

CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP AND MENTORING: CONTEMPLATIVE THEOLOGY'S TROJAN HORSE

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I. INTRODUCTION

When the Greeks had lain siege to Troy for ten years, without success, they pretended to retreat. They left behind a large wooden horse in which a number of Greek soldiers had hidden themselves. A planted spy convinced the Trojans, despite the warnings of Laocoön, to move the horse inside the city as a war trophy. In the following night, the Greeks descended out of the wooden horse, opened the gates for the Greek army, attacked the unsuspecting and celebrating Trojans, and finally conquered Troy.

From this story comes the expression *Trojan horse* as a general term describing a gift that is actually a trick. It gave rise to the proverb “Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.” The term *Trojan* is also used today to refer to malicious computer software that look harmless or beneficial to the user but actually contain a computer virus or spyware. In the last decade the spiritual virus of contemplative spirituality¹ has been introduced widely in Evangelical circles through the avenue of leadership training and enrichment.

¹John Caddock, “What is Contemplative Spirituality and Why Is It Dangerous?” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 1997): 3-25.

II. EXAMPLES OF CONTEMPLATIVE INFLUENCES IN EVANGELICALISM TODAY

A. VANTAGEPOINT³ AND THE NAB CONFERENCE

In the fall of 2005 I received a call from the developer of the leadership training material used by the conference of Baptist churches of which my church is a member. He wanted to form what's called a Leadership Training Center in the North Dallas region that would involve churches from several denominations. I met with him at a Starbucks and he went over with me the Leadership Training Center strategy and gave me a copy of the first workbook used in the program. I took the workbook home and began to read it. I was surprised to find this contemplative exercise:

Step into the Quiet...

find a place where you can be alone for a two hour period of time.
for the first thirty minutes, relax and allow yourself to be comfortable.
chill the noise and clutter within...this could take awhile.
focus on God actually indwelling your very being.
repeat a special name or phrase which characterizes your relationship with God.
when distractions come, return to your name or phrase.
sing a chorus, or pray Psalm 42:1.
for the next hour, meditate on the truths for you in Luke 1:26-38.
if it helps you to focus, write thoughts or prayers as they come to you.
for the next thirty minutes listen.
conclude your two hour time by praying the Lord's Prayer or singing a chorus.²

This exercise, I now understand after some research, makes use of two contemplative practices: centering prayer and sacred reading (*lectio divina*). I continued reading through the workbook and observed that contemplative spirituality was an integral part of the whole leadership development program. Two required texts were *In the Name of Jesus*:

Reflections on Christian Leadership by Henri J. M. Nouwen and *Spiritual Mentoring: A Guide for Seeking and Giving Direction* by Keith R.

² *Emerging Leaders: Biblical Foundations of Leadership* (Sioux Falls, SD: VantagePoint³, 2005), 70.

Anderson and Randy D. Reese. Reese is the developer of the program and the man I met with at the Starbucks. I acquired both books and read them and began to research the topic of contemplative spirituality and theology. I soon found out that contemplative spirituality had become the practice of many leaders in the Evangelical Christian community.

Nouwen is a popular author with many Evangelical leaders. Most books by popular Evangelical authors that deal with the topic of spiritual formation and spiritual disciplines refer to him. A few quotes from his book, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, summarize Nouwen's view of the necessity of contemplative practices for Christian leadership.

For Christian leadership to be truly fruitful in the future, a movement from the moral to the mystical is required.³

Future leaders must be mystics deeply steeped in contemplative prayer.⁴

We have to be mystics.⁵

But for the future of Christian leadership it is of vital importance to reclaim the mystical aspect of theology so that every word spoken, every word of advice given, and every strategy developed can come from a heart that knows God intimately.⁶

Christian leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice, and guidance. Through the discipline of contemplative prayer, Christian leaders have to learn to listen again and again to the voice of love and to find there the wisdom and courage to address whatever issue presents itself to them.⁷

If there is any focus that the Christian leader of the future will need, it is the discipline of dwelling in the presence of the One

