



## Can science test prayer?

Greg Koukl

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*Greg Koukl explains why the answer is 'No.'*

I have in front of me a piece in the Religion Section of the *Wall Street Journal*, Wednesday, December 20, 1995. I've had it for a while and I've been wanting to respond to it but haven't had opportunity because other things have preempted it. But I think it is a good time to talk about this since in the last couple of shows there has been some discussion of the nature of philosophy as it touched on religious questions. Some people, especially fundamentalist types, are quite hostile to the use of philosophy in helping us to understand our faith, or to defend our faith. To them, the Bible is adequate.

But whenever anybody makes the statement that the Bible is adequate, my question is "Adequate for what?" And that needs to be clarified, which is actually part of the point about philosophy. I mentioned before that the main help of philosophy is allowing you to make distinctions that you wouldn't ordinarily be able to make. In this case, I am asking for a distinction. When you say the Bible is fully adequate, my question is, "Adequate for what?" Because obviously it is not adequate to fix my plumbing, so it is not adequate for everything one might imagine. It is adequate for particular things. So before you can agree to the truthfulness of the statement that the Bible is adequate, you need more clarification and more precise distinctions.

Prayer, I think, is one of the most – I almost said nebulous – but that isn't quite what I mean. To be more precise, I think it is one of the most *difficult* things to understand. It is a hard thing to master. I

have attended different conferences on prayer, read books on prayer, done Bible study myself on prayer and I notice that there are some people who approach prayer in what I would consider a very mechanistic fashion. If you look at some, and this tends to be more Pentecostal types, and I'm not putting down Pentecostals because I am one – but it seems to be that those who are of the Pentecostal side of the theological perspective – they approach prayer kind of mechanistically. They see it as just the right means to accomplish an end. If you just get all the proper things in a row, and you press the right scriptural buttons and you do these particular things, bang-go, you've got your answer to prayer. And so you have these formulas to pray.

I think that there are things obviously that are hindrances to prayer. And there are things that will get prayer answered more readily. But it is a mistake when we start thinking about prayer in a mechanistic fashion, as if we're just apply a particular formula and the formula then must accomplish its particular end. Because prayer is not a machine-working kind of thing. And this helps us by the way to understand why some prayers aren't answered.

C.S. Lewis wrote a wonderful piece just before he died. It is called *Letters to Malcom* mostly, or chiefly, on prayer. And in that, he talks about the reason that prayer doesn't always get answered, is because prayer is not a machine. It isn't like you can just put this cog with this wheel and this lever and that the laws of nature then work in the process of the right construction of this prayer machine such as to produce a predictable result if you just work the machine properly. The fact is, when you are dealing with prayer, when you are praying, you're dealing not with a machine, but with a Person. You are making a request of a Person. And that Person is God. Persons don't act like machines. There are times that persons just will things that may be different from what we anticipate and part of the mystery of prayer has to do with the will of God.

So, Lewis makes this point and I think this is an underlying problem with people trying to reduce prayer to a mechanistic process – examining it like that in a somewhat scientific way. That is what is done here in this article entitled 'The Healing Power of Prayer is Tested by Science'. The *Wall*

*Street Journal* writer here, Joseph Pereira, starts his article this way, 'Kate McPherson stands beside a massage table in Loveland, Colorado, praying for someone dying of AIDS in San Francisco whom she has never met. With a photograph of the man in view, she moves her hands over an imaged outline of his body. In her outstretched hands, McPherson says she senses warmth, a connection with God. The patient's "energy centers are up", she says. He "could have grown strong or he may have passed on".' (I think that is kind of interesting. He is either getting better or he's dead is her assessment!). "Sometimes", she continues, "when you die there is this tremendous burst of energy."

The article goes on, "The patient's post-prayer condition will only be revealed next month when his responses, or lack thereof, become part of a research and report on remote healing. Ms. McPherson, a registered nurse, is praying as a part of a controlled study run by psychiatrists at the University of California in San Francisco, one of a growing number of attempts to prove whether prayer can heal."

