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Capitalizing on my African American Christian Heritage in the Cultivation of Spiritual Formation and Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

CAPITALIZING ON MY AFRICAN AMERICAN CHRISTIAN HERITAGE IN THE
CULTIVATION OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND
CONTEMPLATIVE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
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for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Global Perspectives

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All quotations from the Bible are from the King James Version.

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ABSTRACT

This project addresses what I perceive to be an opportunity for some aspects of African American spirituality to become more holistic. It is noteworthy that many African American communal worship experiences are powerful and dynamic. I hypothesize that many African American Christians can enjoy an even more enhanced spiritual experience by integrating contemplative spiritual disciplines into present dynamic communal practices for spiritual formation. In Section One, I look at the genesis of the circumstances that necessitated communal solidarity for enslaved Africans in the New World. I follow the path of their religious journey from being a clandestine group of ecstatic Christian worshipers, to eventually establishing their own Christian churches with a distinctively black culture. In Section Two, I examine the spiritual experiences of traditional African American Christian churches and some multi-ethnic churches to ascertain to what extent contemplative spiritual disciplines play a role in spiritual formation, if at all, and note alternatives. In Section Three, I propose my hypothesis as a way forward to fill a gap in some areas of African American spirituality. I argue that practicing the contemplative spiritual disciplines will further enrich the corporate spirituality of many African Americans and replicate that same dynamic encounter with God in their private lives. I present the benefits of consistently practicing the disciplines through the experiences of some leading practitioners. Section Four is a brief, summarized description of the content and structure of the Artifact. Section Five describes the mechanics of bringing the Artifact into fruition. Section Six provides a review of the overall process and discusses further research needed.

The Artifact is a resource for an upcoming focus group discussion, in preparation for a subsequent online presentation of spiritual disciplines in a program called, “The Gathering,” in which this group will participate in as a panel. The purpose is to discuss the value of practicing contemplative spiritual disciplines for an enriched Christian spirituality.

SECTION 1:
THE PERCEIVED OPPORTUNITY

Preface to the Study

In this project, I make no attempt to paint a broad stroke portrayal of African Americans as a people group or of African American spirituality as a singular construct representative of all African Americans. There is no such thing as a universal conceptualization of what constitutes African Americanism or African American spirituality. There are as many diversities and complexities between individual African Americans and among African American groups, as there are in the sum total of all African Americans, and by reference African American spirituality. Therefore, in this project I make claims pertaining to African Americans collectively with respect to a specific context, that is, in particularity, rather than universally. Even though it is true that African Americans differ widely on many levels, and in various times, and places, it is also true, that black Americans of African descent share a historical and Christian religious heritage. I provide an abundance of space in this paper to show how that rich heritage shaped, influenced, and dominated the divergent paths that Christianity undertook for African Americans and other Christians over the centuries.¹

¹ In the research literature, the terms “African,” “Negro,” “black,” “Afro-American,” “African American,” “colored,” “freedmen or free Africans,” and “enslaved Africans,” may be used interchangeably from study to study and within the same study. A fuller understanding is usually derived from context. For the sake of clarity, in this paper I use the terms “enslaved Africans,” or “free Africans,” to distinguish the status of Africans in America during the antebellum period. I use the prevailing, contemporary terms “black,” or “African American,” to denote persons of African descent residing in America as free citizens of the United States of America.

Much of the content in this project is derived from the context of my research on African and African American Christianity and spirituality, from the perspectives of the African Americans in the Focus Group I created for this project, and from my own decades-long, personal observations and experiences in multiple African American churches and instructional settings. In my research for this project, I discovered that there is comparatively very little attention given to spiritual formation and contemplative spiritual disciplines in African American literature or that specifically address the black context. That is, at least in comparison to what has been written more from the perspective of a white, European-American point of view and has been primarily embraced by white audiences. This study has greatly enlightened my understanding of the origins and contributing factors related to my African American Christian heritage. It has aided in defining and crystalizing my divine mission, and self-identity as a senior African American Christian woman.

A Story

Robert was the only child born to the African American couple Joseph and Elizabeth Caldwell. The family lived in Brooklyn, New York where Joseph was employed as a construction worker for a leading real estate developer. They were devout Christians and the most sacred time of praise and worship for them was when the “Holy Spirit fell” on the congregation. In this communal worship experience, they could *feel* the presence of God which edified them and helped them to cope with life’s challenges.

All was well until Joseph suffered a fatal industrial accident when Robert was seventeen years old. Robert knew that the remuneration from his father’s former employer was not sufficient to sustain them long-term. He joined the United States

Marine Corps and was stationed in Iraq. He could never *feel* the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit during his tour of duty, in the absence of an exuberant, communal experience of praise and worship to God, and in the presence of anti-Christian and hostile sentiments. Robert sensed something was missing from his religious experience and he was determined to learn more about God and how to abide in His presence. He used his GI Bill to further his education at an orthodox Christian seminary. At the Christian Religious Center on campus he was introduced to personal spiritual formation and contemplative spiritual disciplines. He felt that this additional component in his spiritual walk was vital to experiencing an abiding presence with God. Robert was extremely elated that he could achieve the same quality of intimacy with God in solitude, in corporate worship, and even in public secular spaces.

Gleaning from the Past for Spiritual Empowerment in the Present

Early Beginnings: Acculturation of Enslaved Africans in the New World

Monica McGoldrick contemplates that slaveholders went to great lengths to break the spirit of enslaved Africans. They attempted to eliminate all vestiges of their African historical and cultural heritage and denigrated their traditions.² Albert Raboteau concurs that slave control in the New World was predicated on the eradication of all forms of African culture to prevent potential collusion and rebellion among the slaves. Despite aggressive attempts to extinguish all elements of African culture and traditions from the consciousness of enslaved Africans, “African folklore, dance, music, art, culture, and

² Monica McGoldrick, *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2005), 77, Questia Online Research.

religious beliefs were transplanted in the New World by the African diaspora.”³ Albeit with modifications reflecting cultural, spiritual, and socio-economic influences of the new environment.

Some of the dehumanizing processes in which this slave control was accomplished is delineated by Nancy Boyd-Franklin who reports that enslaved Africans were forbidden to use their African names, to speak their tribal languages, and to transmit their culture to their children. They were forbidden to practice traditions related to family ties, customs, and spiritual rituals. She is correct in discerning these efforts as “cultural genocide.”⁴ Boyd-Franklin projects that there was a multiplicity of situations in which slaves were traumatized: white slave masters used women as sexual objects, men were used as breeders to increase the labor supply, slaves could not marry legally, and children born to slaves were considered the slaveholders’ chattel. Boyd-Franklin hypothesizes that “The labelling of African slaves as chattel, sub-human, and inferior has had a profound effect on blacks. The residual effects of this labeling have continued through many generations and have had the impact of a *collective posttraumatic stress disorder*.⁵ Boyd-Franklin’s unique hypothesis requires further exploration and critical analysis by the scientific community.

³ Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

⁴ Nancy Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy: Understanding the African American Experience* (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2003), 8.

⁵ Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy*, 8. Although Boyd-Franklin’s hypothesis may currently be unsubstantiated scientifically, this syndrome is blatant in some African American communities. It is widely acknowledged but rarely addressed in any meaningful way. I can attest to witnessing these residual effects in the lives of African Americans over multiple generations. I personally give credence to her perspicacious hypothesis.

African Slavery in America Supplanted by African American Segregation and Discrimination

When institutionalized slavery was eventually abolished in the United States in 1865, it did not bring the anticipated emancipating Jubilee that enslaved Africans envisioned and sang about. Upon emancipation, slaves were thrust into a society where they were not welcomed and in which they were not prepared to cope with independence and self-reliance. Peter Paris observes that “The abolition of slavery marked the end of its absolute status, while on the other hand, it occasioned the beginning of a new era in which the principle of racism was destined to achieve a new form in which to express itself—that of racial segregation and discrimination.”⁶ It was actively and prominently practiced in the South until the 1960s Civil Rights’ agendas influenced its eradication from the legal system. Anthony Campolo and Michael Battle rightly assert that “the foundation for racial reconciliation for church and society lies in honest self-appraisal and confession of one’s participation in oppressive structures and behaviors.”⁷ They offer a way forward through fostering authentic multiracial/multiethnic Christian fellowship and trustworthy relationships.

⁶ Peter Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 4.

⁷ Anthony Campolo and Michael Battle, *The Church Enslaved: A Spirituality of Racial Reconciliation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 139

Christianization of Free and Enslaved Africans in America

The Impetus of the Revivalist Movements in the Conversion of Enslaved and Free Africans to Christianity

Raboteau reports that from the outset of the Atlantic Slave Trade, conversion of African slaves to Christianity was paramount for the emerging nations of Western Christendom, in order to legitimate the system of slavery. Ostensibly, missionary zeal motivated the colonization of the New World. Emphasis was placed on “The grace made available to Africans, who otherwise would die as pagans.”⁸ In the fifteenth century, the chronicler Gomez Eannes De Azurara, made this comment concerning enslaved Africans brought to Portugal: “The greater benefit belonged not to the Portuguese adventurers, but to the captive Africans, for though their bodies were now brought into some subjection, that was a small matter in comparison to their souls, which would now possess true freedom for evermore. They benefitted not only spiritually, but also materially from contact with Westernization.”⁹ Christianity already had a long-term influence on the African continent, although it had little penetration into Sub-Saharan Africa, the provenance of the vast majority of enslaved Africans. Even so, the fallacy of the arguments used by Europeans for the slave trade is refuted by the fact that Christian

⁸ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 96.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

development had African origins.¹⁰ This is not a fact readily known or acknowledged by many Christians.

For sundry reasons, according to Raboteau, only a small portion of slaves received instruction in the Christian faith during the first century and a half of slavery in British North America. He delineates: there was a deficiency of missionaries to catechize slaves; there were linguistic and cultural barriers between Africans and Europeans; slave owners feared Christianity would make their slaves ungovernable and rebellious; slave owners viewed the lengthy process of catechesis as economically unprofitable for them; and some slave owners regarded slaves as incapable of learning.¹¹ Addressing the humanity of African slaves, in his tract *The Negro Christianized* (1706), Cotton Mather, offers a thorough exposition of scriptural arguments illustrating the fallacy of denying full humanity to the Negro.

Pro-slavery advocates for the evangelization of African slaves advanced arguments that Christianization supports the social order rather than upsetting it, as evidenced by Ephesian 6:5.¹² Christian missionaries assured slaveholders that converted slaves are inculcated to serve their masters diligently out of love and duty, rather than fear. Ann Pinn and Anthony Pinn highlight that in the Northern colonies, the Quakers advocated Christian education for African slaves and eventually made strides to end the

¹⁰ See *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007), 9-10. In this work, Thomas Oden explains how “Africa played a decisive role in the formation of Christian culture before being recognized in Europe, and a millennium before [finding its] way to North America.” The seeds spread northward from Africa.

¹¹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 126.

¹² Ephesians 6:5 “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.”

system of slavery. By contrast, Puritans like Cotton Mather advocated converting slaves, while maintaining the system of slavery.¹³ George Fox's admonition in 1657 to Quakers who were negligent in Christianizing their slaves emanates from a compassionate biblical perspective. In a tract entitled, *Gospel Family Order*, Fox exhorted slaveholding Quakers that, "Christ died for all . . . for the tawnies and the blacks and for you who are called whites . . . Let them go free after a considerable period of years and with some compensation for their labor."¹⁴ Fox set the tone for Quaker sentiment in attaching value to all humanity and involvement in social justice issues in general.

History substantiates that the revivalism of the Great Awakening Movements periodically extending across the English colonies ushered in an environment conducive to the conversion of free and enslaved Africans on a large scale. The consuming emotionalism of revivalist movements greatly accelerated Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian efforts to convert enslaved and free Africans. Protestant evangelical revivalism embraced an inclusive, universal aspect that encouraged evangelization to all persons and their active participation in prayer meetings and revival services regardless of their socio-economic status, education, race, and ethnicity. Evangelicals did not refrain from preaching the gospel of salvation to a diversity of congregants for all humans were viewed as sinners in need of God's salvation. Raboteau relates that by 1740, when the Great Awakening was gaining exceptional momentum in the colonies, George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, Jonathan Edwards, and other revivalists noted with great

¹³ Ann Pinn and Anthony Pinn, *Fortress Introduction to Black Church History* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

felicity that blacks were coming to hear their message of salvation in unprecedented numbers. Not only were free blacks and slaves attending revivals, but they were offering public prayer and taking an active role in church leadership as exhorters and preachers.¹⁵ The emphasis on the immediate, inward conversion experience as foremost for baptism by evangelicals, rather than long-term religious training, enabled Christianity to be readily received by illiterate slaves and the general masses. Pinn and Pinn observe, “the Great Awakening’s theological ethos appealed to African slaves because of its reliance on a priesthood of all believers.”¹⁶ The geographical areas influenced by the Great Awakening brought new possibilities in preaching the gospel for lay and ordained black ministry.

Raboteau emphasizes that evangelical revivalists shared corresponding concerns with Anglicans in the observance of orthodox Christian rules of conduct after conversion. The goals of the Anglican clergy were to instill moral precepts through an extensive process of catechesis involving the Ten Commandments, the Apostle’s Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer. But “it was *conviction, repentance, and regeneration* exemplified in the *conversion experience* that was key for evangelicals. The Methodist and Baptist exhorter dramatized and personalized the drama of sin and salvation, of damnation and election. They helped converts to feel the weight of sin, to imagine the threats of Hell, and to accept Christ as the *only Savior*.”¹⁷ Revivalist evangelicals did not attempt an exegesis of complex doctrines of Scripture in their sermons. They expounded simple doctrinal truths

¹⁵ Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African American Religious History* (Beacon Hill, MA: Beacon Press Boston, 1995), 210.

¹⁶ Pinn and Pinn, *Black Church History*, 8.

¹⁷ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 133.

in sermons with an intense emotionalism that resonated with mixed races of congregants. Baptists and Methodists did not require their clergy to have theological training; exhibiting genuine conversion and the ability to articulate the gospel message efficiently was satisfactory. Before prohibitions by church and state, Baptist churches licensed and ordained free and enslaved black men who felt the call to preach, after close scrutiny of their faith walk, and an evaluation of their gifts. Some Methodists circumvented the law by permitting enslaved and free black men to serve as lay preachers or as licensed exhorters.

Baptist and Methodist slaves living in close proximity to towns or cities had opportunities to attend segregated churches with their masters, but the majority of slaves living in rural areas or on plantations were too far away to attend the institutional church. Therefore, denominational missionary societies, local churches, and slaveholders provided monetary support for plantation missions. But some slaveholders preferred to hire a visiting clergyman to preach on their plantations, and others opted to provide their own Christian instruction to their slaves by reading printed sermons, prayer books, or Bible lessons.

Emergence of Independent and Separate Churches Among Persons of African Descent

Due to the ambitious efforts of Baptist and Methodist evangelicals in licensing black men to preach, a significant number of black preachers, free and enslaved, began to pastor their own people during the 1770s and 1780s. They interpreted biblical texts to their congregations relevant to their own context and thereby contributed to establishing a

black culture among free and enslaved blacks in the last quarter of the 18th century.¹⁸ Raboteau notes that in the North, between 1790 and 1820, black Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians founded churches, but they had to strive for complete autonomy. Richard Allen, a licensed and ordained minister and former slave was at the forefront of these developments. He founded Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia in 1794. This was precipitated by a rift that occurred between the black members and white members at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church that enraged Allen and other black Methodists to the point that they left St. George's en masse.¹⁹ The rift was the result of an incident on a Sunday morning in the early 1790s when Methodists were informed that they were required to sit in the rear of the church in a newly constructed balcony. The black Methodists refused to comply and abandoned St. George's as a place of worship for themselves.

Paris declares that blacks sensed an intentional distortion of the Gospel message in the white churches, and discerned that their dignity was compromised by remaining in a marginalized status with whites. He relates, "From slavery through the period of Reconstruction, they were committed to finding ways of separating themselves from the religious moral corruption endemic in the white churches, so that their humanity might be acknowledged in a nonracist appropriation of Christianity."²⁰ For Paris, that orientation was exemplified by Richard Allen who expressed his desire for separation to prevent

¹⁸ Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 24.

¹⁹ Albert Raboteau, *African American Religion* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 30-31.

²⁰ Paris, *Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, 5.

whites from being offended by a black presence, to prevent blacks from getting a distorted view of Christianity, and to elevate the race from the debasement of slavery.

Methodists were the first to take independent control of their church property, finances, and governance on the denominational level. Bethel and other black independent churches emphasized progress for the race and disproving prejudices that support slavery through good moral character, education, and hard work. McGoldrick draws attention to the fact that as the first institution that belonged exclusively to people of African descent in America, the black church was a refuge that provided spiritual support, counseling, and a location for communal gatherings.²¹ The independent churches gave black Christians a voice in articulating their conceptualizations of orthodox Christianity.

Even with the exponential growth of slave converts to Christianity in the slaveholding South, establishing independent religious institutions was not a possibility for them. In the view of slaveholders, slaves participating in the leadership and organization of churches portended of dangerous consequences. However, in the late eighteenth century, black preachers began to convert their own people and founded *separate* black churches for worship. As a result, several “African” churches, as they were called, sprang up before 1800. These African churches consisting of free and enslaved Africans were a more in-depth version of the nascent religious rituals of the hush arbor meetings. Pinn and Pinn note that “in these churches, black Christians worked out their relationship with the Christian God and fought for full participation in American

²¹ McGoldrick, *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*, 81.

society.²² Some of these African congregations were independent in that they selected their own pastors and officers but, were officially controlled and supervised by whites. These African *separate* churches were an exception to the norm in which slaves attended church with their masters or on their home plantations and farms.²³ The African churches thrived in the South but were never great in quantity.

Andrew Billingsley reports that black Christians were not at ease worshipping with whites because the “sermons, prayers, spiritual suppression, and prohibited fellowship” were clear indicators that it was not a church that valued them. He articulates, “Africans were presented with a God who had cursed them and ordained their enslavement in perpetuity. It was obvious to black and white Christians that there were some incongruities in the Christian faith that could not be easily reconciled. Black Christians desired religious freedom devoid of constricting factors that diminish full human potential in accomplishing God’s purposes.”²⁴ In the same vein, Billingsley professes the true freedom the black church desires is to be free to worship God exclusively without hindrance.

Institutional and Non-Institutional Slave Religion in the Antebellum South

The religion of the slaves was both “institutional and non-institutional, visible and invisible, formally organized and spontaneously adapted,”²⁵ observes Raboteau. He

²² Pinn and Pinn, *Black Church History*, 14.

²³ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁴ Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), xxiii, Questia Online Research.

²⁵ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 212.

intimates that the most symbolic part of the slave's religion was manifested in the unauthorized, clandestine spaces where they congregated, and in which contextualized versions of Christianity flourished outside the institutional church.²⁶ Robert Franklin considers slave religion or the “invisible institution” as a “sacred space” in which enslaved Africans were able to exhibit total freedom in their worship experience. This worship was often characterized by a high degree of emotional and sensory expressions.²⁷ According to Don Boraine, the clandestine gathering had more than religious significance for the attendees. He describes the “invisible institution” as an “Agency of Socialization” because it provided children with a setting for learning from the entire slave community. It supplemented the education received from family and peers.²⁸ The major focus in these gatherings centered around spiritual encounters with God and acknowledging His power and goodness in their liberation from slavery.

As slaves throughout the South were severely punished for attending these forbidden, secret prayer meetings, they frequently met in the seclusion of ravines, brush arbors, swamps, woods, or slave quarters. Most slaves rejected the sermons of their master's preachers which were often limited to urging slaves to be obedient and docile. Slaves desired to worship God in a Christianity informed by the Bible which they memorized and added to their repertoire of folktales. They particularly wanted sound

²⁶ Raboteau, *African American Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 47.

²⁷ Robert Franklin, *Another Day's Journey; Black Churches Confronting the American Crisis* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 30, Questia Online Research. Sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier coined the term, “Invisible Institution” to describe slave religion because it was invisible to the eyes of slave masters.

²⁸ Don Boraine, *Children and Childhood in American Religions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009) 4, Questia Online Research.

doctrine in matters pertaining to freedom in *this* life, as well as, the *next*. This was the central theme of their prayers.

The slave meetings were an all-night communal experience following a pattern of preaching, commiseration and support of one another, fervent supplications to God, singing hymns of praise, “feeling the spirit,” and parting prayers of thanksgiving and praise to God. The songs, sermons, and prayers in these meetings reinforced their identification with the Exodus account of God’s liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage.²⁹ They recognized that the Exodus narrative proved that slavery was against God’s will and He would eradicate it. Also, it refuted claims by proponents of slavery that God intended *Africans* to be slaves. Armed with these truisms, African slaves emphasized trusting in God rather than humans for deliverance. In continual sermons and prayers, they reiterated the words⁶⁵⁷ of Moses, “Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord” (Exodus 14:13).³⁰ Appropriating the themes of Exodus as their own story enabled enslaved African Christians in America to comprehend their own value and self-worth in the eyes of God and in His faithfulness for deliverance.

Enslaved Africans creatively synthesized African vocal expressions with Protestant hymns, known as spirituals. For some slaves they inspired rhythmic movements in singing, dancing, handclapping, and foot-stomping. Slaves often created spirituals spontaneously with one singer composing verses reflecting the conditions of their common dilemma and the group responding with a familiar chorus, akin to the call-

²⁹ Exodus 6:1 (“Then the Lord said unto Moses, Now shalt thou see what I will do to Pharaoh: for with a strong hand shall he let them go, and with a strong hand shall he drive them out of his land”).

³⁰ Raboteau, *Fire in the Bones*, 32.

and-response improvisations of contemporary rappers. James Noel believes spirituals represent expressions of the heart and soul of enslaved Africans, and as such, “They express the frustration, anger, and despair, but also, the joy, and love of God and one another.”³¹ Additionally, Paris perceives spirituals as the response of individuals trapped in bondage who desired freedom and the ability to decide their destinies. He characterizes spirituals as, “a product of the spirit of an oppressed people telling the universal story of pain, agony, and suffering through the lens of faith and hope.”³² Spirituals played a significant role in the worship of the invisible institution. This was especially demonstrated by slaves dancing in the counterclockwise circular shuffle known as the “ring shout” wherein they sang praises to God for their deliverance while they danced ecstatically until they experienced a spiritual catharsis and renewal.³³ It is not uncommon to see ecstatic dancing and/or shouting in African American churches today, minus the ring formation.

African and African American Spirituality in Christianity

Continuities and Discontinuities in African Spirituality with Christianity

Raboteau declares that enslaved Africans were linked to their past in the New World through the commonality of certain religious practices, rituals, and belief systems

³¹ James Noel, *The Passion of the Lord: African American Reflections* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004, 165-166.

³² Paris, *Social Teaching of Black Churches*, 9.

