

# DOORWAYS OF GRACE

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**MY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BIBLE HAS AT TIMES DRIVEN ME, QUITE LITERALLY, TO TEARS.** It's not that I didn't believe it. In fact I longed for the life that it offered me. But I was deeply frustrated, and largely disillusioned, by my ability ever to step into that life – the life that is life indeed.

Jesus' own words in the Sermon on the Mount were not to be anxious, yet I was anxious. He said don't be angry, yet I got mad with people. And he said there really is no need to judge and yet, all too often, I compared myself to others. How was I to escape? Or should I join the long line of people of my own age group who were leaving the Church just as we were trumpeting in all those fresh faced converts through the good work of Alpha?

If the Bible describes a life that's open to all, would someone please tell me how to get it?

Then I found myself at a meeting organised by Richard Foster in Colorado Springs, some 15 years ago now. In the group was a man I had never met, but who has now become something of a friend and mentor to me, Dallas Willard. We were divided into pairs to pray for each other and I happened to end up with Dallas.

From those early days I began listening and reading up on Richard, Dallas and the people behind Renovaré. Now I sit on their US board. The journey this has taken me on has been rich and rewarding and introduced me to how anyone can step more fully into this 'life indeed'. At the time of these early encounters I was making it good in the world of commercial publishing. I'd no idea that I'd one day lead the work of Bible Society. Some transformation!

Of course, spiritual disciplines, one of the major themes of Renovaré, are nothing new. We sometimes say that God is doing a new thing but, in fact, he is doing an old thing, or a 'new old thing' if you prefer. Of course, like its sister 'spiritual direction', spiritual disciplines are not the preserve of one part of God's Church. As Alister McGrath says in *Roots that Refresh*,<sup>1</sup> it 'remains a real and important option within the Reformation tradition'. 'In no way did the Reformation witness the abolition' of these historic practices.

So, with the knowledge that there's no single definitive list of disciplines, I began to explore the depth and diversity of these doorways of grace. I tried the discipline most people think of first, that of fasting, and discovered that the best way to do this in our busy lives is to run from after supper one day to before supper the next. I even found that it helped to take a nap during the day and that the greatest value and clarity of mind came in the last few hours of the fast.

## 'spiritual disciplines ... are about putting on the character of Christ'

### NOTES

1. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992).
2. (London: Harper & Row, 1980).
3. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

► I also learnt about fasting from other things like eating out (my job demanded it), watching TV (my usual habit after a busy day) and conversation (the neglected discipline of silence). But I also discovered the enormous joy and benefit of celebration, of feasting, of abundance and of laughter, or what has been called 'holy hilarity'.

Alongside these faltering steps I began to read up on the subject, most importantly, Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline: Pathway to Spiritual Growth*<sup>2</sup> and Dallas Willard's *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*.<sup>3</sup> They taught me that there's no virtue in spiritual disciplines in and of themselves. We can forget anything about 'earning' with regard to these practices. We're not trying to gain merits but to receive lavish amounts of grace into the core of our beings.

The gospel is rightly opposed to earning merit, but it is not opposed to effort, contrary to what some contemporary teachers suggest with disastrous results. Even the discipline of 'slowing' requires effort. A great deal of it in my case. Try it for yourself. Decide today to only cross the street when the green man appears to indicate 'walk'. Or deliberately join the *slowest* lane of traffic on the road ahead of you or at the lights. Not easy is it?

And what of all this slowing and stopping, these conscious acts of engagement and disengagement? What are they for and what do they *do*? Essentially they are means to an end and not an end in themselves. They are, at their most basic, about character formation. Quite simply spiritual disciplines, even in the hurly-burly of modern life, are about putting on the character of Christ.

The thinking is quite clear and goes like this: if you want Christ formed in you (Gal 4.19), start doing what he did. This is something the Church discovered a long time ago now but that we, strangely, seem to have largely forgotten. Jesus took time to withdraw from others on a regular basis, the practice of solitude. He memorised Scripture, the practice of repetition. And he refused to win every argument, the practice of not having the last word. Now that last one has been a particular challenge for me to embrace.

The premise that all this is based on is that when our interior worlds resemble more closely the interior world of Jesus Christ, then our attitudes and behaviours will start to resemble his as well. It's not exactly rocket science. You don't have to know more than a few verses from the Gospels to realise that Jesus stressed cleaning the inside of

the cup (Mt 23.26) to get the outside clean as well, or that when a tree is healthy then its actually quite hard to bear bad fruit from it (Mt 12.33 and Jn 15).

At the risk of being misunderstood, we could even say that this path, rightly understood, means that the life of Jesus can become for us ordinary life. I'm still working on it, but with the right mutual support and accountability progress is certainly possible.

Because spiritual disciplines are grace and not law, then there is not a fixed 'must do' list of obligations. They suit our modern and postmodern world. Back in 1728, William Law put it rather quaintly that we should 'take the liberty of adding such devotions [disciplines] as the accidental difference of your state or of your heart shall make most needful and expedient for you'. He stressed the freedom to adapt the disciplines to these 'two conditions: the difference of our state and difference of our hearts'.

