Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

Volume 44 • Number 1 • January 2020

Published by

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Department of Theological Concerns

ERT (2019) 43:4, 49-61

Are We Free to Pray? On the Freedom Necessary for Petitionary Prayer

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Among Christian spiritual disciplines, few are more fundamental than the practice of petitionary prayer. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus himself bears witness to the essential nature of this practice (Mt 6:5–15). Here Jesus assumes that his disciples will offer petitionary prayers, and accordingly he teaches them how to pray in view of the fact that they have a Father who 'knows what you need before you ask him' (Mt 6:8). The significance of petitionary prayer is underscored by the widespread Christian practice of repeating this very prayer as believers ask God to hallow his name, bring his kingdom to pass, provide daily bread, forgive debts and deliver us from temptation.

If petitionary prayer is fundamental to Christian living, then freedom must be equally so. Lay Christians do not spend much time thinking about whether we have free will to pray as we wish, but philosophers and theologians have expended much effort analysing the nature of human freedom. As a result, a number of theories have arisen, the most popular of which—very broadly construed—are compatibilism and libertarianism.

Compatibilism claims that the following two premises are both true and can exist simultaneously: (1) events are determined by a sovereign God and (2) agents can possess the kind of freedom necessary for moral responsibility. Libertarianism, on the other hand, contends that the freedom necessary for moral responsibility is incompatible with divine determinism (i.e. the second premise is impossible if one assumes the first premise). Moreover, the kind of freedom necessary for moral responsibility is one in which an agent can choose between alternative courses of action, e.g. to vote or not to vote.[1]

1 For a helpful introductions to different types of compatibilist and libertarian positions, see J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 300–315; Kevin Timpe, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); Kevin Timpe and Daniel Speak, eds., *Free Will and Theism: Connections, Contingencies, and Concerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

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As a Christian philosopher or theologian reflects upon these subjects—petitionary prayer and freedom—the question arises as to what theory of freedom best comports with our intuitions about petitionary prayer.[2] Recently, some Christian philosophers have claimed that genuine petitionary prayer is impossible under accounts of freedom that deny libertarian free will. This claim puts Christians who, for biblical or confessional reasons, are committed to compatibilistic theological determinism in a difficult position.[3] For if these philosophers are correct, then such Christians would have to either abandon theological determinism or admit that petitionary prayer is not possible.[4]

In this paper, I rebut these philosophers, arguing that libertarian freedom is not necessary for a robust account of petitionary prayer.[5] Specifically, I claim that theological determinism is in fact compatible with an account of petitionary prayer that aligns with several important intuitions regarding our freedom to pray. In making this argument, I draw upon the philosophical theology of the sixteenth-century Italian Reformer Peter Martyr Vermigli.

I will begin by reviewing recent claims concerning the necessity of libertarian freedom for genuine petitionary prayer. I then turn to Vermigli's account of petitionary prayer as it is articulated in his *Loci Communes*. I conclude by showing how Vermigli's account is consistent with three common intuitions many Christians have about freedom and prayer: (1) God does some things precisely because we have prayed for them, (2) we freely desire the things we pray for, and (3) we are the cause of our own prayers.

I. Libertarian Freedom and Petitionary Prayer

In a recent book on petitionary prayer, Scott Davison catalogues a number of 'divinity-based challenges' to pe-

2 I define petitionary prayer as an act of communication directed towards God that takes the form of presenting a request for some state of affairs *x* to God. This definition, I believe, refrains from taking a stance regarding the efficacy of those requests or on exactly how our doctrine of God's providence frames our understanding of how God acts in light of those requests.

3 I refer to 'compatibilistic' theological determinism because it is also possible to be a complete determinist and deny that humans have any moral responsibility. This form of fatalism is, of course, unacceptable for orthodox Christians. Hereafter I will refer simply to 'theological determinism'.

