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A table of contents for *The Fraternal / Baptist Ministers Journal* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bmj-06.php

CONTENTS

Praying and Believing	3
Howard H. Gordon, M.A., B.D., Minister, Zion, Cambridge	
R. Alastair Campbell, Minister, Broadmead, Northampton	
Personal Prayer	13
Timothy Marks, B.A., Minister, Woodbridge, Suffolk	
One Man's Retirement	19
The late Norman B. Jones	
Of Interest to You	25

Praying and Believing

From the tantalisingly few and brief examples in the Gospels of Jesus at prayer it is clear that Jesus enjoyed throughout his ministry a unique prayer life, whose quality readily impressed itself on his closest followers, the twelve disciples. We find Jesus, under constant pressure from the crowds during the daytime, having to make time to pray early in the morning and late at night (Mark 1:35; Matthew 14:23). His life of obedience to the will of God did not make prayer superfluous for him; rather his obedience was the result of his praying. Luke notes particularly that Jesus prayed at times of special importance, decision, and crisis in his life: at his baptism (Luke 3:21), before choosing his twelve disciples (Luke 6:12f), and on the mountain of transfiguration (Luke 9:29), as well as in the Garden of Gethsemane, as recorded also by Mark and Matthew (Luke 22:39ff, Mark 14:32ff, Matthew 26:36ff). Donald Coggan comments on the prayer life of Jesus: "He could not carry on a ministry of constant self-giving without such renewal.....With that behind him, he could face anything.....In the presence of God he held himself still, and so had reserves of power which enabled him to stretch out a firm hand to those who were finding life too much for them.....There would seem to have been a kind of rhythm about the life of Jesus - withdrawal and work; withdrawal and work.....He who knows God in the intimacy gained from daily intercourse will not lack guidance when, in an emergency or faced by a weighty decision, he turns to him for special direction" (*The Prayers of the New Testament*, pp. 15-17).

John's Gospel draws out the basic concern of Jesus's prayers. At the tomb of Lazarus he prays, not simply for the resurrection of his buried friend, but that the miracle may promote faith in God as the source of Jesus' work (John 11:41f). In anticipation of his suffering and death, he asks for courage to do the will of God and to promote the glory of God (John 12:27f). In his great High Priestly prayer his desire is for God to be glorified in him and in his work (John 17:1-5).

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he answered by giving them the Lord's Prayer. It is marked by a profound simplicity, such as one would expect from a great teacher initiating his pupils into a rich and rewarding discipline. Its contents are respect for God's name and obedience to God's will; dependence on God for daily food; God's pardon of sins, and his help in temptation. It is a prayer about being in tune with God and with his purposes for the world. It is also a commitment to any action which may be required to fulfil those purposes.

The clear lesson of both the teaching and the practice of Jesus is that to pray believingly is to pray that the will of God and the glory of God will be revealed in the granting of our prayers. If we could only start here, where Jesus starts, we should immediately have reached the heart of prayer, for underlying such prayer is the conviction that if we seek to live in harmony with God, our own lives and the life of the world around will begin to be transformed - God's kingdom will come. Indeed, Jesus gives an excellent illustration of this, appended to Matthew's account of the Lord's Prayer, when he says that if we realise our need of God's forgiveness and seek it for ourselves, we must at the same time offer forgiveness to those who have offended us. The two inevitably go together (Matthew 6:14f).

It is instructive also to note the content of Paul's prayers for the believers to whom he writes. He prays that God will grant the Roman Christians such harmony, that God will be glorified by it (Romans 15:5f). He tells the Ephesians that his unceasing prayer for them is that they may understand the resources of God that are available to them through their faith (Ephesians 1:15-23). For the Philippians he requests love, knowledge, purity, and fruitful godliness which will bring glory and praise God (Philippians 1:9-11), and for the Thessalonians wholeness of spirit, soul, and body through the action of God within them (1 Thessalonians 5:23). As in the prayers of Jesus, so in Paul's prayers, we discern the recurring theme of conformity with the will of God and its transforming influence on life.

At some stage, however, we discover the need to advance from prayer which centres on the discernment of and conformity with the will of God in matters of regular living and enter that stage of prayer which seeks to find the will of God in matters which to human minds appear extra-ordinary, miraculous, and even impossible. Jesus leaves us in no doubt that the exercise of a small but growing faith can achieve results of 'mountainous' proportions (Matthew 17:20). In the parallel passage in Mark (9:14-29) we learn that Jesus is thinking of the exercise of this kind of faith in prayer. As R.V.G. Tasker expresses it, commenting on the same point in relation to the cursing of the fig tree (*Tyndale Commentary* on Matthew 21:18-22), "The praying disciple, gifted with the supernatural power of faith, can achieve with apparent suddenness results which apart from faith and prayer would be wholly beyond his reach". Or in the words of A.M. Hunter (*Torch Commentary* on Mark 11:24), "It teaches the boundless possibilities of believing prayer". Prayer has a transforming effect.

In contemporary writing on Christian prayer we find this New Testament witness being interpreted in two very different ways. There are first the defenders of the orthodox view of prayer which has a long and honourable tradition among evangelicals. Their creed may be summarised in the phrase: *prayer changes things*. It is the view of prayer most commonly believed and more commonly disbelieved, in our churches and outside them. It takes with great seriousness the words of Jesus concerning prayer: 'If you ask anything in my name, I will do it' (John 14:14).

The other view needs a more extended exposition. At heart it sees prayer as *self-offering*. Prayer changes the one who prays as he offers himself to seek, to love and to do the will of God. This is a view which has received eloquent treatment by Neville Ward in his book *The Use of Praying*.

'Religion', says Ward, 'is the attempt to live life according to the facts, according to the way things are'. (p51).

Any kind of praying which aims to change the way things are is magic, not religion.

'If the Christian wants things altered the appropriate course would not seem to be prayer, but some action to modify the situation he wants altered'. (p52).

But where that is not possible the right course is not prayer, for that is only the cry of a frightened child, but rather the bringing of our desires and fears to God so that they may be recorded. In the world as we know it God does

not intervene either with the regular course of nature or with human freedom, so:

'There is no reason to think that God will do on his own what he purposes to do with man. If man will not end war, then though we pray for ever God will not end it for man'. (p85).

