

WHERE TWO OR THREE HAVE GATHERED: SELF-PRESENTATION IN
EVANGELICAL YOUNG ADULT PRAYER GROUPS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Review of literature.....	3
Presentation of Self in Everyday Life	3
Prayer.....	8
Praying to God around Others.....	11
Young Adult Evangelicals.....	13
Method	16
Data Collection.....	17
Data Analysis	18
Results.....	19
Who is prayer for?	19
What is prayed for?	25
How is prayer performed?	26
Why pray together?	31
Discussion.....	35
Frontstage Works and Backstage Grace.....	35
Prayerful Testimony	37
Group Prayer as Intercessory Prayer	38
limitations & conclusion.....	41
Appendix.....	43
References.....	44
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ABSTRACT

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This study explored the performance of group prayer within young adult evangelical contexts. Employing Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model of self-presentation, this study sought to make sense of who the actors and audiences of prayer are, along with identifying the specific manners in which prayer is done amid others. The sample contained 20 young adult evangelical Christians who were involved with a faith-based small group at the time of study, and they participated in semi-structured interviews with the researcher. This study found a number of tensions between the authentic nature of their private prayers and the beautified nature of their public prayers. Theoretical implications suggests that prayer performance is impacted mostly by who is being performed to, whether fellow members or God.

INTRODUCTION

“And while all the people were listening, He [Jesus] said to the disciples, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love personal greetings in the marketplaces, and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, who devour widows’ houses, and for appearance’s sake offer long prayers. These will receive all the more condemnation.” (Luke 20:45-47, NASB, 1995)

The final note of Jesus’ warning against the scribes regards the prayer made for aesthetic pleasure. Though Christian scripture calls members of the faith to pray, Jesus warns against prayers that privilege impression management over God Himself. Throughout history, prayer has been a form of resistance and reflection and employed for its sense of artistry and hope (Robinson, 1997). For all it encapsulates, prayer is an essential form of communication between a believer and the deity of the believer’s religion (Baesler, 2002). It has been defined as an address directed exclusively to God (Balentine, 1984) and as an inward exchange of communication with a power perceived as divine (Harrison, 1999).

The following study examined how evangelical Christian young adults exercise group prayer (i.e., praying together with a relatively small number of fellow evangelical Christians), with a specific focus on understanding both enacted and perceived self-presentation. I have employed Goffman’s theory of presentation of self (1959) as a theoretical lens for understanding how prayer may function as frontstage performance that shapes how group members understand each other’s (spiritual) maturity. The study focuses primarily on young adults aged 18-30 who identify as evangelical Christians. Though evangelical churches are gradually becoming fewer and further between, young adults make up much of evangelical Christianity’s demographics (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2017). The evangelical form of Christianity is, to the

young adult believer, often the core of their existence, and in both doctrine and cultural practice, evangelical Christianity places a high premium on prayer; thus, I expected to find self-presentation of identity during group prayer as a salient concern for evangelical Christian young adults. My hope was to better understand how a young adult communicatively manages face during group prayer; I anticipated this understanding will both (a) extend Goffman's theory to understand simultaneous self-presentation with other people and with God and (b) yield practical insights that inform how evangelical Christians engage in the practice of group prayer.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

Goffman (1959) employed theatrical language to describe an individual's self-presentation. In every public expression is a "performance" that encapsulates an "actor's" complete behavioral itinerary. Performances are beheld by those around who collectively serve as the actor's audience; the actor implicitly persuades the audience to sincerely subscribe to his or her own impression efficacy as revealed through performance. In so doing, an actor may exaggerate certain behaviors over others so as to align their observable behavior with their claimed identity. However, problems may arise when the dramatization of behavior eclipses the actual performing of it. Goffman (1959) provided examples of the shopper who scavenges antique malls to acquire necessary décor for quiet dignity and of the beautified supermodel posing with a book of which she has little understanding. Prioritizing the aesthetic of a task's expression can often prevent actual substantial completion of the task.

Religious self-presentation is likewise not immune from this tendency to prioritize appearances over reality. Zackariasson (2014) examined Christian identity and self-presentation among young Christians in Sweden. Christianity in countries like Sweden is not as expected or cultural as it is elsewhere; accordingly, there is a need for the religious to "come out" in a way an LGBTQ+ person comes out in a largely heteronormative context. Those interviewed revealed that the Christian identity in Sweden is better tied to religious organizational involvement than to the Christian's actual belief in God or personal identification as a Christian. In a different respect, 1980s Vietnam saw thousands of Hmong become Christians as they were subjected to the Vietnamese state's socialist rules privileging the country's ethnic majority, the Kinh. The government prompted an all-out assault on Christianity as they realized the underground church of Hmong Christianity continued to flourish. Thus, government officials proceeded to

extravagantly revive the events of traditional Hmong religion so as to out-perform the traditions newly seen amidst Christianity. Government officials, however, eclipsed the religious nature of these events with an over-emphasis on event presentation and festivity. The revived traditions of Hmong religion, with a fixation that favored the visual over the spiritual, fell short of the religious fervor the Hmong felt within Christian tradition and practice. Essentially, Hmong religiosity became superficial performance that could not keep up with the religious experience Christianity offered (Ngo, 2021).

Goffman (1959) conceptualizes frontstage as the locus in which these public dramatizations occur. Characterized by the presence of a participatory audience, frontstage is where behaviors and actions believed to be most congruent with the audience's rules and expectations are performed. A performing individual engages in an effort to appear suitable within a context's unique standards. These standards are comprised of two groupings, the first regarding a performer's treatment of the audience in manners such as what is prominently known as "politeness." The second concerns a performer's behavioral integrity while in view, but not in engagement, of the audience. Goffman (1959) refers to this as "decorum," which can claim various forms such as "make-work," a phenomenon in which the appearance of meaningful work dominates over meaningful completion of their work. Casting appearances of employee diligence become privileged in contexts where decorum becomes prominent. Decorum can be understood further as respectful displays towards the immediate performative area, though it can be motivated ultimately for favorable perceptions from the audience or to defer consequence from the same.

In a study investigating self-presentation on social media from young Muslims and Christians, Trysnes and Synnes (2021) found their religious identities were mediated through social media by three strategies. Secular frontstage undermined the centrality religion played in

their lives out of concern for stigmatization. Double frontstage strategy ensures someone's secular nature is unrevealed in sacred contexts and the sacred unrevealed in the secular. It neutralizes crossover between religious devotion and everyday living so that the religious has little to no control over the everyday. The final strategy, religious frontstage, refers to religious content the Christian or Muslim may post on their personal social media accounts. Religious content on social media profiles were intentionally curated, regarded everyday religious experience, and shared content seemingly secular but was religiously incognito, such as a photo from church camp. Whereas the deeper motivation for religious content on a Muslim's social media profile was to confront and change a negative image of Islam in their immediate society, Christians posted ultimately for religious show to their followers.

Frontstage is where appearances are upkept, even if antithetical to the legitimate actions and behaviors made backstage. Goffman (1959) characterizes backstage as being void of the audiences and expectations adorning the frontstage. Backstage performance is personal expression made raw and authentic, irrespective of frontstage rules. It is the place where behaviors sequestered from the frontstage can find a home and the venue in which the "true self" is fully realized. Thus, the backstage may store and hide from frontstage what is believed to be undesirable. For example, Joosse (2012) adopted Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor to investigate a charismatic spiritual leader from Canada. The leader, though viewed as superhuman and extraordinary, was understood to simply lock his commonality and inferiority into the backstage. He and those in his inner circle proactively prevented fans and followers from backstage access. His everyday-ness was no different from the everyday-ness of society and those who knew it were safety hazards for the integrity of his frontstage. Information that eventually leaked from backstage to front was shown to be most effective in damaging the

leader's charismatic persona. Joosse (2012) contended that the impartation of the ordinary (i.e., revelation from the charismatic's backstage) is salient in the breakdown of frontstage identity.

