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“Prayer to Jesus: A Call to Fellowship”

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Abstract

Many Christians, especially Trinitarians, are somewhat confused about prayer. To whom should we pray? Everyone can agree that Christians should pray to the Father, but what about the Holy Spirit? And what about Jesus? Even Biblical Unitarians and Arians struggle with this issue, causing divisions among Unitarian congregations over the formulation of prayer. My contention is that a review of the biblical text, philosophical questions, and early Christian history will reveal a weak case for prayer to Jesus. Notwithstanding the lack of clear precedent, Christians of all backgrounds should acknowledge that this is not a reason to break fellowship with other Christians.

Points of Consensus

The language of prayer is diverse in the Bible. Prayer can be simply defined as “a solemn request for help or expression of thanks addressed to God or an object of worship.”¹ In the body of Christian scripture, multiple modes of prayer are delineated: giving praise, thanksgiving, entreating/beseeching, supplicating, and simply conversing with God. Generally, prayer can be understood as speaking to someone who is not physically manifested. In this practical way, one can differentiate between asking a friend to pass the salt and praying for God to grant wisdom.

In beginning a review of the biblical text, one fact immediately gains preeminence among all of the true things one can say about prayer: prayer normatively is to the Father alone. Jesus, during his earthly ministry, explicitly taught prayer to the Father (Matthew 6:6ff; Luke 11:2ff). The apostle Paul, during the post-Pentecost church, repeatedly demonstrated prayer to the Father through Jesus the king. One particularly interesting example can be found in the book of Romans:

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “prayer, n.¹”, accessed July 28, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4601624186>.

Romans 14:6-9 (ESV)

The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.

For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

What is particularly interesting about this passage, among others, is that in a context filled with references to Jesus (using the trademark language “Lord”), Paul is clear in attributing prayer language (*eucharisteō*) to the Father alone (“God”). Later in Romans 15:30, Paul again specifically uses prayer language in reference to the Father (*proseuchē*). There are many other notable Pauline references to prayer to the Father, including Romans 6:17, Romans 7:25, Romans 10:1, 1 Corinthians 11:13, 1 Corinthians 14:2, 2 Corinthians 1:20, 2 Corinthians 2:14, 2 Corinthians 8:16, 2 Corinthians 9:15, 2 Corinthians 13:7, Ephesians 1:15-21, Ephesians 5:18-21, Philippians 4:6, Colossians 1:3, 1 Thessalonians 1:2, 2 Thessalonians 1:3, and 2 Thessalonians 2:13. And for a Biblical Unitarian, it is self-evident that all Old Testament prayers were to God the Father. The inescapable conclusion this brings is that normative biblical prayer is to the Father.

Even though prayer is normatively to God the Father, one cannot conclusively prove that prayer is never addressed to Jesus. In this paper, every major biblical text used to support prayer to Jesus will be addressed. However, there are reasons to take both sides of these texts. There is enough ambiguity to allow for prayer to Jesus, which is why this debate has been persistent throughout time.

Next, it is vital to acknowledge that the “person” addressed in prayer does not guarantee proper delivery of the prayer. The Father is a God of mercy and grace (Exodus 34:6) and is the Searcher of Hearts (1 Chronicles 28:9; Jeremiah 17:10; Acts 15:8, among others). Any prayer said in sincerity by a righteous person, whether directed to the right “person” or not, is heard by God (1 Peter 3:12, cited from Psalms 34). Any theology of prayer has to account for human lack of understanding, as humans still “see in a mirror dimly” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Finally, Jesus does play an active role in the church today. He is active in healing (Acts 4:30), appearing to people (Acts 9), giving ministries to people in the church (Acts 20:24, Ephesians 4:11), establishing and sustaining his disciples (Romans 14:4), giving specific revelation (1 Corinthians 11:23), nurturing the church (Ephesians 5:29), and many other things. Any theology of prayer should include an active ministry for the Lord Jesus.

Battleground Passages

Working in biblical order, the first battleground passage occurs in John 14.

John 14:12-14 (ESV)

"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.

Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it."

Jesus tells his disciples that they can ask him anything. The word for "ask" here is the Greek word *aiteō*. Though not generally considered a prayer word, *aiteō* is incredibly close. If this "asking" were to take place when Jesus is not physically present, then this would be describing prayer. Those who believe prayer to Jesus is warranted cite this text to provide foundation for their practice. But is John 14 teaching prayer to Jesus? There are two things to note about this text. First, there is a textual variant at play: verse 14 could read "if you ask anything in my name, I will do it." Even though a minority of texts has this omission of "me," it does make better sense of asking "in Jesus' name," since that generally means "asking as if Jesus were asking the Father." Second, we have to make sense of the passage (and book) as a whole, in which prayer is normatively directed to the Father alone. As Trinitarian commentator J. Ramsey Michaels argues:

We have come to expect Christian prayer to be directed to the Father through the Son, and this is in fact what we find in this Gospel's other passages on prayer (see 15:16, "so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he might give you"; 16:23, "whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you")... The promise here is notable for what it does *not* say. Jesus does not invite them to ask "whatever you want" (as he will in 15:7!), but to ask "in my name," a phrase that seems to mean "Ask as if I were asking," or "Ask what I would ask." **This would suggest that the prayer is directed ultimately to the Father after all**, yet Jesus the Son promises to answer it, "so that the Father might be glorified in the Son" (v. 13, echoing 13:31, "Now the Son of man is glorified, and God is glorified in him"). The disciple is invited to come to the Father "in the name of" Jesus, with the promise of enjoying the same access to God that Jesus enjoys (see 9:31, and especially 11:41–42).²

John 14 is emphasizing that Jesus has an active role in answering prayers, even if prayer is not directed to him. Additionally, in the same discourse, Jesus later instructed his disciples to pray to the Father instead of asking him (John 16:23-27), leaving open the possibility that the time period for the "asking" of Jesus in John 14 was during his earthly ministry and not after his departure.

The next text in question is Acts 1, where the apostles work to replace Judas.

² J. Ramsey Michaels, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) (emphasis added).

Acts 1:24-25 (ESV)

And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place."

Christians who pray to Jesus use this ambiguous usage of Lord as a potential example of explicit prayer to Jesus found in the New Testament. The contextual evidence used to support this is found in Acts 1:2, where Jesus is mentioned as the one who chose the apostles. Since Jesus chose the apostles, then surely they could ask him who the new twelfth apostle should be, right? However, if this "Lord" indeed refers to Jesus, it would be the only time in the New Testament where clear prayer language (*proseuchomai* in this case) is used of Jesus. On the other hand, the disciples pray a later prayer in Acts using the title "Lord" where the Father is clearly meant (see Acts 4:24ff). In Acts 1:24, the person in question is called the one "who knows the hearts of all." As has already been demonstrated, that language is used of the Father throughout the Bible.³ Remember also that Jesus himself prayed to the Father all night when the original twelve were selected (Luke 6:12-13); therefore, these apostles would have been imitating their Messiah by praying to the Father under these exact circumstances.

The next series of texts uses the language "calling upon the name of the Lord." Here are the texts in question:

Acts 9:13-14 (ESV)

But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name."

Acts 22:16 (ESV)

And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'

Romans 10:11-13 (ESV)

For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

1 Corinthians 1:2 (ESV)

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

2 Timothy 2:22 (ESV)

So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

³ See also David J. Williams, *Understanding the Bible Commentary: Acts*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011).

