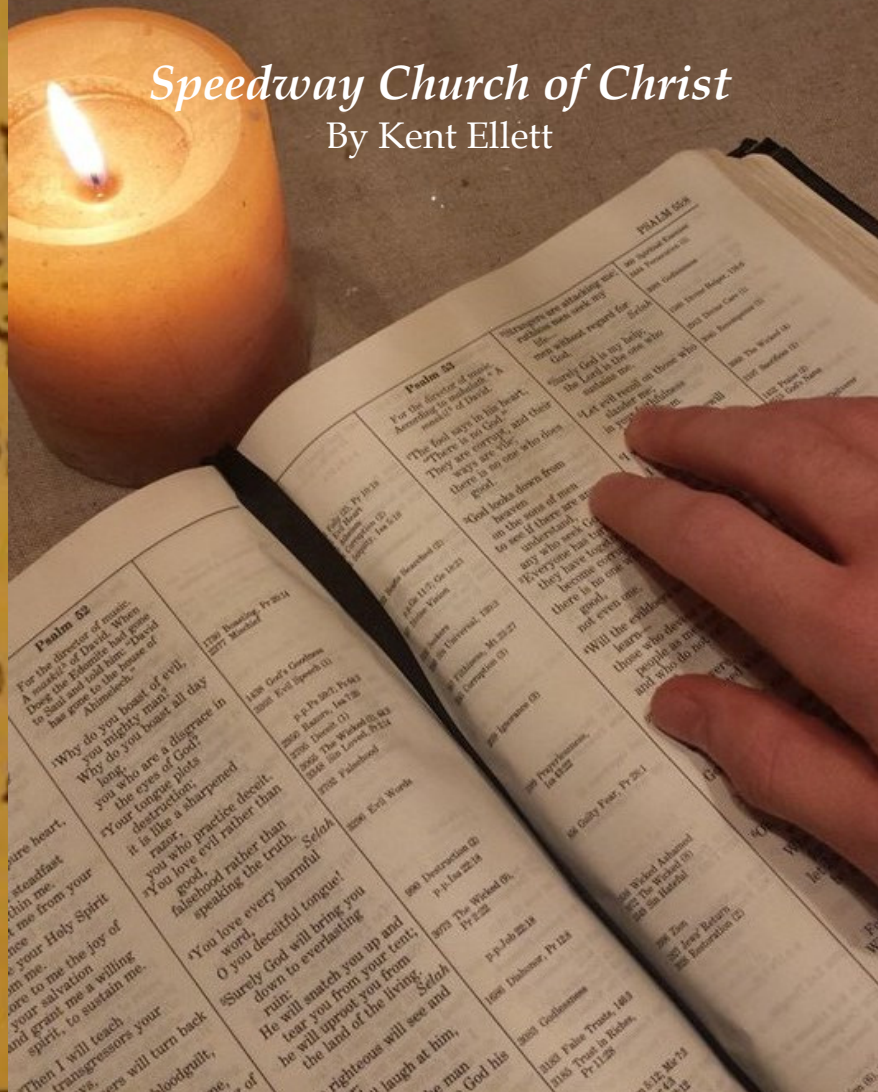


# Spiritual Disciplines Handbook

*Speedway Church of Christ*  
By Kent Ellett



## *Author's Note*

*Philippians 3:12*

*Not that I have already obtained all this.. but I press on*

While the leaders have approved the general direction of this handbook, it cannot help but bear the marks of my own unique immaturities, and I just ask for your continued patience. I'm not just being polite when I say that much of the decent spiritual direction I offer in this booklet has largely been learned with and from members of this congregation. Many of you continue to coach me on my journey. I owe you all a debt of gratitude.

The road to deeper intimacy with Christ will no doubt lead through Golgotha, and teach me greater humility. If we succeed in growing together over the next years, I strongly suspect that I will look back at the writing of this handbook and be tempted to embarrassment. I say "tempted," because I'm learning to not despise my maturity level. Little children should not feel ashamed of their mis-judgments when they are part of a faithful effort to grow.

Jesus' question to Nicodemus, haunts me. "*You are Israel's teacher and you do not understand these things.*" I'm not a blind guide like some of the Pharisees. I identify more with Nicodemus. I know enough to head for Jesus in the middle of the night. I know enough of his presence to want more. Sometimes I'm also like Peter. When the going gets difficult, I know I don't have any choice but to follow Jesus. If he has the "*words of eternal life,*" then I have nowhere else to turn.

So, sinful and broken, I do press on, knowing the grace with which God holds me will set my feet upon higher rock. I earnestly invite each member of the congregation to really press on inward and upward with me. We need each other on this adventure.

Kent Ellett  
January 2015

## *Table of Contents*

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction.....  | 3         |
| <b>Calendar of Texts and Meetings.....</b>                                       | <b>7</b>  |
| Section 1: Meditating, Memorizing and Collectively Praying over the Psalms ..... | 9         |
| Section 2: Prayer, Scripture and Centering.....                                  | 18        |
| Section 2 <b>Supplement: Free form exercises for weeks 34-38.....</b>            | <b>25</b> |
| Section 3: Fellowship and Mentoring .....  | 28        |
| Section 4: Purposed Giving .....   | 30        |
| Section 5: Practicing Hospitality.....   | 33        |
| Section 6: Fasting, Preparation and Holy Communion.....                          | 47        |
| Bibliography... ..   | 51        |

*A document with appropriate endnote citations can be provided in a different format.*

*.. we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.*  
Ephesians 1:11-13

*"...we, who with unveiled faces reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory."*  
2 Corinthians 3:18

## ***Glorious Possibilities***

The Apostle taught us that our life-purpose is to be *"for the praise of [God's] glory*. This is true in at least a couple of ways. Not only is it possible for us, as distracted people, to learn to focus on God, but also, through worshipful encounter, it is possible for those of us accustomed to chronic failure to become the occasion of many others glorifying God on account of us.

