

## 13. Paul's mission and prayer

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The topic assigned me in this essay combines two themes close to the heart of Peter O'Brien: mission and prayer. In both cases – mission and prayer – Peter has displayed a salutary mix of personal commitment and academic focus. To take the domain of mission first: Peter served for a decade as a missionary in India, and continues an interest both in evangelism and in the mission of the church around the world, exemplified not least in his active participation in study groups sponsored by the World Evangelical Fellowship. Academically, his 1993 volume, the fruit of Moore College Annual Lectures, was in large part an examination of certain mission aspects of Paul's theology.<sup>1</sup> Occasional essays attest his deep interest in the subject<sup>2</sup> and more recently he has co-authored a volume likely to become a standard textbook on the theme of mission in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> But those of us privileged to know him also recognize in him a man of prayer. Not only have we prayed with him; we have read the published form of his dissertation on the introductory thanksgivings in Paul's letters,<sup>4</sup> and noted his return to the subject in various dictionary articles<sup>5</sup> and in the occasional strategic essay.<sup>6</sup>

### **Introductory thanksgivings in Paul**

In some ways Peter's dissertation built on the seminal work of P. Schubert.<sup>7</sup> But while Schubert focused primary attention on the form of Paul's thanksgiving periods and on their ostensible Hellenistic parallels, Peter modified

the formal analysis but little, criticized Schubert for his focus on Hellenistic sources, isolated various Jewish parallels, and, above all, examined the function and purpose of Paul's introductory thanksgivings. He demonstrated that they are carefully wrought theological pieces that introduce themes that would figure in the main body of the letter, emphasizing the apostolic pastoral care displayed in these sections. Judging by the many positive and sometimes penetrating reviews, Peter's work convinced large numbers of scholars.<sup>8</sup> Among the many important points he made is that thanksgiving for Paul is never the primary thing: it is always a response to God's goodness in creation and in the gospel. Indeed, Peter made that the primary point of his 1980 essay,<sup>9</sup> opening it with the much quoted words of Deichgräber: "The praise of the church is the response to God's act of salvation ... praise is never the first word, but always occurs in the second place ... It is never *prima actio*, but always *reactio*, *reactio* to God's saving activity in creation and redemption, to his orderly working in nature and history."<sup>10</sup> That observation enables us to sidle a little closer to the linked themes of this essay. For if thanksgiving and redemption are linked, surely (we might think) we cannot be far from the twin themes of this essay, namely, prayer and mission.

Yet at a merely formal level of analysis, that is not what we find. Of the petitions in Paul's thanksgiving periods, none is directly related to mission. They have a great deal to do with what might be called the ongoing fruitfulness of the gospel, that is, Christian maturation, but very little to do with what we commonly mean by mission today. The comprehensive survey of Paul's intercessory prayers provided by Wiles a quarter of a century ago<sup>11</sup> comes to similar conclusions. Although there are (as we shall see) occasional exhortations to pray for Paul in the context of his apostolic ministry, and although almost all the prayers are in one fashion or another gospel-related, on first reflection it is surprising that there is little intercession for the lost, little evidence of systematic praying for the conversion of men and women, few examples of what we might call mission praying – that is, praying specifically for the outreach of the gospel, not least in cross-cultural contexts.<sup>12</sup> Paul's own prayer life is extensive and intense. He can pray not only for Christians whom he knows, but for Christians and churches of whom he has only heard, wrestling and agonizing in prayer for them (e.g. Eph. 1:15–19). But so far as the explicit evidence goes, it is hard to find evidence of similar intensity in prayers for the lost, even though Paul understands that God has made him an apostle to the Gentiles. The closest approximation to that sort of intensity for the lost is in Paul's agonized supplication for his fellow-Jews – and here, of course, there are special themes operating.

