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The Teaching of Prayer in Bible Colleges and Seminaries

Challenge

Teaching prayer in a seminary is no less challenging than my experience of teaching prayer as a pastor to new believers in a church. You would imagine it to be otherwise. But prayer, the simple conversation between Sovereign God and finite human being, is hard. A student wrote about it this way:

Wrestling, agonizing, sweating, working, asking, fulfilling duty, this is what prayer has been for me in my journey of faith. I have found, along with comfort and hope, both confusion and frustration. The same questions kept lurking like shadows in the back of my mind year after year. Why is prayer so hard? Why do I lose interest in praying? Why does God feel distant when I pray?

I have heard various teachings on this subject, some good, some mediocre, and I had been aware of the disparity between the teaching and my experience of prayer. Intuitively, there was a strong feeling that prayers should be more and take me deeper, But I did not even know what was missing or where to look for answers. It was startling to realize that my focus on prayer was severely limited.¹

Many persons say they pray, but few have experienced the wonder and power of prayer. Paloma and Gallup found that after 4 decades of surveys about prayer, the percentage of persons who say they pray has changed little.² However, out of 88% of persons who pray today only 15% regularly experienced a definite answer to prayer and only 12% regularly received a deeper insight into a Biblical truth.³ Statistics support the reality of the student. Many pray, but few find prayer satisfying and effective.

This is a distressing reality. Christ modeled prayer as foundational to his life with God and to his ministry. Prayer is also directly linked to the effectiveness of the church today. George Barna discovered that the only constant he ever found between effectiveness for the Kingdom of God and some other element was not some particular gifted person, was not some fancy program, but was simply prayer.⁴ In light of its importance to the Kingdom of God and in light of the difficulties people experience with prayer, seminaries and Bible Colleges must find some way to “teach” prayer that shifts the student’s experiences from difficult to vital and effective.

Methodology

Before exploring the content of a course on prayer, the question of “how” to teach prayer is critical. Knowledge in and of itself does not usually change people. Therefore, care must be given to the methods of teaching prayer. The methods are not simply pedagogical in the classroom, but also institutional.

Institutionally at George Fox Evangelical Seminary, the prayer class is part of an extensive and intentional spiritual formation program. The Seminary places the highest value on students' personal spiritual formation while studying. Students on a normal track take a spiritual formation course every semester they are in their program. The courses are scheduled in protected "bubble times" so that regular course offerings do not compete with the spiritual formation curriculum. Students have a few required courses, prayer being one, and the rest are spiritual formation electives such as "Spiritual Formation and Creation," "Spiritual Formation and the Mystics," and "Spiritual Formation and Social Justice." In all, the seminary has 22 spiritual formation courses.

All of the courses, except a couple designated for training spiritual directors, are one credit hour and are designed in a particular manner. The courses are designed to create time and reflective space for spiritual growth while students are in seminary. Therefore, they do not require research, the writing of formal papers, or the taking of examinations. Students are required to read, write reflection papers, keep journals, and participate in class discussions and a class small group. Students receive grades on the basis of attendance, completion of reading and reflection papers, and participation. Overall, the courses give the student focus, time, and accountability to their spiritual formation, and hopefully, the courses also model a spiritual formation value that becomes a lifestyle value for the graduate in ministry.

Specifically for the course on prayer, I used the insights of Jay Conger to develop the pedagogy methods. Jay Conger, a professor of organizational behavior, discovered in his research that four approaches were necessary to ensure leadership development: self-awareness/personal growth, conceptual analysis, feedback, and skill development.⁵ The development of a student's prayer life is not the same as leadership development in the area of content. However, both are formational, have a praxis component and a theory component, and both are critical to the effectiveness of the church. I have experimented with using together all four of Conger's approaches in my prayer class, and I believe, it has increased the effectiveness of the course experience.

