Word & World
Volume 35, Number 1
Winter 2015

Prayer Does Not Work: Paul Tillich and Centering Prayer

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The question "Does prayer work?" is the wrong question. If one answers yes, endless counterexamples can be brought to mind in order to demonstrate the naiveté of such an affirmation. But if one answers no, the role of prayer in the lives of countless saints and geniuses is given no explanation. The question does not go deep enough. But, though it is easy to brush the question aside, it is by no means so easy to banish the mindset that gives rise to it. It seems to exist in most believers (including myself), but it's killing us.

This is an essay for those for whom prayer has become a problem. I have in mind those who may have grown up with regular times of prayer, but who have long since ceased to pray, perhaps not fully knowing why. Or maybe they do know why. Perhaps at some point they sensed that the whole thing just didn't work anymore: God, prayer, the whole bit.

As we grow up, our everyday lives become more and more predominated with a constant attention to how well things are *working.* Before we go to bed at night, we might hope that the alarm clock works, thereby ensuring we make it to, well, "work" on time. We change the oil on our vehicles, exercise our bodies, and work on our relationships. Why? So things keep working. Everyday life tends to be a constant attention to making sure that life in general goes on working. If things

When prayer stops "working" and our understanding of God becomes itself problematic, some might find renewal in the theology of Paul Tillich and the practice of centering prayer, a theology and practice that can reunite the surface of life with its depths, and in so doing, free us to be fully alive.

stop working, however, we either get to work on a solution or get rid of them. "It wasn't working," is a perfectly sensible answer to a whole range of questions: "You have a new car! What happened to the old one?" or, "How come she ended the relationship?" It can even be an answer to the question of why someone might choose to give up the whole project of life itself. And with that, we can see just how deep this goes. Not only can the many particular tasks of our life either work or fail to work, our life as a whole can be viewed in the same way.

Is it any wonder then that our prayer life easily finds itself under the purview of this regular and necessary frame of mind? Perhaps, now that we've looked at a few examples, it's not even quite so clear to us why our original question is so badly placed.

Lutherans in particular have always been wary of works righteousness and rightly so. But the space between salvation by way of moral effort and the dropout mantra of "let go and let God" has never been an easy one to chart.[1] When we get the sense that our prayer life is missing something, it's a great deal easier to vacillate between redoubling our efforts and being more disciplined, or just—to take the other approach to something that doesn't seem to be working properly—stop bothering with it.

As a young man attending a Baptist seminary while working on my MA, I had tried and failed enough times at the former path that I was pretty much resigned to living in the latter state. But it was at that time that a rather unexpected thing began to happen. Through the writings of a Lutheran theologian, Paul Tillich, I came to discover a typically Catholic form of prayer. Though, in its contemporary form, this mode of prayer came after his time, it remains deeply resonant with his thought. I'm speaking here of "centering prayer," and I've come to see it as an interesting path between a crude form of sanctification by moral effort and the lazy caricature of "let go and let God." In either case, I want to argue, prayer simply "doesn't work." In fact, the very term "work" is a bad metaphor for what happens in prayer. The theology of Paul Tillich and centering prayer can subvert our usual notions of "work" and reorient the question of prayer toward a deeper question of the fullness of life.

Paul Tillich and Prayer

Paul Tillich's conception of God first intensifies the problem of our prayer life, but then it provides a key to a revitalized life of faith.

God: self and world

Every act of prayer implies a conception of the relation of our self to God. When it comes to Paul Tillich, this relation is described in a very radical way. He is typically remembered for describing his views in ways that often struck his listeners

[1]We can think, for example, of Paul's conflicts with the "Judaizers" who felt he was being too lax on this point, as well as Augustine , who was warmly received by many cosmopolitan Roman citizens, as they felt his theology to be comfortably tolerant of persistent sin.

as being quite unbelievable. His assertions that "God does not exist"[2] and the suggestion that in the face of radical doubt God must be found "above the God of theism"[3] are often recalled, but seldom understood. And yet, behind the radical nature of his formulations stands a quite classically orthodox view of God, and a correspondingly orthodox view of the way that the human self relates to God.