³³ In 2017, I was privileged to attend a live performance of the “Ring Shout” presented by the Department of Ethnomusicology at the University of Virginia. The all-female dance group were accompanied by drummers, and a small chorus as they sang and danced uninhibitedly around a designated circle for one hour. The dancing and shouting increasingly gained momentum and intensity—culminating in euphoric, spiritual rapture.

that survived transformation from diverse African cultures and religious traditions. Consequently, “A common religious heritage evolved from the blending and assimilation of many discrete religious heritages of Africans, with their common experience of enslavement in the New World.”³⁴ Collectively, African Christians retained their heritage of song and dance through the “shout” and “spirituals,” which were congruent with revivalist style worship.

Henry Mitchell affirms that numerous African religious doctrines and belief systems that parallel orthodox Christianity predate the onslaught of slavery. This is evidenced by African religious doctrines of the High God’s omnipotence, justice, omniscience, omnipresence, divine justice, and providence. These were not the same biblical beliefs white masters taught slaves in which “emphasis was placed on text out of context, such as Ephesians 6:5.”³⁵ The few slaves that learned to read the entire Bible, though illegal, shared its contents with others and they studied key portions of the Bible to encourage and edify themselves. Enslaved Africans resonated with Galatians 6:7-9 regarding sowing and reaping. This passage exactly cohered with their law of “identical harvest” illustrated in hundreds of African proverbs “using a variety of metaphorical images to declare the justice of God.”³⁶ The doctrine of the providence of God is also

³⁴ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 149.

³⁵ Henry Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 16, Questia Online Research.

Ephesians 6:5 (“Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters, according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ”).

³⁶ Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 16.

very significant in African traditional religion exemplified by countless proverbs and laws which have parallels with Romans 8:28.³⁷ Enslaved Africans were not introduced to these doctrines of God in the New World.

Pinn and Pinn underscore the fact that the felt presence of the Holy Spirit as paramount in Baptist and Methodist revivalists' worship was in harmony with spirit possession in traditional African religious spirituality. Africans who accepted Christianity applied its tenets to their own context of enslavement. These scholars point out that "They adapted the Christian faith in ways that responded to their existential condition and spiritual needs, making the Gospel of Christ a liberating religious experience in this life."³⁸ The Christianity that they formulated denounced all allusions to the gospel that justified slavery and instead stressed a Christian orthodoxy that addressed physical and spiritual freedom.

Through the lens of his African background and vast scholarship, Matthew Michael sheds light on a little known traditional African religious concept pertaining to salvation. He explicates, "There are no cult practices, ritual observances, or ethical motivations in Africa that seriously use 'fall stories' as a framework to understand the past, present, or future of the world."³⁹ For this reason, Christian biblical teachings of the

Galatians 6:7-9 ("Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well-doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not").

³⁷ Romans 8:28 ("And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose").

³⁸ Pinn and Pinn, *Black Church History*, 8-12.

³⁹ Matthew Michael, *Christian Theology and African Traditions* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2013), 168.

necessity of the soul's redemption from the damnation of the fall is a foreign concept that is not easily grasped. Most Africans' conceptions of salvation stem from physical, social, economic, and political realities that have no spiritual significance. Michael states, "This concept of salvation is driven by the temporal, existential concerns of the world now not in the world to come."⁴⁰ For Africans, salvation is translated into benefits and well-being that sustain life such as a good harvest and protection from evil.

Additionally, Mitchell draws attention to Christian doctrines pertaining to Jesus, hell, and the Bible that were unknown to enslaved Africans. He infers that enslaved Africans familiar with the biblical narratives associated with the life and work of Jesus Christ would have readily identified with Him as "Son of God" and intermediary in their earthly oppression. Mitchell asserts that "Through the love and work of the Cross, Jesus made God personal and immanent for Africans."⁴¹ Enslaved Africans had a transcendent conception of the "High God" who could only be approached through dead ancestors, sub-deities, and designated social means. Mitchell maintains that the Good News for enslaved Africans was not so much, "He is risen," as "Immanuel, God with us," because they were already familiar with concepts of life after death and the living dead.

Mitchell informs that there was no doctrine of eternal damnation or hell in the traditional African belief systems because tribal or social systems were designed to mete out punishment in *this* life.⁴² Nonetheless, enslaved Africans readily embraced a doctrine

⁴⁰ Ibid., 168-169.

⁴¹ Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings*, 19.

⁴² Ibid.

of hell wherein God's full measure of justice could be imposed to give sinners their just due beyond human existence. In the absence of fortification from their corpus of proverbs, songs, and narratives that were normally preserved in oral tradition, enslaved Africans diligently studied the tenets of the Bible as the Word of God, and Christianity in general, which they eventually interpreted and adapted to fit their own needs.

The Primacy of the Holy Spirit in African American Pentecostalism and the Azusa Street Revival Nexus

Cheryl Gilkes relates that slave religion with emphasis on the visible manifestation of the power of the spirit in the believer was a precursor to the emergence of black Holiness churches in the 1880s and 1890s, and Pentecostal churches in the early twentieth century.⁴³ Amos Yong states the nineteenth century Holiness Movement focusing on personal piety, influenced twentieth century Pentecostalism by stressing John Wesley's concept of entire sanctification and piety on the personal level. Yong remarks, "Holiness worshipers were already employing camp-meeting style revivalism and language of Holy Spirit fire baptism as endowment with power for service and piety. A number of denominations that had roots in the black Holiness Movement would ultimately become Pentecostal."⁴⁴ Pentecostals introduced speaking in tongues as an indication that a person had truly received the Spirit.

⁴³ Cheryl Gilkes, "The Sanctified Church and the Color Line: Reorganization, Social Change, and the African American Religious Experience," in *Religion in a Changing World: Comparative Studies in Sociology*, ed. Madeline Cousineau (Westport, CN: Praeger, 1998), 167, Questia Online Research.

⁴⁴ Amos Yong, *Afro-Pentecostalism: Black Pentecostalism and Charismatic Christianity in History* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2011), 2, Questia Online Research.

Harvey Cox illustrates the incipient moments of modern Pentecostalism involved William Seymour assuring his multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural followers for several weeks that if they prayed fervently, God would send a new Pentecost like the event recorded in Acts 2:17-19. They believed that God would pour down “a latter rain” as described by the prophet Joel in Joel 2:28, only greater and more eventful than the first Pentecost.⁴⁵ Innumerable Christians were convinced that the latter rain had descended in Los Angeles, CA on April 9, 1906, and ushered in the prayed for revival. When “the power fell” Seymour and several congregants began praising God in unknown tongues. Cox notes that “Throughout the three years of the Revival, participants anticipated experiencing a new Pentecost in a mighty gathering together of the tribes and nations, a worldwide resurgence of faith, and the healings and miracles evident in the first years of Christianity would happen again as a prelude to the second coming of Jesus Christ to establish His visible Kingdom.”⁴⁶ The modern Pentecostal movement motivated its adherents to evangelize the world with their new found experience of the Holy Spirit. They were instrumental in millions of people around the globe experiencing the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit. However, Cox brings awareness that modern

⁴⁵ Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995), 45-47, Questia Online Research.

Acts 2:17-19 (“And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams: And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy: And I will show wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke”).

Joel 2:28 (“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions”).

⁴⁶ Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, 48.

Pentecostalism has had many predecessors and has subdivided countless times since the Azusa Street revivals.

For Gilkes, the Azusa Street Revival marks the emergence of modern Pentecostalism and is the phenomenon from which most Pentecostal churches owe their heritage. Charles Parham is credited with its doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit evidenced by speaking in tongues, in Topeka, Kansas, 1901. Gilkes points out that the Azusa Street Revival is *the* singular event attributable to the movement's existence. Parham's mentee, William Seymour, a black Holiness preacher was the leader whose doctrinal emphasis was speaking in tongues as evidence of a person being "saved, sanctified, filled with the Holy Ghost and fire baptized; exhibited by tears, dancing, upraised hands, and testimonies."⁴⁷ Charles Parham reportedly denounced the Azusa Street Revival as a darkies camp meeting, and distanced himself from Seymour. White Pentecostals eventually divorced themselves from its African American origin and formed their own churches.

Additionally, Yong insists "There is no one exclusive black Pentecostal Movement and no one form of black Pentecostal life. African American Pentecostals can be found in a diversity of strains and sizes from regional groups to those with international constituencies"⁴⁸ He identifies four basic types of African American Pentecostal groups:

1) Classical Wesleyan Holiness Trinitarian Pentecostals

⁴⁷ Gilkes, "The Sanctified Church and the Color Line," 172.

⁴⁸ Yong, *Afro-Pentecostalism*, 3.

2) Classical Apostolic

3) Charismatic independent congregations or networks

4) Neo-Pentecostal currents within the wider black church tradition

“Collectively, these Pentecostal groups are characterized by their belief that the ‘baptism or outpouring’ of the Holy Spirit on the believer represents God’s grace subsequent to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at conversion.”⁴⁹ It potentially empowers Christians to lead holy lives and do great exploits for the Kingdom of God.

Yong notes that some classical African American Pentecostal denominations trace their roots to the Azusa Street Revival and Holiness traditions, such as the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), the Assemblies of God, and the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. Black Neo-Pentecostals, such as, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, retain their denominational theology but integrate Pentecostal elements in worship and practices. Charismatic churches emphasize the demonstration of spiritual gifts in the personal experience of the believer and in corporate worship without the requirement of speaking in tongues as evidence of the Spirit’s presence. Its focus on attaining optimal health and achieving material wealth as a spiritual endeavor has spread rapidly into mainline congregations.⁵⁰ In Ross Douthat’s comprehensive and critical examination of decades of Christian theological trends, he brings awareness to the inherent flaws in many religious doctrinal traditions. He posits that the theologies of many prominent Christian leaders representing various denominational strains of

⁴⁹ Yong, *Afro-Pentecostalism*, 4.

⁵⁰ Yong, *Afro-Pentecostalism*, 3-4.

Christianity deviate remarkably from biblical precedents.⁵¹ In some instances, the notoriety and dogma of Christian leaders overshadows biblical thought and practices.

Research literature indicates that Pentecostalism as a whole is increasingly being transformed from the margins of society into mainstream Protestantism.⁵² It is well documented that the largest constituencies of Pentecostalism reside in the Global South and are influencing the practices of mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches. Under Seymour's leadership, ecstatic worship was the norm and sanctification meant withdrawal from the world. More ministries are focusing on social activism as Pentecostalism is steadily becoming a powerful force in America and worldwide.⁵³ Progressive Pentecostals of the Emergent Movement are following the model of Jesus Christ in announcing the Kingdom of God while meeting the concrete needs of those they encounter and sometimes doing heroic deeds in the process.

A Perceived Ministry Opportunity: Integrating the Heritage of African American Communal Spirituality into Personal Spiritual Disciplines for Holistic Spirituality

Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori researched the material in their book for four years, in twenty different countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and eastern Europe. In *Global Pentecostalism: A New Face of Christian Social Engagement*, they offer a thorough depiction of modern Pentecostalism that captures the essence of its

⁵¹ See, Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How Did We Become a Nation of Heretics* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2012), 103.

⁵² See, Donald Lewis and Richard Pierard, eds., *Global Evangelicalism: Theology, History and Culture in Regional Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 60.

⁵³ Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 211.

various strains and worship styles globally. Their worship experience at Kampala Pentecostal Church in Uganda, epitomizes contemporary African American liturgies. In Kampala, they observed worship service commencing with energetic, vivacious songs to inspire congregational interaction which later shifted to more subdued and heartfelt songs to usher in the felt presence of the Holy Spirit individually and corporately. Communing with God was the most sacred moment in the service. Following this encounter with God, a worship leader led the congregation in corporate prayer in the Spirit with some individuals prophesying. Scriptures were read over the offering, the sermon was preached, and an alter call was made for salvation or healing.

Miller and Yamamori's analysis and keen observations of the Kampala worship experience are reflected in their statements:

The sincerity and authenticity of the several hundred worshippers was palpable as heart, mind, and body coalesced into one concerted effort to connect the human with the divine. The songs were not about God or Jesus, rather worshippers were singing directly to God. The assumption was that God was present; He was there in the midst of the people. Worship in this style was a collaborative process. Regardless of one's situation in life, everyone was equal before God and had a right to speak publicly. Pentecostal worship is not a matter of mere cognitive assent to theological propositions. It is an experience of allowing oneself to feel the presence of God, and for that reason worship is a full-bodied expression. People raise their hands in praise. Their bodies sway in rhythm to the music. Some people dance.⁵⁴

As illustrated above, there is no question of the efficacy and value of the communal aspect of the African American Christian heritage wherein congregants surrender themselves to the "infilling of the Holy Spirit" for catharsis, renewal, illumination, and

⁵⁴ Miller and Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: A New Face of Christian Social Engagement*, 129.

edification. This Christian heritage is strong in communal worship, but not as strong in cultivating personal spiritual formation through contemplative spiritual disciplines. My personal experiences are in accord with Bradley Holt's observations that "for the most part, fostering personal spiritual formation in the disciplines such as prayer and meditation is not a high priority for Christian churches and seminaries. Nor, are believers apprised of the Christian traditions relating to these practices."⁵⁵ There are multiple benefits derived from practicing these disciplines. Believers frequently discover their relevance and purpose in the world and develop authentic relationships with God.

A Brief Look at the Emphases of Some Prominent African American Churches

To understand the degree to which African American Christian churches might be practicing contemplative spiritual disciplines for personal spiritual formation, I checked some sources on the internet. I conducted a cursory search on the websites of some prominent African American Pentecostal churches in the United States to ascertain their ministry focus and initiatives. The search revealed that most of the churches selected did not explicitly verbalize the existence of programs geared toward spiritual formation through contemplative spiritual practices. Collectively, the sponsored programs showcased the following: children's and youth ministries; men's ministries; women's ministries; couples' ministry; and counseling, which were standard in all churches with

⁵⁵ Bradley Holt, *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 22, Questia Online Research.

supplementations as noted below.⁵⁶ Only one church searched, World Changers Church International in Atlanta, a charismatic church pastored by Creflo Dollar, had a range of ministries targeting consistent, personal, spiritual growth and development, over and above educational, economic, and social mentoring or support common to all churches searched. World Changers Church International has a Bible School and offers daily devotions, Bible study, prayer, and daily confessions. (<https://creflodollarministries.org/>). The overall findings concerning all churches reviewed, suggest that other methods were emphasized for spiritual formation and development.

Summary

Section One is foundational for understanding the religious, socio-political, and cultural dynamics that shaped and influenced the African American Christian heritage. The sense of identity and community in a shared religious and oppressive experience, became the glue that cemented the interpersonal relationships of persons of African descent in the New World. They have attached great value to their communal, contextualized worship experience as the focal point in their spirituality. The strength of this spirituality is evident in the exuberance of corporate worship in which the felt presence of the Holy Spirit is fundamental.

⁵⁶ The Potters House in Dallas (T.D. Jakes), has a School of Ministry, offers ministry in evangelism, mentoring, and spiritual support; <https://thepottershouse.org/ministries/ministerial-affairs/>. West Angeles Church of God in Christ in Los Angeles (Charles Blake) has a Bible College, offers ministries involving discipleship, evangelism, homelessness, prisoners, prayer, and world missions; Westa.org. Crenshaw Christian Center in Los Angeles (Frederick Price) has ministries for alcohol and drug abuse, community outreach, correctional care, HIV/AIDS, and intercessory prayer; crenshawchristiancenter.net. City of Refuge in Los Angeles (Noel Jones) has ministries pertaining to deafness, outreach, worship and worship arts; www.noeljonesministries.org.

Through research, observation, and experience it is perceived that the legacy of the corporate strength in African American spirituality has resulted in some contemporary African American Christians to focus more on this significance, and to a much lesser degree on fostering personal spiritual development or formation. Practicing the contemplative spiritual disciplines are opportunities for filling this gap by fostering spiritual formation and encountering God in a powerful way privately and corporately. In Section Two, I recognize Christian ministries that encourage the practice of contemplative spiritual disciplines in personal spiritual formation. I also examine ministries that are approximating the contemplative spiritual life and those practicing alternative ways of ministry.

SECTION 2:

OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

The Efficacy of the Holy Spirit in Nuances of African American Christian Praxis*Experiencing Transformation and Wholeness*

From his observations of black church culture, Robert Franklin delineates seven main traditions African American churches practice in seeking spiritual communion with God:

1. **The Evangelical Tradition**—seeks a deeper knowledge of God’s Word, following conversion, through study, teaching, and preaching.
2. **The Holiness Tradition**—seeks purity of life and thought through the disciplines of fasting, renunciation, and prayer.
3. **The Charismatic Tradition**—seeks empowerment through the Holy Spirit in prayer and tarrying, in the search for spiritual gifts (William Seymour, the modern father of black Pentecostalism represents this tradition).
4. **The Social Justice Tradition**—seeks a public righteousness through community activism, political advocacy, and preaching (This tradition is represented by Rev. Vernon Johns, predecessor of Dr. Martin Luther King at Dexter Baptist Church).
5. **The Afrocentric Tradition**—seeks to celebrate the halcyon days of the African past and to affirm black identity in the present through cultural displays and identification with African history and rituals.
6. **The Contemplative Traditions of Spirituality**—seeks intimacy with God and employs the disciplines of prayer and meditation (In the black church tradition, the theologian and mystic, Howard Thurman has been viewed as a towering symbol of this style of spiritual existence).
7. **The New Age Nontheistic Tradition**—seeks peace of mind and harmony with nature through meditation, chanting, and music (This is a new and small expression of the black community)⁵⁷

Franklin notes that congregants in black churches understand that when they commune with God through the Holy Spirit they are being made whole. There is often a

⁵⁷ Robert Franklin, *Another Day’s Journey*, 41.

designated period in the communal worship service for intimate engagement with God. In these instances, congregants have complete freedom to exercise their own personal style of spirituality in which they intimately sense or commune with God. These experiences may be “introspective, corrective, therapeutic or empowering.”⁵⁸ Franklin makes a valid claim in noting that in the black church tradition, personal and social transformation are interrelated. He states, “It emphasizes that personal conversion, moral renewal, and sanctification should manifest themselves in acts of justice, charity, and service in the wider world.”⁵⁹ For many black Christians this raises the bar for their individual responsibility in caring for the world outside of their church community and heightens their awareness of their duty to participate with others in combating social evil.

The Power of the Holy Spirit in Personal and Corporate Communion with God

In his research on worship services in African America churches, Timothy Nelson began his project with Eastside Chapel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and the present work is the product of his findings in that endeavor. He observed that the congregants in this church understand that God is omnipresent, but they also believe that in His immanence He can be called on at any time and place. God is conceived as manifesting Himself in various degrees of intensity in specific environments. The church sanctuary where worship takes place is considered a sacred space designated for God’s habitation.

⁵⁸ Franklin, *Another Day’s Journey*, 41.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

For the members of Eastside, worship is a duty that recognizes God's deity and is an opportunity to express love, devotion, gratitude, and praise for all His blessings. They believe, "Worship is God's rightful due as one's Creator, Savior, and Sustainer. Worship is a response to God's blessings."⁶⁰ When God is present in communal worship He will speak words of encouragement and instruction to the whole congregation. God will also act with power to touch and transform individuals. He will heal the sick, mend the brokenhearted, and save the lost. Nelson apprehends that, "When God's Spirit is present in the service, tremendous spiritual power is unleashed—power to reveal hidden spiritual truth and predict future events, power to transform lives and remove whatever hinders participants from reaching their full spiritual potential, even power to heal physical and emotional ailments."⁶¹ Worship is a time set aside in the service for this dynamic encounter with God.

For the congregants at Eastside, studying the Bible privately or in a formal Bible study group is deemed a necessity for exhortation and revelation in the understanding of God's ways and purposes. The Holy Spirit is the teacher who reveals deep spiritual truths. Nelson discerns, "Because the Holy Spirit is the one who reveals truth, when the Spirit is present in the worship service, He communicates these spiritual truths to the gathered worshippers. The preacher is the mouthpiece of God's Word, the medium of the divine message."⁶² Therefore, the authority of the preacher in the congregation is thought to emanate from God. Believers at Eastside report that sitting under a pastor who

⁶⁰ Timothy Nelson, *Every Time I Feel the Spirit: Religious Experience and Ritual in an African American Church* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2004), 121, Questia Online Research.

⁶¹ Nelson, *Every Time I Feel the Spirit*, 123.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 124-128.

preaches the Word, enables the anointing of God's Spirit upon the pastor to flow through the Word that the pastor preaches to those assembled, enabling them to lead a fulfilled Christian life. Members of Eastside profess the need of humanity to continually appropriate God's power through individual Bible study and prayer, and attendance in corporate worship services.

As a folklorist, Glenn Hinson's purpose for conducting an ethnographic study of Long Branch Disciple Church in North Carolina, was to understand reported experiences of the Holy Spirit's power among Christians. He acknowledges that he knew little of its reality prior to his investigation. Like others he regarded "testimonies, prayers, sermons, and songs as ways of artfully capturing and conveying community meaning."⁶³ His narrative is based on one church service—a celebratory service honoring the twentieth anniversary of North Carolina's gospel singers, the Branchettes. Upon choosing the medium of song as a pathway into his project he soon discovered that understanding the sanctified experience of song required one to be in tune with the Spirit in order to feel the power of the Spirit. He was advised by the saints in the church that the Spirit manifests Himself in diverse ways. "The Spirit can draw a saint's feet into the exhilarating steps of a holy dance, empower preachers with wisdom and revelation, summon from the throat a shout of praise and jubilation, lead a tongue into revel in phrasing an unknown celestial language, and it can push a singer to voice lyrics never before heard by mortal ears."⁶⁴

⁶³ Glenn Hinson, *Fire in My Bones: Transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American Gospel* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 2, Questia Online Research.

⁶⁴ Hinson, *Fire in My Bones*, 3.

Song, preaching, praying, testifying, witnessing, and praising are all avenues of ushering in transcendence.

Historically, various musical expressions and forms of supplication have always been an integral part of African American spirituality. For this reason, Hinson chose this special celebratory song program to explore meaning and experience in the sanctified world of the African American experience. He notes:

Public prayer initiates the program's formal conversation with the Lord, opening the service with explicit entreaty and thanks. At the same time, it encourages private, unvoiced communion eliciting reflection, and inspiring personal prayer. Prayer supplements song with a message of thanksgiving, setting the services off on a path of devotional celebration. At the same time, it explicitly asks the Spirit to guide the proceedings and calls on saints to open their hearts to that guidance. Prayer's style symbolically alludes to the touch of transcendence, while its words overtly invite that touch. And its delivery offers a model for intense worshipful engagement. Prayer indeed provides a foundation for worship.⁶⁵

He observed the congregants at Long Branch Disciple Church service clapping hands, tapping feet, and swaying bodies in accompaniment to singing in exaltation to God and magnifying His name, thus welcoming the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He was advised that true saints are characterized by lifestyles of praise and prayer in daily living, heeding the psalmist's call to "bless the Lord at all times" (Psalm 34:1) and the Apostle Paul's charge to "pray without ceasing" (1Thessalonians 5:17).⁶⁶ Hinson concludes that private worship necessarily complements and reinforces corporate worship. The experience of the Holy Spirit in corporate worship communicates divine truths to the human spirit which informs and guides Christians in their journey of sanctification.

