

Being a pastor within the secular frame means teaching people how to pray

Prayer is ministry, and ministry is prayer.

by [Andrew Root](#) in the [July 3, 2019](#) issue



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It's rare that a cutting-edge scientific research project needs a person in a gorilla suit, but so it was for Daniel Simons's experiment in attention blindness. Simons, who teaches at the University of Illinois, is a researcher in a field of psychology called visual cognition. His best-known experiment—which can be seen on YouTube—is popularly called “the invisible gorilla.”

The idea behind the experiment is simple. People tend to think—particularly in this secular age—that seeing is believing. For instance, you'd assume that if you were watching people walking in a circle passing a basketball, you'd notice if some dude in a gorilla suit randomly walked through the scene, waving his arms and jumping up and down. That can't be missed. Yet half the participants in Simons's experiment miss it. People assume at rates over 90 percent that they are not the kind of people to miss such an obvious, right-in-front-of-your-face event—and yet 50 percent do.

The experiment shows that if people are looking for a gorilla, they see a gorilla. But if your attention is elsewhere—for instance, on counting the number of times the basketball is passed—at least half will miss the interloper.

That's just how Simons's experiment is set up. Two groups of people, some in white shirts and others in black, pass a basketball between them as they move. The observer is asked to count how many times people in the white shirts touch the ball. Seconds into the sequence, the gorilla comes walking through. Afterward, half the observers are shocked when asked if they saw a gorilla. Most assume there was no such thing and that those who say they saw a gorilla are either liars or crazy.

Simons's point is clear: perceptions of reality are contingent on our mode of attention. What we are prepared to focus on determines what we see.

Deep-seated assumptions about how to conceive and represent the world—what philosopher Charles Taylor calls “social imaginaries”—inform and frame what we give our attention to. We can and do miss hugely obvious realities when our attention is on something else.

In his book *A Secular Age*, Taylor argues that in the modern era our attention has been drawn away from what our ancestors thought was obvious: that a personal God acts and moves in the world. Some would say this movement represents liberation: we've put aside an untenable belief. But Taylor suggests instead that we've acquired a unique observation blindness. It's not that we've given up an untenable

belief but that new imaginaries have drawn our attention away from divine action and toward something else. New forms of attention make us unable to see what was once obvious.

One of the reasons for the results of Simons's experiment is that people focus so intently on the white shirts that they block out the black ones. When the gorilla arrives in his black gorilla suit, many see him as just another part of the background. Taylor calls our culturally formed kind of observation blindness "the immanent frame." We all live inside the immanent frame, the socially constructed framework that imposes levels of attention that make divine action questionable even for those of us who do not define ourselves as atheists or unbelievers.

Taylor's point is that we all live in that immanent frame. There is really no way out of it if you live in the West. God is in the background, and our day-to-day, moment-to-moment attention is on material things.

Being a pastor in this immanent frame is challenging. Most people are unwilling to stop paying attention to what society deems most important. They can't, as it were, stop counting the number of basketball passes—or focusing on their bank accounts, Twitter followers, product promotions, or consumer purchases—to attend to something different.

Pastors too live in the immanent frame, drawn to pay attention to measurable things like church budgets, membership rolls, catalogs of programs, and the data on denominational decline. Pastors have observation blindness—though they may be too ashamed to admit it.

And yet real experiences of divine action occur. The problem is not that God is not visible but that (to pursue the analogy) God is the gorilla to whose appearance we have been blinded.

There is, however, a way to avoid this observation blindness, a way even to encounter the event of God speaking. This is the way of prayer.

Prayer is something few people in the immanent frame have been taught. Therefore a major part of a pastor's vocation in a secular age is to teach people to pray, individually and corporately. It is also the task of the pastor to form her own life around the practice of prayer. To be a pastor is not to be an entrepreneur, community organizer, or podcast celebrity. It is to be a person of prayer.

The strategy of most pastors, by contrast, is to try to align their church with the immanent frame. Since people are passionately attentive to things like youth sports, financial investments, the craft of brewing beer, and the practice of yoga, pastors try to divert attention to the church by bringing those activities inside the church. That can be done. But that won't enable people to see the action of the divine.

