

Leaven

Volume 21
Issue 4 *Revelation*

Article 12

12-1-2013

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Joseph Horton
Jhorton16@hotmail.com

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Recommended Citation

Horton, Joseph (2013) "A Different Way to Pray," *Leaven*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 4 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol21/iss4/12>

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A Different Way to Pray

JOSEPH HORTON

One of the most common reasons that a lot of us do not participate in this ancient way of prayer [is this]: nobody told me. It is one of the things many of us can honestly say when we give reasons for not saying these prayers. —Robert Benson¹

Many Christians are unsatisfied with their prayer lives. And this sentiment is not confined to the pew. It is found behind the pulpit as well. A 2005 survey of Protestant ministers in the United States revealed that only 16% were “very satisfied” with their personal prayer life. Another 47% said they were “somewhat satisfied” while 30% felt “somewhat dissatisfied” and 7% felt “very dissatisfied.”²

I believe that one reason many Christians are disappointed with their prayer lives is because they keep their prayer lives exclusively personal. In other words, many ministers and church members are feeling displeased because they are relying entirely on spontaneous personal prayers to sustain a satisfying prayer life. New Testament scholar Scot McKnight says it succinctly:

If we are always...praying our own spontaneous prayers, we can eventually run out of things to say.... But learning to pray set prayers at fixed times according to a sacred rhythm can reinvigorate our prayer lives and lift the burden of creativity off our shoulders.³

McKnight hints at a different form of prayer: one that asks us to use prewritten prayers; one that involves saying these prayers at set times of the day; one that claims these set times are connected to a sacred rhythm; and one that, when combined with our spontaneous personal prayers, can bring us into an enriching, satisfying prayer life. What is this different way of praying? Where did it come from? And why haven't some Christians been taught how to practice it?

Fixed-Hour Prayer: Big Questions Answered

The form of prayer McKnight refers to is *fixed-hour prayer*, which can be defined as “a regular pattern and order for formal worship and prayer that is offered to God at specific times throughout the course of the day.”⁴ The practice is also referred to as *the liturgy of the hours*, *the divine hours*, or *the daily office*. The content of these prayers includes selections from the Psalms, the Gospels, New Testament epistles, and other writings from Christian history.

1. Robert Benson, *In Constant Prayer*, The Ancient Practices Series (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 68–9.

2. Grey Matter Research and Consulting, “Study Shows Only 16% of Protestant Ministers are Very Satisfied with Their Personal Prayer Lives,” entry posted May 23, 2005, www.greymatterresearch.com/index_files/Prayer.htm (accessed April 20, 2012).

3. Scot McKnight, *Praying with the Church: Following Jesus, Daily, Hourly, Today* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 14.

4. Benson, *In Constant Prayer*, 9–10.

During a recent dinner conversation with my extended family, the topic of this article came up. After I briefly explained the practice of fixed-hour prayer, my father said, “Now, is that in the Bible?”

I know he is not alone in wondering. I have asked the same question, and the answer is “Sort of.” Worship scholar James F. White admits that “we cannot find in the New Testament much development” in daily fixed-hour prayer. “But there are hints of the planting of seeds from which [the practice] would later sprout.”⁵ Let’s take a look at some of these biblical hints.

Christianity arose out of Judaism, which had a long history of fixed-hour prayer. A few passages in the Old Testament reveal the early development of that history. In Psalm 119, the Psalmist speaks of praising God for his righteous rules seven times a day, including at midnight (verses 62 and 164). The writer of Psalm 55.17 says, “Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice” (ESV). And the book of Daniel tells of the exiled prophet continuing the prayer traditions of his nation’s former life in Israel: “He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously” (Dan 6.10, ESV).

