

1-1-2016

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Recommended Citation

Bryce, Brady (2016) "Praying Attention to God in Community," *Leaven*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol24/iss1/7>

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Praying Attention to God in Community

Brady Bryce

A common practice of beachgoers is to pick up a seashell along the sand and put it to an ear to listen for the sound of the ocean. However, with the actual sound of the ocean in the foreground, hearing the ocean in the shell does not have the same effect as when you are back home, reliving good memories of the beach trip. Listening to the sound of the ocean within a seashell is a shared human experience—but do you ever wonder why we hear the ocean in a seashell?

Another practice more common than shell listening is telling stories about our lives. This happens naturally over a meal with a friend, in line with strangers, or on break among coworkers. Conversation connects our lives with others' lives. Large groups energize some people and others prefer small informal settings, yet all people find meaning when others listen to them. Unfortunately, safe occasions to be truly heard are rare—even in expected places like church, living rooms, or Sunday school classes.

Our lives—so filled with activity and input—leave us tired and in need of a vacation. This exhaustion shows up in distracted, lonely lives spent staring into little screens. These problems worsen when Christians give little thought to what they do together beyond the exchange of good content or generation of good feelings. Too often our Christian activity lacks attentive focus on God and therefore cannot gather up life as a prayer to God.

This article is an exercise in practical theology for regular Christians. It offers a simple practice promoting attentiveness to God in life. Listening for the oceans of God's activity connects us with something far greater than our device screens, opening us up to the possibility of hearing and being heard. After a few framing words about practical theology, I describe a conversational prayer method using four questions, provide some historical background for the approach, and emphasize the need to orient life to God.

Is Theology Practical?

A common response to the word *theology* is fear. This reluctant fear may be due to using the term *theology* without definition. People assume a shared understanding that is not present. Many Christians avoid theology because it seems too intellectual. They dismiss theology as something outside their ability or interest, believing it to be an irrelevant discipline restricted to detached scholars. However, in its simplest form, theology means “discourse concerning God” or “God words.” The fact is that *every* Christian does theology, in the basic sense of “talking about God.” Even non-believers do theology by talking about life in respect to the absence of God. But while all may do theology, too often we fail to bring our life into focused conversation with God.

One risk of dissecting a term—like a health inspector examining a banana—is leaving nothing useful after the inspection. Once peeled, separated, and sampled under a microscope, the banana becomes a browned mush fit for the trashcan. Similarly, theology and practical theology risk defining and explaining versus actually practicing theology. Without extensive explanation, I will define *theology* as “discourse that considers life in relationship to God.” While theology covers vast terrain, in this article we will only consider that speaking which relates to God and orders life in relationship to God.

Over the last few decades, people apply the *practical theology* label with more frequency. Why place an adjective in front of theology? As a husband, father, minister, professor, and practical theologian, I believe theology is inherently practical. Discourse about God is relevant to life and especially to the most important things in life.

In addition to the simple definition of theology provided earlier, I clarify the intentions of my approach by noting the boundary markers of practical theology. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (former president of the International Academy of practical theology) provides four distinct and interrelated aspects of practical theology: an activity of faith among believers, a method to studying theology in practice, a curricular area of theological education and a scholarly discipline.¹ This article contributes a method useful for a believer's practice of faith. I aim to help every Christian to do theology with others using a simple set of questions. My hope is that this method will assist ministers, pastors, and Christians observe God's activity within their community, as resident theologians in their communities.

Sharing Prayer

Almost any mature Christian can use this conversational prayer approach. My four questions have been posed to middle school students, state university students, Christian small groups, Sunday school classes, homeless and poor people in inner-city settings. Over the last fifteen years, these questions have uncovered many stories of God's activity in unsuspecting lives.²

The sharing prayer method is an active conversation. Rather than bowing heads to pray, the group discussion becomes an informal conversational prayer. A leader poses each question, one at a time, and silently allows people time to respond.

For what are you thankful?

How have you seen God at work in life?

For what are you sorry?

To whom do you need to show love?

For what are you thankful? The spokesperson asks the first question and waits. People need time to think. Silence is appropriate. Allow silence and stillness time to work. Do not beg others to speak. The best leader or facilitator of these questions is one less prone to talk. When facilitators avoid filling the air with "leader speak," the silence welcomes people to answer. Typical responses become short stories from life. This prayer lays bare the texture and reality that transcend a one-dimensional dry-erase whiteboard prayer list. Eventually there comes a point when most people have responded, but it is not necessary for everyone to speak. The group leader does not need to feel the burden to call on people nor go around the circle. Allow responses to come at each individual's discretion.