Those who support prayer to Jesus are quick to remark that “calling upon the name of the Lord” would have included prayer in the original Old Testament context (see Genesis 4:26, Genesis 12:8, 1 Kings 18:22-39, and Zephaniah 3:9 for several examples), with good reason. Many of the linguistic resources agree. *Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies* defines this usage as “to cry for help, to call upon, to invoke; to call upon God... to call upon the name Jehovah.”⁴ Brown-Driver-Briggs’ lexicon says the following: “call with the name of (i.e. use it in invocation).”⁵ Gesenius defined the word this way: “to call upon the name of God, i.e. to celebrate, to praise God, to implore his aid.”⁶ On the other hand, we have to be careful here for a few reasons. First, just because Jesus takes on some attribute of Yahweh from the Old Testament does not mean that *every* aspect of the former context applies in the new context. This is the logic that Trinitarians use to show that Jesus somehow “is Yahweh.” So, in other words, some of the meaning from the Old Testament context may come through even if all of the meaning does not carry forward to the new context. Second, there may be good reason to believe that the new context is limiting the application itself. For example, if we replace “call upon the name of the Lord Jesus” with “pray to the Lord Jesus,” then Romans 10:13 would be suggesting that those who pray to Jesus will be saved. So then what happens to those who do not pray to Jesus? Are they saved as well? The one-to-one application of “calling upon the name of the Lord” and “prayer” is clearly an overstatement. So, what does “calling upon the name of the Lord Jesus” mean? Minimally, “calling upon the name of the Lord” was an expression of trust in Jesus for salvation (Romans 10:13) and forgiveness of sins through repentance and baptism (Acts 22:16). Elsewhere, it is an identity marker similar to the modern term “Christian” (Acts 9:14; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Timothy 2:22). If prayer to Jesus was the defining aspect of Christianity, then why are there no explicit references to the practice in either the Bible or (as we will soon see) the early church in the next 150 years?

The next grouping of verses relates to the idea of talking to Jesus as opposed to prayer to Jesus. When someone is present, either in a vision or personally, speaking to them would not be considered a prayer as we generally think of it. Here are the texts in question:

Acts 7:55-56, 59-60 (ESV)

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

⁴ William Wilson, *New Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1987), 62.

⁵ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, & Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 895.

⁶ Wilhelm Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1854), accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G1941&t=KJV>.

And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Acts 9:3-5,10,17 (ESV)

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him.

And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."

So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

2 Corinthians 12:8-9 (ESV)

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

In the first two examples, Jesus appeared to Stephen, Paul, and Ananias. Although some have used the word "prayer" to describe Stephen's action, I think the word "prayer" is misapplied. When someone is present, speaking to them or asking them something is not prayer. My children, when they ask me or their mother for a snack, are not praying, even though the form and content of the language they are using are similar to prayer language. In the example in 2 Corinthians 12:8-9, many argue that this is a clear example of prayer to Jesus. The word "Lord," although technically ambiguous, generally refers to Jesus in Paul's letters. However, there is another possibility here. Jesus told Paul that he would appear to him again in the future, that is, after the experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 26:16). One of these experiences is shared by Paul in Acts 22 (see verses 17-21). Therefore, it is quite possible that Paul asked Jesus three times, as Jesus was appearing to him, to remove the "thorn in the flesh." In other words, there simply is not enough data to conclusively say that this was Paul praying to Jesus.

Another interesting couple of passages occur in the two Thessalonian letters. Here are the texts in question:

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13 (ESV)

Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you,

so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 (ESV)

Now may 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.

While scholars are divided about what the grammar actually implies in these two sections,⁷ many argue that we have two prayers directed to both God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. As Fee comments, the two prayers have reversed formulations: in 1 Thessalonians, God the Father is first. In 2 Thessalonians, the Lord Jesus Christ is first.⁸ Are we meant to read these as prayers addressed to the Father and the Son together? While this is a possibility, notice the specific language of each prayer. Paul never addresses both the Father and the Son directly — Paul is using wish-prayer language as a way of hoping that both the Father and Son will be involved in various aspects of the lives of the Thessalonian Christians. Similar language is used by Paul in benedictions in Thessalonians (see for example 2 Thessalonians 3:16). When Paul does address his prayers directly in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, he always directs prayer specifically to the Father alone (see 1 Thessalonians 1:2, 1 Thessalonians 2:13, 1 Thessalonians 3:9, 2 Thessalonians 1:3, and 2 Thessalonians 2:13). This fits the larger pattern of scripture and Pauline thought.

