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Unanswered Prayers:
A Study of Apologia for God in the Matter of Prayer

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Abstract:

Many Christian writers and thinkers take up the vexing issue of unanswered prayer and thereby use various rhetorical strategies to address the intersection of pertinent teaching about prayer, and the disjunctive, problematic life experiences concerning the experience of unanswered prayer. Our investigation uses the ancient rhetorical genre of apologia as a lens to better understand the tactics and stances taken up by those who seek to guide members of faith communities toward reconciliation between perceived biblical *teaching and actual life experiences concerning unanswered prayer. Our study incorporates an analysis of both the formal and conceptual strategies utilized by rhetors who seek to repair, or account for, breaches in lived-faith and understood teaching by religious communities through investigation of representative contemporary rhetors who address prayer.*

"Promises and pie-crust are made to be broken."
-Jonathan Swift

> Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!
> (*Matt.* 7:7-11, NIV)

Upon reading New Testament passages such as Matthew 7:7-11, one could forgive an inexperienced disciple for expecting an immediate, accurate, and pleasing response from God to a specific prayer request.[1] Experienced believers, however, recognize that immediate answer to prayer is rare and infrequently matches prayer requests with exact precision. Therein is born a communication dilemma to which many rhetors on prayer have addressed thought and careful explanation. How do believers address the seeming disparity between certain New Testament claims about prayer and God's response (or non-response) to prayer and human interpretation of results? Below we have explained in greater detail the benefit from focusing on messages created to address this dilemma (which include extension of knowledge in both the genre of rhetoric under consideration and possible benefits to those who would seek to understand rhetorical tactics that may reach pertinent audiences).[2]

We have addressed defense (or explanation) statements produced by individuals who believe they understand the biblical and life reasons that answer potential questions concerning the unfairness, immorality, or unethical responses of God based on New Testament teachings about normative expectations concerning results (or perception of lack thereof) from faithful prayer from Christian believers.

Apologia has long been a focus of scholars interested in public explanation or justification of behavior or policy. Previous studies have addressed apologia ranging through apostates, presidents, pro athletes, popes, kings, and soldiers (among many others) (Benoit, 1995; Blair, 1984; Butler, 1972; Dorgan 1972; Huxman & Bruce 1995; Kruse, 1981; McClearley, 1983; Ryan, 1982, 1984; Short, 1987; Vartabedian, 1985). While groups, corporations, and professional occupations *have* been addressed in apologia studies (Benoit & Brinson 1990; Hearit, 1995; Phillips 1999), the majority of such studies examine public figures who must (in Ware and Linkugel's [1973] formulation) "speak in defense of themselves" (p. 273).

Our study differs from the bulk of apologia and related studies in that we have addressed apologia by rhetors given in defense of another. And, the *another* in question is the putative creator of the universe. We have examined similarities and differences between explanations given in support of God by Christian believers concerning the matter of unanswered prayer and traditional understandings of apologia discourse in public. Such examination should expand and refine apologia theory as well as shed some light on typical explanations concerning the dilemma perceived in unanswered prayer. Since all of the popular books on prayer we discovered treated the concern of unanswered prayer, we assume it holds a place as a standard issue within the overall area of Christian prayer.

The most comprehensive examination of apologia through the mid-90s is available from Benoit (1995).[3] He sifted through over seventy years of studies in apologia and image restoration by rhetorical critics, persuasion researchers, and sociologists. By integrating this substantial research review he expanded Ware and Linkugel's (1973) long-used scheme of apologia and arrives at four primary image restoration strategies: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, and corrective action.

We have used these categories, and types of apologia within them, as a baseline structure against which to judge discourse found in over twenty books, written from a variety of Christian perspectives, traditions, and denominations, that address prayer for a popular (i.e., non-scholarly, non-technical) audience.

Justification for Study

Prayer is a substantial, common form of everyday communication for most Americans. An April 2009 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 78% of Americans believe prayer is an important part of their daily lives (Pew, 2009). Similarly, a July 2008 AARP survey found that 69% of Americans consider time spent in prayer an important daily habit (Opinion, 2008). In May of 2010, *USA Today* reported that 83% of Americans believe that God answers prayer (Grossman, 2010). Moreover, across the last four decades Gallup has reported that nearly 90% of Americans pray (Baesler 1997; Paloma & Gallup, 1991).

Since 1997 a number of articles have been published in communication journals on prayer. However, we agreed with MacGeorge, et al. (2007) who argued that, despite the ubiquity and religious importance of individual prayer behavior, the study of prayer has not received the attention it deserves among communication scholars. Our study helps address an important part of this potent area of investigation digging into pertinent messages presented in popular books on prayer to observe and analyze persuasive tactics used therein.

Our study focuses on unanswered prayer and apologia. We explore how Christian writers of popular books on prayer deal with the issue of unanswered prayer.[4] Rhetors who wrote in these books sought to use the best argumentative strategies available to convince their audience members of how to best approach the practice of prayer.

