

Q&A: How should I understand (theophanies and) christophanies?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

How should I understand Christophanies? I've been pondering Jesus appearing bodily in the Old Testament and his incarnation in the New Testament

In the OT is he:

- 1. God appearing in the form of a (sometimes glorified human body?) but not human in any way other than physical;*
- 2. Not appearing as a man in these Christophanies anyway, but something else we can't define;*
- 3. Appearing as fully God and fully man before the incarnation;*
- 4. Or something else!*

I'm asking this question to better understand how Christophanies relate to / contrast with the uniqueness, cosmic significance and humility of the incarnation where Jesus became forever the man who is God.

What can I understand about God and what can I understand about the Bible being all about Jesus, through Jesus walking on our planet before Bethlehem?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

Thanks for the question, Sarah.
There's a lot in here.



Firstly, to clarify some language. “Christophany” means “appearances of Christ” and my understanding of that term is that it is about post-incarnation post-ascension appearances of Jesus. Paul on the road to Damascus appears to have had a christophany. The account of John in Revelation can be thought of as a christophany, depending on how you take the narrative and the genre; simple visions or dreams of Jesus don’t usually count as a full-bodied appearance!

In my mind, manifestations of God *before* the incarnation are more properly described as “theophanies” – i.e. “appearances of *God*.” Some people would still use the word “christophany”, arguing that they are manifestations of the Son of God, the Divine “Word” or “Logos” (referencing John 1). I’m unconvinced. In my mind, the word “Christ”, meaning “Anointed One”, is entirely adhered to Jesus’ messiahship; it is a *human* title and therefore makes no sense apart from (or before) the incarnation.

Similarly, while our understanding of the Trinity can be unearthed in the Old Testament, that understanding is grounded in our understanding of Jesus in the New Testament. The thrust of the Hebrew Scriptures is that “the Lord our God, the Lord is *one*.” Whatever we see in the Old Testament should firstly be taken as a manifestation of the one true God.

So “theophany” is, I think, the better term. And I’m not just quibbling about terminology. I hope I have also begun to

answer your question about the unique significance of the incarnation; let's not use incarnational language to describe pre-incarnational phenomena. The Son of God (fully divine) may have appeared to his people in some form, but *Jesus* (fully divine, fully human) never walked on our planet before Bethlehem.

But what are we actually talking about? By way of example, some events that are considered to be theophanies are:

1. God "walking and talking" with Adam & Eve at creation (see Genesis 3 in particular).
2. The Lord "appears" to Abram (later called Abraham) in Genesis 12 and then later as a covenant-making "smoking fire pot" in Genesis 15.
3. Abraham famously had three divine visitors (Genesis 18)
4. Jacob wrestles all night with a man (Genesis 32) and is then told that he has wrestling with God.
5. The Burning Bush of Moses (Exodus 3).

Clarity does not quickly come:

Even in compiling this list I was running into ambiguity of category. Should the "pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night" (Exodus 13:21) be considered a manifestation of God, or simply a manifestation of his *glory*, a physical *symbol* of his presence? If so, would Abraham's smoking fire pot and Moses' burning bush also be in the same category? Where do we draw the line?

There are also literary questions to ask. Old Testament imagery is full of anthropomorphisms of God. e.g God has a "mighty arm," or "comes down to see" etc. These are appropriately considered to be metaphors. Is that what's happening with Adam & Eve? Perhaps. I don't think we could argue that Jacob's wrestling was merely metaphorical; metaphor usually doesn't lead to a limp!

And so there's some ambiguity, but I think it's an ambiguity

of our own making. In all these cases, the *story* is clear, and doesn't depend on who or what is appearing and how. e.g. in Abraham's encounter with his visitors, the point of the story, the essence of Abraham's experience revolves around his conversation... and it makes sense irrespective of whether or not the visitors were divine, human, or angelic. **But when it comes to Jesus there is no ambiguity.** In the birth narratives, the gospels, and all that follows, **the incarnation of God** as fully human and fully divine **is entirely the point.**

So I'll stand firm on the incarnation, but I'll allow some ambiguity about the exact nature of the OT theophanies, *because the Bible allows it*. And so my answer to the first part of your question is to allow all of your suggestions, except for 3); God is not incarnate before Jesus.

