

Emory University

**United to the Lord:
Introducing a Contemplative Prayer Practice in an American Protestant Church to
Remedy the Lack of Intimacy with God**

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Introduction – A Story of Longing for Spiritual Intimacy

One Sunday morning, the Dahlonega United Methodist Church in Dahlonega, Georgia, where I serve as senior pastor, held a celebration for our local College Methodist Ministry that revealed a paradox in the broader American Church. The celebration for the University of North Georgia Wesley Foundation was to recognize the phenomenal growth of the ministry over a four-year span from about ten college students meeting weekly to about a hundred and fifty meeting regularly. It has grown to become the third-largest Wesley Foundation in the state of Georgia. The Foundation had also developed a leadership team of thirty college students committed to praying for the life-giving ministry that was occurring; several of these student leaders shared their testimonies in our three Sunday morning services. I was surprised to hear a common refrain echoed in the various testimonies: what drew them to the Wesley Foundation was the opportunity to enter into a more intimate relationship with Christ. Of the six speakers, four directly talked about growing up in either Baptist or United Methodist churches, of their faith as believers in Christ, of their faithfulness to the biblical and ecclesiastical teachings, and their lack of having intimacy with the Lord.

As I participated in the celebration I could not help but notice the paradox: how is it possible that so many young adults could grow up in various protestant denominations, have an earnest desire to lead a Christian Life, and yet lack the intimacy with God that they longed for and that the Bible speaks so frequently about. Hearing their joy and passion for serving Christ because of their newfound intimacy with God inspired me to help others discover the intimacy

that Jesus offers each person. Intimacy with God is found throughout the Bible and is described in various ways: a longing for God's presence, friendship with God, union with God, abiding in Christ, and the indwelling Holy Spirit. Intimacy with God is not merely a feeling or an experience, but is personal encounter with the living God in a mutual relationship.

The Statement of the Problem

There is a Lack of Intimacy with God in the American Protestant Church

The testimonies of these college students from varied churches and differing denominational histories reveal that the American protestant part of the Body of Christ may be failing at one of the primary tasks Christ instituted it to perform: to help persons to develop intimacy with God and one another as Christians.¹ Jane*², one of the college students who gave her testimony, grew up attending a Baptist church and expressed its failure unmistakably:

Lack of intimacy with God is rampant in churches today. Technology has increased a lack of intimacy with others on a social level, but our being is made of more than social aspects. We are spiritual beings living incarnate on this earth. Our home is eternity, but what happens if we don't possess any intimacy with the One we are meant to spend eternity with? From my personal experience, I know that because I've always struggled with having an intimate relationship with God, I fear death along with eternity itself. I don't desire to spend an eternity with someone I barely know. Many churches are failing to teach their congregation (or younger generations for that matter) what it means to have an actual friendship with God. Because of this, I had no idea what true community looked like until college. When you don't know intimacy at the spiritual level, the core of your being, then all other aspects will suffer.³

¹ The purview of this project is not to prove that intimacy with God and one another is a primary purpose of the Body of Christ, but I will assume that as a starting point for my argument. I reasonably assume it based on Jesus' instruction to the Apostles that they abide in him (John 15:1-17) and that their identifying marker as disciples is the way they love one another (John 13:34-35) and that they and those who believe in Jesus through their witness are to be one as he and the Father are one (John 17:20-23). Paul also teaches that Christ endowed the members of the Body of Christ with differing gifts so that each would build the others up and grow together into unity in love (Ephesians 4:11-16). All Scripture is NRSV unless otherwise noted.

² Pseudonyms will be used to protect the privacy of those interviewed.

³ All interviews were confidential; the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

Jane's lament points to a problem: is there a lack of teaching or encouraging spiritual intimacy with God in the many churches whose primary focuses are inviting persons to make professions in faith in Christ, instructing biblical knowledge about the Christian life, bringing about justice in society and creating fellowship opportunities within the church body? These are all worthy goals, but are these churches failing to help Christians have the abundant life that Jesus came to give us (John 10:10)? If the American protestant church community is experiencing a lack of intimacy with God, then seminal biblical teachings of friendship/union with God, abiding in Christ, the life in the Spirit and communion within the Body of Christ are virtually incomprehensible to many people inside and outside of those churches.

Searching for Spiritual Intimacy Outside American Protestant Churches

Persons dissatisfied with the spiritual life offered in American Protestant churches may be searching elsewhere for spiritual intimacy with God. Protestantism has been in a steady decline in the United States throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries.⁴ Multiple surveys have shown the departure of many Americans from all institutional forms of Protestantism and the rise of many persons who claim no religious affiliation known as “nones.”⁵ Robert Wuthnow analyzed this trend, tabulating that from 1974 and 1991 the number of Americans that said they “had no religion” was stable at 7 percent, however “from 1991 to 2012 persons with no religion rose to 20 percent.”⁶ Pew Research Center found this decline was not just proportional:

In 2007, there were 227 million adults in the United States, and a little more than 78% of them – or roughly 178 million – identified as Christians. Between 2007 and 2014, the overall size of the U.S. adult population grew by about 18 million people, to nearly 245 million. But the share of adults who identify as Christians fell to just under 71%, or approximately 173 million Americans, a net decline of about 5 million . . . Of the major

⁴ Robert Wuthnow, *Inventing American Religion: Polls, Surveys, and the Tenuous Quest for a Nation's Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 150.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

subgroups within American Christianity, mainline Protestantism – a tradition that includes the United Methodist Church, the American Baptist Churches USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Episcopal Church, among others – appears to have experienced the greatest drop in absolute numbers.⁷

This decline becomes starkly evident when the data is studied generationally:⁸

Generational Replacement Helping Drive Growth of Unaffiliated, Decline of Mainline Protestantism and Catholicism

	Silent generation (born 1928-1945)	Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964)	Generation X (born 1965-1980)	Older Millennials (born 1981-1989)	Younger Millennials (born 1990-1996)
	%	%	%	%	%
Christian	85	78	70	57	56
Protestant	57	52	45	38	36
<i>Evangelical</i>	30	28	25	22	19
<i>Mainline</i>	22	17	13	10	11
<i>Historically black</i>	5	7	7	6	6
Catholic	24	23	21	16	16
Other Christian groups	3	3	4	3	3
Other faiths	4	5	6	8	8
Unaffiliated	11	17	23	34	36
Don't know/refused	1	1	1	1	1
	100	100	100	100	100

2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014. Figures may not add to 100%, and nested figures may not add to subtotals indicated, due to rounding.

The "other Christian groups" category includes Mormons, Orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and a number of smaller Christian groups.

