

Soundings

Short articles (up to 1000 words) in support, extension, criticism or correction to articles previously published in the Journal. Or short articles expressing hunches, opinions, thoughts for prayerful consideration, questions, concerns, wisdom and discussion that can stimulate further research, scholarship and clinical observation.

Praying for Departed Loved Ones: A Critique

Clinton Conner, M.A., A.C.S.W.

Dr. Douglas W. Schoeninger's article (6:1:53b-54) supporting both praying for the dead and their being spiritually/communally present with us and vice versa ignores the fact that all thirty-one Old Testament references to living/dead interaction forbid not only communication but *knowing* them (i.e., relating to them as he suggests), putting both in the category of divination. New Testament Greek (e.g., *Krisis* in Heb. 9:27) also denotes either a permanent separation or the act of permanently separating the living from the dead until time ends.

The article also implies (1) some kind of ongoing relating to the deceased enhances unity in Christ's Body and (2) our growth and theirs is somehow inhibited without it. The former ignores the fact that impartation and imputation are the bases given biblically for *spiritual unity*; the relatedness Schoeninger refers to is the basis for a *soulish unity* we're commanded to put aside. The latter ignores the fact that without the termination of all ongoing relatedness at death our growth remains truncated simply because we never experience what the Holy Spirit can work in us only through bona fide separations.

To argue as Schoeninger does, taking a release experience intended for us and theologizing that the release is also for the dead, is not only subjective but also antiscriptural. If one is going to insist on using peoples' experiences as a basis for doctrine, then

we must include *everybody's* experiences (e.g., Moslems, Hindus, Universalists who feel their prayers to their gods help the dead, and real Christians who feel the Holy Spirit has told them to stop [or never start] praying on behalf of the departed). Equally poor exegetically is taking the experience of God's giving any of us a "picture" of a deceased loved one's new state (intended for our peace) on into an ongoing relatedness to them. Followed to its logical conclusion, the foregoing, along with praying for the dead, gives us a part in atonement and redemption, both of which are exclusively Jesus Christ's. Theology drawn from Scripture ahead of experience and tradition says that only Jesus and the Holy Spirit and the dead pray for us, not vice versa.

Isaiah prophesies to us that we're a people with a living God, forbidden to consult the dead on behalf of the living (Isa. 8:19). People's helpful experiences ought not to be our standard of measure.

The Body unity Schoeninger refers to always occurs alongside honoring in Scripture. I'd like to suggest honoring those already anointed and given the ministry of distinguishing between counterfeit and divine spiritual experience(s) (e.g., Walter Martin, Spiritual Counterfeits Project, et al.) by seeking and publishing their critique of this controversial and to many of us aberrant position on praying for the departed.

Praying for the Departed: Response to a Critique

Douglas W. Schoeninger, Ph.D.

Before responding to Clint Conner's critique of my article, I want to thank him for offering his perspective. As members of the Body of Christ we need to be in dialogue, opening our convictions to each other and engaging the process of mutual understanding and correction.

I am not able to comment specifically on the thirty-one Old Testament references to "living/dead interaction," or on the Greek usage in Heb. 9:27. I do not have the knowledge of Hebrew or Greek required to

examine the nuances of "knowing" and "permanent separation" he refers to. Assuming that Mr. Conner's interpretations of these scriptures are accurate to the original meaning and context, I would conclude that God through the Bible is forbidding divination and that consulting the dead was part of this practice (that of attempting to foretell future events or discover hidden knowledge by occult or supernatural means).

While prayers for, awareness of communion with, or communication with the dead can be hidden forms of divination, they are not necessarily so.

The prophet in Isa. 8:19 says (NAS) "... should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living?" To me this scripture seems to speak against consulting the dead as opposed to consulting God; in other words, an avoidance of God. I am speaking rather of contact with the departed that occurs in the midst of prayer, in the midst of God's presence. Such an event can be a gift from God and is not sought outside of God.

There is, of course, a profound separation at death. Even if some meaningful relatedness takes place between the living and the dead, the reality of profound separation certainly dominates. And this separation must be accepted, even in some sense chosen, for the Holy Spirit to work in us through our "bona fide" separations. Any attempt to hang on to the person who has died and not to let him or her separate through maintaining a fantasy of her or his presence or by projecting that presence onto another human being will eventually be damaging and impede the work of God in our life, because it is avoiding truth. For example, a woman who had experienced the helpful reconciling presence of her sister in a dream shortly after her sister's death tried to dream of her husband's presence after he died so as to not lose him. The more she tried to program her mind to dream of her husband, the more despairing her life became. Fantasy or imagination that is strictly self-willed and not created and nourished by the Spirit of God cannot give life, only death.

