

## Ancient Spiritual Practices for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church

Imagine this scene. Teens silently form a line in a hallway, patiently waiting late into the night to enter a room in which they will experience an ancient spiritual discipline: contemplative prayer. When they emerge from the prayer room an hour later, many have tears in their eyes, smiles on their faces and peace in their hearts. They have just walked a prayer labyrinth, an interactive eleven-station experience in which the participants learn to practice the presence of Christ. Scenes like this are happening again and again in churches, camps and conferences all over North America.

Spirituality is “in” these days. Many people are searching for truth in new and unconventional ways. In the modern era (roughly the past three hundred years) there was a move away from the spiritual toward the rational, the observable and the quantifiable. During the Reformation Protestants “protested” the mysticism of the Catholic Church and favored a logical interpretation and presentation of scripture—thus the sermon was born. Today’s postmodern culture is increasingly distrustful of science, institutions and established religion. This post-boomer population is once again open to the mystery of the Holy Spirit and eager to understand God in ways other than the traditional sermon.

In a recent survey of twentysomethings George Barna demonstrated that while 80% of twenty to twenty-nine year olds say faith is important and 60% report having a relationship with Christ, only 31% attend church weekly and only 30% make donations to a church. The survey results reveal that America’s young adult population is deeply spiritual but highly disinterested in the modern church. Biblical scholar and theologian Robert Weber makes a case for a return to an ancient spirituality including mystery, holism, community and spiritual disciplines in his important book *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*. Weber argues that ancient traditions must inform our contemporary church practices. He states, “Our challenge is not to reinvent Christianity, but to restore and then adapt classical Christianity to the postmodern cultural situation.” Returning to ancient spiritual practices can help a new generation re-imagine the power of the gospel and re-engage with the church.

Many ancient disciplines are energizing congregations all over America. The list is far too long to review in a short article, but two are worth mentioning in particular.

**The labyrinth** dates back thousands of years and was adopted from Greek culture by Christians in the first centuries following Christ’s death as a tool for prayer. Labyrinths were also widely used in the great gothic cathedrals of medieval Europe, the most famous being in Chartres, France. Laid out as a single path within concentric circles, participants wind their way from the outside into the center and then back out again. The path represents the journey of life at three different levels. First the pilgrim moves toward the center through a variety of twists and turns symbolic of the journey toward God who exists at the center of all life. Next the traveler waits and prays at the center in communion with God. Finally the participant follows the maze out representing a movement with God back into the world. This type of ancient symmetrical circular labyrinth has again become popular and can be found in modern churches throughout North America.

A recent adaptation of the original labyrinth has made use of technology, imagery and prayer stations. Known as the "Prayer Path" in the United States, this labyrinth looks more like a traditional maze than a set of concentric circles. Through eleven interactive prayer stations participants relinquish distractions, confess their failures and admit their brokenness before God. At the center travelers rest on pillows, read from scripture and celebrate communion. As they move outward participants pray for those that are lost, remember the global community of faith and think about the witness they are leaving for others. Finally, participants journal about their time on the labyrinth. Many describe the experience of prayer and meditation as life-changing.

***Lectio divina*** is another ancient practice being used in churches. Simply translated from the Latin, it means "divine reading." Sometimes referred to as "dwelling in the word," *lectio divina* is a way of reading, praying and meditating on scripture with the expectation that God is present and that He can be heard through the text (maybe that is why it's called the Word of God!). This devotional reading of scripture can be traced back to the Desert Fathers and other early church leaders, and was given special prominence by St. Benedict. To this day the Benedictine monks set aside time each day for labor, liturgy and *lectio*.

There are four basic steps involved in *lectio divina*. First is the *lectio*, or "reading/listening." This stage cultivates the ability to listen deeply without distraction. The selected scripture should be read more than once with the option of using different translations and a variety of readers (especially in a group). The listener is encouraged to identify any word or phrase that stands out or "shines." Even in familiar passages something new might catch the reader's attention. This is done in deliberate silence and with great patience. Next is *meditatio*, or "meditation." In this step the listener dwells on or "chews on" (reminiscent of a cow regurgitating its food) a specific word or phrase asking for God's help in letting His Word become flesh. The third step is *oratio*, or "prayer." While the whole exercise can be considered a prayer of scripture, this segment emphasizes a prayer of contriteness. The listener prays that God will shape him or her through the text. The final stage is *contemplatio*, or "contemplation." This is the silent response the reader has to God's magnificent presence. It is a time of resting in the midst of the Living Word.

The *lectio divina* is a discipline of silence, slow reading and careful attention to the voice of God. I have led *lectio divina* with teens, college students, church leaders and entire congregations. In a day when we are often encouraged to read the entire Bible in a year, it is a very profound and diligent way to not only read, but also to experience scripture as a community.

Other ancient spiritual practices could also be discussed. Contemplative worship is growing in popularity among college students and young adults, including silence, prayer, chants, antiphonal responses, etc. Taize worship, a contemplative form of worship based on the pattern of an ecumenical community in Taize, France, draws on all of the senses in quiet reflection. Even so-called contemporary services are engaging in some of these habits. Other reflective approaches include the Jesus Prayer, the *Ignatian Examen*, and spiritual direction. Spiritual habits that are directed not toward silence but to an active response include fasting, journaling, Stations of the Cross, Sabbath and service.

Spiritual disciplines are meant to draw us into the presence of Christ. The ancient practices of the Christian church are not harsh duties to be performed with unquestioning rigor. Instead, they provide a means by which an intensely spiritual though distracted culture can find the source of that spirituality. In his book, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, Mark Yaconelli says, “The contemplative tradition of the Christian faith comes to us as a precious gift in an age when no one has time to sit still. It comes as a medicine to a church culture obsessed with trends, efficiency, techniques, and bullet-point results.” Jesus called His disciple to times of personal retreat. What would happen if we heard this call and practiced His presence in the midst of our busy lives?

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