

The Devotional Life

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Dear Members of the Endtime Issues Newsletter:

The beginning of the New Year affords us the opportunity to resolve to modify certain aspects of our behavior and habits. One aspect of our Christian life that most of us need to improve, is our devotional life. The pressure and rush of our daily schedules tend to reduce our devotional life to a kind of drive-in—drive-out experience. Such a superficial devotional life hardly enables the Holy Spirit to empower us to meet our daily challenges.

Recognizing my personal need to improve my devotional life, I thought to share with you my resolution by posting an essay on "THE DEVOTIONAL LIFE." I wrote this essay several years ago as a chapter for a book on *THE CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE*. Unfortunately I had to shelf this project after writing three chapters because of other pressing demands on my time. By God's grace I hope to resume and complete this practical book in the near future.

What motivated me to dust off this essay and use it for this newsletter, is the fact that it does speaks to the needs of my spiritual life. When I prepare a sermon or a Bible study, I always ask myself: "Does it meet my personal spiritual needs?" If it does, chances are that it will also meet the spiritual needs of other fellow believers. I trust that you will find this to be true when you read this Bible study.

Out of consideration for some of our subscribers whose servers limit the length of the messages they can receive, this study is posted in two installments. The present installment examines the Biblical view of prayer as communication with God through the intercession of Jesus and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within us. We shall see how each Being of the Godhead plays a vital role in our prayer life. Some of the practical questions discussed are: Why do we pray? When should we pray? Where should we pray? How should we pray?

The next installment to be posted in the next newsletter, move from the theology to the actual practice of prayer. Special consideration will be given to these three important topics: (1) Devotional Readings, (2) Jesus' Model Prayer, (3) Conditions for Answered Prayer.

The ultimate goal of this Bible study is help us appreciate more fully that a balanced devotional life consists not only in the consecration of special times and places for the worship of God, but also in the consecration of all the aspects of our daily life. We show our devotion to the Lord not only through our private devotional exercises, but also through our conduct: the way we dress, we eat, we drink, we work, we play, we relate to our family members and to society.

SOME ENCOURAGING RESPONSES

Were you to ask me, "Brother Bacchiocchi what motivates you to spend long hours in preparing these Bible studies on contemporary issues?" My answer is simple. It is the encouragement that I receive from fellow believers of different walks of life who find in these newsletters a fresh appreciation of the relevance of the Adventist message for our times.

There are many thinking Adventists who are struggling at times with doubts and questions. It is gratifying to receive messages from some of them who find these newsletters helpful in their search for answers to their spiritual quest. These messages encourage and motivate me to continue this ministry of Biblical research on Endtime Issues.

To give you a sampling of the kind of encouraging responses I received this past week, I will share four of them from fellow believers serving the Lord in different professions. They have granted me permission to quote their messages. The first message is from A. Obisanya, M. D., an Adventist physician practicing in England. He wrote:

Dear Prof Bacchiocchi:

I want to thank God for your ministry during this past year. Since I have been receiving your newsletters things have not been the same for me. I was at the verge of spiritual death before I started reading your sometimes provoking views. I sincerely will be praying for you.

I have worked as a physician for the Seventh Day Adventist Church for the past 20 years and at times it has been rough. I want to thank the Lord for you and your loving wife whom I think is your best adviser and consultant.

A. Obisanya, M. D., England

Thank God for using this newsletter to rekindle the spiritual life of sincere fellow believers like Dr. Obisanya. The second message is from Carlos Martinez, a most pleasant mortgage and real estate broker who was largely responsible for inviting me to present my Sabbath Seminar at his church in Long Beach, California. He wrote:

Dr. Bacchiocchi,

Please do not apologize for areas of your ministry that create controversy. Many of us welcome a challenge in our thinking and are not afraid of potential future change. Since our church is sleeping, please do not be concerned with those who ask you not to turn on the light. Some may be made uncomfortable and God forbid, wake up from the brightness therein.

When the final trial will severely test my faith, I want you to know that your ministry has made a big difference toward my ability to depend upon the Lord's faithfulness. I am sure that your encouragement and ministry has made a positive difference in the lives of thousands of persons around the world, likewise.

Yours in Christ

Carlos Martinez
Long Beach California

It is encouraging to know that this ministry of biblical research can make "a big difference" toward the ability of others "to depend upon the Lord's faithfulness." The third message is from Y. H. Ted Struntz who serves as Evangelist in the Michigan Conference. He wrote:

Dear Brother Sam:

I cannot tell you how much my wife, Lisa, and myself appreciate your newsletters. I especially appreciated the series on Islam, its comparisons with the papacy and the 1260 years. I do wish that you would share the results of your findings. Some of us have been thinking along the same line and wish that we could have serious studies done by conservative scholars who strengthen our faith. Thank you again for the studies...

My travels this year will take me to the Kiev, Ukraine to do evangelistic meetings, teach and train in the area of evangelism.

God Bless,
Y. H. Ted Struntz
Speaker, Director PROPHECY LECTURES
Michigan Conference Evangelist

I am eager to meet the expectations of thinking Adventists like Pastor Struntz, but I have been made forcefully aware that any fresh investigation of the time prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, stirs up bitter and divisive controversies. Out of pastoral concerns I have decided to suspend these studies until the General Conference appoints a commission to conduct such an investigation. At that time, if requested, I will be glad to resume my research.

The last message is from an Adventist pastor who is struggling with his commitment to some of the Adventist doctrines. We had a pleasant telephone conversation. I could sense that the Holy Spirit is helping this pastor to find answers to some of his questions. He has given me permission to quote his message, but without mentioning his name. He wrote:

Dear Dr. Bacchiocchi:

I have been struggling with my commitment to Adventism. Studying what you've written has renewed my commitment to the Adventist church. I thank you for your faithfulness. What has helped me most has been your willingness to reexamine traditional positions and yet do it graciously, courageously and effectively.