On the other hand, in the context of accepting death and the radical separation that comes with it and choosing finally to release the loved one to Jesus and allow the chasm to be, sometimes people do experience a form of spiritual communion with someone who has died. Granted, experiences of spiritual communion are not necessarily contact in the sense of spiritual intimacy with the departed person in his or her "present" state. An experience of reconciling contact with a departed person through healing prayer or in a dream may be simply a gift of reconciliation within the still-living person, a work that needs to be done in order for the person to be healed of destructive attitudes, grievances, and inner divisions.

However, sometimes experiences of contact with departed friends or relatives are experienced as direct spiritual communion in the presence of Jesus Christ and mediated by Him. Such experiences do occur in the midst of prayer—that is, in the midst of communion with Jesus. They are not sought *outside* Jesus. They are experienced as mediated *by* Jesus and bear marks of the fruit of the Spirit, e.g., forgiveness, reconciliation, mutual understanding, a greater love for God, a sense of being in God, and so on. These are not experiences of divination, that is, calling forth the dead for advice, knowledge, power, and the like. Such experiences in the Lord have the quality of gift and mercy, a grace given for the healing of persons and relationships. They seem to take place within the resurrected Christ in whom we all live and move and have our being. The safety, giftedness, spiritual validity, and merit of such experiences may relate to the barriers between life and life after death, which were broken through by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

While people's helpful experiences should not be *the* measure of truth, they should always remain *a* measure. The Christian way is an incarnational way. God lives in and through us, calls us to union with His life, and speaks to us, lives within, is *known* within human experience. Any separating of truth, of knowing, from experience separates humans from

their bodies and from their integrity, positing truth in some external standard or external tradition; for example, in a particular community's interpretation of Scripture that has come to seem objective and definitive. To give up the task of interpreting Scripture in the light of the Living Word being spoken in and through one's experience is to give up authentic relating. Authentic life in God is not lived by formulas or correct interpretations but rather by risking convictions in context, convictions born of a living process of contending with various traditions' interpretations of Scripture, accountability to prayerful discernment of friends and authorities, deep interior listening for the Spirit's living Word as Scripture is interpreted into one's context.

The assumption that a word given to a specific Hebrew community (in a particular time and context in relation to certain attitudes and practices) can be applied directly as an objective, self-evident word to another contemporary context without question, interpretation, or translation does an injustice both to each context and to a living relationship with and in God, through the Spirit. Christian life is not lived by being correct or right, but by risking life through choosing to live the movements of the Spirit as one discerns them. This does not mean license to do anything or avoidance of accountability to Scripture and to Christian fellowship. It does mean, however, that we can hear and know God's voice, albeit imperfectly, and that one can never abrogate responsibility for discerning the truth in one's own experience without abrogating one's intimacy with God.

Each person is responsible for his or her own conscience. One should never assume that one particular community's interpretation of Scripture is final or complete or infallible. If I submit my understanding of praying for the departed and of experiences of ongoing relatedness to the departed to the Spiritual Counterfeits Project, it will be to learn and be informed by their critique and to prayerfully listen to the Lord through their critique. I do not abrogate to SCP, or any group, my own responsibility to discern these experiences

because these others are somehow the ones anointed and called to this type of discernment. Rather, it is important to enter into dialogue with those who seek to discern these matters in full respect for the wisdom and experience they bring to the discerning process.

The following is a summary of my convictions:

1. Prayers for the dead or requests for their intercessions need not imply any relationship or contact between the living and the dead. They may be simply prayers to Jesus.
2. If a person is convicted through prayerful study of Scripture that she or he should not pray for the dead, then he or she should not. However, if people find that through prayer and study of Scripture the Lord is moving them to pray to Him on behalf of the dead or to call on the intercessions of the departed through Him, why forbid such a practice? Should anyone on principle or because of a particular tradition's interpretation of Scripture stop a practice of speaking to Jesus about anything she or he is moved to speak to Him about? If he or she is misinterpreting His word, won't He correct her or him through earnest study of the written word and seeking His face?
3. People are sometimes given an interior image or sense of a departed loved one to put them at ease, to give them confidence that their loved one is, indeed, with the Lord. Also, in imagination, through a dream, or simply deep in one's spirit one may experience a reconciling communication with someone who has died. These may simply be gifts for the interior peace and healing of the person and do not necessarily constitute contact or communication with the dead. They may be simply interior consolations and resolutions enabled by the Spirit.
4. Sometimes experiences such as those noted above seem to reflect a living exchange or a communion beyond words (e.g., a mutual presence in love) with someone who has died. There may be with such events a knowing of Jesus' presence and permission, an opening the way and leading.

