

FRUSTRATIONS OF THE DEVOTIONAL LIFE

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To many Christians, the idea of “devotions” conjures up images of chores to be completed, and rules to be followed. One woman put it this way: “It sounded like a good idea . . . but, to be honest, I tried it once, and I was bored stiff. I don’t seem to be spiritual enough. I don’t know if I will ever be.” Many believers struggle to have consistent personal devotions. They try devotional books, or read-through-the-Bible-in-a-year programs. But often, they fall into a predictable pattern: they enjoy; they struggle; they give up. Then they start up again, only to fail once more. It is a process that produces an inordinate amount of guilt in the lives of countless Christians. Many have given up the whole idea of devotions, or concluded they are unnecessary.

This may be true in the church at large, among ordinary lay people, but what about in the context of an institution of theological education. Surely, among these highly-motivated, God-called, young men and women, the consistency of personal devotions should be marked higher. I have made no objective study of all theological institutions in Papua New Guinea. I only have my surveys of students in my classes in one evangelical Bible college to go on, but, I suspect, that these students would be representative of many, if not most, of the students represented at this conference. These surveys show that the majority of our students come to Bible college without a prior existing practice of regular personal devotions. Furthermore, though most of these students acknowledge the importance of the practice of personal devotions, they do not have a grasp of what it would take for them to initiate such a practice in their lives.

In this paper, I will address the issue of developing a devotional life among students at theological institutions. I hope to address some preconceived ideas that some of you may have concerning devotions. My goal is to help you think of the devotional life, not in terms of rules, but in terms of relationship.

I will start with a simple definition of “devotion”, so we have a common ground on which to start. For the purposes of this paper, I will define devotions as “times, in which we get to know God”. These times will usually involve prayer, and some form of Bible reading, but will not be limited to these activities.

The great 19th-century evangelist, Charles Finney, wrote extensively on the devotional life. He stressed that “devotions” are not simply something we do, but a way of life. He said, “Devotion is that state of the heart, in which everything – our whole life, being, and possessions – are a continual offering to God, that is, they are continually offered to God. True devotion must be the supreme devotion of the will, extending out to all we have and are, to all times, places, employment, thoughts, and feelings.” Finney further challenges us to picture, in our minds, the lifestyle of the ideal pastor. He is one who has a striking singleness of purpose that sets him apart from the ordinary man. All he does is for the glory of God, and, thus, could be labelled “devotional”. But this does not mean that the devotional life leaves out those activities, which we normally call “devotions”. On the contrary, it is these kinds of activities that put us in touch with God, and enable us to live this kind of single-minded life of devotion to God.

The life of Christ illustrates this level of devotion to God. In Mark 1:35, we read “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place, and prayed.” In our first reading of this text, we are impressed with the fact that Jesus had a habit of rising early for time alone with His heavenly Father. But the passage becomes even more compelling, when we read the entire first chapter of Mark. Then we find out what a physically-, emotionally-, and spiritually-taxing day He had just been through. He started off the day teaching in the synagogue, which was followed by casting out a demon, and healing Peter’s mother in law. We find Him still at work after the sun goes down, with the whole town gathered at His door, healing many, who have various diseases, and driving out many demons. It is the morning after this hectic day that we find Him rising before sunrise, to be alone with God. I think we must conclude from this that a real need was met in Jesus’ life by His devotional time. Many people misunderstand devotions, as being something that drains energy that could be put to better use elsewhere. But the opposite is actually true. Jesus found the practice of rising early to meet with God to be energising, enabling Him to meet the challenges of another busy day.

To help our students find ideas that could help them develop their devotional lives, we turn to 2 Peter 1:3-8. “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness, through our knowledge of Him, who called us by His own glory and goodness. Through these, He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that, through them, you may participate in the divine nature, and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For, if you possess these qualities, in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

These verses show us that spiritual growth is a process. A rich devotional life will not happen overnight. Just as a baby does not begin his life driving a car, or playing rugby, so a fully-developed devotional life will not spring to life immediately. Many of our theological students will be starting with no pre-existing devotional habits. They must not be made to feel that they must tackle too much in the beginning. They should be encouraged to set moderate, achievable goals for the time they spend with God in the beginning, and allow the time to grow, as they grow spiritually.

In these verses, we have the promise that we can “escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires”. We must encourage our students that God wants to be in relationship with us, even more than we want to be in relationship with Him. As a hunger for God begins to grow in the lives of our students, God will draw them close to Himself, and help them overcome their evil tendencies, of which we might include the laziness that so often keeps us away from our times alone with God.

Building a devotional life is like building a house. You do not start with the roof, and build your way down. You start with the foundation, and move upward. You do not expect to build a complete house on the first day. You start with each day’s task, and complete it. Then, the next day, you build on what is already there, realising that, one day, you will have a finished product to live in and enjoy.

In conclusion, if you find yourself frustrated with your devotional life, you’re not alone. Many other theological students in Papua New Guinea share that frustration. But that frustration should not be seen as a sign of weakness. Rather, it should be looked at as a sign of unfulfilled spiritual desire. You want to know God better than you do now. Remember the caring, Father heart of God. He is always willing to meet us where we are, and move us on to deeper things.