



Body Prayer

GREGORY OF NYSSA'S PHYSICAL FAITH

Body prayer is physical activity that promotes spiritual communion with God, sometimes accompanied by verbal communication, but often simply experienced as spending time doing something together with him.

Participating physically in prayer changes the nature of our conversations with God. For some, action in prayer adds dimension to what would otherwise feel like flat words (Matt 6:7). For others, engaging the body frees us from the tyranny of the mind so that we can listen to the Lord's voice, not just our own (Isa 50:5). Many of the writings of the Cappadocian fathers wrestled with just exactly how this body participation in communion with God worked.

These three church fathers were born early in the fourth century in a region called Cappadocia, near modern-day Armenia. Two of them attended school together and grew up to be known as Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus.

The third, Basil's younger brother, also named Gregory (of Nyssa, c. 335–c. 394), did not want to be a professional churchman. He had neither Basil's administrative skills, nor the other Gregory's eloquence in preaching. Instead, he used his education to become a lawyer. Big brother Basil did not approve. To force him out of the secular job, he appointed Gregory bishop of Nyssa. Gregory could not resist. As a bishop, he continued to exert his keen mind, however, and eventually became the most proficient writer and theologian of the three.

For many years, the trio corresponded regularly. When the larger church fought over whether Jesus was spirit or flesh, the three men took up the discussion of this paradox in their letters (John 1:14; 4:24). Together they reasoned that Jesus was the same divine substance or essence as the Father—nothing less (John 10:30)—but also that Jesus was human—and thus unique. They argued for three distinct, yet permanently cooperating, persons or “faces” of one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Rom 1:1–4). It is this tri-unity understanding that comes down to us in the Nicene Creed.

In 381, Gregory presented their Trinity concept to a gathering of church leaders at the Second Ecumenical Council, where he lobbied strongly for its adoption. After the council, he traveled to Syria, Arabia, and Jerusalem, helping churches resolve their sometimes bloody disunity over the issue by offering believers the option that Jesus was one whole—both “very divine” *and* “very human.”

Gregory was the first writer to link Christ's act of becoming human to save humans with Christians' acts of eating and drinking communion and getting wet in baptism (1 Cor 11:26; Heb 10:22). He wrote that receiving these physical sacraments played a role in a person's spiritual cooperation with God: “Since the method of our salvation was made effectual, not so much by [Christ's] precepts, . . . as by [his] deeds, . . . it was necessary that some means should be devised by

which there might be . . . a kind of affinity and likeness between him who follows and him who leads the way.”¹

Spiritual gifts did not work apart from observable fruits of this cooperation.² Prophecy, for example, was a useless gift if it was not physically practiced with love and did not bear the fruit of love (1 Cor 13:8–9; Gal 5:22–23). More than any other writer of his time, Gregory articulated the association: physical signs of faith both point to and participate in mysteries of faith.

Fourth century controversies were not the last conflicts to arise over how one’s body engages one’s redemption. Today, you still cannot attend church for very long before you hear such questions. What is the exact nature of the bread and wine with regard to Jesus’ body and blood? Is sprinkling sufficient for baptism, or must you be fully immersed? Shall we raise hands and dance or keep silence in worship? Will we recite ancient prayers or speak in spiritual tongues? The fact is we do not fully comprehend how the body-spirit mystery works, so we discuss it . . . a lot.

What we do know is that you do not *have* a body; you *are* a body just as much as you are a mind and a spirit.³ Modern learning theories and brain science support this scriptural assumption. Multiple-intelligence studies suggest that human understanding grows by doodling and tasting, as well as by reading and taking notes.⁴ And left brain/right brain studies indicate that the right hemisphere, the faith and religion side, needs more exercise.⁵

Many religions encourage such exercises as burning incense, lighting candles, walking the labyrinth, tracing mandalas, dancing, and looking at icons because they know that engaging the whole person in worship is powerful. Some of these methods are used by Christians, too. Long before Gregory, the psalmist urged worshipers to “Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the Lord!” (Ps 134:2 RSV) and implored God to “Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee” (Ps 141:2 RSV). Your body’s posture, your speech, your song, your hearing, your senses of smell and taste, and your hand motions change how you listen to the Lord and how you respond.

Body prayer taps our right-brain listening tools of dimension, imagination, and faith and momentarily sets aside our left-brain demands for black and white, yes or no answers. Instead of worries and wants encumbering the mind, shapes, sounds, and motions occupy it, allowing deeper longings to rise up and be addressed (Ps 42:2). In addition to telling God what is on our prayer list, employing our whole bodies creates space for prayer to become a communion of trust.

Sharing a prayer activity with the Father—rather than simply listing our expectations of him, ourselves, and others—feels more like breaking bread together than flying in for a business lunch (Exod 17:7; Luke 22:15). We relax our need for an immediate word of affirmation, and this allows a sense of God’s intimate presence to sneak in through the back door of action and artistic play. Body prayer allows us to enjoy our time with the Lord. And it is this communion that satisfies our hearts.

¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism* 37 (vol. 5 of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*; Series 2; ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; 1886–1889; 14 vols.; repr. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 502.

² Stanley M. Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1984), 144–51.

³ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 116.

⁴ Neil D. Fleming and Charles C. Bonwell, “VARK: A Guide to Learning Styles,” n.p. [cited 11 Jan 2006]. Online: www.vark-learn.com/english/index.asp.

⁵ Dan Eden, “Left Brain: Right Brain,” n.p. [cited 11 Jan 2006]. Online: www.viewzone.com/bicam.html.

