

Fulton County Gospel News

Good News About Christ And His Church For All Of The World

“... Christ is the head of the church: and He is the Savior of the body.” - Ephesians 5:23

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BACK TO BIBLICAL PRAYER

Part One

by Lee Moses

If there is one thing people in general and the church in specific need to do, it is to get back to the Bible. Paul marveled how quickly certain Christians were removing themselves from the Gospel (Galatians 1:6). When they did such, they also removed themselves from the grace found in Jesus Christ. Paul might also marvel as to how far the church of today has removed itself from the Bible, including in the realm of prayer. Paul spent a great deal of space in his writings dealing with the subject of prayer, presenting it as lifeblood to the Christian and the church. However, anything done apart from Scripture is hopeless (Romans 15:4). This even includes prayer: “*He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination*” (Proverbs 28:9). Our only hope is to get back to Biblical prayer.

Back to Prayers Directed to the Father

Following countless other departures from apostolic doctrine, in the late 4th century, Ephraim Syrus addressed the first known formal prayer to Mary and the “saints.” Sadly, it would not be the last—to this day, the Roman Catholic Church encourages prayer to these mere human beings. Why did they condone the development of such practices?

Among other reasons, the Roman Catholic Church encouraged prayer to Mary and the saints because they

came to view God as wrathful and unapproachable. They believed Mary, as a tender woman and mother of Jesus, could approach the wrathful Son of God and pacify His anger. This denies the advocacy Scripture attributes to Jesus in our behalf; and it denies the description of God as “our Father.” Consider how Jesus described God, prayer, and the father/child relationship:

Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him? (Matthew 7:9-11).

An earthly father is not angered when his needful son petitions him, and neither is our heavenly Father. Scripture teaches that Christians can have confidence when praying to the Father in Jesus’ name (Hebrews 4:14-16), but any doctrine which views God as unapproachable denies this. And the doctrine of prayer to Mary and the saints denies that Christ is our sole Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5).

Another reason that the Roman Catholic Church incorporated prayer to Mary and the saints is because they were enamored with the polytheistic practices of the pagans around them (compare with 1 Samuel 8:5). Other

religions had many options for bringing petitions, and many professing Christianity thought they also deserved multitudinous options. However, they needed to disregard how many deities others thought existed, and simply regard what the Bible says on the matter.

For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) but to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him (1 Corinthians 8:5-6, emphases LM).

Another reason Roman Catholic doctrine came to encourage prayer to Mary and the saints is because many simply grew tired of being limited to directing their prayers toward God. They began to crave variety; they wanted something different. The Athenians who hung out on Mars Hill in Paul’s day “*spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing*” (Acts 17:21). Many are the professed Christians who have similar appetites. However, such is dangerous, as any “new thing” apart from Scripture is a perilous road that leads to a troubled soul (Jeremiah 6:16).

While neither Protestants nor New Testament Christians seem to be gravitating toward prayer to Mary and the “saints” in large numbers, many are sold on the notion that they should direct prayers to Jesus. They believe Jesus would be happy to receive the prayers of Christians. But Jesus specifically told His disciples to

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(continued from page one)

Whom they are to direct prayers, and it is not to Himself. He said, “*When ye pray, say, Our Father which art in heaven*” (Luke 11:2). In His Sermon on the Mount, He said, “*After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven*” (Matthew 6:9). This is the template Jesus gives for prayer. For one to get back to the Bible in any respect, he has to follow the pattern the Bible sets forth in the matter (1 Corinthians 4:6 ASV, 1 Timothy 6:3-4; 2 Timothy 1:13; 2 John 9). And Jesus could not have been more clear that prayer is to be addressed to the Father, excluding prayer to Himself or to any other person.

Furthermore, Jesus explicitly **forbade** prayer to Himself. The night before His crucifixion, He assured His apostles that He would be resurrected, ascend to the Father, and send the Holy Spirit to guide the apostles into all truth. He added, “*And in that day ye shall ask me **nothing**. Verily, verily,*

I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you” (John 16:23, emphases LM). “That day” has come, and now His followers are to ask the Father, not Him. Jesus does not desire for Christians to pray to Him—“nothing” means **nothing**.

