

## **The Intercession of the Holy Spirit: Revisiting Romans 8:26–27**

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### **Abstract**

Traditionally the intercession of the Holy Spirit has been interpreted and understood to be the act of prayer, but an in-depth exegetical and theological analysis of the text revealed that this intercession goes beyond the boundaries of prayer to include an active intervention and mediation in the life of the believer to bring about reconciliation of those areas and issues that are contrary to God's will and purpose. It includes giving believers the appropriate supernatural help needed to accomplish God's will and purpose in their lives. It includes using all circumstances and situations as tools to conform believers to the image of Christ. It involves the Holy Spirit's aggressive fight against the sin and weaknesses that plague and incapacitate believers in their walk of faith. Thus, the Holy Spirit's help in the form of intercession may intervene in various ways to empower and supernaturally strengthen believers to accomplish the purpose and plan of God for them.

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

## 1. Introduction

Whilst there was a consensus among the reviewed writings that the Holy Spirit helps believers in their weakness by interceding for them, it was observed that there is disagreement among scholars about what this intercession may involve and mean for the believer. The literature reviewed revealed that there are three main areas of interpretation among scholars when discussing the intercessory groanings of the Spirit. The three main views debated among scholars are (a) indirect groans, (b) glossolalia, and (c) direct groans. An in-depth critical assessment and evaluation of each view follows the contributions of the authors in each case.

## 2. Indirect Groans

The reviewed scholars have interpreted the Spirit's groanings, mentioned in Romans 8:26 as the believer praying, and have contributed as follows.

Arthur Pink (2012: loc 3285) said these groans are produced by the Spirit but expressed by the believer as inward sighs or sobs. Leon Morris (2012:327–328) was of the same opinion, and believes these groanings are inspired by the Holy Spirit, who takes them and turns them into effective intercession. David Jeremiah (1998: loc 438) also agreed with this view, and reported that the Holy Spirit translates the believer's groans into eloquent petitions, and presents them to the Father. Martin Lloyd-Jones (1975:135–136) came across a lot stronger as a proponent of this view, and stated that since it is inconceivable for God to groan, the groans referred to must be those of believers, which the Holy Spirit then translates. Similarly, Robert Haldane (2013: loc 8657) believes it is unthinkable for the Spirit of God to be subject to

such emotions, and thus refutes the idea that these groanings are from the Holy Spirit. Consequently, he proposed that it is the believers who groan as the Holy Spirit excites and motivates them.

Wayne Grudem (1994:381–382) wrote that the use of the Greek word *sunantilambanomai*, translated ‘help’, implies that the Holy Spirit prays with believers and not instead of them, and as a result has concluded that the Holy Spirit participates with believers and assists them in prayer by turning their wordless groans into effective prayer. Likewise, Benjamin Warfield (2013: loc 689) commented that the Holy Spirit does not remove the believers’ weaknesses or bear the burden wholly for them, but He comes to their aid and shares the load with them. John Parry (1912:120) offered the same opinion, and said the Holy Spirit cooperates with believers in prayer. Charles Ryrie (1999: loc 2314) and Allen Ross (2006: n.p.) both agreed, and pointed out that this Greek word ‘help’ in Romans 8:26 is only used in one other place in the New Testament: when Martha asked Jesus to tell Mary to help her with all the meal preparations (Luke 10:40), hence the implication of the word is that believers will still do their part. To this, Kent Hughes (1991:163) added the illustration of two men carrying a log, one at each end, to demonstrate how the Spirit helps believers with their prayer. Other scholars (Hale 2007:558; Krell 2012: n.p.; Cereghin 2013:259) emphasised even further the importance of believers praying, by stressing the fact that if they do not pray, the Holy Spirit cannot help them, because He will have no prayers to interpret or remould and deliver to the Father.

### **3. Assessment of Contributions: Indirect Groans**

All the proponents of this view agreed and seemed to understand that the Holy Spirit causes the believer to groan in prayer. However, this interpretation does not appear to be accurate, because the text seems to

imply that the Holy Spirit is the one doing the groaning, not the believer (Rom 8:26). Nevertheless, two possible reasons emerged from the authors' contributions, which may have contributed to their arriving at this conclusion.

The first reason is offered by Lloyd-Jones and Haldane, who are of the opinion that it is unthinkable for the Spirit of God to be subject to such emotions, and therefore believe that it is inconceivable for the Spirit to groan. Consequently they are of the opinion that the groans referred to in the text must be the groans or prayers of believers. However, the scriptures teach that God is capable of emotions like grief, anger and joy, and that He is able to express these emotions if He so chooses (Gen 6:6; Exod 32:10; Neh 8:10; Ps 37:13). Would it not then be logical to conclude that the Holy Spirit is able to groan? Curtis Mitchell (1982:234) rightly counters the claim that the Spirit cannot groan, and says by way of argument, 'God is not devoid of emotion. If God loves, grieves, and rejoices, why is it inconceivable that He groans?' Furthermore, the groaning of the Spirit would naturally fit the empathy and identification that accompany and sustain intercession (Grubb 2011:82).

The second possible reason for believing that the groans are from the believer is offered by Grudem, Warfield, Ryrie, Parry, Ross and Hughes, who believe that the word 'help' implies that the Holy Spirit does not bear the burden wholly for the believers, but that He comes to their aid and shares the load with them in prayer. In other words, it implies that believers are still involved, doing their share of praying. This view was strengthened even further by the illustration given by Hughes, of the two men carrying a log, to describe how the Holy Spirit helps believers when they pray. As a result, the emphasis in this view is on the help the Spirit gives believers in prayer, which certainly is

needed, and is most definitely a source of encouragement in the midst of the believers' weaknesses. However, it appears that the intercession of the Spirit for believers is overlooked by this emphasis, and the depth and significance of His help is therefore not discussed. Hale, Krell, and Cereghin emphasised the believer's prayer even further by commenting that the lack of prayer inhibits the work of the Holy Spirit. It appeared, therefore, that the emphasis in this view also suggests that God only responds or acts when believers pray. Where then does God's sovereignty and providence fit in, if He is completely limited to the believer's prayer? Leon Morris (2012:332) offers an accurate opposing comment, and says one should not think that God can only take action when one invites or gives Him permission to do so. In addition to this, it seems that the emphasis on prayer in this view may also cause the motivation of prayer to shift from a 'desire to pray' to 'having to pray', which may not contribute to building an intimate relationship with God or be a real source of encouragement for believers who are anticipating the day of redemption.