When someone is sick and we pray:

'We are expressing the natural desires of human love within the context of our faith in God. Faith means that we are prepared for things to go either way, better or worse as we understand these terms, and that in either case we wish this person will continue to serve God, and that we ourselves shall too, and that we believe that all of us, whether we live or die, are the Lord's'. (p87).

As we bring those natural desires of human love we shall not be surprised to find them changed by being offered to God.

'We begin praying by thinking this is what I hope for in this situation and I trust God not to let me down, and we end by thinking "This is how the situation looks in the light of God's purpose, this is what I must now do to serve God in it, and this is what I really want"'. (p92).

All this might be called the Gethsemane tradition in prayer, and simply to call it that is to recognise that there is much truth in it. But the life of Jesus is by no means the only root of this approach. The other is a conception of God that still relies heavily on the methods and findings of nineteenth century science. This science, at least as understood by the non-scientist, offers an invariable world of cause and effect from which miracle is excluded, in which prayer becomes meditation. The fact that many scientists today would say the world is a very much more mysterious and unpredictable place than appeared likely at the turn of the century has not yet really penetrated the thinking of many people, Christian or otherwise. Meanwhile some theologians have found a virtue in necessity. A regular world is necessary to moral growth. Miracles, intervention by God, smack of the 'deus ex machina', and the desire for them is the mark of man not yet come of age.

But this is in no way a modern view. From its very beginning the Christian revelation of God has lived in uneasy tension with what Pascal called 'the God of the philosophers', unmoved, unchanging, unsuffering. All the moral and factual objections to the idea of a God who answers prayer have been heard in the debate of Christian theologians from the beginning. Gradually during the first thousand years of the Christian era the living God of Abraham and of Jesus lost ground to the God of Greek Philosophy, a process which reached its definitive climax in Aquinas. Aquinas' understanding of God was based more on Aristotle than on scripture, but it was never seriously questioned by the reformers, and so became the unexamined assumption of both catholic and protestant thought in the West. Today however, with scientists less certain of a mechanistic universe, and with theologians like Moltmann saying that it is only the God of Greek philosophy who is dead, while the God who suffers is alive, the way would seem to be open for a more whole-hearted acceptance of intercessory and petitionary prayer.

continued on page 7

WEST HAM CENTRAL MISSION

409, Barking Road, Plaistow, London, E13 8AL

My dear Fellow Minister,

Doesn't time pass quickly when you're enjoying yourself? It seems almost impossible that more than a year has gone by since I became Superintendent at West Ham. I can honestly say that for the most part I have greatly enjoyed this new experience. There have, of course, been headaches and problems of one kind or another, but that is inevitable in such a complex enterprise as the Mission has now become. Far more important than the difficulties, however, has been a deep sense of satisfaction in being involved with such a fine team of workers on such a worthwhile task. Another source of tremendous happiness has been the assurance of the loving, prayerful support of literally thousands of fellow Christians throughout this country and beyond.

1980 will be an exciting and challenging year. Exciting because we hope to see great progress in the redevelopment of our Barking Road Site; challenging because of the inevitable disruption that this involves. We should very much value your prayers for the staff, who will have to work under considerable difficulties until our new offices are opened during 1981. In parallel with the construction of our new buildings will run the task of detailed planning in terms of policy and organisation, and that of recruiting staff. The demands made upon those who care for the terminally ill are very great, and only those of the highest calibre, professionally and spiritually, will be able to cope. Please pray that in this matter also, we might discern the will of God.

Finally, brethren, let me share with you my anxiety about the effect of the "public spending cuts" upon the willingness of Local Authorities to refer to us and to other similar voluntary organisations those whom we exist to help. I am writing this letter in November, 1979. The position is so serious that the continued operation of Orchard House is very much in question at the moment. It could well be that by the time you read this letter, the die will have been cast. We feel that we have an important ministry to offer, and I very much hope that we shall be able to continue to do so.

May the Lord bless you in all your work for Him.

Yours sincerely,

Trevor W. Davis.
Superintendent Minister.

It is time to turn from the God of Greek philosophy to the God of Jesus. We shall look in vain in the gospels for any systematic teaching on prayer or answers to the questions we most often ask. He was a man of action, and his actions are the proper starting point of Christian theology. Among other things he was a healer, and it is through a proper appreciation of the healing ministry of Jesus that the Gethsemane view of prayer will find its correction, and the prayer-changes-things view its justification.

The early church was in no doubt of the central importance of healing in the mission of Jesus. "He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil," says Peter (Acts 10.38) in summarising the life of Christ. By contrast, modern Christians, liberal or conservative have failed to take him seriously. Conservatives, while defending the historicity of his healing ministry, have defended it primarily as a series of miracles of evidential value, while liberals have mistrusted it on the ground of the apparent lack of agreement with the world order we know. But healing was central to the mission of Jesus. Healing stories amount to one fifth of the gospel material. His healing acts were not limited to the few detailed stories we have: there are nineteen references to mass healings, and these together with the unshakeable tradition that great crowds followed him, add up to a picture of high historical probability. Every type of disease, physical and mental, seems to have come within his ministry. It is impossible to prove the historicity of any particular type of healing story, or even of the whole healing tradition. But it is difficult to excise it altogether or treat it as a sideshow in the ministry of Jesus.

If we accept that Jesus healed in the way described, important conclusions follow for our thinking about prayer. The first is that God does act in human lives, and in His world, in response to prayer. Jesus used no medicines. He used no psychotherapeutic techniques. Instead he awakened faith and brought to men and women the power of God. It is true that there is very little record of his having prayed with the sick either, but in the story of the healing of the epileptic boy he said, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer", showing that he himself prayed in such cases and was encouraging his disciples to do so. He also told his disciples to pray for the coming of the Kingdom and considered the Kingdom evidenced in healing power. It is impossible to believe that he did not pray with those he healed, although it is possible that his lonely prayer undergirded his public healing. However, there is no trace of lengthy emotional prayer such as might have been a form of suggestion. A curt word of command is often the only prayer recorded. His whole method pointed men beyond himself to a God who heals and therefore who answers prayer and changes things.

