

*PRAYER POSTURE:
HOW THE MONASTIC PRACTICES OF PALAMAS INFLUENCE SPIRITUAL GROWTH*

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Introduction

The practice of prayer as a spiritual discipline is largely neglected in modern Christianity. Prayer is most often used today as a vapid recitation, transitional tool, or a wish list presented to the almighty. In the Christian tradition, the practice of prayer is a rich tapestry of methodology. The testimony of Christian historians and theologians provides evidence of proven prayer methodology and monumental spiritual growth through the practice of prayer. In order to properly and beneficially exercise prayer as a spiritual discipline, it is necessary to understand the purpose of spiritual growth and the part which prayer plays within it. The purpose of this paper is to present conventions of the monastic lifestyle exemplified by 13th century Greek-Italian monk Gregory Palamas that will spur and strengthen both the practice of prayer and spiritual growth.¹ To begin, this paper will seek to define spiritual engagement and spiritual growth then observe the role of prayer in spiritual engagement according to author and theologian Steven Chase. Finally, this work will examine three aspects of prayer highlighted in the practice and writings of Palamas.

Spiritual Engagement

The concept of *object permanence* was developed by researcher Jean Piaget in 1963 following a study on the cognitive development of infants. Piaget discovered that infants did not have the cognitive ability to recognize that an item exists when it is not visible. Piaget tested this theory by hiding a desired toy under a blanket and found that children older than 8 months would search for the hidden item. Children under 8 months old, however, accepted that the toy was

¹ *Hesychast* - a sect of monasticism that sought “divine quietness” through the contemplation of God and uninterrupted prayer. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hesychasm>.

gone. Piaget's conclusion was that children develop object permanence around 8 months of age because they are cognitively able to form a mental picture of the desired object in their minds.² According to this study, for infants, seeing really is believing.

The ability to imagine an item that is not visible to the naked eye requires the exercise of the child's eyes and cognition. In other words, the comprehension of any given object's existence requires the use of the given physical senses. God, on the other hand, can not be perceived with human senses. To "sense" God one must exercise spiritual muscles, not physical ones. Much like the training of muscles to perform a task like walking or grasping, the spirit must be exercised to engage the spiritual. The person who considers God as an abstract or an idea has no inspiration to exercise spiritual muscles. Freddy Davis wrote, "It is only when an individual is able to grasp the fact that God is a real and objective being that it becomes possible to begin exploring who he really is."³ Spiritual engagement with God can only occur once God has been secured as a reality in the life of the individual.

In regards to spirituality, a common response in modern culture is "I'll believe it when I see it." For many, belief in the supernatural or "the unseen" is considered hokey or superstitious and is largely dismissed. However, Ken Wilson implied that all human beings are "mystically

² S. A. McLeod, (2018, June 06), *Object permanence*, Simply Psychology, Accessed October 12, 2021, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/Object-Permanence.html>.

³ Freddy Davis, *Prayer Is Not For Wimps*, (Otsego, MI: PageFree Publishing, Inc., 2004), 17.

wired”, or, capable of spiritual engagement.⁴ The term “spirituality” was described by Ralph C. Wood as “perilously vague.”⁵ *A Dictionary of Spiritual Theology* defined the modern concept of spirituality as “those attitudes, beliefs, practices which animate people’s lives and help them to reach out towards super-sensible realities.”⁶ Referring to oneself as spiritual could have any myriad of meanings regarding religions or ideologies. Therefore, in order to discuss the engagement of the spiritual, spirituality must be defined. For the Christian, spirituality is the interaction between mankind and the divine, God. Wood described spirituality as religion that is experienced or lived as opposed to a mere statement of beliefs.⁷ Wood continued by describing interaction with the spiritual as a choice of either a pursuit of heavenly, morally superior living or worldly, morally corrupted action.⁸

In Hebrews 11:1, the author wrote, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”⁹ The Greek word *hypostasis* in this passage bears the meaning of assurance, confidence, or reality, pointing to the later word *elpis* (hope). The author of Hebrews stated that faith is a state of being resulting in hope in that which is unseen. Therefore, faith serves both as both a foundation for hope and a window into the supernatural.¹⁰ Thomas D. Lea

⁴ Ken Wilson, *Mystically Wired: Exploring New Realms in Prayer* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2009), 4.