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However, the probable causation of those becoming disaffiliated with Christian denominations is not youth or lack of maturity. The following graph shows that is not just the younger generation who are leaving the churches; there is an increase in all generations of those professing no religious affiliation:⁹

⁷ "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center Religion and Public Life, accessed January 5, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Unaffiliated Make Up Growing Share Across Generations

% of each generation that identifies current religion as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular

	2007	2014	Change
Silent generation (b. 1928-1945)	9	11	+2
Baby Boomers (b.1946-1964)	14	17	+3
Generation X (b. 1965-1980)	19	23	+4
Older Millennials (b. 1981-1989)	25	34	+9
Younger Millennials (b. 1990-1996)	n/a	36	n/a

2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014. All changes are statistically significant.

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Why are Americans in every generation not affiliating with Protestant churches in ever greater numbers? Are Americans simply becoming less drawn to the spiritual life?

There is a Growing View Amongst Americans of a Lack of Spiritual Intimacy in American Protestantism

There are a number of factors for the decline in Protestantism, but a primary factor is the growing view among many Americans of a lack of spiritual intimacy with God within religion.¹⁰

Robert Fuller gives evidence the ramifications of this view:

Maslow warned of the threat to vital spirituality “when people lose or forget the subjectively religious experience, and redefine religion as a set of habits, behaviors, dogmas, forms ... at the extreme this causes spirituality to become entirely legalistic and bureaucratic, conventional, empty, and in the true meaning of the word, antireligious.” This idea became widespread during the last few decades of the twentieth century. One survey showed that as much as 54 percent of the population has come to believe ‘that churches and synagogues have lost the real spiritual part of religion.’¹¹

This growing view of a lack of spiritual development within American Protestantism has created an environment where many people in the United States who are seeking spiritual intimacy with

¹⁰ Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4-5.

¹¹ Ibid.

God look outside the churches. In fact, the decline of affiliation with institutional Christianity is happening at the same time as polls show a rise in interest in spiritual connection among many Americans.¹² Pew Research Center's *2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study* found:

[I]n some ways Americans are becoming more spiritual. About six-in-ten adults now say they regularly feel a deep sense of "spiritual peace and well-being," up 7 percentage points since 2007. And 46% of Americans say they experience a deep sense of "wonder about the universe" at least once a week, also up 7 points over the same period.¹³

Also among those claiming no religious affiliation, 75 percent profess a belief in God and 40 percent said they were "spiritual but not religious."¹⁴ Many Americans are still looking for spiritual fulfillment but do not seek it in churches.

If we place these two trends together, the current picture of religious interest shows that perhaps many people have lost interest in institutional Christianity precisely because they are seeking spiritual connection and do not expect to find it there. Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright highlighted this problem in Western Christianity in general by analogizing the search for spiritual intimacy as a search for a hidden spring of water that has been capped and controlled by the governing institutions.¹⁵ Wright paints a picture of Western Christianity seeking to control the Holy Spirit through the church institution as a city uses concrete pipes to control water flow. As the pressure from the spring builds up and water bursts out through places in the ground, the people seek the water where it flows even when it is no longer pure.¹⁶ Wright critiques Western Christianity for only allowing controlled access to the Spirit, which has led to the Spirit bursting

¹² "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," Pew Research Center, accessed January 5, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Wuthnow, *Inventing American Religion*, 152.

¹⁵ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: Harper One, 2006), 17-20.

¹⁶ Ibid, 18.

out in other places and the people seeking it where they can more fully experience it.¹⁷ How can the American Protestant part of Western Christianity open up opportunities for its members and others to experience true spiritual intimacy with God?

A Remedy – Introducing Contemplative Prayer Practices in American Protestantism

Contemplative Prayer Creates Intimacy with God

There is an ancient prayer practice that could be a remedy to the lack of spiritual intimacy with God in the American protestant church. Contemplative prayer is a form of prayer that brings about spiritual intimacy with God and was taught by Jesus, practiced by the saints in the Bible, and practiced by the faithful throughout the centuries. Contemplative prayer is silent, still prayer which is focused on God and God’s word in order to bring the participant into the presence of God in an intimate way.¹⁸ Some theologians differentiate between meditative prayer (prayer guided by Scripture or devotional reading) and contemplation (silent prayer focused on God and God’s presence), but throughout Christian history the practice of prayer focusing on God and God’s word has been a synchronous practice that draws persons intimately into God’s presence.¹⁹ Biblical teaching and historical practices of contemplative prayer involve both the meditative prayer over scripture (Psalm 1:2) and the intimate prayer with God in the “inner room” which Jesus advocated (Matthew 6:6). While practices of contemplative prayer may differ in form over the centuries and within the Western and Eastern parts of the Church, there is a clear commonality of purpose which leads the contemplative practitioner into a deeper relationship of intimacy with God to unite with God spiritually. Would offering to Protestants an

¹⁷ Ibid, 19-20.

¹⁸ See A. Poulain, *The Graces of Interior Prayer: A Treatise on Mystical Theology* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1907), 59, I agree with Father Poulain that there are myriad definitions of contemplation; theologians “do not give it exactly the same signification” so that each of us need define it clearly for our purposes.

¹⁹ Cf. Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 143-166.

opportunity to develop a contemplative prayer practice in their lives bring them intimacy with God and one another? Would these practices help the participants to better understand Biblical teachings about intimacy with God, union with God, the life in the Spirit and the communion of the Body of Christ? In order to ascertain whether contemplative prayer practices would give opportunities for spiritual intimacy with God in an American Protestant Church, I introduced several practices into the life of Dahlonega United Methodist Church beginning in January 2016. Because they gave opportunities for people to encounter the living God, the practices that I engaged with my congregation are foundational hermeneutical tools on what relationship with God is. This project will produce findings by interviewing persons who participated in the various contemplative prayer practices and analyzing the results.

How Contemplative Prayer Can Help Bring Intimacy with God to Christians in Dahlonega United Methodist Church

The Dahlonega United Methodist Church is growing, vibrant, passionate and diverse and is involved in witness, worship and outreach into the community in a small, rural county (30,000 residents) in the North Georgia Mountains. The Church has 1380 members and averages over 550 in attendance in five worship services which encompass persons from differing socio-economic and educational backgrounds, and has many ministries of discipleship and compassion. Because the Church consists of people from a spectrum of economic situations part of its identity has come to be an identification with the poor. It has incorporated a lower-income community nearby into the life of the Church by picking up by bus families for worship and children and youth activities, holding Bible studies in the neighborhood and helping them to become part of the Church. The Church has large groups of both military and retired persons who have moved to live in Lumpkin County. The Church is staffed with a Senior Pastor, an Associate Pastor, a Minister to Young Adults, Youth Minister, Children's Minister, Music

Minister, Preschool Director, Business Manager, Administrative Assistant and various musicians.