I have concluded that if you can question our traditional interpretations in the spirit of true Adventism, then surely I can stick to the church and do the same. Your research has helped a great deal toward dealing with the truths related to 1844. Much thanks to you.

Name withheld by request

It is heartwarming to see how some of the recent newsletters that have troubled some concerned fellow believers, have brought reassurance and encouragement to others. I wish that a way could be found to encourage a fresh investigation of our prophetic interpretations, without alarming those who are committed to preserve traditional positions. May God grant us the wisdom and grace to search the truth and to share new insights, without alienating one another.

SEMINARS FOR THE MONTH OF JANUARY

Since posting my last newsletters, some changes have occurred in the schedule of my weekend seminars for the months of January. Let me give a brief update for the sake of those who are eager to attend my seminars. Every weekend some subscribers drive several hours to attend our seminars.

Last Sabbath, January 3-4, we had a marvelous rally at the Johnston SDA Church in Rhode Island. Pastor William Warcholik told me that on Sabbath afternoon the church had the largest attendance with a full sanctuary and fellowship hall. Among those who attended were two pastors of other denominations. One of them, Dr. Virgil Wood, is the Pastor of the Pond Street Baptist Church in Providence, Rhode Island.

During the questions/answers period, Dr. Wood asked me a perceptive question on the relationship between the Sabbath and the Jubilee. I responded with a mini 10-minute lecture, explaining how the Sabbath was related to both the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee year. These sabbatical institutions served to nourish the hope and strengthen the faith in the Messiah to come. In fact, in Luke chapter 4 Jesus delivers His programmatic speech in the Synagogue of Nazareth by quoting from Isaiah 62:1-3, where the mission of the Messiah is described as that of the Jubilee liberation. In chapter 5 of *DIVINE REST FOR HUMAN RESTLESSNESS* I discuss how the first and second Advent are typified in Scripture by the liberation and restoration of the sabbatical/jubilee years.

The reaction of Dr. Wood to the seminar has been extremely positive. In an email message he wrote: "Many thanks again for your extraordinary presentation in Rhode Island, and I do look forward to staying in touch." During an half-an hour telephone conversation, Dr. Wood reassured me that he is considering seriously the validity and value of the seventh-day Sabbath for himself and his congregation. He has invited me to spend a day with him during my next visit to the Boston area. I will keep you updated about future developments.

This coming Sabbath, January 10-11, 2003, I will be presenting my SABBATH SEMINAR at the CANOGA PARK SDA CHURCH, located at 20550 Roscoe Boulevard, Winnetka, CA 91306. This seminar was not mentioned in the previous newsletter, because it was arranged on a short notice. For information call Pastor William McCall at (818) 885-7151. On Sabbath morning, January 11, during Sabbath School time I will be making a special presentation at the nearby NORTHRIDGE SDA CHURCH, located at 17700 Plummer Street, Northridge, CA 91325. I will be back at the Canoga Park SDA Church at 11:00 a. m. for Divine Service. At 4:00 p. m. I will deliver at the CANOGA PARK SDA CHURCH an informative lecture on the latest Sabbath/Sunday developments. Members from several areas churches will be joining for the afternoon lecture. You are welcomed to join us if you live within driving distance.

Since I posted the last newsletter, the invitation from Seoul, Korea, has expanded to include Tokyo, Japan as well. This means that from January 16 to 19 I will speak at a SABBATH CONGRESS organized by the Korean SDA Union. For information call Lee Hark Bong at (2) 966-0072 or 966-0073 or 3299-5200.

From Seoul, Korea I will fly to Tokyo on Tuesday, January 21, 2003. I will speak several times in Tokyo from January 22 to 25. The invitation is co-sponsored by the International Tokyo SDA Church and the Central Tokyo SDA Church. For information call Pastor Yozaburo Bando at 81-3-3402-1517. I look forward to share my ministry with our fellow believers in Korea and Japan. This is my first visit to these oriental countries.

The seminar at the Lexington SDA Church, which had been scheduled for January 31-February 1, 2003, has been rescheduled for March 14-15. The reason for the rescheduling is that our children had planned a special family get-together for Sabbath February 1, to celebrate my 65th birthday. I was unaware of this "surprised" celebration and I appreciate the willingness of the Lexington SDA Church to reschedule the seminar for March 14-15. I look forward to a special rally in their brand new sanctuary. For information, call David Parker at (502) 223-8020.

WILL THE SABBATH SEMINAR BE AIRED ON 3ABN?

Many subscribers and participants at my weekend seminar are constantly asking me: "When will your SABBATH and ADVENT SEMINARS be aired on 3ABN?" The answer is "I do not know." Few months ago I was asked to submit a video recording of the Sabbath Seminar for evaluation. A member of the reviewing committee was so impressed that he ordered a set of videos for his personal use. I was told that I would eventually hear from the Program Director, but so far I have not heard from anybody.

Apparently there might be a problem with the one-hour length of each lecture that were recently recorded by the Texas Media Center in Fort Worth, Texas. Most programs in 3ABN are only half-an-hour in length. On my part I am willing to make a new recording in accordance to the specifications of 3ABN. But, before undertaking this project, I need to receive an official request.

If you have attended my Sabbath Enrichment Seminar in the USA or overseas and feel that the messages could benefit the 3ABN's viewing audience, feel free to let the Program Director know about it. You can contact 3ABN by email at <mail@3abn.org> or by phone at (800) 752-3226 or (618) 627-4651.

The Lord has granted me a unique opportunity to enter, study, research, and publish my dissertation *FROM SABBATH TO SUNDAY* at the prestigious Pontifical Gregorian University, in Rome, Italy—which is the leading Jesuit University, founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1541. The dissertation compelling shows the continuity of the Sabbath and the role of the Papacy in changing the Sabbath to Sunday.

Surprisingly, the dissertation was published with the official *imprimatur*—approval of the Catholic church. Pope Paul VI awarded me a gold medal for earning the academic distinction of *summa cum laude*. I view the gold medal, not as a personal triumph, but as the triumph of truth—the triumph of our mission today to proclaim the Good News of the Sabbath to our tension-filled and restless society.