⁵ Ralph C. Wood, “Outward Faith, Inward Piety: The Dependence of Spirituality on Worship and Doctrine,” Timothy George and Alister McGrath, eds., *For All The Saints: Evangelical Theology and Christian Spirituality*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 92.

⁶ Gordon S. Wakefield, ed., *A Dictionary of Spiritual Theology*, (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1983), 361.

⁷ Wood, 92.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hebrews 11:1, ESV.

¹⁰ “Faith provides a platform for hope and a perception into the reality of what would otherwise remain unseen.” Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 228.

wrote, “Eyesight produces a conviction about objects in the physical world. Faith produces the same convictions for the invisible order... Faith also provides an insight into realities which otherwise remain unseen.”¹¹ Joseph S. Exell stated that “all Christian life is the result of heavenly influences” and asserted that interaction with the supernatural is foundational to personal spiritual growth.¹² The Christian life, then, is in and of itself an engagement with the supernatural.

Spiritual Growth

Spiritual growth is also described in terms such as spiritual renewal, spiritual reform, and spiritual maturity. No matter the verbiage, the concept of progress in an individual’s spiritual pursuit remains the same. The process of spiritual progress begins with the recognition that effort is necessary. In other words, spiritual growth occurs by means of intention and exertion; it is not a passive endeavor. The simplest manner to define spiritual growth is to declare its intended result and then explore the methods to achieve said result. The aim of Christian spiritual growth is two-fold: to get right with God and to be more like Christ.

In the realm of Christian thought, spiritual growth is restricted to the pursuit of the experience and knowledge of God. Any spiritual pursuit outside of the pursuit of God is considered spiritual decline. In many cases, spiritual decline is undetected or unacknowledged. In other words, those who do not actively pursue spiritual growth in Christ are likely

¹¹ Thomas D. Lea, *Hebrews, James*, vol. 10, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 200.

¹² Joseph S. Exell, *The Biblical Illustrator: Hebrews*, vol. 2 (London: James Nisbet & Co., n.d.), 187–188.

experiencing oblivious spiritual decline. For the purpose of this paper, spiritual growth heretofore will refer to Christian spiritual growth.

James D. Smith III stated that the first intention of spiritual growth is to return the seeker to a standard.¹³ With Holy Scripture as the authority and Christ as the exemplar, God has provided a standard by which mankind is to live. According to Romans 3:23, all humans are guilty of sin and have thus fallen short of God's standard and are in need of returning to that standard. Matthew Fox wrote, "We are involved in a process of devolution: attempting to remove the debris that has clouded the field of the spiritual."¹⁴ A spiritual separation exists between the person and God because of the presence of sin in the life of the individual. The restoration to the standard comes by way of God's mercy and grace, not as a result of man's effort.¹⁵ Spiritual growth is not the cause of salvation but the result. Therefore, spiritual growth begins with repentance; an acknowledgment of the need to return to the standard.

The second intention of spiritual growth is to mold the believer into an example of Christ. Scripture provides the promise of spiritual growth as well as instruction by which it occurs. In Deuteronomy 30:19, the Lord said to Israel, "...I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life...". 1 Peter 1:3 proclaimed a "living hope" by which mankind is given "new birth" through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ These passages and others like them serve to

¹³ James D. Smith III, "Pathways to Reform and Renewal," ed. Glen G. Scorgie, *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 153.

¹⁴ Fox, xv.

¹⁵ "Christian spirituality then involves a process of transformation, of being nurtured and restored to wholeness in the image of God through a growing relationship of loving union with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. It is essential to recognize that this process is the restoring action of God in us through the Holy Spirit and not a result of our own efforts." M. Robert Mulholland Jr., "Spirituality and Transformation," ed. Glen G. Scorgie, *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 218.

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 30:19; 1 Peter 1:3, CSB.

confirm the possibility of spiritual growth. The “living hope” described in 1 Peter suggests a hope that is active and growing; a hope that is part of an ongoing process of sanctification. Wayne Grudem wrote, “If such a growing hope is the expected result of being born again, then perhaps the degree to which believers have an intense, confident expectation of the life to come is one useful measure of progress toward spiritual maturity.”¹⁷ The prospect of spiritual growth is confirmed by God’s word, but also guided by it.