The final scriptural argument for prayer to Jesus is found in 1 John:

1 John 5:13-15 (ESV)

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

The question is this: is the “him” in verse 14 the “Son of God” in verse 13 (Jesus) or God the Father? The ambiguity of the pronoun and its antecedent have led some to believe that prayer to Jesus is in view here. However, many commentators, even Trinitarian ones, have concluded that the person in view here is God the Father.⁹ See for example this quote from I. Howard Marshall:

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the grammar of both passages, see Gordon Fee, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Examples include classic texts like *John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible* and modern commentaries like the *New American Commentary* (Daniel L. Akin) and the *New Bible Commentary* (Leon Morris).

John has already told his readers: “we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him” (3:21f.). Now he repeats this assurance. God will hear us in respect of anything we ask of him. To “hear” means to hear favorably; God will answer our prayers. To be sure, there is a condition attached. Such prayer must be offered by those who remain in Jesus and let his words remain in them (Jn. 15:7); it must be offered in the name of Jesus (Jn. 14:13f.; 15:16; 16:23–26).¹⁰

Notice also Marshall’s citation of John 14:13. Prayer in John’s writings is normatively to the Father alone.

Typology and Analogy

Another set of reasons to pray to Jesus are not strictly scriptural but rely additionally upon typological arguments or arguments based on analogy. One example of this is when people say, “Jesus is Lord. He has all authority in heaven and on earth. How can he be ‘Lord’ if we cannot pray to him?”¹¹ Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and on earth, but there remains a larger question about his ability to hear and answer many simultaneous prayers (to be expounded upon further in a later section). His status as Lord nowhere biblically or logically entails receiving prayer directly.

Another example of this is fellowship with Jesus. This is based on 1 John 1:3, where Christians are said to have fellowship with both the Father and the Son. How can we have fellowship with Jesus if we do not pray to him? After all, can we imagine having fellowship with another human being without talking to them? The first definition of the Greek word for “fellowship” (*koinōnia*) is “close association involving mutual interests and sharing, *association, communion, fellowship, close relationship*.”¹² Interestingly, the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* gives seven ways to understand this word, and none of them require talking or

¹⁰ I. Howard Marshall, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles of John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 244.

¹¹ See for instance Anonymous, “Can We ‘Pray’ to Jesus Christ?”, Biblical Unitarian, accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.biblicalunitarian.com/articles/jesus-christ/can-we-pray-to-jesus-christ>.

¹² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

prayer.¹³ The greater biblical emphasis of fellowship with Jesus, then, is not in conversing with Jesus, but rather the reproduction of his life in our lives through the transformative power of the spirit, allowing us to persevere in this life as he did (Philippians 2:1, 3:10). In other words, the closeness of the spirit living in Christians is more remarkably complete than a relationship built on conversation alone.

Another example of this is found using the typology of Pharaoh and Joseph to relate to God and Jesus. In this view, proponents of prayer to Jesus rightly show the typological link between Pharaoh and God alongside Joseph and Jesus. After establishing that typological link, the next move is to assert that people did not come to Pharaoh to get grain — they went to Joseph with their needs. This is a classic example of overextending imagery in a text. There is a real typological link to be had between Pharaoh/God and Joseph/Jesus. However, if we push this too far, we would be telling people to pray to Jesus only! This type of typological argumentation falls flat.

A final example of this is using the typology of the high priest. The argument here is also straightforward: Jesus is now the high priest in the heavens (see Hebrews 4:15, 7:26). Since he is the high priest, he mediates for us in relationship to God (see Hebrews 8). As such, surely Jesus can receive our prayers, right? On the other hand, no one ever prayed to the high priest in the Old Testament Temple service. That historical high priest served God in the Tabernacle or Temple, mediating God on the people's behalf. All of that is true without receiving prayer. Some argue that the throne of grace we come to is Jesus' throne based on the proximity of Hebrews 4:15-16:

Hebrews 4:15-16 (ESV)

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Whose throne of grace do we come to? According to Hebrews 8:1, our high priest is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. The throne of grace that we approach is the Father's