Tillich's view is really quite consistent with the broad strokes of the tradition that has come down through Christian history since the first systematic formulations in patristic thought, through Augustine, Aquinas, and even Luther. Take, for example, Luther's view. For Luther, everything created—which includes our notions of God—is a "mask" of God.[4] As such, they partially reveal and partially hide God's true nature, which is, in itself, ultimately mysterious and beyond the capacity of human nature ever to know. This is directly in line with Aquinas's thinking that creatures are "effects" of God that do not rise to the level of their cause. As such, they, again, partially reveal and partially hide God's essence.

God is not "a being," says Tillich, but "Being-itself." The moment this is stated, the game changes. We know how to pray to a being, but how does one pray to Being-itself?

Now, back to Tillich. The basic move that intensifies the problem of prayer in his thinking is the point at which he takes away from us the idea that God is an entity separate from ourselves to whom we can relate through prayer: God is not "a being," says Tillich, but "Being-itself."[5] The moment this is stated, the game changes. We know how to pray to a being, but how does one pray to Being-itself? In fact, the language breaks down in the very suggestion that one could pray *to* Being-itself, for Being-itself is not an object separate from a subject. The power of Being is within both subject and object. As you can see, prepositions here become problems. And yet it is precisely in the neighborhood of these linguistic difficulties that the apostle Paul's assertion makes sense, that "we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26).

In Tillich's jargon, God transcends the subject/object structure of reason and the self/world structure of being. This is one way to get at what has always been thought of as God's *eternal* nature. Tillich's framing of the issue, however, helps us

[2]Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Reason and Revelation, Being and God*, vol. 1 (1951; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) 205.

[3]Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953) 190.

[4]Bengt R. Hoffman and Pearl Willemssen Hoffman, *Theology of the Heart: The Role of Mysticism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Kirk House, 2003) 68–69. Martin Heidegger later made much of this point in an explicit philosophical mode in his critique of "onto-theology." For more on this, see Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

[5]Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 205.

see clearly the way that all human attempts to relate to God, including prayer, face a tremendous difficulty. Any attempt by us as a subject to relate to God, who is beyond subjectivity and objectivity, invariably brings God into the structure of subject/object relations. For it would seem that we cannot think, we cannot pray, unless we think or pray *about* or *to* something or someone. It was just this situation that became a problem for me, and for many others who attended seminary with me. We would pray to God, but as our critical awareness emerged during the course of our graduate studies, God, who had always been there, suddenly faded before our self-critical doubt.

Tillich himself was quite sensitive to this moment in the life of faith. He urged that it should not be stimulated prematurely, but that, once one's critical awareness has been awoken, a decisive point has been reached.[6] He was very much alive to the possibility that the fear of losing God can lead to fanatical suppression of doubt and disintegrating subservience to human authorities who claim to speak for God.[7] Perhaps less dramatic, but just as corrosive, is the path in which one does not necessarily suppresses one's doubts, but simply chooses not to look too hard at them. Just like any other committed relationship in which the difficult bits are left out, no one needs to get too excited, but, in the absence of dynamism and passion, the question of why the relationship is worth bothering with at all eventually makes itself known.

