

Eídon

A Newsletter on Christian Spirituality for Church Leaders

May 2008

From Meditation to Contemplation

In a previous issue of *Eídon* (January 2008, available at <http://danschrock.org/Documents/January%202008.pdf>), I reported on Willow Creek Community Church's vexing discovery that the normal activities of church life were not really helping more mature congregational members to deepen their friendship with God. This finding has caused soul-searching among some church leaders.

I don't understand all the reasons why church life is not doing such a good job helping more mature Christians to grow in love for God and others. But one reason is likely the transition from meditation to contemplation that many people experience during their lives—a transition many congregations neither recognize nor bless.

Meditation

Meditation is a pathway of communication with God that primarily uses words and to a lesser extent images. The practices of meditation largely, though not exclusively, lie within our control. We decide when to begin and end them, and what much of the content will be.

Broadly speaking, modern church life is built on meditation. Our worship services use thousands of words every Sunday—a twenty-minute sermon alone uses approximately two thousand words. Whether the worship style is tradi-

tional, liturgical, charismatic, contemporary, or modern, expressions of meditation figure prominently.

Congregational Christian education classes generally use lecture, discussion, or sharing—all forms of meditation. Small groups, when they move beyond social relationships and actually do some type of spiritual practice together, also usually choose forms of meditation such as Bible reading or intercessory prayer.

Other expressions of meditation include most forms of Bible study; memorizing scripture; mental prayer (where we think the words rather than say them out loud); most singing, whether of traditional or contemporary music; preparing, preaching, and listening to sermons; and reading religious magazines and books (this newsletter is a type of meditation).

Blessings of Meditation

Deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the practices of meditation are a necessary part of church life. For good reasons, we train children and young people in the ways of meditation, and continue to do meditation ourselves. Meditation helps us to learn key information about God and the Bible. It allows us to think theolog-

cally and ethically. It trains our minds and shapes our character.

Contemplation

While meditation is crucial, it's not the only way to communicate with God. The Christian tradition has long recognized a second pathway of communication with God—that of contemplation.

Contemplation moves beyond words, coming to us as a gift via simple, loving attention to God. Unlike meditation, contemplation largely lies beyond our control, though we can open ourselves to it.

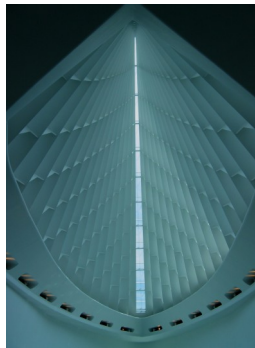
Sooner or later the Holy Spirit leads many Christians to contemplation. This often happens in adulthood, though it can also happen during the elementary or teen years.

Because congregational life rarely recognizes contemplation, Christians who are led down this pathway may think they're on the fringe of church life. They may feel they aren't quite normal. Indeed, they may think something is very wrong in their relationship with God.

Nothing is further from the truth. Contemplation signifies that much is in fact right in one's relationship with God. Contemplation is a gift to be treasured and honored.

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A Greek verb meaning to see or to perceive, frequently found in the New Testament



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Coming in the
July issue . . .

Beholding: A 4th “Be”

An Infusion of God

Contemplation has long been regarded as the flowering of prayer available to every Christian—as the normal result of living centered in God. The soil in which it grows usually consists of simplicity, stillness, and silence.

Writings on contemplation are rich and varied. For John Cassian (d. 430), the route to contemplation lay in purity of heart (Matt 5:8). Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) argued that contemplation is the crowning experience of human life, and that we know God most fully only in contemplation. John of the Cross (d. 1591) described contemplation as “a secret and peaceful and loving inflow [Spanish: *infusión*] of God, which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love.”

In moments of contemplation, God takes the initiative, infusing us with a profound sense of love, peace, joy, or some other fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). Contemplation is therefore an intense and transforming awareness of God’s presence. It changes our perceptions of the world and makes us more faithful.

Our experience of contemplation may last only a few seconds, perhaps ending before we realize it even began. Teresa of Avila (d. 1582), a great teacher of prayer, remarked that for her contemplation never lasted longer than about thirty minutes.

Contemplative Practices

If contemplation comes as a gift from God, then no human practice qualifies as contemplation.

However, a number of spiritual practices are contemplative in the sense that they prepare us to receive the gift of contemplation. These include lectio divina, the Jesus prayer, walking labyrinths, Taizé-style worship, centering prayer, and beholding art, icons, or creation.

One way to think of contemplative practices is that they bridge the pathways of meditation and contemplation.

When doing contemplative practices, we may move back and forth between meditation and contemplation in the same prayer period.

Still, the Spirit may grant us contemplation when we aren’t seeking it. Contemplation may come while we’re daydreaming, watching a candle or a flame, or simply walking in creation.

Congregational Experiments

The fact that churches use thanksgiving, intercession, and petition—some of the more common expressions of meditation—in nearly every public worship service, but rarely use contemplative practices, can give a false impression that meditation is the only “real” form of prayer. After a heavy diet of meditation, contemplation may not seem like prayer to some people.

Yet both meditation and contemplation have a rightful place in our corporate life. Meditation needs the wordless loving of contemplation, and contemplation the concreteness of meditation. At Berkey Avenue Mennon-

ite in Goshen, Indiana (where I co-pastor), we’ve introduced some contemplative practices. Other congregations have pursued other approaches; this is simply what we’ve tried.

We’ve taken four specific steps. First, we’ve scheduled a few retreats on contemplative prayer. Second, I’ve preached about a dozen sermons on the transition from meditation to contempla-

tion, and on what happens to us as a result of contemplation. Third, some years ago we began a centering prayer group (now open to the community)

that meets once a month in the evening. And fourth, for the last nine months a lectio divina group has met on Sunday morning during the adult nurture hour.

We’ve discovered that while contemplative practices are relatively simple to do—far more simple than responsible Bible study, for example—most people find contemplative practices so unlike what they’re used to that they need communal support in order to maintain a regular pattern of practice. We’ve also learned that since not every contemplative practice appeals equally to those whom God is calling to contemplation, it’s good to offer a variety of opportunities so people can experiment with various practices.

While the gift of contemplation is the cream of prayer, spiritual maturity draws on both meditation and contemplation.