Discussion did not end with Peter's dissertation, of course. It would be tedious to trace all the subtle developments that have taken place since its publication. In some ways, the most interesting essays on Paul's thanksgivings and intercessions have grappled with the relationships between such units and the epistolary form – whether in fairly formal categories<sup>13</sup> or by trying to tie Paul's prayers to many, many elements, both formal and material, of Paul's letter structures.<sup>14</sup> A recent essay argues that there is no sense in which the introductory thanksgivings in Paul's letters are grounded in the genre of letters contemporaneous with the apostles: they are *sui generis*, and the ostensible parallels are two or three centuries out of date.<sup>15</sup> If this position stands, it means that all the generic studies that find subtle meanings anchored in genre-specific details must be scrapped. But this position has itself come under strenuous criticism. Reed argues that some useful parallels are available, and in any case the attempt (and failure) to find virtually identical parallels is methodologically flawed, owing to the obvious flexibility of epistolary formulae.<sup>16</sup> In other words, Paul's introductory thanksgivings have sufficient formal parallels with thanksgiving formulas in Hellenistic literature that one may usefully speak of epistolary conventions in this regard – even though Paul also has 'an ability to alter convention for his own communicative needs'.<sup>17</sup>

But as interesting as these and other developments are, they do not directly help us to answer this question: why is it that Paul's prayers, of various kinds, are so infrequently linked directly to mission? Or, to put it more concretely, why is it that Jesus can tell his disciples to 'ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field' (Matt. 9:38), while nothing quite similar surfaces in Paul? Why, on the evidence of Paul's epistles, does the title of my assigned essay seem somewhat anomalous? At one level, of course, such questions demand that we reflect on a silence – always a risky business. But at least a few things may be said.

### Paul and missionary prayer

For purposes of organization it may be easiest to reduce these reflections to four points.

1. Countless writers have remarked on the occasional nature of Paul's letters. All sides recognize that his literary remains do not have the form of a well-ordered systematic theology, but of letters – letters which for the most part have been called forth by specific exigencies. This means that their themes and priorities are in substantial measure constrained by the occasions which in God's providence called them forth. At the very least, this

calls for caution and attentive listening. What Dunn says about our efforts to reconstruct in full Paul's evangelistic preaching could be said as well about our efforts to reconstruct in full Paul's missionary praying:

Paul's allusive taken-for-granted references include much of the faith already common to Paul and his readers. This is why it is so difficult to reconstruct Paul's evangelistic preaching – simply because he did not feel it necessary to repeat it in letters to his converts. Instead he could refer to it briefly or allude to it by using brief formulae – usually summarized as 'kerygmatic tradition'. He did so knowing, we may confidently assume, that even such brief formulations would evoke knowledge of a substantial range of basic teaching which he had passed on, when he preached to his readers the gospel of Jesus Christ and established them as a new church. Such allusions should not be evaluated simply by the brevity of their reference. To reconstruct Paul's theology as measured by the proportions of his explicit treatment would certainly result in a statement whose disproportions would have been pointed out at once by both Paul and the recipients of his letters. We do not 'weigh' Paul's theology simply by counting the number of words he used.<sup>18</sup>

So we may agree that the full place Paul gave to prayer in relation to his mission – indeed, to the Christian mission – cannot be adequately assessed by merely counting up the rather sparse references where he does something like encourage his readers to pray for him in his gospel-preaching apostolic ministry. A more substantive analysis is called for.

Nevertheless, before we reflect on some elements of such an analysis, it is surely fair to conclude that the occasional nature of Paul's letters must not be seen as a disadvantage. We must not succumb to secret resentment that the Pauline deposit did not come down to us in some literary form other than occasional letters. Occasional letters have the power to bring the readers into play, to involve them, to force a kind of interaction with the apostolic writer as if he were present with them – and in few domains is this more important than in the domains of thanksgiving and intercession.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, all Christians recognize the canonical function of Scripture, that is, Scripture as *kanōn*. If Scripture functions as 'canon' for us in our Christian priorities and practices, then although it is right to recognize the occasional nature of Paul's letters, it is wrong to hide behind their occasional nature so that every time our practices do not square with them we attribute the difference to the occasional nature of the apostolic documents and thus leave unchanged whatever it is we are doing (or not doing).

In short, while we recognize that the occasional nature of Paul's writings has a bearing on our subject (in part it accounts for the relative paucity of references that directly link prayer and mission), and while we recognize that Christians bound by Scripture will want to listen attentively to other scriptural voices (e.g. the exhortation to ask the Lord of the harvest to send forth workers), we infer that Paul's relative silence on this subject has something to teach us.

