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## A Model of Interpersonal Christian Prayer

E. James Baesler

*A model of interpersonal Christian prayer (ICP) was created based on a review and synthesis of traditional and social scientific prayer literatures. The ICP model accounts for global theoretical constructs such as active and receptive types of prayer and includes a subcategory of receptive prayer called radically Divine communication. The ICP model describes prayer progressions, specifically the developmental and cyclical nature of prayer. A list of 12 research questions based on the ICP model are provided. Two specific suggestions for future research dealing with the relational quality of prayer and intercultural receptive types of prayer are outlined. Keywords: Prayer, Interpersonal, Christian.*

Prayer as a religious phenomenon is pervasive and important in American society. According to Gallup poll research, about 90 % of Americans report that they pray (this percentage has not changed more than plus or minus 2% in the last 40 years of opinion poll research); additionally, approximately 76% of Americans report that prayer is an important part of their daily life (Poloma & Gallup, 1991). These statistics are based on a sample that included individuals from major world religions such as Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Thus, all major world religions include some type of "prayer".<sup>2</sup>

Heiler (1932), former professor of comparative religions, suggests that prayer has several characteristics including a living relation, mutual intercourse, conversation, fellowship, and communication. These descriptive words and phrases underscore the essential *relational quality* of prayer, namely that prayer is a social

phenomenon reflected in our human relationships such as the relationships between suppliant and judge, child and father, servant and master (Heiler), bride and bridegroom (Talbot, 1985), client and therapist (Keating, 1994), and friend to friend (Kempis, 1955).<sup>3</sup> *Prayer*, then, is a specialized type of communication that occurs in the context of a spiritual relationship.

In several of the major religions, prayer presupposes a spiritual relationship between the believer and Allah (Islam), Yahweh (Judaism), or the Trinity (Christianity). In all three cases, the relationship between the believer and the Other is created and sustained by some type of spiritual communication. This is the type of "spiritual/religious communication" I mean by the term prayer. Examples of prayer as religious communication include a believer communicating with: (a) God, one-to-one, often in a private setting (interpersonal-like prayer), (b) a limited number of believers and God (small group-like prayer), and (c) a large group of believers and God in a ceremonial type of setting (corporate, liturgical, and public prayer). Among these contexts of religious communication, the present inquiry focuses on the micro context (a single believer communicating with God) since this is the basic unit and building block for all other types of prayer. Every type of prayer presupposes this fundamental relationship between the believer and the Other. Moreover, understanding prayer at this micro level should enhance our understanding of prayer at more complex levels. I have elsewhere argued for adopting the phrase "Interpersonal Christian prayer" (ICP) when referring to this micro context of prayer within the Christian tradition (Baesler, 1997a). As necessary background for this study, a summary of these arguments and some qualifications for adopting the phrase "Interpersonal Christian prayer" are presented.

Interpersonal communication provides a metaphor that can be used to investigate the micro context of Christian prayer.<sup>4</sup> This does *not* mean that the phenomenon of Christian prayer in the micro context is equivalent to interpersonal communication. However, there are sufficient parallels to warrant adopting the phrase Interpersonal

Christian prayer as a metaphor for describing and explaining *some* aspects of prayer. Specifically, the micro context of Christian prayer and interpersonal communication both presume: (a) a dyadic relationship between entities that develops over the course of time (thus various aspects of traditional interpersonal communication such as self-disclosure, trust, intimacy, and depth of the relationship also have their parallels in interpersonal prayer), (b) an initial intent to communicate (that is, communication is initially a purposeful and conscious act), and (c) specific types of communication such as talking, listening, and dialoging. Each of these shared similarities which support the ICP metaphor also have an area of contrast which indicates the limitations of the metaphor. Specifically, there are differences in the: (a) nature of the relational being one is communicating with (in one case human, in the other case Divine), (b) locus of initial intent for the communication episode (in interpersonal communication either partner may initiate, but for interpersonal Christian prayer it is always presumed that God initiates), and (c) the empirical verifiability of some types of communication (in interpersonal communication, the relational partner is observable while in interpersonal Christian prayer the relational partner as Other is usually not directly observable).<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the use of interpersonal communication as a metaphor for understanding the relational aspects of the micro context of Christian prayer is more appropriate than metaphors from other disciplines. For instance, psychological explanations might highlight personality factors that correlate with different types of prayer (e.g., Michael & Norrissey, 1991), but personality factors alone are limited indicators of the nature and quality of communication between the Christian and God. However, a psychological explanation that examines the cognitive processes that occur during communication with God may provide additional insights into understanding the nature of prayer just as examining the thoughts of humans while communicating can add to an understanding of interpersonal communication. Alternatively, a sociological metaphor of institutional power might be employed to understand how religious institutions promote specific prayer forms to influence the believer's



relationship with God (ranging from friendly encouragement to dictating what is and is not permissible). However, power in sociological terms is a macro (not a micro) construct, and power in sociology does not encompass the variety of relational dynamics that an interpersonal communication metaphor can. In sum, metaphors from other disciplines can contribute to an understanding of the micro context of Christian prayer, but the interpersonal communication metaphor seems to best fit the relational quality of ICP.

