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They Cried Unto the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer, Patrick D. Miller

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Book Reviews
 Markus McDowell,
 Editor

Patrick D. Miller. *They Cried Unto the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) 464 pp including endnotes, appendixes and scripture index. Reviewed by Markus McDowell.

“Theologians have long maintained that theology is at least in part an outgrowth of prayer. . . . Learning to pray teaches about God” (1). The aim of this book, Miller writes, is to examine biblical prayer comprehensively and broadly. The bulk of the work focuses on the Old Testament because that is the author’s expertise. But Miller states that the book does not ignore the New Testament. First, the assumptions of prayer in the Old Testament are the same as those in the New Testament. Second, many of the New Testament prayers and references to prayers are found in the Old Testament. Third, the last chapter looks at prayer in the New Testament and how it connects with the rest of the book.

Miller feels that the structure of prayer is essentially the same as that of faith. Humans cry out in need, despair, anger, and alienation. God responds with assurance of his presence and deliverance. This in turn leads to praise and trust from those who cried out. The central section of the book (chapters three through five) follows this pattern. The rest of the chapters provide background or further development of the main themes.

Chapter one, “Israel’s Neighbors at Prayer,” focuses on prayer found in the pre-Israelite Ancient Near

East. Numerous examples and quotes from texts are given. The intention is to show that biblical prayer grew “out of the larger universal context even as it contributed to it” (3).

The next chapter, “Prayer by Any Name,” discusses terms and designations for prayers found in the Old Testament: technical terms for prayer, times, places, gestures, and acts of prayer. All of these elements, along with the material in the first chapter, lay the groundwork for specific examination of biblical prayer in the next three chapters.

“Prayers for Help,” “The Response of God,” and “Doxology and Trust” form the central content of the book. Each of these is divided into sub-types, such as address and praise, lament over distress, petition in narrative prayers, petition in Psalm prayers, motivating and urging God, and expressions of confidence and trust. Often there are variations on each subtype as well. Miller admits that, in some ways, each of the prayers for help are unique, but share the assumption that “the ears of God are open to the cries of people in distress and in need of help” (133). Whether the crisis be theological, physical, psychological, or social; whether it come from external or internal forces, God hears and responds. Often, prayers for help accuse and question God, seeming to push beyond the bounds of propriety; yet these prayers always return to a sense of trust, confidence and expectation of eventual deliverance.

The next chapter deals with the question, Does anything happen when people pray? Miller points out that Israel did not ask, Does God hear prayer? Instead, the question was, Does he hear *this* prayer? He quotes many examples, and gives five forms of divine response: one, direct address to the one who prayed; two, intimation of the lament within in the response of God; three, the phrase “do not fear.” The fourth point is connected to the last: dissipation of fear comes from divine assurance (by expressing that God is present, or that he will effect deliverance). Finally, an elaboration of the manner in which help will come. He points out that it is no accident that the New Testament chooses Psalm 22 to interpret the death and resurrection of Jesus: the prayer is a “clear declaration that Immanuel is true, that ‘God is with us’ in the midst of whatever suffering and trouble comes upon human beings” (176). Miller closes the chapter with a look at extra-biblical salvation oracles in the Ancient Near East.

Chapter five deals with doxology and trust. Miller sees these prayers as a natural (and inevitable) result of God’s response. This chapter examines prayers of praise, thanksgiving, hymnic praise, and all the variations found among them. Once again, there are plenty of examples, and he shows that these prayers contain evidence as to why such praise and thanksgiving are appropriate and irresistible, concluding that praise does not stand by itself. If the world exists by accident, then praise serves no purpose. But praise that affirms a Creator declares that he is “turning this world upside down, reversing the order of power, casting down the mighty from their thrones” (223). Praise of God is therefore dangerous, because it challenges the power of human rulers and their arrogance.

Chapters six through nine continue developing the previous themes. Chapter six discusses the prayers of women. Although not different from other prayers, Miller feels that inclusion of this topic is important in light of contemporary discussions concerning women. Prayers of confession and penitence are the subject of chapter seven. Although they have been included “implicitly and explicitly” in previous sections on petition and praise, Miller feels that they merit a section of their own. This fits quite well with Miller’s concept that the structure of faith and prayer are essentially the same; confession and penitence are part of human need *and* response. Chapter eight covers intercessory prayer in terms of its character, occasion, and outcome. Miller discusses the notion that prayer sometimes seems to change God’s mind. He states that this takes place within the larger context of the purposes of God, and

that the prayers of the people of God are all elements in which the future is shaped by him. “Nowhere is it more apparent than in these prayers of intercession that prayer is a genuine dialogue and makes a difference” (280). Chapter nine focuses on two related types of prayer that exist in tension: blessing and curse. Miller states that “the corollary of blessing is curse” (299). This is because both forms have to do with God’s *justice*, and therefore belong in the realm of the ethics of justice rather than the ethics of love.