Some reply, “No, Jesus did not mean ‘nothing.’ Jesus meant the apostles would no longer have to ask Him any **questions**.” The American Standard Version, in a departure from its British counterpart, translates the first part of John 16:23, “And in that day ye shall ask me **no question**” (emphasis LM). The Jesus-prayer camp appeals to this translation, followed by the New American Standard Bible, to claim that Jesus was not referring to prayer but rather to asking Him questions about what He was doing and where He was going. However, the verb here translated “ask” does not necessarily mean “ask a question.” It can just as certainly mean “ask **for** something” or “request,”¹ as Jesus clearly does several times in this same conversation. Just three verses later, the same word here rendered “ask” is actually translated “pray”: “*At that day ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you, that I will **pray** the Father for you*” (verse 26; compare with 14:16). This goes along with what Jesus had just said in verse 23—the disciples did not need to pray to Jesus, who would then in turn pray to the Father for them. They could pray directly to the Father themselves, as long as they did it in Jesus’ name.

Jesus did emphasize that prayers were to be offered **in His name**. This means that Christians approach the Father will Jesus’ authority and approval. Earlier in the same discourse, Jesus said, “*Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye*

shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you” (John 15:16). He also said, “*And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it*” (14:13-14). As F.F. Bruce aptly describes the intent of the passage, “The Father denies nothing to the Son, and a request made in the Son’s name is treated as if the Son made it.”² In addition, Jesus remarked upon the agency He would serve in seeing that answers to prayers were carried out.

Some are quick to point out that several modern Bible translations, including the New International Version, New American Standard Bible, and the English Standard Version, change Jesus’ statement “*If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it*” to “*If ye shall ask **me** anything in my name, I will do it*” (verse 14). If this were a correct rendering, it certainly would seem to allow prayer to Jesus. The few older manuscripts generally include “me,” while the more widely representative and newer manuscripts omit it. But even the United Bible Societies, whose critical text is based almost exclusively on the older manuscripts, does not argue primarily from a textual standpoint: “Some manuscripts do not have **me** in the phrase **If you ask me**. However, this information should be included for translational reasons. The Father could be assumed as the one to whom the prayer is directed; but since it is Jesus who will answer the prayer, it is better understood as directed to him.”³ So “me” should be included because they believe it makes the passage clearer? This is not consistent textual philosophy, since the United Bible Societies generally favor the more difficult reading if all other factors are equal.

But neither does the context make it likely that Jesus said, “Ask **me**.” Why would Jesus command prayer to Jesus in Jesus’ name, effectively saying, “Use my commendation to approach Me in prayer.” This would be akin to an automobile salesman telling an acquaintance, “Come visit me at my dealership. I’ll give you a great bargain on a new Chevrolet!” and then adding, “And tell me that I sent you!”

Bruce states, “The textual evidence in verse 14 is fairly evenly divided between the omission and retention of ‘me’; but the logic and the thought here favour its omission, which indeed seems to be demanded by the clear sense of 16:23a.”⁴ When Jesus speaks of the same subject addressed in John 14:14, He continually tells His disciples to pray to the **Father** in Jesus’ name. Jesus even explicitly forbade prayer offered to Himself. As Jesus cannot contradict Scripture nor Himself, He could not have implied in John 14:14 that prayer to Him is authorized.

Others appeal to various prayers to the “Lord” and conversations with the resurrected Jesus found in Scripture as evidence of prayers to Jesus. However, none of these examples is conclusively both a prayer and addressed to Jesus. But some are so intent on offering prayer to Jesus that they will explain away what our Lord so clearly said in John 16:23. This leaves one to ponder, “What more could Jesus have said to stress that Christians are not to pray to Him?”

There are some who have even advocated prayers directed to the Holy Spirit. Again, the New Testament pattern of prayer to “our Father” does not include prayers to the Holy Spirit. Alexander Campbell aptly noted,

Not only, I say, does the nature of the religion itself, to those who understand it, teach the

impropriety of direct address to the Holy Spirit; but this species of address is absolutely unauthorized by any prophet or apostle, by any oracle of God, commandment or precedent in the sacred books—for from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation, no man, patriarch, Jew, nor Christian; prophet, priest, nor apostle, ever did address the Holy Spirit directly in prayer or praise. They prayed for the Holy Spirit, but never to [Him].

The apparent dissatisfaction some denominationalists and Christians have with directing prayers solely to the Father is the same dissatisfaction that led to prayers to Mary and Roman Catholic “saints.” They misunderstand the nature of God. While each Person within the Godhead is just as surely Deity as the others, different Persons within the Godhead perform different functions. And receiving prayer is the function of the Father.

Just as looking to the pagan world around them led Roman Catholics pray to Mary and the “saints,” some are looking to the spiritual beliefs popular in modern culture. Denominational books speak of modern conversations people have allegedly had with Jesus. Culture is fascinated with angels and such like, without any consideration for Scriptural teaching.

