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EXAMINING CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing focus on spiritual formation, many evangelicals are seeking direction for spiritual disciplines. Richard Foster's Celebration of Discipline *is a commonly cited source, along with materials produced by the group he founded called Renovaré. An increasingly common practice is contemplative prayer, including its particularly well-known strand called centering prayer. The discipline is gaining popularity among evangelicals, often encouraged in churches, small groups, and seminaries. After a thorough evaluation, we argue that contemplative prayer bears more similarity to Eastern forms of meditation than to biblical prayer and that Christians should, therefore, reject it in favor of a more biblically-grounded view of prayer.*

CALLED BY SCRIPTURE TO LIVE PRAYERFULLY and to grow in godliness (2 Pet. 1:1–11; 1 Thess. 5:17), Christians should be attracted to practices that promise deeper spirituality. Advocates of contemplative prayer (often called centering prayer, listening prayer, or meditative prayer) claim that the practice accomplishes just that. This is not a new exercise; yet it has recently surged in popularity among evangelical Christians. Popular books promote its benefits, and it is frequently considered to be an integral part of the spiritual formation movement. Because of its increasing attractiveness and widespread acceptance, contemplative prayer (CP) merits a close examination to test whether or not it is compatible with biblical Christianity and leads to Christian growth.

We will show that CP resembles certain types of Eastern meditation, especially Zen Buddhism and Transcendental Meditation

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(TM). This gives Christians good reason to evaluate the practice biblically and logically. Nevertheless, CP is not to be rejected simply because of its similarity to non-Christian disciplines, because these similarities may be innocuous. Such apparent affinities should prompt a critical analysis of the nature and practice of CP, but the final verdict must be founded on more than a mere similarity or dissimilarity to the practices of other religions. To avoid the genetic fallacy requires probing to the essence of CP and not simply discussing its origins or affinities. In other words, the Christian must discern whether or not CP's similarities to Eastern religious practices reflect an endorsement of an alien worldview. If CP is grounded in assumptions that ultimately misrepresent God's revelation of himself to us, then the Christian should reject it. Christians ought to be discerning about everything they accept or promote (see 1 Thess. 5:21–23; Rom. 12:2; 1 John 4:1–6; Col. 2:8–9; 1 Tim. 5:20–22). Therefore, this article will seek to develop an informed, rational, biblical response to contemplative prayer.

What Is Contemplative Prayer?

The most prominent sources of CP teaching today are the Roman Catholic and Trappist monks Thomas Keating, M. Basil Pennington (d. 2005), and Thomas Merton (d. 1968), as well as an evangelical Quaker, Richard Foster, whose book *Celebration of Discipline* (1978) was pivotal in launching the spiritual formation movement among evangelicals. Following the work of Merton, Pennington and Keating were instrumental in spreading CP in a new form in the early 1970s. These thinkers trace the roots of CP back to Catholic mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

Pennington presents a detailed formula for CP in *The Way Back Home*:

> 1) Sit relaxed and quiet (our back [must be] straight so that the vitalizing energies can flow easily).[1]
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> 2) Be in faith and love to God, who dwells in the center of your being.
>
> 3) Take up a love word and let it be gently present, supporting your being to God in faith-filled love.

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[1] For more on this, see Douglas R. Groothuis, *Confronting the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 76–83, and *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 140–44.

4) Whenever you become aware of anything else, simply, gently return to the Lord with the use of your prayer word.

5) At the end of your prayer time let the Our Father (or some other prayer) pray itself within you.[2]

Language such as "Be in faith and love to God" is rather opaque, but makes a bit more sense when we understand that the goal of CP is neither to think deeply nor to converse with God, but simply to "be," by going "beyond thought and image."[3] Keating asserts that this "deep prayer is the laying aside of thoughts. It is the opening of mind and heart, body and feelings—our whole being—to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond words, thoughts, feelings, and emotions."[4] The goal is a profound shift in consciousness accomplished by a literally thought-less sense of being with God.

Of particular import is that the CP participant must cultivate a rationally inactive focus upon the center of his or her own being. This center is not only where one meets God, but is also where one discovers who one truly is. This teaching is found throughout CP literature. As Pennington puts it, CP serves to help us "discover our true selves centered in God."[5] Richard Rohr, a leader in the contemporary Christian mysticism movement, echoes Pennington by explaining that the goal of CP is to prompt a change in one's inner posture, allowing the meditator to discover his or her true self.[6] This is to be done in a protracted state of sonic and mental silence.