The reason my dissertation was published with the official Catholic *mprimatur*—approval, is simply because my research shows the correctness of the historical Catholic claim to have been responsible for changing the Sabbath to Sunday. Chapter 6 discusses the theological, social, and liturgical measures used by the Papacy to lead Christians away from Sabbathkeeping into Sundaykeeping. The reason *FROM SABBATH TO SUNDAY* has now become controversial among Catholics, is because of the recent Catholic Church attempts to make Sunday observance, no longer her own ecclesiastical institution, but a biblical ordinance, rooted in the Sabbath commandment itself.

With the help of 100 PowerPoint slides I am now able to take the audience in a visual way through my pilgrimage of faith. People can see the Gregorian University, the Vatican, the archives, some of the documents which I found, my major professor who has suffered greatly for his helpfulness to me, the Pope himself and the gold medal he awarded me. This testimony has gripped capacity crowds everywhere around the world, and I would be glad to share it with the 3ABN's viewing audience. If you feel that airing on 3ABN this incredible testimony and the findings of my Sabbath research could benefit many people, feel free to contact its Program Director. The easiest way is for you to email your message at <mail@3abn.org>

If you or your church wishes to receive the 8 one-hour presentations of the newly recorded SABBATH ENRICHMENT SEMINAR at a special offer extended until January 31, 2003, be sure to read the announcement at the end of this newsletter. The seminar is now available in 8 AUDIO CASSETTES, 4 VIDEO CASSETTES, 3 DVD DISKS, and 1 CD-ROM.

THANK YOU FOR INVITING YOUR FRIENDS TO SUBSCRIBE

Thank you for sharing these Bible studies with your friends. Just let them know that they can receive this newsletter directly simply by emailing us their request at: <sbacchiocchi@qtm.net> As a result of your promotional endeavors over 20,000 people are already benefiting from these Bible studies

ANNOUNCEMENTS AT THE END OF THIS NEWSLETTER

At the end of this newsletter you will find the following important announcements:

- 1) Information on how your church can invite me to present the popular PowerPoint Seminars on the SABBATH, SECOND ADVENT, and CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE.
- 2) A special offer on my books, audio cassettes, videos, DVDs, and CD-Roms
- 3) Information on how your church can purchase one of the best LCD VIDEO PROJECTOR on the market (HITACHI 370, 2200 lumens) at a substantially reduced price through an Adventist dealer in Dallas, Texas.

THE DEVOTIONAL LIFE
Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.,
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The lifestyle of a person largely depends on to whom or to what he or she belong. People who belong to the Mafia live a different lifestyle from those who belong to the Rotary Club. This is due not only to the different goals and values of the two organizations but also to the different degree of commitment expected by them. The commitment required by one “belonging” to the Mafia is obviously different from the commitment expected by one “belonging” to the Rotary club.

The Christian life derives and depends upon our total commitment to Christ. It begins when we respond to Christ’s call to follow him. When Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee there were no Christians in the world. Andrew, Peter, James and John were good men but not Christians. They became Christians on the day when they responded to Christ’s call to forsake all and follow Him (Matt 4:20). What was true for those men is also true for all of us today. Our Christian life begins when we respond to Christ’s calling to belong to Him.

Paul reminds the Christians in Rome that they were “called to belong to Christ” (Rom 1:6). To respond to the call of Christ means to become a follower of Him, or as Paul describes himself, “a servant [literally a ‘slave’] of Jesus Christ” (Rom 1:1). This does not mean that we become immediately perfect and wise. One may still be deficient in courage or wisdom and yet belong to Christ. When Peter cowardly denied Christ three times he still belonged to Christ (Matt 26:69-75). His tearful repentance proves it. When Paul unwisely dropped John Mark after the young man failed him on the first missionary journey (Acts 15:36-40), he still belonged to Christ. Eventually Paul recognized his mistake (2 Tim 4:11) and specifically asked for John Mark to assist him in Rome (Col 4:10).

The Christian lifestyle is defined not by absence of mistakes, but by total commitment and dependency upon Christ. It is a life constantly informed and formed by faith in Christ. This is the reason why Paul in his letter to the Romans spends the first eleven chapters explaining the nature of faith before beginning the discussion of the life of faith. A morally upright person without faith in Christ is a good person but not a Christian. Persons are Christians when they belong to Christ in an absolute sense--differently from the way they belong to any club or organization.

When we respond to Christ’s call to commit ourselves to Him we establish a relationship with Him. Our relationship with Christ has at least four components: doctrinal, devotional, ecclesiastical and ethical. In this Bible study we want to examine some aspects of our devotional relationship with Christ.

I. THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF DEVOTIONAL LIFE

Our devotional relationship with Christ stems from our commitment to follow Jesus by living in accordance to His teachings and example. This commitment involves every aspect of our lives. The proof of our commitment is “a sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Cor 11:3).

Our devotion to Christ is revealed especially through our willingness to “Take time to be holy, Speak oft with thy Lord.” Relationships need to be cultivated in order to survive. We cultivate relationships by taking time to be together and share joys and sorrows. The same applies to our relationship with our Lord. We cultivate our relationship with Christ especially through the devotional exercises of prayer, meditation and reading of His Word.

The Crisis of Devotion. Devotional exercises have become foreign to most modern Christians. Many have become so preoccupied with the material things of this world, that the spiritual dimension of their life has become empty. The neglect of spiritual exercises is directly related to the crisis of faith which is partly due to the growing secularization of our culture.

Donald G. Bloesch observes that "Faith cannot live apart from prayer and devotion"¹ Ultimately the survival of our faith is largely dependent upon the quality of our devotional life. In his book *The Human Puzzle*, Christian psychologist David Myers shows that lifestyle influences what people believe much more than what people believe influences their lifestyle.² What this means is that the neglect of devotional exercises precipitates the decline of our faith and commitment to Christ.