The final chapter is called “The Further Witness of the New Testament.” Miller shows that the Israelite and Jewish prayers of the Old Testament are essentially carried forward into the New Testament, although there are some differences. One difference is the significant presence of teaching about prayer. Another is the Trinitarian character of Christian prayer: to God, through Christ, in the Spirit. Miller closes the chapter with a detailed look at the Lord’s Prayer in light of the rest of the book.

Miller’s book contains a wealth of knowledge and detailed analysis about biblical prayer. Each chapter is replete with examples and quotations from biblical and extra-biblical sources. The endnotes are extensive, and there is an appendix containing a structural analysis of fifty prayers from the Old Testament. All the information is presented in a clear and structured manner. The whole of his work is without any personal agenda; he simply wants to discover the form and theology of prayer and share it with his readers. The book is readable while retaining depth and scholarship, and will benefit anyone searching for a deeper understanding of biblical prayer.

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Michael W. Casey. *Saddlebags, City Streets, and Cyberspace: A History of Preaching in the Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: A.C.U. Press, 1995). Reviewed by David Fleer.

Michael Casey’s lifelong devotion to the study of Restoration history, his affection for the primary sources from the pioneers, and his academic training in the art of rhetoric produce an impressive overview of preaching in his recent *Saddlebags, City Streets, and Cyberspace*. Casey traces the movement’s preaching

from its beginning, with the products of the Campbells, Stone, Fanning, Franklin, Lamar, Lard, and a dozen others, to the more current work of Lynn Anderson and Prentice Meador. The author is uniquely qualified for the task of providing a popular history of preaching in the Churches of Christ. Casey's familiarity with rhetoric, homiletics, biblical studies, and church history creates an impressive understanding of the developments within these disciplines over the last two centuries. His unquestionable commitment to the church permeates his work.

Casey places "change" within the pulpit in a larger historical perspective that connects Alexander Campbell with the current challenges of postmodernism. The preaching tradition of the founders is told simply, with lively quotations illustrating a style of preaching that was far different than what occurs today in any pulpit in the Churches of Christ. For example, the division of preaching and exhortation, the early use of women, and the emotional content of the sermons from the Christian Connexion are evidence of an evolution in homiletics. In his sketch of early Restoration preaching, Casey outlines the philosophical and rhetorical influences on Alexander Campbell and others. This information sets the stage for adaptations in subsequent generations. Casey's history is above all readable and interesting, even explaining the rationale for the early emphasis on selected biblical literature that avoided the apocalyptic and parabolic.

This book is the first overview of preaching for the Churches of Christ. Like the journal articles, biographies, theses, and dissertations of pulpитеers that precede it, Casey's work is driven by his focus on individuals and special events. Biography is one way to broach the history of a major topic and probably the best means of attracting a popular listening. Casey's biographical perspective takes the reader to church with him in Kentucky, to college in Abilene, and into the academy at Pepperdine. It is an approach that will draw complaints of parochialism. Fortunately, Casey's scope is broadened by theoretical insight gleaned from research in an ample number of primary sources.

At times, Casey's prose sparkles. For example, "The cultured sons and daughters of Nashville brought Hardeman to Ryman auditorium to put the ghosts of uncouth debaters to rest." Such jewels, however, are rare. If not always inspiring, Casey's literary skills are generally dependable. What drives the book and piques readers' interest is Casey's critical insight, his anecdotal flair, and the subject's importance. This history of preaching is significant.