Another utility of the backstage is its capacity to function as a rehearsal space for eventual frontstage performance. Routines are prepared in backstage and eventually presented in the front. Successful implementation of backstage preparation into frontstage presentation can empower the audience to merge the performer to the performed character. Consequentially, Goffman (1959) argues the performed character is not the impetus of a scene but is rather the product of a scene. An actor's frontstage performance will often intersect with another's frontstage performance, all of which is forged through repetition and often times subconsciously fleshed out. The performed self, then, is an interplay of theatrical mechanisms of co-actors and settings and rehearsal that coalesce into the refinement of the emerging character beheld and validated by the audience.

In addition to Goffman's (1959) work, the current study builds from a number of social identity theories that provide insight on what may occur in prayer group meetings. Social comparison theory was inspired by informal social communication (ISC; Festinger, 1952). Within ISC, Festinger posed a scale of physical reality with end points related to positions of dependence. One end point relates to a complete dependence on physical reality, meaning if a belief can be validated from physical observation, there is little need to seek affirmation from people. Within Christianity, the Bible calls believers to walk by faith instead of sight (2 Corinthians 5:7, NASB). In cases where the need for objective observation is relinquished, members are left to depend on their social reality found on the other end of the spectrum. Here is where opinions, beliefs, and attitudes become correct, valid, and proper only to the extent that it is tethered to a group with alike opinions, beliefs, and attitudes. Individuals tend to affiliate with groups where opinions and attitudes are shared and away from groups where cognitions are not

uniform. A group's pressure to uniformity is further influenced by whether or not a group believes its evolution depends on member uniformity. Should there be a group convinced its progression is not dependent on member unity, they will not be as prompted to elicit the same degree of unification as would a group that emphasizes conformity.

What came of this foundation is Festinger's (1954) social comparison processes, or social comparison theory. The theory claims humans are driven to evaluate opinions and abilities to each other. Thus, much of how individuals perceive themselves is based on how those around esteem their ability, though this is true only for ambiguous criteria. For example, unambiguous criteria, such as running, can be objectively evaluated by consulting lap times. Activities such as prayer offer a more ambiguous evaluation; prayer groups are hardly, if ever, equipped with a rubric to grade the efficacy of fellow members' prayers. Without objective measurement, self-assessments are forged by comparing oneself to others in the group. Festinger frames goals as "Levels of Aspiration", a benchmark in which one's ability is measured. The more important an opinion or ability is to a member, the more related to social behavior, and the more immediate the behavior is, the greater drive someone has to make evaluation. The greater an ability's importance, the stronger the pressures towards uniformity become, which begets a larger sense of competition and heightened willingness to acknowledge the superiority of others. In this case, prayer can be framed as the prioritized ability in Christian prayer groups. It is a potent facet of the Christian faith made substantial enough by Christian scripture that followers may make evaluation.

Jesus taught He is faithful to appear amidst a group of two or three who met in His name (Matthew 18:20, NASB, 1995). He also taught that:

“When you pray you are not to be like the hypocrites: for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men...” (Matthew 6:5, NASB, 1995)

The small group context places believers both in an opportunity to pray amongst others and in a potentially comparative and performative situation largely unseen in private prayers. Unlike private prayer, public prayer features the presence of others that can function as an engaged audience. Evaluative apprehension theory suggests one’s performance can be affected by the presence of others who might make evaluations capable of becoming a social reward or punishment (Innes & Young, 1973). In group prayer, a praying member might feel nervous if s/he fears their prayer will be evaluated by fellow group members for its quality, which other group members could evaluate positively or negatively. It is possible that, within this scenario, a member may pray primarily out of a desire to be positively esteemed by other members rather than actually engaging with the substance of their prayer.

Prayer

Now that I have considered Goffman and Festinger as an overarching theoretical perspective, I will consider evangelical Christian prayer groups as a specific context. The Model of Interpersonal Christian Prayer (Baesler, 1999) suggests two categories of prayer, active and receptive prayers. *Active prayers* begin with a list of wants and are complemented by an extended time of listening for God’s reply, ending with dialogue between self and God. The emphasis of active prayers is found in the human effort involved during the prayer. *Receptive prayers*, however, emphasize God’s activity in the midst of prayer. The primary drive of receptive prayers is divine, not human (Baesler, 1999). To distinguish this further, Zondag and van Uden (2011) identified four specific types of prayer. *Petitionary* prayers seek God’s help and are used as a means to tangibly alter life’s conditions. *Religious* prayers are focused on God,

giving Him thanks, or seeking forgiveness. *Meditative* prayers are used for reflection, contemplation, and taking stock of one's life. Finally, *psychological* prayers seek God's support; the prayer is an alteration of the person instead of the problem. Petitionary and religious prayers place God in the center, whereas meditative and psychological prayers place God on the sidelines. Petitionary and religious prayers are receptive prayers, meditative and psychological prayers are active.

The stitching together of these different prayer focuses have been shown to yield altruistic and beneficial effects. While studying burnout among Anglican parochial clergy in England, Lewis et al. (2007) reported a clergy's positive attitude towards prayer was associated with decreased emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, along with increased personal accomplishment. In other words, positive attitudes regarding prayer and good psychological health regarding a clergy's occupation work in tandem with each other. Although attending church services of either the Hindu, Russian Christian Orthodox, Judaism, Islam, Protestant, and Catholic religion across six nations was positively related to outgroup hostility, personal prayer frequency hosted a small trend towards a negative association with outgroup hostility (Ginges et al., 2009). Loveland et al. (2005) found a significant association between prayer and involvement with nonprofit groups specifically meeting the needs of individuals. They further added that prayer is the religious practice that facilitates the connection between faith and civic involvement.

Evangelical Prayer

The current practice of evangelical Christian prayer has roots in the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s. Bray (2012) noted that medieval society was divided into three orders known as the Three Estates of the Realm. People either worked, fought, or prayed, but those who prayed could not fight or work, those who worked could neither fight nor pray. Those who

prayed (the clergy) were tasked with connecting their community to God. Implied in their assignment was a societal expectation that clergy were the only ones to pray, thus relinquishing the community's personal practice of prayer. Clergy would occasionally be compensated as community members approached them with needs. The system worked well until clergy members were infected while praying for the sick and dying during the bubonic plague. Subsequently, some lay people began making their own supplications to God in a newly created spirituality called "modern devotion". This foreshadowed what would become known as the Protestant Reformation, a move that challenged basic assumptions about religiosity in medieval society. Part of dismantling the set-apart nature of medieval clergy was to remove any barriers that disconnected them from the rest of society. Their unique use of language was retired to favor society's vernacular and their order to exclusively pray dissolved. Now, clergy were tasked with teaching believers about prayer regardless of their identified estate. Prayer and worship became the work of the common man as taught by their clergy and ordinary people were equipped to pray to God without a priestly mediator. Every Protestant denomination helped to teach believers about prayer, notably the Church of England who produced the Book of Common Prayer still used in worship services today. In essence, the Protestant Reformation helped to lessen the gap between God and the common person.