To say that the pastor is the one who prays and teaches others to pray is to say that the pastor leads people into addressing and being addressed by a speaking God, thereby sharing in the person of Jesus, who prays for the world and teaches his disciples to do the same through the Spirit (Luke 11:1-13). Jesus invites his disciples to pray using the intimate name for God: Abba (Mark 14). In prayer, we come to see that this God shares in our lives by caring for us. (Robert W. Jenson makes prayer so central he builds his theological anthropology around it, claiming that we are unique animals because we are the ones who pray. See his *Systematic Theology: The Triune God*.)

The fact that God invites us to pray using his intimate name reveals that God is personal and wants to enter into discourse with us. Because God is a speaking God, we are invited to pray. Prayer is central only because God speaks, sees, and hears. As a matter of fact, it is often those who pray who hear God speak. (T. M. Luhrmann's research seems to back this up. See her book *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*.) Of course, this correlation could be taken as proof that believers are deluded. Or, following Simons, it could be concluded that reality is larger than our perceptions and that by broadening our attention we can perceive new dimensions of reality.

Prayer is the broadening of our attention on the world around us, looking for the arrival of God, who announces himself by speaking to us and calling us to pray for others in and through the actions of ministry. Jesus is the minister because he prays for us. God is so fully a speaking God of ministry that he is the never-ending discourse of the Father and Son through the Spirit in prayer.

Prayer disconnects our attention from false gods not by way of a slap on the hand or a mocking condemnation but in and through the ethos of ministry itself. Jesus prays for us because he is our minister who loves us. Prayer leads us to again hear God's speaking. It is in praying with and for our neighbor, especially our enemy (Matt. 5:44), that we encounter the arriving God.

Prayer not only reveals God as personal but shows God to be a minister. When we pray for another, we ask God, who is a minister, to come and minister to a person in need. God is so deeply a minister that he is willing to leave his action open, responding to our own petitionary prayers for ministry. God is such a deep movement of ministry that when our own prayers for ministry are embodied in love, God arrives and ministers to people.

To say that God is a minister who is present as the event of ministry, and therefore to assert that God is free to come ministering to the persons we pray for, doesn't mean that prayer is a magical incantation or an instrument that guarantees God will arrive. God is free to arrive, speaking when and to whom God wishes. But prayer is our most trusted way to step back, turning attention away from other observations to seek the action of God in and through ministry.

This is the primary challenge: to connect prayer with the giving and receiving of ministry. When prayer becomes disconnected from ministry—the eternal praying of Jesus to the Father through the Spirit for us—it becomes disconnected from divine action.

It's hard to divert people's attention from what society tells them is most important. But that's the pastor's job.

Some people and pastors use prayer as a way to double down on their observation blindness and pursue success or rescue as it is defined in the immanent frame. From *The Prayer of Jabez* to the prosperity gospel, prayer has been used as a way to continue to focus on the immanent acts of counting dollars, possessions, and followers—or else as a way to insure yourself against bad luck. This is not really prayer but wishful thinking cased in religious language. Prayer disconnected from ministry is a self-serving strategy which doesn't need God. This kind of prayer only confirms that atheism is really the logical, grown-up position.

To teach people to pray is to call them into ministry; it is to pray together in and through the acts of ministry. Prayers of thanksgiving and praise are for the arrival of God as minister. Prayer is never abstract, even in the form of praise. We praise God not as a metaphysical force, heralding attributes disconnected from God's arriving action in the world. Rather, in prayer we praise God for his faithfulness as minister, for the ways he's acted for us by ministering to us. In prayer we praise God not as a disconnected deity but as the God who freed Israel from Egypt and resurrected Jesus

from the dead—and who is acting among us.

Praise is remembering and speaking again events of God's arriving to minister to the world. The pastor's job is to invite the community, through both scripture and testimony, to pray by praising God for events of his arrival, for the concrete ways God has ministered to us. The pastor must preach the story of the exodus, for instance, as the prayer of remembering God's ministry. But the pastor must also give opportunity to retell, and therefore remember, the contemporary events of God's action for congregation members, who encounter God's arriving in events of forgiveness, healing, and peace.

