

# The Discipline of Christian Pilgrimage

BY CHRISTIAN T. GEORGE

**Pilgrimage is rooted in the soil of the human soul. This intentional mode of travel has been practiced through the centuries by Christians who are seeking to stretch their faith radically by discovering the God who invites us into sacred and risky intimacy.**

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**P**ilgrimage runs thickly through my veins. My parents named me for a pilgrim—Christian, the main character in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. For years I traveled the world, seeing how God intervened in time and space to accomplish his will through the lives of men and women who took seriously their faith. From monastery to monastery, I traversed the globe, chanting with monks at Taizé, France; climbing the staircase of Skellig Michael, Ireland; and walking up the breezy hills of Iona, Scotland.

These pilgrimages made the past come alive. I saw the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, Germany, where Martin Luther wrestled with Scripture; the Orthodox monastery of Penteli, Greece, where monks taught children to read and write; and the Franciscan monastery of Montelucio in Spoleto, Italy, where Saint Francis fasted and prayed.

Being a pilgrim gave me a three-dimensional picture of God’s interaction in this world. These journeys taught me that Christians were made for motion—progressing in our relationship with Christ, overcoming obstacles that rust our faith, and gaining stamina to battle the world, the flesh, and the devil. Most of all, they showed me that in order best to navigate the future, we need to travel back into the past.

The practice of pilgrimage predates the earthly life of Christ. In the Old Testament, God’s people constructed stone altars to remember what God had accomplished (Joshua 4:1–9). These rocks were tangible reminders of God’s

faithfulness to his people and became teaching aids for many generations. Sacred travels are sprinkled throughout the Scripture. From Abraham's journey to the Exodus to the visit of the Magi, the motif of pilgrimage is deeply ingrained within the biblical narrative. Pilgrimage has long been a discipline for practitioners of the world's major religions. Muslims take pilgrimages to Mecca, Buddhists to Mount Kailash, Hindus to Kedarnath, and Jews to Israel. Pilgrimages occur even among those who are not affiliated with religion. Secular pilgrimage destinations include the Declaration of Independence in the National Archives, the Eiffel Tower, and the pyramids of Giza.

### **PILGRIMAGE THROUGH CHURCH HISTORY**

Pilgrimage is rooted in the soil of the human soul. It is practiced by Christians who seek to stretch their faith radically by discovering the God who invites us into sacred and risky intimacy.

Before the advent of the Constantinian Christianization of Rome in the fourth century, the practice of pilgrimage had long been an established reality in Israel. Throughout Second-Temple Judaism (537 BC-AD 70), the city of Jerusalem enjoyed throngs of pilgrims annually traveling to the Temple to observe the three festivals prescribed in Deuteronomy 16. However, after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 by the Roman armies of Titus, the diasporized Jews, being unable to perform physical pilgrimages to Jerusalem, did not entirely abandon their sojourning identity.

The Apostle Peter, in his letter to the churches of Asia Minor, appealed to the believers as *pariokoi kai parepidemoi*, resident aliens and pilgrims (1 Peter 2:11). These new *christiano*i inherited a thoroughly ingrained tradition of pilgrimage. Theirs was a traveling history, an Abrahamic faith that sought a city whose architect and builder was God, and in his letter to the church at Corinth, Clement of Rome begins his salutation with the following words, "The Church of God which sojourns at Rome, to the church of God sojourning at Corinth."<sup>1</sup> By the time Constantine's mother, Empress Helena, brought pilgrimage into vogue by traveling to the Holy Land in 326, a living tradition of *sancta loca*, or holy places, pertaining to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ had already materialized.

The practice of pilgrimage was not immune to criticism. Gregory of Nyssa, writing to a friend in the mid-fourth century, reflected on the particular dangers facing women on pilgrimages.<sup>2</sup> More notably, his theological objection that "change of place does not effect any drawing nearer unto God"<sup>3</sup> was re-animated a thousand years later by Protestants protesting a medieval, work-based righteousness. Jerome (c. 347-420), who traveled to Bethlehem on pilgrimage, argued that a holy life is more important than a Jerusalem venture.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, in the Middle Ages, in a world saturated with chaos and calamity, when a third of the population would die from the bubonic plague, pilgrimage offered a constant reassurance that there was, indeed,

a road to God, a highway to heaven. Traveling on sacred stones positioned these peasants in direct continuity with a tradition beyond themselves, a legacy reaching all the way back to the Messiah of Galilee who himself embarked on a pilgrimage from the celestial to the terrestrial.