How have you seen God at work in life? At a point reasonable for the time allotted, the facilitator moves to the second question about observing the activity of God. This question can be difficult for non-believers in the group. In such mixed settings, an alternative question may be appropriate: "How have you seen *good* in life?" Adding an *o* to *God* and converting it to lowercase does something to expand the range of responses.

For what are you sorry? The third question can be the most uncomfortable—for what are you sorry? Rarely do people announce their wrongs. The relative absence of confession in Protestant traditions leaves Christians little space to discuss everyday failures. Egregious sins do not come up because we have yet to make space for even simple offenses: cross words, insults, missed opportunities to do good, misplaced priorities, apologies left unsaid, etc. Allow the silence to provide space for God to work. People need time to

1. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "The Contributions of Practical theology" in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 5.

2. These questions are found in a weekly small group liturgy in my book, *Echoing the Story: Living the Art of Listening* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010), 6–7. This resource is the practical outcome and appendix of my doctoral work, "Echoing the Story of God: The Journey of Catechesis as Story, Transformation, and Evangelism" (Fuller Seminary, 2008).

think through the last twenty-four hours or through the events of the last week. This is important attentive work. Remember that not every thought will be verbalized, but God works in this silence. Sometimes people are prompted to act on these unshared items. So, the facilitator silently prays that God allows people to see their lives clearly and eliminates blocks to speaking. Addressing this question may be a good occasion for a leader to go first, helping model appropriate vulnerability to the group.

It helps to close these responses with pronouncement of God's forgiveness. While Christians do not have the ability to forgive sins, they are given authority to announce God's forgiveness. Leaders may cling to the promise—if we confess our sins, the faithful and just one will forgive and cleanse us.³ The leader may use a psalm to call upon God's forgiveness. For example, "Will you not revive us again . . . ? Show us steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation."⁴

To whom do you need to show love? The final question invites consideration of others who need God's love. Each day we encounter people who need the love of God in some specific way. This question may also be a place to seek God's love for yourself. All people are in need of God's love and grace. This prompts both love of neighbor and love of self, drawing on the second part of the greatest command from Jesus to "love your neighbor as yourself."

The simplicity of these questions masks their deeper theological significance. At some level, theology is the work of believers focusing upon God. It is the activity of the faithful to consider life in respect to God. Unfortunately, many sermons, classes, or even ministries do not consider their aims in relationship to God. Ministers worry more about the reception of their sermon than about reflecting God in their sermon. Sometimes our actions arise from default cultural values for succeeding in ministry, effecting social justice, or meeting perceived needs.

One great human need is to bring life into dialog with God. This means going beyond merely training minds intellectually. It means bringing everyday life into discussion with God. This moves us from a focus on the self, to an external relationship with God and our neighbor. The life of St. Ignatius provides an historical precedent to this notion.

Background

In the battle of Pamplona, a cannonball injured the leg of Iñigo Lopes de Loyola, eventually better known as Ignatius (1491–1556). During prolonged recovery from his broken leg, Ignatius read a translation of *Lives of the Saints*. Inspired to pursue the lifestyle of these disciplined Jesus followers, Ignatius composed the *Spiritual Exercises* to focus on Jesus's life. Over a period of twenty years Ignatius used, revised, and shared these practices with others willing to pursue God.

The *Exercises* are arranged into four weeks as a retreat for those seeking to orient their lives to God. These *weeks* are practiced as themes rather than strict seven-day increments.⁵ Week 1 pursues self-knowledge and sin; week 2 focuses on Jesus as King; week 3, on the passion of Jesus; and week 4, on the risen Lord. The arrangement and the writing of the book can be dry and confusing as the book was a guide intended for a director and not a spiritual reading to promote inspiration. Some have compared it to reading a cookbook⁶ or a book on learning to play tennis.⁷ The *Exercises* aim not at clever writing but committing to do the described actions.

Ignatius's example may illuminate some things for practical theology. First, sometimes transformation comes in doing practical theology rather than conceptualizing practical theology. The artificial separation of conceptual from practical is detrimental because they are functionally inseparable. Ignatius's own life reveals this unity in three ways. These disciplined practices were created to instruct how Jesus's incarnation informs self-knowledge. It was a recipe book for paying attention to Jesus's incarnation in our own existence. Second,

3. 1 John 1:9.