Several useful articles have been written on religious apologia. Blaney and Benoit (1997), Sullivan (1998), and Blaney (2001) all argue from several vantage points that the apologia strategy of transcendence (placing the objectionable action or behavior in a different evaluative context) permeates religious image restoration rhetoric.

A robust examination of ancient and modern apologia discourse related to Christian groups and individuals is found in Miller's (2002) book *Divine: Apology: The Discourse of Religious Image Restoration*. Miller's project in the book is substantial as he sought to improve not only apologia-related studies, but also wanted to fashion a contribution to a much larger project: an understanding of a Christian rhetoric. While his work in this book is both telling and valuable, neither his individual case studies, nor his theory-building concluding remarks, focused on either of the core concerns in our study: prayer and the defense via apologia for one by another. To be sure some minor mentions of some apologia messages of a *secondary* rhetor in defense of a *primary* rhetor (e.g., in the chapter "Standing by Their Men: Southern Baptists and Women Scorned" (pp. 103-121) are made, but these examples are neither the focus or substance of the analysis done in any case study in the book. Likewise, prayer as an important form of communication is not a central issue or concern in any of the case studies, or in Miller's theory building.

Further rhetorical analysis of rhetors writing about prayer to popular audiences is in order, keeping in mind the possibility that the apologia strategy of transcendence may permeate such communication by the very nature of the intent and sought function by such rhetors (Blaney & Benoit, 1997, p. 30). Again, certainly apologia as a powerful form of rhetoric has often been seen as a worthwhile venue for understanding Christian-related messages, but even then some have disagreed that apologia-qua-apologia is the correct understanding of the discourse under consideration. For instance, in his study "Francis Schaeffer's Apparent Apology in Pollution and the Death of Man," Sullivan (1998) argued that Schaefer's writings are not *apologia*; rather, they are apparent apologies for Christianity related more to philosophical apologetics.[5] While each of these studies offered an interesting background for our discussion, especially the claim that all religious apologia has used the argument tactics of transcendence, we wish to focus on a persuasive dynamic that has not yet been analyzed. We have looked at image restoration from the vantage point of rhetors offering an apologia for another—not just another human, but rhetors who claim to speak on behalf of God.

Since prayer, and use of prayer, are central to many Christian concepts of faith in a divine being or creator, explanations of perceived failure of (or difficulty with) that practice or communication hold considerable importance.

Since New Testament scripture addresses prayer from a number of vantage points, contemporary, as well as earlier-day, believers have often reflected on the importance of prayer. Mother Teresa (1985) has said: "Jesus Christ told us that we ought 'always to pray and not to faint.' St. Paul says, 'pray without ceasing.' God calls all men and women to this disposition of heart—to pray always" (p. 89). Kierkegaard claimed (concerning the power of prayer): "The archimedean point outside the world is the little chamber where a true suppliant prays in all sincerity—where he lifts the world off its hinges" (as cited in Buttrick, 1942, p. 82; Heiler, 1932, p.

279). While some would proclaim the centrality of prayer: ". . . prayer is the key that unlocks the door of God's treasure house . . . (*Kneeling*, 1986, p. 9), others remain unconvinced of any discernable *instrumental* quality to prayer communication. Kant, for example, asserted "It [prayer] is at once an absurd and presumptuous delusion to try by the insistent importunity of prayer, whether God might not be deflected from the plan of his wisdom to provide some momentary advantage to us" (as cited in Heiler, 1932, p.89). Others reside somewhere in between with significant reservations as to who might be completely successful with prayer: "My own idea is that it [fully answered prayer] occurs only when the one who prays does so as God's fellow-worker, demanding what is needed for the joint work. It is the prophet's, the apostle's, missionary's, the healer's prayer that is made with this confidence and finds the confidence justified by the event" (Lewis, 1991, pp. 60-61). Disputes over efficacy of prayer aside, many Christian believers hold to (and have held to) a view of prayer that leads to messages under investigation in this study. Certain believing rhetors even grant unusual centrality to human-divine communication: "Prayer . . . is either *the* primary fact or the worst delusion" (Buttrick, 1942, p. 15) (emphasis added).

Instruction then, particularly those prayer instructions from Jesus of Nazareth found in the New Testament, have long held deep importance for believers in Christ. Certain parts of those instructions seem to suggest a near causal relationship between prayer and God response. For instance Jesus' teaching as recorded in the Gospel of *Luke*:

> So I say to you, ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, those who seek find, and to those who knock, the door will be opened.
>
> Would any father among you offer his son a snake when he asks for a fish, or a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you, bad as your are, know how to give good things to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!
> (*Luke* 11:9-15, REB)

If the life experience of Christians over the ages had found a functional connection between direct, instrumental prayer requests and perceived results, few (if any) of the books or chapters which form the artifact base of this study would have been written. The perceived *disjunction* between the teaching promise of prayer and eventual results, however, received written attention even in the first 50-70 years after Jesus' death. So some passages in the gospels, and elsewhere in New Testament canon, reflect the same causal prayer promise already mentioned—with important conditions (emphasis is added):