Personal Growth

Therefore, the prayer class is designed to be a personal, honest prayer journey for each student. Early they are asked to share their experiences of prayer: what is their desire for prayer; what are their questions; what are their blocks; how did they learn to pray; and what types of prayer experiences have they had? The whole purpose of the course is to provide an opportunity for a student in community to develop a deeper and more satisfying prayer life. They are expected to pray and to make a commitment towards increasing depth and value in their prayer life. At the end of the course, I ask students to reflect on their journey during the 14-15 weeks of the semester. Over the 6 years I have taught the course, the majority of the students experience significant transformation in their understanding and experience of prayer.

Conceptual Analysis

In order to improve a student's prayer effectiveness, understanding the psychological, Biblical, and theological nature of prayer is important. In this course conceptual analysis of prayer is wedded to types of prayer experiences. For instance, I begin with prayer in the Old Testament

and we have a Jewish prayer experience using the Psalms, getting a flavor of liturgical prayer. In the New Testament we focus on Jesus' life of prayer and his teaching on prayer, and engage the student's personal experience of prayer. Before I teach on conversational and intercessory prayer, we look at the relationship of the Holy Spirit to prayer. The week I do healing prayer and the problem of unanswered prayer, we consider the different theological perspectives on prayer. We evaluate how theology reflects one's view of God and one's belief of the efficacy of prayer to change things. In the lessons on prayer and tears and prayer and the contemplative, we examine the psychological aspects of prayer. Prayer is not a warm fuzzy. A student should develop critical thinking skills and theological understanding in regards to prayer.

Feedback

As God has created us as relational beings, most of our self-awareness and maturity is linked to community. Therefore, in all the spiritual formation courses, students are put into small groups of four. Half of the class time is spent with content and interaction, and half of the class time is spent in small groups. In prayer, I allow the students to choose their small group in the third week of class. The first two weeks I mix the students up so that they get a chance to meet each other. I have them choose a group name, make a list of group prayer goals, decide how they want to support each other and hold each other accountable, and I have them prepare a confidentiality covenant. They have a group folder and each week during their small group time, they check in on their progress on goals and let me know how the group is doing.

After a lesson and prayer experience, I give them specific questions for their small group, and then I have them pray together. Poloma and Gallup concluded in their research that "The true measure of prayer is whether it transforms the old self into a new self, and changes how we relate to one another."⁶ By being in small groups and journeying together through prayer for a semester, students have some accountability for their prayer journey. I have found that when the small group experience works, it greatly enhances a student's experience in the course as a whole. At times, they don't work. In a class of 30, I will usually have one group of four which does not bond. The reason most often given is a resistance to share one's spiritual life with anyone else. If a student is not willing to submit to a group, they rarely grow.

Skills Development

Developing the praxis of prayer is also critical. Emilie Griffin wrote, "There is a moment between intending to pray and actually praying that is as dark and silent as any moment in our lives."⁷ Going through a whole semester without actually praying is wasting a semester on prayer. Prayer is experiential and therefore the experience of prayer is modeled and practiced in the classroom. Some students have never prayed out loud. Some students are new Christians and do not know how to pray. Some students are jaded, and some are arrogant about their piety. The best way to learn prayer in the simple and faith based manner of Christ is not to talk about it, but to pray.

Every week I introduce a different type of prayer along with the theological, Biblical, or psychology concept which is most naturally linked to that type of prayer. I will model the prayer and walk them through every aspect of it. Then we will pray as a class that style of prayer, and

then they often will pray again in their small groups. For instance, when I do meditative prayer, I share with them two types, projection and transposition. I tell them what I am going to do, one type at a time. I lead them through each type. In their small group they will share about their experiences and then pray for each other.

The advantage of using all four of these approaches (personal growth, conceptual analysis, feedback, and skills development) to teaching prayer is that each one of the approaches fits more naturally one learning style over another. Taken together the student is both stretched and taught, and hopefully, transformed.

Content

Prayer is a rich relational experience with God and variety often broadens and deepens that relationship. There are many ways to prayer. Richard Foster has done the best job of describing the variety of prayer experiences.⁸ Therefore, Foster's book is the one standard text I use in this course. Most of the other texts I change from semester to semester.

