
Praying the Back Door Shut

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Abstract

Through a study of how we pray we may better understand current pictures of who God is and how God works in the world—there's a definite connection. One of the ways our picture of God is formed is through our experiences with corporate prayer and the ideas about God expressed as people make requests, offer praise, and thanksgiving. Each public encounter with God is, ideally, an opportunity to reveal a biblical view of God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who is still alive and well. As it pertains to young adults, corporate prayer not only impacts their concept of God but their views about the church community and raises questions of authenticity and belonging, among others. One question that then arises is, Does corporate prayer have anything to do with whether or not young adults remain connected to church community? This paper suggests that while corporate prayer that expresses a Biblical view of God may not be the key to keeping young adults from walking out the back door, corporate prayer does have an important role to play in helping young adults make meaningful connections with their places of worship.

While washing dishes the other day a ceramic bowl slipped from my grasp and hit a glass sitting in the sink. Sadly, the bowl (the weaker vessel) succumbed to the impact. As I picked up the pieces, I hesitantly said, “Oh, thanks God for keeping me from getting cut...or whatever.” I wasn’t being rude; it’s just that in the moment I wasn’t certain that God had a role in the incident. To say that he did seemed strangely presumptuous so thanking him felt misguided. How involved was God in that moment, and why was it so hard for me to thank him?

As Christians, our prayers are intricately connected to our belief about who God is and how God works in our world.¹ The Christian world that I speak of is multifaceted, to say the least. Some professed Christians believe in Jesus, the Bible, and a personal relationship with God while others are of a pluralistic persuasion. Consequently, there is no one message being preached about prayer or about God though we all claim to believe God at least exists. One of the growing prayer spaces is the Internet, and due to the unabashed way in which millions share their lives with others via the Web, the prayer question becomes “Is prayer primarily about God or about us?” Old Testament prayers make it apparent that the words people prayed were indicative of

their understanding of God. For example, to refer to God as the God of Abraham and Isaac was for Jacob to note God’s faithfulness.² And even though Jacob was praying for his safety, his prayer made it clear that he knew God was able to deliver; God had a stellar track record.

Throughout this paper, I wish to explore the relationship between corporate prayer and our picture of God specifically as it relates to those in the millennial generation, among others, who are using our church’s back door. I will address the following questions: What pictures of God do biblical prayers produce? What pictures of God do our corporate prayers produce? What pictures of God do back-door users need in order to stay? How can a change in our corporate prayers lower usage of the back door?

What Pictures of God Do Biblical Prayers Produce?

Let’s first begin by defining prayer. In current biblical scholarship, prayer is an “address to God in the second person that is initiated by humans, is intentional in design, introduced by prayer vocabulary but is not conversational” (Boda, 2005). However, even scholars admit to our inability to scientifically define prayer because some prayers in the Bible don’t quite fit this tight definition. So for the purposes

of this paper, let us say that prayer is when a human being talks to God, and God listens and responds, as and when he wills. Or like one young adult said, prayer is “talking to God throughout the day—kinda like sending text messages all the time for any reason and then listening for his response” (Lawrence, 2008).

The Bible, the primary prayer source for Christians, is filled with a variety of prayers (from confession to thanksgiving), most of which are petitions. In these prayers, people are not simply talking to God but talking to God on behalf of themselves or others. And whether in the Psalms or the early Christian church, these petitions reveal the

“God works for the community not just the individual. In fact, there is a strong community element in biblical prayers.”

belief that when asked, God can “intervene and effect changes in nature and in the course of world events” (Okholm, 2000). Psalm 116:1-2 reads, “I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I

will call on him as long as I live.” God pays attention and saves his people (Charlesworth, 1992).³

Furthermore, prayers of the Bible recall what God has already done. Deuteronomy 9:26-27 reads, “I prayed to the LORD and said, ‘O Sovereign LORD, do not destroy your people, your own inheritance that you redeemed by your great power and brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand. 27 Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Overlook the stubbornness of this people, their wickedness and their sin.’” By praying about what God has already done, Moses also reflects on God’s actions toward Israel as a nation. God works for the community not just the individual. In fact, there is a strong community element in biblical prayers. Many of the Psalms reflect this, asking God to “save us and help us with your right hand” in Psalm 60:5 and “deliver us and forgive our sins” in Psalm 79:9.

What Pictures of God Do Our Corporate Prayers Produce?

In September 2006, Knowledge Networks conducted a national survey of more than 1,000 U.S. citizens (18 years old and older), trying to find out the differences among Christians. Questions were asked about their religious beliefs and practices. In the end, the survey grouped them in the following five categories (Lee, 2007).

