

***A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers.* By D. A. Carson.
Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992, 230 pp., paperback.**

Reviewed by Brian G. Najapfour

The book opens with this very thought provoking question: “What is the most urgent need in the church of the Western world today?” (11). Carson rightly answers, “a deeper knowledge of God” (15). Then he asserts that “One of the foundational steps in knowing God, and one of the basic demonstrations that we do know God, is prayer” (16). Indeed, if we want to know God better, we must grow more in our communion with Him, for the more we talk to God, the more we get to know Him. It is around this subject of prayer that the book revolves. Carson particularly focuses on the Apostle Paul’s theology of prayer, with the aim that his readers will learn from the life and prayers of this man of God. As indicated in the title of the book, Carson calls his audience to spiritual reformation (especially in prayer), a reformation that is rooted in the Bible.

A Call to Spiritual Reformation has twelve chapters, and with the exception of chapters 1, 4, 7 and 9 (which are topical), all chapters are expository in nature, examining exegetically selected petitions of Paul (2 Thess. 1:3-12; 2 Thess. 1:1-12; 1 Thess. 3:9-13; Col. 1:9-14; Phil. 1:9-11; Eph. 1:15-23; Eph. 3:14-21; and Rom. 15:14-33). Yet, given the origin of the book as a series of sermons, it is not technical, but easy to read. Most importantly, it is practical and pastoral, suitable to both an advanced and layman reader. Moreover, Carson writes as a humble and honest scholar, not being embarrassed to admit his own sin of prayerlessness. Consequently, readers (at least in my case) become more willing to listen and learn from him.

One of my favorite chapters is chapter 1. Here the author shares some of the great lessons that he has gleaned from more mature believers, including his own father. While these lessons are not as authoritative as the Scriptures, readers can definitely benefit from them. The first

lesson is worth mentioning here: “Much praying is not done because we do not plan to pray.” Carson explains, “We will not grow in prayer unless we plan to pray. That means we must self-consciously set aside time to do nothing but pray” (19). Jesus Himself allocated specific times for prayer (Luke 5:16). How sad it is that we plan for other things, but not for times of prayer. Elsewhere Carson passionately asks, “Where is our delight in praying? Where is our sense that we are meeting with the living God, that we are doing business with God, that we are interceding with genuine unction before the throne of grace? When was the last time we came away from a period of intercession feeling that, like Jacob or Moses, we had prevailed with God? How much of our praying is largely formulaic, liberally larded with clichés that remind us, uncomfortably, of the hypocrites Jesus excoriated?” (17). I confess that I stand guilty with this question.

Despite my overall support for this book, there are two aspects I would like to critique. First, the introduction concentrates on the Western world, which is acceptable. However, this leaves the impression that the problem of prayerlessness is not present in other parts of the globe. I think it would have been better to acknowledge specifically the universal nature of this problem. Second, the book rarely addresses the unbelievers, assuming that all its readers are saved. Provided the sermonic tone of the book, I think it would have been more profitable to exhort also the unbelievers—to exhort them of their desperate need of the Lord Jesus Christ, the only way to God. This last comment comes out of my belief that every sermon should be discriminatory, that is, a sermon, even about prayer, should address both believers and unbelievers.

The above comments aside, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* is an outstanding work on prayer, offering convicting, challenging and comforting instructions from the pen of the one of the few truly great men of prayer who ever lived, namely, Paul. O Lord, teach us to pray!