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OVERCOMING SMARTPHONE ADDICTION BY ESTABLISHING RHYTHMS OF SOLITUDE, SILENCE, AND CENTERING PRAYER

Written by

CHRISTINA TIN-NAR NG

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Randy Rowland

Kurt Fredrickson

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CHRISTINA TIN-NAR NG
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ABSTRACT

Overcoming Smartphone Addiction by Establishing Rhythms of Solitude, Silence, and Centering Prayer
Christina Tin-Nar Ng
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
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The goal of this project is to develop a study guide for adult Christian smartphone users to prevent and/or to combat smartphone addiction by engaging them in a journey of establishing practices and rhythms of solitude, silence, and centering prayer. The ultimate goal is to awaken their senses to the active presence of God in their daily lives and to cultivate a deeper longing and connection with God.

Part One examines the popularity, impacts, and dangers of smartphone technology in the wider Canadian cultural context as well as in the smaller ministry context of Calvary Logos Baptist Church in Scarborough, Ontario. Smartphone addiction can be a real concern but the smartphone per se shall not be blamed. This study is not about banning the use of smartphones but understanding how unhealthy smartphone habits can be formed and possibly be replaced by life-giving habits.

Part Two presents theological reflection on two sets of academic literature. The first is the impact of smartphones on humans from neuroscience, psychology, and spiritual formation perspectives. The second presents a history from the ancient past to the present on how key spiritual masters practiced disciplines such as solitude, silence, and centering prayer as a means of grace to combat passions, and to pursue spiritual wholeness with the divine. Henceforth, a new ministry initiative evolves through the use of a study guide to help participants establish rhythms of life.

Part Three offers the implementation plan of the study guide. The guide provides seven sessions of materials from theories to practices. Participants are invited to journal their experiences and to participate in a community group for accountability. This project recognizes God can transform individuals through practices of spiritual disciplines, but also through communities that are willing to rise above the currents to devote their attention to God.

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INTRODUCTION

This research project was birthed from my personal desire to combat smartphone addiction. Being a smartphone user for almost ten years, my smartphone has become a loyal companion on my journey. As a pastor whose ministry focus is in pastoral and soul care, I feel I have the most legitimate reason to have a mobile phone that conveniently provides smart access to all my contacts’ addresses, e-mails, phone numbers, as well as calendars, GPS, worship music, and different versions of Scriptures for reflection.

I am one of the “digital immigrants” who have experienced both worlds—before and after the invention of smartphones—and welcomed smartphones with open arms. Every two years after my contract expires, I always request a free phone upgrade with a faster processor, larger memory space and longer battery life. I carry my phone with me wherever I go. The only exception is when it is being recharged in the kitchen overnight. I only recently considered myself a smartphone addict, when due to this research I installed a monitoring app, “Quality Time,” on my phone. Then, I became aware that I checked my phone about sixty-four times on average and spent two-to-three hours on it each day. I was alarmed to find that I had established a habit of reaching out for my phone almost once every fifteen minutes for sixteen hours before I sleep; and the top three programs I frequently visited were WhatsApp, Facebook, and Bible.

From that experience, I had a few observations. First, the smartphone is a handy device with a fast processor that can help serve many purposes. The invention itself is not evil. It can help improve work efficiency. Second, the smartphone shall not be blamed as a cause of addiction. Instead, the many social media and instant messenger apps users
install on their smartphone may potentially cause addiction if they do not practice self-control. Third, smartphones can be used for godly purposes. With a smartphone in hand, people can connect with others, receive news updates, read Scriptures, listen to sermons and talks, schedule quality time for silence and prayer anywhere, anytime. The smartphone has the potential to help nurture souls and enhance spiritual growth.

Fourth, no doubt, the best approach to overcoming smartphone addiction would be to uninstall all social media or instant communication apps and platforms. Yet, without exploring and addressing the unmet desires of one’s heart, users may develop other forms of screen addiction by signing onto other devices like tablets or laptops instead. Hence, the first step to combat any addictive problem is to ask deep questions within: “Why am I attracted to these sites? Where am I heading with this? What do I truly desire and long for? When do I feel most vulnerable that I must go there? What might be more beneficial to me at this moment? How can I become more disciplined?”

New technologies are breaking ground everyday. There are already wearable gadgets that function like smartphones. Therefore, the focus of this doctoral project is not so much about combating the “smartphone” device per se, but the distorted habitual desires of the heart. Smartphones should not be blamed as a cause of addiction. Even technological experts say it is, “The excessive desire to collect micro-feedback about ourselves,” and “the micro-reward we crave” through social media that can be addictive.1 Micro-feedback taps into smartphone user’s desires to be noticed, recognized, and

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praised. Whether it is just a “like” or a smiley emoticon, minutes later intentionally or unintentionally users desire to check for more feedback and rewards. Each little encouragement helps release dopamine to the brain that calms nerves and cheers one’s day, so users get hooked to reward-pleasure motives. Yet, people must know this kind of feedback only gives them instant gratification. When they receive no response, they get depressed instantly as well. Their deep loneliness and desire to seek attention, acceptance, affirmation, love, and companionship is universal. In fact, since the late fourth century, St. Augustine of Hippo reckoned that, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in God.”

This project recognizes that the smartphone is not the enemy. Over reliance on a smartphone for day-to-day operations may indeed affect long-term brain development, emotions, and interpersonal relationships. Due to many attractive programs and functions that a smartphone can offer, it can play a major detrimental role in distracting people from personal growth and real relationships. Since most users are not even aware the kind of attachment they have with the smartphone, this project intends to raise awareness of unhealthy addictive habits, especially among people who are called “not to conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our mind” (Rm 12:3). The main goal of this project is to let the Spirit of God fill people’s hearts and satisfy their deep longings as they make space in their lives for his tending and healing.

Calvary Logos Baptist Church in Scarborough, Ontario is where I serve as a pastor. A survey on smartphone habits was conducted in the English-speaking

\[2\] Ibid.


\[4\] All Scripture is cited from the New International Version of the Bible.
congregation in July 2018 before the writing of this project. The congregants are a group of ethnically diverse smartphone users between the ages of thirteen and fifty-five. The survey attempted to facilitate two purposes.

One key purpose was to raise awareness on smartphone usage habits and to identify the top three applications that influenced congregants most. The second purpose was for me to find out the congregation’s spiritual habits that they identified presently practicing. Spiritual disciplines are supposed to be pathways that lead God’s beloved to the true source of comfort and love where they can make peace with themselves, with the world, and with God. Without walking with the Spirit and establishing any kind of spiritual habits or rhythms, one’s life is prone to be led and driven by habits that gratify the desires of her flesh (Rm 13:14; Gal 5:16-17; Eph 2:1-3).

Though students between thirteen-and-seventeen were included in the survey, congregants above eighteen were the target audience of this pilot project. They are “digital immigrants” who are modeling and laying the path for “digital natives,” born after 2000. The practices I propose in the study guide appear to be small and relatively easy to do. The intent is to encourage participants to establish a steady rhythm of small practices, not to overburden them with big and daunting tasks. Participants are not requested to fast from their smartphone unless they so desire.

Contrarily, some of these practices actually build upon existing smartphone habits. There are many spiritual formation apps available on the market and varieties and forms of practices participants may try out. This project recognizes that nobody should be judged by what they can or cannot do simply because every person is in a different stage and season of life. In fact, it is important to work with what they can, and be aware that
there are many ways to achieve the same goal. At the end of the study guide, participants get to review their overall experiences and to identify spiritual practices that help translate their faith into habits and rhythms in their daily lives.

I am not a disciplined person but fully convinced that the Spirit of God helps those who are determined to seek and follow him. God is eager to fill them, shape them, and transform them to be like Christ. The biggest challenge in this project is to convey the idea that spiritual transformation is hard work that requires intentional efforts from those who love God. Many professing Christians have the misconception that once they have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal saviour, the Spirit within them will do his magical transformative work. Some may even perceive practicing spiritual disciplines as “works” that are unnecessary, rather than means of grace that are beneficial to their souls. Yet, these Christians might not fully understand the differences between justification and sanctification. Justification is God’s work. Sanctification requires their consent, discernment, cooperation, and training. The whole process is still led by the Spirit, but active involvement of participants is crucial.

Part One of this project is to explore the influence and impact of smartphones in the Canadian context and in the ministry context of Calvary Logos. Chapter 1 focuses on the development, popularity, and growth of smartphones in Canada. Its influence and impact to users’ neurodevelopment and psychological, social, and relational health cannot be overlooked. Yet, this is not about banning the use of smartphones. The smartphone is a neutral device that can lead people to Sodom and Gomorrah, or the Promised Land. Without discernment, people may get stuck in the wilderness like the Israelites for many years, struggling with temptations and addictions. Hence, it is important to review and
carefully examine smartphone usage habits. Addiction is not caused by smartphones, but an unfulfilled, unexamined, undisciplined heart.

Chapter 2 introduces the demographics and ministry challenges of Calvary Logos where this pilot project is held. The love-hate relationship between technology and ministry will be examined. Smartphones definitely can have a place and role in ministry, yet even with the best intentions any good tool can be misused or overused if God’s beloved do not set limitations and healthy boundaries. Lack of discipline and spiritual fervour are the main attributes of addiction. The chapter ends in identifying a new ministry initiative of Calvary Logos—that is, to renew hearts in discipleship by practicing spiritual disciplines. This pilot project attempts to help guide the people of God to establish spiritual practices and rhythms that they may find meaningful, enjoy, and so may last. People cannot control how their souls will be transformed, but can intentionally make space and yield to the Spirit to work within and without them on a daily basis.

Part Two focuses on theological reflection. Chapter 3 surveys literature on passions, addiction, and spiritual disciplines. By reviewing Christian literature from the ancient to the present, I have learned that early Christians had a special way of looking at “passions” (distorted feelings, actions, and habits) that could potentially become causes of “addiction” as we have come to experience and understand today.

A group of devout Christians, later known as the desert fathers (and mothers), perceived Roman Emperor Constantine I’s ruling in the fourth century a compromise between the Church and the State, and a threat to their love for God. So, they renounced all worldly pleasures and possessions to move into the desert to live a life of hardship and of discipline as hermits and monks. There they were actually confronted by deep
loneliness, listlessness, boredom, and many other kinds of intense feelings, emotions, and desires. Yet, it was through practicing spiritual disciplines like solitude, silence, dispassion, and prayer that they attained union with God, and so found peace in God.

Similarly, Ignatius of Loyola from his personal experience in the sixteenth century, recognized how attachment of desires led to addiction, and how detachment from desires led to freedom to love, and wholeness in Christ. Since then many pastors, theologians, and spiritual masters from the Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant traditions in the twenty-first century continue to testify and teach that spiritual disciplines of various types are still means of grace directing people’s attention and heart to God.

In today’s fast-paced digital world, devoted followers of Christ have to go the extra mile to create the space they need to filter inner and outer noises in order to hear God. There are many different types of spiritual disciplines. For this study, three classical spiritual disciplines—solitude, silence, and centering prayer—are thoughtfully selected to combat smartphone addiction and the digital age. Evangelical churches are familiar with many cognitive, experiential, and social action-oriented spiritual practices, but not contemplative practices. Chapter 4 presents wisdom on these disciplines from a contemplative Christian heritage.

Chapter 5 delves into the theological framework of the spiritual practices described in the study guide. Based on the four-stage classical journey to wholeness: awakening, purgation, illumination, and union, the study guide proposes a five-stage journey from addiction to freedom characterized by these easy-to-remember words: awakening, beholding, centering, decluttering, and enfolding. Each of these stages comes with simple practices that hopefully may encourage individuals, families, and groups to
practice frequently. Establishing good spiritual habits and rhythms is the goal of the study guide.

The third and final part of the paper provides the plan on how this pilot project was formulated and carried out. Goals, target audience, and methods are laid out in Chapter 6. The study guide was implemented during Lent 2019 in the English congregation of Calvary Logos. Each session begins with an introduction of a discipline, a passage of the Bible, and some suggested practices with or without the help of the smartphone that participants could practice for at least one week. Similar to the application of senses in Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, each session ends with a place where participants were encouraged to journal their experiences, feelings, and thoughts.

Chapter 7 is about the implementation plan, assessment, and findings. Congregants were encouraged to participate in the study, used the study guide personally and joined a community group to share and discuss their journey. Sermons corresponded to introduce each week’s disciplines, and were presented by the project leader and English lead pastor. The project leaders also provided a training session and ongoing coaching for all group leaders.

This project began with the desire to raise awareness of addictive habits like smartphone addiction, but ends with the intent to engage participants to live a life with God informed by establishing healthy spiritual habits. Graciously reminded by the renowned philosopher and theologian Dallas Willard from one of his writings on spiritual formation: “Spiritual disciplines are not primarily for solving behavioural problems.”

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Further, he wrote:

The aim of disciplines in the spiritual life—and, specifically, in the following of Christ—is the transformation of the total state of the soul. It is the renewal of the whole person from the inside, involving differences in thought, feeling and character that may never be manifest in outward behavior at all. This is what Paul has in mind when he speaks of putting off the “old man” and putting on the new, “renewed to resemble in knowledge the one who created us” (Col. 3:10).

Henceforth, the goal of this study guide is to help God’s beloved establish a sacred rhythm in daily life that he may fully know God, who is rich in grace and love, and so may respond to him with love and offering his life. Many things are constantly competing for immediate attention in everyday lives and distracting the people of God from what is true, real, and essential. May God’s beloved constantly practice turning their face towards him as he is turning his face faithfully towards them everyday.

http://www.dwillard.org/articles/individual/spiritual-disciplines-spiritual-formation-and-the-restoration-of-the-soul

Ibid.
PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT
CHAPTER ONE

DEVELOPMENT AND IMPACT OF SMARTPHONES IN CANADA

The Cultural Context

The smartphone refers to a class of mobile phones that provide integrated services from personal wireless communication through e-mail, text and messaging with built-in microphones and cameras that allows for instant voice messages, pictures, and video exchange, and built-in apps that can access the worldwide web and social media sites. It is basically a handheld personal computer. It was not widely introduced to Canadians until 2007 when Apple released the first generation touchscreen design smartphone known as the iPhone. A smartphone with Google’s Android operating system came a bit later in 2008. It had not gained widespread popularity until 2012, and today dominates the market share worldwide.

In 2014, Catalyst and GroupM Next conducted research examining when, where, and how Canadians were using their smartphones. The study showed that 55 percent of Canadians owned a smartphone.¹ It looked at how Canadians were using their

smartphones in three key browsing locations – on the go, at home, and at work. Results showed that people tended to use their devices in different ways depending on where they were. When users were at work, they were more likely to be checking e-mail, stock quotes, reading the news, or doing some personal banking. When at home, they were more likely to be looking for a new car, booking a flight, paying a bill, or shopping and buying products online. When they were on the go, they were likely getting directions, finding a new restaurant to try, checking the weather, reading Twitter feeds, or looking up sports scores.\(^2\) In 2015, the smartphone penetration rate grew to 68 percent, representing a year-over-year growth of 24 percent.

In 2016, a Statistics Canada’s General Social Survey reported that of 19,000 Canadians aged 15 and over, 75 percent actually owned a smartphone.\(^3\) In fact, the majority of Canadians seem to have, or want, more than one digital device. Besides smartphones, there are also laptops, tablets, and smartwatches. Ninety percent of Canadians owned two or more digital devices and 80 percent three or more in 2016. Nearly 59 percent Canadians aged fifteen and older reported that life was better as a result of their use of technology. Seventy-seven percent aged fifteen and older reported that technology helped them to communicate with others, 66 percent felt that it saved time, 52 percent stated that it helped to make more informed decisions, and 36 percent


felt that it helped one to be more creative. In each case, Canadians in younger age groups were more likely to affirm these benefits than older age groups. Overall, 14 percent of Canadians felt that technology often interfered with other things in life. Twenty percent of fifteen-to-twenty-two-year olds felt strongly whereas only 3 percent of those aged seventy-five or above felt the same.

Research studies on smartphone users’ habits in Canada are still very limited. From IDC, sponsored by Facebook, an online survey of 7,446 eighteen-to-forty-four year old iPhone and Android smartphone users was conducted in the US over the course of one week in March 2017. Results showed that four-out-of-five smartphone users check their phones within the first fifteen minutes of waking up. Among these people, nearly 80 percent check their phones before doing anything else. An online poll conducted by Harris/Decima in 2014 for a Canadian bank showed that Canadians checked their smartphones every ten minutes, an average of six times per hour. It was speculated that smartphone users were pulling out the device over a hundred times a day to see a text message, Facebook notification, or another “like” on an Instagram photo. Lack of

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5 Ibid.


7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.


10 Ibid.
recent behavioural research study on smartphone usage seems to suggest that the smartphone has already integrated and become a part of people’s lives.

**The Impact**

The advancement of smart technology in the last decade has completely revolutionized the way people live, interact, and even think. There is a growing body of research done by psychiatrists, neuroscientists, marketers, and public health experts that suggest smartphones are causing real damage to people’s mind and relationships.

First, usage changes the brain. The area responsible for spatial memory (the posterior hippocampus) is larger for people who use it to memorize more things than those who make little effort. London cab drivers, for example, have to memorize the names and locations of 25,000 streets, 320 common routes through the city, and “points of interest” that exist within half a mile of each of these routes before they can be tested and qualified to be a cab driver. They still do today, even with GPS and smartphones. In 2000, a team of researchers led by Eleanor Maguire at University College London published a study in which they scanned the brains of London cab drivers to compare with people who had not devoted months of their lives to memorizing the intricacies of the city and found that those cab drivers did have larger posterior hippocampi.11 With a powerful search engine in the smartphone and sizable storage, smartphone users are less likely to use their brains. Moreover, there was also evidence that products like smartphones rewire human’s brain.

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Dopamine in the brain has many roles. One of the key roles of dopamine is to teach people to associate certain behaviours with rewards. If the smartphone somehow satisfies their needs, wants, and pleasures, dopamine will be released to trigger cravings for more. When users encounter good, positive experiences with a smartphone, they want and desire more. Yet, interestingly, when they feel lonely, depressed, bored, or anxious, reaching out for a smartphone is also a way to escape. That is how addiction can easily be formed. The smartphone is merely a device, but what this little gadget offers is boundless access to social media sites that easily hook people to a reward-pleasure mode. Other effects to the brain include weakening of one’s attention span and concentration, and flickering one’s focus, causing constant distractions.

According to Larry Rosen, a psychologist at California State University, the smartphone “deliberately incites our anxiety by providing new information and emotional triggers every time we pick it up.” Facebook’s newsfeed and Instagram are just some of the examples. Fear of missing out (FOMO) is a form of anxiety that smartphone users easily develop. People are afraid to leave home, go to work or go for vacation without their smartphone near them. They develop a habit of checking their phone unceasingly.

Moreover, apps like YouTube or Netflix on the smartphone actually were designed to provide automatic non-stop entertainment. People no longer need to wait to get home to turn on their TV for video games or movies. With a handheld gadget, people can stream any online entertainment, even when packed like sardines on a subway train. That is how people can easily lose control or concentration. The prefrontal cortex is

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12 Ibid.
responsible for executive function, such as decision-making and self-control.\textsuperscript{13} It is the place to choose and decide where one needs to pay attention and focus. If one loses control over her attention, she cannot think abstract and complicated thoughts. Just like a muscle the prefrontal cortex can easily become excessively tired when focus wavers, the mind wanders, and one is overwhelmed by decisions to make.\textsuperscript{14} When the mind becomes too exhausted, it fails to fight distractions. When people cannot stay focused, they cannot do any one task efficiently and well, let alone multitasking.

Secondly, any subtle changes of the central nervous system might potentially lead to mental health issues such as narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).\textsuperscript{15} People with NPD seek excessive attention and admiration from others who think highly of them. They tend to constantly post photos on social media sites, expect others to respond, and check their phone frequently for messages and “likes.”

OCD is another anxiety disorder in which people have unwanted and repeated thoughts, images, or impulses that cause them to behave in certain ways. A key feature of OCD is that these obsessions or compulsions might cause major distress and interfere with daily life.\textsuperscript{16} Although in all of the studies so far there was no evidence that smartphones can cause ADHD, it is clear that smartphones can cause similar symptoms

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Larry D. Rosen, \textit{iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming its Hold on Us} (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2013), 51.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
to ADHD: more frequent phone interruptions make people less attentive and more hyperactive.\(^\text{17}\)

Moreover, Jim Taylor from the University of San Francisco and the Wright Institute in Berkeley wrote online about seeing increasing numbers of people around him experience symptoms of what he calls “Disconnectivity Anxiety” (DA).\(^\text{18}\) Taylor described DA as, “A persistent and unpleasant condition characterized by worry and unease caused by periods of technological disconnection from others.”\(^\text{19}\) When smartphone users suddenly get disconnected from instantaneous and continuous connectivity, immediately they feel annoyed and freaked out. Also, when the receiver of a message does not respond to the message immediately, the sender of the message feels anxious and distressed. DA is associated with negative emotions such as worry, fear, anger, frustration, despair, and physical distress.\(^\text{20}\) Furthermore, people are so attached to their phones these days that many believe they cannot live without them. “Nomophobia,” which stands for “no-mobile-phone-phobia” describes the irrational fear that people have when they forget to carry their phone to work, or when it is out of reach.

There is also “phantom vibration syndrome.” Research consistently shows that smartphone users are attached to checking their smartphone - on average seventy times per day. This habit may be unintentional as phantom vibration syndrome describes the


\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.
phenomenon that people actually feel a vibration or ringing of their phones when they are not. According to a study in the UK in 2015 by Robert Rosenberger, philosopher and assistant professor at Georgia Institute of Technology, 90 percent of people suffer from phantom vibration syndrome.21 Further, 62 percent of the iGeneration (born in the 1990s), 64 percent of the Net Generation (born in the 1980s), 42 percent of Generation X (born between 1965 and 1979) and 18 percent of Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) check their smartphones for text messages every fifteen minutes or less.

Thirdly, besides the aforementioned neurological and psychological impacts, there are also social and relational impacts. As much as Canadians welcome digital technology, according to the General Social Survey conducted in 2016 many feel it has penetrated too much on their domestic spheres.22 Although 68 percent described themselves as satisfied or very satisfied with their work-life balance, this was down 10 percent from 2008. The decline could be the result of accessing work emails through smartphones or being distracted by smart technology.23 It is not uncommon today to see families with children and teenagers pull out their own personal smartphones or tablets as they dine in restaurants or as they wait in the doctor’s office.

Technology that makes communication quick and easy can create social isolation. Stern suggested that smartphone technology makes physical interpersonal interactions

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22 Andrew-Gee, “Why are Canadians Less Happy Balancing Work and Life in the Digital Age?”

23 Ibid.
less necessary.\textsuperscript{24} With the availability of many apps for smartphones, people no longer need to have physical contact with others, like when ordering pizza, finding a date, or even visiting aging parents. In the TED talk “Connected but Alone?” psychologist Sherry Turkle stated that, “Technology helps us feel connected in ways we can control; it provides the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship.”\textsuperscript{25} People are increasingly connected, yet increasingly lonesome. Digital technology changes people’s relationships with others and with themselves, not just socially but personally as well. Apparently people are increasingly connected to the world, but alarmingly disconnected from themselves.\textsuperscript{26} Human beings have deep physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs. The smartphone is merely a medium that seemingly appears to fill their void, but it can never fully satisfy or fulfill their unquenchable thirst and longing of intimacy.

\textbf{The Addiction}

The \textit{Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5\textsuperscript{th} edition} (DSM-5) is the American Psychiatric Association’s latest classification and diagnostic tool.\textsuperscript{27} This manual does not list smartphone addiction as an addiction or as a mental disorder. Neither was internet addiction included. The only behavioural addiction (as opposed to


substance addiction) included in this DSM is gambling disorder. Internet gaming disorder was included in a section of the DSM-5 recommending further study. In November 2016, seven healthcare professionals from Taiwan came up with “Proposed Diagnostic Criteria for Smartphone Addiction.” They believed the high accessibility of smartphones has led to overwhelming smartphone penetration, which leads to an increased likelihood of smartphone addiction.

The participants consisted of 281 college students who were recruited from the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer and Communication Engineering of two universities in Northern Taiwan from December 2012 to June 2015. Each participant was systematically assessed for smartphone-using behaviours by psychiatrist’s structured diagnostic interview. Researchers developed twelve candidate criteria for characteristic symptoms of smartphone addiction and four criteria for functional impairment caused by excessive smartphone use.

These criteria consist of four main components: compulsive behaviors, tolerance, withdrawal, and functional impairment, which are identical to the components of internet addiction. In addition, two mobile apps have been designed to identify smartphone addiction. The app-generated parameters can delineate some symptoms of smartphone addiction.

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28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.


31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.
addiction, such as excessive use and tolerance, and predict the diagnosis of smartphone addiction. Both self-reported questionnaires and apps are practical screening tools for large-scale epidemiologic studies.34 Out of the 281 college participants, 65 were diagnosed as having smartphone addiction, and 216 were free from smartphone addiction.

David Greenfield, director of the Center for Internet and Technology Addiction, states that smartphone dependency is a problem when people use it to regularly alter their mood.35 It is not about the actual time spent online using the phone that causes problem, but rather how the time spent impact their lives.36 The truth about smartphone addiction is that people are no more addicted to their phone than drug addicts are addicted to the needle as the needle is just a delivery method.37 People are addicted to what the smartphone offers: information, knowledge, entertainment, and personal connections. It is simply an instant way to stay connected, entertained, and informed.

Hilarie Cash, a licensed mental health counsellor specializing in internet and screen addiction and cofounder of reStart, says excessive binge watching on top of compulsive checking of text messages and social media can cause serious issues in the lives of those affected.38 Social withdrawal, lack of interest in work or school, restlessness, sleeping disorders, and depression are just some of the related social and

34 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Emanuel et al, “The Truth About Smartphone Addiction.”
physiological problems that might link to screen addictions.\textsuperscript{39} Smartphones have become so accessible and affordable that it has become an integral part of life for digital natives. Its long-term impact is no less than gambling, drug or substance abuse due to behavioral problems like impulse control, yet now can be developed at a much younger age.

Young people fixating their eyes on smartphones wherever they go is becoming an acceptable social norm. Toddlers refusing to eat or staying quiet in restaurants until they get their personal screen up is far too common in affluent suburban families. Yet, the present study focuses on adults. Parental controls have been around for many years to control the usage of internet time for children, but not for parents. Recently, there are apps designed to help adults break addictive behaviours, which will hopefully help parents set better examples for their children.

**Apps That Help Combat Smartphone Addiction**

During Apple’s annual developer conference in June 2018, vice president of software engineering Craig Federighi announced new feature updates on iPhone and iPad, when iOS 12 arrived the following Fall, that would help people cut back on screen time.\textsuperscript{40} These include: “Do not disturb,” so users will not receive notifications; “Screen time,” allowing users to view their activity summary over the course of the week - how much time they spend on each app, and how many times they check the screen; “App limits,” allowing users to specify a maximum time usage for specific apps each day and get notification when they almost reach the limit and need to move on; and the new “Parental

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.

Controls,” allowing parents to set limits on their children’s apps and cut off access to apps that are not age appropriate.\textsuperscript{41}

For Android, there are free apps like Offtime, Clearlock, and Quality Time that help track usage and set limits. Quality Time is by far the one that offers the most unique and in-depth analysis of smartphone activities, tracking total usage, screen unlocks, and individual apps with hourly, daily, and weekly summary reporting options. The app also provides the ability to take control back by setting time restrictions. It also allows users to reject certain calls or text messages and define exceptions from important contacts.

Some other apps require a small payment. Space, for example, promises to offer users a personalized program based on their own phone habits and personalities, set and limit time on phone usage and number of unlocks, track usage patterns, and even screen dimming to help disconnect from the phone. Forest, a rather creative one, is a reward-based program that enables users to learn to stay focused and take responsibility by planting a tree from seeds. If the user cannot leave certain apps, the tree will fail to grow, and wither. By unlocking the phone, user can also earn new seeds. Users can also share the forest and compete with other users. Then there is an app called Steplock that integrates physical exercise—walking steps—with combating screen addiction. When the step goal is not reached, user cannot unlock designated apps.

These apps basically have one goal in mind: to help smartphone users regain control of their time and so maintain a better work-life balance. However, in order to combat smartphone addiction, smartphone user’s determination and obedience to follow the game plan is crucial.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
CHAPTER TWO

INTRODUCTION TO CALVARY LOGOS BAPTIST CHURCH

Ministry Context

Calvary Logos Baptist Church (formerly called “Toronto Chinese Logos Baptist Church – Calvary Missions”) located in Scarborough, is where this study will be conducted. The church, initially planted by immigrants from Hong Kong in the mid-1990s, was largely Cantonese. Due to political unrest in Hong Kong as a result of the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the changing of hands from a British Colony to be ruled by China in 1997, since June 4, 1989, Toronto, among many popular major cities in North America, became one of the “safe havens” that Chinese families sought through immigration. Many affluent families first sent their children overseas to study, with or without a parent by their side, then figured out what to do when their children graduated from university.