Active Christians 19%

- Believe salvation comes through Jesus Christ
- Committed churchgoers
- Bible readers

- Accept leadership positions
- Invest in personal faith development through the church
- Feel obligated to share faith; 79% do so

Professing Christians 20%

- Believe salvation comes through Jesus Christ
- Focus on personal relationship with God and Jesus
- Similar beliefs to Active Christians, different actions
- Less involved in church, both attending and serving
- Less commitment to Bible reading or sharing faith

Liturgical Christians 16%

- Predominantly Catholic and Lutheran
- Regular churchgoers
- High level of spiritual activity, mostly expressed by serving in church and/or community
- Recognize authority of the church

Private Christians 24%

- Largest and youngest segment
- Believe in God and doing good things
- Own a Bible, but don’t read it
- Spiritual interest, but not within church context
- Only about a third attend church at all
- Almost none are church leaders

Cultural Christians 21%

- Little outward religious behavior or attitudes
- God aware, but little personal involvement with God
- Do not view Jesus as essential to salvation
- Affirm many ways to God
- Favor universality theology

Admittedly, times do quickly change and these results probably shouldn’t be used as an authority on the subject; yet they serve as a substantial critique of our current Christian world in the United States. And in this world, Protestant Christians, particularly Evangelicals, are currently the face of Christianity. They are probably part of the Active Christians, the 19% who feel obligated to sharing their faith. And yet Private Christians make up the majority of those surveyed. They have somehow developed an individualistic perception of God; but how is that possible when so many are sharing their faith? Perhaps even the fervent efforts of church goers aren’t grounded in community. Since multiple Christian types create multiple prayer types, multiple pictures of God are being forwarded to in-boxes around the nation and the world, making our responsibility even greater—we must pray a biblical picture of God.

While it isn’t easy to be sure of what all Christians are praying publicly, some prominent voices in Christianity are continually adding to the conversation. Eugene Peterson reiterates what we’ve seen in the Bible, saying that “Prayer detached from Scripture, that is, from listening to God, is

no longer biblical prayer. Our words to God disconnected from God's words to us short circuit the relational language that is prayer." Prayer is "an offering of ourselves just as we are" and "prayer is access to everything that God is for us..." (Peterson, 1989).

Just two years ago Philip Yancey wrote a book titled *Prayer: Does It Make a Difference?* Yancey asks the question, "Why does prayer rank so high on surveys of theoretical importance and so low on surveys of actual satisfaction?" (Yancey, 2006). People obviously aren't seeing the fruit of their labor which is again related to their understanding of the One to whom they're praying.⁴ While they believe that prayer is important, they don't see that God is at work in response to their prayers. While we can't demand that God respond a certain way in order for people to experience more satisfaction, we can take a careful look at their expectations of God.

In recent news, as our economy takes a downturn, prayer is appearing in very public spheres. In an article titled "In Crisis, Wall Street Turns to Prayer," the author discusses the prayers that took place and were encouraged by the belief that God cares about our financial state. People on Wall Street actually believed that praying to God about their finances would make a difference. Were they praying so publicly before the crisis? We don't know. But their recent actions add to the prosperity picture of God that many a preacher has already painted for us. Not only does he delight in making us wealthy, but he'll do what he can to protect our wealth. God has become more than a dollar bill.

Prayer movements are taking place throughout the nation, and young adults are at the helm. 24/7 Prayer USA "exists to transform the world through a movement of Christ-centered and mission-minded prayer." Since 1999, this group has primarily used prayer communities to send the message that God listens and acts according to our prayers, and that prayer turns people toward God or back to God. Such a strong belief in the power of prayer is coupled with a strong belief in the power of God. God exists in this communal prayer experience.

For a while now, I have heard a lot of people say that Christians should just "preach Jesus" as if Jesus is a simpler idea that what we have been preaching. The comment is typically refuting the preaching of doctrine and reveals that either we haven't been preaching doctrine correctly, as in an extension if you will of who Jesus is, or those hearing doctrine are resistant to that dimension of Jesus. Jesus and God become separate entities, the former representing the lovely warm fuzziness of the New Testament, and the latter representing the tough love of the Old Testament. Jesus is still divine but not quite God. Jesus is near, and God is distant. Jesus is by far the preferable choice.

What Pictures of God Do Back Door Users Need in Order to Stay?