⁶⁵ Hinson, *Fire in My Bones*, 73.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

Spiritual and Social Transformation in African American Spirituality

The Mission of African American Christians as Agents of Change

James Harris is critical of contemporary American worship services that are highly animated and inspire congregants to sing, dance, and shout in praise to God, but fail to address the existential needs of the whole person. He states, “The church needs to do more than what most evangelicals typically do—praising God and winning souls to Jesus Christ through focusing on personal salvation and a . . . mentality that concentrates on salvation from personal sin, because such a focus overlooks oppression, injustice, poverty, and a host of other social ills as manifestations of sinfulness.”⁶⁷ He is adamant that worship should be oriented toward both spiritual and social transformation. For Harris, true spiritual transformation strives to create a society in which justice and fairness are normative. Therefore, authentic spiritual transformation is equated with authentic social transformation.

Harris exhorts African American preachers to address the sin of socio-political and economic oppression by, “teaching the importance of doing God’s will in making a more egalitarian community a reality. As long as we think of salvation as an individual, personal experience, instead of a community experience, we fail to understand the Exodus event as a paradigm of liberation and salvation.”⁶⁸ Thus, acknowledging God’s justice and righteousness is to worship Him in Spirit and in truth. Harris advises that, “When worship is totally devoted to God, grounded in love and humility, and devoid of

⁶⁷ James Harris, *Pastoral Theology: A Black Church Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 4, Questia Online Research.

⁶⁸ Harris, *Pastoral Theology*, 92-93.

any semblance of egoism, we experience the unspeakable joy that has characterized the black church from its brush arbor days to the present.”⁶⁹ From Harris’ perspective, parishioners should perceive Jesus, not only as Redeemer, but also, as Liberator. He is clear, that if parishioners harness the power of the Spirit experienced in Sunday worship and allow the Holy Spirit to teach them how to deal with their daily circumstances, they can become agents of change. They can make a positive impact privately and collectively. Then progressively, the African American community liberates itself from oppression.

Proactive Holistic Ministry: The Sacred and The Secular

In a similar vein to the discourse advanced by Harris above, Andrew Billingsley, a Christian sociologist, conducted extensive research over several years on primarily Protestant black churches. He examined the extent and manner in which these churches are agents of social reform in their communities. More than one thousand black churches were studied from various regions across the United States. The thesis that propelled the investigation was that, “Faithfulness to the Christian Gospel which they proclaim requires gathered communities of faith to be involved in the changing panorama of political, economic, social, demographic, educational, and cultural realities in which persons live out their lives. It must have grasped the truth that service and concern for those God loves is worship.”⁷⁰ Billingsley is supportive of the Christian mentality that goes beyond

⁶⁹ Ibid., 95.

⁷⁰ Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like a River*, xiv.

addressing personal salvation, but, also includes strategies of activism for comprehensive social reform in the community.

The conclusion drawn from his study was that community outreach activities in black churches are extensive, especially in urban areas. The majority of contemporary black clergy are maintaining their dual role as spiritual leader and community activist in their localities. All the black churches in several regions surveyed were committed to at least one community outreach program. It was also observed that the nature of outreach programs differed from the 1950s and 1960s, which were more concerned with protests against oppression that originated outside the black community. Contemporary black churches are focused more on social service interventions and community development initiatives that address systemic problems within the black community. Billingsley noted that the most prevalent types of community outreach programs conducted by black churches across the United States were geared toward strengthening and supporting families. The second most frequent types of programs dealt with a variety of programs for children and youth, especially black adolescents. A third key type of outreach program was designed to service the elderly.

From the one thousand churches surveyed, Billingsley profiled twelve large, outstanding, well-established, urban, black churches. Their leaders were committed to developing community-oriented programs and ministries geared toward strengthening African American families and communities. Billingsley states, "A further characteristic of these twelve churches is that they all have dynamic worship programs. We have found in our studies and observations that churches without dynamic and Spirit-filled worship programs are not likely to sustain active community building activities. The two seem to

reinforce each other.”⁷¹ This is not surprising because dynamic worship among African Americans has been the sustaining force that has undergirded them throughout their history of economic and sociocultural adversities.

Billingsley points out that even though black churches have demonstrated the capability to be significant agents of change and reform, their contributions are not always appreciated by blacks or whites in America who may need their assistance. He relates, “In times of extreme and sustained crisis, the African American community will turn to the churches and their ministers for comfort, support, leadership, and guidance.”⁷² However, he also brings attention to the fact that leadership and guidance are not always forthcoming from all churches.

He notes that for the most part, churches led by strong and resourceful ministers who lead strong and resourceful churches are most likely to offer assistance. Billingsley identifies three typical responses of black churches to a societal need:

Some churches will tend to be conservative, confining themselves to their basic spiritual and religious work, thus ignoring, or seeming to ignore, the social crises around them. Other churches will reach out just a little bit to embrace social or community issues. They may invite guest speakers to address these issues or open their doors for community meetings. They will feed the hungry and clothe the naked on special occasions. Saving souls must take priority over social action. The third category comprises the activist churches, headed by activist ministers. They move with vigor into the community to confront the secular crises engulfing people. Often these churches do not distinguish between sacred and secular issues. They focus instead on their calling to minister to the whole person and the whole community.⁷³

⁷¹ Billingsley, *Mighty Like a River*, 146.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 185.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 185.

From Billingsley's perspective, social reform is ultimately contingent upon the faith of the leadership and the community's faith that their desired social reforms are attainable.

Emergent Paradigms of Pentecostalism in Multi-Cultural and Multi-Ethnic Spirituality

Oasis Christian Center: Propagating the Mission of God through Celebrity Status

Gerardo Marti's research entailed twelve months of fieldwork that included fifty in-depth interviews with members of Oasis Christian Center (OCC), to study how members of this racially diverse congregation interact with one another and how their lives are impacted by the Hollywood culture in which the church is embedded. Early on, in his investigation he discovered that Oasis is committed to racial and ethnic diversity and equality, which is foundational to its mission. OCC is a large nondenominational, Holiness/Word of Faith, charismatic church which emphasizes the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. OCC differs from most traditional evangelical churches in that it shares a closer affinity with the new worship communities known as the *New Paradigm Church*. These new communities emanate from the modern Pentecostalism of the early twentieth century but prefer to be independent of any denominational affiliation. Marti explains, "This neo-Pentecostalism does not emphasize the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues, but rather focuses on the power of the Holy Spirit to effect prophetic utterances, health, vibrant worship, and prosperity for believers."⁷⁴ As a new paradigm church, OCC's greatest expansion has been attributable to Millennials

⁷⁴ Gerardo Marti, *Hollywood Faith, Holiness, Prosperity, and Ambition in a Los Angeles Church* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 6, Questia Online Research.

seeking spiritual authenticity through contemporary expressions of music and the arts in worship.

A large portion of the OCC congregation have ties to the Hollywood, California entertainment industry and the church provides them with a spirituality that enables them to identify themselves as overcomers and champions which anchors them in the stresses and overwhelming challenges of their professional world. These believers strive to be champions in life as they pursue their God-given potential. In this church setting, they learn to rely on God with the confidence that their talents are God-given and therefore their pursuit of success in Hollywood is in alignment with His divine purposes and glorification in that arena. The aim is not only to fulfill their personal goals, but also to fulfill a God-sanctioned mission of evangelism that can only be realized by their success.

Marti states, “By helping entertainment industry workers negotiate their desire for fame through religious devotion, Oasis pioneers a new religious identity for an emerging generation of workers within the creative class who actively brand themselves, seek celebrity for their creative skills, and manage the uncertainties of career.”⁷⁵ Their focus progressively moves away from self-orientation and self-promotion to exemplifying the core values of OCC in advocating moral imperatives, developing a global missional focus and participating in the transformation of the world in collaboration with God. Marti professes that, “It is in the development of Christianity that we see a more expansive understanding of the individual and a redefinition of greatness away from self-aggrandizement, to a promotion of God, His people, and the world.”⁷⁶ OCC advocates

⁷⁵ Marti, *Hollywood Faith*, 137.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

that this is one's obligation as individuals redeemed by Christ. The spiritual life experience becomes much more significant than the material, physical existence. These congregants are aware that Scripture repeatedly warns that improper motives for the attainment of wealth and fame without the attendant orientation of an inner life focused on the love of God and humanity, results in meaninglessness as indicated in Matthew 16:26 and First Corinthians 13:1-3.⁷⁷ Congregants at OCC believe their work is a testament to their divine destiny in service to Christ.

Jesus Christ as Model for Altruism and Social Ministry

In their effort to research growing churches in the developing world that were engaged in substantial social ministry, Miller and Yamamori solicited the assistance of four hundred high profile experts in the field of missions, Christian denominations, and others for nominations of churches to study. "The congregations had to meet four criteria: 1) be fast growing; 2) be located in the developing world; 3) have active social programs addressing needs in their community; 4) be indigenous movements that were self-supporting and not dependent upon outside contributions."⁷⁸ Nearly eighty-five percent of the churches that were nominated were Pentecostal or charismatic. The study entailed three hundred interviews, hundreds of hours of worship services, cell group meetings, and other church activities. Miller and Yamamori's exploration centers on an

⁷⁷ Matthew 16:26 ("For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"). I Corinthians 13:3 ("And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing").

⁷⁸ Miller and Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism*, 5.

emergent movement within Pentecostal churches worldwide that are having a significant impact on global Christianity. Evangelism and holistic social activism characterize this Movement patterned after Jesus's ministry of addressing the spiritual and temporal needs of the people He encountered.

The authors use the term *Progressive Pentecostals* to characterize this emergent movement and describe it in this way: "We define Progressive Pentecostals as Christians who claim to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and the life of Jesus and seek to holistically address the spiritual, social, and physical needs of people in their communities."⁷⁹ These Pentecostals adhere to traditional Pentecostal doctrines concerning the transforming power of the Holy Spirit and experiencing the Presence of the Spirit in personal encounters. But, the Holy Spirit's inspiration and empowerment in their lives far exceeds that of their Pentecostal predecessors in social engagement.

These neo-Pentecostals are involved in an abundance of social ministries that have a wide range—from emergency relief in response to natural disasters, to programs geared toward addressing systemic change in adverse conditions for specific populations. Miller and Yamamori maintain that it is the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in private and corporate worship that impels them to perform these sacrificial acts of social activism. They stress the importance of active participation in corporate worship for renewal, as well as, daily practices in personal prayer to sustain these types of commitments in service to others. They observe, "The founders of these programs are driven by a sense of calling, a feeling of thanksgiving of how God has intervened in their

⁷⁹ Miller and Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism*, 2.

personal lives, and they are constantly reinventing their programs in response to what they perceive to be the leading of the Holy Spirit.”⁸⁰ Progressive Pentecostal leaders trust in God’s omnipotence to enable them to demonstrate His love, compassion, and mercy in the world. “These moments of meditation and prayerful reflection on Scripture cause one to realize that the work of their mission will only be attainable in God’s strength and power and not on the basis of one’s personal strength alone.”⁸¹ As servants of the Lord, individuals are purely vessels of the Divine purpose.

Challenge to Christian Faith Leads to Spiritual Conflict

Perennial studies of researchers from various disciplines have revealed that many Americans believe in God and report experiencing direct contact with Him. Other individuals like T. M. Luhrmann are skeptical of this experience and require empirical evidence of its validity. From the perspective of a psychological anthropologist, Luhrmann’s research explores how God becomes real for American evangelical Christians. She describes evangelicals as “holding to the conservative Christian tradition that the Bible is the inerrant and infallible Word of God and they are born-again Christians through the salvific work of Jesus Christ. They also adhere to biblical mandates to share the salvation of the Gospel through evangelistic efforts.”⁸² Luhrmann

⁸⁰ Miller and Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism*, 127.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁸² For a historical understanding of evangelicalism see, D.W. Bebbington’s classic work, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, UK: Routledge, 2002). To understand the globalization of evangelicalism and its expansion in the southern hemisphere, see, *Global Evangelicalism: Theology, History, and Culture in Regional Perspective*, ed. Donald Lewis and Richard Pierard (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

declares the major shift in American spirituality over the past half century has been toward an immanent God who loves unconditionally, forgives completely, and is a source of joy. She is perplexed that, “evangelicals have sought out and cultivated concrete experiences of God’s realness”⁸³ This modern God is not only real for the majority of American evangelicals, but also personal.

In her investigation of how God becomes real for modern people, and the shift in the American imagination of God, Luhrmann chose congregations of The Vineyard Christian Fellowship, in Chicago and California respectively, for her ethnographic studies. Luhrmann views The Vineyard as a prime example of *new paradigm* Protestantism or *neo-Pentecostalism*, with its emphasis on a Pentecostal ethos, experiencing God’s presence “immediately, directly, and personally.”⁸⁴ Consistent with anthropological methodologies, her investigation involved careful observations, participation, and listening in her attempt to understand the world of evangelicals in which God is known and experienced. For over two years at a Vineyard in Chicago, she attended weekly Sunday services, attended regional conferences and various worship gatherings, joined a weekly house group, and interviewed more than thirty congregants regarding their experiences with God. This was followed by more than two years of research in California where she primarily replicated her anthropological methodologies in Chicago.

⁸³ T.M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 2012), xv.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, xx.

Luhrmann records that the typical Sunday service at Vineyard-Chicago began with worship through the medium of music. This worship period is a personal and private time to commune with God in the corporate setting. The parishioners are free to sit, stand, sing, pray, raise hands, sway, or dance. Love songs are sung to God and about Him. God is understood to be omnipresent, but His presence can be felt individually and corporately when He is invited, and His voice can be heard, but not audibly. Individuals can dialogue with Him and He answers back through thoughts and images in the mind. Prayer can be an avenue to listening to God. Sometimes He speaks to believers through circumstances in their lives or in dreams. “But, God will always speak through His Word. Evangelical Christians at Vineyard intentionally look for ways in which God answers, inspires, consoles, enlightens, brings joy, peace and anything else that has a compelling effect on the believer while reading the Bible.”⁸⁵ Luhrmann indicates, so for Christians, when God is known through the mind, God is necessarily immediately present.

By ascribing primarily human cognitive processes to explain Christian spirituality, Luhrmann further conjectures that the Christian experience is one of imagining the mind differently and thinking and feeling in new ways. She asserts that if God speaks, His voice is heard through human minds. In spite of her detailed, scientific exposition on how one comes to know God as real, Luhrmann concedes that she does not “presume to know ultimate reality,” and that another factor that may contribute to the way an individual experiences God, may possibly be the actual presence of the divine. She acknowledges that she has come to know God through the process of the present project, but she does not think of God in terms of having the degree of reality as tangible,

⁸⁵ Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 39.

material objects. She does not consider herself a Christian, however admits to involving herself in Christian apologetics and experiencing the joy that can only come from God.

Summary

In this section, the detailed ministry practices revealed that the primacy of the Holy Spirit as the vehicle for an intimate encounter with God in the communal experience, is paramount in all the ministry orientations. It was of no consequence, whether listening to God and dialoguing with Him, seeking God's will in social justice matters and heroic humanitarian acts, seeking God's power for healing and transformation, seeking God's direction as agents of change, or merely basking in His presence—the felt presence of God is the highlight of all the religious experiences.

The ministry experiences examined indicate that the spiritual disciplines of praise, worship, and prayer are commonly practiced in contemporary Protestant Christian churches. Individuals may even have a designated time for a personal, intimate encounter with God in the communal experience. But, some Christians may believe that God manifests His power and presence to a greater degree in the communal setting, or they may not know how to encounter the presence of God with the same intensity in the absence of the heightened, animated spiritual atmosphere generated on the communal level.

In Section Three, I present my thesis which I believe is the way forward to this dilemma. I propose that through the practice of contemplative spiritual disciplines, Christians can replicate the same quality of transcendence experienced in church, in all other environments. Spiritual formation through the cultivation of contemplative spiritual

practices can potentially enhance communal spiritual experiences and enable many Christians to experience a deeper, more abiding, and impactful presence of God in private and communal spaces.

SECTION 3:

THESIS

The Influence of My African American Christian Legacy in My Spiritual Journey*Hypothesis*

One of the significant characteristics of my African American Christian legacy is the predominance of dynamic, Holy Spirit-empowered communion with God in corporate praise and worship experiences. But, there is not as much emphasis in fostering practices of personal spiritual development or formation. I hypothesize that integrating dynamic corporate spirituality with personal spiritual formation and contemplative spiritual disciplines will be complementary and reinforcing, thereby producing a more holistic Christian spirituality. I maintain that this synergy can significantly contribute to the viability and sustainability in authentic Christian witness. It has been my observation that Christians nurtured in practicing an abiding presence in God tend to have an abiding and enduring Christian faith. Practices of habitually abiding in the presence of God through spiritual formation and contemplative spiritual disciplines frequently bring about heightened intimacy and a deeper relationship with Him. I have witnessed Christian believers of all races and ethnicities basking in the love of God through contemplative spiritual disciplines, become more amenable to reciprocating His love, obeying His commandments, and exhibiting compassionate servanthood in His name. By bringing awareness, this project affords an opportunity for African American Christians who have not embraced practices of personal spiritual formation and contemplative spiritual

disciplines to ponder the benefits of enhancing their Christian heritage of efficacious corporate spirituality by these means.

Barbara Holmes, in *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* notes that contemplative traditions of the Black Church have increasingly been the focus of academic and ecclesial circles. There is currently more attention and awareness on the comprehensiveness and diversity of Black Spirituality in general.⁸⁶ In 2003, the Hampton University Minister's Conference comprising more than seven thousand Black clergy focused on the contemplative life of the Black cleric. A major initiative of Morehouse College is focusing on cataloguing and publishing the papers of Howard Thurman. In other black literature there is increasing attention drawn to the spirituality of the Black Diaspora within and beyond the Americas. A few groundbreaking monographs published in the last decade are examining under-explored dimensions of religious praxis in the African Diaspora. The present work of Holmes particularly examines Christian contemplative practices developed within "Africana contexts," which has become part of a growing body of scholarship of great value to a wide audience, including theologians and pastors. In chapter three, Holmes assesses the role of contemplation in the liturgical life of the Black church. In chapter five, she presents a series of case studies that illustrate the ways in which contemplation has served as a theological foundation for African American social activism. Her work brings to light a rich array of Africana contemplative practices that have been hidden for years.

⁸⁶ Hugh Page, "Review of *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, Barbara Holmes," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 5, no. 2 (2005): 247-250, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/191725>.

Holt views Christian spirituality with a wider lens than African American spirituality, but one in which it is inclusive because his discussion reflects a more comprehensive, universal human spirituality that has biblical mandates as its source. He affirms, “Our four basic relationships are to God, to self, to people, and to creation, and these relationships can be nurtured through the frequent or repetitive behaviors of spiritual disciplines such as praying, singing, worshipping, studying Scripture, and meditation.”⁸⁷ He declares that churches should introduce their youthful and adult congregants to a variety of contemplative spiritual disciplines because of personal preferences toward the various forms. Congregants should be encouraged to consistently engage the disciplines for a richer and well-rounded Christian spirituality. For Holt, “We have reached a high level of spiritual life when we are able to view all of our doing as secondary and to exist simply before God.”⁸⁸ In maintaining this God-consciousness of our existence in God alone, Holt affirms, “engagement in the spiritual disciplines continually transforms, edifies, matures, elucidates Scripture, and equips the Christian believer for personal and corporate service to God.”⁸⁹ He proposes that Christians meditate on the attributes of God and the nature of God; He alone empowers Christians to love Him and one another as His disciples and ambassadors.

⁸⁷ Holt, *Thirsty for God*, 22.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

Identified Uniqueness of African American Spirituality and Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines

Campolo and Battle recognize the significance of integrating personal spiritual formation and contemplative spiritual disciplines into traditional, communal Christian praxis. They are emphatic that fostering a deeper faith through contemplation potentially purifies the mind to the point that embracing a common identity in the kingdom of God is possible for all Christians. Therefore, surrendering to the Holy Spirit in contemplative praying enables Christians to be transformed by God as Paul admonishes in Romans 12:1-2.⁹⁰ Campolo and Battle categorically declare that it is imperative for all Christian believers to undergo deep spiritual meditation to be thoroughly cleansed by God. Contemplative praying brings renewal of the mind that occurs through the power of the Holy Spirit's inner transformation and makes Christians into the new creations identified in Scripture.⁹¹ This newness of life and transformation is especially relevant for the race-conscious mentality prevalent in American society.

For these scholars, contemplative spirituality is essential for overcoming racism because the centrality of Christ in all of one's life situations obliterates racial barriers and can create the cohesiveness and unity that ought to exemplify the body of Christ. They observe, "In such a contemplative state there is a sense of the Holy Spirit invading one's

⁹⁰ Romans 12:1-2 ("I beseech you therefore, brethren, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.")

⁹¹ II Corinthians 5:17 ("Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things become new").

being which exercises a transforming effect on the personality. One has the awareness that Christ can be loved in the other. . . people possessed by the Spirit look into the eyes of someone of another race and sense Jesus in that person.”⁹² They argue that genuine contemplative prayer inspires the promotion of a healthy community because an individual’s well-being in a community is contingent upon the state of that entire community. The authors encourage Christians of all races to embrace contemplative forms of spirituality as the primary vehicle for effecting racial reconciliation through God’s miraculous Spirit, capable of purifying hearts, minds, and souls. It can also promote bonding between all racial groups and ethnicities because it emanates from the heart of God and therefore is a dynamic force against racism.

These authors acknowledge that not all Christians are receptive to a mystical form of Christian belief and practice. But their writing serves to apprise Christian believers of the value and effectiveness of the mystical dimension of spirituality that is often given little regard by black and white Christian institutions. They are cognizant of the fact that many Christians may prefer to express their spirituality in other ways than contemplation, such as social justice work, biblical exegesis, and counseling.

Joy Bostic is among African American scholars who construe that African-American mysticism or spirituality has racial implications on the foundational level. In her exploration of African-American mysticism, Bostic identifies two distinct elements that distinguish this unique spirituality. First, the marginalization and dehumanization of African-American individuals and communities viewed as objects by hegemonic power

⁹² Campolo and Battle, *Church Enslaved*, 117.

structures have necessitated African-Americans to re-define or self-identify themselves as subjects. The second element concerns attendant challenges of existing in this self-definition in “sacred-social” ways that generate concrete action for communal welfare.⁹³ She relates that African-American contemplative mystical life is characterized by the synthesis of individual and communal spheres; the transcendent and the mundane realities.