Calvary Logos was planted to cater to the needs of many immigrant families, especially university students. Led by one church planter and two seminary students, Calvary Logos began with thirty people and quadrupled in five years. I was one of the privileged ones who was attracted to the student outreach movement of Calvary Logos
held at the University of Toronto, converted to be a follower of Christ, baptized, and then made a member of this church in 1992. Due to the rapid increase in numbers, the church had to move three times in five years. Unfortunately, due to two major crises related to the founding pastor, he was forced to resign in 1996.

The two young associate pastors subsequently left the church and moved back to Hong Kong. Many of the university graduates also left disappointed; some returned to Hong Kong and some moved to other churches. Attendance dropped 40 percent to 120. There was also a full year without any pastor. In 1998, two pastors came to lead. Both saw the limitations of growing a student-led church and began to develop the family ministry. In 2000, Calvary Logos bought their present church building; the subsequent year, they started the first English-speaking worship service. In case one day the church might become multiethnic, the church name was changed to “Calvary Logos Baptist Church” (the word “Chinese” removed) to reflect our determination to fulfill the Great Commission by loving and serving our neighbours in a diversified community.

At that time I was the church clerk, a part-time real estate agent by profession and a full-time seminarian preparing to be a pastor. Upon graduation in May 2003, I began serving as one of the associate pastors helping out in developing the English ministry. The congregation began with six high school youths. It took many years to develop these youth to become student leaders and then to start a university fellowship group. Many of these young adults are still serving in the church faithfully and are growing their families in Calvary Logos.

As of June 2018, Calvary Logos has an average of 120 adult attendants on regular Sundays. The Chinese congregation, largely Cantonese speaking, comprises about
seventy adults; roughly two-thirds are between thirty-five and sixty and one-third are sixty and above. Due to a lack of Cantonese-speaking youth or young adults, the Chinese congregation is aging quickly. The English congregation—with roughly fifty adults between eighteen and fifty-five and ten youths between thirteen and seventeen—projects to grow in size naturally as sixty children under thirteen from both congregations are becoming full participants of the English congregation in the near future. Yet, at the same time Calvary Logos recognizes that these children are not just the future of the church, but the present. This poses an immense need on developing better parents and leaders for the children. Besides, there are many major challenges we have yet to overcome.

**Ministry Challenges**

Young families are known to have very busy schedules and lifestyles. With over thirty young families from both congregations, parents often express they overly exhaust themselves in work and family life. In Chinese culture, they are well known as the “sandwiched generation,” responsible for taking care of their children as well as their aging parents. In Calvary Logos, there is an unspoken expectation on this particular age group between thirty-five and fifty that they will be the up-and-rising leaders of the aging church and so sometimes are being pressured to be involved in many ministries. Hence, it is not too surprising to see many of these parents actually allow their children even at the age of four or five to watch cartoon programs from their smartphones or tablets so that they themselves may have spare time to serve or rest. It is interesting to find out how these digital immigrants teach their young to prevent smartphone addiction, to develop
better self-control, and to model this for them. They are actually the last generation who have experienced life before the invention of smartphones.

In addition, more than 60 percent of church families, including many young families from both the Cantonese and the English congregations, do not live near the church but in other suburban towns north of Scarborough. This creates a unique situation in which the existing church building only holds Sunday worship and Sunday school, and members commute to the church on Sundays only. Most weekly or bi-weekly programs for adults, youths and children are held either at homes or in an elementary school. In fact, two of the three pastoral staff does not hold offices in the church. They work from home, closer to the communities they serve. For many years church leadership has decided to expand online platforms, regularly updating church websites, and frequently uploading materials and resources online for members to access easily. Laptops and smartphones become necessary tools in ministry.

One of the major critical decisions the church has to make in the near future is whether to relocate the church to Markham. The underlying motivation, however, is to relocate the church to another Chinese-concentrated middle-class suburban city. The senior pastor believes that there is great benefit to relocate the church to Markham where the majority of church families live, where children and youths go to school and hang out with their friends, and where their “true neighbours” are. His vision, however, is to build a family-oriented Cantonese-based church with an English-speaking congregation developing the second-generation Chinese ethnic believers. The major setback is that in today’s market it is hard to find an affordable piece of land zoned for religious purposes ready to be built in Markham. Two years ago members voted down the proposal to
relocate because they saw their existing church location as a good mission field. Yet, many church families continue to move out of the area due to the influx of refugees and illegal immigrants. Even before Canada legislated the selling of recreational cannabis, there was a mysterious store across the church that has a cannabis icon on it.

The English lead pastor has quite a different vision. He believes the English congregation is young and energetic and full of potential to reach out to multiethnic groups in Scarborough. In the past ten years, the demographics in Scarborough have been gradually shifting away from predominantly ethnic Chinese to becoming more culturally diverse. Close to one-third of the English congregation who began attending the English congregation in the past two years are non-Chinese or mixed-Chinese who described their ethnicities as Canadian, French, Iranian, Vietnamese, Filipino, Mauritian, Indian, and Nigerian. Many of them are already Christians, live within walking distance to the church and come to worship as a family. Hence, the English lead pastor sees great potential to further develop the English congregation and reach out to all people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

According to Census Canada, 73.4 percent of 861,895 people in Scarborough in 2016 identified themselves as “visible minority.”\(^1\) The Canadian government defined “visible minority” as persons, other than aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-White in colour. In terms of visible minority, 25.4 percent of the population in Scarborough is South Asian, 19 percent is Chinese, 10.8 percent is Black and 8.4 percent is Filipino. In terms of ethnic origin, the first largest ethnic group is Chinese, 14.8

percent. The second largest ethnic group is East Indian, 8.9 percent. The third largest is Canadian, 7.5 percent. In terms of mother tongue, 44.5 percent indicated their mother tongue was English; 8.6 percent, Cantonese; 6.9 percent Tamil; and 6.6 percent Mandarin. Hence, from an outreach point of view, the English congregation of Calvary Logos has a greater advantage and potential to expand its ministries to include all English-speaking citizens from different ethnic groups while the Cantonese congregation can only reach out a small niche of people.

A major concern, however, is whether the Chinese core members are willing to let go of the Chinese identity of the church to include a broader community identity. Many ethnic Chinese churches in Toronto refuse to let go of their cultural identity because they believe God gave ethnic churches a very specific mission to reach out to their own ethnic groups. Only a rare few Chinese churches have the mindset to disciple the second-generation to embrace biblical values before their own cultural values, empowering them to be the leaders of the church.

It was in the midst of these divisive matters that God gave me the vision to focus on soul care and discipleship. The journey has been difficult. Calvary Logos is one among many other evangelical Chinese churches that for many years advocated growth in numbers, focused on quantity rather than quality. It is a busy church that runs many outreach events and programs, especially for families and children. Every other week the church runs the Awana Club for children and a youth group called Anthem in Markham after hosting Sunday worship and Sunday school in Scarborough. The time commitment on Sunday, together with many leaders, is usually from 9:30am to 6pm. On the other hand, the only discipleship element of the program is usually Bible learning and topical
studies and discussions. Once a year they organize food drive and Operation Christmas Child. In the summer they gather for a two-and-a-half day retreat.

Dallas Willard was right in pinpointing the fact that many Evangelicals regard the study of Scripture highly but live poorly as disciples. In his many writings on spiritual formation, he attempts to rekindle ancient spiritual practices to Christian discipleship and specifically highlighting both silence and solitude as the first and core practice among all spiritual disciplines. A good discipleship plan or curriculum on Christlikeness is one that helps people align their hearts, minds, and spirits together bringing glory to God. It is impossible to do so without spending quality time alone to listen to their souls.

Rekindling spiritual disciplines to Christian discipleship has been my personal endeavour, mission, and calling. Another major ministry challenge, however, is to pursue a healthy balance between Bible knowledge and heart knowledge. Good Chinese preachers are perceived to be those who preach nothing but the Bible with careful exegesis, word studies and contextualization. The Chinese congregation did a worship survey last year and specifically requested all pastors to provide sermon outlines as they preach; PowerPoint presentation was optional.

Preaching in the English congregation allows the use of videos and many Christian art forms in sermon presentations. Worship songs are often joyful and worshippers are free to raise their hands to praise God. The English congregation of Calvary Logos has a good group of talented musicians and artists whose spiritual temperaments are more contemplative, sensate, and aesthetically inclined that might

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enable their spiritual learning to be more formational from their heart rather than informational from their head. Prayers, however, from both congregations are often filled with words. Solitude and silence are quite foreign to them.

In April and May 2018, I conducted two prayer sessions to teach and practice listening prayers with both congregations. The first half-an-hour began with *lectio divina* to prepare the heart and tune into the Spirit of God. The second half-an-hour people were taught to listen to their relationship with God as they practiced silence and solitude in community. After a fifteen minutes break, the third half-an-hour people sought to listen to how God wanted them to pray for the ministry of the church. Then they shared what they heard and prayed together collectively.

The Chinese session was held on a Saturday with three three-hours shifts in the morning, afternoon, and late evening. A total of about twenty participants showed up. Some stayed for the whole day. Others stayed for one or two shifts. The English session was also conducted on a Saturday but a three-hours session in the evening was offered only. The turnout was not as good in the sense that none of the young people or young families, except four mature leaders including the English pastor and his wife, showed up. The feedback was that it was difficult for young people to spend a Saturday night out to learn, or to pray. The response and participation rate would be better if the session was held during the regular fellowship or community group time.

**Technology And Ministries**

The present English lead pastor, David Au, has an undergraduate degree in engineering and software programing. In his recent ordination statement he described his
gift in technology this way: “I have an affinity for what technology can to do to serve human beings, even in areas of spiritual growth.” Therefore, besides maintaining an up-to-date church website with the weekly sermon podcasts, sermon notes, devotional materials, and blogs posted, the church also makes use of other social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to reach out to leaders and members on special events, trainings, and personal blogs. Last year they began to explore some worship planning apps, and at the end decided to use Elvanto. It allowed worship leaders to plan the worship service agenda, check rosters, request songs, check-in and register for events. It was advocated as the all-in-one church management app that can also help leaders manage membership, groups, offerings, and much more.

Moreover, since Advent 2017, the English pastor began to provide reflections and spiritual exercises online. Community groups were encouraged to make use of the materials and to do follow-up discussion at their group meetings. In other words, they welcome the use of technology and value its convenience and accessibility. It is specifically efficient and effective in reaching out to a wide audience.

The smartphone is just a medium. It is not evil. What dictates the behaviour is actually their heart’s desire, not the smartphone. Moreover, he has been exploring ways to help people cultivate better disciplines. The intent is to shape a culture that can master the control of it rather than being controlled by it. In the market there are apps designed to combat screen addiction, as shared above, that help set daily limits, block distracting notifications, and even lock and flip off one’s phone during designated time. These apps

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3 Rev. David Au is one of my key ministry partners and contributors to the development of this project. Permission to quote directly from his Ordination Statement dated in 2017 has been obtained.
seem promising yet would not help shift the users’ attention to God. This pilot project attempts to explore the use of certain apps to direct people’s hearts, bodies, souls, and minds back to God. The last section of this chapter will focus on this topic.

Henceforth, I believe followers of Jesus Christ can make use of technology, even smartphones, to enhance ministries. Desktops, laptops, and video projectors have been commonly and widely used in churches for decades to improve the efficiency of day-to-day operations. So can smartphones. What smartphone users need to learn is seeking balance and moderation, paying attention to their heart’s true desires, and honouring rhythms for the betterment of their well being, relationships with others and with God.

**Survey Findings On Smartphone Usage Habits**

A survey on smartphone habits was conducted in the English congregation of Calvary Logos in July 2018. All attendants were given a link to an online Google survey form via Whatsapp, Facebook Messenger, or E-mail directly. The survey can be found in Appendix A. About sixty-five invitations were sent out, fifty-five surveys were completed and returned online. Survey results were conveniently generated and compiled by Google form. The purpose of the survey was twofold: to raise the congregation’s awareness of their smartphone usage and to study their smartphone addictive behaviours; and second, to find out the kind of spiritual disciplines participants were practicing, with or without using the smartphone, to enhance their spiritual development and growth.

Of all fifty-five surveys, 53 percent were completed by males and 47 percent by females; 55 percent were single and 42 percent were married. A total of eleven families with children under twelve participated in the survey. The age distribution of the survey
participants who owned a personal smartphone can be found in Appendix B. Of all the fifty-five participants, 34.5 percent checked their phones for notifications less than three times per hour in a typical day; 41.8 percent checked between four-six times per hour; 9.1 percent checked seven-nine times per hour; and another five people checked over ten times per hour. In other words, 60 percent of congregants checked their phones for notifications between sixty-four to a hundred and sixty times each day (assuming they do not check their phones during an eight-hour of sleep).

Regarding how long participants spent on their smartphones, 5.5 percent said they spent less than one hour in a typical day; 47.3 percent spent one to three hours; 30.9 percent spent four to six hours; 7.3 percent spent seven to nine hours; and another 5.5 percent spent over 10 hours. At least 44 percent of congregants admitted that they spent between four to ten hours on their smartphones each day.

It is, however, not easy to determine if these smartphone users have addictive behaviours. To determine this would require asking would it be measured by the frequency of checking for notifications, by the number of hours spent on their phones, or by specific behaviours like feeling anxious when the phones were not around? From this particular survey, forty-nine out of fifty-five people carried their phones around whenever they went. Forty-three people would turn it on unless it must be turned off. Twenty-eight people would sleep with the phone within arm’s reach. Twenty-eight people also expressed they would panic or feel anxious if they lost their phone. Twenty-one people felt they were spending longer time on their phone than intended. Twenty-four people said they would greet their phone first in the morning before they greet anyone and thirty-one people said they must check their phone one last time before going to bed.
At the end of the survey, the project leader asked whether the participants would consider themselves addicted to their smartphone. Forty percent said “No,” 41.8 percent “may be,” and 18.2 percent “yes.” So, 60 percent of participants felt that they are, or may be, suffering from smartphone addiction. Yet, only six people had ever used an app to monitor their smartphone usage. When asked about the minimum age a child may own a smartphone, five people said at the age of ten or eleven; fifteen said at the age of twelve; sixteen said between thirteen and fourteen; ten said between age fifteen and sixteen; another five said eighteen; and the rest said depending on the child’s maturity, not by age.

**Spiritual Practices**

Concerning spiritual disciplines, of all fifty-five survey participants about 45 percent have a discipline of reading Scripture or doing devotion on a regular basis; 55 percent prayed; 5.4 percent listened to worship music; 9 percent practiced silence, solitude, and quiet time; 5.4 percent mentioned attending church or youth group; and 1.8 percent regularly fasted. Yet, 27 percent left the section blank. This was interpreted that either they did not practice any discipline regularly or they had no idea what it is.

The smartphone, being used wisely, can enhance spiritual growth. Therefore, in this particular survey, there was a set of questions specifically designed to study the habits of using smartphones to nurture spiritual growth. The nine situations using the smartphone include: reading Scriptures, listening to sermons, following a devotional plan, using certain apps to help quiet down, doing reflection and prayer, reading books and articles, using the timer function to help practice certain disciplines, sharing prayer needs or praying with another over the phone (voice or video calls). The results was
compiled and summarized in Appendix C. The survey result showed that the majority of congregants would use their smartphones to read Scriptures: twenty-three people indicated “frequently” and twenty-six “occasionally.” Regarding sharing prayer needs via the phone, fifteen people indicated “frequently” and twenty “occasionally.”

Based on the above observations, reading Scriptures and sharing prayer needs with or without using their phones are the key spiritual disciplines that a majority of the congregants practiced. When participants were asked to list three major apps they frequently visit on any regular day, only 1 person listed a spiritual program - The Daily Bread. A majority of adult participants used SMS, Whatsapp, Messenger, Snapchat, and e-mail for communications. Chrome, Safari, and Yahoo are the most common web browsers used for surfing the internet. Social media sites like Instagram, Facebook, and Reddit are the most common ones participants frequently visited. Teenagers between thirteen and seventeen listed major video games like Hay Day, Discord, Clash Royale, 8 Ball Pool, Pokémon Go, and Fire Emblem Heroes on their phones.

Spiritual disciplines seem to be a subject much under study in the teaching or preaching ministries of Calvary Logos. The journey began two years ago when ready-made study materials were used as meditations for Lent and Advent. Congregants were encouraged to practice spiritual exercises together individually and in small groups. Three community groups participated during that time and the response was good. Last year when another study guide was introduced for Lent, only six or seven participants took the initiative to download them from the church website for personal use because community groups had not finished the series on the previous topic during Lent. This was a timing issue. Yet, it demonstrated the reality that congregants are busy, and not many
can squeeze in additional time to do anything extra in their journey with God. It would be wise to have better planning and schedule any new teaching into the rhythm of community group hours.

Encouraging followers of Christ to establish sustainable life-giving spiritual practices, habits, and rhythms was the goal of the study guide of this pilot project. There are many other types of spiritual disciplines followers of Christ can explore and experiment. This study guide chose to suggest simple practices related to the discipline of solitude, silence, and centering prayer. By observing how smartphones seep into busy lives and form natural habits, followers of Christ can pray and ask God for the same kind of wisdom that allows the Spirit of God to capture their attention, move them, and establish healthy sacred habits. Like the Apostle Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:20-21, “In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for special purposes and some for common use. Those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.” This passage reminds the people of God they are set apart as God’s holy instruments for noble purposes. Similarly, if the people of God pursue holiness, the smartphone in the hand of the godly can certainly be used for noble purposes.
PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
CHAPTER THREE
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is, by reviewing key literature from ancient Christian spirituality to the contemporary, to begin a theological dialogue on how spiritual disciplines may combat addiction. In the context of this project, it is specifically about combating smartphone (social media, video gaming, binge watching) addiction through Christian contemplative spiritual practices. The literature chosen for this study came from most Christian traditions—early monasticism, Eastern Orthodox, Catholicism and Protestant—through many centuries. Christians since the Fall always have been concerned with freedom and restoration of the soul from sinful addictive habits for the glory of God. The cultural context might be different in each generation, but the spiritual predicament is always the same. It begins with the understanding of “passions.”

Passions

Ancient Christian spirituality has long identified that which distracts the Church’s attentiveness to God - their distorted habits of thoughts, feelings, desires, and actions known as “passions.” Distorted thoughts coupled with habitual feelings like a judgmental spirit, shame, anger, forgetfulness, ungratefulness, tiredness, boredom, perfectionism,
complacency, or comfort, correlated directly with distorted attitudes and actions towards how people handle possessions, status, work, security, guilt, sex, love, family, and friends.\(^1\) The eight passions identified by St. John of Damaskos were: gluttony, unchastity, avarice, anger, dejection, listlessness, self-esteem, and pride.\(^2\) The ancient understanding is that people cannot control whether passions are going to harass or attack their souls, but they can prevent impassioned thoughts from lingering within them and arousing the passions to action.\(^3\) It is a training of the mind and heart. The aim is not to eliminate the passions, but to redirect their energy from evil to good.\(^4\)

*The Philokalia* (also known as “The Prayer of the heart”) is a collection of spiritual teachings written by the Eastern Church fathers from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries compiled by two monks, St. Makarios and Nikodimos, on Mount Athos in 1777. Both monks saw the influences of secularism in the West, and thus a need to recover the true heritage of the *hesychast* tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Hesychasm, from the Greek word *hesychia*, translated to “stillness,” is about disciplining one’s mind and heart to attain stillness and freedom from distraction so that one may come fully before

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\(^3\) Ibid., 139.

\(^4\) Ibid., 144.
God to do his will.\(^5\) The ancient understanding of the “heart” is that it consists of the whole person—body, soul, and spirit—or the spiritual center of the human being.\(^6\)

Every one’s whole being shall answer to God’s call to love (Dt 6:5, 11:13, 30:6; Jos 22:5; Mt 22:37; Mk 12:30; Lk 10:27). Every person is God’s image-bearer created for and called to love.\(^7\) But passions develop and hinder love. By entering into the silence and solitude of the desert, desert dwellers demonstrate that it is possible to flee from worldly pleasures and desires, and slavery and bondage of the heart in order to pursue true freedom to love, and union with God. They also recognized prayer as crucial and critical. Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God, for praise and thanksgiving and beseeching him for the good things necessary for soul and body.\(^8\) The essence of prayer is the conscious mental ascent to God from the heart. It is important to keep watch of the heart through prayer. The spiritual struggle is primarily an inner one, a heart problem, where the Kingdom of God dwells.\(^9\)

Life with God

St. Athanasius of Alexandria, one of the early church fathers, uses the theological term “deification” most frequently. The deification that the desert dwellers had in mind however does not mean the change of the human nature into a divine one. Rather, it means “qualifying human nature for life with God in a communion of love.” That is, “a

\(^{5}\) Ibid., 185.

\(^{6}\) Ibid., 30.


\(^{8}\) Smith, *Philokalia*, 144.

\(^{9}\) Ibid., 58.
union in its perfect sense as a life with God.\textsuperscript{10} Jesus Christ, the Son of God, through incarnation, has completed the union of divinity and humanity in himself to deliver to his people the mystery of God’s transcendent love; and through his death and resurrection, he has removed all barriers between people and God and made it possible for them to participate in God’s divine nature.\textsuperscript{11} Athanasius explains and highlights the essential link between the incarnation of God and the deification of human as follows: “For he has become man, that we might deify us in himself, and he has been born of a woman, and begotten of a virgin, in order to transfer to himself our erring generation and in order that we may become henceforth a holy race, and ‘partakers of the divine nature,’ as blessed Peter wrote. (St Athanasius of Alexandria, Letter to Adelpor 4, NPNF, series, 4.576).\textsuperscript{12}

“Deification,” or union with God in its perfect sense, cannot be fulfilled except at the resurrection from the dead. The followers of Christ are granted the means of grace—the Word of God and the Spirit of God—that help conquer temptations and sins of this age.\textsuperscript{13} Yet, they must learn and develop these disciplines. Then on earth they can have a foretaste of union with God in communion of love and in obedience. For the love of God, desert dwellers abandoned the world only in order to “listen more intently to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from its inner depth.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{10} Matta El-Maskeen (Matthew the Poor), \textit{Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way} (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 107.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 108.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 106-107.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 107.

The Desert Way

The desert itself is a hot, arid, and harsh geographical space, yet it can also be a redemptive, transformative, and joy-filled learning space where one can encounter God and find one’s true self. St. Anthony, a classic example of the early desert fathers, fled to an abandoned Roman fort on a solitary desert mountain and shut himself up for twenty years waging a silent battle to deal with his demons for the love of God. Yet, when he returned and went into ministry, he became a symbol of strength and wisdom for all of Egypt. The solitary desert is perceived as a place of purification, or self-knowledge and self-control, of conflict and victory; out of struggle comes a full-grown spiritual person.15 “It was by silence that the saints grew,” said Ammonas, the disciple of Anthony.16

Following the ancient traditions, Thomas Merton, an American Trappist monk in the early twentieth century, added that the desert is where contemplative prayer flowers: “The climate in which monastic prayer flowers is that of the desert, where the comfort of man is absent, where the secure routines of man’s city offer no support, and where prayer must be sustained by God in the poverty of faith.”17 Merton, based on Matthew 6:6, “When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret; and your Father, who sees in secret, will repay you,” described contemplative prayer as prayer that is “centered entirely on the presence of God.”18 In the 1970s, answering the call of Vatican II, three Trappist monks at St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, 

15 Ibid., 136.
16 Ibid., 135.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
Fathers William Meninger, Basil Pennington, and Thomas Keating, looked to these ancient sources to develop a simple method of silent prayer for contemporary people, known as Centering Prayer in reference to Thomas Merton.\(^{19}\)

**Addiction**

In the digital world, smart technology helps people meet their needs and satisfies their wants. The smartphone is just a medium, but the apps within are attractive and can repetitively hook people’s passions to form addictive behaviors. In *Addiction and Grace*, Gerald May defines “addiction” as any compulsive, habitual behaviour that limits the freedom of human desire.\(^{20}\) The word “attachment,” comes from the French *attache*, basically means, “nailed to.”\(^{21}\) It describes the process of distorted habitual thoughts or feelings being nailed to specific objects and creating addiction. Addiction is a serious matter because it tends to control and consume the mind, body, and soul. The Apostle Paul in the book of Romans describes his spiritual struggle this way: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing” (Rm 7:15-19).

Gerald May also identified “repression” as another “milder” force that draws people away from love.\(^{22}\) Love can make people suffer and hurt. When God does not come to his people tangibly to satisfy their deep longing for love, they repress their desire

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\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 2.
for God. When they repress a desire, they try to keep it out of their awareness. In today’s context, it could mean continuously connecting themselves to the wider internet community through a smartphone instead.

In psychology, there is another term called displacement. What people repress does not go away; it just gets moved aside. In fact, while repression stifles desire, addiction attaches desire to certain specific behaviours, things, or people. They then become preoccupations and obsessions that rule their lives. Things like work, power, food, entertainment, exercises, study, relationships, or even ministries can be idols if people do not put them in their rightful place. Addiction is the absolute enemy of human freedom, the antipathy of love. And if all of a sudden an addictive behaviour gets interrupted, people will feel some degree of anxiety and even physical discomfort. This is just because they have been addicted to success and control.

Detachment and Freedom

While attachment is the process that enslaves desire and creates the state of addiction, “detachment” is the word used in spiritual traditions to describe freedom of desire. The classical pilgrimage toward wholeness in Christ has been characterized by four stages: awakening, purgation, illumination, and union. These can be thought of

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23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 3.

25 Ibid., 4.

26 Ibid., 9.

27 Ibid., 14.

28 M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., Invitation To A Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation
either as the overall path of Christian spirituality through life from one’s awakening to God’s call to wholeness and “ends” in an eternal life in relationship with God; or, as the path toward wholeness in any given area of one’s life. For example, God calls his beloved out of addiction (awakening) and moves her to an increasing relinquishment of that addiction (purgation); that leads her to a new structure of being and doing (illumination) and eventually she becomes like Christ in spirit and soul (union).

Built upon this ancient root, Ignatian spirituality is a tradition formed in the sixteenth century that views detachment and freedom as key principles in pursuing wholeness, or oneness with God. Detachment allows people to move from a place of having control to being controlled by God. If people are to learn to love and trust God, they must find ways to detach themselves from the love of money, food, protection, and even family so that they can pursue God. Ignatius of Loyola lived such a life of detachment that even if the Pope ordered his group to disband he would need only fifteen minutes of prayer to collect himself and then move forward. Detachment leads to freedom, “to become the person we are meant to be, to love and to accept love, to make good decisions, and to experience the beauty of creation and the mystery of God’s love.” The goal of freedom is not simply to be free of restraints that seem bothersome. The goal of freedom is wholeness. Wholeness cannot be found when hindrances get in


29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 80.


32 Ibid., Kindle edition, loc 52.
the way of loving and being loved. Hence, the Apostle Paul in the letter to Galatians said: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1).

Detaching from desire is definitely not easy. May reminds readers that their brains never completely forget old attachments. Many addictions are able to exist for years completely outside of awareness. Not until the day one feels frustrated about addiction or causes conflict, might one notice how attached they truly are. A girl was asked to draw her family and she drew her dad with a smartphone held in his hand. The picture made the dad realize how his daughter perceived him and how he might have phone addiction. Similar to other examples like drinking two cups of coffee a day, or procrastination – people who get into old habits will find it extremely hard to quit. The first step to freedom is to notice and acknowledge repression and addiction.

Another major contribution by May is that he finds “the only goodness in addiction is that they can defeat our pride and lead us to more openness to grace.” What he means is that no one can truly be free from attachment except Jesus. Everyone else must work with their addictions, seeking the grace within them and try to minimize their destructiveness instead of spending time fantasizing what it would be like to be totally free of them. This is why his book is called Addiction and Grace. Addiction makes

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33 May, Addiction and Grace, 25.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 41.
36 Ibid.
people realize their helpless state. The more one understands how he enslaves himself to things, the more he may be able to turn in the direction of freedom and love.\footnote{37 Ibid.}

**Spiritual Disciplines**

Desert dwellers in Ancient Christian Spirituality considered themselves as the Lord’s athletes (cf. 1 Tim. 4:7-8).\footnote{38 Christopher Hall, “Session 10: Learning to Pray, Learning to Love and the Discipline,” class lecture, Serra Retreat Center, Malibu, CA (September 2016).} Their specific workout program, *ascesis* in Greek, referred to the spiritual practices held in the desert that were designed to help them overcome passions and develop the ability to love God and neighbor.\footnote{39 Ibid.} In the *Philokalia*, *ascesis* is “washing out the stone and the sand to get to the gold of Christlikeness, or *theosis*.\footnote{40 Anthony M. Coniaris, *A Beginner’s Introduction to the Philokalia* (Minneapolis: Light & Life Publishing Co., 2004)} Such discipline or training consists of prayer, repentance, fasting, meditation, inner attention, and works of charity among others.\footnote{41 Ibid., 16.} Desert dwellers may willingly and intentionally engage in practices they choose, or they may simply be present and responsible in the deserts they are given.\footnote{42 May, *Addiction and Grace*, 141.} May believes, “Either way, when rightly practiced, is the human component of the mysterious incarnate intimacy of human intention and divine grace which holds the only real hope of victory over attachment.”\footnote{43 Ibid.}

Asceticism requires “real dedication of human will, repentance from idolatry, and
willingness to relinquish all for God, but the practices only prepare the ground of the heart.”\textsuperscript{44} Salvation comes by grace, and through faith. True liberation comes not just from a purified heart, but when that heart responds to follow God.\textsuperscript{45} Spiritual disciplines are not grace, but the means of grace.