The second is that God wills the wholeness of men, including their bodily health, and that prayer according to His will will be greatly taken up with this. If we take Jesus as our teacher there is no doubt that sickness is ordinarily contrary to God's will and excites His pity and anger (Mark 1.41). Healing is evidence of the Kingdom's breaking in (Matt. 11.5). It, no less than his words, is the proclamation of the Kingdom. An examination of Mark 1.21-28 shows that the authority with which he taught lay, not so much in his power to convince, but in his power to change men's lives and to heal them.

On the other hand there is no instance of Jesus saying to anyone that sickness serves a higher purpose of God in man. It is not possible to discuss properly Paul's enigmatic passage about the 'thorn in the flesh' (2 Cor. 12.7f). Suffice it to say that we cannot be quite sure that Paul was talking about illness at all, but if he was his thrice repeated prayer shows that his initial response to sickness was to oppose it and pray it away, not to accept it as from God. He himself suffered and died, but when Jesus tells men to carry the cross he is talking about suffering endured for the sake of obedience, not about sickness. Such suffering can be redemptive, but even so Jesus never gloried in pain (as the Gethsemane story shows). All this means that when we pray for healing we are on sure ground. Nor do we have to be content with tales of far away and long ago. All we have said receives eloquent support from the revival of the healing ministry in the churches today. Where men and women have taken this view of Jesus' ministry as their starting point and prayed accordingly, healings have resulted in such large numbers that we do not doubt that this is a vital and central ministry of the church and part of its essential mission.

The reason for concentrating in this way on the ministry of Jesus and his church is that it shows more clearly than anything else that the belief that prayer changes things is basic to our faith in God as revealed by Jesus. But there is real gold also in the Gethsemane view. Prayer must change the one who prays, and a large part of prayer will consist in accepting rather than changing life. We find we are changed both by the fact that we pray and by the way in which we pray. God imparts new attitudes to those who pray to him and worship him. When we pray to the God of peace, we receive peace, and we remain at peace in situations of turmoil. When we pray to the God in whose presence there is fullness of joy, we find joy for ourselves, and we radiate joy in our relationships. When we pray to the God who renews the strength of those who wait upon him, we gain greater confidence within ourselves, and we become more dependable for those who need to lean on us. William Temple expresses it this way:

'Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by his holiness; it is the nourishment of mind with his truth; it is the purifying of imagination by his beauty; it is the opening of the heart to his love; it is the surrender of will to his purpose - and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable' (*Readings in St John's Gospel* p67).

But not only are we changed in ourselves; we are also changed in our awareness of and attitude to our immediate world. We were taught to pray with our eyes closed, yet many young children find it more helpful to keep their eyes open and to pray 'round the room', mentioning the table, chairs, toys and other things. It would be quite wrong to dismiss this as a delightful but childish approach to prayer, for this is where prayer about life really begins. We must learn to pray, metaphorically speaking, with our eyes open. As Michel Quoist says, 'If we knew how to look around us, our whole life would become prayer' (*Prayers of Life* p22).

The first step in relating prayer to life is to take stock before God of life as it really is, and to accept it as it is. This does not mean we are wrong to want to change it. It simply means we begin where we are. We are all tempted to

live in a fantasy world, and to imagine that if the circumstances of our life were different we should be much better people. That is the beginning of dishonesty, which is one of the great enemies of true prayer. Acceptance of life is not the same as acquiescence in the status quo, and to be without goal or purpose in life is a recipe for lethargy and stagnation. But as Christians we need to bear in mind that our goal and purpose is to discern and do the will of God. We must also remember that it is very easy for us to confuse our own ambitions with God's will, and this can quickly happen if we assume too readily that our present circumstances cannot possibly be God's will. So we must learn to pray with Reinhold Niebuhr:

'Lord, grant us the patience to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can change, and the wisdom to know the difference.'

In the words of P.R. Baelz:

'A sense of communion with God will lead a man to view the whole of life as originating from his creative will, and to accept it as from his hands. At the same time it will include a recognition of the fact that there is much in life that is contrary to God's will, and will give rise to active struggle against this evil' (*Prayer and Providence* ch 4).

Acceptance of life in this way also includes acceptance of ourselves: our virtues and our sins, our ambitions and our limitations. Some people find it difficult to discern their own good points; probably far more people lack awareness of their bad points. If we want to pray, 'Lord, let there be revival, and let it begin with me', we must first accept our weaknesses before we can begin to mobilise our strengths. For if we do not begin where we are, we shall never advance to where we might be. As Paul Tournier says: 'In the silence before God, we come gradually to a better knowledge of ourselves' (*The Strong and the Weak* p150).

Having prayed about ourselves, thereby acknowledging that our world includes our own lives in the world, how are we to pray about the world itself and all that is going on in it? Let us consider three cases: a personality clash in which we are involved; a person who is taking a vital examination who seeks our advice; a patient we are visiting in hospital suffering from terminal cancer. When we are at loggerheads with another person, it is very tempting to pray that he will change his ways. It may well be better to pray for a change in our own attitude. By praying in this way we may also affect a change in the other person's attitude as well. If someone asks us whether it is right to pray for success in an examination, especially if he is diffident about the likely outcome, it may be better for us to encourage him to pray for calmness of mind. In this way prayer that starts with himself may well achieve the desired success as well. In the case of serious illness, where we cannot believe that God wants us to pray for miraculous healing, we can at least pray that the illness will not result in bitterness either on the part of the sufferer or his relatives.

The question of how to pray for national and international situations concerns many praying people. What do we achieve by praying about the problems of Northern Ireland, Rhodesia and the Middle East, or about a major strike in our own country? How can we pray in any meaningful way without appearing to take sides and so in some sense adding our own

inadequate opinion or unholy ambition to the very problem we are trying to solve? When we have made every effort to obtain accurate information and a clear understanding of the issues, we can start by asking to be set free from prejudice, and then simply agonise on our knees about the horrors of human conflict. This kind of praying, born of a sense of utter inadequacy, may bring us very close to the kind of prayer which Paul describes in Romans 8:26, 'Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words'.

