

HAS THE TRUE MEANING AND PURPOSE  
OF THE LORD'S PRAYER BEEN LOST?  
A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF THE LORD'S PRAYER  
IN DIALOGUE WITH WILSON-KASTNER AND CROSSAN

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*Introduction*

My objective in this article is to show that Jesus' immediate concern in teaching his own prayer to his disciples was to teach them that it was important for them to pray, and that they must pray with the right motive and attitude. I agree that the content of the prayer serves as a model, but I do not believe that this is the focus of the passages where it appears.

Since the time Jesus taught it, the Lord's Prayer has not only become a significant part of the believer's life and the liturgy of the church,<sup>1</sup> but it has also received much scholarly attention.<sup>2</sup> In our postmodern context today, where there seems to be a great need for both human transformation and the transformation of

1. The Lord's Prayer has established a special place in church liturgy and personal prayers. Palmer, *The Lord's Prayer*, 8, refers to it as the "love-song of the Christian world"; Marty, *Hidden Discipline*, 83, calls it "a battle cry, a shout for the end time."

2. The bibliography for the Lord's Prayer is large, but an excellent classic resource is Jeremias, *Prayers of Jesus*. Apart from the various renditions into different languages and biblical and liturgical versions of the Lord's Prayer (see Porter, "Translations of the Bible," 366–68, for E. Nida's excellent study on the liturgical structure and translation of the Lord's Prayer), the Lord's Prayer has also been interpreted through John 17, the Pauline epistles, and 1 Peter. See Ayo, *The Lord's Prayer*, 225–44. Many have pointed out the connection, as well as the distinction between the prayer that Jesus taught (the Lord's Prayer) and the prayer that he himself prayed (John 17). See Chase, *The Lord's Prayer*, 110–11; Walker, "The Lord's Prayer"; Brooke, "The Lord's Prayer."

the world system, the Lord's Prayer continues to receive such unabated attention because of its practical value for Christian living. Of course, there is nothing wrong with this, but I strongly believe that the true meaning and original purpose of the Lord's Prayer are often overlooked when practicality and application become the central focus, that is, when we ignore its original historical and sociolinguistic contexts in our interpretation.

Two scholarly works that exemplify such practical goals for the study of the Lord's Prayer are Patricia Wilson-Kastner's "Pastoral Theology and the Lord's Prayer" and John Dominic Crossan's *The Greatest Prayer*.<sup>3</sup> As a practical theologian, Wilson-Kastner offers her theological reflection on the Lord's Prayer and raises two issues concerning the correlation between preaching and the Lord's Prayer, as well as the pastoral and theological implications of the prayer.<sup>4</sup> With reference to preaching, she asks whether the pattern of the prayer is appropriate for sermons by virtue of the prayer's prominent status in the Sunday worship service, Morning Prayer, and the celebration of the Eucharist. Accordingly, she points out that the Lord's Prayer raises all kinds of pastoral and theological issues for the preacher and subsequently mentions nine interrelated issues in which the Lord's Prayer becomes relevant to contemporary human reality.<sup>5</sup>

3. There are, of course, many other works in this regard. However, my decision to mention these two is largely because of my own concern, as a New Testament scholar, for both the exegetical and practical aspects of New Testament studies. Whereas Crossan's position may be seen as a more liberal construal of the Lord's Prayer that can be contrasted with my more conservative sociolinguistic interpretation of the prayer from within the New Testament's horizon, Wilson-Kastner's position represents an interpretation of the Lord's Prayer from the pastoral and theological end.

4. Although Wilson-Kastner had a PhD in World Religions, she fully recognized her calling as a practicing minister of the church. In an interview by the Greensboro *Daily News* in August 1974 she said, "My ideal of what a theologian ought to be was what you have in the early church, a practicing minister who writes about and reflects upon the faith of the Christian. I didn't want to be a minister or just be a professor" (cited in Reyman, "Finding Aid for Patricia Wilson-Kastner Papers, 1944–1998," 2–3).

5. See Wilson-Kastner, "Pastoral Theology."

Crossan's proposal, on the other hand, can in various ways be seen as a novel (and postmodern) way of construing God's kingdom as the new egalitarian community Jesus inaugurated during his earthly life, in which Christians are called to collaborate through the Lord's Prayer. He lists five themes that he claims are interwoven, and contends that they emerged out of the first-century Roman socio-political context, where the early believers prayed the Lord's Prayer under an imperial government that had a different world system.<sup>6</sup> Despite living under such an awful world government, Christians were called to pray in collaboration with God's universal plan of equity and justice for the world—the God of the Lord's Prayer is a God of nonviolent distributive justice and not a God of violent retributive justice.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Crossan asks, if God is a nonviolent God, is the person who taught this prayer a representative of violence or non-violence?<sup>8</sup> This is what he seeks to explain by exploring the biblical tradition of each phrase of the prayer through the lens of biblical Hebrew poetry.<sup>9</sup>

While these values and purposes of the Lord's Prayer are important (and I agree with much that these scholars say), I

6. These five themes are: (1) the translation of *πατήρ* by the more appropriate term "householder" rather than "father"; (2) human beings as co-householders or stewards of the divine householder; (3) Jesus as the Heir (not the Son, a patriarchal term) of God; (4) Christians as co-collaborators with Christ; and (5) how all the above themes converge in the Lord's Prayer to show that it is "both a revolutionary manifesto and a hymn of hope . . . from the heart of Judaism through the mouth of Christianity to the conscience of the earth" (Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer*, 181–82).

7. Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer*, 2–3, points out that true "justice" is not retributive but distributive, which means an equitable distribution of everything.

8. Crossan challenges us "to think about Jesus as the creator of the *Abba* Prayer and to ask ourselves: Do we find any violence in it? Or do we find in it—and in the life that produces it as its summary—a nonviolent vision that is still the last best hope for our species and our earth?" (Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer*, 188).

9. Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer*, 4–8, suggests that the entire biblical tradition of Judaism "flowed through every unit of this prayer" and that the Lord's Prayer exhibits a synonymous parallelism that divides the "you" and the "we" sections, and a crescendo parallelism within each of these sections.

suggest that any study of the prayer must first take into account its sociolinguistic context, since the Lord's Prayer in Matt 6:9–13 is embedded within the larger discourse context of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 4:17–7:28). As such, I discuss my sociolinguistic methodological approach to the study of the Lord's Prayer in the next section and identify the various sociolinguistic factors in Matt 4:17–7:28 that are tied in to the Lord's Prayer passage. Subsequently, I analyze each of these sociolinguistic factors, from which I simultaneously integrate and respond to these scholars' theological opinions. Then I conclude with a word on the practical application of the Lord's Prayer for the contemporary Christian and church, and the difference it will make if this sociolinguistic context is considered in the study of the Lord's Prayer.

#### *A Sociolinguistic Methodological Approach to Matthew 6:9–13*

The New Testament is a collection of texts written in a variety of the Greek language of the first-century CE. As such, one of the useful ways of examining this collection of texts is by way of discourse analysis, which “seeks to understand the relationships between language, discourse, and situational context in human communication.”<sup>10</sup> From this definition and goal of discourse analysis, I employ two sociolinguistic approaches known as the “ethnography of speaking” and “politeness theory” to describe, analyze, and determine the various social factors in the environment of the communicative process. Ethnography of speaking is a sociolinguistic tool originally developed by Dell Hymes that generally aims at synthesizing the message, form, and context of a speech (or communicative) event.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is typically con-

10. Reed, “Discourse Analysis,” 189.

11. For Hymes's summative discussion of this topic, see Hymes, “Ethnography of Speaking.” A “speech event” is a series of “speech acts” (a speech act is an instance of speech or utterance that seeks to achieve an objective) in a discourse or conversation within a specific “speech situation” (the entire setting or situation in which people speak, e.g., a party, a church, a classroom, a conference, etc.). For a thorough discussion of speech act, speech

cerned with a systematic and descriptive analysis of the various ways in which people as groups use language (oral or written) to communicate with one another in a specific social and cultural environment.<sup>12</sup> Several ethnographic components are involved in describing a speech event. Hymes's ethnographic framework and formula is a useful and effective tool in describing the various factors involved in a speech event, each of which is intricately interrelated to the others.<sup>13</sup> For my purposes, I describe these various factors according to Hymes's definition of each of these components and Holmes's and Ottenheimers's adaptation of Hymes's ethnographic framework.<sup>14</sup>

*Genre* or type of event: "The notion of genre implies the possibility of identifying formal characteristics traditionally recognized . . . They may occur in (or as) different events."<sup>15</sup>

*Topic* or what people are talking about: this refers to the semantic study of the "lexical hierarchy of the language spoken by a group, including idioms and the content of any conventionalized utterances, for evidence and knowledge of what can be said."<sup>16</sup>

event, and speech situation, see Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*, 51–53, cf. 101.

12. Cf. Duranti, *Linguistic Anthropology*, 85; Philipsen and Coutu, "Ethnography of Speaking," 355.

13. Since its formulation, Hymes's framework has been widely cited and used by many sociolinguists.

14. See Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*, 53–62; Hymes, "Ethnography of Speaking," 110–24; Holmes, *Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, 365–66; Ottenheimer, *Anthropology of Language*, 123–38.

15. Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*, 61. Categories such as poem, myth, tale, proverb, riddle, curse, prayer, oration, lecture, commercial, form letter, editorial, phone call, conversation, business meeting, lesson, interview, blog, etc., are meant here.

16. Hymes, "Ethnography of Speaking," 112; examples would be holidays, sport, sociolinguistics, politics, etc. The old rhetorical category of *topoi* can be included here as well.

*Purpose or Function:* the reason(s) for the talk: e.g., to plan an event, to catch up socially, to teach something, to persuade someone to help you.

*Key or emotional tone:* e.g., serious, jocular, sarcastic.

*Participants:* who is speaking and who is being spoken to; the characteristics of those present and their relationship: sex, age, social status, role, and role relationship: e.g., mother-daughter, teacher-pupil, TV interviewer, interviewee and audience.

*Message form:* a focus on the syntactic structure: e.g., “He prayed, saying ‘God heal him’” (quoting message form) versus “He prayed that he would get well” (reporting contents only).<sup>17</sup>

*Message content* or specific details of what the communication is about: e.g., organizing a time for a football match, describing how a tap works, describing how to make rotis.