I like this approach. It allows me the 'liberty' of picking up or putting down disciplines that best suit where I'm at. Feeling exhausted at work? Get up later or take some time out. Suffering from a common cold or the end of the financial year at work? Give yourself a break or change your reading (another great discipline) to something lighter. Don't beat up on yourself!

William Law also gives us an answer to the concern that some might have that all this talk of spiritual discipline is very introverted, self-obsessed or even selfish. Readers of *TransMission*, with its right emphasis on the gospel in the public square, can be encouraged by the direct connection that Law puts between the inner life and the outer world. He opens his classic *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* with the killer line that 'devotion is neither private or public prayer, but a life given to God'.

He goes on, 'he is a devout man [woman], therefore, who considers and serves God in *everything* and who makes *all* of his life a devotion by doing *everything* in the name of God and under such rules as are conformable to His glory' (italics mine). No sacred secular divide here then for the author of the book that John Wesley threw across the room because he was so challenged by it. Everything is spiritual.

Why is this inner reality of conformity to Christ bound so closely to the work of transforming our culture? Because transformed people have a much better chance of transforming society. Like the king with no clothes, we have all too often been the Church with no clothes, the clothes of righteousness (Ps 132.9). And sometimes the world is right to point out our faults, even when it's does



## *'transformed people have a much better chance of transforming society'*

so with mixed motives. My interest in spiritual disciplines has been fuelled by a realisation that, to be blunt, we can't sell what we ain't got. Not that we are in the business of exactly selling anything, but you get my point.

In the opening words of a paper given by Dallas Willard at a seminar organised by Bible Society and Baylor University in May 2006, 'human beings stand in their world condemned to act, and to act on the basis of whatever ideas, images, beliefs, impulses, desires and emotions they may have in the moment of action. We have no choice in that.' And while the transformation of our world will only come about with the right (biblical) vision of that world, so will that vision only be lived out by ordinary people like you and me when we have the capacity within ourselves to do so. It's all about character, the ability to actually do what we set our minds to do.

When William Wilberforce, a key founder of Bible Society and the champion of the abolition of slavery, said he wanted to 'make goodness fashionable' he was talking about a vision of a society shaped by the Bible that he loved so much. But if you look at his books and prayers you will see that he was also seized by the need for inner transformation, or what has been called a 'renovation of the heart'. So alongside making goodness fashionable I would like to put 'making virtue possible' and this is where spiritual disciplines come in.

Last year I took one of the most woeful trips across the Atlantic that any green-minded person could ever make. I flew to Seattle for just four days to sit on San Juan Island between Washington State and Vancouver with a trusted friend, Bill Vaswig, aged 75. There, with half an eye whale watching, I entered more fully than I had ever done before the discipline of confession. All one evening I wrote page after page about my life as best I could remember it. Next morning we got started as I carefully walked my friend through my life, making my confession as I went.

Occasionally Bill asked a question for clarification, but mostly he just kept silent. At times he even looked bored and asked, 'when are we going to get onto the interesting bits?' He didn't seem to be taking this exercise as seriously as I was! But I pressed on, determined that I wouldn't underplay things and then later talk myself into needing to do the whole painful exercise all over again. Once this profound experience was finished it was finished! Never to be revisited again.

Bill, a Lutheran minister, then put his hands on my shoulders and prayed for me. We took the pages I had written and placed them in a baking tray from the

kitchen, lit them and went outside. There in the gentle breeze of a day drawing to its close we watched as the paper caught light, turned to ash and drifted out to sea. 'We can stop now,' I said as we got chilly when the papers blew out and we had to retrieve the matches. 'No,' he said, the gravest he had sounded all day, 'We'll wait to see it *all* disappear.' And we did.

The next day we took communion together and prayed for each other. Stumbling over our words at times we just collapsed in fits of laughter, unable even to get up off the floor. Something happened that day that only heaven fully knows about. I only wish I'd not waited so long to enter the discipline of confession in such an intentional way, or that I left such a large carbon footprint behind me.

There are lots of ways readers of *TransMission* can practice spiritual disciplines, even in the workplace. Take prayer, for example. When I was working in a busy publishing office I would try to get in early and grab myself a coffee. Sitting for a few minutes before the start of the day I'd cup both hands around the mug as an act of relinquishment, confession and supplication. At other times I'd volunteer to make the coffee for the team, knowing that I could take time to reconnect with God while the kettle boiled. Or I'd take the stairs rather than the lift and enter the shortest of prayer walks ever in order to orientate my working world towards the one who holds all things together.

These little disciplines seem awkward at first. Like getting in to the car and *not* (horror of horrors) turning the radio on. This was devastating for me at first as I started to experiment with silence. But habits, let's call them holy habits, only take three months to form and often less. After this time it actually becomes harder *not* to do them. It's a bit like cleaning your teeth. You'd have to concentrate pretty hard not to get out of bed in the morning and head for the bathroom. Anyone can learn this.

I share these examples not to show off (I still fail big time) but to demonstrate that spiritual disciplines can be brought into the everyday. Washing-up when the children have all headed out the door can become time with God. Holding a sleeping child is a moment for contemplation. Walking, cycling, painting, going to sleep at night, waking up in the morning are all moments of grace where we can at least start making time to find God. Or, perhaps we should say more accurately, making time when God can find us. Now that's worth getting out of bed for. ■