This kind of personal growth is possible. *"He who seeks will find."* Real spirituality leads us to painful, cross-like periods of growth. This, in turn, puts us on a path to glory. Again, this is possible... for **all** of us. *"With God,"* Jesus said, *"all things are possible."* Listen to Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:6. *"For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."*

Read the above verse slowly. Now, read it again. Did you notice that Paul is drawing a comparison between the creative light that gives energy to all living things to the creative work he has already begun inside our hearts? God's creativity is at work in us as we receive a *"knowledge of the... glory of God in the face of Christ."* Again, this transformation is possible for every one of us. It is a supernatural by-product of being committed to our relationship with God.

This is a spiritual kind of knowing. Its not about understanding static data. While biblical information is indispensable, the gospel *"does not come simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction."* (1 Thessalonians 1:5) Paul is aiming at an experience of spiritual power. He speaks of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. He inherited this metaphor from the priests of Israel when they spoke of blessing being a kind of "looking upon God's face" and having God's countenance look back upon us to give us a whole, healed, calm and conscientious self. Listen deeply to the priestly assurance. *"The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."* (Numbers 6:25-26)

I began anew to grasp these profound possibilities when I spoke a year ago with Krista Trippet, the host of the nationally syndicated radio Show, *On Being*. Krista interviews religious people from all over the world who testify to what the medical profession has long-held—namely that prayer and meditation reduce anxiety, lower reactivity, address hypertension and transform character. What was surprising was her interviews with scientists who have performed brain scans on those doing regular meditation. It now seems that the actual neurological structure of the brain may be altered during deep meditation. Paul was right. We can be *transformed by the renewing of our minds*--perhaps more literally than we used to think. Many of our chronic problems and our sinful patterns of relating are not mere matters of personality or genetic make-up. Not even bio-chemical or neurological disease has the final word about us. Without turning our back on medical treatment which should be embraced, we should nonetheless refuse to lose sight of the great open door to healing afforded by Christ. We will always have broken places, but much more healing is possible than many of us have thought.

Our tradition in Churches of Christ has affirmed this. Thomas Campbell said, *"the first and founda-*

tion truth of Christianity is union with Christ.” If the Spirit’s presence is to serve as earnest money—as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come—then union in and with the Triune God can be experienced. Our tradition has often emphasized that the role of textual analysis was to get us within what Alexander Campbell called the “hearing distance” of God’s living voice. Robert Richardson believed that one of the great challenges facing the church was a need to encounter the “reality of the spiritual world.” While Churches of Christ have often, perhaps justly, been criticized as being overly rationalistic, it’s important to note that men such as Richardson wrote, “...but religion dwelling in the heart, rooted in the feelings and affections, is a living, active, and real existence...This is religion. All the rest is machinery.” Barton Stone feared that when people lost sight of this they generated, “more heat than light.” So, while some may find some of the practices in this booklet adventurous, they are in almost every sense... traditional. Stone-Campbell churches have long approached holy text as a revealed mystery. For heirs of Alexander Campbell, the risen presence of Christ makes the scriptures into “living oracles” to the human soul. Within this long tradition we are attempting to coach habits that usher us into “ever increasing glory.”

## ***How to Make Use of the this Book***

In addition to our wider spiritual heritage, we realize that this congregation has long had a rich spirituality of its own. On the last page of our former minister’s, autobiography, Tommy Williams desires “to follow the leadings of the Lord as best as I can discern them.” This process of following after the Lord, he says, is “an adventure...[that] I do not expect will ever cease.” For that and other reasons we have selected practices which:

- 1) the admired disciples of all ages and traditions have usually found helpful
- 2) are likely compatible with any practices of persons who have spiritual muscle among us
- 3) are more easily accessed from within our traditional Stone-Campbell emphases.

More directly, this book is not meant to interrupt those whose prayer life is rich and full. The minister and leaders try not to deceive themselves, like Paul’s opponents, with the absurdity that they alone are “a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish...” Those of us in Christ do not regard one another from such a worldly point of view. We regard each believer as a new creation who is being made new by the Spirit, contributing powerfully to one everyone’s mutual development. If there are alternative practices which nourish your spirit, by all means do not let this manual interfere with what works. If you are a scratch golfer, we do not want to mess with your swing.

Nevertheless we believe an over-all attitude of openness to efforts like this one is a fruit of spiritual depth. We want to be serious about a canonical approach to spiritual formation without being insensitive to today’s needs. Anyone who is familiar with the *Book of Common Prayer* (a traditional prayer book) will note that our recommendations for Bible reading are much less lengthy than what has been traditionally expected of the church. The *Book of Common Prayer*, for instance, coaches us to pray five Psalms per day along with other Old and New Testament readings rather than one per week. It is my opinion that the intensity of this exercise is part of the reason it is largely ignored by communions who have inherited it. While many Christians may live and breathe such prayers, most of us can continue to make spiritual progress with a more deliberate pace allowing energy for analysis and rest for actually inhabiting fewer words. Honestly, for some of us the challenge is to begin reading scripture, period. For others, the challenge is not to speed up our reading in order to in-form, but to slow it down so as to be trans-formed.

Those coming from “high-church” traditions will notice that this book does not often follow tradi-



tional lectionary readings. While we in free-church traditions can see the benefit of keeping time with a wide portion of the church while utilizing rich, written prayers, our traditional practices have always affirmed the importance of the diversity of congregations. In addition, we seek to be rooted in the more primitive giving of scripture, and so our readings are done in canonical order. Ours is not merely a Christian tradition theologically, but a textual tradition in particular.

