

The Lord's Prayer in Its Eschatological Setting

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Introduction. Ulrich Luz's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew notes that the history of interpretation of the Lord's Prayer has taken two broad forms. The dogmatic reading, typified in the writings of Tertullian, reads the prayer as a summary of Christian doctrine. Luz complains that the premodern church tended to alienate the Lord's Prayer from Christian life by turning it into the basis for esoteric theology. For instance, it read the first and fourth petitions in terms of the Father, the second and fifth of the Son, and the third and sixth of the Spirit. The ethical reading, typified by Gregory of Nyssa, takes the prayer as a guide to attaining the beatific life. An extremely influential instance for the west is Augustine's first commentary on the Lord's Prayer, which matches its seven petitions (not six!) to seven gifts of the Holy Spirit and to the seven beatitudes (not eight!) that work as a ladder of spiritual ascent (*On the Sermon on the Mount* 2.4.15-2.11.39, cf. *On Christian Doctrine* 2.7.9-11).

Luz complains that turning the Lord's Prayer into a basis for esoteric theology or spirituality tended to alienate it from real Christian life. Modern historical critics reacted against these habits by reading the prayer through the nineteenth century's romantic notions of early pre-dogmatic – our generation might call it more “authentic” – Christian faith. It was primitive and practical *rather than* theoretical or contemplative, and therefore better. Albert Schweitzer then pioneered an *eschatological* reading that now dominates among biblical scholars. This sets the Lord's Prayer within Jesus' apocalyptic eschatology (Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, Augsburg, 375). It is primitive, practical, and *strange* – and that leaves it remote from modern life.

Later exegetes have accepted Schweitzer's basic insight while jettisoning his peculiar reading of Jesus' life as a failed attempt to inaugurate the eschaton. N.T. Wright says in *Jesus*

and the Victory of God that Jesus' "special prayer" for his disciples "explained what he was doing ... in terms of the reconstitution of Israel" (Wright 1996, 169). John Howard Yoder interprets the prayer's petition for forgiveness according to Jesus' inauguration of the jubilee as a precursor of the Kingdom of God (Yoder 1994, 61-62). Marianne Meye Thompson describes the New Testament's theology as a "trajectory [that] aims at an eschatological horizon, when God's promises to all the people of God are ultimately fulfilled and they enjoy that relationship of trust and love signified by calling upon God as Father" (Thompson 2000, 156).

I too am convinced of this prayer's apocalyptic eschatology. But does eschatological interpretation necessarily move away from the theological, the contemplative, the ethical, or the practical? Several years of reflecting upon the Lord's Prayer in its biblical, historical, and contemporary settings – and in the personal setting of my own life – have given me no compelling reason to set Tertullian, Gregory, Augustine, and the contemporary biblical studies guild in fundamental opposition. In fact, more than ever I think their concerns converge. Robust theological, ethical, and historical-critical readings of the Lord's Prayer support one another. Really understanding and using this prayer demands and lends an adequate appreciation of the historical narrative of Jesus Christ and the cosmic narrative of creation and redemption in which Jesus, the gospel writers, and the apostolic Church all place it. It sets us in our places in his heavenly Father's Kingdom sanctifying his name, realizing his will on earth, enjoying his providence, extending his gracious forgiveness, and awaiting his final deliverance from evil.

Of course a theologian *would* say that. But is it true? And can it be more than an abstraction? In the past few years I have reflected systematically on each petition of the Lord's prayer. My efforts, which I have dubbed "exercises in prayerful theology," are a test of whether this prayer really does bring the gospel's integrity to our complex, incoherent, and inconsistent lives, redeeming our unholy acts and ordering our holy acts into a living sacrifice of praise. All

that is a lot to cover in forty minutes, so tonight I will review my findings on the promise, meaning, and work of just two petitions: that our Father give us our daily bread, and that he forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Then I will close with general suggestions of how the Lord's Prayer respects and informs the coherence among Christian scholarship, spirituality, ethics, and theology.

Daily bread. Money has long bewildered me as a Christian. I do not think this is *simply* because of greed. Rather, money is tied into our lives so intimately that it comes to embody us. So the petition for daily bread confronts years of theological frustration over the issue of wealth.

Not all of us inherit possessions, but all of us do inherit what our possessions mean. Both of my parents were children in the Great Depression. They worked hard to pass its lessons onto us. Our family held onto a small family farm in Iowa and some agricultural land in godforsaken central Nevada just in case a new depression forced us to go there to survive. Had my grandparents invested in California real estate instead, we would now be fantastically wealthy; but what good would beachfront property have been in a famine? My folks taught me to work hard, earn fairly, and save and spend for the future. I can feel myself urging both my children and my students to make the same choices and adopt the same priorities, and hoping for similar results. I also learned from wealth's theorists. A brilliant high school teacher hooked me on economics and made the dismal science a lifelong delight. If I learned how to handle money from my biological ancestors, I learned how to ponder it from ideological visionaries. Above all, I learned about wealth from my *tradition* – from the stories my culture tells with its stuff.

