

Contemplative Prayer Or Terror?

Commentary by Roger Oakland
Source: www.understandthetimes.org

The Bible warns about false teachers that promote doctrines of demons in the last days before Jesus returns. [1] It would seem reasonable then, for Christians to be aware of the possibility of being seduced and deceived.

It is also a fact we are living at a time when many Christians seem to be convinced they cannot be deceived. A growing number have abandoned the idea that the return of Jesus Christ is at hand. They believe we are entering into a period when the Kingdom of God will be established here on earth by human effort. These "Kingdom Now" enthusiasts see church growth and the methods that promote it as a sign Christianity is being "reinvented" and becoming a more powerful force, day by day.

One of the ideas making vast inroads and redefining Christianity is the new "Emerging Church" movement. One of the popular ideas that is being promoted and is attractive to many is contemplative prayer. While proponents claim this method of praying helps them get closer to God, there are some reasons to express caution.

The Roots of Contemplative Prayer

What is contemplative prayer? Here is how one promoter defined it:

Contemplative prayer in its simplest form, is prayer in which you still your thoughts... This puts you in a better state to be aware of God's presence, and it makes you better able to hear God's voice correcting, guiding and directing you. [2]

If that definition sounds beneficial to one's spiritual well-being consider another explanation that provides an even clearer understanding:

Its practitioners are trained to focus on an inner symbol that quiets the mind... When practitioners become skilled at this method of meditation, they undergo a deep trance state similar to auto-hypnosis. [3]

Contemplative prayer is making a big comeback. First discovered by monks in the 3rd century who isolated themselves in desert monasteries, you can now find practitioners and promoters in many evangelical churches today.

Brian Flynn, in his book *Running With the Wind*, provides interesting background to where the technique came from and how widely it is being accepted today. Quoting from his book:

Perhaps the Desert Fathers either came into contact with someone from the East who shared these practices with them, or maybe they stumbled across it themselves. Whatever its origin, this heretical practice (contemplative prayer) has entered our churches virtually unopposed.

The first form of monasticism was practiced by the hermit. (In Greek the word means desert). The first hermit was St. Anthony, a revered Egyptian monk who moved away from society and into the desert around 270 AD (3rd century). Many followed St. Anthony's lifestyle and also became hermits. Nearly 80 years later the first monastery was built. This brought the hermits together under one roof rather than each of them living alone in the desert. [4]

I find reading historical information, such as Flynn has presented, fascinating. Finding out what occurred in the past helps me to understand the present. Furthermore, this idea that we need to go back to the past and find what "Christian experiences" were effective and then re-introduce them into the present, is the central theme of the "Emerging Church" movement that is becoming so popular today.

Just a few days before reading Flynn's account on the origin of contemplative prayer I read an article about the "Emerging Church" published by the Briercrest Bible College in Saskatchewan, Canada. In this article I read the following:

Ancient practices that seem to have spiritual significance for emergent people are often found in the third century, the turn of the first millennium, or the drama of worship in the Middle Ages. [5]

The author of the article was not against the idea of studying the mystics - he was for it. You see many are saying that in order to win this generation for Jesus the church must provide stimulating experiences that will help win the lost to the Christian faith. However, as it can be documented, many experiences that are being promoted are extrabiblical, from the East, and inspired by monks - not the inspired Word.

Christian "New Age"?

Thomas Merton is considered to be one of the founding fathers of contemplative prayer. His writings and ideas have impacted many today who are advocating that Christianity embrace prayer techniques borrowed from Eastern religion.

Consider the following statement that reflects Merton's Buddhist and Hindu beliefs:

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race,... now I realize what we all are... if only they (people) could all see themselves as they really are... I suppose the

big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other... At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusions, a point of pure truth... this little point... is the pure glory of God in us. It is in everybody.[6]

Obviously, such a statement needs little commentary. Anyone who has even a shallow understanding of the Bible knows where this concept comes from. It is the same lie that Satan used to seduce Eve. Anyone who believes that man can be a god has been duped by the god of this world (Genesis 3: 15).

