

Be Still and Know

Contemplative prayer often has been relegated to ancient church history. But God is restoring it as a means to develop intimacy with Him.

I have found that the most direct road to greater intimacy with God has come through the practice or discipline of an almost lost art in the fast-paced church of today—something called contemplative prayer. More than a decade ago this type of prayer came to my attention through some experiences God ordained, and since that time it has become one of the central features of my walk with God.

When I first began to practice it, I spent one full year reading only the Bible and the writings of the earliest Christian leaders, commonly known as the “desert fathers.” The more I read the more I realized I was on familiar ground. This was a road I was already walking on to some extent.

Contemplative prayer is all about the quest for intimacy with God. The Bible is full of references to this quest:

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18, NKJV, emphasis added).

“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth” (Ps. 46:10, emphasis added).

“Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross,

despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2, emphasis added).

Contemplative prayer is an ancient Christian practice that has not been widely known or practiced in many evangelical and charismatic ranks, but I believe the Spirit of God is restoring it to the broader body of Christ in our day.

In contemplative prayer, we as Christians do not relate to God primarily as the one who sits on His throne in heaven; we connect with Him instead, through the reality of our new birth in Christ, as the one who has taken up residence inside us. We each have a throne in our hearts where He dwells in a very personal way.

Another phrase that is often used in many circles today is “communion with God.” This is commonly understood to mean coming into fellowship with God through the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ, who dwells in the born-again believer.

Communion with God is a way of fellowshiping with the Holy Spirit by learning to quiet the distractions of our soul and of the world, calming the inner chaos and the noise from outside that tends to vie so strongly for our attention. In this wonderful form of prayer, we come, as it were, into the heart or “center” of our being, where God dwells through the Holy Spirit. We behold the beauty of the Lord and inquire in His temple (see Ps. 27:4).

In the first chapter of Colossians, Paul speaks of the saints “to [whom] God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (v. 27, emphasis added). The “hope of

glory" is Christ in us. Some of the earlier Christian contemplatives and mystics such as Madame Guyon and others refer to this as "greater union with Christ."

As we come into communion with God, who dwells inside of us, we come into fellowship with the zoe, the very life of God, which cleanses us and sets us apart for Him. That is what it means to be transformed.

Long ago I learned a statement that gives a simple explanation to all this: We must maintain the inner life to be effective in the outer life. In order to be able to step out in confidence and authority to do God's will and minister in the power of the Spirit, we must nurture and maintain our inner communion and fellowship with God. We must regularly go to that abiding place in our hearts where His presence dwells.

Too often throughout church history, Christians have tended to be divided into two camps regarding this truth. One camp is the "going and doing" camp, always going, always busy doing God's work. The other camp is the "contemplative" camp, the meditative, quiet and reflective ones who so love the "interior castle" that they want to dwell there all the time.

Bernard of Clairvaux, the 12th century monk and mystic, identified three "vocations" in the Christian life: that of Lazarus, the penitent; that of Martha, the active and devoted servant of the household; and that of Mary, the contemplative. According to Jesus, Mary had chosen the best part. There was no reason for her to envy Martha, or to leave her contemplation, unasked, to share in Martha's labors.

Contemplation should always be desired and preferred. Activity

should be accepted though never sought for its own sake. In the end, the completion of the Christian life is found in the union of Martha, Mary and Lazarus in one person.

The inner life prepares us for the outer life; both are necessary. One of the lessons we must learn is to build a bridge between the two.

Vocabulary of the Contemplative

Contemplative prayer is not a technique. It is not a relaxation therapy exercise or a form of self-hypnosis. It is not a paranormal or psychic phenomenon. Neither is it a New Age approach to self-improvement. It is not a new thing or a remake of Eastern meditation dressed in "Christian clothing." Contemplation is an age-old biblical tool for coming into fellowship with God.

To "contemplate" means to gaze at intently, to think about intently, to study, to expect or to intend, to meditate, to muse. The word "muse" means to think about or to consider deeply, to meditate. To "meditate" means to plan, intend, to think deeply, to reflect upon. The word "reflect" means to throw back light, heat or sound, to give back an image as in a mirror, to bring back or come back as a consequence or as reflected glory.

Any concept is confusing if we do not understand the terms or the vocabulary being used. For this reason, I want to define some of the terms commonly found in prophetic, contemplative Christian writings, both old and new.

False self. This is the old sinful nature or "old self" that

Paul talks about in Ephesians:

“In reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and ... be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph. 4:22-24, NASB).

This “false self” is the ego-centered self that holds onto the things and values of the world and trusts in possessions, power or other people in trying to find happiness, fulfillment, peace, purpose, meaning and life.

True self. This corresponds to the new spiritual nature we have as Christians, the “new self” of Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10:

“Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him” (Col. 3:9-10).

Centering. Although used extensively by the Quakers, this term is not exclusive to Quaker theology and practice. It means simply to let go of all competing distractions until we are truly present with Him. Centering is the meditative art of quieting ourselves and focusing on the Lord, who is the center of all life.

Recollection (re-collection). This is the process of bringing together disparate parts into a unified whole. It is allowing the Holy Spirit to cast light upon the fragmentations of our

life in order to bring cleansing and healing into our souls, our emotions, our remembrances and our thoughts. A more familiar term that means the same thing is "integration."