³ Henry J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989), 47.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

who keeps asking us, “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?” This is the discipline of contemplative prayer.⁸

It is not enough for the priests and ministers of the future to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word, and to taste fully God’s infinite goodness?⁹

Note the highly experiential and sensory aspects of the last quote. The goal of the mystic is to concretely encounter and interact with “God” in the silence or secret place of the heart. According to Nouwen and many others, one cannot be a fruitful Christian leader in our times without such daily experiences. A current Evangelical proponent of contemplative spirituality is Bill Hull.¹⁰ He recently developed a 30-week curriculum with bible.org to facilitate spiritual transformation through contemplative practices.¹¹ The curriculum is divided into five modules and makes significant use of *lectio divina*. Hull specifically endorses and encourages what Nouwen extols:

Henry Nouwen said, “The central question at the heart of Christian leadership is, are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word, and to taste fully God’s infinite goodness?” Notice the range of desires that Nouwen mentions: to dwell, to listen, to focus, and to taste.

These describe a level of experience with God that may be unknown to many of us, yet is available to anyone who will reserve space in their daily schedule to spend personal time with

⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁹ Ibid., 43.

¹⁰ Hull is the author of *The Disciple Making Pastor* and *The Disciple Making Church*; he is the founder of T-NET, which stands for the “Training Network”; the leadership team of my church went through a two-year T-Net coaching process for disciple making churches in 1994-95.

¹¹ Bill Hull and Paul Mascarella, *Experience the Life: Making the Jesus Way a Habit* (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 2007).

God. I am not talking now about the typical quiet time, because to be honest, mine were too often just me doing religious stuff with very little experience...Being a self-disciplined, well-educated leader with an acceptable quiet time wasn't sufficient to develop the qualities extolled by Henri Nouwen...I needed to be trained in developing my inner life...Now my quiet time with God became the training center where I re-learned what it meant to follow Jesus.¹²

The discipline of spiritual direction or mentoring is used to support mystical or contemplative spirituality. The Anderson/Reese Model of Spiritual Mentoring is based on monastic spiritual direction and contemplative spirituality.¹³

In January 2006, I received an invitation from our Regional Minister to attend a Leadership Center informational dinner for the pastors in our association. He is the one who had referred Randy Reese to me. I responded with an e-mail letter. Among other things I wrote,

I am not aligned with the mysticism components of the material. Some examples of what I mean are the contemplative prayer exercise on page 70 of the manual; the reliance on the book by Catholic contemplative Henri Nouwen; the frequent quotes from mystical contemplatives such as Thomas Merton, Thomas More, Richard Foster; the entire structuring of Randy's book on spiritual mentoring around spiritual mystics such as Aelred of Rievaulx, John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, Madame Jeanne Guyon. I find Randy's approach to spiritual mentoring more in line with the spiritual direction of Catholic monasticism than biblical discipleship. I will not take the existing leaders and the emerging leaders of the church I pastor through such material.

I received back a brief reply saying that he looked forward to talking with me further about the benefits of mysticism. Just recently (September 2007) I received an invitation to a Pastoral Enrichment Retreat for our association pastors that will be moderated by Reese. It is a retreat designed to cultivate contemplative practices in tending to the interior life.

¹² Ibid., 86-87.

¹³ Keith R. Anderson & Randy D. Reese, *Spiritual Mentoring: A Guide for Seeking and Giving Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1999), 12, 13, 25, 31-32, 92, 109-110, 112.

B. RICK WARREN AND BREATH PRAYERS

To direct people on a spiritual journey for 40 days, Rick Warren wrote *The Purpose Driven Life*. The bestselling book has impacted millions of persons. My church took the journey in the fall of 2003. There were some things that I found odd at the time. One was the encouragement to use “breath prayers.” Chapter 11 is entitled “Becoming Best Friends with God.” Two secrets of friendship with God are “constant conversation” and “continual meditation.” After quoting 1 Thess 5:17, “pray without ceasing,” Warren asks how a Christian can practice unceasing prayer to which he answers, “One way is to use ‘breath prayers’ throughout the day, as many Christians have done for centuries. You choose a brief sentence or a simple phrase that can be repeated in one breath.”¹⁴ Then after providing ten examples of short biblical phrases that could work as breath prayers, Warren advises, “Pray it as often as possible so it is rooted deep in your heart.” In this context Warren also cites the book of Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*¹⁵, who testified of experiencing God’s presence by repeating short prayers throughout the day.