Having established the boundary conditions and conceptual framework for the study of ICP, the next objective is to outline the steps in the research process. First, a sample of traditional and modern prayer typologies are identified in the prayer literature with an emphasis on including those typologies that provided a coherent set of prayer categories. Second, specific types of prayer within each of the typologies are listed and defined. Third, prayers within each of the typologies are reviewed to determine if there were any *prayer progressions*, i. e., ordered sequences of two or more types of prayer that suggested the development, maturation, or evolution of an underlying relational dynamic. Fourth, similar prayer progressions *between* different typologies are described and clustered under common labels. Finally, a model of ICP based on the clustered prayer progressions is presented followed by a list of research questions and specific suggestions for future research.

### Traditional Prayer Typologies and Progressions

The following traditional prayer typologies represent 20 centuries of prayer in Christendom. What makes these prayer typologies traditional is that they have an ancient history (all having developed prior to the 7th century) and that they have been practiced as prayer forms in Christian communities for over 14 centuries. Three authors have summarized major works related to these traditional prayer literatures. Keating (1978) outlines Latin prayers that were originally developed in the early Church during

the first and second centuries. Next, Talbot (1985) describes a type of Franciscan prayer that emerged during the third century. Finally, Dubay (1989) provides an authoritative interpretation of Teresian prayer which developed out of the sixth century Carmelite tradition.

### *Keating's Ancient Prayer Typology*

Keating (1978) traces the historical development of prayer within the Christian tradition and outlines four types of prayer which are herein represented by the Latin terms *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. *Lectio* is usually translated as "spiritual reading" and a specific form of this, *lectio divina*, means reading as a form of "listening" to sacred scripture. *Meditatio* represents the reflective pondering of a religious topic (for example, God's love as revealed in sacred scripture). *Meditatio* is a type of discursive meditation in which the intellect actively mulls over and ruminates on a religious topic. After the attentional (*lectio*) and intellectual (*meditatio*) processes have been engaged, the Christian may experience a transition into *oratio*. Typically, *oratio* is defined as affective prayer, the spontaneous movement of the heart and will in response to meditation. Sometimes *oratio* will lead into the final stage of prayer called *contemplatio*. One definition for this type of contemplative prayer is "the knowledge of God based on the intimate and loving experience of His presence" (Keating, p. 36).

There is a logical progression represented by the different types of prayer found in the ancient typology. *Lectio*, is characterized by listening to God's revelation as an input for meditation. In meditation the communication is broadened from listening to an internal dialog. *Oratio* represents a spontaneous communicative response that serves as a conclusion to meditation and as a transition to contemplation. The progression ends with contemplation, a simple awareness of being in the presence of God.

*Talbot's Franciscan Prayer Typology*

Talbot's (1985) explanation of prayer in the Franciscan tradition begins with *dialogue*, "... establishing the facts, discerning the inner qualities of each other as well as the externals" (Talbot, p. 10). This process may involve using the imagination to visualize scenes from sacred scripture and then dialoging with God about them. Dialog is followed by a "nonconceptual communion that is experienced in pure and tender 'love touches' between Lover and Beloved" (p. 44) which Talbot terms *love union*. *Afterglow*, the period that follows love union, is described as a time of silence and stillness, a time to simply be in the presence of God without words, images, or thoughts.

Talbot's explanation of Franciscan prayer indicates a relational progression, beginning with dialog, deepening into the prayer of love union and ending with an extension of the love union called afterglow. While similar, the last two stages in the prayer progression can be differentiated. Specifically, the intensity of the experience in afterglow is not as prominent as during love union, and the duration of the experience during afterglow may be longer than during the love union.