> *If you dwell in me, and my words dwell in you*, ask whatever you want, and you shall have it. This is how my Father is glorified: you are to bear fruit in plenty and so be my disciples. (John 15:7-8, REB)
> This is what I want you to do: Ask the Father for whatever *is in keeping with the things I've revealed to you. Ask in my name, according to my will*, and he'll most certainly give it to you. Your joy will be a river overflowing its banks! (John 16:23-24, The Message)
> From now on, whatever you request *along the lines of who I am and what I am doing*, I'll do it. That's how the Father will be seen for who he is in the Son. I mean it. Whatever you request *in this way*, I'll do. (John 14:14, The Message)

If New Testament writers recorded these qualifying words of Jesus for believers, why have they seemingly not been sufficient to explain or deal with the dilemma of unanswered prayer? Contemporary rhetors expend considerable energy and focus on helping believers grappling with the expectations born of Jesus' prayer promises. Below we have specified our artifact selection, but for now we can note that we sought popular Christian writers who took up the challenge of addressing prayer for audience members seeking new or refined understandings about prayer. Our aspiration was not to tease out the purpose or history of these expectation-building promises; rather we wish to deal with the persuasive tactics used by rhetors to bring understanding to the perceived problem.

While apologia messages have been studied as solutions to problems (e.g., capital trial for treason, or bribery charges, or campaign accusations) (Gold, 1978; Kruse, 1977), few have fully focused on apologia created by others than the principals engaged in the social, cultural, or political difficulty under examination. This study opens a wider (necessary) door to the study of apologia created by supporters of those under attack or suspicion. Since contemporary discourse is a welter of voices attempting influence, we would do well to recognize the power and influence of those other voices.[6] In this study other voices must be heard as few claim to hear (or speak) directly the voice of God concerning renewed, contemporary understanding of scripture.[7]

Similarly, apologia has been seen as a necessary part of an accusation and defense exchange within a culture; indeed, some have suggested that this is the hallmark of apologia messages (Ryan, 1984). This study finds, however, that apologia messages can be expressed in relationship to a perceived communication problem with *no* direct accusation indicated or referenced. While we gladly grant that philosophical and theological writing on issues concerning God/human interaction (including elements of dissatisfaction with that interaction) is voluminous,[8] nonetheless, rhetors' messages analyzed in this study spend *no* direct effort on establishing accusation or other factors of katagoria; rather, the perceived phenomena of unanswered prayer is treated as an important experience for Christian believers without the rhetors directly trying to establish an accusation basis for their responses. Put another way, rhetors encountered in this analysis took as a given the necessity of a defense concerning unanswered prayer without expressing any recognizable need for a specific accusation that would have authorized or encouraged their prose. This unrequested response dynamic is at once mysterious, yet recognizable, when seen in light of the expectations produced by scriptural promises concerning prayer (and expected response to prayer).

The qualifying and hedging statements about prayer given by Jesus in the Gospel of John (listed above) serve to illustrate the perceived power of promises such as the ones enumerated in Matt. 7 and Luke 11. Norms for such claims have long been recognized as demanding a legitimate response on the part of the promise-giver. Austin (1975), in his ground breaking lectures on the performance aspects of language, devoted an entire class of utterances called *commissives* to linguistic expressions which were most strongly typified by promises: Commisives "are typified by promising or otherwise undertaking; they commit you to doing something" (p. 151-152). Similarly, Grice (1975) and others have recognized the underlying expectations of conversational *rules* (Bach & Harnish, 1979; Bennett, 1990; Davis, 1998) that hold makers of propositional performance claims to strict standards of expectation. When the giver, or maker, of a promise is expected to fulfill the promise, social, cultural, and personal sanctions await the person who fails to match the promise made. Such violations often engender explanation of failure.

Our study investigates the dynamic of a promise-giver and promise-receivers separated by thousands of miles and years, and multiple translations. Hence, the imperative for response is not held within a conventional, interpersonal or social communication framework. Instead, the sheer importance of the promise, and the plausibility that the maker of the promise could keep it, make possible promise violations important enough to compel twentieth-century believers to write apologia messages.[9]

Hence, the power of a perceived promise engenders such an apologia message when violation of that promise would bring fundamental issues of faith and reliability into question. Better understanding apologia that operates in human discourse *without* accompanying direct accusation adds to our better understanding of prayer messages as the subject of cultural discussion and should also encourage investigation of other, similar, forms of apologia.