Scripture describes God’s word as a “lamp unto my feet”, a guide for the next step in the spiritual journey.¹⁸ Spiritual growth is observed within the Bible’s pages on behalf of Old Testament prophets, kings, and servants such as Moses and Abraham. The New Testament boasts its own exemplary men and women such as the disciples, Paul, Tabitha, and Onesimus. However, the paramount example of spiritual growth is contained within the person of Christ. According to 1 Peter 2:21, “...you were called to this, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”¹⁹ Diogenes Allen observed that Jesus commanded his followers to love God with all of their heart, soul, and mind, and to “love your neighbor as yourself.”²⁰ Jesus’s request for his followers is to follow the example that he has set. Allen purported that spiritual growth is rooted in love: love for God and love for fellow man. Allen wrote, “If love is lacking, the motivation for keeping all the commandments is lost.”²¹ M. Robert Mullholland, Jr. asserted that “being rooted and established firmly in love” is essential to the

¹⁷ Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 17, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 60.

¹⁸ Psalm 119:105, CSB; Proverbs 3:5-6.

¹⁹ 1 Peter 2:21, CSB.

²⁰ Matthew 22:37-40, CSB.

²¹ Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Spiritual Help Today*, (Lanham, MD: Cowley Publications, 1997), 23.

process of spiritual growth.²² The proof of being rooted in the love of Christ, and therefore the proof of spiritual growth, lies within the resulting “fruit” of such living.

Spiritual growth is measured by the result of such progress. Biblical passages such as Galatians 5:22-23 and 1 Corinthians 13:13 illustrate the “fruit” that is reared from righteous living.²³ When the seeker is in step with God’s standard and living in the love of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, their righteous action results in positive consequences. As Simon Chan summarized, “The one who is in right relationship with God will bear the fruit of righteous living.”²⁴ Chan detailed the process of spiritual growth using three terms: justification, sanctification, and glorification.²⁵ Justification is the beginning stage of salvation through faith, being reset to God’s standard. Sanctification is the life-long process of transformation into the likeness of Christ that begins at salvation and ends with death. Chan explained that the process of sanctification requires worldly exercise of will such as temperance, prudence, fortitude, and justice and therefore must take place in this world.²⁶ Finally, glorification is the divine homecoming of the believer who is then transformed into their eternally perfected self. In agreement with Chan, Allen wrote that the goal of spiritual growth is perfection which can only be reached after death.²⁷ The desired evidence of spiritual growth is found within the actions of the seeker in the process of sanctification.

²² Ephesians 3:17, CSB; Mulholland, 218.

²³ “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The law is not against such things.” Galatians 5:22-23, CSB; “Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love—but the greatest of these is love.” 1 Corinthians 13:13, CSB.

²⁴ Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 79.

²⁵ Chan, 84.

²⁶ Chan, 93.

²⁷ Allen, 23.

Prayer plays a seminal role in the process of sanctification. The act of prayer, or prayer as a lifestyle, directs the seeker on their path to be more like Christ. In terms of spiritual discipline, prayer is often referred to as *contemplation*. Allen distinguished between two aspects of spiritual theology: active and contemplative. The goal of active spiritual theology is acting like God, while the goal of the contemplative is to think like God.²⁸ According to Allen, contemplation leads to an increase in love for both God and man which spurs action. Richard Foster placed contemplation as the second of six essential Christian spiritual practices. Foster stated, “Put simply, the contemplative life is the steady gaze of the soul upon the God who loves us.”²⁹ The aim of contemplation is to consider the things of God. In Hebrews 3:1 the author urged his readers to consider Jesus, using the Greek word *katanoeō* meaning observe carefully, discover, or perceive. The practice of prayer, contemplation, and meditation is to consider and engage the mind of God. Foster wrote, “The result is this transformation of the entire personality into the likeness of Christ. More and more and more we take on his habits, feelings, hopes, faith, and love.”³⁰ Through the vital application of prayer, the believer seeks God and his likeness.

The Tree of Life

Dr. Steven Chase serves as the Professor of Spirituality at the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Spirituality of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. Chase has served as the Associate Professor of Spirituality and Historical Theology at Western Theological

²⁸ Allen, 97-98.