The volume is not without problems of substance. One deficit is revealed in an unnecessary appendix which alphabetically lists the ninety preachers cited in the work, from James O'Kelley (b. 1735) to Charles Siburt (b. 1946) and Stephen Lemley (b. 1945). The problem is not with O'Kelley, but with Siburt and Lemley. Lemley is a middle-aged college administrator. Siburt, albeit a former preacher, is a college professor. The next-youngest preacher is Prentice Meador who, while active in the ministry of the word, is possibly within a decade of retirement. It is a pity that a generation of preachers under the age of fifty has been omitted from Casey's discerning eye. Had Casey considered younger subjects, one wonders what he would have found. Bill Love's cursory review in *The Core Gospel: On Restoring the Crux of the Matter* unearthed some young preachers who honored biblical preaching and gave some emphasis to the doctrine of the atonement. What Casey would have found, I suspect, is the trace of a philosophy of preaching alluded to in his comments on Lynn Anderson and mentioned in his reference to the Nashville congregation: "impatient with traditional approaches to Christianity." The concern for "baby boomers" reared in a visual culture has fueled the growing number of "seeker services" that follow the Willow Creek model of Bill Hybels, and a style of preaching that is, above all else, "user friendly." What are we to make of this phenomenon that presents itself in at least one pulpit in nearly every substantial metropolis? This is a throbbing interest of many church members who are witnessing an exodus of their children and friends or are experiencing a "strange warming" to the sermons from these mushrooming suburban churches. The reader would have benefited from Casey's assessment.

On occasion, Casey's primary sources are so engaging that they are brought to the page without substantial comment. When quoting from a sermon of John Rogers, which included women exhorters and elicited dancing and shouting from the audience, Casey's response is bland and colorless: "The preachers, who felt very strongly about what they were doing, had a deep spirituality and concern for sinners." The power of the quotation itself would be sufficient commentary. The Pentecostal features of these early fathers is subversive testimony of the diversity of homiletic form and content and demands little narrative remark.

Casey's new book will not be the definitive treatment of the history of homiletics in the Churches of Christ. What it will do is initiate intelligent conversation among ministers and other church leaders, giving

all of us some of the necessary historical and critical guideposts for the days ahead. The book is obviously intended for an adult Sunday school audience. Thirteen chapters comfortably fit a quarter's study in most adult programs. I would hope for a wider and more concerned hearing for this material. Elder study groups, homiletic classes in our colleges and schools of preaching, and preacher selection committees would be among several groups to benefit from Casey's research.

In an undergraduate course on preaching, I assigned readings from various sources, including one chapter from Casey. Other options from current and articulate offerings in homiletics included Fred Craddock, Tom Long, David Buttrick, William Willimon, and Frederick Buechner. The student was told to select an article from which he or she would lead a group discussion. To help the student make a decision, I read excerpts from each article. For Casey, I selected his introduction to African American preaching. Casey's reading was the most desired and first selected. I suspect that readers outside the classroom will find the entire book worthy of consumption.

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Fred Gray. *Bus Ride to Justice: Changing the System by the System* (Montgomery, AL: The Black Belt Press, 1995) 400 pp. Subject Index. 5 appendices. Photographs (some very rare). Hardcover. \$25.00. Reviewed by Michael S. Moore.

It was one of our finer moments. A packed Firestone Fieldhouse. Enthusiastic, inspirational singing. Jerry Rushford doing what he does so well, honoring (and surprising) yet another unsung hero of the faith before a cheering, appreciative audience of Christian saints.

The name honored that evening seems common enough: Fred Gray. But the man behind the name is anything but common. Before its first echoes could channel through the loudspeaker, the entire audience jumped to its feet in spontaneous ovation. It was an electric moment. My wife and I looked at each other with a sense of surprise, because earlier that evening we had shared a shuttle ride with Dr. Gray from LAX Airport to the Pepperdine campus. He seemed so humble, so self-effacing, so quiet—just like any other speaker on the annual program. Now we were learning, along with many others, just who Fred Gray was: a man born into a world of racial segregation; a man who, as a

twelve-year-old boy, traveled throughout the South as one of Marshall Keeble's "boy-preachers"; a man who, as a young African-American attorney, courageously represented his friend Rosa Parks in what perhaps has since become the most famous anti-discrimination lawsuit in American history.

But this is only the tip of the iceberg of Fred Gray's accomplishments. *Bus Ride to Justice* carefully documents a life devoted to the rule of law, to "stamping out segregation wherever I found it"; a life devoted to leading others to the Lord of Justice. This is not just a memoir documenting the leading characters and major events of the American Civil Rights movement from the perspective of a trusted insider. It is also a powerful testimony to the power of Jesus Christ to use anyone to bring "justice, mercy, and peace" to people who desperately need it. Many of us like to preach about doing justice and serving the oppressed. Fred Gray does it.

For example, there was the time in 1957 when the people of Eufaula, Alabama, tried to force a number of African American citizens off their own property. The Eufaula Board of Education had recently constructed a modern all-white high school, and they wanted all potential students of African American descent to move. Three years after *Brown vs. Board of Education* effectively outlawed racial segregation in American schools, the Eufaula Housing Authority informed each African American property owner that his home was substandard and would have to be destroyed, allegedly for the advancement of "community development." In return, they offered each landowner a "fair price" for his land.