After a description of the speech event based on these components, the analysis of the speech event may proceed using the following guideline. Because there is no general rule as to the priority assigned to a particular component, any component may be taken as a starting point for analysis, from which all other components will be viewed in relation to it.<sup>18</sup> It all depends on which component weighs the heaviest. This can be determined based on its function within a speech situation. Whereas for some speech events the rules of speaking may be heavily tied to the participants and setting<sup>19</sup> or to the setting and message con-

17. Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*, 55. Message form also includes an identification of the code and/or channel: e.g. telephone, letter, email, language and language variety, non-verbal, etc.

18. Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*, 63.

19. E.g., see the episode in Mark 14:32–42 for Jesus’ conversation with three groups of participants (the Eleven, the Three, and the Father) in three different but proximate places.

tent,<sup>20</sup> the Lord's Prayer as a traditionally recognized liturgical hymn or prayer can be primarily bound to its genre, topic, or purpose/function.<sup>21</sup>

Another sociolinguistic tool used in analyzing a communicative event is politeness theory. Being polite is a difficult and complicated business. It involves taking into account the feelings of others, making them feel comfortable, and speaking to them appropriately in light of their relationship to you.<sup>22</sup> This is already discounting the fact that linguistic politeness varies from culture to culture.<sup>23</sup> In sociolinguistic terms, politeness involves an assessment of social relationships based on the social distance and status dimensions scales. These dimension scales simultaneously serve as the basis for a distinction between two types of politeness. Positive politeness is solidarity oriented and is therefore assessed using the social distance scale. Because it emphasizes "how well you know someone," it minimizes status differences with the use of more informal expressions (e.g., use of first name) and endearments (e.g., honey, dear, etc.). By contrast, negative politeness is status oriented and therefore engages the status scale. Using "titles," such as Sir, Mr., Mrs., or Dr. to address a conversation partner, shows politeness by way of respecting status differences.

With the above two methodological theories in mind, the first step in analyzing the speech event of Matt 6:9–13 is to establish its discourse boundary. Because the Lord's Prayer is a speech/discourse event within a speech/discourse situation (the Sermon on the Mount), the entire discourse situation needs to be analyzed if we are to account for all the social factors and reasons of its occurrence in that speech situation. Its form and function

20. E.g., see the episode in Mark 14:53–65, where Jesus appears before the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court of justice in Jesus' time, in order to defend himself and pronounce that he is the Son of Man after being coerced to admit that he is the Messiah.

21. Cf. Hymes, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*, 64–65.

22. Holmes, *Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, 280–81.

23. For a discussion of linguistic politeness in different cultures, see Holmes, *Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, 287–92. Cf. Wardhaugh, *Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, 260–67.

(note the different speech situation in the Lucan passage) can also to a large extent be gleaned from this discourse boundary.

It is generally recognized that Matthew's Gospel is marked by two introductory (4:17; 16:21) and five concluding (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1) formulas that may serve as a structural scheme for analyzing its continuous narrative.<sup>24</sup> This structural outline of the Gospel strongly indicates the literary quality of the Gospel that serves well the purpose of our ethnographic analysis.<sup>25</sup> The introductory junctions at 4:17 and 16:21 seem to clearly demarcate Jesus' public and private ministries respectively. Because the Lord's Prayer is situated within a section commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount (5:1—7:28), the first introductory junction at 4:17 can mark the starting point of our discourse, especially with the narrator's inaugurating remark: "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'"<sup>26</sup> With reference to our end point, the concluding formula "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching" at 7:28 is definitely appropriate.

#### *A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Matthew 6:9–13*

Having identified this discourse boundary, the various social factors in this speech situation can be described by means of the various ethnographic components I have outlined above.

#### *Genre*

There is little doubt, based on the available evidence, that the Lord's Prayer is a liturgical hymn or prayer that has been used by the early church since the Patristic period. There are three earliest extant texts that serve as our sources. The two accounts

24. For a survey of the various structural schemes suggested by scholars, see Bauer, *Structure of Matthew's Gospel*. Cf. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, 141–53.

25. Cf. France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 2, 5.

26. Cf. Matt 16:21: "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things."



in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are more familiar to us, but a third one is found in *Didache* 8:2–3.<sup>27</sup> As Crossan also believes, it is arguable that Rom 8:15 and Gal 4:6, as well as Mark 14:36 are our earliest sources for this prayer.<sup>28</sup> On the basis of these sources, there is clear evidence that this prayer was not only used in the liturgy, especially immediately before the Holy Communion, but was also recited exclusively by “baptized” members of the church.<sup>29</sup> Because this prayer was only prayed by baptized members or at the most by baptismal candidates, it was called the “prayer of believers.”<sup>30</sup> This genre of the Lord’s Prayer suggests that the Lord’s Prayer was never used for other purposes except in the liturgy of the church, notably in baptism and communion. Using it as a liturgical hymn or prayer, the church from its earliest beginnings has been reciting it as an act of obedience to the Lord’s command “This then is how you should pray” (Matt 6:9) or “When you pray, say” (Luke 11:2), as well as a way of commemorating the Lord’s teaching about prayer in its celebration of the sacraments.<sup>31</sup> This is the historical context of the Lord’s Prayer in the early church. Thus, any investigation of the prayer’s content needs to take this historical context into account.<sup>32</sup>

27. The prayer is introduced by “Do not pray as the hypocrites; but as the Lord commanded in his gospel, thus pray ye,” and concluded by a doxology “for thine is the power and the glory forever.” Audet, *La Didachè*, 219, dates the *Didache* to as early as 50–70 CE.

