

Personal Devotions

They are vital for spiritual growth... and they are often overlooked."

We are saved by grace and faith, not through works, yet our spirituality is our participation in what God has done for us in Christ. When you take your spiritual development seriously, you can view it as a drama – a drama lived in the gap between what a believer is today and what the believer ought to be. How do we nourish and keep growing in our personal faith? The evangelical scholar, Alister McGrath, claims that evangelicalism, particularly American evangelicalism, is failing the modern church. Evangelicals have done a superb job of evangelizing people, bringing them to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, but they are failing to provide believers with approaches to living that keep them going and growing in spiritual relationship with Him. They seem more interested in numerical growth than in spiritual development. In *Man the Dwelling Place of God*, A.W. Tozer, an evangelical, who never hesitated to point out the weaknesses of evangelicalism, observed, "Godliness is no longer valued, except for the very old or the very dead. The saintly souls are forgotten in the whirl of religious activity. The noisy, the self-assertive, the entertaining are sought after and rewarded in every way, with gifts, crowds, offerings and publicity. The Christlike, the self-forgetting, the other-worldly are jostled aside to make room for the latest converted playboy who is usually not too well converted and still very much of a playboy." But is the Reformed community doing any better? I believe that the Bible is read less, we meditate less, and we pray individually less and less. We seem to be more action oriented. Involvement in the community and a host of church activities are viewed as a manifestation of a devout Christian life. But none of these activities should be at the expense of personal piety.

No Shortcuts to the New Jerusalem

How do we develop our spiritual life? We are mistaken if we think devotional life is easy in our complicated and fast-moving society. There is so much to know, it is hard to keep up with the information bombardment. TV has brought about fundamental change. This medium does more spiritual damage than good. The viewer is shown an endless flow of visual images, but seldom accompanied by sustained interpretation of their context. They numb the imagination and the ability to reflect on what we see and hear. TV draws us away from the inner-self. But devotional life demands spiritual discipline. There are no shortcuts. To draw to God, we may have to take a close look at our TV viewing habits. We may also have to learn to say no to life in the fast lane. The Christian life is a continual exercise in piety. A lack of piety by a professing Christian is an affront to God. John Calvin observed: "Impiety profanes and pollutes the very name of God."

This fallen world is not our permanent home. We are pilgrims on the way to the new Jerusalem. We may not become so adjusted to this world and its agenda that we lose our pilgrim character. On the contrary, our journey demands the proper integration of the use of earthly pleasures and the service of God. We are, Calvin suggests, "to learn to pass through this world as though it is a foreign country, treating all earthly things

lightly and declining to set our hearts upon them."

Remembering our Roots

Some 21st century Christians seem to think that nothing ever happened church-wise until they came on the scene. But the roots of the Church go back two millennia to the great events of Good Friday and Easter Day. For spiritual nourishment we should remember our roots and reconnect with the spiritual riches of the past. To find our roots is to gain insights into where we have come from. If we neglect the past, we won't know how to live in the present, let alone prepare for the future. In our time of declining interest in history, it is good to know that in the past lies the present. The cultural riches of the past help us to shape our spirituality amid the poverty of the present. The latter calls for a careful evaluation of the latest offerings for spiritual growth. There is so much fluff on the Christian book market, which has no lasting value.

But I am not so fascinated by the past that I want to duplicate it today. Nor do I believe it was necessarily better than the present. The Reformers, Luther and Calvin, had their spiritual battles and felt at times the absence of God. Yet we can learn from the spiritual giants of the past. We are not new on the scene. We always think out of a tradition, in our case, the Reformed tradition, reflecting the urgencies and struggles articulated by our Creeds and Confessions, liturgy, and practice. They give us identity. We need the stability and strength offered by our roots in the early Church Fathers and the Reformation. Roots are important for continuity and stability; they nurture the conditions under which growth and spiritual maturity may develop. In our immigrant multicultural society, it is so easy to break with one's roots, but it is difficult to pick up those roots, once broken.