When I have spoken in worship of experiencing intimacy with God, being in the presence of God and hearing God in prayer like Peter did on the rooftop of Simon the Tanner or as described in the Psalms, congregants query me as to how that is possible because they have had no such experience of spiritual intimacy. Talking about spiritual intimacy challenged some persons' faith because they have not experienced God in this way. While lack of intimacy with God should not cause doubt in anyone's salvation and faith, the lack of intimacy with God precludes one's experiencing the "fullness of God" in the way that God offers (Ephesians 3:16-19). There are persons at Dahlonge United Methodist Church who have shared their desire to have this greater intimacy with God. To address this expressed need, this project introduced a systematic program of contemplative prayer and practices into various segments of the congregation. The two primary methods I used to help introduce contemplative prayer into the Church were moments of silent prayer and a form of prayerfully meditating on Scripture called *lectio divina*. *Lectio divina* is a form of prayerfully listening to the Bible readings in order to hear God speak directly to the hearer's situation.²⁰ It involves listening to a passage of Scripture read multiple times and allowing God to speak to the hearer's present moment through the spiritual revelation of a word or phrase within the passage. The theology of *lectio divina* is that the many words of the Bible ultimately help us to hear the Word who is God (John 1:1).²¹

Implementation Strategy for Contemplative Prayer Practice at DUMC

²⁰ Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori, MO.: Liguori/Triumph, 1995), 51.

²¹ Mariano Magrassi, *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina* (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 1998), 47-48.

I felt it was wise to begin with the staff as they are the ministers to the rest of the church. I ask each one to pray silently over Scripture or to pray focusing on God at a set time during the week in the Sanctuary and afterwards to integrate contemplative prayer practices into their various ministries. We then added a contemplative prayer moment of 5 minutes of silence into the Sunday morning worship services, began a Wednesday morning prayer service which centered around hearing scripture read followed by 20 minutes of silent prayer, added a 30-minute silent prayer time before our college ministry meetings, added silent prayer or *lectio divina* into numerous adult classes and took several group silent prayer retreats to the Monastery of the Holy Spirit. This integrated program created multiple contemplative opportunities for participants to encounter God in prayer or in hearing Scripture.

Weekly Staff Contemplative Prayer Time

At the close of 2015, I proposed to the Church Staff that I was going to introduce contemplative prayer practice into the life of the Church and I would like to begin with them. God's calling for the members of the Staff is to equip the saints for ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12), and if they are to help persons to develop intimacy with God they should be given the opportunity to experience this intimacy for themselves. I asked each staff member to take a time of one hour each week to specifically pray in silence in the Church Sanctuary. Anna* provides an example of how this new practice began to affect our Staff:

Last year, our Senior Pastor gave the church staff a challenge: have a time of contemplative prayer in our sanctuary . . . I was unsure of this contemplative prayer challenge at first, especially when I had to sit alone for an hour in our sanctuary and talk with God. But what I found was an amazing time with the Lord. Every Tuesday morning at 8:00 am I faithfully entered the quiet sanctuary, ready to spend time with God. I would start by singing . . . I would also read the Word and pray. Silence was included in that as well, as a big part of prayer is listening to God . . .

At first, Anna was uncomfortable with silence so she sang, but she soon discovered that silence allowed her to encounter God in a new way. Anna learned that being in the silence led her into “listening to God.” Although she was at first “unsure” of praying contemplatively, Anna discovered the “amazing time” of being in God’s presence. It became important for her praying to still herself to enter into intimacy with God. She felt this intimacy as being “with the Lord.” Jesus teaches about this as entering the inner room not to speak, but to be in God’s presence, “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do . . . for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:6-8). Anna entered into Jesus’ inner room and discovered the truth that the Teacher in Ecclesiastes wisely instructed:

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice of fools . . . Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few (Ecclesiastes 5:1-2).

Soren Kierkegaard wrote of the importance of silence for encountering God in prayer:

Praying is not listening to oneself speak but is about becoming silent and, in becoming silent, waiting, until one who prays hears God. That is why the way in which the gospel’s injunction to “seek first His kingdom” trains a person up by, as it were, muzzling him, and to every single question about what he ought to do answers, “No, seek *first* the kingdom of God.” Thus, one can rewrite this saying as follows: Begin by praying . . . when prayer really has become prayer, it becomes silence. Seek first the kingdom of God – that means: pray!²²

The Eastern Orthodox Church developed a contemplative prayer practice to bring people into intimacy with God called *Hesychasm*, from the Greek word *hesychia*, which means “stillness, rest, quiet, silence.”²³ The genius of the practice is that it “attempts to make room for God in oneself by directing one’s faculties towards God and attempting to maintain a state of

²² Soren Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings* (New York: HarperPerennial ModernThought, 2010), 185-186.

²³ Christopher D. L. Johnson, *The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer* (London: Continuum, 2010), 15.

constant awareness and attentiveness to God's presence."²⁴ As Anna began to direct her faculties toward God in like manner, she began to develop greater intimacy with God in the silent

Sanctuary:

Those Tuesday mornings became special to me. I looked forward to them because it was my true quiet time with the Lord. You see, my house in the mornings is nothing short of chaotic. Trying to get two girls out the door to school is no easy feat. Lots of yelling, shouting and running out the door. Even though I get up early and try to do a quiet time with God at home, I have found that my favorite place to spend time with Him is in the sanctuary of our church. There's a true sense of peace in that place. I absolutely love connecting with God through contemplative prayer in that sacred space . . . my time of contemplative prayer in the sanctuary has become my time of worship, too. The challenge seemed daunting at first, but the result proved far better than anything I could have ever imagined. Contemplative prayer changed me. And I am truly grateful for every morning in prayer as I experience the Lord in new ways.

Anna learned the spiritual benefit of solitude so that she could experience intimate communion with God "in new ways." Anna's new ways to know God may have seemed peculiar to her at first, but she grew to cherish her intimacy with God in contemplative prayer.

Contemplative Moment in Sunday Worship

We have three adult worship services on Sunday morning; two that are more liturgical and one that is contemporary. In each service we added a contemplative moment of silence prior to the Lord's Prayer as a part of the worship service. Several months after we had started the contemplative moment Roberta* came and shared a powerful encounter that she had with God during the silence on that Sunday. Roberta heard God speak in the silence:

I had been battling melanoma cancer for a year. After three surgeries, I finally got some good test results and then my son, who is twenty-eight, was diagnosed with thyroid cancer that had spread to all parts of his throat and neck . . . will he survive . . . Sunday, April 3, 2016 during quiet time for prayer . . . clearly heard God answer, "I AM HERE." I felt a peace and my tears just stopped . . . We are not alone for HE said, "I AM HERE."

