Putting on the Mind of Christ: A Rationale for the Role of Contemplative Prayer in Christian Unitive Perception

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Putting on the Mind of Christ: A Rationale for the Role of Contemplative Prayer in Christian Unitive Perception

November 26, 2018

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A Rationale for the Role of Contemplative Prayer in Christian Unitive Perception

Prayer is foundational to Christian life. People pray formally in liturgical settings, and they pray informally throughout each day in a myriad of ways. However, the prayer style and approach that many employ takes either a petitionary or intercessory form. When examining Paul’s exhortation to “pray without ceasing,” it becomes immediately obvious that this method of praying may not fully accommodate the Apostle’s intention. He seems to point to a different way, one that undoubtedly includes petitions and intercessions, but one that is more holistic in nature. Contemplative approaches to prayer satisfy this need.

Contemplative prayer is a way of paying attention to God that has the effect of changing our outlook on the world, a vision that leads to an entrenched love of God and neighbor. It has a transformational quality, helping us to assume what Paul terms the “mind of Christ.” This mind sees the divine reality of humanity’s participation in the Trinity, a unitive perception that expresses itself through an overt sense of compassion and unity.

The heart of this essay is a multi-disciplinary “proof-case” for this approach to the prayer life. It scours the Christian canon for textual samples that buttress the arguments for the goal of unitive perception and its attainment via contemplative practice. John’s gospel, Paul’s letters to the Ephesians and the Philippians, and other sources supply ample support for these claims. That evidence secured, it looks to the past to introduce a historical contemplative—Symeon the New Theologian—who embraced these biblical tenets, and whose life spoke to the perceptual outcomes posited in the thesis. Three of Symeon’s written works attest to his transformational experiences and teachings. Once that witness is vetted, the text relies upon contemporary neuropsychological sciences to provide empirical verification of the physiological and mental changes that contribute to the experiences of contemplatives like Symeon as a result of their practice. Magnetic imaging and other technologies help scientists map the processes that the contemplative brain undergoes, changes that directly or indirectly impact human perception. Lastly, the text forms a theological synthesis centered on Christ’s death and resurrection. It examines the contemplative’s death to “self,” and the resurrection-like breakthrough that can result from this type of intentional practice.

The essay concludes with the entreaty for the broader dissemination of contemplative prayer. The compiled evidence speaks to the firm position these historically Christian practices hold within the greater spectrum of spiritual formation. These methods must be taught, as we do a disservice to the Body when we fail to make their illuminative qualities known.
Putting on the Mind of Christ: A Rationale for the Role of Contemplative Prayer in Christian Unitive Perception

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Table of Contents

Introduction ................................................................................................................................... 2

Chapter 1 Prolegomena ................................................................................................................ 6

Chapter 2 Unitive Perception, Contemplation, and the Bible .................................................... 24

Chapter 3 The Witness of a Mystic: Symeon the New Theologian ........................................ 49

Chapter 4 The Contemplative Brain: Process, Plasticity, and the Reimagined Self ............ 73

Chapter 5 The Mind of Christ: Death, Resurrection, and Atonement ................................. 97

Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 123

Bibliography .................................................................................................................................. 130
Introduction

A clergy member of a mainline Protestant church approached several parishioners to voluntarily participate in a non-scientific “experiment” on prayer. During an orientation gathering, the pastor provided an intentionally vague description of the study and its contents, because he wanted to minimize the bias that may occur from his interaction with the volunteers. However, he did allude to the fact that these daily prayers would be “contemplative” in nature. Noticing one member’s furrowed brow in response to this label, he asked if she had any questions or concerns. Her response was typical for her context, yet immensely instructional: “I understand prayer as a conversation with God; but that means I usually ask God for my needs, and then I wait for a response. What is ‘contemplative’ prayer?”

Prayer is a mainstay of Christian life and practice. While not unique to Christianity, we consider it foundational to our relationship in the life of God. We commonly pray over meals, and we bow our heads before we lie down to sleep. We lift liturgical prayers in worship, and we utter brief, gentle thanks under our breath. Prayer is a primary vehicle of growth in the faith walk. But while we are seemingly intimate with the concept of prayer, we oftentimes frame it in a monolithic mold, absent any substance or nuance.

The English word “prayer” locates its roots in the Latin term *precari*, meaning “to beg,” “to implore,” or “to entreat.”1 As narrow as that definition seems, we can discern several major categories of prayers from Scripture. Petitions and supplications are requests made for ourselves or on behalf of someone else (Job 6.8; Phil 4.6); confessions are cries to God in an appeal for mercy (Ps 51; Lk 18.13); and the related prayers of praise and thanksgiving glorify God for God’s sake (1 Sam 2.1-10; Lk 1.46-55), or express gratitude for the blessings we enjoy (Ps 75; 1 Thess 1.2). Each of these has a unique function in the Christian’s communication with the divine, and most of those who pray are familiar with these types. However, distinct from these

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classifications, our approach to the devotional life provides the differentiating depth and character of prayer’s ultimate impact.

The Apostle Paul implores the church at Thessalonica to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5.17; cf. Lk 18.1). Given that this plea cannot be taken literally with the categories of prayer described above, Paul must have a different sense of how this statement is practically applied. A clue to his intent is woven within his explanation as to why his audience should pray constantly: “[This] is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess 5.18). Based on this additional insight, attending to the divine will is ostensibly the purpose of unremitting communication with God. The classification of prayer is not the central focus; rather it shifts to the formation of the proper orientation or attitude of those who pray. This intent is not a temporary mindset adopted solely for occasional pauses to clasp our hands or bow our heads, nor is it a method or a style to be employed when the mood hits. This idea is about approach; it is a permanent mentality of offering all the daily goings on as a continuous conversation with God—it is life as prayer. Contemplative prayer is grounded in this awareness.

The contemplative approach to prayer is not so much concerned with types or even methods or techniques as it is with the disposition of the heart. While there are certainly different methodical ways the contemplative goes about cultivating this heart through prayer, contemplation has as its aim “an unconditional and totally humble surrender to God, a total acceptance of ourselves and of our situation” as willed by the divine.2 If prayer is communication—a conversation—then the contemplative frequently adopts the role of listener, eager to be silent and hear what God has to say. Data suggests this receptive posture to be all but foreign to the American landscape.

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A June 2017 survey of just over 1000 adults (nearly 90% of whom professed to be Christian) reflects that the respondents’ prayers consisted of contemplative-type content only 8% of the time. By contrast, an overwhelming majority of prayer in the US was characterized as a “solitary activity defined primarily by the immediate needs and concerns of the individual.” These statistics argue for a severely myopic view, one that has the potential to nurture a negative sense of ambition and self-centeredness—concepts alien to Christian virtue. This approach to prayer runs the risk of making the conversation about ourselves, a monologue that disconnects us from the source on whom we unescapably rely.

In his now classic work titled *Prayer*, the late contemplative Abhishiktananda aptly observes that prayer “is to see God, to recognize and adore his presence and his glory in everything.” Prayer defined this way is consistent with Paul’s counsel to pray always, living life as prayer. But it requires a renewed approach to prayer; not opposed to personal petitions or other types, but one that incorporates their purpose and intent into a larger way of being and seeing. Abhishiktananda lends further depth:

To pray without ceasing is much less to think about God all the time than to act continually under the direction of his Spirit. It is to live and act “in Christ” (Gal. 2:20); or better still, *it is to allow Jesus freely to live in us his life as Son of God*…. It is to answer with Jesus, “Yes, Father”, full of faith and love, *in every conscious act of our life* (emphasis added).

To pray in this way requires a worldview in which we see ourselves united with Christ, each other, and all of creation. This union has already been made real through the work of the cross, but many have yet to assume this “mind of Christ.” Ironically, prayer itself assists us in attaining

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5 Ibid., 36-7.
this adoption, and there is something inherent specifically to the practice of contemplation that influences this unitive experience of ourselves, God, and the world. As such, contemplative prayer plays a foundational role in the formation of a unitive perception of reality.

In the chapters that follow, we will navigate a course that examines this assertion from multiple perspectives, with disparate academic disciplines providing critical ports of call along the way. Chapter 1 sets the table for the discussion, restating the argument and providing critical definitions to provide clarity at the point of embarkation. Chapter 2 begins the excursion in earnest, locating the biblical foundations of the thesis. It grounds Christian unitive perception as a virtuous aim, and it reveals contemplative prayer as a tool that assists in achieving that end, consistent with the biblical record in practice and function. Chapter 3 is concerned with the embodiment of these tenets via the life of a particular historical figure. An example from the “mystical” tradition of Eastern Christianity buttresses the argument of contemplation’s transformative qualities, highlighting the background, salient works, contemplative practices, and resulting unitive perception from the mystic’s life. Chapter 4 explores this practice’s mental impacts from a neuropsychological viewpoint, identifying the physiological processes that help determine “self,” and describing the possible shift to our sense of reality resulting from changes to those neural structures. Chapter 5 provides a theological synthesis of the preceding content, following the path of prayer as it echoes the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. It also speaks a word on atonement as a natural outgrowth of those observations. We conclude by generally recapping the discussion, with a final commentary on the “next steps” of the argument—Christian education on contemplation. With this course in mind, we prepare to set sail.
Chapter 1 Prolegomena

As the mainline pastor sought out participants for his study, one parishioner was particularly eager to join, and she readily signed up. She had been exposed to meditation and other centering practices due to years of yoga instruction, so she thought this might be something that would resonate with that experience. Yet, while being completely open to the idea of contemplative prayer, she maintained a slight sense of uncertainty—she was unfamiliar with this new terminology and practice as it translated to her Christian context. She needed a frame of reference.

Before we venture into the depths of unpacking our thesis, we must first orient ourselves on the three key concepts upon which we will keep our literary sextants firmly affixed. The idea of the “mind of Christ” is foremost in the title of this work, and its presence suggests an implicit knowledge of that notion. Given the diversity of interpretive paths to which this phrase opens, we will point towards a definition aided by two Pauline texts and the Gospels. Unitive perception, on the other hand, may prove a less familiar idea. We will explore the meaning of this somewhat ethereal term and situate it within a Christian context with the help of author Cynthia Bourgeault’s ideas on “nondual consciousness.” Finally, we will settle our attention on contemplative prayer itself. After propping this concept against the larger backdrop of prayer, we will pull it forward and identify some of its unique characteristics. We will also pause to briefly consider some arguments against this practice, and subsequently address those concerns. Having charted the immediate course, we proceed with our definitions.

The “Mind of Christ”

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he cites what scholars believe to be a standing Christian “hymn,” an oral tradition that is presumably known by others within the faith (Phil 2.6-11).6

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While the content of this passage has implications for our study, it is his preface to that hymn that sets the tone. The author writes, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2.5). This provocative statement begs the question, “What is the ‘mind of Christ?’” Examining Paul’s work within Philippians and 1 Corinthians elucidates this inquiry.

The NRSV and RSV translators of these Pauline letters render two different Greek terms as “mind.” In Philippians, the underlying word is φρονέω (phroneo), and its eight occurrences within the letter (vv. 1.7; 2.2*2, 5; 3.15, 19; 4.2, 10) witness to its sense of overall significance as a theme. While the term generally has slightly disparate contextual meanings, phroneo is limited to two denotations in this text, the predominant one being an “attitude” or “disposition” (2.2, 5; 3.15, 19; 4.2).7 The attitude to which Paul alludes is described by Christ’s actions at the core of the hymn.

Verses six through eight of the pericope speak directly to a disposition of humility and selflessness. Paul seemingly detects an atmosphere of self-centeredness in the community, and so he issues a corrective note for those who claim to be “in Christ.”8 He reminds the church that Christ selflessly “emptied” (v7) himself of his Godly estate, and “humbled” himself through “obedience” (v8). This act of humility is intentional in nature, a voluntary movement that recognizes agency in the one who submits.9 In his commentary on the passage, homiletics professor Fred Craddock points out that the attitude that God glorifies in the end is one of “self-

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9 Thurston and Ryan emphasize that this type of submissiveness is consistent with a feminist theological interpretation of the text, as this disposition does not come as the result of involuntary action or coercion. It is an act of empowerment, suggesting that for something to be given away voluntarily, it first has to be possessed. Thurston and Ryan, Philippians and Philemon, 91.
denying service for others to the point of death with no claim of return, no eye upon reward.”

For Paul, to have the “mind of Christ” means a full participation in Christ, but specifically his actions of the cross. His letter to the Corinthians confirms this interpretation.

In 1 Corinthians 2 Paul argues that those in the faith have the power to discern the mysteries of God, not because of an innate ability to plumb the divine depths, but because “we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2.16b). While this is an audacious claim, vetting the text reveals Paul’s rationale. The word for “mind” that the author uses in this passage is νοῦν (noun). The Bauer Greek-English lexicon provides straightforward translations of this term that seemingly map to our general understanding of “mind,” that is, as a “faculty of thinking,” an intellectual capacity, or the sum of the “mental and moral state of being.”

However, an additional fourth entry supports our purposes. The lexicon notes that when Paul uses the term noun here, he is using it interchangeably with πνεῦμα (pneuma, “spirit”). Because this “mind” is Spirit-filled in Christ, it is thereby virtually indistinguishable from that of Christ. It possesses God’s wisdom of revelation, a wisdom which, for Paul, equates solely to Christ crucified (1 Cor 1.23-4; 2.2). To have the “mind of Christ,” then, is inseparable from participating in the cross. But to what end?

Ultimately, the humility and selflessness that are characteristic of the “Christ mind” promote a loving unity within the community. Clues to this goal emerge in Philippians 2.3, with Paul admonishing the church at Philippi to check their motivations of “selfish ambition” and “conceit.” They are to look instead towards the “interests of others” (v 2.4). He later exhorts them to “be of the same mind,” focused on the prize of Christ (3.14-15). This idea of communal

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12 Ibid.
unity is even more conspicuous with Paul’s message to the Corinthians. Early in his letter he petitions the church to put away divisions and be “united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1 Cor 1.10). His appeal is laid bare in chapter 3 of the letter, calling to task those who would divide over petty allegiances (vv. 4-9, 21-23). Divisiveness is anathema to the community of believers. Unity, on the other hand, represents the distinguishing mark of those who share in the “mind of Christ.” And while Paul’s theology seemingly does not call for the imitation of the “historical” person of Jesus, the Gospel writers nevertheless confirm that this overall attitude is espoused and embodied by Christ.  

The Gospel corpus contains dozens of affirming anecdotes to this end. Because the “mind of Christ” is Spirit led, we would expect Jesus to direct his followers to seek after this source. Matthew’s Jesus counsels the crowd to “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Mt 6.33). That seeking requires a sense of humility and obedience, so Christ sets the example by washing his disciples’ feet (Jn 13.3-16). Acts of humility such as this lend themselves to selflessness, and Mark’s Jesus puts his greatest act of selflessness in context, saying, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10.45). Finally, as Paul’s theology suggests, an attitude of humility and selflessness encourages a condition of unity. In his final prayer before his passion, Jesus speaks these words according to John:

> The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (Jn 17.22-23, emphasis added).

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Unity is Christ’s ultimate ideal for the world. Through its realization, we begin to participate in Christ, which makes us “completely one” in the love of God.

With these thumbnail sketches from Paul and the Gospels as our guide, we are prepared to fully render our working definition of the “mind of Christ.” This “mind” conforms to the disposition and the “spirit” of Jesus, the archetype of humanity. It is characterized by a sense of humility, itself a portal through which selflessness readily flows. Being “other-oriented” as such, the boundaries of “self” expand ever outward as to become virtually limitless. And from this location of inclusivity, this “mind” perceives a loving sense of unity, a state of divine intimacy whose bounds are undefined. Alert to this type of vision, we segue to our next definition.

**Unitive Perception**

As we have seen, the “mind of Christ” is oriented such that it takes a unified view of the world. Mining John’s Gospel again, we find Jesus praying on behalf of the faithful, “that they may be one” (Jn 17.21a). This is a prayer for solidarity, a harmonious condition that is both rooted in and compelled by love. But the “oneness” for which Jesus appeals is no ordinary camaraderie; it is nothing short of our full participation in the divine. He continues his plea, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us…” (Jn 17.21b). Comprehending this cosmic unity is no mere act of the intelligence. Accordingly, the “mind of Christ” presupposes a different mode of cognition.

The late theologian Ewert Cousins defined the human spirit as the “deepest center of the person,” the part of us that is “open to the transcendent” and “experiences the ultimate reality.”

Expanding this construct, we can imagine God emanating grace and love like a celestial beacon. As these hallowed waves are ever-present and accessible, we attune our spirits through practices of piety to receive the sacred signal. For scholar and Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault, the spirit’s mechanism of divine reception is the heart.

Bourgeault shares an age-old understanding that the heart is the location of the “spiritualized mind,” an “organ of spiritual perception.”16 In her book The Heart of Centering Prayer, she captures the true sense of the role our core being plays in the spiritual drama by quoting the modern mystic Kabir Helminski:

Beyond the limited analytic intellect is a vast realm of mind that includes psychic and extrasensory abilities; intuition; wisdom; a sense of unity; aesthetic, qualitative and creative faculties; and image-forming and symbolic capacities. Though these faculties are many, we give them a single name with some justification for they are working best when they are in concert. They comprise a mind, moreover, in spontaneous connection to the cosmic mind. This total mind we call “heart” (emphasis added).17

This conceptualized “heart/mind” then, as the seat of our true selves, is critical to our interaction with divine grace. Returning to our signaling metaphor, maximizing the heart’s input from the Sacred Font implies an optimal position or orientation. Bourgeault’s concept of “nondual consciousness” represents the heart in its most receptive state (receiving “pure signal”), and its attainment is central to her philosophical outlook. Delving into this idea brings us closer to our own definition of unitive perception.

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17 Ibid., 55. While the truth of this passage stands on its own, we are sensitive to those readers who may take exception to the words of an Islamic mystic situated within a presumed Christian text. To that end, we provide an excerpt from the Orthodox tradition that resonates with Helminski’s sentiment: “The heart, as well as being a physical organ in our chest, represents symbolically the focal point of our personhood as created in the image and likeness of God. The heart is thus the ground of our being, the root and source of our inner truth. It includes the emotions, but more significantly it comprises our will, our reason, and also the higher visionary faculty known in Greek as the nous, whereby we apprehend the glory of God.” Ware, The Jesus Prayer, 35-36.
Bourgeault defines “dualism” as a subject/object posturing. As subjects, we typically reflect on or consider some object that we deem “external” to ourselves. This analytical mode of perception creates a de facto partition or separation between the subjective “I” and the objective “it.”18 Even our language constructs reinforce this perception. For example, English grammar typically follows the subject/verb/object (SVO) construction. Subjects have agency, operating on the object via the action described by the verb. The language does not inhibit our reception, per se, but it does frame what we see.19 From this model, no matter how we try to change what we observe, the partition remains.

By contrast, a nondual consciousness approach shifts the paradigm altogether. Instead of attempting to change what we see—changing the object of perception—nonduality concerns itself with changing how we see it—the mode of perception itself. No longer do we perceive a dog as “merely” a four-legged creature of a certain color and breed, having to be fed and house trained. Instead, we understand it as a fellow participant in creation, complete with feelings, experiences, and God-given purpose like our own. Bourgeault refers to this change in acuity as “heart-centered cognition.”20

The idea behind this heart-centered cognition rests in holistic reception, allowing ourselves to come into “sympathetic resonance” with our environs. The differentiating mind takes a back seat to the mind’s parallel processes that tend to receive more broadly.21 By accepting experiences in a harmonizing or sympathizing fashion, we sort through these inputs in a manner that opens us to

18 Ibid., 93.
21 Ibid., 120.
an intimacy with all of creation. Author and “heart field” lecturer Melissa Joy speaks to this type of reception by way of a seemingly common experience:

When we are in the field of the heart, we are in the flow and void of resistance. We are in a space of grace, where anything can happen, and where nothing takes time because everything is available to us instantly through the eternal-now. [Consider] the experience of meeting someone for the first time and connecting so totally heart-to-heart that it feels like you have known them for years, or all your life, or even forever, when in fact, in linear time, you have known them for only a few moments.22

This type of synchronicity is a natural by-product of the shift from “thinking” with our heads to “experiencing” with our hearts, the part of our existence that is blessed to have contact with the divine. And it is that holy communication that lies at the root of this unitive type of seeing. Its sacred purpose resides in our understanding of our place in creation and connectedness to it, a comprehension that demands an appreciation of our unified participation in the life of the One through Christ: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...” (Jn 17.21, emphasis added). Bourgeault recaps this cognition aptly and concisely stating, “[we] see oneness because [we] see from oneness.”23 The synthesis of these ideas provides us with our definition.

Unitive perception is the means of seeing holistically, resisting the natural tendency for our divisive brain to dominate, but deferring to that part of us that takes in the whole. It embraces Bourgeault’s idea of heart-centered cognition—which enables nondualistic consciousness—

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while maintaining its sole identity and purpose as the participation in God through the “mind of Christ.”

Digesting these ideas, we must admit that fundamentally shifting how we see the world is no walk in the park. As we have seen, moving from the “head to the heart” runs counter to our cultural experience, including even the language that we speak. It suggests a level of reprogramming how we receive the world, a “re-wiring” of the mental and spiritual circuitry—which implies work on our part. This effort, as with all attempts at change, begins with prayer.

The fourth century monk Evagrius Ponticus provides sage guidance to this effect in his “Chapters on Prayer:”

The Holy Spirit takes compassion on our weakness, and though we are impure he often comes to visit us. If he should find our spirit praying to him out of love for the truth he then descends upon it and dispels the whole army of thoughts and reasonings that beset it. And too he urges it on the works of spiritual prayer.

We begin the course of change with the help of the Spirit through prayer. We implore God to impart the grace we need to persevere, knowing that, while grace is sufficient, we nevertheless maintain a role in this synergistic relationship. And as we engage in our work, Evagrius’ wisdom proves timeless. As we seek solace and even answers through prayer, we find that the discipline of prayer itself provides a solution.

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24 We do not intend to imply here that Bourgeault does not have this ultimate intention in mind. She clearly states this intent in her commentary on Beatrice Bruteau’s “Prayer and Identity:” “The reason for undergoing this transformation is not personal self-realization or even the person experience of ‘transforming union,’ but to be able to participate fully here and now in the generative, kenotic energy of the Trinity….,” Cynthia Bourgeault, “Commentary,” in Spirituality, Contemplation and Transformation: Writings on Centering Prayer, ed. Thomas Keating (Brooklyn, NY: Lantern Books, 2008), 113. That spiritual end in mind, this mode of “seeing” is, however, qualitatively aligned with the late A. H. Maslow’s notions of “Theory Z.” Here he describes “transcending self-actualizers” as those who “perceive unitively or sacrally,” viewing the world holistically, simultaneously secular and sacred and as one. Abraham Maslow, The Farther Reaches of Human Nature (New York: Penguin Books, 1971, 1993), 270-86. Maslow also uses the term “unitive perception” directly as the “fusion of the eternal with the temporal, the sacred with the profane.” Abraham Maslow, Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences (New York: Penguin Books, 1970, 1994), 79; cf. 59-96.

Contemplative Prayer

The *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* defines monotheistic prayer as a “human approach to God and addressing God in praise and adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, and intercession.”26 This entry is ostensibly consistent with the categories we laid out in the Introduction, and they resonate with Paul’s understanding in his first letter to Timothy where he urges that “supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone” (1 Tim 2.1). The ascetic John Cassian helps to clarify these four delineations in his fifth century treatise on this passage. In short, he proposes the categories of prayer that also echo with our dictionary offering: *petitions*, *confessions*, *vows*, *intercessions*, and *thanksgiving*, a subset of *praise*.27 While these attempts suffice as rudimentary denotations of prayer, their two-dimensionality leaves us flat and needing more. Our lives suggest that the connotations of “prayer” are enmeshed with the rudiments of human experience.