Why not spend some time in the evening delving into the world of literature? A good way to learn from our spiritual heritage is to read some of the classics such as Augustine, Pascal, Martyn Lloyd Jones, as well as the biographies of Reformed thinkers such as K. Schilder, H. Bavinck, and Abraham Kuyper. Meditate on some of the passages that strike and inspire you. When we lose our connection with the faith life and practice of previous generations, we not only lose our sources but also our vision for the work of the Kingdom.

The Importance of Sound Doctrine

Reformed spirituality is, in the first place, scriptural, and in the second, doctrinal. Doctrine is the vehicle that guides the spiritual journey and that keeps it pointed in the right direction. It would be impossible to over emphasize the importance of sound doctrine in the life of the Christian. Spirituality without a firm doctrinal basis will lead him astray. Right thinking about all spiritual matters is imperative. For example, we believe God must come first, before everything, before ourselves. We must depend on God alone in obedience and belief in God's goodness, in movement away from ourselves and towards God, doing it all in gratitude. But who is God? He can only be known through Scripture. A personal relationship with Him can only come through His Son. To

know God is to be changed by God. Knowledge of God is a vital force, capable of changing those who possess it and are possessed by it. True knowledge of God moves us to worship, obedience, and the hope of eternal life. That's why doctrine based on Scripture is so vital for our Christian life.

Meditation

We must learn to meditate. This is a process and an activity in which you diligently turn over in your heart whatsoever you have read or heard. We cannot meditate apart from the Word of God. We should be led by it and test our life and experience by it. Through meditation we can penetrate deeper into what God reveals in His Word. Eternal truths of Scripture then become a reality in our lives. Scripture does not only proclaim the comforting doctrine of justification by faith and grace, it also instructs us on how we ought to live in the sight of God.

But meditation requires silence and space to be alone. We need daily quiet time for spiritual growth. Most Reformed Christians understand what is involved in witnessing, kingdom service, church membership, giving, and serving, but when it comes to this nebulous thing called quiet time, many find themselves baffled. But quiet time means actually what it says. It is time given to listen to the Lord and His Word. We need solitude and, within it, silence to expose ourselves and to provide a natural context in which to listen to God. What would happen to our practical Christian walk if we drove home from church in quiet meditation instead of listening to the car radio or a new music cassette or CD? Or if we spend a few minutes alone with the Lord instead of immediately after a church service turning on the television or picking up a newspaper or magazine?

Man becomes estranged from himself, from his inner being, when he has to live with constant noise. So we must look for a place of quiet where we can spend time with the Lord and His Word. Seek a quiet place in church or on a bench in the woods, without earphones, cell phones, portable radios, etc. The Psalmist wrote, "In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent" (Ps. 4:3). With these words he sketches fruitful conditions for meditation. In silence, we have to reflect where we are at with the Lord instead of constantly worrying about what may happen in the future. When we seek solitude, we follow in the footsteps of Jesus. He sought to be alone and to withdraw from the crowd, even from his own disciples, in order to pray.

Once you get into the habit of spending time daily with the Lord, you have won 90 percent of the battle. I don't know what the best time of day is for you. Mothers who must get their children to school early in the morning may find their quiet time goes better after the uproar has ceased. Shift-workers may have to work out their own schedule. We cannot imitate someone else's schedule. Warren Wiersbe warns, "One of the worst things you can do is to try to imitate some great saint who arose at four each morning and spent three hours in prayer. That may not be your style."

The Cross

In contemporary evangelical circles the focus seems more on health and wealth than on suffering as a consequence of a growing relationship with the Lord. Malcolm Muggeridge, who was converted late in life, wrote, "As an old man looking back over one's life, it's the one thing that strikes you most forcibly – that the only thing that's taught one anything is *suffering*. Not success, not happiness, not anything like that. The only thing that *really* teaches one what life's about - the joy of understanding. The joy of coming into contact with what life *really* signifies – is suffering, affliction."