*Dubay's Teresian Prayer Typology*

St. Teresa of Avila uses the imagery of an interior castle to represent the soul (St. Teresa of Avila, 1980; Dubay, 1989) when discussing types of prayer. The mansions that comprise the castle are represented as a series of seven concentric dwellings of light; the brightest at the center and beyond the outermost circle there is no light. Prayer consists in moving from the outermost to the innermost mansion. The type of prayer discussed in the first three Teresian mansions is called *active recollection*, a gathering together of the self, attempting to quiet the mind, and then conversing with the Lord Jesus as if He were physically present. The fourth mansion represents the beginnings of *infused prayer* which Dubay describes as a Divinely-

given general and nonconceptual (no images, concepts, ideas) loving awareness of God that may be experienced as loving attention, dry desire, and/or strong thirsting. In the fifth mansion, *infused union* is marked by an increased intensity of the experience of God's presence during prayer, but the duration of this union is usually only a few minutes. In the sixth mansion, prayer is experienced as *ecstasy or rapture*. During this type of prayer, sense perception dramatically decreases while inner vitality and energy proportionately increase. The duration of this experience is temporally brief, but what differentiates it from the fifth mansion is that it usually recurs, sometimes lasting as long as two hours. Lastly, *transforming union* (also called the spiritual marriage) describes the permanent and uninterrupted experience of the presence of the Trinity within the Christian.

In the Teresian mansions there are two progressions that represent the movement and development of prayer from outer to inner mansions. In the first three outer mansions, the pattern of prayer is described as a verbal and/or mental dialog with Jesus. This type of prayer is supplemented and eventually replaced by a different pattern of prayer found in inner mansions four through seven. Prayer in these mansions is described as ineffable experiences associated with the reception of Divine love.

### Modern Prayer Typologies and Progressions

Three modern (developed in the 20th century) prayer typologies are represented in this section: Stark's (1965) stages of religious experience provides a relational context for examining types of prayer, Poloma and Gallup's (1991) factor analytic study represents the first empirically based typology of prayer, and the Baesler's (1997a) typology focuses on the communicative aspects of prayer.



*Stark's Stages of Religious Experience*

Prayer is described by Stark (1965) as initially *confirming*, experienced as a generalized sense of the sacred or a specific awareness of Divine presence. *Responsive* experiences are associated with an awareness of Divine presence and a corresponding sense that the Divine is aware of oneself. *Ecstatic* experiences represent intimate and affective contact with Divinity. Finally, *revelationary* experiences indicate that one has become a confidant and/or agent of the Divine.

There is a clear progression in Stark's typology that implies the development of a relationship over a period of time. Stark maintains that any relationship begins with a sense of the Other. This would include the conscious focus of attention on God's presence in the ICP relationship. The responsiveness stage subsumes this sense of Other and adds another dimension of awareness. In responsiveness, the Christian experiences mutual awareness, being aware of God's presence and sensing that God is in turn aware of the supplicant. The ecstatic stage is marked by increased relational intimacy and affection. In human relationships intimacy and affection are often accompanied by greater depth and breadth of mutual self-disclosures (See Altmann & Taylor's social penetration theory of interpersonal relationships, 1973). Perhaps there is a parallel development of intimacy and affection through mutual self-disclosures in human-Divine prayer. After a period of time, God may grace the Christian with more privileged types of communication such as visions and voices in what Stark terms the revelatory stage.

*Poloma and Gallup's Factor Analytic Prayer Typology*

A factor analytic study based on a national sample of 1,980 subjects from different religious orientations by Poloma and Gallup (1991) found four types of prayer that were operationalized according to items on a survey as follows.<sup>6</sup> *Ritual* prayer included "read prayers" from a book of prayers and "reciting prayers" one had memorized.

*Petitionary* prayer consisted of asking God for material things. Four items defined *conversational* prayer as talking with God in one's own words, asking God to forgive one's sins, asking God to provide guidance in making decisions, and thanking God for His blessings. The items associated with *meditative* prayer included spending time quietly thinking about God, spending time "feeling" the presence of God, spending time worshipping and adoring God, and trying to listen to God.

The communication items that make up the prayer categories for the Poloma and Gallup typology are redundant from one category to the next and the categories do not represent any clear progression. For example, the category of conversational prayer as represented by the item "*asking* for God to forgive your sins" is the same type of communication represented by a different category called petitionary prayer which includes the item "*asking* God for material things" (my emphasis). That is, two different prayer categories posit the same type of one-way communication. The same argument could be extended to the meditative category item of "worshipping God" and the conversational category item of "thanking God for his blessings." Worship and thanksgiving, although having different prayer functions, both emphasize the same one-way communication directed from the Christian to God. Moreover, it is unclear why the act of thanking God would be associated with the conversational prayer category since the term conversational typically implies some type of dialog and not simply one-way communication.

