

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Spiritual Disciplines as “Means of Grace”

by Dan Trygg

“...discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; ⁸ for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. ⁹ It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance. ¹⁰ For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of believers. ¹¹ Prescribe and teach these things. ¹² Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe. ¹³ Until I come, give attention to the reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. ¹⁴ Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the elders. ¹⁵ Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress may be evident to all. ¹⁶ Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.” I Timothy 4:7-16

It is clear, when reading the above passage, that **the apostle Paul is advocating some sort of growth process, some kind of spiritual training or exercises that will help us grow in our Christian walk.** The word for “discipline” here is the Greek word, *gumnazō*, from which we derive the English word, “gymnasium”. It referred to “vigorous exercise” or “to strive through an intense, intentional training process to develop strength, skills and abilities”. **The word conveys the notion of a training program, involving intelligent planning and consistent follow-through, in order to develop spiritual strength and maturity.** The intensity of the training program is also conveyed by the word, *gumnazō*. It is related to the word, *gumnos*, which means “unclad” or “stripped down” for hard work. In John 21:7, we read how Peter was stripped for work. When he first went out in the boat, he probably had his outer garment on, but when he got busy casting the net, and pulling on the ropes to pull it back in again, ...or in maneuvering the boat to the precise locations he wanted to fish..., he put aside his outer clothing, and stripped down to the equivalent of his “T-shirt” and “skivvies”, so he wouldn’t overheat. You “took your coat off” when you prepared to dig in and work up a sweat. **The word picture Paul is painting here is unmistakably one of pursuing a training program with intense and vigorous effort.**

What kind of training program would this be? There have been many suggested throughout church history. In fact, **there have been some very different ways of thinking about this entire process.**

In the Roman Catholic tradition, it was thought that some activities or religious rituals actually contained and conveyed “grace” to those who participated in them. These were called “sacraments”. These were a fundamental part of the understanding of what it meant to be a Christian in that tradition. “Grace” was thought of almost in terms of a commodity of forgiveness and life to cover your sin and deepen your walk. **The Church taught that these practices were outward “signs” which the Lord had instituted to give grace to His people.** As a person observed these holy rituals, it was thought that they received grace from God. They believed that the holy ritual, performed by a holy person (a priest), could almost magically produce grace to cover sin.

As an outside observer, it seems clear to me that this understanding is misguided. It most blatantly fails the pragmatic test: It is not working. Many, many have been baptized as infants, confirmed as young adults, have faithfully attended the mass, participated in confession and penance, received the Eucharist, dedicated themselves in holy matrimony (or devoted themselves to some holy religious order), were anointed in sickness, and, yet, in spite of all this, continued to live very worldly and fleshly lives. They may be very committed and devoted Catholics, but they do not express the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22,23). **This type of near-magical or ritualistic thinking is also very foreign to the teachings and lifestyle portrayed in the NT. This understanding also fails the Biblical test.** There, baptism is the faith-*response* of a new believer, one old enough to hear and understand the message of the gospel, and choose to consecrate their life to Christ. The Bible knows nothing about baptizing infants, and the very word, “baptism” means to “immerse”, not sprinkle or pour. Furthermore, the NT teaches that we are all able to come to God directly through Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1,2; Eph. 2:14-18; 3:11,12; Heb. 10:19-22). We do not need to come through any other human priest. He has made *us* to be a kingdom of priests to God (I Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6). Confession to another person may be helpful, but it brings no grace, in and of itself. The idea that some act of contrition or penance could remove sin or earn righteous standing before God is totally foreign to the Bible. We are acceptable to God purely on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, offered to us as a gift, and received by faith. It is quite clear than no one can be justified by works, nor perfected by them (Gal. 2:16; 3:1-3). The Lord’s supper was meant to be a celebration and remembrance of what Christ *accomplished* for us, once for all. It was to be part of a shared meal together, a proclamation and reminder of what Jesus did on the cross. His work was a *finished* work, a *once-for-all* sacrifice, ...not a sacrifice to be offered over and over again (Heb. 7:23-27; 9:11-28; 10:10-14). Entering into marriage, or some holy religious order, *requires* grace to be

effective. You do not simply *get grace* by entering these commitments. The dysfunction and failure of marriage, and the corruption of ministers testify to this. Finally, the anointing of the sick is not always effective for healing. Whatever may have been believed, and sought for, does not seem to consistently be in evidence as a result.

