

#105 “Why Contemplative Prayer Is Critically Wrong”

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Contemplative prayer is based in spiritual formation, it teaches the use of spiritual directors, and it teaches that we need to center ourselves in prayer. These terms and phrases are found nowhere in the Bible, nor do they have any Biblical basis. Some who advocate the use of contemplative prayer use Psalm 46:10 where it speaks of being still before God to justify this practice. In context, the command to be still has nothing to do with letting go of our thoughts and feelings for the sake of some mystical experience with God. It speaks of trusting God even when the difficulties and troubles of life come. The Psalmist's exhortation is to acknowledge God as sovereign over our life's events and to rest by faith in these truths in order to keep from succumbing to fear, doubt, and discouragement. Biblical meditation does not involve emptying our minds but rather filling them with truth according to God's Word. We are not to just meditate, but we are to meditate on the Word, a process in which the mind is active and engaged. Joshua 1:8 says, "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success." Thus, the purpose of meditation is to know God by His Word so that we are careful to live in a way that honors Him. Meditation is not for the purpose of achieving some extra-spiritual oneness or closeness to God, as if we can take our Christian faith deeper through means other than trusting and obeying God's Word. John 6:29 says, "Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.'" It is with faith that we please God (Hebrews 11:6) and it is by faith that we grow in Him (2 Corinthians 5:7). Spiritual formation's idea of "silence" implies that we can find God within us as if turning our minds off leads us to Him. Granted, God indwells believers, but we find Him by seeking Him by faith according to truth, not by trying to find Him in weak, fallible humanness, let alone in nature or some pagan, mystical experience.

Those who advocate contemplative prayer promote the use of spiritual directors who are supposed to hear the Holy Spirit's personal voice in response to the life stories expressed by the directees. Their purpose and goal is to lead these vulnerable ones to some newer level of freedom and closeness with Christ, a job the Bible says belongs strictly to the Holy Spirit Himself (John 16:13). Now, it is true that the Holy Spirit leads and guides His people, but He doesn't need a spiritual director to help Him. He can handle it (Romans 8:26-28). Furthermore, He leads us through His Word, not through any extra-biblical revelation. God is not going from person to person telling them new things as they enter the "silence." This teaching totally undermines the fact that the Bible is able to make us complete and adequate for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). What God has said He has said, and anybody who adds or takes away from it does wrong (Revelation 22:18-19). We are sanctified in the Word, for it is truth (John 17:17). We do not grow spiritually, nor are we formed spiritually or to be guided spiritually by anything outside of the Word of God. This notion of emptying our minds and being freed from our thoughts such that we can hear the voice of God is found nowhere in the Bible. God does speak, but He speaks through His Word as we seek Him in truth and by His Spirit.

Being guided by the Word of God does not mean that we are to repeat single words and short phrases, thinking on them over and over again until we are no longer conscience that we are thinking at all. This is called using mantras, a distinctly pagan practice for the purpose of losing thoughts and feelings. Yet this is the driving force of spiritual formation and contemplative prayer. The teaching is to be so close to God that you just commune with Him rather than communicate with Him. In other words, they believe that God's presence is experienced most deeply without the mind and the emotions. Prayingchurch.com of the ELCA says this, "Respond to God's presence with an act of faith. *Do not allow your thoughts or feelings to get in the way*[1]" (emphasis added). And again, quoting from prayingchurch.com, "When thoughts come into your mind, gently let go of them and focus on a single word, such as - Jesus, Lord, Love." "Center your attention and desire on God. Leave your thoughts and feelings peacefully[2]". Nowhere in the Bible does it say to abandon thoughts and feelings. Rather, it says to think on what is good, right, pure, and noble (Philippians 4:8). It says to have our minds transformed according to the Word of God (Romans 12:1-2). It says to take wrong thoughts captive, which only an active, engaged mind could do (2 Corinthians 10:5). It does not say to stop thinking and feeling. Such teaching is outright pagan and New Age.

This contemplative prayer and centering movement is a dangerous addition to any Christian's prayer life. It is not God who speaks in the contemplative's "silence." Whoever is speaking to the Buddhists and to those practicing New Age and to any other mystics is the same being who is speaking in this "silence." Satan, our enemy, gives new pseudo-revelation (Galatians 1:8-9) and enjoys what he can manipulate when a mind is altered by any means, whether drugs, alcohol, hypnosis, or centering prayer. We are to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), which happens when we remain alert and sober. Notice why Peter commands us to remain alert and sober: "Be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer" (1 Peter 4:7). If we want to grow in our prayer life and in Jesus, we must stay sober and remain in a state where we can make sound judgments. It is only when we stay alert and mentally conscious and engaged that we can truly pray and honor Christ.

[1]<http://www.prayingchurch.org/centering.html>

[2]<http://www.prayingchurch.org/centering.html>