### *Baesler's Communication Typology of Prayer*

Based on a review of 50 definitions in the Christian prayer literature, Baesler (1997a) developed a "communication oriented" typology of prayer. *Talking to God* was defined as one-way communication, a monologue, sending messages directed to God. These messages may be verbally (audible) or mentally (inaudible) "spoken." *Listening to God* was also conceptualized as one-way communication

but with the emphasis on receiving messages. An attitude of openness and acceptance distinguished this prayer from the "talking to God" category. *Dialogue with God* implied two-way communication, both sending and receiving messages. The sequence of dialogue may be listening then talking, and/or talking then listening. Dialogue may include verbal and/or non-verbal (mental) communication. In *Meditation* the Christian is engaged in discursive thinking about a religious topic. The process is intended to be a logical intellectualizing about God and is most often nonverbal (mental communication). Lastly, in *Contemplation* the goal is to experience the presence of God, and the focus is on the heart, will, and/or soul and not on intellectual processes. Contemplation is characterized by solitude, stillness, and quiet with minimal or no mental dialogue or logical thinking. *Mystical union* is considered a peak of contemplative prayer and is distinguished from the contemplative prayer of quiet by the qualities of ecstasy, rapture, and love union. Baesler's proposed prayer typology based on the nature of the communication logically progresses from monologue, to listening, to dialogue, to communication exemplified by contemplation and mystical union.

#### Synthesis of the Prayer Typologies: A Model of Interpersonal Christian Prayer

Six prayer typologies (three ancient and three modern) have been identified from the prayer literature, all of the prayer categories within each typology have been defined, and within each typology, one or more prayer progressions have been highlighted. See Table 1 for a summary of the prayer progressions within ancient and modern prayer typologies. Each prayer progression is associated with a particular typology and does not address the possibility of similar prayer progressions between the six typologies. Thus, part one of this synthesis will consist of comparing and clustering similar prayer progressions *between* different typologies and then creating appropriate linguistic categories for those progressions that share a common relational dynamic. Next, part two of this synthesis will involve clustering the linguistic categories into higher-ordered theoretical units which will be employed as explanatory constructs in the creation of a model of ICP.

Table 1. *Prayer Progressions Within Individual Prayer Typologies*

Ancient Prayer Typologies			Modern Prayer Typologies		
<i>Keating Ancient</i>	<i>Talbot Franciscan</i>	<i>Dubay Teresian</i>	<i>Stark's Stages</i>	<i>Paloma &amp; Gallop's Factors</i>	<i>Baessler Communication</i>
Lectio	Dialog	Active Recollection	Confirmation	Ritual	Talking
Meditatio	Love Union	Infused Prayer	Responsive	Petitionary	Listening
Oratio	Afterglow	Infused Union	Ecstatic	Conversational	Dialog
Contemplatio		Ecstasy	Revelationary	Meditative	Meditation
		Transforming Union			Contemplation
					Mystical Union

*Note:* Traditional typologies refer to the historical period prior to the 7th century, and Modern typologies refer to the historical period of the 20th century. Individual prayer categories depicted within a given row are not designed for direct comparison; however, comparisons of prayer categories within columns are possible. For example, Keating's Meditatio is not the same as Baessler's Listening (same row), but Keating's Meditatio is comparable to Baessler's Meditation (within columns).



## Comparing and Clustering Prayer Progressions

Comparing and clustering prayer progressions revealed three distinct linguistic categories that any model of ICP should account for: dialogic prayer, radically Divine prayer, and temporal prayer processes.

### *Dialogic Prayer*

Several similarities were noted when comparing the various types of prayer progressions in the traditional and modern prayer typologies (See Table 1). First, all of the typologies have a progression related to dialog.<sup>7</sup> The first three Teresian mansions refer to dialogic prayer in terms of an audible or mental dialog with Jesus; Talbot begins his prayer typology with a category called dialog; Stark's ecstatic stage represents dialog as mutual self-disclosures; Poloma and Gallop refer to dialog as conversational prayer; Baesler's typology has a category called dialog, and in Keating's ancient typology the prayer of meditation could be considered a mental dialog. Since the prayer progression of dialog is represented in all of the prayer typologies, the model of ICP should have a component that describes prayer as dialog.

### *Radically Divine Communication during Prayer*

Beyond dialogic prayer, another prayer progression found among all of the typologies is a prayer characterized by loving, and being loved by, God. I have labeled the communication that takes place during this progression "radically Divine communication." Theologically, radically Divine communications are ineffable and thus cannot be linguistically captured with traditional communication concepts. However, the ineffable quality of the prayer of love has not precluded Christians from *attempting* to describe their radically Divine communication experiences with language such as love union and afterglow (Talbot), infused prayer (Teresa), contemplation

(Keating's Ancient), revelation (Stark), meditation (Poloma & Gallop), and contemplation and mystical union (Baesler). Thus, the model of ICP should include a component to account for radically Divine types of communication with the provision that there may be many different symbolic images that Christians use to reflect the ineffable experiences associated with loving, and being loved by, God.

