

EXCERPT

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## **Enhancing Christian Life** *How Extended Cognition Augments Christian Community*

Available August 25, 2020 | \$21, 176 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5281-9

It's time to rethink the Christian life in light of current research on the human mind, particularly with a deeper understanding of "extended cognition." Using insights from neuroscience, psychology, and philosophy, Brad Strawn and Warren Brown argue for a vision of the Christian life as extended into interactions with a local network of believers.

## Extension in Liturgies of Worship

The primary event of the life of a congregation is, of course, worship. The shared liturgies of prayer, Scripture, singing, Eucharist, and preaching provide opportunities for extension into a corporate cognitive and spiritual space. Although the events of worship are to a greater or lesser degree prescribed in a liturgy, they can nevertheless offer opportunity for joining (coupling into) a wide network of congregational interactivity. Elements of worship actively engaged in unison by a group of people constitute extensions into something greater than the individual worshiper. People who genuinely engage in (soft couple with) corporate worship extend their minds and Christian lives outside of themselves into the interactive space of worship. Engagement in the liturgies of corporate worship also extends the individual into the "mental institutions" of the Christian faith—that is, into the accumulated expressions of the church over many centuries.

In chapter four we talked about a hammer as offering the opportunity for physical extension. However, we noted the difference between soft coupling and mere handling of a hammer. If one merely carries a hammer from here to there, no coupling or extension occurs. But if one begins to drive a nail with the hammer, the hammer soon becomes an extended part of the body, transparent in its contribution to goal-directed activity (to a greater or lesser degree depending on one's hammering expertise). Similarly, involvement in worship can constitute genuine extension and coupling when we are interactively engaged in (extended into) the events of the worship. Alternatively, if one attends church to merely watch and listen (or watches a televised worship service) without actually becoming interactively engaged, there is little, if any, enhancement of Christian life. Perhaps in watching and listening we can pick up an element or two that is useful for our individual life and thought—which is not useless, just relatively puny.

It would seem that the move to extend into worship (or any other object or social interaction) must involve an act of the will, even if it is an unconscious act. The mere presence of an object or social situation that affords the possibility of extension does not automatically elicit the sort of interactivity that would constitute soft coupling, cognitive extension, and enhancement. There must be a move on the part of the individual to engage the opportunity. Similarly, there must be a reciprocal move on the part of other members of the community to engage the individual. Woody Allen was off the mark in saying, "Showing up is 80 percent of life." Just showing up is insufficient.

In thinking about the possibility of extension and enhancement through corporate worship, it is instructive to consider more specifically the various elements in a typical worship liturgy.

**Prayer.** Individual prayer is a powerful practice in which a believer may sense the presence of God, voice concerns, intercede on behalf of others, receive a word from God, and even experience transformation. (We will discuss in the next chapter the degree to which private devotional prayer is not entirely understandable as a private and individual event.) But in corporate prayer—that is, prayer with others—interactive soft coupling may occur that extends the reach and power of individual prayer. The corporate prayer becomes an occasion for extension of individual prayer into a common realm of concerns, petitions, and thanksgiving. Corporate prayers are bigger than our own individual concerns, focusing on things worthy of prayer that might not occur to us if left only to ourselves, or are prayed for in a way that extends our

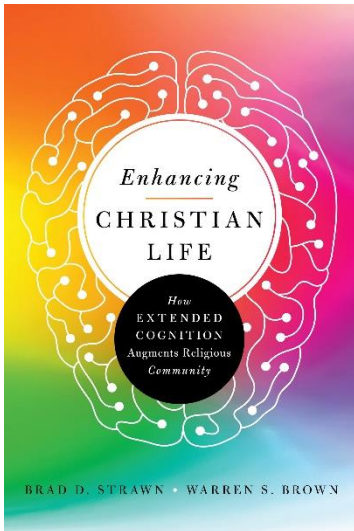


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Karin DeHaven, academic publicist  
800.843.4587 ext. 4096 or [kdehaven@ivpress.com](mailto:kdehaven@ivpress.com)

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perspective. One of us (Brad), in his role as teaching pastor at his church, regularly leads the "corporate congregational prayer" as a part of Sunday worship. Brad purposefully prays for those suffering from physical illness (a common corporate practice) as well as those suffering from mental illness (an uncommon practice). By doing so, mental illness is brought to the minds of congregants who might not normally think of it—thus extending their perspective. Equally powerful in extending prayer into the entire corporate space are times where congregants may give audible voice to prayers, greatly expanding the realm of congregational awareness and prayerful concern into which each extends.

