

Prayer or humanism?¹

Ignace Demaerel
(Translation: Kate Weir)



"Praying is important": is there any Christian who would dare dispute that or dismiss it as nonsense? Not one, of course! And yet, if we put our daily Christian life under the magnifying glass, and look at how much time and priority prayer gets in our busy schedules, then all of a sudden prayer doesn't really seem to be as important as all that. In any case, a whole list of



things suddenly grabs our attention, worms its way to the top in our ranking order, and time and time again threatens this deep need for stillness in our spirit. Recognize yourself in this? Dare you look into this mirror? Is it painful to own up to it honestly? Many Christians, especially western ones, are suffering from **spiritual anorexia**: their spiritual life is being systematically underfed. Our body gets a hundred times more care and physical food; our soul gets ten times as much attention and time (e.g. relaxation, relationships...); so our spirit has to live on "fresh air" but can it still "grow by itself"...?

Many christians' prayer level is dramatically low. An honest survey would really teach us a lot: how many minutes are spent each day looking at TV, in hobbies, in taking care of the outer man, in the "cares of this world" (Matt. 13:22)..., and how many in prayer? We can confess all too easily with our lips that prayer is important, but if our first reaction in a desperate situation is "How are we going to solve this problem?" and not "Let's pray!", then **where is our heart?** What are our eyes focusing on - heaven or earth? How does prayer really work in our lives? Is it a decorative formula according to our own choices? Are we going to involve God in the closing stages or right from the start? Is prayer the last compartment on the train or the engine up front? Is it one of the other many activities that we still have to do, or the source from which we do everything?

And what about our leaders? Do they seek God more than others do, or are they just more under pressure? It is far more important for them that prayer should penetrate their whole life, but they are under greater pressure from circumstances and attacks by the enemy.



¹ This article is the most difficult one I have ever written in my whole life, since it has also been constantly revealing to me how much I am a child of my own times. It has cost me a lot of struggles, and I am still struggling with many of the things that I describe here. Nevertheless, I stand behind every word that I have written, even if I am still on the way to aligning with it myself. That's why I don't want to throw stones at anyone, and I hope that nobody will take it that way. Here and there some things may hit hard and are expressed in glaring black and white, but the reason is to make them clearer and more precise, and not to judge anyone at all.

Of course it all has to do with the spirit of the age: **our western world believes far more in "doing" than in "praying"**. Organising, planning and meeting together are easier for us than drawing closer to God and waiting on Him. Waiting on God... hmm, not easy: it seems such a waste of time, our 'old man' would rather run away from this at all costs, as it gives an uneasy feeling of dependence. The 'doers' among us, even during their prayer time, are desperate to get back to work again...



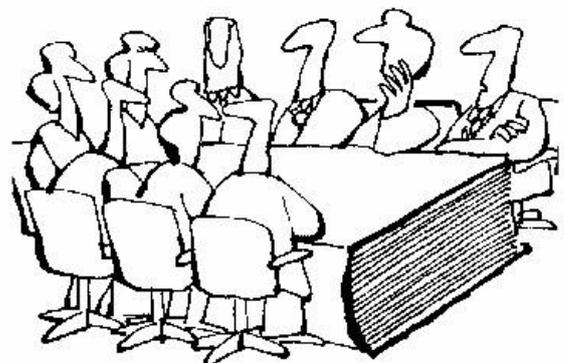
People who pray are really confessing their dependence on God, that they trust in God. **People who don't pray, are also confessing quite a lot:** "it's ok, I can get by without God... I'll try and get by without God as long as possible, till I can't go on any longer, and then I'll call on Him for help". And when we really can't go on any longer, and we've really made a mess of it, is God then obliged to clean up all the junk? Is He the reserve player in our lives waiting on the sideline, the solution in an emergency, Plan B, C, D...? It's like the man whose washing machine is faulty, and he says to himself: "I'll try and fix it myself, without reading the manual or calling a technician, and when it's all lying in bits and I really can't do any more with it, then I'll 'phone the expert".

Isn't it a bit strange that people whose PC or car break down go straight to the shop or the garage, but for the more serious problems of life (far more complex than a PC) they want to solve everything by themselves!?

