

Lighthouse Trails Research

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LECTIO DIVINA-What it is, What it is not, and Should Christians Practice it? written by the editors at Lighthouse Trails is one of the new Lighthouse Trails Print Booklet Tracts and is an easy to understand explanation of the practice of lectio divina, a practice that is becoming increasingly popular in evangelical/Protestant circles today. The booklet is 16 pages long and sells for \$1.95 for single copies. Quantity discounts are as much as 50% off retail. This is a great way to tell others about lectio divina and answer the question, should Christians practice it. Below is the content of the booklet. To order copies of *LECTIO DIVINA-What it is, What it is not, and Should Christians Practice it?*, [click here](#). There are also two bonus sections in the booklet: 1) “Some places you will find lectio divina “(listing over 30 Christian authors who are promoting lectio divina); 2) Is There Really a Different Way of Reading the Word of God? (see this section below)

New Lighthouse Trails Booklet Tract: “LECTIO DIVINA-What it is, What it is not, and Should Christians Practice it?”

LECTIO DIVINA—There’s a lot of talk about it today; umpteen books are published and more are on the way about lectio divina; and an increasing number of evangelical/Protestant figures are writing about it, endorsing it, and teaching it. Some people think lectio divina simply means to read a passage of Scripture slowly (or “praying the Scriptures”) then ponder or think on that Scripture. That can be a part of it. But if you ask mystics or contemplatives what it really entails (And who would know better than they?), they will tell you that lectio divina (pronounced lex-ee-o di-veen-a) always includes taking a passage of Scripture (or other writings), reading it slowly, and repeating it as you work your way down to where you have just a word or small phrase from the passage that you are “meditating” on (repeating over and over). Basically, you are coming up with a mantra-like word or phrase that has been extracted from a passage of Scripture, which, according to contemplatives, if repeated for several minutes, will help you get rid of thoughts and distractions, so then, they say, you can hear the voice of God and feel His presence (going into the silence).

There are said to be four steps in lectio divina. These four steps are:

Reading (lectio)—Slowly begin reading a biblical passage as if it were a long awaited love letter addressed to you. Approach it reverentially and expectantly, in a way that savors each word and phrase. Read the passage until you hear a word or phrase that touches you, resonates, attracts, or even disturbs you.

Reflecting (meditatio)—Ponder this word or phrase for a few minutes. Let it sink in slowly and deeply until you are resting in it. Listen for what the word or phrase is saying to you at this moment in your life, what it may be offering to you, what it may be demanding of you.

Expressing (oratio)—If you are a praying person, when you are ready, openly and honestly express to God the prayers that arise spontaneously within you from your experience of this word or phrase. These may be prayers of thanksgiving, petition, intercession, lament, or praise. If prayer is not part of your journey you could write down the thoughts that have come your way.

Resting (contemplatio)—Allow yourself to simply rest silently for a time in the stillness of your heart remaining open to the quiet fullness of God’s love and peace. This is like the silence of communion between the mother holding her sleeping infant child or between lovers whose communication with each other passes beyond words.¹

Catholic priest and contemplative mysticism pioneer Thomas Keating explains what lectio divina is not in an article he has written titled “The Classical Monastic Practice of Lectio Divina.” He explains that lectio divina is not traditional Bible study, not reading the Scriptures for understanding and edification, and not praying the Scriptures (though praying the Scriptures can be a form of lectio divina when a word or phrase is taken from the Scriptures to focus on for the purpose of going into “God’s presence”).² Keating says that lectio divina is an introduction into the more intense practices—contemplative prayer and centering prayer.

While some people think lectio divina is just reading Scripture slowly (and what’s wrong with that), it is the focusing on and repeating a word or small phrase to facilitate going into the “silence” that is the real danger. There is certainly nothing wrong with reading Scripture carefully and thoughtfully. Thoughtfully, we say. In eastern-style meditation (and in contemplative prayer) thoughts are the enemy. Eastern-style mystic Anthony De Mello describes this problem with thoughts in his book *Sadhana: A Way to God*:

To silence the mind is an extremely difficult task. How hard it is to keep the mind from thinking, thinking, thinking, forever thinking, forever producing thoughts in a never ending stream. Our Hindu masters in India have a saying: one thorn is removed by another. By this they mean that you will be wise to use one thought to rid yourself of all the other thoughts that crowd into your mind. One thought, one image, one phrase or sentence or word that your mind can be made to fasten on.³

Spiritual director Jan Johnson in her book, *When the Soul Listens: Finding Rest and Direction in Contemplative Prayer* also believes that thoughts get in the way, and the mind must be stilled:

