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EVANGELISTIC PRAYING

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Traditionally when Christians have thought of prayer in connection with evangelism, it has centered in praying directly for the salvation of the sinner. In this article such an emphasis is challenged. We will attempt to show that the New Testament advocates prayer for saints rather than sinners in the face of evangelistic need. We will discuss the nature of truly Biblical evangelistic praying.

* * *

PERHAPS in no area of praying has there been more misunderstanding than in the relationship between prayer and evangelism. How should one pray concerning an unsaved friend or loved one? It is startling to realize that Jesus Christ never prayed *explicitly* and *directly* for the eternal salvation of a lost person.¹ It is equally startling to realize that neither Jesus nor Paul ever commanded *explicit* and *direct* prayer for the salvation of the lost. If these statements sound startling—they are. If they sound heretical—they are not.

PRAYER FOR THE LOST IS ALLOWABLE

It is true that *implicitly* and *indirectly* there are several places in the NT where prayer for the salvation of the lost is allowable. By way of example, Jesus taught his disciples to “. . . pray for those who

¹Jesus' prayer from the cross, "Father, forgive them . . ." (Luke 23:34), cannot be established as part of the text because it is omitted in some very important early manuscripts; see R. George, *Communion With God in the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1953) 47; J. M. Creed, *The Gospel According to St. Luke: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indices* (London: Macmillan, 1950) 286; I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 867. But even if it should be allowed, it is not a prayer for the eternal salvation of his persecutors, but rather for forgiveness from the specific sin of crucifying him and involved those perpetrating the act or, at most, all in Jerusalem that evening; see J. E. McFadyen, *The Prayers of the Bible* (New York: Armstrong and Son, 1909) 127; A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, Broadman, 1930), 2. 285; F. W. Farrar, *The Gospel According to St. Luke in the Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges* (London: Cambridge University, 1889) 392; A. Plummer, *Luke* (ICC; New York: Scribners, 1913) 530; Marshall, *Luke*, 867.

persecute you . . ." (Matt 5:44).² The preposition ὑπέρ ("for") has the root idea of "over," which easily becomes "in behalf of," and ultimately carries the concept of "for the benefit of."³ Thus the implication seems to be that the prayer is to be for the benefit of the persecutor in some way. Certainly the greatest possible benefit to any enemy would be his eternal salvation, but this is only implicit.

Likewise, Paul advocated that prayers be offered up ". . . on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority . . ." (1 Tim 2:1, 2). However, the immediate reason for such prayers is ". . . in order that we might lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity" (2 Tim 1:2). Hence, Paul requests prayer for governmental authorities so that they will not interfere with the free working of the church. The ultimate reason is because God ". . . desires all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). Thus, prayer for the salvation of governmental officials is at best only indirectly implied. However, in neither instance is the command to pray for the salvation of the unsaved direct and explicit.⁴

The closest that the NT comes to explicit and direct prayer for the salvation of the lost is Paul's cry, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is for their salvation" (Rom 10:1). While this is an explicit and direct prayer for salvation, it may be understood as a prayer for the salvation of the nation of Israel as a whole⁵ rather than for the salvation of individual Jews. But a more important question is why there is only one clear example of explicit and direct prayer for the salvation of the lost in the entire NT. Is it because Christ and Paul did not care about the salvation of lost souls? No one even casually perusing the NT could arrive at such a conclusion. Rather, Christ wept over the lostness of men and Paul remained zealous for evangelism throughout his life.

CHRIST'S TEACHING ON PRAYER FOR EVANGELISM

The NT instruction concerning the relationship of prayer to evangelism is unusual in comparison to contemporary practices. In view

²All Scripture quotations are from the *NASB*.

³A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1943) 630.

⁴The same could be said of John 17:21.

⁵The petition pertains to ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν ("for them"). It is a reference to Israel in 9:31. The term Ἰσραὴλ as used in this context clearly refers to the nation as a unit rather than to individual Jews. Indeed, Paul acknowledged that individual Jews are being saved, but the nation as a whole was refusing the righteousness provided by God in Jesus Christ (Rom 9:30-33). It was the nation as a whole that had a zeal for God that was not based on knowledge (10:2-4). Thus, when Paul prayed for Israel to be saved, it was not individual but national salvation that seems to be in view. See Barrett, p. 196.

of an obvious need for evangelism (“... the harvest is plentiful . . .” [Matt 9:37, cf. Luke 10:2]), Christ commanded prayer (“Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest . . .” [Matt 9:38]). The word used for prayer (δεήθητε, “beseech”) connotes the idea of petition that gives special prominence to the expression of need.⁶ The sense of need that is latent in the meaning of δέομαι is enhanced by the use of the aorist imperative δεήθητε. Thus, the Lord commands prayer for laborers with a sense of urgent need.