Analysis Process

To accomplish our study we followed these steps of analysis. First, we scoured bibliographies and bestseller lists for popular press, Christian books on prayer; we then gathered 19 books from twentieth- and twentieth-first century rhetors who addressed prayer—which also specifically took notice of unanswered prayer.[10] Our initial search led us to many books on prayer that addressed prayer from historical, contemplative, political, or devotional perspectives (see for instance Elliott, 1985; Foster, 1992; Keating, 1992; Kiley, 1997). We selected only those general books that attempted to explain prayer (including unanswered prayer) to a lay audience of Christian believers. This selection of books acts as a snapshot of contemporary, Twentieth-Century, popular teaching and thought on prayer within mainstream Christian traditions. Such a selection allows us access to pertinent discussion on prayer and unanswered prayer by Christian rhetors who sought to reach a large, popular audience. Second, we read our selected books seeking to find any chapters or sections that addressed unanswered prayer or doubt in praying; two of the books surveyed devoted the entire book to the subject of unanswered prayer (Greig, 2007; Mosley, 1992) while another (Jensen, 2008) saw the phenomena as central to his investigation of faith and belief. Next we re-surveyed the contemporary literature in apologia research with an eye toward finding analysis categories and conceptual challenges that might serve in this study. Next we selected analysis categories generally built by Ware and Linkugel (1973) as well as refinements by Benoit (1995). Finally, we analyzed our various selected texts and compared them to existing categories and studies.

Analysis

We understand that certain avenues of apologia were nearly automatically untenable for rhetors we encountered in our study due to theological perspectives they hold. First of all, the actions of *provocation*, *defeasibility*, *accident*, and *good* intentions which form types of the strategy of *evading responsibility* are simply out of character of the God of the Old and New Covenantal writings and therefore or do not apply. The being worshiped as creator of the universe, parter of the Red Sea, the giver of child to Hanna, and enabler of the warrior-shepherd David by millions was an unlikely candidate for the strategies that allow perceived violators to sidestep responsibility. The arguments made by rhetors writing in a popular, mainstream Christian tradition, as they defended God, presuppose the impossibility that their creator of day and night would have somehow slipped and made a mistake in not answering a prayer.

Similarly the strategies of mortification and corrective action seemed ill fit for characteristics and norms normally associated by believers with God. Having a supreme deity who somehow expressed "I'm sorry" or "We have a new three-part response plan" concerning perceived unanswered prayer has not been normative, or discoverable, in Old, or New, Testament canon, or in contemporary writing on prayer surveyed here that follow in that tradition.

On the other hand, the tactics of denial, shifting the blame, differentiation, bolstering, and transcendence were in evidence in these writings. Understanding these strategies provides the focus of our analysis. The following sections offer our discoveries in investigation of these areas.

Strategies of Response: Combining Shifting Blame and Differentiation

Rhetors covered in this study often defended God in their arguments when they combined the strategies of denial and differentiation. The strategy of differentiation was employed to deny any fault on the part of God. In the case of unanswered prayer, defenders shifted the blame arguing that the fault was not God's, but that unanswered prayers were caused by the character flaws of the people who pray. Benoit (1995) argued that shifting the blame "can be a variant of denial, because the accused cannot have committed the . . . act if someone else actually did it" (p. 75). According the Ware and Linkugel (1973) differentiation "is often signaled by the accused's request for a suspension of judgment until his actions can be viewed from a different perspective" (p. 278). In other words, defenders of God ask those whose prayers are unanswered to look at another part of the equation of prayer and by taking another perspective finding the *cause* of their unanswered prayers.

Some defenders used spatial metaphor to shift the blame of unanswered prayer from God to those who pray.[11] The defender asked the pray-ers for a suspension of judgment until the cause of unanswered prayer could be viewed from a different perspective and to consider that they may be the cause of their own unanswered prayers. Stanley (1992) wrote that people get angry with God for not answering their prayers, but they "need to understand how to get into position to allow Him to answer our prayers. The problem is not in God's ability ... the problem is with us" (p. 55). He wrote that prayers go unanswered because people "cling to unconfessed bitterness and hatred toward a family member . . . because of our wrong motives ... because we are stingy . . . [and] because of unconfessed sin" (pp. 69-70). Stanley thereby suggested that God's character is not in question. The blame is shifted and the pray-ers are offered another perspective to the cause of unanswered prayer.

In a similar vein, three rhetors (Chambers, 1994; Hybels, 1998; Rinker, 1959) each constructed a barrier metaphor to deny, via differentiation, any wrongdoing on the part of God and shift the blame to those who pray. Rinker stated that "There are no unanswered prayers, but ... obstacles to answered prayer" (pp. 62-67). Hybel's (1998) suggested that, "It is possible that something is wrong in our lives, that we have set up some barrier between ourselves and God" (p. 97). These rhetors list several different types of barriers that people construct that hinder their prayer. The list included the following types of barriers: not praying long enough (Hybels, 1998, p. 101, Rinker, 1959, p. 63), unconfessed sin (Hybels, 1998, p. 103), guilt (Rinker, 1959, p. 64), a secret sympathy with sin (Sanders, 1977, p. 89), unresolved relational conflict (Hybels, 1998, p. 104), lack of respect for the spouse (Sanders, 1977, p. 92), selfishness (Hybels, 1998, p. 105), uncaring, bitter, unforgiving spirit (Hybels, 1998, p. 106; Sanders, 1977, p. 91), inadequate faith (Hybels, 1998, p. 107; Sanders, 1977, p. 93), and impure motives (Anderson, 1996, p. 144; Sanders, 1977, p. 89). The defenders, by having listed the possible procedure errors or character flaws of those whose prayers are unanswered, shifted the blame away from God and offer prayer culpability as the most likely explanation.