If we believe so strongly in our doing and activity, who or what do we believe in? In our own abilities? In our own power to do things and our own talents? In our own intelligence and experience? In all our latest methods...? In the end, just in ourselves!? We find it easier to trust in our **own wisdom** (i.e. self-wisdom) than in God's endless wisdom. However, "trusting in man" is a synonym for "humanism". Oops! Help! All of a sudden, without noticing it, I seem to be adopting a completely different philosophy of life! There seems to be an idol standing right in the middle of my temple! Is our situation really that bad? The prophet Jeremiah uses hard words that had never been heard before: **"Cursed is the man who trusts in man"** (Jeremiah 17:5). Ouch, that's a bit raw. The inclination to manage everything in our daily lives on our own, even as Christians, seems to hit us just as hard as the law of gravity. It seems so much simpler and "safer" to keep everything under control. Yes, but in the world around us we can also see and feel the results of this!



What's it like in the church? How much trust in man, **how much humanism** is there **in our church system?** Over the centuries the church has developed so many structures, rituals, creeds, rules and laws. Church leaders have been so proud of the church structure they have built up through their experience over the centuries, that they have come to think: "fortunately we are further along the road than those amateur first Christians were, when it was often quite chaotic; of course the apostles were just simple uneducated men, and we have brought the

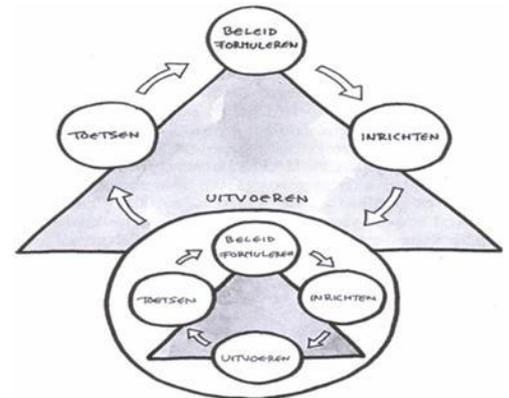


church up to a far higher level with our advanced training..." Theologians believed that their subtle well thought-out **theology** actually put it in better words than the Bible itself, and have more or less said: "you don't need to read the Bible any more: our catechism says it in a nutshell, more clearly and systematically than these illiterate fishermen"! This same danger is lurking even in our present day churches: we develop structures, statutes, rules, vision statements, methods for evangelism, organigrams, role models for authority..., and we rank them so highly and so professionally **that we are almost proud of them**. We copy them from professional marketing specialists, successful business leaders, experts, great politicians and think: "if the church doesn't grow now, if revival doesn't break out now, then I don't know how it ever will!". We pay a lot of attention to spotless organisation, mega-conferences, a seamless program using the most modern multimedia (just like "the world!"), the most modern buildings with the best acoustics, the most comfortable armchairs... We stand in amazement at our own capacity, practically worship "the work of our own hands" (according to Isaiah 2:8, a way of describing idolatry!).

What arrogance and twisted judgment! What an exaggeration of our own human activity. On the outside we can actually sometimes accomplish really impressive things as churches, but if we were to compare the spiritual content of the rich, western churches with the first Christians (or e.g. the spiritual content of the persecuted Christians who risk their lives), we would be deeply ashamed.

Many organisations are also built on a **strong leader**. Thank God for strong, charismatic leaders, but as soon as people begin to switch on to thinking "he'll do it, he knows what to do, he knows the way, he'll bring revival...", they start building again on a person. How many great leaders have to fall before we get the message that this is not what it's all about? We can see the same thing in evangelism: how much confidence is built on great speakers, great men of God, "great names"... that make us to tend to think: "if this world evangelist, this faith healer, this prophet would only come to our land, everything would change!" How difficult do we find it to expect salvation to come from God alone!?

Why is it that in Europe, the only continent in the world, that the church suffers from such a strong form of **anaemia**? The spirit of the age is currently dominated and dictated by humanist values. And yet Europe was once upon a time *the* Christian continent, the standard-bearer of Christendom. The Christian faith survived the most dreadful persecution in the first centuries and overcame the mighty Roman Empire without earthly weapons. However, when a **new, "modern" image of the world** arose at the end of the Middle Ages that put man (instead of God) at the centre of the universe, the church did not seem to be strong enough on the inside to withstand the onset of humanism. The churches were seemingly too weak to offer a powerful alternative. Naturally a physical enemy



"Some trust in chariots, and some in horses, but we will remember the Name of the LORD our God."
(Psalm 20:7).



on the outside is easier to fight than a spiritual, invisible one. The new world image penetrated first science and the arts, then theology and the church. The wine of the Gospel was mixed (more and more) with water until it tasted like nothing at all, and finally the church was drummed into the corner by society as irrelevant.