The strongest and most invisible hand is not a market but a people. David Hackett Fisher traces America's most influential subcultures back to four folkways that began in different cultural regions of Reformation Britain, traveled to America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, grew, spread, and assimilated others into the blurred and faded patchwork of the

contemporary United States. A wave of Puritans brought their congregational polity and ordered liberty from East Anglia and created Puritan Massachusetts. Another wave brought Anglican hierarchy and classbound honor from southwestern England to Virginia. Later an exodus of Quakers transplanted the spiritualistic, egalitarian, and ascetic world of the Midlands into the Delaware Valley. These “worldly ascetics” worked, saved, and invested rather than borrowing, spending, and hoarding. They became pioneers of both American industrial capitalism (555-560) and American philanthropy (566-573). Then a wave of Presbyterian “Scotch-Irish” planted the fierce, economically polarized culture of North Britain’s borderlands on the western American frontier (Fischer 1989, 785-786). These four have dominated to this day. Later ethnic immigrants have tended to adopt the folkways of the regions in which they arrived (873-874). That is true of the Work family: we moved from Scotland to Pennsylvania in 1690 and absorbed its Quaker economic habits. We learned to tell another people’s story with our stuff.

The “substitution effect” in economics is well known: if beef is too expensive at the market I will buy chicken instead, and if interest rates rise then bonds become more attractive relative to stocks. More mysterious and more compelling is the “ancestor effect”: I won’t buy squid at any price, and whatever the interest rate I share my parents’ preference for stocks over bonds. Supply and demand can be plotted as intersecting curves, but the places and shapes of those curves are enigmas. What Wittgenstein said of language is true also of incentives: “Explanation comes to an end somewhere” (*Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell, 1958, 3).

Still another tutor in economics has been the gospel stories in which what we do with our stuff is a matter of sudden and eternal judgment (Matt. 25:13). For risking or burying the king’s talents we are rewarded or punished (25:14-30). For having mercy on the Son of Man’s brothers and sisters or turning them away we are accepted or rejected (25:31-46). Such warnings are but the tip of an iceberg of radical economic expectations Jesus has for his subjects.

What an odd curriculum! Its contradictions often leave me torn, baffled, and tempted to resignation over money. It is not only that my life is a battle of different families, paradigms, and peoples. Nor is it just the challenge of the Kingdom's sacrificial mercy, hospitality to strangers, rigorous discipline, and frequent harshness. To turn Mark Twain on his head, it is the parts of the Bible I *don't* understand that bother me. I get the parables' historical context, the literary genre, and the symbolism. Still – how can *that* bizarre apocalyptic world also be ours? How would my stuff ever tell *this* story? Do I not perceive because I am just a foreigner in the Kingdom? This is the material chaos that the fourth petition exposes in me. And here is its answer.

What is wealth? It depends. Sin distorts the originally good relationships God ordained for his creation. That turns wealth into power, virtue, pleasure, reward, luck, and a host of other metaphors we use for our stuff. In these strongholds of our own making, money gains its familiar power over us. But the story of Jesus the Messiah has convinced Christians that God, the alpha and omega, sustains us through the beta, gamma, and delta of our common journey out of condemnation to the righteousness of his Kingdom. The name for that sustenance is *providence*. *Wealth is providence insofar as its story is that gospel story.*

There is a long tradition of spiritualizing the Lord's Prayer's "daily bread." We turn it into insight into the Bible, mystical relationship with God, calling to mission, the Holy Spirit, and so on. These allegories have their place (see for instance Luke 11:13). But they depend on the literal meaning. When angels came to Jesus in the wilderness and ministered to him (Matt. 4:11), they didn't give him Torah, or fellowship, or a mission, or even the Holy Spirit. He already had those! They gave the hungry savior what he *lacked*: the provisions he needed and refused to grant himself (Deut. 8:1-10, cf. 1 Kings 19:4-8). Daily bread is really bread.

Bread comes up repeatedly in the Torah at pivotal moments in its stories of salvation. With the possible and significant exception of water, no other commodity measures God's

faithfulness so consistently – not gold, not livestock, not even land.