Attempts are made today to remedy the crisis of faith and piety through counseling and liturgical renewal. Counseling, however, is often based on a purely secular psychological criteria rather than on Biblical perspectives. People are taught how to release their inner powers rather than how to seek the enabling power of living Christ. They are instructed on how to find self-fulfillment independently from God rather than by living in accordance to His will.

Celebration forms of worship also attempt to meet the crisis of faith and devotion by making the worship service more lively and entertaining through the use of drama, electronic bands, singing of choruses, recital of litanies, formal prayers and pep talks. Christians need today a worship renewal, but the solution to the decline in faith and devotion does not lie in external drama or litanies, but in an internal spiritual renewal through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.

This is not to deny the importance of worship renewal for the inner spiritual renewal of believers. Corporate worship is designed to nourish and strengthen our inner piety and devotion to Christ. Yet, we must never forget that our ultimate goal must be not merely the renewal of external forms of worship but primarily the internal spiritual renewal of the believer.

Devotional Renewal. A first important step toward devotional renewal is a recovery of the vision of the transcendent holiness of God. When Isaiah saw the Lord "sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up" surrounded by angels covering their faces and saying "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts" (Is 6:1, 3), he immediately sensed his unworthiness, saying: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips" (Is 6:5). As a result Isaiah experienced first cleansing through a burning coal from the altar and then commissioning by God: "Go, and say to this people..." (Is 6:6-9).

This vision of the transcendent holiness of God is often missing today in private and public worship. The tendency today is toward too much familiarity with God, familiarity which sometimes borders on blasphemy. People sing, pray, talk and preach about God as if He were their room-mate. They bring God down to their level so that they do not need to fear Him anymore. This familiarity stems from a misconception of God as being only love, without wrath and punishment.

Judgment and Devotional Renewal. Perhaps John the Revelator was aware of this end-time lack of respect for God when he summons the end-time generation to a worship renewal by saying: "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water" (Rev 14:7). It is noteworthy that the end-time call to worship God as the Creator, is given in the context of the call to fear God as the Judge who is ready to execute His judgment upon the earth. The sequential order suggests that end-time worship renewal must stem from a reverential fear of God who is ready "to judge the living and the dead" (2 Tim 4:1).

“One will not strive to work out his salvation in fear and trembling,” rightly notes Donald G. Bloesch, “if there is no divine judgment in the future.”³ Seventh-day Adventists have long recognized and taught the importance of the judgment message in the end-time restoration of the true worship of God. We believe that the message of the final judgment gives seriousness to our daily devotion and living. It reminds us that our daily prayer, meditation, Bible reading, work, words, and actions in general count for eternity. When our records are examined in the final judgment, our daily devotional exercises and practical life, will reveal whether we lived self-centered lives ignoring God’s principles, or God-centered lives reflecting His moral principles in our attitudes and actions.

A Theology of Devotion. What we believe about God determines how we worship Him and vice versa, the way we worship God reveals what we believe about Him. We mentioned earlier that if we believe that God is a loving Being without wrath, close to us and always willing to accommodate us, our devotional exercises will be casual, occasional, superficial, empty and meaningless. On the other hand, if we believe that God is a stern judge without mercy, inaccessible to us, our devotional exercises will be ritualistic and directed to intercessors like the saints or Mary who supposedly can present our petitions and praises to God. Such a view is totally negated by the Scripture that teaches us that “there one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5).

To ensure that our devotional relationship with God is Biblically sound, we must worship God as both transcendent and immanent. God is transcendent in the sense that He is beyond our human existence, the absolute source of our being. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Is 55:8).

God is immanent in the sense that He is constantly present with His Spirit in this world and in human lives. As Paul said: “He is not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:27-28). The immanence of God is manifested through the numerous ways in which He makes Himself known to us: His creative power, His sustaining wisdom, and especially through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and heavenly ministry of His Son who is eternally present with us. Jesus Christ is the basis and the object of our worship. It is Christ who makes the worship of God possible for us by reconciling us to God through His atoning sacrifice (Rom 5:9-10).

The awareness that God is both transcendent and immanent calls us to worship Him with awe and reverence on the one hand and with love and joy on the other hand. A healthy devotional life requires that we maintain these two divine qualities in their proper balance.

The Enabling of the Holy Spirit. Our devotional life is made possible by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Every spiritual desire, gift, and exercise is influenced by the Holy Spirit. He inspires us to sing, to pray, to teach, to preach and to worship (Rom 8:26-27; 1 Cor 12:8-11; Acts 4:31; Eph 5:18-20).

“In worship,” writes Franklin M. Seger, “God is known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God the Father stresses the ultimacy and certainty of his existence as expressed in creation. Jesus Christ defines the character of God expressed in his redemptive love. The Holy Spirit affirms the intimacy of his life expressed in his never-failing availability.”³

Christ never intended that we should live the Christian life in our own strength. His parting promise was “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8). It is reassuring to know that the Holy Spirit helps us in our various weaknesses: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness” (Rom 8:26).

The Holy Spirit helps us in our intellectual weakness. There are Biblical truths difficult to grasp even for brilliant minds. A vital function of the Holy Spirit is to illuminate our minds so that we can conceptualize and internalize the truths revealed in the Word of God. Jesus said: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). It is amazing how believers with a limited formal education sometimes grasp profound spiritual truths better than highly trained theologians. Such people are endowed with a sixth spiritual sense, namely, the guidance of the Holy Spirit which sometimes can elude some competent scholars.

The Holy Spirit helps us in our moral weakness. At one time or another we all become discouraged by our failure to live up to the principles God has revealed us. Perhaps the problem is that we have made the mistake of relying on our own strength, thus failing to seek the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. We do not achieve Christian virtues on our own, but we receive them as the fruit of the Holy Spirit working in us. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5:22). We do not have to live the Christian life on our own strength. Once we commit ourselves to Christ His Spirit helps us in our weakness.