An advocate of contemplative spirituality explains breath prayers,

One of the beautiful things that emerged from the disciplined life of the Desert Fathers was their soul-full practice of contemplative prayer, including the use of ‘Breath Prayers.’ The Desert Fathers preferred short, one breath prayers offered in a receptive stillness before God . . . To focus their minds simply on Christ and to descend with Christ into their hearts these monks slowly repeated their short holy prayers over and over with each breath. Many of these prayers were a perfect body rhythm of seven syllables that easily could be whispered in one breath.¹⁶

Should we employ breath prayers? Praying a short sentence over and over bears resemblance to the mantra praying of eastern religions in which a word is recited or sung repeatedly to induce an altered state of consciousness.

¹⁴ Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 89.

¹⁵ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1982).

¹⁶ William Gaultiere, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Soul: Breath Prayers* (2007); available from <http://www.christiansoulcare.com/spiritual-discipline-breathprayers.htm>; Internet; accessed September 2007.

What did Paul mean when he commanded the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing”? The command is likely an iterative present, the idea being, “not that believers are to pray every minute of every day, but that we should offer prayers to God repeatedly.”¹⁷ Prayer should be a constant part of Christian consciousness as defined by the surrounding commands to rejoice and give thanks. Just as the attitude of a believer is to be continuously joyful and thankful, so also their attitude is to be continuously prayerful. This command does not support the practice of simply repeating a short phrase in conjunction with the breath throughout the day to experience God’s presence.

C. SPIRITUAL FORMATION PROGRAMS AT CHRISTIAN COLLEGES AND SEMINARIES

Many Christian colleges and seminaries have developed spiritual formation programs that promote contemplative spirituality. For example, Biola University and Talbot School of Theology have an Institute for Spiritual Formation that functions as a Department in Talbot.¹⁸ Note some of the stated objectives, curricular requirements, and course descriptions.

The aim of the Institute for Spiritual Formation functioning as a department in Talbot is to integrate an in-depth integrative theology of spiritual formation with the process and dynamics involved in spiritual growth, soul care and mentoring in the church. It attempts to train a generation of servants who are equipped both to understand and participate in the process of spiritual growth from a theological, integrative and experiential perspective, within the context of a developing mentoring community, to the end that students are better equipped to help others in the church in this process.¹⁹

All students are required to experience monthly spiritual direction and mentoring for the sake of their own spiritual growth

¹⁷ Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 521.

¹⁸ Biola University and Talbot School of Theology; *2005-2007 Catalog*, 235-238; available from http://www.talbot.edu/academics/downloads/talbot_catalog_05-07.pdf; Internet; accessed September 2007.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

and training in spiritual soul care in each semester they are enrolled in courses.²⁰

Due to the nature of soul work involved in spiritual direction and in harmony with its tradition, each student is required to have a total of three weeks of extended retreat in isolation or partial isolation to explore and cultivate the inner life in the presence of God under the supervision of a spiritual guide and one's advisor.²¹

TTSF 531 History and Traditions of Christian Spirituality. An exploration of spirituality through Church history. The course introduces the student to the various traditions of spirituality (contemplative, holiness, Word, charismatic, social reform etc.) and their historical-theoretical roots (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran etc)...Various experiential projects are designed to facilitate understanding, appreciation and personal growth with respect to these traditions.²²

TTSF 532 Developmental Spirituality & Contemplative Prayer. An exploration of the various stages of growth involved in the believer's journey, employing both experiential and biblical data. Particular focus is given to St. John of the Cross who developed perhaps the most elaborate and influential approach to understanding the work of the Spirit in various phases of the Christian's life and how this relates to the relationship between discursive and contemplative prayer and meditation.²³

TTSF 623 Contemplative Spirituality and Prayer. This course encourages personal awareness and sensitivity to the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit. Particular emphasis is upon growing in faith as understood in the Bible and the contemplative tradition by attending, listening and openness to the truth of oneself and God as revealed by the Spirit inwardly.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 236.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 237.