4 There is some question as to whether Thomas Aquinas' understanding of petitionary prayer leads to a combination of a 'no-risk' view of providence with human libertarian freedom. Terrance Tiessen argues that in Thomas' model 'The timelessness of God enables him to "foreknow" and to determine creaturely acts without robbing them of libertarianly free agency.' On the other hand, Eleonore Stump seems to indicate dissatisfaction with Thomas' understanding of prayer because 'it is hard to see how such a belief is compatible with freedom of the will'. I will not take sides on this particular issue. See Terrence Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 190; Eleonore Stump, 'Petitionary Prayer', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 86.

5 Note that I am not arguing that a libertarian account of freedom is incorrect; rather, I am merely arguing that a libertarian account of freedom is not necessary for a robust account of petitionary prayer.

titionary prayer. These challenges, based on some characteristic of God, amount to arguments concerning the pointlessness of such prayer. Among these challenges he lists omniscience, impassibility, freedom and providence. The last two are especially important for our purposes. When Davison addresses the issues of freedom and providence, he casually dismisses the significance of theological determinism in a matter of one paragraph. Davison begins his dismissal of the compatibility between theological determinism and petitionary prayer by quoting John Calvin's belief that 'providence is so complete and detailed that everything that happens in the world is not just known with certainty but also determined from eternity.'[6] Davison explains that such a view poses a challenge to petitionary prayer because 'God's ruling from eternity is doing all the work in determining what happens, without any independent contribution on the part of the petitioners.'[7] Furthermore, such a view poses a serious challenge to the common intuition that our petitionary prayers make an 'independent contribution to the character of the world'.[8]

The assumption underlying Davison's view—an assumption that he does not articulate explicitly—is that for petitionary prayer to make an independent contribution to the character of the world, then the person praying must have genuine options as to whether to pray for a particular thing, *S*. If the person does not have alternative possibilities concerning prayer for *S*, then that person has not made an independent contribution to the world. Theological determinism—the view that God's providence is so complete and detailed that everything that happens in the world is unconditionally decreed by God—claims that once God issues such a decree, alternative possibilities no longer exist. Specifically, then, one cannot say that a person praying for *S* has alternative possibilities concerning prayer for *S*. So, according to Davison's logic, petitionary prayer is impossible given theological determinism.

Much like Davison, Eleonore Stump also casually dismisses the possibility that genuine petitionary prayer can be compatible with theological determinism. In her landmark essay 'Petitionary Prayer', Stump expresses an understanding of prayer that makes petitions consistent with the belief in an omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good God. She does this by arguing for a relational model of prayer.

Prior to advancing her own position, Stump catalogues several ways to provide a consistent account of prayer. These include D. Z. Philipps's view that 'all real petitionary prayer is reducible to the petition, "Thy will be done" ', and Keith Ward's view that God is 'the unknowable, non-denumerable, ultimate reality, which is not an entity at all'.[9] The problem with these views, Stump correctly notes, is that they no longer operate with the assumptions of ordinary, orthodox and traditional views of God and prayer. These revisionist accounts are

6 Scott Davison, *Petitionary Prayer: A Philosophical Investigation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 19.

7 Davison, *Petitionary Prayer*, 19.

8 Davison, *Petitionary Prayer*, 19.

9 Stump, 'Petitionary Prayer', 81.

of no interest to her because they are not views according to which someone offers 'a petitionary prayer freely (at least in his own view) of an omniscient, omnipotent good God, conceived of in the traditional orthodox way'. She explains that she wants to focus specifically upon prayers that are offered freely (in the libertarian understanding of freedom) because 'if all things are predetermined—and worse, if they are all predetermined by the omnipotent and omniscient God to whom one is praying—it is much harder to conceive of a satisfactory justification of prayer.'[10] This decision leads Stump to dismiss the contributions of Calvin and Luther to our understanding of prayer because 'while they may be thoughtful, interesting accounts, they assume God's complete determination of everything.'[11]

In some sense, Stump's approach is more charitable to theological determinists who want to preserve the significance of petitionary prayer than Davison's. Whereas Davison dismisses the compatibility of petitionary prayer and theological determinism because in such a situation the prayer 'makes no independent contribution to the world', Stump at least recognizes (1) the important contribution of theological determinists to the theology of petitionary prayer and (2) that it is harder but not necessarily impossible to conceive of a justification for petitionary prayer while holding to theological determinism. Nevertheless, she also concludes that libertarian freedom makes better sense of petitionary prayer than compatibilism does.