²⁹ Richard J. Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Essential Practices from the Six Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (Englewood, CO: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 49.

³⁰ Foster 51.

Seminary, an adjunct professor for the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, and as the Associate Director of Meditation and Ritual at the Dominican Center Institute of Spirituality. Chase's published works include *Nature as Spiritual Practice* (2011), *Contemplation and Compassion: The Victorine Spiritual Tradition* (2003), *Angelic Spirituality* (2002), and others. The bulk of Chase's work is centered on the study of general and Christian spirituality. Dr. Chase expressed his interest in meditation, prayer, psychology, Christian mysticism, nature-based soul care, as well as medieval spirituality and theology.³¹ His featured lectures and published articles often focus on the topic of spirituality and spiritual practice. Dr. Chase's writing displays an earnest desire to see Christian spirituality lived out honestly and truthfully with an interest in how mysticism and tradition have muddled the proper practice of Christian faith and spirituality.

Dr. Chase's book, *The Tree of Life: Models of Christian Prayer* (2005), presented a paradigm for Christian prayer represented by the parts of a tree. The roots of the tree symbolize conversation, the foundation of prayer. Prayer as a relationship, the exchange with God, is embodied by the trunk. The journey of prayer, the results of prayer, and the presence of God are illustrated by the branches, leaves, and fruit of the tree. At the heart of *The Tree of Life* lies Chase's conviction that prayer is not merely a sporadic inclination or scheduled custom, but rather a manner of living.

For Chase, prayer is like breathing, it is constant. Chase stated that all things, all human endeavor and activity, have the potential to *become* prayer.³² For all things to become prayer, the individual must be in tune with the spiritual at all times. Chase wrote, "Prayer is a way of life

³¹ _____, "Steven Chase," accessed October 12, 2021, <https://ost.edu/dr-steven-chase/>.

³² Steven Chase, *The Tree of Life: Models for Christian Prayer*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 19.

habituated to the awareness of the presence of God in all things.”³³ He continued, “Prayer is stillness in constant motion; it is as trivial as it is profound... Prayer is a way of life.”³⁴ Much like the infant who must exercise his physical senses to achieve object permanence, the seeker must train themselves spiritually to achieve prayer in all circumstances.

Regarding the engagement of the supernatural, Chase purported that participation in prayer is mysterious in that it provides humanity both a direct connection with God and an influence on God.³⁵ Chase wrote that “prayer exerts an influence on God’s action, even his existence.”³⁶ The wording of this sentence is alarming and could be dangerous. At the onset, this statement could be interpreted as Chase suggesting that prayer can change God. Matthew Fox and Soren Kierkegaard would disagree, both arguing that prayer does not change God but rather changes those who pray.³⁷ It can be assumed that the “change” in God suggested in Chase’s statement is based upon the perception of the believer and not upon the person of God, which does not change.³⁸ Interaction with God may change an individual’s circumstances or perception, but it does not change the person nor the will of God.

As the means of interaction between God and man, prayer is essential to the Christian experience. Chase suggested that the trunk, the strongest part of the tree, represents prayer as the

³³ Chase, 20.

³⁴ Chase, 21.

³⁵ Chase, 30.

³⁶ Chase, 30.

³⁷ “Prayer does not change God, but it changes the one that offers it.” Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, translated by Alastair Hannay, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003), ____; “Prayer is man being changed, not God.” Matthew Fox, *On Becoming a Musical, Mystical Bear: Spirituality American Style*, (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 15.

³⁸ “For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.” The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mal 3:6; Chase, 30.

relationship between God and man. Chase reiterated that a relationship with God perfectly reflects proper relational human connections such as companionship, friendship, or motherhood. The remaining effects of prayer sprout from the relationship resulting in the prayer journey, the transformation of the individual, and the culminating fruit of God's blessed presence. However, the trunk, branches, leaves, and fruit are all dependent upon the root system; the conversation with God. According to the first chapter, prayer is more than a conversation, it is a way of life.