2. Before reflecting on the few passages where Paul directly links prayer and mission, it is critically important to observe three other prayer-related themes in Paul. Their relevance will become obvious in a moment. *First*, the apostle insists that all people everywhere *ought* to give thanks to God continually, and *ought* to offer him the praise that is his due. Our failures in this respect mark not only our wilful rebellion but the measure of our alienation and lostness: 'For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles' (Rom. 1:21–23). Thanklessness is thus bound up with idolatry. It is a wretched characteristic of the 'last days' (2 Tim. 3:1–5), even though it was already displayed in the murmuring of the rebellious Israelite ancestors (Exod. 15:1–18, 24) and ultimately prevented an entire generation from entering the Promised Land (Num. 14:1–4, 22–23). Small wonder, then, that Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians to do everything without complaining (Phil. 2:14 – i.e. without murmuring: *panta poieite chōris gongysmōn*), and warns the Corinthian believers, 'We should not test the Lord, as some of [the Israelites] did – and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did – and were killed by the destroying angel' (1 Cor. 10:9–10).

*Second*, Paul provides a converse emphasis on the place of thanksgiving in the life of the Christian. If prayerlessness and ingratitude are linked with idolatry, it cannot be surprising that Paul tells believers to 'pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus' (1 Thess. 5:17–18; cf. Col. 3:15–17). 'Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Eph. 5:19–20). Over against 'obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place', there must be 'thanksgiving' (Eph. 5:4).

None of this can be understood apart from the Bible's story-line, the narrative of redemption, the account of the acts of God culminating in the coming and death and resurrection of Jesus, and the response that is both

demanding of and (ideally) characteristic of God's redeemed people. As Peter O'Brien has finely put it:

While the grounds for the giving of thanks in Paul's letters are manifold, the great emphasis falls upon the mighty work of God in Christ bringing salvation through the gospel. God's activity in creation is, on occasion, mentioned as a basis for the expression of gratitude (cf. Rom. 1:21 and note the thanksgivings said over food). But the majority of the Pauline references are in the context of God's grace given in Christ (1 Cor. 1:4; and cf. 2 Cor. 9:15 with 8:9). Even when gratitude is expressed for the faith, love and hope of the Christian readers these are not to be understood as the inherent achievements of the believers but are regularly related to the prior work of God in leading men and women to himself through the gospel. And because Paul's apostolic labours are intimately bound up with that saving activity among Gentiles, he is able to give thanks for his calling as an apostle to them (1 Tim. 1:12).<sup>20</sup>

O'Brien adds that thanksgiving 'was almost a synonym for the Christian life'.<sup>21</sup>

*Third*, for exactly the same reasons Paul's intercessory prayers – whether the reports of his prayers, or his 'prayer-wishes', or his exhortations to pray – are very largely bound up with the gospel, as even the most cursory study of such passages as Romans 15:30–33; Ephesians 1:15–23; 3:14–21; Philippians 1:9–11; Colossians 1:9–14; and 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 demonstrates. Moreover, most (though not all: cf. Rom. 15:30–33) of these prayers are for the spiritual maturation of believers, for their growth in love and obedience to the gospel and their perseverance to the end. Gospel concerns shape Paul's priorities in prayer, and their applicability to those reading his letters lies first of all in what *they* need (which returns us to the 'occasional' nature of Paul's correspondence). In the words of Wiles:

While immediate concerns did shape the prayers, they were grounded in and directed by the gospel of Christ. It was the salvation events of the gospel that lay behind Paul's apostolic commission and guided his ministry. So too his prayers were made possible only because of the love of God revealed in the gospel; by this their contours were guided and their range immeasurably deepened and extended. All his requests must be according to the will of God revealed in Christ.<sup>22</sup>

3. It is within this framework, then, that Paul conceives of his own mission, and encourages prayer for it. What forgives and transforms 'lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious ... those who kill their fathers or mothers ... adulterers and perverts ... slave-traders and liars and perjurers' is 'the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me' (1 Tim. 1:9–11; cf. 1:12). In the passage that provides the most explicit link between mission and prayer, Paul shows he is under no illusion that, apostle or not, he needs prayer and God's answers to such prayer if he is to prove faithful in his mission: 'Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should' (Eph. 6:19–20; cf. 1 Cor. 16:9). But perhaps what is most striking about this prayer is what immediately precedes it. Paul has just told his readers to don 'the full armour of God', ending with the exhortation: 'And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints' (6:18). It is at this point that he adds, 'Pray also for me ...'