This is my take on it: in pre-incarnation theophanies, we are seeing God taking a *form*, but not taking *on* the essence of that form. e.g. The most we can say for Moses' experience is that God took the *form* of a burning bush, he certainly did not *become* one. It is likely that this was a ministry of God the Son, the Word of God. After all, these forms are aspects of God's *communication*, his *revelation* of himself and his purposes.

God spoke "in many different ways", we read in Hebrews 1:1-3, and these manifestations were some of those ways. But the point Hebrews makes is the point we should end with: Now God has "spoken through his son", he has revealed himself ultimately by becoming *one* of us. He has not just taken on the form, but the substance of who we are.

Hope that helps. Thanks for the question.

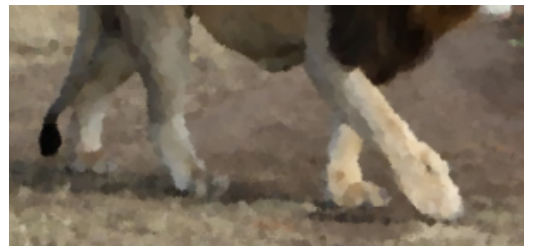
Q&A: How can we cultivate a 'space' for God to move?

Anonymous asks:

In your experience, how can we cultivate a 'space' for God to move in a way that is natural & supernatural, expected & unexpected? How do we do this in different contexts? Church, work, school, family, relationships etc?

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What a great question. If we dived in deep we would have enough to write books and books. We can only skim over the surface here.



So let's begin by considering what it might mean for "God to move"...

It is partly, I think, an *experiential* question. It's the same sort of thing when we talk about God being "present"; the raw theological truth is that God is *omni*-present, he *is* everywhere, but that doesn't mean that we are talking nonsense. There are times when we have a greater sense of the presence of God than at other times. The psalms (e.g. Psalm 73:28) speak of the "nearness" of God as something to be experienced, he is a God who can be *found*. The implication is that sometimes we might "*grope for him*" like someone stumbling in the dark, and this is our *experience* even though, in reality, "*he is not far from each one of us.*".

Similarly, then, when we talk about God "moving," the raw

theological truth is that God is *always* active. What we are talking about is our *experience* of God's activity. Sometimes it is a vague sense of the *wind blowing*. Other times it is a clear sense of direction or even *divine frustration*.. Sometimes the Spirit is "*present to heal*", so to speak, and sometimes it is *otherwise*. In my own experience, there are seasons when I do not *experience* God's movement; prayer seems lifeless, life seems hard, sin looms, and all ambitions and pursuits seem to turn to dust.

In all this I am glad of the way you have phrased your question. You have said "cultivating *space* for God to move" and this is different to what we are usually tempted to do: to *cultivate* the movement of God itself. When God seems to be absent or static, we long to *experience* his presence and movement, and we try and mimic that experience. We resort to positive thinking, hype, self-determination, and even belligerence. A lot of the prosperity gospel "name it and claim it" manipulation happens in this space, and we need to be wary of it.

Not that there is anything innately wrong with a little bit of positive thinking, though. Deliberate choices to use our body positively have their place in raising our eyes and counting our blessings. Because the flip side of trying to generate the movement of God is to believe the lie that he *isn't* moving at all. Ezekiel's *depression*, after seeing God work wondrously on Mt. Carmel, is both understandable and instructive. He is locked into a narrative that almost assumes defeat: " I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."

Taken to their end, these two responses of not experiencing God at work, close us to the truth that God is actually at work, whether we like it or not. The first presumes that his movement depends on our inflated experience. The second presumes that his movement can not overcome our deflated experience. Neither is what we are looking for.

The reality is, is that Jesus *is* building his kingdom; the prayer of his people, “thy kingdom come”, *is* being answered. All authority in heaven and earth *has* been given to him; his kingdom *is* inaugurated and will reach its end, and in the meantime he *is* with us always to the end of the age, empowering us to immerse this world in his name and his ways (Matthew 28:18-20). Theologically speaking, that makes me a missional inaugurated-eschatology man.

We cultivate our *experience* of this work of Jesus when we respond to it in faith, actively seeking to follow him on his terms. We diminish our experience of that movement, when we dictate our own terms. The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is control.