Chase explained that if prayer is viewed only as conversation with God, the point of biblical prayer is missed entirely.³⁹ Fox agreed with this assessment: "To say that prayer is our talking to God is to risk reducing prayer to talking to ourselves."⁴⁰ Fox warned that the 21st century concept of conversation limits spiritual engagement to the confines of spoken language and causes the spiritual seeker to forfeit the myriad of other possibilities to communicate with God.⁴¹ Chase and Fox illustrated that prayer as strictly linguistic conversation does not fit the biblical model because that limitation forces prayer to be intermittent.⁴² Paul's urge for prayer in Romans 12:12 is to "be constant in prayer" and to "pray without ceasing" in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. The biblical model instructs prayer that is never-ending which is more conducive to a lifestyle of prayer than a mere conversation.

To be in constant conversation is physically impossible. Therefore, Chase suggested that, in order to be in constant prayer, one must have a constant desire for spiritual engagement. Chase

³⁹ Chase, 22-23.

⁴⁰ Fox, 19.

⁴¹ Fox, 2-6.

⁴² Chase, 26; Fox, 16-20.

wrote, “[If] we wish to pray without ceasing, we must not cease to desire.”⁴³ Following the teaching of the Hesychasts, Chase suggested that a life of constant prayer becomes like breathing: something that we do naturally, without thought.⁴⁴ To cultivate a lifestyle of prayer, those who pray must make concerted effort to adopt practices that allow for spiritual engagement which serves as a constant reminder to the individual to be in an attitude of prayer. Historian and theologian Gregory Palamas exemplified this approach to prayer through his career as a monk.

Gregory Palamas

Gregory Palamas was born in the late 13th century in Constantinople. Palamas’s family was wealthy and boasted personal ties with the reigning emperor, Andronicus II. After the death of Palamas’s father in 1303, the empire funded Gregory’s education. Through his early years of schooling, Palamas became interested in philosophy inspired by the writings of Aristotle. Palamas committed himself to the monastic lifestyle at the age of twenty, joining a monastery at Mount Athos, the Great Lavra of Saint Athanasius.⁴⁵ Palamas dedicated himself to prayer and the pursuit of “quietude.”⁴⁶ Palamas spent many hours sequestered in prayer and only emerged for carefully limited meals and walks. Palamas gained notoriety among his Athonite peers and by 1335 had begun publishing works on spirituality and hagiography. Palamas’s career as a writer was marked by his ongoing dialogue with Barlaam the Calabrian, a Greek philosopher who

⁴³ Chase, 24.

⁴⁴ “Practitioners of Hesychasm asked a simple question: Is there something we naturally do without ceasing? They found an answer: breathe. The next step was simple: connect prayer to breathing.” Chase, 29.

⁴⁵ John Meyendorff, “Introduction,” *Gregory Palamas: The Triads* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 5.

⁴⁶ Meyendorff, 5.

balked at the monastic practice, particularly Hesychasts. Barlaam argued that mankind was incapable of direct knowledge of the divine while Palamas was convicted that knowledge of God was the only source of apodictic truth.⁴⁷ For the remainder of his life, Palamas defended the monastic tradition against varied opposition.

The Triads, Palamas's most renowned published work, was written in response to Barlaam and initially published in three parts between 1338 and 1341. In *The Triads*, Palamas sought to defend the Hesychast's practice and shared the benefits of the monastic lifestyle with his readership. Palamas wrote with conviction and surety as he described the Hesychast's methods and their culmination. According to the Hesychast tradition, Palamas highlighted numerous disciplines including the study of Scripture and the forfeit of carnality. However, Palamas wrote of three disciplines that echo in modern writings on prayer: clarity of mind, seclusion, and countenance. Similar instruction presented in *The Tree Of Life* and other modern works on prayer will be discussed in the remainder of this paper.

Monastic Practices: Imagination

Palamas championed the discipline of a focused mind. Despite his proclivity for philosophy, Palamas urged that God is knowable through prayer and meditation and not by way of reason. Palamas argued that reason is a gift from God that should be utilized to understand God's ways but also warned that reason will always fall short of grasping God's majesty.⁴⁸ Therefore, Palamas's solution for understanding God was based on the art of focused prayer; on

⁴⁷ Meyendorff, 6.