One expansive yet somewhat common view of prayer that offers greater depth is that of a conversation with God. As with any discussion, this definition would suggest a two-sided sharing of ideas, an implied mutuality. In his work *Praying the Psalms*, theologian Walter Brueggemann speaks to the awareness he gleaned on the reciprocal nature of prayer from engaging the Psalter. He notes that its pages reveal God as “a full participant in a life of lively dialogue,” and those who pray are partners in that conversation, “capable of being an *initiator* or a *respondent*” in the exchange.28 The late Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar provides

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even more nuance to this idea of reciprocity. He considered prayerful speech as nothing less than “the exchange of thoughts and of souls, unity in a common spirit, in a common possession and sharing of the truth” (emphasis added).\(^\text{29}\) However, recognizing that this mutuality is uneven in its distribution—given the nature of its participants—von Balthasar is quick to qualify this human/divine interaction. He states that “prayer is a conversation in which God’s word has the initiative and we, for the moment, can be nothing more than listeners. The essential thing is for us to hear God’s word and discover from it how to respond...” (emphasis added).\(^\text{30}\) This ability to listen, this demand for silence in the divine presence, is our call to contemplation.

Contemplation is an act of inner awareness. In James’ epistle, he makes mention of those who, after gazing upon themselves in a mirror, immediately “forget what they were like” once they turn away from it (Jas 1.23-24). As we have already appreciated, the spirit is that place where the divine speaks to us, guides us, and creates relationship with us. It is home to our true nature, and it longs for intimacy with God. James’ messaging suggests that we need to participate in the Word to remember who we are called to be. The intentional activity of spiritual awareness through contemplation assists us in being mindful of our true selves. But before we advance, we should take a moment to consider those modern voices that may object to this mode of supplication.

Two major streams of thought oppose the authenticity of contemplation in a Christian context. The first of these situate contemplation in the so-called “New Age” movement, a modern adaptation of earlier eastern “occult” practices. The core offense here is the idea of attaining an altered consciousness or other state with the aims of “getting Christ,” not unlike the self-realization tactics of Hinduism or Buddhism as popularly understood. At the very root of


\(^{30}\) Ibid., 15.
this resistance, though, seems to be a rehashing of the age-old grace versus works argument.31

The fourth century Syrian monk Pseudo-Macarius, himself steeped in the tradition of interior prayer, provides a summative response to this misguided belief:

Prayer produces among those who are worthy of it a certain mystical communion (koinonia) of holiness with God, thanks to the action of the Spirit. It brings about a certain union with the Lord that fills the human spirit with an inexpressible love. And each day he who is moved to continue in prayer is drawn by the love of the Spirit to a love and a desire that is full of fire for God. Each one receives the grace from the Spirit of the perfection of a free will. It is God who gives this gift (emphasis added).32

The text resoundingly emphasizes that any attainment of connection with God originates with the Spirit. Using a sailing analogy: A sailor has no control over the wind (the Spirit). If it does not blow, the boat has no energy to move. However, if the sailor does not properly prepare—untie the knots, lift anchor, trim the sails, tend the rudder—then, if by chance the wind does blow, the boat still will not move, or worse, it will launch haphazardly and without direction.33

Contemplative prayer is the Christian’s act of preparation to be at the full disposal of the Spirit.

A second major stream of thought is that contemplation is an idea that only resonates within the Roman Catholic tradition. Donald Bloesch represents this camp when he argues that the end state of prayer is being in the will of God, “not the contemplation of his being.”34 While the record consistently shows that the end state of contemplation is not so much “being in God” as it is realizing God’s kingdom (as Bloesch agrees it should be), his true aversion to the practice

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seems to reside in the seemingly incompatible Roman and Protestant theologies on grace.35

While we could turn to numerous Protestant treatises that combat this idea of contemplation’s absence from this branch of Christianity (as if Protestantism was monolithic), one robust excerpt from the memoirs of the eighteenth century Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards serves to buttress the counterargument:

> Once, as I rode out into the woods for my health, in 1737, having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view, that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension. This grace that appeared so calm and sweet, appeared also great above the heavens. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent, with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception—which continued, as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud. I felt an ardency of soul to be, what I know not otherwise how to express, emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone; to love him with a holy and pure love; to trust in him; to live upon him; to serve and follow him; and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity. I have several other times had views very much of the same nature, and which have had the same effects.36

Edwards’ account is congruent with the reports of his Roman Catholic (and Orthodox) counterparts. It refutes the idea that contemplation runs counter to Protestant thought, and it illustrates and strengthens the arguments for what Christian contemplation truly is—an emptiness before God to gain the fullness of God’s grace in Christ. With these objections duly

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35 Ibid., 97-117. For others in this similar location, the aversion seemingly betrays vestiges of Reformation-age polemics of Roman Catholic “error” and “heresy;” see David Cloud, “Evangelicals Turning to Catholic ‘Spirituality,’” Way of Life Literature, last modified March 14, 2018, [https://www.wayoflife.org/database/evangelicals_turning_to_catholic_spirituality.html?sm_au=iZHSNJZMNg3vQ0TQ](https://www.wayoflife.org/database/evangelicals_turning_to_catholic_spirituality.html?sm_au=iZHSNJZMNg3vQ0TQ).

countered, we return to our path of this Christian practice. Specifically, we trace its path as it was preserved most reliably.

The notion of contemplation was most conspicuously nurtured in monastic practice. In the sixth century, Benedict of Nursia synthesized eastern and western monastic practices through the creation of his *Rule*. In chapter 6 of that guide, Benedict sets the contemplative tone, dictating that “the master should speak and teach, and the disciple should quietly listen and learn.”37 The twelfth century Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux reveals in his seventh *Parable* what by that time was a known formulary, the “precious fabrics” of “readings, meditations, prayers, and contemplations.”38 And in his *Sayings of Light and Love*, the sixteenth century mystic John of the Cross plays upon Jesus’ teachings (Mt 7.7; Lk 11.9) and that same four-fold structure: “Seek in *reading* and you will find in *meditation*; knock in *prayer* and it will be opened to you in *contemplation*” (emphasis added).39 While these categories historically represent the stages of biblical prayer known as *lectio divina* (“divine reading”), we will use the classes of *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation) as a means of understanding different practices that collectively huddle under the umbrella we term contemplation. Briefly dissecting each component informs the rationale behind our approach.

The term *lectio* translates as “reading.” The ancients of course understood scripture (and Christ) as God’s revelation, and therefore the study of written materials was paramount. They did, however, move beyond this literal understanding of “reading” to include listening to biblical

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and spiritual words and memorizing them. In fact, any means of receiving divine revelation rested within this purview; the emphasis here is upon reception.40 As the late mystic Henri Nouwen understood, anything perceived (read) “spiritually” reveals a lesson.41

Not only must we receive these divine gifts, we must also completely own them. *Meditatio*, or meditation, involves this appropriation. Unlike the term’s common use in eastern religious traditions, Christian meditation presumes an active and continual processing of revelation.42 This processing may include repetitive speech, imaginative engagement, or some other means by which the mind remains affixed to its sacred cause. The mind is intentionally engaged in this type of prayer, mulling over its subject until it becomes “second nature.” To animate this concept, the late Trappist M. Basil Pennington applied an ancient analogy of a cow chewing its cud—there is a repeated gnawing and grinding, then a fermentation process deep within extracts all the nutrients. The by-product is a “rich, creamy milk—a symbol of love filled with the unction of the Holy Spirit.”43 Like Jacob wrestling on the banks of the Jabbok, the one in meditation refuses to release the hallowed catch until it relents with a blessing.

40 While the Western church was developing and refining its versions of *lectio divina*, the Orthodox (Eastern) tradition was simultaneously concerned with sacred images as a means of mediating God’s presence. These *eikon* (icons) were the visual counterparts to the Holy Text, telling the story of salvation history as worshippers pondered the messaging they conveyed. In fact, for many the visual representations of figures from the faith tradition conveyed the very presence of God, not unlike the sacramental elements of water and oil or bread and wine. The Orthodox considered these revelations as no less inspired than the written text itself. As such, these religious icons were not said to be *drawn* (or painted) but *written*. Christine Paintner and Lucy Wynkop, *Lectio Divina: Contemplative Awakening and Awareness* (New York, Paulist Press, 2008), 121. Cf. Alfredo Tradigo, *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006), 6.


43 M. Basil Pennington, *Centering Prayer: Renewing and Ancient Christian Prayer Form* (New York: Image Books, 2001), 22. The word “ruminate”—to think deeply about something—is rooted in the term “ruminant”—an animal that chews cud (cow, sheep, goat, etc.) and gains nutrients from the fermentation process in a specialized stomach chamber.
The response to the blessing of meditation is *oratio*—prayer. This type of response comes as a result of the penetrating awareness of God’s reality. It moves. It provokes. It refuses to be ignored, and the one who prays is compelled to answer its call. The spirit splashes in the waves of divine awareness, the expanse and the refreshment of the waters evoking an uncontrollable outpouring. There may be shouts of praise; there could be cries of lament. Whatever the prayer, its release is inevitable. Eventually, however, the *activity* of prayer all but ceases. A joyful weariness sets in, and the soul begins to submerge. But this is no drowning. Like a mammal that suddenly sprouts gills, the soul adapts naturally, breathing in the totality of its spiritual environs.

Still immersed in the consecrated pools of divine experience, the soul is no longer aware of its expressions. Words are not spoken, because the ideas they attempt to conceptualize are not applicable here. Consciousness has shifted to a boundless space, and linear time halts. All that remains is the water, itself the Spirit that is known only as the All in All. These are the ineffable depths of *contemplatio*. Alone with the Presence, the silence nurtures the deepest level of contemplation—a quiet but profound encounter with the Living God.

Understanding the nuance of each segment of *lectio divina*, we can now appreciate the affinity between each of its phases and various prayer practices. Praying the Psalms, reading the lives of inspirational figures, or even strolling through nature potentially provides the raw material for *lectio*. When done with prayerful intent, the Spirit may open us to receive. Practices such as repeatedly reciting the “Jesus Prayer” or immersing in imaginative scriptural engagement resonate with the movements of *meditatio*. Meditation implies an active seeking and use of mental faculties. Deep reflection on the day’s activities and interactions, with God as the “Holy Counselor,” would exemplify *oratio*. Methods such as Ignatius of Loyola’s *Examen* prayer

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44 “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”
embody this type of introspective engagement. Exposing ourselves to God in such a personal manner inevitably results in praise and/or lament. And albeit a challenging experience, Centering Prayer aptly illustrates the wordless engagement of *contemplatio*. The intentional stillness and solitude with an eye towards diminishing “self” creates space for the Spirit to speak and be heard. These are but a sampling of prayers that we sometimes unconsciously engage in daily. While we may or may not know their “technical” designations, our spirits nevertheless are moved in these ways. These ideas ground the final definition of this chapter.

Like a greeting card, sometimes the words of another captures a sentiment so well and succinctly, we let them speak on our behalf. We draw our definition directly from the pen of author David Keller. He writes of contemplative prayer as “a grace-filled attentiveness to God that initiates and sustains a change of consciousness, leading to deepening love of God and neighbor.” This description encapsulates all that we will seek to show in this work.

**Conclusion**

As we transition to the main task of this essay, it would be useful to briefly digress to one of the forebears of contemplative prayer. Origen of Alexandria (185-254) represents the early stages of Christian thought. Origen and his contemporaries equated seeing God with faithful discipleship, faithfulness modeled in the biblical text. Origen’s greatest achievements involved the interpretation of Scripture, and he believed that understanding the sacred text flowed from a literal sense towards a mystical one. And that mystical interpretation was only accessible via “the

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movements of prayer,” contemplative actions that condition us for God’s revelation. Following Origen’s lead of discipleship, we begin our proofs of contemplative prayer’s role in Christian unitive vision with the words of Scripture.

Chapter 2 Unitive Perception, Contemplation, and the Bible

Near the completion of the pastor’s study on prayer, one of the participants approached him on a Sunday morning. She wanted to assure the pastor that she was attempting to maintain the practice as he had prescribed it, and she added that upon conclusion of the study, she intended to continue her contemplative work. She would “continue seeking,” determined to penetrate the mysterious depths of prayer in this fashion. She intimated that at the heart of her zeal lay the profundity of her encounters with Scripture. While many of her daily readings still left her perplexed, she nevertheless was experiencing newfound clarity and insight from the texts. Something about the Bible’s message was resonating with her contemplative prayers.

Contemplative prayer evolved from the ancient Christian practices that formed the totality of what became known as “mysticism.” The late scholar Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as “that organic process which involves…establishing [a person’s] conscious relation with the Absolute.”48 This process was originally rooted in the interpretation of Scripture, specifically a multi-layered approach to hermeneutics. In the third century, Origen exemplified this type of exegetics par excellence, distinguishing between a “superficial” or surface reading of the text—one that any literate person could appreciate—and another deeper rendering of the message that “escapes the notice of most.” Origen considered these “spiritual” writings so shrouded in mystery that their meanings would be availed only to those “on whom the grace of the Holy Spirit is bestowed in the world of wisdom and knowledge.”49 Later theologians followed his lead.50

History credits the sixth century author known as Pseudo-Dionysius with coining the term “mystical theology,” so named after one of his brief treatises on the topic. In that work, he

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50 We do not use the word “theologian” here completely in the modern sense. Theologians were considered those who experienced God in their daily lives, specifically (but not exclusively) through prayer. Cf. Hannah Hunt, A Guide to St. Symeon the New Theologian (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 107ff. See also William Harmless, Mystics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5. Evagrius Ponticus defined this class succinctly in the fourth century: “If you are a theologian you truly pray. If you truly pray you are a theologian.” Evagrius, Praktikos, 65.
too alludes to the greatest depths of biblical insight, prefacing his essay with a prayer that God would lead the faithful “up beyond unknowing and light, up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture, where the mysteries of God’s Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence (emphasis added).”

This tendency towards viewing the sacred texts as the primary means of contemplating the mystery of the divine lasted through the middle ages, with the Bible as the central object around which “reading, meditating, preaching, and teaching” maintained their orbits. However, the early church viewed the Bible as more than a means to divine consciousness; they also understood the content of its sacred pages as instructional towards the purpose and practice of contemplation.

Early theologians excavated the recesses of scriptural mines searching for gems that would inform their daily spiritual walk, oftentimes emerging with treasure of immeasurable worth. One such find rests in the pericope of 2 Cor 3.17-18. Researcher Bernard McGinn points out that the word in verse 18 that the NRSV translates as “reflected,” κατοπτριζόμενοι (kataptrizomenoi), was often interpreted as “contemplating” by early church thinkers. As such, these verses became the basis for the historical understanding that perfecting the image of God that we all carry within ourselves—the purpose of contemplation—was in part facilitated by reflecting upon Christ—the practice of contemplation. Thus, the scriptural pages themselves were the bases of contemplative prayer, a means of grace by which the Christian could cultivate her or his call to holiness. This interpretation maintains its luster today.

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53 Ibid, 71.
Like the treasure-hunters of old, we too delve into the hallowed grounds of Scripture to find precious nuggets that mark this same purpose and practice. This chapter will explore the depths of the sacred pages to see how the *Bible richly informs our implied goal of unitive perception*, and the proposed vehicle to that end, *contemplative practice*. By examining pertinent texts throughout the canon, we will understand how viewing the world holistically relates to the ideal of unity through Christ, and we will better appreciate the “grace-filled attentiveness to God” as a means of aligning to the divine will of loving God and neighbor.

**The Bible and Unitive Perception**

Before we examine contemplation’s practice and purpose, we should first call our attention to unitive perception as a valuable biblical cause. In his 1934 work “Choruses from the ‘Rock,’” poet T. S. Eliot penned these words: “What life have you if you have not life together? There is no life that is not in community, [and] no community not lived in praise of [God].” Missiologist Isam Ballenger makes use of Eliot’s sage declaration in an essay that speaks to the theme of unity in the book of Ephesians, specifically 4.1-16. In that brief text, he makes his own keen observation. He notes that the church “unites with the mission of God to unite all things, things in heaven and things upon earth, that is, to bring the whole creation into harmony to the praise and glory of the creator” (emphasis added). These holistic views of unity for God’s purposes hit the mark.

The concept of “unity” in Ephesians is reinforced by Paul’s use of the term *ενοτης* (*henotes*) in 4.3 and 4.13. Bauer’s lexicon aligns with this straight-forward interpretation,

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describing a “bond of unity” that is especially manifested by God between believers.\textsuperscript{56} While the only appearances of this word in the entirety of the canon occur in this letter, ‘\textgreek{ενοτης}’ nevertheless captures the spirit of wholeness communicated throughout Scripture. It is a constant theme of the faithful being united \textit{by God, in Christ, and through the power of the Spirit.} Through this harmony the people \textit{live with a single mind and purpose}, lacking discernable division relating to the common goal. It is not integrity for its own sake, however; it is instead a state which \textit{mirrors the glory of the unified life within the Godhead}, a life in which we are invited to participate. Textual evidence for each of these five claims suggests the authors desired their audiences to share in this vision of unity.

\textit{United by God}

From the time of the patriarchs, the biblical record attests to the idea of God choosing and unifying a people to fulfill the divine purpose. As early as the calling of Abraham, God’s words in Genesis speak to this truth: “\textit{I} will make of you a great nation, and \textit{I} will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. \textit{I} will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you \textit{I} will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12.2-3, emphasis added). Likewise, during Moses’ commissioning as an agent of Israel’s delivery from Egypt, God instructs him to tell the assembly, “\textit{I} will take you as my people, and \textit{I} will be your God” (Ex 6.7a, emphasis added). As with Abraham, God is clearly the primary actor. However, the notion of chosen-ness has expanded—now the “you” and the “your” are plural in their implications. Nevertheless, God sees the people as an integrated whole, and looks to instill

\textsuperscript{56} Bauer, \textit{Greek-English Lexicon}, 267.
within them that same vision of solidarity based upon their common deliverance. A survey of the broader text reveals this same pattern.

The Hebrew Bible is replete with further examples of the people being reminded of their unity as God’s possession. Passages like “The LORD your God has chosen you” (Deut 7.6), or the “people whom you have chosen” (1 Ki 3.8) allude to an assembly of the faithful set apart by God. Through the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, God speaks in personal terms: “I have called you by name, you are mine” (Isa 43.1b), or “on the day when I chose Israel…I swore to them, saying, I am the LORD your God” (Ezek 20.5). Still other samples promote a deep, familial intimacy, as in Malachi’s cry, “Have we not all one father?” (Mal 2.10) and Hosea’s beautiful poetry, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hos 11.1). This latter imagery resonates with Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, as he imagines the entire Biblical canon taking a form that identifies the faithful as “[embracing] the call and [believing] the promise,” a people seeing themselves as explicitly shaped by God into a single “family.” The New Testament writers continue with this vision of Godly kinship.

The idea of the faithful as a unified “family” runs deep in the second half of the Christian canon. In John’s Gospel, the high priest Caiaphas is said to “prophesy” Jesus’ death, a death that the narrator tells the audience would “gather into one the dispersed children of God” (Jn 11.52). The common bond between these “children” is their true Father, who, according to Matthew’s Jesus, is the “one in heaven” (Mt 23.9). In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he reiterates the source of this spiritual paternity, noting that there is “one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph 4.6). Paul also puts a fine point on our argument here that it is only by God’s “enabling” that any can “share in the inheritance of the saints” (Col 1.12). And at the

root of this enabling, of course, is the “spirit of adoption,” the overall joy of which compels the faithful to see each other as integral parts of a greater whole, and to cry out to God in the most endearing of terms, “‘Abba! Father!’” (Rom 8.15). Another point of this adoption helps to summarize our discussion thus far.

Paul notes that through this holy covenant, the faithful are counted as “God’s own people” (Eph 1.14). The only other place this wording appears in the New Testament is in the book of 1 Peter, where the author pronounces boldly to his Christian audience, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Pet 2.9a). While this short passage is rich in allusions to God’s calling of Israel in Exodus and Isaiah, focusing briefly on the words “nation” and “people” informs our discussion. The word translated as “nation” in the 1 Peter passage is εθνος (ethnos), from which we get our term “ethnic.” In his commentary on this pericope, New Testament scholar Donald Senior makes a telling observation. Given the diversity of ethnic backgrounds from which 1 Peter’s audience would have emerged, applying the term εθνος to the faithful most likely “gave them a sense of common identity” in an otherwise divisive context; now they were empowered to perceive themselves through the lens of solidarity and common cause. Our second word of interest may have had a similar effect.

The term λαός (laos, “people”) appears over fifteen hundred times in the Hebrew Bible, most of these instances referring specifically to the “people of God.” Once again, the author of 1 Peter appropriates this word from the Judaic lexicon and applies it to his Christian audience. His reasoning is straightforward—as God elected the Israelites for the divine purpose, so too is the

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58 Exodus 19.6a reads, “but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation,” and Isaiah 43.20c-21a states, “my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself.” It seems the author is calling upon these known Judaic references to help his audience understand themselves as part of this same biblical tradition. Cf. D. P. Senior and Daniel Harrington, 1 Peter, Jude and 2 Peter, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 61-62.

59 Ibid, 62.
church set aside. Through God’s adoption, individuals who once saw themselves as separate and distinct can now visualize themselves as a people, “chosen as [God’s] heritage” (Ps 33.12). But that claim is only valid through the work of Christ.

_In Christ_

While the wholeness of the people is initiated and shaped by God, realizing that harmony is made possible in Christ. In chapter 17 of John’s Gospel, Jesus prays within earshot of his disciples, “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one” (Jn 17.22, emphasis added). Commenting on this chapter, theologian Gerard Sloyan notes that since Christ possesses the love and oneness of God—as God’s revelation—he is the only one capable of granting these divine gifts.60 Scholar Francis Moloney lends additional perspective, equating the δόξα (doxa, “glory”) bestowed by God on Christ as nothing less than the love between the Father and the Son.61 This dynamic equivalence between God’s glory and love suggests a foundational truth in that relationship—where this glory is present, so too exists a bond of loving and conspicuous unity. Working with that premise, Moloney is free to comment further on John 17.22: “Jesus prays that the oneness of love among believers might reflect the oneness of love that exists between the Father and the Son.”62 This same oneness of love—this impenetrable yet perceptible unity—is a golden thread deeply woven into the tapestry of the New Testament.

The entirety of chapter 17 from the Gospel of John represents Jesus’ final prayer before his passion, and his intercession for the sake of distinguishable unity is prominent throughout. As

62 Ibid.
discussed, he highlights the Father’s “glory” that he has imparted to his friends (v22). He prays for the disciples’ “protection” through the divine Name (v11). And Jesus petitions for “completeness” in their union with himself, the avenue to connection with the Father (v23). All these prayers are to the end “that they may be one” (v22). Furthermore, these blessings are not limited to Jesus’ immediate disciples; he opens his plea for unity to include all who come to believe through the witness of his immediate followers (vv20-21). Moloney asserts that being gathered by Christ into “all that can be known of the reality of God” is the basis for this kind of unity, because that solidarity discernably imitates the oneness of Jesus and the Father.63

A sampling of Paul’s epistles reinforces this notion.

The theme of oneness in Christ is primary to Paul’s letters.64 When he addresses those baptized into the faith in Galatia, he aims to change how they perceive identity, insisting that neither ethnicity, servile status, nor gender has significance in their faith lives, “for all…are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3.28). Similarly, in a message to the Colossians, the apostle plays down ostensible differences, promoting instead the view that “Christ is all and in all” (Col 3.11). Corresponding with the church in Ephesus, Paul speaks to the overt functions the “gifted” fulfill as the body of Christ, squarely focused on the unifying consummation of the faith “to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4.11-13). He also makes use of this “body” metaphor to illustrate solidarity in his treatise to the Romans, writing that “we, who are many, are one body in Christ,” and because of that relationship, “we are members one of another” (Rom 12.4-5; cf. 1 Cor 12.12-26). The corporal metaphor extends all the way to the Eucharist; Paul compels the

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63 Moloney, John, 467.
church at Corinth to recognize themselves in the Sacrament: “[Because] there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10.17).  

Paul’s eloquence in addressing the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile captures the idea of a palpable unity in Christ:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross… (Eph 2.13-16, emphasis added).

This brilliant imagery sums up the work of Christ in bringing the faithful into oneness, both with himself and with each other. The reconciling power of love is the fire that forges this unity, and that love is no better revealed than through Christ’s selfless act of the cross. This deed brings “access” to the Father, access quickened “in one Spirit” (Eph 2.18). A closer look at the activity of the Spirit reveals its unifying role.