The evangelical method of prayer lessens the gap further through its imaginative nature. Kataphatic prayer employs imagination to depict God's presence in a literal sense; it is prayer that involves active composition of mental images using one's inner senses (Luhmann et al., 2013, Asprem, 2017). Luhmann (2012) contends the central act of prayer is, from an anthropological and psychological perspective, to pay attention to internal experiences and to treat them as essential instead of distraction. Prominent evangelical pastors such as Bill Hybels have taught their congregations to employ imagination to make God vivid: "Words are useless

without the imagination... so imagine that you are part of the scene the words invite you to imagine” (p. 160). Daily interactions with others are facilitated mainly by the conversational partner’s facial expressions; the warm and empathic face may solicit information the giver did not initially intend to transmit. So it goes for praying to God, though it requires picturing God’s otherwise invisible face in order to relate to Him as a person. In short, kataphatic prayer imaginatively fleshes out the invisible God. The evangelical may approach this envisioning by believing they are talking to God as with a best friend. Luhrmann (2012) indicated that imagining “God-as-buddy” has led some to giggle with God during walks and to seek Him for advice on what brand shampoo to purchase at the store; some have imagined “date nights with God” not as a game of pretend, but as a means to encounter Him. Whether kataphatic or not, however, the prayer of evangelical Christianity is characterized by minimal distance between God and the individual.

Praying to God around Others

The unique interest of this study is how one engages in God’s presence in a context made of several others. Martin Buber’s (2010) *I and Thou* philosophy speaks of humanity’s capacity to engage in two forms of relationship. The I-It relationship involves communicative partners treating each other as objects instead of as people. The beholder does not perceive the beheld as an equal but rather as a tangible means to an end. The I-Thou relationship, however, emphasizes the mutual and holistic existence of two entities and thus becomes the only manifestation of relationship that generates pure dialogue. In Buber’s *Between Man and Man* (2002), dialogue is written to appear in three forms. Genuine dialogue is a communication either spoken or silently constructed in which both conversational partners turn to each other intending to establish mutual relationship. Technical dialogue is marked by its pursuit of acquiring information or objective knowledge. Monologue, the last form, is dialogue in disguise for which there is no

relational goal or interest in knowledge acquisition. Instead, it is solely used to confirm self-reliance. The latter two forms are tucked within the I-It relationship whereas the first is best encased in an I-Thou relationship.

One of the primary communicative tools Jesus used in His teachings were parables grounded in daily life as it then happened. Jesus expressed moral and ethical truths through stories of conditions familiar to nearby listeners, such as fishing and agriculture. The everyday life was sanctified in His teachings, suggesting that God is not one to privilege certain ranks in the social hierarchy. A God found everywhere is a God whom Buber contends can only be connected with via the I-Thou relationship. Compressing relationship with God into an I-It relationship renders Him an object for which technical dialogue and monologuing become the only communicative options. Prayers in a divine I-Thou relationship better capture the dynamics of God than a consumeristic I-It relationship. The I-Thou prayer, emanating from a relational understanding that comprehensively realizes the existence of both relational partners beyond utility, calls for the praying person to authentically express their self just as they desire to see God express Himself (Guilherme, 2011).

Historically, researchers revoked the need to operationalize group prayer as distinct from private prayer as they have viewed the dynamics of group prayer to be similar enough to individual prayer (Fuist, 2015; Rainville, 2018; Zarzycka et al., 2019; Sharp, 2010). Cockayne and Salter (2019), however, claim that prayer becomes shared once second-person connection is established. If two people pray together in the same space but neither acknowledges the other, the experience is only common, but not shared. Once a prayer context becomes shared amongst two or more others, the interpersonal benefits of group prayer become realized, including the recognition one might not be alone in their needs. Unique to the dynamic of shared (or group) prayer is its capacity to see praying persons influence fellow praying persons. Barnes and Sered

(2005) noted that the styles, emotions, languages, and actions performed in group prayer are socially situated and learned. Nelson (1996) further added that publicly performed actions of prayer establish behavioral expectations about prayer across a congregation. Fuist (2015) found that collective prayer among groups of various Christian denominations tend to elicit unique physical movements (such as folded hands, swaying, bowed heads, and so forth) and unique prayer languages (speech norms that are more formal than everyday conversational norms) that cast the prayer message as distinct from common chatter.

Young Adult Evangelicals

The aforementioned interpersonal benefits of public religious practices appear to be one of the prime motivators for the young Christian today. In regard to young people (ages 16-27) and Christianity in Scotland, Vincett et al. (2012) found that young adult Christians are more likely than older generations to consider a group of like-minded believers as “church”. As experienced from the young adult Christian’s perspective, church is fleshed out through fellowship in someone’s home and experiences in various churches one might attend weekly. The church experience for Christians aged 16-27, then, is not solely found within a specific institutional church home. Young adults are mobilizing their religious practices beyond brick-and-mortar churches and are deemphasizing the differences across denominations. In so doing, they have witnessed the devolvement of the Sunday Christianity practice that segregates one’s religious life away from their everyday life. Simply put, young adults desire a more authentic experience with their Christianity than what they saw in generations before.

Young adult Christians have subsequently flocked to small group configurations. Barna Research (2016) reports the majority of American churchgoers worship at a church of intimate sizes with only up to several hundred people; half of American churchgoers attend a church with 100 or fewer members. Though megachurches are attended by a minority, the Hartford Institute

for Religion Research (2017) shows that nearly two-thirds of adult megachurch members are younger than 45. Although small congregations have the benefit of intimate size, larger congregations have increased need for small group opportunities. Dougherty and Whitehead (2011) found that consistent involvement with a small group increases a member's sense of belonging with and attendance to their church. They observed that corporate prayer was a chief practice within these small groups. Though the effect of increased belonging and attendance is seen across the spectrum of congregational size, Dougherty and Whitehead (2011) acknowledged that members of a larger congregation must proactively pursue small group opportunities in order to obtain a sense of congregational involvement. It is possible, however, that congregational involvement is not as grave a concern for today's young adult generation as it is for older generations. In the young adult eye, Church has become a mosaic of various houses of worship and a tapestry of friendships with interchurch connections. They are renovating "church" space to a site boundless and omnipresent. They display their venues of religious practice, often beyond the context of a dedicated church space, as evidence their Christianity is set apart from antiquated ways of performing the religion (Vincett et al., 2015).

Self-Presentation in Young Adult Prayer Groups

The manner in which prayer within a divine I-Thou relationship manifests itself can be influenced if the prayer is made in the presence of others, i.e., a prayer group. Praying to a divine Thou while surrounded by Thou peers make a prayer of one the prayer of all. Interconnected church groups are spheres in which experiences may diffuse across all members so long as group members perceive each other with full humanity. Yet the dynamic of praying to a divine Thou around Thou peers is different from praying to the same divine amidst *It* peers. Praying persons might find themselves constructing prayer differently when praying around those whom utility is the relational cornerstone. Previous research shows an inflated focus on religious performance

can override the purpose of religious and spiritual practices such as group prayer. A similar vein of superficial performance has been, and continues to be, evident in small groups populated by young adults (Dunaetz et al., 2021). Thus, this study will be guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How does prayer function to uphold an individual's self-presentation?

RQ2: How, if at all, does the backstage experience of prayer differ from the frontstage performance of prayer?

Method

This study was prompted by scripture in Luke 20:46-47 (NASB, 1995), “Beware of the scribes, who like to talk around in long robes and love respectful greetings in the marketplaces, and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquet, who devour widows’ houses, and for appearance’s sake offer long prayer. These will receive greater condemnation.” An aspect of prayer enactment that concerns itself with “appearance’s sake” is best conceptualized within the frontstage and backstage position of Goffman’s dramaturgical model of self-presentation. The small group setting purposed for prayer, while initially an occasion for like-minded believers to commune amidst meaningful spiritual discipline, can also become a venue where personal appearance becomes a chief focus. Among others, personal appearance can potentially eclipse the other foci a person otherwise has when praying alone. This study, then, strived to capture the ways in which a young adult constructs prayerful meaning while around others engaged in the same practice, with a specific bent towards both enacted and perceived self-presentation. Semi-structured interviews (see appendix) with individual young adults were employed to elucidate the otherwise blurry performative methods used to convey one’s own prayerful competence and that which is perceived from their young adult peers.

