

Intercontinental Church of God

26. The Christian Relationship with God

DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

A Christian's personal relationship with God is fundamental to his current spiritual condition and his ultimate spiritual state. Prayer, Bible study, meditation, fasting and serving fellow human beings are the chief means by which such a relationship is initially established and continually deepened.

DOCTRINAL OVERVIEW

Salvation is an individual matter between a person and God. God will grant salvation as an unmerited gift of mercy if the individual has the proper relationship with Him. God will forgive our sins if we ask Him to do so in prayer. God will greatly reward those who diligently study His Word and meditate on His way for the purpose of better serving Him. Thus, it is of profound importance that one attain the deepest and closest possible state of personal fellowship with God.

But the Christian does not merely seek to build and nurture this close relationship between himself and God because he must do so. Rather, the true Christian finds the developing rapport with his spiritual Father to be a uniquely satisfying and joyous experience that transcends any physical friendship or association. This warm, personal relationship gives the peace of mind, spiritual confidence and faith that can only come from knowing that one really has contact with the Designer, Sustainer and Ruler of the entire universe.

The intimate relationship that a Christian has with his God is that of a family—the affinity is that of a son or daughter with his deeply loving and concerned father. "As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord tenderly sympathizes with those who revere him" (Ps. 103:13, *Modern Language Bible*). The tie between a Christian and God far transcends the "blood" relationship of physical families—it is the relationship of God's Holy Spirit (1 John 1:3). It is through this spirit that we can have contact with God when even words cannot express our feelings (Rom. 8:26). It is through this spirit that we are begotten as God's sons; through it we gain the right to know God, and indeed to call Him our "Father" (Rom. 8:15-16); and it is also through God's Holy Spirit that we gain brotherhood with Jesus Christ so that He becomes our spiritual elder brother (Heb. 2:11).

As a physical and biological creation, man is constantly in need of food, air, water and other necessities of life to maintain and strengthen his body. In like manner, the Christian's life as a spirit-begotten son of God also requires proper maintenance. The spirit of God is nurtured and grows within our minds in much the same fashion as our muscles are nurtured and grow within our bodies. Constant, constructive activity of a spiritual nature is essential if a Christian is to thrive and reach his fullest potentialities. Personal and private devotion includes prayer, Bible study, meditation and fasting. These serve to initiate, and then to augment and enhance, a person's relationship with God.

Prayer is man's personal communication with God. When one prays, he utters verbally or mentally his praise for God, his thanks for God's blessings, and also his requests from God for himself and for others. Biblical example shows one should maintain close prayerful contact on a daily basis—even several times daily (Dan. 6:10). The Christian's prayers are an offering to God; they are described as incense stored in golden bowls before God's throne (Rev. 5:8). A Christian's prayers are not mere repetitions or imposed or stylized prayers, but rather heartfelt, personal communication with the Creator, analogous to communication with an intimate personal friend. A Christian shares his hopes, dreams, frustrations, needs and desires with God as he would with a physical father whom he loves and who loves him.

Jesus' instructions in Matthew 6:5-13 are the clearest in the Bible regarding prayer. We are told to pray to our Father in secret; not to heap up empty phrases; to address God as our Father; to hallow His name; to pray for His Kingdom to come; to ask that His way be followed and His will be done; to thank Him for our sustenance and other blessings; to forgive us for our sins; to help us forgive those who sin against us; to keep us from temptation; to deliver us from Satan; and to help us understand, appreciate and look forward to the majesty, power and glory of God.

While no one can dictate the amount of time one should spend in personal prayer, Paul's admonition "be constant in prayer" epitomizes that the proper mental attitude for the Christian is to always be close to God. Although praying on one's knees is a common biblical example (Acts 20:36; 21:5), there is no official posture or position of prayer. One can pray at any time, in any place, with any position and for any reason, and know with full assurance that God is listening. Of course, the *attitude* of the individual is critical in determining how God reacts to our prayers. On the one hand, God states that it is our iniquities and sins which separate us from Him, so that He will neither hear nor answer our prayers (Isaiah 59:2). On the other hand, when we go to God in faith, with a humble and contrite spirit, He will both hear and spiritually revive us (Isaiah 57:15).

In order to pray, we must realize that Jesus Christ is our Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5), our Intercessor (Rom. 8:34) and our High Priest (Heb. 2:17-18). He sympathizes with our weaknesses and understands our problems, because He was "in all points"—"in every respect," (RSV)—"tempted as we are" (Heb. 4:15). It is only through Jesus Christ and His sacrifice that we can approach God the Father in prayer. This is a remarkable reality, truly an awesome opportunity to literally come into the presence of God and have His full attention, interest and concern. This is why the veil into the Holy of Holies (where God symbolically dwelled) was ripped apart when Jesus died, as direct access to the Father was suddenly made available for all mankind for the first time (Matthew 27:51; Heb. 9, especially v. 8). But even more than this, our direct contact with God the Father can be *bold and with confidence*. Through Jesus Christ our high priest, we can "come boldly before the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). Though God is the very Creator of this vast unfathomable universe, He wants us to speak to Him strongly, directly, honestly and resolutely. This means that Christians should pray to God "with confidence" (RSV), asking Him to forgive them for their sins and to provide them with their spiritual and physical necessities. But *we must ask* in our prayers; we must make the conscious effort; we are part of the process. We must take the active step of aggressively importuning God in faith. As Jesus told His disciples:

"Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him" (Matthew 7:7, 11).