D. KENNETH BOA, BIBLE.ORG, AND SACRED READING (*LECTIO DIVINA*)

Bible.org promotes *lectio divina* through a series on the Apostles' Creed by Kenneth Boa and the previously cited 30 weeks curriculum, *Experience the Life: Making the Jesus Way a Habit*, developed by Bill Hull. Boa's first article is *An Introduction to Sacred Reading: Our Image of God*.²⁵ *Lectio divina* is Latin for divine reading, spiritual reading, or sacred reading, and represents a method of prayer and scriptural reading intended to promote inward communion with God and provide special spiritual insights. It is about hearing God personally talk to us. There are four phases of the prayer: *lectio* (listen/read), *meditatio* (meditate/reflect), *oratio* (pray/respond), and *contemplatio* (contemplate/rest).

E. NATIONAL PASTOR'S CONVENTION

Zondervan is the main sponsor of the National Pastors Convention. This year's conventions feature a Pastors Transforming Retreat. The convention's website gives the following description:

Experience God's transforming presence in this special overnight retreat designed specifically for you. "Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership" challenges participants to forge a connection between their souls and their leadership. This National Pastors Retreat provides leaders with a safe place to be honest about the challenges of spiritual leadership, to experience spiritual rhythms of solitude, prayer, and community, and to deepen their understanding of leadership that flows from one's authentic self. Led by the Transforming Center leaders Ruth Haley Barton and Joe Sherman, this retreat offers a meaningful introduction to the community, spiritual rhythms, teaching themes, and guided experiences that will come to characterize National Pastors Retreat.²⁶

Ruth Haley Barton is the co-founder of The Transforming Center. The center's website biographical page tells us that she is a spiritual director, teacher and retreat leader trained through the Shalem Institute for

²⁵ Available from http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=3862; Internet; accessed September 2007. See also Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 174-86.

²⁶ Available from <http://www.zondervan.com/Cultures/en-US/NPC/Retreat/>; Internet; accessed September 2007.

Spiritual Formation and the Pathways Center for Spiritual Leadership in Nashville, Tennessee.²⁷ She is also the author of several books including *Sacred Rhythms* and *Invitation to Silence and Solitude*. She has served on the pastoral staff of Willow Creek Community Church. The Shalem Institute and the Pathways Center for Spiritual Leadership (a ministry of the Upper Room now known as the Academy for Spiritual Formation) are ecumenical and interspiritual organizations that find unity in the experience of contemplative spirituality.²⁸

III. WHAT IS THE APPEAL?

Why are so many Christians attracted to mysticism? One or more of the following reasons may apply: the desire for a direct experience of God, the desire for personal communication from God beyond the Bible, the desire for peace and calm within, the desire to experience something new. It seems to be a matter of walking by sight. We would do well to have the same ambition as the apostle Paul, “Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord — for we walk by faith, not by sight — We are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him” (2 Cor 5:6-9).

IV. WHAT ARE SOME DANGERS?

A. ELEVATING MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE OVER THE EXEGESIS AND APPLICATION OF THE BIBLE

The Bible is the believer’s objective authority for everything pertaining to faith and practice. Mystics come to rely on subjective experience.

B. FINDING UNITY IN MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE NOT TRUTH – ECUMENICALISM AND INTERSPIRITUALITY

At the end of 1994 Thomas Keating and a group of Centering Prayer practitioners established a structure called Contemplative Outreach to

²⁷ Available from <http://www.thetransformingcenter.org/ruthbio.php>; Internet; accessed September 2007.