¹³ See Kittel, Gerhard, G. W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Volume III*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 804 - 808. They cite partnership in work (legal partnership), fellowship and communion with Christ based on faith, the Lord's Supper as a means of communion/fellowship, living aspects of Christ's life (suffering, dying, inheriting, and reigning with Christ), sharing in the spirit, fellowship with Christ through fellowship with others in the Body of Christ, and (especially in relation to 1 John 1:3) the "living bond in which the Christian stands."

throne,¹⁴ but we know that our high priest beckons us forward into that union with the Father. None of the arguments from typology or analogy prove conclusive.

Philosophical Problems

The Trinitarian Christian has no problems with an exalted Jesus who can listen to prayers. Biblical Unitarians and Arians, however, have to grapple with the implications of the receiving end of our prayers. Stated differently, does the Unitarian view of Jesus' nature (ontology) allow for Jesus to hear a million simultaneous human prayers?

There are Unitarians who are untroubled by this problem or who have wrestled with it and still affirm that Jesus can hear all prayers. There probably is a way to resolve this satisfactorily. However, there are concerns that must be considered. If a million people pray to the Father at the same time, the Father hears them all. No Christian, Unitarian or otherwise, has a problem yet. This is because every Christian agrees that the Father knows all that can be known and is omnipresent. But Biblical Unitarians and Arians would deny that Jesus is omniscient and omnipresent, no matter the exact definition of those terms. The fact that Jesus could hear one million simultaneous prayers does not make Jesus necessarily omniscient. There are still other things that he may not know that the Father does know, such as the time of his return to earth (Mark 13:32). And perhaps there is a way to handle the problem of omnipresence as well. Perhaps Jesus can simply immediately gain knowledge from the Father.

But if the analysis is limited to only what the text of scripture says about Jesus in his exalted state, another picture emerges. The picture of Jesus in his post-resurrection state is someone who is located in one place at a time, who eats fish, even though he has gained the ability to pass between walls and transport quickly from one place (or dimension?) to another. Jesus also clearly has a vast amount of information about various churches (see Revelation 2-3), although this information was possibly given to Jesus by the Father (Revelation 1:1).

Many proponents of prayer to Jesus use a negative framework: "prayer to Jesus is never forbidden in scripture." That is a true statement. But prayer to Mary and prayer to saints are also not strictly forbidden in scripture. Using a positive framework, it is difficult to make a case for prayer to Jesus. The philosophical problems of how it works (at least from a Unitarian perspective) should arrest additional effort and attention.

Prayer in the Early Church

Having considered the biblical and philosophical arguments for prayer to Jesus, let us turn our attention to prayer in the early church. One might believe that, as the Christology of the early church fathers went higher and higher, their view of prayer to Jesus would have

¹⁴ Gareth Lee Cockerill comes to the same conclusion in Gareth Lee Cockerill, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles to the Hebrews*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

changed over time. Upon investigation, however, the consistent witness of the early church fathers is that prayer is to the Father alone.

One of the earliest Christian documents that survives to today is called the *Didache*. The *Didache* is dated to around 100 AD, which is close to the time of the final New Testament documents. In every single place where prayer is mentioned, prayer is directed to the Father alone. For example:

9:1 But as touching the eucharistic thanksgiving give ye thanks thus.

9:2 First, as regards the cup:

9:3 We give Thee thanks, O our Father, for the holy vine of Thy son David, which Thou madest known unto us through Thy Son Jesus;¹⁵

The earliest Christian witness mentions only prayer to the Father.

Another incredibly early source is *1 Clement*, also dated to around 100 AD. At the end of the letter, Clement of Rome mentions prayer on several occasions, always addressing prayer to the Father:

1 Clement 59:2-4

but we shall be guiltless of this sin. And we will ask, with instancy of prayer and supplication, that the Creator of the universe may guard intact unto the end the number that hath been numbered of His elect throughout the whole world, through His beloved Son Jesus Christ, through whom He called us from darkness to light, from ignorance to the full knowledge of the glory of His Name.