It's bad enough that it has penetrated our society, but it is far more serious that it has invaded our churches as well. It is so subtle: it is just like a cloud of poison gas wafting over our land that people neither see nor smell. It hangs everywhere - in education, the media, politics. It is so "obvious" that it is nearly a crime to question it...

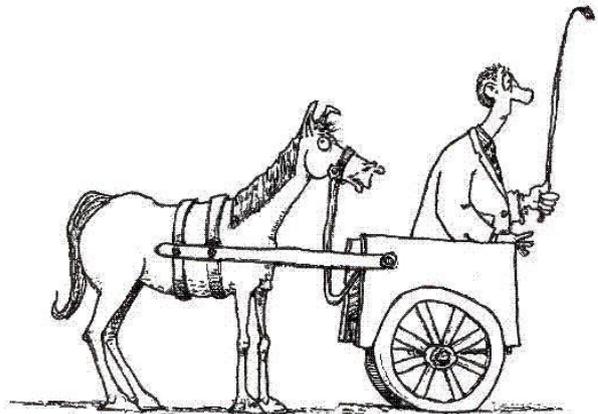
Let's make it clear first of all what "humanism" actually means. Humanism is:



making **man the measuring rod in everything**. Put differently: in everything we do, starting from our own point of view instead of from God. Living and planning our lives as if we had the first and last word. For an unbeliever this is as clear as day, but a Christian has accepted God in his life as Creator, hasn't he? Humanism in the life of a Christian means: **giving God a minor role** in our existence. Allowing God entry just as much as we need Him, in the areas where we have chosen and at the moments we decide (so that we can always make the last decision ourselves). Some Christians live as if God should be happy that they go to church and

pray from time to time! Or they pray as if God is our message boy and has to serve us (straight away!) when we ask Him.

We treat God as if we were putting the cart before the horse. If we were to look at ourselves from God's perspective, we would discover, to our shame, that we have turned the world upside down. Probably we all do it once or twice, or at least we try to do it... until we discover that it won't work that way, that God won't be manipulated by our caprices, and then we'll really repent, turn around and let God be God. We didn't create God, but He created us. God is not there for us, but we are there for Him!



Even a church can function in a humanistic way: running our organization and arranging our meetings in such a way that we could go on if He's not around, that we wouldn't even notice the difference. It's like a business where the employees plan everything so well that the boss is not needed (or is not even welcome) in his own business. Try checking up a bit on the **humanistic content in your church**: if the leaders' team meets, do they meet for two hours and pray God's blessing for two minutes over the decisions that they have just made? Before Jesus took any crucial decisions, like choosing His 12 disciples, He spent a whole night in prayer; how does that go down in our churches? Do we really

realise that the church belongs to God? That it's all about His children? It's irresponsible to be working in God's kingdom without first hearing the Boss's instructions and then following them closely.

One great preacher once said: if Jesus came to the earth today and visited His church, He would throw out 85% of it just like He did at the time when He cleansed the temple of everything that people had built up round about it. Or, to put it differently: if Jesus led a church today the way He wanted, 85% of the church members would walk out in consternation and go to another church. These are hard words, but it's being honest if we ask ourselves: what would stand the test in my church?

Let's take a look at **the example Jesus gives us in all this**. Did He build up a huge organisation? Did He leave behind the "perfect" statutes and church rules for us? Did He take the Roman Emperor with all his efficient administration as an example for His Kingdom? Did He choose managers as His disciples? Who was His PR specialist, His spokesperson? How many large buildings did He set up? What percentage of His budget went towards communication and advertising? None of that, of course! Neither was it because these things did not exist then, but because these are not the source of His world changing power. His Source was His Father. His secret was "*the Son can do nothing by Himself, but only what He has seen the Father do*" (John 5:19). When He was tired, He didn't go to a "wellness centre", but climbed up a mountain to be alone in prayer. He didn't choose the twelve best trained, most promising young men of His day: He didn't need any human grandeur or skill to set up the greatest religion in history. No diploma, noble descent, no rich family, no earthly position of authority, no brilliant strategy... He just wanted to show by the very absence of worldly power and intelligence that it was only God's power that led this maligned little Jewish sect to eventually overcome the Roman Empire. In spite of this **lack of professional entourage**, He had a deeper impact on the world than any other world leader!



