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Praying Together in Unity

Greg Peters, Biola University

“Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers [and sisters] dwell in unity,” writes David in Psalm 133. Augustine of Hippo’s exposition of this psalm becomes in the African bishop’s hand a masterful treatise on the monastic life. Augustine’s argument is as follows: (1) God’s salvific call “rang all around the world”; (2) yet this call was “not heard in Judea” because they “were deaf to the sound of it”; (3) but others heard the call and responded (e.g., the prophets, the apostles, the five hundred who witnessed Jesus’s resurrection,¹ and the 120 gathered in the upper room²), giving birth to the Christian church at Pentecost. And why did the Holy Spirit descend on these believers at Pentecost? Augustine believes, it appears, that it was because they were gathered “together in one place.” Thus, those who longed to live as *one* gathered together in *one* place and, we are then told, began to live together as *one*. They did not just live together; they lived together “in unity” by selling “all their possessions” and laying “the proceeds at the feet of the disciples.” Augustine is, of course, referencing a combination of Acts 2:45 and 4:32, in which these early believers in Jesus Christ form themselves into a community, holding all things in common. Moreover, this group of believers is not just unified around common possessions but also unified by having “one mind and one heart.”³ It is these believers united in mind, heart, and possessions who “hear effectively the psalm’s words, *See how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity.*”⁴ Augustine reminds his readers that these Acts 2 and 4 believers were the first but not the only ones who responded to God’s call.

¹ See 1 Cor. 15:6.

² See Acts 1:15.

³ See Acts 4:32.

⁴ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 132.2.

independence, from which we are still trying to recover. In any case, in the New Testament era and into the high Middle Ages, prayer, like all of life, was often communal. In fact, the earliest Christians were merely continuing a practice that they had learned as devout Jews, praying regularly together at the temple or synagogue: “And day by day, attending the temple together” (Acts 2:46a). In the words of commentator Richard Longenecker, “the early Jerusalem believers expressed their faith through daily adherence to the accustomed forms of their Jewish heritage... The favorite meeting place of the early believers was in the temple (cf. Luke 24:53), at the eastern edge of the outer court called Solomon’s Colonnade (cf. 3:11; 5:12). There, in typically Semitic fashion, they carried on their discussions and offered praise to God.”⁶

Jewish piety revolved around daily prayer. Temple sacrifices occurred each morning and evening with local synagogues arranging systematic readings of the Scriptures, together with psalmody and prayers. If someone was unable to attend the temple or synagogue services, she prayed on her own three times a day: “In the evening, and morning, and at noonday will I pray and lament, and he shall hear my voice” (Ps. 55:18). This pattern was continued/adopted by the first Christians in Jerusalem: “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and *the* prayers.” Subsequently as the Church grew, cathedrals and monasteries devised their own schemes of Scripture reading, psalmody, hymns and prayers. This is the origins of what is often called the Daily Office; or, in the language of the Rule of Benedict, the “work of God” (*opus Dei*). Throughout Christian history monasteries took seriously Ps. 119:164: “Seven times a day do I praise you.” But this frequency required the kind of time that non-monastics (i.e., “average” Christians like you and me) did not have (not to mention that it was in Latin) thus making the Daily Office inaccessible to the non-monastic laity.

⁶ Frank E. Gaebelien, ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 9: John, Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 291.

belief, Christian monasticism, as an institution, is not monolithic. That is, there have been and continue to be many forms of monastic life. But the form that has become the most popular is that associated with the sixth-century monastic legislator Benedict of Nursia (d. 547). Benedict was born in central Italy. According to his biographer Gregory the Great, Benedict was sent to Rome for his education but seeing the sinful life of his classmates he abandoned his studies, seeking to please God alone. This led him ultimately to live in a cave at Subiaco, about forty miles east of Rome. Gregory tells us that on the way to Subiaco Benedict met a monk named Romanus who clothed Benedict with the monastic habit. Gregory goes on to state that Benedict founded a number of monasteries in the vicinity of Subiaco but in time he placed all the monasteries he built, with their brothers, under other superiors. Benedict then moved south, founding a monastery at Monte Cassino, which was, we suppose, the catalyst for him to write the Rule. James Clark, in his magisterial study of the Benedictines in the Middle Ages writes, “The men and women that followed the sixth-century customs of Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–c. 547) formed the most enduring, influential, numerous and widespread religious order of the Latin Middle Ages. Their mode of life superseded the monastic codes of the early Christian fathers and before the close of the eleventh century it was the dominant form of monastic observance practised in the west.”⁷ By the high Middle Ages Benedict’s Rule was the most influential and followed monastic rule, governing hundreds, if not thousands, of monasteries across Latin Christendom.