There is bread beyond Eden (Gen. 3:19). There is bread to bless the God of victories (14:17-20) and entertain God and angels (18:1-6, 19:1-3). There is bread for refugees in the desert (21:14) and for exiles from the father's house (28:20-22). There is bread for gaining inheritance (25:34, 27:17) and making treaties with potential enemies (31:51-54). There is bread in Egypt for starving nations (41:53-57) and patriarchs' journeys (45:23).

There is bread in Midian for a refugee (Ex. 2:20). There is bread of affliction for the exodus (Ex. 12:37-49) and bread from heaven in the wilderness (16:4-5). There is bread for the conquest (23:23-25) and bread in the land conquered (13:5-10). There is bread of divine presence in the tabernacle (25:23-30), and bread of priestly sustenance to keep fellowship (29:31-34; Lev. 8, 24:5-9). There is bread for commemorating Israel's holy past (Lev. 23). There is bread for fulfilling the vows of holy ones (Num. 6). There is bread aplenty when Israel obeys God (26:5, Num. 17:21), and bread of prophetic scarcity when she disobeys (26:26).

In the language of ethics, bread is teleological. It advances the plot. As it is in the Torah, so it is in the prophets and the writings: Bread meets present needs to help bring the future.

The phrase "daily bread" is an awkward translation of the obscure Greek term *artos epiousios*. Scholars have long debated it refers to our bread for today, our bread for the morrow, or our bread for the eschaton. In the biblical imagination there is no dilemma, because the same bread serves all three ends. Bread's versatility in the biblical story is its sacramental ability to join the mundane to the spiritual and the present to the past and future. We may gloss the petition this way: "As you did before, so give us now what we need to see us through to the very end."

The New Testament follows the Old. In 1 Corinthians 10-11 Paul describes bread, and food generally, in terms of two whole economic constellations. On the one hand, it is the "spiritual food" that our fathers ate in the wilderness (10:3), the communion loaf we break

worshipfully (10:16), the sacrifice that sustains the temple priesthood (10:18), genuine hospitality to outsiders (10:25-27), the unity of believers (11:18-20), the Lord's gracious death (11:26), his promised return (11:26), the body's spiritual discernment (11:29), and Christ's saving discipline (11:32). On the other hand, it is the meal from which Israel arose in rebellion and was overthrown (10:5-7), partnership with demons (10:20-22), legalism and judgmentalism (10:28-29), division, selfishness, gluttony, and hunger (11:21-22), accountability for Christ's sufferings (11:27), illness and death (11:30), and condemnation (11:34). Quite a contrast!

Now consider the roles we give material resources in our own age. On one side, wealth is for protecting and promoting those who have it. Let us label this pole "reactionary," though I do not mean the political right. After all, entrenched interests on the left are as reactionary in this sense as landed gentry and patrician family trusts. Wealth is for buttressing a status quo. On the other side, wealth is for transferring to those who should have it but don't. Let us label this pole "progressive," though I do not mean the left. After all, libertarians and entrepreneurs, commonly mistaken for conservatives, are more often actually radicals. For them economic change is its own good, wiping away the dead hand of the past that would obstruct the coming of the future. Wealth is for changing the world – by flowing to the poor, to the invisible, to the hardworking, to the entrepreneurial, to the just, to the free. Pragmatists in the middle balance the past and future to bring some of each into the other to suit their tastes.

The whole spectrum constructs wealth as a servant of opposition. Money distinguishes insiders from outsiders, resists change, feeds growth industries and starves sunset industries, or buries the past to deliver the future. The leaven of reactionaries, pragmatists, and progressives alike makes bread the second of Paul's constellations: an embodiment of power and envy, and a means of rebellion, idolatry, impurity, alienation, hypocrisy, egocentrism, guilt, and perdition.

The "daily bread" we pray for is none of these. It inhabits Paul's first constellation

because it tells a different story. The Lord's Prayer is neither reactionary, nor progressive, nor moderate. It contradicts our theories of capital because the past we remember, the present we endure, and the future we await all depend not on the acquisition or the transfer of wealth but on the providential work of Christ.

In his Kingdom, those who do not store up treasure on earth somehow still have resources to give. That is because they are still receiving the daily bread they pray for. They can still give because God still provides. And what God still provides is not called property, shares, collateral, income, profit, rent, interest, equity, capital gains, distributions, dividends, royalties, plunder, welfare, tax credits, benefits, winnings, loans, transfer payments, or charity. Jesus has us call it our daily bread. It is what we always need now to see us through to the very end.

Of course, our daily bread may come in all these forms and more. The Baptist invited Israel back into the land of milk and honey; Jesus passed around full baskets; the disciples found an unridden donkey; Peter pulled up a staggering haul; the disciples pooled their monies; Ananias sold a field; destitute widows got a daily distribution; parents cared for their children and masters for their slaves; Lydia funded a mission; Paul marketed tents and raised funds for Jerusalem. The point is not the various forms, but the common substance. To be the kingdom's providence they must be our daily bread.

