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Why Pray?

One of the great conundrums of the Christian life revolves around God's omni-science and the practice of prayer. If God knows everything and already knows what is best for all of us, then why bother praying?

I believe that, like many problems we wrestle with, this issue is clarified by a better understanding of who Jesus is as the union of the Trinity and humanity.

First of all, it is not accidental that I have framed the question in terms of "God's omniscience" instead of in terms of "the Father, Son, and Spirit's omniscience." A major component of the problem we have in understanding prayer stems from our Unitarian thinking about God. When we visualize God as a single, solitary, all-knowing being in another dimension, then we naturally reduce prayer to our attempts to communicate our thoughts to this distant being. The omniscience of this imaginary being becomes an obstacle to that attempted communication by making that attempted communication seem like an exercise in futility.

In contrast, when we base our understanding of prayer on a Trinitarian image of God, then we begin to see the vital, foundational role that relationship plays in all existence. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not an isolated all-seeing eye watching over the creation. God the Trinity is a loving relationship. As a loving relationship the Trinity does nothing outside of relationship. The Divine existence is inherently relational and therefore everything the Triune God does, he does in and through relationship.

At the heart of loving relationship is communication. The Father, Son, and Spirit have been communicating - i.e. "praying" - to each other for all eternity. Since the Father, Son, and Spirit are omniscient, prayer in the Triune Life is not primarily about communicating previously unknown information. Instead it is about participating joyfully and completely in relationship. The Father, Son, and Spirit pray (i.e. talk) to each other because they love each other and want to be in relational conversation with each other, not because their own limitations require them to communicate. Communication (i.e. talking/prayer) is part of who God is in his Triune nature.

The gospel is the good news that Jesus has included humanity in this loving relationship of communication. Because the Triune God does not exist, and does not act, apart from relationship, he has acted in Jesus to create a relationship between the Son of God and the human race. Since the Son of God is in loving relational communication with the Father and the Spirit and is now - through his humanity - in loving, relational communication with the human race, it means that humanity is now included in the eternal conversation that has been going on within the life of the Triune God.

This is why we pray "in Jesus' name." This phrase at the end of our prayers is not just a ritualistic way to stop talking in the same way that we might say "Roger, over and out" when talking to someone on a walkie-talkie. Rather, the phrase "in Jesus' name" is a way for us to express the faith of Jesus that he is sharing with us. Jesus has faith that the Father wants to hear from him and that they are having a loving conversation that has been going on for all eternity. Jesus also has faith that

we are now a part of that conversation. Therefore, our life of prayer is a life that belongs first and foremost to Jesus and that he is sharing with us in our humanity. It is in and through Jesus' divinity, humanity, and prayer life (i.e. his "name") that we are praying.

This is also why Jesus prays in the gospels. As the Son in human nature, Jesus is continuing to live in the relational conversation he has with his Father in the Spirit. The disciples were witnesses of this relationship and when they saw it they realized that up until then they had never understood what prayer really is and so they made their request: "Teach us to pray!"

So then, why do we pray? For the same reasons that Jesus prays and the persons of the Trinity have been in prayer with and to each other for all eternity:

Because we are in a loving relationship of communication. Because of Jesus, humanity is now part of the Divine conversation, and prayer is how Jesus lifts up and translates our thoughts and feelings into that conversation.

Because the Triune God does nothing apart from relationship. Yes, the Father already knows our needs and Jesus already knows what his plans are for us and how the Spirit will work in our lives. But the Father, Son, and Spirit have freely chosen in Jesus to always be God *with humanity*, not God apart from humanity. That means that the Triune God's decisions, actions, and blessings (including healing, miracles, and guidance) will always include the prayerful participation of The Human Being, Jesus, and countless other human beings. When we pray for ourselves, our family, our friends, and our world, we are participating in the loving, relational communication of the Divine Life of the Trinity and we are becoming a part of what our loving Father is doing in the world and the lives of the people we love.

Prayer, then, is an integral element of Trinity's life. Therefore it is an integral element of what it means to be a human being made in the image of The Human Being, Jesus, and therefore made in the image of the Triune God.

So, when we say in worship "Let us pray," it is really the voice of the Triune God speaking and inviting us to speak with him.

~ Jonathan Stepp