In the New Testament era, the Jewish tradition of fixed-hour prayer was practiced in some form by Jesus and the earliest Christians. However, the extent to which early Christians adopted prayer practices from the Jews is unclear for a couple reasons. First, the specifics of Jewish prayer systems during the New Testament era are virtually unknown. Robert Taft observes that “no two authors seem to agree about even the basics of Jewish services and prayer at the time of Christ.”⁶ Second, the New Testament era was one of remarkable transition as Christian communities were in the process of separating from Judaism. Scholars are divided in regard to the speed of this process. Paul F. Bradshaw observes that “even if Christians did cease to pray in common with other Jews at an early date, the pattern of their worship was undoubtedly very strongly influenced by the Jewish worship from which it sprang.”⁷

Turning to the New Testament evidence, we see that Jesus would often withdraw to isolated places at certain times of the day to pray (Mark 1.35, Luke 5.16). The book of Acts casually mentions early Christians following the Jewish tradition of fixed-hour prayer. In Acts 3.1, Peter and John are going up to the temple at the ninth hour of prayer, or 3 p.m. From this passage, David Peterson observes that “the earliest Christians apparently went up to the temple at the set hours of prayer . . . , continuing their associations with the traditional practices of their religion.”⁸ Two more passages suggest that even when trips to the temple were not taken, early Christians still prayed at set hours. In Acts 10.9, Peter is going up on a housetop at about the sixth hour, or noon, to pray. And Acts 16.25 records Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns to God at about midnight in a Philippian jail.

It is only when we depart from the writings of the New Testament and look at *The Didache*, which was written in the mid-to-late first century, that we see “the first explicit, unambiguous reference to a system of daily prayer.”⁹ The writer of that document teaches Christians to pray the Lord’s Prayer from Matthew 6 three times a day.¹⁰

Since that time, fixed-hour prayer has undergone a long and complex process of development, a thorough discussion of which is well outside the scope of this paper. However, two observations about how the Bible has impacted and shaped the practice are worth considering. First, the Psalms play a central role in fixed-hour prayer. From the earliest days, Christians have utilized the Psalms in their prayers (Acts 4.23-30). Phyllis Tickle observes that “the Psalter has remained as the living core of the daily offices ever since.”¹¹ Second, the injunction from

5. James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 30.

6. Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today*, 2nd rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 3.

7. Paul F. Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer in the Early Church* (London: Alcuin Club/SPCK, 1981), 25.

8. David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 138.

9. Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, 13.

10. *The Didache*, in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. and trans. Cyril C. Richardson, vol. 1 of *The Library of Christian Classics* (1953; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1970), 174.

11. Phyllis Tickle, ed., *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Autumn and Wintertime* (New York: Image/Doubleday, 2000), xi.

Paul to “pray without ceasing” in I Thessalonians 5.17 has also impacted the practice. For many Christians, fixed-hour prayer became the means to practice the life of constant prayer about which Paul speaks. Despite its long and complicated history, fixed-hour prayer has continued to incorporate the Psalms into a framework of prayer within each day in order for Christians to experience unceasing communion with God and the church.

However, many Christians in our age are entirely unfamiliar with fixed-hour prayer. I found it interesting that, during that aforementioned dinner conversation, another of my family members first associated the practice with Islam. When I explained I was researching the “Christian version,” she said, “You mean...there’s a Christian version of that?”

Why is it that a number of churches and Christian fellowships have completely forgotten about or intentionally neglected the long-standing practice?

Scot McKnight grew up in a church that did not practice fixed-hour prayer, and he reflects on reasons why “using someone else’s prayers was not permissible.”¹² First, using prewritten prayers leads to an impersonal faith. Prayer is to come from the heart, and “it is better, we were taught, to say something clumsy but really mean it from the heart than say something profound and poetic and run the risk of not meaning it.”¹³ Second, fixed-hour prayer is associated with the very type of prayer that Jesus himself condemns when he says, “When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words” (Matt 6.7, ESV). In McKnight’s church, practicing fixed-hour prayer was synonymous with the vain repetitions of the hypocrites of Jesus’ day. But McKnight goes on to debunk these beliefs: “If our prayers have become vain repetitions, it is because our heart is not engaged, not because of what we say.”¹⁴ He no longer adheres to the logic of his childhood church and has now embraced the practice of saying set prayers at fixed times. And he’s not the only one.