Medieval pilgrims traveled for many reasons: the veneration of relics, the demands of penance, the promise of miracles and healings. In her book *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England*, Susan Morrison notes that a large number of these pilgrims were mothers traveling to shrines, often barefoot, for the healing and resuscitation of their sick and dying children.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the Middle Ages, the practice of pilgrimage developed into a movement from the locus to the liminal, an outward manifestation of an inward reality, fueled by prayer, discipline, paintings, iconography, and relics. It was in this context that pilgrim travelers radically transcended the thresholds of geographical and spiritual familiarity, even to the ends of the earth. However, since most pilgrims could not afford a long and treacherous journey, for example to Jerusalem, a Milky Way of local cathedrals dotted the European landscape: Santiago de Compostela, Walsingham, Canterbury, Salisbury, Notre Dame, Ely, Winchester, and Durham, to name a few.

To understand the significance of medieval pilgrimage, we must enter the milieu of medieval experience. Imagine what it must have been like for peasants who had never traveled more than five miles from the place of their birth to journey for days and weeks through forests, mountains, and treacherous terrains, unaided by modern hygienic luxuries, susceptible to robbery and raids, pressing on through storm and wind and disease, until finally arriving at what must have looked to be a premonition of paradise itself. A building rises, startling at first to behold, with sky-scraping spires and gargoyles, embellished detailed stone work and golden reliquaries, life-sized apostolic sculptures and towering roods, all situated beneath

Gothic arches that magically supported weighty mosaic ceilings above. Its tall nave, working in tandem with majestic organ music, pulls the eyes upward, off of oneself, off of the problems and plagues that come from living in a Dark Age, raising the gaze almost to God's very being. And then there were the windows. Since most of the population in the Middle Ages was illiterate, vibrant stained glass illuminated a gospel that simple peas-

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ants could not absorb from paper. As the Romanesque style gave way to the Gothic, pointed arches and flying buttresses allowed for the elimination of wall surface, resulting in walls of stained glass previously impossible to construct. Guilielmus Durandus, a thirteenth-century French theologian, wrote, "The glass windows in the church are holy scriptures which expel the wind and the rain, that is, all things hurtful, but transmit the light of the true sun, that is, God, into the hearts of the faithful."<sup>6</sup>

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For those who were literate, *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer offered unique perspectives on pilgrimage prior to the Protestant Reformation. The popularity of *The Canterbury Tales* reflected the highly commercialized industry that medieval pilgrimage generated. Bands of pilgrims traveling to holy shrines perpetuated a radical *communitas* experienced by those from all

walks and trades of life, each bearing his or her own personal narrative and cooperating as a single moving organism, traveling together from Southwark to Canterbury to see the place where Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, was beheaded by the knights of Henry II on December 29, 1170. In this way, pilgrimage fostered more than mere individualistic penitentiary practices, allowing for a peripatetic *koinonia* stimulated by danger and devotion.

Though criticism of pilgrimage existed from Late Antiquity, it was the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century who amplified this criticism, leading to a ubiquitous attenuation of its practice throughout Europe. The medieval expression of pilgrimage, complete with indulgences and sacramental penance, was crippled by the quests of continental reformers like Luther and Calvin who posited a grace-based righteousness over against a salvifically meritorious expression of faith.

In 1536, Henry VIII, whose marital dilemmas placed him in questionable standing with Rome, set forth his *Injunctions* in which the clergy were forbidden to "allure the people by any enactments to the pilgrimages of any saints."<sup>7</sup> John Foxe records that hostility toward the practice of pilgrimage became a matter of identity for those protesting the corruptions of the Roman papacy,<sup>8</sup> and as this attitude permeated England during the Reformation, there existed a great waning of the practice of pilgrimages to local shrines.

