

The Problem of Prayer

“The question is as follows: I, who am a Christian, can I really live according to the word of the gospel and of the law, according to my faith and in obedience? Shall I be able to live thus in the midst of the necessities of my existence?—Yes, according to the gospel it is possible in the holiness of obedience to live that which is given us to live, that which we must live. In order to do this, we must listen to what is told us about prayer and ask God himself to come to our aid, to instruct us, to give us the possibility of walking in this path. Such a quest must be made in order that we may live. Prayer is this quest.”

“The core of our being is put to the question at the very moment we believe and obey as well as we can. In this situation (which is the same for every Christian) prayer means going toward God, asking him to give us what we lack—strength, courage, serenity, prudence—asking him to teach us how to obey the law and accomplish the commandments, and then that God may instruct us how to continue in believing and believing yet more, and that he may renew our faith.”

“For the Reformers, everything was reduced to this question: How is it possible for me to have an encounter with God? I have heard his word, I wish sincerely to listen to it, and yet here I am in my insufficiency. The Reformers were not unaware of other difficulties, but they knew that such hindrances are all implicit in the following reality: I stand before God with my desires, my thoughts, my misery; I must live with him, for to live means nothing other than to live with God. Here I am, caught between the exigencies of life, both small and great, and the necessity of prayer. The Reformers tell us the first thing is to pray.”

What is your working definition of “prayer”? (Think of what might normally characterize your actual prayers...)

What seems to be at the core of Barth’s definition of prayer?

How is your own working definition similar to—or different from—his?

If we took Barth’s idea of prayer, what are some actual prayers we would pray?