

Three Ways to Pray: Learning About Prayer from Church History

Course Description

This course explores three traditions and practices of prayer from the history of the church: the short, frequent prayers of the Desert Fathers; the dense, compressed set prayers (collects) in the Book of Common Prayer; and the Lord's Prayer as a structure for personal prayer as seen in Martin Luther and C. S. Lewis. We will examine each of these practices, place it in historical context, and discuss a related short classic text. But just like one wants not just to study sheet music, but to play the music for oneself, we will take time together to practice these patterns of prayer during the course.

Course Resources

Short Prayers

John Cassian, *Conferences* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 125-140 (Conference 10).

William Harmless, *Desert Christians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 392-98.

Dense Prayer

C. Frederick Barbee and Paul F.M. Zahl, *The Collects of Thomas Cranmer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), ix-xii and at least four selections from the collects.

Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1996), 79-100.

Lord's Prayer

Luther, Martin. *Little Prayer Book, 1522 & A Simple Way to Pray, 1535*. Edited by Mary Jane Haemig and Eric Lund. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017. The latter is also in Martin Luther, "A Simple Way to Pray: For Master Peter, the Barber," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 43.

C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* [any edition], chapter 5.

Stevenson, Kenneth W. E. *The Lord's Prayer: A Text in Tradition*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2004. Chapter 1 and any other chapter.

Course Objectives

- To gain a first-hand knowledge of three classical traditions of prayer from the history of the church and acquire an appreciation of the historical context, theological framework, and practical expression of these traditions of prayer.

- To learn to pray in three time-honoured and practical ways and to teach others to pray in these ways too.
- To explore personally the integration of study and prayer as interpenetrating acts of thoughtful Christian discipleship, and to discover the self-implicating nature of studying theology (this has to do with me!).

Student Projects and Grading

Reading Report (40%)

Students should read the selections under the three headings in “Course Resources” and write one report on each set of readings (three in total). Each report should summarize each reading in one paragraph (100 words each), and you should then add a paragraph of reflection at the end (100 words).

Prayer Journal (30%)

Students should take time to practice these forms of prayer and reflect upon them personally (What does this mean to me?), biblically and theologically (How does this help me to engage with Scripture and the content of my faith?), and practically (What am I learning about how to pray?). Try to do this over the course of at least three weeks making entries for most days. Photocopy, scan, or take a picture of ten pages of the diary to submit.

Concluding Essay (30%)

Write a final essay to consider these patterns of prayer. The structure of your essay should be as follows. First, in your introduction, answer the question of what prayer is and why it matters. (100 words). Then under the headings (1) Short Prayers, (2) Dense Prayers, and (3) Lord’s Prayer, discuss these traditions in 300-500 words each under three further sub-headings: (a) Bible and Theology: Why pray this way? What authorizes us to do so? (b) History: Where did this come from, and how was it found meaningful in the past? And (c) Practice: How exactly does one pray this way today? You may conclude with any personal reflections on what this means to you (100 words). Total words: 1100-1700.

Instructor Bio

Bruce Hindmarsh is the James M. Houston Professor of Spiritual Theology and Professor of the History of Christianity at Regent College. His DPhil in theology is from Oxford University, and he has published widely in church history. His book *The Spirit of Early Evangelicalism* (2018) was awarded best book in history and biography by *Christianity Today*. For the anniversary of the song “Amazing Grace,” he co-authored a popular book, *Amazing Grace: The Life of John Newton and the Surprising Story Behind the Song* (2023). Bruce is at work turning this book into a feature film documentary, due out this fall. He loves teaching the history of Christian spirituality and speaks often to lay audiences as well as preaching in his own church and elsewhere. You can learn more at www.brucehindmarsh.com.