

## The Liturgy of the Hours: Reclaiming an Ancient Practice as a Means of Ecumenical Dialogue – Brian T. Hartley

I have just returned from Morning Prayer at St. Paul's Free Methodist Church where the Liturgy of the Hours is prayed four times a day. What might be startling to many is the fact that this is a church situated squarely within American Evangelicalism, which has rediscovered its identity in the larger Christian tradition and offers to a largely Christian college crowd an opportunity to receive the Eucharist daily and to engage in the prayers of the church using the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. Our practices have allowed us to join with a group of Eastern Orthodox Christians in ecumenical dialogue, as well as introducing countless students and community folk to these central practices of the larger Christian church.

St. Paul's really grew out of impulses first birthed at Greenville College where the Religion Department has been taking all of its freshmen to Chicago for an ecumenical and inter-religious experience for over thirty years as well as seniors within the department to St. Meinrad's Abbey for an introduction to monastic life. As a student at Greenville a generation ago, I was privileged to be on the front end of both of these experiences and decided to write a paper on the Ecumenical Movement for a Religion Seminar. This experience propelled me towards further theological graduate education, first at Princeton Theological Seminary and later at Saint Louis University. As an evangelical Wesleyan, I often found myself "brokering" dialogue between those in the Reformed and Roman Catholic traditions, while looking to engage in common worship. A sabbatical at the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in the fall of 2006 provided the ideal opportunity to sit in on a graduate course on the Liturgy of the Hours taught by Fr. Allan Bouley at the School of Theology at St. John's while worshipping regularly with the monks at the abbey—particularly in the "hinge hours" of Morning and Evening Prayer.

That recent experience has prompted me to think about how such common experiences might provide a basis for further ecumenical dialogue—particularly between evangelical Protestants and those in the more mainline part of the church. This brief essay will attempt to point to central tenets of the liturgy that provide entry points for both common experience and theological discussion particularly as they apply to the college-age students with whom I work. While my own field is that of Historical Theology, I have found through exploring the Anglican tradition a bridge for helping current-day Methodists discover their own inheritance in the English Reformation. "Faithful hearing" lies at the heart of such a project and provides, I believe, a means of inviting Christians of different backgrounds to come together around a common purpose in service to God.

In a recent essay entitled, "Liturgy: the Ordo of Time," Dwight Vogel reminds readers that, "the Daily Office is a school of prayer, an ongoing novitiate in which we are taught how the Church has glorified God through the ages, entering into the paschal mystery through the transforming

power of the Holy Spirit,” (Ordo: Bath, Word, Prayer, Table, 154). Protestants, in general, and Evangelicals, in particular, come out of a tradition where, historically at least, catechizing played an important role in the shaping of its youth. “Having the right words,” whether in theological debate or, as in some Holiness traditions, proclaiming the narrative of one’s faith through “testimony,” were considered essential to evangelism and the personal appropriation of the faith.

Today, except in strongly confessional traditions, there are no longer central liturgical or even educative processes for “counting one’s self in” on the faith once delivered. The shaping of Morning and Evening prayer, however, give to the worshipper the words of scripture, prayer, and song to understand and appropriate the faith of the church into one’s own heart as a part of the larger body of Christ. The incorporation of all of these elements provides, also, a rhythm to counteract the cacophony of voices which dominate the media of the twenty-first century. Adolescents, both Evangelical and Catholic, participate in a common popular culture in which IPODS provide a beat, against which the Daily Office can suggest at least a counter-cultural rhythm. This “schooling” or “shaping” suggests a new common language over against that of the dominant culture.

Second, practicing the prayers of the church teaches all Christians the value of silence. Many of my students, coming out of an electronic culture, think of silence in terms of “dead air,” and something to be avoided at all costs. Barbara Brown Taylor in her book, *When God is Silent*, points out that, “there are fewer and fewer oases of silence in our noisy world. Communication has higher value for us than contemplation. Information is in greater demand than reflection,” (43). Regular use of the liturgy teaches us all, particularly those in the younger generation, the value of silence and allows us to hear the voice of God. What stronger bond might there be between Christians of all backgrounds than to reflect carefully together in silence upon a scripture passage just read?

Third, the structure of the liturgy provides a “safe place” for those who feel caught up in chaos, dissonance, and brokenness. Many of my students come from dysfunctional homes where shouting or isolation are sometimes their most common experience. Coming into the church where there is clear order provides a respite from this chaos and pain and allows them to participate without having to worry about what they will need to say while standing alongside their brothers and sisters. One curiosity in our own unique setting is that this has been particularly attractive to young men. I am often reminded at Morning Prayer of the careful cues we encounter when visiting a mosque, each man carefully lined up next to his fellow adherent. There seems to be a certain level of comfort for adolescent males who are quite awkward in other kinds of settings within the context of the liturgy. Some of these same young men who are so unsure of themselves (particularly with members of the opposite sex), don’t have to worry about what to say within the safe bounds of the liturgy.

Finally, since there is a mix in the Scripture lessons between a *lectio selecta* (scripture chosen to fit the season and the day) and a *lectio continua* (continuous reading through a book of the

Bible) methodology, the former provides key linkages to the cyclical rhythms of the church year while the latter allows the listener to become more familiar with the contents of the biblical canon. For Evangelicals, the church year is becoming, more and more, a means of reclaiming their faith (see for instance, Bob Webber's Ancient/Future series, published by Baker Press). Entering into this annual cycle provides a ready means for engaging those in the mainline and Roman Catholic traditions. Central to this has been the wider embrace of the Revised Common Lectionary, which owes at least part of its genesis directly to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. While it still is not widely used in Evangelical circles, more churches are finding it a means of reclaiming the important role of the scriptures in the regular weekly worship of the church. Perhaps it, more than any other liturgical reform, has opened up opportunities for discussion across the various Christian traditions.

At the heart of the daily liturgy remains the practice of scripture reading, corporate prayer, silence, and song. These are not unique to any one Christian tradition, though different theologies may support a variety of approaches to each. If our discussions about the Eucharist continue to be weighed down, at least in some respects, by the long centuries of rhetoric and the divisions of the Reformation, the revitalization of parish life through the regular practice of daily prayer may provide a way of helping our youth recognize the depths of spiritual practice available to them through the history of the church, as well as supplying a tool for reaching across the barriers that have traditionally separated Protestant and Catholic, Evangelical and Mainline, from one another.