Bostic notes that overall, many African-American scholars view mystical experience as an intimate encounter with the sacred or with a transcendent deity. The encounter is so transformative and revelatory that the individual is impelled to take concrete action for social good or reform. She observes that Howard Thurman’s mysticism was stimulated by his practice of solitude in awe of and communication with nature. A prison cell conversion and mystical vision motivated Malcolm X in his pursuit of spiritual disciplines and social activism. Martin Luther King Jr.’s experiences in the divine presence gave him the ability to overcome the fear of death and undergirded his Christian commitment for social justice.

Bostic affirms, “African-American ‘sacred-social’ worlds inform mystical experiences and interpretation. It is within certain ‘sacred-social’ worlds that religious subjects commune with the divine and experience intimacy. This mystical communion gives rise to concrete action in the world where practitioners participate in social change and transformation.”⁹⁴ These expressions of self-definition mitigate the effects of

⁹³ Joy Bostic, “Teaching African American Mysticism” in *Teaching Mysticism*, ed. William Parsons (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 138, Questia Online Research.

⁹⁴ Joy Bostic, “Teaching African American Mysticism,” 150.

hegemonic power and enable African-Americans to embrace their “sacred-social” existence in a greater measure. Bostic observes that, “African American mysticism is understood as a source of knowledge, authority, and empowerment for healing social engagement.”⁹⁵ This may perhaps be one of the most profound outcomes of the mystical life in the African-American experience from Bostic’s point of view.

Cultivating the Contemplative Life

Intimacy with God through the Power of the Holy Spirit

Jan Johnson highlights that Christians who do not cultivate an intimate relationship with God will not be spiritually transformed by Him, even if they consistently read the Bible and listen to inspiring sermons. She opines that it is crucial to strategically engage in spiritual disciplines that are conducive to establishing and maintaining an intimate relationship with God. She remarks “Communing with God in prayer contributes to intimacy with God; engaging the scriptures enlightens the understanding and knowledge of the character and nature of God; and deliberately and consciously focusing on God’s presence leads to dialogue with Him and eagerness to serve Him.”⁹⁶ This intimate encounter with God comes about when one diligently practices spiritual disciplines under the power and leading of the Holy Spirit.

Johnson attaches great importance to scripture-meditation as a spiritual discipline that she feels is especially soul-transforming. She illustrates its value as follows:

⁹⁵ Ibid., 141.

⁹⁶ Jan Johnson, *Savoring God’s Word: Cultivating the Soul-Transforming Practice of Scripture Meditation* (Navigators International United States: NAVPRESS, 2004), 21.

As we sit in Scripture and ponder it, all parts of ourselves are fascinated by the ways and doings of God. We begin to long for more of God in our life. This interaction with God affects us so deeply in our core that we become much more likely to respond to people with a quiet presence, a readiness to listen, and a desire to love them. We obey in a more natural, automatic way because our hearts have been transformed.”⁹⁷

Johnson states scripture-meditation is a pathway to an encounter with God through the power of the Holy Spirit Who enables one to become united with the text in such a way that critical analysis is not necessary. It follows a pattern of quieting oneself, reading and re-reading the text, and with eyes closed sense what dominates the experience, then “pray” the Scripture so that one is dialoguing with God. God speaks to individuals in Scripture and individuals respond in prayer. Johnson sees this activity as a way of actualizing Psalm 34:8.⁹⁸ She believes that when scripture-meditation is empowered by the Holy Spirit it, “stores the words, ideas, and images of Scripture in our minds, feelings, and even our bodies in a way that affects our behavior later. . . in building a rich and life-transforming relationship with God.”⁹⁹ Johnson clarifies that in scripture-meditation the Holy Spirit cultivates the heart in such a way that individuals see life through the lens of Jesus and desire to exemplify His ways as mandated in Joshua 1:8.¹⁰⁰ The end result of scripture-meditation is that Christian believers progressively come to love, trust, obey, and hear God more and more, thereby enriching all aspects of their lives.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Psalm 34:8 (“O taste and see that the Lord is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him”).

⁹⁹ Johnson, *Savoring God’s Word*, 23.

¹⁰⁰ Joshua 1:8 (“This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous and then thou shalt have good success”).

The depth and primary focus of Aiden W. Tozer's engagement with God comes across emphatically in the beginning phase of his writing with the quotations from Psalm 63:8 and Psalm 42:1-2.¹⁰¹ Tozer points out that it is only God who can nourish the soul. Even sound biblical exegesis may leave congregants wanting. He emphasizes the need to find God in personal experience or else God's truth will not be beneficial. He explains, "The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they may delight in His Presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and center of their hearts."¹⁰² This longing or pursuing after God does not emanate from the heart of humankind, but rather, is the work of God's prevenient grace supernaturally drawing individuals to Himself according to Scripture.¹⁰³ None other than God can be credited with drawing individuals to Himself and saving their souls.

Tozer declares God must be the focal point for individuals seeking Him in order that the Spirit of the Most-High God can be manifested in their lives in increasingly greater ways. Obedience to God, loving Him, and spending time in His Word are necessary for spiritual enlightenment and divine revelation. God readily manifests Himself to those who are obedient to His ways and have pure hearts. Eventually, a heightened consciousness of God overtakes and overshadows the individual in His

¹⁰¹ Psalm 42:1-2 ("As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God?").
Psalm 63: 8 ("My soul followeth hard after thee: thy right hand upholdeth me").

¹⁰² Aiden Tozer, *The Pursuit of God: The Human Thirst for the Divine* (Camp Hill, PA: WingSpreadPublishers, 2006), 9.

¹⁰³ John 6:44 ("No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day").

encounter with God. God desires to reveal Himself to His human creatures and to maintain ongoing dialogue with them. As individuals intentionally practice experiencing God's Presence, their faith in God and love for Him increases. Of prime importance is Tozer's notion of God's Speaking Voice. He draws on John 1:1 to establish that God's Voice is actively speaking and never stops speaking.¹⁰⁴ He maintains that the Bible is replete with instances that God is speaking. As such, the whole world is consumed with the power of His speaking voice which is the life force in all creation according to John 6:63.¹⁰⁵ Tozer states in preparation for hearing God's voice, it is necessary to be still and wait on God in a state of receptivity to hear Him speak to our hearts. He asserts, "The Bible will never be a living book to us until we believe that God is articulate in His universe. The Bible is the inevitable outcome of God's continuous speech. It is the infallible declaration of His mind for us put into our familiar human words."¹⁰⁶ Tozer advises individuals who want to know the Lord, to come to the Bible with the expectancy that it will necessarily speak to them because it is the voice of the living God which is unspeakable joy.

When Nicolas Herman (c.1611-1691) entered the Discalced Carmelite monastery in Paris, he took the name Lawrence of the Resurrection as a lay brother. His profound and insightful thinking in the written work that he left behind included personal letters, conversations, and personal spiritual maxims that were later published posthumously.

¹⁰⁴ Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, 69.

John 1:1 ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God").

¹⁰⁵ John 6:63 ("... The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life").

¹⁰⁶ Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, 76-77.

Brother Lawrence’s teachings are especially enriching in producing an unceasing God-consciousness within his readers that motivates them to truly allow God to have the “preeminence in all things”¹⁰⁷ through total surrender to Him. He provides an invigorating prescription of life for Christians to experience optimal spirituality.

Brother Lawrence highlights the necessity of practicing the presence of God in the following statement:

The practice of the Presence of God is the most holy, the most all-encompassing, and the most necessary practice of the spiritual life. It trains the soul to find its joy in His Divine Companionship. At all times and at every moment, it engages the soul in humble and loving communion with Him, without rules or methods. This is practical in all circumstances, in times of temptation and tribulation, spiritual dryness and apathy, and even when we fall into unfaithfulness and sin.¹⁰⁸

He advises Christians to be committed to continually finding time throughout the day for communion with God, such as, pausing momentarily from time to time in the midst of busyness to permit the soul to worship, praise, and thank Him for all His “loving-kindness and tender mercies.”¹⁰⁹ It is also necessary to engage in introspection to ascertain what virtues are lacking and those that are a challenge to acquire. These failures should be confessed to God whose grace can strengthen us in our weaknesses.

Since Christians are mandated to worship God in Spirit and in truth, Brother Lawrence declares that this means Christians are obligated to offer to God the worship that we owe Him in true humility from the depth of our being. “It acknowledges God as

¹⁰⁷ Colossians 1:18 (“that in all things he might have the preeminence”).

¹⁰⁸ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, trans Marshall Davis (San Bernardino, CA: 2018), 62.

¹⁰⁹ Psalm 103:4 (“Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with loving kindness and tender mercies”).

infinite and perfect in all His attributes, and that we owe Him reverence, love, service, and unceasing worship.”¹¹⁰ If this is done consistently, it will become natural for believers.

Brother Lawrence delineates several practices for realizing the presence of God:

- 1) Purity of life is essential. We must guard against saying, doing, or thinking in any way that may displease God. In instances when it happens, it is important to repent of it immediately and humbly ask God for forgiveness.
- 2) Faithfulness in the practice of His presence requires keeping the soul’s gaze fixed on God and discouraging anxious thoughts and emotions.
- 3) Make a practice before beginning every task, sacred or secular, to look to God. Look to God while you are doing any activity and also, after completion.
- 4) The practice of the Presence of God is the most spiritual, most real, most free, and most life-giving form of prayer.¹¹¹

These practices are conducive to sustaining a consciousness of God’s presence and of promoting spiritual formation and transformation.

For Brother Lawrence, the additional benefits of the presence of God include a more active faith and strengthened hope in all life circumstances. “By the practice of the presence of God, by steadfastly gazing upon Him, the soul comes to a deep knowledge of God. Its life is spent in unceasing acts of love and worship, contrition and simple trust, praise, prayer, and service.”¹¹² He is correct that the presence of God produces within the

¹¹⁰ Brother Lawrence, *Practice of the Presence of God*, 66.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹¹² Brother Lawrence, *Practice of the Presence of God*, 74.

human heart an intense holy passion to know and love Him. God is constantly drawing human beings to Himself.

Saint Teresa of Avila was born in Spain in the sixteenth century. She was a nun of the Order of our Lady of Mount Carmel. Much of her written work is directed to the theological enquiries and spiritual edification of the Discalced Carmelite Sisters and daughters who lived in the monasteries she founded. For Saint Teresa, “the essential element of the Carmelite Rule is unceasing prayer. Emphasis is placed on one being fully present to God in prayer, for He is fully present to us at all times.”¹¹³ She was known to personally and consistently offer various forms of prayers to Christ which included adoration and petition. Centering prayer was one of several methods of prayer that Saint Teresa practiced. It entailed being fully present, while being fully focused on God. The passive prayer of quiet is the initial stage of the contemplation process, followed by steadily shutting down the faculties until one reaches an inner silence and is ready to commune with God.

Saint Teresa advised, “If while speaking I thoroughly understand and know that I am speaking with God and I have greater awareness of this than I do of the words I am saying, mental and vocal prayer are joined. If you are to be speaking, as it is right, with so great a Lord, it is good that you consider whom you are speaking with as well as who you are.”¹¹⁴ You should not be thinking of other things while speaking with God. Saint Teresa’s idea of keeping focused on Christ extended to, “being present to Christ in joy, to

¹¹³ Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, trans., *The Collected Works of Saint Teresa of Avila, Volume Two* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2017), 32.

¹¹⁴ Kavanaugh and Rodrigues, *Collected Works of Saint Teresa*, 121.

be with Him as risen; in trial and sadness, to be with Him in His passion.”¹¹⁵ She offers encouragement that when God is the focus of sincere prayer, He listens and responds.

Identifying Some of the Christian Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines for Spiritual Formation

Richard Foster underscores the Christian tenet of the centrality of God in all life in his statement that, “We have only one thing to do, namely, to experience a life of relationship and intimacy with God.”¹¹⁶ Spiritual disciplines engender spiritual growth for Christians on the personal and corporate level and situate them to be transformed and blessed by God. The disciplines are the avenue by which Christians experience the abundant life ordained by Christ. Foster states that, “The primary requirement for practicing spiritual disciplines is a longing after God.”¹¹⁷ This spiritual life may involve singing, dancing, shouting or other expressions of reverence to God such as the biblical ordinances of fasting, prayer, worship, and celebration.

In Foster’s designation of spiritual disciplines, three major categories are detailed with their attendant sub-categories. The first category is comprised of the inward disciplines, which include: meditation, prayer, fasting, and study. The second category is comprised of the outward disciplines, which include: simplicity, solitude, submission, and service. The third category is comprised of the corporate disciplines, which include:

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 33.

¹¹⁶ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), 4.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 2.

confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.¹¹⁸ Foster states the purpose of the disciplines is for our spiritual growth and transformation.

Many Christian contemplatives would probably agree with Foster that prayer is the most crucial of the spiritual disciplines for ushering believers into the presence of God and in communion with Him. The relationship of believers with God in prayer is a sacred space where they can be transformed by God. Foster feels, “Real prayer is life creating and life changing. The closer we come to the heartbeat of God the more we see our need and the more we desire to be conforming to Christ. Progressively we are taught to see things from His point of view.”¹¹⁹ One of the advantages of prayer is that it can be done anywhere, anytime, and in any position. The biblical reference indicates worshippers have prayed in many positions from lying prostrate on the ground to standing with uplifted hands and head while entertaining thoughts about God and desiring to do those things that conform to His will.

Intercessory prayer is probably the most common form of prayer that Christians engage in to “stand in the gap” for others by listening to the Holy Spirit for divine guidance in how He wants to intervene. Foster views successful intercession as being the result of listening to the Lord as a major first step in the process. He is adamant that all Christians should take responsibility for changing world conditions by constant prayer. He exhorts Christians, “to learn to pray against the evil in the world by waging spiritual warfare against the world, the flesh, and the devil.”¹²⁰ Prayer is the spiritual mechanism

¹¹⁸ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 13-21.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 34.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 45.

in which Christians combat principalities and powers and the forces of darkness. Foster advises Christians that they should also be in prayer concerning their own protection and personal welfare, that is, they should cover their whole lives with the blood of Jesus and the Cross.

Dallas Willard views the spirit of the disciplines as emanating from the love Christians have for Jesus and the determination to be like Him.¹²¹ The biblical narratives portray Jesus practicing a regimen of solitude, fasting, prayer, and service. These practices have become somewhat canonized throughout the centuries and are often referred to as the classical disciplines for the spiritual life. For Willard, “A spiritual life consists in that range of activities in which people cooperatively interact with God—and with the spiritual order deriving from God’s personality and action. A person is a spiritual person to the degree that his or her life is correctly integrated into and is dominated by God’s spiritual Kingdom.”¹²² He declares that the disciplines for the spiritual life pertain to mental and physical actions that are conscientiously brought under the power of God’s control. Some Christians believe that consistency in church attendance, service, and certain duties or responsibilities will lead to spiritual transformation; but this usually does not occur.

Christians can apply and benefit from the wealth of wisdom that prominent Christians have offered throughout the centuries regarding the spiritual disciplines such as fasting, prayer, solitude, and celebration to enhance their spiritual life. But,

¹²¹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988), xii.

¹²² Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 67.

transforming the human spirit is a continual process over a lifetime and requires much effort. Willard remarks, “True spirituality is simply the holistic quality of human life as it was meant to be, at the center of which is our relation to God.”¹²³ In preparation to practicing the spiritual disciplines, believers will need to yield their spirits to the ways of God. According to Willard, “A discipline for the spiritual life is nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and His kingdom. When we understand that grace (*charis*), is gift (*charisma*), we then see that to grow in grace is to grow in what is given to us of God and by God. The disciplines are then, in the clearest sense, a means to that grace and also to those gifts.”¹²⁴ Spiritual disciplines or spiritual exercises are activities that promote godliness in Christian believers and make them amenable to receiving more of God’s life and power.

There is no universal or comprehensive list of spiritual disciplines anywhere. Willard believes a good practice would be to start with prayer and consider using the spiritual disciplines that have been proven to be effective strategies for the Christian spiritual life over the centuries. Willard offers his own list of spiritual disciplines that fit that qualification. His listing is divided into two divisions: disciplines of abstinence and disciplines of engagement. The disciplines of abstinence include: solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice. The disciplines of engagement include: study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission. He makes the point that “There are many other activities that could, for the right person and upon the right occasion, be counted as spiritual disciplines in the strict sense of our

¹²³ Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 77.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

previous chapter.”¹²⁵ Nonetheless, he feels the foundational spiritual disciplines he has delineated are more than enough in aiding Christians to follow Jesus in sustainable Christian lifestyles if they are adapted and contextualized to individual needs. In building up the Church spiritually, Willard’s advice to the Church is to be in the forefront of leadership in teaching congregants how to experience God more fully. He believes it could have a domino effect, on a global scale; the Church can be instrumental in transforming the nations to conform to God’s righteous character.

With artistic and rhythmic style, Thomas Merton provides an insightful account of the contemplative life. He professes a very high and lofty estimation of contemplation as a spiritual discipline. He refers to it in the following manner:

Contemplation is the highest expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source.¹²⁶

He affirms that in contemplation this transcendent Source is known beyond reason and beyond faith. It is a knowing so deep it cannot be articulated or grasped in visual representations.

Merton further relates that contemplation seeks to know and experience the transcendent God through a tangible interaction and relationship with Him “who is pure Reality and the Source of all that is real. Contemplation is a gift of sudden awareness, an

¹²⁵ Ibid., 190-191.

¹²⁶ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York, NY: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1961)1, Questia Online Research.

awakening to the Real within all that is Real. A vivid awareness of infinite Being at the root of our own limited being. This awareness is a free gift from God as an act of His love.”¹²⁷ Merton declares that contemplation can possibly be a response to a call from God, while at the same time declaring that God has no voice. But, he further clarifies God’s nature as One, “Who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being, and we are meant to echo Him in contemplation.”¹²⁸ Merton intimates that the innermost spirit of the Christian believer in coalescence with the living God becomes one voice with the living God. God’s divinity is reflected in His human creatures that bear His image.

The author describes his own experience in contemplation in this way: “It is the religious apprehension of God, through my life in God, or through ‘Sonship’ according to Romans 8:14, 16.”¹²⁹ Therefore, for Merton contemplation has religious implications because it is discerned as a gift from the transcendent God who in His love and mercy completes the work of creation in His human creatures by enabling their minds and hearts to comprehend their new status in Him. Christians everywhere then, can embrace the Apostle Paul’s writing in Galatians 2:20.¹³⁰ Merton rightly describes contemplation as God ordained and God empowered to enable individuals to have illumination to

¹²⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹²⁸ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 3.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 4.

Romans 8:14, 16 (“For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God”).

¹³⁰ Galatians 2:20 (“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live: yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me”).

experience His awesome love, presence, and spiritual wholeness. Meditation is the work of the Holy Spirit and surpasses human efforts.

Merton encourages Christians to learn the value of practicing solitude and silence, which are essential for the contemplative life. Speaking from the vantage point and experience of a former Trappist monk, Merton states, “We do not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them; we do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out the way to do them the most good. The one end that includes all others is the love of God.”¹³¹ Merton portrays solitude as something that is deep within the core of an individual’s soul that has a craving that cannot be satisfied by anything in the material world. He encourages Christian believers to find a place where they can be silent and totally focus on God and worship Him in secret. He believes that God created humans so that they could know and love Him through the experience of contemplation in a way that cannot be experienced through any other process.

Regarding meditation for humans, he declares “It is our proper element because it is the fulfillment of deep capacities in us that God has willed should never be fulfilled in any other way. God Himself becomes the only reality, in Whom all other reality takes its proper place—falls into insignificance.”¹³² Humans have done nothing to deserve it and should exhibit joy and thanksgiving in His presence. Merton asserts, “God is pure love and when we taste the experience of loving God for His own sake alone, we know by

¹³¹ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 80.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 226.

experience Who and What He is. We experience Him not for ourselves alone but also for others.”¹³³ He goes on to say that a genuine mystical experience of God occurs when all else is subordinate to His reality. Since contemplation is the gift of God, no one else can teach it except God.

According to Howard Thurman, “The true purpose of all spiritual disciplines is to clear away whatever may block our awareness of that which is God in us. The aim is to get rid of whatever may so distract the mind and encumber the life that we function without this awareness or as if it were not possible.”¹³⁴ Christian believers have to strive to make the desire for God the dominant force in in all of life. Desire for God can easily come through prayer and practicing silence or quiet.

In describing his own early experience in communion with God, Thurman explains: “As a child, I was accustomed to spend many hours alone in my rowboat. There was a sense of Presence which always seemed to speak to me. My response to the sense of Presence always had the quality of personal communion. There was no voice. There was no image. There was no vision. There was God.”¹³⁵ He exhorts believers to find a physical place to withdraw where silencing can be achieved. It is helpful to read or recall a passage that quiets, or to contemplate the life of Jesus. Once the interference has been removed and the quieting takes place, communication between God and individuals can take place. Gradually, the consciousness of the Presence of God becomes manifest.

¹³³ Ibid., 268.

¹³⁴ Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2003), 96.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

He advises that this experience of prayer can be cultivated and nurtured so that it becomes a way of everyday life for individuals. They can share its spiritual impact with others as Christ did with everyone He encountered, after rising up early in the morning to pray to the Father. Communion with God may result in an abundance of thanksgiving because of His benevolence. But also, what Thurman describes as, “The sheer joy in thanksgiving that God is God and the soul is privileged and blessed with the overwhelming consciousness of this.”¹³⁶ It is the kind of thanksgiving that inspires exultation and song to praise the Lord because He is God.

Achieving Wholeness and Well-Being Through the Disciplines of Meditation and Prayer

Passage Meditation

Thomas Plante and his colleagues note that many Christians and Jews have no knowledge of the ancient history of contemplative practices within their own faith traditions. Most individuals in the West are more familiar with Eastern contemplative practices. But, in fact, all major religious and spiritual traditions offer some type of contemplative disciplines geared toward cultivating wholeness and enlightenment. It has been demonstrated that meditation that is related to spiritual convictions or orientations have more favorable psychological and physical health outcomes.

Tim Flinders et al. present The Eight-Point Passage Meditation Program created by Eknath Easwaran, as one of several contemplative practice systems created to integrate spiritual ideals into daily living practices. The aim of Passage meditation is to

¹³⁶ Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 102.

help practitioners cultivate a sustainable spirituality as they are managing daily stressors.

These eight points are briefly outlined as follows:

- Point One: Meditate on an Inspirational Passage
- Point Two: Repetition of *Mantram*
- Point Three: Slowing Down
- Point Four: One-Pointed Attention
- Point Five: Training the Senses
- Point Six: Putting Others First
- Point Seven: Spiritual Association
- Point Eight: Inspirational Reading.¹³⁷

The eight points form an integrated contemplative practice and provide a comprehensive program of spiritual living. The points reinforce each other and help practitioners deepen their wisdom and effectively cope with daily stressors effectively. The program is universal and can be used by all religious faiths and those individuals who regard themselves as spiritual, but not religious.