This continuous textual approach (*Lectua Continua*) increasingly seems odd. Church education programs regularly cater to felt individual needs. Bible study curriculum has come to be aimed at addressing the unique needs and topical interests of children, teens, seniors, singles, or young professionals etc. While there is nothing inherently wrong with such practices in moderation, overtime they can give the impression that Christian formation is about learning how to adapt the Christian tradition to our pressing cultural concerns. Today most church-goers are trying to fit God into their lives. The task of discipleship, however, is to find our lives within the life of God. We believe that most often happens in the lengthy and continuous encounter with holy text. There in and beyond the sacred page we discover ancient frames of reference that mystically *transform* what Jonathan Edwards called our religious affections and our sense of what is “relevant.”

While this is a book about spiritual formation, it assumes a commitment to Christ as he is confessed in the New Testament traditions, and in the ecumenical creeds. The kind of spirituality on offer at Speedway stems from our self understanding as a Christian unity movement and our identification with the universal church in *all* its manifestations.

Evagrius in the fourth century said, “If you are a theologian you pray truly; if you pray truly you are a theologian.” In our sanctuary fly banners of central biblical texts. These are expressions of what Jude calls “*the faith once and for all delivered.*” We seldom use the word creed, (from the Latin *credo*-to believe) but we do talk about and recite the *Word of Christ, the gospel of God* or *the faith*. While the gospel has metaphorical and spiritual power for individuals, we insist the biblical texts tell a continuous story of God’s revealing acts in history. He is saving all of creation. Alexander Campbell insisted that the gospel, far from being about speculative, abstract or highly personal truths, was about public *facts*—things God literally has done in history. Hesitancy about settling for only one formulation of the creed, then, is not a sign of heterodoxy, but it is rooted in our preference for the canon of scripture and its diverse ways of articulating the gospel. Our minister’s creed is in deep agreement with the church’s tradition, but we understand it as only one of numerous and always-reforming articulations of the gospel we can affirm.

**We believe  
the one Lord, God and Creator,  
according to his covenant with Israel,**

**became incarnate  
in the historical life, death, burial  
and resurrection  
of his anointed King, the Lord Jesus of Nazareth.**

**We believe Jesus in saving us  
unleashed new creative power,  
ascended on high, and  
is interceding for us,  
and will come judging  
the living and the dead.**

**We believe in the indwelling Holy Spirit, our Lord,**

**who breathes life into Scripture,  
gives birth to one universal church  
through one baptism for the forgiveness of sins,  
and who will give life to our mortal bodies,  
pervading the world to come.**

This faith serves as the conceptual background for what is being coached in this booklet. Unfortunately, theology often gets separated from our worship and practice. This book is not so much about right thinking as it is right living. Here we are not so much seeking to know and defend what is right as much as learning to *love* what is right. As such it is about integrating our theological head, which often knows what we ought to do, with our aching heart, which may only go along with Christian obedience grudgingly. Spiritual disciplines are about discovering, confessing, and transforming our deepest desires so that they conform to the gospel. Jonathan Edwards spoke of transformed “*religious affections*.” Reading scriptural information is just the beginning of seeking to have Jesus “read into our heart.”

This requires social healing. There will be very sympathetic, confidential help available in the congregation, if you only will ask for it. We all need carefully selected others as well as the church in general to help us. We need each other to listen to our admissions of failure, and often to help us celebrate progress that we do not see. Those of us who listen to others talk about their spiritual efforts we are actually being given a gift. It is one of the consistent ironies of the gospel that the persons we listen to usually end up blessing us more than we them. Fear of social pain, deep memories of shame and vulnerability are obstacle to following Jesus in this age. But in this congregation we can count on each other! Throughout this process there will be opportunities for sharing with a someone who has promised to do the exercises along with everyone else. They will be a sounding board about what is taking place inside us. We will list these volunteers (both men and women) some of whom may be in a small group. There will be wider internet and church-wide venues for sharing. Especially on Sunday nights we will do many of the reading and spiritual exercises together.

I will be frank. True spirituality often requires us to grieve. But we are allowed to face fears and difficult emotion at a pace that does not overwhelm us! Henri Nouwen speaks of only “*day by day taking small steps toward life*.” The exciting part is that through all our inner work there is always a mystical grace. Jesus says that will never leave us. Paul says, he works powerfully in us.

There is a calendar and weekly list of memory verses and prayer exercises immediately following this introduction. These spiritual exercises are economic, social, and deeply-personal practices which we ask each member of the Speedway Church to take seriously. They are simultaneously social rituals, intimate conversations, intellectual pursuits, emotional exercises, and psychic mysteries. They constitute the journey of a life-time, and this booklet is an invitation for you to adapt as much or all of it as is helpful to you as a member of this missional community. There has been no attempt to be comprehensive. That having been said, the disciplines emphasized in this booklet are:

**Meditating, Memorizing and Collectively Praying over the Psalms  
Prayer, Scripture and Centering  
Fellowship and Mentoring  
Purposed Giving  
Engaging in Hospitality  
Fasting and Preparation for Communion**