Researcher Position

The interviewer’s role is marked by a need to lead from respect and familiarity with the discussed topic (Heritage, 2013). As a confessed evangelical Christian myself, I have been involved with and have led a wide array of group prayer experiences over the years. My position as a researcher intimately familiar with the discussed context likely increased participant willingness to share their experiences. It also gave a more nuanced understanding of the language and context that enriched analysis.

Data Collection

Rubin and Rubin (2005) contend interviews can sprout a phenomenological complexity that other methodologies would have kept in shadow. Interviews can reveal the kind of information other methods are unable to show. Unique to the interview configuration, however, is a sense that while the interviewer and interviewee are equals with a potential for friendship (Oakley, 1981), the interviewer does claim conversational leadership as it relates to topic and direction (Tracy, 2013). On the other hand, the interviewee acts as a gate keeper for the information sought after by the researcher. Goffman (1971) argues that individuals have unique personal territories under constant defense; embedded in all personal territories are preserves of information that contain the very content an interviewer seeks access to. The interview then becomes a delicate affair between conversational partners in which the interviewee's personal territory is simultaneously protected and assessed (Heritage and Raymond, 2005).

Those who self-identified as an evangelical Christian, aged between 18-30, and were currently involved with a faith based small group were eligible for this research. Participants were recruited through personal contacts, social media (Facebook, Instagram, & Twitter), and word-of-mouth. One-on-one interviews were conducted both in-person and online with 20 participants ($N=20$). Six participants were male, 14 female. Though racial demographics were not explicitly collected for this study, most were Caucasian. All but three participants came from the South; another came from Central United States and the other two from the Pacific Northwest. Interview transcriptions amounted to 306 pages made through an online transcription service called Temi (<https://www.temi.com/>) and just under 17 hours' worth of audio. Having narrowed the participant pool to those who identify as an evangelical Christian helped to establish a uniformed theology and worldview amidst all participants, as well as common cultural practices within the faith group.

Data Analysis

This study adopts the iterative analysis approach discussed by Tracy (2013) that alternates between a data's emergent readings and a theory's etic utility. Once the data set was collected, it underwent constant revisitation and connection to emerging insights in the analysis approach. Data analysis began with tangible copies of interview transcripts. I then immersed myself in the data to make sense of it through conversations with peers while maintaining deep consideration of all possibilities to materialize what is happening within the data (Creswell, 2007). A coding cycle also ensued; key words or phrases identified in the transcripts as salient and evocative to the greater overlying research questions were captured as a code. The goal of coding's initial process, known as primary-cycle coding, is simply to release meaning from the data (Tracy, 2013). Codes were subsequently collected in a codebook that archived all key codes, definitions, and examples used in the main analysis. In the second phase, I re-examined previously identified codes and arranged them into appropriate interpretive concepts. These codes, conceptualized as hierarchical codes, advanced explanation as to what was happening in the data set. Participants were renamed into pseudonyms I determined for the sake of preserving confidentiality.

Results

The analysis of interviews revealed six themes that are captured in the following four frameworks: (1) Who prayer is for; (2) What is prayed for; (3) How prayer is performed; and (4) Why pray together. Tucked within these answers are revelations of tensions participants felt while praying in the public eye. Mindful of the first research question, though participants contend prayer is meant for God regardless of the social context, the intentionality surrounding what is prayed about and how it is prayed seemed to increase around others in order to fit in with the “perfect Christian” persona. The second research question concerns the potential difference between private (backstage) prayer and group (frontstage prayer). Participants shared that their philosophies and beliefs as to how they pray privately seemingly opposed their public expression of prayer. Thus, praying in front of others “cleaned up” the otherwise messy prayer participants made in private.

Who Prayer is For

Invisible God and Visible People

Participants understood the purpose of prayer mainly in terms of connecting with and being in God’s presence. Carrie described one aspect of prayer as being an acknowledgement of needs and desires, especially those contextualized within deeper expressions of stress and anxiety. Prayer’s dominant purpose, however, was “to continue that relationship and talk with Him as a friend, like you would anybody.” Daisy spoke of prayer’s purpose as synonymous with prayer’s privilege, “When we are in prayer, we are actively communing with God and we are actively abiding in Him. The privilege it is to speak to the Holy God of the living. And He hears us.” A youth pastor further expressed how prayer can be most meaningfully conceptualized as the experience of Eden (the paradise described as humanity’s first environment, created by God in the book of Genesis). “When I think of prayer, that’s how I view it as – I’m walking back into

the gates of Eden where I can just simply be with God, speak to Him and allow Him to speak to me, sitting in the presence of God all the time.” Accordingly, the purpose and subsequent joy of prayer has more to do with God’s presence than the actual act of praying itself. Lucia expressed that as she prays in public contexts, “I feel a huge sense of anxiety/ And I’ll do this thing where I say ok, start over with Jesus. So I’ll say the name Jesus in my mind.” Later, she shared prayer is “Just me envisioning myself in the presence of a sweet Father who wants the best for me. ... I don’t know the right way to pray. I think you’re doing pretty good if you’re just talking to Him.”

Group prayer adds person-to-person communion to the submersion in God’s presence as it is experienced during individual prayer. Jonah, the aforementioned youth pastor, says of group prayer:

I’m experiencing the Garden of Eden where there’s no separation of me and God, especially when praying with other people. I usually do not have the words to say in situations that are tough. When I pray with other people, it’s almost like this Edenic reality where I am with another person in the presence of God, and there’s spiritual connection between all three of us.

Jenna viewed the presence of others in prayer as an additional detail that does not change prayer’s purpose. “It’s pretty much the same. It just becomes plural, building ourselves up. But usually when I’m praying with people, ... it goes back to communing with God. It still goes back to the same thing.” The interpersonal aspect of group prayer was described by Stephen as edification and transformation. “We will all go around and be like, ‘How is your week?’, ‘What’s going on?’. And it’s not just ‘Well I have a test’ – really, how are you doing mentally, spiritually? Any struggles? People will share however much they’re willing to share and then we’ll pray for those specific requests.” Participants valued the potential of prayer to stimulate interpersonal relationships but did not see that as prayer’s highest purpose. Prayer group settings

were reportedly centered around the invisible God, not the visible people. Relationships that group members had with each other would be gradually impacted the more they together remained in God's presence through prayer. The dilemma, however, was expressed by Ariel: "It's interesting because [group prayer] kind of takes it out of that intensely personal kind of place. It allows you to be vulnerable with the group, but you're still an individual communicating with God."

People serve as living and tangible participants and witnesses of God encounters during group prayer. This presents a potential tension between connecting with the unseen God among seen people. Kathleen said, "I've heard it and I've said it to other people that it doesn't matter what you say [during prayer]. ... We're just talking to God together. I've never fully felt that way. There's always an aspect of performance. If I'm praying with people, I don't know that I've ever fully forgotten that I was in the presence of other people listening to me pray out loud." She continues, "I still prayed in a certain way out loud because I knew people were listening." She spoke from her experience of performative pressure as a Bible study leader. Like Kathleen, Jack added:

With more [spiritually] mature people, I feel like I wouldn't have as much stage fright. I struggle sometimes coming up with the proper words at the proper time. I cannot think of either an alliteration or a Bible verse or something beautiful to talk about and I will sometimes end it right there. ... I wouldn't necessarily feel so self-conscious [around mature believers] because the last thing I want is someone new to the faith to say 'Oh man, this guy's been doing this for what, since he was five? And he still can't find the words?'

Praying in public, then, can involve intentionally phrasing the prayer in a manner that can sustain the praying one's spiritual reputation amongst the group.