Practice

1. Choose an activity that you will dedicate to body prayer. With a little research, you can pursue ancient prayer arts like walking the labyrinth. Others might designate a modern activity, such as shooting hoops or cross-stitching, for body prayer. Perhaps you would prefer to commandeer a daily chore like walking the dog. Or you might want to dip into your brain's artistic side by doodling abstractly or coloring a book of geometric shapes.
2. Find any equipment you need (the dog's leash, colored pencils and paper, etc.) and a location where you won't be disturbed by interested observers. You may load your headset with modern worship songs, recorded Scripture, or classical church music to help you focus. Or you may choose the stillness of silence.
3. Turn off your phone, pager, social networking site, email, etc. Quiet yourself before the Lord and invite him into your prayer time. Ask him to direct and protect your thoughts from foolishness and deception. You may suggest a topic of conversation with him, perhaps a choice you have to make or a tricky relationship or an unhealthy attitude. You may ask him to bring something to mind. Or you may simply decide to be together without a specific agenda.
4. Whatever the activity you choose, the goal is to free your mind from immediate concerns by using a single, repetitive motion to focus your attention. This activity is different than an intercessory prayer walk, where you make requests for the neighborhood as you circle the local buildings, or an artistic expression, which depicts visually or audibly how you feel. Ironically, the purpose of body prayer is to limit yourself to a single activity as a means of stilling yourself to listen to God's voice (Ps 46:10).
5. When you are ready, turn on your headset and begin. Allow yourself to wander wherever the dog leads or to doodle freeform, for example. Do not obsess with accuracy, precision, or perfect pace. Enjoy the mix of colors, shapes, and movement that you encounter. Trusting the Lord to reveal what he wishes, let your thoughts roam.
6. Set yourself a time limit and faithfully stop when it is up. You can return to the exercise of prayer tomorrow.
7. Immediately, make a note to yourself of any specific patterns or directions your thoughts took. What did you hear in the worship or in the Scripture that bears more attention? What issue from your current circumstances dominated? Do you feel like laughing? Are you sad? If you noticed a new thought or synthesis, if you understood an anxiety, if you felt a conclusion emerge, write that down, too. If nothing happened, ask yourself what nothing felt like. Where did you and the dog end up? What shape did nothing take on your paper?

8. Offer your wandering, your notes, your ideas, your feelings to God. Thank him for his guidance, safe-keeping, and peace. If nothing did happen, offer that nothingness to God, thanking him for the chance to be still in his presence (Ps 23:2–3).

9. It may take some time for you to release yourself from expectations of production or success. Often, people become discouraged because they cannot see immediate purpose or meaning in their wanderings, whether by foot or by hand. Western society and sometimes our personalities have conditioned us to trust only the scientific approach of our left brains. Give yourself permission and several chances to simply delight in the right brain artistic “mess” you and God make because you have made it together. Allow yourself to take walks with God that assert no more agenda than spending time together.

Sample the Prayer

If you only have five uninterrupted minutes to spend with God, take note of your posture. Are your arms crossed or open? Are your hands clenched together or relaxed? Are your shoulders tensed or at rest? Are your legs crossed or are your feet planted on the floor? What does your body language tell you (and God) about how you are feeling or what you are thinking at the moment? You have expressed this through your physical position; can you tell God about it with your words, too?

During another five-minute prayer time, simply change your posture. Kneel at your chair or bed instead of sitting. Prostrate yourself on the carpet instead of kneeling. Open your palms and lay them face-up on your lap instead of clasping them together. Look at a picture of Jesus instead of closing your eyes.

Practice Together

If you practice this exercise as a small group or with a friend, take turns suggesting a topic to intersect with your activity. You may also take turns selecting the music or Scripture to which you all listen. When the designated time has elapsed, give yourselves a short period to consider the individual patterns your prayer has followed before sharing these with the group. Some spiritual direction groups choose different media for this exercise; depending on the availability, you might rather sculpt clay, paint, glue pieces of colored paper or found objects into a collage, or walk a labyrinth.

Alternatively, your group may wish to contribute to one canvass, one sculpture, one drawing, or one collage during the designated time frame. You may choose to walk the labyrinth in twos instead of one-by-one. When your activity is complete, you will be able to share, not only individual themes that arose as part of your prayer, but how those themes shifted with the physical interaction of other group members. Furthermore, you may be able to discern what the group’s melded prayer seemed to be and to listen for how God would speak to you as a unified community.

Consider

1. Jesus’ wholly divine and wholly human nature constitutes one of the most difficult paradoxes of the Christian faith. Believers and seekers alike struggle with it. How does your own fully spiritual and

fully physical nature influence the way you understand Jesus? How do these paradoxes influence your relationship with God?

2. Recall a time when something you did or felt physically changed your mind, messed with your emotions, and/or affected your sense of connection with God or others. Considering the impact, what are ways that you already harness the power of your body to influence the state of your spirit? How might you apply these to your personal or corporate prayer life?

3. History has long connected the friendships (and frustrations) of the three Cappadocian church fathers with our three-in-one understanding of God, which grew out of their relationship. How do the interactions of your friends, family, or faith community reflect the interaction of the persons of the Trinity? How, for example, is physical prayer with your group or a friend different than doing this alone? Do you feel more self-conscious or find it easier to let go of your expectations when you are alone or when you are with a group?

4. If you have tried several types of sacred music or Scripture for this exercise, how do the various pieces flavor your listening? How does the location, lighting, or physical medium change your experience with God?

5. What other activities might lend themselves to body prayer? Which activities do you prefer? Why? Which seem inefficient, goofy, dangerous, or otherwise unappealing to you? What might be the advantages and disadvantages of trying one of those?

Study Further

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