

## PRAYER AND STUDY ARE PARTNERS

By Bill Vamos

When I was in seminary, I experienced impish delight every time I used a certain table in the library. Etched right into the middle of the table top was this bit of graffiti: "The only difference between us and other people is that we are confused on a higher level."

That is often what happens when people study. They become confused on a higher level. New ideas clash with our pre-conceived notions and scrape against our hard-won convictions. But here is a reward for such unsettling activity. Study stimulates creative thinking. We can't stay in the same mental rut. We have to re-think the issue and maybe even create a new conviction or a new way of action.

I recall how the blockbusting study, required by seminary courses, saturated us young theologues. Not only did the faculty stretch our minds, they also folded and stapled and bent them. In the process they stirred up and established a lifelong quest in us. Study is a way to keep responding to an exciting, challenging God.

Recently The Center for Christian Growth Mission Group met for about 2 \_ hours with Elton Trueblood, at Earlham College. During our discussions Dr. Trueblood kept laying on us some of his perceptive one-liners. My favorites were these: "Thinking improves by thinking. "What you don't use, you lose." Always be learning. If you're always learning, your mind will be alert." Those words acquire more impact when you know that Elton Trueblood is 82 years old.

Some time ago, I sat in a seminar led by Bill Enright, Pastor of Second Presbyterian Church, Indianapolis. He was challenging us to be more intentional in our studying. He said: *"If we're going to become the Church, we've got to let God stretch our minds in new directions ...The Gospel is chuck-full of mind-bobbling perceptions...when was the last time a new idea gripped you with power?"*

Study enables us to see more deeply into life, the world, other people and ourselves. Study also heightens our perception of how God relates to His world and His church.

And study is a compatible companion with prayer. Prayer and study are partners which keep us in balance as we develop our disciplines of spiritual renewal. In Romans 12:2 Paul writes: "Do not be conformed to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

Ernest Best of St. Mary's College St. Andrews has summarized Paul's meaning in this verse in these words: *"Now that Paul's readers belong to Christ and His Kingdom their lives must show the change...Here Paul affirms that it must begin at the very centre of being—the mind. For Paul this denotes much more than a brain which can think logically and clearly when faced with a problem; the mind should bother think out what is the will of God and make the decision to obey it. Thus the whole nature, and not just the thinking process alone, needs to be transformed."* This passage in Romans 12 makes clear to me

that solitude and prayer, and study and creative thinking need each other as disciplines for spiritual renewal.

Prayer without study can easily become no more than a spiritual method of rearranging my prejudices, or a regular attempt to add Christ Jesus to my life as one of the stars in my crown. I'll never forget the nauseating experience of listening to an evangelist deliriously hawking personal devotions because they were the key to his success. He happened to be a layman, a businessman, although his statement could have been expressed just as readily by a member of the clergy. He exclaimed to his gathered throng: *"Ever since I have been tuning in the Lord everyday, my profits have soared and now I have the scalps of 7 of my competitors hanging on my belt."* When we study the Bible, theology, and even the other multiple forms of recorded human knowledge, we keep rooting ourselves in God's action in history. All of us need that kind of study in order to correct our natural view of things. John Biersdorf in his book Hunger for Experience says:

Experience says: *"...religion of experience is not unambiguous. The emotional Power of it can deepen one's prejudices and self-righteousness. It can, and has at times, become elitist, putting burdens of guilt and inadequacy on those who cannot achieve certain states of consciousness. And it can appeal to and support privatism and social irresponsibility in American religion. Theologians have the task of helping to set the norms for religion of experience; which experiences, powerful and meaningful though they may be, are faithful to, and which are denials of the God of love."*

I believe that is part of what Paul means when he says: "...be transformed by the renewal of your mind..."

I find that I need to prioritize study at the top right next to prayer.