Davison and Stump are not alone in treating theological determinism as incompatible with petitionary prayer. In describing his 'Two-Way Contingency' account of prayer, Vincent Brümmer begins by observing that in cases of petitions between human beings, 'requests are aimed at persuading the addressee and not merely expressing the attitude of the petitioner.'[12] That is, the petitioner aims at persuading the addressee to do something other than what the addressee originally intended to do. Brümmer then applies this observation about petitions between human beings to his reflections on petitions offered to God, which, he concludes, work in the same way. That is, our petitions 'seek to move God' to fulfil what we have asked for.[13]

Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder make a similar move, arguing from petitions between human beings to those offered to God. Thus, concerning human petitions they state, 'In general, our words do not constitute the speech act of petitioning if we think that our words won't make a difference to whether the petitioned does what we ask.'[14] Like Brümmer, they conclude that prayer is only genuinely petitionary if it makes a difference in what God wills to do.[15]

10 Stump, 'Petitionary Prayer', 81.

11 Stump, 'Petitionary Prayer', 81.

12 Vincent Brummer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray? A Philosophical Inquiry* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 29.

13 Brummer, *What Are We Doing When We Pray?* 29.

14 Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder, 'The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 2 (2010): 46.

15 On the prevalence of this 'Two-Way Contingency Account' see Christopher Woznicki, 'What Are We Doing When We Pray? Rekin-

Clearly, Brümmer's and the Howard-Snyders' views are incompatible with theological determinism. If theological determinism is true, then God has unconditionally decreed everything that will happen in the world. According to their account of petitionary prayer, however, such prayer is effective only if it persuades God to act in ways other than how he would have acted had the prayer not been offered. And if God is in fact persuaded to act in response to some prayer, then it would seem to no longer be the case that God acts merely from his unconditional decree. Rather, God's actions would be conditioned upon human actions. Thus, theological determinism seems incompatible with the view of petitionary prayer advocated by several prominent philosophers who have addressed the topic.

To summarize what we have covered thus far: some philosophers of religion assume that petitionary prayers are meaningful only if both God and human beings possess freedom in a libertarian way; otherwise petitionary prayer would not meet the condition necessary for genuine petitions, namely that the person petitioned can genuinely respond to or be persuaded by prayers. Both parties involved in petitionary prayer, this line of argument contends, must be indeterministically free, and this ability to choose between alternative courses of action in light of another person's course of action is a necessary condition for the meaningfulness of petitionary prayer. Let us call this view the Libertarian Account of Prayer (LAP):

> LAP: Petitionary prayers are genuine petitionary prayers only if the agent praying and the agent receiving the prayer possess libertarian freedom.

One strength of LAP is that it fulfils several important intuitions that many Christians have concerning petitionary prayer. Davison describes one of these intuitions when he claims that meaningful petitionary prayers must make an 'independent contribution to the character of the world'[16]—which I take to mean causing events to occur that would not have happened if we had not offered that prayer. Peter Geach makes a similar assumption when he states that 'if *X* had not prayed, or had prayed otherwise, God would not have brought about situation *S*.'[17] This assumption should not be surprising, since Scripture seems to indicate that 'the sovereign Lord does some things precisely *because* we pray for them.'[18]

A second intuition many Christians have regarding petitionary prayer is that we freely desire the things we pray for. To use the language of the Psalms, people bring 'the desires of their heart' to God in prayer, hoping that God will answer those prayers. The things prayed for by person X are X's own desires, not desires forced upon X.

A third intuition held by a number

dling a Reformation Theology of Petitionary Prayer', *Calvin Theological Journal* 53 (2018): 319–43.