Through the Spirit

Paul’s letters sufficiently illustrate the certainty that we are united by God, in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. In Galatians, Paul enumerates for his audience nine different “fruits of the Spirit” (Gal 5.22). Among those listed, εἰρήνη (eirēnē, “peace”) appears early in the list. The “peace” represented in that passage is literally a “harmony” among people, not far afield from the “wholeness” suggested by its Hebrew counterpart, שָׁלוֹם (shalom). So when Paul implores the church at Ephesus to “[bear] with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the

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“unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4.2-3, emphasis added), he suggests that a visible byproduct of the presence of the Holy Spirit is the mutuality and unification of the faithful. That working assumption is directional for our premise when applied to other instances of Paul’s work.

Paul understands the Holy Spirit as nothing less than the binding force of the community when he explicitly speaks of “peace.” In his view, when the mind is set on the Spirit, the outcome is “life and peace” (Rom 8.6). He sees the “power of the Holy Spirit” availing a wellspring of hope to “joyful and peaceful” believers (Rom 15.13). From Paul’s perspective, the kingdom of God itself is identified by the “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14.17).

Even when the language of “peace” is absent, Paul still understands wholeness in the life of the community as an indicator of the activity of God’s Spirit. When there is “sharing in the Spirit,” the people are living “in full accord and of one mind” (Phil 2.1-2). As the giver of all good gifts, God’s Spirit “activates” and “allots” talents that edify the body of believers “as the Spirit chooses” (1 Cor 12.4-11). Enriched by that grace, the collective lives of the people serve as a “letter of recommendation” for all to see, “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God” (2 Cor 3.1-3). The rationale behind Paul’s perspective is simple—through baptism, the faithful are integrated through the fellowship of the Spirit: “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12.13).

In speaking of unification through the Spirit, Ballenger references the “seven-fold unity” expressed in Ephesians 4.4-6. Through his commentary, he aptly captures our position: “Oneness is a given, a truth over which we have no control. There is one body and one Spirit, one hope,
one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, a seven-fold oneness that should leave no doubt as to the significance of [this] affirmation” (emphasis added).67 The εἰρήνη alluded to here is inclusive of the Godhead—“Spirit…Lord…Father”—as well as the “body” of the faithful. It reflects the glory within which we participate, the very depths of the Trinity, and we are called to bring it into view for others. To do so, we must first see ourselves as reconciled to oneness.

Singular Mind and Purpose

“The ministry of unity is a ministry of conciliation, which refers more generally to the process of bringing various different parties into relationships of mutual benefit and enrichment, in order to live in a model of unity….”68 This statement is excerpted from a 2010 World Council of Churches study paper titled “Towards Common Witness to Christ Today: Mission and Visible Unity of the Church.” It resonates wholly with the purposes of seeing and realizing a corporate solidarity—attaining a singular mind and purpose that lacks division or any type of infighting. It is not a sense of uniformity; it is a clear eye on the common goal, and the community’s synchronized push towards that end. Paul has this ideal in mind as he writes to his congregations in Corinth and Philippi.

Learning of different “schisms” that had taken place in the Corinthian community, Paul appeals to his audience “that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1 Cor 1.10, emphasis added). Paul is not concerned with “agreement” on minutiae here; the accord he seeks is a harmonious rhythm, a consecrated crew heeding the call of their spiritual coxswain

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towards the finish line. Likewise, sensing that some might be distracted by self-serving desires, Paul implores the church in Philippi to “be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil 2.2, emphasis added). His notion of unity is strongly conveyed, insisting on loving mutuality in purpose, and a twice-mentioned singularity of perception.

Paul in fact wants the unity of the church to be in full view to the world. Once again addressing a Philippian audience, he states, “Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel…” (Phil 1.27, emphasis added). Paul wants evidence of the community’s oneness, but not for self-affirmation. He seeks it for the sake of the church and for the nations to whom they serve as a witness. Oneness “worthy of the gospel” is a sure sign that Christ is at the core of a community. It is proof positive that love is at work, binding the faithful and fueling their lives together. For the people of God, oneness must be experienced, it must be seen. What it mimics is nothing less than the unity within God’s self.

A Reflection of the Trinity

Both halves of the Christian canon speak to the uniqueness of God. This unity is expressed as resolutely today as it was when the Shema was first uttered: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone” (Deut 6.4, emphasis added). Similarly, Jesus recites this steadfast reality in Mark’s gospel account, removing any ambiguity as to the unitary nature of God: “‘Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one’” (Mk 12.29, emphasis added). However, both the Old and New Testaments strongly allude to distinct revelations of the personhood of God, such as the “spirit of God” in Isaiah (Isa 61.1; cf. 1 Sam 19.20; Job 33.4; Ezek 11.24), or the “Word” in John’s gospel (Jn 1.1, 14; cf. Rev 19.13). Even more overtly, Jesus commands the disciples to
baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28.19), an explicit equivalency of the divine Name, which undoubtedly calls into question the relationship between these revelations. Understanding that God is one, yet simultaneously recognizing that scripture unveiled something deeper within this unity, early Christians began pondering the “inner life” of God.

The eighth century theologian John of Damascus wrote authoritatively about the relationship within the Trinity. His enduring words and concepts as quoted by scholar Charles Twombly help to frame our discussion:

> The abiding and resting of the Persons in one another is not in such a manner that they coalesce or become confused, but, rather, so that they adhere to one another, for they are without interval between them and inseparable and their mutual indwelling [en allais *perichoresin*] is without confusion. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit is in the Father and the Son, and Father is in the Son and the Spirit, and there is no merging or blending or confusion. And there is one surge and one movement of the three Persons.69

The “mutual indwelling” of which John writes is known today as *perichoresis*, a term accredited to him because of this same passage. The unity to which the people of God aspire is founded in this *perichoresis*; the emulation of that same harmonious bond in love is their aim. In quoting ethicist Ryan McLaughlin, missiologist Susan Davies states that “‘perichoresis—as experienced by the divine persons—is not possible for human beings who are separate subjects. However, the Spirit indwells these separate subjects *and* forms a communion between them and communion with them.’”70 Without God, harmony as a goal is out of reach given our divisive nature. Yet through the work of the divine, union within the body is not only possible, it is an expected truth.

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among the faithful. And this reflection of the Trinity serves a purpose beyond the community itself; it manifests the glory of God. The canon attests to this truth.

From the outset, the chosen-ness of God’s people served the purpose of pointing towards the divine. This intent is somewhat veiled yet, nevertheless, apparent in Abraham’s calling, when God informs him that his blessing was an instrument through which “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12.1). The world would readily see Abraham’s progeny as set apart, a holiness that called attention to the source of its sanctity. Upon the Israelites’ release from bondage, this purpose is clearly stated: “I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy. (Lev 11.44-5; emphasis added). The church is under this same mandate.

Revisiting two passages from the New Testament, the church is graced with sharing in the identity of “God’s own people.” Paul writes that participating in this inheritance is “to the praise of [God’s] glory” (Eph 1.14b). The author of 1 Peter speaks more directly to the point. For this writer, membership in the unified household of faith is a privilege, but it simultaneously carries inherent evangelical responsibility: “that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you” (1 Peter 2.9b). This burden is a joyful task, and its ramifications are far-reaching.

Oneness in God is a reality toward which all of creation strives. The revelation of the Trinity provides the model of this unity, and God’s chosen are called to emulate it. Ballenger succinctly encapsulates this idea, noting that “the unity of God is for the unity of the church and the unity of the church is for the unity of the whole creation.”71 Solidarity is our purpose, and its achievement is emblematic of Kingdom life. But as with all goals, this reality must be perceived before it can be achieved. The Spirit is the moving force behind this changed perception, and it

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follows that any tool that aids in receiving the Spirit ultimately assists in aligning the faithful with this divine understanding. Contemplation is just such a tool.

**The Bible and Contemplative Prayer**

At the outset of Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, he provides several “annotations” that edify his reader in the use of his manual. In the first entry, he notes that just as “strolling, walking and running” are physical exercises, the prayer practices contained within the volume are analogues for “preparing and disposing the soul.” Much like Ignatius’ systematic approach, the key to contemplation is *practice*, a definitive rigor applied to the faith in general, and the prayer life in particular, as a means of preparation (cf. 1 Cor 9.27).

Meanwhile, the purpose or *function* of the practice should be likewise well defined. If the goal is emulation of the “mind of Christ,” then a basic assumption regarding the purpose of the discipline is our alignment with Christ’s presumed perspective. Author and scholar Ilia Delio sees this alignment as “[breaking] through our individual egos and [becoming] one with God in all our relationships so that, like Jesus, we create the world as reflection of the One we love, God.” In what remains, we will explore the biblical record as it supports contemplation as a practice of preparation, and subsequently we will examine how it functions to parallel the mindfulness of Christ.

*Quieting Self in Preparation*

Contemplative prayer is a means of preparation to experience God. Like an orchestra that takes its tuning clues from the first chair violinist, contemplation is a time of shutting off the

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distractions of the world to attune our hearts to the perfect pitch of the Divine Concert Master.

Known for her activity in the world, Mother Teresa appreciated the necessity of quiet and solitude in this process of fine tuning:

> We too are called to withdraw at certain intervals into deeper silence and aloneness with God, together as a community as well as personally; to be alone with Him — not with our books, thoughts, and memories but completely stripped of everything — to dwell lovingly in His presence, silent, empty, expectant, and motionless. We cannot find God in noise or agitation (emphasis added).74

In this foundational instruction, Teresa highlights two key constituents of contemplative prayer—aloneness and silence. She also presumes a third element—or condition—that those who pray in solitude and quiet seek:

> In the silence of the heart God speaks. If you face God in prayer and silence, God will speak to you. Then you will know that you are nothing. It is only when you realize your nothingness, your emptiness, that God can fill you with Himself. Souls of prayer are souls of great silence (emphasis added).75

Theresa presumes that the heart is the central “organ” towards which the practice of contemplation is targeted, and its purgation and conditioning is central to the experience of God. The contemplative foundations of solitude, inner quiet, and purity of heart are abundantly present in the Christian canon.

Throughout the Gospel record, Jesus modeled deep, abiding prayer that was facilitated by seclusion. He promoted isolation, instructing his followers to “go into your room and shut the door and pray” to God who “sees in secret” (Mt 6.6). He understood the value of solitude, and he withdrew often to engage in prayer. Sometimes he retreated to “deserted places” (Mk 1.35; Lk 5.16), while at other times he sought refuge in the “mountains,” even through the course of the night (Lk 6.12; Mt 14.23; Mk 6.46). He occasionally shared the solitude with his disciples, as he

75 Ibid., 7.
did in Gethsemane (Mt 26.36; Mk 14.32; Lk 22.41). And in one instance of prayerful retreat, Peter, James, and John got a rare glimpse behind the veil, witnessing Jesus’ union with the heavenly spaces in the Transfiguration (Lk 9.28-35; Mt 17.1-5; Mk 9.2-7).

Delio’s ideas of solitude resonate with Christ’s witness. She writes, “Solitude is not being alone; it is being alone with God. It is not an escape from people but a deepening of one’s heart in God so as to be united with all that is of God.” Solitude of this type is about removing distractions—physical, psychological, or spiritual—to eliminate any background noise that may interfere with connecting with the Spirit of God. The practice of contemplative prayer not only welcomes but prescribes this isolation. It is an environment that is conducive to cultivating and maintaining inner quiet.

In his “Sayings of Light and Love,” the sixteenth century mystic John of the Cross pens that the “Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul.” As the prayer book of the Bible, Psalms sets the tone for this anticipatory hush. The psalmist instructs those who pray to “ponder” and “be silent” when their souls are despaired (Ps 4.4). He compares the “quieted and calmed” soul to a weaned child, content to be in the embrace of its mother (Ps 131.2). The faithful are not called to be anxious, but to “be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him” (Ps 37.7). This stillness in prayer, as John of the Cross wisely assesses, is the prerequisite for receiving the Word: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps 46.10). It also creates an environment for discursive thoughtfulness on the things of God.

Variations on the term “meditate” appear at least eighteen times in the Book of Psalms as it relates to God or divine instruction. Psalm 1 sets the stage for the entire Psalter, describing as

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76 Delio, Making All Things New, 156.
77 John of the Cross, Collected Works, 92.
“happy” the disposition of those who meditate on God’s law “day and night” (Ps 1.2).

Meditation on the divine nature itself was central to prayer, as the psalmist thinks of God on his bed “in the watches of the night” (Ps 63.6), or he moves from meditation to contemplation as his spirit “moans” and “faunts” from the intimate contact (Ps 77.3). Psalm 119, the longest psalm in the book, continues with the theme of pondering the law, containing nearly 45% of all mentions of meditation, and over sixty-seven allusions to divine instruction. Biblical researchers like the late Claus Westermann have suggested that at some point in its development, the Psalter may have concluded with this entry.78 In that context, the “bookends” of Psalm 1 and 119 imply that meditation on God’s precepts bounded the prayer life itself. Jesus’ and Paul’s teachings take clues from this singularity of resolve.

Matthew’s Jesus instructs his followers to “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Mt 6.33a; cf. Lk 12.31), an admonishment to keep heaven’s priorities front and center. Paul issues similar advice, penning to the church in Rome that “[setting] the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Rom 8.6). From that position of narrowly focused commitment Jesus also encourages his disciples to “ask,” “search,” and “knock,” understanding that such inner purity of intent is rewarded from above (Mt 7.7; cf. Lk 11.9). This type of authenticity originates at our essential core, or what Paul calls the “inmost self,” the place that, like the psalmist, “[delights] in the law of God” (Rom 7.22). This center is the seat of our being, the confluence of our bodies, thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and even the will.79 It is the hushed location where we encounter God, oftentimes with silent “sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8.26). Jesus identifies this core as the “heart,” the seat of our desires (Mt 6.21; Lk 12.34), and the depth from which our

true self emerges (Lk 6.45b). The practice of contemplation is a means of purgation for the heart, “cardio” exercise that strengthens this organ of spiritual reception.

The contemplative pillars of solitude and inner quiet are grounded in Scripture, and so too is the call for purity of heart. Psalm 24 responds to its own question “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?” with an immediate and convicting answer: “Those who have clean hands and pure hearts” (Psalm 24.3-4). Matthew’s Jesus echoes this same pericope when he announces in his sixth macarism, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matt 5.8). Both passages present a case that “purity of heart” is a precondition to approaching the divine.

Through Ezekiel God also speaks of the heart, removing altogether the “heart of stone” and replacing it with one “of flesh” (Ezek 11.19; cf. 36.26), presumably renewed and open to divine interaction. Jeremiah clarifies why this purity of heart is so essential: it is to be the tablet of God’s law, fresh clay inscribed directly from the instrument of God (Jer 31.33).

In its typical usage, the word καθαρός (katharos, “pure”) is synonymous with “clean,” itself implying “being free from” persons or things (vis à vis, impurities). As such, “purity of heart” ostensibly has something to do with removing those things that pollute our core selves. Twentieth century mystic Henri Nouwen helps make the connection. In speaking of formation of the heart, he notes that “to let God’s presence fill us takes constant prayer, and to move from our illusions and isolation back to that place in the heart where God continues to form us in the likeness of Christ takes time and attention.”

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80 Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 388.
81 Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation*, xvii.
As Paul built a case to the church at Galatia regarding justification by faith, he made a profound observation. According to his epistle to that congregation, Paul fully understood the transformation into the “likeness of Christ” to which Nouwen alludes. Because of his transformation “in Christ,” Paul couldboldly proclaim, “[It] is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2.20). Looking inward, he saw the heart of Christ—the living law imprinted on his core being. That same Christ-like perspective translated to his view of the world.

Aligning with Christ’s Perspective

The Bible not only endorses the practice of cultivating inner silence that contemplation promotes, it also aligns with the purposes of that practice. Delio wonderfully articulates the pragmatic side of this reality, noting that “gospel life is praxis; it begins with awareness of God’s presence and discernment of the inner mind or spirit. It is a life of awareness that something new is being formed and an invitation to be part of the creative process” (emphasis added). She also understands that this connectional practice has an ultimate function. The continuation of her statement brings that purpose into view:

Thus, Christian life requires a conscious decision to shift the mind (metanoia) by training the mind to focus on the central values of the gospel and to dispense with all other things. Without the choice for a new level of consciousness, there can be no new reality or reign of God. Where our minds focus, there our treasure lies (emphasis added).

Focusing on “the central values of the gospel” implies aligning our values to that of Christ. It means a “shift” in our perspective, one that replicates Christ’s teachings and actions. With this divine pattern as our guide, we will explore how Scripture endorses contemplation’s function of

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82 Delio, Making All Things New, 158.
83 Ibid.
perfecting the image of God within ourselves as an act of seeking, as an act of humility/selflessness, and as an act of unification.

Contemplative prayer serves as an act of seeking God, an entreaty by Jesus (Mt 7.7; Lk 11.9) that is endorsed throughout the canon. Some of these endorsements involve indirect appeals. Before crossing into the land of promise, Moses prophesies that the people will “seek the LORD your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul” (Deut 4.29). David’s psalm of thanksgiving before the ark entreated the faithful to “[seek] the LORD and his strength, seek his presence continually” (1 Chr 16.11). Likewise, the psalmist expresses an inner desire to search God out, exclaiming “‘Come,’ my heart says, ‘seek his face!’ Your face, LORD, do I seek” (Ps 27.8). Paul echoes this wisdom, linking the pursuit of God with true perception: “There is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God” (Rom 3.11; cf. Ps 14.2). And the author of James’ epistle grounds this searching in pragmatic terms: “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you” (Jas 4.8a).

In other places within the text, it is God who encourages the seeking. In Jeremiah, God’s words succinctly align with those of Christ: “When you search for me, you will find me” (Jer 29.13). Proverbs echoes this sentiment, but here God additionally affirms this pursuit as a loving act, stating, “I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me” (Prov 8.17). The Chronicler, however, best situates the quest in unambiguous contemplative terms. Within those pages, God declares that “if my people…humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven…” (2 Chr 7.14, emphasis added). This notion of seeking God through humility in prayer to effect a change mimics the work of Christ, and it strikes at the heart of contemplation.
Contemplative prayer also functions as an act that promotes humility and selflessness, scriptural qualities wholly embodied by Christ. To be “selfless” implies an eradication of self-centeredness, the idea that the “energy of self-will” is expended solely for self-gratification. This type of self-denial originates in humility, a submission to God that demonstrates the proper Creator/creature relationship. To that end, the prophetess Huldah declares to King Josiah through his agents, “because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the LORD…I also have heard you, says the LORD” (2 Ki 22.19). Likewise, Isaiah conveys God’s preferred disposition, “the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word” (Isa 66.2b). According to the psalmist, it is from this humble location that we are taught God’s “way” (Ps 25.9). We see this humility expressed through John the Baptist’s proclamation about Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (Jn 3.30); and ultimately, it is depicted by Christ, who, foreseeing his own suffering, nevertheless utters, “not what I want but what you want” (Mt 26.39b). The contemplative adopts this same attitude, silently submitting themselves to God’s transformational power that enables and delights in death to “self.”

Jesus is the archetype for selflessness, giving himself up completely for the sake of his “friends” (Jn 15.13). He counseled his disciples that “[if] any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mt 16.24). Paul picks up on this theme of self-denial, interpreting our new “death” to be that of the “old self.” In writing to the church at Ephesus, he reminds them of this teaching: “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts” (Eph 4.22). His parallel between death and self-denial crystallizes via carefully nuanced language in his address to the faithful in Colossae:

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Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly…. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things…seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator (Col 3.5, 7-10, emphasis added).

Taken as a whole, these verses (and others) describe a humility and selflessness that is central to the character of Christ. They also depict a denial of self that is core to his atoning work.

In Philippians, Paul describes Jesus’ self-emptying action of the cross. Again, the tight-knit relationship between humility and selflessness is laid bare, the act of self-denial resulting in physical death:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross (Phil 2.5-8, emphasis added).

Christ evinces humility through taking human form, suffering, and dying, while his selflessness is displayed in the release or “emptying” of his divine right. Forms of contemplative prayer emulate this same kenosis, the one who prays releasing the inner conflicts and constructs of the “false self,” making room for the Spirit to claim its rightful ownership of the heart. The result is transformational.

Paul instructs his readers to “be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God” (Rom 12.2). Contemplative prayer is a process that can facilitate this renewal, disciplining the faithful to move beyond the limited ideas of themselves—positive or negative—and to simply “be” in God, letting the Spirit indwell and work. Revisiting our reference to 2 Corinthians 3.17-18, we can better appreciate the early Christians’ take on this pericope as grounding for contemplation:
Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. All of us, gazing [(contemplating)] with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor 3.17-18, NAB, emphasis added).

These early contemplatives understood prayer as something that holistically changed lives, the Spirit transforming the believer into their destined image—that of Christ. As such, the fire of the Spirit becomes a smelter of spiritual ore, purifying its subjects and casting them into the one Body.

Lastly, contemplative prayer is an act of unity, the biblical task of aspiring to grasp the reality of the world and our connection to it as Christ perceives them. In describing Augustine’s understanding of contemplation, scholar John Kenney frames it as “coming to see as the Spirit sees.” Jesus had this type of vision. When told that his “mothers and brothers” were waiting to speak with him, he responded “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Mt 12.46-50; cf. Mk 3.31-35; Lk 8.20-21). Jesus was not scorning his relatives; his response was instructional on Spiritual seeing—all are intimately related through God’s love. Paul’s letter to the Roman church confirms this relationality: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family” (Rom 8.29, emphasis added). Jesus understood that from heaven’s perspective, the faithful are inseparably bound.

Paul directly experienced this same reality when he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus. Embedded in the question “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9.4-5) is the implication that Paul’s persecution of the church served as an assault on Christ himself, a reality only possible if the two are mystically united. Paul confirms his lesson learned, penning that

“anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him” (1 Cor 6.17). Contemplation promotes receptivity to and comprehension of this unitive reality.

**Conclusion**

The thirteenth century Rhineland mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, “The eye with which I see God is the same with which God sees me. My eye and God’s eye is one eye, and one sight, and one knowledge, and one love.”86 This type of vision—seeing as God sees—is the crux of unitive perception. It is understanding that we are united by God, in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and this harmony of mind and spirit is nothing less than a reflection of the Divine Oneness. While this graced vision is imparted wholly by the Spirit, we are charged with preparation. Contemplative prayer is such a discipline, paralleling the mindfulness of Christ in seeking God through humility and selflessness, with a keen eye on unity.

In his well-known address to the Thessalonians, Paul counsels them to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5.17; cf. Lk 18.1; Eph 6.18). To pray “constantly” moves beyond dedicated intervals of supplication; it means living *life* in a spirit of prayer, all thoughts, words, and deeds lifted as an offering to God. This is the mind of Christ, and Paul reminds us that to participate in that mind also includes participating “in the pattern of the cross,” with the humility, suffering, and sacrifice that life entails.87 While this is a seemingly daunting task, there have been those who have paved the way, demonstrating their attainment of unitive vision through a life of contemplation. It is to an example of these historical figures we now turn.

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87 Richard Hays, *First Corinthians*, 47.
Chapter 3 The Witness of a Mystic: Symeon the New Theologian

Reflecting on the ninety-day period that made up the prayer “experiment,” one of the participants shared her experience with the broader group of her fellow pray-ers: She had been arriving to work about thirty minutes earlier than normal, and, keeping the lights off in her office, she prayed through the contemplative curriculum that the pastor had outlined. About forty days into the program, a handful of her co-workers began to approach her individually to understand what she was up to. Parallel to the three-month prayer period, the participant’s work environment was undergoing significant administrative changes, and the resulting uncertainty had created an atmosphere of stress and anxiety. The lone exception was this congregant. Her colleagues noticed her apparent sense of calm, and they understood her shift in demeanor to be coincidental with her newly adopted ritual. Something about her very countenance had changed, and they wanted in on the secret.

Countless historical figures have chosen a life of contemplative prayer. Augustine, John Cassian, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, Francis and Clare of Assisi, Bonaventure, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila are merely a handful of luminaries that brighten the skies of Christianity’s numinous past. While their contributions to this constellation vary over time and by context, they share a common bond of being classified as “mystics” in spiritual parlance. Recalling Evelyn Underhill’s definition of mysticism, it is a process by which we “consciously” connect with the divine. Quoting the fifteenth-century academic Jean Gerson, scholar William Harmless adds nuance to our definition, noting that this sacred connection comes from “the embrace of [God’s] unitive love.”88 Mystics are those who surrender to this embrace.

