

“Think Biblically” about Prayer

As evangelicals, “thinking biblically,” or “being biblical” is considered to be a minimal virtue/expectation. Of course we “think biblically,” we are children of the Reformation. “Sola scriptura (scripture alone)!” But what does that really entail? What does it mean to actually “be biblical” about an issue?

One answer is proof-texting. “Being biblical” just means being able to provide an explicit chapter and verse in scripture that makes the exact point that you’re trying to make. This is by far one of the most common maladies in Protestant churches. We become “people of the verse” but we have little idea how to read scripture as a whole, as a unity centered around the historical-redemptive work of God in Christ. We tend to lose the forest for the trees. Sometimes it is legitimate to ask the question, “Where does the Bible teach such-and-such?” But if we are only expecting a specific chapter and verse, then we’re in for a rough ride. For one, you couldn’t get to the doctrine of the Trinity. Are there specific chapters and verses that explicitly refer to the Trinity as articulated in the Nicene Creed? No, the doctrine of the Trinity was a theological synthesis of the biblical material with regards to the nature of God throughout the entire scripture. Only whispers and echoes are heard throughout which, when compiled, make for a pretty strong case for the doctrine. But any individual verse is likely to be unconvincing at best.

The other problem with proof-texting is that it makes the very concept of “doctrine” impossible. It doesn’t take a seminarian to notice that the Bible is full of paradoxes. Things aren’t always as clear as we would like them to be. For example, how are we to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17), if we “do not know what to pray for” (Rom. 8:26)? Who is the proper wielder of the Word of God? Is it the Spirit (after all, it is the sword OF the Spirit!) as in Heb. 4:12, or is it my sword that I am to “take up” (Eph. 6:17)? Have I already been sanctified (1 Cor. 6:11, Heb. 10:10), or do I still have to be sanctified (Gal. 5:17, Phil. 2:12, 1 Pet. 5:7)? And the list goes on...

Doctrines are meant to be systematic and holistic treatments of themes/subjects in scripture. They are meant, among other things, to be a kind of theoretical construct through which we understand the whole of scripture, and allow scripture to interpret scripture. When we lose the ability to think doctrinally, we tend to end up with no systematic and coherent answer to the most existential questions in the Christian life. We have no idea how to think about our prayer life. We’re

only able to point weakly to a list of verses in the Bible that “talk about prayer” but have no obvious coherence to them. On top of that, we wrestle with our own personal experience of prayer and how to make sense of it. Forget what the Bible says what prayer *should* be like for a moment, what is prayer *actually* like for me? Why is it that way? Without a doctrine of prayer, it is little wonder that our prayer life is confusing and frustrating. If Christ has done all on the cross, what “work” is there left for me to do in the Christian life, if I am saved purely by grace and not works? What does it actually mean to “walk in the Spirit” so that I will not “gratify the desires of the flesh?” Without a doctrine of sanctification, we are only left repeating the verses to ourselves, or having them repeated back at us Sunday after Sunday to no constructive effect. We need to recognize the meaning and so the need for doctrine and its purpose.

Here is part of one version of a doctrine of prayer as an example.

We have the tension in prayer between Paul’s imperative to “pray without ceasing,” and even our Lord Jesus’ admonishment to “pray then like this,” and Paul’s later statement that we “do not know what we ought to pray for.” So am I able to pray or am I not? If I do not pray as I ought, then how am I to pray without ceasing? Is Paul contradicting Jesus and himself? One possible response is to downplay the significance of Paul’s statement in Rom. 6 about not being able to pray. I might say that, “Paul just means that I need to try harder at prayer. I need to work harder at it, so that I can do it better!” That’s one possible response. Swiss theologian Karl Barth goes in the other direction. He suggests that the passage in Rom. 6 actually points to the inevitable failure of human prayer. All human prayer must be grounded in the intercession of Son and Spirit on our behalf. Humans do not stand in front of God other than in the Son and by the Spirit, and so the realm of prayer is not exception to that. Our prayers cannot be understood to be autonomous texts that we “shoot up” at God, independent of the Son’s continued intercession for us at the right hand of God (Rom. 8:34), and the Spirit’s groaning in our deep, with groanings too deep for words (Rom. 8:26). When Jesus says that he “prays on our behalf” (John 17:20), he does not just mean that he is talking to the Father *about* us (as in petition). He means that he is making our prayers *for* us. What does this mean for prayer then?

It means, for one thing, that prayer is primarily a divine activity. Prayer is first and foremost NOT a human action. Because all prayer is grounded in the intercession of Son and Spirit, prayer is an activity that goes on within the very life of God. Human prayer is a participation in that movement of the divine life. Human prayer, far from being self-generated and self-propelling, is

more being “caught up” in the ongoing flow of prayer in the Triune life. But what does this mean practically? It means that human prayer was designed for failure by virtue of it being *human* prayer. Creaturely prayer is *meant* to fail, to give way to the recognition for Christ’s intercession. In prayer, we discover our utter inability to pray. We get distracted, we sin, we fall asleep, we might even find ourselves lusting in prayer. Why is that a surprise? It just means that God is beginning to allow us to experience our inability to pray. The task then, is not primarily to “hunker down”, grit our teeth, and “dominate” prayer. Prayer just isn’t that kind of thing. In the face of our inability to pray, the failure of our prayer in the midst of our prayers then, is to turn to the Son’s prayer in truth. It is an invitation into weakness, into inability, into creaturely failure, for the sake of discovering that our life is not found within ourselves, but hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). We want our life, significance, meaning, strength, peace, joy, etc. to be found within ourselves, if only we can dig hard and deep enough. But in Christ God teaches us that that is a doomed prospect. We are not the center around which God oscillates as a constellation to meet our desires for growth and moral progress. The Christian life is a trajectory downward into weakness so that we discover ourselves to be the constellations oscillating around God as the center of all reality. Thus, when greeted by prayer’s failure, it is a sign that God is inviting us into deeper truth-talk. Remember the early days when you *thought* you were able to “pray well?” Well, maybe not so much. It’s not necessarily the case that you have backslidden, as much as it might just be God showing you more of your own heart as it actually is. In the early days when prayer was sweet, easy, and came naturally, perhaps God was graciously allowing you to enjoy the benefits of prayer **ahead of your character**. But now it’s time to grow up, time to see yourself in truth. This is who I am. I can’t pray. Often times I don’t even *want* to pray. Turn to God in that, tell him that. Talk to him about your lack of desire to pray. Tell him how you feel like prayer doesn’t accomplish anything, or how you’re frustrated at your prayer life, or how you wish you wanted to pray more than you actually do. Do that, and realize that you have found your way back into true prayer. For from the human side, prayer is little more than the simple turning of the will to **be present** to God. When we are present to something/a person, we are not necessarily looking for a certain effect or result.

Thus we find a developmental trajectory with regard to prayer. Prayer is ultimately not the kind of thing that we should walk away from feeling like we “accomplished something.” Prayer is meant to be an unmasking of our weakness and a revealing of our continual dependence on God in Christ. The easiest way to circumnavigate “prayer’s intended failure” is to simply turn to

intercession. Why? Because in intercession, we have a handy “list” of items to run down so that we can subconsciously “tick off.” Intercessory prayer can very easily become a means to provide ourselves with a sense of “success” with regard to prayer. Either that, or we simply stop praying.

The above “story” about prayer is not found explicitly in scripture, but it is *consistent* with scriptural witness. It is also, I find, deeply consistent with personal experience. Doctrine is meant, among other things, to speak into our personal experience of God, to be a guide for our souls in the presence of God. The link between doctrine and experience must be recovered. To think biblically is to think doctrinally.