

## Centering Prayer

Psalm 46:10 - "Be still and know that I am God" (NIV); "Calm down, and learn that I am God!" (CEV)

Western Christianity has contributed much to the spread of the Gospel and our modern emphasis on theology and Scripture study. One of the consequences of this emphasis for us is that our faith in God can be primarily thought based and cognitive and de-emphasize God's presence and work in the rest of our being (our emotions, spirit, body). One response to this has been the reintroduction of a form of prayer that is not word based, but designed to open us up to experience God's presence at the very center of our being and God's "peace that surpasses all understanding". The term used for this is "Centering Prayer".

Centering prayer as a spiritual practice or discipline can contribute greatly to our spiritual growth and development, but in ways that may be new and unfamiliar to us as we receive them through entry points other than our minds and our thoughts.

It is my hope and prayer that more of us will adopt centering prayer as a means to further our growth and development in our relationship with Jesus as a supplement to regular scripture study and other word-based forms of prayer. We still need the cognitive forms of spiritual development, but can find centering prayer to be a great complement to them and refreshing way to "experience" more of God's presence with us and in us.

An important spiritual concept on which centering prayer is based is that God's spirit is present with us and in us and that at the very core of our being is God's presence, nearer to us than our breath. We don't need to invite God to be present with us so much as to discover God's presence within us, opening our hearts and minds to the very real reality of God's indwelling us.

Others have written guides and books, even, on centering prayer. My desire here is to give you a helpful introduction to the practice that is easily accessible to those who would be most comfortable describing themselves as "evangelical".

The benefits of centering prayer are most often received over time and through regular practice of the discipline than through any one profound spiritual "encounter" or "breakthrough" in a centering prayer time. One helpful recommendation has been to practice centering prayer twice a day, morning and evening, for 20 minutes, though I have found it difficult to maintain this rhythm and have still found benefit in practicing centering prayer once a day (sometimes for only 10 minutes) as often as I am able. However, the more we are able to practice it, obviously, the more we will be able to receive from it.

### Getting started

To get started, find a quiet place where you are most likely to be undisturbed and undistracted for a 20+ minute period; bring a watch or other time keeper, so you don't have to be mindful of how long you are praying, with as mild an alarm as you can find (you want to exit your centering prayer time gently rather than being jarred from it by a highly intrusive alarm); use a basic chair that allows you to sit upright with your feet flat and comfortably on the floor beneath you, or sit on the floor or on a pillow on the floor against a back support. It is generally helpful to sit so that your back will be straight and you are not slumped over or slouched down.

It is typically helpful to choose a “sacred” word that you will use while praying to help you focus and draw you back into prayer when your mind starts to wander or you find yourself engaged with your thoughts. You may want to ask God to help bring a sacred word to mind. Examples are: God, Jesus, Father, Mother, Abba, Amen, Love, Peace, Mercy, Listen, Let Go, Silence, Stillness, Faith, Trust, Yes. Or, instead of a sacred word, you may find that noticing the rhythm of your breathing may be more helpful.

As you sit and get settled, close your eyes (we close our eyes as a symbol of letting go of what is going on within and around us). Introduce your sacred word inwardly and as gently as laying a feather on a piece of cotton.

“Centering prayer familiarizes us with God’s first language, which is silence”[1]. Our desire is to be connected with the indwelling presence of God at the center of our being, but this is not something that we accomplish by our thoughts or effort, it comes through letting go of our thoughts and effort and letting God open our hearts and minds to the presence of God at the core of our being.

During this prayer (and even afterwards) we want to avoid analyzing our experience, harboring expectations, or aiming at some specific goal such as:

- Repeating the sacred word continuously.
- Having no thoughts.
- Making the mind a blank.
- Feeling peaceful or consoled.
- Achieving a spiritual experience.<sup>1</sup>

It is normal to have distracting thoughts, feelings and perceptions, whether from an internal or external source. These distractions are not bad and should be considered a part of the prayer experience. When you find yourself engaged with your thoughts or a distraction, return ever-so-gently to your sacred word.

1. Thoughts are an inevitable, integral and normal part of Centering Prayer.
2. “Thoughts” is an umbrella term for every perception, including sense perceptions, feelings, images, memories, plans, reflections, concepts, commentaries, and spiritual experiences.
3. By “returning ever-so-gently to the sacred word” a minimum of effort is required. This is the only activity we initiate during the time of Centering Prayer.
4. During the course of Centering Prayer, the sacred word may become vague or disappear.<sup>1</sup>

It can be helpful to remain in silence and with your eyes closed for another minute or two after the centering prayer time ends as we slowly re-engage our inner and outer worlds and bring the atmosphere and experience of silence with us into our everyday life.

There is no right way to practice centering prayer. Don’t get hung up on whether you are doing it right or not. Keep practicing and remember that Centering Prayer is an exercise in ‘letting go’ of our thoughts, again and again. And also remember that “the principal fruits of (centering) prayer are experienced in daily life and not during the prayer period.”<sup>1</sup>

If silence and solitude are new to you or if you are someone who is used to constant sensory stimulation or mental activity, you may find the practice of centering prayer challenging for a while. I encourage you to stick with it as it is such a countercultural practice (often even in evangelical Christian circles), but something that, when developed over time, can be such a source of life-giving

connection with God's presence within us. We so often long to "experience" more of God's presence and work in our lives and centering prayer offers a very helpful means of opening up our minds and hearts so that we may, over time, cultivate our relationship with God and experiencing God's transforming presence and work in us.

"In solitude (and silence) God begins to free us from our bondage to human expectations, for there we experience God as our ultimate reality—the One in whom we live and move and have our being. In solitude (and silence) our thoughts and our mind, our will and our desires are reoriented Godward so we become less and less attracted by external forces and can be more deeply responsive to God's desire and prayer in us."<sup>[2]</sup>

The pattern of the universe is that we are one and that it is radically okay. God is on our side. So we can be at rest. We realize that life is a school. And I want to give myself to that school so that my soul can be formed.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Bibliography

[1] Quotes and certain ways of articulating things are borrowed from "The Method of Centering Prayer: The Prayer of Consent", a brochure by Thomas Keating available at [www.contemplativeoutreach.org](http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org). This brochure can be a helpful resource for you in practicing centering prayer, but is written from a Catholic perspective with language and ideas that are not always familiar to evangelicals.

[2] Invitation to Solitude and Silence, Ruth Haley Barton, IVP, p. 34

3 Creating Christian Community, Richard Rohr, OFM, [www.cacradicalgrace.org](http://www.cacradicalgrace.org)