

# Christian Disciplines

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Disciplines are not always pleasurable or easy to come by. In a true sense they are a battle between the spirit and the flesh. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Disciplined living for the Christian means an intentional surrender to the superiority of the Spirit leading to the Lordship of Christ over all of life.

Undisciplined living is a mark of our age and culture. D.G. Kehl says, "The church has not escaped the blight of undisciplined living: perverted values, wasted time, flabby bodies, and distorted emotions provide ample evidence . . . undisciplined living is blighting the church."<sup>1</sup> Discipline, however, is a fruit of the Spirit, according to Scripture:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control (Gal. 5:22).

For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline (II Tim. 1:7 NASB).

Christian disciplines need not be looked upon as unpleasant, or as a legalistic obligation. When practiced meaningfully they become sources of strength and joy. Says Richard Foster,

Neither should we think of the spiritual disciplines as some dull drudgery aimed at exterminating laughter from the face of the earth. Joy is the keynote of the disciplines.<sup>2</sup>

Spiritual disciplines may well be considered as a joyful response to the grace of God. Prayer can actually become a hunger, meditation a time of resting, and reflection a time of pulling oneself together again.

Our disciplines — things like fasting, prayer, contemplation, and journaling are a response to grace, not an alternative to it. They are a way of being open before God, of giving Him a chance to do His work in us.<sup>3</sup>

Since we are talking about spiritual disciplines, a further word of clarification would be helpful about our use of "spiritual" or "spirituality." The tendency is to treat "spirituality" too narrowly, thinking about it only in terms of devotions, prayer, or worship. We wish to use

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spirituality here in a broader sense, so as to cover all of life as being integrated by the spirit of God.

In both the Old and the New Testaments the word “spirit” is equivalent to “breath” or life. Blood and breath are essential for sustaining life. Dr. Roy Fairchild of the San Francisco Seminary says that the opposite of spirit is not matter, but death. You are spiritual when you have God’s life in, with, and under all that you are . . . Scripture equates spirit with that which is life-giving, the whole human person inclined toward God, to life, to liberation.<sup>4</sup> Spirituality cannot realistically be seen or perceived except through the life and actions of a person. In one of her lectures at Seminary, Dr. Dody Donnelly said “Even though we have never met a “spirituality” coming down, we have met people who are inspirited . . . who have shown self-integration, clear goals, strong identity, serenity, self-acceptance, resting in God in prayer, and most importantly, reaching out to others in loving service . . . these are the signs of the life of the spirit in one another . . . spirituality is how you live your faith.”

Then again, spirituality must not be taken out of human experience. Spirituality describes the totality and quality of a person’s being. The human and the spiritual must be kept in reasonable balance and be integrated. Father Crawley put it this way in a seminary on healing, “A spiritual person is one who is supernaturally natural, and naturally Supernatural.”

While there are many Christian (or spiritual) disciplines, we will only consider five of the basic ones.

## **I. Prayer and Meditation.**

While these disciplines are very familiar, or because they are, time and usage tend to disfigure them, shift them off course, or rob them of their sharpness and effectiveness.

*Prayer:* Oswald Chambers in *My Utmost for His Highest*<sup>5</sup> says, “Our ordinary views of prayer are not found in the New Testament. We look upon prayer as getting things for ourselves. The Bible idea of prayer is that we may know God.”

This brings to mind that far too often prayer is seen as getting things, or begging the Lord for what we need and often for what we want. It is most important that in prayer we discover what God wants, rather than what we want. Charlie Shedd writes “Prayer is not first man’s trying to get through to God, it is just an opening up to God who is trying to get through to us.”<sup>6</sup> So often our prayers are attempts to get through to Him — “To storm the gates of heaven” — while what is really needed is quietness and silence on our part — so that He can speak to us. Did Jesus not say, “ . . . if one of you fathers is asked by

his Son for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he?" (Luke 11:11).

Prayer also needs to be stressed as a dialogue, as a communion between us and God. A new Christian asked the pastor what he must do to pray. The pastor said, "Prayer is not doing something, it is being with someone."

*Meditation*: The root for meditation means: "To measure out." "Medicine" comes from the same root. To meditate is to "measure out," think upon, reflect, sort out, evaluate. Quakers call it "centering down." Scripture calls us to meditate. "In His law he meditates day and night" (Psalm 1:2). "Meditate" occurs at least 10 times in the Psalms. Similarly, Paul exhorts Timothy to "Meditate on these things" (I Tim. 4:14-15).