A Growing Number

In a recent *Leadership Journal* article, Ken Wilson, a pastor from Ann Arbor, Michigan, reflects on his discovery of fixed-hour prayer during a low point in which he struggled to maintain a consistent devotional life. His praise of the practice is glowing: “Fixed-hour prayer transformed my prayer life.” In addition to changing Wilson, it has powerfully impacted members of his congregation who are being drawn into deeper communion with God and the church through this practice. He concludes, “Fixed hour prayer is uniting us together in the Spirit.”¹⁵

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, a leading voice in the new monasticism movement, shares a similar yet unique story of being drawn to fixed-hour prayer, along with his community of faith in Durham, North Carolina.¹⁶ And Richard Liantonio, who grew up in a “standard non-denominational church” (as he describes it), recounts his discovery of fixed-hour prayer and describes the now personally-cherished practice as “a treasure waiting to be unearthed.”¹⁷

I am among the growing number as well. I was introduced to the concept of fixed-hour prayer by a youth minister friend who credited the practice with “saving his soul” during a difficult season of his life. So two years ago, with my interest piqued, I purchased the autumn and winter edition of the series of books that he uses: *The Divine Hours* by Phyllis Tickle.¹⁸ I confess that I have been very inconsistent in my practice, but even from my small amount of saying set prayers at fixed times, I have seen my prayer vocabulary and my desire to be in God’s presence increase.

12. McKnight, *Praying with the Church*, 3.

14. *Ibid.*, 4.

14. *Ibid.*, 6.

15. Ken Wilson, “Finding Myself in Fixed-Hour Prayer,” *Leadership Journal*, January 11, 2010, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2009/fall/findingmyselfinfixdhourprayer.html> (accessed February 17, 2012).

16. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, “Joining the Eternal Song,” *Christianity Today*, May 2011.

17. Richard Liantonio, “Entering the School of Prayer: Leaning on the Church’s Tradition of Written Prayers,” *Immerse* 2, no. 4 (November/December 2011): 27–31.

18. Phyllis Tickle, ed, *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Autumn and Wintertime* (New York: Image/Doubleday, 2000). See also *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Springtime* and *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Summertime*.

As I have come to learn more about fixed-hour prayer, I have developed a set of terms for what happens with us during the practice. When we pause to say set prayers at certain times of the day, we involve ourselves in the *upward*, *backward*, *outward*, and *forward* dimensions of fixed-hour prayer. These dimensions go a long way toward convincing me of the value of this practice.

The Dimensions of Fixed-Hour Prayer: Upward, Backward, Outward, Forward

First, in any form of prayer, there is an upward dimension of communing with God. When the people of God pray, they “seek to communicate with the Eternal One, speaking words of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication.”¹⁹ This is no different in fixed-hour prayer, and I would argue that in some ways, the upward dimension is enhanced by the practice. For Wilson-Hartgrove and his faith community, fixed-hour prayer has been a powerful reminder of the sovereignty and faithfulness of God:

One of the most important lessons I’ve learned from liturgical prayer is that, by God’s grace, we have all the time in the world to do the work of Christ’s kingdom. We pause for prayer morning, noon, and evening as a confession that our work depends not on our efforts, but on the faithfulness of a God who has already redeemed the whole creation.²⁰

Christians also commune with God the Son in fixed-hour prayer, especially in the morning and evening prayers which “are celebrated at times of the day that from the early Christian centuries have been associated with the dying and rising of Jesus—the evening more clearly with his death; the morning with his resurrection.”²¹

Second, there is a backward dimension to fixed-hour prayer. I believe the backward and outward dimensions are what truly make fixed-hour prayer distinct from other forms. Richard Liantonio speaks of feeling “an inexplicable desire . . . to be connected to the larger church, both geographically and historically. I wanted to be part of the Christianity I knew was much, much larger than what I had known.”²² The backward dimension is the connection with the historical church; with saints who have long since left us but whose words remain with us to teach us, bless us, and lead us before our Father’s throne. Through their words, we experience fellowship with them in prayer.