But the feeling that our prayers can or should *affect* the world persists. Merely to agonise on our knees, or voice our concern, is not enough, and if it merely makes us feel better it might be a deceptive self-indulgence. Nevertheless there are real problems for many thoughtful Christians today in believing that prayer is used by God to change things, and they deserve to be answered. There is the problem of the apparently fixed order of cause and effect in the universe. There is the problem of human freedom, and there is the problem that the unchanging, all-knowing love of God does not need our prayers. All of these make it much easier to settle for the view that prayer changes me and not the world for which I pray, but this is a reduction of the Christian faith.

The problem of whether God can intervene in the world without violating the world can be met by reference to the ordinary functioning of human wills. If our human wills can operate upon the matter in the world and change it without disrupting it, altering its arrangement without violating its laws, then there is no objection to God's will doing the same. At heart most of us work with a mental picture of the world from which God is an outsider, but if in fact, in the words of John Magee: 'God is the being in whom all else exists', and if, 'the ultimate character of all law is his will, and his life is the life of all', then, for God to act upon the matter of the world is no more interference than for me to subject matter to my will, not violating its laws but using them to achieve a higher good. Moreover most of us regard the physical world as dead and immutable, but in fact it is growing and changing, so that prayer may be thought of as operating at the 'growing edge' of the universe, enabling its growth according to the will of God. This helps to explain why some things can be granted in prayer and others not. We can pray for the healing of wounds and vanquishing of disease, but not, though we pray for ever, for the growth of another limb in place of one that has been amputated. Prayer so understood will co-operate with the will of God expressed in the way things happen. It will not wish that he had made another kind of world. When God answers prayer he will be doing more quickly and in response to faith what he is doing all the time in what we call the course of nature.

The problem of human will and human freedom may perhaps be met by asking how we conceive of human spirits anyway. Is each of us wholly separate and individual, inaccessible the one to the other? Or is it rather the case, as some suggest, that we are bound up together in the human race and far more closely linked at a deep subconscious level than we are usually aware? It is surely true that we and the person we pray for are actually

present to one another in God who is present to each, so that it makes sense to see prayer as the operation of love. If our life can influence for good those whom we ordinarily describe as present with us, and who can doubt that the love of a parent *is* often responsible for influencing the conduct and character of a child? - then prayer can be thought of as a special instance of the power of love to influence those who are in fact present with us when we are all in God. If this is so, then it helps to deal with the moral objection that prayer is interference. Perhaps it is, but only as love is interference, setting free and not dominating, willing good and not evil. When we pray for someone we are loving them into wholeness of being, from which it follows that one purpose of prayer will be the purifying of our desire for that other person, and we recollect that their truest good and wholeness of being are not confined to absence of pain and difficulty in this present world. Everything that has been said about prayer seeking God's will and reordering its desires would then be right, even though that is not the whole of prayer.

Finally, to the question whether God needs our prayers we may reply with words of St Augustine, who said: 'God does not ask us to tell him our needs in order that he may learn about them, but in order that we may be capable of receiving his gifts'. God has tied himself to acting in response to human faith. Unbelief hinders his work. Faith enables God to do something he could not have done without our asking. God, of course, is ceaselessly at work more quickly where human hearts and wills are open to him, willing the coming of his Kingdom in the hearts of men and women. The same idea was being expressed by the person who, on being asked, is everyone healed for whom you pray? 'No, of course not. But if I prayed for none of them, then none of them would be healed'.

In prayer, then, we are both asking and offering, both seeking to change and learning to accept. Both emphases have been shown to be present in the prayer life of Jesus, and nothing but impoverishment results from setting them against each other today. When we are fired with faith and enthusiasm, and are sure of what we want, it is easy to forget that God is God and his ways are not our ways. Our job then is to submit our wills to his in faith that his will is perfect love. Yet to restrict prayer to such offering and submission is not the mature faith it sometimes pretends to be, but faith mixed with doubt that God can and does 'answer prayer' in the straight forward sense that is the essence of child-like faith. Such faith is the joy of our Father's heart.

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H.H. Gordon and R.A. Campbell

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PERSONAL PRAYER

Prayer begins in listening.

Prayer is a response; it is man's reaction to a great discovery. It is the discovery that God is not only really there in His light and joy and bliss in the fabric of the material universe, but He is there for us, He has acted on our behalf; He has achieved something stupendous to which we contributed nothing. It is a response to an enormous gift which we find placed in our hands.

Prayer is a response to God's Word, to His self-communication. If that is the case, then the Bible must be our primary text book to help us to pray more effectively. We are not called to the hothouse cultivation of a spiritual life, the nurturing and polishing of our sanctity, but to rightly hear the Word of God and give God due answer in that prayer, which is part of our delighted obedience. We must begin by listening, by hearing that Word of God which is addressed to the deepest parts of our personality, the word of conviction and salvation, the word of law and free grace.

'Prayer escapes the danger of disorder and confusion only as it is enkindled by the words of scripture. From the Word proceeds its inner justification, as well as its life-giving power and the clearness of its petitions. A prayer life that does not stick to the scriptures will soon become poor in ideas, poor in faith, poor in love and will finally die'. Adolf Koberle in *Quest for Holiness*.

A clear mood of prayer emerges from the scriptures and it would be true to say that this is a mood rather than a pattern. There are as many patterns as there are people who pray. This mood is caught from the grandeur, the sovereignty, the joyful triumph of the God who is always enough for his people. Their prayer and worship are rooted, not in their own religious insights, but in the faithful covenant mercies of their God. He is the all-sufficient God who cares, who judges, who suffered and died for His people to bring them spiritual riches they find hard to conceive of or grasp. The prayers of God's people in the Bible are full of this energy, this triumph and hope. The Bible looks earnestly for that activity of God in this world which will show the nations that the 'Lord He is God and there is none beside Him'. This mood is seen clearly in the prophecies in the second part of Isaiah and in the prayers of the early church (Acts 4. 23-31). We must soak ourselves in this atmosphere - to put it theologically, our prayer life must have an eschatological rooting, placing the concerns of the moment in the wider, grander scheme of God's ultimate purposes which will triumph over all negativity and darkness.

If we wish to pray aright, we must carefully and intelligently read the scriptures. They should govern our approach and make clear our requests. They should fix our confidence and enlarge our hope.