In practice, then, what does that look like? You ask for my experience, let me give you an overview:

It looks like plodding. I remember during our church planting days, when asked to reflect on our experience, I would say “It’s slog work for Jesus.” It looks like preaching week in and week out, in season and out of it. It looks like simply being *bothered* – bothering to care for people, to take time, to talk, to listen, to fix what can be fixed and to allow the rest of the serenity prayer to kick in as well. It looks like not avoiding responsibility but carrying whatever loads are given to us along the way. It looks like roads in the valley more than soaring above the mountain.

What we come to experience is that the movement of God can be incredibly ordinary, and awe-inspiring in that ordinariness if we care to look. We may want the hair-standing-on-end experience, but heaven cheers for the ordinary extraordinary life-bringing moment just as hard, probably more. e.g. I once returned to my church after a holiday to discover some of my brothers and sisters had taken it upon themselves to befriend and draw close to a survivor of child abuse who was taking a lonely stand in the witness box as she faced her abuser.

Some of the most profoundly applicable spiritual teaching I've heard has been from my wife... while she was talking to our children in the car, driving home from school, in a conversation that started with "How was your day?" We plod along, we seize the ordinary, we don't avoid the mess, we simply *bother*. And God moves.

The regular rhythm of spiritual disciplines is part of this. You may have heard how God has moved at the Ffald-y-Brenin retreat centre in Wales. Their experience rests on their regular rhythm of prayer that invades the landscape. They simply pray, and if God moves in someone, they simply entrust that person to God... and continue to pray. We have brought these sorts of rhythms into our family; morning prayer before school, thanking God around the table for something in the day. It is ordinary space, in which God can move.

It looks like waiting. This is similar to plodding, but has a slightly different direction. Plodding "gets on with the mission". Waiting is worship, when God seems absent. Waiting is the space of emptiness.

There are many things about the world, church, and life in general that can seem impressive. I have learned in my experience to be less impressed. These things are usually "achievements" – scores, marks, promotions, wealth, numbers, activities, tasks, and programmes. None of them are bad in themselves, many of them are blessings in their way. And we want them. We want them, so we grasp them. We use our strength and our power to pursue them. I count myself in this! God is gracious, and sometimes he uses us, but I have learned that they are not usually the stuff of a "move of God" in the sense that we are talking about. We can't seize God's plan, we are called to active waiting.

The right response to "unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain" (Psalm 127:1) is to *wait*. This does not mean passivity (we keep on plodding after all!), nor does

it mean a lack of expectancy in which we fail to seize opportunities. What it does mean is that we refuse to despise the fallow years. We refuse to fill our lives with busy self-justifying activities, a conglomeration of straws to cling to for the sake of self-worth. Rather, we offer ourselves, we put ourselves on the line for his sake by stopping and waiting.

In that waiting, God moves, sometimes more than ever. It is there that he brings about adaptive change in us – a change in who we are, not just in what we might do. The sense of his absence draws us deeper into him. As the level of our spiritual fervour recedes hidden sins are revealed, insecurities manifest, and we find how shallow we actually are... and he calls us deeper.

The movement of God is deep. And we may not even know it until after it is over. A current favourite story of mine is the Road to Emmaus in Luke 24. The two on the road are despondent and low, plodding along in their experience of everything falling apart. We know that Jesus is with them, but *they* don't. It is not until afterwards do they realise that during their journey of despondency, their hearts had actually been burning the whole time. God moves when we wait; he makes our hearts burn.

It looks like active, discerning, worship. This is one of the things I have appreciated in the Soul Survivor movement (which also has its roots in plodding and waiting). They have high production values and excellent musical skills, but they have done well (by and large) to keep these as means rather than ends. They keep their eyes open to discern how God is moving during the time of worship. When they sense an experience of God they often stop the music and allow the silence.

What they are doing is using worship – musical declarations of God's grace and other words – as a form of creating space, encouraging an openness to God, expressing faith. I have found

similar in other traditions: devout Anglo Catholics who find this space in ancient rites and the presence of God in the sacraments; reformed evangelicals who thirst for the spoken exposition which brings the Word alive.

There are some things in common to these worship experiences: 1) The focus is God, it is declarative rather than subjunctive ("Lord, you are" rather than "This is how I feel"); 2) The senses are entertained (it *is* an experience), but nothing is forced or coerced; 3) What is done is good in its own right – praises are sung, sacraments administered, the word is preached – and even if there is no significant experience, there's a real sense in which good has been done, we have worshipped the Lord; 4) Time is taken as we diminish our control; whether it be 45 minutes of praise worship, bible teaching, or contemplative prayer, we give God the gift of time to do what he wants in us. You'd be surprised (or perhaps you wouldn't) how easy it is for a worship leader to be driven by the demands of the clock and the expectations of the flock about style more than substance.