Similarly, Archibald Hart, a clinical psychophysiologist, co-authored \textit{The Digital Invasion} with his daughter, Sylvia Hart Frejd, a counsellor and spiritual formation life coach, stating that, “Whatever crowds out our space for God has the potential to become an idol in the biblical sense. . . . The first step toward protecting your Godspace is to see the time you spend with God as sacred. For a space to be sacred, it needs to be interruption free.”\textsuperscript{46} The digital world, however, has robbed people’s space with God. It has made them information rich, but spiritually poor.\textsuperscript{47} While God calls his people to “be still” (to surrender, to release control) and to “know” (to intimately experience) him (Ps 46:10), the world “wires” people to things, to people, to noises. The challenge is to find ways to restore quietness of the heart, sacred space with God. Hence, solitude, silence, and centering prayer have been identified as key contemplative spiritual practices combating the exterior and interior noises of the soul.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 142.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 189.
CHAPTER FOUR
THEOLOGY OF CONTEMPLATIVE SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

There are many different types of spiritual practices. Some are more cognitive, like studying the Bible, attending a seminar, and listening to a sermon podcast. Some are more experiential, like attending worship services, prayer meetings, and small groups. Some are more social action oriented, like community outreach, volunteering in soup kitchen, and joining a mission trip. All of these various types of spiritual practices are good and are very familiar to many Evangelical churches, except one last type—which has not been mentioned—and that is, the contemplative. Contemplative spiritual practices include solitude, silence, and centering prayer. These practices attempt to focus on the inner journey of the individual, orienting the desires of the soul towards God.

The previous chapter enriched Christians’ understandings on the formation of addiction and the formation of the soul. This second theological reflection chapter examines the disciplines of solitude, silence, and centering prayer and how those practices may help filter the outer and inner noises, so that the people of God may find rest for their souls in God. The renowned author of Celebration of Discipline, Richard Foster published Sanctuary of the Soul (2011) and used the term “meditative prayer”—a
combination of solitude, silence, and centering prayer—as the means of grace to combat passions. Many authors through the centuries arrived at the same conclusion that the end goal is not just to be free from passions, but to foster deeper fellowship, communion, and union with God. In Willard’s term, it is to be “at home with the Father.”

Solitude and Silence as the Condition of Prayer

Henri Nouwen’s *The Way of the Heart* was birthed from a seminar he attended with five women and ten men at Yale University on the subject matter of the spirituality of the desert. Together they learned from the stories of the desert abbas and ammas of the fourth century and came to a greater understanding of the spiritual path “the way of the heart.” Inspired by the ancient teachings of St. Anthony and the Desert Fathers, Nouwen believed three key spiritual disciplines of the desert—solitude, silence, and prayer—are crucial practices for everyday life that would enable the people of God to hear and filter the small still voice of God from the noises and compulsivity of the world.

Even for ministers who are called and set apart by God to participate in his redemptive work, Nouwen identified how easily they could lose their true selves in their busy ministry work and lifestyle, and conform to the world according its tenants and values. Fleeing from people, noises of the world, and the desires of the flesh in order to spend quality time alone with God are crucial. According to Nouwen: “Solitude is the furnace of transformation. . . . Solitude is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter – the struggle against the compulsions of the false self, and the encounter with

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the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self.”² The true self is Christ who lives in his people, full of grace and love. Nouwen stressed that, “Our primary task in solitude, therefore, is not to pay undue attention to the many faces which assail us, but to keep the eyes of our mind and heart on him who is our divine savior.”³ Similarly to the above authors who wrote about digital or screen addiction, only in the context of “grace” can people face their sin, receive healing and courage and strength to live, and be the light in this dark and evil world for Christ.

Further, silence and solitude go hand-in-hand. Silence is solitude practiced in action.⁴ In the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, silence has three aspects: it makes the people of God pilgrims, guards the fire within, and teaches people to speak.⁵ Desert dwellers recognized the need of controlling the tongue as it has great potential to sin and to corrupt the body (Jas 3:3,6). Silence is above all a quality of the heart.⁶ It often makes people uncomfortable, but enables them to guard the fire within and to discern the reality of one’s soul.⁷ Silence intensifies the experience of solitude. It is a reverent posture as

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³ Ibid., 20.
⁴ Ibid., 36.
⁵ Ibid., 42.
⁶ Ibid., 59.
⁷ Ibid.
people hold, pause, and listen to God, or to others.\textsuperscript{8} Words emerging out of silence and solitude are often perceived as more wise, and have greater power to heal.\textsuperscript{9}

Silence and solitude is the condition for prayer.\textsuperscript{10} The Apostle Paul urged the people of God, “to pray always.” The literal translation of the words “pray always” is to “come to rest (\textit{hesychia}).”\textsuperscript{11} Unceasing prayer or prayer of the heart is a form of praying and resting in God’s abiding peace in the midst of daily struggles. According to the Russian mystic Theophan the Recluse, to pray is “to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all-seeing, within you.”\textsuperscript{12} According to Jewish-Christian understanding, the heart is where all physical, emotional, intellectual, volitional, and moral energies dwell. To the desert dwellers, entering into the heart is entering into the Kingdom of God; the way to God is through the heart.\textsuperscript{13}

Hence, the disciples humbly asked, “Lord, teach us to pray.” And the Russian pilgrim prayed unceasingly, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Hence, the people of God should pray unceasingly, fervently; and as they pray “whatever we eat, drink or do, we do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). Nouwen believed charity is the end goal of Christian spirituality. It is in the context of solitude and silence and through prayer of the heart that the people of God ask for God’s wisdom to separate the chaff (impure

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 64.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 73.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 75.
motives) from the wheat in ministry and thus become authentic witnesses of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{14}

Nouwen’s work has tremendous contributed in helping twenty-first century Christians understand and appreciate desert spirituality and its traditions. Especially in the digital world today, it has been increasingly more challenging for Christians to find space and quietness of heart in order to hear God. Nouwen, who was a pastor and prophet in his time, introduced the concept of a “portable cell” to his students, parishioners, and readers.\textsuperscript{15} Solitude or silence is not confined to a specific time or space, but a “portable cell” in which people carry with them wherever they go. From it they speak to those in need and to it they return after their words have borne fruit.\textsuperscript{16} Hence, in today’s context, maybe the people of God should consider calling their smartphone a “smart cell” to remind themselves of the bodily posture, as the condition of their prayer, even as they carry a smartphone with them wherever they go. This study project is much indebted to Nouwen’s creative spirituality.

\textbf{Centering Prayer}

In \textit{The Path of Centering Prayer}, David Frenette describes four deepening ways of practicing centering prayer, based on three sacred symbols—the sacred word, the sacred breath and the sacred glance—and the sacred nothingness, which is pure

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 89.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 61.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
contemplation. These forms of prayer are primarily based on the teaching of a classic spiritual text from the fourteenth century, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. They are rooted in the teachings of Jesus and in his resurrected presence as the Christ. These practices largely came from Eastern monasteries, but Merton brought them to the West.

In the 1970s, Meninger, Pennington, and Keating, further developed it calling it centering prayer. Keating even created an extensive support network, Contemplative Outreach, to support the practice of centering prayer in ordinary life. Interestingly enough, many people in twelve-step recovery programs also practice centering prayer as a means of developing a relationship with their own “higher power.” This includes being practiced in a treatment program to help adolescents seeking freedom from addiction by Frenette, who sees Keating as his spiritual father. The primary effect of contemplative prayer practices is in “transforming the structures of inner consciousness, brings freedom from separate-self sense and allows practitioners to experience greater compassion for other people.”

Centering prayer and contemplation are often seen as two ends of a continuum. Centering prayer at one end is filled with actions; contemplation is at the receptive end of the continuum where God’s actions predominate. While centering prayer involves

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18 Ibid., xx.
19 Ibid., xxi.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., xxii.
symbols (katapathic), contemplation is beyond concepts and symbols (apathetic).\textsuperscript{22} The path of centering prayer is to receive the gift of God’s presence and love. Taught by Keating and Contemplative Outreach, centering prayer is a very simple yet profound contemplative practice that orients the people of God on the path toward transformation in Christ.\textsuperscript{23} Based on the unshakable truth that “God is not just a transcendent truth outside us, but a living reality within us, a mystery, a hidden ground from which everything in life is born, in every moment in time,”\textsuperscript{24} God’s people may center themselves by looking into their heart to find his presence. The basic template and guidelines are as follows.

**Sacred Word**

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within.
3. When engaged with your thoughts (which include body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections), return every so gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.\textsuperscript{25}

A sacred word, a word of one or two syllables, is used to help practitioners stay centered and focused. In deepening the sacred word in centering prayer practitioners let the living Word of God act in them. It is not about a technique or effort but making space for God between the person and the word. It is about deepening and recollecting the mind of

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
Christ. Teresa of Avila calls this the “prayer of recollection” – in which every thought is recollected in the mind of Christ. When all thoughts are recollected in the state of contemplative prayer, practitioners begin to discover a new sense of who they are and what their inner life is like.

Sacred Breath

Keating in *Open Mind, Open Heart*, teaches that practitioners may practice other forms of the sacred symbol: sacred breath, sacred glance, or sacred nothingness (no symbol). In the Hebrew language, the words “spirit” and “breath” are the same: *ruah*. When the Lord God formed humans from the dust of the ground, he breathed the breath of life in the person; and the person became a living being (Gen 2:7). Breath has long been a symbol for the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. After Jesus’ resurrection, he also gave the followers the gift of *ruah*: “he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (Jn 20:22). The Holy Spirit animates life as her breath breathes in people, from the moment of birth until the instant of death. Yet, people are usually not aware of the Spirit in them, just as they are usually not aware of their own breath. Scripture invites them to greater awareness: “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor 3:16) Practicing sacred breath opens the people of God to greater awareness of the Spirit’s presence and action in them and in all of their lives. Sacred breath takes them out from a thinking mind to engage their feelings. The breath unites the body and the spirit together.

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26 Ibid., 23.
27 Ibid., 45.
Teresa of Avila calls this the “prayer of quiet,” when all thoughts and the thinking mind are still and silent in prayer.28 Practitioners will become more aware of the ever-present source of life. Yet, in practicing with the sacred breath, they do not attend to their breathing continuously for that would be focusing their will on an object that is just passing, not resting in God’s eternal, timeless presence.29 Breathing is a physical way of consenting to God, to make people “be” and “rest” in God, in pure awareness of God’s presence. When thoughts and feelings may roam around on the surface of their awareness, people return and recognize the effortless breathing again and again.

Breathing is a very receptive moment of faith. Faith in the context of contemplation is a gift beyond concepts, images, and thoughts.30 In practicing sacred breath, practitioners basically consent to let Christ come alive to them, to embrace their whole being - pain or sorrow, joy or love; the separate-self sense is enfolded, held, and gently released by God. It is like waiting for the casting to be played on the screen at the end of a movie. People often only pay attention to the acting and drama in a movie, but do not stay long enough at the end of the movie to learn about the crews that made the production possible. They are the people who work silently and secretly to hold the film together. So do people’s life stories. God is always present holding people up. They just need to intentionally recognize his unceasing, unfailing loving presence.

28 Ibid., 46.
29 Ibid., 48.
30 Ibid., 53.
Sacred Glance

In the early years of centering prayer, the term “sacred gaze” was used for this symbol. But experience showed that the term “sacred glance” evoked less effort in people drawn to this way of practicing centering prayer.31 Sacred glance involves a visible symbol. However, it should not be an object that requires practitioners to study or gaze upon.32 It should be introduced silently to help practitioners enter and consent to God and return to it whenever we are distracted by other thoughts.

Keating was aware of theories on the learning styles of people. The three key learning styles are auditory, kinaesthetic, and visual. The sacred word is often a more natural way of practicing centering prayer for auditory learners who respond better to sound. They hear the word prayed within, then let it go to yield to interior silence.33 The sacred breath is often a more helpful symbol for kinaesthetic learners who engage better with senses and movement. They instead notice the felt sense of breathing, then let it go to yield to interior stillness.34 The sacred glance is often a more helpful symbol for visual learners who are drawn by sight. Gently turning to a visible image may help visual learners open into the unseeable mystery of God and then let go of the glance to experience inner spaciousness.35

31 Ibid., 61.
32 Ibid., 60.
33 Ibid., 63.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
Sacred Nothingness

Silence, stillness, and spaciousness dance as the Trinity awakens in its nothingness—the source of everything.\(^{36}\) In fact, disciples of Christ learned from Jesus’ self-emptying love (kenosis in Greek) that God desires to give himself to them beyond any concept, content, or even a spiritual experience to which they hold dear. Each symbol can yield its fruits: a fuller relationship with Christ, more inner freedom, and the ability to be of greater service to others.\(^ {37}\) When practiced the right way, it helps God’s beloved relate to God during different seasons of the spiritual journey.\(^ {38}\) No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor 2:9). Therefore, his will is to draw his beloved to detach from all sacred symbols so that he himself can be fully and completely known to them.

The path of centering prayer is a path “to remain in the darkness of unknowing, where the dualistic way of perceiving, relating, and being is undone and one becomes fully known.”\(^ {39}\) It is a journey to nothingness. The call is to give full consent, and to yield completely, to let Christ abide and pray in his children, and work through them. Gregory the Great referred this as a journey “from glory to glory.”\(^ {40}\) In pure contemplation, pure hope and pure faith are brought to completion by something greater.\(^ {41}\) Teresa of Avila

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 64.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 24.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 72.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 89.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.
distinguishes a deeper state of contemplative prayer, the prayer of full union.\textsuperscript{42} In full union, God’s beloved loses awareness of union itself and become oneness in God. Jesus says, “On that day you will know that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you” (Jn 14:20). Speaking to his disciples about his own parting and the Holy Spirit’s abiding, “that day” is now, in the eternity of the present moment.\textsuperscript{43}

**Major Contribution**

Frenette’s major contribution is that he distinguishes the final goal of contemplation: union as opposed to unity. He stresses that contemplation is a lot like dancing.\textsuperscript{44} A dance has different steps and different movements that bring dancers into deeper relationship with a partner. In the divine dance, people of God are drawn into a more subtle relationship with Christ, a relationship with oneness, of union beyond duality.\textsuperscript{45} The seven deepening movements of the dance with God are preparing, orienting toward the partner, relating, yielding to the partner, handling challenges, uniting with the partner, and expressing the dance in life. He uses Matthew 6:6 to illustrate the first six steps of the dance and the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13 for the seventh step beautifully. The final movement of the divine dance of contemplation is that of living union, oneness, in the ordinary events of human life, but it is about unity, beyond union.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
Unity is greater than union. Union is oneness. Unity is oneness expressed in diversity. Unity is when the divine and human are not separate, acting together in ordinary acts of faith, hope, and love. To summarize, the grand vision of contemplative prayer practices (centering prayer) is to embrace and fulfill God’s will on earth as it is in heaven.

**Evangelical Perspectives**

Richard Foster is a highly respected man in Christian Evangelical circles. He founded Renovaré, a ministry devoted to train leaders to renew the church, in 1988. In a blog post on Renovaré, he boldly expressed his concern that many think of spiritual formation in terms of various practices. In the past there were quiet time and Bible study; now it is lectio divina and journaling. He stated that: “Christian spiritual formation has nothing essentially to do with such practices. Many practices can be genuinely helpful in their place, but they are not ‘it.’ What is ‘it’ is LIFE—life with Jesus, interactive relationship with the great God of the universe, inner transformation into Christlikeness.” He warned Christians not to fall into the trap of elevating certain spiritual practices as that will just produce legalism and bondage. Many of the familiar practices are useful; some are more useful than the others, but none are essential. What

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46 Ibid., 111.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
truly matters is “growing into a familiar friendship with Jesus,” as Thomas à Kempis expressed it.\(^{52}\)

_Sanctuary of the Soul: Journey into Meditative Prayer_ (2011) was one of his latest books written for the Christian community. There he stressed: “At the very heart of God is the passionate disposition to be in loving fellowship with you . . . with me. From the human side of this equation it is meditative prayer that ushers into this divine-human fellowship.”\(^{53}\) Two Hebrew words deeply inform and enrich understanding of meditative prayer: _haga_ and _siach_.\(^{54}\) English Bibles most often translate both with the simple word “meditate.” The Hebrew conveys a host of nuances: to mutter, to moan, to whisper, to reflect, to rehearse, to muse and even to cool like the dove (Is 59:11).\(^{55}\) Often the emphasis is on silent reflection upon God’s works in nature (Ps 143:5; 145:5) or God’s Word (Ps 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 148). At other times it involves audible murmuring: “This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night” (Jos 1:8). Joshua underscores the act of obedience. Hence, meditation in the Old Testament often moves the faithful from silence and stillness, to hearing and obeying.

Foster spoke highly about Theophan the Recluse who said, “To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all seeing, within you.”\(^{56}\) Prayer is not merely an exercise of the mind but the heart.

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\(^{52}\) Richard J. Foster, _Sanctuary of the Soul: Journey into Meditative Prayer_ (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 25.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 34.
Jesus often challenges people to use their imagination to understand his metaphors and parables. Some Christians are afraid to use imagination as it can go wild, but imagination is created by God and can be sanctified and redeemed by God for his good purposes.\(^{57}\) In fact, before God took human form in Christ, no material depiction was possible and therefore blasphemous even to contemplate in worship. But once God became incarnate, depiction become possible.\(^{58}\) The icons of the Eastern Orthodox Church are considered as “windows onto heaven.”\(^{59}\) They are stylized and two-dimensional to keep people from idolizing the icon and moving past the image into the reality the image represents.\(^{60}\) *Lectio divina*, for example, is a way of seeing the text of Scripture, engaging the sanctified imagination in the full drama of God’s Word.\(^{61}\) It is a meditative, spiritual reading in which both the mind and the heart are drawn into the love of God. However, whether using Scripture, icons, or the lives of faithful Christians like Augustine, A.W. Tozer, Teresa of Avila, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, personal faith in God will grow and deepen as people of God allow their minds to descend to their hearts.\(^{62}\)

Foster is not teaching the Christian community another new practice called “meditative prayer.” His focus is providing an Evangelical perspective on contemplative prayer that he named “meditative prayer” and addressing how people can overcome distractions. He suggests three basic steps to meditative prayer.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 37.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 38.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 40.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 39-40.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 41.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 45.
The first is re-collecting oneself until he is unified whole.\textsuperscript{63} One should sit comfortably and let go of all anxieties and tensions\textsuperscript{64} - not suppress them, but release them and surrender them to the Lord. This may also be a time of repentance and confession to the Lord. Sometimes using a sacred word helps one stay focused.\textsuperscript{65}

Second, is beholding the Lord as one soaks in God’s love and care.\textsuperscript{66} Foster proposed three ways for this: being still in the reflected glory of God to see in creation.\textsuperscript{67} God’s creation speaks about his invisible and eternal glory. One may also use worship music to help her come before the mercy seat, then let the music go and attend to the Lord.\textsuperscript{68} Finally, is just coming to the Lord in silence.\textsuperscript{69} One lets the Holy Spirit intercede for her with signs deeper than human words.

Foster’s final step is listening attentively to discern God’s voice.\textsuperscript{70} Willard named a few characteristics of God’s voice that distinguishes it from human voices; they are the quality of the voice, the spirit of the voice, and the content of the voice.\textsuperscript{71} Regarding “quality,” the voice of God always carries weight, but is often steady and calm.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 62.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 73.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 76.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 80-81.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
Regarding “spirit,” it carries the spirit of Jesus bearing fruit of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Regarding “content,” it always conforms consistently to the truths about God’s nature and Kingdom that are made clear in the Bible. Concurring with Nouwen, Foster reminds contemplative practitioners of the need to bring their stance of listening prayer into the course of their daily living. While Nouwen called it a “portable cell,” Foster called it a “portable sanctuary.” Wherever one goes and whatever he does, he can enter into silence, staying in God’s loving presence and hear him.

Foster also commented that in the internet culture distraction is the primary spiritual problem. The moment Christians seek to enter the creative silences of meditative prayer, every demand screams for their attention. There are many ways of dealing with distractions when people are trying to meditate: preparing a notepad to jot them down first, and put them away temporarily; speaking a word of peace to each of them; befriending the intruder by making it the object of meditation. Foster also proposed that Christians should practice Sabbath time for electronic media, a fast from all internet gadgetry one hour a day, one day per week and one week a year. In the last chapter of the book, he answered many questions contemporary Christians had in mind concerning the practices of meditative prayer. For example, how can a nursing mother

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73 Ibid. 82.
74 Ibid., 86.
75 Ibid., 104.
76 Ibid., 106.
77 Ibid., 105.
78 Ibid., 106.
quiet down to meditate? What can people do if they often fall asleep during the time of meditation? What is the best time, place, and posture, for meditation? Does meditative prayer exclude an active life? He attempts to clarify all of the misunderstandings Christians have and offers practical solutions and guidance.

Lastly, the contribution of Willard on Evangelical practical theology, especially on the subject of Christlikeness, was enormous. He was described by many of his friends as “the unhurried, humble, selfless attention of a human being who lived deeply in the genuine awareness of the reality of the Kingdom of God” and “one of the godliest people many had ever met.” Willard also compiled a collection of essays, interviews, and lectures on spiritual formation in *Renewing the Christian Mind*. This book reflected his intense labouring in the field for many decades as a theologian and an apprentice of Christ; and his beliefs, thoughts, and spiritual insights are meant to help people develop a better theological and biblical framework and understanding on how their inner beings can be shaped, formed, and transformed to be Christlike.

In the essay “Living a Transformed Life” (Chapter 2), Willard demonstrated how the people of God can possibility establish a discipling relationship to Jesus. He directed readers to an acronym “VIM,” which stands for vision, intention, and means. The “vision” of life in the Kingdom of God is the place where everyone must start: “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mk 1:15; cf. Mt 3:2, 4:17; 1 Co 4:20). Announced by Jesus, the Kingdom of God is the range of God’s

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80 Ibid., 17.
effective will, where what God wants done is done.\textsuperscript{81} Hence, the vision that underlies spiritual transformation into Christlikeness is the vision of life now and forever in the range of God’s effective will. Children of God are to partake his divine nature and seek to be Christ’s hands and feet in the world. Having this vision in mind, they must become “intentional” to obey and follow Christ.\textsuperscript{82} The “means,” spiritual disciplines like solitude and silence, meditation of Scriptures, are what can bring them to fulfill the vision.\textsuperscript{83}

These spiritual practices are understood as the “means of grace” – activities that open lives to the action of God in the heart, mind, body, and soul, to progressively remake a whole personality.\textsuperscript{84} The first two spiritual disciplines that Willard identified were “silence and solitude.” He suggested they are central to a curriculum for Christlikeness.\textsuperscript{85}

His emphasis on practicing solitude and silence as a key means to spiritual transformation had given me great encouragement and assurance that this project undertaking is going in the right direction. According to Willard, solitude is “being out of human contact, being alone, and being so for lengthy of time.” And silence is “to escape from sounds and noises, other than perhaps the gentle sounds of nature;” and “is a natural part of solitude and essential to its fullness.”\textsuperscript{86} In an interview titled “Spiritual Disciplines in a Postmodern World” (chapter 16), he further stressed that: “Solitude is central precisely because it breaks us free of the world in which we are used to exercising power

\begin{footnotes}
\item[	extsuperscript{81}] Ibid.
\item[	extsuperscript{82}] Ibid., 19.
\item[	extsuperscript{83}] Ibid., 20.
\item[	extsuperscript{84}] Ibid., 31.
\item[	extsuperscript{85}] Ibid., 37.
\item[	extsuperscript{86}] Ibid., 36.
\end{footnotes}
or having power exercised over us. Solitude and silence together, when adequately practiced, form a framework within which we can absolutely and constantly be aware of the movement of God in us, and know it is not us.”

To practice silence and solitude is to release control, and let God have control. It helps create inner space that allows one “to break away the patterns of the epidermal responses, with their consequences.” They are often automatic and impulsive responses that lead to harmful and damaging consequences. The bad habit of momentarily checking messages on the smartphone is such an automatic and impulsive response that might affect Christians’ prayer life as well as their family relationships. Willard brought an important insight that “liberation from our own desires and becoming more at home with the Father in his kingdom is one of the greatest gifts of solitude and silence.” So, solitude and silence are just the means, and being at home with the Father is the goal.

In the same interview, Willard pointed out that spiritual disciplines are much more effective if they can be practiced in community. Practicing spiritual disciplines in community helps build accountability with one another and helps clarify any questions that participants might have as they learn and practice them. This becomes a major reason why a study guide is produced not merely for personal use, but group sharing.

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87 Ibid., 180.
88 Ibid., 37.
89 Ibid., 39.
90 Ibid., 177.
CHAPTER FIVE
THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE NEW MINISTRY INITIATIVE

This chapter delves into the theological framework of the spiritual practices proposed in the study guide. Based on the four-stages of the classical journey to wholeness represented by awakening, purgation, illumination, and union, this project proposes a five-step journey resting in God’s love characterized by the following words: awakening, beholding, centering, decluttering, and enfolding. These easy-to-remember words from A to E are meant to help the people of God get into a rhythm of centering in God. Centering prayer has been identified as a key spiritual practice in the study guide.

The teaching and the practices of centering prayer will be brought to the forefront while solitude and silence are introduced as conditions of centering prayer. The ultimate goal is lead God’s people to encounter the loving presence of God and find rest in him. The five-step journey, resting in God’s love resembles the transfiguration journey Jesus took with Peter, James, and John, recorded in Mark 9:1-8. It was a journey of ascent. Their bodies were moved to follow Jesus, leaving all habitual thoughts, feelings, and behaviours (including smartphones if they had them) behind. They were led to a high mountain where they were all alone, with Jesus. There, Jesus was transfigured gloriously
before them that brought them to a moment of awe and wonder. Jesus looked exceptionally pure and bright. His clothes became so dazzling white that no one could truly fathom the purity of color. At one point, the disciples were distracted by the presence of Moses and Elijah as they were talking with Jesus. Peter exclaimed, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters.” Then a voice came from the cloud, shifting their focus back to Jesus: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” Then they looked around, saw no one but Jesus.

**Awakening**

Based on the classical journey towards wholeness, the first stage is “awakening” – the need to wake up to the spiritual reality that God is both transcendent and immanent. “The book of Isaiah speaks of a (transcendent) God who does not forget nor forsake that which God has created and intimately related (immanent) (Is 49:15-16).” And in God’s appointed time, Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, came fully divine and fully human, made his dwelling among people teaching the Kingdom of God. He took up all infirmities, suffered and died on the cross so that his children could be set free from the bondage of sin. Knowing he had to part from his disciples, he reassured them his presence through the Spirit:

> If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you (Jn 14:15-20).

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By his wounds, Christ has made his children reconciled to the Father. By the *Paraclete*, they are marked and sealed to an intimate relationship with Christ and the Father (Eph 1:13-14). Yet, the work of the Spirit is more than just a deposit guaranteeing their inheritance; the Spirit plays an active role within them to help them in their weaknesses and intercede for them in accordance with the will of God (Rm 8:26-27). In defending the Gospel in the city of many idols, Athens, the Apostle Paul stood up in the meeting of Areopagus to testify the transcendence and immanence of God: “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands . . . he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands . . . so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us” (Acts 17:24-27).

God’s transcendence and immanence are evident. Yet, the people of God are often too slow to recognize his presence, and too easily distracted by their disordered hearts. Close disciples of Jesus like Peter, James, John, Mary, and her sister Martha, and even Mary the mother of Jesus, have all encountered moments when they did not fully recognize or understand the presence and the work of God.

Mulholland reminded followers of Christ that awakening is an encounter with the living God and also an encounter with the true self.² It is coming to see something of themselves as they are and coming to see something of God as God is.³ This experience can be gradual or radical. It can be through everyday events or an extraordinary experience. An example he used is from Isaiah – “I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne,

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² Mulholland, *Invitation To A Journey*, 80.

