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SOAKING PRAYER

by Roger Harper

In 2000 Anne Hibbert was in Toronto having a break from her ongoing Prayer Development Officer for the Bible Reading Fellowship. There was a conference at the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship (TACF), a church Anne had heard much about as the centre of what has been called 'The Toronto Blessing'. The afternoon was free and Anne stayed in the main church building. She lay on the church chairs while quiet music played on the sound system. Anne was not looking for anything particular, just relaxing in what felt like a good place. As she lay on the chairs Anne felt an overwhelming sense of God. "It was in my mother's womb. God was stroking my head and I was just feeling loved. This was the first time I really received Father God's love." This is a telling comment from someone whose whole job was to help people develop their prayers. Anne Hibbert was doing what TACF calls 'soaking prayer'. Anne now leads the Well Christian Healing Centre in Leamington Spa. In the Pump Rooms every Wednesday afternoon there is soaking prayer open to anyone who wants to come. Quiet worship music is playing. After a five minute talk people sit or lie quietly. "It's chilling with God to see what He wants to say or do," says Anne

God's presence
Soaking prayer is a modern form of contemplative prayer, described by Joyce Huggett in this magazine a few months ago. People put themselves in an attitude of stillness, focusing on Jesus and open to the Holy Spirit but with no requests or agenda. The aim is to be still in God's presence, waste time with Jesus. [i]. The Toronto church sees soaking prayer as one of the main ways in which they encourage people to be open to the Holy Spirit. The more usual way is for people to stand and receive prayer ministry one to one with a member of their church, as is now common practice in many churches. In the UK the most common model of prayer ministry is that taught by the American John Wimber. John was introduced to British Churches by David Watson, a leading Anglican Evangelical of the 1970s. John also founded the Vineyard association of churches, of which TACF was originally a part. The heart of the prayer ministry taught by John Wimber was to expect, invite, look for and welcome the Holy Spirit to come to individuals. John taught that there are signs that the Holy Spirit is on a person. "Some of these phenomena are obvious: weeping, cries, exuberant and prolonged expressions of praise, shaking, trembling, calmness, bodily writhing and distortions, falling over (sometimes referred to as 'being slain in the Spirit'), laughter and jumping. Other phenomena are more subtle: slight trembling, fluttering of the eyelids, faint perspiring, a sheen on the face, ripples on the skin, deep breathing...[ii] Wimber also said that people sometimes experience a sense of heaviness or tiredness, weeping or drunkenness.

Toronto Blessing
In January 1994 at a series of special meetings at the Toronto Airport Vineyard (as the church was then called) there was a dramatic increase in the phenomena John Wimber describes, especially laughing and falling over. Believing this was the work of the Holy Spirit, the leaders John and Carol Amott continued the meetings. The dramatic phenomena have continued and, as visitors came and went home, have spread to other places, including Britain. This has come to be known as 'The Toronto Blessing'. Many people also report dramatic renewal in their Christian lives, inner healing, recovering their first love, being set on fire for Jesus – especially as having been knocked to the floor by the Holy Spirit, they lie there for as long as seems right. This was also what Wimber had noted about falling over in the Spirit. "Most people are aware of a sense of calm and a sublime indifference to their circumstances. Commonly, no after effects are noted either good or bad. Occasionally this state continues for 12 to 48 hours, in which case profound spiritual changes have been said to follow. The most dramatic falls are those sustained by pastors and ministers... The changes following this experience may also be profound. Their ministry is infused with new power and effectiveness...[iii] TACF now have thousands of testimonies to the truth of these words, except that some profound spiritual changes have taken place in much less than twelve hours. As people at TACF reflected on what was happening, it became clear that the Holy Spirit was not knocking people over because He likes playing skittles, but because He wants people to lie down in an attitude of rest and stillness, so that He can bless and renew them inside. They think it makes sense, then, to adopt that resting attitude deliberately, cooperating with the Holy Spirit. This is 'soaking prayer.' Joyce Huggett notes, "a fresh touch of God's Spirit often opens the door to contemplative prayer."

In the middle of prayer ministry at TACF one evening Carol Amott felt tired and decided to have a lie down. After a couple of minutes she was about to pull herself back to her feet when she noticed that there was a slight tingling in the tips of her fingers. "Lord if this is you, please continue," Carol prayed, trying to push away the sense that she really ought to be up and working, praying for others. The tingling moved slowly up her hands. Carol stayed lying down as very slowly she felt the Holy Spirit move through the whole of her body. Eventually, she says, all her tiredness was gone, she was "buzzing with the power of God." She had been on the floor for three hours.

"I know, Lord, you could have done that in an instant. Lord why did it take three hours?" Carol asked. She thought Jesus replied, "Carol it wasn't the empowering, it wasn't the feeling that I was after, I just wanted you to spend time with me. I was lonely for you." Carol explains, "He wants just our presence, not our prayer lists, not our need to's – that's important to Him too, but He just wants us to come into a love affair with Him – what we call soaking in His presence." [i]

Prayer Centres

TACF are now encouraging people to set up 'Soaking Payer Centres' in their own churches and homes. Make the room comfortable and inviting. Provide a variety of places for people to sit or lie. Play a CD of quiet worship music. Encourage yourself and others to focus on Jesus. Say 'Come Holy Spirit.' Then, as Carol Amott teaches, "Wait in a receiving mode, not praying, not speaking in tongues, not helping in any way, just relaxing and waiting and receiving from Him."