28. Cf. Jeremias, *Prayers of Jesus*, 90–91, who suggests that the originality of the Lucan version can also be seen in the brief form of address “*Abba*” in Rom 8:15 and Gal 4:6.

29. This piece of evidence is found in Cyril’s twenty-fourth Catechetical Lecture in 350 CE, which is our earliest proof for the liturgical use of the Lord’s Prayer in the Mass. See Manson, “The Lord’s Prayer.” Cf., however, Ayo, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 5, who claims that the first reference to the title “Lord’s Prayer” is already found in the third-century commentary of Cyprian of Carthage, who, in turn, was indebted to Tertullian.

30. Jeremias, *Prayers of Jesus*, 83.

31. The CEV translates Matt 6:10b as “so that everyone on earth will obey you as you are obeyed in heaven.”

32. The various ways in which and reasons for which the ancients prayed the Lord’s Prayer seem straightforward. Kirzner, “Historical Background,” 6–7, points out that the Jews believed God could hear the voice of the heart, and

Crossan's suggestion, therefore, that the Lord's Prayer is a revolutionary manifesto and a hymn of hope prayed by Christians for the conscience of the whole world, while a novel one, seems to ignore this historical context. Unlike Crossan, Wilson-Kastner's reflection on the prayer's interconnection with preaching, along with its various pastoral and theological implications for human reality, takes into account this historical context, especially when she acknowledges the prayer's central place in the Sunday worship, Morning Prayer, and the Eucharist. Nonetheless, as noted above, if the Lord's Prayer was originally a liturgical prayer recited by the early church as an act of obedience and to commemorate the Lord's teaching about prayer, it remains uncertain whether interpreting the various components of the prayer is appropriate or necessary, since it is apparent that contemporary interests in interpreting the Lord's Prayer certainly come only as a result of its prominence in the church liturgy.

### *Topic*

The Lord's Prayer is embedded in Jesus' teaching about prayer (6:5–15) in the Sermon on the Mount. The central topic in this teaching can be derived from three lexical items that weave this entire section together.<sup>33</sup> The words *προσεύχομαι* (pray), which

they therefore needed to communicate with him spontaneously. In early Judaism, the sixth benediction in the *Amidah* was recited daily: "Forgive us our Father, for we have sinned against thee . . ." (Charlesworth, "Jewish Prayers," 46–47). The petition for bread in Jewish sacred meals was also a common practice even during the time of Jesus: "Blessed art thou, Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth" (Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book*, 773–74).

33. A discourse is assumed to have coherence, a linguistic feature that makes a text "hang together." Coherence involves the meaningful relationship of topics or themes, which is determined by cohesion (or cohesive ties): the "set of linguistic resources that every language has for linking one part of the text to another." Westfall, "Blessed Be the Ties That Bind," 204, points out that "the links and bonds formed by cohesive ties create texture in the discourse and contribute to the formation of units and sub-units." In our pericope here, at least two types of cohesive ties/chains are noticeable: (1) lexical chains—formed by the repetition of the same word or cognates; and (2) semantic chains—formed by words that share a common semantic domain. See Halliday and Hasan,

occurs six times (vv. 5, 6, 7, 9), βατταλογέω (speak much/babble; v. 7), πολυλογία (much speaking; v. 7), and αἰτέω (ask/demand; v. 8) are lexical items that belong to the semantic domain “Communication.”<sup>34</sup> Whereas προσεύχομαι is classed under the semantic sub-domain “Pray” and αἰτέω under “ask for, request,” both βατταλογέω and πολυλογία belong to the sub-domain “speak/talk.”<sup>35</sup> It is therefore interesting to note, based on this semantic domain categorization by Louw and Nida, that there is an apparent distinction between the believers’ and the hypocrites’ prayer and the pagans’ mere babble (i.e., talk without meaning). A further distinction can even be made between the believers’ sincere and urgent request to God (αἰτέω) and the hypocrites’ mere act of praying (προσεύχομαι) to God.<sup>36</sup>

Jesus’ introduction to his teaching about prayer in vv. 5–8 is linked to the Lord’s Prayer unit at v. 9 by the appropriate form of προσεύχομαι. After telling his disciples about the wrong ways and manner of praying (vv. 5, 7), as well as the right motive and reward of “secret prayer” (v. 8), Jesus begins to teach (or better, to instruct) them to pray (v. 9). The imperative προσεύχεσθε at v. 9, in light of Jesus’ teaching about prayer in this context, strongly suggests that he was merely instructing them to pray (though of course not all kinds of prayer would be suitable, so a model is given).<sup>37</sup> The emphasis is on the command to pray, just like the command to fast (6:16–18), to give to the needy (6:1–4), to love one’s enemy (5:43–48), etc., and not on the content or *how* to pray, even though there is certainly much to be learned

*Language, Context, and Text*, 48, 70–96; Halliday and Hasan, *Cohesion in English*, 4, 274–92. Cf. Brown and Yule, *Discourse Analysis*, 191; Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*, 230–34.