Furthermore, one may also need to consider that Hughes' illustration gives a picture of possibly two equally matched participants. But this is not the case when the Holy Spirit, who is omniscient and omnipotent, participates with believers. Whilst there is participation taking place, it is more a picture of a toddler and an adult sharing the load. The toddler may be willing and eager to carry the load, but in reality is totally incapable of offering much assistance, just like believers in their weakness when they don't know how to pray. Thus, sometimes the believer's part may just be very small, and may amount to a simple cry for help. It may look like the toddler merely putting his/her hand on the heavy load but not actually carrying it, just like believers when they do not know how to pray and the Holy Spirit intercedes for them. Hence, this research is not promoting passivity in prayer, and therefore does not dispute the fact that believers need to pray, or that there is participation

taking place with the Holy Spirit when believers pray. It does, however, highlight the point that the participation may not be equally shared, because one participant is finite while the other is infinite. Furthermore, the point emphasised in this research is that the proponents of this view seem to be interpreting these groanings from the believer's perspective and not from the Spirit's perspective. In other words, the position being highlighted is the believer's prayer-life, in which the Holy Spirit participates and helps them, which He does. But, this emphasis redirects the focus of the text, and puts it on the believer, as opposed to keeping the Holy Spirit as the focus of the text and viewing what His intercession involves and means for the believer.

Most of the authors reviewed who hold this view also propose that the Holy Spirit translates the believer's groans into eloquent and effective petitions. However, there is no biblical support given by these authors for this understanding of the Spirit perfecting the believer's prayer. Their view also seems to imply that without the Holy Spirit translating these prayers, God would not know what the believers are praying. However, Scripture teaches that God knows all things, including believers' desires and needs before they even ask (Jer 17:10; Matt 6:7–9; Luke 16:15). This belief also seems to imply that God only accepts and responds to perfect prayer. On this point, Richard Foster (1992:104) offers a contrary opinion. He maintains that God accepts the believer's prayers just as they are, for 'in the same way that a small child cannot draw a bad picture, so a child of God cannot offer a bad prayer'. Would one's prayers not be acceptable to God because of one's relationship with Him as a son or daughter (Matt 6:8–9, Jas 5:16)? Would one's prayer not be effective because of the God one prays to, and not because of one's eloquence or lack thereof?

In summary, this assessment has evaluated the view of ‘indirect groans’ based on the contributions of the writings reviewed, and it has observed that the emphasis on the believer praying with the help of the Spirit has largely overlooked the Holy Spirit’s intercession on the believers’ behalf and what significance that may have for them while they wait for the day of their redemption.

#### 4. *Glossolalia*

The proponents of this view have interpreted the Spirit’s groanings, mentioned in Romans 8:26, as the believer praying in tongues, and have contributed in the following way.

Grant Osborne (2004:216) explained that the proponents of this view argue that praying in tongues best explains the groanings of the Spirit, because the language used is similar to the *glossolalic* prayer referred to in 1 Corinthians 14:14–15 and Ephesians 6:18. Similarly, Ernst Kasemann (1994:241) said, ‘praying in tongues’ (*glossolalia*) makes good sense, in his interpretation of the text. Gordon Fee (2011: loc 2463) is of the same opinion, and wrote that the ‘inarticulate groanings’ most likely refers to *glossolalia*. Likewise, Robert Kendall (2014: loc 2073) is personally convinced that Paul was describing the practice of *glossolalia*. David Bernard (1997:188) agrees too, and commented that *glossolalia* can certainly be included in the interpretation of the text. Frederick Bruce (1985:175) has the same opinion, as he commented that ‘tongues may be included in this expression’. He suggested further that believers praying in the Spirit (Eph 6:18) and the Holy Spirit interceding on their behalf (Rom 8:26) are one and the same thing.

## 5. Counterarguments from Scholars

There are scholars who contest this perspective on the grounds that *glossolalia* does not naturally fit the interpretation of this text. For example, Colin Kruse (2012:382) highlighted two valid reasons why it is unlikely to be glossolalia: (1) the apostle is speaking of the Spirit's intercession for the believer, not His inspiration of prayer in the believer, and (2) Paul says that the Spirit's intercession is through wordless groans, which suggests that the intercession is silent, and not verbal as is the case with speaking in tongues. Likewise, Bob Deffinbaugh (2004: n.p.) and John Cereghin (2013:260) rightly agreed that speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*) is not in view here, because the text refers to 'wordless groans' and tongues which are uttered are expressed by the believer. Charles Ryrle (1999:441) is of the same mind, and said these groans are wordless and therefore not *glossolalia* or any other kind of formulated expression. Likewise, Allen Ross (2006 : n.p.) and Wayne Grudem (1994:1078) both agree, refuting the idea of tongues, because the intercession in question is on behalf of all believers and not just for those with the gift of tongues. Ross argued further that the result of such teaching creates guilt and confusion on the part of those who do not speak in tongues.

## 6. Assessment of Contributions: *Glossolalia*

Kasemann, Fee, Kendall, Bernard, and Bruce are all of the opinion that the groans of the Spirit are believers praying in unknown tongues (*glossolalia*), based on the view that the language used in Romans 8:26 is similar to the tongues referred to in 1 Corinthians 14:14–15 and the prayer in Ephesians 6:18. This explanation would imply that the tongues prayed by the human spirit (1 Cor 14:14–15) and believers praying in the Spirit (Eph 6:18) are the same as the Holy Spirit making



intercession for them (Rom 8:26–27), which is exactly what Bruce has concluded. However, the Holy Spirit praying for believers (intercession) is not the same as believers being led by the Spirit to pray effectively according to the will of God. Hence, this interpretation appears to be forcing the scripture to say something that it is not saying, which would be a typical example of eisegesis. A more accurate view may be that it is the groanings of the Spirit on the believer's behalf which become the perfect intercessions to God, and not the forced idea of tongues being the perfect intercession. That said, this research is not disputing or contradicting the fact that believers sometimes speak in tongues when they pray. The point being emphasised is that this view may be guilty of eisegesis, as this specific text does not seem to naturally fit the idea of the gift of tongues. Three valid counter-arguments were given, aptly explaining and showing why the text does not naturally fit the idea of tongues.

