

3 Reasons I Refuse to Practice Contemplative Prayer

I value quietness and solitude. In fact, it was in such a setting that I received the inspiration and direction for this article. It happened like this.

One morning I found myself wide awake at 3 a.m. No wanting to awaken Sue, I quietly arose and went into another room where I sat in a chair, enjoying the stillness and quietness of the early morning.

As I sat, with only light from a street light streaming through the window, I thought about God and His goodness and faithfulness. At times I would voice quiet words of praise and thanksgiving. As needs and concerns came to mind, I would present these in prayer. It was a wonderful, refreshing time. Sometime, during those quiet hours of fellowship with God, the title and layout for this article were presented to my mind.

Please do not confuse my “quiet time” with contemplative prayer. There is a world of difference. Contemplative prayer, emphasizing “silence,” has roots that go back to the mystics of the medieval Roman Catholic Church. The mystics were, in turn, profoundly influenced by Neo-Platonism, a pagan, mystical religion founded by Plotinus, a disciple of Plato.

Although the word “contemplative” is, by itself, a positive word meaning “thoughtful” and “reflective,” contemplative prayer as taught by the mystics is entirely out of sync with what we know of Jesus and early Christianity. I am convinced that it is a hindrance rather than a help in nurturing a relationship with God.

Here are three reasons I do not practice contemplative prayer.

Reason No. 1: Contemplative Prayer Is Rooted in a Pagan

Concept of God

Contemplative prayer began with Plotinus (A.D. 203-270), the founder of Neo-Platonism, who transformed the philosophy of Plato into a religion. Plotinus taught that all reality had come from a supreme deity whom he called "the One." This supreme deity, Plotinus taught, is impassible, meaning that he is unmoved by human experiences of joy, sadness or suffering. This is because he is absolutely "other than" and "separate from" this realm of physical and human existence.

From this one supreme being there had issued forth a series of lower beings, resulting in a hierarchy of celestial beings, or gods. The Neo-Platonists believed that it was one of these lower (and evil) heavenly beings that had created the earth and its inhabitants. The Neo-Platonist sought for a way to ascend through this hierarchy of celestial beings and be united with the ultimate deity they called "the One."

Because "the One" existed in a realm absolutely "other than" this earthly realm, human reason and language were deemed inadequate for understanding or communicating with him. In fact, "the One" could not be known by human beings but could only be experienced in a mystical encounter facilitated by a form of spiritual prayer characterized by silence and a mind emptied of any rational thoughts about deity.

This form of prayer was called "contemplation" or "contemplative prayer." If one was unable to clear his/her mind of rational thoughts, a "mantra" or "prayer" might be repeated over and over to help them center their thoughts on the goal of their prayer—a mystical union or encounter with "the One."

This concept of God and the form of prayer associated with it, found its way into the church of the Middle Ages through the writings of a Syrian monk who was obviously influenced by Neo-Platonism. One book he wrote was called *On the Heavenly*

Hierarchy, where in Neo-Platonic fashion, he examined and classified the various heavenly beings in ranks of three with each having three subdivisions—seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, archangels, angels and so on.

According to this writer, these constituted an ascending ladder or hierarchy of celestial beings leading to the throne of God. He also advocated a form of mystical/contemplative prayer by which one could ascend through this celestial hierarchy and be united with God.

The writings of this monk, who falsely claimed to be Dionysius, Paul's convert in Athens (Acts 17:34), became foundational for the mystical movement in the medieval church. His writings were quoted by bishops and some of the most famous theologians of the medieval church, including Thomas Aquinas.

As a result, spiritual experiences and revelations through contemplation were exalted and valued. Paul was interpreted through the lens of this false Dionysius, and as Dr. Justo Gonzalez says, "Paul's entire life was viewed as a process of mystical ascension."

Today, both Catholic and Protestant scholars recognize the claim of this author to be the convert of Paul as false. The 16th century Reformers also rejected all notions of a mystical ascension to God through contemplative prayer as it placed too much emphasis on human effort and diminished the work of Christ in opening the way into God's presence.

I do not practice contemplative prayer because it is a form of prayer rooted in a pagan, non-Christian concept of God.

Reason No 2: The Revelation of God in Scripture Becomes Secondary

Because the contemplative approach to prayer devalues human reason and language, its practitioners tend to neglect the

concrete revelation of God in Scripture. This, in turn, leaves them vulnerable to deceiving spirits and the “angels of light” of which Paul spoke in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15.

Hans Kung, the most widely read Roman Catholic theologian in the world today, addressed this problem among the mystics of the Roman Catholic Church; but his assessment also fits many in the charismatic and prophetic movements today. He wrote,

These new revelations not only overshadowed the Bible and the Gospel, but also Him whom the Gospel proclaims and to whom the Bible bears witness. It is striking how rarely Christ appeared in all these “revelations,” “apparitions” and “wonders.” Catholics who followed in the wake of every new “revelation,” which often turned out to be fantasy or deceit and indulged their desire for sensation by looking for the latest reports of miracles—and yet who had never once in their whole lives read the Scriptures from cover to cover (Hyatt, Angels of Light, 103).