³ Ibid.
high and lifted up” (Is 6:1) And the prophet Isaiah was awakened to who he is – “Woe to me. . . . I am a man of unclean lips” (Is 6:5). Or in another occasion, when Peter was going fishing with other disciples, he was told by a man on the shore to throw the net down at the right side of his boat; and miraculously he had caught many large fish, 153 in total. At that moment the disciple that Jesus loves recognized the man, “It is the Lord!” (Jn 21:7). Two basic emotions go with awakening: it is both a comfort and a threat. It is a comfort because there is an awareness of deeper realities of who God is and who human beings are. It is a threat because in awakening humans recognize what they are not and what they ought to be and that God is someone far greater than what they thought.

The Awakening Practices

Every time Christian smartphone users notice their hand reaching for the phone to check messages, they can say a short breath prayer to God. They call upon “Jesus” repeatedly and slowly for one to two minutes. They should pay attention to their breathing, being mindful that Christ is present. They must let Christ interrupt any habitual desire and fill them with his holy presence and peace. Traditionally the breath prayer is also called the Jesus Prayer. This invokes the Spirit of God to come and tend to his children. Finally, Christians let the feeling of his love and warmth stay.

This practice attempts to help Christians shift their attention to the loving presence of God. He is not against technology, or the people he loves. In fact, he is the Lord of all, and he is Love. He desires to have their attention and they desperately need him. The call is to acknowledge his presence and consent to receive his comfort and love.

4 Ibid., 82.
The practice is simple but speaks to the tender relationship between parent and child, the lover and the beloved. The practice is proposed to tap into the intentional or unintentional rhythm of checking the smartphone, and not replacing it completely. This is to recognize that a new habit may be easier to build upon an established habit. It is somewhat like a “holy interruption” as people allow God, who is behind the smartphone, to interrupt them so they can express their need to him. For people who do not have a smartphone or smartphone addiction problem, they can add this practice into other existing habits. For example, nursing mothers can practice breath prayer every time they are feeding their babies. Office workers can practice breath prayer every time they raise their cup of water, coffee, or tea.

**Beholding**

Continuing from the stage of awakening, one lets the Spirit move his beloved to the stage of illumination.⁵ It is an experience of a radical shift of being, a profound transformation, and total consecration to God in love.⁶ It is characterized by a number of things. The basic shift in illumination is from seeing God as “out there” to an experience of God present deep within the soul. As long as the people of God perceive God as “out there” and separated from them, they feel anxious, consciously attempting to retain control of their relationship with God. Merton put it this way: “To reach a true awareness

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⁵ I am aware that the second stage of the classical pilgrimage model is supposed to be “purgation.” But as the people of God are being awakened to God’s love, they will be “illuminated,” consecrated by his love. They are God’s image-bearers radiating love, God’s love. I see no harm in reordering this; in fact, it might help Christians awaken their senses to experience the active engagement of God in everyday life. Also, I hope to arrange these spiritual practices into an easy acronym from A to E so that it will be easier for the users of the study guide to remember and practice.

⁶ Mulholland, *Invitation To A Journey*, 84.
of Him as well as ourselves, we have to renounce our selfish and limited self and enter into a whole new kind of existence, discovering an inner center of motivation and love which makes us see ourselves and everything else in an entirely new life.”

At this stage, prayers flow from people’s lives as they experience God in all things. This is probably Paul’s understanding of unceasing prayer: “A life that is increasingly attuned to God in all things – not in a privatized withdrawal from the world, but in the midst of the hustle and bustle, busyness and pain, hurt and brokenness of our life and the world around us.” This will result in a new connectedness between one’s relationship with God and her relationship with the world. Hence, illumination is also characterized by increasing social concern, not out of obligation but out of a deep sense of God’s love filling her heart, pouring it out for others.

Jesus is a classic example of a consecrated life deeply rooted in love, illuminated through his actions. His life is characterized by unceasing prayer of praise, adoration, love, and grace. By looking at the birds of the air and the wild flowers of the field, with deep gratitude he invited his audience to look beyond the temporal concern of their hearts to experience the loving care of the Father (Lk 12:24-27). Yet, he is not so “out there” spiritually that he does not understand or care about the misery of the people. Rather, when he looked at people, he would look deep into their souls and was often filled with deep compassion. Nathaniel (Jn 1:48), Levi the tax collector (Mk 2:14), the rich young

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8 Mulholland, *Invitation To A Journey*, 96.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.
man (Mk 10:21), the woman who was crippled for eighteen years (Lk 13:12-14) and many others have been seen, loved, and touched by Jesus. Jesus appeared to behold creation and all creatures quite differently from what people do today.

Ignatius was one of the many saints who took this practice of “beholding” seriously. He always began his prayer with a living awareness of God’s loving presence to him. An eyewitness reported how Ignatius often prayed:

He would stand there and take off his hat; without stirring he would fix his eyes on the heavens for a short while. Then, sinking to his knees, he would make a lowly gesture of reverence to God. After that he would sit on a bench, for his body’s weakness did not permit him to do otherwise. There he was, head uncovered, tears trickling drop by drop, in such sweetness and silence, that no sob, no sigh, no noise, no movement of the body was noticed.\(^\text{11}\)

Ignatius always spent a moment of joy and of reverence looking up to the heavens before he proceeded to pray. Similarly, in his *Spiritual Exercises* he invites retreatants to pause “for the time I would take to pray an Our Father” and “with my understanding raised on high” to consider “how God our Lord looks upon me” (SpirEx, 75). This transitional space, Ignatius tells them, can be brief, but is profoundly relational.\(^\text{12}\) They simply become aware of being with the God who is looking upon them at the same time as they are beholding him.

In fact, the vision of Ignatius goes beyond beholding the Lord or being beheld by him. Through all created things, including everyday experiences, he believes that all things are meant for deepening one’s life in God. Ignatian spirituality began with a vision, outlined in the first principle of the *Spiritual Exercises*, that all creation is a gift,

\(^{11}\) Timothy M. Gallagher OMV, *The Examen Prayer*, loc 1679-1680.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., loc 1681-1687.
coming from God and leading toward God. Similarly, Paul teaches that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). Nothing—not health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure—can separate his children from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Finding God in all things is a way of listening and discerning the voice of God as people bring all of their experiences to God, and let God put them in the rightful place.

The Beholding Practices

Practitioners slow down by applying their senses to appreciate God who makes all things beautiful. They are to use their five senses—seeing, smelling, tasting, hearing, and touching—to discern the presence of God in everything. Slowing down to smell the roses is not bad imagery to help people remember this stage. But they begin with the refreshing taste of menthol toothpaste in the morning. Not everyone might enjoy the taste of menthol. However, without it, toothpaste can taste like chalk, glycerin, paraffin, detergent, titanium dioxide, and seaweed. Then they can feel the softness of the toothbrush gently scrubbing their teeth, and massaging their gums.

After grooming themselves, they go to their closet to select, mix and match what they enjoy wearing that day. As they make breakfast, they continue to count the Lord’s blessings: toasted croissant with egg salad dressing, blueberry yogurt, and a cup of dark roast coffee with hazelnut flavoured cream. They bless their family in the Lord and ask for God’s grace to find him in everything they see and encounter that day. In the evening family can gather to share what they see, hear, and experience.

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In small group gatherings, groups spend about ten-to-twenty minutes beholding each other in the Lord. They honor silence. Group members are allowed to use their eyes only to greet each other. They try to spend at least one minute to gaze at each person. This is an exercise of gazing at each other lovingly how the Lord gazes at his children. They practice stillness and acknowledge each other’s presence. Finally, they thank God for each person, saying a prayer silently for each person.

These gazing activities help the people of God discern God’s blessings and his presence wherever they go. Discernment is a way of beholding - not just “seeing,” but seeing the wonder within. Most importantly, is seeing God behind all people and things.

Nature walks are a good way to unwind the mind. One can take children out for a nature walk and spend quality time with them. People may set up time for the whole family to be away from phones. This may be the last generation that knows what life before smartphones was like. Parents in this generation have a great responsibility to help their young develop life-giving habits. Setting an example for younger ones and journeying together with them is crucial.

**Centering**

Centering is not a specific stage in the classical pilgrimage model, but a good sacred rhythm that can be practiced in the portable cell wherever the people of God go. Centering Prayer is drawn from the ancient practices of the Christian contemplative heritage, notably the traditional monastic practice of *lectio divina* and the practices described in the anonymous fourteenth century classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and in the writings of Christian mystics such as John Cassian, Francis de Sales, Teresa of Avila,
John of the Cross, Therese of Lisieux, and Thomas Merton. Its biblical foundation is introduced in the following.

The gospel of Mark begins with an announcement of the coming of the Messiah quoting Isaiah 40:3 concerning the role of the announcer John the Baptist: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him’” (Mk 1:2). “Wilderness” (or, desert) is not a popular marketplace where crowds can easily be gathered to listen to an announcement, but a remote place where the message is kept for those who intentionally seek to hear. In the time of Moses, the wilderness that the Israelites experienced was both a place of blessings, and of discipline. God delivered 60,000 Israelites from 400 years of slavery in Egypt to a place where they would be freed to worship the one true God and seek him as their refuge, yet many chose to grumble against God’s servant Moses, and the Lord God. Many fell into the temptations of their passions, and ultimately died in the desert. Only those who followed the Lord faithfully under the leadership of Caleb and Joshua were able to enter the Promised Land.

The wilderness “ρημία,” (transliterated erēmia) that Jesus experienced at the beginning of his public ministry was a place of intense struggle; he was led by the Spirit there to be tested by the devil (Mt 4:1; Lk 4:1). Without food and water for forty days and forty nights, he was physically and emotionally challenged. Yet, he was able to fully detach from all passions, overcome all temptations, and attain apatheia (total peace and tranquility). Since then, Jesus frequently withdrew to ρημία for times of solitude, silence, and prayer to the Father (Mk 1:35; Lk 4:42, 5:16). He often went there alone when it was

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still dark, at daybreak. Furthermore, there was one occasion when the apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught that day, without eating yet, Jesus invited them to the wilderness: “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” So they went away by themselves in a boat to ῥημία (Mk 6:31-32).

But the crowds arrived there ahead of them. Jesus was touched and filled with compassion and so began to teach them many things. By the time it was late in the day, the apostles became extremely hungry and suggested sending the crowd to surrounding villages for food. Jesus, however, challenged them to provide food. Their faith was stretched. Yet, in the ῥημία, Jesus provided not just spiritual manna but physical manna to feed five thousand people. Silence was broken in the wilderness, as it had become a teaching space. Besides the wilderness, Jesus often went up to the mountainside to pray (Mt 14:23; Mk 6:46; Lk 6:12, 9:28) as well as to teach (Mt 5:1). His teaching on prayer (Mt 6:5-14) was part of a collection of his teachings known as the Sermon on the Mount.

When Jesus taught about prayer, he focused on inner motives and attentiveness. In the Sermon on the Mount concerning prayer, Jesus taught the disciples, “Do not be like the hypocrites” who love to pray in the public to be seen by others (Mt 6:5) and “do not be like them (the pagans/Gentiles)” who keep on babbling (utter empty words or phrases repetitively) (Mt 6:7). Rather, “when you pray, go into the room, close the door and pray to the Father, who is unseen; then your Father, who sees what is done in the secret, will reward you” (Mt 6:6). Though it seems like Jesus was promoting a location where prayer should be held—in a quiet, non-distracted room with a door that can be closed—it could merely be a contrast to the place where the hypocrites were praying. Jesus himself did not
literally pray in such a room. Most likely he was referring to a state of mind, and of heart, in stillness and in solitude, secretly offering attentiveness to the Father.

The Centering Practices

This is the stage where the people of God may practice imitating Jesus by withdrawing to a quiet place to practice solitude, silence, and centering prayer. First, they silence smartphones and put them away so that they cannot easily be grabbed or annoyed by it. Solitude is a time and space God’s beloved set aside to give God their full and undivided attention. Silence refers to the stillness of the heart: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10). They release every control to God, attempting to stay with God in the present. There is no need to set any expectations, one just offers the time to God. Then they follow the simple guidelines below:

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within.
3. When engaged with your thoughts (which include body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections), return every so gently to the sacred word or symbol.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.¹⁵

One should try not to keep track of time, unless there is an important errand to do next. In that case, an alarm should be set for a specific time period. Otherwise, whether it is ten or twenty minutes, they let it be. It is not so much about how long one can practice centering prayer each time, but whether it can be practiced everyday in a week and attempt to establish a rhythm. This exercise is time resting in God’s presence. People may journal

what the experience is like after a week of practice. Besides sacred word, there are other symbols like sacred breath, sacred glance, and sacred nothingness that may help center and give constant consent to the Spirit. Practitioners may find one form is better than the other according to their learning styles and sacred pathways.

Centering prayer can be conducted in a group setting as well. Groups carve out twenty minutes uninterrupted to stay together in silence. This can be conducted in church or in a quiet retreat center. It is possible to conduct it in a home setting as long as no children or pets are at home during that time. It is also recommended to turn off any devices that make noise. Using a sacred word or symbol helps one center in Christ. If there are distracted thoughts coming to the mind, one returns to that sacred word or symbol. Finally, one rests in God’s presence, in peace.

Many people find centering prayer is easier to practice in a group setting, rather than individually. The element of companionship in one’s spiritual journey shall not be overlooked. All spiritual disciplines can be practiced corporately, even silence and solitude. It helps cultivate a greater spirit of submission to God and to one another.

**Decluttering**

The second stage of the classical pathway towards wholeness is “purgation.” Purgation is the process of bringing one’s motives, behaviours, attitudes, and desires into increasing harmony with her growing perception of what Christlikeness is like. It is the process of becoming integrated into the new order of being in Christ.\(^16\) The word purgation means the act or the result of purging, purification, or cleansing from sins. It is

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\(^16\) Mulholland, *Invitation To A Journey*, 82.
the renunciation of sins, abandoning values, behaviours, and old habits that are contrary to God’s will as revealed in Christ and Scripture.\textsuperscript{17} Due to the Catholicism’s notion of purgatory in their theology, the word “purgation” itself might not sound welcoming to Protestants, Evangelicals, or contemporary hearers. Hence, I have decided to use the word “decluttering.” It also gives the idea of getting rid of things or habits that are distorted and disordered, and reprioritizing as necessary.

John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, announced the message of the Kingdom in the wilderness and baptized sinners in Jordan River, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt 3:2). In anticipation of the coming of the Messiah, John urged the Israelites to repent, to turn away from their sins. When John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to the place where he was baptizing, he was furious about their lack of fruit produced in keeping with repentance (Mt 3:8).

Pharisees were Jewish religious leaders of their time, yet they were well known in the New Testament for self-righteousness and hypocrisy. Sadducees were a Jewish sect that denied the existence of angels and other spirits, miracles, or resurrection of the body. John forewarned them that they would not enter the Kingdom of the Messiah just because they were children of Abraham. Sometimes what needs to be stripped away goes beyond one’s moral and spiritual sins, but an entire religious system that has no place in God’s righteous Kingdom.

This is how Jesus taught the disciples to pray: “Pray, then, in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name . . .” (Mt 6:9). Calling on the Father who is wholly transcendent and immanent, the people of God ask God for his effective will to transform

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
the world and so they pray “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in
heaven” (Mt 6:10). And as they orient their heart to his heart and their will to his will,
they acknowledge their physical, relational, ethical, and spiritual needs before him and
humbly ask for his grace and healing so that they may indeed live a holy, blameless, and
effective life on earth glorifying God in his Kingdom. This prayer, widely known as The
Lord’s Prayer, attempts to help the people of God open their hearts and ears to God as
they seek to listen and to obey. It is a process of orienting and reorienting their thoughts
and desires to God.

The Decluttering Practices

Many people have the habit of using their smartphones as their alarm clocks. That
is, in fact, a great excuse for putting their smartphone beside their bed within arm’s
length. So they would first be greeting their smartphone a “good night kiss,” then a “good
morning” the next day in their bed. Decluttering is about honouring God first above
everything else, not the other way around.

First, it is important to find an old alarm clock or use a disconnected smartphone
as an alarm clock instead. People should try not to give any excuse to check their phone
first thing in the morning or last thing at night. Even though people must put their
smartphone beside their bed for the purpose of any late night emergency call, it is
possible to set the phone to “Do Not Disturb” through the night except emergency calls,
so there will be no notifications or alerts from e-mails, Whatsapp, Facebook or other app.

Second, one should set a specific time in the morning and determine not to pick
up the phone to check for any messages until spending time with God in the morning.
Reciting the Lord’s Prayer is a great practice to draw near God. Psalm 63 can also be used to help get into the rhythm of greeting the Lord in the morning (v.1), afternoon (vv.2-5) and evening (vv.6-8). For people who do not have smartphone addiction problems, they may want to set the alarm three times a day to draw close to God. Traditionally it is known as fixed hours prayer. The focus of this stage is to train the mind to set a mental rhythm to give full attention to the Lord, whether making use of a smartphone or not.

Morning prayer can be a time of praise and entering his love. Evening prayer can be a time of examen. Ignatius’ prayer of examen is extremely helpful. During the time of examen, practitioners review the day, take notice of God’s grace, discern what brings them close to God or away from God, and pray for renewed strength for the next day. The idea is to break away from the habitual pattern of giving the smartphone constant attention day and night, and to replace it by sacred rhythms honoring God above all else.

Moreover, when it comes to any bad habit, one should pause and take a closer look. He should discern what causes such an addictive habit; whether there are certain sins, desires, people or things, he identifies and acknowledges their existence. Then one shares personal thoughts and feelings with the Lord. He lets go of things that cannot easily change, then returns to centering prayer - returning to the source of love, the river of love. God desires his children to abide with him in peace, to have life everlasting.

**Enfolding**

The final stage of the Christian pilgrimage to wholeness is called “union,” in which God’s beloved experience oneness in God and find themselves caught up in
rapturous joy, adoration, praise, and a deep peace that passes all understanding.\(^{18}\) This is totally a gift from God and his grace. It comes from a deep desire of total abandonment of control over what people know and how they feel about God, entering into the dark night of one’s senses, as St. John of the Cross describes, to an unconditioned relationship with God.\(^{19}\) After this dark night of senses, there is a dark night of the spirit. It is the last and narrowest tunnel of the spiritual journey toward wholeness in Christ.\(^{20}\) It is the needle of the eye through which no self-will may pass.\(^{21}\) It is the final stage of losing the self through suffering and crucifixion into the everlasting arms enfolding in Love. In this final stage, God’s beloved then realize “I no longer live but Christ lives in me” (Gal 3:20).

Job, a righteous man, who, deprived of all affective and cognitive assurances of God’s love and care, came to deep suffering, or total darkness, where he found “even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you” (Ps 139:12). The Apostle Paul also described a mysterious experience of a man who was caught up to the third heaven (known as the paradise). This man has heard many inexpressible things. Yet, he was not permitted to tell. In fact, he had no idea whether he was in the body or out of the body (2 Cor 12:2-3). He had arrived and come to a place where he considered all his gains in the world (status, privilege, education, profession) as garbage, except knowing Christ. Whether dead or alive, he did not really care. He would rather participate in Christ’s death and resurrection to truly know him (Phil 3:7-10).

\(^{18}\) Mulholland, *Invitation To A Journey*, 97.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 99.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 100.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.
“Union” is the goal of all mystical endeavour. Those who have traveled that road speak of it in terms of “divine marriage” and “deification.” It stresses on total abandonment to God and becoming like Christ. John Mabry concludes this stage with:

And the mystics are clear on this: when God truly lives in us, we can do much more than we ever could on our own. For it isn’t we who are bringing forth all this fruit. If we can just get ourselves—our fears, our illusions, our desires, our egos—out of the way, God will do it all. All we have to do is give our permission, cooperate, and as I said, get out of the way. That’s good news for people who are already run ragged, who are already tired. All we have to do is say, ‘Yes.’ God will do the rest.

Teresa of Avila, who devoted herself to contemplative prayer, had an experience of “union” when she became very ill. She described it as being stabbed repeatedly through her heart by a fiery, golden lance. Mabry quoted her friend John of the Cross describing the phenomenon this way: “While the soul is inflamed with the love of God . . . it will feel like a seraphim is assailing it by means of an arrow which is all afire with love. . . . It seems to it that the entire universe is a sea of love in which it is engulfed, for, conscious of the living point or the center of love within itself, it is unable to catch sight of the boundaries of this love.” She had a feeble body throughout her life, but she was aflame for the Lord. She reformed the Carmelite order to espouse absolute poverty and stricter ascetic disciplines. Altogether she founded sixteen new convents, attracted hundreds of women and men to the new austere monasticism, largely due to her saintliness and zeal.

23 Ibid., 109.
24 Ibid., Growing into God, 111.
25 Ibid.
The ultimate purpose of one’s union with Christ is selfless service for the sake of others. This is in fact the prayer of Jesus as the great high priest: “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you . . . so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (Jn 17:21-22). The spiritual pilgrimage to become whole in Christ is not for our own ecstasy, but for the sake of the world so that everyone may come to know God and so can rest in his love.

The Enfolding Practices

The experience of being totally enfolded and enveloped by God is grace. This is the stage where participants are invited to unplug for a day and rest in his presence. Every six days the people of God shall honor a day of rest - that is, the Sabbath time with the Lord. They leave all dark thought (worries, fears, anxieties, and restlessness) behind.

This project is truly not about banning the smartphone, but recognizing disorderly thoughts, feelings, and desires that potentially might lead to smartphone addiction. It is about combating and overcoming those thoughts, feelings, and desires. When smartphone users find no trouble in putting the smartphone away for a day, they may consider signing up for a longer retreat. Beginning with a three-day retreat may be a good start. Parents with young children might need to arrange for childcare so that they can be totally free. Parents in retreat might recognize it is actually more difficult to separate from their spouse and children than from the smartphone. However, a temporary separation from people or things might be necessary to give undivided attention to God. Having a weeklong retreat once a year is recommended.
A silent retreat enables people to withdraw from the external busyness, noises, and distractions (what smartphones present). Practicing solitude, silence, and centering prayer allow internal noises (distorted desires, feelings, and habits) to come to the surface. A directed silent retreat is the one where retreatants can meet with a trained spiritual director to talk about their soul, their relationship with God. It is true nobody can make the effort to attain union with God. In fact, it is about abandoning everything that one uses to trust, to actually trust in God. There one may fully experience rest in God and be enfolded in his love. It is like a weaned child with the mother, as the psalmist described in Psalm 131, completely satisfied and content.
PART THREE

MINISTRY AND STRATEGY
CHAPTER SIX

A NEW MINISTRY PLAN DESIGNED FOR CALVARY LOGOS BAPTIST CHURCH

This chapter focuses on the development of a comprehensive ministry plan surrounding a study guide *Life With God: 5 Steps to Rest in God* (Appendix G) that was designed especially for the Christian adults of the English congregation of Calvary Logos Baptist Church to encourage the practice of centering prayer in their everyday lives. The study guide recognized how centering prayer might help prevent and combat smartphone addiction as people’s relationship with God deepens. The study guide was first introduced in Lent 2019, but was not designed solely for Lent. The study guide addressed the rising concern of smartphone addiction in the digital era without neglecting other forms or manifestations of addiction caused by undisciplined hearts and minds. Centering prayer was identified as a key spiritual practice that enables the people of God to dwell on his everlasting love and rest. The study guide would serve as one of the basic discipleship tools of Calvary Logos that guide Christians onto an interior journey to contemplate God and be transformed by his presence.
Goals

The first major goal of *Life With God* is to raise awareness of the many habits that shape and form participants’ everyday lives: What can participants learn from their own habits about who they truly are? What are some of the distorted or bad habits that may require adjustment, balance, and moderation? Smartphone addiction is used in this context to demonstrate how a habit can be formed so easily without any intentional effort. The smartphone is just a device. What causes addiction or attachment to a smartphone is the content the smartphone delivers. By paying attention to the specific sites smartphone users frequently visit, it is not hard to discern where their hearts desire to dwell.

However, in order to be set free from such bondage, people must honestly acknowledge their needs and bring them before God who can deliver them and truly satisfy their deepest longings. Moreover, it is through the practices of spiritual discipline that souls can come fully alive in God. The introduction of the study guide attempts to stir a discussion on the importance of spiritual habits and rhythms: What kind of life-giving spiritual habits are participants practicing in their everyday lives? How do they make room for God? What their experiences are like?

By raising such awareness, Christian adults and parents get to examine their own lives, and may also discern good spiritual habits and rhythms that they may want their family to practice together. For example, learning to come to Jesus for rest is crucial: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (*Mt. 11:28-29*). Good spiritual habits are meant to be enlivening, refreshing, not burdensome. As followers of
Christ, it is important to learn from Jesus the source of his strength and how he rests his soul with his father through solitude, silence, and prayer. When parents are restless, children tend to be restless also. When God’s people rise up fervently to pray, rest, and trust in God, the digital world cannot tempt or harm them and the generations to come.

The second major goal is to resurge the contemplative tradition of Christian spirituality in Evangelical churches. Classical spiritual disciplines like silence, solitude, and centering prayer will be introduced, contextualized, and repackaged for contemporary followers of Christ. Desert dwellers in the past fled to the wilderness to seek solitude and serenity, that they may hear the voice of their heart and the voice of God. But what about people who live in the digital world, where can they go to hear the voice of God? With affordable smart data plans, smartphone users can be connected to the outside world even in the seemingly quiet retreat center. This study attempts to help those who seek to hear God to cultivate sustainable life-giving contemplative practices and rhythms so that they may find God actively present in their distracted wired lives.

Spiritual disciplines are just the means to achieve higher goals. Through practicing spiritual disciplines, God’s beloved may deepen their friendship with God and allow the Spirit to do his work in them. Spiritual disciplines require practitioners to make intentional efforts to slow down in order to pay attention, and to stay in order to listen. Learning to be still—that is, to let God be God as one rests in his presence—is crucial, and is also counter-cultural. Therefore, the study guide promotes a five-step approach to learn how to rest in God. Each step can be practiced as a stand-alone spiritual exercise on its own right, but collectively the five steps can also be perceived as one heart-transforming prayer practice cultivating and deepening one’s wholeness in God.
The third major goal is to recognize that life with God is a journey towards freedom from bondage and rest in God’s love; it is best to be practiced in community. Spiritual disciplines like silence, solitude, and centering prayer can be practiced personally and corporately. *Life with God* stresses on one’s personal relationship with God, but the pursuit is not a private endeavor. God intends his children to be soaked in love, yet radiating love. Coming from a center of love where God nurtures and empowers, the people of God may spur each other on towards love and good deeds. Hence, it is highly recommended that participants use the study guide during their personal devotional time, but also in families and in community groups. Participants are encouraged to journal as they practice the disciplines, and share their experiences in their families and community groups for prayer support, accountability, and encouragement.

**Target Audience**

The target audience of this study are followers of Christ who have the desire to grow deeper in love with Jesus. The invitation was extended to all congregants of the English worship of Calvary Logos. Sixty-five surveys on Smartphone Habits (see Appendix A) had been sent out and fifty were completed and returned. The sample size of fifty adults, eighteen years and above, also had a good multi-ethnic representation. Though there are still many Chinese-ethnic families, a majority identified themselves as Canadians rather than Chinese. There are also Filipinos, Vietnamese, French, Koreans and Mauritians. During the past summer, an Indian family and a Nigerian family have joined the congregation as well. All of these families have at least one smartphone at home. By the end of 2018, the congregation had an addition of fifteen more adult
participants; the total number averaged seventy adults by Lent 2019. About 40 percent of the present attendants actually joined the church in the past two years. Therefore, there was an urgency to get to know these participants—their spiritual journey, habits, and needs—and to engage them in smaller community groups.

From demographics, the family composition of the English congregation was quite evenly distributed: roughly one-third of adults are young married couples with toddlers or babies, one-third are married couples without children, and one-third are still single or in a relationship. All family units have at least one or more smartphones at home and a majority responded in the survey that they are comfortable buying a personal smartphone with a plan for their children once they reach junior high when they are twelve or thirteen.

From a spiritual formation perspective, the uniqueness of the present target audience was that they have not been taught about centering prayer prior to this study. Calvary Logos is a Bible-centered church. A majority of leaders and congregants often desire more Bible studies. Other than reading Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline* ten years ago in an adult Sunday school class, there are rarely any kind of formal or informal teachings on spiritual disciplines, habits, or rhythms in other formal or informal settings. Addiction was also not a common topic of discussion in their culture. I saw the importance of establishing life-giving spiritual habits and rhythms in the everyday lives of God’s beloved, and believed good habits and rhythms that help make space for God may effectively counter any addiction that distracts, disturbs, or drains their souls. Hence, the project was perceived as relevant and timely. I anticipate it will just be the beginning of a greater work of the Lord in our midst.
Hence, whether these seventy congregants had completed the smartphone habit survey back in July 2018 or not, they were all invited to participate in the study as long as they were willing to commit to attend Sunday worship, read and follow the study guide, and join a community group during the week and/or the discussion group on Sunday after worship. People who could not make time to join a weekly sharing/discussion group, were encouraged to find an accountability partner to share and pray for each other during the study. In fact, I volunteered to help them find an accountability partner if there was such a need. All of the participants went through an online registration process to indicate how they would like to commit in this pilot project. The online sample form can be found in Appendix D.