Richard Foster is one of Thomas Merton's disciples. He would be regarded as the most influential and well-known of those considered to be evangelical Christian and supportive of contemplative prayer. Foster considers Merton as his mentor. [7]

Now consider this question: Why would someone who claims to be a Christian, after reading and understanding Merton's position on Eastern religion, promote his ideas? Worse yet, why is it that when other Christians who have embraced contemplative prayer are informed about this connection to Eastern religion, they refuse to listen?

Now, please pay attention to what Richard Foster said about his mentor, Thomas Merton:

Thomas Merton has perhaps done more than any other twentieth-century figure to make the life of prayer widely known and understood... His interest in contemplation led him to investigate prayer forms in Eastern religion. Zen masters from Asia regarded him as the preeminent authority on their kind of prayer in the United States. [8]

Contemplative Terror

As previously stated, the purpose of contemplative prayer is to become more in tune with God. Further, we have documented where the idea originated. While not found in the Bible, it can be found in the sacred writings of Eastern religions. Further, the idea has been adapted for modern day Christianity and it is becoming very popular.

Now, there is one more thing about contemplative prayer that I would like to mention. Richard Foster, one of the most well known promoters of contemplative prayer, claims there is reason to be cautious. Quoting from his book *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*:

I also want to give a word of precaution. In the silent contemplation of God we are entering deeply into the spiritual realm, and there is such a thing as supernatural guidance that is not divine guidance. While the Bible does not give us a lot of information on the nature of the spiritual world, we do know... there are various orders of spiritual beings, and some of them are definitely not in cooperation with

God and his way! ... But for now I want to encourage you to learn and practice prayers of protection... "All dark and evil spirits must now leave." [9]

I cannot find a single place in the Bible where we are instructed to pray a prayer of protection before we pray. The fact that Foster recognizes contemplative prayer can open the door to the fallen spirit world is very revealing.

What is this - praying to the God of the Bible but instead contacting demons? Maybe contemplative prayer should be renamed "contemplative terror".

Even more suspect is the idea that contemplative prayer is only for a select group. Again, pay attention to what Richard Foster claims:

At the onset I need to give a word of warning, a little like the warning labels on medicine bottles. Contemplative prayer is not for the novice. I do not say this about other forms of prayer. All are welcome, regardless of proficiency or expertise, to enter freely into adoration and meditation and intercession and a host of other approaches to prayer. But contemplation is different. While we are all precious in the eyes of God, we are all not equally ready to listen to "God's speech in his wondrous, terrible, gentle, loving, all embracing silence." [10]

Did you get it? Foster promotes a form of prayer that is only for the mature, select, proficient, experts who are "ready to listen" to God.

Search the Scriptures. Where do you find support for this idea? It seems to me that Foster and those who promote contemplative prayer should be assigned warning labels.

Of course Jesus forewarned, teachings like this would be popular in the last days. [11] What is amazing to me is that many today would rather listen to men and the methods they promote rather than Jesus and His Word.

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Endnotes:

[1] 1 Timothy 4:1

[2] Jan Johnson, *When the Soul Listens*, Harrisburg, PA, NavPres, 1999, p. 16. Quoted by Brian Flynn, *Running Against The Wind*, Lighthouse Trails Publishing, Silverton, OR, p. 133.

[3] Ray Yungen, *A Time of Departing*, op cit., p. 48, citing Jacquelyn Small, *Awakening in Time*, New York: Bantam Books, 1991, p.261.

[4] Brian Flynn, *Running Against The Wind*, p. 137-138.

[5] Dr. Dale Dirkson, “Old Is New Again: The Emergent Church,” *Passport Magazine*, Fall 2005, Vol. 64 No. 2, p. 7.

[6] Ray Yungen, op.cit., pp.60,61, citing Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1989, pp. 157-158.

[7] Brian Flynn, p. 142.

[8] Richard Foster and Emilie Griffin, *Spiritual Classics*, San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2000, First Edition, p. 17.

[9] Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1992, First Edition p. 157.

[10] Ibid. p. 156.

[11] Matthew 24: 3-4