SECTION 1

PRAYER DURING THE FIRST TO THE FOURTH CENTURY
CHAPTER ONE

PRAYER IN THE FIRST FOUR CENTURIES A.D.

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Prayer, broadly construed, is a virtually universal religious phenomenon, and the fact that the early Christians prayed hardly distinguishes them within the Greco-Roman matrix of the first four centuries of the Common Era. Christian prayer, consequently, exhibits a great deal of continuity with prior religious cultures. Since Christianity arises as a sub-sect within first century Judaism, Jewish practices are especially significant for the background to early Christian prayer. Prayer, both private and communal, is fundamentally a ritual activity, and ritual is resistant to change, especially on the levels of physical gesture and daily pattern.¹ A great deal of Christian prayer will remain discernibly Jewish in gesture and pattern throughout this period. On the level of meaning, however, Christian prayer exhibits a great deal of quite rapid evolution. Indeed, the specifics of early Christian prayer suggest contours of the development of distinctively Christian understandings of God (as Trinity, for example) and the church (as the Body of Christ).

The Pattern of Daily Prayer

The first Christians took to heart Paul’s admonition to “Pray without ceasing,” and did not limit either the times or places for its observance. Clement of Alexandria remarks that the wise Christian “prays throughout his whole life, endeavoring by prayer to have fellowship with God,” and further comments, “Each place, then, and time in which we entertain the idea of God, is in reality sacred.”² And yet, Christians as early as the New Testament period were inclined to mark the life of ceaseless prayer according to specific times of the day. Luke records that Peter received a vision during prayer at noon (Acts 10:9ff.) and that

¹ For a discussion of the importance of ritual pattern in constructing the origins of Christianity see Étienne Nodet and Justin Taylor, The Origins of Christianity: An Exploration (Collegeville, Minnesota, 1998).