

Travis Bott  
YSBA

PRAYER AGAINST OUR HEARTS:  
BONHOEFFER, BAPTISTS, AND THE ETHICS OF PRAYER

Perhaps it is precisely the case that we must pray against our own heart in order to pray rightly. . . . Not the poverty of our heart, but the richness of God's word, ought to determine our prayer.<sup>1</sup>

The crucified Jesus teaches us to pray truly the psalms of wrath.<sup>2</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not a Baptist, but his theology has ongoing resonance for Baptists. He grew up in a German Lutheran household and studied academic theology with Adolf von Harnack at the University of Berlin. He was steeped in the liberal Protestantism of his day, but his thinking began to shift under the influence of Karl Barth.<sup>3</sup> A trip to the United States was also pivotal for him. While studying at Union Seminary in New York, he met Jean Lasserre, a French pastor who urged obedience to the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>4</sup> He also worshipped and served among African-American Baptists in Harlem.<sup>5</sup> By the time that he returned to Germany, he had changed. In a personal letter, Bonhoeffer described a process of turning “from phraseology to reality.”<sup>6</sup> Eberhard Bethge, his close friend and biographer, called this his transition “from theologian to Christian.”<sup>7</sup> Whatever label one uses, it is clear that Bonhoeffer began to stress the

---

<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible* (DBWE 5; ed. Geoffrey B. Kelley; trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 157.

<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 176.

<sup>3</sup> For similarities between Barth and Bonhoeffer, see John Webster, “‘In the Shadow of Biblical Work’: Barth and Bonhoeffer on Reading the Bible,” *TJT* 17 (2001): 75-91. They did not always agree, however. On the complex nature of their relationship, see Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (rev. and ed. Victoria J. Barnett; trans. Eric Mosbacher et al.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 175-186.

<sup>4</sup> Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 153-154.

<sup>5</sup> Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 150.

<sup>6</sup> Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 203.

<sup>7</sup> Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 206.

centrality of the Bible, the demanding call of Christ, and the church as a community of disciples. He put these themes into practice in his work as a seminary director at Finkenwalde and gave them eloquent expression in his books *Discipleship* (1937) and *Life Together* (1939). The last book that he published during his lifetime was *Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms* (1940), a small but profound exploration of praying the Psalms. The Nazi authorities regarded his use of the Old Testament in this work as dangerous enough to restrict him from further publication.<sup>8</sup>

What follows is a study of Bonhoeffer's *Prayerbook of the Bible*. My aim in analyzing his use of Scripture is threefold—descriptive, prescriptive, and illustrative. First, I intend to show how Bonhoeffer utilizes what James McClendon has called the “baptist vision” in theology.<sup>9</sup> Second, I wish to advance Bonhoeffer's proposal for biblical prayer as an important corrective to the Baptist practice of free prayer. And third, I want to investigate the hermeneutical and ethical implications of Bonhoeffer's view of enemies in the Psalms, using Psalm 23 as an example.

### **I. Worship, Theology, Ethics**

Bonhoeffer's book is not simply a work of biblical commentary or systematic theology. Rather, it intertwines worship, theology, and ethics for a pastoral purpose. I begin, therefore, with a survey of traditional models for relating these three aspects of Christian life. This will set the stage both for describing Bonhoeffer's approach and for showing its contribution to Baptist prayer.

---

<sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 143.

<sup>9</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine: Systematic Theology Volume 2* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 44-46.

### A. Three Approaches

There have been three different understandings of the relationship of Christian worship, theology, and ethics. Using the Latin tag *lex orandi, lex credendi* (“the rule of prayer [is] the rule of faith”),<sup>10</sup> Roman Catholic and Orthodox thinkers have assumed that the Church’s worship practice is supremely authoritative and should determine the content of theology. Aidan Kavanagh<sup>11</sup> and Alexander Schmemmann<sup>12</sup> represent this approach. Protestants do not typically use this terminology or make direct links between worship and theology. If they do, however, they reverse the saying—*lex credendi, lex orandi*. In other words, it is the role of theology both to establish proper worship and to correct its errors. This was the mission of Reformers like Luther and Calvin. More recently, some Protestants have proposed a dialectical relationship between worship and theology. Geoffrey Wainwright, for example, proposes an interaction between worship and theology with theology being dominant.<sup>13</sup> Another development in the discussion has been the introduction of the phrase *lex agendi* (“rule of life”). This indicates an awareness that worship forms Christians ethically and may be judged on its ability to produce virtuous lives. It has been a particular emphasis of Catholic scholars like Kevin Irwin.<sup>14</sup>

I would argue that the Free Church or Baptist perspective provides a third option. Like the Protestants, they make *lex credendi* primary, but not in a magisterial or creedal way. The focus is on the Bible and, specifically, the authority of Jesus as Lord. In this sense, it may be more accurate to speak of *lex Christi* (“rule of Christ”). Like the Catholics, however, there is also

---

<sup>10</sup> The tag derives from an expression in the fourth-century work of Prosper of Aquitaine: “the rule of prayer constitutes the rule of belief” (*legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*). Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 224-227.

<sup>11</sup> Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984), 91-92.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 15-16.

<sup>13</sup> Wainwright, *Doxology*, 249-250. Don Saliers proposes a reciprocal relationship with worship being primary. See his *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 39-48.