These experiences are known as mediated by, through, and in Jesus. The question whether they represent direct contact or not is not seen as relevant because the experience is one of being with the other in Jesus.

People also report visitations from a departed loved one that seem to bear fruit either in terms of helping the departed person or in receiving help from a departed person who appears as a messenger from God. These experiences are not sought. They simply happen. They are experienced as in the Lord and permitted by the Lord.

One person reported to me that one night she awakened and had the impression someone was sitting on her bed. The figure was shadowy and could not be seen clearly, but was clearly the shape of a human being. In a moment she knew it was the presence of her departed father. He seemed to be asking for help, but he could not speak. She spoke to him about Jesus, explaining His forgiving love, and forgave him herself. Then she pointed him to Jesus, whom she could now see standing there with them. Her father seemed reluctant, afraid, and confused, but gradually began to turn and after some time as she prayed left the room with Jesus and seemed to brighten up as he went. The woman experienced a deep relief within her being and a lightening of her spirit.

A man approached me during a workshop and said he believed the Lord wanted him to tell me about an experience he had when close to death. He was hospitalized after a heart attack and was being monitored when his heart went into another spasm. He thought he was dying and began to experience himself "going." The medical team was working on him furiously, but he felt distant and removed from their activity. Suddenly his mother (who had died years before) appeared in a vision and spoke to him. He said it was not like a mental image but rather a real vision of her presence. She said, "Stuart, it is not yet time for you to die—go back." From that moment, he began to recover. During this moment of "contact," Stuart said, he was

wrapped in light and sensed the Lord's presence.

There is no proof that either or any of these experiences represents true contact or communion with the departed. All we can say is that many of them bear fruit in healing, in deepening faith in Jesus Christ, in drawing the person into a deeper, more personal relationship with Him. And people who have such experiences believe the contact is real. They know their experience to be different from a mental image.

5. Since Jesus lives and ministers through His Body, I do not find it "aberrant" in the negative sense that persons sometimes experience the departed helping them or themselves being called to help the departed, or Jesus opening the way at times to experiencing a deep communion of love (or even consultation) with a departed loved one. Such communing with those who are close to Jesus is probably "ordinary" within our spirit as we become increasingly yielded to the Holy Spirit. What is rare is the conscious experiencing of such communion.
6. God speaks within our experience. So do other voices and spirits. Therefore we must be discerning, and our discernment must contend prayerfully with the written Word, Scripture. However, I do not see any reason Christians should be afraid per se to examine the practices and experiences of any religion to try to see what is going on there. A particular desire toward and practice of "helping" the dead in another religion is not necessarily evil or distorted in and of itself. People may have a genuinely loving desire to help the dead and may genuinely perceive that they need help. Such a desire is good. The implementation of that desire may lead to evil or distortion because the saving power, protection, and love of Jesus Christ is not known and therefore the movement is not completed in Him and is subject to the distortions and manipulations of evil.

I can see no reason not to investigate these practices of other

religions. If we are seeking truth in the Lord, He will instruct us as to what is valid and what is dangerous in those practices. Christians sometimes endanger themselves by assigning to the enemy all practices and spiritual insights and ways associated with non-Christian religions. In this way we give over to Satan energies, understandings, and forms of relating that were created by God and need to be centered in Him and governed by His Spirit.

7. As Christians we are to be co-creators and coredeemers with Christ. His atonement and redemption are both complete in Him and ongoing in and through us. We are to grow into being Christ in the world. We are His Body.
8. The danger in spiritual experiences of relatedness to the departed lies in their being sought in opposition to God's call and the movement of His Spirit, especially to gain power, avoid loss and separation, acquire spiritual knowledge, and so on. Therefore one's spiritual maturity as well as one's particular giftedness, woundedness, and calling bear a relationship to the spiritual validity, safety, and value of such experiences.
What is dangerous spiritual territory for one person may be another person's special calling. Sometimes the danger is based in one's previous experiences with occult phenomena or commitments and therefore relates to spiritual trauma in one's life or to vulnerability to deception or doublemindedness. Sometimes such vulnerabilities are rooted in one's ancestry, where occult practices and commitments may have been present.
9. While many people may have experiences of contact with the departed at some time in their lives, such experiences are certainly infrequent, perhaps once in a lifetime for most. More frequent with some is a sense of deep communion and ongoing love and exchange in the Spirit with the departed, a sort of background

awareness that is heightened at certain moments. My own experience with focusing on specific departed persons in prayer either to pray for them or to ask for their intercessions is that sometimes I sense the Lord's encouragement and leading, while often I sense His clear word to keep "hands off." I find my comfort and safety in focusing on Jesus.