⁴⁸ Palamas, 28.

ridding oneself of reason and selfish thought in order to let God speak. Palamas wrote, “For in prayer, the mind gradually abandons all relation with created things.”⁴⁹ This idea of a focused mind is often referred to in modernity as the *imagination*. The human imagination is not just what children access to play pretend, it is a means by which humans cope with reality and it is the cacophony of thought that is present in any given human consciousness.⁵⁰ In order to focus on God, the noise must be silenced. Foster wrote of contemplative prayer, “Through it all, God gradually and slowly ‘captures’ the inner faculties: first the heart and the will, then the mind, *the imagination*, and the passions.”⁵¹ The process of intentional prayer involves the submission of the imagination to the purposes of the Holy Spirit.

Chase asserted that the imagination serves as a means by which mankind experiences the almighty God.⁵² It is not possible to pass notes with God in school, to take God on a date, or to see God seated in the audience at a graduation ceremony, but it is possible to imagine God as our friend, lover, or father. This active imagination does not mean that our concept of God should be dismissed as our own manifestation, but rather that it should be viewed as a reaction to God’s presence in our lives. Chase wrote, “The imagination is employed more often as a *response* to divine presence than as a means to conure it up.”⁵³ This is what it means to allow God to “capture our imagination” as the idiom suggests, to allow God to consume our thoughts.

⁴⁹ Palamas, 65.

⁵⁰ Chase, 49.

⁵¹ Foster, 51; emphasis added.

⁵² Chase, 49.

⁵³ Chase, 49.

Spiritual growth occurs under the leadership of the Holy Spirit and it is within the submission of our imagination that God speaks. Chase described prayer first as a conversation; an interaction between God and man. The seeker's temptation and tendency is to speak and not allow God the opportunity to respond. Perhaps James's instruction to be slow to speak and quick to listen does not only apply to the corporeal.⁵⁴ Davis wrote, "We have to learn to listen to God, not just talk to him."⁵⁵ It is suggested, then, that listening is as important, if not more important, than speaking in prayer. Ladislaus Boros contended that hearing from God should come before speaking to God.⁵⁶ Boros proposed that one should pause frequently during the day, "saying nothing and allowing our gaze to rest on God."⁵⁷ Sandra McCracken wrote, "Silence is the waiting posture that helps us to be poised to hear God's voice."⁵⁸ The term "meditation" often conjures ideas of mysticism and Eastern religions but should not be dismissed. Ken Wilson proclaimed that it is essential for Christians to "be still" in order to pray sufficiently.⁵⁹ Wilson wrote of his experience of meditative prayer following the death of his father which led him to a new understanding of stillness before God.⁶⁰

From 2007 to 2019 the staff of Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach, FL developed *The Spiritual Disciplines Project*. This program required students to practice various

⁵⁴ James 1:19.

⁵⁵ Davis, 33.

⁵⁶ Ladislaus Boros, *Christian Prayer*, translated by David Smith (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1973), 7.

⁵⁷ Boros, 5.

⁵⁸ Sandra McCracken, "Our Silence, Music to His Ears," *Christianity Today* (November 2017, Vol. 61, Issue 9), 34.

⁵⁹ Wilson, 131-149; Psalm 46:10.

⁶⁰ Wilson, 31-42.

spiritual disciplines within the religious practice of their choice. The disciplines included prayer, fasting, charity, chastity, and simplicity, chosen from the commonalities between various world religions. Students were challenged to spend at least 20 minutes in prayer. Remarkably, students reported that time spent in silent prayer became beneficial. One student reported that he began to allow moments of silence in his prayers to allow God to speak.⁶¹ Another young woman wrote:

“In the beginning, twenty minutes was much longer than I anticipated, and I found myself running out of things to pray about and cutting the time short. But again, as the days progressed, I noticed something significantly different about the time I was spending with God. Not only had I dropped the effort to use fancy words (like the ones I hear in church) but the subject matter of my prayer changed. I noticed that my prayers became unselfish. I began to pray for other people, their safety, their health, and their financial hardships.”⁶²

Through the practice of listening to God, the one who prays is effected. It is within the stillness that God can be heard more clearly and stillness is encouraged by isolation.

Monastic Practices: Isolation

Russell H. Conwell contended that there is nothing special about temples, sanctuaries, or any church buildings in regard to prayer.⁶³ For some, certain locales such as historic churches or cemeteries are regarded as places where prayer is amplified. The truth is that the most effective place to pray is anywhere that the individual will actually do so. Origen wrote, “Every place is

⁶¹ Alice L. Wood, “The Spiritual Disciplines Project: Fostering Spiritual Development of Undergraduates at a Historically Black University,” *International Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Society* (Vol. 10 Issue 4, December 2020), 65-67.

