

“The Christian Response to the Current Spiritual Climate...”

Re-discovering the Art of Attentive Spiritual Listening

By Phil Daughtry

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Generalised Themes Reflected in the Current Spiritual Climate

I'd like to begin this paper by commenting briefly on two excellent recently published articles, which together, provide a very concise, honest and helpful overview of our current Australian ‘spiritual climate’ and the challenges and such a climate presents to the Christian community. The articles in focus are:

- “Young People and Their Quest for Meaning” (*Youth Studies Australia*, v.21, n.1, 2002: 40-43) by Ruth Webber, Director of the Youth Studies Flagship at the Australian Catholic University, Fitzroy.

And...

- “Do-it-yourself Spirituality – Effectively engaging today’s seekers” (*Working Together*, The Magazine of the Evangelical Alliance, 2002 - Issue 2: 2-4) by Philip Johnson, CEO of Global Apologetics and Mission Ltd.

In essence, the authors identify the following general themes, which will be familiar to those who are in touch with current dialogue on contemporary spiritual trends:

- Spirituality is “in” - but the Church is out. The majority of Australians, young people in particular¹, do not even consider the Christian churches as viable, safe or intelligent places to explore issues of Spirituality. The concept of ‘spirituality’ is increasingly being distinguished from the concept of ‘religion’, and even the concept of ‘divinity’.
- Young people are highly distrustful of hierarchical/propositional approaches to spirituality, choosing instead to ‘engage in a personal quest for meaning that is outside the social and cultural confines of late modernity’ (Webber: 40).
- Whilst wanting to move beyond, a pure empirical/material/secular approach to life and meaning, young people, and seekers in general, have little time for a spirituality which asks them to ignore or dismiss the research and findings of modern science.
- Interest in the supernatural and mystery is high. This interest being expressed through involvement in witchcraft (Wicca), pagan, earthbound and eastern religions².
- Young people’s spiritual quest is characterised by an emphasis on the experiential and subjective, which also expresses itself significantly in practical involvement with issues of social concern.
- Eclecticism, diversity and syncretism are “in”.
- The reconstruction of myth and history are important factors in the contemporary spiritual quest - (For example, interest in Celtic heritage/spirituality, increasing numbers of young Australians visiting Gallipoli).
- A sense of connection to the natural environment, together with a nurturing ecological concern, forms a major theme of the current spiritual quest.
- For the Christian churches to have any hope of making meaningful contact with today’s spiritual seekers, they must move from the position of propositional dogma and polemic reaction, to a place of dialogue, participatory questioning and cultural engagement.
- The authority to act as a ‘Spiritual Guide’ must be earned relationally and cannot be assumed institutionally.

Much of what Webber and Johnson summarise in their helpful articles has been further articulated and ‘fleshed out’ in David Tacey’s insightful book, *ReEnchantment*³.

The Christian Response to the Generalised Themes

The most concerning of the above general themes is the fact that Australian young people (and the broader seeking populace in general) are largely avoiding the Christian churches, whilst engaging with many other sources, the process of working out some sense of spiritual meaning⁴. This means, that the

¹ This conclusion tends to be reflected in ongoing statistical research (1996 Census, 2001 National Church Life Survey) which continues to show both low church attendance by Australian young people and proportionally low youth ratios amongst Christian congregations (NCLS Research Newsletter Issue 2 May 2002)..

² David Tacey notes that ‘Buddhism is attracting many of our young people, and is the fastest growing religion in Australia today’ (2000: 199). His comments are further underscored by the latest census figures, which show a 79% increase in people stating their religious persuasion as ‘Buddhist’ since 1996 (Hughes, 2002: 2).

³ Note particularly the introduction: ‘The Rise of Spirituality in Australia’; chapter one: ‘Spirituality and the Return to Mystery’ and chapter seven: ‘Youth Spirituality and the Old Religion’.

⁴ Philip Johnson notes the observation of Australian journalist, Ali Gripper: ‘Australians buy more self-development and spiritual books per head than the US and Britain... It seems that when Australians are searching for meaning these days, they walk straight past the church and into their nearest bookshop, the shelves of which are starting to sag with how-to-change-your-life tomes’ (4).