| <u>Date</u> | <u>Sunday</u> | <u>For Meditation</u> | <u>Type of Exercise</u> | <u>Fast</u> | <u>Memory Psalm</u> | <u>Sunday PM</u> |
|-------------|---------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Jan 4       | 1             | Matthew 7:13-23       | Examination             |             | 1:1-2               | Exercise         |
| Jan 11      | 2             | Matthew 7:24-28       | Examination             |             | 2::12               | Exercise         |
| Jan 18      | 3             | Matthew 10:34-40      | Examination             |             | 3:5-6               | Testimony        |
| Jan 25      | 4             | Genesis 18:1-9        | Hospitality Journal     |             | 4:6-8               | The Story        |
| Feb 1       | 5             | Matthew 12:1-44       | Life of Christ          |             | 5:11                | Conversation     |
| Feb 8       | 6             | Matthew 12:43-45      | Passion of Christ       |             | 6:1-4               | Testimony        |
| Feb 15      | 7             | Matthew 13:31-33      | Resurrection            | Fast        | 7:14-15             | Purposing        |
| Feb 22      | 8             | Leviticus 19:34       | Hospitality Journal     |             | 8:1-2               | Versailles       |
| Mar 1       | 9             | Matthew 13:44-45      | Service                 |             | 9:11-12 or 19-20    | Alton            |
| Mar 8       | 10            | Matthew 20:1-16       | Life of Christ          |             | 10:17-18            | Conversation     |
| Mar 15      | 11            | Matthew 20:20-28      | Passion of Christ       |             | 11:3-4              | The Story        |
| Mar 22      | 12            | Matthew 21:18-22      | Service                 |             | 12:7-8              | Alton            |
| Mar 29      | 13            | 7 Words from Cross    | Passion of Christ       |             | 13:5-6              | Gospel Meeting   |
| Apr 5       | 14            | Matthew 22:1-14       | Resurrection            | Fast        | 14:3 or 7           | No PM            |
| Apr 12      | 15            | Matthew 26:17-35      | service                 |             | 15:1, 5             | Alton            |
| Apr 19      | 16            | Matthew 28:16-20      | Resurrection            |             | 16:9-11             | The Story        |
| Apr 26      | 17            | Luke 7:36-48          | Hospitality Journal     |             | 17: 14b-15          | Alton            |
| May 3       | 18            | Job 29:21-30:23       | Passion of Christ       |             | 18:2                | Testimony        |
| May 10      | 19            | Job 38:1-21           | Service                 |             | 19:1-3              | Alton            |
| May 17      | 20            | Job 42:1-6            | Examination             |             | 20:6-8              | The Story        |
| May 24      | Indy 500      | Luke 10:25-42         | Hospitality Journal     |             | No church           | No church        |
| May 31      | 21            | Job 42:7-16           | Resurrection            |             | 21:13               | Alton            |
| Jun 7       | 22            | Numbers 9:15-23       | Service                 |             | 22:3-4              | Conversation     |
| Jun 14      | 23            | Numbers 11            | Life of Christ          |             | 23:1-3              | Exercise         |
| Jun 21      | 24            | Numbers 12            | Life of Christ          |             | 24:4-6              | Testimony        |
| Jun 28      | 25            | Lk 12:13-21;16:1-15   | Hospitality Journal     | Fast        | 25:16-18            | The Story        |

| <u>Date</u> | <u>Sunday</u>    | <u>For Meditation</u>                       | <u>Type of Exercise</u> | <u>Fast</u> | <u>Memory Psalm</u> | <u>Sunday PM</u> |
|-------------|------------------|---|-------------------------|-------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Jul 5       | 26               | Numbers 13                                  | Examination             |             | 26:1-3              | Conversation     |
| Jul 12      | 27               | Numbers 14:1-44                             | Examination             |             | 27:4-5              | Exercise         |
| Jul 19      | 28               | Numbers 16:1-50                             | Passion of Christ       |             | 28:6-9              | The Story        |
| Jul 26      | Brickyard<br>400 | Luke 14:12-24                               | Hospitality Journal 6   |             | No church           | No church        |
| Aug 2       | 29               | Numbers 17:1-13                             | Life of Christ          |             | 29:1-2              | Testimony        |
| Aug 9       | 30               | Numbers 20:1-13                             | Life of Christ          |             | 30:11-12            | Conversation     |
| Aug 16      | 31               | Numbers 21:4-9                              | Passion of Christ       |             | 31:14-16            | The Story        |
| Aug 23      | 32               | Luke 16:19-31                               | Hospitaliy Journal 7    |             | 32:1-2              | Exercise         |
| Aug 30      | 33               | Gregory of Nyssa 1                          | Nature/Centering        |             | 33:20-22            | Testimony        |
| Sep 6       | 34               | Basil the Great 2                           | Nature/Centering        |             | 34:18-22            | The Story        |
| Sep 13      | 35               | John Wesley 3                               | Art/Centering           |             | 35::9-10            | The Story        |
| Sep 20      | 36               | Richardson 4                                | Memory/Examine          | Fast        | 36:5-9              | The Story        |
| Sep 27      | 37               | Luke 18:15-17                               | Hospitality Journal 8   |             | 37:10-11            | The Story        |
| Oct 4       | 38               | Richardson 5                                | Memory/Examine          | Fast        | 38:17-22            | The Story        |
| Oct 11      | 39               | 1 Tim 1:12-17                               | Resurrection            |             | 39:4-5              | The Story        |
| Oct 18      | 40               | 1 Tim 3:1-7                                 | Life of Christ          |             | 40:1-3 or 9-10      | The Story        |
| Oct 25      | 41               | Luke 19:1-9                                 | Hospitality Journal 9   |             | 41:13               | Dinner/no pm     |
| Nov 1       | 42               | 1 Timothy 4:9-16                            | Resurrection            |             | 42:11               | Testimony        |
| Nov 8       | 43               | 2 Timothy 2:1-13                            | Life of Christ          |             | <u>44:20-26</u>     | Conversation     |
| Nov 15      | 44               | Luke 24:13-25                               | Hospitality Journal 10  |             | <u>44:20-26</u>     | Conversation     |
| Nov 22      | 45               | Rom12:4-16; 1 Tim<br>5:9-10; 1 Peter 4:5-11 | Hospitality Journal 11  |             | 45:7-8              | Unity Meetings   |
| Nov 29      | 46               | Matthew 9:1-30                              | Examination             | Fast        | 46:1-3 or 7         | Unity Meetings   |
| Dec 6       | 47               | 2 Timothy 4:1-8                             | Passion of Christ       |             | 47:9                | Unity Meetings   |
| Dec 13      | 48               | Titus 3:1-8                                 | Resurrection            |             | 48:12-14            | Unity Meetings   |
| Dec 20      | 49               | Matthew 26:17-35                            | Examination             | Fast        | 49:13-15            | Candlelight      |
| Dec 27      | 50               | Mt 25:31-46 Heb 13:2                        | Hospitality Journal 12  |             | 50:1-2              | No service       |



137

## Praying The Psalms

*Ephesians 5:19*  
*Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and*  
*spiritual songs.*



*Be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.*  
Ephesians 5:19

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.*  
Colossians 3:16

### **Why the Psalms?**

“*Psalms hymns and spiritual songs*” is not a throw away phrase. It’s a formula Paul repeats in contexts having to do with spiritual formation. At Speedway we affirm the importance of contemporary hymn writing and the rich inheritance of the classic hymns written largely in the last 500 years. But without being overly ridged or divisive, we do think that we should regularly make use of the canonical Psalms God gives for our transformation. Paul’s instructions were clear.