16 Davison, *Petitionary Prayer*, 19.

17 Peter Geach, *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1969), 88–89.

18 David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 290 (emphasis in the original). Consider for example 2 Kings 20:1–11 and Luke 18:1–8.

of Christians is that we are the cause of our own prayers; that is, I cause myself to pray. LAP easily accords with this intuition, since LAP is grounded in an indeterministic account of freedom. Can theological determinism also satisfy these three intuitions that easily comport with LAP?

II. Peter Martyr Vermigli's Account of Petitionary Prayer

The question of whether important intuitions about petitionary prayer, such as those identified above, can co-exist with a view of providence according to which God has decreed all that comes to pass has received much attention within the Reformed tradition. In his *Common Places of Christian Religion* (1572), Heinrich Bullinger responds to several objections against petitionary prayer. Even before defining the act of petitionary prayer, Bullinger treats an objection that arises from theological determinism:

> There are some that do gather that those things must necessarily come to pass which are decreed by God's eternal and infallible predestination. And therefore, that God, if he has determined anything, cannot by prayer be removed from it. … For as much as all things which God has once decreed must of necessity come to pass.[19]

Bullinger responds to this objection by claiming that our prayers are accounted for in God's decrees and thus play a role in bringing about what God has decreed would come about by those prayers. He appears to be attempting to show how theological determinism fits with the 'independent contribution' intuition that has a firm basis in Scripture.

Wolfgang Musculus also sought to address objections to petitionary prayer that arise from theological determinism. Like Bullinger, Musculus realized that, for some people, their understanding of the implications of God's sovereignty presented a stumbling block to offering petitions to God. He wrote, 'We must arm our minds against the wickedness of them, which do fondly imagine that prayer which is made unto God is unprofitable, ineffectual, yea and to no purpose, because all things which have been given us of him have been already predestined before, and would be given also, though we ask not.'[20]

In this statement, Musculus indicates his conviction that believers should offer petitionary prayers even though God has already decreed all that can come to pass. Thus, Musculus denies the claims of LAP. Where, then, does Musculus find the efficacy of prayer? He says that petitionary prayer is an opportunity to exercise faith. He states that God could 'liberally give us all things unasked for … but his will is to be called upon of his children, to the intent that they should practice the assured trust of their hearts towards him, and be the more out of doubts of his goodness,

19 Heinrich Bullinger, *Common Places of Christian Religion*, trans. John Stockwood (London: Thoshaft & H. Middleton, 1572), 163. Spelling and punctuation in all citations from this translation have been modernized.

20 Wolfgang Musculus, *Common Places of Christian Religion,* trans. John Man (London: Henry Bynneman, 1578), 1168. Spelling and punctuation in all citations from this translation have been modernized.

when they do obtain that, which they do desire.'[21]

Thus, for Musculus, petitionary prayers are mainly for the sake of the person offering the prayer. Calvin states similarly that God 'ordained [prayer] not so much for his own sake as for ours'.[22] Prayer, says Calvin, leads us to 'embrace with greater delight those things we acknowledge to have been obtained by prayer' and to 'meditate upon his kindness more ardently'.[23]

Although various Reformers attempted the pastoral task of explaining how petitionary prayer comports with theological determinism by appealing to theological principles, the most robust philosophical explanation of how these two concepts fit together belongs to Peter Martyr Vermigli. This Italian Reformer is not as well-known as the other Reformers, but his influence on the Reformation was substantial. Fleeing Roman Catholic Italy, he made his way to Zurich and eventually to Strasbourg and Oxford. He held important academic posts in each of these cities and played a central role in shaping the Church of England and the continental Reformed churches. Despite attaining academic prominence, he never strayed far from his ministerial roots, remaining acutely concerned with the spiritual well-being of growing Christians. This concern is especially evident in his discussion of prayer in the *Loci Communes* (Common Places).[24]

One issue of pastoral concern that Vermigli addresses in the *Common Places* is that some Christians fail to pray as often they should because 'they determine to themselves: Although I desire not these things, yet God will do that, which shall seem good unto him: neither can his will be altered by my prayers.'[25] This hypothetical scepticism concerning the meaningfulness of petitionary prayer seems to assume LAP. Vermigli is addressing the objection that if God has already decreed what will come to pass, then prayer is redundant because (1) God has ordained that I would pray and (2) God will bring about what he desires regardless of my prayers.