Christian churches will need to pay close attention to the other emerging themes and seek to respond creatively from the vast resources of our community life, theology and heritage. Ruth Webber (author of the first mentioned article), is pessimistic about the capacity of institutionalised Christianity to be able to make this kind of response:

It is argued by some modern scholars that unless the churches redefine the place of religion in the present culture, replacing dogma and exclusion with relevance and acceptance, then attendances will continue to decline and young people will continue to look for meaning elsewhere (Spong 1996). I suspect this is a pill too bitter for most established religious denominations to swallow (Webber: 43).

I don't quite share the rather fatalistic outlook reflected in the above comment (neither does Johnson in his article). Whilst, as a realist, I do believe it may take many years for the Christian churches to achieve the paradigm and practice shift necessary to become a significant central player within the contemporary spiritual dialogue; I can't help also believing that there are so many potential points of contact between the contemporary spiritual search and what the Christian faith community has to offer. For example:

- Surely, our tradition and theology of a personal relationship with God and His mysterious indwelling/empowering presence by the Holy Spirit has something to say to the contemporary fascination with the supernatural and mystery?
- If we engage in a truly biblical ecclesiology, appreciating the fact that we belong to the whole Church, universal and historic, then surely we can assist people to explore the vast diversity of spiritual wisdom, practice, myth and history which together forms our Christian heritage. Should this not mean that we have much to say to the contemporary quest for eclectic approach and event reconstruction?
- Surely our understanding of creation, as a reflection of the divine, and as a context for worship, has something to say to the environmental aspect of the contemporary spiritual quest?
- Surely, the dominant biblical theme of 'Mercy, Faithfulness and Justice' has something to say to the contemporary understanding of spirituality as it is expressed through involvement with issues of social justice?

I could go on, but I think you get my point. Our Christian heritage, in its local, universal and historic form, provides us with a breathtaking array of the resources with which to potentially address many of the contemporary spiritual themes being expressed within our current cultural climate. The question really is, do we also have the creativity, flexibility and sensitivity to support contemporary seekers in making the connections? I believe, in part, this question can be answered by considering one of the most basic and ancient forms of approach to the discipline of spiritual direction: listening, with the view to discerning the contextual spiritual cry, and activity of God, in personal and localised situations. Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

Spiritual direction is the act of paying attention to God, calling attention to God, being attentive to God in a person or circumstances or situation... It notices the Invisibilities in and beneath and around the Visibilities. It listens for the Silences between the spoken Sounds (in Dean and Foster, 1998: 143).

The Problem of Poor Listening Posture

Our problem in responding to the contemporary spiritual cry, in the way that Peterson suggests, is that we're raised in a culture which has developed a very poor listening posture:

Conversation in the United States is a competitive exercise in which the first person to draw a breath is declared the listener (Nathan Miller, in Bolton, 1986: 4).

The above comment, I'm sure, is very much applicable to our experience of interpersonal communication in Australia as well. In their excellent communication skills book, *Messages*, McKay, Davis and Fanning, identify 12 common 'listening blocks'. Listening block number 9, "sparring" says much about the inability of the church to hear and respond to the contextual 'spiritual cry':

This block has you arguing and debating with people. The other person never feels heard because you're so quick to disagree. In fact, a lot of your focus is on finding things to disagree with. You take strong stands, are very clear about your beliefs and preferences (1995: 10).

One of the negative traditions of the Church is the propositional, doctrinal, hierarchical imperialism of our approach towards those who have disagreed with us. This forceful/rhetorical approach, with its seeds in 'Fathers' such as Tertullian and Augustine, and its full-blown caricature in the medieval crusades and inquisition, continues to influence our 'sparring' communication style today. In other words, we have a tendency to be far more concerned with defining and arguing for propositional 'truth' or 'correct' doctrine than we are with discerning and responding to the 'Silences between the spoken Sounds.'