There are seventy-three chapters in the Rule of Benedict. He begins by summoning the monks to “Listen carefully... to the master’s instructions... [which] will bring [them] back to him from whom [they] have drifted through the sloth of disobedience.”⁸ Benedict casts the

⁷ James G. Clark, *The Benedictines in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2011), 1.

⁸ RB, Prologue 1-2.

For Benedict it is not just the number of the psalms but the disposition of the pray-ers that needs addressing as well. Note the following:

We believe that the divine presence is on all sides and that the eyes of the Lord behold all, both good and bad wheresoever they may be. Especially however let us believe this without any doubt whatever when we assist at the Work of God: and thus let us be always mindful of what the prophet says: “Serve the Lord in fear”; and again: “Sing wisely”; and: “In the sight of the angels will I sing to Thee.” Therefore let us consider how we ought to comport ourselves in the sight of God and His angels and let us so take our part in the office that mind accord with voice. (Ch. 19)

If when we wish to seek any favor from men of influence we presume not to do so except with humility and reverence, how much more must supplication be made with all humility and purity of devotion to the Lord God of all? And let us bear in mind that it is not in much speaking that we are graciously heard but in purity of heart and tears of penitence. And so our prayer should be pure and short, unless haply it be prolonged as a result of the infusion of divine grace. In any case however let prayer in common be made short and at a signal from the superior let all keep time together in rising to a standing position. (Ch. 20)

For Benedict, the chanting or singing of the psalter, when done with proper comportment, gives birth to a mind in accord with one’s voice; or, to say it in more communal terms, one’s mind is in accord with the community’s voice. Further, approaching the Lord with a proper disposition to prayer leads to unified prayer among the community. The default setting for Benedict is the faithful praying of all the psalms, in a short span of time, in community. And as I said previously, this communal-based theology of prayer was the very form of Christian prayer practiced for centuries, in imitation of the earliest Christians.

Let me return in the time I have left to the Anglican tradition to illustrate the way that the Rule of Benedict has influenced Protestant prayer in community. Over the years scholars have noted that Anglicanism has a monastic quality to it that is, in some measure, attributable to its unique history. As Benedictine monk John-Bede Pauley writes, “Anglican identity is the

morning] offices of vigils and lauds) and ‘evensong’ (drawing from the [evening] offices of vespers and compline) as the principal public forms of worship... Daily celebration of mattins and evensong in the non-parochial churches [such as cathedrals]... is fully documented from the late seventeenth century onwards.¹⁵

As noted previously, this monastic quality to early Anglican liturgy seems to owe much to Thomas Cranmer, the primary architect of the Book of Common Prayer. It was his love of the Bible and of the patristic readings of Scripture that led him into a more monastic understanding of the liturgical hours: “Just as the ‘monastic’ understanding of liturgical prayer in early monasticism emphasized listening to and being formed by the words of Scripture, rather than singing and speaking them primarily in an attitude of praise, so too did Cranmer believe that the Bible was the living Word of God... his ideal was that the liturgy should play its significant role in encouraging everyone to ‘heare, read, marke, learne, and inwardly digeste’ Holy Writ.”¹⁶ In short, Anglicanism is direct heir to the monastic heritage of praying the psalter in community.

But this does not mean that one needs to become Anglican to enjoy the rich tradition of praying the psalms together. One only needs to call to mind the seminary at Finkenwalde run by Dietrich Bonhoeffer during the Nazi regime. The daily routine of life at the seminary began and ended with two services, conducted at the dinner table. The services began with a series of readings: a psalm, followed by a hymn, an Old Testament lesson, and a New Testament lesson. A time of extemporaneous prayer followed the readings and the praying of the Lord’s Prayer. For Bonhoeffer, the Protestant church needs to recover the practice of praying the Psalter, for it is in “the Psalter we learn to pray on the basis of Christ’s prayer. The Psalter is the great school of prayer.”¹⁷ So, I will end on that note: that the psalter is the great school of prayer and ideally

¹⁵ Pauley, “The Implication of Monastic Qualities on the Pastoral Provision for the ‘Anglican Use,’” 265.

¹⁶ Pauley, “The Implication of Monastic Qualities on the Pastoral Provision for the ‘Anglican Use,’” 266.

¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York/Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1954), 47.