⁶² Wood, 68.

⁶³ Russell H. Conwell, *Effective Prayer* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1921), 1-8.

suitable for prayer if a person prays well.”⁶⁴ Whether in a group setting or lone, cathedral or forest, prayer is potential.

Palamas lauded isolation with his monastic lifestyle. Life as a monk is distinguished by isolation from the outside world. Barlaam’s argument with the monastic life was that cutting oneself off from the world resulted in ignorance of the world and, therefore, a lack of knowledge that is gained by interacting with and observing “creatures.”⁶⁵ Contrarily, Palamas purported that solitude resulted in greater knowledge of creatures and all of creation revealed in isolated prayer.⁶⁶

Solitude is not a welcomed companion for many of us. Talk of prayer retreats or isolation is met by the average church-goer with disdain. The truth of the matter is that the lives of the average person have become so busy that stillness and solitude are foreign concepts. William O. Paulsell suggested that solitude can be very formative and impactful when used correctly. For example, Aelred of Rievaulx created a three-part rule for solitude that included a rotation of the study of Scripture, prayer, and physical labor.⁶⁷ Julian of Norwich is an example of someone who had knowledge of the world and grew in the love of Christ while also being voluntarily confined to a cell for much of her life.⁶⁸ A life of solitude is not fitting for all, but moments of solitude are necessary for the purpose of prayer. Chase likened spiritual growth to a pilgrimage, which is

⁶⁴ Origen, *On Prayer (De Oratione)*, accessed October 19, 2021, <https://www.copticchurch.net/patrology/schoolofalex2/chapter16.html>.

⁶⁵ Palamas, 10-13.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ William O. Paulsell, *Rules For Prayer*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 100-101.

⁶⁸ Chase, 121.

typically characterized by the journey of an individual.⁶⁹ This metaphor speaks to the solitary nature of salvation, that each is responsible for their own.⁷⁰ In the end, spiritual growth is a solitary process.

Although Scripture commands the gathering of the saints in fellowship, it also demonstrates retreating for the purpose of prayer. The greatest example comes from Christ, who absconded on numerous occasions to pray. In Matthew 14:23, Jesus climbed a mountain alone to pray and stayed into the night. Luke 5:16 and 22:41 recorded that Jesus withdrew from the disciples to be alone in prayer. In Matthew 6:6, Jesus instructed his disciples to “go into your private room, shut your door, and pray to your Father who is in secret.”⁷¹ Jesus, who is God, sought solitude to pray and commanded his disciples to do the same. Surely, this instruction applies to the modern Christian as well.

Monastic Practices: Position

In modern Christianity, we have developed a “prayer formula.” The problem with this prayer formula, according to Davis, is the misconception that there is only one way to pray.⁷² The Southern Baptist tradition instills “every head bowed, every eye closed,” convincing churchgoers that proper prayer consists of one posture and verbose language. In truth, prayer is as diverse as the people who pray. Chase contended that models for prayer are simply tools to

⁶⁹ Chase, 140-142.

⁷⁰ Philippians 2:12.

⁷¹ Matthew 6:6, CSB.

⁷² Davis, 32-33.

illustrate the result of prayer, not systematic guidelines.⁷³ Chase wrote, “Each Christian believer’s prayer experience... brings rich, new prayer habitats to the prayers that form the tree of life.”⁷⁴ Like physical exercise, the best way to pray is the way that will habitually and naturally occur.

Position in prayer can be acknowledged in both an inward and outward sense; both in regards to relationship with God and physical posture. The inward sense refers to the seeker’s relationship with God. As discussed previously, the first intention of spiritual growth is to return the individual to God’s standard.⁷⁵ This concept of position ties the imagination, isolation, and position together in the sense that one must be in a righted relationship with God.