### *Temporal Prayer Processes*

Almost all of the prayer typologies imply a progression during prayer, but the extent to which one can progress through all of the stages during any given period of prayer is variable. Keating's ancient typology allows for a complete progression during a single prayer period beginning with receptive listening, moving into a more active period of dialog, and concluding with a deeper level of receptive listening. This does not imply however that one must move through all of the stages in the progression in a single prayer period, only that it is desirable and possible. In contrast, the seven Teresian mansions do not imply that one can progress through all of the stages within a single prayer period. Rather, progressing from one mansion to the next is depicted as an ongoing evolution of a Christian's prayer over a period of months or years.<sup>8</sup> Talbot's typology, representing a condensed version of the stages found in the Teresian mansions, maintains that prayer normally begins with dialog, and after a period of time (over the course of multiple prayer periods) prayer develops into love union and afterglow. It is possible however that a mature Christian could move through the entire progression in a single prayer period.

There is no clear temporal progression in the Poloma and Gallup typology; that is, there is no logical rank ordering of the ritual, petitionary, conversational, and meditative prayer categories. In contrast, Baesler's prayer typology represents a temporal progression from talking, listening, dialoging, and meditating to contemplating. This prayer progression is similar to that of the ancient typology in

that the progression may be, but is not necessarily, experienced within a single prayer period. Finally, Stark's stages represent a temporal progression that would normally develop over the course of multiple prayer periods. For example, while one may quickly progress through the initial awareness stages, it may take some time to plumb the depths of the ecstatic stage before one is graced with Divine revelations.

In summary, a model of ICP should include a temporal element that describes the progression of prayer over time. In particular, the model should indicate what critical events predict the transition (both progression and regression) from one type of prayer to the next. The model should also be able to account for individual differences in rapid versus slower movement through the various stages of the prayer progressions over the course of time.

#### *Theoretical Units of the ICP model: Active vs. Receptive Prayer*

Part two of the synthesis involved constructing a general model of ICP with higher-ordered theoretical units that conceptually subsumed and provided logical order for all of the clustered prayer categories. In synthesizing the various types of communication across traditional and modern prayer typologies (See Table 1), it is evident that there are at least two qualitatively different types of prayer that represent higher-ordered theoretical units. First, there is an *active* form of prayer characterized by talking, listening, and dialog. For instance, prayer might begin with a litany of wants (talking), followed by an extended period of listening for God's response, and end with dialog. Alternatively, prayer may begin by reading a passage from sacred scripture (listening), move into a dialog, and end by asking for God's help in some matter (talking). While there are many possible variations for sequencing the different types of communication during active prayer, the distinguishing characteristic of active prayer is the emphasis on the human effort involved during prayer.

In contrast to active prayer, there is a *receptive* type of prayer characterized by radically Divine communication. The term Divine



emphasizes the activity of God in the prayer process in contrast to an emphasis on the activity of the human being. Conceptually, receptive prayer does not jettison the notion that the Christian is choosing to pray and that there is some human effort involved, but rather stresses that the primary activity during receptive prayer is Divine rather than human. The term radical indicates that descriptions of receptive prayer fall outside the bounds of traditional communication concepts that have consensual meaning in the discipline such as talking, listening, and dialog. Such traditional communication concepts do not account for the experiences associated with the reception of God's infused grace in receptive prayer. Nonetheless, given the context of a Christian's faith in a living God, radically Divine communication represents an authentic type of spiritual communication. As with active prayer, there are several types of communication associated with receptive prayer. One category of communication during receptive prayer is defined by powerful types of Divine infusion experienced as voices, rapture, and ecstasy. Another category of communication is defined by gentle, quiet, and peace-filled infusions of Divine love.

In comparing the active and receptive types of ICP, there is some evidence that Christian children may be more likely to begin with active as opposed to receptive types of prayer. For instance, Long, Elkind, and Spilka (1967) found the following developmental prayer pattern in Christian children: (a) ages 5-7 typically use memorized "prayer formulas," (b) ages 7-9 tend to ask for concrete things, and (c) ages 9-12 begin to experience prayer as a conversation with God. All of these types of prayer could be considered active prayer forms. In a more recent pilot study of 66 adults (half college-aged and half middle-aged adults who were not currently attending college), Baesler (1997b) asked participants to recall their earliest memory of prayer and found that the majority of responses were related to memories of active rather than receptive types of prayer. The tendency for Christian children to learn active forms of prayer before contemplative forms is not necessarily a fixed developmental pattern since Halpin (1984) has shown that contemplative prayer forms (receptive prayer) can be successfully taught to children as young as 5 years old.