We live in a world where being efficient is extremely important: we want to use each minute to the full and see results straight away. If we're talking about having a stronger, more lasting impact,

Jesus was incredibly efficient. But how efficient is our campaign, our organisation or planning? Let's certainly not overestimate it! In the long run our projects don't really mean that much: what is left of them after 5, 10, 20, 50... years? Organisations, even Christian ones, come and go. In the light of eternity it's more important from God's point of view who we *are* than what we *do*! Someone's personality and charisma leaves a far greater mark than their actions and deeds.

Do we really want to leave a (lasting) impression on this world? Seek God first and foremost! Take time, lots and lots of it, to lay a solid spiritual foundation. How much time? Jesus took 40 days *before* He preached even *one* sermon or performed even *one* miracle. How many of us have ever set just *one* full day apart to seek God on our own?

The humanist world view is also very materialistic, and this influences our current way of looking at life: the material, visible reality seems so real, true and important, while the supernatural world seems so vague, cloudy, imaginary and spooky. We all find it difficult to "believe without seeing" (John 20:29). We would rather walk on the ground than on water. We prefer down-to-earth realities before God's promises. In reality, God only needs to say one word to create the universe: **the power of the spiritual world** is so awesome. There are angels in heaven that are so big that one of their feet stands on the earth and the other is in the sea, and that one word from their mouth will change history (Revelation 10:1-3)! If we could see that and grasp it just once, we would live in a totally different way: then we would rather pray than slave away in our projects. Then we would see that two hours' prayer is more effective than two hours' organising or giving out folders.



We can sometimes feel the effect that western humanism has on us when we come in contact with **African** churches, for example, and their spirituality: when we taste their fiery prayers, their uninhibited faith, the obvious place God has in their lives and in their society, the ease with which they fast... it looks as if they are not infected by this spiritual virus that has penetrated the western world en masse. From their point of view, they are amazed that we don't cast out demons and heal sicknesses (just like Jesus), that we don't have any dreams or visions and see angels (just like the apostles). Western Christians have difficulty fitting the supernatural into their world view - we can't seem to hold it in our mindsets. Is there something wrong with the Biblical world view or with our "scientific" (closed, man-focussed) world view?



I sometimes see Christians who have walked with God for a number of years suddenly backsliding, staying out of the picture and actually disappearing... It's very sad, but I often wonder how deep their prayer life was? You can understand if they were disappointed in people, but did they build their faith on people? Have they grown tired after so many years of serious involvement and few results? That may be, but did they not seek and find their joy, peace and strength in refreshing times with the heavenly Father? Doing God's work on **human fuel** will always lead, sooner or later, to burnout. God never meant us to accomplish His task in our human strength.

We can give a name to a lot of "extenuating" circumstances that cause poverty in prayer, such as pressure, stress, fatigue (tiredness), emergencies..., but not one of them is a good enough reason for **neglecting our first and foremost priority**, or for giving up our first loyalty. A married who neglects his wife on account of numerous very understandable circumstances, will sober up very quickly and rather painfully when he gets a letter from his wife's lawyer. Afterwards, if he is honest, he will have to admit that there were many warning signs that the relationship was not going well, that each was rejecting the other or keeping their distance, and that his wife had tried many times to make it clear to him that things were not right... It is not a sign of maturity when we shove guilt onto the devil, onto other people or onto circumstances: if God created us to rule over the planet, then we really have to begin to rule over our own lives, our use of time and our choices instead of going with the flow. Praying or a "don't-have-time-to-pray" attitude are our **own responsibility!** We are mature adults and must face the consequences of our choices. At the end of the day, it will be obvious from our actions how important we take prayer to be and what place God really has in our lives. Is this judging ourselves too strictly? Perhaps it is, but if we really get a fright about our stubborn humanistic attitude, it will bring life. God help us not to gloss over our falling short of the mark or to take it too kindly, but to humbly admit it. And if we confess with real humility, He, fortunately!, gives much grace, and He wants to help us on the way to establishing heavenly patterns in our lives.