Prayer: ecstasy

In contrast to either fanaticism or boredom born of suppression or superficiality, Tillich almost always spoke of prayer in relation to *ecstasy*. Ecstasy should not be thought of as an intense subjective experience. In Tillich's thinking, ecstasy is a fragmentary union with God. It is an experience of the transcendence of normal everyday experience, which is characterized by the separation between subject and object. If in God all subjects and objects are united, then by this logic, prayer on the level of subject/object relations is rendered impossible. Instead, prayer becomes thought of as intimacy with God by way of moving the human spirit beyond the structure of normal everyday experience. In his own words, Tillich says,

> The best and most universal example of an ecstatic experience is the pattern of prayer. Every serious and successful prayer—which does not talk to God as a familiar partner, as many prayers do—is a speaking to God, which means that God is made into an object for him who prays. However, God can never be an object, unless he is a subject at the same time. We can only pray to God who prays to himself through us. Prayer is a possibility only in so far as the subject-object structure is overcome; hence, it is an ecstatic possibility. Herein lies both the greatness of prayer and the danger of its continuous profanation.[8]

[6]Tillich refers to this as the line between a natural and a reactive literalism. See his *Dynamics of Faith* (1957; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2001) 60–61.

[7]Ibid., 58–59.

[8]Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953) 119–120.

In those few words, the problems inherent in relating to God as "a familiar partner" are brought to a climactic end, and a new way—actually a much older way, beyond thought, beyond words—is opened up. In a sense, the recovery of this mystical dimension of prayer is a sort of return to a more childlike experience, to a time before the mystery and terror of being in the world was boxed up into specific notions of self, of world, of sky and wind, of sex and love, of friend or enemy. To the child, as to the mystic, prayer doesn't "work." The awe, terror, and wonder that naturally fill the child's prayers have yet to be exposed to an adult technology that measures first the world, and then God, by standards of utility, efficiency, and ease of use. Intimacy with God—that is, prayer—is a great deal wilder than we are used to giving it credit for. The term "ecstatic" helps us see a bit more clearly why it is that I'm arguing that prayer does not work. Does one ever think to ask if ecstasy works? Would we not think someone a fool if they did?

Centering Prayer: Ecstatic Practice

Centering prayer is the practical counterpart to the theology I have just sketched. In the previous section, I claimed that the sort of theology that Tillich describes renders impossible communicating with God as one person talks to another. Centering prayer takes such a claim seriously. In broad terms, prayer can be divided into two basic types: cataphatic prayer, which prays to God using one's intellect and language, and apophatic prayer, which prays by surrendering both intellect and language. I'll say a bit in the next section on how these two forms of prayer are related, but for now all that needs to be noted is that centering prayer is decidedly in the apophatic tradition and it comes into its own when God's eternity begins to outstrip our former concepts.

The method of centering prayer is disarmingly simple. First, sit upright in an attentive, but comfortable position. Then, for the next twenty to thirty minutes, gently release any and all "thoughts"[9] from your mind. In this way, the mind is moved from attention to particular things to an awareness of being-as-such. Repeat once or twice per day.[10] That's it.

The practice is not an effort to "think nothing," which would be impossible, incredibly boring, and perhaps liable to give one brain damage of some kind. Rather, the practice is an intentional consent to God's immediate presence in, through, and beyond (there are those prepositions again) all your conscious concepts, images, and thoughts.

For one who remains comfortable in their cataphatic prayer practices, such a different mode of prayer may seem unnecessary or even frightening. On the other hand, apophatic forms of prayer can be a breath of fresh air to those for whom

[9]A "thought" is here interpreted in the broadest possible sense. It can be anything from a daydream, to an insight, to noticing the rumbling in your stomach, or even attention to your breathing. The key is the release of attention to anything "particular," thus developing the capacity for attention to being-as-such.

[10]Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*, twentieth anniversary ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006) 175–181.

prayer has become a problem. When conscious images and concepts of God have ceased to be helpful roads to a deeper intimacy with God and have instead begun to obscure much more than they reveal, the realization that God's mystery always transcends these images can be a deeply healing insight. This is a natural point in the life of faith, but unfortunately some traditions lack the resources to cope with it. The result is that this moment in one's growing life of faith becomes the point at which people feel compelled to leave the tradition. Rather than the point at which Christian faith opens up to a revolutionary understanding of God's unfathomable grace, prayer is thought to no longer work.