Vermigli provides two responses to this sixteenth-century version of LAP. First, he says that God calls his people to prayer for 'honour sake, [that] he might attribute the fame unto their prayers'. How do prayers for things God has determined anyhow bring God honour and fame? It is because before God responds to prayers he 'kindles their minds with a desire to obtain those things' that God has determined to grant.[26] Thus, when a person's prayer is fulfilled, God is glo-

21 Musculus, *Common Places*, 1140.

22 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 3.20.3.

23 Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.3.

24 Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Common Places*, trans. Anthonie Marten (London: Denham and Middleton, 1574). Spelling and punctuation in all citations from this translation have been modernized. The *Loci Communes* are actually a collection of *scholia* that were collected posthumously into one work. Various authors have noted that Vermigli's *Loci* were among one of the most read and quoted works of theology in Elizabethan England.

25 Vermigli, *Common Places*, 300.

26 Vermigli, *Common Places*, 301.

rified because God has brought about his or her desire.

Since Vermigli was himself a preacher, it is no surprise that his second response to the line of thought represented by LAP consists of a pair of illustrations from ordinary life. The first illustration describes a person who wants to swim in a nearby river. To get to the river, the person must travel on whatever path leads to the river. The path, Vermigli explains, is not the cause of the person going to the river; after all, he says, 'if you lack powers of mind and strength of body, you go there in vain.'[27] His second illustration is a schoolmaster who, to reach a school, must climb a set of stairs. The stairs, Vermigli explains, are not the cause of his going to school. Using Aristotelian causes to analyse the action, he explains that 'the final cause is his going to teach; and the efficient cause is the powers of the mind and the strength of the body.'[28]

Prayer, according to Vermigli, is like these two illustrations. The thing that God wills to do is the final cause and a person's petitionary prayers are the efficient cause. God, Vermigli argues, has unconditionally decreed that the thing prayed for, *S*, will come about, and God has also unconditionally decreed the means, *X*'s prayers, by which *S* will come about. Let us call this Vermigli's Determinist Efficient-Causal account of petitionary prayer (VEP).

> VEP: Petitionary prayers are God's unconditionally decreed means by which God brings about his unconditionally decreed state of affairs.

Previously, I observed that LAP easily comports with three important intuitions many Christians have about prayer. Thus, we should now ask whether VEP comports with these intuitions as well, for otherwise VEP might not appear to be a viable alternative to LAP.

III. Vermigli's Efficient-Causal Account and Common Intuitions about Prayer

First, many Christians believe that God does some things precisely because we have prayed for them. This intuition is often born out of the ob-

27 Vermigli, *Common Places*, 301.

28 Vermigli, *Common Places*, 301. That Vermigli makes use of Aristotelian concepts to analyze the causes underlying these actions should not be surprising, given his education in the Aristotelian hotbed of Padua. On Vermigli's relationship to Aristotelianism, see especially Joseph McLelland, 'Peter Martyr Vermigli: Scholastic or Humanist?' in *Peter Martyr Vermigli and Italian Reform,* ed. Joseph McLelland (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980), 141–51. McClelland explains: 'More to the point is Martyr's reliance on Aristotelian categories of both ontology and logic. Most obvious is his use of syllogism and of the fourfold causality and teleology of Aristotle. … Here is a free use of Aristotelian and Thomistic form and content.' See also Luca Baschera, 'Aristotle and Scholasticism', in *A Companion to Peter Martyr Vermigli*, ed. Torrance Kirby, Emidio Campi and Frank James III (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 133–59; Luca Baschera, 'Peter Martyr Vermigli on Free Will: The Aristotelian Heritage of Reformed Theology', *Calvin Theological Journal* 42 (2007): 325–40. For more on Vermigli's use of an Aristotelian account of causation in relation to the writing of Scripture, see Jason Zuidema, *Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562) and the Outward Instruments of Divine Grace* (Gottingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 42–44.

servation that our prayers are somehow related to God's actions that follow our prayers. This intuition, however, is not only born from our experience of prayer; it also seems to be warranted scripturally. Biblical theologian David Crump notes that 'we may not be able to twist God's arm, but we can catch his eye and prompt a reply.'[29] Crump's observation is based on his extensive study of petitionary prayer in the New Testament.

