

Never Pray Again

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NEVER PRAY AGAIN



**LIFT YOUR HEAD,
UNFOLD YOUR
HANDS, AND
GET TO WORK**

ARIC CLARK,
DOUG HAGLER,
AND NICK LARSON



In the early days of blogging, when it seemed like a mere handful of people were conversing on-line, I encountered Doug Hagler, Aric Clark, and Nick Larson (also known as Two Friars and a Fool). They were students at San Francisco Theological Seminary, and full of fiery passion. I loved reading their writings as they playfully and consistently challenged theology, culture, and the church.

It's been about seven years, and we have not stopped those initial conversations. On-line and in-person, we've collaborated on podcast episodes, blog posts, worship, and gatherings. They inspire me and argue with me. On a number of occasions, when I've wanted to put my head down and work without appropriate acknowledgement, just because I want to take the easy way out of something, they make sure that I don't sell myself short.

Today, I'm celebrating with them, because they just released their book, [*Never Pray Again: Lift Up Your Head, Unfold Your Hands, and Get to Work*](#). So I invited Nick, Aric and Doug to answer a few questions.

Carol: How did you get the idea for the book?

Nick: *Never Pray Again* started with an argument, or perhaps we should call it a debate, like many great things that come out of Two Friars and a Fool. Aric and I were talking about Sara Miles' book *Take this Bread* (great read so go buy it btw) at UNCO 2011 (best open source conference ever...<http://unco.us/>). We were talking about how great it was that Sara and St. Gregory's in San Francisco had managed to connect their food pantry and God's mission of feeding their city with communion. You see while we were in San Francisco for Seminary I served there at St. Gregory's food pantry on some Fridays. And you quite literally serve the food out of the sanctuary and off the communion table. So we were arguing about how awesome it would be if all Christian beliefs equated to direct action like that. And then we got into an argument about how to connect things like prayer that are too often something that we do instead of action. It is like we are waiting for God to help out rather than connecting ourselves to action. Doug jumped into the conversation and it spiraled into a 10-12 item list which became chapters. We ultimately came around to the question: What happens if you take prayer out of all the ancient liturgical forms of prayer? And the book is the answer to our question. We think it is pretty awesome.

Carol: Did game designing inspire you?

Doug: The only way that game design really inspired me is that the first book I published was a roleplaying game called [Parsec](#). I wasn't surprised by how much I enjoyed finishing a book and seeing it in print, but it did make the whole writing things more concrete for me. I also learned how difficult it is to actually finish a book, and *Never Pray Again* was no different. Otherwise, I think Nick and Aric have covered how the idea for the book came about. For my own part, it grew out of my personal experience, which has included things like being told to pray to get over depression, which never worked, and mostly made me feel worse. I would find that praying was, for me, often the easy way out. I also found that when I actually took the time to do something about what I wanted to pray about, I felt better, and prayer became less important for me.

Carol: How did you write it? What was the process of working together on it?

Nick: Writing as a team came pretty naturally to us. At this point we've been close friends for a long time. There aren't two people (outside my wife) that I would trust more than these fools. So putting yourself in someone else hands comes a lot easier when it is with great people. But really it was Google Drive (please google we are available for paid endorsements). Our writing win fall came for us when we each took an editing color to a document that all three of us could edit, add too, all at the same time. The colors let us know whose sections or phrasing or word choice we were changing. Before doing this I would always worry, how important is this section to whomever wrote it? But once I knew it was Aric or Doug (or ironically my own after working on another section for a while) then if that concern remained I would just ask them about it. Ownership within the partnership was clarifying for me. So then by the time we finished a chapter, it has been edited at least 3 times each draft, and most went through 3 drafts. So the process for me helped generate my best stuff.

Aric: One thing we've learned a lot about through this process is how to collaborate. For one thing I don't think this project would have been possible for us without some of the new tools the internet has provided. The entire thing was composed in Google Docs (now Drive) so we could all write and edit on the same document simultaneously. We developed a system where we each edited in different colors so we could tell who had done what and nothing was made final until it had been approved by all three of us. I hope this means that the book has a fairly cohesive voice. Even though it was written by three guys it should sound like a unified voice

communicating with the reader. We hope to have avoided any clunkiness or sudden changes in tenor by the way that we really melded our work together. There are very few sentences in the book that were completely composed by a single person.

Doug: The process was, in a word, awesome. It is no small job, figuring out how to collaborate between three authors, each in different time zones, each also a parent and a spouse and an over-working pastor. We came down to a really good process, though, and the book was written over Google Docs and Hangouts, punctuated by a few times we were actually able to be in the same room. As a result, among other things, *Never Pray Again* went through eighteen different revisions - six revisions that all three of us had to sign off on.

Carol: I loved how you were able to question many of our commonly-held ideas. Like, you make the argument that Jesus was ugly. Did you wrangle with each other about certain parts? Are there parts of the book you don't agree with? When did you disagree the most?

Aric: We absolutely wrangled over certain parts. That's what made it fun. We never let anything go to press we weren't all completely on board with though. So pieces got left out, but nothing that is in there is something I'm unhappy with. My thoughts keep developing though so ask me in five years and there will probably be something I've changed my mind on. I think what we disagreed the most about was just how to strike the balance of saying something provocative and interesting without going overboard. We each have different ideas about where that line is. I imagine that there will be readers who think where we ended up was too outlandish, but trust me, we could have gone farther and we debated what was the right thing to say.