As children develop theological knowledge and experiences related to God, one would expect the prayer relationship to grow. In time, given the normal development of a Christian's prayer life, there is less of a focus on self (active prayer) and more of a focus on God (receptive prayer). There may be a variety of conditions and mechanisms that facilitate this transition from active to receptive prayer. For example, a life-threatening illness, an accident, the death of a loved one, a career change or some other dramatic event may precipitate a renewed interest in prayer, or prayer may gradually deepen and grow over time.

#### *Summary of the Interpersonal Christian Prayer Model*

Basic theological beliefs of Christianity serve as a starting point or boundary condition for the ICP model (Refer to the Appendix for a outlined summary and Figure 1 below for a brief summary). Such basic Christian beliefs include the existence of a Trinitarian Godhead and the belief that communication with God is possible through prayer. A second boundary condition is the context for prayer that the model purports to describe. Specifically, the current model restricts the context of prayer to *private personal prayer* between the Christian and God. Thus, at this stage in the process of model building, the ICP model does not account for dyadic or any type of group or corporate prayer. This limitation of examining the micro context of Christian prayer does not exclude expanding the model to eventually incorporate more macro contexts of prayer such as small group and liturgical prayer.

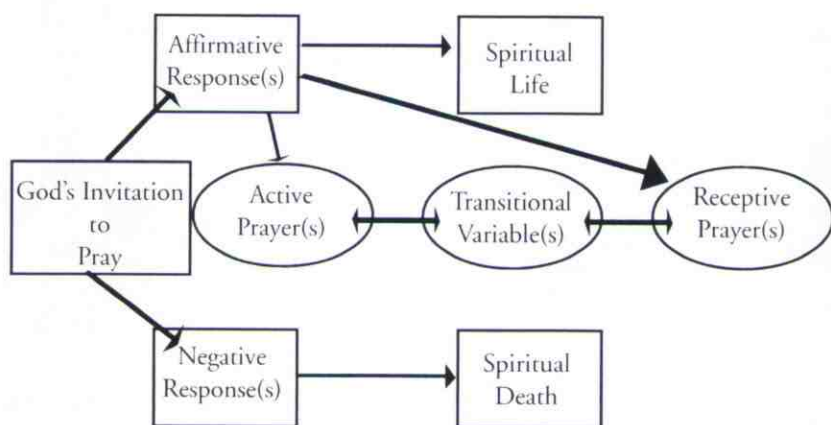
Given the ICP boundary conditions, one theological starting point for the model is God as the source of prayer. The Christian position that God is the starting point for all prayer spans the centuries, ranging from the early Christian era of the desert Fathers of Egypt (Merton, 1969), through the era of the middle ages in the writings of Saint Augustine of Hippo (1960) and Saint John of the Cross (1991), to our modern day era as evidenced in the works of mystics such as Bede Griffins (1992), Thomas Keating (1994), and

William Meninger (1994). From the premise that God is the source of all prayer, it follows that, temporally speaking, God initiates prayer and provides the Christian with the grace to respond (see Note 5). The Christian may choose to respond or ignore God's loving invitation. There are degrees of response to God's invitation to prayer that are theologically possible, but for the sake of parsimony the current version of the model limits an individual's response to affirmative or negative. If the response to God's invitation to prayer is affirmative, then typically the Christian will begin expressing this response via active forms of prayer such as talking to God, listening for a response, and dialoging with God. There is no set sequence to this pattern, that is, one may dialog, listen, then talk, or alternatively talk, listen, then dialog, or one may listen then talk, or simply talk. Moreover, there is no specific quantity of time associated with any of the forms or sequences of active prayer. One may talk the entire time of prayer, or one may dialog for a brief period of time followed by an extended period of listening and so forth. The distinctive quality that characterizes the active prayer forms is the human activity involved in responding to God's invitation to pray.

As the Christian's relationship with God develops, either naturally over the course of time as a tree might grow or perhaps suddenly as in the case of a dramatic life event (or a combination of the two—in either order), prayer becomes less self-oriented and more God-oriented. Eventually, the Christian may begin to experience Divine infusions or what I have called radically Divine types of communication. Christian mystics through the ages have translated the ineffable initial experiences associated with radically Divine types of communication by the terms quiet, gentle, and peaceful. One could hypothesize that these "love touches" may grow in intensity and duration over time, potentially culminating in experiences described by Christian mystics in poetic language such as rapture, ecstasy, and love union. After experiencing the height of mystical union, it appears that a number of variations in prayer are possible. First, the intense experiences may not end but continue throughout the life-span. Second,

the intense experiences may subside and/or plateau (perhaps a recovery period for the Christian lest they become too overwhelmed by God's presence). Third the person may have an abiding awareness of God even when not at periods of time set aside specifically for prayer. Fourth, there may be oscillations in the intensity and/or duration of infused prayer over time. It is not clear at this point what kind of variables might be useful in explaining which types of receptive prayer processes and patterns develop in certain individuals.