Yet during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a waxing of allegorical pilgrimage found resonance in the theology of English Puritanism.

Charles Hambrick-Stowe volunteers, “The principle metaphor running through Puritan Spirituality and devotional practice was the pilgrimage.”<sup>9</sup> The Puritan recovery of an Augustinian understanding of pilgrimage allowed the motif not only to survive the Reformation, but also to thrive in works like John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Fueled by their own vulgar translation of the Scriptures, Puritans like Richard Baxter, John Owen, Jeremiah Burroughes, and John Flavel embraced biblical precedents like Abraham’s journey, Israel’s Exodus, and the sacred travels of the Magi, giving great exegetical and homiletical attention to the Pilgrim Psalms 120-134, Christ’s infant journey to Egypt, and New Testament passages like these.

Pilgrimage proved to be a theme too biblical to abandon, continually surfacing in Puritan sermons, letters, and books. When we read the journals of the Jamestown, Plymouth, and subsequent pilgrims, one senses that many of these New World sojourners did more than merely allegorize the biblical concept of pilgrimage; indeed, they incarnated it by physically traveling, as Abraham had, to a land they did not know.

In every age, pilgrimage has contributed to theological reflection. Post-Puritan references to pilgrimage appear throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. In his sermon *The Christian Pilgrim*, Jonathan Edwards describes the difficult path to heaven as a pilgrimage. “The way to heaven,” he writes, “is ascending; we must be content to travel up hill.”<sup>10</sup>

In the twentieth century, Karl Barth, speaking to the redemptive implications of *o logos sarx egeneto* (“the Word made flesh,” John 1:14), tethers his discussion of Christ’s incarnation to the journey motif: “In being gracious to man in Jesus Christ,” Barth writes, “[God] also goes into the far country, into the evil society of this being which is not God and against God.... It is in this high humility that he speaks and acts as the God who reconciles the world to Himself.”<sup>11</sup>

## **PILGRIMAGE TODAY**

History has never witnessed a time in which the advancement of technology has so primed a generation for spiritual travel as ours. While it once took months to cross the Atlantic Ocean, now it takes only hours, and subsequently the twenty-first century has witnessed a renewed and enthusiastic interest in the practice of pilgrimage. Pilgrims who seek sacred destinations now have unprecedented opportunities to venture to places like Iona, Taizé, Skellig Michael, Mont St. Michelle, Mount Athos, Assisi, Jerusalem, and Rome. In this way, pilgrimage can serve as a unifying commonality among Christians of every denomination and tradition, a point of contact that fosters reconciliation and ecumenism.

Protestants can reclaim what they abandoned during the sixteenth-century Reformation by reforming their understanding of pilgrimage. For Protestants, pilgrimage can be practiced not as an expression of a medieval, works-based rendering of justification, but rather as a spiritual discipline

that reflects our journey to God, that gives great energy to our sanctification, and that engenders a spiritual vitality that is both Christo-centric and community-driven.

Pilgrimage does not assist in our justification; instead, this discipline is a tool that nurtures our sanctification. We do not travel to earn salvation, but rather to experience the God of our salvation in a physical and spiritual way.

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We live in an era of entertainment and in a society saturated with instant gratification. Words like “patience,” “endurance,” and “commitment” sound strange to us. Slow modems are exchanged for high speed Internet access; fast food is not fast enough; and sermons are not short enough. The push of a button cooks our dinner, and the twist of a knob dries our clothes. In

a society that struggles to discipline itself, the discipline of pilgrimage reminds us to slow down and take life one step at a time. It reminds us that life is an emotional, physical, and spiritual journey that requires upward and inward conditioning. It moves us from certainty to dependency, from confidence to brokenness, from assurance in ourselves to faith in God. It exposes us to different traditions that inform our thinking. Ours becomes a kaleidoscopic Christianity, and we see reality through sacred lenses, lenses that put flesh on faith and bones on Bibles.

