

## The Sacred Pathways

As described in *Sacred Pathways* by Gary Thomas, a "pathway" represents the way(s) that people connect with God. Unfortunately, many Christians go throughout their lives only knowing one or two ways to connect with God. For example, someone may have been told by a Bible study leader that the way to connect with God is with a 30 minute "quiet time" involving Bible reading, journaling, and intercessory prayer. Another person may have grown up in a "high" church, where tradition and ritual are emphasized. Gary Thomas describes nine different ways that are all valid ways that people more naturally encounter God, for the purpose of freeing people to try other ways, discover what is most comfortable to them, and to help prevent judgmental or covetous attitudes towards how other people spend time with God.

In the book, Thomas suggests that once you discover your stronger preferences, that you consider supplementing or revamping the way you approach God. For example, if you've struggled to maintain a consistent hour-long Bible study/prayer/journaling time and turn out to have a strong preference as a "Naturalist," it may be more beneficial for you to pray while walking in a forest or park, or to read your Bible while sitting outside. If however, what you've been doing seems to keep working for you, then you might consider working in a few of the suggested activities every few days or weeks just to try to allow God to meet you in different ways. Thomas does point out that spiritual temperaments, or preferences, may change over time, as your life situation changes or as you try new activities and find that you like them.

*(Below: Summarized from Sacred Pathways by Gary L. Thomas. Please, go read the book to learn more.)*

**Naturalist** - Learns their best lessons and connect best with God outdoors; use Scripture to visualize spiritual truths.

Activity Suggestions: Consider the greatness of creation (huge mountains, the ocean, etc.) and then think about how much bigger God is. Think about the multitude of creation (how many different kinds of plants, animals) and then think about what a creative God we have, and how he is able to manage so many things at once. Think about the beauty of creation. While out in nature, let down your anxieties, allow God to speak to you.

Warnings: Naturalists may tend to escape "real life" and responsibilities. They should also be careful of idolizing nature, or believing things that are not based in Scripture. Any insight received should be double-checked with scriptural principles.

**Sensates** - Use their five senses to worship God; are deeply affected by a beautiful piece of art, music, smell, etc.

Activity Suggestions: Listen to a great piece of music. Listen to Scripture being read out loud. Light a scented candle or incense. Hold objects while you pray; for example - hold a paperclip while praying for a marriage that is struggling (that the marriage would be held together). Meditate on Christian art. Appreciate beauty in churches. Draw while praying. Allow taste to remind you of God - for example, something sweet could remind you of God's goodness.

Warnings: Idolizing beauty, worshipping "worship," or doing things without conviction (e.g., being a great pianist and playing piano, but not having the heart condition of worship)

**Traditionalists** - Worship God through ritual and symbol. Celebrations and observances, like Easter and Christmas, are very important. May enjoy liturgical worship. Sacrifice (fasting, giving money, Lent) may be important to the traditionalist.

Activity Suggestions: Read the same Psalm every day, or read one in the morning and read one in the evening. Create a family calendar and traditions to celebrate sacred holidays. Make a liturgy for yourself to read every day that incorporates different aspects of prayer (like drawing things from The Book of Common Prayer) - adoration, confession, thanksgiving, intercession, supplication. Schedule a time for regular prayer. Find a picture or object (or

a symbol like a cross, or a color) that you can use to remind you of God at your home or workplace. Fast during Lent.

Warnings: Traditionalists may fall into serving God without knowing God and mechanically repeating rituals. They should beware against neglecting social obligations of justice and serving others. They should also keep from judging others who don't follow their rites and rituals.

**Ascetics** - Love God through solitude and simplicity. Too much visual/audio/etc. sensations can be distracting. (If you can relate with the annoyance of a ticking clock in a quiet room, you just might be an ascetic!) Have a desire to continually simplify their lives so that they can have more to give to God; interested in spiritual disciplines.

Activity Suggestions: Quiet worship in the night or early morning, when everyone has gone to bed. Being still - not being afraid of periods of silence or inactivity. Fasting from food, movies, radio, etc. - anything you think you might be depending on for spiritual nourishment. Working hard at your job. Taking personal retreats. Living simply - keeping from materialism and packed schedules. Enduring hardship (even "too cold" or "too hot!").