In this meditative discipline, participants are instructed to repeat the words of the inspirational passage as slowly as they can with as much concentration as possible. Slowing Down with focused attention and One-Pointed Attention sustain the inspirational passages throughout the day. The repetition of the *mantram* at moments of stress aid direct focus and bring calm. The program encourages daily engagement with wisdom exemplars well-known over the centuries, such as the Psalmist, Jesus, and Buddha. Meditating on a passage and inspirational reading contribute to the assimilation of the attitudes and teachings of wisdom exemplars.

¹³⁷ Tim Flinders, Doug Oman, and Carol Flinders, "Translating Spiritual Ideals into Daily Life: The Eight-Point Program of Passage Meditation," in *Contemplative Practices in Action: Spirituality, Meditation, and Health*, ed. Thomas Plante (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 40, Questia Online Research.

Flinders et al. state decades of research have extensively documented four major psychological processes that underlie all types of learning from human models of behavior: “attention to the model; retention of information about the model’s behavior and attitudes; reproduction of what is learned in behavior; and motivation to persist. These four processes effectively transmit spiritual behaviors and attitudes.”¹³⁸ The repetition of key verses in the Bible in worship services or meditation may be recalled throughout the day and contribute to coping skills and lower stress. Sustained stress experiences are a risk factor for accelerated rates of biological aging and major chronic health conditions such as hypertension and coronary heart disease.”¹³⁹ Passage meditation helps to combat adverse health conditions. It has multiple benefits and is used worldwide and by various faith traditions.

Centering Prayer

Jane Ferguson has been a practitioner of centering prayer for over a decade and has contributed to the establishment of two centering prayer groups in California. She examined the spiritual and health effects of centering prayer on those who practice it in a doctoral program. Unlike passage meditation, centering prayer is based on a Christian tradition. It is practiced twice a day for twenty minutes to engage in deep intimacy with God and for restoration. Ferguson reports that innumerable people from diverse walks of life and ethnicities are learning the value of this Christian tradition of contemplative prayer as a quieting mechanism. She estimates that about 150,00 persons are now

¹³⁸ Flinders, Oman, and Flinders, “Translating Spiritual Ideals into Daily Life,” 47.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 48.

practicing centering prayer throughout the United States, Latin America, Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Even so, many Christians are not aware of this Christian meditative practice called centering prayer. It is based on the classical mystical theology of the Church known as resting in God. “The emphasis of Centering Prayer is on a personal relationship with God; this distinguishes it from some Eastern approaches to meditation that seek observations of the present moment. Centering prayer reflects the classic contemplative experience of inner silence described by St. John of the Cross in the sixteenth century.”¹⁴⁰ The Centering Prayer Movement encourages practitioners to dialogue with the contemplatives of other religious and sacred traditions which may be the reason it is construed to be on the peripheral of mainstream Christianity. Nevertheless, centering prayer is presently being practiced in many arenas such as college classrooms, twelve-step recovery workshops, psychotherapy sessions, hospitals, prisons, and some churches.

Ferguson ponders that today’s ordained clergy and their congregants have relatively no exposure to this Christian contemplative prayer tradition in seminaries or churches. However, there are some theologians and other scholars who “see theological congruence between Centering Prayer and the biblical concept of *kenosis*—the Greek for ‘to let go’ or ‘to empty oneself’ as Christ emptied Himself to become human and also surrendered His will to God in the Garden of Gethsemane. As such, Centering Prayer is a surrender or letting go of negative thoughts as they arise.”¹⁴¹ This contemplative practice

¹⁴⁰ Jane Ferguson, “Centering Prayer: A Method of Christian Meditation for Our Time,” in *Contemplative Practices in Action: Spirituality, Religion and Health*, ed. Thomas Plante (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 62, Questia Online Research.

¹⁴¹ Ferguson, “Centering Prayer,” 63.

could potentially benefit some African Americans and others who harbor hatred or negative thoughts toward persons who practice racism and other forms of hostility toward them. Ferguson relates that the practitioner is not usually consciously aware of the impact of centering prayer right away. The benefits and transformations are seen over time. She remarks that centering prayer often leads to a sense of greater peace, compassion, and a willingness to serve others.

Correlations Between Christian Spirituality and Well-Being: A Theoretical Approach

An Examination of Meditative Practices from a Neurological Perspective

Andrew Newberg and Stephanie Newberg, in their chapter on “The Neuropsychology of Religion and Spiritual Experience,” report that the religious and spiritual experiences of meditation, prayer, and ritual are being addressed in the biomedical, psychological, anthropological, and religious disciplines. They declare that spiritual experiences emanate mostly from group rituals or private contemplation which are often interrelated. These researchers report that, “Recently, there has been a growth in the number of studies that have examined the neurophysiological and physiological correlates of such experiences. The use of state of the art brain imaging techniques that can now measure various neurotransmitter systems, as well as, other physiological measures, can be applied to investigate brain function during experiences such as meditation, prayer, and ritual experiences.”¹⁴² Brain imaging studies indicate that

¹⁴² Andrew Newberg and Stephanie Newberg, “Neuropsychology of Religion and Spiritual Experience,” in *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, eds. Raymond Paloutzian and Crystal Park (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2005), 199, Questia Online Research.

sustained attention or focus such as is done in contemplative practices on an object, mantram, or prayer, initiate activity in the prefrontal cortex, especially in the right hemisphere that is associated with an effort to clear the mind and heightened focus.

Newberg and Newberg relate that several clinical studies have shown that meditative and related spiritual practices contribute to improved physical and psychological states, such as lowered rates of blood pressure, feelings of calmness, and lower rates of instances with depression. They affirm, “The fact that spiritual experiences have an effect on autonomic function, as well as other cortically mediated cognitive and emotional processes, suggests that such experiences not only affect the human psyche, but also can be carefully crafted to assist in the therapy of various disorders.”¹⁴³ For these researchers it seems appropriate that spiritual experiences such as those encountered in meditation and prayer could become supplemental to Western therapeutic practices. They consider developing oneself spiritually can be instrumental in optimal psychosocial and neuropsychological development. Newberg and Newberg propose that in Western society mystical and meditative experiences can potentially become the norm as measurable outcomes for a wide range of people groups, religions, and cultures.

Health Benefits Associated with Religion and Spirituality

Doug Oman and Carl Thoresen, discuss the research challenges pertaining to the discipline of meditation in their chapter, “Do Religion and Spirituality Influence Health?” They relate that in spite of the magnitude of research that had been done in earlier years

¹⁴³ Newberg and Newberg, “Neuropsychology of Religious and Spiritual Experience,” 210.

in the study of meditation, much of it was plagued with “design flaws, including inadequate assessments, lack of comparison groups or failure to control for other factors that could explain health effects.”¹⁴⁴ By contrast, some later scholars have produced well-designed studies that link meditation with physical and mental health outcomes such as, improved stress management, lower blood pressure, and lower cholesterol.¹⁴⁵ There is now extensive evidence that meditation is associated with better health outcomes, at least among clinical populations. “Research in the affective neurosciences is increasingly showing indications that meditation could possibly be a significant factor in altering prefrontal brain processes, thereby impacting physiological processes associated with major organ systems including “immune neuroendocrine and cardiovascular functioning.”¹⁴⁶ Other research corroborates the association of meditation with brain functioning in that, “meditation increased activity in the left prefrontal cortex area and reduced activity in the right prefrontal cortex area. The left area is associated with positive emotions, such as, compassion. The right area is associated with negative emotions, such as fear.”¹⁴⁷ Oman and Thoresen affirm that it is now clear through advanced neurological studies of meditation that positive associations between health and practices such as attendance at worship services and meditation are prevalent.

¹⁴⁴ Doug Oman and Carl Thoresen, “Do Religion and Spirituality Influence Health?” in *Handbook of The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* eds. Raymond Paloutzian and Crystal Park (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2005), 446, Questia Online Research.

¹⁴⁵ Cited by E.T. Seeman et al. (2003) in Oman and Thoresen, “Do Religion and Spirituality Influence Health?” 446.

¹⁴⁶ Oman and Thoresen, “Do Religion and Spirituality Influence Health?” 447.

¹⁴⁷ Cited in Davidson et al. in Oman and Thoresen, “Do Religion and Spirituality Influence Health?” 447.

Dissenting Voices to Christian Spiritual Formation and Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines

Spiritual Formation

There is a paucity of scholarly literature that addresses opposing views to Christian spiritual formation and contemplative spiritual disciplines. Much of the vociferous opposition comes from online feedback by lay persons and some Christian leaders who refute the claim of proponents of spiritual formation that it is God ordained and enables practitioners to become more like Christ in life situations. **True Bible Info** criticizes practices of Christian meditation and contemplative prayer, often called Centering Prayer, because of their origins from traditional Eastern and Mystic Teachings. Robert Mancusco, of **Christian Research Network**, states Richard Foster introduced the term spiritual formation to the evangelical community in the 1970s with *The Celebration of the Disciplines* in which he proposes true spiritual growth and maturity are not possible without the ancient contemplative methods. Manusco views the dangers in his thought as: unbiblical origins originating from Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox mystics; unbiblical view of man's innate sin condition; invented practices that undermine or deny the sufficiency of Scripture; the possibility of spiritual experiences not of God. Bob Dewaay states that if we come to God on His own terms, knowing that we have a High Priest Who is at the right hand of God, and that we have access through the blood into the holiest place, we can be assured we cannot be any closer to God this side of heaven (Hebrews 8:1).

Contemplative Prayer

Ray Yungen of **Lighthouse Trails Research**, asserts current Western practices of intermingling Christianity with Eastern religions and the occult, ignore Bible warnings. Yungen feels there is a denial of the sin nature, denial of the Atonement, and denial of God's personal nature. Amy Spreeman posts in **Berean Research** on "Dangers of Contemplative Prayer," that the problem with contemplative prayer is its mystical, Eastern, non-Christian roots and its mind emptying techniques (entering the silence, breath prayer, chanting mantras). Gary Gilley of Southern View Chapel writes in **Berean Research**, contemplative prayer practices often enter churches under the concepts of: spiritual formation, spiritual disciplines, contemplative spirituality, Centering Prayer, and Lectio Divina. Spiritual formation encourages evangelicals to practice ancient Catholic and Orthodox contemplative practices in experiencing the presence of God and hearing His voice apart from Scripture. It emphasizes methods for spiritual growth and knowing God that are not found in the Bible.

Christian Mysticism

Daryl Hilbert of **Christian Research Services** states in Christian mysticism one's own feelings, impressions, and intuitions reveal truth in spirituality, not the Bible. Some of the methods in contemplative prayer have their roots in mystical practices of Eastern religions like Transcendental Meditation or Yoga and have nothing in common with Biblical prayer. In biblical prayer Christians come into the presence of the Lord based on the atoning work of the cross. In biblical prayer Christians are not to be mindless; the believer is seeking God to have an impact on his life and those around him. In biblical

prayer, the believer can experience the peace of God by bringing concerns and requests to God. In biblical prayer the believer praises God's attributes and works.

Meditation

Hilbert states, biblical meditation is not an exercise in emptying the mind or entering into an experience. It is saturating the believers' mind with the thoughts and ways of God from the Bible. Biblical meditation is a continuous daily involvement of the mind upon the principles in God's Word, God's ways, and God's works. Biblical meditation produces numerous spiritual benefits for the believer—wisdom, insight, understanding, restraint from sin, spiritual fruit.

Summary

In this section, I present my hypothesis regarding the value of my African American Christian legacy in shaping the contours of powerful, dynamic, corporate spirituality in communing with God through such spiritual disciplines as prayer, praise, and worship. I note that this dominance often overshadows opportunities for engaging in personal spiritual development or formation and I propose integrating manifestations of predominantly communal African American spirituality with contemplative spiritual disciplines for spiritual formation and a more holistic Christian spirituality.

Through the works of a few representative practitioners of spiritual formation and contemplative spiritual disciplines I present the significance of practicing the disciplines in transforming, healing, edifying, and equipping Christian believers in personal and corporate spiritual experiences. I also explore various perspectives and methodologies

employed in communing or connecting with a divine presence for spiritual enrichment, stress reduction, or health and well-being.

Opponents of spiritual formation and contemplative spiritual disciplines affirm that some of the disciplines of proponents are not prescribed in the Bible, some of them are antithetical to biblical norms and practices, and they have their roots in Eastern mysticism rather than orthodox Christian traditions. As with all theological, religious, and philosophical practices, I would advise that individuals evaluate them prior to practicing them. For Christians, they would have to meet certain biblical criteria and be in accord with the tenets of the Bible. I surmise that practices in contemplative spiritual disciplines would also have to be contextualized, so that they flow naturally and spontaneously. The admonition for Christians is to veer away from all aspects of spiritual thinking or disciplines that do not cohere with explicit biblical precepts. The Artifact provides a more in-depth examination of spiritual formation and contemplative spiritual disciplines for enhancing the Christian life. In Section Four, which follows, a brief introductory description and summation of the content and structure of the Artifact is discussed.

SECTION 4: ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

The content of the Artifact is currently a type of “White Paper” that functions as a framework for multiple uses in the Christian context—adult and youth education, focus group discussions, online panel discussions in “The Gathering,” further research projects, expanded work in the future in the creation of a Handbook, and so forth. It describes the genesis of the communal dominance in African American spirituality as emanating from the experience of slavery, during which time it was expedient for slaves to form strong spiritual and social bonds with one another. The same solidarity was necessary during the Jim Crow era and is necessary right up to the present time. African American emphasis has frequently been directed toward doing things communally, and the private needs of the individual experience have not been readily considered. As in former times, African Americans still exhibit a strong, exuberant, communal worship experience in which the felt Presence of the Holy Spirit permeates and pervades the worship experience. But for some African American Christians this experience is thought to only be possible in the sacred spaces with the gathered worshiping community. They are unaware of the fact that they can replicate the intensity and power of the corporate experience privately as well.

In the initial stages of engaging this study, I pondered over the reasons some staunch African American Christians I know did not sustain their Christian faith into adulthood or even later into their more mature and senior years. Why would someone forsake a God that provides everything—infinite joy, peace, love, wisdom, salvation, redemption, forgiveness, comfort, correction, illumination, and fulfillment? The list goes on and on. It occurred to me that more than likely they never had an authentic personal

relationship with God in the first place—never had an intimate encounter with God, never really submitted to His lordship, and never allowed Him to thoroughly transform their souls. Richard Foster sheds some light on this matter in *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. He highlights the fact that it is not what the person does in corporate worship that demonstrates that the person is experiencing a personal, intimate encounter with God. Foster explains that singing, shouting, dancing, raising hands, and clapping are not proof positive that a divine experience is taking place.¹⁴⁸ This behavior is commonly displayed in many African American church services during praise and worship. Foster emphasizes that until God’s Holy Spirit is united with a person’s human spirit, communion with God has not taken place.¹⁴⁹

I considered whether the practice of contemplative spiritual disciplines may be an essential element missing for the spiritual formation of African American Christians in my context. The more I learned about contemplative spiritual disciplines for spiritual formation, the more convinced I became that integrating them into my dynamic communal practices would be a great value to me and they would be instrumental in promoting a sustained Christian faith for me throughout my lifetime.

The Artifact considers contemplative spiritual disciplines as a pathway to enhanced spiritual formation for my African American spirituality, and perhaps others. The Artifact provides a synopsis of the spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, study, worship, forgiveness, and reconciliation that demonstrate their spiritual and psycho-social significance. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board at Portland

¹⁴⁸ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 159.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

George Fox Seminary, I conducted a survey among a few African American Christian women to determine their familiarity with and/or practice of the classical contemplative spiritual disciplines. The results showed that all of them were practicing some form of the classical contemplative spiritual disciplines and some of them practiced all of them. Programs such as passage-meditation and scripture-meditation outlined in the Artifact provide steps for practical application of these disciplines. These meditation programs are designed to embed spiritual words or phrases in the mind that inspire, support, calm, and bring a sense of serenity and harmony in daily experiences. They speak directly to the challenges and stresses in living in a diversified, pluralistic, and fast-paced world. Also, these forms of meditation are linked to positive spiritual, mental, psychological, and physical outcomes in clinical studies.

Another purpose the Artifact serves entails providing the content and framework for a focus group that will convene in late May 2019. The function of the focus group is to prepare its participants for an online program called, “The Gathering,” an Integrity Ministries’ production that will air in July 2019. The Artifact informs the focus group, and the focus group, in turn, informs the content and structure of the July series of the “The Gathering.” Its ongoing series provides a variety of discussions and offers biblically based solutions regarding a variety of challenges in Christian living. In July, August, and September 2019, “The Gathering” will discuss the topic, “The Relevance of Spiritual Formation and Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines in Christian Spirituality.” The sessions will be for one hour in each month.

SECTION 5:
ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

The Creation of the Artifact and Plan for Utilization

When I became convinced that practicing the contemplative spiritual disciplines was the way to maintain an authentic, deep, intimate relationship with God, I proposed to create a handbook on the contemplative spiritual disciplines as my Artifact. The Artifact was to be a thorough, comprehensive, in-depth theological and historical instructional handbook on contemplative spiritual disciplines as they evolved over the centuries in the Christian tradition. But it became apparent that such a project is beyond the scope of the time frame for producing this dissertation. The handbook was to be designed with my church home in view, and for possible use in other Christian arenas. The actual Artifact represents a scaled down version of the handbook previously envisioned.

Current Plan for Utilization of the Artifact

The current plan for the initial utilization of the Artifact is to serve as the primary resource for Integrity Ministries' online production of "The Gathering," which will be launched in July 2019. The targeted audience is the general population. At a later date, an expanded and more comprehensive version of the Artifact will be created and informally produced as a Handbook for my home church, Living the Word Church, and Integrity Ministries, respectively, in Los Angeles, California. It can potentially serve as a theological and historical resource in future ministerial teachings regarding the African American Christian heritage. It can also be a tool for integrating, modifying, and contextualizing relevant contemplative spiritual disciplines that have been a part of the

Christian tradition for centuries, into their communal practices for personal spiritual formation. Other considerations relating to the utilization of the Artifact involve apprising at least three African pastor friends of its content and explaining potential relevance or value for them. Nevertheless, the creation of the Artifact has been the impetus for pursuing further studies that address the need for forgiveness and reconciliation to be a part of the American cultural landscape, and for Christians and non-Christians alike, as a way forward for healing and wholeness.

SECTION 6:
POSTSCRIPT

Execution of the Dissertation

Early on, in the investigative stage of this dissertation, I began to probe for reasons why so many African American Christians I associated with, both young and old, did not stay connected to a Christian body of believers. It is understandable if Christian believers might become disenchanted with their congregation or denomination for sundry reasons. I can recall in street evangelism in Los Angeles' ghettos and on Skid Row in Los Angeles, I have heard story after story of individuals of all ethnicities reporting that they "used to go to church;" some of them are well versed in biblical scripture and have formerly served in church ministries. I couldn't help but wonder—what happened? What would make individuals push God out of their lives or abandon Him altogether? I surmised that for some Christians, most of what they know about God comes from the individuals who teach them about God. They often don't do any independent study, analyze, or question what they are being taught particularly by well-known pastors who are considered to be religious authorities. So, sometimes if they have an issue with the church, they abandon the church and the God that the church portrayed; sometimes it is just bad religion that they are escaping that does not meet their spiritual needs. I conjectured that the basis of the exodus boils down to Christians not knowing the biblical God for themselves—not experiencing Him first hand and having communion with Him—not loving Him wholeheartedly and giving Him the pre-eminence in all the affairs of life.

At the point in the execution of this dissertation that I was convinced of the necessity of practicing contemplative spiritual disciplines for personal spiritual formation, I proceeded to create an Artifact in the form of a Handbook. The Handbook was to be a resource for my own worshiping congregation, as well as, for Integrity Ministries' intercessory prayer team that I have been affiliated with for many years. I eventually came to the realization that such an endeavor is far beyond the scope of this dissertation study. My objectives for the Artifact shifted to scaling down the data amassed from the research to fit the format of a Focus Group in preparation for a panel discussion by the same group, on Integrity Ministries' online, live, Bible-based discussion program. The content of the Artifact prepares the team for the online program that will discuss "The Relevance of Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines for Christian Spirituality." Resuming research and writing on the Handbook will be feasible once this particular, online series has been completed.

The Artifact in its present form is a resource document akin to an extended "White Paper," that provides me with the flexibility to use the material in several ways for a popular audience, and even to adapt the material to be congruent within various Christian contexts. I envision utilizing the Artifact as a resource for focus groups, online panel discussions, youth and adult education, further research projects, creation of a Handbook for leaders in my church, and adapting the material for ministries I am associated with in Uganda and Namibia.

Presentation of Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines

Creating the Handbook will be a lengthy process which means the benefits derived from its content will be delayed. The dissertation will initially serve a larger

purpose by launching the Artifact in an online format. Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines in the Christian context will be accessible to a wider audience, immediately and simultaneously. A diversity of demographic profiles will be served. The program has the advantage over print material in being interactive with a live audience. The topics in the online discussion will be presented in a series with review and follow-up on questions asked from the audience. It expands the use of the dissertation exponentially.

Conclusion

Specific Gains from the Research Experience

I have gleaned so much from the dissertation research. I am convinced more than ever, that African Americans in particular, have much to gain by learning about and practicing the contemplative spiritual disciplines for their personal spiritual formation. Starting with the Classical Spiritual Disciplines, they could branch out to embrace other disciplines as well. Scripture-meditation and the disciplines of forgiveness and reconciliation can possibly be spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically transforming for African Americans who have felt the brunt of racial hatred, discrimination, and oppression.

A Lesson Learned

The research has confirmed my observations and perceptions that a segment of the African American population has unwittingly contributed to its own oppressive experiences by embracing a victimization syndrome. The constant rumination about the transgressions that whites have committed against them personally and against the race as

a whole, has kept some African Americans in spiritual, emotional, and psychological bondage for years. One researcher I encountered has labeled this phenomenon among African Americans as a “collective post-traumatic disorder.” Throughout the years, I have seen this behavior repeated over and over among various African Americans which has prevented them from being pro-active, assertive, charting their own destinies, and experiencing healing and wholeness. Rather than allowing negative thought patterns and behaviors, and other destructive habits to consume them, these African Americans Christians will need to surrender to the transformative power of the Holy Spirit to eradicate these negative influences in their lives.