<sup>14</sup> Kevin Irwin, *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 55-56. See also Saliers, *Worship as Theology*, 171-190.

an emphasis on *lex agendi*, so much so that it tends to merge with *lex orandi*. In other words, faith in Christ must issue in faithful living, which *is* true and proper worship. A good example here is the understanding of baptism and the Lord's Supper as "ordinances."<sup>15</sup> Christ commands certain practices in Scripture, and believers are expected to respond in simple obedience. The mediation of tradition and the elaboration of teaching do not play a prominent role. Rather, there is an *immediacy* of hearing and responding. McClendon calls this hermeneutical stance the "baptist vision" and defines it in the following way:

The baptist vision is the way the Bible is read by those who (1) accept the plain sense of Scripture as its dominant sense and recognize their continuity with the story it tells, and who (2) acknowledge that finding the point of that story leads them to its application, and who also (3) see past and present and future linked by a "this is that" and "then is now" vision, a trope of mystical identity binding the story now to the story then, and the story then and now to God's future yet to come.<sup>16</sup>

Baptists see themselves inhabiting the biblical story. In the case of the ordinances, they are the first-century followers of Jesus, who hear his commands as if for the first time—"Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them" (Matt 28:19), and "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:21). Jesus' point and intended application are plain, but he does not coerce his followers. Christians are free to respond to their master and free in the areas where he does not direct them.

### B. Baptist Free Prayer

The Baptists emerged in the seventeenth century from the Separatist movement, which denied the legitimacy of the Church of England. They questioned various worship practices (*lex orandi*) because they could not find them commanded in the Bible (*lex credendi*) and because they felt

---

<sup>15</sup> Christopher J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 76-78; Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003), 7-8.

<sup>16</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, 45.

that such “Catholic” forms did not promote faithful living (*lex agendi*). A parade example of this attitude was their rejection of the *Book of Common Prayer* in favor of free prayer.<sup>17</sup>

Christopher Ellis has recently produced a thorough study of Baptist worship. Drawing on the writings of Isaac Watts, he distinguishes two forms of free prayer—extempore prayer, in which the worshiper speaks directly to God without planning or aid, and conceived prayer, in which the worshiper plans the prayer in advance and may use some kind of aid.<sup>18</sup> Free prayer aims to be contextual and specific. Even in the case of conceived prayer, the prayer is planned for a particular occasion and not subsequently reused. Although liturgical prayer has had a minor influence on some groups, Ellis maintains that most Baptists today still use free prayer. He estimates that extempore prayer makes up about two thirds of public prayer, and conceived prayer about one third, while private prayer is almost totally extempore. As a result, there is little difference between public worship and private devotion.

Baptist prayer is quite difficult to analyze because it does not rely upon or produce written documents. Nevertheless, Ellis has been able to identify four characteristics of free prayer.<sup>19</sup> First, free prayer is sincere and inspired.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, it is not totally subject to personal preference. Rather, it is bound to truthfulness before the God who sees the heart and dependent upon the Holy Spirit to provide appropriate words. Second, free prayer is saturated with scriptural references, paraphrases, and allusions.<sup>21</sup> Here again, it is not totally arbitrary. The assumption is that the Spirit will bring to mind words from the dictionary of biblical language. Third, free prayer is eschatologically oriented toward God’s coming kingdom.<sup>22</sup> As opposed to

---

<sup>17</sup> Leonard, *Baptist Ways*, 21-22.

<sup>18</sup> Ellis, *Gathering*, 107-108.

<sup>19</sup> I have reordered his four characteristics.

<sup>20</sup> Ellis, *Gathering*, 115-119

<sup>21</sup> Ellis, *Gathering*, 121-122.

<sup>22</sup> Ellis, *Gathering*, 119-121.

mystical prayer, which seeks divine communion, and dialogic prayer, which molds the self in relationship, free prayer petitions for God's decisive intervention. Fourth, free prayer is primarily individual in nature.<sup>23</sup> Congregations rarely pray the same words together. Rather, the pious individual is the norm and ideal. There is, however, an interpersonal dimension, in that individuals lead the congregation, and those in the congregation pray for and agree with the leader.

Baptist prayer has a number of important contributions to make to an ecumenical discussion of prayer. For example, its particularity and contextuality keep prayer rooted in the actual experiences of believers and churches. Also, its refusal to separate spheres of life (sacred/secular, public/private, clergy/laity) means that all of life must be offered up in honesty to God. Finally, its combination of creative spontaneity and personal engagement with God makes prayer exciting and dynamic. There are, however, significant problems. Prayer surely has eschatological and individual aspects, but focusing too much on these aspects neglects ethical responsibility. Prayer must also include here-and-now realities and the believer's relationship to neighbor. Moreover, the neglect of communal and dialogic types of prayer means that Baptists lack crucial means of moral formation. Don Saliers describes well the way in which prayer should create *tension*:

Tensions are built into the Christian moral life shaped by common prayer. This is because the concept of praying is internally connected with the call to holiness at the heart of the Christian gospel. This constitutes the focal point of Christian existence: Christ's own life is one of active prayer and prayerful action. It is thus fitting to speak of his whole life as a prayer—continual self-offering in love and obedience to the Father. In exploring what Christ's life (liturgy) signifies, we ponder anew the necessity of understanding prayer and action not in opposition but in tension required by living particular moments in the stream of life which is oriented toward the full stature of God in Christ.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Ellis, *Gathering*, 122-124. He calls this characteristic "communal prayer," but since he goes on to stress its individual nature, I have relabeled it.

<sup>24</sup> Saliers, "Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings," in *Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch Before God* (eds. E. Byron Anderson and Bruce T. Morill; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 30-31.

Jesus Christ exemplifies the unity of prayer and life, and he calls his followers to embody that unity, but there is a persistent gap between their prayers and their actions. Prayer should draw life toward worship of God and service of neighbor, but, unfortunately, life often determines the shape of prayer. Dependence upon Scripture and the Spirit is a Baptist ideal, but it is not always practiced, and when it is, it often remains too vague or fluid to challenge the status quo. Finally, Ellis mentions nothing of the Trinity. Surely the identity of the Christian God must inform the nature of Baptist prayer. What is needed is a type of free prayer that is more robustly biblical, communal, and Trinitarian, and therefore capable of molding Baptists in Christ's image. I believe that Bonhoeffer proposes such an approach.