The question then becomes, What picture of God is causing young adults to leave Christian community? We know that the most popular reason anyone stops going to church has to do with the person's interpersonal relationships with fellow churchgoers. But what are people saying about God or failing to say about God that causes young adults to forego their church commitment? For three weeks I conducted an informal, 10-question survey via the Internet that was completed by teens and young adults.⁵ The survey asked the following questions: 1. How do you define prayer? 2. What has your picture of God been? 3. When you hear prayers in church or other religious venues, what picture(s) of God do they typically give you? 4. What picture(s) of God would you like to have? 5. What do you pray about? 6. Think about what you pray for most frequently under #5. Why do you pray about it? You can choose more than one answer. 7. How often do you pray? 8. How often do you willingly (JUST because you want to) go to church or attend other spiritual events (Bible study, prayer meeting, etc.)? 9. Do you think you'll be part of a Seventh-day Adventist church community five years from now? 10. How old are you?⁶

I added question 9 so that I could get a general feel for how many of my participants are committed to Adventism and why or why not. After spending so much time thinking about those who are no longer committed to going to church regularly, I was surprised that the majority of my participants believe the Adventism community is right for them. Out of 179 responses, 89% said they plan to be part of an Adventist community five years from now. However, whether this means they'll actually continue going to church isn't crystal clear. One person between 16-18 years of age said he/she would be a part of an Adventist community five years from now but added, "I'm trying to find my personal spiritually, and I've decided to stay affiliated with Adventists until I find something which I believe fits more, and this could possibly take more than five years." Another between 19-21 said he/she would not remain and added, "I have been told multiple times that my liberal beliefs (equal pay for equal work, gay marriage) are incompatible with Adventism. Once I graduate I will begin looking for a church more compatible with my beliefs." And another between 22-24 said he/she wouldn't remain because Adventist community is, "Exclusive and distantly pragmatic." These responses serve as clear reminders that,

"Prayer movements are taking place throughout the nation, and young adults are at the helm."

more than likely, a young adult's decision to no longer attend church is neither haphazard nor impulsive.

And the same is true for those who choose to stay. One person between 19-21 said, "I grew up in the church and believe in what I have been taught. I also love God, and I think this is where He wants me to be." Another in the same age range will stay "Because that's the faith I have found to fit my picture of God most." And he/she sees God as a "loving, caring, friend." One person who is 16-18 will stay "Because I think that we have some truth. At one point of my life I thought I was going to leave. But my relationship with God changed through the years." These answers also reveal the connection between a relationship with God and a desire to stay connected to church community.

One of the most significant points this survey revealed is that for many young adults, there is a disconnect between their corporate spiritual experience and their personal spiritual experience. While the pictures of God revealed to them through corporate prayer may be negative, their personal prayer life is active. Over 44% of those surveyed pray every day while 30.2% pray as often as possible. One person said, "Just about every waking moment is spent with me talking to God about something...literally," while another said that his/her picture God is very personal, "someone you can just talk to normally." One 25-27 year-old prays as often as possible, "Although I admit that my prayers need to be more consistent, genuine, and earnest." When reflecting on the prayers he/she hears, this person says they are "Too tame and powerless, too warm and fuzzy. Sometimes it's not the picture of God portrayed that bothers me, but the insincerity/unbelief/ritualistic [nature] of the person praying that I don't like."

The reality is that public prayers paint a picture of the one praying and his or her relationship with God. That picture often has the power to add fuel to the fire as young adults continue to be frustrated by their church experience. In response to question 3, one 19-21 year old said "I hate public prayer—it seems like a useless ritual" while another said it sounds "high and mighty, maybe a touch stuffy—it depends on who prays and how eloquent they think they have to be." While we can't spend so much time focusing on how people perceive each other that we lose focus on God, we should pay attention to how our corporate prayers are impacting the spiritual experiences of others. We cannot afford to approach prayer halfheartedly. Who is God, and do our prayers reveal our belief?

How Can a Change in Our Corporate Prayers Lower Usage of the Back Door?

So what should we do? Here are a few suggestions I'd like to propose as we look at how to provide proper prayer examples that reveal who God is while deepening our spirituality and communion with each other.⁷

Grow in God personally

About six years ago while a graduate student at the University of Illinois Chicago, I was heading to class on one of the school's inter-campus shuttle busses. A friend from the Campus Crusade Bible study group that I frequented got my attention, and we began to talk. I don't remember everything about our conversation, but I do remember her boldly talking about her love for Jesus as if everyone else on the bus was a believer. For days I struggled with the reality that I wasn't very comfortable talking about my

faith in public, even with someone who shared it.