These things from corporate worship can be brought into "school, work, family etc." Whatever we do, we take time to focus on God through something innately good (e.g. private or shared devotions), we allow him to move, we don't try and generate it, and so we rest in him.

It looks like response. Some people talk about seeking a move of God through *expectancy*. We are to pray with *expectancy*, mustering a belief that our prayers not only *will* be answered, but *must* be. I get what is meant, but it's hard to imagine it in practice: Somehow an attitude of "OK God, this is what I'm expecting" doesn't exactly create space for God to move; and anything that does happen could easily be taken as self-justification of prayers well prayed.

Rather, I think that sense of expectancy is better described like this: when we seek a move of God, we do so with

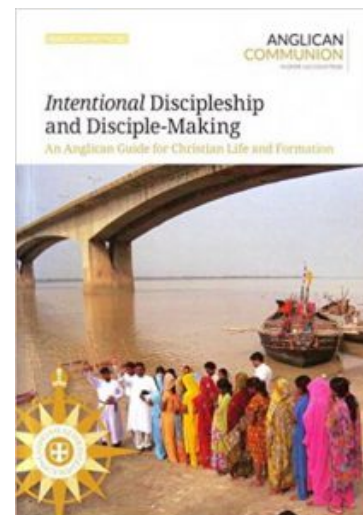
a *readiness to respond*. If we ask God to “move in us” and he confronts us with our sin, our response should be to repent. If we feel called to pursue something, we should count the cost and act according to our faith. If we find someone or something laid on our hearts, we shouldn’t let that pass but should pursue it further.

For me, that is more helpful than some of the caricatured answers you see: e.g. “The Holy Spirit can’t work if you have sin in your life, a lack of expectancy, or if you don’t have enough faith.” Ouch. Rather, God *is* moving, and our experience of that movement simply doesn’t make sense if we don’t respond, so we get ready to respond.

To conclude: This is a big topic and a simple blog post can’t do it justice. But you ask for my experience, and this is where I’m coming from. Thank you for the question – I haven’t really had the opportunity to put words down on this topic before. You’ve stirred my thinking, and I’m sure my thoughts and words will develop.

Review: Intentional Discipleship and Disciple- Making – An Anglican Guide for Christian Life and Formation

The word “discipleship” has become such a buzzword in recent years that when it is used, particularly in official documents or vision statements, it’s intended meaning is not always certain.



I have a vested interest in pursuing discipleship in an Anglican context. It is useful, therefore, to familiarise myself with how discipleship is being understood, talked about, and promoted. Practical on-the-ground examples are the most valuable. But perspectives from the heights of the institution are also important. Last year’s Archbishops’ Council report, *Setting God’s People Free* pointed out that the main obstacle to discipleship is cultural intransigence. Sometimes it is possible for papers at the top to cut across the lower tides of avoidance; they can simply state what needs to be stated, even if their immediate effect is not obvious.

This small book, published by the Anglican Consultative Council in 2016, is a case in point. It is a Communion-level, globally-scoped report. It brings some important insights, especially from the Global South. I’m finding it invaluable as I prepare some thoughts on discipleship for our Deanery strategic planning process.

It is available for download in pdf.

One of the ways we avoid a discipleship culture is by subsuming the term into our existing church culture, rather than allowing it to provoke much-needed adaptive change. That is, we undertake “discipleship activities” or, worse yet, we simply shoehorn the word “discipleship” into the description of our *existing* activities, and we quench the Spirit. In the

end, discipleship is about being a disciple/student/follower of Jesus himself. If we think we can do that and remain unchanged. If we think we can avoid having our “self-identity” challenged (page 5), we are deluding ourselves. Yet we try.

Archbishop Ng Moon Hing of South East Asia addresses this symptom from the very beginning, in his foreword:

To follow Jesus of Nazareth into his cosmic reign is simply the most challenging, the most beautiful, the most costly, the most rewarding journey we could ever choose to begin... our following Jesus requires much more than the latest course or introduction to Christian living. Courses have their place... but our apostleship, our discipleship demands much more – in fact it demands everything. (Page vii)

A definition of discipleship is needed for this book to make any sense. The definition it gives is not so much *provided* as *located*; discipleship “encompasses this total God-ward transformation which takes place when individuals and communities intentionally, sacrificially, and consistently live every aspect of their daily life in commitment to following Jesus Christ” (Page 4).