Prayer and the Bible

My spiritual parents were right to teach me the value of habit. There is nothing that can take the place of regular systematic Bible reading,

commitment to be regularly involved in the spiritual life of others through prayer and new every morning seeking afresh the face of the Lord. The morning seems increasingly difficult for many people, but we must and can find at least half an hour a day to be with God on our own. There are vast resources of quietness within empty churches available every dinner hour to the busy commuter. We must find a time and stick to it and put it first.

If our prayer lives are going to be thoroughly informed by the scriptures, then the sort of Bible reading which involves a text appended by a blessed thought will not be enough. Good as they are in their way, anthologies of scriptures like Daily Light will not do either. The Christian who desires spiritual maturity is at some stage of his spiritual life going to have to learn to handle the Bible in a 'theological' way, that is, learning what the broad sweep of 'salvation history' tells us about this God and what He requires of us in the obedience of love. For this we need some scheme that will take us systematically through the Bible. Is it too much to expect people to read through the Bible once every three years? This is possible in McCheyne's system or in a more thoughtful way through *Search the Scriptures*. There is much helpful material on the bookstalls at the moment - the B.F.B.S. Bible reading and prayer plan might well be commended in this respect. However, the point to be stressed is that we cannot escape from doctrine, for a sturdy and enduring life of prayer will be built on nothing less. The whole atmosphere of prayer in the Bible is rooted in 'covenant theology' and based on 'the steadfast love of the Lord'.

The Bible should stimulate our imagination. Three writers have impressed me in the way their writings have opened the inner lives of the characters in the Bible. Jonathan Edwards in *The Religious Affections*, shows us people of God in the Bible made vivid by the emotions which leap out of the page. They are hoping in God, loving Jesus Christ, hating sin, longing and hungering after God and holiness, grieving over their sin and hardness, rejoicing in God's mercy and grandeur. There is David in the Psalms, full of delight and joy in God, filled with thankfulness for answers to prayers, full of zeal for God and against the enemies of the Lord. There is Paul almost overpowered by his sense of God's power and love, pouring out his love and concern for God's people. There is John, full of the love of Christ and the greatness of what has happened in Christ. There is our Lord, filled with the vigour and strength of love, agonising in the garden, walking in obedience, grieving and angry over sin and its effects on the heart of man and eager to accomplish His work of redemption. Alexander Whyte shows us how to pray by showing men praying in the scriptures "Lord, teach us to pray". There is Jacob wrestling with God, there is Moses making haste to worship while the divine glory passes by, there is Elijah passionately crying for God to act and Job groping the darkness of the theological confusion. John White takes ten prayers (People in Prayer, I.V.P.) in the Bible. People pleading, praising, confessing, interceding. People being changed as they grew closer to God.

This Bible is a book about real people struggling with a real God - it is vivid with characters and above all, with God. It will change us and our prayer life.

THE BAPTIST INSURANCE COMPANY LIMITED

4 Southampton Row, London, WC1B 4AB.

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To the Readers of the Fraternal.

Dear Friends,

"When the enterprising burglar's not a burgling".

W. S. Gilbert.

Gilbert created a new verb with the word burgling, but in choosing "burglary" as the subject for "B" I have selected a term which for Insurers is largely historic. Under the Larceny Acts of 1861 and 1916 until superseded by the Theft Act of 1968, the crime of burglary, as defined, could only be committed in a dwellinghouse at night, and many felons loosely described as burglars were not in fact "burgling" when they broke into other types of premises.

Since the re-definitions of the Theft Act 1968, Insurers have largely dropped the word burglary in favour of policies which cover "Theft". However, for risks other than private dwellings, theft *not* involving entry or exit by forcible violent means is often excluded. Usually we do not make this exclusion when covering theft of property from within the Church and ancillary buildings. Although the deacons can have the protection of this wide cover, I hope they exercise the vigilance demanded by present day conditions. For two main reasons our premises were once much less a target for theft. Firstly, there was a greater sense of wrong in misappropriating property which had been set aside for God's work. Secondly, our Churches and other buildings tended not to have a high element of valuable contents attractive to thieves. Now, almost every post tells us of the theft of an amplifier, a microphone, a loudspeaker or a projector.

This risk cannot be eliminated - hence the need for insurance, but sensible attention to security, door locks, window fastenings etc., can reduce the likelihood of theft and its attendant inconvenience. At least as important when premises are in use, is the care that should be taken to see that valuable equipment is not sitting ready for the taking in an unattended part of the building. Wherever possible such articles should be secured or locked away. The "Enterprising burglar" or rather "thief" is in fact either a despicable character watching his chance to prey on the unwary or a weak one who cannot resist temptation. It behoves us to be on our guard.

Yours sincerely,
M. E. PURVER

General Manager.

Prayer and Silence

I have never forgotten the wise words that were said to me as a young man seeking Christ. They were spoken by a contemplative monk. He said to me 'God has far more to say to us than we have to Him. You must learn to listen'. I am convinced beyond any doubt that we need a deeper spiritual life within our churches, a more definite abiding in the profundity of God's love. There is in the end only one way that will lead us to the deep things of God. We need not more knowledge, but experience. The challenge is - 'Do we know what we are talking about?'

Knowledge of God, knowledge of oneself, solitude and silence always go together. The place of silent prayer is not the whole of the Christian life. There must be a balance between work and fellowship and silence. But the silence is that to which we go back for refreshment - the waters of quietness where we know that He is God. I am not sure what Whittier exactly meant when he spoke of Jesus sharing with God 'the silence of eternity', but anyone who has shared in a Quaker meeting may get a glimpse of a fact we often forget. Silence is the first and abiding thing, noise and words and thoughts interrupt the abiding brooding stillness, but the ripples inevitably fade until silence reigns again. If God is immanent within His universe then that silence is not a negation but a fullness waiting to be discovered. There will be barriers we experience when we search for God in this way, boredom, negative discoveries about ourselves, memories we thought were past. Yet these areas may be precisely those that the Holy Spirit wishes to show to us that we may give them to Him. If God is about the redemption and substantial healing of the total personality then very much of that healing occurs in the subconscious mind - that shadowy larger self that we are rarely aware of.

