Protestant Barriers to Contemplative Prayer

by J. David Muyskens

i am an ordained protestant minister who has benefited greatly from contemplative prayer. i speak from experience with a way of being open to contemplative prayer called centering prayer. i am well acquainted with some of the resistances protestants have toward contemplation.

What led me to centering prayer was a physician asking me, “are you trying to do it all yourself?” my symptoms were caused by stress. i was trying to do it myself, leaving out my dependence on God. i did not have a private practice of prayer. The question caused me to find that missing ingredient. as i set up a daily practice of prayer I learned that prayer is not only talking to God but also listening and very much a matter of being in faith and love with my creator, lover and holy Spirit. in prayer i put into practice my relationship with the divine. i learned the practice of centering prayer by reading Basil pennington and listening to tapes by Thomas Keating.

We consider contemplative prayer an Eastern practice: eastern religions stress the importance of meditation. Many have thought that to find a quiet, silent prayer one had to go to the east. Since the 16th century many churches had given up teaching contemplative prayer to ordinary people. in the 1970’s three monks in Spencer, mass., Thomas Keating, William meninger and Basil pennington, discussed how contemplative prayer had always been part of the christian tradition but a way of teaching it was needed so modern, ordinary people would know this dimension of the christian tradition. William meninger was especially familiar with

The Cloud of Unknowing from the 14th century. The three developed guidelines for teaching a way of prayer that could open a person to receive the gift of contemplation. We are against Catholics: Thank God this prejudice is declining. But the fight between protestants and catholics still lingers. catholics are more prone to like contemplation. They have grown up with the mystics. catholic communities of men and women are more inclined to be contemplative. as a result some protestants may associate contemplation with catholicism. But in the practice of centering prayer i discovered the value of spending time in silence with God. i enjoy having my relationship with God strengthened by contemplative prayer. centering prayer is not catholic or denominational. it is simply silent relationship and communion with God.

Contemplative Prayer has not been taught in Protestant Churches: The protestant experience doesn’t usually encourage people to be in silent prayer. We all tend to be suspicious of anything different than our usual experience. This suspicion keeps us from following heretical ideas and destructive practices. But it also can cut us off from some fountains of living water. So we miss the contemplative part of the christian tradition. as it is restored to the practices of devotion for protestants, i discover the rich communion with God that is possible by the work of the Spirit. i need to take time for silence.

Prayer consists of talking to God: a friend of mine has little time for silent prayer because he says, “if you have something to say to God just say it.” he considers prayer to be entirely a matter of petitions. But in conversation there has to be more than our talking. We also need to listen to God. and there are times when we simply commune with God, aware of God’s presence and consenting to God’s action in us. it is the same with any relationships in which i am engaged. i need to talk, but i also need to listen and sometimes, when I am most intimate with someone, we spend time together without words. in a workshop where i was one of the presenters, a protestant, much respected, said that in every language prayer means petition. But prayer, as a relationship with God, includes at least three dimensions: listening, talking and being together. contemplative prayer emphasizes the dimension of spending time in awareness of the presence of God. in that moment, i am not telling God about my needs, but, in silence, receiving what God gives.

We customarily use our minds to know truth: our creeds are intellectual statements. in belief we primarily think of propositions of doctrine. Feelings are suspect because they can be fickle. But faith engulfs the whole reader contributions person from the very core of our being. That includes the heart as well as the mind. The whole person can be in silent, deep communion with God. The devil can play tricks with our mind as well as our heart. We need to apply the same suspicion to both. exercising the heart i discover the presence and power of God.

We think a lot about the past and the future: i often would be going over what happened in the past. or i would be planning what comes next. So i missed the present moment. But the past is gone and the future isn’t here yet. I experience the gifts of God in the present moment. in contemplation i live right now. in centering prayer i let go of thoughts of the past and anticipation of the future. i take time to be in the moment with the presence of God and open to the immediate action of God. in contemplative prayer i celebrate the present, right now.

We want answers: For our many questions we want clear answers. churches are filled with people who desire certitude. preachers of growing churches seem to have answers. But the Bible talks about mystery. it encourages belief in God who is beyond our comprehension. The revelation paul received, of which he speaks in ephesians 3, is the mystery hidden for ages. Not mystery as in a puzzle to be solved, but mystery beyond human knowledge, only seen by the light given by the holy Spirit. in contemplative prayer i stand amazed at the love of God not fully understood but known and experienced in the Spirit.