Union with God. This means to be made one with our Creator God. It is a work that God does in our hearts, with two vital preparations on our part: love for God and purity of heart. First comes the revelation of God's vast love toward us, and then we allow Him to produce in us a heart of purity as an expression of our love for Him.

Spiritual ecstasy. This is a supernatural trance state initiated by the Holy Spirit in which one is caught up into the realm of the Spirit to receive the revelations, visions or other experiences God desires to impart.

All these terms reflect an attempt by contemplative believers to describe the indescribable. In the end, we are reduced to the simple confession of Walter Hilton: "Contemplation is love on fire with devotion."

Three Stages of Prayer

Richard J. Foster, a Quaker and author of the modern-day Christian classics *Celebration of Discipline and Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, is a longtime student of various forms of prayer. Through his studies and experience he has capsulated contemplative prayer into three stages: recollection, the prayer of quiet, and spiritual ecstasy.

Recollection. Phase one is recollection, which as we saw above means letting go of all competing distractions. That is the idea behind Psalm 46:10: "'Be still, and know that I am God'"

(NKJV).

Some translations literally say it this way: "Relax and let go, and know that I am God."

There is a correlation here between the inner knowing, in a revelatory way, of God's great love for us, and repentance on our part. "Repentance" means to turn away from sin and turn to God. In recollection, it means turning away from all competing distractions in order to focus on the Lord and His presence.

While resting in quietness, we ask the Holy Spirit to make Jesus real to us and close off everything else. Foster teaches that one way to do this is to see Jesus sitting in a chair across from us. He truly is present, but sometimes we need help to visualize that reality. God created our imagination and, like every other faculty we possess, we need to sanctify it, surrender it and use it for God's purposes.

Our ability to flow in the gift of working of miracles, including creative miracles, comes in part from our surrendering to the Lord our imagination because that is where we begin to believe the impossible. Utilizing our imagination in contemplation is perfectly appropriate and one of the best uses to which we can put it when we ask God to sanctify and fill our senses with His Spirit. This is not the same as New Age imaging, but simply what Brother Lawrence called "the practice of the presence of God."

If frustrations and distractions press in on us, then we need a strategy for shutting them out. Madame Jeanne Guyon, the French Christian mystic of the late 17th and early 18th centuries and

a pioneer of contemplative prayer, recommended meditating on Scripture for this purpose. She wrote that when competing distractions vie for our attention, we should muse, meditate, ponder and mutter upon Scripture. Meditating on Scripture helps us refocus our attention on the Lord.

The Prayer of Quiet. As we grow accustomed to the unifying grace of recollection, we are ushered into the second phase of contemplative prayer, what St. Theresa of Avila and many others called “the center of quiet,” or the prayer of quiet.

Through recollection we have put away all obstacles of the heart, all distractions of the mind and all vacillations of the will. Divine graces of love and adoration wash over us like ocean waves, and at the center of our being we are hushed, and there is a stillness, to be sure, but it is a listening stillness. Something deep inside of us has been awakened and brought to attention, and our spirit now is on tiptoe, alert and listening. Then comes an inward steady gaze of the heart, sometimes called “beholding the Lord.”

Now we bask in the warmth of His dear embrace. As we wait before God, He graciously gives us a teachable spirit. Our goal, of course, is to bring this contentment into everyday expressions of life, but this does not normally come quickly to us.

However, as we experience more and more of the inward attentiveness to His divine whisper, we will begin to carry His presence throughout our day. Just as smoke is absorbed into our clothing and we carry its smell with us, so the aroma of God’s presence begins to seep into our being, and we become carriers of His fragrance wherever we go.

Spiritual Ecstasy. The third phase of contemplative prayer is spiritual ecstasy. Anyone who has ever been around prophetic, seer-type people knows that they tend to be quiet in nature. They calm themselves, many times even closing their eyes, and wait in an almost passive repose. In that place of quiet detachment from the reality around them, illumination—the spirit of revelation—is granted and their being becomes filled with God’s pictures, God’s thoughts and God’s heart.

This is the way it works with me. I apply the blood of Christ to my life and quiet my external being. Then I worship the Lord and bask in the beauty of His presence. Then He takes me into rooms permeated with the light of His love and fills my being with visions He desires me to see. At times, I am so captured by His love that He leads me up higher into a heavenly place where my spirit seems to soar.

Spiritual ecstasy, the final step in contemplative prayer, is not an activity we undertake but a work God does in us. Ecstasy is contemplative prayer taken to the nth degree. Even the recognized authorities in the contemplative prayer life acknowledge that it is generally a fleeting experience rather than a staple diet.

Another way to describe the ecstatic state is to be “inebriated” with God’s presence. To an outside observer, someone caught up into the realm of the Spirit and taken to a rapturous place may appear drunk. The essence of this experience is to be overwhelmed with God’s presence, whether or not we see any pictures or hear any words.

Ultimately, the goal of our passionate pursuit is not an experience at all, but Christ Himself. As we learn to be still

and know that He is God and commune with Him in our inner being, we will realize that we were created for fellowship with Him—and our inward life will provide the power for us to go forth to do His works.

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