**Methods**

The project was conducted during Lent 2019 between March 6 and April 18. The kick-off sermon was held on the first Sunday of March, the same week of Ash Wednesday. Each Sunday began with a new session of the study guide. Altogether the study, including the conclusion spanned over the seven weeks of Lent. Lent is often the time Christians are encouraged to fast from something and to feast on something. Hence, the Lenten sermons were to challenge the congregation to re-examine their everyday habits, to get an understanding of the kind of distorted addictive thoughts, feelings, or behaviors they might have, and to be replaced by centering prayer.

The study guide was structured to walk each participant through five steps to be freed from the control of addiction and to pursue abiding and resting in God. The methodology was to listen to weekly sermons, to pick up a study guide to learn the
meanings of each step, and to join a community group for accountability and support. Reading the materials attempted to transform the mind. Walking away from addictive habits and practicing the spiritual disciplines proposed were to transform the will. Journaling about the feelings and the experience of the spiritual practices was to shape the heart. Joining a community group for sharing, support and encouragement was beneficial to not just to the personal physical and spiritual body, but the community body.

All participants of the *Life With God* campaign who wished to obtain a free study guide must register via a Google online form (Appendix D) indicating their different levels of participation, whether they could commit to attend seven weeks of Sunday services listening to sermons, Sunday discussion groups after each sermon, support groups held designated days of the week, learning and practicing the prayer exercises from the study guide and/or journeying with an accountability partner.

I was convinced that true spiritual transformation must come from a deep desire to love. That is, to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength (Mk 12:30). Hence, the entire body will be renewed and reoriented to be in conformity with the Spirit within. This is what life with God is, where the soul can finally feel rest in God—at home.

Learning a new spiritual habit in seven weeks and assuming a new rhythm could be established was an impossible task. This project recognized that each participant is on a different and unique journey. Not all community groups, especially the young families, managed to meet once a week. In fact, the two young family groups could only afford to meet once a month. Hence, group leaders were encouraged to learn as much as they could during Lent through sermons and Sunday discussion group, and then took the time to lead
their groups after Lent. I anticipated the project might span over three or more months and hopefully would have a ripple effect as more participants would be talking and sharing about their experiences in centering prayer even after Lent. Ideally the practices of centering prayer would lead to a greater desire of participating in a silent retreat. I was unable to plan a silent retreat right after Lent due to Easter weekend and a youth retreat that had been scheduled right after Easter. Yet, I did have plans to lead a silent retreat to follow up in June.

**Implementation**

Designing and writing up the study guide is a key component for this project. Yet, the implementation of the project requires good coordination and communication with the lead pastor of the congregation and training leaders for the many small groups. The project was conducted over seven weeks, but the entire planning and implementation process required more than half a year.

**Survey**

Prior to launching this study, a survey on Smartphone Habits (see Appendix A) was conducted in the English congregation of Calvary Logos Baptist Church. The survey helped in understanding the target audience’s smartphone habits. It also raised the awareness of congregants to their smartphone usage patterns.

**Group Leaders Training**

A month before the first group meeting or the kick-off sermon, I gathered all group leaders for a training session. The vision of the project and the expectations of their
leadership were communicated. A summary report of the smartphone habits survey was given to the group leaders to share with their group members on their first group meeting date. The purpose was mainly to let group participants think more deeply, share, and discuss what might have contributed to those findings and phenomenon, including unplanned and unintentional formation of smartphone habits and the lack of motivation in cultivating spiritual habits.

A major focus of the training was to teach and reinforce better listening skills for God and for the people of God, and to encourage the practices of silence, solitude, and centering prayer in the group meetings. Group leaders ought to model and give space for members to encounter God in their midst. For example, before the beginning of each group meeting time, leaders were encouraged to slot at least fifteen minutes to practice silence and solitude before the Lord, to prepare their hearts and to make room for the Lord’s presence. During the meeting, leaders were not expected to give a response to every question immediately, but to lead members to hold questions in silence and to learn to listen to the voice of the Spirit first. Such a posture attempts to make leaders rely less on expert knowledge from themselves but more from God and his Spirit.

During the closing prayer, leaders were reminded to thank God for his presence and to commission their group members onto a journey with God. The goal for such prayer was to orient members’ focus to look for the active work of the Lord in their journey. While I committed to support the group leaders prayerfully and provide ongoing guidance on their journey, group leaders were responsible to support their members prayerfully during the week.
Preaching and Teaching Sessions

A series of six sermons on *Life With God* were preached each Sunday during Lent 2019. The results of the smartphone habits survey were partially shared in the kick-off sermon with the congregation as a way to illustrate how easily unintentional habits formed and shaped people’s lives. Smartphone addiction is just one of the many other distractions people have in life. The short-term impact made to their cognitive, psychological, relational, and spiritual development seems to be relatively subtle since it is considered nothing like drug, alcohol, or sex addiction. However, the long-term impact is unimaginable as children are born into the digital age and influenced by it through their educational and developmental years.

The eligible age to buy recreational cannabis in Toronto is nineteen, whereas children may have access to smart technology as young as three. The kick-off sermon aimed to address how some distorted habits may turn into addictions that may take away people’s freedom in God, and to encourage the people of God to develop life-giving habits that deepen their lives in God. Life-giving habits cannot take shape without intentional effort. Jesus and his disciplines practiced many spiritual disciplines together.

The kick-off sermon also briefly outlined a plan and on established how a rhythm of contemplative spiritual practices through the practices of solitude, silence, and centering prayer would help the people of God take their control back and cultivate a deeper love with God. Hence, congregants were encouraged to learn the practices by using the study guide, to journal, and to join a community group. After the kick-off sermon, the five subsequent sermons focused on biblical and theological foundations of the five steps: awakening, beholding, centering, decluttering, and enfolding.
I led a one-hour Sunday discussion group right after worship for six consecutive weeks. Following the study guide, I seized opportunities to introduce the practices of each week and respond to any questions participants had during the sermon. People who could not join a community group during the week and group leaders who wanted to learn from before leading their own group were encouraged to join the Sunday discussion group. The target audience of the Sunday discussion group was about twenty people.

I recognized that the content in the study guide might be too dense, and attempted to make it as simple as possible. Hence, I committed to preach and teach for six consecutive weeks. Due to different schedules of community groups, some leaders were able to first learn by attending the Sunday discussion group and introduce it to their community group at a different time. After all, the study was not intended to be conducted one time only, but to be added in the discipleship and spiritual formation inventories of Calvary Logos. Weekly teaching sessions also allowed me to share personal challenges and struggles on my journey that were real and not uncommon to all.

Study Guide and Community Groups

In preparation for Lent, congregants were informed ahead of this time of this particular study and were asked to register and join one of the community groups or the Sunday discussion group. Registrants to the campaign were invited to participate in the research study, but were not obligated. Those who were willing to participate in the study signed and submitted an Informed Consent Letter (Appendix E). A hard copy of the letter was enclosed in each study guide, and a soft copy was provided as an attachment via the email titled “Life With God: Informed Consent Letter.” That email to all registrants
specifically stated that each registrant who signed up for *Life With God* had the option to be a full participant of the campaign without feeling pressured to participate in the research study. Leaders were responsible to distribute the study guide to all group members who registered for a copy at no cost, and were trained in advance to clarify basic questions about the consent letter.

The study guide consisted of seven sessions in total, including the introductory and the concluding sessions. Participants were expected to read through the Introduction on their own before the first session to discuss the impact of smartphones in their lives and to share about signs of any addictive habits, not limited to smartphones. The purpose of the discussion was not to identify who had more severe addiction problems, but to allow participants to interact with each other about the meanings behind their habits.

After the first introductory session, subsequent sessions aimed to introduce different spiritual practices: awakening, beholding, centering, decluttering, and enfolding. Participants were encouraged to share their struggles and barriers as part of their formational journey. Fears, resistance, and myths were acknowledged and addressed. Biblical examples were shared. All participants were encouraged to practice the disciplines proposed for one-to-two weeks (depending on how frequent their group met) and to journal their experiences, largely focusing on their feelings as they encountered those practices and the follow-up conversations with Jesus.

In the last session, group leaders were asked to lead a discussion on the secrets of establishing long-term, sustainable, life-giving habits and rhythms from their experiences in the previous couple of weeks. Participants then had the space to share their overall experiences, what they had learned about themselves, and how they desired to be
supported moving forward. Before they attended the last session, in the study guide they were asked to respond to the following questions: From the journey through this study guide and the prayer practices in the past couple of weeks, what have you learned about yourself, your habits and God? Which key prayer practice(s) have you been trying to practice regularly? Was that rhythm helpful in raising your awareness of the loving presence of God, or countering any old habits or addictions? In what ways have your relationship with God grown or deepened?

Participants were also encouraged by the group leaders to offer feedback and share their journey with me directly for further encouragement, support, and spiritual direction.
CHAPTER SEVEN

ASSESSMENT AND FINDINGS

Assessment

The initial online survey conducted in July 2018 was a crucial assessment of the spiritual condition of the English congregation of Calvary Logos Baptist Church. Prior to the survey, I made assumptions and speculations about congregants’ smartphone habits based on my own personal smartphone habits. The survey revealed that 36 percent of congregants expressed “frequently” that they felt they spent time using their smartphones longer than intended; however, only 18 percent acknowledged the fact that they “definitely” had smartphone addiction problem and another 42 percent said, “may be.”

Moreover, it was intriguingly alarming to learn from the survey that almost one-third of all survey participants had either no idea what spiritual disciplines were, or that they did not practice any spiritual discipline. They were asked to fill out what types of spiritual disciplines they were practicing in the present; yet, one-third of participants (mostly young parents in their thirties) left that section blank. These specific findings prompted sensitivity and awareness of the needs of parents with babies or toddlers in the design of the disciplines. Hence, in the study guide there were suggestions specifically
responding to the needs of young families regarding how ancient spiritual disciplines
could be practiced more creatively with flexibility and adaptation in mind. Nevertheless,
it was not easy to measure effectiveness or growth because there are many individual
factors contributing to the success or the failures of establishing spiritual rhythms.

Participants were encouraged to journal along the way and share their insights and
needs on a weekly or biweekly basis in their group meetings. At the end, they were asked
to reflect on the overall experience and provide feedback. Establishing a rhythm of
spiritual practices is a lifelong journey. I did not make the assumption that there would be
significant changes in participants right after this pilot project; rather, everyone, including
myself, is on a unique journey with Jesus Christ. Those who have given consent for
participation in the research study would receive an online Life With God: Assessment
and Feedback survey (Appendix F). They became the more focused group to evaluate and
assess for personal growth after the seven weeks of prayer practices.

Yet, in order to invite honest evaluation and feedback, the survey was to be
completed and submitted it online anonymously. That hopefully eliminated any bias of
the project, treating all participating individuals on equal footing without identifying
gender, age group, family compositions, faith traditions, or personalities, and so might
help improve on the overall design of the project and make necessary recommendations
for future next steps.

Assessing and measuring one’s spiritual growth seems to be a daunting and
impossible task. I recall the words of Jim Houston: “Spiritual growth is the slowest of all
human movements.” Yet, if the prayer practices were seriously engaged, participants may
have experienced greater rest in God through centering prayer. In The Path of Centering
Prayer, David Frenette proposed eight qualities or attitudes that true contemplatives would exhibit and manifest. They are: 1) giving consent to God to act in us; 2) recognizing the presence of God in all things; 3) receiving and offering the gift of simplicity; 4) becoming more humble and gentle; 5) letting go and letting be; 6) resting in God’s being; 7) let God embrace us and our pain; and 8) integrating prayer and action.

Participants of the final assessment survey were asked to assess their personal spiritual growth based on the aforementioned eight signs. As to further summarize, it is basically a greater expanded view of God, greater integration with self and the world, greater inner freedom, greater compassion for others, greater obedience, humility, and love.

Findings

The seven-week *Life With God* campaign held during Lent 2019 was well received. Forty-five adults registered online to join the campaign. The basic commitment was to engage in Sunday Worship and to listen to LWG sermons for seven weeks. Weekly audio sermons were provided on the church website also. Then they were asked to express if they were willing to read through the study guide and practice the exercises.

All forty-five registrants expressed they were willing to do so. Hence, each registrant was given a free LWG study guide upon registration. The higher level of commitment included joining the LWG Sunday discussion group after Sunday worship and/or joining a LWG support group for seven weeks. It turned out that thirty-four adults signed up for the hour-long Sunday discussion, and twenty-three adults signed up for participating in a LWG support group for greater support on their journey. Nineteen
registrants actually signed up for joining both Sunday discussion and a support group. Of the twenty-two adults who joined a support group, six were young career adults. They met in the church after work every Thursday evening. Another eight were young couples, with or without children, gathered in a home setting, every Thursday evening also. The remaining eight adults gathered in the church every Saturday afternoon for sharing, prayer, and support. For a small congregation of an average of sixty attendants, the participation rate in the *Life With God* campaign was overwhelmingly high.

All forty-five registrants to the campaign were given a choice to opt in or out of participating in research on overcoming smartphone addictions by establishing rhythms of solitude, silence, and centering prayer. If they were willing to opt in, they signed and returned the Informed Consent Form enclosed in the study guide. It turned out that twenty-six people opted to participate in the research and also signed and submitted the consent form. However, when the final assessment and feedback survey was sent out to the twenty-six consented research participants, only nine copies were returned, completed, and submitted anonymously. Detailed survey results are found in Appendix H.

Findings basically reflected that all nine participants became increasingly more aware of their daily distorted habits and started to address them by practicing contemplative prayer practices. Seven participants experienced better rhythms in life; and eight participants had greater peace and rest in God.

When asked which prayer practices they learned from the study guide and intended to establish as a rhythm, two mentioned breath prayers; four mentioned centering prayer; one mentioned sacred word that used in breath or centering prayer;
another mentioned the prayer of *examen*; and another mentioned enfolding, which is a deeper form of centering prayer, characterized by oneness in Trinitarian love. It was good seeing that participants were touched and moved by different spiritual practices promoted in the study guide. It also reflected there is no one spiritual practice that might fit the temperament, style, and readiness of all people.

When asked how they have been experiencing the signs of practicing centering prayer, eight survey participants were more open to “let God and let go;” seven expressed they were more willing to give consent to God to act in them and through them, and to become more gentle and humble; six became more aware of God’s presence in all things and offered the gift of simplicity towards self and others; and six expressed they had let God embrace them and their pain, and put their prayers forward into actions. Some people wrestled with the signs and indicated “not sure,” likely because too short a time was given to observe or to measure growth by themselves or others.

When asked about what they gained most through the study, participants gave the following statements: “The importance of rest and solitude in a Christian's life;” “I am more aware of God’s presence, and allowing myself to lift my immediate worries or plans to God due to my awareness. I can experience peace and comfort from God sooner because I remember to rely on Him immediately. And I see how God rewards me when I am more open to Him and His guidance.” Another wrote, “Restfullness and a calm feeling in my mind. I had a constant fear about the future of my kids and our life. After attending these sessions Awakening Beholding, Centering, Decluttering and Enfolding. It brought a change in my self.” Another was “More aware of different spiritual practices but some of them were hard to practice and was a bit uncomfortable to practice ex: beholding, breath
prayer - felt very new age and very different from what I've been taught about spiritual practices.” One participant developed “A habit of praying during the day; put worry aside to God; intentionally seeing more how God works on other b/s especially during pain and suffering.” The last participants wrote, “The importance of relationship with God through spiritual exercises. I want to continue to review the course handbook and review and practice the spiritual exercises;” “Learned a lot;” “Reliance on God.” and “Peace.”

There was a section for additional comments and/or recommendation at the end of the survey. One person responded “to encourage other churches to participate;” and another said, “It is a turning point in my life!”

In summary, the Life With God campaign has been a blessed journey to those who recognized their needs of cultivating deeper relationship with God by making room in their lives through engaging in spiritual disciplines like solitude, silence, and centering prayer. A pharmaceutical doctor in his early forties shared his testimony in Sunday discussion weeks after the campaign said:

A major lesson I learned from Life With God is that I cannot claim to know my spouse by knowing her DNA, sequence, blood type, physical features, or her medical history without dating her and spending time to know who she is and what she thinks. Similarly, I cannot engage in the study of God intellectually and claim that I really know God; I must come before him, seek to know him personally, and to experience his love and his rest.

The research study itself began with a holy desire to overcome smartphone addiction. Participants generally expressed the study helped raise awareness of smartphone and other distorted habits. However, as it was repeated many times throughout the campaign that the intent of the study was not to discourage or ban the use of smartphones, this study had no intention to further explore whether or how participants
chose to deal with their smartphone addictions. Rather, followers of Christ ought to recognize distorted habits that crowd out healthy habits and weaken desire to draw near God. Therefore, the study took participants onto a journey of five steps to rest in God - awakening, beholding, centering, decluttering, and enfolding. It was interesting to find that God spoke to his people at different steps as they learned the materials and practiced certain exercises.

While the practices of solitude and silence are the conditions of centering prayer, centering prayer was introduced as a key contemplative spiritual practice that helps God’s beloved center and rest in him. Centering prayer was an unconventional spiritual prayer practice for Evangelicals. The initial founder and practitioner, Thomas Merton, was perceived by the Evangelical circle as a Catholic priest influenced by Buddhist thoughts. Hence, I was aware of tension that might arise. Of the nine research participants, one person did express both centering prayer and breath prayer seem to be very new age. Despite efforts in clarifying what mysticism is and is not during a sermon and mentioning a famous Evangelical author, David Benner, who also found centering prayer helpful in his spiritual practices, it was expected that many congregants might choose to step back and observe due to scepticism.

Lastly, learning about the contemplative spiritual tradition and its practices in seven weeks was not an easy task. Expecting participants to be able to establish a prayer rhythm since or to experience a significant growth or outcome in their relationship with God might not be reasonable at all. Yet, it was encouraging indeed to receive nine surveys completed by people who made exceptional efforts during the seven weeks of Lent to read through the study guide, practice suggested weekly prayer exercises, and
participate in the weekly discussion or support group. In fact, one person expressed the
desire to review the study guide continuously and keep on practicing the exercises.
Others expressed they found peace and greater reliance in God.

Running a campaign in seven weeks does spin off certain excitement and
momentum. Yet, it may have greater impact if the study is to be held in a smaller context
with people who have already expressed desire to learn, grow, and deepen their
relationships with God; and that study may span to seven months, or even a full year,
instead of just seven weeks. The involvement of a seasoned spiritual director leading the
group will be exceptionally helpful.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The vision of the project began with a personal desire to grow away from attachment to a smartphone. Yet, the information, knowledge, entertainment, and connection with people that little device provides within arm’s reach is hard to resist. During the Life With God study, many Christian smartphone users expressed smartphones had become a necessity in their work and family lives. A stay-home mother with two teenaged boys of a new immigrant family said the smartphone is the only thing she has that enables her to get in touch with her family and friends from afar and learn about everything that is going on in the world. Their home does not have a television, but three smartphones. It is not atypical that a household of four has at least three smartphones, so that everyone may stream different channels at the same time. It is not an understatement that once a person owns a smartphone the struggle of distraction intensifies.

Richard Foster was asked to cast a vision for the next forty years. The very first challenge he chose to address was the explosion of information through technology coming with lightning speed, and commented that distraction is the primary spiritual problem in contemporary culture.¹ Constant perpetual outer noise, news, and demands are making people incapable of hearing their own interior voice, nonetheless the voice of God. Even neuroscience studies show that neural pathways of the brain are being rewired

accordingly, so that one’s physical capacity for sustained attention is decreasing.\(^2\) Despite all these negative impacts, “let’s be honest—we do enjoy our technological gluttony.”\(^3\) Foster expressed the need of “a discerning, life-giving technological asceticism.”\(^4\)

According to Foster, spiritual disciplines are God’s means of grace by which the people of God are able to bring their body, mind, and spirit before God as “living sacrifices” so that he may transform and produce graces and virtues in them.\(^5\) Spiritual disciplines are means of grace – as opposed to “works” that earn God’s love, but not “efforts” in inviting and making space for God’s spirit to shape the heart and mind of his people. Foster emphasizes that spiritual disciplines are actions of the body, mind, heart, and soul that the people of God actually do and practice, not admire, study, or debate.\(^6\)

Two distinct movements of spiritual disciplines are the via negativa and the via postiva.\(^7\) The practices of solitude and silence, in this particular research study, are examples of the via negative ascetical disciplines, or life-giving ways of self-denial and abstinence that help practitioners let go and become free from outer and interior noise. Centering prayer, on the other hand, is an example of the via postiva ascetical discipline that helps cultivate and deepen the practitioner’s desire to abide and stay in and with God.

However, without the regular practices of solitude and silence to clear the noises, it is very difficult to practice in centering prayer. Hence, to combat screen (smartphone,  

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\(^2\) Ibid.  
\(^3\) Ibid.  
\(^4\) Ibid.  
\(^5\) Foster, *Celebration of Discipline.*  
\(^6\) Ibid.  
\(^7\) Ibid.
iPad, laptop, TV) addiction, Foster proposes to turn off and fast from all technological devices for thirty minutes each morning, then practice stillness by reciting Psalm 139:23-24, Jesus’ prayer, or the Lord’s prayer. The idea is to establish a rhythm everyday to spend quiet time alone with God. It can be done over coffee or while taking a walk. After a year of practice, practitioners can increase the session from thirty minutes to one hour, then expand it to one full day every quarter. It is a good life-giving ascetical practice proposed by Foster.

The *Life With God* study on overcoming smartphone addiction by establishing rhythms of solitude, silence, and centering prayer considered Foster’s approach in fasting from technology, but did not incorporate it. *Life With God* did not request participants to turn off their phones for thirty minutes right away. In the initial stage, participants were asked to become aware of the moment when their hand reached out for their phone, and take note of their underlying desires within. At that particular instance, they were encouraged to pause, close their eyes, take some deep breaths slowly, then call on the name of the Lord and become aware of his presence at that time in that place while still might have their phone in hands. Participants may call out a different name of the Lord each time, as their heart leads. This approach intended to make use of distorted habits and rhythms as a catalyst of establishing sacred rhythms, breathing God into their lives, so participants might bring themselves to a greater consciousness of God as frequently as they check their phone throughout the day. That was the first stage: awakening.

When participants had greater consciousness of God, they were invited to move to the second stage: beholding. This is, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord as he gazes at his beloved. Participants were encouraged to practice finding the presence of God in all
things throughout the day. They can still find God in every news and person they encounter via the smartphone. Yet, they are also invited to move their eyes outward and upward away from their phone. The goal was to let beholders see the invisible intrinsic value of all God’s creation. It is also a discipline of growing their faith, discernment, and understanding in God.

The third stage, known as centering, was to sit with God like Mary, who gave undivided attention to Jesus, when she welcomed him into her home. At that stage participants would spend time learning and practicing centering prayer – that is, to use sacred word, sacred breath, sacred glance, or sacred nothingness to help let go of any distracting thoughts, in order to bring attention to focus and center on God.

Centering prayer can take place in ten minutes, then gradually increased to fifteen minutes, half an hour or more. For smartphone users, there is a rather convenient app on Centering Prayer designed by Contemplative Outreach that can also help keep track of the time while putting all notifications on mute. Hence, technology can have a place in enhancing spiritual discipline if it is employed with the intention to serve God. While Nouwen promoted the idea of a “portable cell” carrying the presence of God wherever one went, not necessarily secluding to a distraction free environment, smartphones can also serve as a “portable cell” assisting the people of God to offer hospitality to God, and others, intentionally. YouVersion, Centering Prayer, Examen Prayer, Sacred Space, Pray As You Go, and Abide are apps conducive to Christian spiritual growth.

In stage four, decluttering, participants were encouraged to continue practicing centering prayer, yet paying attention to any distracted images or thoughts that surfaced during centering prayer. They invited God to examine clutter and let him put it in its
rightful place. He is mighty, good, faithful, and trustworthy. He can set his people free from clutter, anything that hinders one’s journey with him. The goal is not to be free from restraints that seem bothersome, but free to pursue wholeness. Wholeness cannot be found when hindrances get in the way of loving and be loved. Wholeness signifies a deep union with God.

The last stage is enfolding. That is, letting the Spirit lead God’s beloved into his dance. This requires giving consent to God and letting him translate one’s daily longings and prayers of his Kingdom into actions. Day retreats or quarterly retreats are recommended at this stage to review one’s journey in God, and to orient and re-orient priorities in God. It is this stage where one experiences total abandonment or control of the self: “for you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3), or “I no longer live but Christ lives in me” (Gal 3:20).

In fact, these five stages can be perceived as five steps to rest in God. There are not certain timeframes or requirements for any stage that ought to be fulfilled before a person may move from one stage to another. All it takes is a step forward to enter his grace. Everyone is invited to a journeying life with God, and everyone has the freedom to walk at her own pace. Yet, those who are willing to take one step forward to develop a spiritual discipline in their lives are taking a step closer to home. It recognizes that souls are restless until they truly come home. Moreover, it can be an everyday moment-by-moment encounter with the divine: an awakening to the source of love, an experience of beholding the lover, a discipline to center in love, a call to declutter, a gift to be fully enfolded by his love. The study guide *Life With God: 5-steps to rest in God* helped introduce the contemplative spiritual tradition and some key contemplative practices to
the English congregation of Calvary Logos Baptist Church. Forty-five out of sixty regular adult attendants registered for the campaign and picked up a study guide - a relatively good response rate. An average of thirty people stayed in church to join the weekly Sunday discussion group after worship to learn and discuss the materials for seven weeks, which was unprecedented. Four leaders were trained to lead spiritual exercises in their respective support groups and experienced holding the group in silence and listening to the Spirit for the very first time. It was revolutionary in the sense that they were more used to leading Bible studies and topical studies—programs that they could control. Yet, all four leaders expressed they had good experiences leading the groups and supporting one another on the journey.

The *Life With God* campaign was very well received in general. Knowing the majority of congregants had no prior background, history, or understanding of the contemplative tradition and its practices, I initially was quite concerned and worried about whether I even had knowledge to answer everyone’s questions. Gratefully God had prepared the hearts of his people. Many participants expressed they were fed up with fast-paced work, family, and ministry, yet helplessly attempted to seek control over their lives with the help of a smartphone—for faster communication and knowledge with the world and connections with people. They were more ready to learn practices that might calm their hearts and quiet their souls.

Though many young families with newborn and toddlers could not follow most of the programs offered through seven intense weeks during Lent, many did pick up the study guide and expressed they would read it and learn it at their own pace. This project recognized that the study guide was the primary tool to communicate, teach, and learn
about the history, tradition, and practices of Christian contemplation. Weekly sermons helped enhance and establish a stronger biblical background and perspectives on mysticism, spiritual disciplines, and union with God. Yet, life with God is not merely an intellectual pursuit. It was highly recommended that participants would practice the disciplines daily, journal, and share their experiences in their families and community groups for greater accountability, prayer support, and encouragement.

If the program would be rerun again, I would propose not to do it in seven weeks, but seven months or even a full year. It was quite unrealistic to expect participants to overcome control of their smartphones, or establish a daily rhythm to practice centering prayer in seven weeks. My dual role as a researcher of this study and the pastor of my church leading the campaign was at times hard to differentiate. If I were to do it again, I would choose not to lead a campaign but run the study in a focus group instead.

Nevertheless, three primary purposes had been served in the seven-week *Life With God* study. First was raising awareness of the long-term impact of smartphone (or screen) addiction and the underlying causes to Christian smartphone users. Second was to heighten awareness of the active presence of God in the world and in everyday lives, requiring intentional effort to seek, and to abide. Finally, the study introduced spiritual disciplines and practices that may equip the people of God to contemplate God and to rest in his love.

To conclude, I hope the study guide may continue to help other Christian churches, leaders, and congregants, and many generations to come. There will be endless technological advancement and breakthroughs that cause greater distractions and hindrances to people’s walk with God in the days to come. Yet, God’s Word and his love
remain the same: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest!” (Mt 11:28). The incarnated Christ always desires to live with people and dwell in them now, and in eternity. This is life with God.
APPENDIX A

SMARTPHONE HABITS SURVEY


Smartphone Habits Survey

*Hi friends, I am doing a research on smartphone habits. If you have a personal smartphone, please help fill out a simple survey that requires about 5 minutes of your time. Thank you! God bless.*

*Required*

1. How many years have you been using a smartphone? *
   
   Mark only one per row.