Here we meet one of the eternal questions of Christian ethics. What makes these assets daily bread? How can the resources of a condemned world be the Kingdom's providence? How can bad trees yield good fruit?

They cannot. The Kingdom of God is not bankrolled by the ruler of this world. Neither capitalism, nor socialism, nor any other oppositional economic order can produce Paul's "spiritual food." A tithe does not justify unrighteous income. A charitable foundation does not rectify an unscrupulous fortune. Redistributive taxes, violent revolutions, nationalized industries,

free trade, and high technology bring neither social peace nor common prosperity. Adam Smith's and Karl Marx's efforts to turn vice into virtue are just modern schools of alchemy.

Why? Because the Kingdom *comes*. As what is personal must be born from above, so what is impersonal must be graced with a new beginning. A bad tree cannot yield good fruit, but a bad tree can be made a good one (Matt. 12:33). That is not alchemy but transubstantiation, judgment and refreshing, death and resurrection.

The point of wealth's transubstantiation from the second constellation to the first, from bread as sin to bread as life, is the intersection of the two economies in Jesus' ministry. There wealth is Roman taxes, the awakened appetites of a crowd ready to force Jesus' coronation, embezzled apostolic funds, Caesar's denarius, a demand to divide an estate, two sons' downfalls, a rich young man's burden, a rich dead man's torment, a Pharisee's annual giving and a publican's guilt, silver for a disciple's betrayal, a plundered garment, and a potter's field. Yet in the same stories wealth is also treasure from wise men, a steady if unremarkable job, angelic relief in the wilderness, supporters' hospitality, funds for a well budgeted house, a coin from a fish's mouth, a seamless robe, wine for a wedding, signs for thousands of the coming bounty, a found coin, discounted loans that win friends, a widow's mite, Zacchaeus' penance, a jar of costly perfume, a Passover meal, and a proper tomb.

What distinguishes these two economies is also what links them. One proclaims, embodies, and brings about the good news. The other refuses, resists, and opposes it. The two economies meet in the broken flesh and spilled blood of Christ. On his cross, violence is made an occasion for peace. At his tomb, providence quells rebellion. On the road to Emmaus the covetousness that ended in murder is ended with the daily bread that yields recognition and satisfaction (Luke 24:35). In Jerusalem, the disciples devote themselves to a whole new economy of signs and wonders centered in the apostles' teaching, a fellowship of profound sharing, the

breaking of daily bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42-47). The old has been made new.

The Kingdom's prayerful life reconstructs money. Jesus taught us to beg not just for our individual selves or just for today's rations but for the whole body – and for the Name to be made holy, the Kingdom to come, the Father's will to be done, sinners to be made righteous, and evil to be defeated. This metanarrative changes everything. Money ceases to be just consumption or capital and becomes what it should always have been: our daily bread, what we have always needed today to see us all through to the very end. Providential wealth is something new and free. The true sage in Jesus' parable of the rich fool is the one who is generous toward God and so accumulates treasure in heaven (Luke 12:21, 32-34). In the parable of the prodigal son, the Father's will is to beget heirs who gain his own generosity and discipline.

Our financial cultures have no words for *artos epiousios*, no sense of its happy ending, no vocabulary of providence. Thus they need judging, convicting, forgiving, and healing. As a product of these cultures, I do too. Jesus' mission frees all of us from the distraction wealth has become in our lives so we can become faithful trustees of Kingdom's far greater treasure.

And when we embrace God's vocabulary and beg for our daily bread, not only do we receive sustenance, but material things also receive significance. Land and currency and all the rest gain the opportunity to become our daily bread. They take part in the great story of salvation that is not just for our sake but for theirs too, and especially for the sake of the Lord's name (Ps. 23:3). The salvation is twofold: we are freed from wealth's grip, and wealth is freed from ours.

Consider the illustration that follows the Lord's Prayer in Luke (11:5-13). We are desperate neighbors who need bread to entertain unexpected visitors. Everything is going wrong! Our guests will be insulted. We will be humiliated. We will resent our ungracious friend. The friendship will be strained, if not broken. His loaves stored away for tomorrow will be ... what? The last answer is ambiguous. But whatever they turn out to be, they will have the bitter taste of

unrighteousness. What rights the relationships and rescues everything is our incessant begging and the answer of transubstantiating grace. When the sleepy friend is finally roused and lends the bread, the guests are welcomed, we are honored, our friend credited and glorified for his sacrifice – and the bread becomes not just bodily nourishment but the delicious currency of fellowship.