Firstly, Kruse rightly argued that the Spirit's intercession is for believers, and it therefore does not refer to the prayers He inspires believers to pray (Eph 6:18). This interpretation seems to be the most sound, and therefore the one most preferred by the majority of scholars. Hence, this argument refutes Bruce's suggestion that 'believers praying in the Spirit' and 'the Holy Spirit interceding on their behalf' are one and the same thing.

Secondly, Kruse, Deffinbaugh, Cereghin, and Ryrie concurred and argued further that the groans are wordless groans, implying that tongues, which are spoken by believers, cannot be what is meant. This observation rightly refutes the claims of all the proponents of this view, who seem to be forcing the text to say something it is not saying. Although not mentioned, it may be possible that the proponents of this view may be of a similar opinion, and also believe like Lloyd-Jones and Haldane (indirect view) that it is inconceivable for the Spirit to groan,

and therefore have concluded that believers groan with unknown tongues.

Thirdly, Ross and Grudem both accurately argued that those who don't speak in tongues would be excluded from this intercession, resulting in guilt and confusion. To this, one could add that those who do not have this gift may feel inadequate and somewhat rejected by the Holy Spirit not interceding for them by withholding tongues from them. It appears therefore that this view could be guilty of exclusivity, which seems to be contrary to the inclusive generous heart of God that freely gives believers all things (Rom 8:32).

In summary, this assessment has evaluated the view of *glossolalia* based on the contributions of the authors reviewed. As a result, it has noted that because the interpretation of this view has resigned 'the groanings of the Spirit' to *glossolalia*, it has also contributed to the lack of research on the topic of the Spirit's intercession on behalf of the believers and what significance that would have in their life as they wait for the day of redemption.

## 7. Direct Groans

The proponents of this view have interpreted the Spirit's groanings, mentioned in Romans 8:26, as His own groanings and have contributed thus.

Douglas Moo (1991:562) and John Stott (1994:245) agreed and seem to understand that the groanings are the Spirit's own intercession, which takes place within the believer. Similarly, William MacDonald and Arthur Farstad (1997: n.p.) agreed that the groanings are related directly to the Holy Spirit, and not to the believer as He intercedes for them.

Keeping the focus on the Holy Spirit, Earl Radmacher, Ronald Allan, and Wayne House (1999: n.p.) remarked that the groanings of the Spirit are unexpressed and unspoken, and therefore are inaudible. Similarly, John Stott (1994:245) refers to the Holy Spirit's intercession for believers as 'speechless groans'; he goes on to explain that the 'unutterable' or 'speechless' groans are 'unexpressed, rather than inexpressible', because the Greek word used for unutterable is *alaletos* meaning wordless. John Polhill (1976:425–436) agrees, and says these 'unutterable groanings' are probably 'unformulated, unexpressed words'.

To Stott and Polhill's observations, Robert Gundry (2011: loc 1688) added that the Spirit's groanings are not only unexpressed but 'ineffable', because they are too deep and way beyond words. Wesley Duewel (2013:327–328) explained that the Greek word for groan is *stenagmos*, meaning 'an inward groaning'. He commented further that deep inner groanings don't need to be expressed or vocalised for God to hear, understand, and answer them. Likewise, authors Charles Barrett (1957:168) and Charles Spurgeon (2014: loc 1027) agreed that the Spirit's groanings do not need to be spoken or expressed, because God the Father knows the mind of the Spirit (Rom 8:27).

John MacArthur (2013:1676) proposed that the Spirit's intercession takes place within believers and on behalf of them, but that it is something that is imperceptible to them. On this subject of imperceptibility, Wayne Grudem (1994:1078) commented that this would mean the Spirit's intercession would be similar to the continual intercession of Jesus mentioned in Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 7:25.

James Rosscup (1999:151–152) noted that in the context of Romans 8:18–30 Paul was emphasising the Spirit's ability to intercede for believers. He also drew attention to the fact that verse 26 is the only

reference to the Spirit of God interceding by prayer, ‘whether in the Old Testament, Jewish apocryphal or pseudepigraphical books, rabbinic writings, Qumran literature, or any known source up to Paul’s words in Romans 8’ (1999:139). Nevertheless, he also observed that this intercession fits naturally with one of the Holy Spirit’s ministry titles as Intercessor. Similarly, Charles Hodge (2013: loc 4026) described the Holy Spirit’s intercession, as ‘the help of an advocate who pleads the cause or case of believers before God’. John Schultz (2005:72) is of the same opinion, and noted that the Holy Spirit’s intercession proves Him to be all that His name, Parakletos, implies and represents.

Colin Kruse (2012:352) argued further and pointed out that these groanings are of a different order to those of creation and those of believers, which stem from frustration and suffering, and noted that the Spirit’s groanings are associated with intercession for believers. John Stott (1994:245) agreed and explained that the groanings of the Spirit are not because of imperfection and weakness, but are in empathy and identification as the Holy Spirit shares in the believers’ longing for final redemption. Grant Osborne (2004:217–219) contributed that the Holy Spirit’s deep groanings are an expression of His deep love and concern for them. In the same vein, John Schultz (2005:73) added that the intensity of the Holy Spirit’s intercession reveals His compassion for believers as well as His participation in redeeming God’s creation.

## **8. Assessment of Contributions: Direct Groans**

Moo, Stott, MacDonald and others agreed that the groanings are related directly to the Holy Spirit, and not to the believer. As a result, the focus is kept on the Holy Spirit and not transferred to the believer. This seems to be the most accurate and least complicated interpretation, because it does not twist or force the text to say something it is not saying, but it

allows the passage to remain true to its original author-intended meaning of the Holy Spirit making intercession for believers in the midst of their weaknesses.

Radmacher, Stott, Polhill and others agreed that the groanings of the Spirit are deep inward groanings that are not expressed, or are wordless, and therefore are inaudible. Observing that these ‘unutterable groans’ are more accurately translated from the Greek text as ‘wordless groans’ adds weight to their findings, making their observation a valid one, as it proves that these groans could not be tongues. It is possible, therefore, that the Spirit’s deep groanings point to emotions of sorrow and heartache, alluding to the idea of empathy, compassion and identification that accompanies and sustains intercession.

