

## **Article from Teacher Christian Fellowship of NSW : Educating in a post Christian society**

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Like most Christians, I find myself increasingly challenged to live and work in a world that seems to pay less and less attention to the God to whom I am committed. Recently, I came across an old book, *Celebration of discipline: A path to spiritual growth*, by Richard Foster. I remembered enjoying reading it some years ago and found that I was quickly challenged by its contents. I thought it might be my challenge to relate some of the issues raised in this book to us as Christian teachers and educators.

### **Part 2 Prayer**

I don't know any Christians that tell me that prayer is easy. They will tell me that its important, that they value prayer, that they discipline themselves to pray regularly, that they love it when they pray and that they marvel at what God does through prayer, but not that it's easy.

In the post-Christian secular society that pervades our everyday experiences, prayer for most people is like a crutch for the hopeless, a wish for better, a plea for help and a last ditch act of desperation when all rational behaviour fails. Unfortunately, it can sometimes also be like that for us as Christians. I believe that some of the reasons we find prayer so difficult are that there is a tension between the lives we live in the society of our time and the nature of prayer.

We read that Australians are working longer and that the economics of daily life requires two incomes to live and to be able to cope financially, especially if you have children. In Sydney, and elsewhere, the average home loan continues to eat into a greater proportion of income, even with low interest rates, as the price of property rises. Christians are to *live in* the world and not *be of* the world, but this is becoming more complex everyday. Just when do Christians pray, and is it a matter of fitting it in, even if in a disciplined way, to a hectic world-oriented week? Do the stories of people of prayer inspire us, or depress us, as we read about the priority they gave prayer in their lives?

Foster claims that understanding that prayer was a learning experience liberated him from most of these fears. His analysis of the New Testament convinced him that rather than castigating ourselves for our lack of prayer we should see it as developmental and move forward like runner trains for a future race. He challenges our thinking about prayer in the following ways:

#### ***If it be thy will***

Foster is overwhelmed by the way prayer is documented in the New Testament. Those praying believed that they knew the will of God. They prayed with expectation and anticipation and not with qualification (if it be thy will). Knowing the will of God will require the level of communication that it takes to know others. If we are not spending time talking with someone then it is difficult to know what they think about a whole range of issues. Built communication is two-way. As well as talking to God we need to listen, to be able to know his will.

At this point our secular friends of this world usually part company. They are sceptical enough about talking to God, expecting him to talk back is a bit creepy. As Christians our expectation of the Holy Spirit is that God will talk to us, *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is.* (Rom 12:2) Our minds are not only renewed by our learning from the Scriptures and the teaching we receive but from our experience of God in our lives. In prayer, God opens-up to us as we open-up to him. As love, in the form of a deep seeded compassion for other people, ideas and events develops through prayer, so we keep taking those things back to God and working them through in our lives.

A growing knowledge of the will of God allows us to pray in confidence and expectation. The prayer for guidance becomes the prayer of faith as we listen to God's response.

#### ***Simplicity***

Although we often speak about prayer being simply talking with God, we tend to fall back on forms of prayer we have learnt as children or structures and formula that provide security for our prayers and helping us to concentrate and avoid mistakes. While these may help, at some stage the real you has to open up to the the God of creation. As scary as that might sound, it is the privilege we have as his adopted children in Christ, to be able to come to him and to speak with him as a loving father. Simple and uncomplicated, honest words help communication.

For some people, especially when a longer time is set-aside for prayer, scaffolds can help to provide structure and concentration when praying. I remember some talks by Yonggi Cho, the Korean pastor of the world's largest church, using the Lord's Prayer and the parts of the Old Testament tabernacle as scaffolds for prayer.

For me, one of the best methods of prayer is to relate everyday things to God when they are happening. This involves consciously, but not necessarily formally, talking with God about what you are doing, thinking or planning. It's more than reflecting, because you expect a response from God, a closing of thoughts or directions or an opening up and affirmation. I'm trying to do this more and more in my work, especially when I get annoyed and want to respond with a heavy hand. I hope that with more training my prayers might be more and more in line with the will of God.

### ***Discipline***

As much as I might like to, I cannot avoid the word discipline. While I am encouraged to be spontaneous and contemporary in my prayer life, I know that I need the discipline of pray, otherwise I will not stay in close contact with God. I need to set time aside to pray for my family, my church, my work, my friends and the many other people and situations that I have been asked or volunteered to pray for.

Accepting such discipline is not a burden but an opportunity to know God better. I am always inspired by Christians that can give large blocks of time to prayer and when busy give even more time. I need to be careful. When I pray at night I am tired and find my concentration wenders quickly and my thoughts become dreams (day dreams) not prayers. While acknowledging that God could speak through such moments, I prefer to be more focussed when talking with anyone.

In a world where rational sciences dominate and secularism views religion as a declining influence, Christians need to talk more with the Creator, not less, and in both disciplined and informal ways.

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