Is this scenario a tale of maximized utility? Managed scarcity? Benefits exceeding costs? Spontaneous order? Sure. But these accounts hardly scratch the surface. However economists might see it, theology must see it as a story of the Kingdom's righteousness. Wealth is made providence when God reframes it in the Kingdom's righteous economy, renarrating it in the Spirit as the Father's daily bread for the Son and all his charge.

Forgiveness. If the petition on daily bread stirs my persistent concerns about what we have, the petition on forgiveness stirs my growing concerns about what we lack.

In one of a series of essays he published in 2000 as *Hooking Up*, Tom Wolfe claims that this century's two deepest thoughts are headed for a collision. Neuroscience and evolutionary psychology are discovering the physiological basis of all human behavior. He believes they are thus closing in on solutions to the timeless riddle of human existence (Tom Wolfe, *Hooking Up*, Picador, 2000, 97-98). "Here we have the two most fascinating riddles of the twenty-first century," he says: "the riddle of the human mind and the riddle of what happens to the human mind when it comes to know itself absolutely" (107).

What will happen to us after whatever happens to "us"? Wolfe thinks Nietzsche's fulfilled predictions of bloody twentieth century nihilism will pale in comparison to what will happen once we realize that "transcendence" is just a misnomer for mental impressions that once had survival value. Our age already senses that final twilight approaching, into light or darkness we cannot yet tell. As a student of the trend, Wolfe makes a good early indicator.

For decades Wolfe's writing has been driven by a sociological "Theory of Everything"

that declares that we are all constantly absorbed with social status. His social-scientific journeys led him to Edmund O. Wilson, who connected the genetically determined social behaviors of ants to rhesus macaque monkeys and finally to human beings. Wilson is the father of sociobiology, which Wolfe calls “the hottest field in the academic world” (96). Wolfe realizes that his old-school Weberian Theory of Everything stands challenged by Wilson’s new Theory of Everything. Wolfe claims to be a skeptic of Wilson, but he allows that he is ready to exchange one for the other as the evidence comes in (Wolfe 2000, 87).

Well, a little evidence just came in. Wolfe’s latest novel *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is something of a test of Wilson’s vision. Does the new paradigm work as well as the one that put Wolfe on bestseller lists for decades? Does a novel need a self? Or will a sociobiologically constructed “self” suffice? Judging from the book’s sales, “selves” with quotation marks are not enough. Hardcover sales peaked at a fraction of Wolfe’s first two novels.

Why has the word-of-mouth been so lukewarm this time? Wolfe’s “ravenous curiosity” about all things American (170) is still infectious. His reliance on realism as the best conveyer of life’s riches (168) works its usual magic. His scrupulous attention to detail captures again the mystery of the mundane. He populates his collegiate landscape with his typical array of tragic characters. But this time the book’s anthropology turns them more than ever into – things. They resemble people I know, but the resemblance ends right at the line where they would become personal. They cannot compete with the real human beings of his non-fiction. Even in their interior monologues, Hoyt, Jojo, and Adam are eerily two-dimensional collections of social and physiological attributes. This is even true of Charlotte, who is Wolfe’s most autobiographical character yet. Her hunger for status and her emerging-then-repressed self-knowledge feel robotic. It is as if Wolfe were playing *Sim University* using Wilson’s axioms of ant behavior rather than telling a story of human beings. They are the literary equivalent of CGI characters.

I think this tells us something important about neuroscience's new Theory of Everything: it doesn't work. It seems to explain a lot about us, but it does not render *us*. Something is still missing. Perhaps it is that old Hellenistic *deus ex machina*, a soul. Or it might be a complexity of the physical that no reductionism can capture. Maybe it is merely a knot that the relentless tweezers of scientific inquiry have yet to unravel. The apostolic faith has room for all of these possibilities and more. But whatever is missing, it seems to be the key to a story worth telling.

I worry not that this novel is a bore but that it is a harbinger. It troubles me that such an insightful observer of human life could suddenly find people, and even himself, so opaque. Wolfe's projects suggest a cultural and personal regression from the introspective consciousness that Augustine's *Confessions* gave the West back into the un-self-conscious ambition and fatalism of pagan Rome. In *City of God* Augustine described that city's characteristic vice as the love of praise. The modern research university is only one fitting embodiment of that. Wolfe may be *personally* experiencing the collision of social scientific self-knowledge and the consequences of gaining it. Rather than coming to absolute self-knowledge, he is left with artifice and mystification like Adam reaping thorns and thistles. Are our poor impressions of *Simmons* ultimately appraisals of our own future?