Now one thing you might notice right from the outset is this perspective on prayer, or this description of prayer, certainly isn't what Christians do when they pray. They don't pass their hands over a photo and by doing so sense energy fields and then think that in the process of intending another person's healing that that person will in fact experience a result. Prayer is addressing a divine being, God, who is a Person, who has the power and capability of changing things in other parts of the world in a supernatural way and it is our request of Him to do so. So, this is not even a really good description of what Christian prayer is. But there is another problem with it.

The problem is obvious to me because I am able to make a distinction between certain types of causes. This distinction, essentially coming from philosophy, allows me to answer this and make corrections in my own prayer life. So the application is coming up here, how knowing certain distinctions in philosophy actually helps you to do better theological work and improve your personal relationship with God.

Part of my point is that being able to make

certain distinctions, which is the task of philosophy, helps us to answer this question. I was alerted to this distinction listening to a debate, a fairly well-known debate, between Gordon Stein (who is an atheist) and the late Dr. Greg Bahnsen (who was a Christian). The debate was over at the University of California, Irvine and many of you have heard that debate. But in that debate, Dr. Stein raises some objections about some things. For one, he suggests that it is inappropriate to appeal to God as the Creator of the universe because he says that is circular reasoning. You can't appeal to God as the Creator of the universe because that presumes that God exists which is the very thing that you are debating. First you must prove that God exists before you can assert or even suggest that He might have created everything. Now, I think he was missing the boat there. I'll explain why and how it relates to this issue of causation in just a moment.

What is interesting is that Gordon Stein is also quoted in this article, 'The Healing Power of Prayer is Tested by Science' in the *Wall Street Journal*. He makes a comment that I actually agree with and is at the heart of some of my objection about using science to test prayer. The article reads, 'Another critic of the prayer research is Gordon Stein, a senior editor of *Free Inquiry*, a religious magazine with a liberal bent. "Studies like the one at the University of New Mexico," he says, "make the assumption that God is a sort of Pavlovian dog. Say a prayer, and he or she answers".' Now, I agree with this statement. If you want to test something scientifically, the only things that you can really test are those things in which there is a necessary cause and effect. And if we test God scientifically, we are turning God into a participant in a mere cause and effect process, which makes Him somewhat like a machine. God isn't a machine, He is a Person.

Now, I think we can use methods of science and scientific testing of what we can see, to draw conclusions about that which we can't see, but that is a different kind of thing. It's an inferential kind of thing and that's fully appropriate. And that does address the question of the creation of the world. Let me put it this way to bring it more into focus. Facts about the world are discovered in different ways. Take for example the nature of matter verses the guilt or innocence of a criminal case. Can you see how one would use

different methods to determine the fact about the nature of matter than you would the fact about the guilt or innocence of a person in criminal case? The one you can do with strict scientific method. You can test things. You measure things. You can weigh things. You can't do that about the question of fact in a murder trial. Because it doesn't lend itself to that kind of testing. You use a different method. It doesn't mean you can't possibly know with a reasonable assurance who might have killed someone, just because you can't put it in a test tube, which makes the point that there are different ways of learning things and science is only one of them. A law method would be another way of learning facts about the world. In this case, historical facts. Did a particular event take place, and who was party to that event?

Here is another way of putting that, by the way. I gave you the illustration of the nature of matter, facts pertaining to the nature of matter, and facts pertaining to the guilt or innocence of a person in an alleged crime. What this highlights is two different types of causes. Here comes the philosophic distinction. There is a difference between event causation and agent causation. Event causation occurs where mindless physical events happen in process and in sequence and we intersect that series of events, look at one of those events and infer from that event something else that caused it. This is the scientific method. We examine the laws of the natural world and we apply science to find out what events caused what particular things. But when it comes to a criminal case, we don't talk about events, not strictly speaking. We talk about people choosing. Agents causing something by an exercise of their will. He was angry and that was the contributing factor that resulted in his willful decision to commit the crime of murder. And you use one method to prove one kind of thing, event causation, and another method to prove another kind of thing, agent causation. In other words, you must use a method appropriate to the kind of question you are asking.