Defenders also shifted the blame to the pray-ers when they argued that unanswered prayer was caused by not following the proper conditions. E.M. Bounds (1981) wrote: "The whole explanation [to unanswered prayer] is found in wrong praying.' We ask and receive not because we ask amiss'"(p. 202). Mother Teresa (1985) suggested that proper prayer must be made in silence. She explained that,

> Our prayer life suffers so much because our hearts are not silent, for, as you know 'only in the silence of the heart, God speaks.' . . . 'God is the friend of silence. His language is silence.' 'Be still and know that I am.' He requires us to be silent to discover him. In silence of the heart he speaks to us. (pp. 100-101)

Charles Stanley (1992) used Biblical texts like a contract lawyer listing the "six conditions that must be true in our lives if God is going to answer our prayers" (p. 55).

Citing Psalm 66:18, Stanley (1992) stated that those who pray must first "have a right relationship with [God]" (p. 55). Secondly, pray-ers' requests need to " . . . be specific" (p. 55) according to Mark 11:24 and Psalm 37:4. Thirdly, those who pray must, according to 1 John 5:14, "ask according to [God's] will" (p. 57). Fourthly, Stanley cited Jesus' proclamation from both John 14:14 and 15:7 to argue that pray-ers "must make sure everything in the prayer is in keeping with [God's] character" (pp. 57-58). Stanley used James 1:7,8 to state the fifth condition that, "Doubt and prayer do not mix" (p. 58). "Finally, we must have the right motives" (p. 60). Here Stanley cites Matthew 5:16. Rinker offered a shorter list of three conditions. She claims that "we should ask in His Name (John 16:24) . . . let His Word live in our hearts (John 15:7) and . . . keep on asking . . . (Matthew 7:7,8)" (p. 63).

Instead of writing like a lawyer, Mosley (1992) devoted most of his 191-page book *If Only God Would Answer: What to Do When You Ask, Seek, & Knock- And Nothing Happens* offering tips on how to get answers to prayer. Mosley's book took the form of popular self-help books complete with cartoon illustrations. His tips implicitly suggested that blame for difficulties in prayer should be cast on the pray-er. For example, Mosley wrote, "Our prayers . . . often run into a brick wall because we tend to focus exclusively on the final, complete solution . . . . It will help immensely if we break our requests down into small, shorter-term petitions" (p. 12). He also recommended that believers take an active role in prayer:

> First you see a need: your spouse is depressed; your child's schoolmate is neglected . . . . Think and pray: How can God meet that need? ... Then formulate a petition in which you cooperate with God in meeting that need ... asking to meet the Lord and His resources at that point of need. (p. 26)

Mosley (1982) offered sixteen chapters of suggestions like the examples above. Unlike Stanley (1992) and Rinker (1959), Mosley rarely cited Biblical texts to support or illustrate his tips to receive answered prayers. However, mirroring Stanley and Rinker, he implicitly denied any fault on the part of God for unanswered prayer by shifting the cause of unanswered prayer to those who pray. Following his tips suggested a reorientation wherein the pray-er will have their prayers answered. Yancey (2006) joined the chorus of these voices that shift the blame and invoked a motivated theme related to social justice: "Thus God flatly declares that, in addition to our private spiritual state ourv social concern (or lack of it)—for the poor, for orphans and widows—also has a direct bearing on how our prayers are received" (p. 224).

This combination of shifting the blame and offering another explanation to the cause of unanswered prayer offer a plausible explanation for unanswered prayer. Benoit (1995) claimed that shifting the blame:

> ... may well be more effective than simple denial for two reasons. First, it provides a target for any ill will the audience feels, and this ill feeling may be shifted away from the accused.

Second, it answers the question that makes the audience hesitate to accept a simple denial: 'Who did it?' (pp. 75-76)

Rhetors who defended God by shifting the blame back to the pray-ers themselves may take advantage of this dynamic identified by Benoit (1995). If readers identify with one of the defender's explanations, that they were the cause of unanswered prayer, then any animosity that the pray-ers may have had for God may be resolved. However, if pray-ers believe that they have not created any barriers, met the required conditions and followed the proper procedures for prayer then this strategy would most likely fail.[12]

As has been previously demonstrated, defending rhetors have used a combination of denial and differentiation strategies in several ways. They denied that unanswered prayer is God's fault by shifting the blame, arguing that prayers are not answered because: 1) of the immoral character of those who pray, 2) praying incorrectly, and 3) praying for comprehensive solutions when people should pray for smaller solutions in which the pray-er can participate.