Duewel also said the groanings do not need to be vocalised for God to hear, understand, and answer them. This is a correct and valid observation that contributes to this research, because God knows all things including the mind of the Spirit, and therefore knows and understands exactly what the Spirit’s groanings are about without any vocalizing or interpretation needed (Rom 8:27). This point highlights the confidence believers can have in the intercessory help of the Holy Spirit.

Rosscup noted that Paul was emphasising the Spirit’s ability to intercede for believers in the midst of their weaknesses. In other words, Paul was not trying to stress the need for believers to pray, but rather the Spirit’s ability to intercede for them and help them in their weaknesses. His observation is therefore a valid one for this project, because it keeps the focus on the Holy Spirit’s role of intercession, and does not deviate to the prayers of the believer. And rightly so, because it appears that Paul devoted the whole of Romans chapter 8 to what a life controlled by the Holy Spirit looks like. It seems unlikely, therefore,

that he would change focus by putting emphasis on the prayers of the believer, though prayer is important, but not the focus in this text. It seems more likely that Paul wanted to highlight the believers' inability to help themselves in the midst of adversity as compared with God's ability to sustain and keep them while they wait for the day of glorification no matter what suffering and adversity they have to endure in the meantime (Rom 8:18).

Cranfield, MacArthur, and Grudem commented on the imperceptibility of the Spirit's intercession taking place within believers and on behalf of them, but not noticeable to them. Grudem also noted that the Spirit's intercession would thus be similar to the continual intercession of Jesus mentioned in Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 7:25. This is an accurate observation, for believers know that this intercession is taking place only because the Bible tells them so, and not because they hear anything from the Spirit who dwells within them. But this should not be a difficult thing to grasp or accept, neither does it need to be an area of contention, because the Christian life is one of faith, and there are aspects of the faith (e.g. trinity) that believers accept as true even though they may not fully understand them. This intercession by Jesus and the Spirit is a case in point. So, if this intercession is taking place, then what does it mean for the believer?

Rosscup noted that Romans 8:26 is the only reference in any known source to the Spirit of God interceding for the believer. This obviously highlights the fact that there are no other sources with which to compare it, making interpretation of the text complicated and tricky. To underscore this point even further, the Strong Concordance (1981:518) only records intercession nine times and intercessions only once. As a result, biblical evidence for this word is indeed very sketchy; however, the practice of intercession in scripture is not vague at all. Hence, each

example of intercession found in scripture contributes to the knowledge and understanding of the topic under discussion. So, even though there may be mystery surrounding this topic, and even though one may not fully understand the implications of this ministry, one cannot deny that the reference to the Spirit's intercession is in the text. And so, if it is there, what does it mean, and what significance or encouragement may it have for believers while they anticipate the day of final redemption?

Rosscup, Hodge, and Schultz also made a valid point that this intercession fits naturally with the Holy Spirit's ministry title as Intercessor. This is a title hidden within the Greek word *parakletos* translated helper (NKJV), which according to Strong's Concordance means intercessor, advocate, consoler and comforter. So, despite the fact that this is the only reference to the Spirit of God interceding for believers, it is still a valid reference to His ministry, and, as scholars have observed, it proves that He is all that His name says He is. If the Holy Spirit is interceding for believers, what encouragement does it give them as they endure suffering and patiently wait for their redemption to be fully realised?

Kruse, Stott, and Osborne argue that the groanings of the Spirit are not because of imperfection and weakness, but are in empathy and identification as the Holy Spirit shares in the believers' longing for final redemption. This observation is correct and true, because the Spirit is perfect and strong, and would therefore not be groaning in weakness and imperfection. However, intercession is accompanied and sustained by empathy and compassion, so it seems logical to conclude that the groanings of the Spirit are a reference to His empathy and compassion for believers and not because of any weakness or imperfections on His part; however, these authors have not discussed what this may mean for the believer.

Schultz noted that the Spirit's intercession does not only reveal God's compassion for believers, but it also reveals His participation in redeeming God's creation. This is a valid and significant observation, because the Holy Spirit, who is God's agent in the earth, has been participating and working to redeem all creation since the fall (Genesis 3) and will continue His work until the day of final redemption, when the sons and daughters of God are revealed and all creation is delivered from the bondage of decay due to sin (Rom 8:19–21). This observation also implies that the Holy Spirit has always been an intercessor interjecting on mankind's behalf to redeem that which was lost due to sin. It may also imply that the intercession in view may involve more than prayer and include the possibility of further acts of service, sacrifice and the participation that may accompany intercession.

In summary, this assessment has evaluated the 'direct view' based on the contributions of the authors consulted. As a result, it has observed that although these scholars agree that the groanings in question are from the Holy Spirit, some of them have not acknowledged the empathy and identification found at the heart of intercession. This does not mean that they disagree with the concept, but merely have not acknowledged it. Those who have acknowledged this aspect have not discussed it in detail. As a result, not much consideration has been given to the significance and the encouragement which the Holy Spirit's intercession may have for believers waiting for their final day of redemption.

## **9. Conclusion of the Three Interpretations**

The indirect view proposed that the Holy Spirit causes the believer to groan as He intercedes through them, for it is inconceivable, as some have suggested, that the Holy Spirit should groan. The glossolalic



perspective claimed that the groanings of the Spirit are the unknown tongues expressed by believers when they pray. It was noted that the emphasis in these two views was on the importance of the believer praying, and as a result, the intercessory ministry of the Holy Spirit has been largely overlooked and seemingly ignored. Having said this, this research is not disputing or contradicting the fact that believers ought to pray, or that they sometimes speak in tongues when they pray. However, it is highlighting the fact that these views seem to redirect the focus of the text from the intercession of the Spirit to the prayer of the believer. The direct view proposed that the indwelling Holy Spirit intercedes for the believer directly with His own wordless groans that seem to be inaudible. It was observed that the emphasis in this view remained on the work and ministry of the Spirit; however, it failed to explore the depth of this ministry and the significance it may have for those who believe. Thus, in each case the study gap for researching the nature of the Holy Spirit's intercession on behalf of believers is evident.