If we suggest that contemplative prayer is foundational in forming a unitive perception of reality, then the witness of those who have dedicated themselves to engage in this deep spirituality should certainly buttress such an argument. In this chapter, we will draw back the

88 Harmless, Mystics, 5.
curtain of time on a relatively obscure contemplative, Symeon the New Theologian, a medieval monastic representing the Eastern strand of Christian tradition. Using his corpus as a case study of sorts, we will 1) sketch a brief biographical framework of his life; 2) summarize three of the primary written works that hearken to Symeon’s contemplative legacy; 3) dive slightly deeper into his ideas on and practices of contemplation; and 4) conclude with examples of this historical figure’s attainment of unitive vision. The portrait thus painted will help illustrate contemplation’s contribution to Symeon’s life, and particularly his perceptions. With these markers in place and with this destination in mind, we point our attention eastward and chart a course towards the Byzantine world.

**Eastern Spirituality: Symeon the New Theologian**

Born as George Galatones in Galatia, Asia Minor, this latter tenth- and early eleventh-century figure arose from noble means and a culturally nurtured upbringing. The Byzantine spiritual atmosphere that surrounded Symeon had presumably become somewhat sterile and ritualized, catering to the institutional needs of the empire versus the spiritual concerns of the people. Additionally, an eastern version of religious scholasticism was vying to become the standard for discussion and practice, unnaturally deconstructing the symbiotic nature of doctrinal ideas about God and the lived experience of God. After long bouts of prayer and reports of divine visions, Symeon was compelled to move from his world of patristic favors and court appearances to monastic life, although his calling went unrealized until he reached the age of 27.89

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As a monk, priest, and eventually abbot, Symeon sought to swing the theological pendulum back towards experience.⁹⁰

Several characteristics locate Symeon squarely within the Eastern tradition. First, his title the “Theologian”—assigned upon his canonization—reveals the belief that his teachings arose not simply from a brilliant intellect, but from a “deep mystical union with God.” Addressing the idea of a theologian in the Eastern context, scholar Hannah Hunt goes on to mention that Symeon himself would have considered any theological conversation “divorced from deep-seated belief and Christian experience” a “mockery of the concept of speaking about God.”⁹¹ Second, he firmly embraced the idea of deification, a type of sanctification the late Jesuit and scholar George Maloney describes as “a consciously experienced process of continued growth through intimate, loving communion with the Trinity.”⁹² Third, like his mystical forebears in Origen and others, Symeon primarily sought God through biblical study. In Discourse 24 Symeon compares Scripture to a treasure chest whose contents exceed the imagination:

“Pay heed to me, brother, and apply this to spiritual things. Think of the chest as the Gospel of Christ and the other divine Scriptures. In them there is enclosed and sealed up eternal life together with the unutterable and eternal blessings which it contains, though unseen by physical eyes. As the Lord’s word says, ‘Search the Scriptures, for in them is eternal life’ (Jn 5:39).”⁹³

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⁹¹ The title “Theologian” had only been applied to John the Evangelist and Gregory Naziansus prior to Symeon. Hunt, Guide, 108. Cf. De Catanzaro, Discourses, 4; Egan, Anthology, 144.


Lastly, his ideas on prayerful encounters within and beyond the biblical text set the tone for Gregory Palamas and others in the tradition later known as hesychasm, a structured form of “stillness” and “prayer of the heart” that serves as a mainstay of Orthodox spirituality today.94

Symeon’s contemplative openness to the Spirit set the tone for his legacy. His sense of authority parallels that of the apostle Paul, legitimizing his teaching as direct knowledge from God. As such, he is known as a theodidact, one who is “taught by God.”95 Like Paul’s encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9.3-8), or his subsequent portage to the “third” heaven (2 Cor 12.2-5), Symeon reported an encounter with the “light” of Christ, even before his monastic career began in earnest:

While he was standing in prayer one night, with his own pure intellect communing with the Prime Intellect, he suddenly saw a pure and immense light shining on him from the heavens above. Illuminating everything and making it bright as day. He too was illuminated by it, and it seemed that the whole building, along with the cell in which he was standing, vanished and all at once dissolved into nothingness, but he himself was caught up into the air and completely forgot about his body.96

Experiences like this convinced Symeon that divine revelation was not limited to the apostolic generation, nor to members of the magisterium who claimed it as their ecclesial right. Instead, anyone baptized into Christ could receive this spiritual gift and in fact should expect it given the right disposition towards God.97 Three of his works witness to these constants of his theology.

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95 Paul coins the term θεοδίδακτος (theodidaktos) in 1 Thess 4.9: “Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another” (emphasis added). McInnes, “Theodidact,” 197. Cf. Maloney, The Mystic, 14. For an extended view on the epistemology of Symeon’s approach, see William Abraham, “Symeon the New Theologian,” in The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology, eds. William Abraham and Frederick Aquino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 383-392.
96 Stethatos, Life, 13.
Before we delve into Symeon’s ideas on and practices of contemplative prayer, we pause momentarily to introduce three key works that serve as illustrative source material for these ideas. Scholars acknowledge that Symeon’s *Discourses* (aka *Catechesis*) is the seminal work of his years as abbot of Saint Mamas. These thirty-six installments of salient sayings represent written accounts of various daily sermons he delivered to his monks. The homilies enshrined his emphases on the themes of piety and the work of the Spirit, two critical foci which we will examine later in this chapter. In *Discourse 9*, for example, Symeon instructs his audience on the virtues of giving to the poor:

> Cheerfulness consists in not regarding these things as our own, but as entrusted to us by God for the benefit of our fellow-servants. It consists in scattering them abroad generously with joy and magnanimity, not reluctantly or under compulsion (cf. 2 Cor 9:7ff). Further, we ought cheerfully to empty ourselves of that which we stored up in the hope of the true promise God has made to us of giving us a hundredfold reward for this.

For Symeon, acts of mercy represent an emptying of the self, a kenotic movement of charity that puts contemplative openness into action. And these are acts driven by the Spirit, the “key” of God’s enlightenment of the human heart and mind, and the enabler of human movement towards God. Symeon reveals his pneumatologically based Trinitarianism in this excerpt from *Discourse 33*:

> The Holy Ghost is spoken of as a key because through Him and in Him we are first enlightened in mind. We are purified and illuminated with the light of knowledge; we are baptized from on high and born anew (cf. Jn. 3:3, 5) and made into children of God…. This indicates to us that the door is light; the door shows us that He who dwells in the house is Himself unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16). He who dwells therein is no other than God, His house is nothing else but light. Likewise the light of the Godhead and God are not two different things. He is one and the same, the house and He who dwells in it, just as the light

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99 Ibid., *Discourse 9*, 156.
and God are the same. In theological terms we use the term *house* of the Son, even as we use it of the Father, for He says, “Thou, O Father, art in Me, and I in them, and they in Me, and I, O Father, in Thee, that we may be One” (cf. Jn. 17:21, 23). Similarly, the Spirit says, “I will live in them and move among them” (2 Cor. 6:16).100

These two themes of devotion and the Spirit’s shaping of the believer continuously emerge in Symeon’s writings, underscoring his belief that the virtuous life is both an attempt to open to God and simultaneously a gift of the Spirit that empowers that effort. His second major work elaborates on these same dominant ideas in poetic meter.

During his tenure as abbot, Symeon also composed his *Hymns of Divine Love* (hereafter *Hymns*). The fifty-eight entries that comprise this collection contain the intimacy we would expect from love poetry, complete with longing (“Let Your oil of grace drop, my God, and pour over my wounds,” *Hymn 46*) and self-abasement (“I’ve shown myself worse than creatures without reason,” *Hymn 17*). Some are directly instructional (“Listen only to the advice of your spiritual father,” *Hymn 4*), while others read as prayers of thanksgiving (“I give thanks to You, Lord, I thank you, Unique One,” *Hymn 36*). Some passages are short (*Hymn 57* has 10 lines), while others draw out their song to over 500 lines (*Hymn 21*). Regardless of tone or length, the entire tome echoes Symeon’s teachings and theologies, especially his lessons on religiosity and the Spirit.

*Hymn 27* encapsulates examples of Symeon’s constant shepherding in the ways of piety and his notions on the role the Holy Spirit plays in the believer’s transformation. He begins his poetic admonition with words that set the tone: “Transform your soul into a place where Christ and King of all / may dwell by your flood of tears, your cries and lamentations, / by the bending of your knees and the number of your groanings, / if you truly, O monk, wish to be one who lives

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100 Ibid., *Discourse 33*, 343.
alone."\textsuperscript{101} After a somewhat lengthy discussion of what this solitude in the Spirit is like, he ends with a return to the role of the virtues in aligning with the divine will:

\begin{quote}
…in the same way also everyone who seeks repentance and everyone who serves the Lord should strive also to be always with the preoccupation of how his repentance will be accepted and how his service will be pleasing and perfect. [And] then dwelling completely with God by means of these virtues he is totally united and sees Him face to face and receives the child-like confidence to turn to Him in proportion that he hastens to accomplish his will.\textsuperscript{102}
\end{quote}

For Symeon, those who live the virtuous life are destined for the tears of penitence, a sacred solvent that cleanses the soul and hearkens to purity of heart. The ways of piety—of which contemplation is foundational—help clear away the clutter of misguided desires and superfluous points of focus; they create a space for God to enter in so that the believer “sees Him face to face.” Despite human effort, however, conversion remains the sole domain of the Spirit. And when the Spirit is at work, the impact is undeniable.

Remaining in the verses of \textit{Hymn 27}, we get a clear view of Symeon’s beliefs about the power of God’s Spirit within:

\begin{quote}
Do not say that it is impossible to receive the Divine Spirit.
Do not say without Him you can be saved.
Do not say, therefore, that one can possess Him without knowing it!
Do not say that God is not able to be seen by men.
Do not say that men do not see the divine light or that this is impossible in these present times!
This is a thing never impossible, friends, but on the contrary it is very possible to those who so wish, but only to those who lead a life purified of the passions.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 145-146.
and have purified, spiritual eyes.\textsuperscript{103}

This hymn is emblematic of many of Symeon’s writings and thought. He rejects the notion that all cannot encounter the living Spirit, the sole saver of souls. He equally denounces the idea that we can possess God’s Spirit yet be unaware of it. For Symeon, any who have achieved the appropriate amount of detachment from worldly desires are properly prepped to experience the divine, their hearts purified and their “spiritual eyes” opened from tears of repentance. And what they encounter is nothing less than the Trinity indwelling in themselves.

A third resource comes in the form of a relatively obscure essay titled \textit{Practical and Theological Precepts} (hereafter \textit{Precepts}).\textsuperscript{104} This general treatise serves as an instruction template for Symeon’s disciples after his resignation from the monastery, providing guidance in ascetic and contemplative practice. His dominant themes of piety and God’s role in the process are certainly present here, fully evident in statements like “it is right that we should…bend our necks to the yoke of Christ’s commandments,” or “without the fire of the Spirit, everything he does will remain inactive and useless for his aim.”\textsuperscript{105} However, this text is wholly concerned with the \textit{approach} to contemplation. In it, Symeon counsels his audience that “[our] mind is pure and simple, so when it is stripped of every alien thought, it enters the pure, simple, Divine light and becomes quite encompassed and hidden therein and can no more meet there anything but the light in which it is.”\textsuperscript{106} The essay’s full utility is revealed in the contextual discussion of Symeon’s sense of the prayer life, and, as such, we will address it in more detail momentarily.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 145. These lines also hint at the arguments that Symeon and his contemporaries engaged in around the contemplative life and the universal access to the Holy Spirit, and the possibility of becoming a \textit{theodidact}. This “controversy” and others contributed to Symeon’s subsequent exile by Byzantine religious authorities. For more, see Stethatos, \textit{Life}, 167-217; cf. De Catanzaro, \textit{Discourses}, 9-10.


\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 122, 116.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 132.
Evagrius Ponticus outlined a two-tiered approach to contemplation, one of “nature”—Scripture, the cosmos, the natural order—and a second of the Triune God. The first of these was meant for contemplative adherents to prayerfully consider their natural surroundings, including (and especially) their own selves, while the latter was set aside until the faithful achieved some mastery of the first. As we have already seen, Symeon was solidly attuned to this tradition, and so we would expect his ideas on the contemplative life to similarly align. Since Symeon’s writings represent deep reflections on his own practice and experience of God—as with any true “theologian” of his time—close examination of some of these works provides a window into his world of contemplation. Continuing to use The Discourses, Hymns, and Precepts as primary sources, we now narrow our view to determine Symeon’s specific conceptual and pragmatic engagement of contemplation as a means of virtue, and subsequently how that engagement impacted his perception of the Trinity.

**Symeon and Contemplative Prayer: Purity, Tears, and Detachment**

In his Precepts, Symeon comments to his audience that the person “who has acquired purity of heart has conquered fear” (emphasis added). Later in that same text, he returns to and expands on this topic of purity as it relates to penitence:

Mourning has a twofold action: like water tears extinguish all the fire of passions and wash the soul clean of their foulness; and, again, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, it is like fire bringing life, warming and inflaming the heart, and inciting it to love and desire of God (emphasis added).

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107 Evagrius Ponticus, Praktikos, lxxxiii-iv. This view was not unique to Evagrius, as his predecessors—namely Origen and Gregory of Nyssa—viewed the contemplative life similarly. See McGinn, Foundations, 144-57. Cf. Egan, Anthology, 43-8.  
109 Ibid., 114-5.
These statements supply several markers of inquiry of which we take note. To better understand Symeon’s experiences, we specifically look at his attitudes towards the interrelated concepts of purity of heart, the “gift of tears,” and apatheia, detachment from the passions; all are central to this mystic’s prayer life of contemplation.

**Purity of Heart**

As we noted in the previous chapter, Jesus teaches the crowd in the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Mt 5.8). Recalling that discussion, cleanliness of heart involves the purgation of impurities, creating and maintaining a personal “Holy of Holies” within which the divine might dwell. Symeon provides his own working definition of this purity, anchoring it solidly in contemplative vision of blessing:

> A heart is and is called pure when it finds in itself no worldly thought, but wholly cleaves to God, and is so united with Him that it no longer remembers anything worldly, either sad or joyful, but remains in contemplation, soaring up to the third heaven, enters paradise and sees the blessings promised to the saints in their inheritance; and then accordingly it reflects eternal blessings as far as is possible for human weakness (emphasis added).\(^{110}\)

Purity of the heart is an important goal for Symeon because the heart represents the “locus Dei,” the “place of God” from which all spiritual connections originate.\(^{111}\) Without purity, there is no ability to truly communicate or experience God within.

Not surprisingly then, the heart as a target of preparation and safekeeping is fundamental to Symeon’s contemplative life. His pattern of prayer is primarily concerned with keeping the mind “in the heart.” Situated there, the mind can experience the grace that nurtures the soul “as a hen gathers her chicks” (2 Ezra 1.30). “For by the sweet love of God the impulse of [the soul’s] heart, or, rather, the whole inclination of its will, is bound. When once, as I have said, it has been

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\(^{110}\) Ibid., 137.

bound to its Maker, how can it be inflamed by the body or in any way fulfill its own desires? In no way!” Symeon’s motivation for prayer is completely enmeshed in this symbiotic love between the heart and the divine source of its sustenance. This symbiosis is maintained by running “well in the practice of virtue,” a race with Christ as its prize.

For Symeon, the virtuous life is achieved by keeping the “commandments,” and his writings evince that the commands to which he often alludes are not simply the Decalogue, but are typically those encapsulated in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In *Discourse 31* (aptly titled “Self-examination on the Beatitudes”), the author moves through this series of macarisms as a litmus test of sorts for gauging personal piety. Upon reaching the sixth instruction on purity of heart (Mt 5.8), we see that this verse serves as a watershed for those that precede and those that follow. Symeon writes:

…unless our soul attains to such a disposition [(purity of heart)] it can neither constantly *mourn* nor become perfectly *meek*, nor yet *thirst for God*, nor yet *become pure as a mirror*…. The soul, however, who has attained to this sees God from every (side) and is reconciled to Him…. Peace is established between our Maker and God on the one hand and the soul that was once hostile to Him on the other, and it is then *called blessed by God for having made peace*… (emphasis added).

Purity of heart is Symeon’s key to fulfilling the virtues. And while he makes it very clear that the Holy Spirit is the agent through which all enlightenment is achieved (“virtues alone cannot make the heart pure without the action and presence of the Holy Spirit”), the primary means of heart preparation for that Spirit is through the contemplative acts of self-examination and Christ-focus.

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112 De Catanzaro, *Discourse 25*, 270.
113 Ibid., 272.
114 Symeon’s *Discourse 2* is titled “To Christ through the Beatitudes,” setting the tone throughout the rest of the work. De Catanzaro, *Discourse 2*, 47-59; cf. 104, 111, 160, 185, etc. See also Maloney, *Mystic*, 141-5; McInnes, “Theodidact,” 203; *Philokalia*, 122.
115 De Catanzaro, *Discourse 31*, 332.
116 *Philokalia*, 115.
There are two main components of Symeon’s purgative prayer practice. The first part of his regimen consists of interior attentiveness. His younger contemporary and biographer Niketas Stethatos indicates that, prior to Symeon’s tonsure, he received a book that spoke to the “examination of conscience.” Taking this as divine instruction, Symeon began to do just that, and as a result his prayers lengthened at times until daybreak. Stethatos writes that it took but a few years for Symeon “to depart completely from what is visible and arrive at the invisible contemplation of God.”

His routine often included retreats into solitude for up to three hours at a time, preparing himself “day by day to grow and bear fruit.”

For Symeon, the key to this type of prayer life was discipline. In Discourse 25 he notes that each of his colleagues needs to “fix in himself a standard and pattern” that in turn ‘keeps the ways in his heart.’ Purification implies daily rigor and mindfulness of the inner self:

No less than the outward man, so must we needs adorn our inner man (2 Cor. 4:16) with moderation of the Spirit, and completely offer up ourselves to God in soul and body…. By piety (cf. 1 Tim. 4:8) we must train the soul to think as it ought to think (Rom. 12.3) and constantly meditate on the things that belong to eternal life…and by prayer invoke on itself the light of the Spirit…. Apart from these not even its garment may ever be cleansed, let alone the soul itself rise to the height of contemplation (emphasis added except Scripture listings).

Maintaining this type of rigor shaped Symeon into the contemplative master that he was, girding him to offer prayers of all types for the means of purgation. This excerpt from the lengthy Hymn 17 colors Symeon’s experience with the unlimited palate of poetic hues:

I am seated in my cell / either by night or by day: / love is invisibly with me / and without my knowing it. / As it is exterior to all creatures, / it is also with them all; / it is fire, it is also ray, / it becomes a cloud of light, / it perfects itself as the sun. / Hence because it is fire, it warms the soul again / and burns my heart / and excites it towards desire / and

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118 Ibid., 17-19.
119 De Catanzaro, Discourse 25, 272.
120 Ibid., 159.
love, love of the Creator. / And when I have been sufficiently inflamed / and set aflame in
my soul, / like a ray carrier of light / it flies around and surrounds me entirely / casting its
sparkling rays / into my soul, / illuminating my mind, / and it makes it capable / of the
heights of contemplation / endowing it with a new outlook.121

The work for Symeon began explicitly with an inner focus and assessment. The openness that he
pursued allowed it to flower into a “new outlook,” a changed perspective. Yet the object of his
contemplative world remained steadfast.

The second component of Symeon’s heart purgation was his fixation on Christ. This
mindfulness of the indwelling Christ is not an intellectual exercise, but is one wrought through
contemplative consciousness.122 He sets the trajectory for Christian contemplation in Discourse 2:

Let us flee from the deceit of life and its supposed happiness and run to Christ alone, who
is the Savior of souls. Him let us endeavor to find who is present everywhere, and when
we have found Him let us hold Him fast and fall at His feet…. Nay, I entreat you, let us
endeavor to see Him and contemplate Him even in this life (emphasis added).123

Contemplation absent Christ as its target was completely foreign to Symeon, especially since it
was the work of Christ’s Spirit that set the whole enterprise in motion. Pursuing Christ either
through a form of the Jesus Prayer or some other centering means locked Symeon’s intent onto
its devotional ends.124 Even more specifically, it was the Christ-centered light mysticism that
Symeon clung to as his primary image, permanently impacted by his first encounter as a young
man. Commenting on Jesus’ metaphor of the eye as the lamp of the body (Lk 11.34), Symeon
makes use of this imagery while simultaneously providing insight into the exegetical influences
of his practice of prayer: “What else does He mean by ‘the eye’ than simply the mind, which will

121 Hymns, 67.
122 Maloney, Mystic, 212; cf. 83-111, esp. 105.
123 De Catanzaro, Discourse 2, 58.
124 “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” Cf. De Catanzaro, Discourse 22, 245; Discourse 30, 322.
never become simple unless it contemplates the simple light (cf. Lk 11:34ff)? The simple light is Christ. So he who has His light shining in his mind is said to have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2.16).” The mystic shares our sense that putting on the “mind of Christ” is intricately entwined with the contemplation of the Triune God. His light motif is a means of expressing a supra-sensory experience that we understand as “deep calling on deep” (Ps 42.7), the wordless communication between created and Creator that is only accommodated through the economy of the Spirit. Nevertheless, he attempts to articulate his “vision” through hymnody to encourage others to adopt and maintain the contemplative life:

Grant me, Christ, to kiss Your feet.
Grant me to embrace Your hands,
these hands which created me by Your word,
these hands which brought forth everything without effort.
Grant me to fill myself with these graces without being satisfied.
Grant me to see Your face, O Word,
and to enjoy your inexpressible beauty,
to contemplate and savor Your vision,
ineffable vision, invisible vision,
awesome vision; however, grant me to tell not its essence but its operations.126

The rhythms of Symeon’s Christocentric prayer are massaging fingers that ease the tensions of the heart, releasing its toxins and toning its structure for renewed strength in God. The inviting flow of the prayer’s words beckon and encourage the listener to adopt this same pattern of contemplation, a preparation of our core being that opens us to new consciousness and horizons. Symeon issues these words from a place of intimate encounter, a state of purity that allows him

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125 De Catanzaro, Discourse 33, 340.
126 Hymns, Hymn 24, 126.
the “privilege” of being one directly taught by God.127 And such an awesome gift demands a sense of great humility.

The Gift of Tears

Inseparable from Symeon’s purity of the heart is the work of the Spirit that Evagrius termed the “gift of tears.”128 For Symeon, involuntary tears were an affirmation of contrition. Psalm 6.6 reads, “I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping.” Symeon promotes the psalmist’s languishing position before God in penitence, an appropriate attitude of solemn compunction when approaching the Holy One in prayer. In Hymn 17 he expresses this posture through heart-felt song: “Consider my teardrops / as ever gushing fountains, / O my Christ, / and wash my soul in them / from the stains of their passions.”129 The sacred waters of weeping are akin to the baptismal font, cleansing the soul and restoring the heart to its God-given image. In a clear parallel, Symeon explains that “[without] water it is impossible to wash a dirty garment clean, and without tears it is even more impossible to wash and cleanse the soul from pollution and stains.”130 He solidifies his argument for tears with a biblical appeal:

No one will ever prove from the divine Scriptures that any person ever was cleansed without tears and constant compunction. No one ever became holy or received the Holy Spirit, or had the vision of God or experienced His dwelling within himself, or ever had Him dwelling in his heart, without previous repentance and compunction and constant tears ever flowing as from a fountain.131

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127 McInnes, “Theodidact,” 203.
128 Evagrius, Praktikos, 56. Cf. de Catanzaro, Discourse 29, 315; Maloney, Mystic, 129-37; Egan, Anthology, 147.
129 Hymns, 61.
130 De Catanzaro, Discourse 4, 81; cf. 83, Discourse 9, 159-60. Symeon gives a brief explanation of how these tears of contrition may be brought about in Discourse 30, including repetition of “Holy, Holy, Holy,” the Lord’s Prayer, and the Jesus Prayer, assumption of various physical and mental postures, and self-castigation “violently and unsparingly,” 322-3. See also the biographical account of Symeon’s tears in Stethatos, Life, 71, 93.
131 Ibid., 81-2.
For Symeon, communication through contemplation requires the purgative power of tears. They are emblematic of the one who prays’ contrition, a sign of the Spirit’s movement in the human conscience. But this process is not one of complete sorrow. Symeon states in *Precepts* that mourning has a “twofold action:” the “first effect of mourning in God is humility; but later it brings unspeakable joy and gladness.”132

For Symeon, tears were also an affirmation of joy. The psalmist holds firm to a hope that “those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy” (Ps 126.5). Symeon’s experience of contemplative tears has taught him likewise. In *Hymn 13*, he expresses this spiritual irony:

\[
\text{I weep, I am pierced with sorrow, when the light shines on me, that I see my poverty and that I realize where I am, what world I live in, what mortal world, mortal myself; and I am filled with joy, with bliss, when I understand what condition God has bestowed upon me, what glory, and I consider myself like an angel of the Lord completely adorned with the immaterial garment. Thus joy kindles my love for the Giver and the One who transforms me, God—and love cause streams of tears to gush forth and makes me still more brilliant.}^{133}
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Eyes and hearts flushed by tears of compunction are cleansed for a new vision, one that brings ineffable delight to the soul. That delight turns the bitter waters of contrition to sugar-sweet joy of divine revelation. With personal conviction Symeon can instruct his disciples that the penitential sorrow eventually “engenders increasing joy in our hearts and enables us to see the radiance that never sets.”134 Tears are tightly coupled with purity of heart, evidencing the

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133 *Hymns*, 44.