Why don’t we feel free to replace the Psalms with peppy instrumental praise songs more “relevant to today’s culture” the way we have substituted a hug and a handshake for the holy kiss? The short answer is that we cannot always do this without many kinds of loss. C.S. Lewis in his book, *Reflections on the Psalms*, states that he believed Psalm 19 to be the most beautiful poem ever penned. Our renditions of *Sing and Be Happy* just don’t stack up—either in theology, in structure, complexity, richness, or in spiritual depth. We make room for such songs in the same way a Shakespearean and Milton scholar enjoys and makes room for classic comic books and *Hunger Games* novels. These can even play an important part in a popular diet, but without the protein of biblical prayer, such things will stunt our aesthetic and moral judgment.

N.T Wright persuasively argues that the church cannot abandon the Psalms without a loss of biblical worldview. The Psalms teach us to view time, space and creation the way Jesus did. We cannot follow Jesus to the cross in primitive simplicity without noticing that he died there with multiple psalms on his lips.

That is because the Psalms were Israel’s prayer book. Jews in Jesus day didn’t carry around scrolls of Torah; but they did sing the Psalter from memory. Even Christian traditions that rejected the notion of prayer-books during the Reformation did so with a rich practice of singing psalms.

It is in the Psalms, then, that we can learn to pray not for mere stuff, but for the things that truly matter. In the Psalms we learn how to pray ourselves into God’s presence, how to praise him for himself—how to learn gratitude even when we do not get our way. They teach us to own a redemptive history with other people; they teach how to bring our laments to God. They instruct as to how to mourn and to rejoice in suffering. They give words to us when all our words fail.

We cannot neglect the Psalms without this kind of loss of *inspiration*. We do not use “inspiration” here only in a diminished, secular way. The Spirit actually inhabits or breaths into (*in-spiro*) these particular musical texts; they connect us back 2800 years and call us to a shared future with all ages. So, we recommend a private and collective reading of the Psalms as an important spiritual discipline.

## *Praying with and Encouraging One Another*

We are enjoined not only to make melody in our hearts to God, but also to “*speak to one another with psalms.*” This year we are looking forward to using our new Psalm books, crafted for our own context. This should be especially rich because our memory verses for the year are also from the book of Psalms. When reading a psalm it is a good practice to try to understand who is speaking. Sometimes the narrator is speaking to God. During times like this we should use the words to pray to God. Speak directly to him with the whole church assembly. Sometimes God speaks to the King or to the people in a psalm. At such a point, our meditative stance is to try to listen as we say the words, as if God is also speaking to us. If the Psalm narrator is speaking to others then, as we speak the words of the Psalm, we assume the role of someone encouraging others. Speak to other church members in that situation. If we have words memorized, it will be possible to make eye-contact. Make the words of the psalm your own offering of wisdom to your brothers and sisters. This is what Paul told the Ephesians to do.

## *Creating a Setting for Memory*

Please consult the assignment calendar in the introduction of this booklet (pages 7-8) to determine what memory verse will be recited in church every week this year. When you turn to your assigned Psalm at home think about your setting, your body posture, and what can maximize your experience. The Deuteronomist makes this suggestion for families in Deuteronomy 6:7-9: “*Talk about them (God’s instructions) when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.*” My family recites scripture while we are in the car together. We also post “post-it notes” literally on doorframes. Some say the supper table is where they and their children memorize small portions of verse. Others take care to turn on the fireplace on their televisions as they curl up in a chair. Others find it nice to light a candle. None of this is strictly necessary; yet, the principle from Deuteronomy seems to be that paying some attention to our space when approaching the scriptures is important.

## *Preparation Prayer*

The introductory Psalm insists that as a people we can take delight in God’s instruction by *meditating on it day and night.* (Psalm 1: 1-2) Of course, the command to meditate on God’s instruction applies to all of scripture. We will discuss how to do this in relation to gospel texts at a later point. First, we need to say a few things about how to approach a period of meditation. Over its long history the church has developed forms for meditation and holy reading, often called by its Latin name, *lectua divina.* Ignatius Loyola consolidated many of these practices and introduced a period of imaginative listening to the text, providing a very structured way to train people to discern the will of God. Within these ancient frameworks, the church generally taught its members to begin spiritual exercises by saying the Lord’s Prayer. Here it is.

Matt 6:9-13  
"Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
10 your kingdom come,  
your will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
11 Give us today our daily bread.  
12 Forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
13 And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from the evil one.'  
(For thine is the kingdom and the power  
And the glory forever and ever, Amen.)

If a person does not know this prayer, it should be committed to memory—not so that it can be prayed as a mantra, but so that it can coach a more free-form and deeply personal prayer which does not neglect the essential movements of Jesus' example. This is a kind of opening exercise that prepares us to encounter God more deeply.

Begin by addressing God in some way. *Our Father...* Be sure to hallow his name. Express respect. Here is your judge and defense attorney together in one. Let God know that this is a special time for you, and you will be delighted to discover that it is special for him as well.

Then, make it clear that you want to see his will done in your life and in the world around about you. *Your will be done...* Confess sin if seeking his will is not honestly the highest thing on your agenda. We don't pray as we should be. We pray as we are, seeking to be transformed. Spend some time praying for God's will in all the areas of your life. All of your worries about the spouse and the kids—everything that is not right—bring it to God and tell him whatever solution you are seeking is surrendered to his will.

