

Activism as Devotional Practice

Action is a form of devotional practice, just as much as meditation and mysticism are other forms. Worship is also thought of as taking place while one is acting righteously. Worthy work becomes worship of God. Isaiah 58:6 describes God's preferred form of fast as "to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free" (cf. Micah 6:6-8). In Matthew 25:31-46, service to the needy is the only kind of worship or form of relationship with God that is mentioned. A doctrine of justification by faith does not eliminate works as a necessary element. If faith is thought of as a response of total life, then conduct is included and "faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:26). Faith then is "completed by works" (James 2:22).

One's devotion toward God is inseparable from one's action. Just as meditation and contemplation tend to coalesce at their more intense levels, so the same kind of merger takes place as we grow in both interior experience and outward expression. Without devotional support we are less effective activists than we might be. Not only does adequate action require a devotional attitude, but meaningful growth in private relationship to God requires the dimension of social action. Neither worship nor work is complete until supplemented by the other.

If it is to become simultaneously worship, action must be penetrated by eagerness to respond to God's direction. This will introduce changes in conduct deeper than is customary and in areas normally forgotten. Action that was wide open to the leading of God would move beyond personal habits and one-to-one relationships to much neglected change in larger social systems. When we are freed from the raging inferno of egoism, we feel deep pangs of suffering in the presence of hungry children and in the face of wartime killing of young men and women. They are part of our larger body to which we have been joined by God.

It is not enough to pray for insight and power when those prayers are contradicted by our real interests as expressed in our action. Conduct is a form of devotion which expresses more accurately than our prayers how much we adore God and what we are really petitioning from God. Our behavior more effectively demonstrates our dedication than do the resolutions recorded during meditation.

Across the full spectrum of human need no one of us can do everything that needs to be done. A division of labor is necessary among us. But each of us can choose a few points for concentration. This individualized calling of God may be identified as each of us meditatively asks two questions. 1. Which is the greatest human need for which I am well fitted by my particular background and abilities? 2. Which of the many problems confronting us are most basic, urgent, and neglected? No one of us can do everything, but every one of us can have important influence at some major point.

We can become better equipped by studying the issues selected. Intelligent conversation with associates is both effective and available to all. Our action as consumers and as workers is affected. We can write letters to key people, like legislators and corporation officials. Through joining and contributing to reform organizations, we multiply individual strength. On political issues, all of us can vote, and many of us can supply one of the wide varieties of talents needed in campaigns. All of these become service to God so long as our action is open to the guidance of God.

Without devotional action, the other forms of devotional growth remain stunted. At their best, the journey inward and the journey outward become the same journey.