From this flow of thought we must infer at least two things.

*First*, while Paul encourages prayers for himself and his gospel mission, he does not conceive of such prayers as belonging to a separate category, a missionary category. The prayers of Paul's Christian readers should be all of a piece, part of what it means to 'be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power' and to 'stand against the devil's schemes' (Eph. 6:10–11). They are part and parcel of being spiritually alert, of praying constantly for all the saints (6:19). The way that Paul refers to the good news he preaches – he wants to 'make known the mystery of the gospel' – inevitably calls to mind his earlier allusions to 'mystery' in this epistle, especially 1:9 and 3:2–13, the latter of which is profoundly tied to Paul's grasp of the significance of his apostolic and gospel ministry.<sup>23</sup> This is weightier than what some of us mean by 'gospel preaching' or 'mission' or the like. It is so declaring the whole counsel of God that now, at the end of the age, the church comes into existence and discloses 'the manifold wisdom of God' (3:10), making Jews and Gentiles alike one people and one body (3:6), declaring the good news which in certain respects 'was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's apostles and prophets' (3:5) since 'for ages past' it 'was kept hidden in God' (3:9). Paul's ministry is thus 'according to [God's] eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord' (3:11). Thus when Paul thinks about the cross-cultural emphases of his ministry (after all, he sees himself as apostle to the Gentiles,

Gal. 2:8-9), he does not conceive of them as crossing many cultural and racial barriers so much as crossing one particular barrier, namely, that between Jews and Gentiles. The crossing of that particular barrier and the uniting of redeemed men and women into one new body, the church, lies at the heart of the gospel itself, and has already been accomplished, in principle, in Christ. This is the framework in which Paul encourages his readers to pray for him that he may make known the mystery of the gospel 'fearlessly' (6:19-20).

*Second*, it is not too much of a stretch to detect a reciprocal effect. If praying for Paul along these lines is part and parcel of their praying 'for all the saints' (6:18), it is difficult not to perceive that part of what believers should be praying for when they pray for all the saints is a certain holy boldness in their own witness. If even the apostle Paul, who can insist that he is not ashamed of the gospel (Rom. 1:16), discloses his need for God's help in declaring the mystery of the gospel fearlessly, how much more do the rest of us need such help?

4. Perhaps, then, our initial surprise that Paul has not left us with clearer links between mission and prayer betrays our own faulty views of both mission and prayer – especially the former. There are at least four factors.

*First*, we have tended to think of mission as a discrete project (or as discrete projects), often of a cross-cultural kind, with the result that special prayer for this isolable function is called for. But quite apart from the special calling on his own life as an apostle (indeed, as the apostle to the Gentiles), Paul sees mission in holistic, even cosmic terms. The glory of God, the reign of Christ, the declaration of the mystery of the gospel, the conversion of men and women, the growth and edification of the church, the defeat of the cosmic powers, the pursuit of holiness, the passion for godly fellowship and unity in the church, the unification of Jews and Gentiles, doing good to all but especially to fellow-believers – these are all woven into a seamless garment. All the elements are held together by a vision in which God is at the centre and Jesus Christ effects the changes for his glory and his people's good. This means that thanksgiving and intercessory prayer, though sweeping in the range of topics touched, are held together by a unified, God-centred, vision. Our more piecemeal approach looks for certain kinds of links which for the apostle are embedded in a comprehensive vision.

*Second*, the comprehensiveness of Paul's outlook is tied to his understanding of his place in redemptive history. To put it differently, it is tied to his grasp of biblical theology. In the fullness of time, God sent his Son (Gal. 4:4), and this eschatological event – this stunning intertwining of prophecies

about kingship and suffering, this fulfilment of centuries of models of priests, sacrifices, forgiveness, temple, the rule of God, the anticipation of rescue by God himself – has imposed its priorities on all that Paul thinks and does, all for which he offers thanks and for which he intercedes.