²⁸ Available from www.shalem.org and www.upperroom.org/academy/; Internet; accessed September 2007.

serve as a network to transmit the method.²⁹ They listed three purposes for the network. The first purpose was to renew the contemplative tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. The second purpose was to make the Christian Contemplative heritage available to the other Christian communities. Keating explains, “We knew from our experience of praying together with people of different denominations that Centering Prayer bonds the participants in a way that transcends doctrinal differences.”³⁰ The third purpose was to prepare Christians for more profound interreligious dialogue. After such dialogue Keating came to believe “God manifests himself through the rituals and spiritual disciplines of the various religions of the world.”³¹

C. PHYSICAL, PHYSIOLOGICAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTURBANCES

DSM IV TR has a diagnostic category that can be used when the focus of clinical attention is a religious or spiritual problem.³² David Lukoff, one of the members of the task force who helped to establish the diagnostic category explains its rationale.

In the DSM-IV, spiritual problems are defined as distressing experiences that involve a person’s relationship with a transcendent being or force, but are not necessarily related to an organized church or religious institution. Sometimes such experiences result from intensive involvement with spiritual practices such as yoga. The impetus for proposing this new diagnostic category came from transpersonal clinicians whose initial focus was on crises triggered by meditation and other spiritual practices.³³

Lukoff details possible physical, physiological, and psychological symptoms. Physical symptoms can include “sensations of heat, tremors, involuntary laughing or crying, talking in tongues, nausea, diarrhea or

²⁹ See Thomas Keating, *Manifesting God*, 119-23.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

³² *American Psychiatric Association: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision* (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000), V62.89, 741.

³³ David Lukoff PhD, *DSM IV Religious & Spiritual Problem*; available from http://www.spiritualcompetency.com/dsm4/lesson3_5.asp; Internet; accessed September 2007.

constipation, rigidity or limpness, animal-like movements and sounds.” Physiological problems can present as “internal sensations of burning, hypersensitivity to sensory input, hyperactivity or lethargy, great variations in sexual desire, and even spontaneous orgasm.” Psychological symptoms can be “feelings of anxiety, guilt, and depression (with bouts of uncontrollable weeping).” There may be “visions of lights, symbols, spiritual entities. Auditory sensations may include hearing voices, music, inner sounds or mantras. There may also be disruption of the proprioceptive system, with loss of a sense of self as a body, or an out of the body experience.”

D. SPIRITUAL DECEPTION

Contemplative practices can usher in an altered state of consciousness which may render the practitioner susceptible to the wrong kind of spiritual influence. The Apostle Paul warns “that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim 4:1). Even as strong a proponent of contemplative practices as Richard Foster cautions:

I also want to give a word of precaution. In the silent contemplation of God we are entering deeply into the spiritual realm, and there is such a thing as a supernatural guidance that is not divine guidance. While the Bible does not give us a lot of information on the nature of the spiritual world, we do know there are various orders of spiritual beings, and some of them are definitely not in cooperation with God and his way! But for now I want to encourage you to learn and practice prayers of protection... All dark and evil spirits must now leave.³⁴

It is not wise to become involved with a non-biblical form of prayer that could bring exposure to demonic influence.

E. DISTORTION AND MISAPPLICATION OF SOME SCRIPTURES

Many contemplatives quote the first part of Ps 46:10, “Be still and know that I am God,” to endorse a form of meditation that involves techniques on “quieting” the mind or going beyond the mind. Is this what the verse is talking about? Psalm 46:10, far from endorsing a mystical meditative state, is stating to the readers that they should be in awe of God as the Sovereign Ruler. This verse is not about contemplative prayer, it’s

³⁴ Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1992), 157.

a declaration of God's sovereignty. It simply means to stop and acknowledge that God is in charge. Some other passages that are distorted and misapplied are 1 Kgs 19:11-13 as referring to the still, small voice of God heard in the silence of the heart, Matt 6:6 as to meeting with God in the secret place of the heart, and 1 Thess 5:18 as to using "breath prayers" throughout the day to continually experience the presence of God.