The "love word," mentioned by Pennington in step three, should be simple in order to turn off the mind in order to focus the meditation. Common "love words" are "Abba," "maranatha," or "Jesus." Keating instructs, "The meaning of the sacred word or its resonances should not be pursued. It is better to choose a word that does not stir up other associations in your mind or cause you to consider its particular emotional qualities."[7] Rather than concen-

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2 M. Basil Pennington, *The Way Back Home* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 19.

3 M. Basil Pennington, *Centering Prayer* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1980), 18.

4 Thomas Keating, *Foundations for Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Life* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002), 116.

5 Pennington, *The Way Back Home,* 18.

6 Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 65–66.

7 Keating, *Foundations for Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Life,* 45.

trating on the meaning of the word, the purpose is to repeat the word to induce an altered state of consciousness, which is "beyond thoughts and image."[8] With practice, the meditator eventually no longer needs the love word to reach this altered state, for then, "your whole psyche gathers itself together and melts into God."[9]

The meditator is instructed to "gently say this word deep within, and let it quietly repeat itself. No effort. Just let it be there—to keep us there with the Lord—open to him, letting him be present to us in any way he wants."[10] This word should be either audibly or silently chanted, with attention drawn to breathing, timing the word or phrase with the rhythm of the inward and outward breaths. "Soon you will forget the words and find that you are simply using them to keep you in contact with the presence of God or Christ," wrote Catholic theologian Ernest Fiedler.[11]

Repetition of the sacred love word is intended to pacify and nullify the mind so that it yields to God's direct presence. Pennington explains that this is much like mentally sleeping while the heart is awake to the presence of God at the center of one's being.[12] In order to quiet the mind, CP advocates teach that the "problem of thoughts" must be overcome.[13] Step four deals with this problem, because, as the teaching goes, one can focus on God only if thoughts are transcended. The meditator is not to analyze, ponder, or even acknowledge any thoughts; rather, she must simply let her thoughts flow like a river. Richard Foster recommends that meditators visualize themselves placing each thought and concern into a gift box, wrapping it, and giving it to God for him to do with it as he pleases.[14] One does not examine the thought but simply releases it. When one surpasses meaning and thought, the prayer is free to open "out into the transcendent experience."[15]

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8 Pennington, *Centering Prayer,* 18.

9 Keating, *Foundations for Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Life,* 45.

10 Pennington, *The Way Back Home,* 21.

11 Ernest J. Fiedler, *Mystical Prayer Is for (Almost) Everyone* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009), 7.

12 Pennington, *Centering Prayer,* 86.

13 Ibid., 103.

14 Richard Foster, *Meditative Prayer* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 15.

15 Pennington, *Centering Prayer,* 62.

Detachment from thought, focus on breathing and posture, and words like "transcendent experience" are only some of the CP components indicative of Eastern religious practices that are antithetical to Christianity. In order to compare Eastern meditation (EM) with CP, we will survey EM with particular attention to Zen and Transcendental Meditation, because they bear the most resemblance to CP.

A LOOK AT EASTERN MEDITATION

Eastern meditation describes a set of related, yet religiously distinct, spiritual practices that originate in the ancient Far East (particularly India). They instruct the meditator to transcend the illusory material world by seeking a higher state of consciousness. While the two practices highlighted here derive from distinct religions—TM is Hindu, while Zen is a branch of Mahayana Buddhism—they are similar in practice. Both TM and Zen require that the meditator "go beyond thoughts" to find the True Self. The meditator must cease to interact with his own thoughts, so that he can leave behind the illusory world of space, time, and matter to reach an ineffable transcendence. In both disciplines, the mind (one's individuality) is considered to be the root of the false self that keeps one from transcendence. By contrast, the True Self is pure being, or ultimate reality. This is monism, the view that all is one. Thinking must be abandoned in order to lose one's individuality (the false self) in favor of attaining pure being (the True Self), as Gordon Lewis puts it in his critique of TM.[16]

In order to detach from thoughts, the meditator is given a sound, word, phrase, or riddle intended either to lose meaning through incessant repetition or to be meaningless from the start. This blow to cognition through loss of meaning is deemed the gateway to transcendence, either to TM's union with the divine or to the Buddhist Nirvana (extinguishment of the self).[17] In both, the meditator abandons control of the mind and seeks to enter a state of complete mental inactivity.[18]

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16 Gordon Lewis, *What Everyone Should Know about Transcendental Meditation* (Glendale, CA: G/L Publications, 1975), 39.

17 Zen emphasizes the attainment of a universal self, which is unlike the original Buddhist teaching that one must extinguish any sense of the self.

18 Lit-sen Chang, *Transcendental Meditation: A Mystic Cult of Self-Intoxication* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 44.

