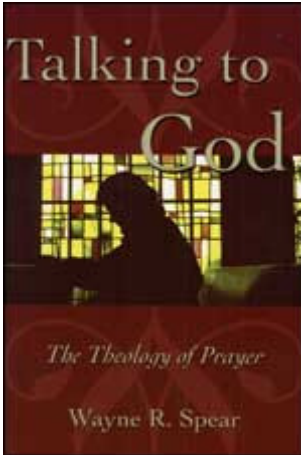


BOOK REVIEW



Talking to God – The Theology of Prayer by Wayne R. Spear, Crown and Covenant Publications, (Pittsburgh PA, 2002), 107 pages.

“Talking to God – The Theology of Prayer” is a revised and updated edition of a book published in the 1970’s. Originally written as a Master’s thesis, this reprint is intended for the layman with no formal theological training (though it will be extremely useful to pastors, too). To that end, it has lost its references to Hebrew and Greek and has gained extremely helpful “Questions for Study and Reflection” at the close of each chapter for personal meditation or group discussion.

Spear clearly achieves the goal of his book, which is “to present a *fairly complete summary* of what the Bible teaches about prayer” (p.10). Asserting that theologies of prayer are scarce, especially from a Reformed perspective (Calvin and Hodge are cited as notable examples), the author hopes that this book will provide a much-needed remedy. “The faith that comes to expression in prayer needs to be grounded in the Scripture” (p. 10), i.e. our theology will affect our prayers. How true this is in face of the theology of prayer being offered by the “Prayer of Jabez” movement! Thus at the outset, Spear affirms his commitment to Reformed doctrine (specifically, the sovereignty of God, salvation by grace and a grammatical-historical hermeneutic), and demonstrates this stance throughout in nine brief chapters which are laced with references to historic Reformed confessions and catechisms.

In the first chapter, a “working definition” of prayer is given as “human language that is directed to God” (p.14). It is thus a *human* activity first and foremost (although the idea of angelic prayer is mooted), and it is a *form of language*.

In an important second chapter, the author deals with prayer in the Old Testament, which is rightly seen as essential to a full understanding of the New Testament’s teaching on the subject. Spear points out that there is relatively little explicit teaching on prayer in the Old Testament (mostly contained in the Wisdom Books), but rather mainly descriptive and narrative material. When considering the *content* of Old Testament prayer, Spear understandably focuses on the Book of Psalms, demonstrating that *temporal* welfare (guidance, provision, deliverance, and so on), are not the main focus, but rather seeking God’s favor and His glory in the accomplishment of His purposes. Here is a timely response to the “name it and claim it” theologies of prayer. This section also contains a brief but helpful treatment of the imprecatory psalms.

Spear builds his case for the Old Testament’s foundational role in teaching about prayer in two ways. First, by demonstrating its clear connection between prayer and the offering of sacrifice (for instance, the Babylonian exiles prayed towards the Temple, Dan. 6v10). In this way, the believers in the Old Covenant were taught the need of a substitutionary

atonement in order to approach God, i.e. through Christ. Secondly, he shows how the rituals in the Old Testament taught the need for an intercessor, notably the offering of incense by the priests and the prayer of the leaders of the people (e.g. Abraham, Moses, and the godly kings of Israel).

Chapters three to five treat what Spear calls the “objective” aspects of prayer and are divided along Trinitarian lines – the role of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in prayer, respectively. “Prayer is a unique form of human language because of the uniqueness of the one to whom it is addressed” (p.35), and so the attributes of God that are “most important for prayer” are considered – omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, sovereignty and authority. Two other related issues that Spear handles in connection with the objective aspect of prayer are the invocation of the saints (which is rightly rejected as idolatrous) and a most interesting study on praying to each Person of the Trinity – what the Biblical model is, and what errors must be avoided.

Spear sees the role of *Christ* in prayer as twofold: First, as the *teacher* of prayer in both precept and example. Here, we have a timely reminder that the Lord’s Prayer is a pattern which “in all ages has formed the basis for catechetical instruction and theological reflection in prayer” (p.46). Secondly, Christ is the *only Mediator* in prayer. Under this heading, Spear provides a most interesting explanation of what it means to pray in Jesus’ name, where he argues that the New Testament privilege of knowing and praying the Name of Christ as contrasted to prayer in the Old Testament, takes prayer to a new level. Drawing from the Epistle to the Hebrews (4:14-16 and 6:19-23), he lucidly outlines Christ’s priestly work of intercession. Perhaps most helpful is his explanation of the “new and living” way that has been opened to us by this ministry.

The *Spirit’s* role in prayer is also seen as twofold: He *motivates and guides* us in prayer, and He also *intercedes* for us in prayer. In the former, Spear gives a precise exposition of Rom.8:15 and Gal.4:6 to show that “our ability and inclination to pray comes from the Holy Spirit who dwells within us” (p.60). In the latter, Spear bases his discussion on Rom.8:26-7 (“likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness ... with groanings that cannot be uttered”). In doing so, he contrasts the views of Calvin (who regarded the intercession of the Spirit as a training ministry – teaching us how we should pray) and Abraham Kuyper (who viewed it as a distinct activity of the Spirit, wherein He prays for us). Spear gives his reasons for adopting Kuyper’s position.