Then the prayer moves to asking God for what we need for today—*daily bread*. This is not a wish-list or a time to press God for the kind of financial security which has *bigger barns* storing up for retirement. Here, seek to be content with God's gifts in the moment. George Buttrick observed that it may not be wrong to ask for many things, "*but the fact remains that Jesus asked for nothing for himself except daily bread, strength in testing and grace to reveal God to the world.*" Here, we ask God to help us do whatever we need to do to please him by giving us what we need for today. We refuse to worry beyond this. We recognize that we need to rest in his provision. This, too, may be a matter that is left incomplete. But we confess that it is so, and go on, praying, "oh for grace to trust him more."

Of course, all of this leads directly into the next movement of the prayer—asking God *to forgive our debts*. If you know what bothers your conscience, confess it directly to God. Tell him exactly how you fail and have failed, and then receive his forgiveness. Sometimes we need time to feel the depth of what we have done. This is appropriate; but don't get stuck there. Know that forgiveness is being offered. God is the one who has the right to forgive. Don't argue with him; receive his forgiveness, even as you recognize that there may be some irritation,

some anger, or disappointment you may feel toward others. Ask him to help you let that go. Do not neglect the discipline of praying for your enemies. Most of us do not have life and death enemies, but we do have people who do not wish us well because there is relational brokenness. It is crucial to pray for people we are mad at and who are mad at us! Sometimes negativity sneaks up on us very gradually because we do not seek forgiveness for ourselves and for those who *trespass against us*. The job will not always be done completely. But if it is not, let's tell God that we want to continue the work soon, asking his help to let all bitterness go.

The temptations to pretend in life are great. Here, in our private prayer-closet, we have our last defense against dishonesty and neurosis. So ask God to lead us to where we can escape evil forces. It is a universal human temptation to find false compensations for our hurts. Temptations to justify our actions because of the bad behavior of others—these are all enormous traps. We need God's help to provide for our escape from such minefields.

Finally, we acknowledge that if we escape, if we are thankful and forgiven and free from bitterness, free from worry because of God's daily provision—if all of this is so, it is not because of our own goodness. It's not a result of our fine spirituality. It is because God is gracious and glorious infusing our lives with all that is good about us. All the credit belongs to him. The Reformation reminded the church of its more ancient mantras. *Sola fide, sola gratia!* (*by faith in God alone, by grace alone is it possible.*) As we contemplate our deliverance, we cannot help but finally be moved to praise God. Everything should move toward doxology—praise.

### ***A Method for Praying and Meditating on our Weekly Psalm***

Now we are ready to read. I wish to recommend a Trinitarian approach to praying the Psalms.

Read the selected text for the week:

**1)attending to the acts of the God of Israel.** Here is where we use our head. Who is speaking? What kind of a psalm is it? If we find ourselves confused, the minister or leaders can help orient. Nothing would make the leadership feel better than to get a call asking us to talk about the setting of a psalm. There may be particular resources you like to read along with the Psalms. At this point we respect the fact that these are Davidic and Hebrew poems that nurtured God's people long ago. For instance Psalm 2 appears to be a song sung at the Davidic King's coronation—a holy ceremony where God from his heavenly temple mocks all opposition to God's rule because he adopts his King as Messiah and promises to take care of the enemies that threaten Israel. This Psalm, repeatedly cited in light of Jesus' work in the New Testament, is not directly about Jesus in the first instance. We will understand how Jesus fits the Psalms—or as we say fills up the meaning of a text (fulfills a text) only in the next movement. First work on your understanding and insight in the Psalm in its own context. Pray that the setting of the Psalm would help you understand your own world. Celebrate discoveries. Maybe even jot a question down after you come up from prayer.

Read the text a aloud a second time, playing with different stresses on different words. This

time...

**2. Seeing the text in the light of the glory of Christ.** Jesus is now the anointed King whom God calls his son at Jordan and on the Mount of Transfiguration. So Psalm 2 is the frame of reference from which we should understand Jesus' calling in the gospels. "Jesus, raised from the dead, descended from David," is living and ruling now, and he shall protect us from all enemies, like David did, except far better. His rule cannot ultimately be threatened. So, in this prayer exercise, we let the words slowly pour over us and help connect us emotionally to the presence who assures us that he is in charge. This time through the Psalm we ask ourselves how we feel. For instance is there something about breaking the nations that worries me? Why do I feel a little uncomfortable about kissing the son? Are these the emotional reactions intended by the text?

Not every Psalm will be so easily understood in terms of Christ, but in each reading there comes a time when the understanding should give way to the experience of God's message and presence. Pray again, this time concentrating on our emotional state. In Psalm 2 it would be appropriate to feel God's comfort and security, knowing that he "*is installed in Zion.*" Here is perhaps where we commit our sections of text to memory allowing them to seep into our sub-conscious.

The sub-conscious is perhaps part of the location of the following centering prayer.

**3) Read the text listening for the ongoing voice of the Spirit in your life.** What is God doing in your spirit? Are you asking for his Spirit to direct your life and fill you in every way? Do this, as you move from word to word on the page. Resolve to obey his prompting. **Begin a centering prayer to by asking that you would hear no other spirit other than the Spirit of Jesus.** At that point say and think nothing; just listen or attend to God. Here is where we learn to *be still and know that [God] is God.* In our childhoods men who may have led public prayer approached the pulpit and stood before us saying, "Let us clear our minds." This is now the task before us. It is a hard task. But it is also a means by which God's Spirit may testify with our spirit. At baptism we affirm that the Spirit does this, and we call out to God as Father. So also now, we rest, attending to the Spirit with our spirits rather than just our minds.