Devotional Weakness. The Holy Spirit helps us in our devotional weakness. Most Christian will admit that it is most difficult to maintain alive a consistent prayer life. Sometimes the problem is physical weariness that overcomes us as it did overcome the disciples in Gethsemane. "Could you not watch with me one hour?" (Matt 26:40), Jesus asked sorrowfully. Then He noted: "The Spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt 26:41).

Other times the problem is our inability to articulate the inner longing of our hearts. There are also times when we pray for what we do not need while neglecting to pray for our real needs. "We do not know how to pray as we ought," but the Scripture reassures us that "the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26). It is comforting to know that when we go down on our knees, we have a Helper besides us who understand the longing of our hearts and conveys to God not only the content of our petitions, but also the unuttered substance of our needs.

2. THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF PRAYER

The Crisis of Prayer. Prayer holds the distinction of being the most talked about and yet the most neglected devotional exercise of our Christian life. In theory the importance of prayer is recognized by every Christian but in practice few Christians pray regularly. The crisis of prayer in contemporary Christianity is a recognized fact. Jacques Ellul observes that there is a "drying up of private prayer. People read their Bible less, meditate less, and pray individually less and less."⁵

Commenting on the prayer life of theological students in America, Walter Wagoner says: "Students suffer from the general syndrome of Protestant churches: they've become artful dodgers of a disciplined prayer life. They use social action, spiritual guruism--in the form of psychological counseling--and a scrupulous academic approach to the study of religion as a substitute to evade the problem of a totally religious prayer."⁶

The crisis of prayer is not just a phenomenon of American Christianity. On the European scene the crisis of prayer is even worse. The triumph of a secularistic mentality that celebrates the emancipation from the religious traditions of the past, has caused a sharp drop in church attendance and in the practice of prayer in both nominally Catholic and Protestant countries.

In my own country of Italy, the center of Catholicism, church attendance is estimated at 3% of the population. Someone jokingly said that 97% of the Italians go to church only three times in their lives: when they are hatched, matched and dispatched. In discussing the impact of secularism in Europe, Ronald G. Smith says: "It is probably not an exaggeration to say that the vast mass of even conscientious church members have entirely relinquished the habit of private prayer in any conventional form."⁷

There are many contributory causes to the crisis of prayer. At the root of them all is Satan's attempt to keep Christians away from prayer, because as the often-quoted saying goes,

Satan trembles when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees.

Secular humanism has contributed to the crisis of prayer by teaching people to trust in their own human resources rather than in divine power. The discipline needed to maintain a regular prayer life discourages those who find it difficult to observe such discipline. There is also the problem of unanswered prayers which leads some to give up praying altogether.

Misunderstandings of Prayer. To compound the problem there is also disagreement among those who pray on what prayer really is. Some view prayer as a form of self-therapy, as a technique to attain self-fulfillment. For them the answer to prayer does not come from God but is to be found in the act itself.

In some charismatic circles prayer is seen as a technique to twist the arm of God to obtain what we want. Prayer-healing programs, which are popular even on TV, reduce prayer to magic performed by a skilled prayer leader. Other charismatics believe that prayer should be primarily praise rather than petition. Kenneth Hagin argues that Christians should "exchange petition for praise."⁸ In existentialism, prayer is not communication with God but a mechanism to come to a new self-understanding.⁹

The mystics view prayer as a technique that facilitate union with or absorption in the Divine Being.¹⁰ Secular theologians define prayer in terms of ethical engagement rather than petition or intercession. They see prayer as a reflection on the needs of the world for the purpose of a deeper involvement.¹¹ These and other misconceptions of prayer should alert us to the fact that where the Holy Spirit is at work, evil spirits are also hard at work.

Biblical View of Prayer. In the Scripture prayer is not a technique for self-improvement or for reaching mystical union with the Eternal, but rather a channel of communication with God. Ellen White offers my favorite definition of prayer: "Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend. Not that it is necessary in order to make known to God what we are, but in order to enable us to receive Him. Prayer does not bring God down to us, but brings us up to Him."¹²

Prayer, then, is not a recitation of liturgical formulas to please the Almighty, but an enjoyable and intelligent conversation with God as with a loved and respected friend. Our speech with others is conditioned by what we think of them. We would not talk with the president of the United States in the same way we talk to the young lad who has damaged our mailbox. So the way we commune with God through prayer is largely depended upon our understanding of the nature of God.

Communion with God through prayer is possible because God has revealed Himself to us through Jesus Christ and dwells within our hearts through the Holy Spirit. To appreciate the nature of Christian prayer it is necessary for us to understand the nature of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The God of the Bible is not a philosophical principle or a magnetic force that moves the world, but a supremely personal being who coexist as a Trinity. This means that God does not exist in eternal aloofness but in a triune fellowship. Such a God can be approached in prayer not only because He lives in triune fellowship, but also because He seeks to include His rational creatures in fellowship with Himself.

The Nature of God. The caring and loving nature of God is conveyed to us through the Biblical picture of God as “heavenly Father. This means, as Donald G. Bloesch points out, that “We do not ask as beggars but as sons and daughters, since he is the Father of all by creation and the Father of Christians in particular by adoption.”¹³

What makes it possible for us to open our heart to God as to a respected friend is the fact that He is omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent and above all, love. God is omnipresent in the sense that He is ever present not only above us but also within us (Eph 4:6). This means that we do not have to go very far to have a conversation with God through prayer because he is close to us through His Spirit.

God is also omniscient in the sense that He knows all, including our personal needs before we bring them to Him (Matt 6:8; Prov 15:3). “Even before a word is on my tongue,” acknowledges the Psalmist, “lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether” (Ps 139:4). This means that we present our needs in prayer to God, not to inform Him, but to make us capable of receiving what He sees fit to give us.

God is also omnipotent in the sense that He is all-powerful and capable to accomplish whatever he wishes. He can and does answer our prayers made in the name of Jesus. His answers are according to His will and not necessarily according to our desires.