Suggested Further Research

More research is needed in exploring correlations between African Americans’ perceptions of self-identity, self-worth, and sense of victimization with their personal relationship with God and the nature of their spiritual practices. Such a study would need to seek links between African American spiritual practices that promote forgiveness and reconciliation as a high priority, to the resultant positive African Americans’ spiritual, physical, emotional, and psychosocial outcomes. I am currently on a mission to finding research that speaks to the African American experience in terms of, personal spirituality, well-being, and self-agency as it relates to learning to forgive oneself, and others; to bless those who mistreat them. If reconciliation or reparation is not possible with offenders for any reason, African Americans can still move forward and allow the Holy Spirit to lead and equip them in doing great exploits for the Kingdom of God.

APPENDIX A:
THE ARTIFACT

Introduction

This document in its present form is a type of “White Paper,” created for the spiritual enrichment of the popular audience in the Christian community in general, and particularly for the African American population. With respect to the participants of Integrity Ministry International’s Intercessory Prayer Team, it will serve as a framework for the upcoming, online, live presentation of the themes discussed in this document. To that end, it purports to be inspirational, informational, supplemental, and transformational. It can potentially serve as a tool for Christians who want to expand their horizons beyond their current spiritual practices and to consider cultivating spiritual disciplines that heighten awareness and consciousness of God in all life situations.

The Saga of African American Christian Spirituality in the United States

The Beginnings of African American Communal Spirituality

From the beginning of the Atlantic Slave Trade that brought the majority of African slaves to the United States, conversion of African slaves to Christianity was important for the emerging nations in Western Christendom, to justify the slave system. Supposedly Christian evangelism was the motive for transporting slaves to the colonies in the New World. It was often mentioned that slavery of Africans was an act of God’s grace so that Africans would not die as pagans. Therefore, it was said that the system of slavery benefitted African slaves spiritually, and socially as well, because of their contact with the civilized Western world. When African slaves from various tribes and regions,

were Christianized in the New World, they formed strong bonds with one another. Their shared experiences of bondage in slavery and a new religious focus was the basis of the relationship. These factors gave them a sense of identity, community, and solidarity. From that time to the present, Americans of African descent have attached great value to community life and their own style of communal worship as the focal point of their spirituality. The strength of that spirituality is most apparent in the dynamic, corporate worship in which the felt presence of the Holy Spirit is dominant.

Due to the ambitious efforts by Baptists and Methodists evangelicals in licensing black men to preach, free and enslaved black preachers abounded who began to pastor their own people during the 1770s and 1780s. They interpreted the Bible texts in ways that spoke to their needs and interests, thereby creating a distinctly “black church culture,” among free and enslaved Africans in the last quarter of the 18th century. In the North, between 1790 and 1820, black Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians founded churches. Richard Allen, a licensed and ordained pastor, and former slave was in the forefront of these developments. He founded Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1794. Leaving segregated churches founded and controlled by whites, and forming independent churches gave black Christians a voice in interpreting orthodox Christianity. As the first institution that belonged exclusively to people of African descent in America, the black church has historically been the backbone of African American communal relations. It has been a refuge and a location for communal gatherings. It has offered spiritual support, counseling, and various outreach initiatives, and programs for strengthening African

American families and communities. Black churches have also shown leadership in activism for social justice and the betterment of the whole community.

Considering the Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines for African American Spirituality

From my personal observations and contacts with African American Christians, I conjectured that most of them would express total satisfaction with their present Christian spiritual experience and that the integration of contemplative spiritual disciplines to their basically corporate spiritual experiences would seem superfluous. The feedback that I received from you in the Survey Questionnaire that I presented to you indicated that I was totally wrong in my assessment. I am happy to see that many of you are enthusiastically practicing the Disciplines of Prayer, Solitude, Study, Meditation, Fasting, Confession, and Worship; your whole countenance glows and you become ecstatic in reporting the various benefits you are reaping from these practices.

Except for confession, fasting, prayer, and worship, I have been practicing these disciplines since I was fifteen years old. However, they were not Christian contemplative spiritual disciplines because they were based on the positive-thinking affirmations of Religious Science or Science of Mind teachings influenced by Eastern Meditation. After becoming a Christian and discarding these teachings, my spiritual inspiration and edification have come solely from the Bible and Bible-based inspired teachings. The benefit of the Science of Mind experience was the cultivation of a discipline for spiritual engagement throughout the day, which fortified me, especially during challenging

moments. Some Christian churches do not emphasize practicing the Christian-based contemplative spiritual disciplines systematically and conscientiously; they may bring attention to these disciplines in a sporadic fashion, if at all. Nevertheless, you all have taken the initiative to practice them on your own time, letting the Holy Spirit guide the experience. I believe many Christians do not practice the contemplative spiritual disciplines, not so much from the standpoint of resistance, but more from the standpoint of not knowing about the Christian contemplative spiritual disciplines or not understanding their value in the Christian experience. I believe to be informed is to be empowered; when they know better, they can engage in a richer spiritual experience.

**Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines: A Pathway to Enhanced Spiritual Formation in
the African American Christian Heritage**

Reviewing Some of the Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines

In this discussion on the contemplative spiritual disciplines, only Christian contemplative spiritual disciplines are being considered, unless otherwise noted. Richard Foster in *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, relates that practicing the disciplines is an exercise that all Christians can partake of upon their Christian conversion. According to Foster, “The purpose of the disciplines is spiritual growth. It is liberation from the stifling slavery to self-interest and fear; this is accomplished when the inner spirit is liberated from all that weighs it down. The primary requirement for practicing the disciplines is a longing after God.”¹⁵⁰ Singing, dancing, shouting are

¹⁵⁰ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1998), 2.

typically expressions of the disciplines of the spiritual life. Foster states, “We only have one thing to do, namely, to experience a life of relationship and intimacy with God.”¹⁵¹ In His grace, God has ordained the disciplines of the spiritual life as the means in which we place ourselves before Him so that He can bless us and transform us. Foster identifies three categories of spiritual disciplines: Category One The Inward Disciplines—meditation, prayer, fasting, and study; Category Two The Outward Disciplines—simplicity, solitude, submission, and service; Category Three The Corporate Disciplines—worship, confession, guidance, and celebration.

Thomas Merton, in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, explains the enlightenment that comes from contemplation. He refers to contemplation as “the highest expression of man’s intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awakening, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being.”¹⁵² In contemplation Christians seem to touch God and be touched by God; an experience that God in His mercy gives freely. God is pure love and we know Him by His love toward us and we reciprocate that love. Christians appropriately respond to this experience with joy, thanksgiving, happiness, and praise.

Richard Foster, in *Streams of Living Water: Essential Practices from the Six Great Traditions of Christian Faith*, declares that the contemplative life is characterized by the soul maintaining a steadfast gaze upon God. Practicing the spiritual disciplines strengthens believers in their Christian walk because they are focused on God, who loves

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵² Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York, NY: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1961), 1.

them. Therefore, all Christians are obligated to develop contemplation that results in loving God and being in partnership with Him for the redemption of the world. Each of the disciplines must be approached with consideration in how it can be practiced during the routines of everyday life.

Dallas Willard in *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, offers a similar perspective. He declares that the disciplines are activities of mind and body that are intentionally practiced so that the Holy Spirit can mold and shape all aspects of the Christian life into conformity with God's will. Communing with God brings about a new quality of human existence and empowerment as Christians willingly yield themselves to God and His righteousness. In this way, Christians participate in their own redemption and their practice in the disciplines is profitable to all things. Willard breaks down his list of spiritual disciplines that have been used widely over the generations into two categories: Disciplines of Abstinence—solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice; Disciplines of Engagement—study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission.

Marshall Davis translated and published the writings left by Brother Lawrence, a lay brother in the Discalced Carmelite monastery in seventeenth century France, and *The Practice of the Presence of God* is the product of Davis' work. Brother Lawrence provides four benefits that result from being in God's presence. The first benefit comes from dwelling on God and sensing His presence which causes faith to increase, become alive, and active in all life situations. When God is called upon there is assurance that He will respond. Second, in the practice of His presence, our hope in God grows stronger and is sustained. Third, "God's love is a consuming fire, burning to ashes all that is contrary

to His will. Living in the presence of God produces within us the heart of consecrated zeal, a lively ardor, passion to see this God known, loved, served, and worshiped by all His creatures.”¹⁵³ Fourth, in practicing the presence of God with a fixed gaze upon Him Christians come to a special knowledge of God deep down in their souls. The Christian life is compelled to express unceasing acts of love, worship, trust, praise, prayers, and service. That is for Christians, life is a continuous, unbroken practice of God’s divine presence.

There are many Christian practices considered to be contemplative spiritual disciplines, but there is no one, universal, comprehensive list of such disciplines. Older ones sometimes fade out of use and new ones emerge. All bona fide Christians can add to the list of Christian spiritual disciplines. After much discussion about the Christian spiritual disciplines in this dissertation, the Holy Spirit gave me a new discipline: “the discipline of miracles, signs, and wonders.” This incorporates not only meditating on God’s attributes and the wonderment of His created order in such things as beautiful sunsets or rhythmic ocean waves, but also includes instances of God’s interventions throughout world history in setting the captives free. Of special interest to me, has been God exercising His omnipotence in putting down oppressive social, political, and religious regimes or structures in the United States. He rescued the ancient Israelites from the bondage of slavery; he rescued African slaves in America from the bondage of slavery and the social and political Jim Crow power structures that followed. He freed black Africans in South Africa from oppressive white supremacy. History is replete with God’s interventions across continents transforming individuals and nations through the

¹⁵³ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (trans by Marshall Davis, 2013), 74.

power of His Holy Spirit. These interventions are manifestations of God's covenantal promises and of His infinite authority in the earth realm. Scriptures that come to mind are: Ephesians 3:20-21, "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end, Amen," and Exodus 14:13, "And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord."

Many of us are already practicing the contemplative spiritual disciplines that are regarded as the Classical Disciplines that have been practiced by Christians over the centuries, such as, prayer, fasting, worship, praise, and meditation. There are also several contemplative spiritual disciplines that are not well-known such as: simplicity, submission, service, guidance, celebration, silence, frugality, chastity, secrecy, sacrifice, fellowship, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

The Discipline of Prayer

Of all the spiritual disciplines, many Christians regard prayer as the most powerful and beneficial because it is direct communion with God, our heavenly Father. Sincere prayer is life-creating and life-changing because in that experience we are being transformed by God. It seems that the more we experience God's presence in our lives, the more we sense that we cannot live without Him, and the more we want our lives to be everything He ordained it to be. In prayer, God reveals to us the things that prevent us from being who He ordained us to be; they are frequently referred to as spiritual strongholds in our lives. Only God has the capacity to free us entirely from them. Communion with God in prayer is not only valuable, but it is also essential for leading

godly lives; prayer transforms our thoughts, desires, and wills so that they conform to God's ways. Jesus made prayer the first priority of His day, arising early, before dawn to pray. David also arose early in the morning to have communion with God. That is also my favorite time to start my day in prayer, early in the morning around 04:00 AM, while the day is still quiet and peaceful without distractions; it fortifies me before experiencing the busyness and challenges of the day. The apostles of Jesus developed the habit of praying continually as they went about their ministry proclaiming the Gospel. Constant communion with God enabled them to accomplish extraordinary feats. Christian believers throughout the centuries have offered prayers to God to be effective in ministry and to address negative situations in their environments. They have used various forms of prayer, including intercessory prayer, discursive prayer, mental prayer, the prayer of quiet, the prayer of relinquishment, the prayer of guidance, and other forms of prayer. As participants of Integrity Ministries, we are committed to practicing intercessory prayer weekly as a group, and individually for critical matters as they arise. We pray for others with faith in God and with the expectancy that our prayers will avail much. We fully understand that we cannot pray for others without the guidance we receive in communion with God, especially when we pray in the Spirit, that guidance is made clear. Listening to God is the first requirement necessary for our successful intercession. We understand that as intercessors, we must hear, know, and obey the will of God before we can pray it into the lives of others.

The Discipline of Meditation

In the Bible, the Hebrews words for meditation have the meaning of listening to God's Word, reflecting on God's works, rehearsing God's deeds, considering God's law,

and so on. In every instance, attention is drawn on behavior that is transformed due to our encounters with the living God. Unlike, Eastern meditation and secular meditation, Christian meditation focuses on repentance, obedience, and faithfulness to God. The Psalms are good examples of Christian meditation because they center on direct communion with God and dialogue with Him; Christian meditation keeps God's attributes, laws, and promises in focus as we live out our Christian lives. Meditation is the ability for Christians to hear God's voice, so that we may obey what He speaks directly to us individually, corporately, and what He speaks to us through His Word. In His intimate relationship with God, Jesus modeled for Christians the obedience that comes from listening and obeying God. It is important for God's people to listen to His voice and obey His Word in all life experiences and to allow this fellowship to transform us. God is able to purify us from everything that defiles us. In Christian meditation, we willingly surrender ourselves to God and experience His presence for ourselves, which contributes to our inner wholeness, joy, and peace. Being in God's presence is our chief delight; we learn His truths and His ways and desire our thoughts to be aligned with His thoughts and ways.

Once we are convinced that God is vital to our everyday life situations, we learn to set aside specific times for Christian meditation or contemplation. It should be understood that, the work of Christian meditation involves all our life experiences all day long. It is a discipline that is also a lifestyle. The mechanics involved in the practice are not important. The aim will always be the same. That is, to focus our entire being—body, emotions, mind, and spirit upon God's glory constantly. Christians throughout the centuries have spoken and written about various ways of listening to God and

communing with Him as they experience His eternal love. The collective wisdom and experiences of Christian saints and sages throughout the centuries can be helpful to us in our times, as we also seek intimacy with God and strive for faithfulness to Him.

Contemplation can take many forms. Such as, a contemplative practice in meditation on creation by giving our attention to the created order. There is also a form of contemplation that involves meditating upon current events and to seek God's perception in their significance. The Integrity Ministers' Intercessory Prayer Team frequently hold the crucial events of our time before God and seek discernment in what we ought to do about them. The primary thing to remember about meditation is that in some respects we are practicing it all day long as a way of life.

Biblical References to Meditation

There are perhaps some individuals who associate all or most meditation with certain forms of secular meditation or Eastern mystical, religious traditions. In order to emphasize that the Bible not only condones, but also, encourages meditative practices, a few additional scriptural quotes has been highlighted. The Psalms begin with the exhortation of all people to emulate the "blessed man" whose "delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night" (Psalm 1:2). "My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness; and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips: When I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches" (Psalm 63:5-6). "Mine eyes prevent the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word" (Psalm 119:148). "Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay" (Jeremiah 20:9).

God spoke to them because they were willing to listen to His voice. During His demanding ministry Jesus seized opportunities to be alone so that He could commune with God. “And his disciples came, and took up the body, and buried it, and went and told Jesus. When Jesus heard of it, he departed thence by ship into the desert place apart: and when the people had heard thereof, they followed him on foot out of the cities” (Matthew 14:12-13). Jesus habitually set Himself apart from the crowds, to a solitary place where He could be renewed and strengthened by His Heavenly Father. Jesus sought out times for communion with His Father and He listened to Him. All Christians are exhorted to follow His practices.

The Discipline of Worship

For Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, “Worship is to know, to feel, to experience the resurrected Christ in the midst of, the gathered community. It is a breaking into the Shekinah of God, or better yet, being invaded by the Shekinah of God.”¹⁵⁴ God is actively seeking worshipers. Jesus declares, “But, the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24). Worshiping God in spirit and in truth is the Christian response to God’s gestures of love toward His people when His Spirit touches our human spirit. Formal rituals and liturgy do not produce worship. We have not worshiped God until His Spirit touches our human spirit and is working in us. Foster reminds us that it is God who seeks, draws, and persuades us to worship Him. In Genesis, God walked in the

¹⁵⁴ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 158.

garden seeking Adam and Eve. In the crucifixion Jesus drew men and women to Himself. The Bible is full of examples of God's efforts to restore and maintain fellowship with His human creatures. Worship must have a high priority in the lives of Christians if the Lord is to be Lord. "The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment" (Mark 12:29-30). That means that our lives should continually be exhibiting praise, thanksgiving, and adoration to God. Most Christians would not want it in any other way. Foster affirms that, "Those who have once tasted the Shekinah of God in daily experience can never again live satisfied without the practice of the presence of God. We are to live in a perpetual, inward, listening silence so that God is the source of our words and actions."¹⁵⁵ That is also my experience and observation.

Praise is another avenue into the worship experience. Most of the Psalms are worship in a literary form. Praising God is the dominant feature of the Psalms. Singing, shouting, dancing, rejoicing, adoring—all are expressions of praise. The Bible says, "By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name" (Hebrews 13:15). The current Christian awareness and understanding of the power and value of praise in the Christian experience came about through the charismatic movement in the twentieth century. With this understanding, praise has become central to modern day worship. God calls for worship that involves our whole being. The body, mind, and spirit, and emotions should all be involved in the worship experience. Standing, clapping, dancing, lifting the hands, lifting the head, lying

¹⁵⁵ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 166.

prostrate, kneeling, bowing the head are postures consistent with the spirit of adoration and humility. But, Foster cautions, it is also possible that Christians may do all these things and never enter into worship in spirit and in truth. But, these gestures could possibly be avenues through which these Christians may be touched by God.

Foster offers a simple, daily practice of worship which involves the following steps: First, learn to practice the presence of God daily. Second, cultivate various worship experiences. Third, prepare spiritually for corporate worship. Fourth, have a willingness to gather in the congregation with fellow believers in the power of the Lord. Fifth, depend upon God for everything. Sixth, drive distractions away with thanksgiving. Seventh, offer sacrifices of worship. Standing before our holy God, humbles us and motivates us to strive for increased obedience as He is transforming and empowering us. We willingly follow the biblical command, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom: teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Colossians 3:16).

The study of God in his Word inspires Christians to practice the Disciplines of Worship and Celebration. In worship, we dwell or gaze upon the greatness, beauty, and goodness of God through our thoughts, words, and rituals in both private and communal worship. The Book of Revelation teaches us this well. “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (Revelation 4:11). And again, “Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour and glory, and blessing. And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard

I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever” (Revelation 5:12-13). If we were to worship God as indicated in the Book of Revelation, we would be constantly mindful of God’s worthiness in our own redemption, salvation, and reconciliation with Him. Consistently engaging in worship cultivates worshipping communities and individuals, and they are shaped by this experience as it becomes a way of life, guiding moral and ethical behavior.

The Discipline of Study

The purpose of the Spiritual Disciplines is the total spiritual transformation of the person. Of special benefit for some African Americans that are struggling with victimization issues, is that during this practice destructive habits and thinking are replaced with life-giving habits and thoughts. The Apostle Paul counsels us in this way, “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:2). The mind is renewed by applying it to those things that will transform it. Paul further exhorts, “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” (Philippians 4:8). The Discipline of study is the primary way Christians are able to maintain this quality of thinking in a positive manner. Many Christians remain in bondage to fears, anxieties, anger, and unforgiveness because they do not avail themselves of the Discipline of study that could transform their minds and hearts. It is as Jesus said, “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”

(John 8:32). Good feelings, ecstatic worship experiences, or getting “high on Jesus” will not free us. Without a knowledge of the truth, we will not be free. Meditation is devotional, but study requires analysis.

When engaging Scripture, meditation is a way of sensing the essence of a word by dwelling on it, while study attempts to explain what the word means. Foster provides four basic steps for study: the first is repetition that directs the mind along a certain path; the second is concentration which positions the mind to focus attention on what is being studied; the third step is comprehension which focuses on the knowledge of the truth that sets us free; the fourth step is reflection that analyzes the significance of what is being studied in such a way that we see God’s truths from His perspective. In the study of Scripture, the interpretation of what it means is a key element. Our primary aim is to be objective in sensing the meaning of the original author, and not to ascribe our own meaning to the texts. The whole point of the study is that we are striving to obtain life-transforming truth. Daily devotional reading is beneficial in emphasizing application, but it is not study.

Willard tells us that in the spiritual discipline of study, we engage ourselves with the written and spoken Word of God. We may be able to hear God speaking through the Bible, nature, Christian ministry, and the lives of others. In study, we read, we listen, we inquire, we wait, and are attentive to God’s speaking Voice. It entails giving sufficient time on a regular basis to meditation upon passages in the Bible that are most meaningful for our spiritual life, as well as, reading the Bible as a whole. It is also good to sit regularly under the ministry of gifted teachers who can ultimately lead us into more

fruitful study on our own. Additionally, we can glean from the lives and experiences of disciples throughout Church history and cultures.

The Discipline of Solitude

Solitude is a choice to be alone, away from interactions with other individuals. A person can exercise this freedom to be alone, not necessarily to get away from people per se, but specifically to hear God's Voice more effectively. Jesus commenced His ministry by spending forty days and forty nights alone in the desert. Before he chose the twelve disciples, He spent the entire night alone in the desert hills. After the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, Jesus "went up into a mountain apart to pray" (Matthew 14:23). When the twelve disciples returned from a preaching and healing mission, Jesus exhorted them to "Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest awhile. . ." (Mark 6:31). Before going to the cross, Jesus sought solitude in the garden of Gethsemane, saying to His disciples, "Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder." (Matthew 26:36). The purpose of the Discipline of Solitude always involves a heart set on listening to and obeying God. One of the results of solitude is increased sensitivity to God's Voice and compassion for fellow human beings, especially those in need and are hurting.

The Discipline of Service

Authentic service is not about calculated results or showcasing one's deeds. It has pure delight in the performance of the service. Christian service may involve serving enemies, strangers, as well as, friends or family. Christian service is indiscriminate and unpretentious in its ministry; it obeys the command of Jesus to be "servant of all" (Mark 9:35). Sincere Christian service is a lifestyle in ministry that offers service simply

because of a perceived need and may call for a spontaneous response from the person or persons meeting the need. Authentic Christian service quietly cares for the needs of others as it strives to promote healing and restoration.

The discipline of Christian service can be quite humbling. Purposely choosing to serve quietly to contribute to the good of others extinguishes fleshly carnal desires of self-fulfillment or self-glorification; it brings humility to the Christian's outlooks and practices. Certain people that we would have refused to serve in the past, we begin to see through the lens of Jesus and we are grateful for the opportunity to be of service to them. This transformation that occurs within us as we transform the lives of others also leads to a greater appreciation of the love of God towards us. Our life is characterized by spontaneous praise, thanksgiving, and adoration of God. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Voice, the beginning of love for others is learning to listen to them. By listening to others, our minds become trained to listen to God in a greater way. There is the service of bearing the burdens of each other. "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). We can learn to uphold the burdens of others because Jesus is our role model. We learn to share the Word of Life with one another that we received from God. Our service promotes the good of others and serves Kingdom purposes.

Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines that Are Particularly Relevant in Interpersonal Relationships

Perspectives of The Discipline of Forgiveness

Phil Cousineau. *Beyond Forgiveness: Reflections of Atonement*

I like Phil Cousineau's candor and reality check that has great potential in aiding the healing process for African Americans whose personal identity and self-worth are linked to membership in a race that is marginalized, exploited, and oppressed. Forgiveness is spiritual liberation even in that status. From a religious and scientific point of view, forgiveness is not only powerful, but necessary for the well-being of all human beings. Most of us can benefit from a discipline of prayer and a discipline of meditation as part of our daily routine in practicing the discipline of forgiveness. The spiritual work in making amends, of self-forgiveness, and of forgiveness of others, puts us in a position to take control of our destiny. Cousineau makes it real. He outright declares, "You cannot determine my destiny, only my perception can determine my destiny. When I forgive you, I take back my power. When I give you back positive affirmative energy, for some wrong you may have done, I own my power and now I own my destiny. My destiny is not in the hands of what you did or did not do to me. If we accept responsibility for our actions, we emerge out of being a victim."¹⁵⁶ Cousineau is clear, he is not suggesting that one denies wrongdoing by an individual or group, sweeping it under the rug, or letting someone off the hook for offenses. The point Cousineau is stressing, is that African Americans need to allow a bigger destiny to evolve in their lives. We should not

¹⁵⁶ Phil Cousineau, *Beyond Forgiveness: Reflections of Atonement* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 7.

see ourselves as victims because of what somebody did to us, or what they said about us, or called us. We do not have to be victimized by those things because we have the power of choice—to forgive it. We can own our power and move forward on our journey.

From Cousineau's perspective, another way of looking at Jesus' teaching about turning the other cheek means that you are supposed to give back a different form of energy. If you are given hate or indifference, you are to give back love, patience, and compassion. If someone gives you negative energy, you give back positive affirmative energy, such as forgiveness. If someone has done something wrong or destructive to you, you give another energy back—you give back a higher form of energy. He declares, the practice of forgiveness is a higher state of consciousness because you're acknowledging a wrong done to you that was destructive, but you are still willing to give back an affirmative energy. When African Americans think about the evils that we have endured as a race throughout history, we should not use that history as an excuse not to move forward. We should forgive it and not look for someone outside of ourselves to just give us something. The process consists of, taking into consideration what has happened that has harmed us and then think about what can be done in terms of forgiveness, atonement, and moving forward the best way we can, forgiving. Affirmative action or reparations may need to be made.

Cousineau encourages his congregation to practice forgiveness of others and self-forgiveness daily before they go to bed at night. They should ponder over personal mistakes made and any wrong to them done by another person. Then they forgive themselves and forgive the offender. They go to bed with a clean conscious and unforgiveness is not prohibiting them from hearing God's Voice. Forgiveness becomes a

way of living. Allowing hurtful and painful feeling to mount up through unforgiveness, reduces quality of life and may lead to sickness and disease. When we develop a spiritual practice and come to the realization that God is on our side, we begin to eliminate the defense mechanisms and the compulsive behaviors.

Cousineau says, when our functioning in the world as African Americans have a spiritual practice of affirmative prayer, meditation, contemplation, introspection, study, fellowship, or social service, we start to unravel our stories about being a victim, being powerless, and being separated. These issues have not manifested in the Integrity Ministries Prayer Team, but many other African American individuals need to embrace this understanding and start the healing process in their lives and those they influence. I believe our spiritual walk should lead us to focus on our “true identity” in Christ Jesus and the victory we have in Him, our Overcomer, even from the tribulations in this world. Our spirituality should increasingly become more Christocentric instead of remaining Afrocentric, motivating us to stop rehearsing the myriad of scenarios of victimization, racial strife, and abuse generation after generation. We are a completely liberated and empowered people through Christ Jesus. Cousineau states, when we begin to participate in the spiritual disciplines, our lives begin to change. We gain compassion, patience, and love leading to a willingness to be forgiving. When we say, I forgive, it really means I’m changing. The other person may have done a heinous thing but if we are willing to go deep within *our soul* to forgive that individual, then we are changing, we are being transformed, although the other person may not be changing.

When we forgive someone else we do not forfeit our divine blessings; we are developing spiritual maturity and the ability to forgive. Nelson Mandela hired his ex-

jailers to act as tour guides and to serve as ferry operators to and from Robben Island.

These actions are demonstrations of forgiving and turning the other cheek; that is, giving positive energy back for negative energy. Cousineau goes on to say, by the positive act of forgiving them, Mandela was displaying a very high state of consciousness. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. demonstrated this same conduct in the 1960s, when he prohibited individuals from carrying firearms in the marches by teaching them that their aim was to give love for hate and to forgive and love their enemy until their enemy became their friend. King and Mandela are good examples of individuals putting biblical principles into action in practicing forgiveness and atonement and allowing those who had mistreated them to make things right. Luke 6:28, says “Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you.” African Americans especially need to understand that in forgiving, we are spiritually empowered. Cousineau certainly gives African American Christians some great guidelines to becoming free in Christ by discarding all the negative elements that have held them in spiritual bondage for centuries. Following his line of reasoning, African American Christians can take the initiative to make themselves spiritually, emotionally, and psychological whole. I applaud Cousineau for his frank and profound insights which have been an eyeopener to me and have caused me to engage in an honest introspection of areas in my life in which I need to practice forgiveness. Perhaps, his discussion will have the same impact on some of you.

Cynthia Ransley and Terry Spy. *Forgiveness and the Healing Process*

Cynthia Ransley and Terry Spy note that there is much written in the Bible about forgiveness. In a position of authority, Jesus repeatedly released people from the sins they committed against others, as stated in Mark 2:10, “But that ye may know that the Son of

man hath power on earth to forgive sins. . .” Christian forgiveness as an act of mercy brings a sense of peace and release to the person who offers the forgiveness. It is a necessary path to healing. Christians must forgive themselves and others in order to be in full fellowship with God. The Bible demands that people repent of their sins and ask God to forgive them. Ransley and Spy affirm that those who have experienced God’s forgiveness are expected to forgive others without reservation. Applying the biblical principles of forgiveness to personal and public life relationships is of utmost importance. It promotes personal happiness, better health, and a better life. It lessens depression and anger which could lead to improved communication. From the Christian perspective, forgiveness does not depend on the repentance of the other person. Forgiveness is an act of one’s own will, so it is possible to let go of certain kinds of negative, emotional associations with the perpetrator. Forgiveness can sometimes be a painful experience because the victim may have to relive the transgression and experience the pain all over again. The knowledge of God’s forgiveness and unconditional love motivates some Christians to forgive because they are loved by God and forgiven by Him.

Ransley and Spy emphasize the harm of unforgiveness, referring to it as one of the strongest negative emotions that creates a stronghold in the human experience. It is an enemy that keeps individuals locked in the past as prisoners of the past because they refused to forgive. They recommend all Christians to make forgiveness a lifestyle in all situations and not allow painful experiences to manifest in unhealthy outcomes. I have personally seen several individuals’ lives come to an unhealthy end due to unforgiveness.

Desmond Tutu experienced living in a racist and oppressive society most of his life. He became the leader of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that was

set up to encourage reconciliation between the former South African victims of color and their white South African oppressors. Tutu was adamant that without forgiveness there was no future. He was not condoning oppression; he was not denying that wrongs had been committed. The aim was to create harmonious relationships so that people could hear one another, forgive one another, find closure, and end the cycle of racial discord. Ransley and Spy emphasize that to forgive is to let go, and have the ability to move on.

Christians, need to understand that all unforgiveness is required to be confessed before God before they can establish a personal relationship with Him. They must start the process through self-forgiveness which entails taking responsibility for one's actions, facing them head on, and admitting wrong-doing. They can apply the words in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). God's forgiveness often frees us to forgive ourselves. Self-forgiveness involves being able to admit wrong doing. Even with forgiveness toward others, we must take responsibility for any wrong doing we might have done. If others don't accept our forgiveness, the fact that we have forgiven them releases us. It does not allow bitterness and pain to fester and destroy us. The Bible admonishes, "Keep thy heart with all diligence: for out of it are the issues of life" (Proverbs 4:23). Unforgiveness can sometimes do more damage to the victim than the actions of the perpetrator. Forgiveness can afford the opportunity for behavior to change and fractured harmonious relationships to be resumed. It provides a better quality of life than could be possible in retaining bitterness or hostility.

Gregory Jones. *Embodying Forgiveness*.

For Jones, the significance of forgiveness in Christianity is seen in the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, Baptism, and Holy Communion. In Luke 23:34, Jesus

uttered from the cross, “Father forgive them; for they know not what they do.” God’s forgiveness is seen throughout Jesus’ life, and in His death, and resurrection. Jones asserts, Christian forgiveness is a discipline that must be practiced for a lifetime. Forgiveness is the pathway for restoring communion with God and one another. In the brokenness that comes from sin and human depravity, God’s forgiveness is directed toward healing lives and restoring communion with Him. Jones observes, it is necessary for Christians to practice the discipline of forgiveness and other disciplines that contribute to spiritually transforming our souls and our minds. God’s love continually transforms our sinfulness when practicing the discipline of forgiveness becomes a lifestyle.

Gordon Mursell. *The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two Thousand Years from East to West*

Gordon Mursell relates that the Bible teaches us that the prayer for forgiveness for our sins is linked to our forgiving others. The Sermon on the Mount links God’s forgiveness of our sins to our attitude to the sin of others and warns us of the seriousness of being unforgiving. “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But, if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14-15). In Jesus’ teaching on prayer and forgiveness, He points out that our forgiveness extends even to our enemies. “But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

Jan Johnson. *Savoring God's Love*

Jan Johnson is very perceptive in observing that Christians sometimes convince themselves that they are complying with God's commands to forgive someone and letting go of bitterness. She notes that we think we are being righteous by showing kindness to the person who wronged us. But, if there is no change of heart, we have not been transformed. We need to ask God to help us have a genuine desire to love those who have wronged us and to believe He can redeem us from the negative impact of what happened to us. Meditation can often generate a genuine change of heart because we are in a personal encounter with God. Whatever God directs us to do during the encounter, we should implement immediately. Otherwise, we may take pride in thinking that we are holy because we had good intentions toward someone who wronged us. Johnson points out, if we are willing to forgive but feel that we are not capable of forgiving, we need to ask God to show us what is reasonable for us to do immediately, given our nature. There is no need to beat ourselves up because we are unwilling or unable to forgive, we need to do whatever we can do immediately. "This is also true with other spiritual disciplines. We love as we can, not as we can't; we serve as we can, not as we can't; we meditate as we can, not as we can't."¹⁵⁷ The point is to start doing something by focusing on what we can start with so that our spirituality is not about our inadequacies. We should allow the Holy Spirit to enable us to do what we can do immediately so that our spirituality is focused on God.

¹⁵⁷ Jan Johnson, *Savoring God's Word: Cultivating the Soul-Transforming Practice of Scripture Meditation* (Navigators International, USA: NavPress, 2004), 20.

Michael McCullough. *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion*

Michael McCullough paints a vivid picture of what true forgiveness is and is not. He states, forgiveness is not pardoning, condoning, excusing, forgetting, and denying. Forgiveness occurs when the victim or target of the transgression has no ill feelings for the wrongdoer, but instead, views the wrongdoer with compassion, empathy, and love. In forgiveness, positive love-based emotions replace the negative emotions the person previously experienced regarding the transgression. People come to experience forgiveness as they become less motivated to seek revenge against a transgressor. Forgiveness is a deeply religious concept for people from many faiths and cultures, including Christian and Jewish traditions. Religion promotes forgiveness by: encouraging emotions such as compassion and empathy; modeling forgiving actions through Scripture; and facilitating forgiveness behavior through religious role models.

McCullough reports that for three decades, psychological research has consistently demonstrated that religious involvement is positively related to the disposition to forgive others. Some researchers found that compared to non-religious people, highly religious people reported having greater motivation to forgive, working harder to forgive, and harboring fewer reasons for getting even and staying resentful toward their transgressors. Research clearly suggests that people with high levels of religious participation and religious commitment tend to be more forgiving than their less religious counterparts. Research has also shown that holding positive images of God are related to holding positive mental models of one's self and others. There is considerable evidence that religious involvement is positively associated with many instances of physical and mental health. Perhaps the tendency for religious people to forgive is one of

the ways in which religiousness is associated with positive health outcomes. Based on these findings, researchers argue that unforgiving responses to transgressions, if chronic may erode physical health, particularly by increasing risk for cardiovascular disease. In addition, researchers point out that forgiving one's transgressors has a positive effect on psychological well-being. Forgiving thoughts have been linked with a demonstration of greater control, reduced chronic stress, and anger responses. Health benefits of forgiveness may be the result of reduction in excessive self-focus, angry rumination, more adaptive coping, and overall enhancement of mental and social health.

Everett Worthington et al. *Faith and Health: Psychological Perspectives*

Everett Worthington and his team of researchers assert that for several years scientific research has shown connections between religion, faith, mental health, and physical health. First, religion promotes moral and virtuous personality traits. Second, the social support individuals receive from church congregations has positive effects on health. Third, religion has a positive effect on a person's ability to cope with stress. Harmonious social interactions contribute to positive health outcomes by reducing stress and hostility and promoting positive emotions. Unforgiveness on the other hand, is related to negative emotions such as, resentment, bitterness, hatred, hostility, residual anger, and fear which are experienced after ruminating about a transgression.

Unforgiveness occurs when people ruminate about the event, its consequences, their reaction to it, the transgressor's motives, and potential responses from the transgressor. Worthington et al report that most people do not like how they feel when they are unforgiving and attempt to eliminate it or reduce it quickly. They may use various coping methods to rid themselves of unforgiveness. They may seek civil justice, restitution,

turning judgment over to God, resolve the conflict, deny unforgiveness, project blame, or simply bear the transgression. All these efforts tend to inhibit aggressive, antisocial, vengeful or hostile emotions and acts.

According to Worthington et al. another way to reduce unforgiveness is by forgiving. Forgiveness prevents unforgiveness through experiences of strong, positive, love-based emotions as one recalls a transgression. The positive love-based emotions can be empathy, sympathy, compassion, or agape love for the transgressor. Such emotions contribute to reconciliation with the transgressor if it is safe, prudent, and possible to do so. Other positive emotions such as humility over one's own culpability, past transgressions, and gratitude for one's own experiences of forgiveness, could possibly replace the emotions of anger and fear. Worthington et al. observe that, "Unforgiveness and forgiveness are subjective, and as such they involve emotions, feelings, thoughts, memories, associations, neurochemicals in the brain, pathways through various brain structures, hormones in the blood stream, facial and bodily musculature." The experiences of forgiveness and unforgiveness can be complex and comprehensive.

Overcoming unforgiveness does not mean a person has forgiven. Forgiveness is associated with achieving cooperation and warm emotional bonds between people. Unforgiveness is associated with self-promotion, dominance, and self-protection against threats. Forgiveness is associated with positive emotions not just the absence of negative emotions. A person who is high in forgiveness would wrestle with unforgiveness and likely forgive the transgression. Many passages in the New Testament direct Christians to extend forgiveness to those who transgress against them. A lifestyle characterized by

forgiveness often exhibits love, empathy, humility, and gratitude. Studies have identified health benefits with these forgiving behaviors.

Perspectives of The Disciplines of Forgiveness and Reconciliation

I was born and reared in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-national environment in the mid-western section of the United States. When I became a Christian at thirty-eight years of age, I readily embraced the Apostle Paul speaking of unity in Christ. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). I have since pondered over the reason why so many African American Christians I encountered are still so Afrocentric in their perspectives. It concerned me that African Americans may need to take special care that an African American identity does not go beyond a benign sense of racial pride and solidarity and move into an arena of Afrocentric sensibilities that equal or compete with appropriate Christocentric realities. In writing this paper it became clear to me that others outside of the race also contribute to perpetuating this focus through hostile interpersonal relations, pre-conceived assumptions, language that ascribes low value to African Americans, and multiple economic, political, social justice, and educational disparities between African Americans and other groups. No matter what region in the United States an African American resides in, it will be difficult to find African American adults who have not had racial slurs and epithets directed toward them personally in their lifetime. More importantly, are the systemic evils surrounding the blatant, institutionally sanctioned destruction of African American lives and unlawful detentions, and incarcerations. Many of us have experienced or witnessed these injustices first hand, or had these experiences related to us by others who have been directly

impacted by them. Integrity Ministries Intercessory Prayer participants continually lift these matters up in prayer and seek spiritual guidance in our specific roles in these matters.

But, Cousineau makes an excellent point in the earlier discussion. African American Christians should not allow racist practices to define who we are. These attitudes and experiences do not acknowledge who we are in Christ and our true identification and status through Him. That is where our focus should be. When we forgive offenses done to us, we become powerful agents of change because we are spiritually transformed by the Holy Spirit. When we take the initiative to forgive the transgressions of others committed against us, and seek God's forgiveness for our trespasses against others, we set the tone for healing and reconciliation to take place. We are released from the spiritual and emotional bondage of the sin of unforgiveness. We are only responsible for our spiritual obligation to forgive others and be forgiven by God. We are not held accountable for those who will not forgive us of our offenses against them or those who will not accept our forgiveness for their offenses against us. The freedom in forgiveness and an attitude of reconciliation enables us to shed the victim complex and forego recounting the injustices done to us over and over and over throughout the generations. This syndrome only perpetuates a condition of emotional, spiritual, and psychological bondage and reduces possibilities for genuine wholeness and reconciliation. Forgiveness sets us free and enables us to move on to higher heights in Christ Jesus and to do great exploits for the Kingdom of God. I believe practicing the Disciplines of Forgiveness and Reconciliation is a way forward because these Disciplines

bring awareness to the potential for significant *spiritual* transformation, healing, well-being and wholeness for African Americans and all other racial groups.

Michael McCullough et al. *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*

McCullough et al. recognize that reconciliation involves the restoration of trust in an interpersonal relationship through mutually trustworthy behaviors; it is not a prerequisite for forgiveness. In some situations, people are able to forgive individuals with whom they cannot resume a relationship with, such as, those who are incarcerated, deceased, or those with whom they do not wish to resume a relationship.

Everett Worthington. *Faith and Health: Psychological Perspectives*

Worthington describes reconciliation as the restoration of trust in a relationship in which trust has been violated, sometimes repeatedly. Reconciliation can involve forgiveness or other ways of reducing unforgiveness. But, reconciliation will always occur within some type of relationship.

Howard Thurman. *Disciplines of the Spirit*

For Howard Thurman, reconciliation can apply to inner turmoil within individuals, as well as, disharmony in interpersonal relationships. He states, the objective of reconciliation is to achieve wholeness. In interpersonal relationships it attempts to create a climate of trust, mutual respect, and understanding between parties in which there is discord. The discipline of reconciliation for Christians is related to the entire Christian experience in which loving God and neighbor have significance. Ultimately, it is God's intervention that brings healing, reconciliation, and harmony to individuals or groups in conflict and He makes them whole.

Anthony Campolo and Michael Battle. *Church Enslaved: A Spirituality of Racial Reconciliation*

Anthony Campolo and Michael Battle emphasize that white Christians and black Christians need to speak truth to each other in love if they are serious about understanding one another and building true fellowship. They should be honest about the hostilities between them. I believe these authors are correct in stating that it is easy to blame all the evils of racial discrimination on everything that is wrong in the lives of African Americans. In my opinion, this gives African Americans the sense that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with their own social structures. The authors state if there is going to be reconciliation, there must be mutual accountability for the actions of African Americans and white people. Honesty will help each group see its own flaws and shortcomings. Church leadership can facilitate the process. Campolo and Battle believe the approach of a contemplative spirituality would be of great help in achieving racial harmony because in practicing contemplative spiritual disciplines, people sense God in fellow human beings and they must accept them no matter what their race or ethnicity. They believe this Christian approach is vital in eliminating racism. An open exchange might be helpful in which racism can be discussed freely and honestly. Introspection, self-appraisal, and confession of participation in oppressive practices and behaviors can potentially lead to productive dialogue and be the vehicle for positive change.

Solomon Schimmel. *Wounds Not Healed by Time*.

Solomon Schimmel perceives that expressions of remorse and sorrow make it easier for us to forgive someone who has hurt us. Nevertheless, it is always in our best interest to forgive parents, children, siblings, or friends who caused us pain even if they

have died, and cannot apologize, confess, express remorse, or rectify what they did that injured us so deeply. He ponders, What can we do to reconcile ourselves with someone no longer alive but whose earlier actions still impact our lives, cause us to be angry, and dominate our memories? His suggestion is that as a healing strategy, sometimes it may be useful to consider the whole person and not focus on only that aspect of the person's personality that caused us harm or grief. He notes that there are many factors that come into play in the healing process. "Healing is affected by the nature and extent of the injury we have suffered, our relationship with the person who has hurt us, and whether or not the person whom we contemplate forgiving has expressed remorse for the transgression or attempted to repair the emotional, physical, or material damage wrought upon us."¹⁵⁸ To forgive someone means to no longer feel angry or resentful over the transgression the person committed. In situations in which the transgressor and victim were known to each other and had a harmonious relationship, forgiveness is a step in returning the relationship back to the condition it had before the transgression.

Schimmel remarks that forgiveness may mean that the victim will not seek further revenge or demand further reparations. Forgiveness is a complex phenomenon since it includes feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Usually, people are not either forgiving individuals or unforgiving individuals. The emotional and mental attitudes involved in forgiveness can change back and forth in intensity; anger, hatred, compassion, and love are emotions that are subject to change. It is often assumed that victims of injustice and injury are either vengeful or forgiving, but that is not true. There are also ways of

¹⁵⁸ Solomon Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed by Time: Power of Repentance and Forgiveness* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 91.

reducing unforgiveness without actually forgiving. True forgiveness or active forgiveness is the desirable virtue. Reducing unforgiveness is not as desirable as actual forgiving. Some people seek revenge or justice through God or human means and once that has taken place, their anger may be reduced. Spiritually, this is not as superior as forgiving privately in one's heart without having amends being made. From a Christian perspective, when the offender has repented, the victim should forgive the offender. Forgiveness in response to apology, remorse, and restitution has psychological and social value for the offender and the victim. It can possibly bring closure for the victim and free the victim from being consumed with anger or hatred.

Schimmel comments that forgiveness in response to repentance encourages people to make positive changes and brings harmony and reconciliation into fractured relationships. It may be an avenue for the renewal of friendship, affection, and love. Forgiveness can keep families intact, especially if family members are committed to offering mutual help and support. Forgiveness can also have physiological and psychological benefits, but it is still a very difficult thing to do for many people. In some situations, in which the offender has apologized and repented, the victim may still experience the traumatic consequences of the offense for a lifetime.

Schimmel offers some strategies for individuals who want to forgive:

Phase I: 1) acknowledge being hurt by an offender; 2) confront the anger and release it; do not harbor it; 3) admit shame if it exists; 4) develop an awareness of the investment of mental or emotional energy in the person or event; 5) become aware of the cognitive rehearsal of the offense and don't be consumed by these negative thoughts; 6) realize permanent injury.