Meditation and prayer take time; they are not something that can be done in a hurry. One must "center down," become silent, to be able to hear God and His still small voice. We should do God the honor and respect to listen to Him, as much as we expect Him to listen to us! Elizabeth O'Connor says, "To meditate is to love the words you read, and to let them shape you."<sup>7</sup>

Among several basic requirements for a rewarding discipline of prayer and meditation I mention only two.

a. Time and Place. For most people the biggest problem about the devotional life is time, lack of time!

During the last two years I have surveyed at least six churches where I have spoken concerning prayer and renewal. The last question of my questionnaire reads: "What is the greatest problem you encounter in prayer?"

The overwhelming number say, "Time!" Too little time. *Leadership* magazine reported on a questionnaire the editor sent to 500 of its readers about their devotional life. One question reads, "What is the one greatest obstacle you struggle with in your devotional life?" Answers: Time 34%, distractions 9%, consistency 7% and discipline 6%.<sup>8</sup>

We must "buy" time for this discipline; otherwise it will be sporadic, or will not happen at all. I think we all admit that there is time and that it boils down to priority. I offer you a practical suggestion: Put a pencil and paper on your TV set, and each time you finish viewing a program record it on that paper. See the results at the end of a week! We can buy time, if we wish.

Place is important also. There is an emotional and mental asset to designate a place that becomes a familiar and a focused place for meditation and prayer. Jesus frequented the mountains and the desert. He told the Pharisees who prayed so much in public, "go into the closet and shut the door!" Selecting a familiar place is like creating a sanctuary

where we are familiar and at home in spiritual meditation.

b. A second requirement for effective prayer is to allow this discipline to reach beyond ourselves. Engage in “Kingdom praying” as I like to call it. The Lord’s prayer is a kingdom prayer. Two thirds of it deals with the kingdom. Kingdom praying keeps prayer from becoming selfish and self-centered. The vertical relationship will result in a horizontal awareness! Some years ago I was shaken by these words:

“When this link between God’s redemptive ordering of history and his demands on our individual lives is served, prayer has a way of floating away from the center, of becoming peripheral to the heart of things.”<sup>9</sup>

Prayer must always feel the pain, hurt and concern for people other than ourselves.

When Dr. James Dobson was asked how he accounts for the spectacular surge in his ministry for the family, his answer was that his ministry began to grow when he gave priority to his devotional life.

The blessings and benefits of prayer and meditation are many. Those that should be on such a list are:

a. Renewal: “They that ‘wait’ (lay it out) upon the Lord shall renew their strength” (Isaiah 40:31).

b. Release from anxiety: “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God that passes all understanding shall keep your heart and mind in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6-7).

Gordon Cosby, Pastor of the Church of the Savior, Washington D.C., offers this observation: “The only journey that ultimately matters is the journey into the place of stillness deep within one-self. To reach that place is to be home. To fail to reach it is to be forever restless.”

## **II. Spiritual (devotional) reading.**

Reading for personal spiritual growth is quite different from reading for information, analysis, investigation, research, or even different from “reading through the Bible in one year.”

Devotional (spiritual) reading is characterized by reading more slowly, contemplatively, reflectively, and with anticipation of being spoken to through the still small voice of the spirit. Basically, devotional reading should be more non-judgmental and non-analytical, particularly so, if we read devotional classics and the Scriptures.

It is probably a good practice to read a chapter a day, or as we

understand from Billy Graham — to read one Psalm and one chapter of Proverbs each day. However, there must be the freedom, at least at times, to read more slowly, allowing the Spirit and the Words to guide us. I have heard of “spiritual masters” who read one chapter of the bible over and over for days before going on. I found this to be of benefit for myself. Reading Philippians this last spring, I found chapter one to be so meaningful that I read it day by day, over and over again, especially verses 6, 18, and 22 which brought a special message of hope to me and I literally “relished” the message they gave me.

We come to the Scriptures and the devotional classics, particularly, to be addressed; not to judge, but to be judged. A tourist walked through the halls of a famous art gallery and kept chattering critically about some of the paintings. Thereupon the guide of the art gallery said to the tourist: “Sir, these pictures are not on trial, you are.”