134 De Catanzaro, *Discourse 4*, 88.
contemplative’s progression towards the things of heaven. That progression requires detachment, too.

_Apatheia—Detachment from the Passions_

Paul writes the church at Colossae with sage contemplative advice: “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3.2-3). The ancients interpreted this state as “impassibility” or _apatheia_, a condition of passionlessness existence. Maloney describes this idea as the calming of thoughts and desires that detract humanity from its truest purpose of pursuing God, a “re-integration of [our] whole being, senses, emotions, intellect and will.”135 Scholar William Abraham puts a finer point on the idea of _apatheia_:

> Love, the climax and very heart of Christianity, is not just a moral commitment to live a life of faithfulness to God and neighbour as taught by the Son of God but a profound experience of the love of God through the Holy Spirit that _overcomes here and now_ in a radical way[,] the effects of ancestral sin[,] and the _wayward effects of disordered passion_ (emphasis added).136

Abraham’s “overcoming” resonates with Symeon, for whom detachment amounts to a matter of human freedom. He notes in his _Precepts_ that “a man whose thoughts are occupied with cares of this life is not free; for these cares hold him in their hands and make him their slave.”137 Reminiscent of Paul’s dire appeal in Phil 3.18-19 against the “enemies of the cross of Christ” whose “minds are set on earthly things,” Symeon issues a similarly solemn sentiment in _Hymn 15_:

> But if you are clothed with the shamefulness of your flesh if you have not bared your mind, nor stripped your soul, if you have not succeeded in seeing the light,

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buried as you are in darkness, what could I really do for you,
how should I show you the formidable mysteries?138

The mystic’s outlook is somewhat binary here: For those who have “died in Christ” (Col 3.2-3),
putting off the passions is symbolic of this death, a “white martyrdom” that raises the offering of
self-denial in union with Christ’s own self-giving.139 For those who have not embraced this
“enlightenment,” they remain “buried in darkness,” blind to the mysteries of the faith. Those
who do not let go of the cares of the world are like prisoners in a solitary confinement of their
own creation. The keys of release are within arm’s length, but the layers of attachments form
deceptive lenses like looking through the opposite end of binoculars; for the imprisoned, the
mechanism of their freedom is perceived to be far off in the distance, completely inaccessible.

Evagrius wrote that the “soul which has apatheia is not simply the one which is not
dist(302)unted by changing events, but the one which remains unmoved at the memory of them as
well.”140 A spiritual descendent of Evagrius, Symeon adopted his teaching. He understood
disordered passions as detrimental to the sustaining of purity of heart; but he also believed that
those no longer effected by them lived in a state he termed “supersensory”—completely attuned
to God in love.141 These blessed contemplatives have a renewed sense of reality, seeing things as
they truly are—the world created through Christ (Jn 1.3; Col 1.16). Returning to Maloney, he
summarizes this divine vision well: “Seeing a thing by the grace of the Holy Spirit with spiritual

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139 “White martyrs” were those, according to early church writers like Cyprian of Carthage, who did not sacrifice
their lives for the faith (“red martyrs”), but instead “died daily” like Paul (1 Cor 15.31) to the cares of the world. See
Isabelle Kinnard, “Imitatio Christi in Christian Martyrdom and As...” in Asceticism and Its Critics: Historical Accounts
and Comparative Perspectives, ed. Oliver Freiberger (Oxford: Oxford University
140 Evagrius, Praktikos, 34.
141 Philokalia, 137. This state is similar to John Wesley’s controversial notions of “perfection”—the faithful being
not sinless, per se, but so deeply consumed by the love of God that the occasion of sin has no foothold. John Wesley,
“Christian Perfection” in John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology, eds. Albert Outler and Richard Heitzenrater
(Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 70-84. See also the witness of the anonymous author of The Cloud of
eyes ‘according to the nature’ means to go beyond the superficial impressions given us by our prejudiced faculties of knowing and judging through sense and emotional responses to outside stimuli.”\textsuperscript{142} This statement encapsulates our definition of unitive perception, and the record shows that this vision was prominent in Symeon’s life and work.

**Symeon and Unitive Perception: Light and the Indwelling Trinity**

Paul uses several metaphors to describe the faithful, with “clothed in Christ” (Gal 3.27) and “children of light” (Eph 5.8) among that repertoire. In *Discourse 28*, Symeon applies both images to those who lack awareness of God’s blessing of illumination, indicating that these will “appear naked” and be “filled with much shame.”\textsuperscript{143} Like the attendee without the proper garment at the divine wedding celebration (Mt 22.11-14), their absence of attentiveness will subject them to unwanted scrutiny. The New Theologian’s accounts and biographical anecdotes indicate that through much contemplative struggle (purity of heart, tears, and impassibility) and the work of the Spirit, he had attained to this consciousness. Two chief indicators of Symeon’s unitive perception were his visions of light and awareness of the indwelling Trinity.

*Visions of Light Motif*

In his work *The Life of Moses*, Gregory of Nyssa interprets the light emitted from the burning bush as nothing less than the light of God.\textsuperscript{144} Symeon pays homage to his spiritual predecessor in *Hymn 23*, and affirms his use of the luminous descriptor: “As Gregory / the Theologian has said:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{142} Maloney, *Mystic*, 152.


\textsuperscript{144} Gregory is translated to say that it is on “those of us who continue in this quiet and peaceful course of life that the truth will shine, illuminating the eyes of our soul with its own rays. This truth, which was then manifested by the ineffable and mysterious illumination which came to Moses, is God.” Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham Malherbe and Everette Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 59.
\end{quote}
/ illumination is the end / of all those who love; / and repose of all / contemplation is the Divine
Light."145 Symeon had experienced this theophany of light first-hand on multiple occasions, and
he not only recognized the significance of its occurrence, but he also appreciated its
transformational impact on how he would view the world thereafter. While he describes and/or
alludes to several of these visions, two such experiences will suffice to illustrate the transcendent
nature of his encounter. In his first theophany, we can appreciate Symeon’s struggle to articulate
the scene:

So I entered the place where I usually prayed and, mindful of the words of the holy man I
began to say, ‘Holy God.’ At once I was so greatly moved to tears and loving desire for
God that I would be unable to describe in words the joy and delight I then felt. I fell
prostrate on the ground, and at once I saw, and behold, a great light was immaterially
shining on me and seized hold of my whole mind and soul, so that I was struck with
amazement at the unexpected marvel and I was, as it were, in ecstasy. Moreover, I forgot
the place where I stood, who I was, and where…. I conversed with this Light. The Light
itself knows it; it scattered whatever mist there was in my soul and cast out every earthly
care…. Thus all the perceptions of my mind and my soul were wholly concentrated on
the ineffable joy of that Light (emphasis added).146

The profoundness of this type of contemplation is indeed unspeakable. However, Symeon does
provide his audience with the lasting impact even from this first of many experiences: “The light
envelops me and appears to me like a star, and is incomprehensible to all. It is radiant like the
sun, and I perceive all creation encompassed by it. It shows me all that it contains, and enjoins
me to respect my own limits” (emphasis added). His revelation situates Symeon in the symphony
of all creation, enveloped in love’s irresistible melodies, yet individuated through his
contribution to the overall composition. And Symeon understands the purpose of such a

145 Hymns, 122.
146 De Catanzaro, Discourse 16, 200.
grandiose vision: “To those who come near us we shall become “light” and “salt” (cf. Mt. 5:13-14) to their great benefit in Christ Jesus our Lord….”

Another of his visions of light seems to describe a lasting effect. While contemplating a Theotokos icon, Symeon has yet another encounter with the divine:

As I fell before [the icon], before I rose up, Thou Thyself didst appear to me within my poor heart, as though thou hadst transformed it into light; and then I knew that I have Thee consciously within me. From then onwards I loved Thee, not by recollection of Thee and that which surrounds Thee, nor from the memory of such things, but I in very truth believed that I had Thee, substantial love, within me. For Thou, O God, truly art love.

From that point on, Symeon had a lasting notion of God’s light, himself becoming “God-bearer.” He never lost sight of that reality, and perhaps it was from that moment that he gained lasting assurance of the indwelling Trinity to which he was certain all had access. The experience continuously framed the outlook for himself and others.

Awareness of God’s Indwelling

In Hymn 50, Symeon asks the tantalizing question: “And how is it that one made god by grace and by adoption / will not be god in awareness and knowledge and contemplation, / he who has put on the Son of God?” He answers his rhetorical question with his take on Trinitarian theology: “I am entirely god by sharing in God in a conscious awareness / and by knowledge, not by essence / but by participation, as is absolutely necessary to believe to be orthodox” (emphasis added).

Symeon is aware of God within because he participates in the Trinity through the work of Christ. Recalling the unitive revelations of John’s gospel, as the Father is in the Son, and

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147 Ibid., 202-3. In Precepts, Symeon states that if a person looks at the sun, it changes their vision. Comparatively, when people stare into the “sun of truth with mind and heart,” they suffer a change to their mental vision, “unable to imagine anything earthly,” seeing “God in all things,” 141.
148 Ibid., Discourse 36, 376.
149 Hymns, 254.
vice-versa, Jesus prays that his disciples too will be joined to the divine Unity (Jn 17.21, 23). Based on this lived truth, Symeon can say with confidence that, while the Father and Son are eternally united, the faithful too can participate through “adoption and grace.” The Byzantine monastic speaks with experiential authority when he preaches to his charges on the indwelling of God:

When the soul by a good zeal has reached this state it is identified with God and becomes the house and abode of the Divine Trinity. It sees its own Maker and God clearly, and as it converses with Him day by day it departs from the body and the world and from this air and ascends into the heaven of heavens (emphasis added).

And while some objected to the “common person’s” access to this type of awareness and participation, Symeon insisted—based on his own reality—that such objections were not only in error, but also encroached upon blaspheming the power of the Spirit.

As we move to close this section of the chapter, it is appropriate to rely on the beauty of Symeon’s hymnody to truly express his gift of indwelling awareness. He begins Hymn 7 with an open and longing heart:

How do I adore You within myself and yet I perceive You at a distance?
How do I embrace You within me and I see You in the heavens?
You alone know it, You, the author of these things who shine like the sun in my heart, my material heart, immaterially, you who made the light of Your glory shine on me, O my God.… Symeon is confronted by the age-old conundrum of God: How can the Ultimate Reality be immanently present, yet simultaneously transcendent? In the end, he does not attempt to solve the riddle; he is content to be present in the reality as he experiences it.

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150 De Catanzaro, Discourse 34, 350.
151 Ibid., Discourse 9, 160. Symeon’s language here and elsewhere is reminiscent of Augustine’s view of contemplation—all is seen properly through the Spirit: “And since [a person] now has the capacity to understand, you teach him [or her] to contemplate the Trinity in Unity, the Unity that is Trinity.” Augustine, The Confessions, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997, 2016), 294. See also John Kenney, Mysticism, 126-7.
152 Ibid., Discourse 32, 335-8.
153 Hymns, 28.
Conclusion

Symeon’s awareness of God within himself stood out to his contemporaries and to those who know of his legacy these many centuries later. While common to the mystical experience of the East, his use of light imagery to capture his indescribable encounters with the Transcendent nevertheless reveals a personal spirituality that clings to God yet is also determined to share that accessibility with others. What is exceptional about Symeon’s contemplative life is the primacy of contrition, expressed in prayers for purity, tears, and impassibility. Not seen as purely a preliminary step, constant compunction for Symeon was essential for any Christian to attain to the conditions necessary to commune with God.154 His visions of the Divine prompted Maloney to rightly pen the lasting nickname, “Mystic of Fire and Light,” and his efforts for others to likewise perceive this truth affirms the Church’s designation of “the New Theologian.”

As we leave this chapter, we take one final glance at Symeon’s first theophany of light in his own words (in the third person of “George”):

One day, as he stood and recited, “God, have mercy upon me, a sinner” (Lk. 18:13), uttering it with his mind rather than his mouth, suddenly a flood of divine radiance appeared from above and filled the room. As this happened the young man lost all awareness [of his surroundings] and forgot that he was in a house or that he was under a roof. He saw nothing but light all around him and did not know if was standing on the ground. He was not afraid of falling; he was not concerned with the word, nor did anything pertaining to men and corporeal beings enter into his mind. Instead, he was wholly in the presence of immaterial light and seemed to himself to have turned into light.155

Symeon’s account raises questions for the post-modern thinker as to the “reality” of this experience, the descriptions lending themselves to a delusional or even pathological state of

154 McGuckin, “Symeon,” 188. This constant purgation contrasts with the typical threefold, iterative view of purgation, illumination, and union. Others saw these as “overlapping stages,” but Symeon construed purification as a necessity throughout the process. On the three stages of purgation, illumination, and union, see Underhill, Mysticism, 169-70.
155 De Catanzaro, Discourse 22, 245-6.
mind. The findings of contemporary neuropsychological research related to contemplative prayer and the brain provide some provocative answers.
One of the participants in the pastor’s three-month study was an avid outdoorsman. He spent as much time as possible outside, whether going on hikes, building Habitat for Humanity homes, or enjoying the sights from the comfort of his back porch. For him, nothing was more rewarding than passing time in fresh air and the sights of creation. However, towards the end of the study period, the parishioner noticed something different about his time outdoors—images were more vivid, birdsong was more rhythmic, and the air was a little bit fresher. His awareness of his surroundings had intensified incrementally. He was increasingly sensing the divine Presence, and it was speaking to him through sights and experiences he had had hundreds of times before. But now they were different; his attention had shifted, and his interpretation of those experiences was transforming too. His perception was changing.

We translate experience through interpretation. Ice is cold; music can be loud; on cloudless days, the sun is bright. “Cold,” “loud,” and “bright” are interpretations of sensory inputs (touch, sound, sight) that are fashioned by culture, stored in our memory, reinforced by time, and then revisited and recalled when seemingly appropriate. This parsing and filtration is the process of perception. But these ostensible realities may differ from person to person. For one, an 85-pound, black Labrador Retriever represents an irresistible thing to be stroked and doted upon. For another, that same animal poses a menacing threat—as do all dogs—ever since that fateful childhood day of being attacked by a German shepherd who leapt the fence and exacted revenge upon its perceived antagonist. Perception is a function of experience.156

As we noted in Chapter 1, perception does not imply what we see, it relates to how we see it. In the example of the Lab above, both people see an 85-pound black dog. However, the first person perceives something to be loved; the second understands it as something to be feared. The respective meanings they assign to their sensory inputs stand in diametric opposition. Because all

“realities” are ultimately the result of the cognitive process, we understand the brain as the primary actor in how we receive both the world and the transcendent. Any shift in worldview, then, must presumably be accompanied by a change in the brain’s structure and/or operation to be sustained. Considering our thesis that contemplative prayer plays a role in shaping perception, the implication is clear that contemplation in some way facilitates such a physiological change.

In this chapter, we will examine the neurological effects of contemplative prayer, specifically the processes that are activated by these methods, and how the brain’s structures can potentially be altered by intentional practice. Since there are psychological outcomes that attend these neurobiological changes, we will also investigate contemplation’s relationship to optimal experience, our sense of self, and our external perspectives.

**Contemplation and Neurological Change**

At the outset of this discussion on neurological change, we define terms for our discovery. In the context of this work, that means a preliminary distinction between the brain and the mind.

Researcher Andrew Newberg and his co-authors concisely define the brain as “a collection of physical structures that gather and process sensory, cognitive, and emotional data.”

For some time now, scientists have understood the brain in its basic functionality. The left hemisphere of the cerebrum is that half concerned with analytical processes like spoken language and mathematical computation, while the right hemisphere takes a holistic approach to sensory input, lending nuance and helping to shape meaning. Both sides work in conjunction with one another to paint a full, contextual picture. The two hemispheres are further subdivided into four lobes, each having a unique relationship with sensory processing. The frontal lobe is responsible for

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body movements, conscious decision making, and executive functions. The parietal lobe, located about two-thirds of the way back, is concerned with the localization of touch and external sensations. The temporal lobe, on the side of the cerebrum, plays a major role in hearing, self-experience, and in memory, and it also connects directly to the limbic system, the portion of the brain associated with intense emotions. The fourth and final subdivision is the occipital lobe; it resides in the back of the cerebrum, and one of its primary duties is the regulation of vision. Meanwhile, the bases for the brain and its myriad functions are tens of billions of neurons, nerve cells that generate and communicate information, and quite subject to reorganization.158

Abstracted from the physical brain is the concept of the mind. Newberg et al define this idea as “the phenomenon of thoughts, memories, and emotions that arise from the perceptual processes of the brain.”159 Stated differently, the mind is how the brain essentially “sees” itself. It is a product of all the various neurobiological processes, a “self-perception” that is naturally susceptible to the corresponding structural changes to the underlying infrastructure. However, somewhat counterintuitively, modern research has demonstrated that thoughts—mental activity that results from neural processes—can conversely influence how brain circuitry is physically wired. We use the beacon of neurophysiology to help pierce the dense fog of this transformational conundrum.


Building perceptions

Since perception is the interpretation of sensory input, we begin with a glimpse of the regions of the brain that are primarily responsible for this processing. These locations in the temporal, parietal, and occipital lobes are known as association areas because they are the geographical centers where information from all over the brain is aggregated and analyzed. For example, raw image data from the eyes and optic nerves is routed to the occipital lobe, and then, after other data is amassed, that picture is passed to the visual association area. Once there, memory and emotion are “associated” with the image to give it full meaning; with these additional inputs—conceptions, labels, context—the image is converted to a full-blown perception. There are four of these known association areas, including visual, orientation, attention, and verbal conceptual.\footnote{Ibid., 24-32. See also Carson, Creative, 52-3. Cf. Sweeney, Brain, 102-3. We should also note that the senses do not seem to operate autonomously, but instead are part of the “additional inputs” that any particular sense receives as well. These come together to help form a “total” sensory picture. Cf. Sweeney, Brain, 130-2.} Two of these—orientation and attention—seemingly play critical roles during contemplative prayer. We will attend to their functions shortly.

Three smaller yet equally significant parts of the brain also inform our conversation. The thalamus resides in the center of the brain between the two hemispheres, and it serves as a “gateway” of sorts for sensory information to pass into their respective association areas. It is particularly important to memory and emotional traffic. Meanwhile, the hypothalamus, resting just below the thalamus, exerts control over the autonomic nervous system.\footnote{Sweeney, Brain, 22.} We will speak more to this system momentarily. Also central to memory storage is the hippocampus. This seahorse-shaped structure inside the temporal lobe plays the “traffic cop” for the movement of
information around the brain, and it translates new information to long-term memory. Each of these three areas is key to the formation of perceptions and to contemplative experience.

Background on one additional area of physiology is useful for our purposes. The autonomic nervous system (ANS) is an extension of the brain that plays a foundational role in our makeup. It functions “involuntarily” (autonomic) or without conscious thought to control vital functions like heartbeat or lung expansion and contraction, regulated by the hypothalamus. Its two parts, the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), operate in a complementary manner in the case of external stimuli. The former is active when organs or processes need a burst of energy (e.g. in the so-called “fight or flight” scenario); the latter acts in the opposing way to bring things back to homeostasis.

According to researchers David Hartman and Diane Zimberoff, specific labels are assigned to the “intense engagement” of these systems. In the case of the SNS, “hyperarousal” is marked by a sense of high attentiveness; the person is completely immersed in an activity, especially one of potential risk to the participant. At the other end of the spectrum, “hyperquiescence” is the term used for the experience of extreme serenity, all external stimuli seemingly blocked out by inner calm. When one of these conditions exists, its counterpart is typically inactive. There are situations, however, when both the SNS and the PNS may be at work simultaneously, a state known as “spillover.” Hyperarousal/quiescence represents a condition of ecstatic experience that peaks with an overarching sense of tranquility or euphoria. Hyperquiescence/arousal describes a deep, blissful experience that leads to extreme awe or

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profundity, sometimes described as a sense of “absorption.” In the paragraphs that follow, we explore how these ANS conditions, their regulators, and the brain’s various association areas contribute to the contemplative experience.

*Neural processes of contemplative experience*

Contemplation can be roughly divided into two domains: those methods that make use of attention or focus, and those whose aim is to clear the mind of thoughts and distractions, keeping it virtually “open.” Christian practices that use icons or other visual foci, repetitive prayers, or self-reflection techniques fall into the first category. Variations on the so-called “Centering Prayer” and those concerned with mindfulness and/or breath-awareness are examples of the latter type. Some label the focused prayers “active” in their nature; the others they term “passive.”

The neural processes involved with each type are somewhat different, yet their ultimate influence on perception tends to be similar. Borrowing from Newberg’s modeling informs our understanding of how all the processes function in concert.

On the active side of prayer, the intent is focus. Since “willful” activities are thought to be initiated by the right attention area of the brain, this location is where our Rube Goldberg-like journey begins. From there, the thalamus serves its role as “messaging gatekeeper,” alerting the

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165 Visual meditation and contemplation are grouped into practices termed *visio divina*—“divine seeing.” Repetitive prayers may include a myriad of methods, such as praying the rosary or reciting the “Jesus Prayer” (“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me”). Techniques like Ignatius Loyola’s *examen* prayer represent those of self-reflection.

hippocampus to intensify the neural flow to the right orientation area (the part concerned with spatial context) and the appropriate sensory-related association area (e.g. the visual center in the case of iconic focus). After sustained contemplative concentration, the right attention area is flooded with neural activity, filtering out all sensory inputs except the object or idea on which it is centered. This process continuously loops, reinforcing itself like a hurricane gaining energy from the warm waters below. At some point, the effect is overwhelming to the hypothalamus, and it triggers the SNS, leading to the state of hyperarousal.

If the intensity of the event continues to increase, the situation we know as “spillover” occurs. At that point, the hypothalamus activates the PNS to help bring the system back to equilibrium. However, because of the reverberations of the neural flow throughout the brain, both the SNS and the PNS continue simultaneous operation; in this elevated state, the contemplative has now entered the realm of hyperarousal/quiescence. With the SNS and PNS at work, neural flow to the attention area—the seat of focus—is at its absolute peak. Meanwhile, since the hippocampus is redirecting all neural resources toward the attention center, the left orientation area (the place that defines the “geographic” sense of self) lacks input. This invariably leads to a condition called deafferentation—a total loss of the boundaries of self. In parallel, the right orientation area is getting bombarded with signals from the right attention area, which now only knows one thing—the target of concentration. Since the bounded self has melted away, the only contextual reference that remains is that target. As such, the contemplative and the item merge into one.\textsuperscript{167} Our mystic from the previous chapter provides a working example of this phenomenon.