It is this expectation of receiving which is the main difference between soaking prayer and classic contemplative prayer, in which 'union with God' is the aim. [ii] John Amott says: "soaking is more than just waiting, it is receiving the presence of the Lord." In soaking prayer, particularly as taught by TACF, there is a strong expectation that people will receive some refreshment, healing, empowering. The leader does not themselves 'soak' but prays over the 'soakers.' In Leamington Spa there is a small team moving round, watching over people, praying intently, making, as they see it, a circle of protection over the 'soakers.'

Concerns expressed

Soaking prayer is not welcomed by all. A few years ago Jim Packer wrote a book warning against what he called 'hot tub religion' – a Christianity which encourages people to be spiritual consumers. [iii] Soaking prayer could be criticised for encouraging people to seek more and more blessing for themselves. Stephen Sizer sees this as 'narcissistic self-centredness,' evidence that the whole Toronto Blessing takes people "into the realm of the cultic and heretical." Stephen is an Anglican Conservative Evangelical who sees the key Charismatic practice of praying to receive the Spirit as "quite fallacious." [iv]

For Stephen and others soaking prayer has too little mental or Biblical focus. The worship music played usually has words to listen to, but in the teaching from Toronto there is no expectation that a Bible passage would be used in a session. There are traditions of contemplative discipline, of using Bible passages to focus the mind and of stilling exercises, but TACF does not refer to any of these. Peter Hocken, Roman Catholic chronicler of Charismatic Renewal writes, "... a key question is what message is being preached. Where 'soaking' is being practised as a surrender to the Lord for Him to do what He wants with us, then for those who are steeping themselves in the Scriptures it can have significantly positive results. But if the focus is on self, and soaking becomes a technique to get blessed, then it begins to be problematic." [v]

Benefits enjoyed

This lack of focus can also be seen in TACF's use of the phrase 'the presence of the Lord' described as something that Jesus sends. Instead of looking to see Jesus with us as we sit or lie quietly, people are led to expect that Jesus will send from heaven a special atmosphere called His 'presence' - the presence or coming of the Holy Spirit in a palpable way. This is hard to focus on and is open to criticisms of emotionalism and subjectivity.

For many Christians, however, soaking prayer has brought much benefit. Paul Maconochie is a leader of St. Thomas Crocker, Sheffield. "As a staff at St. Tom's, we have thought long and hard about the challenge that is raised by the prominent fall from grace, usually over sex or money, of many church leaders from our tradition (Charismatic Evangelical) over the years. Our conclusion as we reflected on this together was that we have a kind of approach which attracts those hungry for intimacy, and then only really teaches them how to engage with God in the context of communal worship. This can result in a 'full, empty, full, empty' pattern in how they feel, and may even result in the development of addictive practices. The scenario would be that someone has a great time at church, then comes home, feels 'empty' and hits the fridge (or their favourite sin...). As a church, which chooses to stay connected to our historical heritage, we looked together at the different traditions and spiritualities through church history to try and find a way of countering this, and decided that contemplative practice, with its focus on constant fullness and unbroken fellowship with God, was the most appropriate... Against this background, we found it interesting when, a few months after we had gone through this process of reflection, TACF started to talk about 'soaking', which to me seems like a very similar practice but with the trappings of American Charismatic language and culture" [vi]

Mark Stibbe of St. Andrew's Chorleywood writes, "I personally love to soak. My main emphasis is on 'being so filled with the Father's love that we cannot resist giving it away, especially to the lost (our church's vision). You have to freely receive before you freely give' [vii]. Anne Hibbert also emphasises the need to receive God's love, not just for ourselves, but so that we can give love to others. "There are too many dried up Christians not excited by our Father's love. When you do receive it's very hard to keep it to yourself."

Rebecca is an older member of an independent charismatic church. She writes: "Our leader opened up his front room and put on a CD of quiet worship. He invited the Holy Spirit to come and I sat quietly in a comfortable chair.

Once I was sitting very relaxed when I sensed God say "Martha." I knew just what He meant. I hadn't chosen the better part as Mary had. Then I saw I was tapping at an old farm house door. I walked in, to the back scullery where the servants would work. The walls were stone, glistening and running with cold dampness. I said, "Why am I standing here?" "That's you." God said, "You let the cares and anxieties stay with you until they seep into your innermost being."

"I was then led out of the scullery. There was a beautiful room with a large table spread out with every kind of food. God said, "This is always there for you to come to, but you choose the back kitchen." We moved on to a sitting room where there was a tremendous sense of peace. I drew back. The voice said gently, "I'm always here, waiting for you."

"I thought that was the end. But there was another room, even larger, with a bright crystal chandelier reflecting in the polished wooden floor. As a girl I had never been allowed to go to dances; that was something we Christians didn't do. Now I was dancing in the ballroom with Jesus and it was amazing. I'm 78 and enjoying life more than ever".

Taking it Further

TACF have produced a 'Soaking Prayer Center Kit' with instructional videos, a Manual and 3 worship CDs. Available from www.tacf.org – Catch the Fire Ministries

For an introduction to Contemplative Prayer see Richard Foster Prayer – Finding the Heart's True Home (Hodder and Stoughton 1992) and Streams of Living Water (Font 1999)

For an exploration of the call to learn to be receivers of God's love see Henri Nouwen The Return of the Prodigal Son (Darton Longman & Todd 1994)

Joyce Huggett recommends Coming to God by Jim Borst (Kevin Mayhew 2004)

- [i] Video 'How to Start a Soaking Prayer Center' available from TACF
- [ii] Richard Foster "Prayer, Finding the Heart's True Home" p 67
- [iii] J. I. Packer 'Laid-Back Religion' IVP 1989
- [iv] S Sizer www.christchurch-virginiawater.co.uk/articles/toronto4ea.htm
- [v] Peter Hocken private correspondence
- [vi] Paul Maconochie private correspondence
- [vii] Mark Stibbe private correspondence

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