An age which is desperately lonely needs to discover the positive nature of solitude. Loneliness is an experience of the void, a nothing aching to be filled. It is a sign. It shows us that we are made to be filled with Somebody, we are like vessels. The God who wishes to fill us keeps us from being satisfied with anything less than Himself. We can temporarily assuage the longing within by work, friends, marriage, amusement, but we are always on the run from the emptiness within. Only God can fill the centre of our lives. Roland Walls says 'As a Christian, I believe God in the person of Jesus Christ has entered on loneliness in His own loneliness of rejection and death, in order to find us where we are lonely. Sometimes it seems as if He has taken up, unbeknown to us, the only vacant spot there is and He waits for me to find Him there'. (*From Loneliness to Solitude*)

It is only when we have truly come to terms with this fact that we can take our full place in the Christian community - there are people who seek Christian fellowship because they cannot bear to be alone. 'The person who comes into a fellowship because he is running away from himself is misusing it for the sake of diversion He is not really seeking community at all, but only a distraction which will allow him to forget his loneliness for a brief time' (Bonhoeffer - *Life Together*). Our community life and corporate worship need to be preceded by silence. Again, to quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he says 'Silence is the simple stillness of the individual under

the Word of God. We are silent before hearing the Word because our thoughts are already directed to the Word We are silent after hearing the Word because the Word is still speaking and dwelling within us. We are silent at the beginning of the day because God should have the first word and we are silent before going to sleep because the last word also belongs to God' (ibid). Before every word and activity there is the silence of personal encounter, "Seeing Him who is invisible". When all is done and the fever of activity over, we must return again to that place of silence where He waits for us.

The Ultimate Reason for Prayer

Prayer is a natural impulse of the converted man and also a duty. Our hearts will desire to be close to God and bring our concerns before Him, but our minds must be convinced of the worthwhileness of that task and that it is the first thing that this God requires of His children.

Luther, in his Large Catechism asks the question 'Why pray?', and answers it bluntly by saying that we must pray because God has commanded it and has promised He will hear. This means, to slightly lessen the Lutheran bluntness, that we must set prayer in the context of obedience and faith. Prayer is a response to God's saving work within us. 'If you love me you will do as I ask'. We pray because God asks us to love, adore and worship Him and this exercise of the will and heart is our greatest joy. It is joy because we are invited to adore and enjoy Him who is the Living Spring of all beauty, truth and goodness. We cry 'Blessed be He' because it is objectively true and to know even the very edges of His ways is to be full of delighted surprise.

Secondly, we pray because He has promised that He will hear us. He is the God who listens. He knows our condition and can speak to it in a way that is ultimately satisfying. We are promised that in Christ He continually and with infinite love and understanding hears our faintest or most incoherent cries. He knows what we really are seeking for and where it is found. He knows our real needs and the causes of our pain better than we do ourselves. The church is in some sense a hospital - 'The church of Christ is a common hospital wherein all are in some measure sick of some spiritual disease or other' (Richard Sibbes - *The Bruised Reed*). Nothing helps more than one who listens to our pain. Dr Frank Lake says 'God has not only spoken through His Son; what is perhaps more important, He has listened through His Son. Christ's saving work cost Him most in its speechless passivity of dereliction. It is this which gives Him the right to be called the greatest listener to all suffering. It is this which gives His suffering its redemptive value' (*Clinical Theology*). The Christ to whom we pray knows all too well what it is like to live in a world marred by sin.

Thirdly, we pray because we have enlisted in a spiritual warfare. We are called to be soldiers in a cosmic conflict. Martin Lloyd-Jones' expositions of Ephesians 6 are masterly on this topic. He says, with Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*, in an interesting contradiction to the above paragraph, 'In the Bible I find a barracks not a hospital. It is not a doctor you need but a Sergeant Major. Here we are on the parade ground slouching about we have lost sight of the great battle' (*Spiritual Depression*). We are called to

fight, not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces of wickedness. This is a call to us to wage a spiritual warfare, armed with the weapons of the fullness of the Spirit. Christ will progressively reign until all the enemies of His light and grace are put under His feet, and we are to be aggressive combatants in the fight to make this world wholly Christ's kingdom, until the day when the last enemy, death, will be destroyed. Nothing could be more foolish than to doubt or disregard the fact that there are real forces of wickedness set against the Christian and the spreading dominion of Christ. It is the experience of the Church that believing, joyous, hopeful prayer is the greatest weapon that we have. It is the expression of the faith that conquers the world.

The fourth reason for our prayer life is that we are in love with Jesus Christ. Our relationship with Him is responsive, in a sense feminine. He is the Eternal Lover. His is the initiative which seeks the sinner, which dies for those he loves, which brings them new life in the Spirit, which prepares them for the eternal joy of His presence. The themes of this story are courtship, betrayal, rescue, fidelity and consummation. He is the one who is the ultimate satisfier of the human personality. To love Him is to desire to be near Him, to ache for His company, His smile, His assurance. As Samuel Rutherford says,

'The very dust that falleth from Christ's feet, His old and ragged clothes, His knotty and black cross are sweeter to me than king's golden crowns and their time-eaten pleasures. His bare shadow were enough for me Fy, fy on us that we should have love rusting beside us, or what is worse, wasting on some loathsome object, and that Christ should lie on His lone'. (*Letters*).

This is why we should pray. It is His desire, He is listening to our tears and joys, we have been called to wage war with Christ, and because to pray brings us into the presence of Him who is most to be desired.

T. MARKS.

Notes from Committee meeting, held on 12th November 1979.

A welcome was extended to D. McCallum, representing Scotland and also to G.A. Taylor (Yorkshire). Roger Poolman stated in his financial report that he estimated we should break even with Income & Expenditure at the end of the year; but expressed grave concern at rising costs and suggested that at the Nottingham Assembly Pastoral Session he should give notice that the Annual Subscription be raised to £4, as from 1st January 1981. After discussion it was agreed that this be done. Voluntary increase in subscriptions in 1980 would be welcome. It was also agreed that Overseas subscriptions be pegged at £2.50.

G. Rusling reported on preparations for the Probationers' Summer School at Pilgrim Hall, Uckfield, 16-19th June 1980: Main lecturer to be Paul Fiddes.