Let's try out an experiment with our thinking: imagine that someone "forces" you to spend **24 hours alone with God** in one certain place: would the very idea give you a terribly uncomfortable feeling, or would you say: "Ah, wonderful, at last some time to be alone with my heavenly Father"? Interesting way to examine yourself, isn't it? Compare it with this: You would gladly spend 24 hours alone with the person you love the most and not even think it was enough time; is that the same thing then with God? If not, how come? What picture do we really have of Him? "To know God" is the definition of "eternal life" (according to John 17:3!), but there is no other way of getting to know God than through praying, speaking to Him? and spending (a lot of) time with Him.

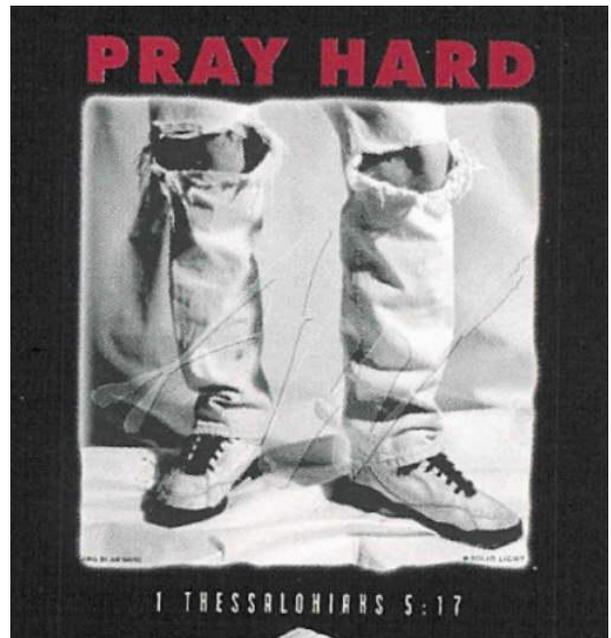


How often have you really gone after God? And **how hard have you been seeking?** How long did you persevere? How quickly were you discouraged when you didn't see any breakthrough?

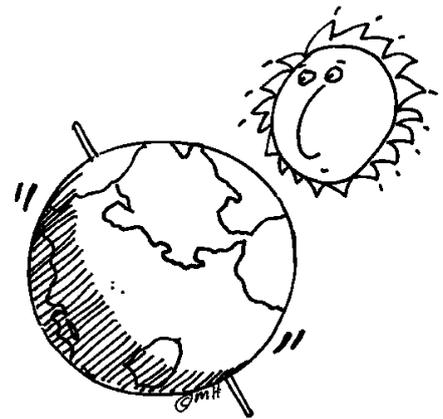
To come into a deep relation with God through prayer we should shut ourselves up regularly for hours (or better: for days), alone with God, naked before His face. Maybe we will feel really awkward in the beginning, and not know what to say or how to behave... Maybe we will need a lot of time to battle through all the obstacles, our inner walls, our resistance, the distractions..., maybe it just won't work several times... Do we give up? Or will we call out to Him even louder? Will we try tougher measures? Ever fasted? Fasted a long time? Fasting is a strong

support for prayer: we switch off our body to show God that we really mean it, that His words are more important to us than eating. Fasting goes very much against our humanism! If we persevere and push through to the core of a relationship with our Creator and Father, to real interaction, in-depth contact, a Father-son-moment, the reward will be more than worth all the trouble.

Job thought he knew God all his pious life long..., but when he really heard God speaking, he understood that he had been living all these years far away from God, and had hardly had any personal contact with Him (Job 42:5). How are things with us? Have we ever heard God speak to us directly and met Him face to face? Prayer can maybe (probably/quite definitely) be much more than we think it is.



Actually, humanism (putting man at the centre of things) is not so much a theoretical way of life, but the result of our self-centredness, our being tied to the material things, navel-gazing: because of sin it has become so difficult to not think from our own viewpoint. Humanism as an ideology is just the rational articulation (justification-afterwards) of this lifestyle which, on closer inspection, is totally unsustainable. We all need a thorough **Copernican revolution** in our lives: mankind thought for centuries that the sun went round the earth, until one man who had enough courage to examine the facts objectively.