Carrie shared how assumption plays a role in the distinction between relationship with God and relationship with people. “You picture this relationship with your spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend, whoever it is. I think it’s natural to talk in the sense that there’s a lot of assumptions being made, assumptions about how they’re expressing themselves or the tone they have. But for God, there is no assumption.” She proceeded to share how the invisible God, already fully knowing, desires all things to be made known to Him. Prayers, though meant purely for experiencing God’s presence, can be prevented from “making all things known” as fellow members are perceived as making proactive assumptions about the praying one. Participants shared occasional cases of fellow members intentionally or unintentionally serving as gatekeepers for how and what can be prayerfully addressed to the all-knowing God. The potential tension of praying to an invisible God around visible people emerged as the overarching theme in the data; as such, I will keep this in mind as I address other tensions described by participants.

Godliness and Churchliness

It is plausible that a prayer’s nature depends on whether the prayer was meant mainly for God or for people. In the earlier section, participants described prayer as communication with God, not people. Nevertheless, prayers that behold God can themselves make an impression on others by virtue of what seeking God would cause people to subsequently pray for. Kathleen shares:

It’s amazing to listen to the actual things people are praying to God for. ... Like, ‘God, lead me where You want me to go’, ‘Take my life and make everything about it what You want it to be’, and ‘God, what will most glorify You, even if it’s where I would actually hate to be?’... Sometimes I listen to other people pray and I’m like, wow. I don’t

know if I'm bold enough to pray that God would have His way in that. It strikes me then that they must have a close relationship with God.

Participants viewed the prayer that holistically yields to God's ways as evidence of spiritual maturity, not the performative manner in which they have done so. Daisy adds, "[Prayer] is a very unique space to come to the Lord and be exactly as we are, whether that's the best or worst. The Lord is moved because we're His." Praying to God is characterized by authentically communicating a person's best or worst into His presence. In prayer, Godliness was seemingly expressed through authentic expression of a personal relationship with God, even as others were around to listen.

In contrast to Godliness, Churchliness was viewed as the increased concern to edit the prayer instead of authentically expressing it, especially when around others. Lucia shared that, "At the beginning, especially when you're becoming a new believer, it's really intimidating. Because you want to be accepted into this group and you want to be on your best behavior. People reiterate 'come as you are'. You can do that with Jesus, but can you do it with a group of believers?" Churchliness can itself become deified during prayer. Jonah said, "In my mind, when I hear people pray very formal prayers, [I think] do you feel like you have to do this? Is this your expectation of who and what God is? Or are you trying to show how holy you are? How Christian you are?" He later said, "I think people want to look holy to others more than they want to look pure to God." Carrie expressed how people sacrifice vulnerability on the altar of impression management, "I think they might not be as vulnerable as they would if they were just praying by themselves because they want to have it sound like they're all put together." Lori shared that those who inflated their churchly performances may have done so in compensation for a lack of intimacy with God. "Having the whole Spirit's anointing has nothing to do with the performative presence. In a lot of cases, honestly, the more someone's performing – I hate to say

this because it's judging people – but it isn't necessarily the whole experience. They're trying to compensate for something they don't have.” Whereas Godliness calls for authentic prayer, Church-centered prayer seems to solicit intentional censorships and exaggerations that would depict the praying one in light of the socially constructed Christian ideal that is, in one participant's words, “pure and holy and perfect.” In this respect, Church-centered prayer is the kind wherein Church becomes a prayer's deity and centrality. Whether God or Church, every attribute of a prayer is affected primarily by the deity whom it beholds. The prayer itself might, in some cases, be better reflective of how well someone absorbed the Christian dialect than it is of their intimacy with God.

Consequently, though participants felt it is possible to evaluate, most did not believe it wise to treat one's prayer as a thermometer to assess their spiritual maturity. Daisy mentioned her dad who “has loved the Lord for the majority of his life, but his prayers sound more like my [girls I disciple] if that makes sense.” Carrie expressed moments when the Holy Spirit leads a prayer over and “speaks through me; I could not have formulated those words myself.” She further added, “there could be a lack of education where someone may have been walking with God for a long time, but they just haven't had the education to make their prayer sound nice.” Lucia said, “Where you are with the Lord isn't indicative of what your prayer life looks like. ... I have a friend who has cancer and I'll listen to her pray, and I know it sounds like she's a new believer, but she's been seasoned for years and years. But man, she's going through something hard and I just, I know God is growing her and He is working in her.” Overall, participants indicated that authenticity is a better marker of spiritual advancement than the elegance of the prayer.

What is Prayed For

Presence Driven vs. Presentation Driven

Prayer groups have been previously explained as a collective of people encountering God's presence together. Participants suggested, however, that sometimes the church-focused aspects of prayer took priority over connection with God. For example, Lori felt that moments for prayer requests were a competition to reveal the strongest Christian in the room. She explains, "some part of it may go back to the 'woe is me; suffering is righteousness' ideology that we use to have 50 years ago. 'If you're all joy and everything seemed to be working out for you, is God really with you? Because you're not getting challenged at all.' It's the notion of being a Christian means suffering in your walk as the devil tries to tear you down." Prayer groups filled with this ideology could see individual prayer requests shared only to the extent that it supports an image of faithful Christianity through suffering. Margaret further adds that:

We still fear judgment as people, and we fear it from individuals our age. We're constantly inundated by society about what people might think. I don't think that necessarily changes despite it being a Christian group. Perhaps it maybe even amplifies it because the way society constructs Christianity is pure and holy and perfect. I think what's influencing [prayer groups] is this expectation to be perfect.

Hilary discussed the struggle to share "The parts of me I believe are shameful; that if people knew about, they would not accept or love. The parts of me that are probably antithetical to what God calls a good Christian to be or to do." Again, personal struggles within group contexts were reportedly magnified or minimized in order to best depict one's faithfulness to the Christian ideal (e.g., purity, holiness, and perfection).

There were, however, some sins confessable in group settings that can leave the perfect Christian image unscarred. Sandra explained:

“I think there’s these soft prayers, these acceptable prayers that you can put out. College students will say ‘oh, just overwhelmed with homework. I’m just really not spending enough time in the word.’ These are ok struggles. They are in the little list of things you can go through. If you go outside that list, they’re no longer soft prayers. They might be too bold. I think there’s a lack of courage we have because we’re subscribing to this culture of the lack of vulnerability.”

The curated sense of vulnerability works in partnership with thoughtful “praises” that ultimately serve to emphasize how involved someone is in their faith and ministry. John said, “We were in a group and one of our members said a lot of the things they’ve done in God’s name, like ‘I did this’ without giving God the credit of what’s been done”.

How Prayer is Performed

Private Messiness vs. Public Eloquence

Participants reported that prayer functions like a sponge that absorbs the prayers heard throughout the timeline of one’s personally expressed Christianity. Eddie himself shared his prayer education came from hearing others pray. “I learned by listening to others. At my church, we base the foundation of everything on Jesus Christ.” Given the dilemma of praying to an invisible God among visible people, the publicly made prayer can be forged from a greater concern for the performative aspects of prayer.

Most participants described their private prayers to God as messy and discombobulated. Lori said, “Prayer is a conversation with God. ... I’ll journal back and forth to God, or I’ll shout at the sky and He answers. The simplest conversations I’ve had and the best conversations I’ve had have been in moments of weakness when I’m really struggling. I’ll be crying on the floor talking to God, ‘Can you please answer me?’” Jenna said, “I word vomit in front of God when I’m alone. A lot of the times it doesn’t make sense. It’s a lot messier praying alone.” Laurie

described it as “if I’m by myself, if I was really emotionally exhausted, I probably just sit and cry and leap to the Lord and just speak out what I’m feeling.” Kathleen opened up about her private prayer life, “I would probably never swear in a prayer [group setting], but when I’m alone with God and I’m really upset or angry or scared, you better believe I do that. It’s just me being myself, like my full self in front of God and expressing, releasing, and relating to God in that way.” Participants also addressed the numerous ways their prayers are mediated. Though most prayed aloud, some penned their prayers into a journal. Laurie said, “I would just write ‘Dear God’ and write as if I was writing to my best friend.” Others, like Ariel, prayed silently. “When I’m praying individually, I usually don’t pray out loud. I usually don’t pray aloud if I’m entirely by myself. I don’t think the way I pray changes [when in public] because it’ll be in my head.” Private prayer is unhinged. Participants felt no need to filter, organize, or beautify their privately made prayers. They often spoke of these private prayer sessions in terms of warfare, repentance, and overall communion with God.