²⁴ Ibid.

Roberta's example shows that in the silence, God speaks very clearly. The practice of contemplative prayer gave her the opportunity to enter into a place where she could hear God speak. Contemplative prayer helped Roberta develop intimacy in her life with God by revealing to her that there are two living beings communicating in each other's presence during prayer – God and her. Walter Wangerin Jr. helps explain this mutuality of communication in prayer by highlighting four parts to Christian prayer: we speak, God listens, God speaks and we listen.²⁵ Contemplative prayer helps us begin to listen at the “point that people often cease their praying . . . reducing the Almighty to a candy machine whose only purpose is to respond when we punch its buttons . . . But God is alive. He participates in conversation. His yearning is to be heard . . .”²⁶ Kierkegaard notes that this conversation requires effort because “God is in heaven, and we are on earth, and therefore we cannot easily talk together.”²⁷ As Roberta entered into the intimate presence of the living God through contemplative prayer, she was able to hear God. She was open to listening as Kierkegaard explains, “You had thought that praying was about speaking: you learned that praying is not merely keeping silent but is listening.”²⁸ The contemplative aspect of prayer is the disciplined practice of listening for God in a life full of distractions.

How did Roberta know she heard God? How do we know that it is God who speaks? To address this problem, I conducted a communal book study of Dallas Willard's *Hearing God* with a volunteer group of 15 persons in my church. We read the book and met for six sessions to discuss various aspects of hearing God and the consensus pressing issue of the group was how to discern the voice of God. The group acknowledged that scripture records that God speaks

²⁵ Walter Wangerin Jr., *Whole Prayer: Speaking and Listening to God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 27-40.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 32-33.

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *Spiritual Writings*, 185.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

audibly (e.g. 1 Samuel 3:8-9; 1 Kings 19:11-13; Acts 9:4-5), through visions (Acts 10:9-19), through the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:9-13), through the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16-17), through angels (e.g. Judges 6:11-24; Isaiah 6:6-13; Matthew 1:20-25, Acts 5:19-20), and through other people (Exodus 4:12; Jeremiah 1:9). However, many in the group expressed frustration that either God had never spoken clearly to them, or that they could not discern the voice of God. Willard acknowledged the pain of this frustration by revealing that his wife's grandmother, a "woman of unshakeable faith," once remarked, "I wonder why God never speaks to me [in a clear, discernable way]."²⁹ This example resonated with several persons in the group.

What gave the group hope for the possibility of their discerning God's voice was Willard's teaching that this can be learned through a process of understanding.³⁰ Willard argues that God speaks but that many of us can make no use of God's communication, and he uses the paradigm of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah (Matthew 16:16-17) to illustrate this. Jesus authenticated that the truth given to Peter was indeed from God, and further elucidated that this truth involved persecution, death and resurrection.³¹ Peter immediately "showed that he did not understand what he himself had just said" by rebuking Jesus.³² Peter needed to grow in understanding so that he could discern between his ideas and God's voice.³³ How do we grow in this understanding?

God's communication with us is like any communication, verbal and non-verbal, which consists of guiding of the thoughts of another. In a study of the prayer practices of neo-Pentecostal communities, anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann points out that humans learn at an early

²⁹ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 18.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 87.

³¹ *Ibid*.

³² *Ibid*.

³³ *Ibid*.

age to distinguish between thoughts (mental events generated within the mind) and perceptions (mental events generated from an external source).³⁴ She notes that the in prayer practices of her informants, “that distinction is all of a sudden no longer straightforward . . . prayer is hard work and requires effort and training; and when you develop that relationship, God will answer back, through thoughts and mental images he places in your mind . . .”³⁵ Luhrmann describes this process as “interpretive tools” to “pick out the thoughts that count as God’s and learn to trust that they really are God’s, not their own . . .”³⁶ Furthermore, this process of discernment is a carefully cultivated discipline of the mind. What she describes from a social-scientific perspective, theologians and spiritual writers have been describing for centuries. Similarly, Willard used experience as an interpretive tool, “I learned to wait upon ‘the word of God’ to come to me . . . [e]xperience taught me the remarkable difference between when it was ‘just me’ talking, or even ‘just me’ quoting and discussing Scripture, and when a certain something more was taking place.”³⁷ Returning to the question posed of Roberta’s testimony: How did she know what she heard was the voice of God? This study suggests that she was able to know because she had been rigorously practicing a form of listening and discerning that enabled her to know.

Creation of Wednesday Morning Prayer Service

The most obvious new program to introduce silent Contemplative Prayer that I implemented within the greater Church was a Wednesday Morning Prayer. The service begins with Opening Prayer, a Psalm prayed corporately, intercessory prayer, a hymn, a scripture reading followed by twenty minutes of silent prayer and meditation. After the silence, we close

³⁴ T.M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 40.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 41.

³⁶ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 41.

³⁷ Willard, *Hearing God*, 19.

with the sacrament of Holy Communion. We started this service on Ash Wednesday 2016 and have had a stable group of 10-20 persons each week. I interviewed several persons who regularly attend the Wednesday morning service to ascertain the impact that it has had on their spiritual lives.

I interviewed Sarah* who shared that it has become her favorite service of the week. Sarah's daughter committed suicide this year, and this is the only service she would attend for several months. She longed to be in the Sanctuary, but could not bear the thought of noisy interaction on Sunday morning with others in the congregation until she experienced more healing. This service became a healing place of being in God's presence for her as she had been unable to pray at home where her daughter killed herself. Contemplative prayer has allowed her to be in communion with God when it is too difficult to be in community with others or be at home.

Max* shared that the simplicity of the Wednesday prayer service was beneficial to him in allowing him to unburden himself before God:

[T]he overall key to the success of the service is in its design. It is a combination of prayer (intercessory, personal, interactive and silent) and worship based on the teachings of the Bible. It is a service of quiet reflectivity/meditation to encourage attendees to unburden themselves . . .

Max has opened up in this service about his "burdens" in a way that was surprising. The communal intercessory prayer has freed him to share and confess in ways that were new to him and contemplative prayer has allowed him to receive peace and forgiveness from the Lord. Max experienced what Jesus promised, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matthew 11:28-29)." This rest of

Jesus has come to Max in contemplative prayer through his growing ability to receive grace and peace from God in contemplation. Max entered into the intimacy with God that missiologist E. Stanley Jones termed “receptivity,”³⁸ which he held to be our most intimate relationship with God. For Jones, this intimacy with God is analogous to that of mother and newborn child as shown by the first act of a newborn seeking the mother’s breast to receive.³⁹ Contemplative prayer has opened the way for Max to find intimacy with God and receive rest, grace and peace.