Practising the Art of Discerning and Responding to the Spiritual Cry

If the Christian community is to move from its current marginal position, to becoming involved in the centre of people's spiritual concerns, we will need to re-discover the art of contextual spiritual discernment through attentive listening. What I'd like to do now, is offer you the opportunity to engage in a variety of listening/discernment exercises. The material that follows, represents a variety of verbal/behavioural expressions which each represent at least an echo of a spiritual cry... for those who have ears to hear. Some of these expressions are taken from the print media, a number are related to stories and anecdotes. Your mission, and I hope you will choose to accept it, is, firstly, to discern the spiritual cry, reflected in the verbal or behavioural expression. And, secondly, to consider the connection between the spiritual cry and the spiritual resources of the Christian community to which you belong.

1. Boredom keeps the Christian flock away:

(Adelaide Advertiser, July 4th, 2002)

Local columnist, Rex Jory, penned the following lines of personal reflection as part of his commentary on the newly released findings of The National Church Life survey:

Its a decade or more since I went to a conventional church service. I doubt I will go again. For me, church - and religion - have lost their relevance. They are old-fashioned, out of touch and essentially meaningless.

My last appearance was spontaneous and unrewarding. On a casual Sunday stroll, we were attracted by the strangled rendition of a popular hymn coming from a splendid suburban Kirk. We slipped silently into the back-row pew... There were the usual mysterious trappings of the church. Clergy in colourful outfits, the elaborate brass candles, the sun-lit lead-light windows, the hint of incense. Eventually the vicar mounted a raised pulpit and thundered his sermon to his attentive flock. The message was clear: steer away from sin; lead a temperate life. He finished with a flourish. "There are three words which should guide your life," he urged. "Three words that will lead you to salvation. Three words that will show you the pathway to eternal life."

He built the tension, teasing us, tempting us to guess the three words. Finally, we were liberated: "Those three words are - Jesus, Jesus, Jesus."

Presumably those three words - really only one word - were meant to leave us satisfied and morally fulfilled. Without in any way criticising or devaluing the image of Jesus Christ or his message to the Christian world, that sermon was rubbish. Only the most devote and blindly faithful could have been impressed. As oratory, it was nonsense. As a contemporary message, it could have been from medieval England.

Reflection:

- What kind of thoughts and feelings are reflected in these words?
- How can these thoughts and feelings be discerned as a spiritual cry?
- How might the Christian community respond in a helpful way?

Comment:

I hear cry for intellectual substance, practical relevance and communication competence. I hear a cry against the uncritical acceptance of religious practice and ritual. I hear a cry for honest communication and

dialogue in relation to the formation of structured expressions of worship. I hear the echo of family therapist, Virginia Satir's, appeal to 3 of her articulated "5 Freedoms" (1991: 62):

- The freedom to see and hear what is here, instead of what should be, was, or will be.
- The freedom to say what you feel and think, instead of what you should.
- The freedom to feel what you feel, instead of what you ought.

Judging by the responses to Rex Jory's column, in the following letters to the editor, I don't think that too many Christians heard these kinds of 'cries'. They were too busy, highlighting the better practice of their local churches, and challenging (quite reasonably) his very generalised conclusions... Good for them, maybe, but not so helpful for the many people, like the columnist, who at some stage in their journey, are attracted to the idea of church, but repelled by the uncritical repetition of 'dumbed-down' and dated practices. People who, for lack of a decent forum opportunity to express their true thoughts and feelings, end up leaving with no intention to return.

Some of these people are far more than casual, spontaneous, attenders. Some have had profound experiences of God and have been involved with the church over a long period of time... They simply can no longer reconcile themselves to adherence to a ritual that has become meaningless. This problem is **not** merely limited to the 'high Anglican' scenario suggested in Jory's column. As Philip Johnson points out:

Parallel to this non-Christian approach (of a 'churchless' approach to spiritual formation) is a burgeoning Christian subculture of 'church exiles'. It comprises those who have exited from evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal congregations and yet have not abandoned their vital commitment to Christ as Saviour. Church exiles are disenchanted with the routines of the local church, and feel alienated particularly by the 'worship wars'. Many feel an acute need to deepen their faith, pursue unanswered theological and apologetic questions and seek opportunities to utilise their ministry gifts and engage in vital personal witness with their neighbours (4)⁵.