V. CONCLUSION

Many in the academy and in the church are using leadership and mentoring programs to introduce contemplative practices. Contemplative practices lead the practitioner into the "silence." A common method is to empty the mind of thought through repetition, usually of a word or phrase. This helps to self-induce a contemplative state which supposedly facilitates an experiential encounter with God and the reception of personal communication from Him. It is often asserted that no one can be a spiritually deep leader without such consistent experiences. Not only are contemplative practices not supported by the Bible, but they can also produce artificial experiences or even leave a practitioner open to the deception of familiar spirits.

Nowhere in the Bible is prayer a technique or a way to go beyond thinking. Creating an experiential theology of prayer apart from the Bible is dangerous because we enter an area filled with subjectivism, truth based on experience, and therefore, an area where we can be deceived. The Bible presents prayer as words and thoughts expressed by us to God.

Contemplative practices are not found in the Bible. We should be wary of any instruction that advises us to repeat continually a word or phrase, even if it's from the Bible, or use a word or phrase to stay "focused," go beyond thinking or thought, to turn inward in order to find or be with God, be in silence in order to truly hear from God. Christian prayer should be taught as it is modeled in the Bible. Beware of monks bearing gifts.

APPENDIX 1

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

David Knowles concisely explains the origin of Christian mysticism, "All theoretical, speculative presentation of contemplation came down the centuries from Plato, Philo and the Alexandrians, reinforced by a new and strong infusion of Neo-platonism, originating with Plotinus and car-

ried over into the Christian tradition by Augustine and pseudo-Denis.”³⁵ Contemplative spirituality does not have its origin in the revelation of the Bible. Plotinus (c. 205-270 AD) wrote the *Enneads* and is the non-Christian, neo-platonic basis for much Christian, Jewish, and Islamic mysticism. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 500 AD), is the author of *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Mystical Theology*, and *The Divine Names*. He originated the distinction between *kataphatic* and *apophatic* theology.

Kataphatic and *apophatic* are two strands which run throughout Christian mysticism.³⁶ The term *kataphatic* comes from a Greek word that means “affirmative,” and refers to the tradition as the way of affirmation and stresses the knowledge of God through symbols, song, images, and metaphors. The *apophatic* comes from a Greek word which means “negative,” and refers to the tradition as the way of negation and understands God as beyond words and images.

The contemplative practices can be categorized by their tendency to fit one end of this spectrum or the other. Ritual chants (Taizé, Gregorian), Icon meditation, Ignatian spirituality with its emphasis on visualization fit the *kataphatic* tradition. Centering prayer and the Jesus Prayer fit the *apophatic* tradition. The practice of *lectio divina* seems to bridge both the *kataphatic* and *apophatic*. The stages of *lectio* and *oratio* involve words, but *meditatio* and *contemplatio* move beyond the words. Regardless of the tradition they fit, the practices are really aids to entering into a relaxed and altered state of consciousness so as to have spiritual experiences.

APPENDIX 2

SOME CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES

Many practices help induce a mystical state of contemplation.³⁷ Let’s take a closer look at four of them.

³⁵ David Knowles, “The Influence of Pseudo-Dionysius on Western Mysticism” in *Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Gordon Rupp* (London: SCM Press, 1975), 94.

³⁶ Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 467-511.

³⁷ For a description and historical overview of many contemplative practices see Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); Jones is a strong advocate of contemplative spirituality and the national coordinator of *Emergent Village*.

A. CENTERING PRAYER

Eastern mystics, religious contemplatives, occultists, and others have employed what they call *centering* as a means to self-induce an altered state of consciousness. Don Matzat in an article entitled “What Is Centering?” provides a good explanation of how a person can enter an altered state of consciousness in this way.³⁸

