

Weathering The Storm

:: contemplative spirituality ::

*"The road to the future runs through the past."
- Robert Webber¹*

A core element of the Emerging Church Movement is something they call 'contemplative spirituality' or 'Christian mysticism.' Sometimes it is referred to as 'vintage Christianity' or 'ancient-future faith,' this fundamental pillar of the Emergent Church is probably the most disturbing change in this 'reformation' that they're offering to the world.

As usual, I will let the Emergents tell you themselves what they mean by 'contemplative spirituality.'

Contemplative spirituality is the teaching that spiritual growth and true spirituality occur by contemplation not of Scripture or even of scriptural themes, but contemplation of God through emptying your mind.²

Mysticism, according to its historical and psychological definitions, is the direct intuition or experience of God; and a mystic is a person who has, to a greater or less degree, such a direct experience – one whose religion and life are centered, not merely on an accepted belief or practice, but on that which the person regards as first hand knowledge.³

Mysticism is a way of living that makes this consciousness of God's presence the shaping context, the compelling energy of our lives.⁴

A Christian mystic seeks an experiential closeness to that Presence. A check-list of beliefs is certainly not enough to know God.⁵

God cannot be reached by logic or captured by thought.⁶

The intellect can entertain the concept of God, but not grasp God.⁷

*For now, it is enough to understand that a 'Christian' mystic is a person who finds the teachings, life and event of Jesus of Nazareth to present, **for them**, the clearest way to grow into a spiritual relationship with God...Put simply, God speaks to the 'many flocks' Jesus spoke of in a language and a way they can understand...The Dalai Lama, when asked about converting from this religion to that, states clearly it is in one's best interest to remain within the familiar territory of their own upbringing, culture and understanding.⁸ (emphasis added)*

¹ Vital Worship | www.calvin.edu/worship/stories/webber.php

² Contemplative Spirituality Definitions | www.contemplative.us

³ Christian Mystics | christianmystics.com

⁴ Contemplative Spirituality: A Guide | metanoia.org

⁵ What Is A Christian Mystic? | christianmystic.com

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Proponents of Christian mysticism will tell you that the Bible is not the inerrant, exact word of God,⁹ thus, once again, truth is in the eye of the beholder, open to any interpretation, any tradition, any manipulation. Contemplative spirituality, or, Christian mysticism is centered on the teaching that we cannot KNOW God. He is unknowable through study or logic or teaching, thus all we can and should do is EXPERIENCE God through their methods and practices.

So what are their methods? I'm glad you asked...

The key to understanding the methods we're talking about is summed up in this quote by Emergent author Spencer Burke,

I stopped reading from the approved evangelical reading list...I discovered new authors and new voices at the bookstore – Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen and St. Theresa of Avila. The more I read, the more intrigued I became. Contemplative spirituality seemed to open up a whole new way for me to understand and experience God.¹⁰

To understand the mystic, one must abandon the popular and wildly erroneous notion that Christianity is simply a true/false test with just one question.¹¹

Contemplative spirituality opens up quite a wide range of possibilities. Here are some ways that the Emerging Church says we can have a more mystical or contemplative relationship with God:

Use prescribed Judaic prayers and Jewish table liturgies¹²
 Stations of the Cross – a labyrinth or maze for prayer
 Entering the Gate Called Beautiful – a guided meditation using Acts chapter 3
 Anglican Prayer Beads
 The Rosary
 and Contemplative Prayer.¹³

Contemplative prayer is essential in the Emerging Church and it sums up well this whole idea of mystical Christianity.

Have you ever found that your love and desire for God was greater than your ability to communicate with the Lord in words? Contemplative prayer can develop our relationship with Jesus Christ so that we commune with God beyond words, thoughts, feelings and actions.¹⁴

'Contemplative prayer' is key in the Emerging Church Movement. It is foundational. It is championed. It is gaining popularity, so we need to know what it is.

Silence and mantra are the 2 biggest components in Contemplative Prayer. Here are some quotes:

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Faith Undone pg 102

¹¹ What Is A Christian Mystic? | christianmystics.com

¹² Hebraic Table Prayers For Thanksgiving | ancientfutureworship.com

¹³ Contemplative Prayer | prayingchurch.org

¹⁴ Ibid.

God's first language is silence...progress toward intimacy with God means progress towards silence...the important thing [in Contemplative Prayer] is that our back is straight so that the vitalizing energies can flow freely.¹⁵

*Contemplative Prayer is the opening of mind and heart...we open our awareness to God whom we know by faith is within us, closer than **breathing**, closer than **thinking**, closer than **choosing** – closer than consciousness itself. Contemplative prayer is a process of interior purification leading, if we consent, to divine union.¹⁶(emphasis added)*

*For the Church's first sixteen centuries Contemplative Prayer was the **goal** of Christian Spirituality.¹⁷(emphasis added)*

Catholic monks like Thomas Merton and Thomas Keating are the fathers of Contemplative Prayer. These and other proponents reach back to the dark ages and borrow the methods of mystics, Buddhists and Hindus and apply them to our faith.¹⁸ Words like 'detachment,' 'emptiness,' 'awakening' and 'enlightenment' are frequently used when defining and describing this mystical ritual.

The Buddhist practice of mantra repetition is also central to Contemplative Prayer. The method of how to 'center yourself' with Contemplative Prayer is described by Emergent forefather Thomas Keating:

Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.¹⁹

Twenty to thirty minutes is the minimum amount of time necessary for most people to establish interior silence.²⁰

Once again, the Emerging Church Movement is offering a type of faith that is in contrast to the personal relationship with Christ that the Bible presents. Our faith is about being filled, not being emptied, about meditating on the full Word of God, not repeating one phrase over and over again, about receiving knowledge and wisdom and discernment not simply waiting for a God that cannot be known to possess us in some strange, existential experience.

And, once again, the Emerging Church invites everyone to the party except us.

While Emergents go to great lengths to convince the Church that contemplative prayer is "100% orthodox Christianity,"²¹ they work even harder to show that conservative, Bible-believing evangelicals are the cause of controversy and division.

¹⁵ Contemplating Contemplative Prayer | christiananswersforthenewage.org

¹⁶ The Method Of Centering Prayer | thecentering.org

¹⁷ Centering Prayer Overview | centeringprayer.com

¹⁸ Contemplating Contemplative Prayer | christiananswersforthenewage.org

¹⁹ The Method Of Centering Prayer | thecentering.org

²⁰ Faith Undone pg 81

²¹ Contemplative Spirituality: A Guide | metanoia.org

Unfortunately, fundamentalists and others have co-opted the word 'mysticism' and use it to describe occult practices.²²

As you find out more about the tradition and beauty of Christian mysticism you will also find out that there are people who feel the very term itself has to be highly improper...for these people, especially those of the fundamentalist nature, the word 'mystic' summons up images of the occult, of otherworldly spiritual attitudes and belief, or, more concretely, of concepts such as those found in 'New Age' philosophies. Nothing could be further from the truth.²³

Mantras, mental conditioning, the energies of the universe, emptying of the consciousness...sounds pretty New Age to me.

Let's focus on the Word of God and be in a great deal of prayer for our Emergent friends so that we can learn how to minister to them as we remember how much God dearly loves them.

²² Ibid.

²³ What Is A Christian Mystic? | christianmystics.com