And just as some simply grew tired of directing prayer to the Father all those years ago, some today believe they cannot find spiritual contentment without “changing things up.” But again, Scripture reminds us, “*Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein*” (Jeremiah 6:16). Rest for one’s soul, including the “*peace that passeth all understanding*” found

in prayer (Philippians 4:6-7), is to be found only in the “old paths” given in the Bible. And that includes directing prayers to the Father.

[To be continued next month]

¹ Walter Bauer, *erōtaō*, in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), BibleWorks. v.8.

“Although in **classical Greek** [used from 1000-330 B.C., LM] the verb ‘to ask’ (*erōtaō*) means ‘to ask a question’ rather than ‘to ask for [something]’ (which meaning was reserved for *aiteō*), in the **Greek of the New Testament period** *erōtaō* can have either **force**. Even in John, *erōtaō* sometimes means ‘to ask a question’ (1:19, 21, 25; 9:2, 19, 21; 16:5, 19, 30), and sometimes ‘to ask for [something]’ (4:31, 40, 47; 14:16; 16:26; 17:9). In the verse before us, *erōtaō* is used in the first clause (‘you will no longer ask me anything’), and *aiteō* in the last clause (‘my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name’). If the two verbs are roughly synonymous [and they appear to be in this context, LM], with the meaning ‘to ask for [something]’, then the only contrast in the verse is between the disciples asking Jesus for things during the period of his public ministry, and their asking the Father for things after Jesus has risen.” D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 545. Carson does believe “ask me no question” is also a possible translation of this passage.

² F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), p. 301.

³ UBS Handbook Series (United Bible Societies, 1961-1997; BibleSoft).

⁴ Bruce.

AIMED AT THE MIND

by Nathan Brewer

The first time the Gospel was ever preached, it cut listeners to the heart.

“*Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?*” (Acts 2:37).

This emotional response was triggered by a fact-filled, scripture-filled, logical presentation. Peter explained to those Jews in Jerusalem that: the wonders they saw and heard

were a fulfillment of prophecy, David had prophesied the resurrection, and that Jesus was responsible for what was occurring. Peter concluded: *“Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ”* (Acts 2:36).

This information was too much to ignore for about 3,000 people. They heard what was said, they processed that information, they applied that information to themselves, and they acted that very day to right the wrong they had done (Acts 2:38-42).

This process continued in the following days, and the church grew as sinners continued to hear the facts and logic of the Gospel (Acts 2:43-47).

Do you have the patience and the stomach to actually study the word of God to see what it says? Do you have the desire to hear the Bible explained and applied, or is that too boring?

Emotion is all the rage these days. Preachers can whip people into a frothy frenzy as they pace back and forth on stage working the microphone, alternately shouting and whispering to the audience. And many worship “services” today seem more like performances than efforts to honor God.

The Gospel—its history, facts, reasoning, and commands—produces emotion. That’s the order of the first Gospel sermon in Acts 2. It’s the order of every other Gospel sermon in the book of Acts.

But people today want emotion and entertainment, and they leave out the reading and hearing and thinking that the Bible requires.

The religious emotion so popular today is based largely on...emotion. Not on a hard look at the facts. Not on thinking. Not on reasoning. Not on considering what the Bible really says.

This is dangerous because emotion often feels good, even when

it’s based on error. Don’t be fooled by a feeling.

The Bible is aimed at the mind. Jesus said those who continue in His word would know the truth, and the truth would free them from sin (John 8:31-32). The kind of real emotion that you see in Acts 2 is based on a factual, logical, demanding presentation of truth. And understanding the truth leads people with good, honest hearts to obey the Gospel, live faithfully, and ultimately go to heaven.

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GOD’S AUTHORIZED WORSHIP

- COLOSSIANS 3:17

1. **LORD’S SUPPER** - The New Testament and early church history record that Christians met on the first day of every week (Sunday) to worship God and remember Christ (Acts 20:7; I Corinthians 11:23-34; 16: 1-2).
2. **PRAYERS** - (Acts 2:42; Philippians 4:6-7; I Thessalonians 5:17-18).
3. **SINGING** - God’s word authorizes only vocal music and specifically singing (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 2:12). The New Testament shows no use of mechanical instruments of music in worship to God by the church Christ established. Church history notes no such use for nearly 700 years after the New Testament was completed. It is an innovation of men, not of God.
4. **GIVING** - Free-willed, cheerful, generous, and every week (Acts 20:35; I Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 8 & 9).
5. **PREACHING OF THE WORD** - The gospel of Christ, not men’s doctrines nor entertainment, saves and strengthens us (Acts 2:42; 20:7; Romans 10:17; I Corinthians 1:18-23).

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