

# Prayer time

reviewed by [Richard A. Kauffman](#) in the [May 3, 2003](#) issue

The ancient formula *lex orandi, lex credendi* might be translated: as we pray, so we believe. Unfortunately, there has been a split between theology and spirituality, and many theologians haven't had much to say about spirituality. Contemporary theologians are more known for talking about God than talking with or listening to God. Conversely, the many books on spirituality often are quite thin on theology. So how are we to discern what makes for good spirituality? I like the three principles suggested by Eugene Peterson: spirituality, if it is to be Christian spirituality, should be Christ-centered, biblically based, and rooted in a living Christian tradition. Not that Christians can't or shouldn't learn from the spiritualities of other religions. But the least helpful forms of spirituality are those which are not rooted anywhere.

Spirituality should also reflect and respond to the realities of life. Lawrence Cunningham says all spiritualities should be subjected to these questions: Can you teach it to your children? Does it carry over into more loving relationships with people not part of your nurturing community? And will it help you in times of profound crisis?

To varying degrees, the books reviewed here measure up to Peterson's tests. You'll have to judge how they stack up with real life.

*Keeping Silence: Christian Practices for Entering Silence.*

By C. W. McPherson. Morehouse, 96 pp., \$12.95.

While she was a university student, Joyce Maynard observed that her generation didn't notice the radio was on until someone turned it off. And that was before cable TV, the Internet and cell phones. For her generation, noise is the norm; silence is not just abnormal but unbearable. *Keeping Silence* is an antidote for a world in which we are bombarded with sound and are unsettled by silence. The author of this manual on silence, an Episcopal priest, regularly encourages his parishioners to practice various spiritual disciplines. But when he encourages them to practice a few minutes of silence each day during Advent and Lent, he says, he might as well urge them to memorize the Gospel of Luke. Some simply find it impossible to turn off either

external noise from the environment or internal noises from their own psyche. A student of both the patristic period and the Middle Ages, McPherson draws from the rich resources of both eras, suggesting many exercises to aid in keeping silent, from Benedictine rumination and breath counting to cloister walking and the stations of the cross. Silence, of course, isn't an end in itself; being still and sensing the presence of God is. "Resources for further study" is a useful annotated bibliography at the back of the book.

*The Rhythm of God's Grace: Uncovering Morning and Evening Hours of Prayer.*

By Arthur Paul Boers. Paraclete, 165 pp., \$15.95.

Boers is numbered among those contemporary Christians who are calling the church back to fixed-hour prayers, which have their roots in the Jewish tradition. But as a concession to the busyness of our context, Boers suggest morning and evening prayers only, not the monastic regiment of eight "hours" of prayer from matins (or vigils) to compline. Boers finds these benefits, among others, in adhering to fixed times of prayer: it keeps him in touch with the rhythms of the day, it exposes him to scripture and it keeps him connected to other Christians around the world who keep a constant chain of daily prayers going as the earth revolves. Besides, when we pray "by the book," the book helps us pray when we don't know how or can't. Boers, a Mennonite pastor and professor and a Benedictine oblate, encourages praying in groups. He suggests numerous book sources for daily prayers.

*Sounds of the Eternal: A Celtic Psalter: Morning and Night Prayer.*

By J. Philip Newell. Eerdmans, 86 pp., \$18.00.

Newell provides a seven-day cycle of morning and evening prayers that draw upon the rich tradition of Celtic spirituality. The daily readings each include an opening prayer, time for silence, brief scripture texts, prayers of thanksgiving and intercession, and a closing prayer. The reading for each day carries a special theme--mystery, wisdom, strength, beauty, creativity and so on. In this way each day brings a new perspective on God and the life of faith. Newell, who was once warden of the Iona Abbey in the western Isles of Scotland, assumes that the creation and the human body are essentially good, and that this is an affirmation shared by the Hebrew tradition and Celtic spirituality, in contrast to much of Western Christianity. For instance, in the Kabbalistic tradition of Judaism, "the human body is like a sacred text in which we may discern the sounds of the soul." Although these morning and evening prayers include snippets of scripture, such as psalms, it would

be appropriate to supplement this book with a daily lectionary of Bible readings. This book, which is a sequel to *Celtic Benediction*, is beautifully illustrated with prints from Hebrew illuminated manuscripts, an art form that supports the written texts and therefore often incorporates calligraphy.