[Grant unto us, Lord,] that we may set our hope on Thy Name which is the primal source of all creation, and open the eyes of our hearts, that we may know Thee, who alone abidest Highest in the lofty, Holy in the holy; who layest low in the insolence of the proud, who settest the lowly on high, and bringest the lofty low; who makest rich and makest poor; who killest and makest alive; who alone art the Benefactor of spirits and the God of all flesh; who lookest into the abysses, who scanest the works of man; the Succor of them that are in peril, the Savior of them that are in despair; The Creator and Overseer of every spirit; who multiplieth the nations upon earth, and hast chosen out from all men those that love Thee through Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, through whom Thou didst instruct us, didst sanctify us, didst honor us.

We beseech Thee, Lord and Master, to be our help and succor. Save those among us who are in tribulation; have mercy on the lowly; lift up the fallen; show Thyself unto the needy; heal the ungodly; convert the wanderers of Thy people; feed the hungry; release our prisoners; raise up the weak; comfort the fainthearted. Let all the Gentiles know that Thou art the God alone, and Jesus Christ is Thy Son, and we are Thy people and the sheep of Thy pasture.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Didache*, edited and translated by J.B. Lightfoot, accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-lightfoot.html>.

¹⁶ Clement of Rome, *1 Clement*, edited and translated by J.B. Lightfoot, accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-lightfoot.html>.

See also chapter 61 of the same letter — Clement prayed to the Father alone.

Interestingly, one of the most famous early church fathers was incredibly opinionated on this subject. Origen of Alexandria lived in the late second and early third century; he died around 250 AD. His writings had an incredible influence on the larger Christian world for centuries to come, and he arguably had a higher Christology than many Unitarians. However, Origen explicitly taught that prayer was to be addressed to the Father alone:

But if we accept prayer in its full meaning, we may not ever pray to any begotten being, not even to Christ himself, but only to the God and Father of All to whom our Savior both prayed himself, as we have already instanced, and teaches us to pray.¹⁷

And how does it not accord with Him who said, “Why callest you me good? None is good save One—God the Father” to suppose that He would say, “Why pray you to me? To the Father alone ought you to pray, to whom I also pray, as indeed you learn from the holy Scriptures. For you ought not to pray to one who has been appointed high priest for you by the Father and has received it from the Father to be advocate, but through a high priest and advocate able to sympathize with your weaknesses, having been tried in all points like you but, by reason of the Father’s free gift to me, tried without sin.”¹⁸

Origen believed that prayer was to be directed to the Father alone.

Although less forceful in his opinion on prayer, Tertullian implicitly assumes prayer to the Father alone in his book *On Prayer*. In fact, chapter 11 of his book (in the Roberts-Donaldson translation) is titled “When Praying the Father, You Are Not to be Angry with a Brother.”¹⁹ And even though Tertullian mostly uses the title “God” in reference to prayer (which some find ambiguous), he defines God to be the Father alone in his other writings.²⁰ Similarly, Justin Martyr references prayer to the “Maker of the Universe” in his *First Apology*, and in context,

¹⁷ Origen, *On Prayer*, translated by William A. Curtis, accessed July 31, 2023, <https://ccel.org/ccel/origen/prayer/prayer.xi.html>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Tertullian, *On Prayer*, translated by Roberts & Donaldson, accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian22.html>.

²⁰ See for example, this quote from chapter one of *The Veiling of Virgins*: “The rule of faith, indeed, is altogether one, alone immoveable and irreformable; the rule, to wit, of believing in one only God omnipotent, the Creator of the universe, and His Son Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, raised again the third day from the dead, received in the heavens, sitting now at the right (hand) of the Father, destined to come to judge quick and dead through the resurrection of the flesh as well (as of the spirit).” Tertullian, *The Veiling of Virgins*, translated by Roberts & Donaldson, accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian28.html>.

that person is the Father.²¹ Finally, the *Apostolic Tradition*, supposedly written by Hippolytus of Rome before 235 AD, contains a number of prayers, all addressed to the Father.²² In many of the earliest church fathers, prayer was either explicitly given to the Father alone or was implicitly given to the Father alone — prayer to Jesus is uncommon at best.