Ruth* declared that contemplative prayer in the Wednesday morning service brought her in line with God’s will for herself:

I am drawing closer to God through [Wednesday prayer service] . . . obedience is the key to me, but being obedient to the one who chose me to be his own, who calls me his daughter, and has brought me out of darkness into his marvelous light; that light turns brighter when I make conscious effort being at church and praying and pronouncing HIS name on Wednesday mornings. That is why this prayer service draws me nearer to HIM. Of course, I can do contemplative praying in my home, in my car, and wherever I choose, but there is something about being with like-minded folks who LOVE the LORD as much as I do that brings a special closeness . . .

Ruth shares that praying this way not only focuses her on Christ but helps her to love him more deeply by obeying his commands (John 14:15). One of the criticisms of contemplative prayer from modern Protestants is that it takes the focus away from God revealed in Christ and found in the Bible. Yet, Ruth is drawn deeper into the love of Christ through contemplative prayer and in doing so fulfills scripture by her obedience to “pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer (Ephesians 6:18).”

Ruth is clear that she is focused on the Lord Jesus Christ, who called her out of darkness and into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:4-9). Many modern Protestant critics of contemplative

³⁸ E. Stanley Jones, *Christian Maturity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 316.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

prayer assume that it is a non-Christian religious practice or and that it devalues Jesus Christ and His Atonement.⁴⁰ Thomas Dubay refutes that contemplative prayer is syncretic and distinguishes it from Eastern contemplation, “Buddhist ‘contemplation’ is impersonal, not a love matter at all, whereas [Christian contemplative prayer] is preeminently a profound personal love union with God . . .”⁴¹ Ruth evidences this distinction through her declaration that contemplative prayer allows her to “love the Lord.” Dubay continues in his comparison, “in many other Far-Eastern spiritualities more or less related to [Hinduism], like Chinese Taoism, the spiritual man tends toward an absorption of his proper personality in a deity which is itself impersonal . . . all authentic Christian [contemplatives insist] that God and the individual remain unambiguously two distinct beings: the one is not lost in the Other.”⁴² Christian contemplative prayer brings the one praying into a personal encounter with the living God; in union with God but still differentiated selves.

Ruth’s prayer moved the focus toward God and God’s word and she responded in obedience to God’s initiative as “the light turns brighter.” Ruth responded to God as Kyle Strobel explains,

Contemplation is the proper creaturely response to the self-revelation of God; it is a response and not construction or initiation . . . “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you” (Eph. 1:16-18). Being caught up in God’s movement of self-revelation is exactly what it means to receive the Spirit of wisdom and revelation and to have the eyes of our hearts enlightened; this is what it means to know the hope to which he has called us.⁴³

⁴⁰ Tom Schwanda, “To Gaze on the Beauty of the Lord: The Evangelical Resistance and Retrieval of Contemplation,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 7, no. 1 (2014): 63-67.

⁴¹ Thomas Dubay, *Fire Within: St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and the Gospel – On Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 7.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Kyle Strobel, “A Theological Prolegomena for Contemplation,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 7, no. 1 (2014): 102.

By Ruth being obedient in her response to the self-revelation of God she received hope in being God's daughter drawn nearer to God. She has received what the Bible promises, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you (James 4:8)."

Mary* expressed a great sense of nearness and intimacy in her encounters with God in contemplation during Wednesday morning prayer:

God is not only with me, Christ is not merely for me – He is in me. This is the oneness for which Jesus prayed so fervently in His final prayer . . . [while in prayer] I saw real intimacy, the Son worshipping the Father in my body, the Father adoring the Son in my body. I am a participant but it is not about me – no longer I but Christ who lives in me. That is the ultimate intimacy.

In her encounter with God in contemplative prayer, Mary is overwhelmed by the experience of intimacy with God the Father and Son within her body. As contemplative prayer drew Mary closer to God through abiding in Christ, she experienced an intimacy with the triune God through the indwelling Holy Spirit within her body (John 14:17). Paul Miller explains how prayer creates intimacy with God, "People often talk about prayer as if it is disconnected from what God is doing in their lives . . . [m]any Christians haven't stopped believing in God; we have just become functional deists, living with God at a distance . . . as we learn to pray well, we'll discover that this is my Father's world."⁴⁴ Mary's intimate encounter with God during prayer allows her to connect God's work and her life. Thomas Merton describes how these intimate encounters with God merge God's life and ours, "the natural life in us has been completed, elevated, transformed and fulfilled in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Contemplation is the awareness and realization, even in some sense, experience, of what each Christian obscurely believes: 'It is now no longer I that live but Christ lives in me.' Hence contemplation is more than a consideration of abstract truths

⁴⁴ Paul Miller, *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2009), 22-23.

about God, more than affective meditation on the things we believe. It is awakening . . .⁴⁵ It is notable that Merton and Mary used the same biblical verse to describe their respective encounters with God in contemplative prayer.

Nelson* has had several epiphanies while praying contemplatively during our Wednesday morning service that have changed his worldview:

[My wife and I] are currently involved in activities that are plunging us into a deeper relationship with God, engendering greater trust in Him, and deepening fellowship with other believers . . . We hold a Wednesday prayer service, followed by a Fellowship Breakfast. Because of these integrated activities, I am coming to a greater understanding of God's nature. I have changed my view of God's plan and intent for mankind from the rigid, conservative "right" political world view to one that revolves around "love God, love neighbor, love enemies" point of view. This has led to a great measure of peace, and confidence in knowing God's will for our lives. I feel it has enriched the fellowship of the small but important group of believers who are involved in these activities.

Through contemplative prayer, Nelson is growing in spiritual knowledge which is deepening both his fellowship with others and his "understanding of God's nature." Contemplative prayer has become a means for Nelson to participate in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:3-4) as both his response to God's divine gift and his effort toward the attributes of divinity.⁴⁶ Nelson is entering into the realization of the truth that he has been saved by God into the body of Christ.

Contemplative prayer is enabling him to value the communion with God and others in a new way.

Contemplative prayer does not create a disembodied experience or feeling which can be separated from the rest of a person, but creates an opportunity for the whole person to have a

⁴⁵ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Books, 2007), 5.

⁴⁶ Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), 65-66.

personal encounter with God.⁴⁷ Consequently, not everyone experiences intimacy with God as peace and joy. Bill* comes to the Wednesday prayer for a different reason

Step 11 [in AA] says to increase our conscious contact with God through prayer and meditation . . . this was my attempt to practice meditation to be better at it . . . my social anxiety overwhelms me after about 15 minutes when I get up and leave, but I keep trying.