Keith Skirrow's suggestion that a list of members be published was further discussed, but was felt to be impractical. However, specific requests for prayer from missionaries could be included in 'Of Interest to You'.

The Secretary outlined preparations for the Pastoral Session at the Nottingham Assembly. Dr. Frank Lake and the Clinical Theology Group would arrange the programme. Subject: "Counselling and being listened to." Time of meeting: Business, 2pm - 2.30pm. Dr Lake: 2.30-4.00pm. Place to be confirmed.

Vice-Chairman: The Secretary intimated that he would be circularising Fraternalists requesting nomination.

ONE MAN'S RETIREMENT

(The late Norman Jones, wrote this article following his enforced retirement from the Baptist Union, because of ill health. We are grateful to David Pountain for bringing it to our attention and also to Mr Jones' widow for her co-operation).

The room is quiet. the sleeper stirs uneasily in his sleep. As gropingly he seeks consciousness, he feels a sense of panic. He has missed the alarm and still half asleep he makes efforts to get out of bed, when a sleepy voice beside him says, "Have you forgotten, you retired on Friday?" For the first time he begins to sense what retirement means, and slips back into holiday sleep.

For some weeks his new sense of freedom is exhilarating. Soon, however, he finds that 'time' is now a new concept, bounded only by the regularities of eating and sleeping. Hobbies which had meant so much, now cease to interest. They had been his 'preparation for retirement'. Because there is now plenty of time, the pressure to make time has gone and some of the pleasure in the hobby with it.

Moreover he finds that he still wakes early in the morning. The hours between darkness and light seem endless and he has thoughts scanning the past. He may even feel with Kari Marx that, "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living." At least that this is true of his own past.

This experience is most likely to be true of a man who comes upon retirement unexpectedly and early. Suddenly he is redundant. He is no longer wanted. In a recent T.V. play dealing with this subject a young son says to his father, "If you had been better than the others they would not have made you redundant." Cruel, but in many ways corresponding with his own feelings. This is something that friends unintentionally rub in. They ask him to join the Pensioners' Club, or his hairdresser informs him that, now he is retired, if he comes on Monday or Friday it will be 30p and not 50p, and has he applied for his pass on the buses? A pensioner! Me! It is tragic that among the reported increase in suicides many are retired, or redundant workers.

Yet this is not true of every man's experience. As his death, so also a man's retirement is his own. It has to be faced alone. To some it will come as a blessing and relief, but to others, perhaps to all in differing degrees, there will be moments of regret and perhaps feelings of guilt. The major part of life is over. The gap left at work will be filled. You now will be talked about as you talked of those who retired before you. You will not be forgotten, you will be a reminiscence: "Do you remember old....." But I have called this article, *One Man's Retirement* so I must speak in the first person, although perhaps my experience is not entirely unique. I have found that after the moments of self-reproach, which came unwilling, that what I feel most guilty about and at the same time most happy about (this strange ambivalence I shall attempt to explain later) is the way I have used 'Time'. I put it this way because the operative word is 'used' and I do not write 'my time'. I have used time, which is a gift, as though it were in some way mine by right. Time was to be filled

with activity and so few moments were left to be surprised by joy. The diary was the master, good works the order of the day, everything else secondary; selfishly sacrificed to one's own ego, which demanded that 'you give and not count the cost'.

So much has been lost and rarely for the causes I set out to serve. How much richer that service would have been if I had been a richer person, if I had observed nature in more detail, if I had developed a deeper understanding of literature and music, and above all, if I had observed in greater detail the surprising development of my family. So much time has been spent in knowing about people. So little in knowing them. So much time in serving God, and so little to become sensitive to his presence. Yes, there is much to regret about the past, as there is also forgiveness for it. But retirement is not only the time for self-examination, it is also a time of great happiness. Chief of the happy memories is the sense that even when you were blind to love, you were loved. Raymond Williams, writing about Edmund Burke, says:

"Burke is one of that company of men who learn of virtue from the margin of their errors, learn folly from their own persons".

So we are retired. What new opportunities lie ahead. Time is now timeless. Everyday is NOW and every to-morrow an adventure into and beyond oneself.

I sometimes feel that I have lived more than one life; that there have been decisive experiences which have separated one life from another, and that I have inhabited a number of different worlds. While each 'life' has been different, there has been, in the centre of it, the authentic 'me' and that 'me' has been moulded and developed and then passed on for new experiences.

The sociologists speak of role taking. I suppose that each new world has been marked by a break with a previous pattern and I have assumed the appropriate role. I accept this, but it does not alter the fact that being a reasonably sensible being I have known this (and sinner that I am, have observed it with cynical amusement in others). Yet I feel that life has been not just role taking, but also a process. New opportunities have come as I have entered each new world. Some have been taken, some neglected, some have been painful, but always they have been ultimately enriching.

Why should retirement be different?

Not long ago I went into our local Public Library. In the centre of the Main Hall stood an exhibition of about 30 paintings. They were landscapes, mostly reproductions of postcards. They were very pleasant to look at and I would have been proud to have painted them. The significance about them was that they were all painted by a husband and wife. She is 75 and he is 82. They have been painting for only three years.

Like so many men I was completely absorbed in my work. If I were asked if I had a hobby I would say: "Gardening or reading". Both so far as I was concerned were necessitous rather than freely chosen. The garden, like Everest, was there (and sometimes it seemed like Everest), and reading though enjoyable was part of the job. So when I came to retirement I had to decide what to do with this new freedom. I soon learnt that freedom has its boundaries and that mine in particular were physical.

I have always had an interest in different patterns of society and the influence of such patterns on its citizens. I have therefore, as yet tentatively, begun to read again in this sphere, and particularly to study those thinkers who have had a decisive influence on our times. So I have done what my artist friends did. I have signed up for Night School again and am beginning to take advantage of courses run by extra-mural departments of our local University.

I would commend these courses to you who are retired or about to retire. All interests are catered for, practical and theoretical. If you are interested in study you will get guidance. If you are interested in music, art, carpentry, etc. etc. it is there. And if you have physical energy there are plenty of voluntary organizations waiting for the help of those who are reliable and in these also you will meet men and women of different social backgrounds and life will be enriched.