Warnings: Ascetics may overemphasize personal piety and forget about reaching out to others. They should also beware of doing things to earn God's favor, or seeking pain for its own sake.

**Activists** - Spiritually nourished through battle for social justice. They need to take risks spiritually. This may come out as defending true Christianity (keeping doctrine pure, goading Christians to walk as they talk), working for social reform, actively confronting error and evil, or being a true "prayer warrior."

Activity Suggestions: Prayer – go on prayer walks, intercede for others. Get involved with politics. Get involved with a social issue (abortion, for example). Speak the truth in love to other Christians.

Warnings: Because they are people of action, Activists may experience judgmental attitudes, elitism, or resentment against other Christians who seem to be "doing nothing." They may have a preoccupation with activity or statistics, and lack an emphasis on personal sanctity. Thomas also points out that people with great ambition also are more prone to sexual failure.

**Caregivers** - Experience God's power when caring for someone, feel close to God while serving others.

Activity Suggestions: Nursing sick people. Adopt a prisoner. Help a friend. Lend someone money. Volunteer on a rescue squad. Fix someone's car. Make meals for a needy family. Etc...

Warnings: Can be judgmental of people who aren't serving. Can neglect those closest to them (remember that God gave you a family first!). Can "serve others to serve themselves" – serving in order to get a sense of self-worth, as opposed to actually serving out of worship.

**Enthusiasts** - "Mystery and Celebration." "Enthusiasts enjoy a celebratory form of worship" and are also more open to God's supernatural working and mystery - they may be more expectant in looking for God to look around them, and they may have had experiences where God spoke to them (through unexplainable circumstances, dreams and visions, etc.) They see God's answers to prayer and celebrate through enthusiastic worship (think of David dancing before the Lord!) and using the life he's given to create other things (building a business, writing a poem, planting a garden, etc.).

Activity Suggestions: Be open to God speaking through dreams - the "interpretation" or message should be quite clear (no need to "figure it out"), may need to start a habit of journaling dreams to help remember them! Keep a prayer journal and being expectant throughout the day for God's activity. Celebration! Create something. Use your imagination, feeling, or reason to meditate on Scripture; imagine Scripture actually working out in your life (what it would look like for you to be more loving, etc.)

Warnings: Beware of "spiritism" and things like sorcery, witchcraft, etc. Just because Enthusiasts might be more open to God's supernatural work does not mean that they can dabble in occult things! Because Enthusiasts are feelings-oriented, they should beware of just looking for an "experience" vs. truly seeking God. They may equate "good feelings" with "good worship." They may also be independent to the point of not being accountable.

**Contemplatives** - Love to just "be in the presence of God." Intimate friendship, heart-felt connection, love relationship, are ways to describe how they feel about God.

Activity Suggestions: Praying the "Jesus prayer" or centering prayer, which helps to practice God's presence and rest. Do secret acts that are just between you and God (anonymously helping someone, writing a letter to God that you burn, "secret" prayer walk, or making a secret vow or fasting). Try "dancing" prayer – allowing God to be the lead and guide you to what to pray for. Practice just "being" in front of God - sitting quietly with him, without trying to pray "for" anything or do anything. Reflect on the stations of the cross. Use your imagination to enter Scripture scenes and encounter God. Prayerful use of an object to reflect on Scripture.

Warnings: Contemplatives may be so used to "listening from God" that they ignore God when he speaks through other people, through his creation, etc. They should also stay away from the New Age concept of "emptying yourself," and instead be filled with the Spirit. They may become addicted to spiritual addiction and neglect action.

**Intellectuals** - Thinkers. Love to learn new things about God, church doctrine, apologetics, etc. God may speak to them primarily through Bible study.

Activity Suggestions: Take seminary classes to help your mind stay active. Get training in church history, Biblical studies, systematic theology, ethics, apologetics. Intellectuals may find it helpful to teach what they learn to others, either in a formal "speaker" setting or as a discussion group leader. Read good Christian books. Learn how to study the Bible, and spend enough time doing so (like, focus on one book a month).

Warnings: Intellectuals might love controversy for the sake of it and get embroiled in "stupid arguments." They may also be guilty of knowing but not doing, or being proud and arrogant.