Again, I want to thank Mr. Connor for his response to my article, and to encourage this kind of dialogue to continue and broaden. We must bring our convictions to each other to seek mutual understanding of our agreements and disagreements. God will work His Truth within and among us as we listen to each other's truth.

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Praying for the Departed: Theological Reflections

Robert T. Sears, S.J.

Clint Connor's response to Douglas Schoeninger's short reflection has raised a number of issues of importance for the healing ministry. Connor argues: (1) that the OT forbids not only communication with but also knowing the dead and that this permanent separation extends also to the NT; (2) that such communication is necessarily "soulish" rather than "spiritual" and hence prevents the spiritual growth that full separation would bring; (3) that Scripture rather than experience is the Christian's norm for action and that Scripture only affirms that "Jesus and the Holy Spirit and the dead pray for us, not vice versa." This last point raises (4) the question of the Christian's relationship to other religions and

practices. Dr. Schoeninger has responded to these issues from his own theologically reflected pastoral experience. I offer the following specifically theological reflections as a contribution to this important discussion.

On the first point, it is certainly true that the OT forbids communication with the dead, which was then a form of divination practiced in religions surrounding Judaism. How deeply rooted the practice was can be seen where Saul consults the "Medium of Endor" (1 Sam. 28:7) to call Samuel back for consultation after he had previously driven out mediums and fortunetellers from the land! Such mediums were to be stoned (Lev. 20:27; 1 Sam. 28:3-9), so Saul had to promise the lady protection. The purpose of such consulting of the dead, or necromancy, was to seek information Yahweh withheld (1 Sam. 28); it led people to reject His word in favor of a reply from the underworld (Isa. 8:13, 19-20). It is an abomination in Yahweh's eyes (Deut. 18:11-12), "apostasy" from Yahweh ("rebellion" [JB] 1 Chron. 10:13f.) which defiles the Israelite (Lev. 19:31). According to official Yahwism the dead no longer know anything about this world (Job 14:21; 21:21; Eccl. 9:5f., 10).

Even though the OT knows no "interchange" between the living and the dead, it does acknowledge the power of God over this realm, which gives rise to a changed perspective in the NT. In the OT God sends people to Sheol and also can lead them forth (1 Sam. 2:6; Wisd. Sol. 16:13). Ps. 16:8-11 shows this same conviction, but in Acts 2:24-28 it is applied not to David but to Jesus. God has sovereignly broken open the gates of Sheol through raising Jesus from the dead. Thus Jesus now ascends and descends (Rom 10:7f; Eph. 4:8ff.); He opens heaven and the realm of the dead. He overcomes the last enemy, death, by His cross/resurrection (1 Cor. 15:26) and has the power to communicate this victory to others (Rev. 1:18 "I was dead, but see I live and have the keys to death and the underworld").

This victory over death is extended to believers through Jesus' resurrec-

tion. "In Baptism," Paul says, "you were not only buried with him but also raised to life with him because you believed in the power of God who raised him from the dead" (Col. 2:12). Christ rules "over living and dead" (Rom. 14:9). He has been given power to have life "in himself" (John 5:26), and a time is coming when all those "in their tombs shall hear his voice and come forth" (John 5:28). It is because of Jesus' power over Sheol (hell) that He can promise the church deliverance from its power (Matt. 16:18) and give the power of forgiveness from heaven (Mark 2:10; Matt. 18:18; John 20:22).

All this may be conceded, but the question remains when this power over death is given to believers. Is there a permanent separation until the Last Judgment (as Mr. Connor argues from Heb. 9:27 *Krisis*) or is the "last judgment" in some way *now*? Both views can be appealed from Scripture.

While Paul initially saw Jesus' resurrection as model of our future resurrection (see 1 Thess. 4:14), he increasingly presented it as "cause" of our resurrection (as Phil. 3:20-21 "he will give a new form to this lowly body of ours and remake it according to the pattern of his glorified body by his power to subject everything to himself"; also 1 Cor. 15:25-28, 45). Still later (2 Cor., Gal., Rom.) he begins to see Christ's dying and rising already at work in this life (see Rom. 6:3-11). Finally, the captivity letters speak of *salvation* as *present* (Col. 3:1-4 "you *have been* raised up"; Eph. 2:5 "you *have been* saved").¹ The present power of Jesus' resurrection is presented in Luke (see 23:43 "*this day* you will be with me in paradise"), in John (see John 11, the raising of Lazarus: "I Am the resurrection and life . . . whoever is alive and believes in me will *never* die"), and even in Matt. 27:51-53 "the dead saints rose and appeared to many" as a sign of Jesus' victory. We are judged in this view by how we respond to Jesus' coming (John 3:19; 12:31; 15:11) or how we respond to Jesus' offer of forgiveness (Luke 23:43).