If I don't know and love God enough to be able to talk about him as comfortably as I talk about researching prayer, what are the chances that my public prayers will convey my desire for God? Without mumbling or apologizing, without lowering our voices or hiding out in chapels, we should be able to bring God into the conversation whenever appropriate.

You and I must have a daily, intentional encounter with God that includes prayer, if nothing else. The more we pray privately, the more comfortable we'll be in corporate prayer. While we don't want to showcase our prayer experience, we do want our public talks with God to reveal a meaningful divine-human relationship. We also have to keep reading the Bible so that we remember who God has been and who he promises to be. We need to reveal a growing desire for God.⁸

Pray our experiences

In his book *Answering God*, dynamic prose writer Eugene Peterson says that prayer is our response to something God has already said. Peterson says that prayer "is not an original language, it is a received language" (Peterson, 1989). We receive it from the generations before us; just as genes are passed down the line so are words and the experiences those words convey.⁹

Like those in the Bible who referenced God's existence by calling him the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we should talk about God's existence and who he has been during our time. Our prayers should discuss how God has been both provider and disciplinarian, how God has worked in good

"If I don't know and love God enough to be able to talk about him as comfortably as I talk about researching prayer, what are the chances that my public prayers will convey my desire for God?"

times (Israel's freedom from Egypt) and bad times (Job's losses). As often as we think of it, we should not only talk with God about our present life but also what he has promised to do for us and through us for the future. By remembering our history with God, we will reveal a God who is truly supreme and has experience dealing with his creations.

The danger, however, is that the multimedia availability of religious content helps people become spiritual do-it-yourselfers. As a result, they lack an important aspect of faith development: interaction with other Christians in community. This privatizing of Christian faith fits with the American spirit of individualism, but it may not produce Christians with enduring and long-term spiritual vitality. (Lee, 2007)

So when Christians are in public Christian spheres, they should be able to take part in community that is committed to faith development. Praying about what God has done in their lives as evidence of God's power reminds the community at large that they don't have only Bible narratives to reference when they need a reminder of God's goodness.

The Psalms are filled with examples of individuals' prayer experiences. Job's long interface with God is detailed for us. Daniel, Hannah, Habakkuk, Jesus, and even Samson have prayer experiences all their own. And for each one, God's response is somehow different, be it the time he takes, word choice, or the methods he uses, among other things.

Our own prayer experience is a witness to who God is. Like the witnesses in a court of law, our testimonies are stronger when our firsthand knowledge is deeper. *We need to reveal a personal God who works in our history.*¹⁰

Encourage listening

If prayer is really a two-way street, we must leave time to hear God speak. This doesn't necessarily mean having a moment of silence during the "garden or prayer" time in the middle of divine hour, though that may often be appropriate. Leaving time to hear God speak could also mean planning a service with such intentionality that any dead time is intentional, not a delay in service. When prayer time is announced, the person praying can simply remind the hearers to listen not only to the prayer but to God. The time in between the song of meditation and the sermon could be intentional space free of background music, free of any awkward transitioning. We're afraid of silence, a fear that often rushes us through the moments of silence.

We often put a lot of emphasis on listening to what God is saying through the sermon, as if it's the only time during the service that God has something to say. God can speak anytime, even through the offering call. Consequently, we have to do our best to give people the opportunity to hear

him which requires intentional prayer-soaked planning on our part. *We need to reveal a responsive God.*¹¹

Stop praying donor letters

Donor letters are quite static. Even if you know the donor personally, the letter doesn't typically express that casual knowledge, and if you were to talk to the donor face to face in the same language you used for the letter, your relationship would soon depreciate. Most of us learned to pray to "Dear Jesus," and many years down the road we finally graduated to "Heavenly Father." Beyond titles, God has emotions and various reactions. His faithfulness doesn't make him boring; he's actually quite dynamic. And the better we get to know him, the more we'll be able to pray more informed prayers.

Our prayers must also speak to a present God. Just as the language of KJV is hard for many to connect with, so is the language of some of our prayers. Certain terms used to describe God have been tossed around for so long now that their meaning is lost. When we call God "Lord," are we really saying that he should rule our lives? When we call God "Heavenly Father," are we really aware of his ability to be both a superior being and a loving parent? *We need to reveal a dynamic God.*¹²

Praying biblical prayers is by no means the only way to connect young adults to their church community, but it'll definitely make a difference because it will develop the relational aspect of prayer, and as we know, young adults are relationship-oriented. God talks about us being his people, and He being our God.¹³ It is possessive language that emphasizes our relationship as a community. God and humankind have the opportunity to belong to each other, to walk with each other through prayer. If our prayers speak this truth, those walking toward the back door may very well give God and the rest of God's people another chance because they'll see that a genuine relationship exists and will want to be part of that journey.