This is a wonderfully Anglican way of doing it: Discipleship is not so delicately defined that it adheres to one time or place, but it is *bounded* so that we know what we’re talking about.

It is also wonderfully Anglican to begin from the basis of biblical theology. Discipleship themes are quickly traced through the Old Testament before focusing on Jesus himself, with his “group of ‘learners’ who were selected to be with him” (page 11). The book does well to go beyond the prosaic picture of Jesus merely as pedagogical exemplar, as if Jesus is defined by his discipleship methods. Rather, the fundamentals of Christ’s person and mission are first and foremost. It is *discipleship* that is defined by Jesus, not

the other way around. Therefore, true discipleship bears the mark of the cross. It is much more than a spiritualised self-help program, “much more than belief and personal growth in Christian character” (page 16):

For the original twelve there was a literal journey following Jesus up from Galilee into the eye of the storm, Jerusalem – a journey marked with misguided hopes and some trepidation...: we are all on a journey, following Jesus... we are to leave things behind... we are to trust him both for our eventual arrival in the city and also for the surprising details along the way and through the desert; above all, we are to ‘take up [our] cross daily’ and follow Jesus (Lk 9.23) (Page 15)

From this biblical starting point, we are taken through a cursory look at discipleship in the early and historical church and arrive at a multi-faceted examination in recent and contemporary Christianity. Like the charismatic renewals of that latter 20th Century, there appears to be evidence of similarly transdenominational currents in this area. I find this encouraging.

Consequently, **this book has stimulated my *thinking***. For instance, there is a harmony in discipleship between *separation* (as in the monastic tradition of withdrawing from “the accommodation of Christian communities to the ways of the secular world” (page 35), or the Latin American emphasis (page 101) on “preparing Christ’s disciples to act differently”), and missional *engagement* that connects with and promotes a relevant gospel. Popular evangelicalism lacks the language to tackle this.

For instance, I found myself unexpectedly pushing back at how we describe secular “work and other human activities as a form of vocation” (page 65). It’s not that I disagree that secular work is vocational. Nor do I wish to slip into some sort of clericalism that elevates church work as somehow spiritually

superior. It's just that the language does not prevent an apparent lack of *distinctiveness* in the pursuit of vocation. The consequence is our propensity to sacralise *all work* and so fall into the *careerism* of our surrounding culture; to assert the divine right to pursue the career of my choice. Rather, the journey of discipleship necessarily moves us away from careerism; it may take us on either path of secular work or ecclesial ministry, (if we need to make the distinction at all), but whatever it is, whatever we do, it is to be submitted to the call of Christ. Our career is first and foremost shaped by our vocation, our discipleship, and not the other way around.

This book has stirred my consideration of *practice*. The way it draws on the experiences of discipleship in various parts of the world and diverse cultures is stimulating. The common threads recognise that discipleship is *holistic, communal, missional, and deliberate*. Jesus is the beginning and the end.

Churches should be assemblies of disciples of Christ and not pew-warming believers. All sermons should be discipleship-driven and not entertain spectators with feel-good sensation. Christ's death is costly, and it would be considered worthy if he knew that his life was laid down for people who became his disciples. It would be sad for him if he knew that it is for pew-warmer Christians. A disciple of Christ will ask, 'What and how shall I serve and live for Christ?' A pew-warmer believer will ask, 'What will Christ do for me?' (Page 89)

These experiences are wells to draw from. They help us get to some practicalities without becoming programmatic.

For instance, the importance of *cultural analysis* is present in the reflection from the Middle East. Cultural self-awareness *is* something that can be learned and practised. It

is a skill that is sadly missing in much of the Western Church, an aspect of our normative missional illiteracy. The book speaks of “an adventure for the ‘disciple-maker’ as for the ‘disciple’... discovering where the Spirit of God applauds the norms of our culture, where he accepts some norms as a fair enough starting point and where he says ‘not good enough!’ about them” (page 91). Similarly, the cultural questions posed by “insider movements” (page 120) poses important cultural questions that can and should be more readily asked; we are all *inside* a culture.