Bill's encounter with God on Wednesday mornings is not facilitating an experience of peace and calm, but it actually brings him anxiety as he encounters God in the silence. Bill's description of his time in contemplative prayer shows that there is no universal experience that each participant realizes because "prayer is not simply to be equated with serenity."⁴⁸ A disciple must beware of trying to create or recreate an experience in contemplative prayer rather than be open to encountering God. To cope with his anxiety, Bill leaves each service prior to the end, but he keeps trying because he encounters God there.

Contemplative Prayer for Wesley College Leadership Team

On Wednesday evenings prior to Wesley Worship, more than 40 college students spread throughout the sanctuary praying in complete silence to prepare for worship. The Wesley Foundation from the University of North Georgia meets in our church every week for worship. The leadership team for the Wesley Foundation now participate in the practice of contemplative prayer in order to draw near to God to prepare to lead worship. Roger* explains how this practice has drawn him into intimacy with Christ:

To sum up everything I'm about to say, meditative prayer has been a revolutionary experience in my relationship with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in me. We implemented it in the time before our Wesley service about a year ago or so in an effort

⁴⁷ See Warren S. Brown & Brad D. Strawn, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, & the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 148.

⁴⁸ John Koenig, *Rediscovering New Testament Prayer: Boldness and Blessing in the Name of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 35.

to show the importance of quiet prayer with the Lord. We modeled it after Jesus' way of prayer, when he would withdraw to a solitary and quiet place to be with God.

Roger revealed that the college students engaged in the practice of contemplative to model themselves after Jesus' way of prayer found in the Gospels. The evangelists emphasized prayer for Jesus as more than just the ritualized practice found in worship or mere repetition of needs to God. As Roger began to model his prayer life after Jesus, he encountered God in a new way:

In my own experience, meditative prayer has been the time when God revealed his truths to me and his clarification on the current events of my life. To be bluntly honest, it's when God speaks to me. Sometimes he uses my imagination to speak to me; other times he gives me "gut feelings" to pray over certain people or to go talk to them; and other times he speaks directly to me. I know there is a lot of skepticism when people start claiming that God spoke to them, but I can't tell you how much I love that communication with God. How much I need it. It has become the reason I go to church, or read the bible, or do anything religious. This communication with him has allowed me to understand the metaphor of Christ as our groom with a deep lasting knowledge. In this way of praying, I feel like I truly am his beloved bride. It has changed everything for me honestly.

Roger describes his "life-changing" encounter with God as God speaking to him. Roger also describes this encounter using intimate marital language with himself being the beloved bride of Christ with a "deep lasting knowledge" of Christ's loving acceptance. This revelation has "changed everything" for Roger and has become the priority in his Christian life. As Roger prayed he experienced "sharing in the life of Christ . . . as a foretaste of the divine union to come."⁴⁹ He was experiencing intimacy with God as Paul described, "anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (1 Corinthians 6:17). Roger's intimate encounters with God allowed him grasp the scriptural teaching about union with God and he began to understand himself as bride of Christ. Roger's testimony of this life-changing encounter illustrates why the

⁴⁹ Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 28.

Patristic fathers felt that union with God was intention of God for every believer.⁵⁰ Orthodox theologians ground this belief firmly in Scripture; Christ's command to be perfect (Matthew 5:48) is fulfilled as we "come near to God and dwell in union with Him."⁵¹ Union with God, defined as *theosis* by the Orthodox Church, is what makes "possible the full spiritual perfection of humans."⁵²

Prayer Retreats to the Monastery of the Holy Spirit

I took small groups of 3-4 persons to the Monastery of the Holy Spirit for contemplative prayer retreats in the Spring and Fall of 2016. I invited Rich* to go on retreat because stress was causing a great apathy to develop in his spiritual life. Rich was very unsure about whether to go:

I went to the monastery kicking and screaming, well out of my comfort box. I went for camaraderie and perhaps a little get to know the preacher time. What I did not expect was what I got. For three days I devoted myself to prayer, reading and a strange type of worship that I was not accustomed to. At 4 am I would get out of bed, go worship and [contemplatively pray] for 30 minutes, I thought for sure that I would have fallen asleep during this time. Not at all! I could feel the Holy Spirit throughout my body, but it did not end there. Throughout the day I wanted to know more about Jesus. I read the book of Acts and had so many questions. Questions that could only be answered through prayer and meditation. That weekend I did not worry about anything outside of the monastery, it was all in God's hands.

Rich's praying contemplatively helped him to move his anxious focus from himself and his problems, sins and needs and to redirect his focus toward God and God's word as he "wanted to know more about Jesus" and "read the book of Acts." This seeking of deeper knowledge of Christ led Rich to seek answers to questions that could only be answered in prayer and

⁵⁰ Christoforos Stavropoulos, *Partakers of the Divine Nature* (Minneapolis: Light and Life, 1976), 17.

⁵¹ Lorenzo Scupoli, Nikodemus of the Holy Mountain, and Theophan the Recluse, *Unseen Warfare* (London: Faber and Faber Lmtd., 1963), 21.

⁵² Johnson, *The Globalization of Hesychasm and the Jesus Prayer*, 15.

meditation. Rich received spiritual knowledge that came through “prayer and meditation” that took away his anxiety and gave him a sense of being in “God’s hands.”

God’s revealed knowledge to Rich through prayer and meditation is a challenge to modern understanding of what constitutes true knowledge.⁵³ The modern understanding reduces knowledge to measurable, material and replicable facts or events and leaves no room for spiritual revelation.⁵⁴ Stephen Gunter characterized the modern understanding, “Our intellectual, rational, empirical (scientific) ways of knowing provide us with true knowledge, characterized by greater and lesser degrees of certainty. Christian believers may assert that their faith gives them certainty, but this is of a religious order and may not properly be called knowledge.”⁵⁵ This has led to a disastrous split in American Protestant churches between theology/study as thinking about God for knowledge, and spirituality which is reduced to individual devotional activity that reveals no true knowledge to the practitioner.⁵⁶ Rich’s receiving answers only available for him in prayer and meditation shows that he received true knowledge in the self-revelation of God. God reveals to us knowledge by “indwelling a reality that is simultaneously indwelling us . . . this knowledge is as true as any available to us.”⁵⁷

Thomas Merton affirms that spiritual knowledge attained in contemplative prayer is true knowledge, “Contemplation is the highest expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual life . . . it is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life . . . [and] reaches out to the knowledge and even to the experience of the transcendent and inexpressible God.”⁵⁸ Yet, this is

⁵³ Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (Valley Forge, PA.: Trinity Press International, 1996), 1-3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 7.