Does VEP comport with this intuition, which has both experiential and scriptural backing? Paul Helm thinks so. He first observes that Christians are convinced that God brings about certain events *because* people ask him. Helm then proceeds to examine more rigorously what 'because' might mean. He suggests that the word indicates the possibility of cases where prayer can be efficacious if God has indicated that certain events will take place only if people pray.[30]

Helm uses an example of praying for rain to show how such an account might work. He asks the reader to assume the 'all-decreeing' view of God's providence (what I have called theological determinism). He then says, 'In the case of the prayer for rain one would have to say that God did not only ordain "from the beginning" the meteorological sequence that included rain on Thursday, but that he also ordained at least one phase of the sequence (the "rain on Thursday") phase was to follow prayer for rain on Thursday, and that he also ordained the rain because of the prayers.'[31]

Helm's description of what prayer accomplishes in a theologically determinist account of freedom can make sense of people's intuition that God does things *because* we have prayed for them. 'Because' here means that the prayer is an ordained part of the sequence necessary for the ordained event to occur. Here Davison might object that in such a situation our prayers do not make an 'independent contribution to the world'. This may be so, but Davison is making significant assumptions about the nature of providence and freedom and then dictating what sort of account of prayer is necessary to meet those assumptions. If one does not accept Davison's assumptions about providence and freedom, one can affirm both scriptural teaching on God's sovereignty and what our intuitions seem to say about prayer by holding to VEP.

A second intuition many Christians hold about prayer is that things we pray for are born out of our own desires. This intuition at first seems problematic for Vermigli's account of prayer. Vermigli indicates that before granting people what they have prayed for, 'God exceedingly kindles their minds with a desire to obtain those things.'[32] At first glance, this feature of VEP seems to undercut the notion that we freely desire the things for which we pray.

Consider the following scenario. Shiloh enters the ice cream shop with her mother, Amelia, hoping her mother will buy her a vanilla ice cream cone. Amelia knows that vanilla is a terribly plain flavour and that Shiloh ought to order chocolate chip if she is

29 Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door*, 289.

30 Paul Helm, 'Asking God', *Themelios* 12, no. 1 (1986): 23.

31 Helm, 'Asking God', 24 (emphasis in the original).

32 Vermigli, *Common Places*, 301.

to experience maximal pleasure from eating ice cream. Amelia, knowing what is best for Shiloh, decides that she will give her chocolate chip even though Shiloh desires vanilla. However, Amelia wants Shiloh to know that she is a good mother who loves her, and she wants Shiloh to praise her for being a good mother. Accordingly, Amelia asks Shiloh to order chocolate chip. Shiloh does not want that flavour but, out of respect for her mother, orders it anyhow.

In this scenario, most people would conclude that Shiloh did not freely desire chocolate chip ice cream. Is Vermigli's insistence that God kindles or stirs our minds to desire to pray for what he would have given us anyway a comparable scenario? It is not, because Vermigli believes that freedom is a matter of voluntariness and that voluntariness is a matter of spontaneity.

Vermigli has a broadly Aristotelian account of freedom. In his commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, he interprets Aristotle's use of the Greek word *hekousion*, which is used to describe a particular type of intentional action, to mean 'voluntary'. Further, Vermigli believes that 'voluntary' reduces to a notion of spontaneity.[33] An action is spontaneous if its principle resides in the agent.[34] This means that Vermigli would recognize an action as voluntary only if that action comes forth from the agent's own principles.

With that background, we can ask again: according to VEP, are prayers born freely from our own desires, or are they more like Shiloh ordering ice cream at her mother's direction? The answer is that they are not like the ice cream case. In the case of the ice cream, Shiloh's petition was not spontaneous; the desire she expressed was not in line with her own desires. In our prayers, however, Vermigli would say that our desires are spontaneous. Even though God kindles our desires for what he himself desires to give us, the petitions we offer to God are in line with our own desires, and thus they are spontaneous, making them voluntary as well. So it appears that VEP can meet our second intuition about petitionary prayer.