## **II. Bonhoeffer on Biblical Prayer**

Having set the stage in Section One, it is now possible to analyze Bonhoeffer's proposal for biblical prayer in order to draw out implications for Baptists. After sketching the background of his book, I explicate its ideas employing David Kelsey's method of mapping theological arguments<sup>25</sup> and McClendon's terminology in Christian ethics.<sup>26</sup>

### **A. The Practice of Meditation**

In the face of National Socialism and the German church struggle, Bonhoeffer was concerned that church leaders lacked the necessary ethical resources for a faithful response. But neither the universities nor the seminaries taught spiritual disciplines. Instead of more training in traditional academic subjects, Bonhoeffer thought, church leaders urgently needed to return to basics. They

---

<sup>25</sup> David H. Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology Volume 1* (rev. ed.; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

needed to cultivate a life of prayer and Bible reading—what he called “meditation.”<sup>27</sup> For him, this communion with God was the proper source of all ministry and theology.

Assessing the problem, Bonhoeffer wrote the following in a letter to Barth:

Recently a leading member of the Confessing Church told me: “We haven’t the time for meditation now; the ordinands must learn to preach and to catechize.” This either shows a total lack of understanding of young theologians today, or else a blasphemous ignorance of how preaching and reaching come about. The kind of questions that young theologians seriously put to us today are: How can I learn to pray? How can I learn to read the Bible? Either we can help them to do this, or we can’t help them at all. None of this can be taken for granted.<sup>28</sup>

During his time as seminary director at Finkenwalde (1935-37), Bonhoeffer tried to answer these questions by instituting a regular schedule of meditation.<sup>29</sup> Each seminarian was required to spend half an hour each morning in quiet Bible study and prayer. He viewed solitude as a necessary discipline, but he also tried to foster a sense of community in various ways. For example, individual meditation always followed corporate worship. In addition, he carefully chose common texts for reading and organized corporate prayer once a week. Times of practical training, fellowship, and recreation offset sessions of meditation. Bonhoeffer made it clear that prayer was in no way a retreat *from* the world. Rather, it was the normative mode of Christian life and witness *within* the world. Nevertheless, the students found solitary reflection challenging and had trouble focusing. Some even resisted and accused Bonhoeffer of “legalism.” But he eventually won them over with his own example of faithful and fervent prayer. After leaving Finkenwalde, many continued the practice, and Bonhoeffer continued to send them texts for common meditation, even after the Gestapo closed the seminary.

---

<sup>27</sup> For an extensive example, see “Meditation on Psalm 119,” in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word* (trans. David McI. Gracie; Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1986), 103-145. Note especially his explication of v. 15 (131-133).

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 465.

<sup>29</sup> Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 462-465.

In order to commend the practice of Finkenwalde to the wider Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer and Bethge produced a catechism-like document entitled “Instructions in Daily Meditation,” which they disseminated to pastors in 1936.<sup>30</sup> It consisted of four questions with answers. First, why should one meditate?<sup>31</sup> Answer: meditation is the way that all Christians—not just ministers—hear from God and learn to speak of God. In addition, God requires it and uses it to mold their characters. Second, what does one want to gain from meditation?<sup>32</sup> Answer: one seeks to meet the risen Christ and to enjoy his fellowship. Third, how does one meditate?<sup>33</sup> Answer: meditation is not driven by whim. Rather, one begins with dependence upon the Holy Spirit, moves through the biblical text slowly and prayerfully, from word to word, and concludes with thanksgiving for a full heart. Fourth, how does one overcome problems with meditation?<sup>34</sup> Answer: difficulty is inevitable and, indeed, necessary. One must learn patient waiting and solidarity with the entire church at prayer. This document provides the basic outlines of the practice that Bonhoeffer developed theologically in his *Prayerbook of the Bible*, to which I now turn.

## B. Two Theological Arguments

Although Bonhoeffer claims simply to “introduce” the Psalter in his book, his use of the Psalms is embedded within theological argument. In order to show how this is so, it will be helpful to use the categories of David Kelsey. Kelsey suggests that, instead of debating *whether* and *to what extent* theologies are biblical, it is more productive to investigate *how* they are biblical. In other words, the goal is to determine the manner in which Scripture serves as authority within the

---

<sup>30</sup> “Instructions in Daily Meditation,” in Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 30-36. For another version of these ideas, see “Morning” in Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, 37-41.

<sup>31</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Daily Meditation,” 30-32.

<sup>32</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Daily Meditation,” 32.

<sup>33</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Daily Meditation,” 32-34.

<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Daily Meditation,” 34-36.

structure of a specific position. Drawing on the work of Stephen Toulmin, Kelsey develops a method of mapping the informal logic of theological arguments.<sup>35</sup> Theologians make “claims” based upon “data.” They also use “warrants” to move from data to claims, supporting their warrants with “backings.”<sup>36</sup> According to Kelsey, the purpose of theological argument is to reform church practice, and theologians configure their criteria with understandings of divine presence.<sup>37</sup> These terms and concepts will inform the following discussion, illuminating reasoning and revealing possible objections.

Bonhoeffer begins with Jesus’ teaching on prayer in Luke 11. Seeing Jesus praying, his disciples make a request: “Lord, teach us to pray.” From this episode, Bonhoeffer derives his overall thesis that prayer is not a natural human capacity. On the contrary, it must be taught:

“To learn to pray” sounds contradictory to us. Either the heart is so overflowing that it begins to pray by itself, we say, or it will never learn to prayer. But this is a dangerous error, which is certainly very widespread among Christians today, to imagine that it is natural for the heart to pray. We then confuse wishing, hoping, sighing, lamenting, rejoicing—all of which the heart can certainly do on its own—with praying. But in doing so we confuse earth and heaven, human beings and God.<sup>38</sup>

The simple act of addressing God does not make prayer. Even sincerity is not enough. Rather, Bonhoeffer says, there are proper and improper ways of addressing God. Just as children must learn to speak before they can have a conversation with their parents, so humans must learn a new language in order to address God. But how does one learn Christian prayer? As I see it, Bonhoeffer makes two theological arguments.

---

<sup>35</sup> Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 125-29.