And is there a way to self-understanding that doesn't return us to the maze of pagan antiquity? Of course there is. Long ago the pagan Roman world learned that a person is neither a moral architect nor a helpless puppet, but "a subsistent relation": a locus of relationships with other persons whose mutual reality and otherness image the Triune God. It learned this not through a flash of philosophical insight but through the blood of the one who loved us to the end.

You see, while some call us individuals organized in societies of contested power and status, Jesus' prayer insists that we are bankrupt debtors struggling to survive in a moral Great Depression, and announces that *judgment and forgiveness are God's new creation of those*

formerly barren relationships.

Adopting contemporary sociology's language in a very basic way, the world is an overlapping patchwork of communities with reciprocal roles, powerful orders, conventional rules, socially constructed cultures, reified institutions, personal networks, formal and informal procedures and authorities, negotiated identities, and the like. These social worlds are both products and means of human adaptation and ingenuity. They are legitimate insofar as they provide the structural necessities of human life. However, even where they are relatively just and good, their legitimacy is radically deceptive. For even the best of these worlds lacks the resources to do anything else but finally decline and fall. They are barren. This barrenness turns even these worlds' good roles, orders, relationships, and identities into means of servitude and suffering. Their people, even the better off ones, are at each other's mercy. They are caught in webs of accrued power and powerlessness that drive them to fear and ambition and empty them of hope for gaining anything more than better parts in the same sordid drama.

The social sciences offer whole catalogs of constructions of reality that rationalize this collective indebtedness, slavery, and suffering. We need not evaluate these proposals here – even Wilson's sociobiology – except to note that the gospel's power lies in *not* rationalizing it. Instead Jesus trains us to offer and seek forgiveness.

Debts imply lost wealth. Sins imply missed opportunities. Forgiveness implies lost investment, trust, and power. Much had been given, and much is now required, but we have nothing. Our indebtedness twists our good relationships into forces of destruction. So grace *justifies*. Its plenitude, its weight of divine glory, its sheer *substance* renews the old that otherwise passes away. Sin is not *just* barrenness, of course; but where sin *is* barrenness, atonement is replenishment. The relationships that sin bankrupts, forgiveness refinances. Grace reconciles the estranged, fertilizes the sterile, refills the empty, rights the skewed, reconstructs

the ruined, and revives the dead. It restores the wealth of providential relationship, not just among the good and the just but also the evil and the unjust (Matt. 5:45). Into our barren world Jesus comes bearing the good news that Israel's corrupt roles, orders, relationships, and identities are refreshed as a sign of the arrival of God's promised new creation.

Wherever the Messiah journeys, things break down in the face of his righteousness. This is God's judgment on the whole present age: that it cannot tolerate his full presence. Opposition inevitably results, from both the "good" who respect our worlds' constructed boundaries and the "wicked" who violate them. Like the exodus that foreshadowed it, Christ's career inevitably has the quality of a showdown. The cross is definitive of both Christ's gracious presence and the world's failure along every line of engagement between our social worlds and the Kingdom. His presence unsettles because it suggests a better world yet makes us cling more tightly than ever to the one we have.

All of Christ's opponents are invested either in the way things are or in the way we wish them to be. By our reckoning, he *is* unrighteous – a debtor defaulting on his community obligations. He is a troublemaker who promises to make things better but will just end up making them worse. The inability of any social order to cope with the Messiah's disruption is God's definitive interpretation of our life as sinful. In rejecting his justice, identity, and life, Jesus' opponents reject their own flourishing, humanity, and future. Yet God's favor still restores them and grants them new and eternal standing in God's kingdom.

Here the unfashionable atonement theories of Anselm, Luther, and Calvin are helpful interpreters of the story's inner logic. These have faltered as we have cooled to the idea of the Son as a sacrifice who suffers the Father's violence. Nevertheless, every life and every world is ordered, and thus sacrificial; and Jesus is a sacrifice from every possible point of view (Gunton 1988, 115-141). Sacrifice gives one thing for another. Some things come to an end so other

things will not. So pure is the Son's trust of the Father that he surrenders even his own present in order to invite the Father's future. He does this by submitting to Israel's and Rome's wayward structures of justice, honoring their fundamental but abused legitimacy and so guaranteeing their (and humanity's) future. Jesus is also the sacrifice of the Father who gives him for our sake, and the sacrifice of the Spirit who "mortalizes" him at his conception and withdraws at his death.

From the world's perspective, Jesus is a sacrifice too: Its powers subordinate him to their own sinful ends. No heavenly plague or priestly act in the Temple kills Jesus, but only the God-given power his rulers wield abusively (Heb. 13:12-13). The perceptive thief on the cross knows the authorities who punish Jesus as a sinner are legitimate (Luke 23:41) and divine (23:40). Their legitimacy helps explain Jesus' refusal to yield to his temptations to overthrow them forcefully (Yoder 1994, 21-59).