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Endnotes

1. In his article on prayer, Dennis L. Okholm (2000) speaks to this idea stating that our understanding of prayer is not just based on who we believe God to be but what we believe the divine-human relationship looks like.
2. Genesis 32:9-12, Then Jacob prayed, "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'"
3. Prayer in early Judaism revealed that, "Jews lived out the conviction, expressed throughout early Jewish Literature, that God does hear and answer prayers."
4. This raises the question: Do our prayers have the power to change God's mind? With such a belief in prayer, it would seem as if our words actually do something in the great cosmos. But maybe prayer changes us? Both are very important questions that necessitate deeper study that reaches beyond the parameters of this paper.
5. Participants were from age 13 to 28+. I was most interested in what those in their late teens and early twenties had to say. I wanted responses from those below and above that range in order to get a taste of what others were thinking and feeling toward prayer. One thing is certain: while reasons for staying in or leaving Adventist community are much more articulate in the 28+ group, they hold the same general sentiments as other ages.
6. A copy of the survey, in full detail, is included at the end of this paper. It is a combination of results from two identical surveys. Also find the survey at www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm'2cXrDgBcPyyQbrPLbo3tlg_3d_3d
7. With each suggestion, I will include footnoted comments from young adults who took the survey, along with their age range. The comment will answer one or all of the following survey questions: How do you define prayer? When you hear prayers in church or other religious venues, what picture(s) of God do they typically give you? What picture(s) of God would you like to have?
8. "I usually just see people doing what they are accustomed to do," age: 25-27; "Sometimes it seems as though He is a Santa Claus who they recite their wish lists to. Other times, you can see there is a deep connection," age: 19-21
9. Since so much of our prayer tradition comes from what we hear, we then must ask: So what of families that haven't prayed in years? What prayers do their children pray? Perhaps these are the same children who do not have a Biblical picture of God. To put the entire burden of picture reconstruction on the church is not a realistic approach. Nevertheless, the church still has an important role to play. Were this a more in-depth discussion, I would take time to unpack the parent's role in this process.
10. "Not sure, a lot of times it seems kind of like the person praying knows God better than the rest of us," age 19-21; "I would like to be able to picture God as a father whom I can talk to about anything on my mind and he will listen and help me work through my problems and joys," age: 16-18; "A friend, someone who cares about the little things and is with me every second of everyday," age: 19-21.
11. "I think God would shake his head at the length of some of the prayers. I think He'd also shake His head at the extreme impatience of the listeners," age 19-21; "A God who is real, who hears me, who isn't distant and who I know for sure is there listening," age: 19-21; "I want to see a father. I have to remind myself of God's love and desire to be with me, and that I am not alone in this relationship," age 19-21. "Talking with God—a two-way street including both hearing and listening," age: 19-21.
12. "Royal, old, stingy, obviously doesn't mind repetition, wants us to be lofty," age: 19-21; "I'd like to see a more personal focus...less flowery prayers," age: 19-21.
13. Leviticus 26:12 (NIV) I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people; Ezekiel 37:23 (NIV) I will cleanse them so that they will be my people, and I will be their God.

Corporate Prayer Survey

1. How do YOU define prayer? (No dictionary definitions please)

2. What has your picture of God been?

	Stern	Warm	Distant	Very personal	Indifferent
Early childhood					
Elementary					
Junior high					
High school					
College					
Post college					

Other (please specify)

3. When you hear prayers in church or other religious venues, what picture(s) of God do they typically give you?

4. What picture(s) of God would you like to have?

5. What do you pray about?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	All the time
Family					
Finances					
Food					
Friends					
Gratitude					
Job					
Peace					
School					

Other (and please specify how often)

6. Think about what you pray for most frequently under #5. Why do you pray about it? You can choose more than one answer.

I've talked to God about this before and he has helped

My church believes God cares about it

Biblical examples

My parent(s) believe God cares about it

Other (please specify)

7. How often do you pray?

As often as possible

Every day

Nearly every day

Mainly for my food

Mainly for special occasions

Only in religions services/settings

Never

Other (please specify)

8. How often do you willingly (JUST because you want to) go to church or attend other spiritual events (bible study, prayer meeting, etc.)?

Twice a week

Once a week

At least twice a month

Every now and then

At least once a year

Never

9. Do you think you'll be part of a Seventh-day Adventist church community 5 years from now?

Yes

No

Either way, why?

10. How old are you?

13-15

16-18

19-21

22-24

25-27

28+