<sup>36</sup> He also includes “qualifiers,” which show the degree to which claims are warranted, and potential “rebuttals,” which invalidate the warrants.

<sup>37</sup> Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 160. He calls the configuration of criteria a “discrimen.”

<sup>38</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 155.

First, on the basis of the data that Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:7-15; Luke 11:1-4)<sup>39</sup> and prayed the Psalms himself (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34; Luke 23:46),<sup>40</sup> Bonhoeffer makes the claim that Jesus wants to teach contemporary Christians the same manner of praying. He moves from data to claim by means of two warrants: that is, Jesus is alive today, and Christians are equivalent to his first followers. He apparently backs these warrants with convictions about the resurrection of Jesus and the continuing obligation to obey his teaching. The mode of divine presence here is what Kelsey calls "concrete actuality."<sup>41</sup> The New Testament provides identity descriptions of Jesus and his disciples, which render them present to one another today.<sup>42</sup> Jesus is still instructing his followers, and they are still looking to him as the normative model for prayer.

One could object that, while Jesus does *quote* the Psalms a number of times in the Gospels, he does not often *pray* them. But Bonhoeffer would surely respond that it makes all the difference that "Jesus died on the cross with words from the Psalms on his lips."<sup>43</sup> If the cross is the central Christian symbol of salvation, it must also be the central Christian symbol of prayer. The Psalms are necessary for understanding the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection, and they are necessary for making sense of his way of relating to God. In short, the Psalms are necessary for the intelligibility of the gospel. One could also object to Bonhoeffer's understanding of divine presence. Catholics might say that it neglects the Eucharist or developments in church history, and Protestants might say that it bypasses proper ecclesiology.

---

<sup>39</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 155.

<sup>40</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 156.

<sup>41</sup> Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 161.

<sup>42</sup> On Barth's view of Scripture as identity-describing narrative, see Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 39-50.

<sup>43</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 162. Patrick Miller takes this statement as central for understanding Bonhoeffer's view of the Psalms. See his "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Psalms," *PSB* 15 (1994): 280.

But for those, like Baptists, who have a similar view of Scripture, this should be a relatively strong argument.

In his second argument, Bonhoeffer moves to a deeper level. Beyond the claim that Jesus teaches his followers how to pray, he claims that praying the Psalms is an entrance into the very triune life of God. The primary datum here is the assumption that the Psalms are words of David addressed to God in prayer.<sup>44</sup> He then moves from this starting point by using two warrants with biblical backings. In addition to being human words to God, the Psalms are also divine words to humans because of texts that speak of David as a prophet moved by the Spirit (1 Sam 16:13; 2 Sam 23:2; Acts 2:30).<sup>45</sup> Moreover, on the basis of a general understanding of the New Testament (e.g., John 1), he sees Jesus praying the Psalms as both the Davidic Messiah and the incarnate Son of God.<sup>46</sup> Jesus is the divine Word from the Father and the human word back to the Father. In praying the Psalms, then, Christians are empowered by the Spirit to join the Son in prayer to the Father. This fills out Bonhoeffer's account of divine presence as "concrete actuality." The Old Testament Psalter is the primary place that Christians hear the praying voice of Christ. Moreover, in joining with this voice, they come to know the One rendered in Scripture as the triune God.

One could object to Bonhoeffer's understanding of prophecy and inspiration on historical grounds, but his interpretation is still a legitimate way of construing depictions of David across the Testaments. In addition, one could object that the Psalms are neither all prayer nor all by David. Bonhoeffer, however, grants both of these points. He knows that there are psalms that do not address God a single time.<sup>47</sup> But the fact that the Psalter is the largest deposit of prayer in the

---

<sup>44</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 158.

<sup>45</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 159.

<sup>46</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 157.

<sup>47</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 160.

Bible makes this, for him, its dominant mode of speech. He makes a similar move with regard to Davidic authorship. He knows that there are psalms ascribed to other psalmists, as well as a number of psalms without superscriptions.<sup>48</sup> But the fact that over half of the psalms are attributed to David means that the entire collection belongs to him in a unique way. That being said, Bonhoeffer views the Psalms as first and foremost corporate prayer:

Who prays the Psalter? David (Solomon, Asaph, etc.) prays. Christ prays. We pray. We who pray are, first of all, the whole community of faith in which alone the entire richness of the Psalter can be prayed. But those who pray are also, finally, all individuals insofar as they have a part in Christ and in their congregation and share in the praying of their prayer. David, Christ, the congregation, I myself—wherever we consider all these things with one another, we become aware of the wonderful path that God follows in order to teach us to pray.<sup>49</sup>

No individual can pray all of the Psalms in isolation, but it is possible to pray them as part of a diverse community.<sup>50</sup> As David led the ancient Israelite into prayer with various psalmists, so Jesus leads the Christian into fellowship with the wider church. What is more, the Son leads the worshiper into communion with the persons of the Godhead.

### C. Contributions

In Section One, I presented three ways of relating worship, theology, and ethics, arguing that the Free Church or Baptist perspective differs from the Catholic and Protestant. It is now possible to see that Bonhoeffer fits best within the Baptist approach.<sup>51</sup> In *Prayerbook of the Bible*, he begins with the *lex Christi* and follows it to *lex orandi* and *lex agendi*. In the words of Saliers, Christ embodies the unity of prayer and life, and he calls his followers to the same form of

---

<sup>48</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 158.

<sup>49</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 160.

<sup>50</sup> Bonhoeffer's belief that poetic parallelism reflects antiphonal singing in ancient Israel is unfounded (*Prayerbook*, 161).