The obvious failure of these practices to deepen the faith commitment of God's people spawned numerous attempts in history to press in after Christ by following more radical commitment and spiritual disciplines. As early as the mid-third century, *a movement of separatistic hermits and monks began to appear.* They could see that the lives of most church people were sorely lacking in holiness of life or intimacy with God. They withdrew from everyday life to pursue extended periods of prayer, meditation on the scriptures, fasting, solitude, silence and simple living. **Many developed communities of like-minded believers, who also committed themselves to simple living, lives of devotion, and acts of charity.** Monasteries began to spring up all over. While most did *not* chose to join such a group, many were inspired by their lives of devotion, and began to imitate many of the disciplines they followed. Unfortunately, most people simply excused themselves from such commitments, thinking they were too radical. **From the very beginning, there have been fleshly, worldly people who claimed to be Christians, but who only attended church services or did the "bare minimum" expected of them.** They have shown no serious commitment, and have spent little time or effort to grow or serve God. Then **there have also been those who seriously followed Christ by applying themselves to various disciplines in order to grow, and who attempted to live obedient lives.**

It was the corruption of many of these worldly churchgoers, even clergy among them, and the promotion of this "magical thinking" again, in the form of selling indulgences, that prompted Martin Luther to protest the practices and theology of the Roman Church. It was thought that the Church had the ability to dispense grace from the Treasury of Merit that Christ had provided through His death. Church representatives were teaching that, in exchange for a contribution, the Church could grant the donor an "indulgence of grace" to cover his sins, or that of his loved ones, so they could escape the suffering of Purgatory. Some were even purchasing indulgences sufficient to cover sins they had *yet to commit!* Luther was horrified, and protested these corrupt teachings and practices. When the Church attempted to murder him, he managed to escape, and led the Reformation, *an attempt to reform the Church.* When the Church rejected *that*, as well, **the Reformation took on a life of its own, as the common people threw off the yoke of corrupt and worldly Roman oppression. As the dust began to settle, the reformers tried to rework some of the poor teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.** Some reformers (notably, Zwingli) did away with the "magical language" and virtually eliminated the idea of a "sacrament" as a ritual for conveying grace.

As later traditions attempted to give explanation as to how disciplines worked, the phrase "means of grace" began to be employed. In some traditions, this term was used almost like the "sacrament" language had been employed. It was interpreted along similar lines, again in an almost "magical" understanding. However, other people and groups have employed this terminology in a manner that is illuminating and helpful. To them, **means of grace are avenues through which believers draw near to or align with God. As they do this, He works in their lives to quicken, strengthen and encourage them.** A key distinction between these practices and the notion of a sacrament is that *there is no power or grace inherent in the religious practice of these means of grace.* **They are Biblically prescribed, time tested practices or disciplines through which a seeker may draw near to God for insight, strength, encouragement and empowerment.** The practices *themselves* do not impart grace, but the humble faith-expectation and obedient-love of the seeker is *an appeal to God.* God is opposed to the proud, but He gives grace to the humble. **Those who invest in spiritual disciplines with the right heart do so out of faith, love and obedience.**

As an example, John Wesley categorized means of grace under two separate headings: Works of Piety and Works of Mercy, with both *private* and *communal* disciplines. The Works of Piety in early Methodism included prayer, fasting, Bible study, and healthy living as individual disciplines, and communion, baptism and fellowship, as the communal disciplines. Works of Mercy entailed acts of service focused toward individual needs, including doing good deeds for others, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned, feeding and clothing the poor, ...as well as earning, saving and giving all you can to help others and support the work of ministry. There were acts of service focused toward communal and societal needs, including working for social justice, and addressing the ills of society. At the height of the Methodist revival, careful attention to these "means of grace" were thought to be essential elements of a healthy and growing faith, and were strongly encouraged among those involved in the movement.

We live at a time of great spiritual laziness, listlessness and lethargy. People *dabble* in spirituality. They do not seriously discipline themselves to seek God or grow in effective service. Paul encouraged Timothy to *vigorous training* and *exercise* in spiritual growth. Are you willing to push yourself to grow, to push past the comfort level to get real results? **"Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress may be evident to all."**