What about our third intuition, namely that we are the cause of our own petitionary prayers? VEP might run into a problem here since even our prayers have been unconditionally decreed. Such a view is problematic if it is interpreted as a version of fatalism, which would say that since God determines all things that happen, God is the sole cause of those things. Vermigli's own understanding of God's providence, however, is not fatalistic. Vermigli holds that God is the primary cause of all our actions but that we are secondary causes of those actions.

In 'Whether God Is the Author of Sin', Vermigli states that even though 'nothing happens in the world, not even sins themselves, outside of God's will and choice or providence', God is 'not by himself and properly the cause of sin' (*per se et proprie*).[35] How does

33 Baschera, 'Peter Martyr Vermigli on Free Will', 329.

34 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.1. There Aristotle explains that 'counter-voluntary' applies to what comes about by external force or because of ignorance. However, that which is voluntary has its origin in oneself.

35 Peter Martyr Vermigli, 'Whether God Is the Author of Sin: Commentary on 2 Samuel

Vermigli defend this position? First, he assumes that 'God is the cause of all things: inferior things receive the impulse of the first cause according to their nature.'[36] Second, he reasons that even though God is the first cause, this does not mean that God removes the creature's causal agency. This is because creatures still act within 'their own proper motions', i.e. there is an element of spontaneity in creatures' actions. In the case of any creaturely action, including sin, 'Our will does all, God does all, but one is the first cause and the other the secondary.'[37] Furthermore, Vermigli believes that since we are the secondary cause of our actions, they are wilfully performed (because they are spontaneous), and that an action is to be evaluated by its proximate cause.[38]

Given this understanding of primary and secondary causes, Vermigli would contend that we are the genuine cause of our petitionary prayers, since we are acting freely and are responsible for the prayers offered. Thus, VEP fulfils our intuition that we are the cause of our own prayers.

IV. Conclusion

I began the analysis in this essay by observing that according to some philosophers of religion, a libertarian account of freedom is necessary to make sense of the Christian practice of petitionary prayer. We saw that LAP is consistent with several important intuitions that many Christians have about prayer. To be compelling and persuasive, an alternative account of prayer should also satisfy these basic intuitions.

Here I have shown that VEP, an account of petitionary prayer that finds its origin in the philosophy of Peter Martyr Vermigli, can in fact meet these intuitions. However, in the course of comparing VEP to our intuitions about prayer we have added an extra feature to the account, namely the feature of secondary causation. Therefore, instead of VEP, I propose the following as an alternative to LAP:

> Secondary-Causal Account of Prayer (SCA): Petitionary prayers, offered to God spontaneously by agents who are secondary causes, are an unconditionally decreed means by which God enacts his unconditionally decreed state of affairs.

If the argument presented here is correct, then libertarian freedom is not necessary to offer genuine petitionary prayers to God. Rather, petitionary prayer is compatible with theological determinism. (I am not so bold as to insist that SCA is the definitive, absolutely correct account of petitionary prayer, but it is both plausible and consistent with important, scripturally grounded intuitions about what we are doing when we pray and why our prayers are meaningful.)

V. Coda: Pastoral Implications

The work of pastors indisputably involves praying for their congregation, due to pastors' responsibility to

16', in *Philosophical Works: On the Relation of Philosophy to Theology*, ed. and trans. Joseph McLelland (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 1996), 224.

36 Vermigli, 'Whether God Is the Author of Sin', 239.

37 Vermigli, 'Whether God Is the Author of Sin', 240.

38 Vermigli, 'Whether God Is the Author of Sin', 228.

beseech God on behalf of their flock and due to their love for the people entrusted to their care. This pastoral responsibility includes both public and private occasions of prayer, such as worship services, personal intercession, and prayer as part of pastoral visitations. However, in addition to offering their own prayers, pastors are responsible for teaching and exhorting the flock to pray.