<sup>51</sup> Bonhoeffer later explicitly critiques Catholics for neglecting the message of preaching (*lex credendi*) and Protestants for neglecting the spiritual disciplines (*lex orandi*), thereby distorting their common life (*lex agendi*). See his *Ethics* (DBWE 6; ed. Clifford J. Green; trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 394-96, 406-8.

faithfulness.<sup>52</sup> Bonhoeffer also exhibits a use of Scripture that operates according to the “baptist vision.” Jesus and his contemporary disciples are immediately present to one another through the medium of the biblical narrative. In the words of McClendon, “this is that and then is now.”<sup>53</sup>

Although Bonhoeffer has similarities with the Baptists, he also challenges them in the area of prayer. Baptists rejected the *Book of Common Prayer* because they did not find a biblical ordinance of prayer and felt that it should come from the heart.<sup>54</sup> But, in effect, Bonhoeffer argues that there *is* an ordinance of prayer: Jesus commands, “Pray then in this way” (Matt 6:9). Indeed, Bonhoeffer maintains that the Psalter is the “Book of Common Prayer” that trains Christians to pray “against our hearts.”

As I suggested above, the primary problem with Baptist free prayer is its lack of tension or ethical challenge. McClendon’s approach to ethics will be helpful in further diagnosing this problem and clarifying how Bonhoeffer addresses it. According to McClendon, Christian morality may be described in terms of practices, rules, virtues, and narratives. Drawing on Alasdair MacIntyre, he defines a practice as “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity.”<sup>55</sup> As “cooperative human activity,” practices require both intention and rule-keeping behavior.<sup>56</sup> Virtues are the “standards of excellence” that

---

<sup>52</sup> Saliers, “Liturgy and Ethics,” 30-31.

<sup>53</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, 45.

<sup>54</sup> According to Ellis, some Baptists did hold to an ordinance of prayer, but they meant by this the obligation of extempore prayer (*Gathering*, 84-86).

<sup>55</sup> McClendon, *Ethics*, 173. This is a quote from Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 175, which McClendon connects to his own understanding of game theory (*Ethics*, 169-172).

<sup>56</sup> John Webster rightly worries that excessive talk of “practices” may make the church anthropocentric (*Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 42-52). But for Bonhoeffer (and Baptists), ecclesial practices originate from and remain subservient to the Word of Christ.

practices foster in their participants. Moreover, the coherence and continuity of life required for developing virtues is narrative in nature, consisting of character, setting, and incident.<sup>57</sup>

If we consider prayer as a practice,<sup>58</sup> using this terminology, the deficiencies of free prayer come into focus. First, by emphasizing their own unmet needs, Baptists often seek goods external to the activity of prayer. In order for prayer to be legitimate, speaking with God must be the goal. All other results and goods must be secondary and internal to the practice.<sup>59</sup> Second, although Baptists stress intention, they do not view prayer as a rule-keeping activity. Therefore, they fail to participate with one another in prayer and to develop the virtues with narrative continuity that result from such participation.

In contrast, Bonhoeffer argues that biblical prayer is a normative Christian practice:

Whatever enters into the petitions of the Lord's Prayer is prayed aright; whatever has no place in it, is no prayer at all. All the prayers of the Holy Scriptures are summed up in the Lord's prayer and are taken up into its immeasurable breadth. They are, therefore, not made superfluous by the Lord's Prayer, but are rather the inexhaustible riches of the Lord's Prayer, just as the Lord's Prayer is their crown and unity.<sup>60</sup>

The primary source of biblical prayer is the Psalter, but the seven petitions<sup>61</sup> of the Lord's Prayer serve as rules governing its use.<sup>62</sup> They give preeminence to God (in petitions 1-3) and show humanity's needs properly ordered in relation to God's rule (in petitions 4-7). They also serve as hermeneutical guides to the Psalms, inculcating virtues like holiness, hopefulness, obedience,

---

<sup>57</sup> McClendon, *Ethics*, 177, 329-30.

<sup>58</sup> McClendon, *Ethics*, 173.

<sup>59</sup> A good example of this is Bonhoeffer's claim that Jesus Christ is *himself* the fulfillment of all of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer. See his *Discipleship* (DBWE 4; ed. Geoffrey B. Kelley and John D. Godsey; trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 157-158.

<sup>60</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 157-58. This formulation adapts a quote from Luther: "[The Psalter] runs through the Lord's Prayer and the Lord's Prayer runs through it, so that it is possible to understand one on the basis of the other and to bring them into joyful harmony" (*Prayerbook*, 158). On Luther's ethical use of the Psalms, see Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 165-240.

<sup>61</sup> This is based upon Matthew's fuller version of the Lord's Prayer. Luke's version (11:2-4) has only five petitions, lacking "your will be done" and "rescue us from evil."

<sup>62</sup> One may find implicit rules within the Psalms themselves and other biblical passages depicting prayer, for example, patterns of lament, thanksgiving, and praise.

dependence, forgiveness, perseverance, and goodness. Finally, the address to “our Father” incorporates the lives of Christians into the narratives of David and Jesus and the communities of the church and the triune God. Bonhoeffer sums this up beautifully in a passage from *Life*

*Together*:

We would learn again of God the Father and Creator who has preserved our life through the dark night and awakened us to a new day; God the Son and Savior of the World, who vanquishes death and hell for us, and dwells in our midst as Victor; God the Holy Spirit who pours the bright light of God’s Word into our hearts early in the morning, driving away all darkness and sin and teaching us to pray the right way. Morning does not belong to the individual; it belongs to all the church of the triune God.<sup>63</sup>

This is a compelling vision for Christian prayer and, I would argue, an important corrective for Baptist practice. The ongoing interplay between the Psalms and the Lord’s Prayer means that prayer remains free—but free with power for moral transformation.<sup>64</sup>

### **III. Forgiveness and the Ethics of Prayer**

Although Bonhoeffer notes twice that he could have organized his survey according to the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer,<sup>65</sup> he opts instead to use ten themes that arise from his reading of the Psalms—that is, creation, the law, the history of salvation, the Messiah, the church, life, suffering, guilt, enemies, and the end. Having explained Bonhoeffer’s approach in Section Two, I now illustrate that approach, using the theme of enemies and the example of Ps 23.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 49.