Romans 8:26 says that, when we don't know what we ought to pray for, the Spirit intercedes for us through wordless groans. In a similar way, in corporate prayer the church prays for us when we don't know what or even how to pray. In fact, it may be that the extended and reciprocal nature of communal prayer creates the very conditions by which the Spirit intercedes on our behalf.

Particularly powerful from the point of view of cognitive extension is prayer in small groups. Here prayers are typically voiced by each member in ways that are interactive. Concerns raised in the prayers of one are revoiced by another and often reshaped by their perspective. During such soft-coupled networks of praying there is often the palpable experience of engagement with others, much like our previous description of the subjective experience of moments of engagement with others in dialogue. There is also the realization of participating in a form of prayer that is beyond the capacities of any single individual. The Spirit of God is experienced most acutely in prayer "where two or three are gathered together" (Matthew 78:20 KJV).

Corporate prayer as extension and soft coupling serves another important function. Because, as we have argued, knowledge of oneself is the outcome of being embedded within networks of other persons, it is meaningful and formative to hear others praying for and with us. Even beyond what God may or may not do via the church's prayers, there is something powerful in knowing that others are praying for me, or at the very least, are holding me in mind. Crucially important is also the simple but profound sense of care experienced when someone is aware that they have been prayed for. To privately pray for one's own healing is very different from participating in a corporate liturgy of healing by kneeling at an altar and being prayed for publicly and perhaps anointed with oil.

Another important outcome of corporate prayer is that these prayers serve as reminders to the group of personal needs, which may then lead to actions that directly encounter an expressed need. For example, prayers for a sick parishioner might lead to a food chain, hospital visits, or telephone calls. While the Holy Spirit cannot be reduced to simply human action, nevertheless the Spirit works robustly through the mediated forms of intervention via God's people. God's Spirit works in and through the interactive extension and soft coupling that constitutes the life of a church body. The title of a book by Claiborne and Wilson-Hartgrove poignantly captures this social extension component of prayer: *Becoming the Answer to Our Prayers*. They are referring to the fact that in a sufficiently extended and interactive congregation, the body will be activated to engage in meeting the concrete needs that have been expressed in prayer.

Here are a few other examples of how to more explicitly foster prayer as corporate and extended. First, praying out loud with other believers. In my (Brad's) home group, our voiced prayers for one another are often followed by text messages throughout the week asking how things are going or offering tangible help with respect to those prayers. Another way in

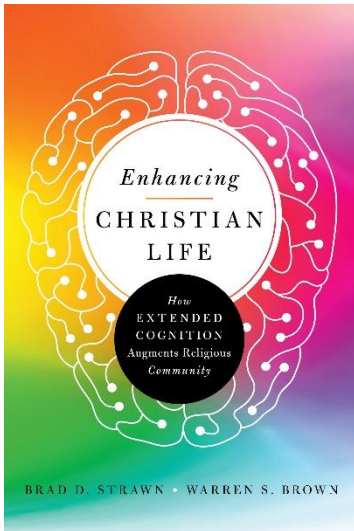


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which prayer can be enhanced by extension into a group is by incorporating practices often used in group spiritual direction. In a small group, each shares concerns and then prays silently, waiting and listening for a word from God on behalf of the other. Sharing of these words extends individual listening into a common, more robust space. Third, some of us remember when we used to speak of "prayer warriors." These were individuals who were known to pray often and fervently, persons with whom you could share your prayer concerns knowing that the concerns would be lifted up consistently in their prayers.

Forms of corporate prayer open up the potential for praying to be enhanced by extension into the larger body of believers. In contrast, this potential can be stifled by an individualistic view of prayer that arises from a cultural narrative that encourages privacy, rewards go-it-alone heroism in Christian life, and degrades the value of vulnerability. Corporate prayer therefore should never simply be the cursory bookends that we add to the beginning and end of our gatherings when it has so much potential for enhancement of Christian life as a medium of extension into the body of believers. As noted above, the kind of extension that leads to significant and deep incorporation can only happen by spending considerable time together. A one-time prayer experience is like a weekend golfer wielding a golf club. The deeper extension of a truly embodied and embedded community that spends considerable time together in prayer is more like a professional golfer incorporating a club.

—Taken from chapter six, "The Church and 'My Spirituality'"



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