⁵⁵ Stephen Gunter, *Resurrection Knowledge: Recovering the Gospel for a Postmodern Church* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1999), 12.

⁵⁶ Strobel, “A Theological Prolegomena for Contemplation,” 89.

⁵⁷ Gunter, *Resurrection Knowledge*, 88.

⁵⁸ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1-2

not an abstract or philosophical knowing through prayer, but a personal and experiential knowing of God as the Bible states, “Be still and know that I am God (Psalm 46:10).” Rich came to the place where he “wanted to know more about Jesus” and so he became still and received knowledge “through prayer and meditation.”

I also invited Cindy* to come along on retreat as she was returning to the Christian faith after a long sabbatical. Cindy is a professional musician and was initially attracted to the aesthetic experience of visiting the Monastery:

I attended a three day retreat at The Monastery of the Holy Spirit . . . I went, prepared only with a love for Gregorian Chant, five years of Latin in high school and an upbringing in the Episcopal church . . . The chanting was antiphonal. The singing was workman-like and, well, plain, actually. It didn't sound like the artistic Chanticleer recordings of chant but the effect was, for me, transcendent beyond all the beautiful, brilliant and heartfelt music I had ever heard. I believe that the very simplicity and lack of virtuosity, coupled with the sincerity of the deliberate one note singing were responsible for this effect on me.

The words of the psalms, sung this way and not rushed or sung with passion had the effect of slowing down time for me, and therefore slowing down life for me. I felt the calming strong presence of God and I was changed. I felt that I was alright, God was there - curiously - it was the "still, small voice" and not the passionate display that led me to this peace and confidence in God's presence and patience with me.

This intimacy with God was not what I expected ever to find although I believe that it is what I had been searching for all my life. The silence, the frequency of the short "interviews" with God held at regular intervals, and the talks with Brother Callistus about how to pray made my experience at the Monastery a life-changing event for me . . . I feel like an actual child of God and less like only a struggling and failing member of this physical world. I am grateful to have lived long enough to have found this Peace with God and gladly appreciate every day that I am given to be allowed to cherish that Oneness.

Cindy came expecting to simply enjoy external beauty but was surprised to discover the intimacy with God that she “had been searching for all [her] life.” It was not the artistic beauty that changed her, in fact she found the chant “plain.” As she began to meditate on God’s word slowly through the chant and as she listened for the “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:12) of God in the

silence, Cindy encountered God and was overcome by the knowledge that she is an “actual child of God.” Contemplative prayer has helped her understand that “all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Romans 8:14). Cindy would concur that being “led by the Spirit means first of all the renewal of our identities as God’s daughters and sons, which we sense as we ‘cry’ . . . to the most Holy and Intimate One who adopts us in Christ.”⁵⁹

Cindy also experienced this love from God as peace from the silence. Thomas Carruth called this awakening of love the receiving of the “sacrament of silence.”⁶⁰ Carruth wrote, “[t]o become aware of the presence of God in silence is a marvelous way to unite in worship, love, and prayer . . . quietness is the preparation and the prelude to receptivity.”⁶¹ Cindy received the intimacy of “oneness” with God and knowing she is “an actual child of God.”

Introduction of Lectio Divina into Disciple Bible Study

I also decided to introduce the contemplative practice of biblical reading call *lectio divina* into the Disciple Bible Study Program that I teach every year. *Lectio divina* is a form of prayerful reading/hearing the Bible developed in the fourth and fifth century to allow the triune God to speak through the text so that “[t]he soul’s doors . . . be opened to the One who makes himself lovingly available in his Word.”⁶² The practice is based on the theological principle that the “Word of God, incarnate in Jesus . . . spoke at different times and in different ways through the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings . . . [and therefore] it is Christ who speaks to us, in different ways, in all the different types of writing that make up the Bible.”⁶³ By hearing Scripture read in order to hear the triune God speaking, it insures its “perennial youth” and the

⁵⁹ Koenig, *Rediscovering New Testament Prayer*, 31.

⁶⁰ Thomas Albert Carruth, *Prayer: A Christian Ministry* (Nashville: Tidings, 1971), 39.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 5.

⁶³ Casey, *Sacred Reading*, 36.

continual living witness of ancient Biblical texts.⁶⁴ One of the Disciple class members, Dylan* has found that Scripture has a new resonance when it is heard within the aspect of the contemplative prayer practice of *lectio divina*:

To sit back and listen to the Scripture read to me, I seem to be able to concentrate more. It also takes on its own meaning, versus looking up myself what I think or feel I need . . .

The practice of *lectio divina* allowed Dylan to hear God speaking through the text in “its own meaning.” Dylan was in a position to receive from God and was not controlling the process “by looking up what I think or feel I need.” It is notable that by practicing *lectio divina* in a Methodist setting, Dylan was following in the path of the original Methodists who believed strongly in praying and meditating over Scripture. Dylan can relate with one of the founders of the Methodist movement George Whitefield, who was known for “his habit of reading the Bible on his knees [in prayer] . . . [he] could neither understand the Word for himself, nor translate it into his own life, nor apply it to others with power, unless the Holy Spirit became to him both insight and unction.”⁶⁵ John Wesley, the principle founder of the Methodist movement, was a strong proponent of daily hearing Scripture in the context of morning prayer and meditating on this Scripture.⁶⁶ W. Paul Jones characterizes the Methodist movement – grounded in daily prayer and meditation on God’s word⁶⁷ – as an “evangelical [monastic] ‘order’ within an Anglican ecclesiology.”⁶⁸ Wesley held that these divine gifts were to draw us into intimacy with God, “The chief of these means are prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching

⁶⁴ Magrassi, *Praying the Bible*, 27-28.

⁶⁵ Arthur T. Pierson, *George Muller of Bristol and His Witness to a Prayer-Hearing God* (New York: L.B. Printing Co., 1944), 138.

⁶⁶ W. Paul Jones, “The Wesleyan Means of Grace” in *Wesleyan Spirituality in Contemporary Theological Education* (Nashville: Division of Ordained Ministry, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 1987), 11.

⁶⁷ Jones, “The Wesleyan Means of Grace”, 13.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 11.

the Scriptures (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon) . . . these we believe to be ordained of God, as the ordinary channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men.”⁶⁹

Dylan’s experience reveals the spiritual loss to people from not having this type of scriptural reading offered in many American Protestant churches. *Lectio divina* allowed the Biblical text to be relevant and transformative for Dylan, not merely informative. Dylan recognized that Biblical knowledge is a means toward the goal of personal intimacy with God, and when it becomes an end to itself it can thwart “its own meaning.”⁷⁰ Jesus critiqued the religious leaders of his day about this mix-up of the means and the goal, “you search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40). Jesus taught that this confusion can result in ungodly consequences like not doing God’s healing work on the Sabbath when he says that the “Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Paul also understood well the danger of interpreting scripture without the intimate guidance of God when he says that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6). Have Protestant churches, who have such a high regard for Jesus and Scripture, fallen into the same patterns as those persons Jesus critiqued?