What is needed when prayer breaks down due to an overly rationalized image of self and God is a method to gently introduce a mode of relating self and world to God that transcends these necessary but increasingly alienating dynamics.[11] What is needed is *ecstasy*, and centering prayer is daily practice in ecstasy.

Coming back to the language of subject/object transcendence, what happens in centering prayer when one gently releases one's attention from particular thoughts is the release of attention also from one's self. Not only are external realities or objects that we might fix our attention on released, but our consciousness of our very self is gently let go of. In this moment—and it will likely be only for a moment—the subject/object split within human consciousness is overcome. The state of mind in which we live out our normal everyday lives as a self separate from everything in the world around us, separate from our own potential, and separate from God, is in this unspeakable moment overcome. Such moments are both tastes of heaven as well as tastes of our own ego death. It is the ecstatic reunion of life that, within our usual experience, is always separated.

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When prayer stops working, it is time for prayer to begin *living.* The ecstatic practice of centering prayer is one moment in this new life. As reflected in classical Trinitarian theology, the life of prayer, like the divine life-itself, is a dynamic of leaving one's self, encountering otherness, and returning to one's self in the form of love. The trouble that the life of prayer runs into is that there comes a point where the moment of self-alteration, of leaving one's self, gets hung up in known patterns of thought, images, and words. The life process, the dynamics of intimacy,

[11]Richard Fowler, in his six stages of faith, locates the transition between stage four and five as typical of this sticking point. He says that the weakness of stage four self/world construction is "an excessive confidence in the conscious mind and in critical thought and a kind of second narcissism in which the now clearly bounded, reflective self over assimilates 'reality' and the perspectives of others into its own world view." James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 182–183.

love-itself, consequently stall. From this angle, centering prayer is practice in "getting out of one's head." This idea of prayer, as an entrance into divine life, allows me now to relate cataphatic prayer to the practice of centering prayer.

Centering prayer related to cataphatic prayer

It is perhaps easy to get the impression from what I've said to this point that apophatic forms of prayer are, in essence, the highest forms of prayer. This, however, is not the case. As the spiritual life matures, the nature of all forms of prayer matures. The reason apophatic prayer tends to take on an air of superiority is only because it is the necessary step beyond a cataphatic prayer rut that has lost touch with its depth. That is, it has lost the transcendent, eternal dimension beyond the usual subject/object structure of everyday life. Since this is the place that we routinely find ourselves stuck, the apophatic moment that does the unsticking might seem to be, in itself, a final end. But such an interpretation results from standing too close to the picture.

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The highest form of prayer mirrors a life lived to its fullness, which in turn mirrors God's superabundant life. In each case there is the risky moment of leaving the safety of one's centered identity, the encounter with otherness, and a return, though changed, to the known world of self-identity.[12] Cataphatic prayer resides within the known world of self-identity. The known world is not, as is sometimes suggested in contemplative literature, unreal or pure illusion, but when divorced from its transcendent depths, it becomes superficial, dull, prone to confusion, and, as Augustine was wont to stress, a context for misdirected love.[13] Thomas Merton describes such a state as the point at which "[a]ll the pretty images and concepts of God that [the mind] once cherished have vanished or have turned into unpleasant and frightening distortions. God is nowhere to be found. The words of prayers return in a hollow echo from the walls of this dead cave."[14] Intellect and language have their limits, but this does not imply that one's intellect and words must forever be left behind in one's prayer life. They do, however, take on more complex characteristics. They cease to be ends, or the final limit of our ability to interact with God, self, or others; instead, they become pointers, suggestions, hints, whispers, and echoes.

[12]Tillich portrays this classical exit and return pattern in part IV of his systematic theology. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God* (1963; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) 30–32.

[13]"Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you." Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) X, xxvii, 38, p. 201.

[14]Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 2007) 237.