Contemplative prayer, in its simplest form, is a prayer in which you still your thoughts and emotions and focus on God Himself. This puts you in a better state to be aware of God’s presence, and it makes you better able to hear God’s voice, correcting, guiding, and directing you.⁴

Mark Yaconelli, author of *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus*, has this to say about lectio divina. Keep in mind that Yaconelli’s materials are used in evangelical/Protestant settings (e.g., colleges, seminaries, youth groups):

In order to practice lectio divina, select a time and place that is peaceful and in which you may be alert and prayer fully attentive. Dispose yourself for prayer in whatever way is natural for you. This may be a spoken prayer to God to open you more fully to the Spirit, a gentle relaxation process that focuses on breathing, singing or chanting, or simply a few minutes of silence to empty yourself of thoughts, images, and emotions.⁵

Research analyst Ray Yungen explains this silence that contemplative mystics seek:

When [Richard] Foster speaks of the silence, he does not mean external silence. In his book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Foster recommends the practice of breath prayer⁶—picking a single word or short phrase and repeating it in conjunction with the breath. This is classic contemplative mysticism. . . . In *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, [Foster] ties in a quote by one mystic who advised, “You must bind the mind with one thought”⁷ . . . I once related Foster’s breath prayer method to a former New Age devotee who is now a Christian. She affirmed this connection when she remarked with astonishment, “That’s what I did when I was into ashtanga yoga!”⁸

With lectio divina, the word or phrase one repeats eventually can lose its meaning, and this repetitive sound can start to put the practitioner into an altered mind state. Yungen tells us that:

Keeping the mind riveted on only one thought is unnatural and adverse to true reflection and prayer. Simple logic tells us the repeating of words has no rational value. For instance, if someone called you on the phone and just said your name or one phrase over and over, would that be something you found edifying? Of course not; you would hang up on him or her. Why would God feel otherwise? And if God’s presence is lacking, what is this presence that appears as light during meditation and infuses a counterfeit sense of divinity within?⁹

Yungen exhorts believers that: “the goal of prayer should not be to bind the mind with a word or phrase in order to induce a mystical trance but rather to use the mind to glory in the grace of God. This was the apostle Paul’s counsel to the various churches: ‘Study to shew thyself approved’ (2 Tim. 2:15) and ‘we pray always’ (2 Thessalonians 1:11) as in talking to God with both heart and mind.”¹⁰

In order to help those you care about stay clear of contemplative spirituality and spiritual deception, it is important for you to understand how lectio divina plays a significant role in leading people toward full blown meditative practices. And we propose that this “presence” that is reached during the “silent” altered states of consciousness from saying a word or phrase over and over (or focusing on the breath or an object) is not God’s presence. God has instructed us in the Bible not to perform “special kinds of process[es]” or “formula[s],”¹¹ as Thomas Keating calls lectio divina, to induce mystical experiences (see Deuteronomy 18:9-11); thus, we believe ample warning about lectio divina is warranted.

In conclusion, lectio divina is a bridge to eastern-style meditation. If indeed, this is true, then it will lead Christians away from the message of the Cross and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and thus Christians should not practice lectio divina. Do you know where practices such as lectio divina took Thomas Keating in his spirituality? When you read the statement by him below, you can see the answer to this:

We should not hesitate to take the fruit of the age-old wisdom of the East and “capture” it for Christ. Indeed, those of us who are in ministry should make the necessary effort to acquaint ourselves with as many of these Eastern techniques as possible.

Many Christians who take their prayer life seriously have been greatly helped by Yoga, Zen, TM and similar practices, especially where they have been initiated by reliable teachers and have a solidly developed Christian faith to find inner form and meaning to the resulting experiences.¹²

Notes:

1. Taken from: <http://www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/lectiodivina.htm>.
2. Thomas Keating, “The Classical Monastic Practice of Lectio Divina” (<http://web.archive.org/web/20120201174238/http://www.crossroadshikers.org/LectioDevina.htm>).
3. Anthony de Mello, *Sadhana: A Way to God* (St. Louis, the Institute of Jesuit Resources, 1978), p. 28.
4. Jan Johnson, *When the Soul Listens* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1999), p. 16.
5. Mark Yaconelli, http://web.archive.org/web/20080724110254/http://www.ymsp.org/resources/practices/lectio_divina.html.
6. Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1992), p. 122.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
8. Ray Yungen, *A Time of Departing* (Eureka, MT: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2006), p. 75.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
11. Keating, “The Classical Monastic Practice of Lectio Divina,” *op. cit.*
12. M. Basil Pennington, Thomas Keating, Thomas E. Clarke, *Finding Grace at the Center* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede’s Pub., 1978), pp. 5-6.

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