*A Holy Island Prayer Book: Morning, Midday and Evening Prayer.*

By Ray Simpson. Morehouse, 168 pp., \$11.95.

The format is similar to *Sounds of the Eternal* (above), except that it features a five-week cycle of prayer, and prayers are offered three times each day rather than two. Here, too, each day of the week has a particular theme: Sunday focuses on resurrection and renewal and Monday on creation, while Friday focuses on brokenness at the cross and Saturday on leisure (morning) and saints (at night). This prayerbook grows out of the community of worship at the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, known as one of those "thin places" in the Celtic world where the divine pierces the earthly. In contrast to the earthy spirituality of Iona, Lindisfarne tends to be more contemplative.

*Christian Prayer for Dummies.*

By Richard Wagner. Wiley, 351 pp., \$19.99.

To my surprise, this is a useful, if not very profound, manual on prayer. I can't imagine anyone reading this book from cover to cover, but I can imagine people keeping it handy as a quick reference on prayer techniques and aids or on such matters as fasting, prayer for healing, praying in tongues and journaling. There's even a brief section on use of rosaries as icons in prayer, noting, however, that such aids for prayer are not accepted by most Protestants. Written in a colloquial style, it has an implicit evangelical theology and, predictably for this series, a "how to" feel to it, with "tips" flagged throughout the book with the "Dummies" trademark bull's-eye. At times this book is frankly corny: for instance, a "secret recipe" for prayer calls for one cup each of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, intercession and petition, with a teaspoon of salt. Why salt? "I'm not sure why," says Wagner, "but every recipe always includes salt." The last part of the book consists of annotated lists: the Bible's ten best prayers (prayer of Jabez not included!), prayers for ten occasions when you need it most, ten or so prayers to teach children, ten retreats and ten pilgrimages, and ten-plus recommended Web sites on prayer.

*Wrestling with Grace: A Spirituality for the Rough Edges of Daily Life.*

By Robert Corin Morris. Upper Room Books, 251 pp., \$15.00.

Spirituality is sometimes pursued in order to transcend the harsh realities of life or, worse, to escape them. From this perspective God is in the business of ridding our lives of problems. Morris sees another God, one who even brings problems into our lives--what he calls "probe-blems," experiences with the potential to awaken in us new awareness and attitudes toward both the Divine and life. In fact, one of the biblical images of God is that of provocateur and challenger; it was after all, the Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. This kind of spirituality, then, arises not from inspiration but from frustration. He tells the story of a somewhat bitter monk who said he spent 30 years living the contemplative life without ever having had an encounter with God. But what was he looking for, asks Morris. Could he not see God in the everyday realities of life that we should embrace rather than critique or react against? A spirituality that looks for God in the rough edges of life has the potential for moving us from curses to blessings, from reactions that diminish us to moments of receptivity to God's grace. By turning away from our own self-preoccupation and absorption, we can become blessings to those around us. An appendix includes a number of useful exercises in cultivating a spirituality for the rough edges of life.

*Messy Spirituality: God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People.*

By Michael Yaconelli. Zondervan, 141 pp., \$14.99.

One of the remarkable traits of the Bible is that the bad characters have not been edited out, and the flaws of even the so-called good characters are exposed. But a certain kind of Christian piety assumes a before-and-after narrative: sin, yes, in a former state outside the grace of Christ; but then victory over sin. This is what Yaconelli is reacting against, growing out of his own experience of being nearly 60 and finding that his life is still a mess. This is precisely where spirituality should begin, in the messiness of our lives. "Spirituality is not about competency; it is about intimacy. Spirituality is not about perfection; it is about connection. . . . Spirituality is not about being fixed; it is about God's being present in the mess of our unfixedness." In a breezy style, peppered with engaging anecdotes (good preaching fodder), Yaconelli reminds us that God doesn't stop loving us, no matter how many messes we make in our lives. Yaconelli is strong on God's forgiving love, but more could be said about God's regenerative and transformative love. As Anne Lamott put it, God loves us so much he accepts us just as we are; but God loves us so much God

doesn't want us to stay the way we are. Preoccupied with God's love for us in spite of the messes we make, *Messy Spirituality* has a self-absorption not found in Morris's *Wrestling with Grace*.