Position in the second sense refers to physical posture. One Sunday morning, I knelt at the steps of the sanctuary stage during a prayer meeting. I must remark that my body position was quite comfortable. As the pastor prayed, I felt myself begin to doze. After a few attempts to rouse myself, I started to give in to my drowsiness and allow myself to sleep. In that moment, I heard a voice that said, “Really, Brian? You can’t do as much as make yourself uncomfortable for my sake?” It occurred to me that though I had tried to wake myself, I had not changed my position of comfort. I felt a wave of conviction come over me and immediately changed my posture to something less comfortable. Over the following years, I began to make an effort to avoid praying in comfortable positions. I know now that I was mimicking methods suggested for centuries by Christian theologians.

⁷³ Chase, 50-52.

⁷⁴ Chase, 53.

⁷⁵ Smith, 153.

Mary Jane Haemig observed that Martin Luther made much of the physicality of prayer in his writings. Haemig wrote, “Just as the whole person lives life, so the whole person prays... [For] Luther the whole physical body... was involved in calling upon God, the postures of the body reflecting the attitudes of the heart and the application of the mouth.”⁷⁶ Palamas wrote that elevation of the mind comes through the surveillance and taming of the body.⁷⁷ Palamas recorded that Hesychasts would learn to limit their breathing in order to be as subdued as possible for prayer.⁷⁸ Chase wrote that “the body is engaged on equal footing with the mind,” asserting that both the mind and body are engaged in prayer.⁷⁹ Going beyond body posture, Flora Slosson Wuellner suggested that the seeker “let your body pray.”⁸⁰ For Wuellner, allowing physical interaction to permeate prayer involved eyesight, hearing, touch, and smell as well.⁸¹ The art of posture can influence the impact of prayer and spiritual growth by bringing physical exertion into our prayer effort. Prayer that is difficult or costs us energy to perform can have greater effect.

Scripture provides various examples of prayer posture. Bowing is presented as a posture of submission and reverence by the Psalmist in Psalm 5:7 and Moses bowed in worship in Exodus 34:8. Daniel knelt in prayer in defiance of king Nebuchadnezzar.⁸² In Nehemiah, the returned Israelite exiles fell on their faces to worship, as did Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane

⁷⁶ Mary Jane Haemig, “Practical advice on prayer from Martin Luther,” *Word & World* (Vol. 35, Issue 1, Winter 2015), 28-29.

⁷⁷ Palamas, 47-48.

⁷⁸ Palamas, 46.

⁷⁹ Chase, 40.

⁸⁰ Flora Slosson Wuellner, *Prayer With Our Bodies* (Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 1987), 52-62.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Daniel 6:10.

in Matthew 26:39.⁸³ In 1 Timothy 2:8, Paul instructed the men to lift up their hands in prayer. Jesus looked to the heavens in prayer in both John 11:41 and Luke 9:16. And both Psalm 77:1 and Hebrews 5:7 instruct the lifting of voices to God.⁸⁴ Worship and prayer in the Old Testament required sacrifice. In a culture today where so much is demanded of our time and effort, perhaps our sacrifice is giving God more than a bowed head and clasped hands in prayer.

Conclusion

The practices of imagination, isolation, and position have the potential to revolutionize the prayer life of any Christian, thus enhancing and spurring spiritual growth. However, it is worthless if prayer does not lead to action. Donald G. Bloesch wrote, “The soundness of a prayer is measured not by our feelings or fervor at the time but by our behavior afterwards.”⁸⁵ For Bloesch, prayer that does not result in action is worthless.⁸⁶ The practice of prayer must be combined with deeds in order to bring formative spiritual growth.

This paper has attempted to prove that the practices of imagination, isolation, and position serve to strengthen the Christian's prayer life, thus resulting in accelerated spiritual growth. These three practices represented in the monastic tradition reflect the need for wholistic engagement in the supernatural for body, mind, and soul. Chase wrote, “The invitation to journey

⁸³ Nehemiah 8:6.

⁸⁴ Alex Kendrick and Stephen Kendrick, “8 Powerful Displays of Prayer in the Bible,” *Lifeway.com* (Published January 29, 2016. Accessed October 19, 2021), <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/prayer-postures-in-the-bible>.

⁸⁵ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Struggle of Prayer* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), 131.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 137-138.

into God is an invitation to our whole person—body, mind, and spirit.”⁸⁷ The act of prayer is both a spiritual endeavor and a physical one, engaging both the supernatural and the natural.

⁸⁷ Chase, 135.

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