³⁸ In 1920’s, Dr. Hans Berger, a German psychiatrist, uncovered some interesting insights about the activity of the brain during various stages of human consciousness. By hooking-up patients to an electro-encephalograph, he discovered that the brain of the person actively using his or her five senses emits between 13 and 18 vibrations per second. He referred to these as “beta” rhythms. During sleep, the brain emitted between five to eight rhythms, or what he called “theta.” The vibrations below five, found in the deep sleep of infants, he termed “delta” rhythms. The brain waves emitted between “beta” and “theta,” the state of consciousness between normal mental activity and sleep, when the brain is emitting between eight to 13 vibrations per second, Berger termed “alpha” rhythms. This is the basis for what is called the “alpha zone,” a new definition for the trance of the mystics. In the alpha zone, the human brain is in a state of receptivity. Images freely flow through the imagination. The critical, rational mind, as Jose Silva puts in, is on the back burner and the imaginative mind is up-front. It is important to point out that entering the alpha zone is a natural human condition and is experienced by everyone prior to falling asleep. We have all sensed the free flow of images that pass through the mind immediately before sleep. This is natural. This is alpha. Also, there is good evidence to suggest that inducing this alpha state of consciousness does have value in stress management. Lowering brain waves produces relaxation, and we all need to relax. The issue is not the natural experiences of human consciousness, but rather the relationship between the alpha level and spiritual experience. Does such a relationship exist? If so, is the Holy Spirit producing the experience or is there an alternative source? Should we be concerned that this altered state of consciousness is associated with a variety of occult practices?

Self-inducing alpha is the goal of a wide range of today’s spiritual practitioners. Mystics alter their consciousness in order to seek a visualized experience with God. New Age advocates desire a personal, visualized “spirit guide” who will grant enlightened knowledge. Occultists continue to go after psychic phenomena. Followers of Eastern religions pursue the god within.

Don Matzat, “What Is Centering,” *Issues, Etc. Journal* Vol. 3 No. 1 (Spring 1998); See also Dennis Coon, *Psychology: A Modular Approach to Mind and Behavior* (Florence, KY: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), 216, 223, 235-36; read the definitions for “alpha state”, “alpha waves”, “alpha-wave training”, and “altered state of consciousness” by Robert M. Goldenson, PhD, *Longman Dic-*

The current practice of centering prayer can be traced to the mid 1970's, to St. Joseph Abbey in Spencer, MA, and three monks, Abbot Thomas Keating, William Meninger and Basil Pennington.³⁹ Their work was a response to the exhortations of the Second Vatican Council to become more knowledgeable about other religious faiths through dialogue with practitioners from these traditions and to revitalize the path of contemplative prayer in order to help Catholics, especially those who had left the church, to find such experiences in their own faith tradition.

Thomas Keating was personally disappointed that so many Catholics had left the church because they had no idea it offered meditation practices that could cultivate the inner peace and spiritual union they desired. At a monastery gathering in the mid-1970's, Keating posed a question to his fellow monks that provided the impetus to the centering prayer movement: "Could we put the Christian tradition into a form that would be accessible to people in the active ministry today and to young people who have been instructed in an Eastern technique and might be inspired to return to their Christian roots if they knew there was something similar in the Christian tradition?"⁴⁰

Fathers Keating, Meninger, and Pennington entered into dialogue with leaders from other religious traditions living near the abbey. They invited to the abbey ecumenically oriented Catholic theologians, an Eastern Zen master who offered weeklong retreats on Buddhist meditation, and a former Trappist, Paul Marechal, who taught Transcendental Meditation. The interaction between these Christian monks and practitioners of Eastern meditation helped distill the practice of Christian contemplative prayer into the centering prayer form that could be easily practiced by anyone.

Keating puts forth four simple guidelines for practicing centering prayer:⁴¹

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.

tionary of Psychology and Psychiatry (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Longman 1984), 33; Robert Jean Campbell, MD, "electroencephalogram", in *Psychiatric Dictionary Seventh Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 238-39.

³⁹ See Thomas Keating, *Manifesting God* (New York: Lantern Books, 2005), 115-128; and Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York: Crossroad Classic, 1996), 11-21.

⁴⁰ Keating, *Intimacy with God*, 15.

⁴¹ Keating, *Manifesting God*, 133-36.

2. Sitting comfortably with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently and introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.

3. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word.

4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

The recommended time for centering prayer is twenty minutes twice a day. Centering prayer is a close cousin to Transcendental Meditation.