The "catch" in this relocation plan was that the cost of new homes was entirely out of these folks' price range. The Housing Authority knew this; it was part of their segregationist strategy. "My clients already owned their present homes. They had no interest in spending money to satisfy someone else's desire to have them live in another part of town" (136). In this case, which typifies the kind of politics he has faced over a lifetime, Gray succeeded in securing for his clients a satisfactory settlement. He did not stop the Eufaula Housing Authority from segregating Anglo- and Afro-Americans, but he did make it easier for them to survive. In addition, this was one of "the first cases of [his] practice in which [he] received a reasonable fee," even though many of the cases he argued were pro bono, "because [his] clients had very little money" (141). Such was the determination of this Christian to take a stand for justice at a very painful time in our nation's history.

The most celebrated case is that of Mrs. Rosa Parks. Most Americans know something about this story: how

Mrs. Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Birmingham bus in 1955; how she was unjustly arrested for so doing; how this incident sparked the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. Yet from Gray's autobiography, one learns more of the historical details; namely, (a) that nine months earlier Gray had unsuccessfully defended another African American woman, Claudette Colvin, for exactly the same "offense" as Mrs. Parks; (b) that Gray and a friend named Jo Ann Robinson first drafted the Montgomery bus boycott strategy in Ms. Robinson's kitchen; and (c) that a crucial part of that strategy involved the choosing of a leader acceptable to all factions of the African American community, which at that time was woefully divided. Most will probably recognize the name of the leader they eventually chose: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—at that time a new, young, still-uninvolved minister at Ms. Robinson's church.

This is a fascinating book. Much more could be said about the cases Gray presents as well as the anecdotal tidbits with which he lovingly memorializes them. My only disappointment is not knowing more about Dr. Gray's relationship to Marshall Keeble. In the religious circles in which I was raised, the very mention of Keeble's name invoked a sigh of awe or a whisper of praise, yet very little has been written about this pioneer of North American Churches of Christ, at least not with the kind of "insider's detail" that this book offers. If he has not already done so, perhaps Dr. Gray or one of his students will consider writing Keeble's biography.

Yet what Gray records is extraordinary. *Bus Ride to Justice* is a book that ought to be read by every preacher and elder of the Churches of Christ in the United States. *Bus Ride to Justice* could remind many of us of what the gospel is really about. It could remind us once again that we should live by faith in Christ. It could refocus our understanding of the church as a wonderfully diverse assembly of people called out from "every tongue and tribe and people and nation," as well as increase our respect for her precious, unsung servants—all of them.

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POCAHONTAS: A Closer Look
a movie review by Michael S. Moore

The people who gave us *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin* gave us their first animated feature

about an actual historical character last summer (1995). Like its predecessors, *Pocahontas* is a gorgeous piece of cinematic art. One expects this from a Disney film, and *Pocahontas* does not disappoint. The color is incredible, and the music is wonderful. Computer-generated graphic sequences make this state-of-the-art in contemporary animation. Alan Mencken, the songwriter who wrote *Aladdin*'s "A Whole New World" (and won an Oscar for Best Original Song), has again produced some witty, lyrical, musical masterpieces here.

Also, like its predecessors, *Pocahontas* tells a familiar story from a familiar point of view. As in *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin*, the female heroine of this story is presented to us as a rather free-spirited, independent young woman, a woman whose desires clash repeatedly with those of her rather backward social world. In fact, each of these heroines begins life complaining about her limited circumstances. Each longs to be free of traditional roles like "wife" (Jasmine, Belle), and "daughter" (Ariel).

When one takes a closer look, a striking characteristic comes into focus. Each heroine lives in a world where there are no men—at least no strong, secure men. The "men" in these stories are either naive adolescents (*Aladdin*), empty-headed bombasts (*Gaston*), distant fathers (*Triton*), embittered loners (the "Beast") or evil villains (*Jafar*). Unlike the female leads, not a single male character looks even remotely heroic. Each, in fact, is completely dependent on the heroine of the saga for his identity and his redemption.

Pocahontas continues this sort of "innocent" stereotyping. The difference, however, between *Pocahontas* and Disney's earlier films needs to be stated carefully and clearly. In fantasy cartoons, everyone knows what the "rules" are. Everyone, even the small child laughing hysterically in the front seat of the theater, understands that these characters are not "really real," that the jokes and the songs and the colors are intended to provide little more than an hour's escape from the "real world" outside.