The great advantage of these groups is that they are not confined to one age group. I would run a mile (even if it brought on a heart attack) to escape a group catering for the needs of the elderly. I refuse to be a Senior Citizen, a Darby (with my Joan). I wish only to remain until I die, a citizen, a member of the community, a person and not a category.

Wordsworth, in one of the Prefaces to his poems, says of the artist and the poet that he "is an upholder and a preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love".

As a Christian I can find no better guide in the new opportunities that retirement brings.

Until I was over 30 years of age I had not lived continuously in one place for more than 5 years. I had never lived where I had other relatives than my immediate family. In the jargon of the day I knew nothing of the extended family. I belonged always to the nuclear family. It was a new experience for me about that time to be accepted as part of an extended family albeit by adoption. This also happened at a time when my own family was growing up.

The community of which I became a part could well be described as closed, although it was beginning to see the ravishes of the changing times. There were still many families with grandparents, aunts, cousins, uncles and more distant relatives living in the same community. It was, moreover, as classless as one might wish. The local industries were family concerns and their founders were often still actively engaged in their management and more often than not on Christian name terms with their workers and they with him. It was also interesting to see how this larger group incorporated smaller groups within itself, primarily the churches and chapel communities. These might meet for special events, but you knew to which group you belonged and were quick to designate yourself if a mistake should arise.

I suppose from the beginning to the end of my relationship with this and other communities like it, I have always had a love-hate relationship. I am speaking particularly of the church and chapel groups. They produced some of the finest characters I have ever met. Men and women with strong opinions, and often strongly expressed, most of them self-educated, but

with sharp and critical minds unspoilt by intellectual fashion. They produced much amateur and often fine professional talent, in music, the arts, dramatic and visual. Once you had learnt the language you came also to appreciate a most subtle wit and an hilarious sense of comedy. My hate for this kind of church community was that it was obvious to an outsider that its usefulness was at an end, and unfortunately few could see it. The inevitable happened that when because of growing mobility young people left, they so often discarded, not only the outward trappings of the community, but its values also, or not finding the same kind of community elsewhere ceased to have any further interest in the church.

There are three types of retired people in our churches. There are those who think of their retirement as an opportunity to do more church work and get more and more absorbed in it. Sometimes so absorbed that they do not see that resignation might be their best service to the church. I see no reason why retired people should not occupy offices within the church provided they see their service as releasing younger men and women to do wider service outside the church. Many I know find fulfilment in doing this, but they must never complain that 'young people have too many interests these days'. The second group comprises those who have retired and find liberation from everything and just enjoy retirement. The third group are of a different kind. They still love the church but see their retirement as supplying wider opportunities to join groups outside the church and to help the church see itself as others see it.

There will be no need for me to say that I belong to the third group. My first article for the *Baptist Times* was written over 30 years ago and was a plea for the community church. I have passed through idealism about the family church, and the servant church, to believe that all these are various adaptations of the pattern of church community I described at the beginning. They all tend towards the ingrown community rather than to an outgoing mission. So I see retired people reminding the church of its image within the community and thinking through the changes that are demanded. I believe we have to call the church back to its central place. A Worshipping Community, encouraging, strengthening, dispersing church involved in the total life of every part of the community, at work, at play, in service and caring. Indeed I think we owe to our young people to enable them to grow to full manhood and womanhood in the sense that Martin Buber describes:

You shall not withhold yourselves.

You imprisoned in the shell in which society, state, club, school, economy, public opinion, and your own pride have stuck you, break through your shell, become direct; man have contact with man.

Vera Britain's *Testament of Youth* was one of the books I prized as a young man. I was reminded of it when I read a quotation from it in a review of a recently published book some weeks ago. It was the advice given by a school chaplain to girls going to university to "hold themselves in doubt". The *Testament of Youth* reflected very much the feeling of the thirties. Yet this advice is still relevant. Dogmatism is still puppyism grown up, as the saintliest man I have known used to say; dogmatism not only in religion, but in science, philosophy politics and every sphere of knowledge.

Karl Popper, said by some to be the greatest living philosopher has translated a verse from the philosopher Xenophanes who lived in the sixth century B.C. which expresses a similar feeling:

The gods did not reveal from the beginning,
All things to us, but in the course of time
Through seeking we may learn and know things better.
But as for certain truth, no man has known it, Nor shall he know it, neither of
the gods

Nor yet of all things of which I speak.
For even if by chance he were to utter
The final truth, he would himself not know it,
For all is but a woven web of guesses.

Popper, himself, sees no theory that can be relied upon for final truth. Newtonian physics must yield to Einstein and eventually Einstein will be superceded by a more useful truth. A scientist will escape dogmatic only as he recognises that every hypothesis and every useful theory will be superceded. When we look beyond the scientific attitude to the wider aspects of human life, we are reminded by Eric Fromm that "all men are idealists and are striving for something beyond the attainment of physical satisfaction".

Because we are retired we do not contract out of the human situation. Our own personal quest for truth remains and the tension between faith and doubt remains. There can be no refuge in the Authority of a Book or a Church. To seek such a refuge is to opt out of the human situation and indeed of the continued adventure of living. This does not mean that we are without a framework to our lives. I cannot believe with Eric Fromm that "there is no meaning to life except the meaning man gives his life by the unfolding of his powers". For myself I would place my faith about life's meaning in the words of Paul, "I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified". The word 'determined' needs qualification in the light of what is written above. For me it means that this had been my own act of faith, faith in this historical event as giving the ultimate meaning to life. There can be no final theological explanation. Each theory may illuminate, it cannot explain. The quest for understanding goes on to the end. One day we shall know even as we are known, or we shall not know. Faith, hope, doubt, these three share the same mind and excite the same heart.

As a young man I used to recite Studdert Kennedy's *Rough Rhymes of a Padre*. Some of these still remain in my mind. They were written in the bloody morass of the first world war:

I bet my life on Beauty, Truth and Love,
Not beauty's passing shadow,
But its very self made Flesh.
I bet my life on Christ, Christ Crucified.

And what about death? It is as near and as far off as it ever was. The only preparation for death is to live. But, having shaken hands with death recently, I hold myself in doubt, but expect eventually 'to be surprised by joy'.

N. B. Jones