The practical importance of *relational* and *emotional courage* is present in the reflection from Latin America. This pushes back at the Western tendency (or perhaps it’s British?) to confuse harmony with polite silence and emotional avoidance. This lesson moves away from an attitude of “waiting for someone else to solve [the] problem.” Drawing upon the lessons of the Road to Emmaus, it speaks of the importance of the final movement back “to Jerusalem – to community, joy, dynamism, but also to the conflicts, to the Cross... to the crises” (page 102).

There is one significant weakness, a gap that is almost bewildering: Despite the brief acknowledgement of the “importance of the parents’ role in teaching each new generation to walk in the ways of the Lord” (page 9, see also page 68), there is very little at all on the place of family, children and youth. The one perfunctory chapter (page 107) is insufficient. A discipleship culture is inherently *intergenerational* and that characteristic deserves more engagement. Our prevailing habit in the Western church of splitting the Body of Christ into homogenous age brackets is fundamentally antagonistic to Christ’s heart for mission. A failure to engage with that diminishes this book.

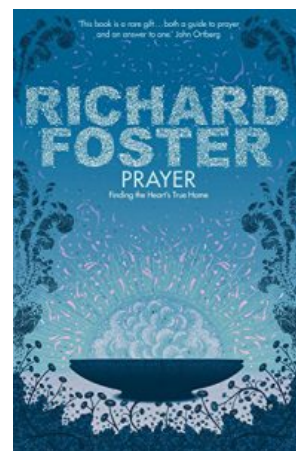
Nevertheless, the book’s ambition is valuable: It is fundamentally vocational. i.e it issues a *call* that is coherent across all Anglican contexts. Without whitewashing

the “rich diversity in the understanding and practice of discipleship and disciple-making” (page 3), it nevertheless affirms a “strong intentionality” and lays it before us: “...the Church needs to be called back to its roots as a community of disciples who make disciples.”

It is therefore yet another resonance to the growing prophetic voice calling for a shift in culture. More voices are still needed.

Review: Prayer – Finding the Heart’s True Home

Richard Foster’s *Prayer* is a classic of the early '90s but I’m glad that I have only just recently read it. I don’t think I would have truly understood it, or been impacted by it, if I had come to it before I’d lived some life.



Foster is, of course, known for his teaching on spiritual disciplines with contemporary application. This book is in the same vein. It is a compendium of independent chapters, each considering the sorts of prayer that we see in the biblical narrative and in Christian experience. A quick look at the table of contents reveals the gist: “Simple Prayer, Prayer of the Forsaken, The Prayer of Examen, The Prayer of Tears, The Prayer of Relinquishment...” and so on.

Foster takes us to the base foundation of spirituality, to the

character of God himself. God is a God who speaks, and who listens, and who creates and restores the relationship between himself and his people. How we interact with him, i.e. how we *pray*, is the question that takes us into these depths. Like similar relational questions (e.g. “How do I speak and be closer to my husband, my wife, my child?”) the answer is both simple (“Just speak!”) and profoundly deep, even mysterious. Like all relational issues, it requires both deliberate action and humble response. Prayer is not something to “master, the way we master algebra or motor mechanics” (page 8), but “we come ‘underneath’, where we calmly and deliberately surrender control and become incompetent.”

As I record my thoughts here I am not going to touch on every chapter, but on those parts that have challenged me, taken me deeper, or have reminded me of the gracious permission I have, as a child of God, to come to him in prayer.

Prayer of the Forsaken.

It is right that Foster touches on forsakenness early in the book. This sense, occasional or frequent, is part and parcel of the Christian experience; we feel as if we are praying to bronzed-over heavens, when everything would scream at us that God is absent. Foster has drawn on “old writers” to give me a new phrase, “*Deus Absconditus* – the God who is hidden” (page 17) for those times when God appears to have disappeared.

The prayer of the forsaken is the prayer of the pair on the *road to Emmaus* who stand with “downcast faces” because of their dashed hopes about the one who was “going to redeem Israel.” They walk with Jesus, but he is hidden from them. It is the prayer of Jonah in the belly of the whale. It is the *prayer* of David, and Jesus himself, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Times of forsakenness are a given in the Christian pilgrimage of life. And they are necessary. They take us to the bedrock

of God's *sovereign* grace where we are stripped of any pretence that we might manipulate God in relationship or prayer.