   □ under 2 years
   □ 3-5 years
   □ 6-9 years
   □ over 10 years

2. What are the activities you use the smartphone for? *

   Mark only one per row.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Check emails &amp; messages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check weather &amp; news</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check sport scores</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banking (checking balance, depositing cheques, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play games</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping &amp; purchasing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read books, blogs, literatures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networking (Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, LinkedIn, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take photos and share photos</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make voice/video calls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access and transfer files and documents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take notes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor personal health progress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find locations, restaurants, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Watch movies & dramas
Listen to music
Book flights and hotels
Calendar
Making payment, transferring money

3. Please name 3 Apps you visit most frequently on any regular day: *

____________________________________________

4. What are your smartphone usage habits? *
   Mark only one per row.

   I carry my phone with me wherever I go.  
   I turn on my phone at all time unless turning it off is a must.  
   I sleep with my phone within arm's reach.  
   When I wake up in the middle of the night, I will reach for my phone to check messages.  
   I would panic or feel anxious if I lost my phone.  
   I feel I use my phone longer than I had intended.  
   I am afraid I miss out something important when I do not have my phone with me.  
   I feel I hear my phone vibrating even when it is not.  
   When I am eating, I put my phone out on the dining table.  
   When I am waiting in line for something, I usually pull out my phone to check messages, or read.  
   I greet my phone first in the morning before I greet anyone.  
   I must check my phone one last time before I go to bed.
5. Do you have the habit of using smartphone to enhance your spiritual growth? *  
*Mark only one per row.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read Scripture.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to sermon podcasts.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow a devotional plan.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use certain apps to help you quiet down.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use certain apps to guide you through reflection and prayer time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read spiritual books and materials online.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set timer to practice certain spiritual disciplines.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing your prayer needs with others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praying with another through smartphone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. What are the spiritual disciplines do you practice regularly? (if any)

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

_____________________________________________________________________

7. How many times in a typical hour do you check your smartphone for notifications? *  
*Mark only one.*

- 0-3 times per hour
- 4-6 times per hour
- 7-9 times per hour
- 10+ times per hour
- Other: __________________________
8. How many hours in a typical day do you spend on smartphone? *  
   Mark only one.
   □ Less than 1 hour
   □ 1-3 hours
   □ 4-6 hours
   □ 7-9 hours
   □ 10+ hours
   Other: ________________________________

9. Have you tried to use any App to monitor your smartphone usage? *  
   Mark only one.
   □ Yes
   □ No

10. Would you consider yourself addicted to your smartphone? *  
   Mark only one.
   □ Yes
   □ No
   □ Maybe

11. What is the minimum age you believe a child can have a personal smartphone? *  
   Please be specific.
   ________________________________

12. Suggestions about ways to prevent smartphone addiction (if any)
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
Demographics
Please provide some general demographic data for research purpose.

13. Gender*
   *Mark only one*
   
   ☐ Male
   ☐ Female

14. Age Range*
   *Mark only one*
   
   ☐ Under 12
   ☐ 13-17
   ☐ 18-22
   ☐ 23-29
   ☐ 30-39
   ☐ 40-49
   ☐ 50-59
   ☐ 60+

15. Present Primary Occupation*
   *Mark only one*
   
   ☐ Student
   ☐ Self-employed
   ☐ Full-time employee
   ☐ Homemaker/Temporarily on leave
   ☐ Retired
   ☐ Other: _______________________________

16. Ethnic Origin*
   
   _______________________________

17. Marital Status*
   *Mark only one*
   
   ☐ Single
   ☐ Married
18. Age of your children (if applicable)  
*Check all that apply.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>18 and above</th>
<th>13-17</th>
<th>6-12</th>
<th>Under 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19. Today’s Date*

Example: December 15, 2012

This form can be found at: https://forms.gle/4mffk8yrBFgjGzKo7
APPENDIX B

SURVEY RESULTS – AGE

Survey on smartphone habits was conducted in the English congregation of Calvary Logos Baptist Church in Scarborough, Ontario, in July 2018. Fifty-five participants involved in the survey. This is the age distribution of the survey participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13-17</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-22</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-29</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C

SURVEY RESULTS – SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Survey findings of spiritual habits using the smartphone device conducted in the English congregation of Calvary Logos Baptist Church in Scarborough, Ontario, in July 2018. Fifty-five participants involved in the survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Reading Scriptures</td>
<td>23 (41.8%)</td>
<td>26 (47%)</td>
<td>4 (7.2%)</td>
<td>2 (3.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Listening to sermons</td>
<td>4 (7.2%)</td>
<td>19 (34.5%)</td>
<td>15 (27%)</td>
<td>17 (30.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Devotional plans</td>
<td>11 (20%)</td>
<td>10 (18.1%)</td>
<td>25 (45.4%)</td>
<td>9 (16.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Quiet down</td>
<td>6 (10.9%)</td>
<td>16 (29%)</td>
<td>12 (21.8%)</td>
<td>21 (38.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Reflection &amp; Prayer</td>
<td>4 (7.2%)</td>
<td>12 (21.8%)</td>
<td>20 (36.4%)</td>
<td>19 (34.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Reading books &amp; articles</td>
<td>7 (12.7%)</td>
<td>23 (41.8%)</td>
<td>18 (32.7%)</td>
<td>7 (12.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Set timer for disciplines</td>
<td>2 (3.6%)</td>
<td>11 (20%)</td>
<td>14 (25.5%)</td>
<td>28 (50.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Share prayer needs</td>
<td>15 (27%)</td>
<td>20 (36.4%)</td>
<td>10 (18.1%)</td>
<td>10 (18.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Praying with another</td>
<td>4 (7.2%)</td>
<td>17 (30.9%)</td>
<td>18 (32.7%)</td>
<td>16 (29%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D

LIFE WITH GOD

Description

Welcome to the registration of Life With God: 5 Steps to Rest in God!

- This study will be conducted between March 3 and April 22, 2019, during the Season of Lent.
- This study will take us onto an interior journey to shape and develop a spiritual habit known as Centering Prayer that helps us center and rest in God in the midst of our hectic and distracted lives.

Please sign up below and let us know how you can participate. God bless.

First Name:

Last Name:

Email Address:

Phone Number:

I will commit to the 7-week Life With God study in the following capacities (**you can check multiple lines**):

- [ ] I will join the 7-week Sunday Sermon series on Life With God in the church
- [ ] I will learn from the Study Guide and to practice the suggested Daily Prayer Exercises
- [ ] I will join the Sunday Discussion Group held on Sunday at 11:15 AM after the Worship Service for 7 weeks
- [ ] I will join the LWG Group in Scarborough held at church every Thursday at 8pm for 7 weeks
- [ ] I will join the LWG Group in Markham held at a home setting every Thursday at 8pm for 7 weeks
- [ ] I will find an accountability partner to pray and support me through the process
- [ ] I need help in finding an accountability partner to journey with me

If you would like to remember your commitment, please try to take a screenshot right now. Otherwise, you can send in a request via email. Thank you! God bless.

The above form can be found at: bit.ly/LWG2019

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Hello,
I am Christina Ng. I am doing a pilot study on “Overcoming Smartphone Addiction by Establishing Rhythms of Solitude, Silence and Centering Prayer.” I will be delighted to share this project with you in details.
If you are of age 18 and up, you are invited to this study. You will be asked to join one of the Life With God (LWG) Groups in Scarborough or in Markham and to go through a Study Guide in the next seven weeks.
You can ask questions about the study at any time. Also, if you decide you don’t want to finish, you can stop whenever you want. This study is not about how much you can do or accomplish; it is about learning, growing and journeying together.
If you happen to be addicted to the smartphone, this study might make you feel a bit of discomfort or anxious at times. However, I can promise you that this study is not a smartphone banning campaign! You will not be asked to turn off your smartphone unless you personally desire and choose to do so. Moreover, this Study is basically using smartphone habit as one example among many others; the primary purpose and goal is to help you establish better spiritual habits and rhythms in life!

**Hence, whether you are addicted to the smartphone or not, the benefits of participating in this study is that you will be able to have a better control of your life, an heightened awareness of God’s active presence and a deepening connection with your inner and outer world.**

During this study, you will be asked to share your experience in your group on a weekly basis for greater accountability and support. This is no difference from any support group you attended in the past. Your group leaders are committed to listen attentively and uphold confidentiality. At the very last session of the study you will be asked to complete a short online survey and submit it anonymously.

If you have any question, please reach out to me (416) 712-6127 or christina.ng@calvarylogos.ca at any time.

Signing your name at the bottom of this form means that you have read or listened to what it says and you understand it. Signing this form also means that you agree to participate in this study and your questions have been answered. You will be given a copy of this form after you have signed it.

___________________________________________  __________________________________________
Signature of Participant  Signature of Leader

___________________________________________  __________________________________________
Typed/printed Name  Typed/printed Name

____________________  ____________________
Date  Date
Life With God: Assessment & Feedback

Hi,

You received this online survey because you have consented to participate in the research: Overcoming Smartphone Addiction by Establishing Rhythms of Solitude, Silence, and Centering Prayer.

In this survey you will not be asked to disclose your name, gender or any contact information. It will be completed and submitted anonymously. Your honest assessment and response are much appreciated. There will also be space provided at the very end for additional comments, recommendations and feedback related to this specific research or the campaign.

Please kindly complete and submit it before May 8, 2019. Thank you once again!

Grace and peace,
Christina Ng

* Required

1. 1. Through this Life With God campaign, have you been able to...? *
Mark only one oval per row.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definitely yes</th>
<th>Somewhat yes</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Do not apply</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>become increasingly more aware of your daily distracted habits and/or addictions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>begin to address some of the key distracted habits and/or addictions</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>overcome smartphone addiction or take better control of the smartphone intentionally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make room for solitude and silence in daily life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practice the more contemplative form of prayers like breath prayers or centering prayers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience better rhythms in life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience greater peace and quietness of the heart</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>encounter and experience greater presence of the Lord</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>find your soul more rested in God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. 2. Based on your commitment in the campaign, how would you rate the helpfulness of the following activities in learning the spiritual practices? *
Mark only one oval per row.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extremely helpful</th>
<th>Very helpful</th>
<th>Helpful</th>
<th>Not helpful</th>
<th>Do not apply</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Worship (sermons, songs, corporate prayers, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Discussion (a platform to ask questions and listen to each other's response)</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Guide (learning from the guide and practicing the prayer exercises)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>LWG Support Group (practicing the exercises together and journeying with group members)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accountability partner (sharing, praying and supporting by a partner intentionally)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serving as a LWG Leader</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. During the Life With God campaign, how have you been experiencing the following symptoms of smartphone addiction?

*Mark only one oval per row.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Digital eye strain - eye discomfort, fatigue or even in pain after viewing 2 hours or more</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neck problem - also known as &quot;text neck&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sleep disturbances - waking up in the middle of the night feeling the urge to check the phone</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Spending more time on the phone than you plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Read messages when you are driving or stopping at the traffic lights</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting the phone out on your work desk or dining table</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the smartphone to alter your mood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of missing out (FOMO) - constantly checking out for updates, afraid to miss messages and calls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>No-mobile-phone-phobia (NOMOPHOBIA) - cannot live without it, anxious when the phone is left home or out of reach</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phantom vibration syndrome - hearing or sensing its vibration even though when there is none</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

4. 4. Which suggested prayer exercise(s) from the Study Guide did you find helpful that you intend to establish as your spiritual rhythm?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

5. 5. If you can recall an experience in overcoming smartphone (or screen) addiction by the practices of solitude, silence, and centering prayer, please describe and share what that experience was like.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
6. How have you been experiencing the following signs as the result of practicing Centering Prayer?
*Mark only one oval per row.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Definitely yes</th>
<th>Somewhat yes</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Do not apply</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I give consent to God to act in me and through me.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I am more aware of God's presence in all things.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I receive and offer the gift of simplicity to myself and others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I become more gentle and humble.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am more open to let go and let God.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I can rest in God's love.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I let God embrace me and my pain.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I put my prayer forward into action.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

7. In your own words, please describe what you have gained most from the Life With God campaign.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

8. Additional comments, recommendations and feedback related to this specific research or campaign

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

The above form can be found at: https://forms.gle/JadMFJgDL4R3ZMxN8
HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

This Study Guide is designed to help you establish healthy spiritual habits and rhythms that may heighten your awareness of God’s active presence in everyday lives.

It attempts to engage your mind, heart, will, and body. There will be time of learning the materials, practicing the disciplines, journaling the experience, and traveling with like-minded people on a weekly basis for 7 intense weeks. The requirements are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 mins.</td>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td>Reading the weekly material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 mins.</td>
<td>Monday-Friday</td>
<td>Practicing the prayer exercises daily and frequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 mins.</td>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>Journaling the prayer experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 hrs.</td>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>Traveling with companions in LWG group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

This study initially was birthed from my personal desire to combat smartphone (or, screen) addiction. Smartphone has penetrated so much into my everyday life that it has become a faithful companion on my journey. Those who have a smartphone would understand what I mean. Unfortunately, according to many scholarly research studies, smartphone is quietly altering our neurodevelopment; impacting our psychological, social, relational and even spiritual health. The problem however lies not in the smartphone device per se nor even the many apps developed, but our untamed habits that are momentarily trying to satisfy our unquenchable desires and thirsts to stay connected, informed and entertained. This leads to a quest of ancient wisdom in understanding sins, addictions, and spiritual disciplines.

Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.
Jeremiah 6:16

Life With God is not merely a self-reflection study guide. It is a workbook that helps facilitate the people of God to make room for God each day. It attempts to draw a generation of authentic followers of Christ into a deeper interior journey with God. As they make intentional practices to filter all other noises through the discipline of solitude, silence and centering prayer, they may find rest in God’s love.
HABITS

When was the last time you reviewed and took a closer look at your own habits?

Everyday our lives are structured by hundreds of habits. Habit, by definition, is a routine of behaviour that tends to repeat regularly and subconsciously. Habitual behaviours, whether good or bad, are formed based on repetitions and rewards. Brushing our teeth, washing our face, and combing our hair are habits that run subconsciously every morning before our mind fully awakes. Daily flossing, exercising or eating healthy, for example, actually may require greater intentional efforts to make them into our daily routines. Then there are bad habits like procrastination, snacking or binge watching that are very difficult to shake it off once it becomes a habit.

Addiction, on the other hand, is an unhealthy habit that cannot be easily stopped despite adverse consequences to self, family or others. A noticeable difference between a bad habit and an addiction is the amount of effort and time required to change the behaviour. Some examples of addiction include: food, body image, work, sex, drug, alcohol, gambling, shopping, hoarding, shoplifting, video gaming, Internet, and the smartphone. Due to the physical and psychological withdrawal symptoms, addiction might require an integrated treatment plan that includes counselling and a good support network.

Can you name a few good habits, bad habits or even addictions you have right now? What can you learn from them that reflect your beliefs, values, desires, or longings? Let us spend some time before the Lord prayerfully to reflect on our habits.
Spaces are provided in the next page for you to jot down your reflection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good habits</th>
<th>What are your beliefs, values and/or longings?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bad habits</th>
<th>What are your beliefs, values and/or longings?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addictions</th>
<th>What are your beliefs, values and/or longings?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
SMARTPHONE HABITS

If you are a smartphone user, do you have good smartphone habits? How frequently do you check for messages? If you would like to know exactly how many times you unlock your phone, how many hours you spend on your phone each day and what programs you access a lot, you may want to install a monitoring app QUALITY TIME (Android) or MOMENT (iPhone) to help you keep track your daily usage.

How would you feel about turning off your phone for a day or even a week? Can you do it? What would be your potential withdrawal symptoms? Statistics Canada’s General Social Survey in 2016 reported that of 19,000 Canadians aged 15 and over, i.e., 75% of the population, three out of four Canadians actually owned a smartphone; ninety percent (90%) of these Canadians owned two or more digital devices and 80% three or more in 2016. An online poll conducted by Harris/Decima in 2014 showed that Canadians checked their smartphones every 10 minutes, an average of 6 times per hour,¹ and speculated they pulled out over 100 times a day to check for messages and notifications.² “Phantom vibration syndrome” describes the phenomenon that people actually feel the vibration or ringing of their phones when they are actually not.³ And “nomophobia” which stands for “no-mobile-phone-phobia” describes the irrational fear

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² Ibid.

that people have when they forget to carry their phone to work, or when it is out of reach. It can instantly trigger a wide range of emotions like fear, worry, anxiety, anger, frustration, despair, and physical distress.\textsuperscript{4}

Dr. David Greenfield, director of the Center for Internet and Technology Addiction, states that \textit{smartphone dependency is a problem when people use it to regularly alter their mood.\textsuperscript{5}} \textit{It is not about the actual time spent online using the phone that causes problem, but rather how the time spent impact their lives.\textsuperscript{6}} The truth about smartphone addiction is that people are no more addicted to their phone than drug addicts are addicted to the needle.\textsuperscript{7} The needle is just a delivery method. \textit{People are addicted not to the smartphone per se but what the smartphone offers instantly: information, knowledge, entertainment, and personal connections.} What causes people constantly desiring to know more and faster, to be entertained and connected? FOMO (fear of missing out) is a form of anxiety that smartphone users easily develop. That is how we get hooked to certain online platforms.

Hence, this study is not about banning the smartphone. Contrarily, it is about having a sincere dialogue with our smartphone (or any device with a screen) to find out


\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.

what apps, sites, platforms, programs or channels that we spend most time with. What do they tell us about our inner desires and longings? What are the untamed behaviours or habits?

Be honest with yourself. Besides school or work-related usage, can you name the top three apps/websites/platforms you go to most frequently or spend the most time with, and why?

1. I go to ___________________________ because ___________________________
   ______________________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________________

2. I go to ___________________________ because ___________________________
   ______________________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________________

3. I go to ___________________________ because ___________________________
   ______________________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________________

   Lord, I long for _________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________________
SPIRITUAL HABITS

*Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.*

*For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.*

*(1 Tim 4:7-8)*

TRAIN YOURSELF TO BE GODLY. What does this mean to you? What is being “godly” like? And how do you “train” yourselves to be godly? While many contemporary Christians believe that being godly is a goal too high to attain or that it can be achieved supernaturally only, our ancient spiritual fathers and mothers think otherwise. Like athletes who engage in strict diet and physical training to build up their bodies, spiritual beings must also engage in necessary trainings of the soul to pursue godliness.

Desert spirituality understands that our soul is not a distinct, completely free entity; rather, it is influenced by many *disordered impulses* and *habits* known as “the passions.” These *passions* are habitual thoughts, feelings, desires, attitudes and actions that are constantly distracting us from God and his love. They are no different from *addiction in the contemporary sense*. Loneliness, boredom, tiredness, complacency, greed, pride, lust, anger, judging, and excessive talking are just some of the examples of the deep-rooted causes. Passions are hard to get rid of.

Desert dwellers believe that the soul requires training. *Asceticism* (or spiritual disciplines) came from the Greek word *ascesis*, i.e., training or exercise. Ascetic practices like silence, solitude, fasting, prayer and meditation help us make room from
our busy lives to discern the interior journey of the heart, to explore our passions, and to get in touch with our true selves.

Yet, the Eastern Christian spiritual texts Philokalia stated that: “we cannot control whether passions are going to harass or attack our soul, but we can prevent impassioned thoughts from lingering within us and arousing the passions to action” and “we can redirect their energy from evil to good.”

Ancient Christians entered into the desert to listen to the most neglected voice, but the desert is primarily an inner reality rather than a physical location. They formed monastic communities for the people of God to listen to the divine clearly, to share spiritual wisdom, to serve and to practice love. The ultimate goal to practice ascesis is not to practice spiritual disciplines per se but by engaging spiritual disciplines through an interior journey to learn to love one another as how God loves.

Jesus himself models such disciplines. Jesus lives in a community with his disciples but often withdraws privately to a solitary place to pray (Mt 4:12, 12:15, 14:13; Mk 1:35; Lk 4:42, 5:16; Jn 6:15). Even before the beginning of his public ministry, he was led by the Spirit to withdraw to the wilderness; after he fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry and was tested by the devil. The devil presented to him three worldly passions: to be relevant (turning the stones into bread), to be recognized (jumping off from the highest temple and be saved), and to be rich (bowing down to

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9 Ibid., 22.
Satan for the splendor of the kingdoms of the world); Jesus was tempted but he did not sin. Instead, he suggested three spiritual habits to overcome passions: knowing God through meditating Scriptures, trusting God through prayer, and honoring God above all else through worship.

Moreover, disciples of Christ of the early churches continued to walk with Jesus as they regularly devoted themselves to the following spiritual disciplines: to learn from the apostle’s teaching (Acts 2:42, 4:2, 5:25, 15:1), to fellowship with one another, to eat and break bread together (Acts 2:42), to praise God (Acts 11:18, 21:20), to pray unceasingly (Acts 1:14, 1:24, 4:24, 6:6, 7:59, 8:15, 9:40, 12:5,12; and fixed-hours prayer, Acts 3:1, 10:9), to fast (Acts 13:3, 14:23), to witness (Acts 2:23, 3:15, 5:32, 10:39, 22:15, 28:23) and to help those in need (Acts 4:32, 6:1, 9:36, 10:4, 31). These were the rhythms and the practices they intentionally embraced, engaged and experienced in their everyday lives to show their desires to be with Jesus and to love as how he loves.

What about you? What kind of spiritual practices and rhythms have you established in your personal and family life? How have you been experiencing those practices so far? Let’s spend a moment to reflect on each of those practices you have embraced and your experiences of each. Share your feelings with Jesus.
There are no standard spiritual practices that we should do, but ancient spiritual masters would prescribe their apprentices certain spiritual practices to deal with.
particular passions. Dallas Willard, one of the most brilliant Christian thinkers and scholars in the 21st century, highlighted the practices of solitude and silence this way:

Indeed, solitude and silence are powerful means to grace. Bible study, prayer and church attendance, among the most commonly prescribed activities in Christian circles, generally have little effect for soul transformation, as is obvious to any observer. If all the people doing them were transformed to health and righteousness by it, the world would be vastly changed. Their failure to bring about the change is precisely because the body and soul are so exhausted, fragmented and conflicted that the prescribed activities cannot be appropriately engaged, and by and large degenerate into legalistic and ineffectual rituals. Lengthy solitude and silence, including rest, can make them very powerful...He called us to ‘be still, and know.’

Willard is not downplaying Christian activities like Bible study, prayer or church attendance, but precisely pinpointing the sad and shocking reality that how those activities have little effect on transformation of our souls due to exhaustion of our bodies. Especially in today’s fast-paced culture, learning to rekindle the ancient practices of solitude, silence and rest to reconnect with God and our true self is crucial.

Moreover, pertaining to the digital age, Adele Ahlberg Calhoun in her book *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* added that:

The technological age, with its peculiar temptations and desires, is opening paths into disciplines like slowing, centering prayer and unplugging. Furthermore, classical disciplines like solitude, silence, rest, spiritual direction and retreat are resurging as people desperately seek a quiet, still center in the midst of the whirlwind.”

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You might think these practices may not totally fit your personality. However, they are exactly the types of spiritual practices and training we all need, that help us change our distorted desires and habits, so our hearts may freely follow God and his will.

**Protestants, especially the evangelicals, have the tendency to downplay the contemplative spiritual tradition of our Christian heritage.**

Spiritual disciplines are *means of grace.* Calhoun describes them as “ways we give our bodies to unhurried rhythms of grace.”\(^12\) We are not under the law, but under grace. The Spirit of God is still the active agent in the process of spiritual transformation. We are relying on his grace, but at the same time making the effort actively training our body and soul to cooperate with the Spirit. The end goal is not to be perfect in certain spiritual disciplines, but to be like Christ being one with the Father and the Spirit.

This study guide has identified *solitude,* *silence* and *centering prayer* as key spiritual practices that are foundational to any other spiritual practices. These contemplative practices will heighten our awareness of the active presence of God and deepen our journey with God. The primary goal is not so much on fixing a behavioural problem, but to help us establish life-giving spiritual habits and rhythms in our daily lives that ultimately shape and transform our characters and spiritual DNA for the glory of God.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 20.
O God, we thank you for your indwelling Spirit.
We ask that by your grace we may yield our hearts and minds to you,
so that moment by moment we may respond to your promptings,
and be conformed to your will in all of our ways,
for your glory,
Amen.
SESSION 1. AWAKENING

On August 1, 2018, the very first day of my Sabbatical journey, my brother informed me the sudden death of our uncle in Toronto. His body was found after many days of his passing. For many days I found it hard to accept the fact that he was physically gone. Later I visited the McDonald across his apartment and imagined where he would usually sit, have his coffee and read his newspaper. I regretted that I did not have the habit of spending quality time with him and paying attention to his wellbeing. Tragic incident like this caused me to re-evaluate my priority in life, especially my habits in dealing with close family and relatives. I took them for granted and neglected them the most. It awakened me to establish better habits and rhythms that include visiting them and checking on them more regularly and frequently.
The second awakening came from my smartphone habit. During my three-months break from work, I actually spent long hours at home writing my dissertation and this study guide. I could have put away and turned off my phone completely, but I did not. I was aware I still checked my phone momentarily. Not because I adored my phone but I really missed the connection with the people of my community. I felt I still long to be updated how they are doing. That led me to my second awakening: What about my connection with God? What might help my soul to be awakened to the love of God unceasingly?

Oswald Chambers says, “Prayer is not a normal part of the life of the natural man.” In fact, “We hear it said that a person’s life will suffer if he doesn’t pray, but I question that. What will suffer is the life of the Son of God in him, which is nourished not by food, but by prayer.” What he means is that we nourish the life of God in us through prayer, but prayer does not come naturally. Prayer is not getting the things we want. Prayer is getting to know God himself. And it comes from a discipline.

Spiritual disciplines like silence, solitude and centering prayer are the means, or the ways, to orient our life to cultivate a deeper love with Jesus. The end goal is to become one with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Allowing our soul to be nourished requires much love, intentionality and cooperation with the Spirit.

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13 Oswald Chambers, My Utmost For His Highest, accessed August 28, 2018, https://utmost.org/

14 Ibid.
Robert M. Mulholland reminded us that “awakening” is an encounter with the living God and also an encounter with our true self.\textsuperscript{15} It is coming to see something of ourselves as we are and coming to see something of God as God is.\textsuperscript{16} This experience can be gradual or radical. It can be through everyday events or an extraordinary experience. An example from Isaiah: “I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up...Woe to me! I am a man of unclean lips” (Is 6:1-5). Or when Peter went fishing with other disciples, he was told by a man on the shore to throw the net down at the right side of his boat. Miraculously he had caught many large fish, 153 in total; the disciple that Jesus loves recognized the man immediately, “It is the Lord!” (Jn 21:7) Two basic emotions go with awakening: it is both a comfort and a threat.\textsuperscript{17} It is a comfort because there is an awareness of deeper realities of who God is and who we are. It is a threat because in the awakening we recognize what we are not and what we ought to be and that God is someone far greater than what we thought.

Spiritual awakening is the work of the Holy Spirit that requires the grace of God. But it is granted to those who desire his presence. While Moses was tending a flock of his father-in-law, he saw a burning bush and responded immediately by going over to see. The Lord called him from within the bush saying, “Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5). The Lord


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 82.
does not remain within the bush. The Lord is at the place where we give attention to him. At the place where we call on the name of the Lord, there is the holy ground.

The Lord is not merely above you, before you, behind you, on your left or on your right, but he is also in your body, heart and soul! Are you ready to be awakened to that reality? Let’s try the following practices this week.

**Practice**

_Awake, awake, Zion,_  
_clothe yourself with strength!_  
_Put on your garments of splendor,_  
_Jerusalem, the holy city._  
_The uncircumcised and defiled will not enter you again._

*Isaiah 52:1*

Let your soul rise and awaken to Christ’s redeeming love! Put on Christ always.

Every morning as you dress yourself, be mindful to put on Christ who is in you and with you always. But if the time of dressing is challenging to you, consider other habits like brushing your teeth, washing your face, or checking out your face in the mirror.

Discern which habit might help you awaken to put on Christ every morning.

**While starting a new habit might be difficult, building a new habit around established ones might be easier.** This action or mindset requires much love, and intentionality, and cooperation of the Spirit.
Awake, awake, _____________ (insert your name),
clothe yourself with strength!
Put on your garments of splendour,
the Church, God’s beloved!

During the day every time when you are reaching for the phone
to check messages not because of ringing or vibrating, let your heart
and soul be first drawn to God by pausing to say a short breath prayer.

And if you are a parent with a newborn child, you may want
to try practicing breath prayer every time as you are feeding or
cuddling your baby. As much as the baby needs to be nourished,
parents needs extra portion of grace and nourishment from the Lord. Be mindful that
you are caring for the child on behalf of God who loves and provides for all of you.

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**Breath prayer**

Call upon the name “Jesus” repeatedly and slowly for 1-2 minutes,
as you pay attention to your breathing. Be mindful that Christ is in you. Let
him interrupt your habitual desire and fill you with his holy presence and
peace. Traditionally the breath prayer is also called Jesus prayer.

You can also use any word as the Spirit leads. For example, simple
words like “love,” “peace,” “joy,” “shepherd,” “lord” that describes who
Jesus is.

This practice helps us shift our focus to the one who truly satisfies
us. We can practice this breath prayer at any time, especially when we feel
stressed or anxious. It helps us calm our heart and anchor in God’s love.