Christian faith communities of all persuasions will do well to hear and respond to the cry for honesty, dialogue, relevance and an authentic participatory approach. Whether that cry comes from a middle-aged journalist, a year 10 student or a 20-something arts graduate.

2. An unusual activity for recess time:

I was recently chatting to one of the students in my Youth Ministry class. She has been working on placement under the supervision of the chaplain at a local high school and she related to me the following incident (her words are paraphrased):

The chaplain offers young people in the school the opportunity to come to a room, during recess time, to pray. We get these two girls who turn up for every prayer time. Its really weird because neither of them come from a Christian family but they always want to pray. I think about how precious recess time was to me when I was at school and I'm even more amazed that these two want to keep using their break time in this way.

Reflection:

- What kind of needs are reflected in this 'unusual' recess behaviour?
- How might these be discerned as a spiritual cry?
- How might the Christian community respond in a helpful way?

Comment: I hear a cry for sacred space. A place to go that is set apart for the purposes of devotion and reflection. A physical area that provides a tangible point of contact with the intangible divine. One of the tragedies of the so-called 'contemporary' church is their appalling lack of such sacred spaces. In a modern cultural context, in which spirituality was marginalised, many churches sought to increase their 'relevance' by utilising their buildings as multi-purpose, de-facto 'community centres'. Whilst much thought was given to the value of making space available for play-group, craft classes, dance club and table-tennis, the concept of a visible, accessible prayer sanctuary often went unconsidered.

⁵ For a notable example/profile of a person who has journeyed through with the tension reflected in these kinds of comments see 'Tim Winton's Holy Lands' an interview in *Zadok Perspectives* (Autumn 2002).

I suggest that we'd do well to set apart physical spaces and specific times for the purpose of prayer. We'd also do well to facilitate the ambience, silence, imagery, art and literature that contribute to making such spaces truly conducive to sacred activity⁶.

3. The lament of a young Aussie Christian 'battler'

Leah was one of the young people associated with the youth ministry of the local church in which I worked as youth pastor for nearly 11 years. I first met her when she was about 13, and was involved in supporting her with her spiritual journey for a period of approximately 5 years.

Leah seemed to have an acute sensitivity to her need for Jesus and a genuine passion to live the spiritual life in the biblical model. However, Leah also struggled with other passions and influences, which created tension between her spiritual ideals, and behavioural realities... pretty normal stuff really.

The last conversation I had with Leah was at my house, only weeks before my family and I were to depart our congregation and city to come to live in Adelaide. I'll never forget what she told me. I'd commented to her on the fact that we hadn't seen her around for a while and asked her how she was going. She responded very simply and honestly, along the following lines:

I can't be Christian anymore, it's too hard and it doesn't seem to work for me. Other people seem to be able to do it but, no matter how hard I try, I just keep on failing... so I'm giving up.

Reflection:

- What kinds of thoughts and feelings may have led up to Leah's conclusion? (Her 5 years of 'trying to make it' demonstrate the fact that this is hardly a 'snap decision').
- How can these thoughts and feelings be interpreted as a 'spiritual cry'?
- In what ways could the Christian community respond to the need reflected by this cry?
- In what ways could the Christian community have responded at an earlier stage, had they been carefully listening?

Comment: I hear a cry for a theology of grace. I hear a cry for the kind of revelation for which the writer to the Ephesians prayed:

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge... (3: 17b-19a, NIV).

I hear a cry for a pastoral approach that facilitates an honest understanding of the common human tension that exists between 'ideal' and 'reality'. I hear a cry for a theology, which, as the above passage suggests, affirms that it is impossible to 'fall from grace' - the grace of God, in Christ being simply too 'wide and long and high and deep' to fall from!