If we have a thought, we simply clear our minds with a word or phrase. I like to use a phrase from the text. I might say "kiss the son," and in this way allow my thought to disappear down my stream of consciousness, allowing my spirit to attend again with God's Spirit within. Others have a special word that they say to themselves in order to allow their anxious thoughts to stop. When we stop and try to think of nothing we will realize why we are so tired. We may even find ourselves going to sleep. That is fine. We will have discovered something important. So much of this culture's sleeplessness is a result of our minds running a mile a minute.

Slowing this motor down is a challenge. But take the challenge. If there is a distraction, for instance if the cat meows, thank God for the love of the cat, and "kiss the son," returning to mental silence. Spend a few minutes doing this. Hopefully, as the years goes on, increasing amounts of time spent this way will be more and more rewarding.

Sometimes—for me, by far and away most times-- there is nothing that comes to me during



this quiet time. This is not a technique or a tool with which to manipulate the spiritual world. Our prayers do not control God. But after practicing the discipline of silence for years now, I can testify that there are times when I feel something huge happening inside of me. Sometimes I don't know what is going on. Other times God's voice can be heard. Sometimes I wonder if I did not just imagine the voice. And, of course, God *is* working *in* our imagination. His voice is not always to be easily distinguished from our own holy desires.

Of course, we must test the message to see if our take-away is consistent with the gospel. We have to *test the spirits* with our other brothers and sisters in Christ who "*also have the Spirit of God.*" (1 Corinthians 7:40) This centering prayer is a way of getting the "self" put back together. God wants to enter into our speeding minds which are working so hard to keep deep things at bay. The practice of this centering prayer is what really makes our devotional life a "quiet time."

### ***Why Are Structured Forms Necessary?***

In strongly suggesting learning specific forms of prayer we are not trying to imply that the extemporaneous prayer offered by someone who knows very little is not heard by our gracious Lord. All prayer begins with simple prayer—prayers that progress the way any conversation with our friends would. God responds to such simple conversations. Infant faith need only to reach out to God. We are saved by grace, and we always pray by grace, even if all we can manage is a groan.

But the blunt answer to the question of why a particular form is being instructed in this manual is that Jesus gave his followers a specific form. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, they were asking as Jews who had been to synagogue and around the temple their whole life! They, no doubt, had various degrees of familiarity with the scriptures, but they had generally prayed. "*Yet one day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray."* (Luke 11:1) The question here is not about how to address God. The question is much deeper, and it arises from being with Jesus as he engages in mystical experience. Jesus' prayerful acts carried with them the presence of a discernible power and authority, which seeped into his ministry. This is the force of the disciples' question. They were seeking a deeper grace.

I believe some parts of the Stone-Campbell tradition are correct in treating the Lord's prayer as a template, rather than a personal mantra, though the plural forms (*our Father, give us*, etc.) in the prayer clearly suggest that it was intended for collective, church-like use. When we neglect the collective recitation of such basic prayer forms which Jesus commanded his disciples to use, the form either must be learned in some other way (like in this manual), or our neglect of it is a form of disobedience.

Does this mean we must always pray in the form of the Lord's Prayer? Of course not. It is one form of prayer we are commanded to use as a basic tutor in learning to pray widely and variously. When young basketball players learn basic kinds of cuts, screens and patterns for a basketball offense, they begin by following an exact set of coordinated and timed movements. By the time they are in high school, basketball players generally know how to improvise within

that framework. But free-form improvisation is improvisation—not chaos—precisely because the basic forms have become second nature.

Of course, I have also recommended a three-fold reading and prayer movement over each of the Psalms. This has many hundreds of years of precedent, and it is recommended for carefully considered theological and methodological reasons. The movements—even their order-- are not arbitrary.

The first movement of biblical reading is completely in harmony with the best of our Stone-Campbell heritage in that it insists on us understanding the meaning of biblical texts within their historical and literary context. This critical reading of scripture in light of what its authors and editors first intended is fundamental for providing the framework for what subsequent meanings are allowed to emerge.

Does this mean that we can't profit from scripture unless we are prepared for rigorous study of all its background all the time? Of course not. It just means we have to regularly practice this *first* or else we'll get in the habit of making the bible mean what our flesh wants it to mean.

Only then, once we have attended to the words, can we go on to acknowledge that revelation does not come to us merely as rational data on a page. The Word that was near Israel and that is near us in the risen Jesus is a word that confronts us as a living presence. Thus, reading the Psalm a second time in light of Jesus' work, allows us to be confronted in a deep, emotional way. Many of the Psalms do not lend themselves to messianic interpretations, so this movement is not always going to be the same. But it is important to keep the living presence of God in Israel and in Christ at the center of all our exercises.