Though participants identified several variants of public prayerful expression, the “successful” prayer was depicted solely in terms of its verbal performance. Jack clarified, “If you can make them feel something’s huge and relate it back to scripture. ... I think anytime someone hits a rhyme or alliteration with a good point to it, that’s not just a rhyme for rhyme’s sake.” Stephen adds “I feel like there’s always intonation, the rising and falling of climaxes. ... I think pauses throughout and not going too fast, letting things simmer and leaving it out there for a moment is good.” For Ariel, however, clever linguistic composition was not an indicator of how deeply the praying one experiences prayer. “Sometimes people have these really elegant and flowery prayers. Not that that’s worse than the alternative, but sometimes people just have these really simple and heartfelt prayers. ... For me, I think ‘they just like impromptu speaking,’ you know?” Thus, Ariel suggested that elegant prayers may indicate a greater affinity for public

speaking than for God. Praying among others can seemingly threaten the freedom to pray authentically. Dan shared this straightforwardly, “People’s presence affects the way I talk a lot more than it probably should. I like to perform and I like to entertain people. I always feel like I have to put on a show whenever I’m in a group setting.” Emma expressed, “When I am personally in those [group prayer] situations, I go back to the default of ‘ok, I have to say the right things.’ And I have to sound spiritual and I have to sound like I pray all the time.” Though participants sometimes described private prayer in terms of warfare, Hilary explained “people do want to manage their impressions and not embarrass themselves. I think you’re less likely to go to war when you’re praying with a group. ... there is that natural tendency to manage what you’re saying and how you’re saying it.”

Pastors usually model prayer to their congregations. If prayer is indeed learned by observation, pastors are among the primary craftsmen. Carrie explains, “I think [pastors] have an easier time with words and theology, things the mass population might not have. When you’re constantly sitting under the leadership of a pastor that has that training, I think Satan can use that to instill fear in the mass population that I’m not as eloquent as the pastor.” The pastor’s prayer, enriched with spiritual pomp, led one participant to share “Pastors pray differently. They just seem a whole lot more eloquent. They use better vocabulary and they’re able to reference scripture off the top of their heads. ... It feels a whole lot more, I don’t want to say educated, but maybe just more educated on the word itself. So that in itself is a level of maturity.” The words used in prayer can also suggest personal longevity in the faith, whether the pastor or the layperson. Kathleen explained, “[Something that] could be a marker of someone who’s been at it for a longer time is certain phrases or words or concepts that oftentimes are repeated in prayer that we ask God to do, but a lot of us ask God to do it because we’ve heard other people say it.” She purported phrases such as “a hedge of protection,” commonly mentioned in prayers for

safety, are usually far-fetched from one's baseline linguistic ability. "I've actually heard from people that sometimes being a newcomer to the faith can be overwhelming and confusing. There are so many things like specific languages that people use that doesn't get used outside of prayer or the church. It can be confusing at first."

Eloquence, then, can be viewed as part and parcel of the good and mature prayer. Sandra said, "If you use more refined, fancier sounding language, bigger words, and say God and Lord and Father a lot, I feel like all those are things that people are like 'Wow, that's so good'." She continued to say, "I don't know if the content is always the most important thing that people are looking for." She then explains how people have codified eloquence into "spiritual cues" that, when activated, casts the entire prayer in positive light irrespective of what was being prayed for. Emma similarly shares that the good prayer "Sounds emotional. If it sounds like it has a lot of passion behind it and whether it's filled with declarations or taking authority over something. ... I think that's more of what people are drawn to. I think that's typically what we classify as a good prayer, even if it isn't biblical or even about God."

Prayerful eloquence can be said to be the appearance of ideal spirituality. Daisy explains, "People don't want to look different or look weird. It's just this desire to fit in. Whether that's making your prayers really long because you're in a Reformed church or, I have friends who've been in more charismatic settings, and my prayer looks totally different. We just matched the setting that we're in naturally as people." Thus, it appears a congregation might absorb their pastor's eloquence believing it to be the mature form of prayer. Christians do not actively consider the countless hours in study and training that produced their pastor's eloquence, and so expecting such verbal poise from laypeople is an unrealistic standard. Jonah raised this concern:

For somebody who's saying 'thee' and 'thou' while making really elegant and formal language, if that's how they connect to God, that's great. But I also wonder, if it's a

preacher or person doing it in group prayer, how much of that is their cultural context that they've come from, maybe they've been raised in the church. ... Do they have the perspective that God is this personal God that you can be authentic with?

Daisy added, "Everyone wants to be more spiritual than we are. It's funny how people in prayer, like 'I've never heard you talk like that'. We try to make ourselves sound more spiritual."

Whereas messiness characterized the private sphere of prayer, eloquence in the public sphere was seemingly geared towards making a point to fellow members, not to better connect with God.

For John, however, prayer was more about experiencing the "emotional and intangible connection" than saying the "concrete words and things that you pray and ask, things like that".

"I think experiencing prayer is what I need. I need to be in a quiet place away from people. I need to experience that kind of connection." Participants such as Hilary shared that in prayer, "It's definitely so much more about feeling the [Holy] Spirit. I think that's what I've observed and what I started to encounter myself. Where is the Spirit guiding you? ... There wasn't a structure to the prayer that you could see or follow or maybe have ingrained in your brain."

Hilary later explained:

That verse or section in the Bible where when we don't have the words, the Holy Spirit speaks for us through moans and groans. That's where more of my perspective has grown. Like last night, I was praying and was just like, God, I don't know what to pray for. I feel really burdened. ... So I just kind of said "Holy Spirit, please come in the middle for me and communicate to the Father what I need and whatnot.

Laurie attended her university's chapel a few days before our interview. She shared how the chapel sermon revolved around speaking in tongues, a spiritual gift where unknown languages are spoken in the context of religious devotion. The chapel minister taught that "When you speak

in tongues, you say whatever comes to mind. You open your mouth and trust what's coming out of it. ... When I do group prayer, I will just lift up whatever needs to come out.” Daisy complemented Laurie's comment by sharing, “If we spend time in prayer thinking how it should be, you're going to miss all the time actually praying.”

As society understands certain linguistic cues as suggestive of proper prayer, participants shared prayer is really about experiencing it in whichever form it comes out, i.e., authentic prayer. The “successful” prayer bears no rubric or pre-requisites since God's guidance of prayer can steer it a myriad of directions. Lori shared that Spirit-led prayer “exudes peace and genuineness and [authenticity]”, not the “pure and holy and perfect” aspects of the socialized Christian ideal. The spirit led prayer is seemingly unmarked by particular Christian catch phrases or jargon but is instead infused with the presence of God that fellow group members are sensitive towards. To pray in this way, participants suggested to pray with fullness, to make all things known, to surrender elegant linguistic tools and speak as they do daily. For John, the method is simple. “It's an experience. Listen. That's it.”