In his classic treatment of pastoral ministry, Richard Baxter writes:

> Go occasionally among them, when they are likely to be most at leisure, and ask the master of the family, whether he prays with them, and reads the Scripture, or what he doth? Labour to convince such as neglect this of their sin; and if you have the opportunity, pray with them before you go, and set them an example of what you would have them do.[39]

At times, Baxter says, the pastor will find that families will neglect this practice of prayer and study because of ignorance or 'want of practice'. When this happens, the pastor ought to help them 'learn to do better as speedily as possible'.[40]

The duty to teach Christians to pray is an often-neglected aspect of pastoral practice. Christians across all times and places know that prayer is crucial to a flourishing relationship with Christ, yet they still struggle to pray. There are several common reasons for this difficulty, such as (1) lack of spiritual fervour, (2) fear that God will not hear our prayers, or (3) the belief that our prayers will not make a difference anyhow, because God's decrees are unconditional and nothing we say will influence him.

A pastor cannot generate spiritual fervour in the life of a congregation; this is the Holy Spirit's job. But a pastor can certainly address incorrect beliefs that prevent fervent practices of prayer, such as believing that our prayers do not make a difference. As we have seen in this essay, a number of Reformers were concerned with addressing Christians who struggled to pray because they believed that God's unconditional decrees invalidated the significance of petitionary prayer.

Why are Christians tempted to find prayer superfluous in light of God's eternal and unconditional decrees? I would suggest that one reason has to do with an implicit belief in LAP. Some Christians might reason that if the only meaningful kind of petitionary prayer is LAP, then the incompatibility between LAP and theological determinism would render their prayers ineffective. Furthermore, some Christians might assent to a doctrine of theological determinism and yet at the same time operate with a notion of prayer that is more influenced by LAP than by their doctrine of providence, because at first glance LAP seems to make petitionary prayers more efficacious. Although the evidence is anecdotal, I have often heard people in Reformed churches encourage others to pray as though Reformed theology—specifically theological determinism—was not true.

If what I have argued for in this essay is correct, then prayer in the Reformed tradition is still meaningful even though this tradition does

39 Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor, or the Duty of Personal Labors for the Souls of Men* (New York: American Tract Society, 1829), 157.

40 Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 157, 158.

not affirm LAP. If pastors who identify with a Reformed understanding of providence want to fulfil their responsibility to disabuse their flocks of double-mindedness when it comes to petitionary prayer—i.e. assenting intellectually to theological determinism but praying as though LAP were true—then they would benefit from looking back to the theology of Reformers like Peter Martyr Vermigli. Doing so would not only help to address objections that commonly arise because of an implicit belief in LAP but would also provide strong justification for accepting a view like SCA. My Secondary-Causal Account of Prayer emphasizes the significant role that our prayers play in God's accomplishment of his wise and sovereign plans. In fact, SCA tells us that God views our prayers as an essential component of bringing about his will in this world.

Bruce Ware states this point well: 'Although God is fully capable of "doing it on his own", nonetheless, he enlists people to join him in the work that alone is his. And one of the chief means that he employs for our participation with him in this work is prayer.'[41] Instead of leading to a belief that prayer is in some sense insignificant, the denial of LAP and the acceptance of SCA result in a recognition that prayer matters immensely. Prayer is the way in which God involves us in his work of ruling over creation.

What this means, practically speaking, is that God has ordained prayer to be one way in which Christians fulfil the cultural mandate of Genesis 1. According to the opening chapters of Genesis, God himself is king and human beings serve as God's representatives and agents in the world. Richard Middleton explains: 'The *imago Dei* designates the royal office or calling of human beings as God's representatives and agents in the world, granted authorized power to share in God's rule or administration of earth's resources and creatures.'[42] When we pray, we participate in God's rule on earth. If congregations were to understand the weightiness of this concept—one that aligns precisely with SCA—then perhaps they would no longer fail to pray because of ignorance or want of practice.

41 Bruce Ware, 'Prayer and the Sovereignty of God', in *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 139.

42 Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 27–28.