Above all, God is love. Being love, God is merciful and caring. He has accepted us in the person of His Son while we were yet sinners (Rom 5:8). Because God is love we need not be reluctant to reveal to Him in prayer our innermost desires, needs and problems. In sharing our problems with God we receive power to bear them and to overcome them.

The Vital Role of Christ. Christian prayer is possible because of the decisive role of Jesus Christ. Through His substitutionary death on the Cross and His resurrection from the grave, He has paid the penalty of our sins and gives us power to break the grip of sin in our lives. Because Christ is our Substitute who has reconciled us to God through the sacrifice of Himself (Heb 9:26) and because He is our representative who intercede in heaven for us (Heb 7:25), we can boldly approach the throne of grace (Heb 4:16) in Christ’s name. Jesus said: “Whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you” (John 15:16; cf. John 16:26-27).

Christ makes our prayer life possible not only because He is our intercessor in heaven, but also because he dwells within us through the Holy Spirit. Paul reminds the Corinthians, “Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?” (2 Cor 13:5; cf. 1 Cor 6:19). It is this reassurance that Christ by His Spirit abides within us, that gives us confidence to approach Him in prayer.

Finally, Christ offers us a model of prayer life. We read in Hebrews that “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear” (Heb 5:7). Jesus gave us not only a model prayer, but also, as we shall see below, a perfect example of a consistent prayer life.

The Role of the Holy Spirit. Prayer is grounded not only in the Father and the Son, but also in the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that unites us with Christ and makes communion with Him possible. The Holy Spirit moves us to pray, teaches us how to pray and interprets our prayers (Rom 8:26-27). When the Holy Spirit enters our life, our prayers are energized. Before Pentecost the disciples prayed timidly, but after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit they testified and prayed with power and boldness (Acts 4:23-31).

The Holy Spirit enlightens our minds, convicts our consciences, and moves our hearts to offer to God our praises and adoration (1 Cor 2:10-13; John 16:8). The fact that the Holy Spirit abides in our hearts can tempt us to take Him for granted. It is important to remember that we can grieve and quench the Spirit (Eph 4:30; 1 Thess 5:19), thus causing Him to withdraw from us. Karl Barth aptly warns us that “Unless the Holy Spirit is sighed for, cried for, prayed for, don’t assume that He’s present in our organization, in our theology, even in our ordinances.”¹⁴ We need to pray daily for the enabling power of the Spirit so that His gifts may be manifested in our lives and our prayers might be meaningful and effective.

3. THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER

Our concern so far has been to understand the Biblical view of prayer as communication with God through the intercession of Jesus and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within us. We have seen how each Being of the Godhead plays a vital role in our prayer life. We need now to move from the theology to the actual practice of prayer. There is a tendency to give much general exhortation to pray but little practical instruction on how to pray. The last part of this chapter will be devoted to the actual practice of prayer.

Reasons for Praying. Why should we pray when God knows all our needs without our telling Him? The question assumes that the reason for praying is to inform God about our needs so that He can speedily intervene. Such a view reduces prayer to selfish interests and ignores the real reasons for praying.

We pray not to get something out of God but because we are God’s friends. We take time to associate and talk with our friends, not because they are useful to us, but because we appreciate who they are, we enjoy their company and find fulfillment in the fellowship of giving and receiving. The true benefit of friendship is the friend himself. The same apply to our relationship with God.

Jesus said: “You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.” (John 15:15).

“You are my friends.” Can anything be more wonderful than to have Christ as our friend? How reassuring to know that Christ is our friend whom we can trust, with whom we can speak freely, and to whom we can confide the secret longings, ambitions, and troubles of our hearts! How reassuring to know that He loves us in spite of our weaknesses; that He will stand by us even when the world turns against us; that He will never leave us nor forsake us. Such reassurances give us reasons to maintain and deepen our fellowship with Christ through prayer.

The Psalmist expresses his heartfelt appreciation for the friendship of God, saying: “Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is nothing upon the earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever” (Ps 73:25-26). When we, like the Psalmist, catch a glimpse God’s fathomless love for us, we cannot help but pray to Him because we sense the need of His love, fellowship, care and guidance.

In his book *Prayer*, M. L. Andreasen succinctly summarizes the major reasons why we pray. He writes: “We pray because we love Him who first loved us, and because we find in Him a satisfaction of the soul not obtainable elsewhere. We pray not to get what we want, but to find out what He wants. We pray not to get Him to change His mind, but to have our minds changed. We pray not to have Him change His plans for us, but to ask Him to help us willingly to accept His plans. We pray not primarily to avoid pain, but for strength to bear it. We pray not to be taken out of this world, but to be kept faithful while in it. We pray not to escape hardship or trials, but for patience to endure them. We pray not to escape work, but for wisdom to know how to do it and do it well.

We pray first and last, because we love Him who has loved us, because we treasure His fellowship and that of the saints.”¹⁵

Meditation and prayer can bring sanity and balance to our tension-filled and restless lives. Because we spend so much time rushing, we need a time to be still. Because we are bombarded with a constant cacophony of noise, we need a time to be silent. Because we are constantly exposed to a changing barrage of images from the media, we need a time to behold the beauty of God’s revealed truth. Because we live in a materialistic world where goods and gadgets dominate our lives, we need a time to withdraw from the world of things to experience the peace of God for which we were created. Today more than ever before we need meditation and prayer to bring equilibrium to our lives.

Prayer as Giving and Receiving. Prayer as communion with God is a fellowship of giving and receiving. The giving aspect of prayer is expressed especially through the offering of our praises, thanksgiving and ourselves. We offer to God our praises by acknowledging His great majesty and glory. We offer to God our thanksgiving by gratefully acknowledging His gifts of life, providence and salvation. We offer to God ourselves by presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to Him (Rom 12:1). We accomplish the latter not by placing our bodies on an altar to be sacrificed, but by offering to God, as Paul puts it, our “spiritual worship.” The Greek term for “spiritual” is *logiken*, which literally means logical, rational, intelligent. The implication is that our worship and prayers must engage our minds, they must be a response of our total being to God.