Thomas Keating describes centering prayer as "preparation for action."[15] A cataphatic prayer practice that begins primarily with thoughts, images, words, and so forth, *to the neglect* of self-emptying and attentive listening is action without preparation. All too easily such a practice succeeds only in keeping one confined to the limited resources of one's conscious mind. The same old complaints, concerns, and desires that shape our everyday experience are in this way simply directed to God, who also remains one more artifact of our rationalized awareness.

What a well-developed cataphatic tradition will emphasize, in contrast to this, is the element of *listening.* Indeed, God will be conversed with as another person, but not, as Tillich warned, as a *familiar* partner. For example, William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, in their classic text on spiritual direction from a Jesuit (cataphatic) perspective, make a great deal of the un-selving element of listening in the context of their eminently conversational model of prayer.[16] Thus, neither cataphatic nor apophatic prayer are superior one to the other, but when one's life of prayer gets stuck in a *superficial* cataphaticism, the attentive resources of the apophatic tradition are often just what is needed to reinvigorate the vital movements of one's prayer life.

From Work to Life

In any life of prayer, there will come a point where one's usual ways of going about one's practice become a problem. This essay has been an attempt to place this moment into a broader context. The thought of Paul Tillich can be a helpful aid to those for whom an implicit or explicit framework for thinking about God has become problematic. Ecstasy, conceived of as life reaching beyond itself to God's eternal abundance, is seen then as the ideal end of prayer. In comparing cataphatic and apophatic prayer, I located centering prayer in the apophatic tradition and attempted to show how the typical stalling of one's prayer life in a superficial cataphaticism can be rejuvenated by way of insights from the apophatic tradition generally and, in particular, centering prayer.

My constant refrain through it all has been that prayer does not work. The reason for this, I've tried to show, is that "work" is a bad metaphor for what happens in prayer. To a certain extent, any word taken from the realm of our normal experience will inevitably be inadequate when applied to God's eternality, but the word "work" is especially ill suited, connoting as it does something within our control that can be mastered with technical proficiency.

I have suggested the word "life" as a more suitable alternative. Our question then becomes: "Does prayer foster life?" Or, in a more personal context, "Is your prayer life alive?" On this footing, the issue can be approached in much the same way as an intimate relationship between humans. When the life goes out of a rela-

[15]Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart*, 58.

[16]William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, rev. (New York: Harper One, 2009) 47–53.

tionship, it is a sign that, for one reason or another, one of the partners has stopped bringing all of themselves to the relationship, both in terms of the good and the bad. The same is often the case with prayer. When our spiritual life begins to outgrow the framework we had always couched it in, there can be elements of ourselves that we feel we are not supposed to, or are unable to, bring to prayer. For example, we may come to doubt the very existence of the God to whom we pray, or we may feel that our frustration with prayer itself is not to be included in our prayers.

Continuing this analogy between prayer and intimacy in human relationships, marital therapist David Schnarch has developed a number of practices to deal with intimate relationships that find themselves stuck in a lifeless place. All these practices are suggestive in that each breaks the cycle of a superficial reliance on our intellect. To take but one example, his practice of "hugging till relaxed" instructs a couple to simply stand in a silent hug, each supporting their own weight. Rather than focusing on the other, who may annoy, infuriate, or disgust them, they are to focus on calming *themselves.* Then, in this close proximity to the other, they are to allow their anxiety to dissipate.[17] There is no talking. No one tries to sort out their problem. There is only silence, proximity, and waiting. Words eventually return, but now they have been prepared by what has been elicited from this silent practice.

Centering prayer has the potential to serve a quite similar role when prayer loses its depth. The goal is not to get back to work. It is to reenter the superabundant multidimensionality of the divine life. As Tillich's theology helpfully illustrates, prayer reunites the surface of life with its depths, and in so doing, frees us to be fully alive! When prayer stops working, the time is ripe for prayer to begin *living*. ⊕

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[17]David M. Schnarch, *Passionate Marriage: Keeping Love and Intimacy Alive in Committed Relationships* (New York: Norton & Company, 2009) 160–161.