Since God's legitimate guardians of human life and righteousness cannot bear his presence, they must sacrifice something else: their own integrity, to preserve the orders they guard. In John 11 Caiaphas pursues expedience over justice in resolving that one man die for the sake of the general welfare. Pilate declares Jesus innocent in Luke 23 and John 18 but does nothing about it. His disciples betray and deny him. The centurion at the cross confesses the dead Jesus as just in all three synoptic gospels.

All of these thereby default on their legitimate authority as stewards of the created order (Matt. 21:33-46). They turn their own dehumanizing barrenness upon Christ's rehumanizing fruitfulness and expose themselves and their orders as radical failures. They mediate God's judgment to Jesus *as* a curse, *as* a debtor, but it is they who really deserve the sentence. As in that archetypical act in Eden, the good and the righteous turn themselves into enemies of goodness and righteousness, and their last moral authority is stripped away.

The sacrificial cross reveals the insoluble impasse between the old and the new. Politics

may be “the art of the possible” (so Otto von Bismarck), but there is no finessing the conflict between injustice and God’s peaceful kingdom. The cross is the radical failure of all human possibility. It all really does end there in Golgotha.

Yet salvation is the art of the impossible. Jesus’ death finally exhausts our resistance. After all, what more can rebels do but rob, murder, bury, and forget? Sacrifice ends one thing that another may continue. What ceases (logically, not chronologically) at the cross is our opposition. What outlasts it is God’s grace. On the cross Jesus graciously takes on God’s legitimate foreclosure on behalf of the debtors he loves, and at the tomb the risen Jesus picks up where he left off. Christ is put to death for our sins and is raised for our justification (Rom. 4:24-25). The ultimate creditor offers again the Kingdom’s replenishment, first to his own destitute sheep and then through them to the ends of the earth.

The result is a social revolution. The powers and principalities continue to have roles in Christ’s new arrangement. It was he who held them together; without him they could do nothing but fail; against him they could not prevail; with him again they are re-made. Jesus’ apostolic ambassadors extend his forgiveness and its benefits to all who hear their good news. This disrupts our hardened world all the more. The king’s messengers pose his same threat to the old order with its precarious rules. They too provoke it to persecution and expose its bankruptcy even as they invite their impoverished enemies into newly funded relationships of righteousness and peace. Ultimately, left with no way of self-justification in the face of his grace, every knee ultimately bows and every tongue confesses to the Father’s glory that Jesus is Messiah and Lord.

Forgiveness is thus mission. The petition’s first half concerns “our” debts – the debts of all the Father’s children. I do not just pray for my sins and you for yours, but *we* pray for *our* Father to forgive *us*. The petition’s second half concerns “theirs” – the sins of brothers and sisters as well as strangers. The absence of a distinction here between fellow Christians and

strangers is critical. “We” are simply those who are praying to receive the Father’s forgiveness. Sometimes “they” are the same people, sometimes not. Sometimes the forgiven are believers, sometimes not. It is not just Christian networks that make the Kingdom visible on earth, but the old creation’s networks of holy *and* unholy roles, orders, relationships, and identities. As persons beget new persons through relations, so relations beget new relations through persons. As the atonement of persons populates the Israel of God, so the atonement of relationships reveals the Kingdom beyond the boundaries of Christ’s family outward to the maternity and new birth of all peoples. “I believe in the forgiveness of sins” means “I believe in the rebirth of relationships.”

God’s judgment-with-mercy grants us the access to profound self-understanding with which Augustine constructed the Christian self at the end of pagan antiquity. In the face of our era’s emerging anthropologies of depersonalization, forgiveness’ rebirth of relationships is nothing less than *rehumanization*. Let me illustrate this with a story.

Recently I found myself in urgent need of a passport. The only way to get it in time was to get in and out of the county recorder’s office in time for the Federal Express deadline. But purchasing tickets, arranging appointments, finding documents, and taking a photo took just long enough that I arrived at the recorder’s office three minutes after closing time. I got in the door only because the last customer left through it. “We’re closed,” all three workers at the vacant counter told me sternly. “Come back tomorrow.”

I told them that I could not, that I absolutely had to make the FedEx drop.

“Then you should have come on time. We’re closed.”

I didn’t raise my voice, but I didn’t leave. I was too desperate to do either. I just stood there filling out my form while my fellow Santa Barbarans averted their eyes.

“I can’t help you,” one of them told me, as if doing so would have broken the laws of physics. “You’ll have to come back tomorrow.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I have to get this out today.”