Why Pray Together

God and Community

Participants defined group prayer as a place for members to open up about personal celebrations and tribulations as members pursue God together. Hilary explained:

I do think the purpose of prayer is in its opportunity for people to share their struggles. ... It's an intentional way to hear what people need and to lift it up in prayer. Most people are presenting prayer requests with the expectation to lift up prayer, but there is also an opportunity to be like, ‘Oh, I'm gonna make them a meal this week so they don't have to worry about feeding their family on top of everything else’ ... It's a way to hear about and see if you have an ability to meet some of the needs of the Church.

Hilary's hypothetical comes from the experience she had with group prayer during a family circumstance. "Our church did this for us when we were going through this season. We never had an empty fridge or freezer because so many people within the church came and brought meals. That was beautiful." Dan said one of the reasons he prays today is because he "genuinely wants to see people succeed in life. I believe the way to help people out is through prayer." Praying together served as a platform for life updates while equipping fellow members with the chance to consider how they can directly help meet the shared need. In this sense, there is something about group prayer that empowers the Church to be the Church. For Emma, her small group is her Church:

For me, Church is just community. Having deep relationships and loving people where they're at and just diving into it. ... I go to a Bible study. There's one every other week, and they're actually older women and I'm the youngest. But they invited me, and it just means a lot to me. I've had so many people come into my life and love me in the way I haven't seen the church do. That's more of what church is to me now.

Participants frequently cited Matthew 18:20 (NASB, 1995): "For where two or three have gathered in My name, I am there in their midst." Leslie extrapolated:

I believe there's power in prayer and there's power in more people praying for the same thing. We don't know how God's gonna answer the prayer. By no means is it like 'Oh, if I can get 27 people to pray for this, then great, You're like some kind magical genie.' Not like that. But just that He hears our prayers. So He hears that more and more if more people are telling Him that or asking Him that.

She then shared, "It brings comfort to you to know that brothers and sisters in Christ are praying for you and care for you." Likewise, Jack brought up a memory from high school: "At the all-guys Christian school I went to, we never had group prayer where people didn't put their arms

around each other. And maybe that was just, we were all best friends.” He started to tear up as he talked. “I love that. That means a lot to me. I know it’s little, but those guys were my best pals growing up and we went through some tough stuff together. It literally felt like someone had you, like someone you could feel love in that.” The community artifact of group prayer is such that: “You actually end up sometimes getting lifelong friends out of it because you really get to know somebody’s heart. If the group dynamic is right, you could really build those deeper level relationships because they start to hear who you are and what you believe, and also what they believe, and that can build up your beliefs.” Margaret concluded, “You’re being fed by being a part of the fountain. You’re constantly drinking from the water because you’re surrounded by people who get it too.”

Daisy affirms, however, that the climax of Matthew 18:20 is not in the gathered three, but rather in the coming of God’s presence:

Remember the purpose of prayer is you’re communing with God, that it’s not about the group you’re in. Those things are important, but the most important thing is that prayer draws us near to the Lord in a unique way. I think of new believers and how they can be tossed to and fro really easily. And I’ve seen a lot of people who aren’t as grounded in their faith and the Lord. They go into group settings, and they get on spiritual highs. They start believing things about the Lord and about Christians, about the Church and about the world. I think that comes through in our prayers when we forget it’s about God. Though it offers rich experiences with community, the upmost reason for praying with others is seemingly to behold the Lord in unity with fellow believers.

Personal Voice and United Voice

Community within group prayer was reported to yield spiritual value only to the extent it carried the essence of God’s presence. Advice Sandra would give to a new believer is to know

“that we’re all part of the body of Christ and that praying together is a really great visualization of that. It helps us to see in a real way that my walk with God is not more important than your walk with God. We’re actually all walking with God together”. During his study of ancient Christianity, Jonah learned, “When we pray, we are praying with one voice as the church. Eastern Christianity is a lot about the singularity of the church. ... When I think of group prayer, I’m praying with one voice as one body, with 2,000 years of Christians that came before me and thousands of years of Christians that will come after me.” For Daisy, group prayer paints the bigger picture. “It reminds us that we’re a part of a global church. It’s our relationship, but it’s not about us. We are saved as a Church and not as much saved as individuals.” Community in the group prayer context becomes a beautiful consequence of the crowning purpose of pursuing the Lord together with one voice that spans the fabric of 2,000 years and those upcoming. Group prayer was, for some, joining in the one true voice of the Lord’s Church. It was the facility where they recognized the Lord’s believers are far more numerous and diverse than prayers in the private sphere would suggest. Though some did warn against praying exclusively in group contexts, praying with others appeared to be just as essential of a spiritual discipline as private devotion.

DISCUSSION

This study examined participants' reported experiences with group prayer, using Goffman's dramaturgical model of self-presentation. The sample contained 20 interviews with young adult evangelical Christians presently involved in a faith-based small group, and they shared their stories, experiences, and theological beliefs regarding prayer in both private and public sectors. While alone, they felt no pressure to retain the linguistic flamboyance they were more likely to hear or speak in group contexts. Though God remains unchanged in both contexts, praying to the invisible God became refined and beautified while around visible others. Prayer in the group setting subsequently teetered towards moving the visible audience's heart instead of God's through personal display of "Churchliness". Spiritual face and reputation were advocated and enhanced through a group prayer's content and pragmatic presentation. Uniquely, the prerequisites of perceived "good" prayers and the beliefs about how one should pray were antithetical to each other. The "good" prayer was defined by eloquence whereas the "should" of prayer was described in terms of experience, i.e., experiencing God's presence. As this is the ultimate purpose of group prayer, the very act of requesting prayer and praying for others bore an effect on group members to exist as the Church has been called to exist. Serving others and walking alongside others were forged from the impetus of group prayer. In this discussion section, I will consider three interrelated implications of these results: (a) the tension between frontstage works and backstage grace, (b) prayer as a form of testimony, and (c) group prayer as intercessory prayer.

Frontstage Works and Backstage Grace

This study brought insight into the implications surrounding the theatrical language employed to describe self-presentation. Goffman (1959) says the frontstage performance is

rehearsed and refined in one's backstage areas. Backstage is deprived of the rules and rituals surrounding frontstage performance and is thus rendered as the place in which someone can function as their most authentic selves. The concept of backstage as a rehearsal space further suggests it is a place where the actor can perform incoherently or wrongly without concern for losing preferred reputation. Backstage encapsulates a process towards refinement that might appear, as participants said of private prayer, messy.

A major tenet of the Christian faith is salvation through grace, not works. Ephesians 2:8-9 (NASB) reads: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." In conjunction, Krause (2004) suggested that prayer is the very practice of Christianity. Some academics have unanimously agreed that prayer is faith's essence and is indeed the most commonly practiced religious discipline. Any consequence of prayer would be more reflective of God's grace than it is of a person's ability to pray. Participants reported, however, an inflated sense of performative concern in the frontstage than that of the backstage. They revealed heightened awareness of word choice and nonverbals they believe could perceptively enliven the quality of their prayer. This comes in part from learning prayer from pastors who, after years of seminary education, retained a spiritual and poetic vernacular that is then used to model prayer to their congregation. Some congregational members may strive to pray in their pastor's manner in spite of having bypassed the process of training that pastor may have endeavored to retrieve the poetic language. An absence of performative pomp in the publicly made prayer might, to some, suggest improper or weak prayer. Similar to Goffman's (1959) decorum, intentional appearances of prayer could be suggestive enough of meaningful prayer, even if one is not meaningfully praying.

Joose (2012) tells of the highly regarded spiritual leader who had an inner circle of individuals defending his frontstage charismatic impression. Their means of defense was to simply prevent outsiders from accessing his backstage self. Those with backstage familiarity of the spiritual leader were viewed as a threat because of their ability to expose the incongruency between the leader's front and back stages. Similarly, participants did report praying among another's backstage context. This was in the context of their own "inner circle" comprised of likeminded believers bound together by trust. While prayer in the frontstage appears to be sequestered from the grace seen in the backstage, it was only in the midst of trustworthy community that participants would be more willing to pray in grace, not works. Essentially, the perceived grace or works of a group prayer context served as precedents for how the prayer will be performed.