Two further chapters address the “subjective” aspects of prayer (i.e. the *qualifications* of the one who prays, and the *content* of proper prayer). Since prayer requires a relationship between God and the one praying, the qualifications of the one who prays are outlined. Specifically, the one who approaches God must be reverent, sincere, submissive, believing in God’s existence, power and benevolence, and obedient.

In dealing with the *content* of prayer, Spear demonstrates that although the Apostolic Church used the psalms in worship, she did not restrict herself to the psalms as fixed forms of prayer. Such “fixed forms” (for instance, the Lord’s Prayer) are legitimate for use as they come from the pages of Scripture, but do not negate the appropriateness of

prayers of our own composition. The remainder of this chapter qualifies this truth by outlining the Biblical *limitations* that are placed upon our *requests* in prayer, specifically, we must pray in faith, according to the will of God, and in the Name of Christ.

In a masterful exposition of Mark 11:22-4, Spear deals with the “prayer of faith” that “grants” what you “believe you will receive”. He interestingly follows Hengstenberg’s interpretation of the “mountain” that is cast into the sea as representing the Roman Empire being cast back into the sea of nations. Thus Christ calls his disciples to pray not for “the seemingly impossible”, but for what has been promised (in this case, as prophesied by Daniel).

The author also draws a line of differentiation between *submission* to God’s will (“Not as I will, but as You will”) and prayer *according* to God’s will (“Let this cup pass from me”). Prayer that is answered by God (and can be assured of a response) is prayer according to God’s *revealed* will (1 John 5:14-5). Although it is pointed out that God’s will has not been revealed in its entirety, Scripture *does* provide us with a knowledge of God’s will, and it is upon this basis that the believer prays expectantly. There is thus an intimate connection between the Word of God and prayer. “The freedom from fixed forms of prayer, then, is not unlimited freedom” (p.80).

In applying this doctrine, the author helpfully outlines three different kinds of prayer that have three different kinds of expectancy of reply. The first is prayer for things that God has explicitly commanded and promised in Scripture. The second is prayer that is in harmony with Scripture’s general principles, but in which specific elements of the request have no specific promise of fulfillment. The third is prayer that has no basis at all in Scripture – specifically, “the prayer of doubt and complaint” (e.g. in Job 10:3).

Chapter eight contains a response to skepticism about both the necessity and efficacy of prayer. In defending the *necessity* of prayer, Spear first addresses the question that might be abbreviated, “If God already knows, why pray?” The Arminian viewpoint that God is hindered by our lack of willingness to pray is refuted as a denial of God’s sovereignty; events are not ultimately decided by whether or not we pray. Prayer should be regarded as the means God uses to accomplish His sovereign purposes, not as a compliment or antithesis of divine activity (p.89).

In defending the *efficacy* of prayer, Spear addresses some of the ways in which modern scientific thought criticizes prayer, and answers them from a Biblical perspective. The objection posed by the modernist’s “closed universe” of Natural Law is refuted by maintaining the Biblical doctrine of God’s providence over all things. Neither can prayer merely be “the practice of the presence of God”, which, Spear contends, reduces prayer to meditation, contemplation or auto-suggestion. The second objection, based upon the denial of God as personal, but rather as “Being” is shown to originate in a modernist worldview that rejects any commitment to the revelation of God in Scripture. Spear presents their case and then ably demonstrates how this objection renders “meaningless much of the language of prayer as it has been practiced by the Christian Church through

the centuries ... The teaching about prayer in the Bible cannot be separated from the Biblical view of God and the world that is its foundation and context” (p.98).

As a reprint of a book originally written in the 70’s, one feels that some additional material confronting some more recent challenges to prayer in a post-modern world might have been helpful. Nevertheless, the solid foundation of the previous seven chapters is a thorough summary of the Biblical teaching on prayer, and should prove adequate in responding to contemporary challenges.

In a four-page conclusion, Spear sets forth “the substance of the Christian doctrine of prayer” (p.100) in an excellent “Westminster Confession-like” summary of his entire thesis. He is at pains to point out that “these conclusions present no finding that can be called new” (p.102), and yet sadly the practice of the contemporary church remains far removed from these “old paths”. He concludes with a timely appeal that we return to the Reformed position of prayer within the limits of the Word of God, and faith that expects an answer to prayer based on the revelation of God’s will. One important application is that we return to the historical use of the Lord’s Prayer “as the structural basis for both public and private prayer” (p.102). There is a thorough “works cited” page and a shortlist of six recently published recommended readings for further study.

Spear’s book is thoroughly systematic in structure; his argument progresses logically, and he writes in a straightforward, matter-of-fact style that most readers will find readable. “Talking to God” presents a sound Reformed overview of the doctrine of prayer, as presented in Scripture. It will fill a gap in many pastor and layman’s libraries, and for good reason. This reviewer wishes it a wide readership, with the caution that “a study of the theology of prayer will not in itself make one persistent and powerful in prayer” (p.12). This teaching of prayer must be *put into practice*.

David Whitla