\textsuperscript{167} Newberg et al., \textit{Why God Won’t Go Away}, 120-3.
Symeon the New Theologian’s *Discourse 22* illustrates a possible outcome of active contemplation. The following excerpt reveals the mystic’s experience, at least as he was able to describe it after the fact, told in third person:

One day, as he stood and recited, [A] “God, have mercy upon me, a sinner” (*Lk. 18.13*), uttering it with his mind rather than his mouth, suddenly [B] a flood of divine radiance appeared from the above and filled all the room. As this happened the young man [C] lost all awareness [of his surroundings] and forgot that he was in a house or that he was under a roof. He saw nothing but light all around him and did not know if he was standing on the ground. He was not afraid of falling; [D] he was not concerned with the word, nor did anything pertaining to men and corporeal beings enter his mind. Instead, he was wholly in the presence of immaterial light and [E] seemed to himself to have turned into the light.168

As we analyze this text, we see several indications of a classic hyperarousal/quiescence state. First, we can classify the prayer as “active” because Symeon is mentally repeating the phrase, “God, have mercy upon me, a sinner,” a version of the Jesus Prayer (A).169 Secondly, we assume his visual focus rests on the singular source of light in the room, his burning lamp, as that practice was common for Symeon (B).170 Next, we understand Symeon experiencing deafferation, as he has lost his bearings to the point where he does not know whether he is standing or not (C). Because his neural flow is purely in attention mode, other sensory

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169 Ware calls repetition of the prayer “fixed use,” when “we repeat the Jesus Prayer as part of our appointed times for prayer, when our *whole attention is concentrated on the act of praying*” (emphasis added). Ware, *Jesus Prayer*, 15.
170 In comparing this text with Symeon’s works like *Hymn 25*, he often prayed under “the light of a lamp.” His constant imagery of flame and light contributed to George Maloney’s nickname, “Mystic of Fire and Light.” Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymn 25, Hymns of Divine Love*, 135-8. This experience of light is also common to near-death experiences. Author Brian Bain’s assessment of a common view from the scientific community is worth re-printing here: “Scientists and academics have not generally accepted the near death experience as an encounter with the Divine by a ‘soul’ that survives death. In fact, a fairly extensive critical literature has developed contending the contrary, though not all the critics agree on what the cause of the experience might be. Theories range from the influence of an unusual flow of brain chemicals; to the reaction of the dying brain to reduced levels of oxygen; or to purely psychological factors such as dreams, hallucinations, or wish fulfillment. While all of these criticisms offer interesting possibilities, none of them rise above the level of speculation.” Brian Bain, “The Divine Light and Ecstasy in Religious and Near-Death Experiences: A Retrospective Glance and a View for the Future,” *Journal of Near-Death Studies* 24, no. 4 (2006), 200.
association areas like verbal concept center are void of input, such that “he was not concerned with the word,” and nothing else occupies his mind (D). Finally, we see the ultimate end of deafferation and complete focus in the visual center, as Symeon reports that he himself has become the light that he “sees” (E).

Admittedly, Symeon’s report of this account is nothing short of mysterious. The subjectivity of his story cannot be “scientifically” validated, nor can his emotional state of mind be evaluated some ten centuries later. However, given his descriptions of an otherwise ineffable occurrence, they uniquely map to the processes we have described for “active” prayer.

For passive types of prayer, the processes tend to parallel their counterparts, but with notable exceptions. The idea of clearing the mind of distractions is again initiated by the right attention area. The thalamus is the next actor, this time requesting the hippocampus to *dampen* all neural flow except that necessary to preclude thoughts in the attention areas. The cycling of this attention focus essentially deprives the rest of the system of all sensory input. The hypothalamus gets bombarded with messaging, eventually igniting the PNS to go into an overdrive of calming activity—hyperquiescence. Continued intensity results once again in spillover, and so this time the hypothalamus signals the SNS to balance things out. The neural traffic is now very high in both nervous systems, and the state of hyperquiescence/arousal arrives as anticipated. However, something unique happens at this juncture. In the active approach, only the left orientation center is deprived, such that the boundaries of self are diminished. In this passive case, *both* orientation areas are starved of neural input (along with the visual and verbal conceptual centers), so not only has the sense of *self* been dissolved, but there is also an absence
of spatial context. Time, space, and identity have disappeared, leaving the vastness of the “void” as the sole relational reference.\footnote{Newberg et al., \textit{Why God Won’t Go Away}, 117-19.} The contemplative has perceptually merged with infinity.

Meanwhile, the experience is ineffable post-prayer because the contemplative presumably has nothing to work with to describe what occurred. Another excerpt from Symeon’s writings on contemplation validates this assertion:

\begin{quote}
The mobile mind becomes motionless and unthinking—without thoughts—when it is entirely encompassed by the Divine cloud and light, at the same time remaining in conscious contemplation and apprehension, feeding on the blessings which surround it. The depths of the Holy Spirit is beyond understanding or explanation. [A] The mind enters therein after relinquishing everything visible and mental, and moves and turns motionlessly among these incomprehensible things, living a life more than life, being a light while yet in the light, though no light when in itself. [B] Then it sees not itself but Him Who is above it and, being inwardly transformed by the glory surrounding it, loses all knowledge of itself.\footnote{Philokalia, 132.}
\end{quote}

Reviewing his experience, we once more find common ground with latter stages of passive contemplation as described. We see the evidence of the deactivation of the visual and verbal conceptual association centers through Symeon’s “relinquishing [of] everything visible and mental,” all things moving towards the “incomprehensible” (A). And he perfectly describes the outcomes of total deafferation, noting that the mind “sees not itself but Him Who is above,” ultimately losing “all knowledge of itself” (B). Couching this physiological end game in spiritual language, Maloney accurately describes Symeon’s perceived state: “[The] degree of oneness with both God and the real world outside himself gives the mystic the simplified consciousness of \textit{becoming} the whole of reality.”\footnote{Maloney, \textit{Mystic}, 9.} Trials with modern contemplatives as subjects have validated these independent claims.
In 1999, Newberg and his team of researchers conducted one of the first studies of its time: They convinced three Franciscan nuns to undergo imaging tests during their contemplative “centering prayer” sessions.\(^\text{174}\) Using a now dated form of neuroimaging technology called single photon envision computed tomography (SPECT), the scientists measured blood flow throughout the brain as the nuns prayed. Their findings of flow patterns through the frontal and parietal lobes and the thalamus seemingly support the processes described above in relation to the various association areas. In his book *How God Changes Your Brain*, Newberg shorthands this transcendental formula: “Frontal lobe activity increases, limbic activity decreases, and the combination generates a peaceful and serene state of consciousness.”\(^\text{175}\) Later research corroborates these findings.

Inspired by the Newberg undertaking, neuroscientists Mario Beauregard and Vincent Paquette later conducted similar experiments with a group of fifteen Carmelite nuns.\(^\text{176}\) Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) techniques (which lend greater image clarity), the team examined the contemplatives as they *recalled and relived* an intense “mystical” event. While the nuns were not actively praying during the imaging, the results nevertheless echoed


\(^{175}\) Newberg and Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain*, 49.

Newberg’s work. Most prominent in the researchers’ observations were the activations of those areas associated with feelings of “joy and unconditional love,” and the modifications to the orientation centers that would leave the “impression that something greater than the subjects had seemed to absorb them.” Both the Newberg and the Beauregard/Paquette studies provide evidence that there are in fact neural correlates to contemplative prayer, a firm association between mind and brain.

We should pause to note that analyzing a contemplative’s prayer life from a neurophysiological point of view does not diminish his or her notion of mystical experience, whether they be a medieval ascetic, or a contemporary group of religious. We cannot be certain what happens to those who pray during these moments of divine encounter. We can, however, be confident that when the Spirit speaks, we have a finite means of receiving that message, and that perception begins with the faculties with which we are created—namely our neurophysiological systems. Likewise, we know that with repeated encounters of this sort, structural changes do occur. Just as an athlete conditions her body to the point of “muscle memory,” so does the brain reshape itself in the case of repeated contemplative stimulus.

*Prayer conditioning: neuroplasticity*

Clinical psychologist Charlotte Tomaino says that “the brain is simply an organ that repeats what it knows.”177 As a therapist who assists her patients in recovering from traumatic brain injuries, she is a firm believer in the power of the brain to reorganize itself structurally with the intent of reinforcing that repetition. This process is termed *neuroplasticity*, the “ability of neurons to forge

new connections, to blaze new paths…even to assume new roles.” 178 In the early stages of this science, researchers paid strong attention to sensory inputs as the source of these changes, first the amount of sensory data, then later the quality of that input. But as the science has matured, studies have shown that not only external stimuli can effect change, but so too can internal processes, i.e. thoughts. 179

Prayer always begins as a mental activity. As we have explored, contemplation is especially a cerebral exercise, with focusing and mindfulness techniques consuming significant mental energy. Since these practices are repetitive in nature and continuously “exercise” the same parts of the brain during contemplative experience, we would presume that those impacted neural networks are likely to strengthen or reorganize over time. Additionally, given these presumed changes, a “new normal” should arise. Data from numerous studies buttress these ideas.

Referencing the Newberg example, they assert that the neurological changes they observed in their subjects “were significant and very different from how the human brain normally functions.” They attribute these changes to the duration of prayer, both temporally and longitudinally. While intermittent practice may not result in much variation, “forty minutes of daily practice, over a period of years, will bring permanent changes to the brain.” 180 Engaging the various structures of the brain through prayer over time alters their makeup.

More recent studies on contemplation and the brain focus on its so-called default mode network (DMN). This DMN consists of regions within the frontal and parietal lobes, as well as

179 Ibid., 225-36.
the association areas near the back of the brain, and they are most active when we are not engaged in intentional thought. The DMN is involved in several mental functions, but the most notable for our purposes are the acts of “mind wandering,” introspection, and the overall assessment of “self.” 181 Excessive mind wandering indicates a tendency to be frequently off-task, while incessant self-examination usually results in a negative assessment or self-image. 182 The common findings of the researchers is that those who engage in contemplative practices show significant changes in their brain anatomy as it relates to internal attention, emotional stability, and sensory reception. And in keeping with our assumptions based on the characteristics of neuroplasticity, prolonged contemplation seems to create a “new normal,” one in which the resting state of the DMN is far more “present-centered,” even when not engaged in active contemplation. 183 All these indicators translate as this: Contemplatives tend to be on-task, are less susceptible to criticism, and have a controlled sense of self-awareness—the contemplative brain rewires itself to a dispassionate state. Some researchers have picked up on these observations and promote contemplation as a means of change. Creativity specialist Shelley Carson provides two valuable examples.

Carson identifies seven “brainsets” or neural functions that apply to the creative process, and she promotes several means of activating them in her book *Your Creative Brain*. Two of these have particular application to our conversation. The *absorb* brainset represents the brain in

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its receptive mode, “open to information generated in the external environment (the world) as well as from the internal environment (the mind).”\textsuperscript{184} Here, the brain’s filtering mechanisms are relaxed, and information is free to pass from the association centers into conscious awareness. This mode is akin to the contemplative’s goal of detachment in that judgments are put to the side, and thoughts are free to come and go without over analysis. It is a critical condition that enables novel observations and opens the gateways to relevant connections.\textsuperscript{185}

Carson recommends accessing this state via a passive discipline termed “openness meditation” (OM). OM methodology includes an abiding consciousness of the breath. There is an awareness of thoughts, but the contemplative makes no effort to evaluate or otherwise to attach to them. The sole intent is the rhythmic breath in a sense of “being.”\textsuperscript{186} Christian contemplatives recognize this practice as a variation on the Centering Prayer, with occasional attention to the breath substituted for Centering’s mental “prayer word.”

A second idea of interest here is her \textit{envision} brainset. This activation state facilitates imagination, a gift that allows us to see things beyond the boundaries of superficiality. Pragmatically, the envision brainset also “provides the neural basis” for how we construct a “coherent worldview and a sense of identity.”\textsuperscript{187} Envision is achieved through the practice of mental imagery. In this mode, the association areas of the brain typically involved with processing outside stimuli are engaged, yet their action is generated from “quasi perceptual” means, namely visualization. When we visualize, we deactivate the executive functions of the prefrontal cortex, but we activate the neurons that are responsible for sensory detection and

\textsuperscript{184} Carson, \textit{Creative}, 76.  
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 105.  
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 96-7.  
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 106.
interpretation, thereby training those parts of the brain and strengthening their ability to “see” (or hear, smell, feel, or taste) on demand.188

One of the exercises that Carson promotes to enhance the ability to generate “multi-modal” mental imagery is called “mental holiday.” The practitioner imagines a space of familiar relaxation (like a beach or other locale), then takes a virtual tour of that space. Carson invites the “dreamer” to engage all the senses on the trip, including sights, sounds, sensations, and smells. Continuous practice results in “vivid” imagery, and simultaneously reduces verbal thought.189 For the contemplative, these steps map directly to those of “imaginative prayer” sourced from Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*. In the “Fifth Contemplation” of the second week, the text directs the one who prays to bring “the five senses” to bear during the contemplation of Jesus’ life in the Gospels. The practice prescribes complete sensual engagement in the stories, with visualization being key to entering the sacred mystery of Scripture. By imagining these scenes and experiencing them mentally, the contemplative is immersed in the worldview of Christ, identifying with him (or others) in the passages.190

In his essay framing the epistemological influences of Symeon the New Theologian’s ideas and practices, Abraham highlights the fact that spiritual disciplines are “essential to cognitive transformation,” itself the root of behavioral change.191 We have seen so far that contemplation facilitates not only activation of the areas of the brain that relate to building positive perceptions, but in fact contemplatives actively reorganize their neural circuitry in a way that reinforces those process for later functioning. And once reorganized, the resulting perceptions that arise from this spiritual practice take on a semi-permanence, subject only to

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189 Ibid., 117-18.
190 Ignatius Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*.
191 Abraham, “Symeon the New Theologian.”
future changes that may emerge. This permanence in turn manifests itself via Abraham’s “cognitive transformation.”

**Contemplation and Psychological Phenomena**

As discussed, the mind’s activity—thoughts—can influence the neural reorganization of the brain. More intuitively, we also understand that changes to the underlying infrastructure of the brain manifest themselves in our thoughts (and thereby behaviors). It is a symbiotic “chicken and egg” type conundrum that somewhat defies examination. Nevertheless, the relationship is real, and so there is a logical implication that contemplation has the power to affect our mentation, either indirectly or otherwise. Those influences show up in many ways related to perception, but the results are pronounced as they relate to presence, self-perception, and the adoption of a new worldview.

*An sense of presence: contemplation and flow*

In our earlier discussion of the brain’s default mode, we recognized from research on mindfulness that contemplatives tend towards a greater sense of presence in their daily disposition. This state of being “in the moment” is characterized by a mind that disregards distractions and remains singularly focused yet is simultaneously open to possibility. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi terms this state of mind “flow.” He notes in his book of the same name that flow is the sense of “consciousness [being] harmoniously ordered,” where the sage-like pursuit of a given task is completely unitary and wholly enjoyable. Centuries ago, as the 19th century progresses, and the 20th century unfolds.

relevant to presence, we briefly highlight five for their direct correlation to contemplation. First, action and awareness are seemingly combined. The author calls this “one-pointedness of mind,” and it is facilitated by mindfulness contemplation that allows the practitioner to hone their attention. Second, distractions are excluded from consciousness. The previous studies we discussed noted that the contemplative builds the ability to block out the “noise” of external and internal disturbances, marking them as irrelevant to the moment. Third, there is no concern of “failure.” Success and failure are judgmental land mines that the contemplative mind is wired to avoid. Fourth, the sense of self-consciousness is absent. The ability to withhold judgment begins with the self; caring about external opinions is subdued through the contemplative’s developed apatheia. Lastly, the person in a state of flow loses the sense of chronological time. Symptomatic of deafferation, the contemplative’s notion of spatial time dissolves, leaving only a raw sense of the now. Speaking of the mind of presence and its perceptibility, psychologists Allan Combs and Stanley Krippner describe it as one that “exhibits an open and translucent quality through which reality is experienced in a clear and less conditioned way,” possibly “on the path to the nondual and unconditioned consciousness described in many traditions” (emphasis added). The researchers grasp the potential of developing this mind, and they understand the transformational possibilities of its attainment. And the psychologists’ suggestion as to the “most effective way”

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of moving towards this mind? The practice of “some form of regular meditation or contemplation.” Contemplative prayer is essential for the proper development of presence.

**Contemplation and self-perception**

Contemplation is also staple in developing a clear perspective of self. Csikszentmihalyi notes that whatever appears in our minds comes as a result of attention, and he terms that attentional impetus as “psychic energy.” Our investment of this energy is directly correlated to our creation of “self.” If we give attention to negative aspects of our lives, the mind becomes trained to see through the filter of that negativity. On the other hand, if we apply psychic energy in ways that promote more positive processes—presence, detachment, and attention itself—the self forms in ways that are likewise reinforcing. This type of consciousness experiences the “mundane” as special, and it merges the temporal with the sacred. “Self,” then, takes on new meaning, both differentiated in its enhanced ability to “be,” yet simultaneously integrated into the greater whole as one who understands how he or she is woven into the fabric of society and creation. This increased complexity hearkens to psychological growth.

In an essay from 2003, Combs and Krippner discuss the idea that, as our sense of self within reality expands, so too does our identity with the community at large. In their words, “wholeness brings clarity,” and it causes us to expand outward from ourselves towards the “object” of our perception. In the case of the contemplative, this “object” lies wholly outside the self-seeking intentions of self-gratification or personal gain. The late psychologist Abraham

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196 Cf. This argument is aligned with Maslow’s notions of the “B-realm” (transcendent) meshing with the “D-realm” (profane). Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*, 79.

Maslow calls this experience “ego-transcending, self-forgetful, egoless, [and] unselfish.” In this positive movement, the mind assembles its inputs in ways that reinforce its own ideas of wholeness and purpose, consistent in its thoughts and equally constant in the resulting behaviors. As in a continuous state of flow, the contemplative seeks the overall goals of internal and external integrity with a singular mind, with distractions and perceptions that oppose this end gaining no foothold in the consciousness. What emerges is a consciousness that, in the spiritual language of Bourgeault, attempts to “eradicate the ground of sin,” because it “completely expose[s] that small-self ‘I’ who always has some stake in the matter, some vested self-interest.” And once again, psychologists point to the spiritually based practices of contemplation as the mechanism of choice to reframe this self-perception.

Recalling Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “psychic energy,” he posits that mastering that energy—enabling ourselves to direct our attention toward self-growth—requires a means of harnessing it for proper use. His preferred methods are the spiritual techniques of contemplation, and he specifically cites the rigors of Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* as favorable to controlling the attention. Combs and Krippner second his choice for contemplative prayer, providing an eloquent metaphor of how contemplation polishes the mind for a clear sense of self to shine forth. They write that “practices such as meditation have a slow but continuously abrasive effect on mental agitations, gradually leading to a cleansing of the mental grit that impedes the smooth flow of consciousness.”

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The mind precedes the self in that it contains all the raw materials from which the self constructs its reality.\textsuperscript{202} In other words, as the mind goes, so goes the sense of self. By influencing the raw materials themselves, contemplative activity hones the powers of attention; simultaneously, this heightened presence reframes self-perception through a conscious outward movement from the ego-centric “I” to the unified “we.” The self that emerges as a result has a new sense of priority and purpose, untainted by stimuli that would distract from its cause. And as the perception of self expands, so too does its understanding of the world.

\textit{Contemplation and a transformed view of the world}

The final psychological phenomenon we examine is the contemplative’s adoption of a new worldview. When the mind interprets its inputs in an entirely new way, perceptions shift. Experiences have new and/or evolved meanings, and our responses adapt accordingly—we begin to “see” differently. Creativity is related to this type of perception, and our worldview is reflected in its expression.

Author and Episcopal priest Matthew Fox boldly proclaims that “\textit{our true nature is our creativity}.”\textsuperscript{203} We are made to ascend beyond the concrete to the farthest reaches of possibility, to attend to our fullest potential. To envision this future requires broad perception, a seeing that begins with imagination. Fox sets the goal of imagination as “liberation itself,” the key to unlocking the bounded world of an enclosed existence.\textsuperscript{204} As research demonstrates,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{202} Newberg et al., \textit{Why God Won’t Go Away}, 150.
\item \textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 64. Thomas Merton echoes this sentiment. He notes that the “important thing in contemplation is not gratification and rest, but awareness, life, creativity, and freedom. In fact, contemplation is man’s highest and most essential spiritual activity” (emphasis added). Thomas Merton, \textit{The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation} (New York: HarperOne, 2003), 34.
\end{itemize}
contemplative approaches to prayer have a direct correlation with generating divergent or “out-of-the-box” ideas.

Ideation as a function of creativity is a key indicator of imaginative output. Standard divergent thought tests administered to experienced active and passive contemplatives reveal that the total number of responses (fluency) and the number of different categories for those responses (flexibility) are statistically higher than the norm.\(^{205}\) Passive contemplation’s activation of our “open-mindedness” may be at the root of this method’s results, while the tendency for active meditation to “uplift” our mood is the driver for that style’s efficacy.\(^{206}\) Taken together, the results of these studies reinforce the claim that contemplative prayer enhances our ability to be imaginatively creative, a key component of seeing the world in a novel way. Other aspects of creativity also signal a changed outlook.

Completing the statement “When I’m creative I am…,” psychologist Ruth Richards compiles a list of twelve possible psychological “benefits” of living a creative life.\(^{207}\) Each of these aspects has an obvious connection to the contemplative outcome of changed perception, so we visit them briefly here. The person living creatively is: 1) dynamic—seeing change and understanding they are part of an evolving system; 2) conscious—actively aware of and attentive to internal and external stimuli; 3) healthy—living a life in physical and psychological (and spiritual) balance; 4) non-defensive—limiting forces that could lead to inner negativity; 5)


\(^{206}\) Colzato et al.

open—operating within a high state of detachment, therefore welcoming thoughts and experiences without judgment; 6) integrating—functioning across multiple domains of consciousness and perspective, moving from complexity to simplicity; 7) observing—constantly in dialogue with the environment, actively or passively; 8) caring—living a life of love and compassion, with awareness of a larger unity; 9) collaborative—acting as cocreators with others; 10) androgynous—bridging false dichotomies despite social stereotypes; 11) developing—constantly emerging and evolving; and 12) brave—welcoming the unknown in trust of life’s processes. All these traits are transformative in nature, and as we have seen in previous paragraphs, each can be directly linked to contemplative prayer practice. As Richards appropriately summarizes, through realization of these benefits, contemplatives “might even come to see self and life in whole new way.”

Conclusion

Schwartz and Begley profoundly inform their readers that “[c]onsciousness is more than perceiving and knowing; it is knowing that you know.” This enigmatic statement captures the paradoxical relationship between the brain and the mind. One—the brain—obviously provides the core “stuff” through which the other—the mind—finds fulfillment. Nevertheless, we have seen that the latter can influence the very neural circuitry of the first through pure “will.” Meanwhile, perception sits as a product of both purely organic reception of inputs and the mental interpretation of those same stimuli. And since contemplative prayer serves as an effective agent

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208 Ibid., 290.
of change for both the physiological and psychological domains, it plays a unique role in its ability to change human experience.

While not receiving an overwhelmingly welcome response in the scientific community, associating the spiritual disciplines with the neuropsychological world has steadily gained traction since the 1990s. Specifically considering contemplative practices, the body of research continues to grow. As a vocal champion of this cause, Newberg forges ahead in this area. In one of his earlier works, *Why God Won’t Go Away*, he makes a provocative statement:

Mystical reality holds, and neurology does not contradict it, that beneath the mind’s perception of thoughts, memories, emotions, and objects, beneath the subjective awareness we think of as the self, there is a deeper self, a state of pure awareness that sees beyond the limits of subject and object, and rests in a universe where all things are one.\(^{211}\)

Traditional scientific inquiry tends to shy away from exploring such ostensibly non-empirical ideas. However, there are some who step up the challenge. Newberg’s most recent work is titled *Neurotheology*, and as the name suggests, he blends the topics of neurology, psychology, and theology in ways that respectfully yet critically approach all three disciplines.\(^{212}\) His conclusions and those of others certainly seem to overlap with many contemporary Christian theologians who examine the faith with post-modern eyes and hearts. As we move to the fifth chapter of this work, it is upon their insights and revolutionary interpretations of the Gospel message that we build as we attempt to synthesize the biblical, historical, and neuropsychological acumen gained thus far on our travels.

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\(^{211}\) Newberg et al., *Why God Won’t Go Away*, 155.