Prayerful Testimony

Findings from the study further suggested that the "main character" of a prayer can yield a testimonial effect. An advantage to public prayer unrealized in its private counterpart is its evangelistic capacity to express certain aspects of someone's history with God to local listeners. Participants expressed their specific way of praying stems from the experiences they have with God and the ways in which they have seen Him intervene in their lives. Consequentially, God's nature, as experienced by the one praying, can become known through their prayer as if it were a narrative testimony. It is important to note, however, that a prayer's ability to testify about God is directly related to the extent the prayer is about God.

Bandak (2017) shares that the very things people pray for suggests not only their beliefs and convictions, but also their hopes, anxieties, and desires. Inherent in prayer is an expression of gratitude and an acknowledgement of needs. Zondag and van Uden (2011) offer four

typologies of prayer related to the petitioning to and meditation of God. In one respect, sharing personal hopes, anxieties, and desires in prayer can testify to God's desire to have them. In another respect, someone can devote a significant portion of their prayer time to personal hopes, anxieties, and desires without directly addressing God's role in the three. Participants mentioned intentional curation within prayer; prayer that was designed to censor socially displeasing aspects in order to further illuminate personal perfection. Some reported keeping a personal struggle unmentioned during group prayer in spite of their desire to have someone pray over the circumstance. Others reported hearing prayers that included intensifications of faithful Christianity, such as an emphasis on prolonged faith-related suffering or elaborate reassurances of how God is using them to further His Kingdom. Essentially, the empirical build of some prayers revolved around the praying person, not around the God whom prayer was said to be for.

Sharp (2012) contends American culture contains a culture of prayer given Christianity's prevalence in the country. Innate to the prayerful culture are spiritual utterances (such as prayer) that immediately become attributed to high moral class. An indication of moral standing can be suggested through spiritual language that, though in use, may not have been the actual private practice of the one employing the language. These implications of prayer amid others may involve the capacity to make a greater point about the goodness of the person instead of God.

Group Prayer as Intercessory Prayer

In a similar respect, sharing the person-centered prayer in a group context may set group members up to better experience the presence of the praying one instead of the presence of God. Therefore, these results suggest a need for prayer group members to appreciate the distinction between who is prayed to and who is prayed for. The study's participants acknowledged that the impetus of group prayer is usually found in the spoken phrase, "Can I pray for you?" This

question primes anticipation in the one being prayed for to behold how well-represented they will be in the forthcoming prayer. Yet prayer, as participants described it, is communication between the praying one and the God sought after. It is a communicative vessel through which God, not people, are experienced. Participants spoke in regretful terms of prayers designed around the experience of people instead of the experience of God. This experiential tension between God and people was previously captured in the theme *Invisible God and Visible People* that served as the overarching theme of this study.

Provided that prayer was solely understood as communication with God regardless of the sizeable crowd surrounding it, it is possible that intercessory prayer is a more accurate understanding of what happens within group prayer. Intercessory prayer is defined simply as prayer for another's benefit, or for the benefit of someone other than oneself (Tloczynski & Fritzsich, 2002). Praying amid others was praised for its capacity to expose individuals to the broader context of the global Church; prayer made in the public sphere naturally became more altruistic and other-focused. On the other hand, personal prayers tended towards prayer for the self. Intercessory and personal prayer, though made to the same God, emphasize different "actors" in the prayerful message enough to make one distinguished from the other. Practices such as therapeutic interventions have employed intercessory prayer and have consequentially seen profitable health outcomes (Hodge, 2007; Tloczynski & Fritzsich, 2002).

In intercessory prayer, the "prayed for" is placed in between the "praying one" and the God prayed to. Though intercessory prayer places another person or situation in the gap of their prayer, the intercessory prayer nonetheless retains its utmost focus to God. In Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical language, God is the audience of the prayer; the pray-er, those featured in the prayer, and those around the prayer play a role active enough for all to be considered co-actors.

In this sense, there lies a rationale for appreciating for the Church's singular voice as described by participants. They shared that though private and public prayers are empirically distinct, God hears one voice still. God as the ultimate audience for prayer, as evidenced by the intercessory nature of group prayer, yields a number of implications on the manners of corporate prayer.

Festinger (1952) forwards Social Comparison Theory to suggest one's social and personal worth is determinable by comparison to others, especially in the absence of unambiguous criteria. Evaluative Apprehension Theory (Innes & Young, 1973) further adds that one's performance is influenced by the presence of evaluative others that determines the given social reward or punishment. It could perhaps be, then, that praying to the God whose very scripture says knows everything about the one praying, employs an entirely different evaluation than that which is used by fellow members. In praying to God, there is seemingly increased relief; in praying to peers for performative reasons, there is increased pressure. Those in group leadership positions would benefit from considering what voice in their group is empowered to make the evaluations that risk the germination of nervousness and anxiety within group members, whether it's the one being interceded for the One interceded to.

LIMITATIONS & CONCLUSION

The unique niche of this study was its focus on young adult evangelicals aged between 18-30. As such, there lies a wealth of demographics within the Christian faith that went untouched in this study. In terms of age, it is likely the findings from this study would yield different results if the age demographic encompassed a broader stroke. Future research would benefit from gleaning the voices of younger and older Christians who are engaged in group prayer. Furthermore, the evangelical nature of this study prevented those with mainline Protestant involvements from partaking in the study. The specification was instituted to retain as much theological, experiential, and cultural consistency across participants as possible. Therefore, future research would further benefit from branching out to other Christian denominations about their experiences with group prayer. Another limitation to the study was its inability to ensure complete theological and experiential consistency across the participant board. Ideally, participants would be recruited from the same church or ministry to observe as much of a uniformed worldview as it would allow. This study's participants, though evangelical, worshipped in churches ranging from Presbyterian to Charismatic. Uniform involvement with a singular type of church could help to clarify the study's findings, and in-depth observation of the dynamics of a specific praying group would complement the insights yielded via interviews in this study.

Regardless of its limitations, this study enhances the theoretical utility of Goffman's (1959) *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* by implementing it within a context distinguished by the corporate pursuit of the invisible God. Though prayer was not ultimately about people, this study shows how the emphasis on human experience can provoke performative temptations that shrouds the whole of prayer. Called by God to join together, group members gather in a

singular space to uplift the singular voice of the Church. Yet in so doing, the desire or pressure to appear spiritual (or Churchly) can seemingly hijack the desire to authentically experience God. Members may clean up their otherwise messy prayers as they strive to keep their brokenness in shadow. Essentially, group prayer can function more as a museum showcasing the supposed goodness of people instead of the goodness of God. The study's findings conclude that understanding group prayer as intercessory prayer, prayer that puts others in the gap between God and the pray-er, is perhaps a more appropriate approach towards public prayer as it only integrates others into the prayer without giving the prayer moment entirely to them. For it is, as participants and scripture say, the experience of God, not people, that served as the chief purpose to coming together. "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, *I* am there in their midst" (Matthew 18:20, NASB, 1995).

APPENDIX

1. Tell me about how you learned to pray.
2. What, in your view, is the primary purpose of prayer? Of group prayer?
3. How might the presence of others change how you pray?
4. Talk about how you present yourself in a prayer group.
5. How specifically might others present their identity in group prayer?
6. How should someone pray?
7. How might one's prayer speak to their spiritual maturity?
8. What do you appreciate about group prayer? What are you concerned by?
9. Why do you pray amongst others the way you do today?
10. What is one thing a new believer should know about group prayer?

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