Pocahontas, however, crosses the line between fantasy and reality. This film takes an historical event in a real place with real people—and portrays it in exactly the same way. For those viewers who care less whether, say, *Entertainment Tonight* is as factually reliable as say, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, this may pose no problem. For others, however, this blurring of the lines poses a number of rather serious questions.

Gender-Cultural Revisionism

First, like its predecessors, the gender-cultural

message of this film sounds a familiar refrain: women are wise, brave and resourceful, while men are impulsive, uninformed, and shallow. All the men in Pocahontas's life relentlessly reinforce this stereotype, whether they are oppressively paternalistic (her father), hopelessly humorless (her intended "fiancé"), impulsively naive (Captain John Smith), or grotesquely evil (Governor Ratcliffe). Where is there a mature male character in this film who knows who he is? It is one thing to see such simplistic gender portrayals like this in fantasy cartoons. It is quite another thing to see stuff like this sold to millions of children as American history.

Such portrayals say more about the political biases of their creators than they do about what really happened in American history. David Blankenhorn (*Fatherless America* [New York: Basic Books, 1995] 49-62) offers a cogent reason why gender-cultural revisionism like this is so prevalent today. Previous generations, as late as World War II, felt that the absence of strong paternal figures in our culture was a tragic thing, something truly detrimental to a child's social, spiritual, emotional, and economic well-being. Today, however, many feel that men—as a gender—are immature, unreliable, and dispensable. *Pocahontas* passionately reinforces this politically correct stereotype of contemporary maleness.

Socio-Ethnic Revisionism

Pocahontas also propagates revisionist socio-ethnic history. True, the historical Pocahontas did play a role in breaking down socio-ethnic barriers in the early years of the Old Dominion (no one knows exactly what this role entailed because accurate records were not kept). Yet the myth of American origins articulated here is very different from what most historians think actually happened. Robert Bellah (*The Broken Covenant* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992] 1-35), for example, argues that most seventeenth century English settlers came to America to establish a place in the New World where all people (including indigenous people like Pocahontas) could have the opportunity to *convert* to Christ and live in *covenant* with God.

In *Pocahontas*, however, the primary reason for the coming of the English to America is *greed*, pure and simple. Nowhere do we see anything even approximating the dreams of these colonists, particularly their religious dreams. In *Pocahontas*, the earliest Anglo-Americans were simply "bad" white people who came to America to plunder "good" brown people.

Religious Revisionism

Perhaps the subtlest message of this film is its fundamental *religious* belief that Ultimate Reality is something determined only from the spirit within, not something received from the Spirit without; that in lieu of a benevolent Creator (Christianity) there exists only a profoundly mysterious creation (animism); that in place of a desire for covenant between Creator and creature, there stands only Pocahontas's intention to convert the English to *her* view of religious reality.

This becomes quite clear in the segment of the film where Pocahontas preaches the "truth" to Captain John Smith about this Reality. Images of spirit-beasts and spirit-plants fill the screen while she chides him for his ignorance about the mysteries of Mother Earth. Pocahontas chastises him for his insensitivity to "truly" spiritual matters. She challenges him to open his eyes and become spiritually aware—as if prior to their encounter he had lived a life of spiritual ignorance.

Few students of the Bible will be able to watch this scene without seeing in Pocahontas a veritable reincarnation of the Canaanite goddess Asherah (1 Kings 18:19) or the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar (Jer 44:15-23). In short, whether consciously or unconsciously intended, Pocahontas is an oracle for Mother Earth in this film, the embodiment of feminine mystery, the very Goddess of Wisdom sent into John Smith's poor, ignorant world to teach him the "truth" about God/dess.

The question is whether the good folks at Disney even wondered whether a real seventeenth century man like John Smith would have listened to this kind of propaganda. Is it really so difficult to believe that the real John Smith probably believed in a God who *transcends* the material universe, not *inhabits* it; a God who reveals himself through his Spirit, not our spirits; a God intent on *redeeming* as well as creating the world?

In short, *Pocahontas*, like all of Disney's movies, is a beautiful film. But I would not call it, for the reasons given, a great film. In fact, in my politically incorrect opinion, I would suggest that it is a clever statement about gender, ethnicity, and religion. But don't take my word for it. See it for yourself on video. Watch it with the kids. Let them enjoy the songs and the story (and the syrup!) on their own level. Then if one of the children, by some strange twist of fate, should ask whether tree-spirits really exist, or whether all men are spineless, or whether the earliest English colonists were uniformly brutal, perhaps the opportunity will arise to discuss what *really* happened in American history.