The receiving aspects of prayer is experienced when we open the door of our heart to receive the Lord Himself, not merely His gifts. Our first concern in prayer should be to make ourselves receptive to Christ Himself, to experience the awareness of His presence, peace and guidance in our lives. As we receive Christ we can gladly and rightly receive His gifts.

His gifts are designed to meet both our spiritual and material needs. Spiritually, through prayer Christ gives us guidance and strength. He guides us in understanding what we are and what God expects us to be. He strengthens us through His Holy Spirit so that we become what God wants us to be. Materially, through prayer Christ supplies us our daily needs. By making us what we ought to be and by providing for our needs, Christ through prayer becomes our all-sufficiency.

What we give to God in prayer we are also receiving, for as we offer to God our praises and ourselves, we make ourselves receptive to Him so that we can receive Him and His gifts. Thus prayer is a fellowship of giving and receiving.

Learning to Pray. The fact that there is an inborn, spontaneous tendency to pray does not negate the need to learn it and improve it. It is natural for human beings to walk, and yet we learn to walk with practice and the help of others. It is natural for human beings to speak, and yet we all have to learn how to speak clearly and coherently.

Unlike walking where most people achieve the same level of proficiency, the mastery of speech differs greatly from one individual to another. Some people have difficulty to put two words together while others learn to articulate the most abstract thoughts with clarity and precision. Communication skills are mostly learned. They are learned by reading, listening, writing and practice.

The same is true of prayer. Though it is a natural tendency for most human beings to pray, unless we take the trouble to learn how to pray, our prayers will remain elementary and immature. Sometimes we meet people who have never grown in their prayer life. They may be have earned academic degrees but they still pray the simple prayers they learned on their mothers’ knees. The challenge to give up “childish ways” as we grow mature (1 Cor 13:11) applies to prayer.

Learning by Doing. Some skills are acquired almost exclusively by practice: riding a bicycle, driving a car, swimming, typing. This is especially true of the art of prayer. We can learn the theoretical principles of prayer from the Scriptures and devotional books, but we become skilled in the art of communicating with God through prayer by taking time to pray consistently in our daily life.

We can learn how to pray by praying not only by ourselves but also with others. Most of us have first learned to pray with our parents. Later we have learned to pray with our fellow-believers in the church. Listening attentively to heartfelt and well-structured prayers of fellow-believers who through the years have learned to communicate with God in prayer, can teach us much about how we can improve our prayers.

We can learn how to pray especially from Jesus who gave us not only a model prayer, the Lord's Prayer, but also an example of consistent prayer life. We can learn to pray by being alert and responsive to the influence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. As Christ taught His disciples how to pray by giving them a model prayer, so the Holy Spirit teaches us to pray by giving us both the desire and the content of our prayers (Rom 8:26).

The Time for Prayer. The Bible frequently admonishes us to "pray constantly" (1 Thess 5:17), to "be constant in prayer" (Rom 12:12; cf. Eph 6:18). Jesus Himself emphasized the need for continuing prayer. "Be on the alert," He warned, "praying at all times for strength" (Luke 21:36, N.E.B.). Does this mean that God expects us to pray 24 hours a day? Obviously not. Our life becomes a continuous life of prayer when we set aside some special times for prayer. Here we discover a very important Biblical principle: By consecrating a portion of our time or of our money to God, we express and experience the consecration of the totality of our time and resources. The precious moments we spend each day in communion with God through meditation and prayer, make it possible for us to consecrate the whole day to God.

This is why the principle and practice of Sabbathkeeping is so important for our Christian life. When we consecrate our Sabbath time to God by giving Him priority in our thinking and living during the 24 hours of the seventh-day, we show in a concrete way that God really counts in our lives every day of the week.

Jesus offers us a perfect example of a life of total prayer and praise. He realized this objective by developing definite prayer habits. Though the Gospels give us only snap-shots of Jesus' life, they do contain suggestive indications of His prayer life. Mark seems to be describing a typical day in the life of Jesus when he says: "And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed" (Mark 1:35).

In describing Christ's prayer life, Ellen White says: "His hours of greatest happiness were found when He could turn aside from the scenes of His labors . . . to hold communion with God. . . . The early morning often found Him in some secluded place, meditating, searching the Scriptures, or in prayer."¹⁶

Jesus not only began but also closed His day with prayer. After miraculously feeding five thousand people, Jesus withdrew for prayer in the evening: "And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone" (Matt 14:23). We know that Jesus frequently withdrew into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray because on the night of His betrayal Judas knew the spot where to find Him "for Jesus often met there with his disciples" (John 18:2).

Jesus was faithful not only in His private daily prayer but also in His public Sabbath worship. "He went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day" (Luke 4:16). If the Son of God needed definite times for prayer to meet the challenges of His ministry, how much more we need it today to live a victorious Christian life.

Making Time for Prayer. The rapid pace of modern life can easily squeeze prayer out of our daily lives. There never seem to be enough hours during the day to do all our work. In our frantic rush it is easy to become like Martha “anxious and troubled about many things” (Luke 10:41), so that we have no time left to sit at the feet of Jesus and fellowship with Him.

To avoid the risk of crowding out prayer from our lives, it is important to set aside definite times each day for communing with the Lord. At the risk of his own life, Daniel “got down upon his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously” (Dan 6:10). Daniel’s habit of praying three times a day should serve to us as an example, and not as a rigid rule.

The Bible does not spell out how many times a day we should pray and how long should be our prayers. God in His wisdom recognizes that the needs and circumstances of each person are unique. Thus He invites us to commune with Him through prayer, leaving each one of us to set up our own prayer schedule. It seems most fitting, however, to follow the example of Jesus in beginning and ending each day in communion with God. This places the activities of each day within the framework of prayer.