TM and Zen teach that enlightenment is possible only when one clears the mind "of all the conceptual clutter that impedes true insight."[19] To aid in clearing the mind to connect with the transcendent, these disciplines heavily emphasize controlling breathing and physical posture. But teachers expect that the meditator will not be able to cease thinking completely; they therefore instruct their students to let their thoughts flow without acknowledging, analyzing, or wondering about them. This is disturbingly similar to the CP advice of letting the "river of thoughts" pass by or offering "gift boxes of thoughts."[20]

CP and Eastern Meditation

As we have shown, EM and CP have striking similarities. Both EM and CP are concerned with discovering the true, hidden self within, thus transforming the consciousness of the meditator. This altered state of consciousness is necessary to achieve enlightenment in both forms of meditation. Repetition of a specific sound, word, or phrase is strategically used in both EM and CP in order to rid the meditator of any attachment to rational meaning. To that end, specific postures and breathing exercises are used.

However, similarity does not mean sameness. We must not make the mistake of simply assuming that CP is essentially the same as Zen or TM. If we reject CP as a legitimately Christian discipline, it must be for reasons greater than its mere resemblance to another worldview's spiritual practices. Nevertheless, analysis of these similarities gives needed insight and direction for evaluation of CP. To his credit, Foster has attempted to clarify the differences between Christian and Eastern forms of the discipline. CP (or meditative prayer, as he calls it) strives to fill the mind with God, while Eastern meditation attempts to empty the mind.[21] But does Foster's clarification delineate sufficiently between the two forms of meditation? It seems not for at least two reasons. First, EM is, in fact, concerned with a detachment-and-attachment pattern. The idea is, much like in CP, to detach from the false self and then attach to the True Self. Second, if the God of the Bible is fundamentally rational and relational, then he cannot be beyond thought. If

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19 Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 234.

20 Foster, *Meditative Prayer,* 15.

21 Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (1978; New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 20.

the CP meditator transcends thought, then the object of attachment cannot be God.

Moreover, EP and CP seem to have a great deal of natural overlap. The oft-cited Trappist monk Thomas Merton studied Zen Buddhism extensively and was particularly fond of drawing lessons from it. He wrote,

> We might profitably pause to consider an example of inner awakening taken from an oriental text. . . . This is an account of *satori,* a spiritual enlightenment, a bursting open of the inner core of the spirit to reveal the inmost self. This takes place in the peace of what we might ordinarily call contemplation, but it breaks through suddenly and by surprise, beyond the level of quiet contemplative absorption, showing that mere interior peace does not suffice to bring us in contact with our deepest liberty.[22]

Merton elaborated on this concept by approvingly referencing D. T. Suzuki, a well-known Zen teacher who popularized Zen in the West.[23] This is a clear example of one of the founders of modern contemplative prayer asserting that much can be learned from the practices and teachers of Zen, particularly on finding the true, hidden, inner self through meditative enlightenment. What Merton recognized is that in both CP and Zen, the goal is to detach from one's individuality in order to attach to the transcendent reality. (Exactly what is left that can attach to divine reality when one has detached from oneself remains a mystery.)

Another example of such syncretism comes from the work of Richard Rohr. In *Everything Belongs,* he says,

> I must be "nothing" in order to be open to all of reality and new reality. The Zen master calls this state "the face we had before we were born." Paul would call it who you are: "in Christ, hidden in God" (Col. 3:3). I just say it is who you are before you did anything right or anything wrong, who you are before you thought about who you are. Our thinking doesn't make it so. Thinking creates the ego self, the self of reputation, the insecure self. Contemplation recognizes the Godself, the Christself of abundance and security.[24]

Rohr wrongly conflates the Buddhist idea of nothingness with Paul's teaching that Christians are "in Christ." This is absurd, since being "in Christ" is a personal and relational reality established by the objective and finished work of Christ. That is infinite-

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[22] Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 7–8.

[23] Ibid., 8.

[24] Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer,* 67.

ly far from "nothing." Rohr also claims that this reality is divine, thus conflating the self (the creature) with God himself (the Creator). Such monism has no place in Scripture. The key question, then, becomes: Is there any way to reconcile CP with a biblical view of prayer?

Is CP Biblical?

What is biblical prayer? Evangelical writer and teacher Kenneth Boa describes it as "personal communion and dialogue with the living God."[25] This statement should be uncontroversial (if one means the God of the Bible), but supporters of CP would add that the deepest, most profound form of prayer is of the contemplative variety. To avoid confusion, "contemplative," used in this context, is not synonymous with awareness or concentration. Rohr defines contemplation as "an alternative consciousness that refuses to identify with or feed what are only passing shows."[26] These "passing shows" are one's thoughts.