Jesus' death and resurrection establishes a "new time," a new possi-

bility of going from death to life. The proclamation of this possibility is made available even to the dead in the view of 1 Pet. 3:18-20, 4:6 as well as John 5:25. This preaching occurs in the afterlife, however one thinks of the possibility of conversion after death. In 1 Cor. 15:29 Paul argues from a practice of being baptized on behalf of the dead which presupposes the possibility of changing their lot. First Peter implies both a descent into death by Christ and an offer of new life through his resurrection. In this case the judgment (or *Krisis*) does separate the good from the bad, but it occurs when the death and resurrection of Jesus is effectively proclaimed and either accepted or rejected. In 1 Cor. 15:29 it is believed to happen by the action of baptism of those who are living. Thus in Christ we have a new relation to the dead, though prayer for the dead was already praised in the LXX (Septuagint) Book of Maccabees (12:43-46). Jesus' resurrection opens a new reality for the dead, a reality that is both already operative as well as to be consummated at the end of time.

Second, in view of this new reality is all communication with those who have gone ahead "soulish" rather than "spiritual"? Scripturally, the soul (*psyche*) refers primarily to our human or earthly life with its feelings and emotions, though it can also refer to our supernatural life (see Matt. 10:28, etc.). As earthliness it is bounded by death and has to undergo that transition in order to enjoy resurrected life. Spirit (*pneuma*) is my inner life (breath from God) as open beyond itself ultimately to God.² Spirit implies movement (as wind) by which we cry "Abba" (Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:15) and recognize Jesus as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3) and become gifts for one another in the Christian community (1 Cor. 12:7). Spirit includes the whole person as open to God; it includes the body. The Christian faith acknowledges a resurrection of the body, not a separate immortality of the soul. Since human existence is interpersonal existence, it would make no sense to have Jesus resurrected with no other humans

sharing that existence with Him. In fact, the church is the "body of Christ" (1 Cor. 6:15), and as husband and wife it forms "one body" with Christ (Eph. 5:32). Since this spiritual union of love is said to be "without end" (1 Cor. 13:13), death is not there presented as "unbridgeable separation" but as a different form of union.

Considerations such as this explain the development in the early church of devotion to the saints.³ At first it took the form of devotion to the martyrs, but since they were seen to be with Christ in glory, belief in their intercessory power grew. From the third century on, Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, Chrysostom, Gregory Nazianzen, and the like all argue in support of prayers for patronage of the saints. Against criticism of the practice (by pagans like Julian the Apostate and Christians like Vigilantius) Jerome argued "that if the apostles and martyrs prayed for their fellow-Christians when still alive, it was natural to believe that they would do so all the more now that they were crowned with heavenly glory."⁴ About the same time we have evidence from gravestone inscriptions and prayers about intercessions on behalf of the dead. The main source in the Western church for this belief in a state between heaven and hell of purification (later called Purgatory) was Augustine.⁵ He and others argued from such texts as 1 Cor. 3:15 and Matt. 12:31-32 that souls basically open to God could be helped by the prayers of the church and could in turn pray for the church. Thus there is a solid tradition of Christian faith supporting prayer for the departed and requests for their intercession to the degree they are seen to be with Christ.

But what about direct communication with the departed? Since the NT view differs from the OT and does not specifically address this question, we can only argue indirectly from NT principles. Granted an ongoing spiritual communion of love between the living and departed in Christ, and granted this is "bodily" to the extent that it shares Christ's resurrection, such communion must be able in principle to come to expression if and when authorized by Christ. Since the NT does not affirm or condemn such a possibility, one would have to ap-

peal to general criteria of discernment as to when such communications are "in Christ" or not. Dr. Schoeninger's response offers several helpful criteria: "forgiveness, reconciliation, mutual understanding, a greater love for God, a sense of being in God, and so on."

