

‘Let us talk to God’

(THIS IS HOW I ALWAYS CALL A CONGREGATION TO PRAY)

BY DAVID CLOWES

David Clowes considers some essential questions about prayer.

The old hymn tells ‘Prayer is the Christian’s vital breath, the Christian’s native air’.

This leaves me asking myself the question, ‘If that is true, why do so many of us find prayer so hard?’ It may surprise you but, though I write books of prayer, there are still times when I find it something of a struggle talking to God. My most exhilarating times in prayer have been when seated at my computer and feeling overwhelmed by the Lord’s presence. They are still precious moments when I feel that I am simply writing down the words I believe he is whispering in my ear. To be honest, I don’t have a secret solution to enabling our prayer-life to be the utterly glorious experience I think the Lord desires it to be. What I am offering are simply a few pointers that have guided my prayer-life and rescued me from despair.

It was in June 1965 that I became a Christian and opened my life to Jesus. I knew instinctively that I ought to pray, but initially my time with God was more like shopping online with Sainsburys! The change came in a moment of a literally heavenly revelation. It was a crystal-clear night – there was Jupiter, Venus and the plough – and billions of stars stretching out into the vast depths of space. It dawned on me that I could talk to the one who held the cosmos in the palm of his hands. I believe we cannot pray until we are overwhelmed by the knowledge of the One to whom we are speaking. Instead of a shopping list of requests, my prayers became a conversation with the Sovereign over all things.

The next issue that raised its head in my prayer-life was: where do I begin? I soon discovered that this was perfectly obvious. I mean, if I was in the presence of the n King, I would naturally wait for him to begin the conversation. How much more should I allow the Lord to set the topic of our time together. It seems to me that it is utterly essential that I turn first to the Word of God and wait for him to speak to me. It is equally important that we don’t then change the subject! What he says to me through the scriptures I try to use as the starting point of our conversation. Those times when I am finding it hard to pray, I am learning not to beat myself up or to worry about it. It seems that the Lord is more than happy for the two of us to simply sit in the silence of his presence and enjoy simply being together.

I believe that the leading of public prayer should not be seen as the same as private prayer. Leading the people of God in conversation with their Maker is both a serious and a challenging task. It is too easy to slip into time-worn phrases that lull the congregation into ever deeper

slumbers. When I was first called to be a preacher of the Word, I struggled with leading the congregation in prayer. I initially relied almost entirely on extempore prayer. It wasn’t long before I realised that I was simply saying the same things in my prayers over and over again. I am sure that the congregation realised that much sooner than I did! It was then I began to write my prayers down and that meant I could try to bring a freshness to the prayer-life of our worship.

When writing prayers, I set myself a series of guidelines. First, I have aimed for simplicity of language and for a direct style of writing. This is important if they are to be ‘prayed’ and not simply ‘read’. Secondly, I restricted the choice of congregational responses. A simple straw poll revealed that the main dread of congregations is not the length of the prayers but can they remember the latest complicated response the preacher has dreamt up! Thirdly, I have never used any book of prayers just as they were written and I do not expect those in my books will be used any differently. In some sections I have deliberately given a larger number of stanzas to the prayers than should really be used on any one occasion, to provide options. They are intended as a mine in which to dig, not a building plan to be slavishly followed.

I try to have the prayers set out in verse form. Line breaks have been considered carefully, and punctuation used judiciously, to guide the spoken word. To me one of the important guidelines is that I write as I speak. I believe that this also enables the prayers not simply to be read – but prayed. I never say to a congregation, ‘Let us pray’. Instead, I simply say, ‘Let us talk to God’.

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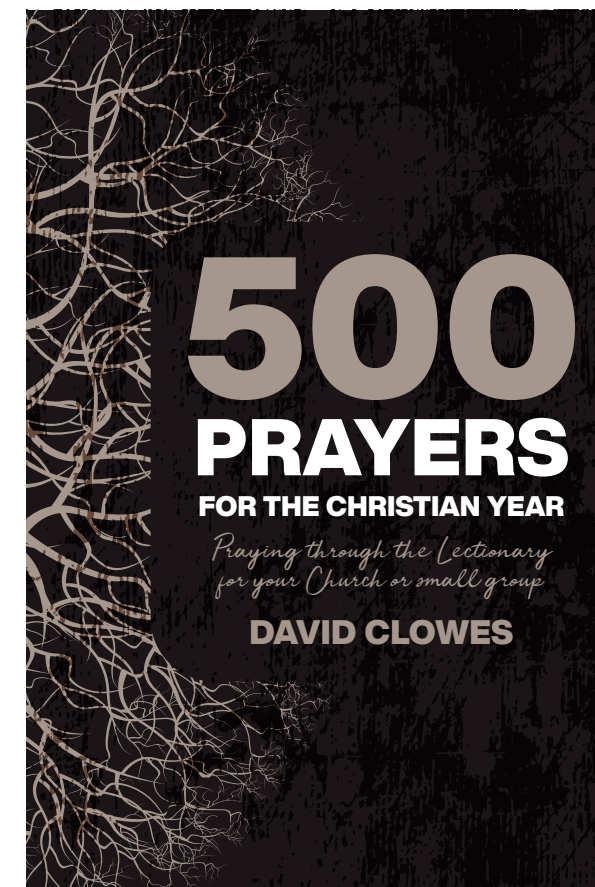
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David is a retired Methodist minister living in Cheadle, Stockport. Throughout his ministry in North West England,

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