<sup>64</sup> That being said, Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer may be regarded as biblical precedent for rote prayer. Where Matthew has “pray then in this way” (6:9), Luke has “when you pray, say” (11:2). Where Matthew cautions “do not heap up empty phrases” (6:7), Luke enjoins repetitive persistence (11:5-13). In the final analysis, then, the canon allows both types of prayer.

<sup>65</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 162, 177.

<sup>66</sup> For an example in another genre, see Bonhoeffer, “Sermon on a Psalm of Vengeance— Psalm 58,” in *Meditating on the Word*, 84-96.

### A. The Problem of Enemies

Bonhoeffer acknowledges that the imprecatory psalms, which violently curse the psalmist's enemies, are the most morally challenging part of the Psalter: "All attempts to pray these psalms seem doomed to failure. They really seem to lay before us the so-called preliminary religious stage in relation to the New Testament."<sup>67</sup> In response, however, he opts neither for casting them off in Marcionite fashion nor for retaining them as simply a "preliminary religious stage."<sup>68</sup> He is determined to learn to pray the entire Psalter with Jesus Christ.<sup>69</sup>

Bonhoeffer takes four steps toward that end.<sup>70</sup> First, he points out that the enemies of the psalmist are presented as the enemies of God. Therefore, *praying* for vengeance takes it out of the hand of the one praying and gives the power to God. The goal of such prayer is divine justice, not personal vendetta.<sup>71</sup> Second, only the perfectly righteous person can pray these psalms and escape judgment. In other words, praying for justice implicates those who pray for it. They learn that they, too, are God's enemies, deserving punishment. Third, when the wrath of God ultimately falls, it does not fall on sinners. Rather, it falls on the innocent Jesus Christ. On the cross, Jesus pays the penalty for humanity's sin. At the same time, he prays, "Father, forgive

---

<sup>67</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 174.

<sup>68</sup> Both responses were prevalent in Germany at the time and advocated by Bonhoeffer's teachers at Berlin. Adolf von Harnack favored rejection on theological grounds, and Reinhold Seeberg favored retention on historical grounds. See Martin Kuske, *The Old Testament as the Book of Christ: An Appraisal of Bonhoeffer's Interpretation* (trans. S. T. Kimbrough, Jr.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 7-11.

<sup>69</sup> Walter Harrelson has criticized Bonhoeffer for removing the Bible from the Jews with his Christological interpretation ("Bonhoeffer and the Bible," in *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Problems and Possibilities in His Thought* [ed. Martin Marty; New York: Association Press, 1962], 115-142). But I would argue that he had to restore the Old Testament to the church before he could restore it to the synagogue.

<sup>70</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 174-176.

<sup>71</sup> Several recent commentators have made this point without pursuing a Christological interpretation. See, for example, Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007), 63-81; Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 63-86. Bonhoeffer's own approach is much closer to traditional Christian interpretations. For a nice summary, see John L. Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 49-70.

them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).<sup>72</sup> Fourth, those who find forgiveness in the cross are freed up to forgive their enemies, but those who look on Jesus as an enemy must bear the wrath of God themselves.<sup>73</sup>

Before moving to an application of this method, I offer further confirmation and critique. To begin with, a few additional texts bolster Bonhoeffer’s argument. For example, in Luke 23:46 Jesus’ last words from the cross come from Ps 31:5: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” This is an imprecatory psalm (see especially vv. 17-18), but Jesus radically modifies its curses with his prayer for forgiveness, providing a clear example of Bonhoeffer’s approach. Also, although it remains implicit in his discussion, Bonhoeffer appears to rely heavily on the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt 6:12). In the context, Jesus understands these “debts” more generally as “trespasses”: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (6:14-15). This is precisely the principle that Bonhoeffer uses to interpret the psalms in question. Here we see quite clearly the interrelationship of ethics and prayer. One must be a forgiving person to pray rightly, but one must pray rightly to be a forgiving person.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> This verse is lacking in some early manuscripts and may be a late addition. If it is, it was most likely drawn from Jesus’ own teaching on prayer in Luke 11. The death of Stephen in Acts 7 shows that Luke intends Jesus’ forgiveness as a model for his disciples.

<sup>73</sup> For Bonhoeffer, Christians must *always* forgive. Here he parts company with Luther, whose two-kingdoms hermeneutic allowed him to make exceptions. For Luther’s approach to enemies in the Psalms, see Thompson, *Reading the Bible*, 62-64.

<sup>74</sup> I am aware that this section uses Matthew and Luke exclusively. That is because they are the two Gospels that include both teaching on prayer and prayer from the cross. Mark has prayer from the cross (15:34) but lacks the teaching on prayer, and John lacks both. See the relevant sections of Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

That being said, Bonhoeffer's penal-substitutionary view of atonement is not well supported in the Gospel passion accounts and not necessary for his proposal.<sup>75</sup> In fact, it appears to conflict with part of his explanation. On the one hand, Bonhoeffer argues that forgiving enemies is possible because the Father's wrath is satisfied, but, on the other hand, he argues that it is possible because the Son forgives: "God hates and judges the enemies of God in the only righteous one, the one who prays for forgiveness of God's enemies."<sup>76</sup> This seems to drive a wedge between the Father and the Son who share the same Spirit. It seems better to see the Son revealing the Father's own forgiveness. Bonhoeffer puts it this way at another point: "The psalm of vengeance leads to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God that forgives enemies."<sup>77</sup> This is also the way that Jesus explains praying for enemies in Matthew 5:44-48:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

There should be a resemblance between Parent and child. As the Son of God, Jesus embodies his Father's forgiveness. This is the forgiveness that he teaches to his disciples: they must learn to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors so that they may be true children of the Father. In this way, the cross of Christ may be seen as a revelation of God's forgiveness, rather than wrath.<sup>78</sup> This does not mean, however, that God has no wrath. Indeed, learning forgiveness through prayer may be the best way to "leave room for the wrath of God" (Rom 12:19). That is,

---

<sup>75</sup> Scholars are now rethinking this view from a number of different perspectives. See, for example, Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, eds., *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

<sup>76</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 175.

