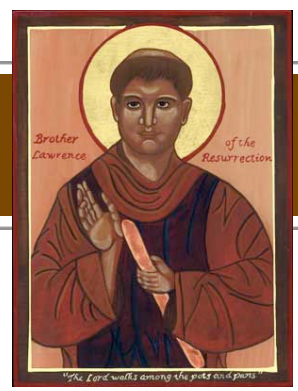


Shall We Take a Walk with Brother Lawrence?



What Shall We Practice?

A century after a certain German monk nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenberg door, another monk quietly engaged in his own soon-to-be influential endeavors. Nicolas Herman, better known as Brother Lawrence, was a 17th-century monastic best known for his teachings on “practicing the presence of God.” These teachings originated in a secluded French Catholic Monastery but have since disseminated throughout Christianity. In this article I will wrestle with the concept of “practicing the presence of God,” and challenge some of its implications.

If we look at this teaching through the lens of the Word of God, we find many deficiencies. Brother Lawrence purports to have found the secret to a higher spiritual life. However, there are several theological and practical problems evident in his teachings. These endanger those who follow his lead to neglect what God has called us to practice — a life centered on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In what follows, I will highlight several of the deficiencies of “practicing the presence of God” and respond to the question “What then shall we practice?”

Practicing the Presence of God— The Teaching

The primary source for “Practicing the Presence of God” is a posthumous collection of recalled teachings and personal correspondences credited to Brother Lawrence and listed by the same name. The work consists of two sections: “conversations” and “letters.” In the “conversations” portion of the work, the interviewer, Joseph De Beaufort, captured the heart of Lawrence’s practice:

Our sanctification did not depend upon changing our works. Instead, it depended on doing those things for God’s sake which we commonly do for our own. He thought it was lamentable to see how many people mistook the means for the end, addicting themselves to certain works which they performed very imperfectly because of their human or selfish regard. The most excellent method he had found for going to God was that of doing our common business without any view of pleasing men but purely for the love of God.

The writer further noted:

It was observed, that even in the busiest times in the kitchen, Brother Lawrence still preserved his recollection and heavenly-mindedness. He was never hasty nor loitering, but did each thing in its turn with an even, uninterrupted composure and tranquility of spirit. “The time of work,” said he, “does not with me differ from the time of prayer. In the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great a tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Supper.”

Here, in few words, is the heart of Brother Lawrence’s teaching: The prime discipline of the Christian life is to devote oneself to “God’s presence” in all tasks. That’s it. He believed that all tasks are of equal value—if one “sees the presence of God” in the task. Brother Lawrence’s teaching has spread not only throughout Christian circles but is also present in eastern religion and practice.

While the book itself has certain commendable elements, it contains several dangers and deficiencies. In exposing these concerns we must first define the Biblical teaching of God’s presence. Secondly, we

must compare the practice itself to what God has instructed His people to do.

The Biblical Precepts of “The Presence of God”

The Scriptures unveil two ways in which we can understand “the presence of God.” First, we should understand that God is indeed omnipresent (all-present). There is no place one can hide from the Almighty. He is the Creator and Sustainer of all things, both visible and invisible. King David poetically teaches on this precept of God’s presence in Psalm 139.

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, Even there Your hand will lead me, And Your right hand will lay hold of me. (Psalm 139:7-10)

It also is true that the attributes of God are evident everywhere throughout His creation. In the convicting opening chapter of Romans, Paul notes, “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse”⁶ (Romans 1:20).

Yet, beyond the omnipresence of God, the Scriptures consistently present the reality of the “special presence of God.” God’s special presence in His people’s lives is both “redemptive” and “relational.”⁷ We see God’s special presence highlighted in the establishing of the Tabernacle following the Exodus: “Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I am going to show you, as the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of

all its furniture, just so you shall construct it” (Exodus 25:8-9).

The omnipresent Lord dwelt with Israel in a unique and special way. His presence in their midst was both “relational” and “redemptive.” God’s special presence took on a radical new dynamic in the incarnation of the Son as announced by the apostle John: “The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The text more literally translated reads: “The Word was made flesh and pitched His tabernacle among us.” The allusion is powerful: Just as God dwelled with Israel following the Exodus, He became human to dwell with us in a much more profound manner. Again, the reasons for this marvelous incarnation are both “redemptive and relational.” Matthew, when chronicling the incarnation, wrote:

And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins. Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.” (Matthew 1:21-23)

While the special bodily presence of Jesus temporarily ceased with His ascension, He promised not to leave us alone but would send the Spirit to “be with us forever” (John 14:16). Those who repent and believe in the person and work of Jesus Christ receive the Holy Spirit. His presence dwells with His people to “regenerate and renew” (Titus 3:5). The presence of God is with the believer forever. His presence is not dependent upon subjective feelings or even “practicing” His presence, but rather upon His sustaining and renewing activity. There may be times when we do not “feel” as if God is near, but this does nothing to undermine the reality of both

His omnipresence in the world and His special presence in His children.

Many problems arise if we equate the presence of God in our lives with subjective religious experience. If we continually seek to feel God's presence through contemplative practice, the result will be that we will experience further spiritual problems. This seeking will cause us to strive for "feelings" rather than obedience. This wrongful pursuit will shake our assurance because the little assurance we have will be based on subjective experience rather than on the historical reality of the cross. In the end we will neglect our primary calling.

Seeing God in the Ordinary and in the Extraordinary

"Practicing the presence of God" asserts that people in any position and any ordinary task can glorify God. True enough. However, is this used as a replacement, or even an excuse, not to pursue our high calling of being ambassadors of the Gospel? Practicing the presence of God places a prime emphasis of seeing God in the ordinary. However, does looking for God in the ordinary take the place of growing in our faith through the extraordinary practice of devotion to the word of God? Does looking for God in the "ordinary" cause us to become stagnant in the expression of our extraordinary Spiritual gifts?