Anyone can practice the discipline of pilgrimage. Richard Foster observes, “God intends the Disciplines of the spiritual life to be for ordinary human beings: people who have jobs, who care for children, who wash dishes and mow lawns.”<sup>12</sup> Regardless of life stage, all Christians can benefit from this discipline. For children, it concretizes the journey to heaven in their minds by painting a visual and physical picture. For college students backpacking across Europe, it transforms a summer adventure into a spiritual revival. These days, technology allows us to trek through the world. More young people are traveling today than in any point in history, and whether it is to a mossy castle or a musty cathedral, the discipline of pilgrimage is a radical way of increasing our view of God.

What about those who cannot travel—the elderly, the poor, the hospitalized, or those with physical disabilities? Can they practice pilgrimage too? Yes. Pilgrimage is certainly not limited to location. I agree with Oswald Chambers that “the reality of God’s presence is not dependent on any place, but only dependent upon the determination to set the Lord always before



us."<sup>13</sup> By setting the Lord always before us, we are constantly progressing in our understanding of his love. In fact, some of the greatest pilgrimages I have ever taken have been in the midnight moments of my life, the hospital moments when I opened up the Bible and traveled to Jericho, where the walls came tumbling down. As an armchair pilgrim, I went to Egypt and saw the Red Sea stand up for God's people to march through. Because the presence of God extends everywhere, even unto the very ends of the earth, expensive trips to Europe and Asia are not required to practice this discipline. For some, a morning walk with a warm cup of coffee is enough. Others enjoy longer retreats to places of silence and isolation. The practice of pilgrimage can be appreciated by anyone, anywhere, anytime.

Pilgrimage is not a safe discipline, but it is certainly rewarding. It takes us out of our comfort zones and calls us away from a bloated Christianity where God cannot fit into our schedules. It calls us away from an anorexic Christianity where we become spiritually malnourished. It calls us away from a bulimic Christianity where we binge on Sunday only to purge up our beliefs on Monday. A regular diet of spiritual disciplines like pilgrimage can splash our dehydrated Christianity with fresh faith and gives us a greater hunger for the holy.

### **EMBARKING UPON A PILGRIMAGE**

In her book *Walking a Sacred Path*, Lauren Artress suggests three stages for labyrinth walking, a discipline akin to pilgrimage whose principles apply as well to this sacred sojourn: purgation, illumination, and communion.<sup>14</sup>

*Purgation* is the stage of surrender—a divine detox. It is when we surrender to God what we have hoarded for ourselves: worry, anxiety, frustration, fear, doubt, and despair.

As you begin your pilgrimage, take your time. In our productive, accomplishment driven society, we are not accustomed to lingering. Like a midnight run to Walmart, you might feel the pressure to get in and out as quickly as possible. But resist rushing. Pilgrimage is about purpose, not pace.

Step-by-step, purge all the distractions—conflicts with colleagues, arguments with a spouse or teenager, money woes, fixations on entertainment, and so forth. Be specific. At each turn of the path, lay down individual sins or burdens before God. As C. S. Lewis understood, "We must lay before God what is in us, not what ought to be in us."<sup>15</sup> Reflect on the comfortable words of John that if we confess our sins to God, "he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

The next stage is *illumination*. As you progress, center your thoughts on a Bible verse, a promise in Scripture, or an attribute of God. Let each step of the journey be a miniature meditation. Ask God to expand your understanding of the focal idea and to increase your awareness of its depth.

The word "illumination" comes from the Latin *lumen*, meaning light. Unlike Eastern concepts of *Bodhi*, or enlightenment, that seek to transcend

the “fleshiness” of life (birth, suffering, hunger, and death), Christian illumination speaks to the desire to know Christ in the flesh, to walk beside him in his death, and to seek the fellowship of “sharing in his sufferings” (Philippians 3:10).

True pilgrimage leads to *communion*. While the destination of our travel is important, it is the journey that teaches us how to arrive. Tune your heart to worship. This is the exhale part of the breath, the climax of praise. The Psalmist declares, “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise” (Psalm 100:4).