Chapter 5 The Mind of Christ: Death, Resurrection, and Atonement

One of the participants in the 90-day study struggled with the process early on. The pastor had asked the group to read Psalm 23 as the second of four steps of their daily regimen, and it seems the repetition of the psalm somehow set off deep-seated resentments for this pray-er. Those feelings surfaced with a good amount of intensity and regularity, but nevertheless, he persevered.

Several weeks into the practice, the participant realized a breakthrough. When the angry emotions began to rise as they were wont to do, he started noticing them early on. Engaging them systematically, he questioned the rationality of his previous responses, rooting out the weeds of entanglement that were littering his experience of the contemplation and himself. Little by little the tensions eased, until, near the end of the three months, the psalm’s antagonistic quality had dissolved. He had overcome his emotions, and the resulting clarity revealed an underlying joy that proved refreshingly welcome.

In John’s Gospel, Thomas responds to a presumed literal statement from Jesus with an equally one-dimensional question, “How can we know the way?” Jesus replies, however, with a multifaceted truth that is cosmic in its application: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (14.5-6). The word translated as “way” is ὀδός (hodos) and, as Thomas presumes, it denotes a path or road by which a traveler may reach a destination. However, Jesus’ figurative usage here does not presume a destination, but a destiny—life with God. Jesus pronounces that the life he embodies—his “way”—is nothing less than “an expression of the faithful person’s unity with God.”

Two medieval “Franciscans” understood this relationship to God through Christ. Clare of Assisi was a protégé of Francis himself (thus not a literal Franciscan), and she was a church innovator in her own right. Bonaventure was a thirteenth century Franciscan monk, eventually named a Doctor of the Church for his theological brilliance. Bonaventure knew Christ as the true revelation of the Father, and he posited that we tend toward that ideal as creatures formed in God’s likeness. Therefore, the human person is an image of the Image of God—Jesus

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the Christ. Clare, meanwhile, also knew humanity as being created *ad imaginem*, or “to the image,” of Christ. For her, “image” translated to both “a structure and a goal,” simultaneously something to emulate and something to become. Clare is known for her metaphor of the crucified Christ as a mirror, reflecting the image of “what we are to be in our lives.” Combining these similar thoughts, we conclude that God through Christ not only reveals how we are to be human (“the truth”), but also patterns how that life is lived eternally in God (“the life”). Both begin with repentance.

At the outset of his public ministry, Jesus proclaims, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt 4.17; cf. Mk 1.5; Lk 13.3-5). The term *μετανοεῖτε* (*metanoeite*, “repent”) is a verb that literally means “to change one’s mind” or “think differently after.” Jesus’ declaration implies no bit of casual thinking, but a complete rearrangement of perception and outlook, a process with life-changing outcomes. This type of change involves death to the old ways and the experience of new life ahead (cf. Eph 4.22-24). Jesus models this self-sacrifice via the passion of the cross, and then provides a portal through which we see life on the other side.

In this chapter, we draw on the prior discussions of this work to form a theological synthesis. We will examine how the practice of contemplative prayer can lead to a transformation modeled by Christ. It begins with death—death to the world’s alternatives, and ultimately to the “self” we once knew. Through this agonizing process—and the work of the Spirit—we potentially make a breakthrough; on the other side we “awaken” to a new world, a world in which our perceptions have changed. We begin to see life as Christ sees, with eyes of compassion that result from unified perception, as we have in a sense been resurrected.

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Understanding this renewing action of death and resurrection through contemplation, we then take a fresh look at Jesus’ work of *atonement* through this newly ground lens.

**Life on the Cross: Dying to the World and to “Self”**

In the three synoptic Gospels, Jesus remains silent to the powers of the world. He is questioned; he is beaten; he is hauled away and subjected to a death reserved for the most despicable members of society. Yet despite these seemingly dire consequences, his response to the “authorities” is restricted to three words: “You say so” (Mt 27.11; cf. Mk 15.2; Lk 23.3). John’s account is the only place we see any sustained exchange between Christ and the Roman establishment, and these too are telling. In the face of Pilate’s questioning, Jesus affirms twice that his “kingdom is not from this world” (Jn 18.36). And as Pilate argues his own legitimacy, Jesus trumps his claims: “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above” (Jn 19.11a). It is clear from these Gospel accounts that the faithful are not to engage the so-called “world”—social constructs of purely human origin—without proper perspective.

Emulating Christ on the cross, the same applies to our notion of “self.”

In his meditations on the “seven last words of Christ,” theologian Stanley Hauerwas reveals how Jesus’ action on the cross represents a complete and total death to self. He redirects the potentially narcissistic interpretation of this divine work away from ourselves, and he refocuses it on the primary actor in this cosmic drama—God. Hauerwas’ take on three of these meditations are particularly of interest here. In the fourth “word,” he understands Jesus’ cry of dereliction (Mt 27.46) not as some strange separation of the Godhead, but an “outworking of the mystery called Trinity.” It is the image of a God who demonstrates an abandonment of self
through perfect love.\textsuperscript{216} In the sixth meditation on “It is finished” (Jn 19.30), Hauerwas sees not simply a statement of the obvious (Jesus’ death), but a consummation of creation. It is a victorious exclamation, one that signifies the end of “our vain attempts to be our own creators,” and one that evokes peace because “God has given us a way to live without answers.”\textsuperscript{217} Lastly, the seventh passage or “word” presumes a silent, terrorizing moment of the unknown. Jesus commends his spirit to the Father and quite literally dies (Lk 23.46), thereby embodying a God who endures what Hauerwas phrases as the “dark night of death.”\textsuperscript{218} In short, the crucifixion encapsulates the idea of \textit{kenosis}—an emptying, a claiming of true identity and purpose, and an inevitable passage through the shadows of death.

Jesus set the condition of discipleship as the need for self-denial through the cross (Mt 16.24). As we have seen, that journey implies a transition—a death—on our view of the world and of our “selves.” The function of contemplative prayer as a tool of this conversion becomes apparent in the ensuing paragraphs.

\textit{Death to the world: apatheia}

The world provides a plethora of distractions. Ad agencies bombard us with scientifically crafted messaging that plays to our wants. Politicians prey upon our basest emotions, broadcasting divisive slogans and promoting tactics that enhance those fears and anxieties. Electronic media shrink the global domain, allowing for immediate gratification and distorting the notion of “friend.”\textsuperscript{219} As we have seen, the mind through the organic functioning of the brain is how we

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{216} Stanley Hauerwas, \textit{Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words} (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 59-66.  
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid., 83-90.  
\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., 95-102.  
\textsuperscript{219} A 2013 study from the University of Southern California’s Marshall School of Business estimated that people in the US would consume approximately 15.5 hours of media per person per day by the year 2015. Given a linear rate of growth calculated from the study’s projections (which would be quite a conservative estimate given the ubiquity}
receive these inputs, and our perceptions are shaped accordingly. Elia Delio captures the problem
and tone of our post-modern world:

> The problems of our age—war, conflict, racial and religious injustice, economic greed, power, corruption, control and manipulation, lying and deceit—are human problems. *We have literally lost our minds*. We have untethered the human mind from any higher levels of consciousness, allowing our mind to wander aimlessly amid fields of uncensored information, burdening the mind with emotional and psychological baggage, copious amounts of junk information, and dousing the mind with alcohol and drugs periodically. We have the equivalent of a fast-food problem with regard to the mind or, I would say, ‘junk-food minds’” (emphasis added).220

As these “junk-food” inputs increasingly compete for our attention, the messaging of the Gospel becomes diluted, and in some cases, pushed aside altogether. When this occurs, we develop into what the late mystic Thomas Merton termed “exterior” people. The “exterior” person “tends to look at things from the economic or technical or hedonistic viewpoint which, in spite of all its pragmatic advantages, certainly removes the seer from direct contact with the reality which [she or] he sees.”221 This mind develops over time, with emotions, past experiences, and new (misleading?) data helping shape misperception. What is lacking is a means of filtering these inputs that serve as causal agents.

According to the late contemplative Bernadette Roberts, *apatheia* has been defined in a wide range of ways. Some mean it to be synonymous with “dispassionate,” the person free from overwhelming or lopsided emotions and functioning in a sage-like manner in their daily choices and actions. Others take it even further, equating *apatheia* with the reactionless state of “impassibility.” Persons in this condition are completely immovable, unphased by life as it

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220 Delio,* Making All Things New*, 159.
happens around them. Whatever the connotation, *apatheia* at its core represents a condition in which we are no longer easily distracted by what the world tosses our way. As for Christ, God takes center stage, and the awareness of that presence stills all external stimuli. Our mystic from chapter 3 expresses this death to the world in compelling tenth century language.

Symeon the New Theologian understood the contemplative’s posture towards the world’s values to be one of distance. His disdain was not for things or the well-placed per se, but it was people’s *interpretations* of these objects and institutions that he believed many had elevated to idolatrous heights. In his *Precepts*, he attempts to illustrate just such confusion:

Those who with the help of the Holy Spirit have been vouchsafed [in] union with God and have tasted of His ineffable blessings, no longer delight in empty—I would even say dishonorable and worthless—glory had from men. Neither do they wish for money, costly garments, or precious stones, as the foolish call them: they do not love to be attached or to cleave with the hearts to transitory and inconstant riches, passing from one man to another; they do not love to be known to kings and potentates who are not true princes, lords and rulers, since they are possessed and ruled by many passions. Such men do not regard them as high and mighty and do not think that they bestow any special glory on their familiars. Neither do they aspire to be close to any other famous or renowned men of the world, since no man cares to exchange riches for poverty or to become dishonoured, bereft of glory, despicable and lowest of all, instead of being a great and powerful lord covered in glory.

Symeon considered the ideals of the world to be misplaced. Just as Christ metaphorically located those whose priorities were off among the “dead” (Mt 8.22; Lk 9.60), so too did Symeon draw a stark line for the perceptions of the faithful: “For the saints, the world and people in it are dead.”

The mindfulness of Christ through contemplation was what Symeon prescribed to his monastic charges to achieve this detachment:

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223 *Philokalia*, 140-1.
224 Ibid., 138.
…if a monk has truly withdrawn from the world and its affairs and has come to Christ, if he is fully conscious of his calling and has been raised to the heights of spiritual contemplation…then he will look unwaveringly on God and be well aware of the change that has taken place in him. He will see the grace of the Spirit always illuminating him—the grace that is called a garment, the royal purple or, rather, that is Christ Himself, if it is indeed true that those who believe in Christ are clothed in Christ (cf. Gal. 3:27).225

Through experience Symeon understood that constant meditations on God in Christ change the disposition of the heart and mind. Attention to this reality, rather than the concerns of the “world,” attunes awareness in a singular fashion. This practice is akin to mindfulness, and as we discovered in the previous chapter, this entrainment weans the mind off external stimuli and allows deeper focus on the task at hand.

*Time* magazine published a special edition in the summer of 2017 appropriately named *Mindfulness: The New Science of Health and Happiness*. The volume features various entries that speak to presence and its impact on our daily lives.226 One such article notes the effects of contemplation on detachment. Quoting a researcher from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the author notes that consistent, intentional practice of mindfulness can help improve our ability “to accept things without strongly attaching to them.” Additionally, the value of this type of *apatheia* is that, while the emotions that arise from the world’s inputs may still come, our response to these passions is short-lived: “There’s no lingering, no stickiness.”227 The old feelings that consume our lives are compartmentalized, cached in their rightful place of non-influential noise. Contemplation nullifies their effects, thereby allowing us to form different perceptions that align with the faith. Contemplative prayer is a conscious act of dying to the world.

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225 Philokalia, 110.
Jesus refused to hear the noise of society. It challenged him with the enticing definitions of life, power, and authority (Lk 4.1-13; cf. Mt 4.1-11), but understanding the true source of all these, he was dead to that false reality of the “world.” On the cross, he died to self too.

Death to the self: kenosis

With life on the cross, death is inevitable. It is the ultimate end to what has come before, and the gate through which we cross into the mystery of what lies ahead. It marks a transition from one reality to another, and for Jesus there was no exception. Yet there was an aspect of his act that was peculiar: his assumption of the cross was voluntary, a “death freely accepted.” He loosed his claim to divinity and offered up his embodied humanity as a means of cosmic reconciliation, simultaneously obliterating logical notions of Messiah-ship and the mortal tendency for self-preservation. He died with intent through an act of kenosis. Hauerwas’ model helps us understand Christ’s archetypical release as relived through contemplative practice.

Kenosis is about emptying. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul recounts in poetic form Christ’s progression from his ineffable glory in heaven to his unseemly death on a Roman cross (2.6-8). Translators render ἐκένωσεν (ekenōsen) in 2.7 as “emptied himself,” and so we equate “kenosis” with Christ’s outpouring of himself in this Godly act. Hauerwas describes this kenotic movement not as God becoming something outside of God’s self, but as a revelation of the very nature of the Godhead, a “complete self-emptying made possible by perfect love.” In this gesture we see the divine perfection of “self-giving,” emblematic of the pure love from within which it originates.228 Christ’s followers are called to emulate this same undertaking of love.

228 Hauerwas, Cross-Shattered Christ, 63. Bourgeault also speaks to this action as a movement of perichoresis—an outpouring of love typical of the Trinitarian nature of God. Cynthia Bourgeault, The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—A New Perspective on Christ and His Message (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2008), 71ff.
Thurston and Ryan note that “it is only through chosen acts of self-emptying…that we are brought into the sphere of Jesus, his life and his power.” As Paul profoundly knew, the Christian life includes the life of the cross, and so replication of Christ’s kenosis is essential to our spiritual formation. Contemplative prayer is a practice that facilitates this self-surrender. In her book *The Wisdom Jesus*, Bourgeault speaks to the discipline of Centering Prayer as “kenosis in meditation form.” Because the aim of this open-mindedness practice is simply release—of thoughts, of emotions, of self—it replicates Christ’s ministry of the same. However, the kenotic effect of contemplative prayer is not limited to any particular practice. As we have seen in the previous chapter, *all* contemplation that has Christ as its ultimate focal point tends to change the perceptive apparatus of the mind, albeit in differing ways. The “self” prior to contemplative practice no longer exists—it dies—because that self has been opened up and poured out through prayer. As a result, the experiences that formed the ego and its associated awareness are released, and what remains is the “true” or “God-conscious self.”

Self-abandonment is undoubtedly disorienting, and Jesus’ echo of Psalm 22.1, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” adequately express that lament. The tone and intimacy of this fourth word from the cross speak to a soul that is distressed and unsettled. Yet within this psalm and others of its type, there is also promise on the horizon. That potential includes a new framework of identity and purpose. But before these can be realized, the old must be discarded.

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229 Thurston and Ryan, *Philippians and Philemon*, 91.
231 Bernadette Roberts, *What is Self?* 68. We should note that what remains is *not* what Parker Palmer terms an “empty self,” one that consists of a void that allows for “competitive success, consumerism, sexism, racism, or anything that might give…the illusion of being better than others.” Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward and Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 38.
Kenosis also means reestablishing identity and purpose. When Jesus utters his sixth word “It is finished” (Jn 19.30), he signifies completion. It is the end of his ministry. It is the end of his battle with the world. And it is the end of his life. But the work of the cross also indicates the triumphant end of our misperceptions. Athanasius of Alexandria wrote in the fourth century that God “assumed humanity that we might become God. He manifested Himself by means of a body in order that we might perceive the Mind of the unseen Father. He endured shame from men that we might inherit immortality.” Through death on the cross, Christ reveals the identity of God as love, and he discloses the true purpose of the Messiah—humanity’s access to reconciliation. “It is finished” marks the end of being something or someone we were never intended to be. It is the end of the delusional life, knowing ourselves as the product of others’ opinions. It ceases seeing through the clouds of fear and reaction, instead offering a portal of clarity through which we understand life as God intended. “It is finished” allows for unifying change.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18.3). Our understanding of human development sheds valuable light on this rather enigmatic statement. Researchers theorize that little children have a very different sense of “self” relative to adults. In fact, they posit that prior to four months of age, infants see few distinctions between themselves and their primary care giver. Jesus counsels his followers to reconnect with their “inner child,” nullifying the divisive identities they have assumed and awakening to the reality of relational

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existence with God, their “primary care giver.” Contemplation of life on the cross shows the way.

Scholar Beatrice Bruteau understands that even the prayer we attempt is based on how we identify ourselves, an idea that colors our image of God too. For Bruteau, then, the work of prayer becomes a discipline of establishing the proper relational identity.235 The essence of that work is erasing the old self or selves to make room for the new:

[As] it “loses” each of these “selves,” the praying consciousness “finds itself” more and more at liberty. The more you take off bondage, the freer you become; the more you lose restrictions, the vaster you become. The more you empty yourself of predicates, the more you become full of Being. When you are perfectly empty of all predicates…then you are intensely full of pure “I am.”236

Contemplative prayer provides a method through which this relationality with God is realized. At the center of all Christian contemplation dwells Christ, and we gravitate towards his kenotic identity as we engage in moments of rewiring the mind through intentional active or passive prayer. “It is finished” ends the futility of basing identity and purpose in anything outside of this truth. We identify with Christ, and we assume our natural roles of co-creators with the divine.237

Using Clare of Assisi’s mirror imagery, Delio puts a fine point on the discussion: “To find oneself in the mirror of the cross is to see the world not from the foot of the cross but from the cross itself. How we see is how we love, and what we love is what we become.”238 But this love remains predicated on death.


236 Ibid., 98-9.

237 Theologian N. T. Wright notes that through Christ’s work we become “colleagues and partners” in the renewal of creation—“God’s ultimate purpose.” N. T. Wright, Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 192.

238 Delio, Making All Things New, 83.
Kenosis is the demise of the old self. The final portion we use from Hauerwas’ template is Jesus’ seventh word, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk 23.46). While this familiar statement hearkens to images of solace and well-being, we should also understand it as one that portends an eerie voyage into the darkness. We remember that these words announce the onset of Good Friday, when we leave a sanctuary whose sole accoutrements are shrouds of black, and our only hint of humanity is a lone crown of thorns that adorns an altar or a cross. These words herald a period of silence and mystery.

The sixteenth century mystic John of the Cross penned a now famous poem titled “Dark Night,” a graceful recount of the Carmelite’s experience of contemplation. John also authored an extensive commentary on the poetry, opening windows to both his revelation and the theological positions he espoused. The title of this work has become iconic, symbolizing the struggles of the soul related to perceived deprivation of the intellect, memory, and will along the spiritual journey. This “dark night of the soul” is emblematic of the self’s demise.

The “darkness” of Good Friday is one through which all Christians must pass. Ours is not simply a journey up to the cross, content to sit and mourn an elevated Jesus whose work we appreciate but whose life we dare not mimic. That same Christ calls the faithful to lose their lives for his sake (Mt 16.25), and that edict necessitates climbing upon the rugged tree, splinters, nails, and all. But as we have seen, that is love’s vantage point, and so we “let go and enter into the storm.” We intentionally release our will to God, trusting the divine to navigate the unknown.

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240 Ilia Delio, The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution, and the Power of Love (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), loc 1983, Kindle. Bourgeault says of this “storm” that the “practice of meditational prayer loosens repressed material in the unconscious, the initial fruits of spiritual practice may not be the expected peace and enlightenment, but destabilization and the emergence into consciousness of considerable pain.” Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, 97.
Symeon understood this type of faithfulness, and he describes its outcome from his own perspective:

[Whoever] kills his will by effort, with attention and zeal specially directed towards this end, and becomes devoid of will, has obviously transcended his nature and is outside it. Such a man no longer himself wishes anything, since he has no wishes of his own, and does nothing of himself.⁴⁴¹

Death of this manner is apatheia as it relates to self, severing all ties to things not related to the attitude of Christ like ambitiousness, conceit, or self-interest (Phil 2.3-4).⁴² These traits are the treasured possessions of the ego-consciousness, that sense of self that develops over time. But when the ego is eradicated, there is no longer a means of relative experience—including that of God. Roberts describes how the spiritual rug gets snatched from beneath us:

When [the ego-self falls away] we do indeed feel bereft of the divine and the self, but only the self and divine we knew to this point in the journey….Thus the falling away of the ego and its immature level of knowing the divine has forced us to go deeper; from experiencing the divine on our own ground (the ego), we must now experience the divine on its own Ground, a Ground where our being or existence takes its life from the divine….Initially the interior nothingness, darkness and emptiness that takes the place of the self-center (ego) seems to be nothing but nothing. As it turns out, however, this is the divine, but the divine never before experienced or seen by any ego-self naturally.⁴⁴³

The “dark night of the soul” experience Roberts describes is a by-product of contemplative practice. The soul that longs for God and seeks out the Spirit through contemplation interprets the death of the ego-self as the loss of God, since there is no other means by which to interpret that connection. God cannot be perceived in the standard subject/object formation, and therefore

⁴¹ Philokalia, 140.
⁴² Merton expands on Paul’s words, writing that we must radically excise “everything that is focused on our exterior and self-centered passion as self-assertion, greed, lust; as the desire for the survival and perpetuation of our illusory and superficial self, to the detriment of our interior and true self.” Merton, The Inner Experience, 41.
⁴³ Roberts, What is Self?, 62. Abhishiktananda adds due depth to Roberts’ assertion: “God cannot be an object, because by definition an object depends on a subject, who sets it before himself…so as to be able to look at it or deal with it….We cannot rightly speak of God in the third person, despite the exigencies of grammatical or linguistic convention. God comes first. I am only myself in the thou which God addresses to me. God alone is first person, in the proper sense of the term, for he is the fount of all discourse. Genuine experience of the Presence requires that God should be met as the first person, as I. Abhishiktananda, Prayer, 81.
there is no perception at all. Contemplative prayer results in the practitioner “rethinking” their perceptions, their experiences and memories having been short-circuited and then organized anew. Having no contextual background from which to draw, this reorganization is disorienting, and ultimately the one who prays must learn to “re-experience” God afresh from a subject/subject orientation. There is a waiting period, however, and the time between experiences is life within the void, the passage of the “dark night.” From the vantage of the cross, we might also call it the “Good Friday effect.”

Psalm 22 begins with a cry of desertion. From the cross of Friday to the tomb of late Saturday night, Christ wages war with the forces of disorientation and discontent. He “descends into hell” in a way only God can, plumbing the depths of desolation and despair. But then there is a turn. As with most of the lament psalms, this one too ends on a note of “deliverance” (v. 31; cf. 21b-30). In like manner, Jesus arises from his tomb on Sunday, wholly delivered from the cold, dank confines of his “dark night.” And so too does the contemplative.

Scholar Kieran Kavanaugh notes that the “point of arrival to which the night leads is the ‘new self,’ divinized in being and operation, living now a life of faith, hope, and love, fortified and pure.”244 The Good Friday effect is only temporary; the death of the self is but a rite of passage through which we emerge transformed.

**Resurrection: Christ-like Perception**

Jesus tells Nicodemus that “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (Jn 3.3). Nicodemus’ confused response reiterates what Christ already knew—an enculturated mind that has not been “rewired” to a new perception cannot possibly see that a changed mind-

244 Kavanaugh, “Introduction to The Dark Night,” 356.
set is the answer!\textsuperscript{245} It is just this type of “rebirth” that the contemplative undergoes given lasting practice and attention.

As an undisputed mystic, Symeon undoubtedly understood this transformational reality. The wisdom he imparts to his monastic audiences and the broader religious community reflects his first-hand experience with emergence in Christ. This judicious excerpt from the \textit{Philokalia} illustrates the breakthrough Symeon realized:

There is a death which precedes physical death and a resurrection of souls which precedes the resurrection of bodies—by means of deeds, experience, power and truth. For when mortal wisdom is destroyed by immortal mind and death is banished by life, then the soul, as it were risen from the dead, sees itself clearly, as one awakened from sleep, and knows the true God Who has resurrected it.\textsuperscript{246}

Clearly Symeon follows the model we present here. Through contemplation, a death of the self which “precedes physical death” and eradicates “mortal wisdom” occurs. After this experience of the cross, a “resurrection of the souls” ensues, replacing previous misperceptions with the “immortal mind” that now “sees itself clearly” in Christ, “the true God Who has resurrected it.” All of this comes as a gift of the Spirit, predicated on a life of contemplative opening to that Spirit. And this new attitude grounds new behavior.

Jesus dropped hints of “resurrection seeing” throughout his ministry via parables. In one such story, he sets the stage to teach about this vision:

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’ (Mt 25.37-40).