34. See Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 1:387.

35. See Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 1:398, 408.

36. See Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 1:406–8, who point out that αἰτέω, although normally translated as “ask” or “pray,” does not mean “pray” in and of itself, but rather, when referring to prayer, is used exclusively of urgent requests made to God.

37. Note that λέγετε in Luke 11:2 (ὅταν προσεύχησθε λέγετε; “whenever you pray, say”) is also an imperative.

from the Lord's Prayer itself, as shown in the studies of Crossan and Wilson-Kastner.

The prayer itself is linked together by the terms *ἀγιάζω* (to hallow/regard as holy; v. 9), *ὀφείλημα* (debt; v. 12), *ὀφειλέτης* (debtor; v. 12), and *πειρασμός* (trial/temptation; v. 13).<sup>38</sup> This unit is joined thematically to the preceding unit through the word *ὑποκριτής* (hypocrite; v. 5), as all these words are interrelated within the semantic domain "Moral and Ethical Qualities and Related Behavior."<sup>39</sup> Whereas *ἀγιάζω* is a positive quality (holiness) and appropriately belongs to God, *ὀφείλημα*, *ὀφειλέτης*, and *πειρασμός* (debt, debtor, temptation), which are categorized under the sub-domain "Sin, Wrongdoing, Guilt," and *ὑποκριτής* (hypocrite), which is classed under the sub-domain "Hypocrisy, Pretense," are negative qualities that concern and are committed by humans. The linguistic relationship of these two groups of lexemes can be considered as a contiguous or antonymous one (words that share some sort of opposition in meaning).<sup>40</sup> As such, in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus may have been primarily concerned with the person's internal attitude towards praying to God (cf. v. 6), in order that debts may not be incurred by and temptations may not overcome the believer.

Crossan, however, tends to see the central topic of the Lord's Prayer as a call for believers to collaborate with God's equity and justice for all humans, as he relates this with the petitions for daily bread and forgiveness of financial debts.<sup>41</sup> His emphasis is on humans as co-heirs with Christ and collaborators with God to make the world conform to the kingdom of justice and righteousness God has established on earth. But as I have shown above, this notion of social, political, and economic collaboration that

38. For a discussion of the meaning of the Lord's Prayer based on these thou/thee—we/us divisions, see Ayo, *The Lord's Prayer*, 21–107; Jeremias, *Prayers of Jesus*, 98–107.

39. Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 1:741.

40. Antonymous words share at least one semantic feature with each other. They may share a common semantic border but may not overlap each other. See Porter, *Studies in the Greek New Testament*, 72; Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning*, 126.

41. See Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer*, 157–62.

Crossan suggests is far removed from the sociolinguistic context of Jesus' teaching about prayer. The pieces of evidence from the Hebrew biblical tradition that Crossan provide are apparently imposed on the text and context of the Lord's Prayer. Similarly, Wilson-Kastner's emphases on the anthropomorphic and patriarchal language, as well as the transcendence and immanence of God and eschatology are issues that may have concerned neither Jesus nor his disciples.<sup>42</sup> Rather, they are contemporary issues confronting the church today that we hope to address through praying or preaching the Lord's Prayer. Yet the question remains as to whether these things should take precedence over Jesus' emphasis on contrasting the believers' with the hypocrites' and pagans' motive and manner of praying. Needless to say, Jesus might not have been concerned with the issues of anthropomorphism and patriarchy as we would have it today.<sup>43</sup>

#### *Purpose*

There are four instances in this discourse situation that point toward the purpose of the Lord's Prayer, that is, why it was embedded in the Sermon on the Mount narrative or why Jesus included it in his teaching about prayer. This purpose traces back to 4:17, the inauguration of Jesus' preaching ministry; 4:23, his teaching ministry in the synagogues of Galilee; and 5:2, his sermon on various topics on the Mount, all of which suggest that the purpose of the Lord's Prayer is a function of or is derived from Jesus' teaching on prayer. This fact is important, since the stress of Jesus' teaching is on the command to pray and the attitude in prayer;<sup>44</sup> the content of the prayer, if it has a specific

42. Wilson-Kastner, "Pastoral Theology," 112–13, 115–16.

43. Likewise, John Calvin believes that the Lord's Prayer is Jesus' own prayer. He emphasizes the manner in which one should pray and the importance of inward and spiritual prayer before discussing its content. For him, the Lord's Prayer, which is a model for all right prayer, is both a private conversation and communal praise (Calvin, *Institutes*, 73–75). For a summary of Calvin's explanation of the first and second triple petitions in the Lord's Prayer, see McKee, "John Calvin's Teaching," 93, 97–105.

44. Ancient Jews seem to have prayed three times a day (Dan 6:10; cf. Acts 3:1; 10:30) in various postures: standing (cf. Mark 11:25; Luke 18:11, 13;

purpose or meaning, is largely contingent on the reader or interpreter and therefore must always be attached to this purpose.