Third, fixed-hour prayer involves an outward dimension by uniting us with prayerful Christians the world over. When we practice this ancient form of prayer, we experience connection with a church that is geographically larger than what we often realize. For this reason, Scot McKnight describes the practice as “praying with the church.” And this reality remains even when we pray our prayers alone. Robert Benson admits that it is hard to practice fixed-hour prayer by yourself, but that “it helps when you are not actually by yourself, even when you are alone.”²³ In other words, though we may physically be alone, we are spiritually knitted together with believers through time and space in prayer. And not only that, the practice has the potential to increase our awareness of the needs of others. Tony Jones reflects on how fixed-hour prayer, and one prayer in particular, turns him outward: “No matter how well or badly things have gone for me on a given day, when I pray this prayer I’m automatically turned outward, to the needs of others, those I know and those I don’t.”²⁴

Fourth, there is a forward dimension to fixed-hour prayer, as Christians look ahead to Christ’s glorious return and the establishment of his kingdom in its fullness. Once again, there is an eschatological dimension to all prayer, and this can be traced back to the beginning of Christianity. James F. White observes, “Much of the

19. Stanley J. Grenz, *Prayer: The Cry for the Kingdom* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 22–23.

20. Wilson-Hartgrove, “Joining the Eternal Song,” 44.

21. Stanislaus Campbell, “The Paschal Mystery in the Liturgy of the Hours,” *Liturgical Ministry* 15 (Winter 2006): 55.

22. Liantonio, “Entering the School of Prayer,” 28.

23. Benson, *In Constant Prayer*, 119.

24. Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 122.

incentive to prayer was the eschatological fervor of early Christians and the need to watch and wait for Christ's return."²⁵ The theme of watching and waiting is illustrated in the words of Jesus from Mark 13.35-37:

Stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake. (ESV)

Fixed-hour prayer became a consistent practice of expressing the constant readiness of God's people for the return of Christ: a means to "stay awake" throughout the tasks of the day. In fixed-hour prayer, we actively wait and watch for his glorious appearance.

Saying Yes to Fixed-Hour Prayer

These dimensions represent the theological richness of the tradition of fixed-hour prayer. Yet, if we only discuss it in theory and never get to the business of saying these prayers, then we have missed the point. When I first encountered fixed-hour prayer, my primary questions about it involved the actual practice of it. So I close with some tips on how to get started. First, select a resource to use. As I mentioned earlier, I use Phyllis Tickle's series *The Divine Hours* and I recommend her volumes for other beginners like me. Each day of the year is covered and includes morning, midday, vespers (evening), and compline (before retiring) prayers. Conveniently, these daily prayers are also available online at the website for the Vineyard Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan²⁶ and on a free iPhone app called "Prayer Cards."

Second, begin small. I would follow Ken Wilson's advice here: "Set aside a day or two to do all four prayer intervals, just to see how it works. Then begin to build it into your daily routine, starting with the interval that is easiest. Focus on working that interval into your daily routine. Once that interval is in place, add others into your daily pattern."²⁷

And third, be gracious to yourself. If you miss a few offices, or even a few days of praying, do not lose sleep over it. Just begin again. Fixed-hour prayer, like many other spiritual practices, can become a means of trying to merit the salvation that God freely offers. By being patient and gracious with yourself, you will prevent this discipline from becoming an attempt to earn God's favor through your works.

My greatest discovery about this type of prayer, and about all prayer, is that it makes no difference how much I know about it if I am not willing to actually do it. The important thing is simply to start. I will conclude with these words from Robert Benson: "We do not have to know or understand everything there is to know and understand about this ancient way of prayer. But if we are being drawn to it, we have to begin to pray it. We have to say yes to it."²⁸

JOSEPH HORTON IS THE YOUTH MINISTER FOR THE WINCHESTER CHURCH OF CHRIST IN WINCHESTER, TENNESSEE. HE IS ALSO A GRADUATE STUDENT AT HARDING SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY (JHORTON16@HOTMAIL.COM).



25. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 23.

26. See www.annarborvineyard.org/tdh/tdh.cfm.

27. Adapted from Ken Wilson, *Mystically Wired: Exploring New Realms in Prayer* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010). Quoted on "Prayer Cards" iPhone app (accessed August 20, 2013).

28. Benson, *In Constant Prayer*, 150.