Transcendence and bolstering are two tactics that formed a formidable portion of the apologia created by rhetors analyzed in this study. We cover first the transcending messages that cover the most frequent and forceful arguments used to explain unanswered prayer.

Strategies of Transcendence

Transcendence "functions by placing the act in a different context" (Benoit 1995, p. 77). We, for reasons enumerated previously, are using the category of transcendence developed and used by Benoit (1995), Ware and Linkugel (1973) (and others), but we firmly resist the notion that transcendence used by the rhetors analyzed here fits the notion of non-denial advanced by Benoit: "None of these six strategies [bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking accuser, and compensation] of decreasing offensiveness denies that the actor committed the objectionable act or attempts to diminish the actor's responsibility for that act" (p. 78).

The act of God not responding to, or changing, or resisting a prayer request from a believer as explained often by these rhetors *does* emphatically deny God's wrong action. This denial takes the form of non-human-based transcendence that most typically emphasized superior knowledge or awareness on the part of God, or emphasized specific purpose by God. So, for instance, when Hybels (1998) said: "Why would an all-loving, all-powerful God deny valid requests . . . ? Sometimes the reason for our request is not wrong, but in the infinite mystery of things, the outcome still seems to be " (p. 93), or again when Stanley (1992) invoked the "big picture:" ". . . we forget the big picture in our prayers . . . God is trying to conform us to his image" (p. 64) we find these rhetors building a transcending bridge that enlarges the context, but one that essentially denies that any promise was broken or agreement violated. Carney and Long (1997) captured this emphasis on superior scope while still emphasizing connection: "He knows a shameless cry often reflects the true depths of the human heart" (p. 93).

Twelve of the nineteen rhetors analyzed in our study used this tactic of claiming a larger awareness on the part of God. Some emphasized timing: "On other occasions our finger-tapping anxiety is simply out of timing with the ever-patient mercy of the Eternal." (Foster, 1992, p. 183), while others focus on a better knowledge: "But He will always measure our desires against what he knows is best for us" (Stanley, 1992, p. 54). Some times this awareness is qualitatively superior: "Fortunately, our God loves us too much to say yes to inappropriate requests" (Hybels, 1998, p. 90), while other times it is qualitative and perceptual: "God knows what we do not know. God sees what we do not see" (Anderson, 1996, p. 100). In all cases of transcendence argument, God is presented as being superior and beyond human means in knowledge, chronological awareness, and perceptual evaluative ability.

One interesting variation of transcendence as an argument strategy is when this same strategy is expressed from the human experience perspective instead of propositions about God and God's actions: "When we ask for something from God we assume we ask for what is best for us . . . . The problem is this: we don't always know what is best" (Anderson, 1996, p. 30). Hence, whether expressed from the perspective of human limitation or godly strength, a transcending argument is made that serves to explain the presence or occurrence of perceived unanswered prayer.

A predictable variation of this superior awareness is taken up in the imagery of parents and children: "Does a father never say to his child, 'Wait till you are older (or bigger or wiser...)" (*Kneeling*, 1986, p. 91), or: "Like a child, we are grateful for a Parent who knows better and places higher limits on our lesser requests" (Anderson, 1996, p. 100). Such images dovetail well with the notion that such a superior entity likely is a purposive being.

God is often represented by these rhetors as having very specific purposes. These claims form the next set of transcendence arguments. God is variously seen to be developing character (Hybels, 1998, pp. 95-96), purifying believers (Hybels, 1998, p. 92), creating belief (Anderson 1996, p. 40), or planning to show love (Sargent, 1984, p. 18). God's purpose is seen as ranging from the abstract and non-specific to very specific: Another reason God withholds answers is because He is in the process of preparing us" (Stanley, 1992, p. 65).

> If we could make the Creator of heaven and earth instantly appear at our beck and call, we would not be in communion with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We do that with objects, with things, with idols. But God, the great iconoclast, is constantly smashing our false images of who he is and what he is like.
>
> Can you see how our very sense of absence of God is, therefore, an unsuspecting grace? In the very act of hiddenness God is slowly weaning us of fashioning him in our own image. . . . By refusing to be a puppet on our string or a genie in our bottle, God frees us from our false, idolatrous images. (Foster, 1992, p. 20)

This creative, purposive almighty being does *seem* to not answer prayer, but that seeming-ness is not unseemly, or wrong; such is the power of transcendent argument by rhetors utilizing a God perspective.