<sup>77</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 175.

<sup>78</sup> I am not here propounding a single, all-encompassing view of atonement. I am well aware that there are a number of different models within the New Testament itself. My goal is, rather, to strengthen Bonhoeffer's own proposal concerning the link between prayer and the cross, using constructive criticism.

it leaves ultimate judgment to God, removing it from human hands and human theories of retributive justice.

### B. Psalm 23 as an Example

William Holladay has argued that Ps 23 became an American secular icon in the middle of the nineteenth century due to three factors—the shift from a dominant Calvinist theology to a more individualistic evangelicalism, the sentimentalization of church and culture, and the evolution of civil religion.<sup>79</sup> In addition, he points out certain features of the psalm that made it congenial to such use:

Let us remind ourselves of the nature of the psalm. It is short and therefore easily memorized. It is undemanding. It does not mention sin or suggest the appropriateness of participating in any ecclesial community. It simply seems to affirm that God (or, alternatively, Jesus) accompanies the speaker and takes care of him or her. The psalm could be appropriated for a rite of passage, since it appears to move from references to life . . . to death . . . to eternal life . . . . It is a psalm that could be used in public contexts, acceptable to both Jews and Christians and giving no offence to anyone.<sup>80</sup>

Even today, Ps 23 is on the lips of soldiers in trenches, patients in hospitals, and Americans who have not been in church in years. According to Holladay, its popularity is due in large part to its inability to challenge readers ethically. It has become a kind of talisman that affirms and protects all who claim it. In this regard, it provides a good test case for applying Bonhoeffer's approach to the Psalms. He identifies it as a psalm of vengeance, but does not go on to explicate it according to his theological understanding.<sup>81</sup> If he is right, the risen Lord wants to instruct his disciples to forgive their enemies through praying this psalm. Unfortunately, it lost this

---

<sup>79</sup> William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 365. For a more expansive history of interpretation, see Susan Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries: Volume One* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

<sup>80</sup> Holladay, *Psalms*, 364.

<sup>81</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 174.

significance when it lost its proper context in the biblical narrative and the practice of Christian prayer.

The text of Ps 23<sup>82</sup> may be rendered as prayer<sup>83</sup> in the following way:

- 1 O LORD, you are my shepherd,  
I shall not want.
- 2 You make me lie down in green pastures;  
you lead me beside still waters;
- 3 you restore my life.<sup>84</sup>
- You lead me in right paths,  
for your name's sake.
- 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.
- 5 You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.
- 6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in your house, O LORD,  
for length of days.<sup>85</sup>

The psalm consists of three stanzas (vv. 1-3a, 3b-4, 5-6). God appears as a shepherd in the first two stanzas, but becomes a host in the final one. Correspondingly, the psalmist appears as God's

---

<sup>82</sup> In an effort to avoid what Bonhoeffer calls the "flight into philology" ("Daily Meditation," 33), I provide a modified version of the psalm, using only the NRSV and its notes. For commentary on the Hebrew text, see Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (WBC 19; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 203-9; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59* (CC; trans. Hilton C. Oswald; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 303-9.

<sup>83</sup> Verses 4-5 are already addressed to God in the original, so casting the entire psalm as prayer only requires altering or adding pronouns in vv. 1-3, 6. In this sense, the psalm offers a microcosm of the Psalter as a whole, which is partly but not totally composed of prayer.

<sup>84</sup> The NRSV has "soul," but this rendering has led to an unfortunate history of spiritualization, so I opt for "life," an alternative registered in the notes. In the context of the psalm, the word clearly includes both spirit and body.

<sup>85</sup> The NRSV reads "my whole life long," but it also suggests "for length of days" as a more literal rendering of the Hebrew. I adopt this rendering to preserve the inherent ambiguity of how long the speaker dwells with God.

sheep in the first two stanzas, but becomes God's guest at the table in the final one.<sup>86</sup> There is also a plot arc as the psalm moves geographically from the peaceful pasture through the dangerous valley to the safety of home.<sup>87</sup> Following Bonhoeffer, there are three levels at which to read the psalm: "David prays. Christ prays. We pray."<sup>88</sup> The first thing to point out is that casting Ps 23 as prayer removes its talismanic function in popular usage. Prayer requires addressing the *particular* God rendered in the psalm and opening one's self up to challenge and change.

At the first level, we may take Ps 23 as the prayer of King David. Although there is no authorial indication within the psalm itself, the superscription does make this attribution—"A Psalm of David."<sup>89</sup> David was a shepherd both literally and metaphorically: he kept his father's flock, but he also became the shepherd of the people Israel (1 Sam 16). "Shepherd" was a common title for ancient Near Eastern kings.<sup>90</sup> What is surprising here is that David applies this image exclusively to God, thus subverting typical notions of power. David is just one sheep in God's flock. Yet God shows special care for him throughout the psalm, leading him from his father's pastures through the wilderness to the anointing of kingship. Although David's enemies are not identified here, he was forced to flee into the wilderness on two different occasions, escaping the treats of Saul (1 Sam 21-31) and his own son Absalom (2 Sam 15-19). The psalm could easily refer to these experiences. In addition, v. 5 is somewhat ambiguous: "You prepare a table before me *in the presence of my enemies.*" Originally, it probably meant that God would

---

<sup>86</sup> Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 205; Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 305.

<sup>87</sup> For a liturgical structure that lacks plot movement, see Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms 1: With an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (FOTL 14; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 113-116.

<sup>88</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook*, 160.

<sup>89</sup> Bonhoeffer would not object to a historical investigation of the psalm's origin, but he would argue that such inquiry lies outside of the sphere of Christian prayer.

<sup>90</sup> James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 117.

defeat and shame David's enemies.<sup>91</sup> He imagines them watching jealously as he enjoys God's abundant blessing. In the end, David dwells securely in Jerusalem, confident that goodness and mercy—not foes—will pursue him all his days.