Instead, I fear, that Leah saw in us a quasi-Pelagian model of driven conformity to petty externalisms and a lip-service approach to the concept of 'Jesus as the author and finisher of our faith' (Hebrews 12: 2). Thus, she concluded "it 'works' for some people, but after 5 years of 'trying', I've discovered it doesn't 'work' for me". Woe to the church that puts such stumbling blocks in the way of its spiritual children! How we need the gift of ears to hear, and the grace to respond sensitively to this kind of cry.

4. The surprise discovery of a 'living tradition'

Once a year, my support workers and I take our Youth Development (Year in the Son) students away for a weekend spiritual retreat. One of the things that we try to introduce our students to is the idea that Christian Spirituality has a rich heritage of 'living tradition' as opposed to 'dead traditionalism'. In one of our group times we teach on the background and use of what has come to be referred to as 'liturgy'.

⁶ See Tacey, *ReEnchantment*: 197-200 for some excellent commentary on the need for the church to 'monasticise' rather than 'modernise'.

We find that a number of our students have had very negative experiences with the concept and practice of written and structured prayer. However, when we take the time to teach them about the history and purpose of liturgical form, and its potential to be used in imaginative, creative and participatory ways, the response is quite surprising. We consistently receive feedback on the liturgy component of the weekend, along the following lines⁷:

"I've never understood why we keep on saying the creeds and prayers, now it makes much more sense."

"Wow, I never realised just how special a prayer can be when someone carefully writes it out."

"I loved the time when we said the written prayers, there's no way I could have expressed things any better."

"I was tired, and I couldn't have thought of what to pray for, but the written prayers carried me."

"I didn't realise that you could write liturgy as well as read what others have written."

Reflection:

- What kind of spiritual cry can be discerned from these comments?
- How might the Christian community respond to this cry in helpful ways?

Comment:

There's a marvellous story in Tony Jone's excellent book, *Post Modern Youth Ministry*, which illustrates a very helpful example of response to this kind of spiritual cry (see pages 177-189). The author talks about the time when he took on the youth minister's role with a rather conservative congregation in the 'reformed' tradition. The congregation had a long history of 'confirmation classes', which had been run in their present format for at least 30 years, with little change or adjustment. The dilemma, faced by the author, was whether or not to grind on with an increasingly 'dated' program, or, to axe 'Confo' and run the risk of a backlash from long-term constituents.

Wisely, he decided to ask the young people and their parents, of both the congregation and community, what their feelings and thought were on the issue. His informal 'survey' uncovered two common themes:

1. People felt that Confirmation classes were an essential component of the congregation's ministry to both its own families and those of the community (In this particular area, even non-attending families viewed 'Confo' as an important cultural 'right of passage' for their young people).
2. Everyone thought that the confirmation classes were being run very poorly.

The author's response to the survey results (or spiritual cries) was to totally re-vamp the existing program and resurrect a living tradition from the 'carcass' of a dead traditional form. You may wish to find out how he did it by checking out the story for yourself (see the reference list of this paper for details), but the following excerpt, a letter from a grateful parent, highlights the impact:

No words can adequately express my appreciation. I am sitting at home after one of the most incredible evenings of my life. There was no way of knowing one year ago as Corbin and I sat with our daughters listening to you talk about the upcoming year of confirmation that we would have the experience we had tonight... Lona's transformation this year has been incredible to watch and experience. When you read her paper this evening I could not hold back my tears. Knowing that she has not only accepted Christ into her life, but that Christ has changed her life gives me great sense of peace (189).

5. The real terrorists in our society

(Letters to the editor, *Adelaide Advertiser*, September 11, 2002)

⁷ These statements represent paraphrased summaries of the multiple comments we've received in written reflection papers over the previous 3 years.

Of all the comment, debate and dialogue surrounding the massive media over-exposure of September 11, the following piece, for me, stood head and shoulders above the rest of the babble:

I am 17. So, too, is a good friend of mine. We both go to a high school and are proud Australians. However, the difference between us is that she wears a hijab (Muslim headscarf), as she proudly follows the Muslim faith. Because of this, her life has been turned upside down since the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Public abuse, usually from middle-aged men, has become a common event for her. These people publicly humiliate my friend, saying that she is to blame for the attacks and that she should go back to her own country. This disgusts me and I believe the abusive members of the public are the real terrorists.

