

Vivid Prayers: The Counter-Reformation and Puritan-Evangelical Tradition

Imagining Yourself in the Gospels

“When thou settest thyself to meditate on the joys above, think on them boldly as Scripture hath expressed them; bring down thy conceivings to the reach of sense.”

--Richard Baxter

Introduction: *Theology*—Imagination and Prayer

Love desires to have the beloved before its eyes. Thus the contemplative will employ the powers of his soul to summon up the image of the Beloved, the powers of his “inner senses” and his imagination to call forth the image of the incarnate Word. He will contemplate Jesus as he dwelt bodily on the earth, the things he said, the sound of his voice, the way he treated people, his appearance when at prayer, at the Last Supper, in his Passion. This picture is not meant to be a realistic photograph, but love’s picture, solely concerned with love, the divine love of the Father, which is here manifested in the Son and in the concreteness of his whole earthly life. This is the only reason why, in prayer, we seek out the Lord’s earthly form. We do not use it as a crutch for our weakness because we are not yet ready to soar into the realm of pure spirit: we do so in order to seek for the love of God, to see, hear and touch it in the humble form in which it offers itself to man. In prayer, our love seeks love, divine love, through the earthly image (with which it cannot dispense). (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 129.)

1. *History: Four Quick Case Studies*

Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) , the *Spiritual Exercises* (1548), and Ignatian meditation

First Prelude. The First Prelude is a composition, seeing the place.

Here it is to be noted that, in a visible contemplation or meditation—as, for instance, when one contemplates Christ our Lord, Who is visible—the composition will be to see with the sight of the imagination the corporeal place where the thing is found which I want to contemplate. I say the corporeal place, as for instance, a Temple or Mountain where Jesus Christ or Our Lady is found, according to what I want to contemplate.

Francis de Sales (1567-1622), the *Introduction* (1609), and Salesian meditation

The Third Point of Preparation, representing the Mystery to be meditated to Your Imagination.

It Is simply kindling a vivid picture of the mystery to be meditated within your imagination, even as though you were actually beholding it. For instance, if you wish to meditate upon our Lord on His Cross, you will place yourself in imagination on Mount Calvary, as though you saw and heard all that occurred there during the Passion.

Richard Baxter (1615-91), the *Saints' Rest* (1650) and Puritan meditation

“Sure it will be a point of our spiritual prudence, and a singular help to the furthering of the work of faith, to call in our sense to its assistance. . . .”

John Newton (1725-1807), *Amazing Grace* and evangelical meditation

—Amazing Grace as seeing oneself in David hearing God’s word of grace through prophet Nathan (1 Chronicles 17: 16-17)

4. *Practice*: Meditation on our creation (adapted from Francis de Sales)

¹Know that the LORD Himself is God;
It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves (Ps. 100: 3)

O God I am “the work of your hands” (Ps. 138: 8)

²For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb. (Ps. 139: 13)

5. *Practice*: Discerning Jesus’ Presence in Deep Water—Matthew 13: 22-33

²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but the boat by this time was a long way^u from the land,^u beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And in the fourth watch of the night^u he came to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” and they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take heart; **it is I**. Do not be afraid.”

²⁸And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. ³⁰But when he saw the wind,^u he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

³²And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

6. *Assessment*: Thinking Critically

- How do we make sure we are not hearing or seeing just what we want to hear and see, rather than what the Bible is really saying? What are the controls on the imagination in prayer?