Phase II: 1) decision making and willingness to consider forgiveness as an option; 2) commitment to forgive the offender by moving away from preoccupation with one's own pain and into the realm of spiritual and moral claims of a gospel of love and compassion; 3) embark on the journey of learning how to forgive.

Phase III: 1) cultivate empathy and compassion toward the offender; 2) accept and absorb the pain; 3) come to the realization that all people have intrinsic worth due to their humanity (*imago dei*) and are entitled to love and compassion.¹⁵⁹

Schimmel is correct, that if authentic forgiveness does not occur, the anger and hatred will continue to re-surface indefinitely and impact the victim's feelings, behaviors, and health negatively.

Ernesto Valiente. *Liberation Through Reconciliation: Jon Sobrino's Christological Spirituality*

Ernesto Valiente views reconciliation as an attempt to mend and renew broken and fragmented relationships and to overcome hostility by transforming the parties involved. He states, "From a biblical point of view, the need for reconciliation stems from a realization that humans are alienated from God, in enmity with one another, and in disharmony with the natural world. God's intends for His interventions to heal humanity, mend human relationships, and for humans to be capable of living in communion with Him." The book of Genesis traces this state of alienation back to human sinfulness. (Genesis 3:1-21). This alienation is the cause of the discord in relationships between humans. The Bible teaches that each human being is responsible for his or her own

¹⁵⁹ Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed by Time*, 94.

alienation with God, but He takes the initiative to restore the relationship. The scriptures consistently indicate that the legacy of sin and the rejection of God's ways by humans continue to threaten human relationships.

Valiente views God's reconciling work as a model for how human beings are called to relate to one another, overcome their conflicts, and seek reconciliation, involving the restoration of relations between ethnic, racial, and other social groups within a community. This involves the participation of victims and perpetrators in the reconciliation process. Reconciliation occurs between these groups when they have repaired the damage done to their relationships and established relationships of mutual empathy and trust. They must eventually come to the point in the relationship that they can appreciate the humanity of one another, accept one another, and see the possibility of a constructive relationship. Christians striving to transform contemporary society into one that reflects the values of God's Kingdom demonstrate their compassion through the pursuit of justice and forgiveness which complement each other in the reconciliation process. Reconciliation is a continuous process and must be appropriated daily.

Spiritual Disciplines for Incorporating Spiritual Precepts in Daily Life Experiences

*The Spiritual Discipline of Passage-Meditation*¹⁶⁰

Many Christians and Jews are familiar with Eastern forms of contemplation, but not many have knowledge of the ancient forms of contemplative practices of their respective faith traditions geared toward enlightenment and wholeness. The

¹⁶⁰ Tim Flinders, Doug Oman, and Carol Flinders, "Translating Spiritual Ideals into Daily Life: The Eight-Point Program of Passage Meditation," in *Contemplative Practices in Action: Spirituality, Meditation, and Health*, ed Thomas Plante (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 35.

contemporary eight-point passage meditation program has been developed to help those who practice it to *deepen* their spirituality and effectively manage the many stressors of modern living. It is universal and can be practiced by persons of all faiths. It is a comprehensive program that follows classical meditative practices that can be used by individuals and families. Passage Meditation is wisdom-based because its *daily focus* is on historical wisdom teachers and wisdom literature. The eight points are not to be practiced independently. They reinforce each other in supportive strategies that help practitioners deepen their wisdom and more effectively face the challenges of daily life. The practice has been presented as follows:

Point One—Meditation on an Inspirational Passage. Practitioners select their own passages from religious or non-religious sources. (Most Christians are likely to select biblical passages. African Americans might quote the scripture, “I am more than a conqueror through Christ who loves me.” My passage is, “Bless the Lord O my soul, and forget not all His benefits”). 1. Memorize an inspirational passage from a scriptural or major spiritual figure that is positive, practical, inspiring and universal. 2. Choose a time for meditation when you can sit for half an hour in uninterrupted quiet. Sit with your back and head erect on the floor or in a straight back chair. 3. Close your eyes and go through the words of an inspirational passage in your mind as slowly as you can and with as much concentration as possible. 4. If your mind strays from the passage entirely, bring it back gently to the beginning of the verse and start again. 5. Develop a repertoire of inspirational passages to keep from becoming automatic or stale. (The inspirational passage becomes imprinted on our consciousness. As we drive it deeper and deeper, the words come to life within us, transforming our thoughts, feelings, words, and deeds).

Point Two—Holy Name *Mantram* Repetition. A mantram is a sacred word or phrase that can be silently repeated or chanted aloud. It helps practitioners refocus throughout the day. The mantram is used as a bridging tool between meditation on an inspirational passage, typically done in the early morning, to bring calm and clarity for the remainder

of the day. Unlike sitting meditation, it can be practiced anywhere and anytime and is especially helpful for those living in stressful, fast paced, competitive environments. 1. Choose a mantram that appeals to you from a traditional source that has been widely used over time. 2. Repeat your mantram silently in the mind as opportunities arise. 3. Remember to repeat your mantram in times of stress to calm the mind when pressured by time urgency, or to interrupt negative thinking when angry or afraid. The use of the mantram at free times throughout the day is effective in decreasing stress, anger, and anxiety. (This seems especially useful for African Americans during experiences of racial hatred and injustices. A mantram may be, “Jesus is Lord to the glory of God”).

Point Three—Slowing Down. This is the practice of moving with ease and deliberation throughout the day to consciously minimize the stress caused by hurry and time pressures. It does not mean doing things slowly. It means setting priorities and limiting activities so as not to live with the constant time urgency typical of contemporary life. Excessive time urgency undermines quality of life and has been linked to coronary and other illnesses. The practice of slowing down includes looking at and adjusting daily patterns and habits that may contribute to increased time urgency. Alter these practices to a healthier lifestyle including setting a more relaxed pace. Slowing down may act as a buffer against the pressures of time-urgency.

Point Four—One-Pointed Attention. One-Pointed Attention involves trying to do only one thing at a time with full attention. This would include not listening to the radio while driving or studying and not checking emails while talking to someone on the phone. While this practice may appear to counter a multi-tasking workplace culture, it offers a way to remain centered during the continuous interruptions that characterize contemporary life.

Point Five—Training the Senses. Training the senses directs practitioners to discern their lifestyle choices. It is a corrective for compulsive behaviors like smoking, excessive drinking, and overeating which lead to chronic conditions such as cancer and coronary illness. The goal of training the senses is to develop a balanced lifestyle, in which we make wise and healthy choices in the foods we eat, the exercise we get, and avoiding unhealthy habits like smoking and overeating. Training the senses also includes being

discriminating in our entertainment choices. Such moderation can help support a contemplative practice while promoting better health. (For African Americans this could be a time of pause, to think of potential consequences before acting or indulging in self-destructive, or self-defeating behaviors).

Point Six—Putting Others First. Putting others first encourages practitioners to move their concern and attention to the needs of others—family, friends, colleagues, community, world and away from serving only private or personal self-interests. Putting others first translates to the early Christian concept of agape, universal love. (African American mothers are notorious for putting their families first, while neglecting their own personal needs. This is a good practice for African Americans who tend to have a narrow view of thinking about others outside of their communities or self-interests. Also, African American churches can consider creating strong, vibrant missions’ programs nationally or internationally).

Point Seven—Spiritual Association. Like Christian fellowship, spiritual association emphasizes the importance of coming together on a regular basis with other Passage Meditation practitioners to offer and receive support. Social support has long been recognized as a factor in both physical and psychological health and is associated with longevity. (Corporate worship has historically been a focal point in African American spirituality. Members of congregations are normally diligent about regular church attendance and participation in church programs).

Point Eight—Inspirational Reading. Daily spiritual reading from the world’s wisdom traditions is recommended as a source of inspiration and motivation for Passage Meditation practitioners. For instance, *Lectio divina* is an ancient Christian devotional practice centered on reading and reflecting on Scripture. (African Americans attending Charismatic or Neo-Pentecostal churches tend to be well-versed on biblical scripture and would most likely have a repertoire of scriptures to draw on throughout the day related to various challenges and stressors).

The Eight-Point Passage-Meditation Program was created by Eknath Easwaran when he was a professor at the University of California, Berkeley in the 1960s.

*The Spiritual Discipline of Scripture-Meditation*¹⁶¹

Scripture-Meditation is another way of combating stressful and unsettling situations in daily living. It is a much simpler discipline to practice than Passage Meditation and draws inspiration and illumination exclusively from the Bible. Scripture-Meditation is a pathway to encountering God through the power of the Holy Spirit Who enables us to become united with the text in such a way that critical analysis is not needed. It follows a pattern of quieting oneself, reading, and re-reading the scriptural text, then with closed eyes the person reflects on what stands out in the experience, then prays the Scripture as a dialogue with God. God speaks to individuals in scripture and individuals respond to God in prayer. Scripture-Meditation stores the words, ideas, and images of scripture in our minds, our feelings, our bodies in a way that affects our behavior later in building a rich and life-transforming relationship with God and with other persons. In Scripture-Meditation, the Holy Spirit cultivates the heart and programs individuals to see life through the lens of Jesus and they desire to exemplify His ways. In Scripture-Meditation Christian believers come to love, trust, obey, and hear God more and more, enriching all aspects of life with God and fellow human beings. Most of the African American Christians I associate with, study and memorize the Bible regularly which is supplemented by other forms of spiritual formation. Scripture-meditation has huge benefits for all Christians. Vocalizing the text reinforces the content of the scriptural texts so that it becomes embedded into the Christian's consciousness.

¹⁶¹ Johnson, *Savoring God's Word*, 41.

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APPENDIX B:
THE ARTIFACT

Background to the Study

Thoughts pertaining to the present study involved youth who were leaving the Church upon reaching the age of majority. Which led to further inquiry regarding adults, and even ministers and pastors withdrawing from their respective ministerial roles, and/or abandoning the faith all together. Even, I left the Church for eighteen years in the early 1980s, after only two years of belonging to a Christian church. It was a Charismatic Pentecostal black church. I had a few issues with the church governance, such as, not allowing my mother who was in a wheelchair to enter the church in an entrance that had easier accessibility; using church funds to buy expensive cars for the church leadership to commemorate special occasions; people standing up and claiming to have a word of knowledge from the Holy Spirit; speaking in tongues and giving the interpretation of tongues that did not sound like God; attendees supposedly doing “holy dancing” that seemed mighty worldly to me. But, the straw that broke the camel’s back was the obsession with “Satan.” My previous religious orientation in Religious Science taught about the Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent God, and Satan or other evil spirits did not exist. In this Christian church, Satan was everywhere and the cause of all negative outcomes in the world. Christians were not taking responsibility for their choices and decisions in life. It made God look like a wimp and there was a need to be in constant combat with defeating Satan. I experienced what Ross Douthat writes about in *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*. I spent a year or two church-hopping to find a satisfactory congregation. Finding none, I decided to study the Word on my own

with the aid of some Christian commentaries, listen to Christian radio, and watch Christian television. I never stopped loving God.

I can understand how Christians could be disenchanted in a specific congregation or denomination, but I pondered over why a Christian would renounce God? I supposed that they never really knew Him in the first place—never had an authentic relationship with Him. Richard Foster in *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, confirms my suppositions. Regarding communal worship he says, “It is a breaking into the Shekinah of God, or better yet, being invaded by the Shekinah of God. We have not worshipped the Lord until Spirit touches spirit. Our spirit must be ignited by the divine fire.” He indicates that singing, dancing, clapping, shouting, and so forth, does not necessarily mean that we have encountered God in worship, but it can position a person to be touched by Him. With this understanding, my thoughts turned to Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines as the avenue to achieving powerful, intimate encounters with God that can fortify, sustain, and transform a Christian’s faith journey. It is surmised that the infinite joy, peace, love, comfort, wisdom, dialogue, correction, forgiveness, and fulfillment that can only come about by abiding in the presence of God, is an experience a person would never want to forsake. The focus of this study is on African American spirituality and its potential enrichment through the Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines for Spiritual Formation, in conjunction with other current avenues of personal Spiritual Formation. The study represents information gained through research, my perspectives as an African American Christian, and my personal experiences in several African American churches.

Integrity Ministries International

Integrity Ministries International was founded by Dr. Gail Riley in 1978. The ministry offers billboard ministry, intercessory prayer, professional counseling, marriage workshops, retreats, seminars, and conferences. In the intercessory prayer component of the ministry, Dr. Riley meets once a week with a group of approximately eight to twelve Christians to intercede in prayer regarding the current events taking place around the world, as well as, the personal prayers of the group participants and prayer requests sent to the group by others. The participants in the prayer group change throughout the years, but there is a core group that has participated consistently over the last twenty years. Most of the participants are women and all are African Americans representing various charismatic-type African American churches throughout the greater Los Angeles area. Some of the participants are ordained and licensed ministers and pastors. All of the participants in the current group have a college education and five have doctoral degrees. Currently, the age range is from thirty-nine years old to ninety years old.

Integrity Ministry Involvement in the Project

After receiving approval from Carol Jaquith, of the Institutional Review Board at Portland George Fox Seminary, regarding human subjects in research, I solicited several members of Integrity Ministries' intercessory prayer group for their help. I presented each of these members with an "Informed Consent Letter" and a "Written Survey Questionnaire" to ascertain how they perceived certain Christian practices, and in order to better understand the value this group placed on practicing Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines along with corporate practices. A summary of the questions and results of the questionnaire are indicated below.

Questions and Answers to the Written Survey Questionnaire

1) How long have you been a part of a Christian congregation?

The range is from 30 years to 78 years.

2) Has your religious experience been primarily with African American churches?

All the respondents except one stated they have only attended African American churches in their lifetime.

3) What would you consider to be some of the main differences between black churches and primarily white churches?

The main differences are in type of music, praise and worship, delivery of the message, and length of service.

4) What do you consider to be the unique strengths of African American Christianity?

The ability to withstand the onslaught of a racist church and exhibit the love of God in spite of depravity; the same as all religions—importance of family and community and contributing to changing the world. One respondent said I don't see it as African American Christianity.

5) What have been some of your most positive experiences in black churches?

The experience of the musical elements of praise and worship; learning to have strong faith; the love and prayer made possible to walk the straight and narrow path; people who have exemplified Christ in their lifestyle; to experience joy in hard situations; being reinforced by other Christians' experiences.

6) What might be some of the deficiencies of African American churches in expressions of Christianity?

One respondent said, “Is this an African American thing?” Others stated: All Christians struggle to build a personal relationship with God through His Word; the lack of discipline and accountability in teaching on faith and how to develop your individual faith; teaching on how to walk in Agape love; lack of study instead of relying on what others are teaching; lack of guidance in acquiring personal knowledge of Scripture.

7) How might African American churches serve its membership and community better?

Provide knowledge on what the congregants value: financially, socially, emotionally, and educationally; by teaching more and preaching less; the church must continually give spiritual and material support to the people; be aware of the situations that affect the congregation positively and adversely and offer necessary help.

8) What are some of the ways that you engage in your own spiritual development apart from church and worship?

Read the Word: intercessory prayer; attend workshops on spiritual development/spiritual warfare classes; use study aids; attend Christian conferences and conventions; participating in Christian events and helping ministries; study the Word—memorize, quote, and meditate on it; phone-line Prayer; Hallelujah Zumba classes; listen to Christian music.

9) Apart from the Bible, what are other Christian faith development resources that you use or are familiar with, i.e. special literature, study materials, devotionals, video or web-based resources?

Reading plans on my Bible app; listening to the Word continually; teachings via YouTube; Matthew Henry's complete Bible Commentary; learning certain songs in Hebrew; CD's that minister the Word or songs about God and His Word.

10) Which of these Classical Christian Formation Disciplines are you familiar with: contemplative practices; fasting; praying; solitude; confession; simplicity; study? What are your impressions of each of these things?

All of the participants were familiar with and practicing fasting, praying, confession, study, and solitude; two were also meditating. One respondent was practicing simplicity.

11) What are your impressions of the word meditation?

Meditation is focus without distraction; it means to think, ponder, listen, and hear what God is saying about a situation or about a scripture; meditation is to mutter or softly confess, speak the Word of God, not just think on it.

12) What are your impressions of the word "Spiritual Formation?"

Spiritual formation means that a formation/procedure/ act is guided by the Holy Spirit. The result is freedom from strongholds. Two respondents said they were not familiar with the term.

13) What are your impressions of the word "Discipleship?"

This is the practice of the function of a disciple sharing the Good News with others. It is what all Christians are called to do. Be disciples of Christ and get others to follow Him; a person or people group that follows after a certain leader or is a student of a teacher or religious group.

14) What kind of resources would you find most helpful to use to grow in your walk with Jesus on a personal and individual level?

Resources that aid in studying the Word and being able to apply it to the issues of life; anointed music that tell of God's goodness; the ministry of the Word from those rightly dividing the Word; talking with seasoned Christians; Greek and Hebrew word studies; comparative studies; commentaries of the Bible.

15) If I were to develop a resource for personal development geared specifically for the African American audience, what are some of your ideas of what that might look like? What type of resource do you think would be most valuable for African American use and application?

Education on practice and application of the Word; A step by step program; include materials to accommodate audience of varied backgrounds and experiences: educationally, financially, and socially; a study of biblical economics versus cultural economics; give the Word because the Word draws pictures of God for folks young and old, so vivid and plain that it cannot be mistaken for anything else.

The responses to the "Written Survey Questionnaire" allow me to understand how these particular African Americans view their own Christian spirituality within the context of their respective worshiping congregations. I have ascertained not only where

they feel the gaps are in that spirituality, but also what they feel about specific areas in which their churches should be accountable in providing a more holistic Christian experience. I have been apprised of their impressions about and engagement with Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines for their personal Spiritual Formation which is foundational to my hypothesis in this paper. The “Written Survey Questionnaire” informs the content and direction of Appendix A: The Artifact, which provides a framework for the discussion in the upcoming focus group in which these respondents will participate in, along with other members of the Integrity Ministry prayer team. The themes, perspectives, and arguments hashed over and reviewed in the focus group are in preparation for these Integrity Ministry prayer team members’ online presentation of “The Relevance of Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines in African American spirituality.”

Synopsis of Appendix A: The Artifact

Appendix A is an embodiment of the thesis statement in this dissertation. It purports to demonstrate the historical basis for the emphasis in African American spiritual and social communal life. It treats this dominance of African American communal emphasis in spirituality and the lack of simultaneously cultivating private or personal spiritual formation disciplines, as a gap in African American spirituality. My thesis proposes practicing the Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines as a way forward in closing this gap. Appendix A presents a few of the Classical Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines to show their efficacy in the life of the Christian practitioner, on the spiritual level and on the clinical level. A suggested reading list is included for independent study for Christian believers who want to advance their knowledge and understanding of the functional value of practicing the Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines.

Of special significance, is that Appendix A addresses the Spiritual Disciplines of Forgiveness and Reconciliation which are especially relevant to the African American experience. It delves into ways in which African Americans can move forward and be released from the bondage of the victimization syndrome in order, to be free, healed, and whole. Appendix A, also has great prospects in contributing to healing and wholeness for African Americans in their everyday life experiences through the Discipline of Passage Meditation and the Discipline of Scriptural Meditation. If African Americans practice these Disciplines using biblical text only, these practices will necessarily prove to be a dynamic, life-giving, and life-transforming experience in their lives. These Disciplines can help African Americans to remain calm during experiences of abusive treatment when the focus is on God's attributes. With God as the focal point in all life situations, African Americans will develop attitudes of self-worth and refrain from destructive behaviors, and defeatist thoughts or attitudes. The material in Appendix A, is also the primary resource for the discussion in the upcoming Integrity Ministries' focus group, in preparation for the subsequent live, online presentations of the topics addressed in Appendix A.

The Gathering

“The Gathering,” is an Integrity Ministries' production which utilizes Integrity Ministries' intercessory prayer participants to spread the Word of God through various discussions designed to provide Bible-based answers to everyday challenges. The format for this program is panel discussion moderated by Dr. Gail Riley. The panel discussions include a variety of topics, such as, deception, loving the unlovely, raising children in a toxic world, the faithfulness of God, the relevance of spiritual formation and

contemplative spiritual disciplines for Christian spirituality, and so forth. These and other topics will be discussed as the Holy Spirit leads. The first program aired June 2, 2018, on the topic of “deception” based on Minister Nanci Nixon’s book, *Can the Elect Be Deceived?*

“The Gathering” is filmed at Open-Door Communication Network (OCN) cable television studio. The programs are aired on satellite television, YouTube, and Facebook. The programs stream live on satellite stations and Facebook. Two thirty-minute programs are videotaped in succession, one Saturday a month at OCN.

Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines for Today’s Christians

In this investigation, I discovered the enormous value of systematically and methodically practicing Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines for Personal Spiritual Formation. Most Christians of all ethnicities that practice any of the Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines are well aware of the value of practicing these Disciplines that are conducive to a continual abiding in the presence of God and constantly being spiritually transformed by Him. But, not as many Christians are aware of the empowerment, liberation, peace, and physical and psychological well-being that is associated with practicing these Disciplines. When I discovered this, I was enthusiastic about making this discovery the focus of this dissertation and I was eager to share this information with African American Christians in particular. I considered creating a Handbook with a thorough, comprehensive, historical account of Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines, as a legacy of the Christian tradition. The material from extensive research was to be organized in such a way that the end product could be useful as a practical tool for the

pastors at my church, Living the Word Church, to draw from for their teachings. But, due to time constraints, such a project is not feasible at the present time and it is beyond the scope of a dissertation paper. It will require more research and the time element will be lengthy. I had planned for a synopsis of the Handbook to be utilized on Integrity Ministries' production, "The Gathering." But, as things currently stand, this research paper, especially Appendix A, will be utilized in a nuanced version for a future presentation of "The Gathering."

I cannot calculate the significance this project is having in my personal life. The Holy Spirit revealed to me that this recent, deeper engagement with the Contemplative Spiritual Disciplines is a type of spiritual warfare, as well as, spiritual formation. It is a necessary precursor to ministering to children in Africa and other regions in the world. The study has been a source of spiritual enlightenment and maturity. I am more liberated in Christ Jesus. I feel closer to God and I am more willing to submit myself to His authority and not lean on my own understanding. I can envision the actuality of racial discord turning into racial accord and harmony through Jesus Christ. I am anxious for all my brothers and sisters in Christ to experience new freedoms and spiritual transformation as well. It may possibly start off with the audience of Integrity Ministries and go to who knows where. I can foresee the material in the entire dissertation being of interest and of value to at least three pastors of three different churches in Namibia, Africa. They are teachable and willing to listen to someone they respect from the West. How would they access a Handbook I would generate? In all likelihood, it would be electronically or by mail. I am willing to hand carry it to them if necessary and if they are willing, I will personally share its potential. My aim is to bring awareness to African American

Christians of the value of practicing a variety of Christian Spiritual Disciplines that can enhance their dynamic corporate experience and the limited Disciplines they are already practicing.

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