Doug: We wrangled a great deal, but I don't think there's anything in the book that we don't all three agree with. Nothing significant, unless Aric and Nick aren't telling me something. It was important for me, for us I imagine, to write a book that we could stand by after it was published. I think we disagreed most on the actual content of each chapter - whole sections got taken out and rewritten, and a lot ended up on the cutting-room floor so to speak. But our process is very much about consensus.

Carol: What part of the book did you have the most fun writing?

Nick: "Expel!" Definitely expel. Although I can't say that I wrote large chunks of that chapter. But it is chapters like that one that make this book so interesting. I mean which progressive christian do you know who jumps at a chance to talk at length about exorcism? I feel like that chapter represents for me the creative and wonderful process that writing took me on. A lot of the most inspiring stuff for me came out of the these other two guys.

Aric: It was all a blast, but for me the chapters "Praise!" and "Heal!" both really get me excited - partly because they were two chapters I had the least ideas for when we started. I wasn't sure what I'd be able to contribute to these ideas, but once we got on the track we did I found them really profound and enticing. I don't think what we say about praising God, or what we say about health and healing are likely to be said in many churches - and I think they're important messages that I hope people read and share.

Doug: For me, "Love!" I contributed a lot to the section about loving God when God is the enemy, and it was a way to articulate experiences that I hadn't articulated well before, and make meaning out of them. Really, the whole thing was fun to write - if it wasn't, we would never have finished it.

Carol: What did you learn while writing it?

Doug: I forget how hard writing is. Then writing reminds me. I think our research for the book helped us each learn a lot, but what I think was most valuable is the opportunity to put together so many of our thoughts as well as we can. I can explain things I think and believe a lot more easily and directly now, because I've put in the work.

Carol: Did the editor make you change any of your geeky references?

Aric: The editor at Chalice Press was very gracious with us. They helped us make it a stronger book, but for better or worse the book we are publishing is the book we intended to write. That means that our references are frequently geeky. Our language is sometimes salty, and we irreverently poke at some things people hold very sacred. Maybe that's not wise, but that's us.

Doug: Nope. Actually, the editor had, I'd say, 90% syntax changes and very few content changes. Chalice has been great, letting us be the goofballs we are.

Carol: Do you think people who pray are lazy?

Nick: Nope. I think most people who pray are honest, sincere, and perhaps desperate. They are in critical circumstances and want goodness, love and mercy to come out of their circumstances or that of a loved one. It is more that I think prayer can be like an infinite loop in coding that just traps people into inaction. While Christ and following him is really all about acts of love. It is more tiring to be stuck in an infinite loop, it is about time people hit the escape key and try creative acts of love instead.

Aric: I'm lazy. Probably most of the human race is lazy to a certain extent. I don't think people who pray are especially lazy, but I do think that prayer is often the easiest of all possible choices for spiritual discipline. I don't think people pray BECAUSE they're lazy. I just think that we avoid doing some harder things out of complacency or fear or apathy and I hope we can all do better.

Doug: Honestly? Sometimes. I know that I am lazy, and I know that prayer has been part of that laziness in the past. And I think that prayer encourages inaction, or easily can. You wrong someone, pray to God for forgiveness, and feel better - without doing the hard work of reconciling. You are upset about injustice, pray to God about it, and feel less pressure to join the work of justice yourself.

Carol: As I read *Never Pray Again*, I was reminded of how much I don't do as a Christian. Was there anything that you had to leave out because you just didn't live up to it yourself?

Nick: Not intentionally. This is not a list of things that we've done or mastered, this is an open conversation inviting folks to live into the challenge of living as a Christian. The challenges presented by this book are challenges to us as much as they are to anyone else. We aspire to live lives of love. It is like we say in intercede, heroism isn't super (but that doesn't make it easy either).

Doug: There is plenty in there that we don't live up to ourselves. Hopefully that comes across in the text. This is not a book of where we are, this is a book about where we think we should be headed.

Carol: Was there any part of the book that inspired you the most?

Doug: I'm having trouble coming up with a single example. This whole process inspired me - to learn more, become a better writer, become a better person, and write another book. Or ten.

Carol: If you could name one thing that you wished the US Church would DO more, what would it be?

Doug: Disarm.

Carol: How did you break it to your churches that you were writing a book on *not* praying? How did they take it?

Nick: Some folks knew as I was going through the process, but I guess most did not. I work at a larger Disciples of Christ congregation so my extra curricular writing mostly went unnoticed. But then my Senior Minister dropped the bomb a bit on me since he quoted from the book (referencing it by author and title) in his Easter sermon. So a lot found out that way. He didn't tell me he was doing that, but I guess you have to be careful who you give your author copies too. So far the congregation has been really excited and can't wait to get their hands on it. I like to think I've built up enough trust in the congregation that they are intrigued by the title more than put off by it. We're also designing a sermon series called "Go and Do" around chapters from the book, it should be a lot of fun.

Aric: My congregation is supportive and curious, if a bit befuddled, but that describes our relationship all the time. I keep doing things they don't expect, but they've been very good at rolling with it and trying to understand even if they don't always agree.

Doug: My church took it well, but I am currently serving as an interim, so they know I will be there temporarily, and as a result I think they put up with a lot from me. It did make the job search interesting, though, but if the title of the book was a no-go for a search committee, I doubt meeting me would change their mind.

Carol: Are you thinking about writing another book together?

Nick: Yes. Well if these other two fools will carry me through another writing project. Seriously though, we have a few ideas in mind.

Doug: Yes. In fact, we have an outline, and Aric wrote a rough chapter. It's going to be about how you can name and claim prosperity, relying on the promises of God, and about the coming tribulation brought on by rampant liberalism. Or about how

Dungeons & Dragons might be better table fellowship than the way we practice Communion. Or other things.