



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Our Deepest Prayer
(Prayer, pp. 59-63)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Our Deepest Prayer

We often fill our worship time – personal and corporate – to the brim with talking, singing, reading, and reflecting. There is too little prayerful waiting in silence, when we can hear our voice connecting with the voice of the Holy Spirit in a place where our waiting connects with God’s waiting.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:26-27

Meditation¹

Prayer is then not just a formula of words, or a series of desires springing up in the heart – it is the orientation of our whole body, mind, and spirit to God in silence, attention, and adoration. All good, meditative prayer is a *conversion of our entire self to God*.

Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

Reflection

Terry York describes “Waiting Here in Silence, God” as “a simple, sung prayer.” Through the text’s spare lines (see the departing hymn below), he reflects on the nature of meditative prayer and its central role in worship.

- ▶ “*Waiting here, in silence....*” Meditative prayer is rooted not in “anxious, red-light-at-the-intersection waiting,” he notes, but in “focus and surrender and an emptying. This waiting sits astraddle the line between the physical world and the spiritual world, leaning against the thin veil, listening in stereo. Waiting of this magnitude requires silence rather than music as a background, focus rather than distraction.”
- ▶ “*...we hear and own our deepest prayer.*” In this yielding silence our deepest prayer is not so much created by us, but *heard*. York says the experience is akin to hearing a duet of voices – “our voice, yes, but our voice in harmony with the voice of the Holy Spirit. God is down there in the middle of all we have hidden from him.” Echoing Paul’s description of prayer in Romans 8:26-27, York concludes, “Our deepest prayer is our voice connecting with the voice of the Holy Spirit in a place where our waiting connects with God’s waiting.”
- ▶ “*Until this silence we’d forgotten....*” We tend to avoid silence and waiting, filling our lives instead with busyness and distractions. By this strategy, York suggests, we hope to avoid our destructive emotions and to forget our sins and failures. “Such avoidance techniques are futile attempts to be God rather than to turn the matters of our deepest prayer over to God,” he writes. “Ironically, even shallow prayer can be a way of avoiding our deepest prayer.”
- ▶ “*Resurrect to life and light....*” In meditative prayer, God brings to light our buried anger, illicit desire, spiritual apathy, envy, and pride, and through our repentance heals these wounds. Also, “There are happier resurrections [of suppressed hopes and dreams], the results of which are equally as freeing,” York believes. “Releasing to the light our hopes and dreams carries the



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same risk as releasing our sins and failures, the very same risk. It is the risk of exposure, of being found out, to our embarrassment. 'You *dreamed* what?' and 'You *did* what?' are quite similar. Both expose the death of something within us. But resurrection awaits our deepest prayer."

- ▶ "Amen." This traditional close for prayer, meaning *so be it* or *let it happen*, "does not end the thought, the wrestling, or the encounter," notes York. Amen "begins with accepting God's love and forgiveness—believing it to be true, as humbling as that is" and continues with "giving oneself to waiting, not being in charge, not being in a hurry." This Amen is our commitment to embrace silence, allowing it to "become a familiar place and state of being."

"The words of our deepest prayer will no longer lie trapped, unattended and haunting," York concludes. "There will be no more night for what has been confessed. There will be no more night for what has been dreamed. Both have been liberated by the singer's courageous entrance into waiting and silence."

Study Questions

1. What does it mean for a person to become silent before God in prayer, according to Terry York? How is this different from other forms of relaxation and meditation?
2. When we are silent before God, what sort of "hidden" or "buried" things come to our attention? Why is this experience something we avoid?
3. We usually think of the Amen as the *end* of our prayer. In what ways, according to York, is the Amen a *beginning*?
4. Discuss Thomas Merton's observation that "All good, meditative prayer is a *conversion of our entire self to God*." How does this relate to York's description of our "deepest prayer"?
5. Recall your experiences of silence before God in meditative prayer. Have they been similar to those that York describes?
6. Review the ways in which silence is offered to God during worship in your congregation. Are the periods of silence frequent? Are they long? Discuss what they mean to you.

Departing Hymn: "Waiting Here, in Silence, God"²

Waiting here, in silence, God,
we hear and own our deepest prayer.
Until this silence we'd forgotten
that these words were hidden there.
Resurrect to Life and Light
what we have buried in our night.
Amen.

Terry W. York, *ascap* (2005)

Tune: WAITING HERE

¹ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1958), 40.