*Third*, during the first decades of the church's life the expansion was so rapid that it is difficult to think of Christians sunk in the gloom of defeatist introspection asking the Lord to help missionaries out in Pago Pago – even while little by way of evangelism or outreach was attempted at home. Judging by what evidence the New Testament supplies, Christians did indeed pray for outreach/mission. But so far as the evidence goes, such prayer was radically integrated into broader Christian experience. When the Jerusalem church faced its first whiff of persecution, they responded by praying for boldness (Acts 4:29); again, it was while the prophets and teachers at Antioch were worshipping the Lord and fasting that the Spirit instructed them to set apart Barnabas and Saul for new mission outreach. One does not glean, whether from Acts or elsewhere, that the church would get stuck and then pray for guidance about some new 'mission' project; still less does one sense that the church undertook new mission projects and then asked the Lord to bless them. The church was multiplying so quickly that the apostles could not always keep up: the church in Antioch was not founded by an apostle, and neither was the church in Rome or the church in Colosse. In this sort of environment the intertwining of ministry and prayer was so wholesome and inescapable that our piecemeal approach would seem atomistic, perhaps even bizarre. Moreover, at the practical level this sort of environment meant that the most urgent problems faced by church leaders were often the problems *inside the multiplying fledgling churches*. Small wonder, then, that a large proportion of Paul's recorded prayers are devoted to the spiritual maturation of believers.

*Fourth*, even if there is no concrete evidence in the Pauline letters of a prayer analogous to that of Jesus that the Lord of the harvest would send forth more workers, there is evidence that Paul sought out such workers himself, and exhorted those he trained to do the same thing: 'And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others' (2 Tim. 2:2). The conclusion to be drawn is not that Paul has transmuted a topic for prayer into mere activism but that Paul has so integrated prayer and obedience that these instructions to Timothy reflect all that he holds dear for the gospel's sake – and therefore what he prays for and what he does. There is no embarrassing hiatus between what Paul prays for and how he behaves, between the foci of his intercession and the priorities of his life.

## Conclusion

If this brief essay is even approximately right, it follows that Paul integrates mission and prayer in unexpected ways and at deep theological levels. If on a first reading Paul's habits in this regard seem vaguely strange and lacking, on a second reading it is our habits that seem vaguely strange and lacking. Certainly we could do with more models like Peter O'Brien, who integrates prayer and mission not only into his writing but into his life.

## Notes

1. O'Brien, *Consumed by Passion*.
2. O'Brien, 'Paul's missionary calling', pp. 131–148.
3. Köstenberger & O'Brien, *Theology of Mission*. He has also edited a volume of essays for the Church Missionary Society (Australia) entitled *God's Mission and Ours*.
4. O'Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings*.
5. See the indexes in Hawthorne, Martin & Reid, *Dictionary of Paul*.
6. O'Brien, 'Thanksgiving', pp. 50–66.
7. *Form and Function*.
8. See reviews by, inter alia, Boers; Morgan-Wynne; Morris; Thomas Norwood Jr; Schenk.
9. See n. 6, above.
10. Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus*, p. 201.
11. Wiles, *Paul's Intercessory Prayers*.
12. In my own more popular treatment of seven of Paul's prayers (*Call*), I found similar priorities. Paul occasionally exhorts his readers to pray for him in his ministry, but it is hard to find unambiguous examples of prayer for the conversion of the lost, for the extension of the gospel, for the Lord of the harvest to thrust out more workers into his harvest-fields, or the like.
13. E.g. White, 'Epistolary literature', pp. 1730–1756, esp. pp. 1741–1742.
14. E.g. Dippenaar, 'Prayer and epistolarity', pp. 147–188.
15. Arzt, 'The "Epistolary introductory thanksgiving"', pp. 29–46.
16. Reed, 'Paul's thanksgivings', pp. 87–99.
17. *Ibid.* p. 98.
18. Dunn, *Theology*, p. 16.
19. A point forcefully made by Schnider & Stenger, *Studien*, esp. ch. 2, 'Die briefliche Danksagung', esp. p. 47.
20. 'Thanksgiving', p. 62.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Paul's Intercessory Prayers*, p. 294.
23. See esp. Luz, 'Überlegungen', p. 386 – though he does not think Ephesians was written by the apostle.