Repeat this prayer exercise as frequently as you may throughout the
day. Let your awareness of his active presence, much like our breathing,
be the sustenance of our journey.
Breath prayer is a simple prayer that helps us engage our spirit through our breath. “Breath” is actually the first and last word when we enter and leave the world. The goal of this prayer practice is to awaken our soul to the spiritual reality of our tender relationship with God. The purpose at this stage is not to engage in long, wordy prayer. In fact, focus less on perfecting the prayer, i.e., what to say and what not to say, but more on staying in his loving presence, deepening your friendship with Jesus beyond words, within you.

Moreover, God is not against us, our daily work or even our technology. He is the Lord of all creation. Everything belongs to him. This small prayer practice helps us open our heart to acknowledge him, to honor him, to welcome him and to receive him. Though we may switch back to our working or browsing mode after the prayer, we have now been energized, strengthened and renewed trusting that God’s presence and grace stay with us.

Journal

Reflect on your prayer experiences after a week of the above practices:
❖ How do you feel or experience the breath prayer?
❖ Which particular word(s) help you the most to be attentive to his presence?
❖ What do you learn about God, or yourself?

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SESSION II. BEHOLDING

When was the last time you locked your eyes with another? What was that experience like? Our eyes tell a story. Whether we are joyful or sorrowful, stressed or relaxed, confident or frightened, our eyes tell it all. Yet, we spend far more time locking our eyes on the screen than on any faces on the earth, or on God. If this is true, we need to ask ourselves why.

Since the fall of humanity, the trust between humans and human with God has been compromised. Robert M. Mulholland describes the restoration stage of “illumination” in ancient spirituality as “the experience of a radical shift of our being, a profound transformation, and a total consecration to God in love.”

The basic shift is from seeing God as “out there” to an experience of God present deep within our soul. As long as we perceive God as “out there” and separated from us, we feel anxious consciously attempting to retain the control of our relationship with God. But as we

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18 Robert M. Mulholland, Invitation To A Journey, 84.
truly know God who is actively redeeming the world through Christ in us, we become seeing ourselves, our relationship with God and with everything else quite differently. In this stage, “**prayers flow from our lives as we experience God in all things.**”19 This could be Paul’s understanding of unceasing prayer: “a life that is increasingly attuned to God in all things – not in a privatized withdrawal from the world, but in the midst of the hustle and bustle, busyness and pain, hurt and brokenness of our life and the world around us.”20 Hence, illumination is also characterized by increasing social concern, not out of obligation but out of a deep sense of God’s love filling our hearts, pouring out for others.21

Jesus is a classic example of a consecrated life deeply rooted in love, illuminated through his actions. His life is characterized by unceasing prayer of praise, adoration, love and grace. By looking at the birds of the air and the wild flowers of the field, with deep gratitude he invites his followers to experience the loving care of the Father (Lk 12:24-27). He is not someone who is so “out there” spiritually that he does not understand or care the misery of the people. Rather, he looks deep into their souls with great compassion. Nathaniel (Jn 1:48), Levi the tax collector (Mk 2:14), the rich young man (Mk 10:21) and many others have been seen, loved and touched by Jesus. Jesus beholds all things and gives glory to God.


20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.
Ignatius of Loyola was one of the many saints who took this practice of “beholding” seriously. He always begins his prayer with a living awareness of God’s loving presence to him. In his *Spiritual Exercises* he invites the retreatants to pause for the time as they pray to the Father; and with understanding raised on high, consider how God our Lord looks upon them (SpirEx, 75). This transitional space, Ignatius tells us, can be brief, but is profoundly relational.\(^{22}\) We simply become aware of being with the God who is gazing at us lovingly, beholding us as we are beholding him.

In fact, the vision of Ignatius goes beyond beholding the Lord or being beheld by him. Ignatian spirituality began with a vision, outlined in the first principle of the *Spiritual Exercises*, that all creation is a gift, coming from God and leading toward God.\(^{23}\) Therefore, “finding God in all things” is a way of listening and discerning the voice of God. We are to bring everything, including all our experiences – good and bad, highs and lows, successes and failures – before God to seek his guidance and wisdom.

Like Paul says, “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). Nothing – not health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure – can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. What we are lacking, however, is slowing down to

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examine, comprehend and understand everything God has made and prepared for the benefits of our soul.

Practice

I went down to the grove of nut trees
to look at the new growth in the valley,
to see if the vines had budded
or the pomegranates were in bloom.
Before I realized it,
my desire set me among the royal chariots of my people.
Come back, come back, O Shulammite;
come back, come back, that we may gaze on you!

Song of Songs 6:11-13

Let us slow down by applying our senses to appreciate God who makes all things beautiful uniquely reflecting his glory. We are to use all our senses – through our eyes, ears, nose, hands and mouth – to feel and experience how he blesses humanity!

Let us begin the morning by sensing the refreshing taste of the menthol toothpaste. Not everyone might enjoy the taste of menthol; yet, without it, toothpaste can taste like chalk, glycerin, paraffin, detergent, titanium dioxide and seaweed. Then we can feel the softness of the toothbrush gently scrubbing our teeth, massaging our gums. And for the clothes we choose to wear, pay attention to the colour, the design, the pattern, the textile, the fabric, and the weaving. What does God want to say to us through all these?

You may want to do this fun activity as a family. Training the young to slow down, to pay attention to details and to listen to the voice of God. God is always
speaking. You just need to tune in. The earth and everything in it belong to God, full of his magnificent glory.

When you are on vacation alone, with family, or even just going out for a walk after dinner, try to see the world and everything in God’s light. Do not just capture the beautiful scenery with your camera or your smartphone. Slow down. Be contemplative. Be a part of it. Engage your senses. Discern his presence and his glory in all things. Share your findings with your loved ones, friends and families.

When you are alone at night, schedule 10-15 minutes to review your day. Invite the Spirit of God to journey with you once again to zoom into places where he showed up. Explore those feelings and emotions. Share with him. Let him hold you. Rest in him.

**LWG Group Exercise #1 (20 mins)**

Spend time beholding each other in the Lord. First, the group leader acknowledges each other’s presence and the presence of God in their midst. Then briefly explain to the group that we will pair up (ideally with same gender) to spend 2 minutes to behold each other in silence.

One person will be the beholder. The other will be the one being beheld (the receiver). Both will sit comfortably facing each other. For 2 minutes, the beholder will
use his/her eyes to communicate the love of God with the one who is being beheld as how God gazes at us and blesses us with love. The beholder is God’s agent, instrument of blessings. The one being beheld is the recipient of God’s love. There will be no verbal communication. Become aware of your own feelings.

The leader may use a smartphone to set a timer to beep after 2 minutes so everyone will switch his/her role at the same time. Yet in between please spend one minute to rest your eyes and your brain before switching the role for another 2 minutes. At the end of the session, regroup to share your feelings and to unpack the experience. Do you feel overwhelmed? Do you feel uncomfortable? Do you feel consoling? What do you see?

**LWG Group Exercise #2 (30 mins)**

Divide the group into no more than 3 persons each. First, spend 7 minutes together in silence. Encourage all group members to close their eyes, to recollect and reflect on things or events that stood out in the past week, the highs and/or the lows.

Then in the smaller group each person will take turn to share his/her week within 5 minutes. One person can be the timekeeper. When one person is sharing, all other members listen attentively and silently. **Offer your listening ears to the sharer. Do not interrupt. Do not offer advice or ask question. Just behold that person in the Lord.** When the sharer is done, honour silence for another minute seeking the Lord for any words of comfort or consolation from the Spirit. Then allow another minute or two for the group members to pray for the person who just shared.
Continue this pattern and rhythm until all group members get to share and be encouraged. Let the Spirit of God work in us and through us to offer fellowship to each other. A summary of the format as follows:

7 mins – Honour silence before the Lord; reflect on the highs and lows together but alone
5 mins – One person shares while all others listen
1 mins – Honour silence before the Lord, and listen to the Spirit how the sharer can be prayed for
1 mins – Pray according to what you hear from the Lord

Then repeat the last three steps for each person.

Journal

Reflect on your prayer experiences after a week of beholding practices:
❖ How do you feel or experience these prayer exercises?
❖ Any special meaning or grace to you? Or, any resistance?
❖ How do you feel about others or God gaze at you? Any differences?
SESSION III. CENTERING

During my Sabbatical break, I thought I would have lots of time on a daily basis to practice spiritual disciplines. This was not the case however. The biggest lesson I learned was that each discipline or prayer practice requires intentional effort to make it happen. For the practice of centering prayer, my greatest teacher was a dead spider at the edge of the ceiling in my dining room. I noticed her existence but intentionally told my husband not to remove it. This dead spider is a visible symbol reminding me to “be still” always. It draws me to a quiet, surrendered presence before God.

Thomas Keating, who passed away as I was writing this study guide on October 25, 2018, was the key architect and teacher of the contemporary contemplative prayer movement. I am grateful and indebted to his teaching. Motivated by a strong conviction that Scriptures called people into a personal relationship with God, he revived the contemplative prayer traditions and introduced them to the West. He founded an organization Contemplative Outreach to teach contemporary followers of Christ the centering prayer. **Centering prayer is a simple, effortless prayer that helps us rest in deep communion with God.** Based on the unshakable truth that “God is not just a transcendent truth outside us, but a living reality within us, a mystery, a hidden ground from which everything in life is born, in every moment in time,” **we center ourselves by**
looking into our heart to find his presence. The basic template and guidelines of centering prayer are as follows:

Sacred Word

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.

2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within.

3. When engaged with your thoughts (which include body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections), return every so gently to that sacred word.

4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

Thomas Keating in *Open Mind, Open Heart* also teaches that we may practice other forms of the sacred symbol: sacred breath, sacred glance, or sacred nothingness (no symbol). Yet, the basic template of the above remains the same.

Sacred Breath

In the Hebrew language, the word “spirit” and “breath” is the same: *ruah*. The Holy Spirit animates our life as our breath breathes in us, from the moment of birth until

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25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 23.
the instant of death. Yet, we are usually not aware of the Spirit in us, just as we are usually not aware of our breath. Scripture invites us to greater awareness: “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor 3:16) Practicing sacred breath opens us to greater awareness of the Spirit’s presence and action in us and in all of our lives. Sacred breath takes us out from a thinking mind to engage our feelings. The breath unites the body and the spirit together. The breathing is a physical way of consenting to God, to make us “be” and “rest” in God, in pure awareness of God’s presence. When thoughts and feelings may roam around on the surface of our awareness, return and recognize our effortless breathing again and again. Breathing is a very receptive moment of faith. Faith in the context of contemplation is a gift beyond concepts, images, and thoughts.27

Sacred Glance

In the early years of centering prayer, the term sacred gaze was used for this symbol. But experience showed that the term sacred glance evoked less effort in people drawn to this way of practicing centering prayer.28 Sacred glance involves a visible symbol. However, it should not be an object that required us to study or gaze at.29 It should be introduced silently to help us enter and consent to God and return to it whenever we are distracted by other thoughts.

27 David Frenette, The Path of Centering Prayer, 53.
28 Ibid., 61.
29 Ibid., 60.
Thomas Keating was aware of the theory of learning styles of people. The three key learning styles are auditory, kinaesthetic, and visual. The \textit{sacred word} is often a more natural way of practicing centering prayer for auditory learners who respond better to sound. Hearing the word pray within, then letting it go to yield interior silence.\textsuperscript{30} The \textit{sacred breath} is often a more helpful symbol for kinaesthetic learners who engage better with senses and movement. Noticing the felt sense of the breathing, then letting it go to yield interior stillness.\textsuperscript{31} The \textit{sacred glance} is often a more helpful symbol for visual learners who are drawn by sight. Gently turning to a visible image may help visual learners open into the unseeable mystery of God and then let go of the glance to experience inner spaciousness.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{Sacred Nothingness}

Silence, stillness and spaciousness dance as the Trinity awakens in its nothingness – the source of everything.\textsuperscript{33} In fact, we learned from Jesus’ self-emptying love (\textit{kenosis} in Greek) that God desires to give himself to us beyond any concept, content or even a spiritual experience that we hold dear to. Each symbol can yield its fruits: a fuller relationship with Christ, more inner freedom, and the ability to be of

\textsuperscript{30} David Frenette, \textit{The Path of Centering Prayer}, 63.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 64.
greater service to others.\textsuperscript{34} When practiced the right way, it helps us relate to God during different seasons of the spiritual journey.\textsuperscript{35} Yet, no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Co 2:9). Therefore, his will is to draw us to detach from all sacred symbols so that he himself can be fully and completely known to us. The path of centering prayer is a path “to remain in the darkness of unknowing, where the dualistic way of perceiving, relating, and being is undone in you (us) and you (we) become fully known.”\textsuperscript{36} It is a journey to nothingness. Our call is to give our consent, and to yield completely, to let Christ abide and pray in us, and work through us. In full union we lose the awareness of union itself and become oneness in God. Jesus says, “On that day you will know that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you” (Jn 14:20). Speaking to his disciples about his own parting and the Holy Spirit’s abiding, “that day” is now, in the eternity of the present moment.\textsuperscript{37}

Centering prayer may begin with symbols (i.e. \textit{katapathic}), but often end beyond concepts and symbols (i.e. \textit{apathatic}). The path of centering prayer is to receive the gift of God’s presence and love, i.e., himself. The goal of centering prayer, according to Cynthia Bourgeault\textsuperscript{38}, is:

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} Frenette, \textit{The Path of Centering Prayer}, 72.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 94.

\textsuperscript{38} Cynthia Bourgeault is an Episcopal priest, a writer, a retreat leader, and a core faculty member of The Center For Action and Contemplation located in New Mexico.
to deepen your relationship with God (and at the same time with your own deepest self) in that bandwidth of formless, objectless awareness that is the foundation of nondual consciousness. There you discover that you, God, and the world ‘out there’ are not separate entities, but flow together seamlessly in an unbreakable dynamism of self-giving love, which is the true nature of reality and the ground of everything.\(^{39}\)

This is the oneness that we, as his image-bearers, want to pursue; with one thought and one mind, to reflect his glory and do his will.

The fruits of centering prayer are found in daily life. As you practice the centering prayer, you may experience no differences or signs during your subjective prayer experience. The fruits you may eventually bear is the “attention of the heart” that allows you to be “fully present to God, and at the same time fully present to the situation at hand, giving and taking from the spontaneity of your own authentic, surrendered presence.”\(^{40}\) The results will be aligning your heart to his heart and your will to his will in the long run.

Contemplative prayer like this may be new to you. A major contribution of David Frenette\(^{41}\) is that he distinguishes the final goal of contemplation: union vs. unity. He stresses that contemplation is a lot like dancing.\(^{42}\) A dance has different steps and different movements that bring us into deeper relationship with our partner. In the divine dance, we are drawn into a more subtle relationship with Christ, a relationship


\(^{40}\) Ibid., 39.

\(^{41}\) David Frenette is a disciple of Thomas Keating, the founder of centering prayer.

with oneness, of union beyond duality. The seven deepening movements of the dance with God: preparing, orienting toward the partner, relating, yielding to the partner, handling challenges, uniting with the partner, and expressing the dance in life. The final movement of the divine dance of contemplation is that of living union, oneness, in the ordinary events of human life, but it is about unity, beyond union. Unity is greater than union. Union is oneness. Unity is oneness expressed in diversity. Unity is when the divine and human are not separate, acting together in ordinary acts of faith, hope, and love. Hence, the grand vision of centering prayer is dancing together to embrace and fulfill God’s will on earth as it is in heaven.

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 111.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
37 And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, 38 nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. 39 You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, 40 yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

John 5:37-40

Henri Nouwen, a pastor and prophet in his time, introduced the concept of a “portable cell” to his students, parishioners and readers. 47 Solitude or silence is not confined to a specific time or space, but a “portable cell” in which we carry with us

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wherever we go. From it we speak to those in need and to it we return after our words have borne fruit. It reminds us that silence and solitude is the condition of prayer. We can carry this mindset, posture or attitude with us wherever we go, and pray. Whether we are in the office at work or in a busy marketplace, we can stay still, zone out from noises and distractions, and find God’s presence. Ideally it is to withdraw to a quiet solitary place to first learn and practice solitude, silence, and centering prayer.

Solitude is a time and space we set aside to give God our full and undivided attention. Silence refers to the stillness of our heart: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10). Centering prayer is the prayer of the heart, the prayer of rest. Use a sacred word use to help you focus but the ultimate goal is to release your control to God, completely surrender and rest in his presence and peace. Follow the simple guidelines below:

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.

2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within.

3. When engaged with your thoughts (which include body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections), return every so gently to that sacred word.

4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.  

48 Ibid.

Begin with 10 minutes and keep it consistent. You may increase to 20 minutes gradually. However, it is not so much about the length of the prayer time but establishing a good daily rhythm. Try to practice this daily at a certain time consistently. This is a gift of resting in God’s presence. If you happen to fall into sleep during centering prayer, be gracious to yourselves and honour such rest before him.

Do not keep on switching from word to word. Pick a sacred word that may draw close to God. For example, “Jesus.” Later on, you can also try sacred breath, sacred glance, and sacred nothingness. One day this practice may become an unshakable habit much like your breathing that become a major part of you sustaining you and your whole being.

If you are looking for ways to keep track of your prayer time, you may want to use the Centering Prayer app designed by Contemplative Outreach. It is a free app for both Android and Apple users. The beauty of this app is that you can set your opening prayer, beginning sound, silence duration, ending sound, and closing prayer. And during the duration of your silence all other phone notifications will also be silenced automatically.
LWG Group Exercise:

Centering prayer can be conducted in a group setting. Some people find it easier to practice it in a group setting, then individually. Carve out 20 minutes, uninterrupted time, to stay together in silence. Just draw close to him. This can be conducted in a church, or in a quiet retreat center. It is possible to conduct it in a home setting but try to make sure there will be no children or pets at home during that time; and must turn off any devices that make noise.

Use a sacred word to help you center, and give your consent to Christ. If there are distracted thoughts coming to your mind, gently return to that sacred word. Rest in God’s presence and love.

If you find this exercise very difficult, painful or disturbing emotionally, invite God to embrace you, together with your pain. Name that thing, feeling, or pain. Use it as your sacred word. Let God embrace you. Rest in him.

After 20 minutes, gather the group back and share your experience with centering prayer.

Journal

Reflect on your prayer experiences after a week of centering prayer practices:
❖ How do you feel or experience centering prayer?
❖ Any special meaning or grace to you? Any resistance?
❖ What helps you experience rest in God? How do you feel when you invite God to embrace your pain?

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SESSION IV. DECLUTTERING

Purgation in Christian’s pathway to wholeness is the process of bringing our motives, our behaviours, our attitudes, and our desires into increasing harmony with our growing perception of what Christlikeness is like. It is the process of becoming integrated into the new order of being in Christ.\(^{50}\) It basically refers to the act or the result of purging, purification, or cleansing from sins. It is the renunciation of sins, abandoning values, behaviours and old habits that are contrary to God’s will as revealed in Christ and Scripture.\(^{51}\) The word “decluttering” that begins with the letter “d” is used here to promote similar concept of purgation. Decluttering also gives the idea of getting rid of things or habits that are distorted and disordered. We need the help of the Holy Spirit to sort out our clutters.

John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, announced the message of the kingdom in the wilderness and baptized sinners in Jordan River, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt 3:2). In anticipation of the coming of the Messiah, John urged the Israelites to repent, i.e., to turn away from their sins. When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to the place where he was baptizing, he was furious about their lack of fruit produced in keeping with repentance (Mt 3:8).

\(^{50}\) Mulholland, *Invitation To A Journey*, 82.

\(^{51}\) Ibid.
Pharisees were Jewish religious leaders of their time, yet they were well known in the New Testament because of their self-righteousness, and hypocrisy. Sadducees were a Jewish sect that denied the existence of angels and other spirits, miracles, or resurrection of the body. John forewarned them that they could not enter the kingdom of the Messiah just because they were children of Abraham. Sometimes what needs to be stripped away could go beyond one’s moral and spiritual sins, but the entire religious system that has no place in God’s righteous kingdom.

Ancient Christian spirituality has long recognized that which distracts our attentiveness to God is our distorted habits of thoughts, feelings, desires and actions known as “passions.” A workaholic, for example, is a person who works compulsively habitually, or even addictively. It may originate from distorted thoughts, feelings or desires such as low self-worth, the need of approval, perfectionism, shame, anger, insecurity, a judgemental and competitive spirit, or even loneliness and boredom. Work addiction is just an example. If after these few weeks of practices, you still cannot find time to stay and enjoy God’s presence. **What is that one thing or things that are keeping you busy and away from God? What can possibly be the distorted thoughts, feelings, or desires behind those behaviours or actions? Dialogue with Jesus now.**
Jesus understands how easily distorted habits form in our lives and shape our behaviours. The story of a Samaritan woman by the well in John 4 demonstrates many distorted thoughts, feelings, desires and actions she had. She saw herself as a lowly, marginalized, much despised woman from Samaria; she desired to cleave to a man even though that man is not her husband and she already had five husbands in the past; and she believed Jews would not associate or talk to Samaritans, and Jerusalem was the only acceptable place of worship while Samaritans could only worship on the mountain. These examples show that distorted habits can be personal but can also be systematic that arises from our cultures and religious institutions.

Built upon the ancient root, Ignatian spirituality is a tradition formed in the sixteenth century that views detachment and freedom as key principles in pursuing wholeness, i.e., oneness with God. Detachment allows people to move from a place of having control to being controlled by God. If we are to learn to love and trust God, we must find ways to detach ourselves from the love of money, food, protection and even family so that we can pursue God (cf. Luke 14:26). Ignatius of Loyola lived such a life of detachment that even if the Pope ordered his group to disband he would need only fifteen minutes of prayer to collect himself and then move forward. Detachment leads to freedom, i.e., “to become the person we are meant to be, to love and to accept love, to make good decisions, and to experience the beauty of creation and the

mystery of God’s love.”\(^5\) The goal of freedom is not simply to be free of restraints that seem bothersome, but free to pursue wholeness. Wholeness cannot be found when hindrances get in the way of loving and be loved.

Gerald G. May, the author of *Addiction and Grace*, defines *addiction* as to any compulsive, habitual behaviour that limits the freedom of human desire.\(^4\) The word “attachment,” comes from the old French *attache*, basically means "nailed to."\(^5\) It describes the process that distorted habitual thoughts or feelings being nailed to specific objects and so creates addiction.

In psychology, there is a term called *repression* and another called *displacement*. When God does not come to us tangibly to satisfy our deep longing for love, we repress our desire for God. When we repress a desire, we try to keep it out of our awareness.\(^5\) What we repress, however, does not go away, but move to the side — that is, a *displacement*. In fact, while repression stifles desire, addiction attaches desire to certain specific behaviours, things, or people.\(^\) They then become preoccupations and obsessions that rule our lives. Things like work, power, sex, food, entertainment, social media, or even ministries are just a few examples. *Addiction is the absolute enemy* of

\(^{53}\) Ibid.


\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 2.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 3.
human freedom, the antipathy of love.\textsuperscript{58} And if all of a sudden our addictive behaviour gets interrupted, we may even feel some degree of anxiety and even physical discomfort caused by our habits in controlling the situation.\textsuperscript{59}

Addiction is a serious matter because it tends to control and eat up our mind, body and soul. Even the Apostle Paul described his spiritual frustration this way: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do...For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.” (7:15-19)

We are God’s image-bearers created for and called to love.\textsuperscript{60} Our whole being shall respond to God’s call to love (Dt 6:5, 11:13, 30:6; Jos 22:5; Mt 22:37; Mk 12:30; Lk 10:27). But the passions we develop hinder us to love God, self and others. The ancient understanding is that we cannot control whether the passions are going to harass or attack our soul, but we can prevent impassioned thoughts from lingering within us and arousing the passions to action.\textsuperscript{61} \textbf{Our aim is not to eliminate the passions but to redirect their energy from evil to good.}\textsuperscript{62} It is a training of our mind and heart.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 4.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{60} Roberta C. Bondi, \textit{To Pray & To Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. 1991), 28.


\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 144.
Jesus teaches his disciples a model of prayer: “Pray, then, in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...” (Mt 6:9) Calling on to the Father who is wholly transcendent and immanent, we ask God sincerely from our heart for his effective will to transform the world; and so we pray: “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (v.10). And as we align our will to his will, we bring our physical needs (v.11 – daily bread), relational needs (v.12 – forgiving one another), and spiritual needs (v.13 – leading us not into temptations; and delivering us from evil) before God. By humbly asking for his grace, empowerment and healing, we may indeed live a holy, blameless and effective life on earth glorifying God in his kingdom. This prayer, widely known as The Lord’s Prayer, attempts to help us open our heart and ears to God as we seek to listen, and to obey.

Jesus always begins his ministry by prayer to the Father. This is more than just to become aware of God’s presence at all time through awakening, beholding, or centering. Decluttering is to say, “Lord, you are the king and master of my life! Please help sort out my mess and help me replace my old habits with healthy life-giving habits. I want to orient my thoughts, desires, feelings and actions towards loving you, serving you and glorifying you.”

One thing I did during my three-months sabbatical break was to establish a more regular rhythm to meet up and reconnect with my unchurched friends and relatives. I was touched by the fact that Jesus often takes his disciples to go out to find and serve
the one lost sheep. This new habit is life-giving to me. I am motivated to love not because I am obligated to love. As how I am loved, I learn to love.

Practice

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.

Titus 2:11-12

You may not think about yourself as a super disciplined person, but you do live by and work around many disciplines like dressing and grooming yourself, eating and sleeping, working and studying, nurturing your faith and practicing care and love towards others. Many of these habits and rhythms are good and healthy because they do not just benefit yourself but the people around you in positive ways.

Let’s meditate on Hebrew 12:7-13. Read the passage slowly. Pause between each sentence. Let every line, his word of love, penetrates into your heart.

Are there words or phrases that strike you? What comes to your mind?

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________________________________________________________________________
Are there surprises and graces? What does God desire of you?

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Are there God’s promises? What do you need from God?

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God’s discipline comes from a place of love. Continue to practice awakening, beholding and centering as frequently as possible throughout the day. This is the most powerful weapon to conquer any adversity. Recognize his unceasing powerful love that flows like a river. Let this river of love overcomes all obstacles and washes all your sins and passions away.

When you come to a habit that you considered as “bad,” pause and take a closer look. Discern what causes such an addiction, or attachment. Are there people, things, and/or desires that nail you to that particular repetitive behavior? Identify and
acknowledge their existence. Share your thoughts and feelings with the Lord. Ask the Lord to declutter your life. You, however, are not responsible to get rid of the clutters; God will.

Then return to centering prayer. Return to the source of love, the river of love. Let his Spirit lead you to abiding peace.

Have you ever wonder why you can often hear birds singing in the morning and wind blowing at night but not during the day? Of course you know why. Many spiritual fathers and mothers in our Christian history advocate the discipline of fixed hours prayers.

Fixed-hour prayer is the oldest form of Christian spiritual discipline and has its roots in the Judaism. When the Psalmist says, “Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws” (Ps 119:164) he is referring to fixed-hour prayer as it existed in ancient Judaism. We do not know exactly at what time early Christians prayed. However, generally, later Christians followed the tradition of praying at 6 a.m., 9 a.m., 12 noon, 3 p.m., 6 p.m., 9 p.m. and 12 mid-night. Fixed-hour prayer is also commonly referred to as “the divine offices” or “the liturgy of the hours,” and from the time of the Reformation to the present it was held almost exclusively as a part of Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican Christian practice. What about the Baptists then, how frequently do we pray?

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We may even have established a habit like many smartphone users who would first greet our smartphone a “morning kiss,” and then a “good night kiss” before going to bed, instead of our spouse, child, or God.

Many families nowadays no longer keep a land phone line and so have great excuse of putting their phone out beside their bed within arm’s length in case of any late night emergency call. Even so, it is still possible to set the phone to “Do Not Disturb” through the night except emergency calls, and to establish the rhythm of praying to God before checking the phone in the morning and praying to God before going to bed without checking the phone. Decluttering is also about honouring God and offering our best time to him. What is your best time praying to God? If you enjoy praying spontaneous, are there days you do not pray at all? How to establish healthier praying habits?

If all possible, encourage all family members to recharge their phones in one room away from their bedrooms and make a covenant not to check for messages until prayers are offered to God. Some parents might want to set a stricter rule for themselves and their children to have no phone between certain hours to honour rest and cultivate quality family and alone time with God. This will certainly help Christian families heighten their awareness of God.

Psalm 63 calls us to direct our attention to God in the morning (v.1), in the afternoon (vv.2-5) and in the evening (vv.6-8). Three times a day is a good start to
train our mind to set a mental rhythm to date God. Continue to practice centering prayer and unceasing prayer throughout the day. The goal is to break away from our habitual pattern of giving our smartphone constant attention day and night, and to replace it by sacred rhythms honouring God above all else. Once this sacred rhythm is established, soon you will realize you have taken back the control of the smartphone also. Similarly to other kinds of addictive behaviours, when we center in God and invite him to journey with us, his Spirit will guide us, protect us and fight for us. He is not merely the source of love; he is the source that governs our love also.