In 1514, Nicolaus Copernicus proposed a theory that would forever change the way astronomers perceived our solar system. Instead of the ancient, earth-centric interpretation, Copernicus offered a new, helio-centric theory. It was a revolutionary idea that the Earth revolved around the Sun. A similar shift in orientation is necessary in the human heart. In his book *Deliver Us from Me-Ville*, David Zimmerman explains how younger generations have developed a heightened sense of “Me.”<sup>16</sup> He notes that we are a generation prone to pride, or (as he calls it) the vice of *superbia*. Pilgrimage animates the Copernican revolution that occurs within the heart of every Christian, the great transition from *me* to *He*. No longer are we at the center of the universe. Through God’s grace, we can now revolve around something bigger than ourselves, something holier and heavier. When Christ is at the center of our lives, only then can our lives be truly centered.

As you journey home, ask God to prepare you to reengage the world. Jesus never retreated into the wilderness merely for retreat’s sake. He refused to live as a holy hermit. Like Jesus, we, too, must retreat with the purpose to advance. Communion is the centrifugal phase when God commissions, equips, and sends us into society to preach and live out the gospel.

The fading paths of pilgrimage have all but disappeared from the landscape of evangelical history, but perhaps they can be repaved. Perhaps they can be redefined for modern generations who crave a deeper and more authentic spirituality. The discipline of pilgrimage awaits exploration by those who are willing to journey to its depths.

Ever since Christians were banished from the Garden of Eden, we have been trying to return. And God has paved a way. We travel in transition—imperfect, unbalanced, unfinished creatures longing for renewal and pulsing for perfection. We are aimed at another garden, a divine destination. But we are not there yet. The gravel has not turned to gold beneath our feet. Yet we press on, homeward bound, with paradise as our goal and Jesus our guide. A day is coming when faith will become sight and heaven will become home. The God who informs our thinking, reforms our attitudes, and transforms our lives travels with us from monastery to monastery, from pilgrimage site to site, from grace to glory, until at last we will be embraced by the everlasting arms of the Almighty.

This is the pilgrim way.<sup>17</sup>



## NOTES

- 1 Clement of Rome, *First Epistle*, Letter of Clement to the Corinthians, 1.
- 2 See the account of Isolda Parewastel of Bridgwater in W. H. Bliss, ed., *Papal Petitions to the Pope 1342-1419*, Volume I (London, UK: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1896), 512-513.
- 3 See *Select Writings and Letters of Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa*, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, second series, Volume V, translated by William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1892), letter ii, 379.
- 4 "Non Jerusalem fuisse, sed Jerusalem bene vixisse, laudandum est." Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), section 89, "Pilgrimage and Procession."
- 5 Susan Signe Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety as Public Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
- 6 Guilielmus Durandus, *The Rationale Divinorum Officiorum: The Foundational Symbolism of the Early Church, Its Structure, Decoration, Sacraments and Vestments*, Books I, III, and IV (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2007), 24.
- 7 Colin Morris and Peter Roberts, eds., *Pilgrimage: The English Experience From Becket to Bunyan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 240.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 239.
- 9 Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 54.
- 10 Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards with a Memoir by Sereno E. Dwight*, edited by Edward Hickman (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), Vol. 2, section I.
- 11 Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation, Church Dogmatics*, Volume IV, translated by G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1988), 158-159.
- 12 Richard J. Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978), 1.
- 13 Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest, An Updated Edition in Today's Language*, edited by James Reimann (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 1992 [1935]), July 20th devotion.
- 14 Lauren Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 29-30.
- 15 This idea is attributed to C. S. Lewis, in Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Complete Guide to His Life and Works* (New York: HarperOne, 1998), 382.
- 16 David A. Zimmerman, *Deliver Us From Me-Ville* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008).
- 17 Several paragraphs of this article are borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from my book *Sacred Travels: Recovering the Ancient Practice of Pilgrimage* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), and articles "The Pilgrim Way: Discovering the Ancient Practice of Pilgrimage," *Conversations* 5:2 (Fall 2007), 73-76, and "Labyrinth Walking: A Discipline for the Sole and the Soul," *Conversations* 9:1 (Spring/Summer 2011), 72-75. These articles are available at [www.conversationsjournal.com](http://www.conversationsjournal.com).



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