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Our Deepest Prayer

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To describe the practice of silent, meditative prayer.
2. To consider why we fear coming silently before God, and how we avoid it.
3. To discuss how we can offer silence to God through the use of silence and meditative prayer in public worship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prayer (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

This study of the central role of meditative, silent prayer in personal and corporate worship is based on Terry York's hymn, "Waiting Here in Silence, God." The hymn captures the heart of York's experience at DaySpring Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, where a more contemplative approach to worship has developed in recent years under the guidance of its first pastor, Burt Burleson, and musical leader, Kurt Kaiser. When he was asked to write this hymn, York recalls, "my wife and I had been members of DaySpring for about a year. The request was that I write some lyrics that describe my thoughts about DaySpring – why we joined and what this worshipping community had come to mean to us. The poetic exercise was a calming and reassuring experience. It was good to identify and capture these thoughts so that they would not fade with routine and familiarity. DaySpring Baptist Church is special – its grounds and buildings, but especially the people that comprise it. DaySpring is a community whose attention to things sacred and simple facilitates listening to the still small voice" (*Prayer*, 59).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for his presence and for speaking to our hearts when we are silent before him.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 8:26-27 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Terry York considers the nature of silent, meditative prayer and its role in public worship by reflecting on the lines of his hymn, "Waiting Here in Silence, God." Usually this text is sung as a choral anthem at DaySpring

Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, but Kurt Kaiser has written for this issue an accessible tune for congregational singing (*Prayer*, 64-65). For more information on DaySpring, see www.ourdayspring.org. DaySpring's former pastor Burt Burlinson, who is largely responsible for shaping the congregation's contemplative approach to worship, has contributed worship materials and hymns for three issues of *Christian Reflection*: this issue on *Prayer*, and the previous issues on *Catechism* and *Mysticism* (available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws).

Study Questions

1. Terry York describes it as an attitude of expectant waiting that "involves the entire self: body, mind, and soul." This quieting of the mind "facilitates listening to the still small voice [of God]" and engaging in "the difficult internal conversation of deep prayer." He says, "A particular physical environment" – like the awe and beauty of a sanctuary, or certain cues in worship – "may enhance this stillness and waiting, but the crucial environment is within the geography of the soul, an inner space. Then the prayer is heard." The purpose is not therapeutic relaxation or self-reflection, but a merging of one's own deep and hidden voice, or awareness, with the voice of God's Spirit. The Apostle Paul seems to describe this experience in Romans 8:26-27.
2. York mentions two major sorts of things that we bury and hide from ourselves. We hide the first sort, "sins and failures and destructive emotions," because they make us guilty or ashamed before God and others. The Spirit helps us "own" these, repent of them before God, and receive forgiveness. The second sort of hidden thing is "dreams and hopes that are too wonderful to seriously consider, even though it might well have been God who first whispered their possibility into our hearts and minds." We hide these because of pusillanimity, or the shrinking fear of attempting great, but difficult things. The Spirit helps us "own" these and embrace God's strength in becoming all that we were created to be.
3. Each time we end a prayer by saying "Amen," we are endorsing the content of that prayer. In this case, we are endorsing the time of silent communion with God and accepting the truth of our deepest prayer – whether dream, desire, or confession – that we have heard God's Spirit speak in the silence. This endorsement is a commitment to live differently in the future. "The Amen attaches our prayer to our life, the moment just passed to the future just begun," York observes. "The Amen declares that the words of our deepest prayer will no longer lie trapped, unattended and haunting."
4. Conversion literally means "to turn around." Merton is claiming that meditative prayer is a reorientation of our entire self toward God "in silence, attention, and adoration." York is describing an essential movement in this conversion – the moment of coming to understand, with the Spirit of God's help, who we really are, what we really think, and what we most deeply desire. As long as this deepest self remains hidden from our conscious awareness, we cannot yield it to God for redemption and reorientation.
5. Encourage members to describe some of their experiences of silent, meditative prayer. What were the contexts? As Merold Westphal notes in "Not about Me," the immediate prompt that shapes our prayer "typically comes through the words of Scripture, directly or indirectly in preaching, hymnody, liturgy, and so forth" (*Prayer*, 28). York mentions several elements of the experience: a period of silent waiting, an awareness of merged "voices" – of one's self and God's Spirit – that reveal hidden things, and awareness of God's forgiveness or encouragement. While there certainly is no formula for this spiritual conversation and relationship, have members had similar experiences?
6. At Dayspring, there are a number of short periods of silence throughout the worship service – thirty to sixty seconds after many hymns, special music, readings of Scripture, and prayers, and longer times for silence within "collect" prayers. Often these are planned in advance, but sometimes they are spontaneous. This rhythm of silence establishes an expectation for each member to do some "spiritual work," praying silently through the text of a hymn, hearing God speak through a Scripture passage or a member's spoken prayer.

Departing Hymn

"Waiting Here, In Silence, God" can be found on pp. 64-65 of *Prayer*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.