The goal of the person utilizing contemplative prayer methods is to have a mystical encounter with God. To facilitate such a mystical encounter, techniques and postures of prayer, breathing, and meditation are very important.

One striking example of this preoccupation with posture and technique is that of Gregory Palamas, a 13th century monk who stressed quietness and stillness in the pursuit of a mystical union with God. As an aid to concentration, he recommended that the chin rest on the chest, with the eyes fixed on the navel.

God, of course, looks on the heart, not the physical posture of the person who seeks Him. This preoccupation with outward techniques and postures—staring at one’s navel—takes the practitioner away from Scripture. This is serious, for as the great historian, Philip Schaff, said, “Every true progress in church history is conditioned by a new and deeper study of the

Scriptures.”

The great 18th-century awakenings in England and America were birthed, not out of contemplative prayer, but out of the study of Scripture. The Methodist revival that transformed the British Isles began with John and Charles Wesley leading a study of the Greek New Testament each evening from 6 – 9 p.m.

George Whitefield, whose preaching shook both England and America, lived and moved in the Scripture. In describing his commitment to Scripture after his conversion, he wrote,

“My mind now being more open and enlarged, I began to read the Holy Scriptures upon my knees, laying aside all other books and praying over, if possible, every line and word” (Hyatt, *Revival Fire*, 25).

In the 20th century, the Azusa Street Revival that helped birth the modern Pentecostal and charismatic movements was rooted and grounded in the study of Scripture. In the June 1907 edition of the *Apostolic Faith*, the official publication of the revival, the revival leaders wrote,

“We are measuring everything by the Word; every experience must measure up to the Bible. Some say that is going too far, but if we have lived too close to the Word, we will settle that with the Lord when we meet Him in the air” (Hyatt, *Revival Fire*, 27).

I do not practice contemplative prayer because it tends to lead those who practice it away from the Bible into an unhealthy introversion and self-serving pursuit of personal experience, also known as “staring at one’s navel.”

Reason No. 3: Jesus and the Early Church Did Not Practice or Teach It

Jesus does not advocate any form of mystical or contemplative prayer. He does not teach any postures or techniques for

prayer and meditation. Neither is there any mention of silence or centering prayers.

Instead, He emphasizes a relational approach to God in which prayer is simple conversation with a loving, benevolent being whom He calls *Abba*, an endearing term used only by children for the father in the Jewish household.

For Jesus, oneness with God is not a mystical union of one's being with God, but a practical oneness of will and purpose. "Not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42b). Jesus prayed, showing that, in His incarnate state, union with God consisted of a submission of His will to the will of the Father.

When the disciples, in Luke 11:1-4, ask Jesus to "teach us to pray," He does not respond by teaching them techniques and postures for prayer and meditation. Instead, He says to them, "*When you pray, say, "Our father who art in heaven"* (Luke:2b, emphasis mine). Jesus teaches them to verbally express themselves to God in prayer. For Jesus, prayer is relational and is characterized by intelligent conversation with a personal Heavenly Father.

The early church followed in the footsteps of Jesus and prayed dynamic, relational prayers in which they recognized God's majesty and greatness and asked for His help in the urgencies of life (see, for example, Acts 4:23-31). The miracles they experienced (healings, angelic deliverances and so on) occurred, not in a mystical, contemplative state of prayer, but while they were going about the business of obeying Christ's command to take the gospel to the whole world.

I cannot imagine Jesus and His disciples all sitting in the lotus position with their eyes closed, seeking to go into a place of silence and contemplation where they would ascend heavenward into a mystical encounter God. Such a picture is completely contrary to what we know of Jesus from the Gospels.

Instead, He promises His followers a baptism in the Holy

Spirit that will empower them to be His witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Their encounter with God on the day of Pentecost does not cause them to withdraw from the world into silence but compels them to go forth into all the world declaring the Good News of what Jesus has done for the human race.

I do not practice contemplative prayer because Jesus did not practice it, nor did His earliest followers.

Conclusion

A number of years ago, Sue and I participated in a weekend retreat in which everyone was asked to take a “vow of silence” and the contemplative approach to prayer and spirituality was put forth. I came away from that “spiritual retreat” convinced that what I had encountered was a substitute for the promised baptism in the Holy Spirit as an empowerment for life and service. My prayerful studies since that time have confirmed that determination and led me to decide to write this article explaining why I do not practice contemplative prayer.

This article was derived from Dr. Eddie Hyatt's latest book, Angels of Light, available from Amazon and his website at .