Suffering is not something we need to seek out or impose upon ourselves. To be an authentic Christian is to pass under the shadow of the cross, not to avoid that shadow. Our Lord's suffering and death not only show the way – He is the Way. The way of the cross leads home.

The great Christian themes of hope and joy converge on the cross of the one who was crucified and raised from the dead. For Martin Luther, the cross is the centre of the Christian faith. He challenged his own age to allow the cross of Christ to assume the centre stage. And rightly so. We can never appreciate the joy and hope of the resurrection unless we have been plunged into the sense of hopelessness and helplessness that pervaded that first Good Friday. Furthermore, the cross poses a devastating challenge to "what's-in-it-for-me?" We have not truly repented of our sin until we see ourselves as the ones who nailed our Saviour to the cross.

Abiding in Christ

We must keep what we have received from the Lord. Although the Bible clearly teaches the perseverance of the saints, we still must take responsibility for our spiritual life. "Abide in Me!" was our Lord's command (John 15:4), and we must obey it. Jesus warned us, "Without Me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5). If we abide in Christ, then we can bear fruit for His glory. Abiding in Christ is absolutely essential to Christian growth and guidance. According to St. Augustine, the spiritual life consists in following and imitating Christ. All the virtues needed to live godly lives are to be found in Christ. Calvin writes that God calls us to Christ that we may imitate Him. Yet he does not simply exhort us to imitate Christ, but from the union we have with him, he proves that we ought to be like Him. A likeness in life indeed, Calvin says, will prove that we abide in Christ. But even in our striving to become more like Christ, we can count on the aid of the Holy Spirit. Calvin never tired of repeating that the Holy Spirit is the bond of our union with Christ. It is the Spirit who forms and readies us to yield ourselves to God.

Prayer

Prayer is centred on God, and not on our needs. It is not a wish list. Prayer is a dialogue with God. It is a response to the invitation first made known in Scripture. It is a miracle and not a technical procedure. It is a miracle of God's grace. Our status before God is something given, not something earned. Jacques Ellul even states that "prayer is the extreme case of God's grace for us." He also notes that prayer is the permission

granted by God that we speak to Him face to face. In prayer, God allows himself to be called, "Our Father", in which He really places Himself within our reach. God comes to us. It is through prayer that we are made "fellow workers for God" (1Cor. 3:9).

Speaking and listening to God is a unique and even stupefying experience. In *Prayer and Modern Man*, Jacques Ellul notes, "Prayer is specifically there for the purpose of setting a limit to our pretensions, of bringing us face to face with him who judges us in such a way that we are unable to perceive any virtue of our own within ourselves." Yet prayer is also an expression of hope when we are in despair, as a dialogue of faith when we are in doubt. Throughout Scripture we read various prayers offered unto God. Prayer is as vital for the Christian life as the air we breathe. We cannot live without prayer. Prayer comes before all the rest in the life of a Christian. The first expression of faith is prayer. "*First of all*, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for all men," says the apostle Paul (1 Tim. 2:1). We are also commanded to pray. It is a personal word addressed to the believer. Throughout all the ages, it is said to each believer, "call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me" (Psalm 50:15); "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Matt. 26:41).

We continue to pray, because the maintenance of our faith depends on that prayer. We must keep on praying even when everything is discouraging. It is this prayer which causes faith to endure. We cannot do without the discipline of prayer. But we do not only pray during our quiet time, we also pray together. We practice the communion of saints in prayer. Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father," "Our bread." When we pray the Lord's Prayer, for example, we are joined with all those who have said it.

There are no shortcuts in building a godly Christian character. Each Christian should develop a disciplined routine for his/her spiritual development. Each situation is different. You may think that the disciplined Christian life is too demanding. Yes, the disciplined life will cost us. But the undisciplined life will cost us even more – our relationship with God.

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