Morning Prayer. The only way to ensure an adequate time for prayer in the morning is by rising in time. For the past 15 years I have taught a Bible class at 7:30 a. m. It is not uncommon to see students rushing into class late with their hair uncombed and their shirts still unbuttoned. When I ask: “What happened?” The usual answer is: “The alarm didn’t go. I just woke up ten minutes ago.” It is evident that in the rush of making it to class in ten minutes there is no time for prayer. A good alarm clock is a good investment for our devotional life.

The length of the morning devotion differs from person to person. Some spend an hour reading, meditating and praying. Others are satisfied with half an hour or even ten minutes. Whatever the length of time of our devotion, it should be quality time when we worship God, not being half asleep, but fully alert, able to engage our mind, heart and soul. For most people the ideal time for their morning devotion is after dressing, just before breakfast. Mothers may find that the best time for their morning devotion is after their husband have gone to work and their children to school. Some are able to meditate and pray while commuting to work. Such setting is not ideal because of the constant distractions, yet God can give us the capacity to communicate with Him even in difficult places.

Our morning devotion is vital to our daily Christian life because it enables us to renew our commitment to God. “Consecrate yourself to God in the morning; make this your very first work. Let your prayer be, ‘Take me, O Lord, as wholly Thine. I lay all my plans at Thy feet. Use me today in Thy service. Abide with me, and let all my work be wrought in Thee.’ This is a daily matter. Each morning consecrate yourself to God for the day. Surrender all your plans to Him, to be carried out or given up as His providence shall indicate. Thus day by day you may be giving your life in the hands of God.”¹⁷

Evening Prayer. In the daily service of the sanctuary a morning and evening burn offerings was placed on the altar. They represented not only the daily divine provision of forgiveness but also the daily consecration of the people to God (Lev 6:8-13). The evening oblation became known as “the hour of prayer” (Acts 3:1) because it was accompanied by the prayers of the people everywhere.

As the ancient Israelites at the end of each day prayed toward the sanctuary where the priests ministered on their behalf, so we Christians today need to pause every evening to pray toward the heavenly sanctuary where Christ ministers on our behalf (Heb 7:25).

Our evening prayer is especially meaningful, because it gives us the opportunity to close the day thinking of God and expressing to Him our gratitude for the blessings received during the day that has gone by. As our last thoughts of God sink down into our mind, they remain in our subconsciousness through the night while we sleep.

The Place of Prayer. It is possible to pray just about anywhere--in a plane, in a car, in a classroom, on a hospital bed, in a prison cell, under a tree, along the beach. But, usually we do not choose these places for our daily private devotion. Jesus did not think that all places were equally suitable for private prayer. He rebuked those who chose public places like street corners to pray so that they could exhibit their piety (Matt 6:5).

Then Jesus said: "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matt 6:6). The picturesque detail about going into the room and shutting the door, offers us some clues about the proper place of prayer. It suggests that we need a quiet place where we can shut the world out and come into the personal presence of God.

For some it may not be possible to be alone in their room because they share their room with others. This may have been the case for Jesus Himself since He did not have a house of His own where he could retire. As an itinerant teacher he relied for lodging upon the gracious hospitality of people. This may explain why we read that early in the morning Jesus went out of the house into a solitary place to pray (Mark 1:35). In those situations where we cannot isolate ourselves, God gives us special grace to pray without being distracted by those around us.

It may be helpful to have a special prayer-corner in our home. This could be in the bedroom, family room or study. In our prayer-corner we could have a small table where we keep our Bible and devotional book. They can serve as a constant reminder of our daily appointment with God.

ENDNOTES

1. Donald G. Bloesch, *The Crisis of Piety. Essays Towards a Theology of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, 1968), p. 40.
2. David C. Myers, *The Human Puzzle*
3. Donald G. Bloesch (note 1), p. 42.
4. Franklin M. Segler, *Christian Worship. Its Theology and Practice* (Nashville, 1967), p. 65. The fact that the Holy Spirit is sometimes referred to in the New Testament as the Spirit of God (Rom 8:9, 14; 1 John 4:2) and the Spirit of Christ (Gal 4:6; Acts 16:7; Rom 8:9) may tempt us to view the Holy Spirit as an impersonal power or influence emanating from Jesus and the Father. But this is not so. In different ways the New Testament reveals that the Holy Spirit is a personal Being. For example, we read in 1 Corinthians 2:10-11 that "The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God." In this and similar passages (Rom 8:26-27) we learn that the Holy Spirit has a personality of His own, because He interacts with God, searches His mind and brings the person and the work of Christ close to the believers (John 14:15-23; 16:14).
5. Jacques Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man*, trans. C. Edward Hopkins (New York, 1970), p. 100
6. Walter Wagoner, "Can Modern Man Pray?" *Newsweek*, 72, no. 27 (1968), p. 38.
7. Ronald Gregor Smith, *Secular Christianity* (New York, 1966), p. 207.
8. Kenneth E. Hagin, *Praying to Get Results* (Tulsa:1974), p. 9.
9. See for example, Gregory Baum, *Man Becoming: God is Secular Experience* (New York:1970), p. 264. For Baum prayer is a means to be in touch with oneself. Matthew Fox, *On Becoming a Musical, Mystical Bear* (New York: 1972), pp. 49 ff. Fox views prayer as a response not to God but to the mysteries of life. Michael Novak, *All the Catholic People* (New York: 1971), pp.106 ff. Novak understands prayer as an intensified form of self knowledge.
10. See, for example, Friedrich Heiler, *Prayer*, trans. and ed. Samuel McComb (New York: 1958), p. 102.
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12. Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, (Boise, Idaho:1990), p. 93
13. Donald G. Bloesch, *The Struggle of Prayer* (Colorado Springs: 1988), p. 27.
14. Cited in Donald G. Bloesch (note13), p. 39.
15. M. L. Andreasen, *Prayer* (Mountain View, California: 1957), pp. 17-18.
16. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, (Boise, Idaho:1993), p. 52.
17. Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, (Boise, Idaho:1990), p. 70.

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