Strategies of Bolstering

Bolstering is the fourth main means of creating apologia in the writing we analyzed. Benoit (1995) held that bolstering reduces offensiveness by "mitigat[ing] the negative effects of the act on the actor by strengthening the audience's positive affect for the rhetor" (p. 77). Such a bolstering impact is observed in the understanding prayer discourse we covered in the form of promising the *good* to a believer who awaits unanswered prayer with frustration: "In God's providence, he eventually works everything together for good (*Romans* 8:28)" (Anderson 1996, p. 126). Whether expressed as "love" (Hybels, 1998, p. 90; Anderson 1996, p. 113), or "larger blessing" (*Kneeling*, 1986, p. 88), or "gift" (Anderson, 1996, p. 31; Kneeling, 1986, p. 91), most of the rhetors seem to echo Stanley (1992) who said: "A fourth reason God withholds answers to our prayers is because He wants to give us something better" (p. 65). And for some rhetors the believers to whom they write already have much of what is *better*: "God is greater than His promises and often gives more than either we desire or deserve, but He does not always do so" (*Kneeling*, 1986, p. 91). Consequently, believers are encouraged to see God as a giver of good, love, and blessing as over against our inability to see pattern or purpose in seemingly unanswered prayer.

Two interesting variations of bolstering were also discovered in these books. The book the *Kneeling Christian* (1986) used a form of implied bolstering based in chronology with this statement: "Rest assured that God never bestows tomorrow's gift today. . . . His resources are infinite and His ways past finding out" (p. 91). So these rhetors argued an unknown future gift born from inexhaustible resources will belong to their readers, but the believers would never be able to discern its creation or delivery pattern. Another bolstering variation was *negative bolstering* through avoidance of the *bad*: "I am sure the Lord, in His great loving wisdom, sifts all our requests, and the ones which might harm us are not answered according to our asking" (Rinker, 1959, p. 62). Similarly the author of the book, *Kneeling Christian* (1986), offered readers curse avoidance by explaining that the all-knowing God, who transcended time and space, did not grant all prayer requests of His children because "To have said 'Yes' to some of them would have been a curse instead of a blessing" (p. 90).

Human recognition of God's right to be God formed a final major set of transcending arguments in answer to perceived unanswered prayer. Whereas Rinker (1959) viewed this dynamic from the God perspective: "Because of His care over us, all that may seem disappointing will in the end be beneficial. I believe this, because I am learning more . . . about what He is like. God is greater by far than any idea or concept man could possibly conceive in his little mortal mind" (p. 62). Other rhetors pose this awareness as a corrective primarily from the human side of this prayer circumstance:

> Besides, we probably should be thankful that God does not always present himself whenever we wish, because we might not be able to endure such a meeting. Often in the Bible people were scared out of their wits when they encountered the living God. 'Do not let God speak to us, or we will die,' pleaded the children of Israel (*Exod.* 20:19). At times this should be our plea as well. (Foster, 1992, p. 20)

And:

> If God didn't require that prayers be 'according to his will' for him to answer yes, he would no longer be functioning as God. He would merely be the pawn of human prayers. . . . The consequences would be far-reaching and disastrous. (Anderson, 1996, p. 96)

These expressions of human perspective and human *placement* completed a robust set of apologetic tactics by emphasizing the human-divine connection and paradox.

Discoveries and Observations

We learned in our investigation of apologia for God in the matter of unanswered prayer that, unlike the Swift quotation that opens our study, God's promises are most unlike piecrust—according to defending rhetors. Prayer promises received by New Testament-believing Christians from Jesus were held to be inviolate by these writers addressing audiences of those interested in prayer. Perceived difficulty, or non-answer, or inadequate answer to prayer as understood by believers was also an implicitly powerful force, however, that encouraged various rhetors on prayer as they vigorously addressed a possible rupture in the fabric of faith and belief. Explanations offered by those rhetors fall within the genre of persuasive discourse known to rhetorical critics as apologia.

Examining these persuasive attempts has demonstrated that some of the venerable apologia tactics found in political, social, and corporate arenas of life also find expression and utility for those in the Christian sub-culture in America.

Our analysis of rhetorical writing discovered forms of strategies of denial that shifted the blame thereby suggesting that defenders of God often carry finger-pointing straight to the human pray-er involved in the prayer event or equation. The fullness and vigor which characterize this responsibility assignment in the examined artifacts were interesting because they cast the emphatic nature of a conventional, straight denial into areas of apologia traditionally seen as lesser or weaker forms of the genre.[13] We have argued that assumed belief structures for some large, subcultural audiences served to guide rhetors who used apologia tactics, seen as lesser or weaker in many other apologia-inviting circumstances, to serve as a stronger form of argument for the intended audience.

In the discovery, recognition, and analysis of bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence arguments used by these rhetors we found that those tactics served the function of firm denial in a way that primary, direct denial could not. Moreover, the discovered notions of *implied bolstering* and *negative bolstering* should encourage additional attention in other areas of studies concerning apologia. For instance when a world leader, accused of failed or inadequate leadership (say in a worldwide crisis over a volatile middle eastern country), one might usefully pursue the category of *negative bolstering* when that leader chooses to point out the *avoidance* of probable negative consequences as a response to her or his critics.