“Sir, we’re closed,” they each said again, in the matter-of-fact way of all who enjoy monopoly power.

“I know you are,” I told one of them reassuringly, still not leaving.

Finally a woman from the back of the office quietly stepped up to the counter and gestured me to come forward. “Our registers are closed,” she told me, “so you will have to come back tomorrow for a receipt.” And she helped me.

What I did by walking through that door was to enter a relationship in which I was a debtor. If it had been 4:29 I would have had a right to service, but at 4:33 I had nothing but barrenness. The proper thing to do would have been to turn and leave. But I remained in the recording officers’ presence. This went outside the rules of the formal power relationship and thus redefined it. I was no longer a customer; I was a debtor before his creditors begging for mercy. And one of the officers there forgave me my debt. The grace she showed me was an act of new creation. May she find forgiveness in the age to come.

I returned the next morning for my receipt and quietly gave her a potted flower as a sign that I appreciated the extraordinary thing she had done. I waved, she smiled, and I left. The replenishment of our relationship from both sides had transformed it into one of gratitude and honor between persons.

Can any social Theory of Everything describe the new life in that county office better than the gospel? What is missing in the soulless world of Tom Wolfe turns out not to be souls but *agapê* – the person-making love of our Triune God. Christ’s mighty act of atonement ushers in new creation at every level: the cosmic, the tribal, the communal, the familial, the personal, and the relational. His forgiveness rehumanizes us and empowers us to rehumanize others. His death and life bring us back from the brink of death-by-dismemberment to the life of fellowship.

Conclusion. In theology a longstanding axiom holds that “the law of prayer is the law of belief” (*lex orandi lex credendi*). We believe and teach according to the way we pray. Our assumptions inevitably inform our interpretation of the Lord’s petitions, but ultimately the Lord’s petitions structure our theological, spiritual, and practical agenda. Each petition’s work in our lives fits an identifiable pattern in which *prayer is transfiguring*. The biblical scene is figural: We are Jesus’ followers, weary from our efforts to keep up and our struggles to understand. He leads us up to pray. We awaken to see him according to the Father’s intentions. The prayer rouses us with the only perspective in which our concerns are worth raising and leaves us humbly silenced, listening to him, and newly ready to descend and get on with our work.

Christian prayer is inherently eschatological – not just in its content but in its forms and especially in the Lord’s responses. This is why theological and ethical readings of the Lord’s Prayer need not conflict with our academic ones (the accurate ones, anyway). Jesus invites us to join him in remembering, anticipating, and ushering in the new creation that is his own past, future, and present work. In his lovely book on the Lord’s Prayer N.T. Wright says,

Jesus didn’t come simply to offer a new pattern, or even a new depth, of spirituality. Spiritual depth and renewal come, as and when they come, as part of the larger package. But that package itself is about being delivered from evil; about return from exile; about having enough bread; about God’s kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven. It’s the Advent-package. Jesus was taking the enormous risk of saying that this package was coming about through his own work. All of that is contained in the word ‘Father,’ used in this way, within this prayer (Wright 1996, 17).

I don’t endorse all of Wright’s eschatology, but I certainly endorse his words here. The Lord’s Prayer begs for eternal salvation to come, *here, now*. As an artifact of authentic Christian life, it fuses present things, the last things, and the first things. It joins heaven and earth into a community that realizes the purposes of both.

My original hope was that the beginning and ending of each exercise would turn out to be as different as the “before” and “after” pictures of an advertisement. Each would then testify to

the power of the process in the middle. I have sensed such a pattern in the Father's transfiguring answers to the Son's pleas in the Spirit both in Scripture and in my life. As I have prayed, investigated, and contemplated each phrase in the Lord's Prayer, the words have indeed exposed old concerns, overturned them, and supplied new ones by shifting my imagination to the context of his Kingdom and righteousness. Every chapter finds me haunted by a persistent problem or dilemma, not just in my own field but more often in the intersections where life is more confusing and less predictable. It centers on a mere phrase, repeated and studied and searched. It ends with me having learned something homely yet revolutionary, not just about that one area of concern but about the whole sweep of salvation still unfolding in our midst. That pattern fits the theological dogma that describes our holy Triune God, *and* the biblical economy of salvation in which we find the prayer, *and* the roles Jesus gave his disciples in his mission to reconcile to God all things through the blood of his cross. The eschatological *is* the theological, *and* the spiritual, *and* the practical – *and* the economic, *and* the biological, *and* so on.

Or am I just imagining things? These results call for outside evaluation, so I am grateful to have respondents from our two other academic divisions. And of course we will need a lot more data than just a series of my own personal anecdotes. Any volunteers? It is *our* prayer after all, not just mine.