To keep the prayer class interesting, I develop the class on types of prayer experiences somewhat along the line of Foster. However, I divide the course into two main types of prayer kataphatic and apophatic. Kataphatic prayers tend to be more accessible and less threatening to students than the apophatic types. Therefore, we begin with the kataphatic types of prayer such as liturgical prayers, the Lord's Prayer, prayer of tears, conversational prayer, intercessory prayers and healing prayers. Even with the kataphatic prayers, I begin with the less threatening and move to the more difficult. The kataphatic prayers are more often interactive and vocal. Apophatic prayers are more often individual and silent. The apophatic types of prayer include meditative prayer, contemplative prayer, and creativity and prayer. The last prayer type I do is the relationship between prayer and play. Often prayer is seen as heavy and obligatory, and I enjoy very much teaching them how to pray through play. The last two weeks deal with prayer ministry and a challenge again to a life of prayer.

Examples of other books I have used in the course include: (1) Roberta Bondi, *To Pray and To Love*, (2) Sandra Cronk, *Dark Night Journey*, (3) Emilie Griffin, *Clinging*, (4) Jeanne Guyon, *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ*, (5) Bill Hybels, *Too Busy Not to Pray*, and (6) Ann and Barry Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer*.

I do not discuss the books much in class, but use them as another avenue to understanding prayer. Students keep a journal throughout the course reflecting on their prayer experiences and the readings. Students write a final reflection paper which addresses their understanding of prayer, their experience of prayer in the course, and their plan for continuing their prayer journey.

Conclusion

Teaching prayer well is difficult. First of all I have to be a person of prayer. A person of prayer does not just talk about prayer, but lives a life of prayer and believes passionately in its importance for growing deeper in Christ and for accomplishing God's purposes in the world.

Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, “Prayer is the soul of religion, and failure there is not a superficial lack for the supply of which the spiritual life leisurely can wait. Failure in prayer is the loss of religion itself in its inward and dynamic aspect of fellowship with the Eternal.”² Each time I teach the class, I wonder if I will be able to plant deep in the soul of the student a passion for prayer and a persistent habit of prayer.

I would greatly appreciate learning from the experiences of other faculty teaching this subject. How does one get in all there is to say about prayer in one semester? How does one address the wealth of cultural diversity in prayer? How does one deal with the apathy or woundedness of the student which inhibits their ability to pray? How does one create an experience where a taste of prayer drives them back again and again for more? I still have much to learn, but I am encouraged when a student writes this:

This class on prayer has stretched me and pushed me, sometimes much further than I felt comfortable. Praise, confession, intercession, even unanswered prayer, these are factors that I am familiar with. But meditation, breath prayer, play, creativity, simply resting in God and being refreshed...

These are definitely not normal in my prayer life.

Reading about the different types of prayer and discussing them in class have been very helpful and eye-opening. However, what has really expanded my prayer horizons are the prayer experiences we have had in class. I have never colored with crayons while praying. I have never moved together with others while repeating in unison a Hebrew prayer. My mind has been engaged in prayer before, but not my imagination.

The hardest realization for me to deal with is this: my prayer life is a reflection of my relationship with Jesus. Maybe Jesus has seemed so distant because I have kept him detached by my preconceptions and limitations. I want my prayer life to change and so I must begin with my relationship to Jesus. I am thirsty, ready to move on beyond a functional and rational spirituality into a more emotional and relational experience.¹⁰

¹ Shane Gandara, *Tending the Garden of Prayer* (Final Reflection Paper for SFAD 520, Portland, Oregon, April 1999) [used with permission] 1-2.

² Margaret Poloma and George Gallup, *Varieties of Prayer: A Survey Report* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴ George Barna, *What Effective Churches Have Discovered* (Notes taken at a seminar in Portland, OR, 1997).

⁵ Jay Conger, *Learning to Lead* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1992).

⁶Poloma and Gallup, 131.

⁷Emilie Griffin, *Clinging: The Experience of Prayer* (NY: McCracken Press, 1994), 13.

⁸Richard Foster, *Prayer* (Harper SanFrancisco, 1992).

⁹Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer* (New York: Association Press, 1919), xi.

¹⁰Shane Gandara, 3.