We have argued that this set of apologia messages used in certain forms without the typical and expected necessity of direct accusation. Our analysis strongly suggests that certain rhetorical circumstances may find the defense of others to be as necessary, useful, or desirable as a defense offered by the perceived, principle offender. Also, we have offered evidence that, at least in the case of human-God communication (in the practice of prayer), rhetor tactics of apologia often seen as weaker or lesser than simple denial have offered in kind, and in degree, a firm, unyielding stance of denial that rhetors pose as unsympathetic to adjustment.

Since each of these discoveries may have corollaries in other forms of public persuasive messages that hold interest and value for significant communication communities within American culture, this study can act as a prompt to further investigation. We have suggested international crisis rhetoric as one possible area of investigation, and rhetoric used to respond to natural disasters may offer other possibilities as both circumstances present challenges easily beyond the direct, instrumental control of an individual (e.g., an athlete apologizing for behavior transgressions) which mimic those we reviewed in this study of Christian rhetors.

Additionally, we have taken an area of severe concern to Christian believers, that of unanswered prayer, and have better illuminated the most prominent strategies used by rhetors to defend God against questioning that no doubt comes in the lives of the vast numbers of people who report prayer as a significant part of their lives. To better understand key communication components of that prayer life, as well as to anticipate and understand the discourse developed to address a fundamental problem that lurks in the experience of those who pray, now establishes a vantage point from which others can extend this study or examine some of its many parts in greater depth.

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Notes

[1] We have made use of the term *God* and have used the conventional masculine pronoun designation of *He* used by many branches of the Christian faith and represented by the writing conventions of many of the rhetors covered in this study for our own designations; we recognize that contemporary writing has crafted alternatives, some of which we would consider using in another study, but for this effort we decided to write in concert with the work of the rhetors rather than in direct opposition.

[2] While some may certainly see the entire project or practice of prayer by Christian believers as suspect, and thereby any professed disappointment explanation as a specious rationalization to avoid confronting an undesirable reality (i.e., the perceived undesirable reality of the nonexistence of God), we are focused in this study not on thorny, underlying issues of religious philoso-

phy, or theology, but rather on the persuasive practices of rhetors addressing an important and widespread audience in American culture.

[3] To be sure the basic approach of apologia analysis championed by Benoit has been challenged on a number of fronts (e.g., Graves and Filligim 2004, Edwards, 2005, Hatch 2006, or Janssen 2012); nonetheless, no other *comprehensive* survey or challenge to apologia theory has been accomplished since his work in 1995.

[4] For an intriguing study that foregrounds an investigation of unanswered prayer, albeit with a substantially different focus, message base, and method, see: Day (2005).

[5] Christian apologetics, while having some obvious shared concern with the rhetorical study of apologia discourse, is out of the purpose and perview of this study. Similar to massive and important issues such as theodicy, creation/creationism, etc. our intent is to stay close to the messages under consideration for the purpose of public message persuasion analysis and not to resolve or address long-standing issues of religious philosophy or theology.

[6] See for instance: Celeste Michelle Condit, "Hegemony in a Mass-mediated Society: Concordance about Reproductive Technologies," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 11 (1994): 205-230.

[7] For a useful examination of controversies surrounding the reception of Christian scripture, see: Wright (2005), or, Vanhoozer (2002).

[8] Witness, for instance the vast literature covered by the study of the book of Job; see for instance: Aufrecht (1985), Newsom (2003), Dailey (1997), and Sanders (1968).

[9] We recognize that such apologia can be (and is) given in conversational and speech forms; our focus here is in the most accessible apologia messages that result in enduring message artifacts.

[10] In addition to books cited as specific examples in this study, see: Kroll (1997).

[11] Since the phrases "those who pray" or "people who pray" may have become overused in this study, we adopted the equally unsatisfactory, but useful, term "pray-er" to substitute for such phrases in early drafts of this research; we later learned that Scroggie (circa 1900) used this term before us (Scroggie, *Problem*, 1).

[12] Important to note that our analysis of persuasion concerning prayer does not permit us to enter into advice about how actual pray-ers conduct either their lives or prayer lives; to do so would be presumptuous and out-of-bounds for the purposes of our study. Our investigation of the contours of argument invested in these issues is, in fact, focused on the arguments presented—not on the underlying presuppositions of theology or philosophy held by the rhetors. Those issues can (and have) been taken up by those with professional and personal interest in such matters.

[13] The notion of stronger or weaker forms of argument in response to accusation easily predate Twentieth- or Twenty-first Century ponderings on such matters; at various time Hermogenes, Aristotle, Cicero (among others) have contended, when concerned with *stasis* and related concepts, that the earliest and most direct refutation available (typically direct denial of any accusation) is superior, or stronger, than lesser strategies; contemporary theorists of apologia have followed this bent. See: Ryan (1982, p. 256).