That is the next thing that should be said about our sense of the absence of God, namely that we are entering into a living relationship that begins and develops in mutual freedom. God grants us perfect freedom because he desires creatures who freely choose to be in relationship with him. Through the Prayer of the Forsaken we are learning to give God the same freedom. Relationships of this kind can never be manipulated or forced. (Page 20)

Such seasons are seasons of refining that burn hot. We question ourselves, and "nagging questions assail us with a force they never had before" (Page 23)... "'Is there any real meaning in the universe?' 'Does God really love me?'"

Through all of this, paradoxically, God is purifying our faith by threatening to destroy it. We are led to a profound and holy distrust of all superficial drives and human strivings. We know more deeply than ever before our capacity for infinite self-deception. Slowly we are being taken off vain securities and false allegiances. Our trust in all exterior and interior results is being shattered so that we can learn faith in God alone. Through our barrenness of soul God is producing detachment, humility, patience, perseverance. (Page 23)

In the last year we have experienced a sense of this forsakenness. One instructive experience stands out for me: At a summer festival in 2017, ironically surrounded by the joy and bustle of the worshipping people of God, we found ourselves in this dark place – a deep sense of being lonely, abandoned, forsaken. As I breathed and paced myself to get to the next workshop a leader approached me and gave me a word that had been impressed upon him as he saw me randomly within the crowd. What was that word of the Lord in the midst of

emptiness, frailty, darkness, and lost hope? “God is saying, he is giving you the courage of a lion.” It broke me, I wept, and it was bitter. It was bitter, but right.

True courage rests not on ourselves, but on faith. The prayer of the forsaken takes us deeper yet; faith rests on trust.

When you are unable to put your spiritual life into drive, do not put it into reverse; put it into neutral... Trust is confidence in the character of God... I do not understand what God is doing or even where God is, but I know that he is out do me good.” This is trust. (Page 25)

We cry out to the infinite mercy of God. We learn that “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” finds its answer in “Into your hands, I commit my spirit.”

The Prayer of Relinquishment.

There is faithfulness in the simple prayer of petition, in which our needs are laid out before our Lord and provider. But I have noticed that this form of petition can actually play an opposite role; we often use it as a defense *against* the leading of the Spirit. We lay out our needs before God and say “Lord, bless us” with a heart that actually says “I am going this way. I am doing these things. Now do your part, God, and make them work.” We build self-reliant castles, and hold our petitionary facade as evidence of faithfulness.

I have noted this tendency in my own journey with Jesus, sometimes with a desperate internal monologue: “Look at these things, fix them, sort them, don’t let me fall! I’ve turned up to work, where are you?” In an era of church which is fundamentally performance-driven, and amongst my generation of church leaders who are so readily anxiety-driven, I have heard this insecure form of “prayer” echoed time and time again.

The prayer of relinquishment calls us away from this

dysfunction. It is the spiritual equivalent of a trust exercise, or, as Foster describes, “a person falling into the arms of Jesus, with a thirst-quenching sense of ‘ahhh!’” (page 50). Yet while this “soul-satisfying rest” is the end result of the Prayer of Relinquishment, it is not the journey.

The journey is *Gethsemane*. It is “yet not my will but yours be done”, prayed not as a catch-all default at the end of a prayer, but as a positive deliberate choice to submit our plans, our desires, our lives to the will of God. “All of my ambitions, hopes and plans,” sings Robin Mark, “I surrender these into your hands.”

We pray. We struggle. We weep. We go back and forth, back and forth, weighing option after option. We pray again, struggle again, weep again. (Page 53)

Indeed, “relinquishment brings to us a priceless treasure: *the crucifixion of the will*.” (Page 55) Personally speaking, given my first name, I can almost take this literally! And it is a treasure. In many ways, the battle of the cross was won at Gethsemane; from this point in the garden, Jesus endures for the sake of the joy set before him.

There is death to the self-life. But there is also a releasing with hope... It means freedom from the self-sins: self-sufficiency, self-pity, self-absorption, self-abuse, self-aggrandizement, self-castigation, self-deception, self-exaltation, self-depreciation, self-indulgence, self-hatred and a host of others just like them. (Page 56)

The Prayer of Suffering

When the journey with Jesus takes us to fields of forsakenness, or roads of relinquishment, our prayer can bear substantial internal fruit; we grow spiritually and the path leads to maturity. But prayer is not all about introspection.

