

Right or Wrong? Help, Thanks, Wow

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Anne Lamott's recent book, *Help, Thanks, Wow*, contends these three words encompass the necessary prayers for a well-rounded life. Is this an over-simplification or a profoundly simple evaluation?

The blank space in-between a person and his or her Maker can be an intimidating space to fill. What do you say? How should you say it? How do you make sure you have said everything that needs to be said? People who are praying for the first time or whose faith traditions emphasize spontaneous prayer over the use of prewritten prayers can find prayer especially intimidating.

ACTS method

Gracious teachers of the faith offer guidance to those who desire to practice prayer regularly. When I was a child, one of my Sunday school teachers taught our class the ACTS method of prayer. First, you begin with the *adoration* of God. Adoration involves praising God simply for who he is. Next, you offer to God the *confession* of your sins. Then, you voice prayers of *thanksgiving* for God's forgiveness and for his provision in your life. Last, you present your *supplications*, asking God for what you want or need.

Decades later, that simple guide continues to prove helpful in my daily prayer life. The ACTS method has much in common with Anne Lamott's three categories. *Thankfulness* shows up in both discussions. *Wow* easily could be interpreted as adoration. *Help* encompasses both the act of confession and the practice of supplication.

Lamott's categories have one huge advantage over the ACTS method of my

childhood—simplicity. As a child, I struggled to remember exactly what the letters stood for. Furthermore, with the exception of the word “thanksgiving,” the labels in the ACTS method require a certain level of church education in order to be understood. I never have used the word “supplication” outside a church setting.

Profound simplicity

Almost anyone can understand and remember “Help. Thanks. Wow.” That simplicity makes me think Lamott is onto something profound. The most ardent of atheists have felt these prayers deep in their souls, even as they reject the notion there is anyone out there to whom they can offer these thoughts.

I remember reading a book written by an agnostic who attempted to follow the commandments found in the Bible for an entire year. While he found many of the Bible’s commands to be strange and off-putting, the command to offer thanksgiving proved soul-enriching. He found it natural to want to thank someone for the blessings in his life, even as he doubted there was someone to thank. My guess is the same holds true for prayers of help and amazement.

The yearnings of our soul

Lamott’s categories have much to commend them. They are simple enough a child can learn them easily. They are profound enough to cause an atheist to wonder if the yearnings of his or her soul have a spiritual cause. Perhaps the fact we all instinctively cry out, “Help, thanks and wow” indicates we were made by a God who inspires such prayers.

Taylor Sandlin, pastor

Southland Baptist Church

San Angelo

If you have a comment about this column or wish to ask a question for a future column, contact Bill Tillman, consulting ethicist for “Right or Wrong?” at btillman150@gmail.com.