The prayer and most useful attitude in devotional reading is summarized by Susan Muto as follows:

An awakening to my deepest self is facilitated if I place myself at the disposal of the master in the words he speaks. I want not to lead, but to be led, not to tell but to listen, not to transform, but to be transformed. Mine is a receptive rather than an aggressive stance. My desire is to follow with docility. Not to negate but to affirm. Not to find fault with the master’s words but to allow them to find fault with me. The master may not have all the answers I seek but he is able to witness to what it is like to live in the presence of the Lord.<sup>10</sup>

### **III. Keeping a Spiritual Journal**

A spiritual journal, also called a devotional notebook, is a record of God’s activity in our lives. In this journal we record what God is doing in our lives. We trace our thoughts and reflections and record our growth experiences. The journal becomes a tool, an aid to meditation. I have personally found the journal a great aid in overcoming distractions and in helping me to concentrate more fully on the reading and formulating of prayers.

The journal may also record important Scriptures, notes on reflections, plans for the future, ideas to be further pursued, poems or hymns that have become meaningful. Often it is helpful to write out a prayer, expressing our deepest longings, aspirations, dreams, or frustrations, doubts and hurts. The journal is a place where we list people we are committed to pray for. We also record answers to prayer.

Often I add a “corner for praise” since praise is the weakest part of my prayer life. Listing “thank you God” items helps me to be more positive about life.

The benefits of keeping a spiritual journal are many. Foremost is the fact that we become conscious of the Lord's working in our life; more time is given for reflection and centering down becomes easier and more fruitful. Writing helps to sort our issues and problems so they can be prayed about. Journaling brings praise and worship into our lives. It brings about a better balance in our lives. Journaling helps to clarify our goals and objectives, putting life into clearer perspective. Writing a journal calls for more time for the Word to speak to us and allows time for silence and listening to God.

#### **IV. Fasting**

This discipline is not exactly pleasurable or popular. "In a culture where the landscape is dotted with shrines to the Golden Arches and an assortment of Pizza Temples, fasting seems out of place, out of step with our times."<sup>11</sup>

There is considerable resistance to fasting, probably for several reasons. Some may have a reaction to its excessive practices, especially during the Middle Ages, or because of some very traditional requirements, which produce no spiritual meaning for them. Others find it difficult, because our culture is heavy with emphasis on food and even promotes gluttony. Then, again, others feel that it was an ancient practice but does not actually apply for today — the Bible, you see, does not command it. To be sure, fasting does make uncomfortable inroads into our regular, pleasurable eating habits!

While there are no clear biblical laws that command fasting, its practice in biblical times is a given. Jesus "assumed" fasting, together with giving and prayer (Matthew 6:16-18). Jesus expected his disciples to fast (Matthew 9:14) and referred to fasting together with prayer as essential for spiritual power (Matthew 17:21). In total the Bible makes some 87 references to fasting.

We might also add that fasting has a strong history in the tradition of the Christian church.

Whatever our convictions might be about fasting, there are distinct advantages to this discipline which are only experienced by those who practice it.

1. Fasting reveals what controls us. It is amazing how much I am affected by skipping even one or two meals. I notice it both mentally and physically. I then realize how much I am being controlled by the body, rather than by the spirit. In this sense fasting brings awareness to the need for balance, and for the need of spirit aliveness within us.

2. Fasting increases the effectiveness of intercessory prayer. Fasting and prayer really go together. Fasting brings an earnestness into

the situation being prayed for, a seriousness that sharpens our concentration upon spiritual matters.

3. Fasting, with prayer, increases spiritual power that leads to deliverance from bondage. "Is not this the fast which I chose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bonds of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free . . .?" says Isaiah 58:6.

A group of students at our Seminary agreed to fast Monday noons and pray for a six-week period, interceding for specific needy persons in South America. Money saved was collected and sent to this needy family in Paraguay. This was putting fasting and prayer into action.

## **V. Creative Solitude**

This discipline refers to periods of extended silence, whether in the context of a group, or personally being alone. Needless to say in our culture where noise, hurry, feverish activity, and a crowd mentality dominate our waking hours, silence is hard to come by. Silence, even for a few minutes in a worship service, makes many people nervous. Being alone for an hour, several hours, or for a day is a major "interruption" in our busy schedules. Foster says, "Our fear of being alone drives us to noise and crowds."<sup>12</sup> Silence, at first, causes us to feel helpless. We are so dependent on words and activity to give us feelings of worth. While silence is often a regular part of daily devotions, this discipline refers to the need of longer and extensive/intensive periods of reflective solitude.