As his book concludes, Foster's focus becomes increasingly external, even missional. He turns to intercession, to what he calls "radical" prayer, and to a vision for church as missional community (Page 268) that the rest of us are only just starting to realise.

The prayer of *suffering* embraces the missional concept of *incarnation*. This is not to undermine, as some have taken it, the salvation-bringing incarnation of Jesus. Rather, it takes the character of God in Christ as a *model* for how we obey the Great Commission and are *sent as Christ was sent*.

Christ serves us not from above and beyond our condition, but from *within* it. And so Paul can *speak* of a participation in the afflictions of Christ as part and parcel of his participation in his mission. And Peter can extend that participation in both *suffering and glory* to his readers, and so to us. In this sense we talk about suffering as *redemptive*, the same sense in which confession, preaching, evangelism, and other forms of witness are redemptive. The prayer of suffering expresses it.

In redemptive suffering we stand with people in their sin and in their sorrow. There can be no sterile, arms-length purity. Their suffering is a messy business and we must be prepared to step smack into the middle of the mess. We are 'crucified' not just for others but with others. (Page 234)

This is a conscious shouldering of the sins and sorrows of others in order that they may be healed and given new life. George MacDonald notes, 'The Son of God suffered unto the death, not that men might not suffer, but that their suffering might be like his.' (Page 238)

As Foster points out, (page 233), the concept of suffering is almost anathema to the consumerist culture of comfort that coerces conformity in the contemporary church. But this, itself, can create the redemptive suffering. Uncomfortable

prophets and travailing intercessors are politely pushed aside or even directly silenced; their suffering and sorrow embodies the plight of the church and they cry out in the anguish of the church's self-abuse. And so Jesus *yearns* for his Jerusalem and Moses refuses to give up the Golden-Calf-enslaved people of God:

'I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin' (Exod. 32:30b). And this is exactly what he does, boldly standing between God and the people, arguing with God to withhold his hand of judgment. Listen to the next words Moses speaks: 'But now, if you will only forgive their sin – but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written' (Exod. 32:32). What a prayer! What a reckless, mediatorial, suffering prayer! It is exactly the kind of prayer in which we are privileged to participate. (Page 257)

What I have learned from Foster here is that this form of suffering is not only *permitted*, but *valued* in the dynamic of Jesus with his followers. In recent years I have come across many of the faithful who are have been all but submerged in the bloody mess that flows from the machinations of our religious organisations. I have come across the abused with their wounds flowing. I have witnessed the weary weeping of senior leaders overcome by the inertia of apathy. I have seen the delicate shells of those discounted, despised, condescended to and cut off by orphan-hearted panderers. I can count myself amongst both the wounding and the wounded.

The prayer of suffering turns this pain towards redemption. *Daniel* prays in the pain of exile, confessing the sins of those others that sent him there. Jesus, impaled by the nails of desperate human rebellion, *prays* for their forgiveness and Stephen *later* echoes him as the stones descend and Saul looks on. Their prayers *availeth* much, *redeemeth* much. They are prayers of suffering.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that when we pray for our enemies, 'we are taking their distress and poverty, their guilt and perdition upon ourselves, and pleading to God for them. We are doing vicariously for them what they cannot do for themselves.' (Page 240)

There is intimacy in this prayer, and it brings intimacy to our mission with Jesus. Only in intimacy can we pummel the chest of our heavenly Father, offering prayers of "holy violence to God" (Page 241). Only in intimacy can the accusatory cry of the *martyrs*, "How long, oh Lord?" find its answer in the divine heart.

This is not anger. It is not whining. It is, as Martin Luther puts it, 'a continuous violent action of the spirit as it is lifted up to God'. We are engaging in serious business. Our prayers are important, having effect with God. We want God to know the earnestness of our heart. We beat on the doors of heaven because we want to be heard on high. We agonize. We cry out. We shout. We pray with sobs and tears. Our prayers become the groanings of a struggling faith. (Pages 241-242)

Foster has reminded us here that suffering can be redemptive and should be released, not suppressed, in prayer. It is not wrong to demand a divine audience. It is not wrong to be more persistent than the *widow*. It is entirely right to bring our cause before our righteous, just, and loving Father. Maybe our cause is unjust; he can meet us in our prayer and change our heart. But maybe it is true, and we have been unknowingly sharing the heart of God, who mourns with those who mourn, and is stirred to redemptive action.

Come, Lord Jesus.