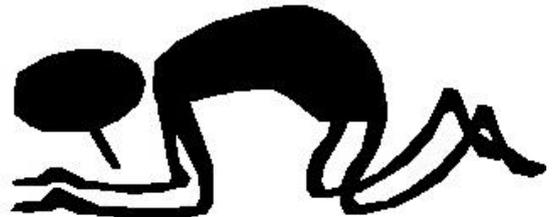
Copernicus reckoned that it was far more logical to explain the movements of the heavenly bodies if we took the position that the earth went round the sun! What a shock that brought into the world of his day! What a paradigm-shift! How difficult it is for us to think that we are not the centre of the universe! Even today we still live as if this were the case, for we say every day: "the sun is rising" or "the sun is moving to the west". And it's just the same in the spiritual world: God does not revolve around us (around me), but we revolve around God. God was not created for us, but we were created for God! God is not there to satisfy our needs (and to serve us!) but we are there for Him! As long as we hold to the attitude that He has to do something for us, then we are way off-track and haven't understood the basics yet! Then we are serving a self-made God, a God whom we have pressed into the little frame that we like to have Him in. In order to make the Copernican revolution, we need a real new birth: anything else is not strong enough. We cannot hold on to a geocentric (egocentric?) worldview that we can adjust to suit ourselves, where we gloss over inner contradictions or disguise them. The sinful 'old man' essentially cannot be patched up: even when we are serving God, he (the 'old man') always wants to be at the centre and he is only interested in God when it suits his own ends. He has to be crucified radically, and the 'new man' – Christ in us – must take his place.

What is **real 'theocentricity'**? Let's look at what it's like in heaven, in eternity. That and that alone must be the final 'norm' for our earthly church fellowship. In Revelation 4:8 and 11 we read an impressive vision: the four living creatures who are seated in God's immediate presence, very holy beings, each with six wings, full of eyes in front and behind... They cry out day and night without stopping: *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, Who was, and Who is, and Who is to come!"* In other words, their attention is focused day and night on God alone, on His holiness: that is the one thing that is worth crying out. That alone is the real essence of things, the true reality -

all the rest is just a detail. There is nothing that anyone can add to that. Everything else just fades into infinity. And the 24 elders on the thrones in the innermost circle around God's throne, fall down before Him again each time the creatures cry this out, cast down their crowns and cry out: *"You are worthy, Lord, to receive the glory, the honour and the might, for You have created all things, and by Your will they exist and are created"*. Once more we see, at the holiest moments in heaven, in the innermost circle around God's throne, that this is the only thing that can be said, the core of it all, the most profound reality, the most tangible essence...: God

alone at the centre! He is worthy to receive everything! He alone! Compared to Him, all the rest (everything that angels or men can do or earn) is not worth a mention. At a moment like this, giving glory to man or angel would be sooooo out of place, so unsuited, so out of proportion, that it would be repulsive. This kind of theocentric worship is the only thing that can endure the test of eternity. All earthly worship that does not have this as its focal point, is hardly worth being labelled "worship". That is theocentricity at its purest. And all human forms of things, be they the most sophisticated church structure, the most balanced church ruling, the most professional statute, the most inspired method, the most brilliant theology, ... at best (!) can only resemble the crowns that are cast down. Just as Paul said once: *"What things were gain to me (my position, my diploma, my own righteousness...), I count them as rubbish ... for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ"* (Phil. 3:7-10)! Compared to the living dynamic presence of God and to knowing Him, everything else is second best, no, third, fourth... no, it is even an obstacle, dirt, a burden, if we trust more in this than in God. In Paul's case these pious, religious things (his theological studies and knowledge of the law) really separated him from God and he was fighting against God: when it leads to pride and self-righteousness, it leads to death.

Let's make it clear: working really hard at good methods, structures, rules and theologies is certainly not wrong in itself, it is even necessary! And thank God for good theologians and church builders. But it can so easily draw our attention downwards instead of upwards, so that we lose sight of the most important thing and idolise things of our own making. Let's



never be deceived into thinking that we can impress God with our own works and construction! He is the only One Who saves, redeems and sets free.