However, such a concept of contemplative prayer is challenged by our Lord himself. When Jesus taught his disciples what to do until his return, he instructed, "But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:36).[27] Mental passivity combined with an "open heart" and the refusal to interact with thoughts appears incompatible with Jesus' divine injunction. We cannot remain alert at all times and simultaneously "go beyond thought and images." It is logically (as well as psychologically) impossible. Additionally, when Jesus taught on prayer, he said not to "use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do" (Matt. 6:7; see also vss. 8–13). Repetition itself is not the problem, but *meaningless* repetition, which is specifically advocated by CP. In this passage, the Lord's Prayer obliges the mind to be fully conscious of specific theological propositions: God as king, provider, protector, forgiver, and deliverer (see also Luke 11:2–4). Biblical prayer assumes that we will faithfully use our minds, not suppress them.

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25 Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 171.

26 Richard Rohr, "Contemplation: Finding Ourselves, Finding God," *Huffington Post*, October 30, 2011, accessed on July 24, 2012, http://www.huffington-post.com/fr-richard-rohr/contemplation-finding-ourselves-finding-god_b_1035271.html.

27 Scripture quotations are from the NASB, unless otherwise noted.

But what of the CP instruction to release all thoughts to God? While God has absolute control over our lives (Eph. 1:11), including our thoughts, yielding complete control to him does not require that we disengage the mind. We ought to take "every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5; see also Rom. 12:1–2). In order to appraise every thought, examine it according to the truth, and then correct it in obedience to Christ, cognitive alertness is necessary.

Such alertness is especially important given that the spirit world is real and active. Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14; see also John 8:44; 1 Peter 5:8–9). Why, then, would we desire to open ourselves to the possibility of demonic influence by going "beyond thought?" If our critical faculties are suspended in the midst of the exercise recommended by CP, then how would we test whether any voice that we hear is that of God or a counterfeit (1 John 4:1–6)? According to CP, if a critical thought or a doubt were to arise in the mind, we would have to ignore it and, as Pennington instructs, "gently return to the Lord with the use of our prayer word." How he can *know*—unaided by reason—that we are returning to the Lord is not stated. Therefore, CP robs its participants of any intellectual discernment regarding God and Satan.

Psalm 46:10 is a specific passage often used to support CP. It is commonly quoted from the New International Version: "Be still, and know that I am God." To many CP enthusiasts, this verse supports their teaching.[28] They claim that the psalm supports entering into an absolute, interior, and mindless stillness. However, this application is fundamentally flawed. Whatever "Be still" may mean, it cannot be construed as any kind of cognitive evacuation. This is because what follows, "and *know* that I am God" (emphasis ours), requires active cognition. God possesses attributes that should be understood and acknowledged. In context, the instruction means that one should assume a humble posture toward God, as a response to the *knowledge* of who God is as the holy Judge and sovereign Lord. This knowledge requires that one humbly submit to God. Pacifying the mind is nowhere implied. Rather, an active, alert, lucid, and focused mind is a required to revere the Lord aright as the God of the nations.

In addition to prayer, we must take a critical look at meditation in the Bible. This is because CP proponents often refer to the

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[28] For examples of this interpretation see Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer,* 54; and Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 149.

practice as Christian meditation, or meditative prayer. In the Bible, meditation traditionally understood has meant focused, conscious rumination on a passage of Scripture, an attribute of God, a mighty act of God, or the like. Throughout the Psalms, the term "meditation" and various cognates are most often used in a way that implies sustained, reflective thought. Consider the following passages: "In His law he [the godly person] meditates day and night" (Ps. 1:1–3). "I will meditate on Your precepts and regard Your ways" (119:15). "I will meditate on Your wonders" (v. 27). "I will meditate on Your statutes" (v. 48). The common thread among these and other examples is that there is always a clear object of the meditation that requires reason to apprehend. There is a *directedness* to these meditations; the person ruminates *on*, mulls *over*, thinks *about* something true. One's mind is not ignored in this activity, but is embraced and engaged. A Christian can thus meditate on such ideas as the glory of God, on the doctrine of justification in the Pauline epistles, or on the meaning of a particular passage. Boa rightly describes biblical meditation as that which "focuses the mind on the nuances of revealed truth."[29] Focusing the mind on revealed truth cannot be done without the engagement with one's thoughts about that truth.

In a state of Eastern-style meditation, the rational acts of discrimination that should distinguish revealed truth from error are intentionally and erroneously muted. Cognition is brought to a halt. However, the idea of noncognitive focus makes about as much sense as asking a statue to dance. Just as dancing requires movement, focus requires thinking. So, CP cannot rightly be called a form of biblical meditation. It is something else entirely, and something unsavory.