Dylan’s previous method of Bible study seemed to be a search for answers that he “think[s] or feel[s] he needs” rather than allowing God to speak to him through the text. Dylan, like many American Protestants, was more apt to take Bible studies for intellectual knowledge than for spiritual knowledge. The loss of the spiritual reading that so moved Dylan occurred when the churches started adapting the secular definition of knowledge that privileged

⁶⁹ John Wesley, *John Wesley’s Forty-Four Sermons* (London: Epworth Press, 1980), 136-137.

⁷⁰ Addison Hodges Hart, *The Yoke of Jesus: A School for the Soul in Solitude* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 109-110.

intellectual understanding over spiritual understanding. As Frederick Schmidt notes, “Scripture was ostensibly the sole religious authority in Protestantism, and spirituality was and is primarily a matter of understanding the text. As such the Protestant spiritual quest has been, more often than not, a quest for biblical understanding.”⁷¹ As this biblical understanding became didactic rather than spiritual, N.T. Wright notes that the modern use of the Bible in the Western church is seen more as “self-help” manual than an “offer . . . [of] springs of living water.”⁷² By reducing the Bible to information, it becomes seen as a roadmap for guidance on how to do life rather than a living word that draws us near to the living God. This puts us in the place of those whom Jesus upbraided for their fixation on the Scriptures to the exclusion of their receiving life from him.

Summary of Findings

Those Who Participated in Contemplative Prayer Practice Developed Intimacy with God

I was surprised by the depth of passion and the intimate language used by many of the participants in their interviews. These interviews show that the implemented practices of contemporary prayer were successful in helping the participants develop greater intimacy with God. Roberta, struggling with cancer and having a child with cancer, felt peace for the first time in a long time, and her tears stopped as God said, “I am here.” Ruth shared that being in contemplative prayer with “like-minded folks who LOVE the LORD” brought her a “special closeness” with God and the others. Bill’s intimacy with God is creating some struggle for him and his anxiety causes him to leave the Sanctuary, but he keeps returning to meet God.

⁷¹ Frederick Schmidt, “5 Reasons Spirituality is No Longer Important to the American Church”, *Patheos Blog*, September, 1, 2016, accessed January 5, 2017, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/whatgodwantsforyourlife/2016/09/5-reasons-spirituality-is-no-longer-important-to-the-american-church/>

⁷² Wright, *Simply Christian*, 22.

Several of the interviewed participants spoke of discovering new ways of encountering God. Anna shared that she “loved connecting with God through contemplative prayer” and this connection “changed me” and “I experience the Lord in new ways.” Nelson’s encounters with God are bringing him into a new understanding of God’s nature and a new worldview of love and compassion for others. Rich was able to receive knowledge from God that he could only get through prayer and meditation. It allowed him to put aside his grief and anxiety and trust more fully that his life is “in God’s hands.”

Most strikingly, several of the participants spoke of spiritual union with God taking them to a deeper place in their relationship with God. Mary was overcome with a sense of spiritual union with the Father and Son adoring each other in her body. Roger, a college student pondering his call into ministry, encountered God in a way that “changed everything” for him. Roger experienced spiritual union to the extent that he feels like the bride of Christ and it has become his primary relation to God. Cindy felt the “oneness” that she “had been searching for all my life” and felt like “an actual child of God.” She is in the process of becoming a lay Cistercian.

Only a Small Percentage of the Church Body Took Advantage of the Offered Practices

I was disappointed that more of the Church did not participate in the various offerings. When I began the Morning Prayer Services on Wednesdays, I assumed that it would grow in time through word of mouth. However, after we had been worshipping for one year only about 20-30 persons were actively participating in the service (for a frame of reference we had over 200 in attendance for Ash Wednesday service). Perhaps the morning time prevents many from attending who must go to work or school. I have taken eight persons on contemplative retreats this year, and the average size of our classes that teach contemplative prayer and *lectio divina* are

only about 12-15 persons. These are wonderful events, but our church has many more persons who are not participating. After one year of implementing the practices that I have elucidated, I distributed 300 copies of a survey to the congregation about contemplative prayer. I was somewhat disheartened by the fact that I only received 17 completed surveys. Of those who completed the survey, each said that prayer is very important to them but 71% prayed less than one hour a day; lack of time was the primary reason for lack of prayer. The survey responses revealed people who long for more intimacy with God, but do not feel they have the time to change the relationship.

Interestingly, the greatest number of people participating in the contemplative practices to find intimacy with God are those between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five years old. The Wesley Foundation has over forty people praying in silence in the Sanctuary every Wednesday evening prior to their worship. There is a group of fifteen students who are now fasting on Tuesdays and meeting in our Sanctuary for noon prayer on that day. The youth group, which has about fifty young adults from the Church and community, has been very positive about prayer and it has energized their meetings and bible studies. These findings could be the result of greater passion amongst those under twenty-five years old or it could be a factor of their having more time to engage in contemplative practices.

Conclusion

The findings of this project show that a lack of spiritual intimacy with God within an American Protestant Church may be remedied for some people through the introduction of contemplative prayer practices within the life of the church. These findings suggests that offering diverse and multiple opportunities for people of all ages to participate in forms of contemplative prayer will allow many persons within the church body to experience intimacy

with God in new ways. The contemplative prayer practices that were offered at Dahlonga United Methodist Church enabled those who participated to become open to intimacy with God through contemplative prayer, *lectio divina* and contemplative prayer retreats. People encountered God in new ways, developed greater understanding of scripture about intimacy with God and experienced spiritual union with God. Many also expressed a greater sense of intimacy and community with fellow contemplatives. These findings also suggest that many within a church body are either uncomfortable or apathetic about the promise of greater intimacy with God. We must further study why many people who have faith in a living, relational God do not long for intimacy with God or fear that intimacy. A future study may perhaps reveal deeper issues of intimacy between Christians and God and one another and its connection to divisiveness in modern life. These findings also suggest there is an enthusiasm gap for intimacy with God between those under the age of twenty-five and those who are older. Some of this gap may be due to time constraints for people with job and families to care for. A future study may delve into structuring contemplative prayer practices for modern temporal realities that can be done while people are involved in daily life activities.

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