

Book Review:

Prayer: Does it Make any Difference? by Philip Yancey, 2006.

By Jeff Warkentin

With the repertoire of insightful books that Yancey has written, and given the importance of the subject, *Prayer* was an easy choice for some inspiring reading. Books on prayer can tend to be a collection of answered prayers, as if we can declare with certainty exactly how God answers prayer and which prayers God does or does not answer.

As one would suspect of Yancey, *Prayer* avoids such pitfalls. For better or worse, Yancey takes the edge off of much of the spectacular when it comes to prayer, resisting the urge to offer easy answers, and even challenging much of the foundation of the Evangelical perspective on prayer. God answers prayer in unspectacular ways, says Yancey. Therefore, prayer's most suitable form is in the sincere, everyday grind of life. Prayer is constant conversation with God.

Yancey asks the question, "Does prayer change God, us, or both?" The answer, of course, is both. Using both Old and New Testament examples, Yancey demonstrates how at times God acted in response to a prayer. A prime example is Abraham bargaining for lives in Sodom and Gomorrah. At other times, prayers have seemingly gone unanswered as if the act of praying itself was enough to help the situation somehow, without any sure sign that the prayer was answered. The most dramatic example, he notes, is when Jesus asks God to take the cup of suffering away from him, at which God is suddenly and completely silent.

This realistic approach to prayer is encouraging for readers who are tired of easy, canned answers to life's questions that the church has been guilty of offering. Yancey's book is fairly ambiguous – it is of course a pro and a con of his approach. He asks a lot of questions but gives few answers. The reader must wade into an overabundance of stories and quotes from various writers, church fathers, and correspondence with supporters to get a hold on any concrete answers. At times, one feels as though one is simply reading a collection of quotes and anecdotes with a bit of Yancey commentary in between. Every chapter seems to give a slightly different definition of prayer. The themes are cycled and recycled to exhaustion, causing the book to stall out. The book could have had an even stronger impact at half its length, or perhaps even as a daily guide to meditation.

The best part of the book may be the collection of Prayer Resources at the end of the book.

In short, the message, if it could be condensed, is a good one in a world where the so-called *Prosperity Gospel* is having influence. Yancey suggests a wholesome approach to prayer: pray for your heart's desire (what you *really* need), pray when you are lamenting, pray for your sins, pray for peace, pray for your awareness of God's presence in your life, for compassion, for gratitude, for faith, for grace. In other words, tell God everything that's on your mind.