For Crossan, the purposes of the Lord's Prayer are for "the conscience of the whole world" and to give "hope for all humanity." The vagueness of these purposes is not only couched in its language style and vocabulary but is also primarily seen in its congruence with the content of the Lord's Prayer. Yes, the Lord's Prayer can be a hymn of hope for the Christian who has a personal relationship with and trust in God. But is it a hope for the conscience of the whole world? In order to argue for this, we have to impose our own meaning on it, since this is not its purpose in the context of Jesus' teaching about prayer. A teaching that is focused on the command and attitude to prayer has personal or spiritual transformation and not some external or judicial practices as its goal.<sup>45</sup> Wilson-Kastner, on the other hand, recognizes Jesus' *Abba* address as showing Jesus' intimacy with the Father, from which his disciples are to learn, and emulate this same kind of intimacy with and dependence on the Father.<sup>46</sup> The problem, however, is with her claim that the Lord's Prayer offers hope of rescuing the world as people realize that they all belong to one family with a common Father.<sup>47</sup> This claim resembles that of Crossan's "hope for all humanity," which I think is not within Jesus' intended purpose in the prayer.

1 Tim 2:8), kneeling (2 Chr 6:13; Ps 95:6; Luke 22:41), or prostrate (Num 16:22; Matt 26:39). See Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 359, who argues that Jews prayed at intermittent times; and Morris, *Matthew*, 140, who insists that they prayed at specific times.

45. For instance, the same Lord who taught this prayer also said "do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father who is in heaven" (Matt 23:9). Jeremias, *The Lord's Prayer*, 63, points out that Jesus in Matt 23:9 forbids his disciples to use the *Abba* address in everyday language as a courtesy title. They are to use it exclusively for God. Similarly, Tittle, *The Lord's Prayer*, 13, writes, "Simply to say that God is our father is not enough"; we are to conform to his image and likeness.

46. In Jesus' historical and social context, the father figure symbolized the head and provider of the family (Wilson-Kastner, "Pastoral Theology," 113–15).

47. *Ibid.*, 121–22.

Second, although Crossan recognizes the anthropomorphism (and patriarchal imagery) in the Lord's Prayer, he nonetheless rejects an exclusive use of the term "Father in Heaven"; instead, he wants to call God "Householder of Earth."<sup>48</sup> But I think that seeing God as the householder of earth has its proper place in a different context (e.g., Ps 24:1; Col 1:15–20). Moreover, as Wilson-Kastner rightly points out, patriarchy and anthropomorphism must be distinguished. On the one hand, "How dare we encourage others to call God Father and thus perpetrate the negative effects of patriarchy?"<sup>49</sup> But on the other hand, because the word "Father," whether we like it or not, resonates deeply with our familial, social, and religious relationships, we can "escape neither the profundity of the feelings nor the responsibility of preaching about God as 'Abba, Father'."<sup>50</sup> The Father is a God who wills intimacy with us. Jesus also wills the intimate character of his disciples' relationship with God; he was not concerned with masculinity or femininity in God.<sup>51</sup> This intimacy is evident in God giving us bread, forgiving us our sins, and delivering us from evil.

### *Participants*

The participants in this discourse situation should be distinguished from the participants in the Lord's Prayer pericope. As most studies on the Lord's Prayer demonstrate, the participants in the prayer itself, *ὕμεῖς* (you, plural) and *ἡμῶν* (us, plural); *πατήρ ἡμῶν* (our father); *ὀφειλέτης* (debtor); *τοῦ πονηροῦ* (the evil one), are the ones that need to be studied. But as I have pointed out above, this is perhaps only a secondary purpose in the context of Jesus' teaching about prayer. What is important here is to determine who the real audiences of Jesus were in this episode. On the one hand, there are the *ὄχλοι* (crowds; 5:1; 7:28), and on the other hand, there are the *μαθηταί* (disciples; 5:1).

48. Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer*, 35–41, esp. 35, 41.

49. Wilson-Kastner, "Pastoral Theology," 113.

50. *Ibid.*, 114.

51. Wilson-Kastner, "Pastoral Theology," 119–21. Cf. Jeremias, *The Lord's Prayer*, 17–21.

Based on the words of 5:1–2, “his disciples came to him and, opening his mouth, he began to teach them,” it can be deduced that Jesus began to teach the beatitudes only to his disciples. Nevertheless, as groups began to arrive and settle down, the crowd grew larger and larger, such that at the end of his sermon, the narrator remarks: “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching” (7:28). Whether other people had heard his teaching on prayer is irrelevant; the key thing to note is that Jesus most likely intended his sermon for his disciples.

Analyzing the Lord’s Prayer based on its intended audience can radically affect how we interpret the content of the Lord’s Prayer. It seems unlikely that the Lord’s Prayer is “a prayer from the heart of Judaism on the lips of Christianity for the conscience of the world.”<sup>52</sup> Rather, the Lord’s Prayer is Jesus’ teaching about praying (an appropriate prayer) both for Jewish Christians and other Christians alike as they seek to communicate with their heavenly Father. Wilson–Kastner supports this point, although I am not entirely sure how to take her assertion that the Lord’s Prayer also speaks about human freedom and responsibility as God empowers and liberates us through our relationship with him.