## 10. Exegesis of the Text

### 10.1. Romans 8:26

In this verse, Paul seems to be highlighting the fact that believers are weak and that the Spirit helps (*synantilambanomai*, συναντιλαμβάνεται) believers in the same way that hope helps believers (vs. 24–25). Put another way, just as hope helps believers by keeping them focused on the promise of final redemption (Rom 8:24–25), so the Spirit helps and sustains believers in their weakness while they anticipate their final redemption. Douglas Moo (2009:268) agreed with this point and commented that the Spirit sustains believers in the midst of their weakness in a similar way that hope does. Grant Osborne (2004:216) had a slightly different perspective, and said that just as the Spirit gives the believer hope, so the Spirit helps to sustain them in their weakness.

In other words, it appears that Osborne is saying that the Spirit is the source of the believer's hope, which would be true because He is the firstfruit (Rom 8:23) and guarantee of their redemption being accomplished (Eph 1:14). So, it appears reasonable to say that just as the Spirit helps believers in the area of hope, He also helps them in the area of their over-all human frailty or weakness.

What might that weakness (*astheneia*, ἀσθενείας) be? It was noted that some scholars (Cranfield 1975; Shreiner 1988; Kroll 2002) have interpreted prayer as the single weakness of the believer and not just an example of the many weaknesses the believer may exhibit from time to time. James Dunn (1988:477) commented that Paul had the whole weak human condition in view and not just external temptations or an inability to pray effectively. Nevertheless, Paul seems to be highlighting the fact that there are occasions when believers do not know what to pray for, and as a result their prayers can be ineffective. Consequently, Paul encouraged his readers with the Spirit's ability to intercede (*hyperentynchano*, υπερεντυγχάνει) on their behalf. John Stott (1994:244) appeared to confirm this interpretation and wrote that just as biblical hope sustains the believer, so the Spirit sustains the believers in their general over-all weakness and specifically in their weakness relating to prayer. He explained further that the believers' weakness in the area of prayer is their not knowing exactly what to pray for. Do they pray for deliverance from suffering or for strength to endure the suffering? Woodrow Kroll (2002:138) also confirmed this, and noted that because believers do not always know how to pray or what to pray, God gives them the Spirit, who makes intercession for them in accordance with the will of God; thus every time the Spirit intercedes on their behalf they can be assured that God's will is being addressed and accomplished. William Barclay (2002:131) verified this, and said believers are weak in prayer because they do not always know what is

best for them and they cannot foresee the future. It seems reasonable to conclude that just as the hope of glory sustains believers in this present life, so the Holy Spirit sustains them in their weakness of prayer, by interceding for them when they are ignorant of God's will and cannot pray effectively for themselves.

In the text, Paul seems to state clearly that the Holy Spirit helps believers by interceding for them with wordless (*alaletos*, ἀλαλητοις) groans (*stenagmos*, στεναγμοις). Despite the fact that Paul seems to specifically imply that the Spirit Himself groans, it has been noted that some have interpreted these groanings as those of the believer and others believe it refers to the believer speaking in tongues. These two interpretations (the believer praying and tongues) seem to change the focus of the text from the Spirit interceding for the believer to the believer praying. As a result, the focus seems to be on what the Spirit causes believers to do as opposed to what the Spirit is doing on the believer's behalf. As already mentioned, this research is not denying or disputing that the Holy Spirit leads and guides the believer in prayer. It just seems that Paul's focus in the text is on what the Spirit is doing on the believer's behalf.

Grant Osborne (2204:218) suggested the Spirit is entreating or petitioning God more deeply than believers ever could, and explains that the Spirit's groanings are expressions of His deep love and concern for them. This observation rightly draws attention to the Spirit's compassion for believers, which motivates His intercession for them, but it is also noted that it seems to limit this intercession to prayer in the form of entreating or petitioning. John Stott (1994:245) does not seem to interpret the Spirit's intercession as prayer, but as 'speechless groans'. He specifically says that His intercession is 'accompanied by them and expressed in them'. In a similar way to Osborne, he wrote that the Spirit's groanings are an indication of His empathy and compassion

for believers and His desire and longing for them to be glorified. Whilst it does not appear that Stott is limiting the Holy Spirit's intercession to prayer, he is also not saying what it may include or involve beyond 'wordless groans'. Nevertheless, it is also observed that Stott recognizes that the Spirit's groanings are as a result of His compassion and desire for believers to experience redemption in its fullness. Hence, it seems evident that these 'groans' reveal the Spirit's empathy and compassion for believers, but the two contributing authors do not seem to shed much light on what the Spirit's intercession may include or involve, and as a result, neither do they suggest what significance the Spirit's intercession may have for believers anticipating glorification.

## **10.2. Romans 8:27**

It appears that Paul is saying three things in this verse, (1) God searches the hearts of believers, (2) God knows the mind of the Spirit, (3) The Spirit intercedes for believers in accordance with God's will. As a result of this, and in conjunction with the previous verse, it seems reasonable to conclude that Paul was encouraging his readers with the Spirit's ability to intercede on their behalf in accordance with the will of God. Thus, in these two verses, it also seems evident that Paul's emphasis is on the intercessory ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers, who may often find that their own prayer life is ineffective due to ignorance of God's will in the midst of their circumstances. So, does one pray for deliverance from the situation or for strength to endure the situation (Stott 1994:244)? What is not clear from the text, though, is whether this intercession is inextricably linked to the believer's prayer (Hale 2007; Krell 2012; Cereghin 2013) or whether it takes place regardless of it. It appears, from the research thus far, that this has been a debated topic among most theological scholars.

Grant Osborne (2004:218) seemed to agree with the interpretation offered above, as he also said that the Spirit's petitions, which undergird the prayers of believers, are in accordance with God's will, and as a result believers can be certain of God's will being accomplished, even if they should pray amiss. Woodrow Kroll (2002:138) has a similar understanding and wrote that God knows the mind of the Spirit as well as the hearts of all men, and as a result, knows exactly what the Spirit is praying for as He intercedes on the believer's behalf in accordance with God's will. Leon Morris (2012:329) also validated this understanding, and says that God searches the hearts of believers and finds the 'wordless groans' of the Spirit there, and answers these prayers accordingly. Thus it appears reasonable to conclude that Paul was encouraging his readers with the Spirit's ability to intercede on their behalf in accordance with the will of God.

These three observations seem to imply that the intercession of the Spirit does not go beyond prayer and petition. It also seems evident, from the contributions of the authors reviewed, that the Spirit's intercession is interpreted mainly as pleading or entreating God on the believer's behalf. Strictly speaking, it appears that 'intercession' is generally interpreted as prayer and nothing else. However, as this research has already pointed out, whilst prayer and petition is an accurate definition of intercession, it may not be a full explanation of what this ministry may involve.