This relates to what Greg Bahnsen called the '*crackers in the pantry*' fallacy. He said, if there are crackers in the house you just go into the pantry and you look. That's how you find out if there are crackers in the pantry. But if you want to ask the question about whether God exists or whether

human beings have a soul, or whether Jesus rose from the dead or not, you can't go to the pantry and look. You can't go anywhere and look in that fashion. You have to use a different method of answering that question. This is why I think Gordon Stein's objection misses the mark – his objection that positing God as the source of everything is an example of circular reasoning, because you first have to prove God exists. One can use a different method and I will explain that in just a minute, to make the case for God and this relates to the prayer question, too.

Some of you have heard of a scientific project called SETI – Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence. They turn this big electronic ear towards other solar systems and they hope to hear something from it. Now, would it be reasonable to conclude from intelligent communication that someone intelligent out there is communicating? What if I said to you, You can't ascribe this intelligent communication to an extra-terrestrial because that presumes they exist!? You must first prove to me that extra-terrestrials exist before you can ascribe this communication to that extra-terrestrial. See how that silly that is? Examining effects is just the way we determine if particular kinds of causes, (intelligent agents, in this case), actually do exist. Science is always starting with an effect and tries to infer the nature of the cause. It simply does no good to say, you must first prove that magnetic fields exist before you can suggest that magnetic fields are responsible for this phenomenon of metal filings taking a certain shape around a magnet, for example.

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This broad issue, this distinction between event causation and agent causation, (and both can be inferred from the right kind of evidence, it seems to me) relates to the prior question. It does show a problem, I think, with using science to assess the issue of prayer. Strictly speaking, science can only test event causation, where one event causes another event which causes another event. Because that is the only thing that is strictly deterministic, which is to say certain combinations of circumstances always and necessarily have particular consequences. You have water, a

certain amount of water, subjected to a certain amount of heat and if you know the amount of water and the starting temperature and you know how much heat, you will be able to predict exactly when that water must boil (you also must know the atmospheric pressure) but if you know the surrounding circumstances and other events, you can predict exactly when that water must boil because it is determined by natural laws. That's what allows experimental repeatability.

But this deterministic element of naturalistic processes that makes science possible is precisely what disqualifies science in its strict sense from answering any questions about agent causation or in answering questions about the non-material world. We can't use science to answer questions about the nature of prayer because prayer is not a natural process that is determined by certain prior events. Prayer is the act of one willing agent making a request of another willing Agent and that second willing Agent may choose to answer, or He may choose not to. It doesn't mean that we can't find out some patterns that relate to the personality of the agents involved to predict how they might respond, but willing agents are not machines and because they are not machines, or as Gordon Stein put it 'Pavlovian dogs', they are not going to necessarily respond in particular ways. And that of course is the problem of prayer. It's the problem of relationships. You are dealing with wills. You are dealing with agents. This helps by the way, in our relationship with God because when we understand that there are different kinds of causes, we can make a philosophic distinction between event causation which is deterministic and can be measured by science, and agent causation which relates to willing beings, personal beings, making choices. And they are not *determined* by the outside circumstances. The choices are related to their characters and their personalities. The more that we find out then about the personality of God and the kinds of things that are important to Him and that matter to Him, the more we will be able to pray in a way that He will respond. Not mechanistically, but understanding His personality.

This is precisely why we can't use science to test something like prayer. We can't use science to test whether a soul exists for that matter, or even whether God exists, because they are outside

of the realm of science, strictly speaking. The soul is not material. Science deals with material things, not immaterial things.

Now, I will underscore that you can use science in a looser sense, the methods of scientific testing to test what we can see and experience to infer an unseen reality. So one could argue in that way that you can test God scientifically, if we understand what we mean by that, in the same way that we might use scientific techniques in a law lab or a necropsy lab, in a law trial for example, to infer from these things that we can test, human actions that we can no longer see. Personal actions that we can't get at. I hope you catch the substance of this. The distinction between event and agent causation which informs our exploration and understanding of the issue of prayer and the existence of God and things like that.

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