CP presents another glaring problem. If CP ushers us into a plane of existence beyond thought and image, how can this be a *relational act* with the *personal* God of Christianity? A personal relationship requires at least two persons. CP seeks to transcend the individuality of the meditator, and in so doing, it eradicates any possibility of a personal relationship. Another devastating blow is that one cannot have a personal relationship with something detached from knowable features. If we transcend knowledge, then nothing—not even God—is knowable. Furthermore, while wisely applied silence can sometimes help to avert a heated argument, it seems to have no constructive power in building a relationship. Pennington attempted to assuage such concerns by stating that

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[29] Boa, *Conformed to His Image,* 84.

when you really know someone—a spouse for instance—you do not always talk with them.[30] Rather, he explains, there are times of silence where the two people simply exist together. This is a false analogy. One does not typically try to go beyond thought and image while quietly being with a significant other (or even a pet!). Any incidental silence is not an intentional, complete mental silence. Attempting to ignore thought altogether and enter an altered state of consciousness does nothing helpful for either party or for the relationship itself. The mindless make bad partners.

Perhaps the greatest enabler of the CP popularity surge is the dire state of contemporary biblical and theological literacy. Familiar words such as prayer and meditation, when used by CP proponents, carry entirely different definitions and connotations than those found in Scripture. It takes a good dose of biblical and theological knowledge to detect this discrepancy. Further, vague and religiously ambiguous language is likely to confuse many who have yet to develop a thoroughly Christian worldview.[31] If we are instructed to "sink down into the light and life of Christ" and to simply exist there in his presence without thought, then it may be easy for the individual who does not have a "renewed mind" (Rom. 12:2) to slip into focusing on mere abstractions or forces (such as light, life, etc.).[32] This is the point where a CP practitioner can fall into an altered state of consciousness, which is the goal of CP. As we have shown, this is not consistent with biblical Christianity.

The support lent to CP tends to be full of partial truths, much hermeneutical error, and the imprecise use of language. Contemplative prayer misrepresents key attributes of God. He is transcendent yet always *personal*; he is not reducible to mere impersonal forces or literal light, and he is certainly not a state without properties (as is the nondualistic Hindu concept of Brahman). We know and communicate with this personal God through personal means, not through transcendence of personality. Thus, CP is at worst spiritually dangerous, and at best does not appear to serve any sanctifying purpose. Therefore, we have no good reason to engage in the practice. Still, we must continue to intelligently and prayerfully converse with fellow believers regarding this trend. Thinking Christians should not be silent about this error.

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30 Pennington, *Centering Prayer,* 86.

31 On recognizing and rectifying this problem, see Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).

32 Richard Foster, *Sanctuary of the Soul: Journey into Meditative Prayer* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 25.

How Should Christians Respond?

In light of our arguments, those who oppose CP must take care not to overreact, since self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. We agree with evangelical CP proponents on some things, such as that God has given believers his Holy Spirit who works in us and through us, as well as the need for spiritual disciplines like study of and thoughtful meditation on Scripture, *alert* prayer (as opposed to CP), and fasting. All believers should be concerned with developing a deeper inner life, and this is what drives many to explore CP. We must speak the truth in love at all times, with gentleness and respect (Eph. 4:15; 1 Pet. 3:15).[33]

Finally, even if we reject CP, we must understand how God does interact with his children. He is capable of speaking to us at any time, regardless if we are prepared or not (see 1 Samuel 3 and Isaiah 6:1–8, for example). Moreover, when we communicate with God, our prayer does not have to be filled with complex thoughts or many words. Sometimes we simply emote to God; we cry out for help; we express sadness or anger. (Consider the full range of emotions expressed to God in the Psalms.) But none of this calls for going beyond thought. Our interactions with God should be conscious, relational, and rooted in God's revealed truth (John 1:17–18; 18:37). We should accept only those spiritual disciplines that lead to a fuller knowledge of God, that sanctify our character, that teach us to lean on the power of the Holy Spirit, and finally, that compel us to go into the world proclaiming the glory of God's kingdom (Matt. 6:33; 28:18–20; 2 Pet. 1:5–8). Thus, we should earnestly desire to expose and reject any path that would misdirect, misinform, or even entirely derail our journey toward Christian maturity. May God grant us the wisdom and courage to do so.

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[33] Some may call a practice "centering prayer," "contemplative," or "mystical" that has little to do with the subject of this article. Such individuals should consider changing their terminology to avoid unnecessary confusion.