When it comes to the practical running of a church, technical questions, legal format, church buildings, God gives people plenty of space: we have a lot of freedom to do things our way according to our talents, our personal style and cultural context. But when it's about the spiritual dimension, the **things of eternal value**, the really important things in life, we can only wait on God. The spiritual level of the church, power in prayer, our level of holiness, our ability to



resist the temptations of this world, our ease in walking in the supernatural, our prophetic giftings to discern and authority to transform our society... these are all *the* things that make the difference between a living and a dead church, between a church that survives and a church that overcomes. The source of living water springs from under the altar of God itself (Ezekiel 47:1).

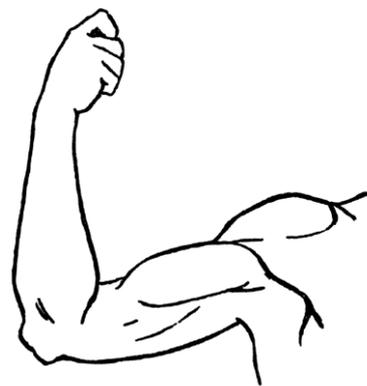
In this area, we cannot add one millimetre to God's wisdom. We cannot convert or change one single

"Seek the LORD and His strength; seek His face forevermore!"
(Psalm 105:4)

person, only God can. We cannot even set

ourselves free from slavery and sin. When it's all about transformations in our very being, praying is much more effective than works. If we want to build God's kingdom without prayer (or with much too little prayer), it's like wanting to build a house without cement (or with much too little cement in our mortar). It can seem to be ok for quite a while, but all will be revealed in time.

A good way of **breaking through humanism** is by starting a project in God's kingdom that goes far beyond our own capabilities: something we are convinced 100% that only God can work out, where we are really dependent on Him. Finding ourselves in great need, at the end of our tether, makes us really cry out to God, since our lives depend on it. In this sense, our western welfare system is not at all a blessing, because it becomes so easy to trust in. Our body and soul have become fat or overweight; our spirit and our faith have nothing to do and therefore develop no "muscle power". A new adventure in faith with God, a high calling, "stepping out on the water", doing something that we have never done before... all that brings us much closer to Him and should convince us of the absolute hopelessness of our own ability.



Praying and actively waiting on God is also a good **antidote for our latent humanism**. The extent to which we find this difficult reveals how deep seated it is in us, just as fasting reveals how much we are attached to food.

"Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the LORD!"
(Psalm 27:14)

There will come times (and we are partly sitting in them now!) when we will not be able to stand fast for one moment in the **shaking of the world** without a strong, direct relationship in prayer with God. Whenever the pressure from the great tribulation gets closer and closer, whenever the (spiritual!) temperature of the world gets higher and higher, it will become overwhelmingly evident that we can in no way trust in our flesh but only cry out to Him with all our heart to be kept alive. Praying is not a hobby or an option: it is a commandment and is essential to life.

The kind of Christianity that the world needs today (and which it would seem she is so afraid of), is a life where God stands radically in the centre: the church **where God is allowed to be God**, where He can change or vary the programme at any moment, where He doesn't "disturb" our beloved liturgy, or our set routine, but where, at the slightest hint of His presence, people will go and stand on the side in reverence, fall down on the ground, full of expectation to hear what He will say. Unbelievers will come into such churches and "*fall down on their face and worship God, declaring that God is among you indeed*" (1 Cor. 14:25)! Churches and Christians like this are on the one hand very threatening to the world, but on the other hand they are also the only ones who will be able to convince the world that Christianity is not just *one* of all the many religions, but that the God of Jesus Christ is today the **Only One**, the Lord and Redeemer of all!



Questions (for discussion):

How much prayer time do you need to be fed spiritually and be strong?

How do you nourish your spirit (compared to your body and your soul)?

How do we get rid of our stubborn self-centredness?

What does Paul mean by "pray without ceasing"? How do you do that?

"Waiting on the Lord": how can you do that (better)?

Why is it difficult for us to trust in God more than in ourselves? And how can you change that?

When does God have the central place in a fellowship/church/christian ministry and when does He not (any more)?

Is God the director of your life or does He only play a minor role in it?

Where do you go to be refreshed /relax when you are spiritually tired?

Are you always aware that the visible things are temporary, and the invisible ones eternal?

"24 hours alone with God": does that excite you or fill you with dread?

Have you ever experienced one of these heavenly moments of pure worship?

What was it like?