The media are splashed with images and stories of the thousands of innocent Americans, whose lives have been ruined by the events of September 11, but how about sparing a thought for the millions of Muslim people, worldwide, whose lives have also been ruined by the repercussions of the terrorist attacks.

The events of September 11 should highlight the desperate need for increased humanity and compassion in the world. They should not have incited this repulsive inhumanity that has been shown towards my friend.

Reflection:

- How could these comments be discerned as a spiritual cry?
- In what ways could the Christian community speak to the identified spiritual concern?
- In what ways could the Christian community be informed by the spiritual concern?

Comment: I hear the voice of a young prophet, crying in a public place, the kinds of things that many contemporary Christians are barely even whispering amongst themselves. I hear a cry for empathy and a multicultural inclusive passion for justice and mercy. The cry is all the more vivid and colourful for its contrast against the background of a middle-Australian climate of self-absorbed social mediocrity, to which the church, particular in its local forms, too often plays the uncritical ceremonial 'chaplain'... 'nuff said.

Recognising our Resources and Continuing the Practice

I could list at least a half-dozen more scenarios for your contemplation and consideration but I'm sure, by now, you've got the gist of what I most wanted to say in this paper:

Discerning and responding to people in context of the current spiritual climate has far more to do with our attentive and imaginative response to personalised and localised issues of spirituality, as they emerge... Than it does with becoming 'expert' on the nuances and commentary associated with 'global/national spiritual trends'.

Yes, lets be people who do have a working knowledge of the big-picture spirituality themes of our post-modern, post-Christendom, post-industrial urban Western culture. More importantly; however, let's put our real focus on discerning and responding to the expression of these trends as we encounter them in the immediate context of our network of influence, be that congregation, school, neighbourhood or workplace.

I'm fully convinced that the Christian community has access to the potential resources necessary to serve those in modern Australia who are engaging in a spiritual quest. A major key in enabling spiritual seekers to make connections with these resources lies in our ability and willingness, under God, to re-discover the simple, yet delicate, art of attentive spiritual listening.

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- 'The Real Terrorists in Our Society' *The Advertiser*, September 11, 2002: 17
- Webber, R. 'Young People and their quest for meaning' *Youth Studies Australia* (v.21, n.1, 2002): 40-43

Recommended Reading:

(Apart from the sources mentioned in the reference list, I've found the following books and articles very helpful in getting my head around the broader issues influencing the 'spiritual climate' of contemporary Western/Australian culture and finding a meaningful framework for Christian response)

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APPENDIX:

“The Practice of Prayer - Comedy Capers or Spiritual Art?”

Note: I am currently writing a book for young people on spirituality. My target audience are primarily those between the ages of 16-25 who are involved, or have been involved, with a local congregation. I hope that the book might also be accessible to a wider audience. My aim in writing, is to offer both an honest critique of current church sub-culture and point to some of the positive possibilities in Christian spiritual formation. What follows is one of my favourite chapters, I offer it as an example of my response to the current spiritual climate. I hope you enjoy reading it (the book should be ready to publish by early 2003).

The Practice of Prayer: Comedy Capers or Spiritual Art?

I've often wondered why a little bit of spirituality seems to bring out so much weirdness in some people. The spirituality/weirdness factor seems to be particularly evident in relation to the practice of public prayer. I've been hanging around a wide variety of praying Christians for nearly 20 years now and I think I've nearly seen it all. I wonder if you've come across any of the following characters and characteristics in your spiritual travels:

The shaking and shouting prayers: For some people prayer is about volume - God is a bit far away so anyone who really wants Him to listen must make themselves heard... over and over again! If a whole bunch of people get together and shout all at the same time... even better! Sometimes shouting prayer people also like to hold out their hands which shake while they pray (this shows that the power of God is moving).

