

Interview with Scot McKnight on *Praying With the Church*

1. What does it mean to pray *with* the church?

It means to pray set prayers at set times – that is, to use a prayer book to pray with others, and consciously join Christians around the world who are also praying set prayers at set times.

2. Why do we, as Christians, need fixed hour prayer? Don't spontaneous prayers work just as well?

The Bible taught Israel to do this as early as Deute 6:4-5; it became a custom in ancient Israel to stop to pray 3x a day. Spontaneous prayers are designed to the individual's heart in tune with God; fixed hour prayer adds two dimensions – learning to pray from those who walked the path before we did and joining in prayer with the communion of the saints.

3. What books would you suggest to people who want to begin to pray the daily office?

My book *Praying with the Church!* Of course.
I'd begin first with the prayer book of my faith's tradition; but two user-friendly prayer books are Paraclete's *The Little Book of Hours* and Phyllis Tickle's 3-volume *Divine Hours*.

4. How did Jesus pray? In what ways did he keep Jewish custom, and in what ways did he add something new?

Jesus prayed both spontaneously and with others; he did the latter three times a day; he prayed the Psalms and he taught his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer and the Jesus Creed (Mark 12:28-31).

5. What is the significance of the ancient tradition of praying three times a day?

It is the habit of pausing at each juncture of the day (meal times) to direct our heart and focus toward God, to join with others to do the same. Pausing three times keeps a sacred rhythm to the day, constantly reminding us that we are a praying people.

6. What prayers are traditionally said during fixed hour prayer?

Lord's Prayer
Shema (Jesus Creed is what I think early Christians prayed)
Psalms
Other set prayers, like the Jesus Prayer.

7. You say in your book that “humans have a knack for turning religious acts in to meaninglessness.” How can we prevent fixed-hour prayer from becoming rote – from turning into “vain repetitions?”

Two things: practicing focus by pausing to recollect our thoughts and hearts.
Saying the prayers aloud which keeps us from rushing through them.

8. What is the significance of the Jesus Prayer in the Eastern Orthodox church? What are the benefits of this famous prayer?

Jesus Prayer is at the heart of the Way of the Pilgrim orthodox tradition; many use it constantly.

It keeps before us our need of mercy and our sinfulness and that grace comes to us through Jesus Christ.

9. What are the unique contributions of the Catholic church to fixed hour prayer?

Much – in many ways. First, the regulation of the seven-hour prayer cycle made famous through Benedict’s Rule. Second, the regulation of praying the Psalms weekly. Third, the addition of the Canticles of Luke 1-2 in the sacred rhythms of prayer. And fourth, the use of special spiritual readings at the hour of readings (often midnight or so).

10. How did Thomas Cranmer adapt the church’s tradition of fixed hour prayer for Anglicans in the Book of Common Prayer?

Cranmer regulated the reading of the whole Bible through annually in a public setting so that all Christians could learn the Bible. And then Cranmer was a magisterial writer and his prayers have become some of the most beautiful used in the fixed hour prayer tradition.

11. How can Christians who aren’t Orthodox, Catholic, or Anglican embrace an ancient, liturgical method of prayer?

First, see the value in the Bible for such a thing.

Second, learn to pause 2 or three times a day to say set prayers and to say them aloud so they are meaningful.

This method of prayer is growing fast throughout the Church among evangelical Christians.

12. What are the first steps for someone wanting to begin the practice of fixed-hour prayer?

Get a good prayer book and learn to use it.

13. How has fixed hour prayer enriched your own life?

It has given structure to my prayers; it has made me more aware of the Church's prayer traditions and prayerbooks; and it has given me words to say when words were hard to come by. Mostly, though, it creates a sacred rhythm to my day so that the whole day becomes an offering of prayer.