Recall the conversation I noted at the beginning of this article. The response of "doing the dishes for God" when confronted with the high calling of Gospel-centered living highlights the danger of this practice. I grant that we do well to realize that God is all-present, all-knowing, all-powerful and every aspect of our lives is to be consecrated to Him. However, the danger in looking to "practice God's presence" as outlined above

is that we neglect the true means of grace which God has granted.

Glaring Omissions

Brother Lawrence was a Catholic monk who lived out his days in a monastery. This alone explains the emphasis of his teachings and their glaring deficiencies. Brother Lawrence would be considered a "contemplative" teacher. His practice was one of inner meditation that took place within a monastic community. Is this the life to which God has called his children? Is "practicing His presence" the "most excellent way to go to God"? In noting the glaring omissions in Brother Lawrence's teachings, the answer to these questions is No.

What has God called His people to do? In the wake of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Luke outlines God's "means of grace" which we are to practice. "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:41-42). Those who received the Gospel message were baptized and continued in the Gospel through devotion to the apostles teaching (the word of God), prayer, fellowship, and the Lord's supper.⁸ All those who subsequently believe are to go and live likewise in this Christ-centered way. With this as the divinely prescribed framework of the Christian's practice, how does this compare with Brother Lawrence's teaching? The most glaring and foundational omission in "Practicing the Presence of God" is the lack of primacy placed on the word of God. Our "practice" must be grounded on the precepts of the Scriptures. Our lives are transformed through the Holy Spirit illuminating and applying the truths of God's

word. Without this all-important devotion we will take our eyes off Christ and become susceptible to all sorts of spiritual pitfalls. Note the Spirit-led author of Hebrews' concern:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. (Hebrews 5:12-14)

If we are to grow in the faith and be sanctified by the Spirit we must devote ourselves to the word of God. And note very clearly this is what we are called to practice (5:14). We are to continually devote ourselves to the word of God. As we continue to dig into the inexhaustible treasure of the Scriptures we will fix our eyes on Christ and be trained to discern good from evil.

While "Practicing the Presence of God" is said to be constant prayer and consciousness of God's presence, the truth is our prayer life must be informed and guided by His word. Without the guiding light of the word of God our prayer life will be deficient; the Scriptures teach us how to pray. Furthermore, the monastic life of which Brother Lawrence partook may have been rich in community, but it lacked the critical cog of Christian fellowship—the act of fellowship around the word and through prayer that is vital to the Christian life. "Practicing His presence" cannot be held as a substitute for such essentials. While the above are a mere sampling of the dangers present in Brother Lawrence's teachings, we do well to focus our attention upon what God has prescribed for His people.

The Purpose of His Presence — The Goal of our Practice

The true purpose of His presence in our lives is that we would be conformed to the image of Christ. His presence fuels us in continuing the Gospel mission (Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. . . and behold I am with you always [Matthew 28:19, 20]). The presence of His Spirit causes us to grow in His word so that we may "have our senses trained to discern good from evil (Hebrews 5:12)." His presence causes us to gather together to encourage and exhort each other as "we see that day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:25). And His Spirit indeed leads us to "pray at all times" (Ephesians 6:18). In the midst of this robust matrix of Spirit-filled living we surely will see God in both the mundane and the extraordinary.

A Concluding, Convicting Example

The Scriptures declare "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men" (Colossians 3:23). If Brother Lawrence was simply affirming this Scriptural truth he would be within the bounds of God's counsel. However, He goes beyond this. "Practicing the presence of God" is presented as "the most excellent method of going to God." His "secret" to a spiritual life is given primacy over what God has provided. What is missing in his concept is a Gospel-centered way of life. Many may practice Brother Lawrence's teaching, and even feel like God is near. Yet, if the Gospel — the person and work of Jesus Christ — is absent from their lives, this practice simply provides false assurance. Rather than follow the lead of Brother Lawrence, we should avail ourselves of God's gracious means. This will keep us centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ and will cultivate genuine assurance.

Luke records an event that speaks to this subject:

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42 ESV)

We surely need to attend to our "everyday duties," and these should be done "as for the Lord." Yet, the "necessary" goal we must be striving toward is growing in our knowledge of Jesus Christ. The Spirit-filled source granted for this glorious endeavor is faithful devotion to the Scriptures. Contrary to Brother Lawrence's teaching, this endeavor does differ from our "everyday efforts." May we all, like Mary, sit at our Master's feet through devotion to His word. In doing so we will practice what He has prescribed and will have surely "chosen the good portion."

by Ryan Habbena

HOW CAN MY WAY BE WELL-FOUNDED

BRIAN L. PENNEY, 2012
FROM PSALM 119:9-16

MEINE HOFFNUNG, JOACHIM NEANDER

1. How can my way be well - found - ed?
2. In my heart Your Word is hid - den,
3. With my lips I have de - clared it,

I shall heed God's ho - ly Word. With my whole heart
That I might not walk in sin; Bles - sed Lord, teach
All Your ways are good and true; In Your tes - ti -

I have sought You, To Your path keep me, O Lord.
me Your stat - utes, Then shall I be clean with - in.
mo - nies joy - ful, As great ri - ches to pur - sue.

Cleanse my way, Lord, I pray; Guide my feet, let me not stray.
Lord, I pray, ev' - ry day, Lead me in the right-ous way.
I de - light to re - cite, That Your Law is just and right.