Divination, or seeking advice from the dead, would be forbidden in the NT as in the OT, since all communication needs to be centered in Christ. Just as with the Charismatic gifts of prophecy, healing, word of knowledge, and the like there are counterfeits which draw people away God to ego-centered power, so there can be communications from the departed that substitute for God and are idols. But just as true prophecy and other like gifts are not to be rejected on that account, neither should (it would seem) communications that release obstacles to more total communion with God. They would have to correspond to the pattern of Jesus' death/resurrection/sending of the Spirit (the criterion for the "new family" in Christ) if they are authentic. I would suggest criteria similar to those regarding celibate relationships:⁶

1. Am I releasing the person to God as Abraham sacrificed Isaac and as Jesus instructed his disciples when he said "It is good for you that I go away" (John 16:7)?
2. Does this communication open me more deeply and freely to God and other people?
3. Am I trusting God rather than trying to control the communication myself?
4. Am I consulting a spiritually competent director, friend, or community regarding this experience?

If these criteria are present and the fruits are good, it would seem to me the experience is in Christ's Spirit.

Third, the need here to use personal discernment raises the issue of the relationship of experience to Scripture in directing our Christian living. Dr. Schoeninger argues from the need of each Christian to take responsibility for one's personal relationship to God while respecting Scripture and the views of others.

From the point of view of theological method, it is important to see that Scripture itself is the product of religious experience and was accepted as canonical only after the communal experience of the church so determined.

The main texts from which most of our arguments for the afterlife stem are Paul's, and he asserts that he does not know Christ according to the flesh or human schooling but by revelation (Gal. 1:12; 2 Cor. 5:16f). What he was shown in his religious experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-5 etc.) was the identification of Christ with Christians and the universal mission of Christians to the Gentiles. It was not Scripture that taught him this but religious experience. Based solely on Scripture (only the OT was then so called), he was persecuting Christians. Out of his experience of the risen Lord Jesus he was freed from the Law (which even Scripture can become if separated from religious experience) and experienced salvation as a free gift of grace. When the NT was finally accepted by the early church as "Scripture" (a process that took more than two hundred years of sifting and deciding)⁷ the main criterion used was apostolic origin, but the decision was ultimately made by the church's sense of the faith—that is, by the faith experience of the community.

Besides the establishment of Scripture, its interpretation also depends 'on the experience of the interpreter. How otherwise can the differences among Christians of good faith be explained, since all appeal to the support of Scripture. Theology is increasingly aware that one's conversion experience colors the way one looks at anything—Scripture included.⁸ The closer we get to the experience of the original authors the more accurate our interpretations will be, but that means we need to trust our experience as one pole of theological method.

Fourth, is only specifically "Christian" experience relevant? What about the insights of Freud into

human nature (though he was explicitly an atheist), or the religious experience of Moslems, Hindus, or Buddhists, or the political experience of Marxists, or the psychic experience of those who claim to have experienced apparitions? Since all revelation is mediated through human experience, all experience is relevant, though not every interpretation of the experience. Freud's insights into the unconscious defense mechanisms of religious people is certainly important, but not his discarding of religion as illusion because of them. OT and Christian prophets were equally critical of religious attitudes of their day but did not deny God because of them. Similarly, the experience of Moslems of humble reverence before Allah, of Hindus of the universality of God's presence, of Universalists who pray for the departed and extend love to them, can all gift the Christian desiring to open to the fullness of God's truth. Each experience, however, would need to be interpreted in light of Christ's death/resurrection/sending of the Spirit. There remains for the Christian an open invitation to find God in every aspect of Creation and to bring it into submission to Christ, who submits all to God (1 Cor. 15:28).

In sum, there is a solid Christian tradition supporting prayer for the departed and petition for their intercession. In no place does the NT explicitly consider possible communication between the living and dead, but since in Christ there is a spiritual bond, it would seem such communication is possible and to be judged by ordinary rules of discernment. Because of different experiences and traditions Christians may

differ regarding these questions, but it is hoped mutual respect will bring ever-increasing light to this important area. Evidence suggests prayer for the dead can heal the living,⁹ so one could err as much by neglecting such prayer as by misusing it. Let each one follow what seems to be "good news" for her or him in Christ.

Reference Notes

1. David Stanley, *Christ's Resurrection in Pauline Soteriology* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1961), pp. 74-80, points out this developmental view of Paul.
2. See George T. Montague, *Riding the Wind* (Ann Arbor: Word of Life, 1974), pp. 21-35, for a clear presentation of the biblical view.
3. See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), chap. 18, for the main lines of this development.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 491 (citing C. *Vigil* 6).
5. See Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), esp. pp. 61-85.
6. See my "Trinitarian Love and Male-Female Community," *Journal of Christian Healing* 6:1 (1984): 37-38.
7. See Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 56-60.
8. See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972) for an exhaustive grounding of this position.
9. See Kenneth McAil, *Healing the Family Tree* (London: Sheldon Press, 1982) for many cases. His article in the *Journal of Christian Healing* (5:1 [1983]: 24-27) "Ritual Mourning in Anorexia Nervosa" shows the effect of such prayer for victims of that syndrome.