LWG Group Exercise:

Continue the practice of beholding and centering.

This time make the group practice even simpler. Yet spend 20 minutes in silence together encouraging all group members to close their eyes to center in God. Practice centering prayer by allowing them to choose their favourite sacred word that helps them center.

This time with their journal before them (or prepared some papers and pens ahead for each person), encourage each person to jot down thoughts, people or matters that come across their mind during centering prayer. Advise them not to dwell on them. Just jot them down. Then immediately come back to the sacred word, as the consent to stay in God’s love and his presence. At the end of the 20 minutes praying time, group leader may say a prayer to thank God for his presence and invite the participants to come back to the group.
All participants may then take a look of their list of distractions, or the clutters, they have during the prayer. Invite the participants to feel free to share what have jotted down. The sharing can just be a few isolated, unrelated words. No need to give any detail, or formulate a story behind those words. As one person shares, the rest remains silent and offer the gift of their presence. Then spend another minute together to pray for that person *silently*. Discourage anyone who tries to help that person to make sense about his/her distractions. Just pray silently to God to *set the person free* (i.e., the goal). Embrace the person lovingly and prayerfully in God. The leader may then invite another person to share the list freely, and repeat the process until everyone who wants to share has the chance to share.

**Journal**

Reflect on your prayer experiences after a week of awakening, beholding, centering and decluttering practices:

❖ Are you becoming more aware of his presence in your journey with him?
  ❖ How do you feel or experience his love?
❖ What are your experiences in honouring silence and practicing these disciplines in the community?

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SESSION V. ENFOLDING

The last stage of the pathway to wholeness is “union” in which we experience oneness in God and find ourselves caught up in rapturous joy, adoration, praise and a deep peace that surpasses all understanding.⁶⁴ This is purely a gift from God and his grace. It comes from a deep desire of a total abandonment of our control over what we ‘know’ and how we ‘feel’ about God, to enter into the dark night of our senses, as what St. John the Cross describes, to an unconditioned relationship with God.⁶⁵ After this dark night of senses, there is a dark night of the spirit. It is the last and narrowness tunnel of the spiritual journey toward wholeness in Christ.⁶⁶ It is the needle of the eye through which no self-will may pass.⁶⁷ It is the final stage of losing our ‘self,’ through sufferings, through crucifixion, into the everlasting arms enfolding us in Love. In this final stage, we awaken to the realization that “I no longer live but Christ lives in me” (Gal 3:20).

Job, a righteous man, who, deprived of all affective and cognitive assurances of God’s love and care, comes to deep suffering, or total darkness, where he found “even

⁶⁴ Mulholland, Invitation To A Journey, 97.
⁶⁵ Ibid., 99.
⁶⁶ Ibid., 100.
⁶⁷ Ibid.
the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you” (Ps 139:12). The Apostle Paul also described a mysterious experience ‘a man’ had that he was once caught up to the third heaven – that is, a paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell – and had no idea whether he was in the body or out of the body (2 Cor 12:2-3). He had arrived and come to a place where he considered all his gains in the world (i.e., his status, privilege, education, profession...) as garbage, except knowing Christ. Whether death or alive, he did not really care. He would rather participate in Christ’s death and resurrection to truly know him (Phil 3:7-10).

"Union" is the goal of all mystical endeavour and those who have traveled this road speak of it in terms of "divine marriage" and "deification." It stresses on our total abandonment to God and becoming like Christ. Mabry concludes this stage with this:

...when God truly lives in us, we can do much more than we ever could on our own. For it isn't we who are bringing forth all this fruit. If we can just get ourselves—our fears, our illusions, our desires, our egos—out of the way, God will do it all. All we have to do is give our permission, cooperate, and as I said, get out of the way. That's good news for people who are already run ragged, who are already tired. All we have to do is say, 'Yes.' God will do the rest.69

Teresa of Avila, who devoted herself to contemplative prayer, had an experience of “union” when she became very ill on the bed. She described such experience as being stabbed repeatedly through her heart by a fiery, golden lance. Her friend John the Cross described the phenomenon this way:


69 Ibid., 109.
“While the soul is inflamed with the love of God... it will feel like a seraphim is assailing it by means of an arrow which is all afire with love... It seems to it that the entire universe is a sea of love in which it is engulfed, for, conscious of the living point or the center of love within itself, it is unable to catch sight of the boundaries of this love.”

Teresa had a feeble body throughout her life, but she was fired up for the Lord. She reformed the Carmelites order to espouse absolute poverty and stricter ascetic disciplines. Altogether she founded sixteen new convents, attracted hundreds of women and men to the new austere monasticism, largely due to her saintliness and zeal.

The ultimate purpose of one’s union with Christ is selfless service for the sake of others. This is in fact the prayer of Jesus as the great high priest: “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you... so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (Jn 17:21-22) The spiritual pilgrimage to become whole in Christ is not for our own ecstasy, but for the sake of the world so that everyone may come to know God and so can rest in his love.

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70 Ibid., 111.

71 John R. Mabry, Growing into God, 111.
Lord, how many are my foes!
   How many rise up against me!
Many are saying of me,
   “God will not deliver him.”

But you, Lord, are a shield around me,
   my glory, the One who lifts my head high.
I call out to the Lord,
   and he answers me from his holy mountain.

I lie down and sleep;
   I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.
I will not fear though tens of thousands
   assail me on every side.

Arise, Lord!
   Deliver me, my God!
Strike all my enemies on the jaw;
   break the teeth of the wicked.

From the Lord comes deliverance.
   May your blessing be on your people.

Psalm 3
What do you need to surrender and let go in order to become like Christ who is one in spirit and action with the Father? Many saints have entered into the dark night of the soul to get in touch with their inner demons, yet come out fully transformed and alive. Do you have such desire? Before Jesus began his public ministry, he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted and prayed for forty days and forty days. He had overcome Satan, and through his words and actions reflected God’s glory. **What was Jesus’ experience in the wilderness meant to you?**

“...The number one enemy of Christian spiritual formation today is exhaustion...As a result, one of the primary activities (or anti-activities) of human life is being neglected: sleep.”

Is it possible that one of the key physical and spiritual trainings we need most nowadays is “sleep”? As long as we live, our body and soul are unified. When our body is tired and exhausted, it directly affects our soul – our listening in God, attentiveness to God, watchfulness, patience, love, etc. An adult requires an average of 7-8 hours sleep.

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to maintain health. Teenagers may require more time to sleep. God understands we need such rest. In fact, he designed one-third of our lives sleeping. Good quality sleep requires God’s grace, but it also requires our willingness, consent and cooperation. **We cannot make ourselves sleep, but we can create the conditions necessary for sleep.**

You may have encountered days that you feel so overwhelmed and restless at work that your mind refused to lay down the problems and worries to rest, and strived to control even in your dreams. Or you may have experienced great attractions from your sins and passions that you decided to cut down your sleep time. Maintaining good physical and emotional health by knowing your physicality and mental limitations. It is all about balance and moderation.

**Sleep is a spiritual discipline because it is an act of surrender, a declaration of trust.** During our hours in sleep, we are entrusting our body, mind and soul to God and being enfolded in his love. Darkness or evil may fall upon us during the night as in Psalm 3, shared above; yet, Psalm 121 provides us God’s promises that, “He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber” (v.3). Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Psalm 4 gives us further insights: “Tremble and (or, in your anger) do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Offer the sacrifices of righteousness and trust in the Lord” (vv.4-5). Therefore, “in peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.”

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73 Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, 34.
Hence, before going to bed, (1) you may want to spend a few minutes to enter into a time of examen to review your day, and to discern what draws you close to God, or away; this is also the time to give thanks to God for his grace and confess any sins to God and ask for strength for tomorrow. (2) It is always good to end with centering prayer. Follow your breathing. Unwind your body and offer it to God. Let his love and peace enfold you until you fall into a deep sleep.

Begin by scheduling a day to pray and fast. Advance planning is crucial. Find a place where you will be least distracted. You may want to book a room in a quiet retreat center, or in a church. Ideally it will be a place where you feel safe even with your eyes closed. Do not bring your smartphone and commit yourself to fully unplug from any music, noises or interactions with people. Inform your significant others that you will be away for a day to fast and pray. Invite them to surround you with prayers as you retreat in order to hear God. You may decide to observe a full or temporary fast from food, based on your health’s situation. Practice centering prayer; offer your time to Jesus and stay presence with him. Sit and stay at his feet. If there are worries, fears or stresses come to your mind, bring them to your heart, to the center. Let him shed light on each of them one by one. Seek comfort and healing from him.

Schedule 3-5 days for a silent retreat to be held in a quiet retreat center. Try your best to unplug from all electronics (including the smartphone) and withdrawing from all noises and interactions with people during the entire duration of the stay.
Practice solitude, silence and centering prayer. Give your time and attentiveness to God only. Wait for the guidance of the spirit. Let him bring you back to places where he wants to shed light on you. Let him explore your thoughts, feelings, illusions, desires, and egos.

Let him enfold you in his love. Let him wipe your tears. Let him bind up your wounds. Let him do what it takes to restore you and give you peace.

A silent retreat enables us to withdraw from the external busyness, noises and distractions (what smartphone presents), and also the ‘noise’ of our inner compulsions (our ego, ambitions, self-sufficiency). As we continue to practice solitude, silence and centering prayer, these noises and distractions will come to surface. In a ‘directed’ retreat, a spiritual director will be assigned to journey with us and help us find our way. One day we may be illuminated and inspired by the Lord; on the other day we may be humbled and purged by the Lord. It is not in our control whether or when we can attain union. But we must learn to abandon all our control to trust the Lord who loves us and knows what we need. Our best offering is to give our time and our heart to him.

Through that, we can truly rest and be enfolded in his love.

For parents with young children, it is difficult to make the effort to carve out a few days for yourselves. But you do need quiet time for rest and replenishment. Discuss with your spouse and your family to see if childcare arrangement can be made. Ideally couples can take turn going to the retreat. Or explore the possibility for families taking
turn to babysit each other’s child so that those who need a retreat may be released to have one. This will be another lesson of trusting God as you are away.

**LWG Group Exercise:**

Together watch Ruth Hayley Barton’s An Invitation to Retreat: https://vimeo.com/288429197

Discuss the need, the benefits and the possibilities of setting aside time for a retreat. It can be a one-day retreat at a venue close to home, or a three-days retreat in a retreat center.

**Journal**

Reflect on your prayer experiences after weeks of intentional prayer practices:
- Are you becoming more aware of God’s presence in your everyday life?
- How do you feel or experience his love?
- Have your consent to God moved beyond prayers to actions in your *everyday life*?
- Do you feel you have greater freedom to follow him and do his will?
CONCLUSION

He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.

1 Thessalonians 5:19

Life With God is a journey. It is not an event. It is not a destination. It is a day-to-day journey: an awakening to the source of love, an experience of beholding the lover, a discipline to center in love, a call to declutter, a gift to be fully enfolded by his love.

It is by making space for God in our daily lives, through the practices of spiritual discipline (i.e., life-giving habits), that we reorient out heart’s attention to the center of our soul where God is found. We are bombarded by many exterior and interior noises and chaos in this world. Contemplative practices in the discipline of solitude, silence and centering prayer help us see and hear God more clearly, and enable us to let go and abandon ourselves in God’s ocean of love.

The renowned philosopher and theologian Dr. Dallas Willard from one of his writings on spiritual formation said, “Spiritual disciplines are not primarily for solving behavioural problems.”74 If they do help you reduce your screen time, that is great.

The primary goal of this study guide is to introduce you to the contemplative tradition

of the Christian heritage and encourages you to follow the ancient path to establish
spiritual habits that help shape and transform the total state of the soul for Christ.
Our inner being must be changed before outward appearances and behaviours. Or else,
we are no different from the pious hypocrites Jesus rebuked in his days. It is the deep
love of God that calls God’s beloved to radiate love.

In the seventeenth century, a French lay brother known as Brother Lawrence
demonstrated what contemplative in action was like. He regularly “practiced the
presence of God” by repeatedly turning his mind and heart to God, in love, all through
the day, whether he was cooking in the kitchen, making sandals in the workshop, or
praying during formal times of prayer.75 He gave his whole self to God, doing everything,
big or small, for the love of God. Hence, there was no division between sacred and
secular, between leisure and work, for he did everything for the love of God.76 Brother
Lawrence truly knew how to love God and dwell in him. True contemplatives always
put their faith in action. They can do more because they know how to lean on their
source of strength.

Life With God also recognizes that you are not alone on your spiritual journey
but with like-minded people who are called according to his purpose. This study guide
intentionally includes ways to honour God’s presence, through silence, even as the
people of God gather in small groups. While many of us might be afraid of the dead

Modern Ltd, 2008), Kindle: Chapter 3.

76 Ibid.
silence in group sharing and discussion, yet taking the time to pause with the intention to seek to hear God is a life-giving habit and rhythm. Initially you may find the time of pausing for silence odd and uncomfortable, but with more practices together it will flow naturally. Let God be an active participant in your group experiences. Let God take the center seat in your midst. Let God guide all conversations, interactions, and reflections. Let God speak through his people. Let the room be filled with his glorious presence, grace and love. Every time as the faithful gathers, they are on the journey to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35).

This is a generation that highly values efficiency and speed. Yet, spiritual growth is more like a marathon than a sprint. Recalling the words of Jim Houston: “spiritual growth is the slowest of all human movements.” It requires faithful day-to-day discipline to discern, pray and rest our soul in God. There are certain ways to measure our fruits and our growth in our spiritual growth. It is definitely not measured by how many times we pray or how many chapters of the Bible we read each day.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

David Frenette in The Path of Centering Prayer: Deepening Your Experience of God suggested that true contemplatives would exhibit the following eight signs, qualities or attitudes:

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77 Christopher A. Hall, Worshipping with the Church Fathers (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 248.
1. **Giving Consent to God to Act in Us**

The great Christian monk and writer Thomas Merton wrote, “We become contemplatives when God discovers himself in us.”

It is about being found by God, not finding God. It is like the sun rises on its own every morning, but if people do not wake up to see it, they cannot truly say they have seen its rising beauty. Centering prayer helps those who are willing to be awakened to see the beauty of God. It is about letting God reveal himself to his beloved. The role of the beloved is to receive such gift of love. The greater the practitioners give their consent to God in prayer, the greater they may give their consent to God in all of their lives to do his will.

2. **Recognizing the presence of God in all things**

As the heart is more consent and open to the spaciousness of God, the practitioner of centering prayer may see and recognize the world in a new light. The whole world and everything in it are connected to his divine calling and will. God is present in all things that include the life events of the people. All the struggles, hardships and emotional turmoils exist for a reason. Only if the people of God pay attention and practice opening to God may recognize the gift of his presence in all things.

Christian contemplation is a response to God’s invitation “be still, and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10). He is the one and only who can redeem everything and give his people “the peace...which transcends all understanding” (Phil 4:7). But the stillness

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79 Frenette, *The Path of Centering Prayer*, 130.

80 Ibid., 137.
needed for knowing God is primarily a stilling of people’s efforts to know God.\textsuperscript{81} It is a deepening trust and faith in God who is love, present with his people always, the Great I Am.

3. \textit{Receiving and Offering the Gift of Simplicity}

In centering prayer, the sacred word is meant to be short and simple. Entering into a simple contemplative practice and remaining with its simplicity awakens the people of God to God’s simplicity.\textsuperscript{82} Despite many random thoughts including feelings like restlessness or boredom may want to get into the mind, the only thought acceptable is to return to the simple sacred word to center in again. In such posture, the practitioner allows the intellectual and reasoning mind to rest and be awaken to the presence of Christ. Gently use the sacred word to give consent to Christ. The glimpses of inner simplicity that come as gifts can help the practitioners to live more simply,\textsuperscript{83} and so in turn may also release others so that they may simply live.\textsuperscript{84} Simplicity is a gift. Like a weaned child feeling content before the mother is a contemplative before their maker.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{82} Frenette, \textit{The Path of Centering Prayer}, 143.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 152.

\textsuperscript{84} There is a saying: “Living simply so that others may simply live.” Source unknown. Some said Mahatma Gandhi. Some said Mother Teresa.
4. **Becoming more Gentle and Humble**

By sitting still and giving consent to God, it is to let Christ’s gentleness bear fruit within the soul. Contemplation is effortless in the same way as the falling of snow or the pedals of a flower open to the sunlight. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt 11:28-30). In contemplation the practitioner realizes Christ as the true source, the agent, the actor, in prayer and in life. Led by the spirit of gentleness, the practitioner will learn to act more and more in line with God’s life and action.

5. **Letting Go and Letting Be**

Whether it is a sacred word, image, or symbol that enables the practitioner to give consent to God, the practitioner must learn to let go, and be. In the same way as people learn how to swim. Whether it is a floating board or the edge of the swimming pool, people who desire to learn how to swim must let go all things that are holding them back again and again. In centering prayer, it is a matter of abiding with God who is love. The kind of love that is of God is not a sentiment or emotion, but is the being, the source of life itself. “God is love and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 Jn 4:16, NRSV). Hence, letting go is an act of love that is drawn forth

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86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., 170.
by God’s loving presence. As Jesus said, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16:25). Jesus lives a life of letting go, and letting himself be in the Father’s arms. It is his rhythm of life.

6. **Resting in God’s Being**

   Contemplative resting is not so much about feeling physically relaxed, or emotionally peaceful. It is a resting of our being in the Being of God. Moses encountered the Being of God in the form of a burning bush that was inflamed but not consumed. That image points to the Great I AM who exists and lives everlasting. Jesus, the Word, lives since the beginning (Jn 1:1), even before Abraham (Jn 8:58). Even death, to Jesus, is resurrection. Jesus models how he lives before the Father, and he prays for all God’s beloved that they may also be brought to complete unity with the Father as how he and the Father are one (Jn 17:21-23). There is no dualism to being in God’s Being. Thomas Merton rightly recognized that it was not the body that had to die but the false self. The false self is a cozy image of the self as individual and autonomous, as separate from God and everyone and everything else. If all people know and have are their false self, no wonder they are afraid of dying, unemployed, retiring. Some form of death—psychological, spiritual, relational, or physical—is essential to help people

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88 Ibid., 175.

89 Ibid., 180.

loosen their ties to their small and separate false self, so that their true self—their basic and unchangeable identity in God—may fully and freely live.⁹¹

7. **Let God Embrace Us and Our Pain**

During centering prayer, practitioners may encounter resistance, dread, and the dark night.⁹² Obsessive thoughts, past hurts or intense emotions may surface as one attempts to quiet down. Thomas Keating has a suggestion for these situations:

One way to deal with intense restlessness, physical pain, or emotions such as fear or anxiety that may arise at such times of unloading is to rest in the painful feeling for a minute or two and allow the pain itself to be your prayer word. In other words, one of the best ways of letting go of an emotion is simply to feel it. Painful emotions, even some physical pains, tend to disintegrate when fully accepted.⁹³

It is to embrace the feelings. In a real physical embrace, one would not just pat another person’s shoulder, but would enfold that person to his/herself with both arms and hold that person in his/her heart. If resistance is strong, it may take time and practice to move into a deep embrace. In a spiritual embrace, one is to embrace God in the feeling, not embracing the feeling alone.⁹⁴ In contemplative prayer practice, practitioners give consent to God and let him embrace themselves, and their pain. Let God transforms, purifies and heals. Jesus knows what it is like. Luke 22:44 recorded that Jesus sweated

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⁹² Frenette, *The Path of Centering Prayer*, 186.


blood as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. No doubt it was a dreadful situation. Yet, he carried his pain to the Father and let the Father embraced him. On the cross when Jesus cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he encountered the dark night, yet he abandoned his soul to God the Father. For three days, he waited in darkness till a new light was dawned and he was raised. The contemplative task is to remain in the dark and to embrace the pain in God until God lifts it up. Job had similar experience. Self-reasoning or other humans’ reasoning effort failed him. He received the Lord’s comfort when he stayed in silence in his dark night with God.

8. **Integrating Prayer and Action**

People’s perception of God affects their experiences in God. Every time when people ask, “Where is God? We don’t see God.” They are like fish keep searching for water. They are not aware their bodies live and move and have their being in an ocean of water. In fact, they might not even know water makes up huge portion of their bodies. Likewise, contemplative prayer practice helps the people of God navigate the waves and currents in life and thus realizing that they are in the ocean of divinity.\(^\text{95}\) It is the movement of the Spirit that awakens them to the mystery of the life they are always in, whether they are praying or going through the mundane day-to-day activities. The sufferings and joy, even busyness, are part of the spiritual journey. One way to practice the integration of prayer and action is to slowly reengage our thoughts, feelings, and sensations after the time of centering prayer and start praying for the needs or the

people that come to surface. Practicing integration helps unify in the practitioner the
split between prayer and life, the separation between peace and thoughts, and dualism
between inner and outer, the rupture between the diving and the human. Then one
may live out a God-centered life consciously and unconsciously from the inside-out, not
outer-in. God emerges, then guides and changes the way we see and the way we live.
Henceforth, the integration of prayer and life emerges from the secrecy of
contemplation.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 205.}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Summary of the fruits of true contemplatives:}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Giving Consent to God to Act in Us
\item Recognizing the presence of God in all things
\item Receiving and Offering the Gift of Simplicity
\item Becoming more Gentle and Humble
\item Letting Go and Letting Be
\item Resting in God’s Being
\item Let God Embrace Us and Our Pain
\item Integrating Prayer and Action
\end{enumerate}
\end{center}

Is there one particular contemplative attitude coming alive to you? Prayerfully
consider these attitudes one at a time. Let each of these attitudes stay with you, as a gift,
to guide you more deeply into contemplative relationship with God.

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 209.}
Lastly, thank you for participating in *Life With God*. I certainly hope it is more than just a curriculum, but a beginning of more life to come! It is a journey in God and with God forever and ever. Before you continue to journal, may you be encouraged by these life-giving words from Philippians 4:4-7:

4 *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*
5 *Let your gentleness be evident to all.*
   *The Lord is near.*
6 *Do not be anxious about anything,*
   *but in every situation, by prayer and petition,*
   *with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*
7 *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding,*
   *will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

May our soul be as light as feathers, not dampened, so that we may rest, rise and soar with him! Amen.

Journal

1. From the journey through this study guide and the prayer practices in the past couple of weeks, what have you learned about yourself, your habits, and God?

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2. Which key prayer practice(s) have you been trying to practice regularly? Was that rhythm helpful in raising your awareness of the loving presence of God, or countering any old habits or addictions?

_______________________________________________________________________
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_______________________________________________________________________
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_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
3. In what ways have you found your relationship with God grown or deepen?

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_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
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_______________________________________________________________________
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_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________
The soul is like a feather

“The soul may quite sensibly be compared to the finest down and the lightest feather which, if spared the onset and penetration of dampness from without, have a nature so mobile that at the slightest breeze they rise up of themselves to the highest points of the sky. But if they are weighed down by any splash, any dampening of moisture, not only will there be no natural impulse to fly up into the air but the pressure of the absorbed liquid will drag them downward to earth.

“So too with our soul. If sin and worldly preoccupation have not weighed it down, if dangerous passion has not sullied it, then, lifted up by the natural goodness of its purity, it will rise to the heights on the lightest breath of meditation and, leaving the lowly things, the things of earth, it will travel upward to the heavenly and the invisible.

“And so we are quite rightly admonished by the Lord's command: ‘See to it that your hearts are not weighted down in drunkenness and intoxication and in the concerns of every day’ (Lk 21:34). Therefore if we wish our prayers to reach upward to the heavens and beyond we must ensure that our mind is cleared of every earthly defect and cleansed of all passion’s grip and is so light of itself that its prayer, free of sin’s weighty load, will rise upward to God.

John Cassian (+435 A.D.), Conferences, p.103

Cover design by Priscilla Wong
APPENDIX H

END OF STUDY SURVEY RESULTS

The following are the findings of the final assessment and feedback based on nine survey participants.

1. Through the LWG campaign, have you been able to…?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Definitely Yes</th>
<th>Somewhat Yes</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Do not apply</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- become increasingly more aware of your daily distorted habits and/or addictions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- begin to address some of the key distorted habits and/or addictions</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- overcome smartphone addiction or take better control of the smartphone intentionally</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- make room for solitude and silence in daily life</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- practice the more contemplative form of prayers like breath prayers or centering prayers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- experience better rhythms in life</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- experience greater peace and quietness of the heart</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- encounter and experience greater presence of the Lord</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- find your soul more rested in God</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Based on your commitment in the campaign, how would you rate the helpfulness of the following activities in learning the spiritual practices?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Extremely helpful</th>
<th>Very helpful</th>
<th>Helpful</th>
<th>Not helpful</th>
<th>Do not apply</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Sunday Worship (sermons, songs, corporate prayers, etc.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Sunday Discussion (a platform to ask questions and listen to each other's response) 4 3 2 0 0
- Study Guide (learning from the guide and practicing the prayer exercises) 4 3 2 0 0
- LWG Support Group (practicing the exercises together and journeying with group members) 5 1 0 0 3
- Accountability partner (sharing, praying and supporting by a partner intentionally) 1 3 1 0 4
- Serving as a LWG Leader 2 2 0 0 5

3. During the Life With God campaign, how have you been experiencing the following symptoms of smartphone addiction?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Digital eye strain - eye discomfort, fatigue or even in pain after viewing 2 hours or more</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neck problem - also known as &quot;text neck&quot;</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep disturbances - waking up in the middle of the night feeling the urge to check the phone</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending more time on the phone than you plan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read messages when you are driving or stopping at the traffic lights</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting the phone out on your work desk or dining table</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the smartphone to alter your mood</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of missing out</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Which suggested prayer exercise(s) from the Study Guide did you find helpful that you intend to establish as your spiritual rhythm?

Two people mentioned breath prayers. Four people mentioned centering prayer. One person mentioned prayer of examen. One person mentioned enfolding, which is a deeper form of centering prayer, characterized by oneness in Trinitarian love. One person mentioned sacred word.

5. If you can recall an experience in overcoming smartphone (or screen) addiction by the practices of solitude, silence, and centering prayer, please describe and share what that experience was like.

The following sentences or phrases are directly transposed from the survey: 1) “Being more aware and disciplined to do more spiritual things like reading the Bible.” 2) “At first it was not an easy task. Many times I unknowingly kept my phone near me. But later on after reading and meditating the book Life with God, I had a feeling of restfulness in me.” 3) “Intentionally put the smartphone away.” 4) “I am still very often
drawn to the computer screen. But I rarely recognize it as a problem so I do not often use spiritual exercise to counteract it. I hope to be more self aware in the future.”

6. How have you been experiencing the following signs as the result of practicing Centering Prayer?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sign</th>
<th>Definitely Yes</th>
<th>Somewhat Yes</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Do not apply</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I give consent to God to act in me and through me.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am more aware of God's presence in all things.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I receive and offer the gift of simplicity to myself and others.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I become more gentle and humble.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am more open to let go and let God</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can rest in God's love.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I let God embrace me and my pain.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I put my prayer forward into action.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. In your own words, please describe what you have gained most from the Life With God campaign.

The following sentences or phrases are directly transposed from the survey: 1) “The importance of rest and solitude in a Christian's life.” 2) “I am more aware of God's presence, and allowing myself to lift my immediate worries or plans to God due to my awareness. I can experience peace and comfort from God sooner because I remember to rely on Him immediately. And I see how God rewards me when I am more open to Him and His guidance.” 3) “Restfulness and a calm feeling in my mind. I had a constant fear
about the future of my kids and our life. After attending these sessions Awakening Beholding, Centering, Decluttering and Enfolding. It brought a change in my self.” 4) “More aware of different spiritual practices but some of them were hard to practice and was a bit uncomfortable to practice ex: beholding, breath prayer- felt very new ages and very different from what I've been taught about spiritual practices.” 5) “A habit of praying during the day; put worry aside to God; intentionally seeing more how God works on other b/s especially during pain and suffering.” 6) “The importance of relationship with God through spiritual exercises. I want to continue to review the course handbook and review and practice the spiritual exercises.” 7) “Learned a lot.” 8) “Reliance on God.” 9) “Peace.”

8. Additional comments, recommendations and feedback related to this specific research or campaign.

The following sentences are directly transposed from the survey: 1) “I really appreciate this experience and glad to have walked through this. I recommend all should experience these exercises.” 2) “I thank God for making me to participate in this group. I personally encountered our mighty God’s presence on me during these sessions. I also thank Pastor Christina for involving me in this campaign.” 3) “First, survey of smartphone used that involves the group of LWG campaign participants or encourage the small group do this exercise to start…and discussion after the sermon was great. Secondly, encourage other churches to participate in order to acknowledge smartphone issue as an example of bad habit, in our Christian life. That we need to strengthen our Life With God.” 4) “I am very appreciative of this course! It is a turning point of my spiritual life.”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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