

# Putting on the Mind of Christ

*Contemplative Prayer and Holistic Unity*

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## Introduction

*A clergy member of a mainline Protestant church approached several parishioners to voluntarily participate in a nonscientific “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 could 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 on hearing this label, he asked if she had any questions or concerns. Her response, while a typical one, was yet immensely instructive: “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, it is foundational to our relationship with God. We commonly pray over meals and bow our heads before we lie down to sleep. We lift liturgical prayers in worship and utter brief, gentle thanks under our breath. Prayer is a primary vehicle of growth in the faith journey. But while we are seemingly intimate with the concept of prayer, we often frame it in a monolithic mold, lacking any substance or nuance.

The English word “prayer” comes from the Latin word *precari*, meaning “to beg,” “to implore,” or “to entreat.”<sup>1</sup> As narrow

as that definition seems, there are several major categories of prayer within scripture. *Petitions* and *supplications* are requests made for ourselves or on behalf of someone else (cf. Job 6:8; Phil 4:6); *confessions* are cries to God in an appeal for mercy (cf. Ps 51; Luke 18:13); and the related prayers of *praise* and *thanksgiving* glorify God for God's sake (cf. 1 Sam 2:1–10; Luke 1:46–55), or express gratitude for the blessings we enjoy (cf. 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 categories. However, distinct from such classifications, our *approach* to the devotional life differentiates the depth and character of how prayer informs and shapes our daily lives.

The apostle Paul implores the church at Thessalonica to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17; cf. Luke 18:1). Given that this plea cannot be taken literally according to the categories of prayer described above, Paul must have a different understanding of prayer. A clue to his intent is woven within his explanation of why his audience should pray constantly: “for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess 5:18). Consequently, 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 forms the proper *orientation* or *attitude* of those who pray. The intent of prayer 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. Rather, it is about an approach; it is a permanent mentality of offering all our daily goings on as a continuous attentiveness to God—it is *life* as prayer. Contemplative prayer is grounded in this awareness.

Contemplative prayer is not so much concerned with types or even methods or techniques as it is with the disposition of the heart. Certainly, while there are different methodical ways the contemplative goes about cultivating this heart through prayer, the aim of contemplation is “an unconditional and totally hum-

ble surrender to God, a total acceptance of ourselves and of our situation” as willed by the Divine.<sup>2</sup> If prayer is communication—a “conversation,” as popularly framed—then the contemplative frequently adopts the role of *listener*, eager to be silent and to hear what God has to say. Interestingly, data suggests this receptive mode to be lacking in the United States.

A June 2017 survey of just over one thousand adults (nearly 90 percent of whom professed to be Christian) reflects that the respondents’ prayers were contemplative for only 8 percent of the time. By contrast, an overwhelming majority of prayer in the United States was characterized as a “solitary activity defined primarily by the immediate needs and concerns of the individual.”<sup>3</sup> 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. Furthermore, this approach to prayer risks 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.”<sup>4</sup> Such a definition of prayer is consistent with Paul’s counsel to pray always, living life as prayer. It requires, however, a renewed approach to prayer—one that is not opposed to personal petitions or other types, but 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).<sup>5</sup>

Such prayer requires a worldview in which we see ourselves united with Christ, each other, and all 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 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 following chapters, we examine this assertion from multiple perspectives, using disparate academic disciplines as a basis for critical analysis. The first chapter sets out 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 the virtuous aim of Christian unitive perception and presents contemplative prayer as a tool in achieving that end, consistent with the biblical record in practice and function. Chapter 3 demonstrates the embodiment of these tenets in the life of a *historical* figure taken from the “mystical” tradition of Eastern Christianity and buttresses the argument of contemplation’s transformative qualities, highlighting the background, salient works, contemplative practices, and resulting unitive perception of the mystic. Chapter 4 explores this practice’s mental impacts from a *neuropsychological* perspective, identifying the physiological processes that help determine “self” and describing the shift in our sense of reality resulting from changes to those neural structures. Chapter 5 provides a *theological* synthesis of our work, following the path of prayer as it echoes the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. It also presents a concept of atonement as a natural outgrowth of those observations. We conclude with a final commentary on the “next steps” of Christian education on contemplation.