Figure 1. *Visual Summary of Interpersonal Christian Prayer Model*



*A Research Agenda for the Interpersonal Christian Prayer Model*

The following questions provide direction for future research based on the ICP model. The questions are arranged from the beginning to the end of the ICP model (Refer to Appendix). This organizational format does not imply that research must begin with R1 and follow the questions sequentially to the end. It is possible to engage in prayer research at any point in the model.

R1: How do Christians recognize and describe God's loving invitation to prayer via the events in their life and/or their internal experiences?

R2: What factors predict affirmative, as opposed to negative, responses to God's ICP invitation?

R3: What variables, such as age, sex, denominational affiliation, memory of parent's praying, and regular Church attendance, predict the frequency and duration of ICP?

R4: Given an affirmative response to God's invitation to pray, how does the Christian describe, in their own words, their experiences during prayer?

R5: When Christians initially begin to pray (as children, teens, and/or adults), do the majority of individuals begin with active forms of prayer as predicted by the ICP?

R6: How many different active prayer sequences do Christians report, and what is the frequency, duration, and intensity of these sequential patterns?

R7: Is there a predictable time frame for the transition from active to receptive prayer forms for Christians who pray on a regular (e.g., daily) basis?

R8: What external events and/or internal experiences aid in describing the transition from active to receptive prayer forms?

R9: What types of images, feelings, and/or words are used by Christians to recognize and describe receptive prayer experiences (what I have called radically Divine communication)?

R10: Are there predictable cyclical patterns of active and receptive prayer within and/or between periods of prayer?

R11: What variables predict experiences associated with highly intense receptive prayer (e.g., mystical union) from other less intense experiences of receptive prayer (e.g., peace)?

R12: To what degree is it possible to teach a method of receptive prayer? For instance, Johnston's (1973) *Cloud of Unknowing* outlines a method of receptive prayer.



While there are many projects that one might develop based on this set of research questions, I will limit my comments to two specific areas for future research. First, there is a fascinating transition period between active and receptive types of prayer suggested by the model (R7 and R8). One possible explanation for this transition period may be related to the relational quality of prayer, that is "...those verbal and nonverbal expressions that indicate how two or more people regard each other, regard their relationship, or regard themselves within the context of the relationship" (Burgoon & Hale, 1984, p. 193). While Burgoon and Hale have applied this definition of relational communication to human relationships, one can use the interpersonal communication metaphor to extend this logic to the interpersonal prayer relationship. Burgoon and Hale (1984) identified 12 dimensions of relational communication based on a review of works spanning from anthropology, psychotherapy, biology, sociology, linguistics, to nonverbal communication. It is possible but currently unknown if a particular configuration, developmental sequence, or threshold level on one or more of these relational dimensions might predict the onset of the transition period from active to receptive prayer.

A second potentially fruitful area of inquiry might focus on what I have called "receptive prayer" (R9 & R11). Investigating the different types of receptive prayer in Christian traditions and then comparing these findings with another religious tradition would broaden the scope of the model from Interpersonal *Christian* prayer to *Intercultural* Interpersonal Prayer. For instance, one might compare similar Christian contemplative types of prayer such as the sacred word (Keating, 1994), the prayer word (Meninger, 1994), and the Jesus prayer (Main, 1981) with a similar type of "contemplative prayer" belonging to the mantric branch of yoga in Hinduism known as the mantram prayer (Easwaran, 1998).

It is intriguing that such a pervasive and vital topic as prayer is not more visible in the field of communication given the obvious correlation between human communication and spiritual communication.

Perhaps it is partly a matter of faith: Many social scientists and rhetoricians are probably uncomfortable talking about, let alone giving a priority to researching, the religious phenomenon called prayer because of issues related to religious faith. Yet, the medical profession has been turning to prayer as a way reducing patient stress for over 20 years (e.g., Benson, 1975, 1984). More recently, medical professionals have been vigorously researching prayer as a mechanism of healing for patients who have exhausted traditional medical avenues of treatment (see reviews by Dossey, 1993, Finney & Maloney, 1985, Francis & Evans, 1995). Given such an interest in the religious communication phenomenon called prayer by individuals in a traditionally *hard* science, perhaps it is time that communication researchers begin to give prayer some priority in their research, especially those of us that claim to be scholars of *religious* communication.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The majority of the survey sample was Christian, reflecting the demographic proportion of Christians in the U.S. relative to the other major world religions.