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Praying for the Departed: Forbidden Now as Then

Clint Conner, M.S., A.C.S.W.

Although the *explicit* statements of Scripture are the first source for theologians formulating doctrine, Doug Schoeninger's reply to me on praying for/communicating with the dead contains *no* biblical references for his position. In addition, Father Sears concludes his remarks by saying that in "no place does the New Testament explicitly consider possible communication between the living and the dead."

Scripture not only nowhere explicitly *encourages* praying for or communicating with the deceased, it also sets out some very explicit injunctions against such interaction. And even though those references all may be found in the Old Testament, God is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8).

Old Testament Hebrew uses *vid'onim* (e.g., Lev. 19:31; 20:6; 1 Sam. 28:3-15) or *b'ob* (as in 1 Chron. 10:13) in this connection. Both terms mean (1) divining demons alleging to be spirits of deceased persons and (2) the medium through whom the spirits divine. The sense of these terms is rendered "he who seeks unto the dead."

While on the subject of Scripture, I should note that only Roman Catholic commentators attach a purgatory-exegesis (i.e., asserting that the state of the deceased can be changed) to Matt. 12:31, 32; John 5:25; 1 Cor. 3:15; 15:29; and 1 Pet. 3:18-20, all cited by Father Sears. All other commentaries, including the *International Critical Commentary*, describe the passages in John and 1 Peter as referring to a *one-time* preaching by Jesus to those who died *before* his first advent, giving them *one* opportunity to respond to the gospel. Neither the Greek of those texts nor any other scripture supports an ongoing, present, right-now provision of opportunity for the dead to repent or have others repent on their behalf or both.

For example, see the references in Ephesians to Jesus' descending when he preached to the dead, then ascending *once* to a heavenly throne where he

now awaits the completion of the church and his second advent.

Neither does the passage in 1 Corinthians 15 point to a possible alteration in the state of the dead. Paul isn't advocating baptism for the dead; here he is arguing to the Corinthians the inconsistency of Greeks who discount Jesus' resurrection yet believe in the concept to the point of being baptized on behalf of the dead.

The Greek of the other 1 Corinthians passage (3:15) refers to a post-, not pre-Judgment Day time frame. Matt. 12:31, 32 contains a teaching on the eternal unforgivableness of the unpardonable sin; it does not introduce a doctrine allowing forgiveness of sin in some domain between earth and heaven, a doctrine that is taught neither in that passage nor anywhere else in the New Testament.

And despite assertions to the effect that the closer we get to the experience of the original authors the more reliable and valid our teaching is, it also should be pointed out that many of the sources Father Sears refers to are third century C.E. and later. This period not only is removed from the early church [apostolic] era, but it also falls during the Dark Ages, so named (among other reasons) for the doctrinal error that originated then. Although both Scripture and first-century history clearly encourage following the examples of the saints (Heb. 12:1, 2 and Paul's "imitate me as I imitate Christ"), nowhere do they refer to devotion to saints as Father Sears suggests, any more than they do to purgatory or praying for the dead or both.

Schoeninger concludes his initial article by saying the deceased sometimes can't be fully free if we've "restricted our *relating to* and prayer for them" (emphasis mine). And in his subsequent response, in this issue of the *Journal*, he speaks of both communication and communion with the dead. Thus he enlarges the issue in both pieces well beyond that of praying to Jesus on behalf of the dead, making neither unity nor separation in the Body of Christ the question as he suggests, but rather the state of the dead and communication with and ministry to them!

If the dead need our ministry then

heaven is imperfect. And if the potential exists to alter one's state after death, then not only are the meaning and purpose of life diminished and altered from what we're told in both Scripture and historical accounts; the nature of justice and God himself also are done irreparable damage and must be adjusted to accommodate the same unorthodox inconsistency any interim "judgment" theology involves.

Schoeninger begins his response by saying that while prayers/communication "can be hidden forms of divination they aren't necessarily so," despite the fact that historically *both* have *always* been considered to be. Sumerian,² Babylonian, and Assyrian records from the mounds of buried Mesopotamian cities include accounts of apparitions of and communication with the dead along with other spiritistic phenomena we now call necromancy.³

Early church historians also defined trafficking with the spirits of the dead (meaning both apparitions and communication) as occult. Clement of Rome refers to communication with the dead as being accomplished "by the art which is called necromancy."⁴ Tertullian said both apparitions and communication with the dead were accomplished "not by the spirits of the deceased but by impersonating demons." Augustine, too, repeatedly ascribed such appearances and visions to the power of demons.⁵

Schoeninger next moves into a series of comments (1) implying the validity of experiences if they occur in the midst of communing prayers to Jesus, thereby raising experience above the level ordinarily afforded it by theology; (2) appearing to elevate his personal discernment above the assessments of those anointed and appointed by the Holy Spirit to the role of trying/testing/confirming in the Body of Christ at large; and (3) concluding in the second of his nine points with what appears to be a question but is really an assumption: Jesus will correct the sincere when he or she misinterprets.

