirituality, it becomes important to state what is distinctive about biblical notions of spirituality. In the present work, this is attempted by frank, courteous attempts to outline the meaning of 'spirituality' in various world religions. Because a non-Christian religion may operate out of a world-view diametrically opposed to our own (*e.g.* Buddhism), or may be enormously diverse and syncretistic (*e.g.* Hinduism), contributors have on occasion gone out of their way to work with definitions of 'spirituality' that are far removed from decisively Christian approaches. This flexibility is meant to be heuristic: it is more than mere courtesy, it is an honest attempt to read other religions on their own terms, and to discover in them what is well preserved of God's general revelation, even if as Christians we find we must return again and again to Jesus Christ as the touchstone of authentic spirituality.

But some readers who may sympathise with treatments of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam may be offended by our decision to include an Evangelical evaluation of the spirituality of Roman Catholicism. We offer no apology. Very often it is those closest to us who must (both for their sake and ours) be most sharply differentiated from us. More important, contemporary Roman Catholicism is extraordinarily diverse. Members of the World Evangelical Fellowship, the organisation that has sponsored this study, are found in most countries of the world, and their experience of Roman Catholicism is highly diverse. But it would be highly irresponsible to fail to respond to those forms of Catholicism that tend to predominate when Catholicism is (at least nominally) the primary agent in shaping the entire culture in which the Evangelical finds himself. The assessment offered by Emilio Núñez of Catholicism's approach to spirituality is decisively shaped by current realities in Latin America; Christians living in India will see things a bit differently. Meanwhile the dominant ecclesiastical voices of the Roman Church in the USA and in Holland bear closest resemblance to classic liberal Protestantism.

There is still another reason for including this chapter. Evangelicalism in much of the world is going through a process of fragmentation that is rapidly losing a spirituality based on the Word. The Word has been so poorly handled, and societal and ecclesiastical pressures have been so strong, that many who wrap themselves in the term 'Evangelical' have chosen to pursue a spirituality of aesthetics, a spirituality of experience, a spirituality of liturgy, a spirituality of mysticism. There is much to be learned from all of these traditions; there is even more to be lost by abandoning what I have called a

spirituality of the Word. If this essay helps to focus some of these points for a few readers, its inclusion is fully warranted.

If Christian prayer and spirituality can be sharpened up by thinking through what it is not, it is more greatly enriched by tapping the resources and experience of the church world-wide. Chapters 13 through 16 attempt to summarise some of the lessons that can be learnt from the prayer habits of the church in parts of the world not all that familiar to many readers of this book. The volume and vitality of prayer in places where the church has had to struggle for existence is a damning indictment of the relative prayerlessness in large swathes of the Western church. But that does not mean there are no dangers or aberrations in the prayer movements that have sprung up in many countries, and contributors have usually proved sufficiently dispassionate, self-critical and frankly biblical to isolate these for us.

In some parts of the world the church is relatively young. In others, including most Western countries, it has a long history. In an attempt to draw something of value from the Western tradition, it was felt that the wisest course would be to tap that tradition at its strength. That meant a distinctly historical paper, for prayer and biblically-informed spirituality are not strong suits of the modern church in the West. But this has proved an advantage: it provides a reason for incorporating in this book some of the findings of Roy Williams on the Puritans, that much maligned group of Christians who above all things were characterised by the desire not only to know the Word of God but to do it, not only to study the Word of God but to apply it to all of life and thought. It is hard to read this chapter without repenting before God for the carelessness and apathy that have squandered so rich a heritage of prayer, of experiential knowledge of God.

Finally, the last three essays in the book are frankly and immediately pastoral. The first addresses the place of prayer in the training of Christian leaders. The last two are moving instances of spiritually-minded self-disclosure — testimonies if you like. If we learn to pray by studying the prayers of Scripture and by seeking to emulate them, we may also learn to pray by listening to senior Christians who have been praying for many years. Paul can exhort young Christians to imitate him, because he imitates Christ. If we learn lessons in prayer from those who have learned to pray in accordance with the Word of God, we shall not go far wrong. And if these last three essays required the least amount of research, they doubtless required the greatest amount of candour and spiritual maturity. The editor joins all subsequent readers of these chapters in profound gratitude.