## **11. Lexical Analysis of Weakness, Helps and Intercede**

### **11.1. Weakness / Infirmary (*astheneia*–*ασθενειας*)**

From the authors reviewed, there appeared to be a general consensus that Paul was making reference to the overall weakness and frailty that still afflicts believers in this life. Leon Morris (2012:326) explained that

the believers' weak and frail state is the reason why they need the continual help and intervention of the Lord, for they are not the 'spiritual giants they think they are'. Hill and Archer (2015: n.p.) seemed to confirm this interpretation, and said that 'weakness' means 'without strength' and it refers to a weakness that deprives someone of enjoying or accomplishing the task at hand. In other words, it is a limitation that incapacitates and makes one powerless to do or experience something. In a similar way, Thayer and Smith (2014: n.p.), defined 'weakness' as a lack of strength and an infirmity that may be experienced in the body or the mind due to its frailty. In other words, due to their frailty, believers may lack the ability to understand something or do something perfectly. They may also be incapable of restraining corrupt desires, or lack the ability to bear the trials and troubles they encounter in this life. Likewise, Mounce's Expository Dictionary (2014: n.p.) agreed with Thayer and Smith, and noted that it may be a weakness or feebleness of the body or a frailty and imperfection of the mind that affects one intellectually and morally.

From these definitions it would appear that the weakness the believer encounters is one of body and mind and not one of the spirit, for none of these resources seem to address the area of the spirit in their explanations. So, it would seem logical to conclude that the weakness lies in the area of the body and soul and not in the area of the spirit. This seems to allude to the idiom Jesus used: 'the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak' (Matt 26:41). In other words, believers are not always physically capable of doing what they are willing to do, and thus fail or find it very difficult to live up to the moral standards that scripture demands of them. As a result, they need the continual assistance of the Holy Spirit to help them where they are weak and incapable of helping themselves to attain the level of holiness and perfection that scripture describes and God expects from them. In plain words, believers are

incapable of sanctifying themselves and thus incapable of conforming themselves into the image of Jesus Christ, and thus remain completely reliant on the ministry of the Holy Spirit within them.

## 11.2. Helps (*synantilambanomai*, *συναντιλαμβάνεται*)

Hill and Archer (2015:n.p) have noted that there are three parts to the Greek word *synantilambanomai*. *Syn* means ‘to be closely identified with’ and *anti* means ‘corresponding to’. Both of these prefixes add meaning to the root word *lambano* which means to ‘aggressively lay hold of’. Thus, *synantilambanomai* means to personally and aggressively take hold of a task, together with another in order to give corresponding or appropriate help.

Thayer and Smith (2014: n.p.) defined ‘helps’ as ‘to strive to obtain with others, to help in obtaining, or to take hold with another’. Mounce’s Expository Dictionary (2014: n.p.) added to this definition ‘to support and to aid someone’. Consequently, and according to Hill and Archer (2015: n.p.), this type of help is one that ‘gives assistance with initiative’. In other words, it supplies help as it corresponds to the real need. Hence, this type of help, as Hill and Archer explain, gives the ‘intimate and appropriate help’ that would bring respite and ‘active assistance’ to individuals who are incapable of helping themselves. They explain further that this is the type of help used to describe the Holy Spirit’s active intervention in the lives of believers to help them live according to God’s will. Thus it refers to the Holy Spirit’s ‘aggressive help and personal interest’ in helping believers as He deeply identifies with their real need in every circumstance of life, and gives them the help that is necessary to enable them to fulfil God’s purpose in their lives. It would appear then that the help the Holy Spirit gives is not demure and passive, but an aggressive and active one set on accomplishing the will of God. It also reveals a commitment and

determination on the Holy Spirit's part to fulfil His task in sanctifying and preparing sons and daughters of God for their final unveiling. In light of this explanation, this research finds it difficult to envision the intercessory help of the Holy Spirit as only being one of prayer.

This word 'help' does not imply inactivity on the believer's part, but a joint-participation of the Spirit with the believer. In other words, the Holy Spirit does not bear the burden wholly for believers, but bears the burden alongside them. James Dunn (1988:476) confirmed this understanding too, and commented that *synantilambanomai* conveys the meaning to 'take part with, to assist in supporting, to lend a hand, and to come to the aid of'. He added further that this Greek word creates a vivid image of the Spirit shouldering the burden that the believers' weakness and frailty imposes on them (Dunn 1988:477). Hence, the illustration mentioned by Hughes (1991:163), of two individuals carrying a log between them to illustrate the help the Holy Spirit gives to the believer. Likewise, James Maloney (2013: loc 285) wrote that God knows man's weakness and frailty, and understands that they are incapable of fulfilling His purpose in their lives, and so in His grace and mercy He gives them the help and assistance they need. He added that the Greek word *synantilambanomai* means 'to take up our cause, to champion our case, and to heave with us'. Hence, it implies a joint-participation of the believer and the Holy Spirit, and therefore does not imply or condone inactivity or laziness on the believer's part. From these contributions it seems reasonable to conclude that the help the Holy Spirit gives believers is an aggressive and active one that corresponds to their real need in order to accomplish the will of God in their lives. Having said this, it does not, however, permit or condone inactivity or laziness on the believers' part, but requires willing and active participation from them.



### 11.3. Intercede (*hyperentynchano*, υπερεντυγχανει) in verse 26 and (*entynchano*, εντυγχάνει) in verse 27

Paul used two different Greek words for ‘intercedes’ (NIV) or ‘intercession’ as some of the translations have rendered it. In verse 26 the word *hyperentynchano* is used and in verse 27 the word *entynchano* is used. In verse 26, Paul used the prefix *hyper* to modify the word *entynchano* and thus add emphasis and meaning to it. The Free Dictionary (2015: n.p.) defined *hyper* as over, above, beyond and excessive. This resource also stated that *hyper* originated from the Greek root word *huper* meaning ‘over and beyond’. Similarly, the Online English Dictionary (2014: n.p.) says that *hyper* meaning ‘over’ has its origins in the Greek language and implies excess or exaggeration. Thus James Maloney’s (2013: loc 283) definition of *hyper* would be an accurate one. According to Maloney, *hyper* means ‘over and above’ and ‘exceedingly much’, which, he explained, would imply that the Holy Spirit intercedes over and above or in addition to and even beyond what believers could ever think or know to ask in any given circumstance. In other words, the Holy Spirit goes way beyond the believers’ lack of knowledge to know what to ask for and He intercedes on their behalf according to the will of God. Benjamin Warfield (2013: loc 716) has a similar understanding, and commented that the Holy Spirit’s intercession is ‘over and above’ the believer’s prayer. Thus it seems that the prefix *hyper* emphasises the fact that the intercession of the Spirit takes place over and above, in addition to and way beyond the believer’s ability to know what kind of help to even ask for.