At the second level, we may hear Ps 23 as the prayer of Jesus Christ, the new David. Christian interpreters have traditionally been quick to identify the shepherd as Jesus on the basis of John 10:11—"I am the good shepherd"—but this is to miss a step in the journey of prayer.<sup>92</sup> In Bonhoeffer's approach, it is crucial first to see Jesus as "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). God leads him from the waters of baptism through the "valley of the shadow of death"<sup>93</sup> on the cross to the bounty of the resurrection feast. Here the enemies at the table are the Romans and Jews who crucified him and the disciples who betrayed and deserted their master. Yet the phrase "in the presence of my enemies" takes on new meaning when the Host unexpectedly extends forgiveness to all the guests. In the end, the risen Lord dwells with God "for length of days."

At the third level, we may appropriate Ps 23 as a prayer of the church, the followers of Christ.<sup>94</sup> The gathered flock now affirms, "O LORD, you are *our* shepherd," and God leads them in the steps of Christ, from death to life, from the waters of baptism to the table and cup of the supper.<sup>95</sup> In the process, Christians move from one side of the table to the other; they are enemies of God who become honored guests with an overflowing cup. Therefore, those who enter the house of the Lord—the church community—must extend forgiveness to one another and to their

---

<sup>91</sup> Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 308.

<sup>92</sup> Holladay, *Psalms*, 12.

<sup>93</sup> The NRSV has "the darkest valley," which is probably closer to the original meaning of the phrase. I use here the KJV translation of the Masoretic vocalization of the Hebrew. As the rendering of the Septuagint indicates, this was the understanding at the time of Jesus. Due to the influence of the KJV, it has also been the most common understanding among English readers.

<sup>94</sup> There is a precedent for the corporate interpretation in the echoes of Israel's exodus from Egypt through the wilderness to the promised land. See Mays, *Psalms*, 118.

<sup>95</sup> This is the understanding of Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria. See Holladay, *Psalms*, 13.

enemies.<sup>96</sup> At this level, Jesus shifts from sheep to Shepherd and from guest to Host, revealing the incarnational presence that undergirds the entire journey of prayer.

Bonhoeffer's approach offers rich possibilities for multi-layered biblical prayer. It departs from the plain sense of Jesus' teaching to create typological linkages between David, Christ, and the church.<sup>97</sup> It also offers resources for moral formation and transformation. In the case of Ps 23, for example, we can see all four of Bonhoeffer's (modified) steps for praying the psalms of wrath. By relying fully on God, David gives up his own vengeance in favor of divine justice. Next, those who pray find themselves in the place of Jesus' enemies, only to behold forgiveness in his cross. Finally, the church is able to grasp God's forgiveness by offering it to others: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt 6:12). What Holladay calls an "undemanding" psalm thus becomes a confrontation with sin and a challenge to the Christian community to live out its baptismal identity and the implications of its common meal. In this way, Ps 23 serves not as a rod of retribution for enemies but as a staff of instruction in forgiveness.

#### IV. Conclusions

This essay has been an exploration of the intersections of worship, theology, and ethics in Bonhoeffer's *Prayerbook of the Bible*, using various conceptual tools. In Section One, I framed the discussion by delineating three ways of relating these spheres of Christian life—the Catholic, the Protestant, and the Free Church or Baptist—suggesting that Baptists seek an immediate experience with Christ through Scripture. Christ calls, and they respond with obedient lives of worship. I also pointed out the central deficiency of Baptist free prayer, which I took to be primarily ethical. As the spontaneous outpouring of a single heart, free prayer lacks the ability to

---

<sup>96</sup> I wish to point out that the prayer is not complete until it includes specific enemies.

<sup>97</sup> "Typology" is, to my mind, a better word to describe Bonhoeffer's method than "allegory."

challenge and mold hearts and lives. In Section Two, I commended Bonhoeffer's method of praying "against our hearts" as a potential antidote. After some biographical background, I isolated and described his two theological arguments: that is, Christ wants to teach his disciples to pray the Psalms, and praying the Psalms is a means to fellowship with the triune God. The first argument fits the Baptist approach but corrects Baptist practice. In essence, Bonhoeffer finds an "ordinance" in the Lord's Prayer and a "Book of Common Prayer" in the Psalms. For him, Christian prayer is a ruled practice imbedded in a shared narrative capable of instilling virtue. His second argument then builds on the first to open up a fuller understanding of God's presence in Scripture and community. Finally, in Section Three, I presented and critiqued Bonhoeffer's proposal for praying the cursing psalms. Using Ps 23 as an example, I tried to illustrate how the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer serves as a guide to forgiving enemies.

Let me conclude with an image and a challenge. My church facility has a prayer chapel. It is lined with a number of small pews. At the front is a large stained-glass window depicting Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jerusalem lies in the distance. The city is dark, but light shines on Jesus' face as he gazes heavenward. Beneath the window sits an open pulpit Bible. It strikes me that this is exactly what Bonhoeffer had in mind. Through the medium of Scripture, Jesus calls his disciples to pray with him. In the presence of enemies, he addressed the Father: "Not what I want but what you want." (Matt 26:39). Sadly, I have never seen anyone using the prayer chapel of our church. Where is everyone? Some may be sleeping. Some may have fled. Some may even have betrayed the Lord. I suspect, however, that most are somewhere else saying their own prayers.

Baptists are not known for prayer. We are known for preaching about Jesus and the Bible, but preaching alone is not enough to produce virtuous lives. With Bonhoeffer, I suggest

that we must learn a new language of prayer if we are to be faithful to our Lord and the Scriptures of the church. According to Bonhoeffer, biblical prayer is fundamentally prayer *with* Christ. It is not prayer *to* Christ, but from and to the Father in the Spirit. Therefore, praying “in the name of Christ” does not mean simply claiming his name at the end of a prayer; it means taking on his identity to such an extent that our lives are lived from and to the Father in the Spirit.