The frustrated preaching prayers: These kind of people are often reminding God of various Bible passages and biblical principles which 'apply' to the various people for whom they are 'praying':

Lord we ask today that each person in this room might be strongly convicted of the need to put lots of money in the offering as your word tells us that you **love** a cheerful giver and that we will each reap what we sow. So Lord, let us now give freely without any sense of pressure or shame, because your word says to us... etc...

The narrative prayers: A less manipulative form of preaching prayer (but just as intensely boring). These people seem to suffer from an obsessive-compulsive tendency to remind God of the total background and context for their prayers:

Lord, I'd like to pray for Stephen, who you'll remember was out fishing the other day when a freak wave capsized his boat and he was left drifting 5 km's offshore, where he was circled by a white-pointer shark for 2 hours, before being rescued by a coast guard patrol who took him to the hospital casualty ward where he was unfortunately struck by a runaway wheelchair whilst waiting for a medical assessment... and anyway Lord, we pray for Stephen who is now in ward 7b where the food is really bad... etc...

The people who pray in tongues: This is not a reference to the biblical gift of 'languages' (As referred to in passages such as Acts 2:1-12). The people to whom I refer have actually made up a 'prayer language' all of their own, it might go something like this:

Lord, we just want to pray today that you Father might just, Lord, be just with us today and cover us all with your blood, Father. We just ask that Satan might just be totally bound Father God, over our church picnic in the park, and that your mighty angels might just hold back the rain clouds, and we rebuke the biting insects in the name of Jesus, and that we might just experience the covering as we just fellowship today in your name Lord.

Well, I wonder if any of these descriptions remind you of a prayer meeting that you've been to lately. Of course, the reason that I can comment so eloquently on all this is that I have extensive personal experience with each of the above expressions. The simple fact is that not

many of us handle the spiritual life very well. We're raised in a largely secular culture and we've simply never been taught to engage fruitfully with the spiritual mysteries that are represented in prayer. Therefore, so much of our prayer activity comes across with all the finesse of a kindergarten class who've been let loose to play in an industrial workshop (them power tools can be pretty darn dangerous in the hands of the little-tackers!).

Of course God understands our situation and our struggles and often graciously meets with us in the midst of our stumbling, bumbling and eccentric attempts to express our devotion and petitions. But do we have to stay forever locked into a 'kindergarten' cycle of comical religious antics? Is it possible to learn something of both the science and art of prayer that will enable us to engage in meaningful conversation with God? Could we learn to pray in such a way that will bring both blessing to our own souls as well as draw the attention of those currently outside the church to the possibilities of a vibrant Christian spirituality? C'mon! The answer to these questions has to be a resounding, Yes, Yes and Yes!

You can't read too far into any of the four gospels without realizing that Jesus Himself was a person of prayer. In fact prayer seemed to be the life-breath of his ministry and existence. The impression that the gospels give to us is that Jesus was very much at home with God. We see Him being drawn naturally and spontaneously to prayer. There's no sense of awkwardness, fumbling, striving or 'verbal diarrhea' in the gospel's portrayal of Jesus experience of prayer. Spiritual authority exudes from Jesus in relation to His prayer life. When Jesus comes across a spiritual manifestation of evil He doesn't need to shout, or jump up and down, or march around the synagogue seven times or say 'I bind you Satan' over and over again... Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus drove out evil spirits from the oppressed 'with a word' (8:16).

Jesus disciples were fascinated by His profound, vibrant and authoritative expression and experience of prayer... He seemed to be a master of this high spiritual art. They must have often wondered why the way in which Jesus prayed was so much more powerful, attractive and meaningful than so much of what they were used to observing. Finally, curiosity and interest prompted one of them to approach Jesus, on behalf of the whole group, and present this most important request: '... Lord, teach us to pray...' (Luke 11:10). Jesus response is recorded as what many Christians refer to as 'The Lord's Prayer' (Luke 11: 2-4, Matthew 6:9-13). In the following chapter I'd like to consider one of the important concepts which Jesus expresses in this prayer and its potential to inform and enrich our own practice of meaningful communication with God.

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