Exactly this kind of silence and solitude is needed from time to time to bring our tattered selves together and bring us to the true source of peace and power: "they that wait upon the Lord receive new strength" (Isaiah 40:31). Morton Kelsey, author of many books on spirituality, says about himself: "I need 15 minutes to an hour per day, one per week to collect the tattered fragments of my life, and once a year I need 1-2 days to center down and see who I am and where I am going, to find out what God wants of me and to get my priorities straight."<sup>13</sup>

Of all the disciplines of the Christian life the periodic, but regular, practice of being in creative solitude may be the hardest to arrange, simply because we are so busy, so tense, so preoccupied with our "muchness and manyness." But it can become the most creative time, for in such silence God can break through as we contemplate His word, hear His voice and review who we are and where we are going. Needless to say we need both fellowship and aloneness. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in *Life Together*,

Let him who cannot be alone beware of community . . . Let him who is not in community beware of being alone . . . Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. One who

wants to fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair.<sup>14</sup>

I observe however, that the church today is doing very well emphasizing fellowship, but has and is doing poorly in guidance and teaching of the essentials of creative silence for personal growth.

Is not Jesus our model and example in this discipline? He inaugurated His ministry by spending 40 days alone in the desert (Matt. 4:1-11); he chose 12 disciples after an entire night in prayer (Luke 6:12); after a long day's work he "went into the hills by himself" (Matt. 14:23), when the 12 returned after a healing and preaching mission He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place . . ." (Mark 6:31); and for the transfiguration experience He chose the silence of a lonely mountain stage (Matt. 26:36-46).

### **Conclusion**

It is impossible to cover all the classical (disciplines which are central to experiential Christianity) Christian disciplines in a brief article. Hence I have selected only a few of the basic ones. It is these common and familiar disciplines which tend in the course of time, through practice and tradition, to erode, get dull, harden and become empty and lifeless forms, producing little spiritual power and doing little to soothe the guilty conscience. It is exactly these disciplines that need to be restored to biblical perspectives.

Disciplines require discipline; there is no easy way. Dick Eastman calls his well known book on prayer, *No Easy Road*.<sup>15</sup> And the writer of Hebrews says, "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but scrowful, yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yeilds the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (12:11).

Nevertheless, in order to be Christian in an age of superficiality, gluttony, instant success, sensuality and activism, the disciplines of silence, deep reflection, refocusing, centering, prioritizing and drinking deeply at the spiritual fountains becomes truly essential. Far too little time (or instruction) is given to meditative prayer and the seeking of God's guidance in our homes, churches and schools. If we waited longer on God we would move more surely (and more swiftly) to our goals.

As we revise our life style to make room for spiritual disciplines, we shall find them rewarding and joyful. Their faithful exercise produces a new song. They do become in the process of practice, joyful responses to the grace of God.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> D.G. Kehl, "The Forgotten Fruit of the Spirit," *Christianity Today* 27 (Oct. 7, 1983): 32.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Donald Klug, *How to Keep a Spiritual Journal* (Nashville: Nelson Publications, 1982), p. 14.
- <sup>4</sup> Roy Fairchild, "Guaranteed Not to Shrink: Spiritual Direction in Pastoral Care," *Pastoral Psychology* 31 (Winter, 1982): 83.
- <sup>5</sup> Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest* (New York: Dodd, Meed and Co., 1943), p. 19.
- <sup>6</sup> Charlie Shedd, *The Church Where People Really Pray* (Waco: Word Books, 1974), p. 19.
- <sup>7</sup> Elizabeth O'Connor, *In Search of Silence* (Waco: Word Books, 1979), p. 137.
- <sup>8</sup> Terry Muck, "Questions About the Devotional Life," *Leadership* 3/1 (Winter, 1980): 31-39.
- <sup>9</sup> Harvie Conn, "Luke's Theology of Prayer," *Christianity Today* 16 (Dec. 22, 1972): 292.
- <sup>10</sup> Susan Muto, *Approaching the Sacred* (Denville: Dimension Books, 1973), p. 29.
- <sup>11</sup> Foster, p. 43.
- <sup>12</sup> Foster, p. 84.
- <sup>13</sup> Morton Kelsey, *Encounter With God* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship Inc., 1972), p. 84.
- <sup>14</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper, 1954), pp. 77-78.
- <sup>15</sup> Dick Eastman, *No Easy Road* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971).