Believers may lack the ability to understand something perfectly or accomplish something perfectly. They may also be incapable of restraining corrupt desires, or lack the ability to bear the trials and troubles they encounter in this life (Thayer and Smith 2014: n.p.). This

is the reason why believers need the continual help of the Spirit. In other words, the limitations that incapacitate believers in body and soul and render them powerless to accomplish God's purpose and reach their full potential are the reasons why they need the Spirit's help over and above and in addition to their weak and feeble efforts to help themselves. Consequently, these various contributions seem to confirm and support the researcher's understanding and interpretation thus far, that the Holy Spirit's help and intercession is extremely extravagant and goes way beyond what believers could ever imagine is taking place, let alone ask for.

Keeping the above in mind, both Mounce's Expository Dictionary (2014: n.p.) and Thayer and Smith (2014: n.p.) defined *entynchano* as interceding for someone or on behalf of someone. In a similar way, Youngblood, Bruce and Harrison (1995: n.p.) defined *entynchano* as 'the act of petitioning God or praying on behalf of another'. Likewise, The New Strong's Guide to Bible Words (2015: n.p.) defined *entynchano* as to entreat, to petition and to impinge. Thus it appears that the general meaning and understanding of intercession (*entynchano*) is petitioning, pleading or entreating on behalf of someone else. The Online English Dictionary (2014: n.p.) defines intercede as 'one who mediates or one who interposes on behalf of someone in difficulty or trouble'. The same dictionary defines intercession as 'interposing or pleading on behalf of another person'. Additionally, this dictionary also says 'interpose' means to intervene or assume an intervening position between parties in conflict in order to mediate and bring reconciliation. Thus, intercession (*entynchano*) is an impinging and an intervention by an intercessor who mediates between the parties at variance to bring about reconciliation. If one applies this definition to the Holy Spirit as the Intercessor, then He would assume an impinging, intervening position between God and believers to bring about reconciliation of

those issues that still cause conflict and hinder the purpose of God in their life. Hence the sanctifying works of the Spirit to bring about the necessary reconciliation.

Hill and Archer (2015: n.p.) confirmed this interpretation as they commented that intercession is an intervening to convey a benefit on someone, and that it is used only in Romans 8:26 in reference to the Holy Spirit bringing sons and daughters of God ‘in line with’ His eternal purpose. Hill and Archer (2015: n.p.) thus explained that *entynchano* is intervention and not intercession (prayer) as such, because, as they clarified, the Holy Spirit is continually intervening for the eternal benefit of believers, as this is the way that He brings every circumstance of the believer’s life into agreement with God’s will. It would seem that with this understanding that the Holy Spirit’s intercession is not altogether dependent on the believer praying, as some authors (Hale 2007:558; Krell 2012; Cereghin 2013) have suggested. These authors seem to suggest that the believer’s lack of prayer inhibits the intercession of the Spirit, and that God also only responds when believers pray. However, where then does God’s providence and sovereignty fit in? It would seem incorrect to assume that a sovereign God only takes action when believers ask Him to or give Him permission to do so (Morris 2012:332). Furthermore, this would seem to suggest that God’s plan and purpose hinges on the prayer of believers. Yet the Lord says that nothing will hinder or stop His plan and purpose from being accomplished in the earth (Num 23:19; Job 42:2; Isa 46:10). It would seem that believers partner with God through prayer in accomplishing His plan and purpose in the earth, and as a result, believers are encouraged and even commanded to pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17). However, thinking that God is completely limited to the believer’s prayers would appear to be presumptuous and possibly foolish.

James Maloney (2013: loc 283) offered a similar explanation as Hill and Archer's (2015: n.p.) comment on *entynchano* being an intervention rather than intercession per se. Maloney said that the Holy Spirit throws Himself into the believers' case to direct their prayers and to positively intervene in the circumstances of their life. He explained that the Holy Spirit wraps Himself around the believers' cause, in order to free them from those things that weaken and prevent them from displaying and manifesting the glory of the Lord in the earth. Along similar lines, Michael Bird (2013: loc 14279) commented that the Holy Spirit acts to set believers free, in order to release and redeem them from enslaving powers. Thus, in His intercession, the Holy Spirit frees them from sin, from guilt, and from weaknesses that limit God's plan and purpose in their life. Hence, this confirms the understanding that the Holy Spirit's intercession and intervention brings the exact benefits believers need to accomplish God's plan and purpose in their life.

Additionally, *intercede* (*entynchano*) means 'to get in line with', 'to light upon', and 'to intervene in order to confer a benefit' (Hill and Archer 2015). Thayer and Smith (2014: n.p.) offered a similar definition, and said *entynchano* means 'to light upon a person or thing, to fall in with a person or thing or to hit (strike) upon a person or thing'. According to the Online English Dictionary (2014: n.p.) 'fall in with' means to 'become acquainted with'. This would seem to imply that the Holy Spirit who dwells within believers knows their weakness and is well acquainted with what they need, and is thus able to give the appropriate help. This dictionary also said that 'get in line with' means to 'conform and agree with'. This definition seems to allude to the purpose and final result of the Spirit's intercession, which is, according to Scripture, to bring the believers' situation and nature in line with the purpose and plan of God for their life (Rom 8:27). That is to say, to conform believers into the image of Christ Jesus and prepare them as

sons or daughters of God for their future glory (Rom 8:29–30). This seems to confirm the understanding mentioned above that the Holy Spirit, as the Intercessor, assumes an impinging and intervening position between God and the believers to bring about reconciliation of those issues and areas of their life that limit them and still cause conflict and hinder the purpose of God in their life.