The conjunction ὅπως (“therefore”) introduces a clause that designates either content or intent. After verbs of praying, entreating, asking, or exhorting, ὅπως is used with the subjunctive to denote what one wishes to accomplish.⁷ For the ὅπως clause to give the purpose of the prayer in which it is found is linguistically possible;⁸ that such is the case in Matt 9:38 is theologically probable. Whatever the precise words of the prayer might have been, its purpose was to gain an increase in the labor force.

Jesus commanded his disciples to pray for the Lord of harvest “. . . to send out workers. . . .” The verb ἐκβάλη (“send out”) is a strong word meaning, “thrust out, force them out, as from urgent necessity.”⁹ Some would render it even in stronger terms such as, “to drive out, to push out, to draw out with violence or without.”¹⁰ This word is a second aorist subjunctive. Hence the translation, “may send out” preserves the force of the subjunctive in a clearer manner.

The strong prayer command δεήθητε (“beseech”) in the aorist imperative indicates that in some manner earnest petition is necessary to reap the harvest successfully. God decrees the means as well as the ends, and one of the means is prayer. Lenski astutely comments: “The wonder will always remain that God, the primal cause, uses us and our prayers, the secondary causes, and does not discard them. . . . What a blessed relation between the workers in the harvest and the Lord of the harvest.”¹¹

Amazingly, the Lord did not instruct prayer for the harvest, but for the thrusting forth of harvesters. In the face of an obvious need for evangelism, he did not command prayer for the sinners but for the

⁶J. H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901) 126; G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960) 91.

⁷J. H. Thayer, *Lexicon*, 450.

⁸BAG, 580; cf. also LSJ, 1244.

⁹M. R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), I, 57.

¹⁰Robertson, *Word Pictures*, I, 76.

¹¹R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1943) 386.

saints. Reflection on current practices of prayer reveals how far afield it is from the NT teaching on prayer. Yet, Christ explicitly and definitely taught that prayer should be offered for laborers for the harvest, but never explicitly or definitely taught or practiced that prayer should be offered for the unsaved.

PAUL'S PRACTICE CONCERNING PRAYER FOR EVANGELISM

Paul advocated that Christians pray for harvesters in connection with evangelistic need. When Paul found himself in prison with possibilities for evangelism on every side, he wrote to believers in local churches requesting prayer (Eph 6:19, 20; Col 4:3). Both passages are similar in content and give valuable insight into the nature of prayer for harvesters.

Instead of sending the churches a list of names and requesting prayer for the salvation of those individuals, Paul said, "Pray on my behalf . . ." (Eph 6:19; cf. Col 4:3). Paul prescribed prayer for the harvester rather than the harvest; for the saint rather than the sinner. The request for himself was a plea for his effectiveness in witnessing to the unsaved. Indeed, these passages can be seen as explanations of Christ's command to pray for the thrusting forth of laborers into the harvest fields.

PAUL DESIRED OPPORTUNITIES TO WITNESS

On one occasion, Paul said pray ". . . that God may open up to us a door for the word" (Col 4:3). His concern was not so much for comfort for his body, but for opportunity to speak. He was concerned about opportunity to witness. Biblically, it is God's responsibility to open doors of opportunity (Rev 3:7). Realizing that it is God who opens doors, Paul requested prayer to this end. The word ἵνα ("that") introduces the purpose clause. In this instance the opening of a door of utterance was to be the subject of prayer, and they were to pray in order that such an opportunity might be granted.¹² The aorist subjunctive ἀνοιξῆν ("may open") is ingressive and carries the idea, "might begin to open." Paul requested that they pray that God would provide opportunities, "a door," for witnessing.¹³ Paul did not force opportunities, but rather, through prayer, he depended on God to provide

¹²J. Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957) 275; cf. also J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (New York: MacMillan, 1879) 137, 231.

¹³R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1943) 190.

opportunities. Thus, prayer for the harvesters involves praying that the saints will be given opportunities to witness.