Final Practical Comments

Many thoughtful resources that support prayer to Jesus, both Trinitarian and Unitarian, reach the same conclusion: typical prayer should be to the Father even if prayer to Jesus (and the Holy Spirit if the resource is Trinitarian) is allowed. One such example is Trinitarian pastor John Piper, who said: “So my conclusion is: Let your normal, regular praying be prayer to the Father through the Spirit in the name of Jesus, but realize that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are persons and to speak to them as a saved sinner would, cannot be unnatural.”²³ Unitarian scholar Dr. Dustin Smith, in a podcast episode dedicated to this question, commented that neither of the Greek verbs for prayer were ever directed to Jesus and the Greek noun for prayer was never used with Jesus. And while he continued to make an affirmative argument based on other verbs (such as the arguments reviewed in this paper), he concluded with: “The safest approach to answering the question ‘should Christians pray to Jesus?’ appears to be in following the New Testament’s example of praying to the Father but in the name of Jesus Christ.”²⁴ So even while answering that Christians can pray to Jesus, the “safest” approach is to follow the clear New Testament guidance to pray to the Father. Finally, the unnamed authors of “Can We ‘Pray’ to Jesus Christ?” on the Biblical Unitarian website conclude that Christians can pray to Jesus. They continue to argue that the personal, devotional practice of prayer to Jesus is a matter of conscience and never commanded in scripture; prayer to the Father should be normative practice for Christians. The writers close the article by calling for unity among Christians, even those who disagree on this issue.²⁵

²¹ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, translated by Roberts & Donaldson, accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-firstapology.html>. See especially chapters 13 and 67.

²² Hippolytus of Rome, *Apostolic Tradition*, translated by Burton Scott Easton, accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/61614/61614-h/61614-h.htm>. See chapters 3, 4, 5, and 8, among others.

²³ John Piper, “Should I Pray to the Father, the Son, or the Spirit?”, accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/should-i-pray-to-the-father-the-son-or-the-spirit>.

²⁴ Dustin Smith, “017: Should Christians Pray to Jesus?,” The Biblical Unitarian Podcast, May 24, 2018, audio podcast, 21:53, <https://biblicalunitarianpodcast.podbean.com/e/017-should-christians-pray-to-jesus/>.

²⁵ Anonymous, “Can We ‘Pray’ to Jesus Christ?”, Biblical Unitarian, accessed July 31, 2023, <https://www.biblicalunitarian.com/articles/jesus-christ/can-we-pray-to-jesus-christ>.

With these concessions in mind, Biblical Unitarian congregations have good reason to consider practicing public prayer to the Father alone. In a world of confused Trinitarian prayer, and understanding conscientious objections to prayer to Jesus by some in the Unitarian community, it makes good sense to limit public prayer to the Father alone. Of course, it is up to each congregation to discuss this issue amongst themselves, and I wholeheartedly agree with the idea that disagreements on this issue should not cause Unitarians to break fellowship with one another.

Conclusion

The biblical case for prayer to Jesus is light. The philosophical case for prayer to Jesus is tougher than can be seen at first glance. The historical case for early Christian prayer to Jesus rests on scant evidence that anyone actually practiced prayer to Jesus. Questions still abound: when should we pray to Jesus and not the Father? Can Jesus hear all of our prayers? If Jesus can hear our prayers, does that entail some change to his nature in order for that to happen?

One vital part of Unitarian Christianity is not simply acknowledging what Jesus our Lord has accomplished but also his vibrant current ministry. However, the clear biblical standard for prayer is directed to the Father alone. This makes prayer to Jesus a matter of personal conscience. As a matter of personal conscience, prayer to Jesus should have minimal prominence in public worship meetings, unless the congregation is in complete agreement. With these guideposts in place, the bonds of peace should allow for healthy fellowship between those who pray to Jesus and those who do not.

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