Regarding no. 1, I don't know of anyone who is ready to say all she or he has experienced in prayer is valid; if that were true. Scripture wouldn't give

us such a variety of measurements for testing the validity of all our spiritual experiences, including those we have in prayer. In fact, it was in the midst of communing with Jesus that Peter received a demonically inspired assertion (Matt. 6:23).

Regarding Schoeninger's second point, Scripture in fact *has been* interpreted. It only remains to be *applied*. It alone is authoritative with a capital *A*, and orthodox exegesis has always measured everyone's experiences by it, not vice versa. Such exegesis has never elevated experience to a par with the written Word.

The third point above ignores something Jesus said clearly: that rather than correct error he would purposely allow it to remain as is so that the valid and the heretical would stand side by side, with increasing visibility being given to both. For example, when Jesus entered Jerusalem he still hadn't brought to an end the disciples' sinful narcissism and judgments of one another over who would be greatest in the kingdom — arguments that had first surfaced three years earlier (see Matt. 20:20-28).

In his sixth and eighth points, Schoeninger's imputation of fears, prior experiences, traumas, et al., into the argument only muddies the waters. We are discussing neither fears of a living relatedness — of which, like Schoeninger, I have none — nor "unhealed healers" and counselors. We are talking, rather, about the vast majority of us outside the "Roman stream" who have experienced valid healing ministry in our lives for everything from ancestral inheritance and prior occult involvement to prior family experiences as Schoeninger has, but who still find prayers to the deceased or for them or both (whether Mary, the saints, relatives, friends, or acquaintances) to be invalid on spiritual, intellectual, historical, logical, and scriptural grounds.

The theme (explicit in places and implicit throughout) of Schoeninger's comments is that prayer/communication with the deceased is valid because (1) it makes us feel better and (2) it has occurred during prayers that maintain a focus on Jesus. No experience is

valid simply because we seem to gain release in association with it. And both his and Father Sears' comments continue to beg the question of documentation that the felt release is spiritual and from Jesus as opposed to psychological and resulting from auto-suggestion that often is not discerned and rooted out of our personal emotional responses to prayers — i.e., calling our answers to our prayers God's answers.

The same can be said for the personal experiences of the woman and man Schoeninger refers to: they aren't necessarily valid because they made people who had them feel good! In a day when we're told to watch for the appearance and attempted intermingling of the valid and counterfeit, every variety of person (some born again, some claiming to be, and some adamantly denying being so) is having happy beyond-and-back experiences of his own and with the deceased. For that reason alone it behooves us to come up with valid criteria for measuring those experiences, criteria that go well beyond felt release and a Jesus-focus during prayer, as well as persons who can discern their validity.

It's fine to conclude (point 9) that we find focus, safety, and comfort in Jesus, as long as all of us in every Christian stream recognize mutually that Jesus repeatedly named and cast out religious (that is, party) spirits. Such spirits infected not only the other religious streams of Christ's day but his own as well, indeed among the Twelve.

We all need continued ministry (from the Holy Spirit, not the dead) to move us from our present stage of deliverance of the religious spirit oppressing our particular stream to where we should be and will be when Eph. 4:13 is fulfilled. Only then will we be able to see that both Schoeninger's position and my own now fall short.

Despite that, it is nice to be bathing in "streams" flowing toward the same River, out of our armed camps on opposite banks. I trust the content of what I have said and the spirit in which it is sent moves us further toward the kind of unity pointed up in the Ephesians reference, a unity for which we all long.

Reference Notes

1. Thomas W. Davies, *Magic, Divination, and Demonology Among the Hebrews and Their Neighbors* (New York: Ktav, 1898), p. 7.
2. L. B. Payton, *Spiritism and the Cull of the Dead in Antiquity* (n.p., n.d.).
3. Leonard Mash, *The Apocatastasis or Progress Backwards* (n.p., n.d.).
4. Clement of Rome *Homilies* 1.5.
5. Augustine *Apology* 23; *de Civitate Dei* 2.24, 26; 28.5.

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