4. Psalm 85:6–7.

5. These weeks may generally follow the pattern of purgation (week 1), illumination (weeks 2 and 3) and union (week 4).

6. Anthony de Mello, *Seek God Everywhere* (New York: Image/Doubleday, 2010), 78, xi–xii.

7. George Ganns, *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 50.

the *Exercises*' development reflects revision by Ignatius. He encouraged other directors to adapt them. Evidently, Jesuits welcome adaptation because even the official website on Ignatian Spirituality reflects a revised order of the *Prayer of Examen*.⁸ Similarly, practical theology must also be open to adaptation. Third, they arose from Ignatius's own experience—a reading of the saints, Christian background and disciplined rearing in the military and aristocracy. His life expressed his deep convictions. His life located and enacted his belief.

So, rather than separate practice and theory, each informs the other and advances the other. Ignatius clearly stated the *Exercises*' purpose. Since human beings are “created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord,” they should become indifferent to all things that hinder desiring God.⁹ Pursuing God becomes the keystone of the order “for the greater glory of God” or *ad majorem Dei gloriam*.

My contemporary reallocation of Ignatius's work attends to one practice of prayer within these exercises called the *Prayer of Examen*. It is located in the first week and yet practiced daily throughout the *Exercises*.¹⁰ This prayer invites personal examination of each person's conscience, including words, thoughts, and deeds through five moves.

First, thank God for all assistance. Second, ask God to provide insight (or light) to distractions and sins. Third, recount the day, paying attention to your thoughts, words, and deeds. Next, seek God's forgiveness for inadequacies. Finally, cooperate with God's grace, resolving to live with God. Obviously, there are many interpretations of this prayer and certainly many abuses are possible. To contemporary Protestant ears this approach can quickly be dropped in a file folder marked *legalistic* or *hierarchal* or *too Catholic* (which often means it is unfamiliar). This brief article does not provide a complete analysis or historical interpretation but rather reintroduces a 500-year-old practice for contemporary use.

A brief summary of learning from Ignatius will deepen the experience when using the method described. Ignatius pursued God by cultivating a deliberate awareness of life in relation to God. Ignatius's founding principles and exercises point to this desire; his life of pursuing discipline and founding schools reflect his deep commitment to seek God. He recognized that the active practice of prayer in community is a necessary part of faith, benefitting the participants through the focus upon God and being directed as a group.

Deepening Practice of Theology

These four questions encourage the practice of theology in three ways. First, the wording of each question orients attentiveness to God. This conversational approach to theology recalibrates the focus on God. Identifying something for which we are thankful supports a more thankful lifestyle. Considering how God has been at work in life invites the assumption that God acts in life.

Second, the practice of silently listening to the experiences of others reminds us that our life is not the only life. We may live as if we were the central figure on earth, but we are not God. We tend to talk about ourselves and assume the correctness of our belief. However, the discipline of silently attending to others places our ideas and needs on hold. When we listen, we allow their stories and views to stand as a physical way of valuing the other person. In a small way, this acknowledges the mysterious other (or God) on a much larger stage. We love our neighbor to love God.

Third, the practice of asking and answering these questions with others encourages deeper awareness of the events of life. This is seeking God by exploring the events of life with others. The group practice prompts us to live differently. Hopefully we are more attentive and become more like Christ. Allow this God-focused conversation to create awareness and prayer returned to God.

8. The adjusted first step prays for God's guidance, according to the official website (<http://www.ignatianspirituality.com>). While I am not a Jesuit and thus not an authority, this revised order may arise from George A. Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen,” *Review for Religious* 31 (1972), 14–21.

9. Acquired from the “Principle and Foundation” in the first week of the spiritual exercises. Ganns, 130.

10. The *Exercises* describe no less than three approaches to the *Prayer of Examen* and even the entire process of the exercises invites an examination of life in relationship to God.

Returning to the Shells

The simple power of these four questions is easily lost in explanation. Remember that one doesn't need to know about the *Prayer of Examen*, nor Ignatius nor practical theology nor even theology. One simply needs to ask the questions and listen with a group.

The seashell provides a closing metaphor as one question remains unanswered: Why do we hear the ocean in a seashell? When I do workshops on *Echoing the Story*, I show a picture of seashells and ask why we hear the ocean. Some think it is the noise of air moving. Some think the sound is of our blood circulation. However, if it was air moving, we should still hear the ocean in a soundproof room, but you cannot. Similarly if it were our circulation, then we should hear it in a soundproof room. Again, you cannot. Plus, if it was blood circulation then the ocean should speed up with our heartrate, but the ocean sound does not speed up with exercise.

Most likely this ocean sound comes from collecting all the ambient noises in the room inside the shell against our ear. The shell acts to bring to clear attention all the scattered insignificant noises of whirring fans, buzzing electricity, or birds or wind. I like the idea of taking time to sit still and collect all the seemingly insignificant words, actions, stories, and encounters of our day and pay attention to them. Thus, with the help of others sitting still with us in community, we can give attention to the God beyond ourselves.

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