We are afraid to go deep because demons can dwell there: Some teach that going to the place of silence and solitude we can meet the devil there. So we are afraid to go there. But actually, in contemplative prayer, i go to the most sacred sanctuary of christ. i go to the inner sanctum where christ dwells with great power and majesty. The devil cannot enter there because christ’s power and glory expel him. i enter with christ, a fortress of inner strength.

We worship a far-away God: God cannot be contained by our imagination. We worship the all-powerful one, high and lifted up, worthy of our praise. and in contemplative prayer i realize God dwelling within me. I experience God both transcendent and immanent at the same time. aware that God dwells in me and invites me to an intimate relationship, i become a contemplative. one of the great leaders of protestantism, John calvin, described the intimacy of prayer as being held in the “bosom” of God (institutes iii, 20, 5). he described the relationship we can have with God as being in the “sweetness of love” (institutes iii, 20. 28).

We are sinners: of course, we have all sinned. and i know that we need to recognize that. We depend on the grace of christ to free us from our sin and transform us into the people God wants us to be. it is well to remember, we are sinners saved by grace. From martin luther we know that we can be both sinners and saints at the same time. “total depravity” does not mean there is nothing good in me. it means that in every aspect of human life sin has messed me up. But God still loves me and desires an intimate relationship with me. i am created in the image and likeness of God.

Contemplation does not appear in the Bible: yet the Bible does talk about moses and elijah and Jesus going to a secluded place to spend time with God. The Bible speaks frequently about the “heart.” and that does

not mean the organ that pumps blood, but the core of our being. From that emotional, spiritual and physical center of my being i can love God and enter into a deep communion with the divine.

Scripture is our authority: This is true. reading all of scripture teaches me the indwelling presence. i rely on the words of the Bible for truth and guidance. and as i listen to the whole scripture it teaches contemplative prayer.

ps. 46:10 says, “Be still and know that i am God.” christ dwells in me. i know that Jesus talked about our being “in” christ. But it is also true that christ lives in us. he said, “abide with me as i abide in you” (John 15:4). i find in contemplative prayer a way of consenting to that presence and the work of God in me.

We tend to be active, not passive: We trust in God’s activity. and it may seem that our response should also be active. We value obedience as a mark of a true christian. But sometimes i need to be receptive, listen, and be deeply in communion. i need rest and restoration. i find a recovery of the contemplative dimension to be healing. i need quiet times as well as activity.

We’re not good at talking about spiritual experiences: if we do have deep experiences of the presence of God we don’t talk about it. everyone has contemplative moments. in a spectacular scene or a confrontation with beauty or a flashing insight we experience the closeness of God. But we may not share that with anyone else. Some of us have traditions of testimony time. But even these can be canned and not very revelatory. in contemplative prayer i make a regular practice of openness to the reality of God. i can rediscover the power of sharing contemplative moments.

We spend time with God in church, but seldom other places: There are times when we are especially aware of God. But often we try to manage things ourselves. We can go about our daily living without being conscious of God. yet at every moment we depend on the gifts of God. The very gift of life itself means divine energy flows through us. In contemplative prayer i become aware of the Spirit of God and in contemplative living i pay attention to the presence and action of God in every moment. The awareness of God that is given me in prayer becomes a way of life. consciousness of God grows as christ transforms us from within. Through contemplative prayer i become more conscious of God in everyday life, in nature, in events, in people.

Conclusion: i wonder if you share some of these resistances to contemplative prayer? you could take a long look at what they are. are they keeping you from enjoying the fruit of contemplative prayer?

 i find a richness in the practice of centering prayer. it helps draw me into a relationship with God, an appreciation of the present moment, and a letting go of attachments that tend to encumber me. instead of trying to do it all myself i let go and let God guide. i remember a moment in centering prayer at a catholic retreat center in which i felt overwhelmed with the love of God for all. That love erases all barriers. it invites us to enter the contemplative dimension of prayer and life.

David is a retired minister of the reformed church in america and a member of the contemplative outreach circle of Service, serving as international coordinator. he has written two books on centering prayer: Forty Days to a Closer Walk with God: the Practice of Centering Prayer and Sacred Breath: Forty Days of Centering Prayer.