Additionally, the definitions mentioned above also highlighted the fact that *entynchano* means to ‘light upon’ someone (Hill and Archer 2015; Thayer and Smith 2014). The Online English Dictionary (2014: n.p.) commented that ‘to light upon’ means ‘to come to rest on’ or ‘to fall and settle on’. This understanding seems to allude to the presence or power of the Holy Spirit descending upon individuals to empower them to perform a task. This ‘lighting upon’ is demonstrated in scripture when the Holy Spirit descended upon individuals like Othniel (Jud 3:10), Gideon (Jud 6:34), Samson (Jud 14:6; 15:14), and Jesus (Matt 3:16) to name four. Hence, these few examples confirm how the Holy Spirit in His intercession may descend upon individuals to empower and supernaturally strengthen them for the purpose and plan of God.

Thayer and Smith (2014: n.p.) also mentioned above that *entynchano* means ‘to hit or strike upon’. This definition seems to allude to some force and hostility taking place in freeing believers from those issues that incapacitate them. James Maloney (2013: loc 283) confirmed this, as he explained further that one of the ideas *entynchano* conveys is an aggressive action of throwing oneself into the midst of a situation to make a case for or against someone. He added that the inference made by some theologians (none mentioned) is that the Holy Spirit strikes out against the believers’ infirmity in an aggressive and angry manner, because He is angered by the weakness that plagues them, and consequently rises up to intervene on their behalf, in order to rip away that which hinders the progress of God’s plan in their life. Maloney

(2013: loc 297) added further that because the Spirit is somewhat enraged by the things that weaken and prohibit believers from helping themselves He ‘lashes out against the weakness, striking it over and over, thus smashing the weakness on their behalf’.

From this vivid description, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Holy Spirit’s intercession is not passive or demure, but rather proactive and bold, as He wars against those things that prevent believers from being conformed into the image of Christ, and being fully reconciled to God in every area of their life. Consequently, it also seems feasible to conclude that the Holy Spirit is not only the Comforter that Jesus promised to His disciples, but an aggressor who invades the believers’ life to accomplish God’s plan and conform them into the image of His Son. Jack Hayford (1995: n.p.) seemed to concur, and wrote a similar thing. He said that although the word *entynchano* conveys the idea of pleading with a person on behalf of another, he added that at times the petition may be against another. This would confirm the idea that the Spirit intervenes not necessarily to always defend and protect, but in order to attack, release and reconcile those areas of the believer’s life that are still at enmity with God. Hayford (1995: n.p.) justified this idea by explaining that sometimes this word refers to ‘falling upon’ an enemy in battle with hostile intent. This would then confirm the idea of the Holy Spirit also being an ‘aggressor’ and not only a ‘comforter’ as mentioned above. This concept is not contrary to scripture, for Jesus is sometimes referred to as the Lion of Judah and sometimes the Lamb of God (John 1:29; Rev 5:5–6), and because the Holy Spirit is both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9), one can safely assume that He has the same aggressive and comforting nature. It seems feasible to say that when the Holy Spirit encounters an enemy of God in the believers’ life (sin and weakness in its various forms), He approaches it with hostile intent in order to redeem them and reconcile

those areas to God that they may truly be pure and holy and ‘brought into conformity with their legal status [of righteousness] before God’ (Erickson 2013:840). Thus it appears that the Holy Spirit’s intercession may be a part of the sanctifying process as He actively intervenes and interposes on the believers’ behalf to purify them and conform them into the image of Jesus. This would also seem to confirm that His intercession is not a passive and demure prayer, but rather an aggressive proactive intervention to set believers free from those weaknesses that limit and incapacitate them, rendering them helpless to fulfil God’s plan in their life.

## 12. Conclusion

Thus, from the various contributions it seems logical and sound to conclude that due to the believers’ weakness and frailty in body and soul they are physically, emotionally and psychologically limited in their abilities to accomplish God’s will in their life, and do not even know what kind of help to ask for, but the Holy Spirit does know, and thus intervenes on their behalf (aggressively if need be) according to the will of God and way beyond what they could even contemplate happening. From these definitions and contributions it also seems reasonable to conclude that intercession has a much broader meaning than traditionally understood and believed. It seems to incorporate more action from the Holy Spirit than just prayer. It appears to include an empowering that enables believers to withstand trials and tribulations. It also seems to be an empowering to accomplish the works that God has ordained for them to do. It looks like it includes an enlightening to know God and to understand the will and purpose of God in the midst of adverse circumstances. It also appears to include a warring against those issues that are contrary to God’s will and purpose in order to redeem and reconcile every aspect of the believer’s life to God. Thus, in

a nutshell, the Holy Spirit's intercession seems to be active and even aggressive intervention on every level to bring about reconciliation between God and the believer.

Whilst this research has shown that the Holy Spirit's intercession goes beyond the boundaries of prayer to include aggressive intervention and participation in various ways, the scope of this research has not allowed for a systematic approach to discover what this intercession may look like from a practical perspective. It has not studied every example in scripture of the Holy Spirit's intervention to ascertain positively what His intercession actually includes or involves.

It is noted that academic scholars like Grudem (1994) and Erickson (2013) have already done systematic studies on the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments, and have included intercession as one of the Holy Spirit's works along with conversion and regeneration of the individual; empowering the believer for spiritual life and service; giving giftings for various tasks; purifying or sanctifying the believer; leading, guiding and directing the believer; giving believers assurance; and revealing, teaching and illuminating believers. It seems evident, though, by definition of the term that many of these separate works may be included as aspects of the Holy Spirit's intercession on behalf of the believer as discussed in this research. In other words, wherever and whenever the Spirit of God intervenes in the life of God's people, in whatever form, it seems reasonable to conclude that intercession may be taking place on their behalf. Thus, it seems apparent that the whole spectrum of the Holy Spirit's work, as it relates to intervening in the affairs of mankind (especially believers), has not been viewed as intercession before. This is possibly due to the limited connotation of the word 'intercession' and the fact that biblical evidence of the word 'intercession' or 'intercessions' is rather scarce.



Having said this, the practice of intercession in Scripture as intervention is not scarce at all. Consequently, this may be an area for further research. A study of this nature would contribute significantly to the current understanding of the Spirit's intercession and possibly reveal the depth and extent of this ministry in much greater detail.

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