The practice of centering prayer has spread widely to "Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Protestants, and Evangelicals as well as Catholics."⁴² For example, Larry Crabb writes about his contemplative prayer practices, "I've practiced centering prayer. I've contemplatively prayed. I've prayed liturgically...I've benefited from each, and I still do. In ways you'll see, elements of each style are still with me."⁴³

B. SACRED READING (LECTIO DIVINA)

Lectio divina is the slow meditative reading of Scripture. It is undertaken not with the intention of gaining information but of using the texts as an aid to encounter God. The four phases of the prayer are *lectio* (listen/read), *meditatio* (meditate/reflect), *oratio* (pray/respond), and *contemplatio* (contemplate/rest).⁴⁴ Tony Jones explains that the final step of contemplation "...moves beyond words and intellect and into that 'thin space' where time and eternity almost touch. It's in moments like these that some of the greatest saints in the history of the church have had a 'mystical union' with Christ."⁴⁵

The concept of God speaking to us through the Bible is legitimate. We receive that through normal reading, study and meditation. The purpose of *lectio divina* is not to think about the meaning and application of a Bible verse or passage, but to gain an experience from it and even receive a personal word from God. There is a difference between reading the Bible to understand its meaning and apply it to our lives versus a method of focusing on a text to gain a mystical experience.

⁴² Ibid., 122.

⁴³ Larry Crabb, *The Papa Prayer* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 9.

⁴⁴ Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 175-85.

⁴⁵ Jones, *The Sacred Way*, 53.

C. THE JESUS PRAYER

The “Jesus Prayer” is based on the biblical prayer of the tax collector, “God be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13). It is the normal form of unceasing prayer in the Orthodox tradition. Kallistos Ware explains the practice and its intended effect:

The repetition needs to be unvarying, so as to bring the intellect from fragmentation to unity, from a diversity of thoughts and images to a state of single-pointed concentration. While itself an invocation in words, by virtue of its brevity and simplicity the prayer Lord Jesus enables us to reach out beyond language into silence, beyond discursive thinking into intuitive awareness.⁴⁶

How, more specifically, are we to acquire inner stillness or *hesychia*, progressing from the level of discursive thinking to that of unmediated, non-discursive union? How are we to stop talking and to start listening?...there is one way of praying that has been found especially valuable as an aid to inner silence: the Jesus Prayer. This is a short invocation, designed for frequent repetition and addressed to the Savior. Most commonly it takes the form “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.”⁴⁷

The Jesus Prayer has become popular among contemplative Evangelicals. For example, leading Evangelical scholar J. P. Moreland recommends the repetition of the Jesus Prayer about “three hundred times a day” to help develop the habit of ongoing prayer!⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Kallistos Ware, “The Origins of the Jesus Prayer,” in *The Study of Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 178.

⁴⁷ Kallistos Ware, “Ways of Prayer and Contemplation,” in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1985), 402-403.

⁴⁸ J. P. Moreland and Klaus Issler, *Lost Virtues of Happiness: Discovering the Disciplines of the Good Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 90. I have a personal story which involved J. P. Moreland. In the summer of 1976 I was working in Mississippi and corresponding with a girl, now my wife, who was on a Campus Crusade for Christ summer project at Myrtle Beach, SC. The Bible teacher for the project was J. P. Moreland and he was teaching on the book of Philippians. Brenda wrote me of being teased by some of the girls on the project with the question “Received any letters from your Philippe...ian?”

D. WALKING A LABYRINTH

Walking a Labyrinth has popular with many Evangelical organizations and churches.⁴⁹ It is sometimes called a “prayer path.”⁵⁰ It has been promoted by Youth for Christ, Youth Specialties, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Navpress, Campus Crusade for Christ, Zondervan Publishing, National Pastors Convention, Leadership Magazine, Group Publishing and a host of others.

The labyrinth has only one path. The path follows a circuitous route to a center. By walking amongst the turnings of a labyrinth, a person loses track of the outside world and quiets the mind. It is but another technique for centering.

⁴⁹ Jones, *The Sacred Way*, 127-33.

⁵⁰ A prayer path kit is available from Group Publishing at www.grouppublishing.com/prayerpath/kit.htm.