Prayer is more than a verbal act. It embraces and accompanies the entire dimension of human existence before God.<sup>53</sup> Jesus acted on what he had taught his disciples in the Lord’s Prayer.<sup>54</sup> Christians, even though perhaps unreflectively shortsighted, recite the Lord’s Prayer in loving obedience to this teaching to converse with the Father and to give him continuous honor and praise (vv. 9, 13b).<sup>55</sup>

52. Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer*, 2, 182.

53. Lochman, “The Lord’s Prayer in Our Time,” 8.

54. Thielicke, *Prayer That Spans the World*, 23, argues that “everything that he [Jesus] does is the reflection, the *reverberation of that heart*.”

55. Some late manuscripts end with “for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever” at v. 13. Although perhaps overly stated, in one of his sermons, Thielicke asserts that “Jesus himself had no intention whatsoever of being the “Son of God,” [or in Crossan’s term, Heir of God] but wished only



*Key, Message Form, and Message Content*

The following elements, key, message form, and message content are all tightly related. In what follows, therefore, I will treat my analysis of these three components together.

*Key.* The emotional tone of the prayer is significant in our analysis, inasmuch as it is important for determining its topic and purpose. It may help us understand whether the Lord's Prayer continues naturally with Jesus' introduction about prayer in 6:5–8. It can be argued that the prayer itself is characterized by an earnest request or petition by children to their father. On the one hand, "Our Father," regardless of how we want to interpret it, definitely sounds like there is an intimate relationship when it is uttered by children to their father.<sup>56</sup> One can observe that the address "Our Father" demonstrates a status difference (negative politeness) between God and his children. On the other hand, the eight out of nine verbal imperatives characterize the "petitionary" tone of the prayer. Even the only subjunctive verb *μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς ἡμᾶς* (lead us not into) at v. 13 is used as an imperative.<sup>57</sup> Both the familial and the petitionary tone of the prayer are tied in to Jesus' teaching that "your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (v. 8).

*Message Form.* Jesus' introduction, "Therefore pray this way," to the prayer may indicate that the prayer is an embedded unit within Jesus' teaching about prayer in 6:5–15. In other words, he may have been excerpting a "message form" and not

to reveal the Father more clearly while he himself remained unrecognized in the background" (Thielicke, *Prayer That Spans the World*, 22, cf. 156).

56. The "Abba Father" address in Rom 8:15 and Gal 4:6, and especially in Jesus' passionate prayer in Mark 14:36, all illustrate this intimately familial language. For an excellent discussion on this issue, see Jeremias, *Prayers of Jesus*, 54–65. Cf. Juel, "The Lord's Prayer," 61–62; Crossan, *The Greatest Prayer*, 31–41.

57. Porter, *Idioms*, 56, points out that the "aorist imperative is restricted in its usage in prohibitions. Instead, the negated (with *μὴ*) aorist subjunctive serves to express prohibition in the second person, even though the negated aorist imperative usually is used in the third person . . . The use of the negated aorist subjunctive as a prohibition is very widespread."

reporting or teaching the contents of the prayer. Even if we may speculate that the prayer is Jesus' way of praying to the Father as remembered by his contemporaries through the familiar "Abba Father" address, it is equally possible that he is merely quoting his own *Abba* Father "message form" here.<sup>58</sup>

*Message Content.* As already noted above, exclusively examining the content of the Lord's Prayer is a highly subjective and reader-contingent endeavor. One evidence of this is the massive literature that has been produced so far, which reduces the possibility of knowing which one comes closest to Jesus' intended meaning, including Crossan's and Wilson-Kastner's proposals. The best we can offer is to say that the Lord's Prayer contains some of the essential components of the kind(s) of prayer(s) Jesus wants us to include in our daily prayers. Of course, both the Old and New Testaments have many examples of the various forms and kinds of prayers that we can emulate and study.<sup>59</sup>

In sum, based on these three sociolinguistic components, it is fair to argue that Jesus might have merely cited his typical form of prayer that is characterized by a language of petition or request, in order to instruct his disciples to pray (a suitable prayer). Our prayer may or may not contain the exact components of this prayer, since we find many other forms of prayers in Scripture.

The nonviolent God who distributes equity and justice to the world that Crossan finds in the Lord's Prayer, therefore, is not featured in the Lord's Prayer. The contrast that he makes between the distributive justice of the nonviolent God and the retributive justice of the violent God of the Old Testament is one that has been claimed since the time of Marcion in the second-century CE. Consequently, his question whether the teacher of this prayer is a representative of violence or nonviolence is out

58. For a good discussion of the various positions on this issue, see Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, 412–13.

59. Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer*, 59–60, lists ninety-seven prose texts where words of prayers are embedded within the narrative contexts of the Hebrew Scriptures.

of place. Similarly, the question whether God is calling for human collaboration in the prayer is hard to answer; neither the form nor the content nor the tone of the prayer elicits such a notion or concern. That there is an eschatological tone in the phrases “Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done,” is perhaps the best we can say here. As Wilson-Kastner suggests, this phrase calls for human participation in a cosmic drama.