There is actually no such thing as truly solitary prayer, prayer completely disconnected from others. Because prayer is ministry in and through the discourse of the speaking of persons, it is always a relational reality. Individuals cannot pray by themselves—and when we try to do so, our prayers become focused on prosperity and protection, on the things that can be counted.

When we tell our stories of wilderness, about our experience of being but dry bones, we confess that we are persons needing others to minister to us by praying for us. The pastor should encourage people to pray alone, in moments of mediation and silence, but what is more important, particularly in our secular age, is to pray together. We need to be prayed for and to pray for others. We need to tell our stories of God's seeming absence and of his presence as minister.

In his memoir *The Pastor*, Eugene Peterson explains that he was a few years into planting and pastoring his church when he was invited to spend his Tuesdays at the county's Department of Health Services. As the county was growing, officials were dealing with more and more mental health issues. Taking the initiative, county leaders gathered the local clergy and offered to train them in dealing with problems such as passive-aggressive neuroses, alcoholism, and depression. So for two years the clergy gathered on Tuesdays for training.

In the middle of this experience, Peterson had a sinking feeling. While this training promised to help him gain professional skill and scientific know-how, it was changing his perception of people. Learning the clinical diagnoses led him to see people more as problems needing medical intervention than as persons receiving and giving ministry. Pastoral life in the immanent frame provided helpful new skills, but it was dissolving his pastoral identity.

Peterson remained thankful for the Tuesday meetings; they gave him perspective and networks to which to refer people in need. But the paradigm alone couldn't anchor and support the calling of a pastor. Peterson says, "Tuesdays, besides helping me be a better good Samaritan in my community (a good thing), also introduced me to ways I could be useful to my congregation that would satisfy them without having to deal seriously with God or with themselves as children of God (a bad thing)."

The need for a deeper pastoral identity became clear when, a year later, Peterson visited Marilyn in the hospital. Marilyn was in her midtwenties, was married, had a new job as a lawyer, and hadn't been at Peterson's church long. She was now getting tests for some ailment the doctors couldn't pinpoint. She explained that her doctor couldn't find any physical source of her symptoms and was wondering if they were psychological.

Peterson knew what he was to do next. His training on Tuesdays told him that this was the opening to launch into the mode of professional healer. But he was stuck. He'd become aware that this service-providing focus had made the pastoral task coldly immanent. He said nothing. He beat himself up for weeks for being struck mute.

A month later, Peterson visited Marilyn again, this time in her home. She said that she thought her doctor might be right about there being a psychological source of her symptoms, so she'd made an appointment with a psychiatrist. With the slot of doctor-savior filled, Peterson felt an odd freedom. He asked, "Is there anything you want me to do?"

This question is a profound one. Being near Marilyn's suffering, just showing up and anticipating the arrival of God, Peterson became most fully her pastor. Hearing her story, he asked, "Is there anything you want me to do?" He was asking: Is there any way I can minister to you?

To his surprise, Marilyn responded, "Yes. I've been thinking a lot about it. Would you teach me to pray?" She was asking: Would you teach me to see divine action? Would you be my pastor and help me to see that indeed God sees me?

This was a breakthrough. Peterson writes, "I had been a pastor . . . for three years. It was the first time anyone had asked me to teach them to pray. Marilyn's shy request gave . . . a focus that I had come to believe was at the very center of my pastoral

vocation.” Peterson continues: “Up until then I had concluded that prayer was not something for which there was much of a market. Wanting to serve my congregation on their terms, I kept my prayers to myself and did what I was asked. Marilyn’s ‘Would you teach me to pray?’ was a breakthrough.”

And so Peterson taught not only Marilyn but many more in his congregation to pray. He no longer kept his prayers to himself, and he found a new sense within him of what it meant to be a pastor. Being a pastor who prayed and taught others to pray formed and directed his life. It never led to a private jet or a 100-acre property with a massive church building filled with suburbanites. Yet it did lead to a joyous resolve to face the secular age and encounter, again and again, the presence of the living God.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Forming a people who pray.” It is based on Andrew Root’s book The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God, just published by Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, copyright 2019. Used by permission.