\textsuperscript{246} \textit{Philokalia}, 137.
To see as Christ sees has two outcomes relevant to our discussion. First, the acts he promotes in this parable—feeding the hungry, satisfying thirst, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, tending to the sick, visiting the prisoner—all represent a response to suffering and need. They are acts based in compassion. Not only is the mind awakened through contemplative work, but as we have seen, it relocates itself in the heart. Secondly, the opportunities for compassion must be recognized, so Jesus attempts to refocus his disciples’ vision: “just as you did it to one of the least of these…you did it to me.” To see someone in need is to see them as part of the Body, not unlike ourselves; thus, to show compassion necessitates the relational connections of unitive perception. Both compassion and unitive vision are derivatives of contemplative prayer.

Contemplation’s natural outcome of compassion

In her book the Unbearable Wholeness of Being, Delio speaks to two different types of suffering. The first sort comes from a place of deficiency. In this condition, we have either lost or lack something that is otherwise essential to our personhood, and our integrity is fractured as a result. The second type of suffering comes from sharing out of abundance, ex abundantia. Here, we can suffer alongside someone else, sufficient in our own selves and able to give out of love. This giving is how God suffers; and this suffering is known as compassion.247 The resurrection of the new self insists on suffering in this way.

Cast in the image of the Image, we too must love ex abundantia. Delio states elsewhere that “[to] be an image of God is to be relational, to love, to suffer with another and ultimately to lay down one’s life for a friend.”248 As is the case with the faithful in general, the post-resurrection self is not free from sin or its ill-effects. Christ himself was victimized by the

248 Delio, Clare of Assisi, loc 1111.
world’s injustice, a battered and bruised form on the cross evincing that truth, and he went on to endure the grave and the hellish mystery beyond. Yet it was all done out of compassion, an offering of infinite love poured out for all creation. Understanding the union with Christ’s offering for us, the resurrected self replicates this same movement of solidarity. Compassion becomes our “second nature,” as living ambassadors for Christ in the world (2 Co 5.20). Giving of self out of abundance is by product of the contemplative heart and mind.

Compassion is essentially about presence, a means of attending to God by attending to others. This intense awareness is nurtured through consistent contemplative prayer. Nouwen terms prayer a “discipline of compassion,” a way of practicing presence. Contemplation’s central act is attentiveness to the Spirit, the “bearer of the new mind” that opens us to recognizing the relational bonds of our common experience in God:

In the intimacy of prayer, God is revealed to us as the God who loves all members of the human family just as personally and uniquely as God loves us. Therefore, a growing intimacy with God deepens our sense of responsibility for others. It evokes in us an always increasing desire to bring the whole world with all its suffering and pains around the divine fire in our heart and to share the revitalizing heat with all who want to come.

This truth understood, we sit in a place of communion with the Living Spirit that incarnated and joined our human lot. From this location, our love for others in their mutual suffering—compassion—flowers to its fullest state, and we become agents of God’s healing and reconciliation in the world.

In Matthew’s account of the gospel, Jesus restates an old, known truth: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (22.39). The standard English interpretation of ὡς (“as”) in this statement typically assumes the adverb form, which refers to the extent or degree of the things in

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question. So, we could paraphrase Jesus to say, “You shall love your neighbor in the way or the amount that you love yourself.” However, it may be just as appropriate to assume the prepositional form of “as” in the sentence, a use that is synonymous with “so as to appear to be.” That change would force a new interpretation of Jesus’ words, his declaration reading something like, “You shall love your neighbor as if they were you.”251 This reading implies a different kind of seeing, one where “neighbor” is no longer an object upon which we operate, but instead we see one another as extensions of our subjective selves.252 In this context, there are a multitude of mirrors into which we gaze, but a single Image is reflected back from each glass. This unitive vision is essential to compassion, and its cultivation is at the heart of contemplative practice.

Contemplation and unitive perception

The creation story in Genesis speaks to a special relationship between God and humanity. We are made in the divine likeness, an image patterned after God’s own self (Gen 1.26-27). At one point we understood that likeness and its implications, and we lived that unitive reality with God, one another, and the natural world. Sometime later, however, our collective memory of our resemblance was lost. A fractured image of self set in, and division and relative identity became normative. But the truth of our origins reminds us that this sacred connectedness—both to Creator and created—nevertheless remains. The reality of our creation in unity must be reclaimed. That reclamation begins with denying the myth of separation and affirming the reconciliation in Christ. Contemplation assists with both.

“Union with God is not something that needs to be acquired but realized.”

Theologian Martin Laird offers this enticing statement as a means of debunking the myth that we are separate from the divine. While certainly true we are not of the same essence of God, we are nonetheless bound in a Creator-created relationship, eternally ensconced by the reconciling work of Christ. Allowing that truth to emerge is the work of contemplation, which dissolves the filters of misperception. It assists us in peering into the depths of our being, past the emotions and interpretations of distorted memories, and it grounds us in a quiet place that, while ineffable, is where the Spirit endurably dwells.

Paul understood this permanence. One of the boldest truths that the apostle proclaims in his letter to the Romans is that nothing separates us “from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8.39). This love is a unifying force that cannot be overcome by anything creation has to offer. In fact, God’s love is so supreme that it is our true identity. Contemplative and psychiatric expert Ellen Birx artistically articulates this mysterious truth:

Love is not a thing. You are not a thing. You are not a container that needs to be filled up with love, like a cup or a bowl or a bucket. When you see completely through the illusion of self as a fixed entity or thing, you directly experience that you are not separate from ultimate reality or God. God is love. You are not separate from God’s love. You are God’s love.

Recognizing this truth comes as a gift of the Spirit. We open ourselves to this giftedness when we work via contemplation to regain the “pre-Me-self,” that child-like mind untethered from preconceived notions of identity and selfhood, an identity clouded by pain and misperceptions accumulated over time. Freed from these bonds, we begin to see ourselves as the ambassadors of love we truly are. We participate more fully in the Trinity, itself a mutual indwelling of love that fluidly encapsulates its persons with no comprehension of beginning or end. We accept our

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253 Laird, Into the Silent Land, 10.
invitation into that flow, fulfilling the joy of divine perichoresis that was, and is, and is to come (Rev 1.8). We say “no” to separation, and we say “yes” to the reconciling work of Christ.

Paul affirms the reality of conversion when he declares that “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2.20a). He recognizes that his nature is that of Christ, made possible through God’s reconciling work in the Incarnate. Bound to the Body in this way, Paul is also linked to all others in that same connection. Merton supports this logic, saying that the Christian’s “inner self is…inseparable from Christ and hence it is in a mysterious and unique way inseparable from all the other ‘I’s’ who live in Christ, so that they all form one ‘Mystical Person,’ which is ‘Christ.’”

As we saw in chapter 2, this unity in the Living Word is the means through which we also obtain oneness with the Father (Jn 17.20-23), the formation of a loving community that weds God and creation. The gospel life demands a consciousness of this communal wholeness, the ability to imagine the limitless scope of love as it unifies the divine and the finite. It is predicated on knowing our neighbor as Christ, a holy extension of our subjective selves. It compels a relational approach to life, intent on co-creating with God and others to continue the divine work from the beginning, “[w]hen God began to create heaven and earth” (Gen 1.1, JPS). It necessitates the formation of a new identity.

When looking at the model of the Trinity, three “persons” in one, the idea of “unique” identity applies only to the whole. God is one, and therefore there exists only one identity of

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256 Merton, The Inner Experience, 22.
God—we term it “love.” Through divine adoption, we share this sacred union. Bruteau provides a thumbnail sketch of this unified landscape:

The whole question of unique “identity” at all—the identity that is “mine” or “yours”—may disappear because “my” identity is “your” identity is “Christ’s” identity, is God’s identity. There is an “I,” but it is not the “I” that had formerly been meant when “I” was said; rather, where “I” was said, one could now as well say “Christ” (cf. Gal. 2.20). And finally, God is all in all (1 Cor. 15.28).258

In this divine union, we remain “ourselves,” yet we at once recognize ourselves in the “other.” Seeing holistically in this way does not come naturally. This type of perception requires entrainment, both mind and the spirit.

Contemplation is a tool that assists in this transition. Prayerful practice allows us to intentionally strip away the foundational myths of division, while simultaneously opening us to the reality of Christ’s reconciliation. It centers us in Christ, and the mind and the spirit reorient themselves to that true north. With no other reference point, our identities unify with that single focus. The resulting perception is one that understands wholeness and relationality as the ultimate truth, a revival of self united to Christ’s on-going resurrection.

Interpreting Bonaventure, the modern mystic Richard Rohr provides fertile soil in which the seeds of our contemplative death and resurrection thesis might germinate. Per Rohr, his thirteenth century predecessor insists that God’s intentions have a circular trajectory, beginnings and endings intimately entwined:

Alpha and Omega are finally the same, and the lynchpin holding it all in unity is the “Christ Mystery,” or the essential unity of matter and spirit, humanity and divinity. The Christ Mystery is thus the template for all creation, and even more precisely the crucified Christ, who reveals the necessary cycle of loss and renewal that keeps all things moving toward ever

258 Bruteau, “Prayer and Identity,” 111. Abhishiktananda is clued into the same vision: “I never truly meet God when I think of him as object, but rather only in the depth of a purified experience of my own I, which is a participation in the unique divine I. To be absolutely true, the Thou of my prayer should be grounded in the Thou which the Son eternally addresses to the Father, in the indivisible I-Thou of the One-in-Three.” Abhishiktananda, Prayer, 81.
further life…. [This] pattern is invariably hidden or denied, and therefore must be revealed by God—which is “the cross.”²⁵⁹

Death is inevitable. But life advancing from that death is likewise expected. That is the profound evolutionary nature of the universe, and God reveals that meaning clearly and finally in the “Christ Mystery.” Contemplation plays a function in both this death and its companion of resurrection in the evolution of the human spirit.

“I am the Way:” Atonement Revisited

Before we conclude this chapter, the previous discussion begs a question: If atonement theories are concerned with the work of Christ, specifically the action of the cross, what does our interpretation of these events as presented here contribute to that conversation? Stated differently, can the death and resurrection of Christ be seriously considered as paving the way for what we might term a “self-death/identity-resurrection theory,” one that complements existing atonement concepts? A brief analysis of three of these prominent models reveals continuities between each and the liberated mind.

The Christus victor theory claims that cosmic forces of evil hold humanity captive and bar us from fulfilment in God. Christ defeats these malevolent powers through his death and resurrection, rendering them neutralized in the struggle for human freedom. The satisfaction or substitution theory holds that humanity owes God a debt because of its sinful response in Adam, a debt that only God’s sinlessness can repay. Jesus as the Word made flesh vicariously represents humanity, suffers on its behalf, and in so doing fulfills its obligation. Lastly, the moral influence

²⁵⁹ Richard Rohr, Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2014), 163. The themes here (as in Delio’s work) resonate strongly with the ideas of the twentieth century priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. As an example, see his discussions on the “Omega Point” in his work Man’s Place in Nature (Toronto: R. P. Pryne, 2015), Kindle; cf. Delio, The Unbearable Wholeness of Being, loc 1575-1620.
theory of atonement posits that nothing is more powerful than the love of God. To model that cosmic reality, God gives of God’s self in the most unconditional way possible, through Incarnation, suffering, and death; the appropriate response to this act of selflessness is awe, gratitude, and replication. The course of contemplative prayer parallels all three of these theories in informative ways.

The outcomes of contemplation result in a synthesis of sorts for the three historical theories above. As in Christus victor, the hordes of misperceptions and false identities ensnare us and bar us from true personhood in God. The contemplative wages war on these forces through the process of death to the old self, resurrecting into the new mind and clearing the way for this Godly identification. Similar to Christ’s suffering in the satisfaction theory, the contemplative “suffers” through the transition from worldliness to apatheia, dying to its affinity for wealth or status or control via kenosis and enduring the Good Friday effect. All is done in the name of discipleship, an “obligation” to pick up the cross daily and imitate Christ (Mt 16.24). Finally, the kenotic act of contemplation replicates the divine self-giving of the moral influence theory, focusing on the work of Christ, and modeling his action through self-denial and attentiveness to others through prayer. Self-death/identity-resurrection theory assumes allegorical elements from these three historical models to form something authentically unique.

Theologian N. T. Wright wisely observes that each atonement theory is an answer to a slightly different question. For example, the Christus victor theory provides the answer to the question of “How do I avoid the punishment I deserve due to sin?” However, if the question was “How can I understand the unconditionality of God’s love?” the more appropriate response here

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would be the moral influence theory.\textsuperscript{261} Using Wright’s logic, we can see self-death/identity-resurrection taking a place along the spectrum of atonement theories, as it provides an answer to the question, “How do I participate in the redemptive work of creation?”

Recalling Jesus’ proclamation, “I am the way,” the faithful are charged to follow suit. Paul notes in Romans 6.5 that “if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” We certainly know that Paul understands this death and resurrection to be the \textit{literal} salvific acts of Christ, actions carrying cosmic implications for all of creation. But like Paul and others, we also understand that biblical words and actions can take on layers of meanings, thus the mystery of the Bible itself. So, Paul goes on to address his beloved in Rome that “you too must \textit{think} of yourselves as [being] dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6.11, NAB, emphasis added). Paul implores his audience to adopt a new \textit{perception} of themselves, using Christ’s death and resurrection as the model. Roberts goes one step further.

In speaking directly of the contemplative experience of self, she determines that “as it went for Christ, so it goes for us.” She understands Christ’s death as a death to his ego-self, in all the paradoxical majesty that image evokes. And in his resurrection, she sees him revealing humanity’s “true nature” as none other than Christ. In other words, \textit{Jesus literally underwent this process of self-death and identity-resurrection} during his work for us.\textsuperscript{262} He shows “the way” of passing through the old self to the new, and in fact mandates that the faithful \textit{must} follow suit. He gives us the path for “at-one-ment,” the key to understanding—and attaining—unity with God through himself.

\textsuperscript{261} Wright, \textit{Surprised by Hope}, 199.
\textsuperscript{262} Roberts, \textit{The Experience of No-Self}, 146-50.
Conclusion

There is a cycle of creation to which we all belong. Death is an inevitable reality in that cycle, but it is not the final word. Through Christ’s resurrection, we understand ourselves united in God, enlivened and availed of the same eternal transformation. The contemplative consciousness experiences this same natural sequence of events. The “self” dies to the world through *apatheia*, resisting the external stimuli that would coalesce to form misguided perceptions in the mind. Likewise, the contemplative pours out self through voluntary denial of personal gratification or control, opening to the working of the Spirit that makes any transformation possible. After enduring the seeming arid emptiness of the Good Friday event, a rebirth occurs. The contemplative mind is renewed in its identity with a “christic consciousness…a mind focused on one thing, the centrality of divine love.”263 This renewal frees a fount of compassion born of a total sense of unity with God, neighbor, and even creation at large.

The pattern of Christ’s death and resurrection becomes in a sense a model for prayer, a template that the contemplative follows for reconciliation. This prayerful atonement emulates Jesus’ work, work that “demands that people themselves be rescued from the powers that enslave the world in order that they can in turn be rescuers.”264 This effort aids the contemplative in understanding and orienting themselves in their rightful place in God through Christ.

Paul exhorts the Roman church to remember the pattern of death and life that was preached to them:

> We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. *But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.* We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he

264 Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 204.
lives to God. *So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus* (Rom 6.6-11, emphasis added).

The contemplative follows this same path. We die as Christ died, and we likewise rise. We emulate this cycle to move towards the perfection that is ours. It is possible only through the Spirit, yet our efforts are an attempt to abandon the self-will to God, shaping our consciousness to be the same “that was in in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2.5).
Conclusion

Several weeks after the prayer study concluded, the pastor encountered one of the participants in the church kitchen. The two were chatting about various volunteer activities, when the conversation turned. As a lady in her early seventies, the parishioner was reevaluating her priorities and how she would dispense her time going forward. She indicated that she would engage in more self-reflection, and then added that she had not suspended her prayer regimen. In fact, she had adapted portions of it to fit her personal prayer style. Of special note was her description of the twenty-third Psalm. She was using an Ignatian imagination form of reading the text, and as she walked beside the “still waters,” there were three people in the scene—the Shepherd, her, and the pastor! The three would walk for a while at the water’s edge, sharing the silence together. Then she would escort the pastor away and continue her journey with the shepherd. She had fully embraced the notion of contemplative prayer to the point where her imagination was expressing itself in bold new inclusive ways. As a result, her place in the world was changing, and her notion of self, others, and God had been reshaped. It had been a long journey, but she was finally experiencing the peace that had—and would eternally be—hers.

As Paul preaches to the Athenians, he speaks of God as one in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). This life equates to a full participation in the divine, a continuous movement of harmony and love. It epitomizes relationship, the Trinity within itself, and the extended community that forms because of God’s life-affirming Spirit. It is a unity akin to nuclear fusion, the “binding energy” witnessed as an unshakable force (Rom 8.38-9). But to live into the fullness of this love, we must first know ourselves to be a part of this universal whole. That vision requires the synergistic work of people and the Spirit.

Ilia Delio rightly asserts that “Christian life…requires personal responsibility,” and she goes on to explain the disposition of such a believer: “One must desire to put on the mind of Christ, one must choose to follow the way of the gospel….”265 This choice is the expression of free will that we all must accede to on the path of adopting the divine will. It begins with a

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profession of “yet, not my will but yours be done” (Lk 22.42b), and it continues with adopting a life oriented towards habitual Christ-like behavior. Contemplative prayer enables these habits.

A summation of the journey
Contemplation is a means of discovery. Through these practices we discover ourselves, we see the world, and we recognize how all creation fits in the oneness of God. It is a proactive way of engaging the spiritual life that prepares us for the inevitable surprise of the Spirit. The late theologian John Main casts the role and character of the contemplative act perfectly:

The call to meditate is an invitation to stop leading our lives on the basis of second-hand evidence. It is a call to each one of us to come to grips with our spiritual capacity and so to discover for ourselves the astonishing richness of the human capacity that is anchored in the divine reality, in the divine life-power. And it is also an invitation to be simply open to that power, to be energized by it and to be swept along by it, into the depths of the divine reality itself.266

The contemplative dives head-long into the deep end of the spiritual life, testing spiritual buoyancy and alternating time between treading sacred water and submerging to the depths of mystery.

Because “[all] perceptions exist in the mind,” reframing the consciousness becomes an overtly human act.267 No different than reading Scripture, fasting, or attending to the sacraments, this work of piety has as its end a greater attentiveness to God. As with other devotional acts, contemplation engages known physiological processes responsible for building and maintaining Christ-like behaviors (e.g. patience, compassion, humility, etc.). We strengthen these processes via intentional practice just as we would fortify our physical selves to execute the divine mission. Through entrainment of the mind, we align our focus to those “heavenly” ideals that affirm our

267 Newberg et al., Why God Won’t Go Away, 146.
image in the divine likeness. All the while, the contemplative fully maintains that divine revelation and transformation remain the purview of the Spirit.  

As we have noted on several occasions, any encounter with God is a gift of the Spirit. It cannot be manufactured; it cannot be coerced. We must prepare ourselves to receive this grace, but it is nevertheless freely given by God as God sees fit. And to reject the notion that God does indeed grace some with this gift is contrary to the biblical witness. Symeon the New Theologian warned against such belief, undermining the naysayers of his time:

“But to deny that at this present time there are some who love God, and that they have been granted the Holy Spirit and…that they have become gods by knowledge and experience and contemplation, that wholly subverts the Incarnation of our God and Savior Jesus Christ (Tit. 2.13).”

Symeon knew the Spirit of God as unequivocally the same as the Spirit of Christ, and like his fellow mystics Paul, Bonaventure, or Clare of Assisi, he also understood that humanity has access to that same divine gift through Christ’s death and resurrection. As such, to deny that such a state could be attained was to deny God’s reconciling work, a condition tantamount to blasphemy. As we see in Symeon’s attestation, the work of contemplative prayer serves as an avenue to this spiritual gift—a “means of grace.”

Contemplation is indeed a channel through which the human and divine come together for change. Author Robert Benson sums up the reality of this outcome and its full impact:

“It is prayer that can change us, make no mistake about it. The changes may go unnoticed for a long time, but they will come. It will change the way we see our work and our rest. It will change the way we live with others. It will slowly, inexorably draw us into itself

268 Merton notes that a psychological awareness of self fits in the “natural,” while awareness of God is impossible without “supernatural” engagement. Merton, The Inner Experience, 12.
269 De Catanzaro, Discourse 32, 336.
and unto the One for Whom and by Whom it is prayed, and into the sanctity of the days that have been given us and which we have been given.271

Contemplative prayer changes our perceptions. It helps remove the mental clutter so that our true focus—God—becomes clear. This type of prayer aids in moving us towards seeing as Christ saw and as God wills for us to see today, beyond the delusions of divisiveness or scarcity or injury. It invites us to into the deep unity for which Jesus pleads (Jn 17.21a), and it is essential for the healthy functioning of the Body (Eph 4.1-6). Given its vital nature, contemplation must be (re)introduced into the life of the church.

A note to clergy & laity

Nouwen predicted that sometime soon the church would be guilty of failing “at its most basic task: to offer people creative ways to communicate with the divine source of human life.” He saw the central means of this communication as prayer, specifically meditative prayer.272 Such a dire prediction challenges today’s clergy and laity to reevaluate how we encourage and enable this form of spiritual formation.

As we noted at the outset, the notion of prayer has a general connotation of petition and intercession. Most people do engage in contemplative practices—sacred reading, mindfulness, silence, etc.—but they are unaware of these as named, historically Christian traditions. Given that unfamiliarity, there is no intentionality built into their practice. Without rigor, the

haphazardness of the prayer method becomes undisciplined, and the result is something increasingly “self-centered and myopic.” Education on these methods of approaching the divine reduces the tendency towards self and opens the congregants to a world in which they find a practice or group of practices that connect with their personality and place in life. This openness in turn leads to greater creativity in spiritual formation in general, which tends to reinforce itself in positive and expansive ways. As the goal is always “contemplation in action,” the ultimate outcome is not only self-refinement, but compassionate community engagement. But it all begins with instruction.

Contemplative pedagogical methods can take many forms, but the key is practice. Some learners are comfortable in a classroom context, with hands-on curriculum-based instruction as the primary means of delivery. For others, group prayer retreats in settings that are conducive to quiet and/or engagement with nature are more effective. Still others may prefer one-on-one spiritual direction, the director providing suggestions and guidance suitable to the nuance tolerance of the directee. Regardless of the delivery method—classroom, retreat space, individual—the emphasis must be praxis. Experiencing contemplation opens the door to the world of the inner space, a gateway for many that remains obscured by the modern tendency towards “attractive” churches, where worship is the central activity, and programmatic content is competitively positioned within a larger marketplace of religious “goods and services” to attract new consumers. Church leadership must be the first in taking a machete to this overgrowth and providing access to these hidden portals. And the landscaping must be maintained.

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273 Benson, Living Prayer, 79.
Education is a process. As with any new learning, it must be reinforced and permanently scaffolded, supplying more and more layers to assist in the growth process. Maintaining an awareness of, and access to, contemplative practice requires a culture that promotes this prayerful movement as something desirable and indeed necessary. Systemic activities that support this type of atmosphere range from preaching about meditation, to engraining *lectio divina* into standard biblical study groups, to full-on contemplative worship times carved out of the weekly schedule. The end look is native to the local parish; the goal, however, is nothing less than the overall mission of the church—model an environment where people learn to become disciples with an “alternative imagination” for being the Body of Christ.275

Reflecting on contemplative education, theologian David Keller provides a summation that speaks to our thesis boldly and concisely:

Contemplative prayer is crucial to the challenges of our era. It is an emptying of self to gain one’s self. It is a letting-go of control to become a vessel of reconciliation and transformation. In its rejection of self-interest, it is totally countercultural, and yet at the same time it is perhaps the single most practical needed thing in the postmodern world. It is also one of the fundamental dimensions of the Christian gospel and way of life.276

Contemplation is about emptying. It is a practice of letting go. But in the end, it is all about gain—gain of self, gain of other, gain of God. Contemplative prayer is about seeing the unified connection of Alpha and Omega and the “I” that is “You” that is “Christ” in each other and the world.

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
  
> who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
  
> but emptied himself,

> taking the form of a slave,

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being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2.5-11).
Bibliography