"Be transformed by the renewal of your mind," Paul writes. Prayer without study is like preaching without the Bible. Uninformed praying can start sounding like Charles Merrell Smith's advice on preaching in his satire entitled, How to Become a Bishop Without Being Religious. He says that when you preach, it really isn't necessary to work with the Bible or anything else theological, in fact he recommends the best document to research is the Readers Digest. He says when you preach all you have to do is "Make them laugh, make them cry, and make them feel religious." That can be true of prayer when we attempt to pray without studying. Then prayer is in danger of becoming euphoric spiritual ignorance. A mystical attempt to manipulate God.

On the other hand, study without prayer can degenerate into intellectual idolatry, in which the living God becomes a theological concept to fondle with my mind. There is a statement that periodically rings in my ears. I believe it comes from the pen of John Milton. *"Hell is the place where devils discuss predestination endlessly."*

Again, John Biersdorf helps us to focus with clarity *"...people do not seek theological talk about how one can discuss the experience of God. They hunger for the actual*

*presence of God. Theologians set norms for evaluating experience according to their intellectual understanding of the tradition. And the writings of great theologians...can themselves furnish occasions for the experience of God. But one has to have experience before guides and judgments about experience make any sense. People today hunger for the experience of reality out of which life's meaning may come, not for discussion of reality."*

In Romans 12:2, Paul is clear that study by itself is not enough. "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind..." Our reading and our thinking, like everything else need to be converted everyday. This is especially true of our reading of the Bible. James d. Smart in his excellent little book, The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church says that there is at least one place where those two German theological superstars, Karl Barth and Rudolph Bultmann, agreed with each other. Both assert that the Bible cannot be understood if we attempt to read it with total objectivity. In fact, according to James Smart, both Brunner and Barth claim that it is appropriate to read the Bible subjectively. If we understand being subjective as meaning that we subject ourselves to god's personal searching of us when we read the Old and New Testament scriptures. James Smart illuminates this conviction when he writes, "*...both Barth and Bultmann insist (that) whatever is heard from Scripture, the Scriptures have not yet spoken their essential word to (us) until in (our) hearing of them God Himself is found dealing with the human problem.*"

Study and prayer are inseparable ways of growing in Christ. Please don't hear that as bad news, just more heavy duty to add onto your daily "to do" list. Remember first of all that no one has yet been able to give absolute definitions to how the disciplines of prayer and study yield their compassion-growing fruit. Look for your own workable structures. As St. Therese of Avila once said about prayer "*...The best way to pray is the way you pray best.*"

Bill Enright says that he prays in the process of studying. He put it this way: "*Study for me blends the inner and outer world. Study is where prayer becomes real for me.*"

On the other hand, according to Richard foster, Martin Luther "*...held it as a spiritual axiom that 'He that has prayed well has studied well.'*"

I suggest a combination of the two disciplines. For example, pray with the support and instruction of study. Use a short yet scholarly commentary, to give information and knowledge of the Scriptures, as you listen to god in solitude and prayer. (i.e., Cambridge Bible Commentary; Daily Study Bible by William Barclay; Layman's Bible Commentary) Or, read a book on devotional life or on action for peace and social justice, to help you grow your regular solitude and praying. (i.e.: Opening to God by Thomas Green; Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster; The Other Side of Silence by Morton Kelsey)

We can also study in an attitude of prayer. Parker Palmer, who teaches at the Pendle Hill Adult Study Center, has an illuminating idea. He says that the way to approach study is

by seeing the process as a means by which Truth studies us, not exclusively as our way of grasping Truth. Palmer writes: *“For Christians truth is a person, and all truths are known in personal relationship. Jesus said, ‘I am the truth’ (John 14:6) Parker Palmer goes on to suggest that, when we read, we invite the author and the writing to search and explore us.*

In such a process God can come through to us. Richard Foster, in his book Celebration of Discipline makes a similar suggestion. He calls us to reflect when we study:

*“Reflection brings us to see things from God’s perspective. In reflection we come to understand not only our subject matter but ourselves...When we ponder the meaning of what we study, we come to hear and see things in a new way.”*

Two examples which combine Prayer and Study are:

1. Creative Bible Study
2. The Life That Listens, by Bill Vamos

The question of how to find time for study is always a primary issue. One suggestion: arrange for your TV set to be afflicted with a perpetual malfunction. What are your ideas?