<sup>2</sup> However many eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism use the term meditation in place of the western term prayer. While there are theological similarities (e.g., Hindu mantra prayer and Christian centering prayer) and differences (e.g., the Buddhist experience of nirvana and the Christian experience of mystical union) between eastern meditation and western prayer, this subject is beyond the scope of the present inquiry. As a starting point and boundary condition for the present investigation, I am focusing on prayer in western Christianity. The reasons for limiting the scope of the inquiry include: (a) demographically, Christianity comprises a significant sector of the U.S. population, (b) Christianity is the religious tradition that I am most familiar with, and (c) pragmatically, there is a limit to what one can meaningfully discuss in a single study.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that a Christian's relationship with God is the same as a relationship between two human beings. To paraphrase St. Thomas Aquinas, all talk about God must necessarily be couched in terms of human analogies, for God is beyond all human concepts (Kreeft, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> While there is some debate about how to define interpersonal communication, the following definition (based on the works of DeVito, 1992, Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, Sudweeks, & Stewart, 1995, & Pearce, 1994) was used for the purpose of this study: an interactive process whereby two individuals, in the context of a personal relationship (some level of personal knowledge and intimacy is necessary) and a particular situation, create, transmit, receive, and coordinate their symbolic verbal and nonverbal messages with the intent to share meaning with one another.

<sup>5</sup> One might ask the question, why does God initiate the communication, the invitation to pray? One response is summarized by Maloney (1979, p. 46) a Catholic mystic, "God... is always seeking by His nature to share His being by communicating His presence... God becomes a God-toward-others by communicating Himself through His Word in His Spirit of love." A second response is based on an erroneous teaching of the 4th century theologian Pelagius, namely that humans have the natural capacity to take the *first step* toward salvation. This view was condemned by the Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus in 431 because it denied the primacy of the initiative of grace by God in the salvific process (Gentz, 1986, p. 792).

<sup>6</sup> The Poloma and Gallop (1991) prayer categories are based on a factor analysis of survey items. A personal communication with Poloma (1997) indicated that the factor loading's data supporting the dimensional structure of the prayer categories was unavailable. In addition, Poloma reported working on a revised prayer typology that includes a new category called contemplative prayer, and in a recent communication (1999) Poloma indicated that there was no further progress on the new typology.

<sup>7</sup> While monologic prayer could be considered a stage in the dialogic prayer progression, several of the prayer typologies emphasized a particular aspect of dialog, namely talking *or* listening. The following prayers exemplify this uni-directional focus: (a) lectio or contemplatio as listening, and oratio as talking in the ancient typology, (b) ritual or meditation as listening, and petitionary prayer as talking in the Poloma and Gallop typology, and (c) listening and talking as separate prayer categories in Baesler's typology. Neither the Talbot or Teresian typologies have a category for talking only. However, both Talbot and Teresa have prayer categories with a listening focus, specifically Talbot's afterglow prayer and Teresa's infused prayer. Thus, the model of ICP should be able to account for periods of prayer that emphasize the distinctive quality of receptive listening or talking to God.

<sup>8</sup> St. Teresa recommended to her nuns that after six months of meditation they should be ready for contemplative prayer, that is, they should be ready to experience the graces of the infused prayer associated with the fourth mansion (St. Teresa of Avila, 1980).

Appendix  
Interpersonal Christian Prayer Model

- I. God's loving invitation to pray
- II. External events and/or internal experiences that influence one's response(s) to God's invitation to pray
- III. If the response to God's invitation to pray is:
  - A. Negative, then no prayer and eventually spiritual death
  - B. Affirmative, then prayer, and varying degrees of the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit
    1. *Active prayer*
      - A) Emphasis is on human effort and activity
      - B) Sample of active prayer progressions
        - 1) Talk only; listen only
        - 2) Talk then listen; Listen then talk
        - 3) Talk, listen, dialog; Dialog, talk, listen
      - C) Variables that predict the frequency, duration, and intensity during and/or between periods of prayer
    2. *Transitional variables* that explain the change in emphasis from active to receptive prayer or visa versa
    3. *Receptive prayer*
      - A) Emphasis is on God's activity
      - B) Sample of receptive prayer progressions
        - 1) Gradual progression from less to more intense and/or longer periods of prayer
        - 2) Primarily low intensity and/or duration
        - 3) Primarily high intensity and/or duration
      - C) Variables that predict the frequency, duration, and intensity during and/or between periods of prayer
      - D) Sample of radically Divine communication
        - 1) Gentle, peaceful, love touches
        - 2) Ecstasy, rapture, love union
    4. It is possible to cycle or oscillate between active and receptive types of prayer within and/or between periods of prayer



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