One final word needs to be said as to Crossan’s main contention that God should be thought of as the “householder” in the Lord’s Prayer. To this end, I refer to the episode of Jesus’ *Abba* prayer in Gethsemane. In Mark 14:32–36, Jesus’ conversation with the Father is both highly intimate (see the emphatic *πάτερ μου*, my Father, in Matt 26:39)<sup>60</sup> and status sensitive (features a superior-subordinate relationship).<sup>61</sup> Jesus demonstrates solidarity (positive politeness) with the Father by submitting to his Father’s will (v. 36). At the same time, the episode also shows status difference (negative politeness), when Jesus kneels down and confidently cries out, “Abba, Father, everything is possible for you” (v. 35).<sup>62</sup> This convergence of both positive and negative politeness is perhaps unique and may not happen in human situations.<sup>63</sup> At the cross, the separation between the Father and the Son, if indeed there was one, was only momentary (Ps 22:1; Matt 27:46). Shriver notes that when the early Christians uttered the word *Abba*, it embodied fully the good news that nothing can

60. Cf. the use of the vocative here, as well as in Matt 26:41–42, with the simple “Father” in Matt 11:25–26.

61. The word *Ἀββᾶ* “combines aspects of supernatural authority and care for his people” (Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 1:139).

62. There is no evidence in pre-Christian Palestinian Judaism that God was ever addressed as *Abba* by a Jew in prayer (Ashton, “Abba,” 1:7). For a good discussion of the uniqueness and significance of the title “Father” in the teachings of Jesus, see Stein, *Method and Message of Jesus’ Teachings*, 82–89.

63. Responding to J. Heinemann’s comment that there is no special importance to the fact that God is addressed as “Father” or as “Our Father” in the Lord’s Prayer, since “Master” or “God” are likewise often used in Jewish prayers, Juel cites statistical evidence from the Gospels and argues that based on such statistics, “reference to God as ‘Father’ is uncommon and noteworthy” (Juel, “The Lord’s Prayer,” 59–60).

separate them from the love of God (Rom 8:39), a claim that neither Wilson-Kastner nor I would deny.<sup>64</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In this study and my dialogue with Wilson-Kastner and Crossan, I have highlighted the various points of disagreement (and agreement) between my sociolinguistic analysis and these scholars' interpretation of the Lord's Prayer. I have also shown in various instances why several of their proposals might be unlikely or implausible.

The Lord's Prayer, I firmly believe, is both Jesus' prayer and his teaching about prayer. Therefore, it has both personal and social dimensions to it. These dimensions are the exact places in the human realm where the Lord's Prayer should be applied, but one needs to be circumspect in this endeavor and should interpret the prayer within its sociolinguistic context. The personal dimension of the prayer can be gleaned from Jesus' embodiment of his passionate communion with God (Matt 6:9; Mark 14:36; John 17), as well as his emphasis on solitude and quietness in praying (Matt 6:5–6; Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). He finds his strength and power through prayer (Matt 4:10; Mark 14:36). The social dimension of the prayer can be found in Jesus' teachings about prayer like the Lord's Prayer. He taught about prayer because he came from a people who also taught him to pray.<sup>65</sup>

From his ancestral background Jesus must have envisioned that all his brothers and sisters would corporately pray whenever they gathered together as a community. The Lord's Prayer serves this particular purpose for Jesus' new community.

For this reason, though I have nothing against those who wish to interpret the Lord's Prayer for contemporary practical, theo-

64. Shriver, *The Lord's Prayer*, 16.

65. The Old Testament assumes prayer (cf. 1 Kings 8) and has exhortations to pray (e.g. Ps 32:6; Isa 55:6; Jer 29:11–14) and many examples of prayer (e.g. Neh 1:5–10). Jews of Jesus' day had regular prayer times (Lk 1:10; Acts 3:1). For a discussion of first-century Jewish prayer practice as relates to the Lord's Prayer, see Kistemaker, "The Lord's Prayer in the First Century."

logical, and ecclesiastical purposes, I nonetheless think that we ought to take the prayer's sociolinguistic context seriously. Otherwise, all kinds of interpretations can be made in our study of the prayer, especially when we want to use the prayer for our own purposes. But it is precisely at this juncture that the true meaning and original purpose of the prayer can be lost. And this is manifested clearly in both Wilson-Kastner's and Crossan's study of the prayer. I fail to see in their studies the important contrast between the believers' and the hypocrites' and pagans' manner of praying that highlights Jesus' teaching about the right motive and manner in praying. Neither of them has emphasized Jesus' simple but urgent command to pray (a suitable prayer), inasmuch as they would perhaps stress the command to give to the needy and to fast if they were to study the pericopes preceding and following the Lord's Prayer, as well as the other topics in the Sermon on the Mount.

Finally, what difference will it make if we incorporate this sociolinguistic context into our study? The answer to this question, I think, is clear based on the result of this study. I can see that our analysis and interpretation of the Lord's Prayer will shift from merely analyzing the various components of the prayer to emphasizing the motive and manner Jesus wants from us whenever we pray (especially the Lord's Prayer).

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