PAUL DESIRED COURAGE TO WITNESS

Twice in his request for prayer in view of an opportunity to witness, Paul requested *παρρησία* ("boldness") (Eph 6:19, 20). In both phrases the apostle used the noun and verb forms of the same word. It has the root idea of "free speech," speech which is open and bold.¹⁴ Fear hinders freedom in proclaiming Christ. Hence, Paul desired that the gospel be made "known with boldness" (Eph 6:19). Grammatically, the verb *γνωρίσαι* ("make known") carries the idea "to actually make it known."¹⁵ The fear of man brings a snare (Prov 29:15). It is possible to witness and yet to be inhibited by fear to such a degree that the presentation is blurred and ineffective. Paul requested prayer that this might not happen. He wanted to be able to have freedom to set it forth courageously without the compelling restraint of fear.¹⁶ Paul considered intercessory prayer an important factor in this type of witnessing. Prayer which is rightly oriented involves praying that the laborers will be given boldness to utilize their opportunities for witness.

PAUL DESIRED A MESSAGE

Paul urged his readers to pray ". . . that utterance may be given to me" (Eph 6:19). The term "utterance" refers to the faculty of speech.¹⁷ It was not the ordinary word used to describe preaching, but rather to describe the elucidation of a message to make sure it is understood.¹⁸ Paul wanted a message; he wanted to proclaim the good news of Christ effectively with words. Perhaps Paul was not a great orator by nature; he admitted that he was ". . . unskilled in speech" (2 Cor 11:6). The passive *δοθῆ* ("be given") indicates that the apostle looked to God for the message.¹⁹ Paul believed that effective witnessing must be initiated by God. It requires God working through him. Hence, Paul urged Christians to pray that God would grant him

¹⁴J. Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1883) 237, cf. 479.

¹⁵R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians and to the Philippians* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1943) 679.

¹⁶J. Eadie, *Ephesians*, 478.

¹⁷T. K. Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897) 189.

¹⁸C. L. Mitton, *Ephesians* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 229.

¹⁹J. Eadie, *Ephesians*, 479.

proper wording in his witnessing. That Paul should solicit prayer in this matter shows the awareness he had of both the difficulty and importance of the task.

Because the message to be presented is “. . . the mystery of the Gospel” (Eph 6:19, cf. “mystery of Christ” Col 4:3), divine assistance would be needed in both its proclamation and its comprehension. The term μυστήριον (“mystery”) is a truth that is sovereignly withheld by God and then revealed to man at a given point in history.²⁰ Paul stated in Ephesians 3 that a “mystery” had been revealed to him by direct revelation from God (Eph 3:3). Because they are of divine origin, the truths are beyond the orbit of all human anticipations. They are things that “. . . eye has not seen and ear has not heard . . .” (1 Cor 2:9). Hence the presentation of the gospel needs to be given with divine clarity if men are to comprehend it. Prayer is needed if this type of clarity is to be achieved.

Paul requested the believers at Ephesus to pray not only that he might present the message boldly, but also “. . . as I ought to speak” (Eph 6:20). Similarly, he requested the Colossian believers to pray “. . . that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak” (Col 4:4). In both instances, Paul was making an appeal for clarity in presentation. This implies that the kind of clarity that Paul sought was beyond the realm of human ability. Thus, God must not only supply the utterance, but the clarity as well and prayer secures divine assistance.

CONCLUSION

All would agree that prayer is crucial in effective evangelism, but prayer as it relates to evangelism has traditionally taken the form of prayer for the harvest. It has consisted of pleas to God to soften the hearts of sinners and to save them. While such prayer is not condemned in the NT, it certainly is not clearly and explicitly set forth (although Rom 10:1 is a possible exception). Rather, Christ commanded prayer for harvesters rather than prayer for the harvest. He taught that prayer should concern saints rather than sinners in connection with the need for evangelism.

Furthermore, Paul practiced exactly what Christ advocated. In the face of a need for evangelism, Paul requested prayer for harvesters. He prayed that the harvesters be given *opportunities* to witness, *boldness* as they witness, and clarity in the presentation of the *message* while witnessing. This explains what is involved in praying “. . . the Lord of harvest to send out workers into his harvest” (Matt 9:38).

Therefore, both Christ and Paul prayed little for the unsaved world directly. Instead, they concentrated their prayer efforts on the

²⁰Ibid.

edification of the saints. As the saints are built up and thrust forth into the harvest, evangelism inevitably takes place. However, it is never wrong to cry out directly to God for the salvation of a loved one. Indeed, it would almost be sub-human not to do so. We are instructed to ask for "anything" (John 14:14) and this certainly includes the salvation of a loved one. In fact, there is the distinct possibility that Paul prayed for the lost on one occasion (Rom 10:1). But it is more in harmony with the NT to pray that God would thrust forth Spirit-filled believers across the path of that loved one, and that Christians would be built up and equipped for witness. Such an approach comes closer to the NT instructions concerning prayer as it relates to evangelism.