In the same way that prayer can be defined as communication with God, so can Bible study be defined as God's communication to man through His written Word (Heb. 1:1). The Bible is God's instruction book on how man should live his life. It is also the record of how God has dealt with men and mankind in the past, and how God wants human beings to respond and react to Him. The Bible is the handbook to salvation, the textbook of eternal life. Certainly no Christian could say he knows God if he has not read about God in God's holy Word. He must learn to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). While the Bible may be and should be studied from different angles and points of view (e.g., in a technical manner to understand doctrine), the most important Bible study for a Christian is to humbly approach God's Word to learn how he might more perfectly live his life before his Creator. A Christian studies the Bible with the full recognition that God is instructing him *that* he must personally apply biblical laws, precepts, principles and directives in his daily life. A true Christian seeks "training in righteousness," and this can often come about only through correction of error; consequently, the true Christian must search the Bible for God's correction in his life. As Paul wrote to Timothy: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Closely related to and practically inseparable from prayer is meditation. Meditation in the Bible is simply concentrated thinking on a spiritual topic. It may include focused attention on a particular biblical concept or passage in order to probe its deepest message or meaning (Ps. 1:2), or God's wonders and work (Ps. 77:12; 143:5). Meditation can also mean thinking before God, as it were, on a topic about which we need to grow and understand. Similarly, meditation can be any personal thinking with the conscious awareness that God is listening and concerned. Hence, meditation is closely akin to prayer, and often indistinguishable from it. (The original words are often capable of meaning either "pray" or "meditate.")

Fasting is illustrated throughout the Bible as a tool by which a Christian can stimulate his personal relationship with God. It is not a means of penance, but is rather a type of self inflicted trial that reminds one of his own humanness and humbleness before his great Creator God. It is by definition a specified period of time in which an individual goes without food (and perhaps without water) in order to remind oneself of his ephemeral, fleeting existence. Fasting forces us to focus full attention on drawing close to God. The examples of fasting in the Bible generally involve grave crises indicating that it is not a ritualistic thing to be done on a periodic schedule. Nevertheless, one should fast occasionally, even though he may not at the time be confronting an emergency, so he will have the spiritual reserve necessary should an unforeseen trial come along.

Prayer, Bible study, meditation and fasting are not ends in themselves. Rather, they are means through which we gain the spiritual strength and endurance necessary to face the trials and tribulations common to all humanity. The human problems of survival, health, happiness, family, marriage, success and other such activities of normal life become challenges to the Christian rather than merely tests of endurance. It is through facing and handling personal problems and even tragedies that a Christian builds faith and develops the essential strength of character necessary for salvation. He views life as a training ground where he can develop the positive qualities of love, patience, faith, hope, and the other traits of God's Spirit.

Likewise, the Christian understands the purpose of godly correction, and punishment. He knows God's ultimate purpose is to reproduce Himself through man, to elevate man from human nature to God's own nature, from mortality to immortality. He realizes that at times God must correct His children to stop them from hurting themselves with evil and to direct them into the godly obedience that produces character and happiness. The Christian realizes that all humans at one time or another need God's loving correction and thus he responds to this correction in his own life with repentance and submission to the laws which are intended for his happiness. God is a loving Father who will, when the occasion arises, correct us—not in anger or out of spite—but rather for our own good.

The twelfth chapter of Hebrews exemplifies God's attitude, His great fatherly love, in correcting His children. We are told "not to regard lightly the discipline of the Lord" (v. 5), because "the lord disciplines him whom He loves" (v. 6). God is treating us as sons (v. 7) and if He did not correct us, we would be "illegitimate children and not sons" (v. 8). God's motivation in correction is clear: "He disciplines us for *our good, that we may share His holiness*" (v. 10).

In the last half of Matthew 25, Jesus Christ explains how we should be developing a progressively more personal relationship with Him. He told His disciples that when we *serve others*—when we give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, welcome to the stranger and company to the sick—we are actually serving Jesus Christ Himself.

When we extend ourselves to do good to the least of His brethren, then we are in fact credited just as though we had done those same things to Jesus Christ personally. It is a profound point. It shows that a Christian's relationship with God must expand beyond internal spiritual thoughts and express itself in an attitude of outgoing concern and compassion for one's fellow man by external physical actions.

Serving human beings is indeed one of the most spiritually penetrating concepts revealed in the Bible. Only by loving one's fellow man can prayer, Bible study, meditation and fasting have any real meaning,

James put it succinctly: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead ... and I by my works will show you my faith ... You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:17, 18, 24).

It is with this overall understanding of God's ultimate plan well in mind that the Christian, as a truly begotten son, develops his intimate relationship with his spiritual Father through prayer, Bible study, meditation, fasting and the full living of the active Christian life.

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This publication is intended to be used as a personal study tool. Please know it is not wise to take any man's word for anything, so prove all things for yourself from the pages of your own Bible.

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