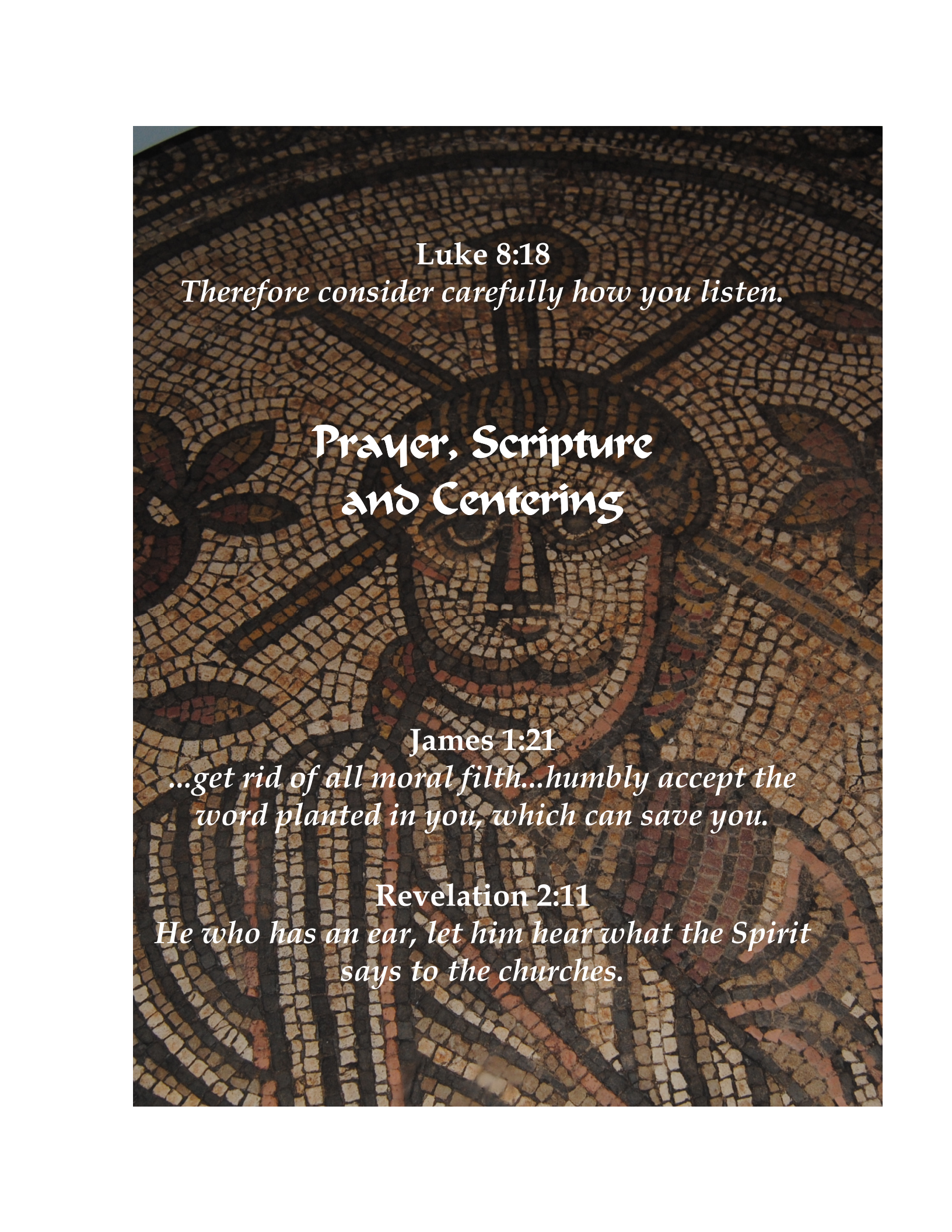
Finally, in suggesting what is called centering prayer or “contemplative” prayer, we are insisting that our union with Christ, can be spiritually experienced. The Psalms enjoin us to *be still*, and in the practice of stillness and silence we come to a different kind of knowledge of God. (Psalm 46:10)

Again, must this form always be practiced? No. In fact, it is not always for beginners. But centering with the intention to listen with our spirit as well as our mind is a practice too well attested to be utterly neglected. Perhaps this kind of prayer can be practiced sometimes for a few minutes before other prayers, and before and during Christian assemblies. These three movements attend to and correspond to each of the ways God reveals himself to us: 1) through the textual witness to God's acts in history, 2) through his living presence through incarnational witness, and 3) through spiritual mystery. These prayer forms are not inflexible laws, but neither are they arbitrary. They are a way of teaching the fundamentals.

### ***A Note About Attitude and Setting***

The sinful flesh will resist the second and third prayer exercises. It is likely that the discomfort will be great enough at times that we will wonder if meditation on scripture is even for us. It is. It is just that emotional and spiritual realities are deep things that we all have a tendency to run from. Do not run. God will hold us. He is *gentle and humble in heart*. *His yoke is easy*. *His burden is light*. It's a burden to change, but spiritual seeking will be fruitful if we keep knocking on the door.

Also don't be disappointed because it may not be practical to do all three movements in one setting. Interruptions must not be treated as interruptions. Jesus was on an emergency house call to the synagogue ruler's house when the bleeding woman interrupted him, and he faithfully attended to the matter which, quite literally, "came pressing up against him." Interruptions should be treated as opportunities to grow in ways that you did not plan or attempt to control. If we allow ourselves to be frustrated, we will thwart the discipline. Perhaps each of these exercises can be done in just a few minutes on successive evenings, or during a child's nap on successive days. Just be honest with yourself about the need to spend time and carve out a decent environment for meditating on God's revelation as the Psalmist says, "*both day and night.*"



Luke 8:18

*Therefore consider carefully how you listen.*

## Prayer, Scripture and Centering

James 1:21

*...get rid of all moral filth...humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.*

Revelation 2:11

*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*



The Psalms are a school in the mechanics of prayer. Using the words of the text to encourage ourselves, one another, and to speak to God is a powerful tutor. Using the Lord's Prayer as a template, we are learning some basic exercises for our soul. Praying for those about us—particularly our close relationships at home and in the church, is something we become more and more habituated to as we approach the Psalms with a preparatory prayer movement. In addition, in the section on meditating on and praying the Psalms we discussed a method of reading, that continued to go back over the text emphasizing different words which often suggests unexpected nuances of meaning in the text.

In this section, as we think about cultivating a deeper relationship with Christ by spending time with him in the gospels, we will continue to build upon what we have learned. Before we begin talking about meditating on Christ in the gospels or seeking to be prayerfully united with Christ in his passion or in his resurrection, we should attend to some common struggles with prayer.

### *Why Does God Seem Absent when I Pray?*

Every Christian experiences times when prayer seems like more of a chore than a privilege—when we have to force ourselves to spend time with God— and when we do attempt to do so, he seems distant, as if we are merely talking to ourselves. Our cries seem to go only about as far as the ceiling. If Jesus has given us his Spirit and if he promises to never leave us, why is this experience so common?

Sometimes there is no apparent explanation. Of course, that is the most maddening thing about the experience—it can feel lonely, or in my case, frustrating and then quite tiresome. A spiritual director might ask someone whether or not she has exercised her hearing muscles. Is it possible that the sense of God's absence is the result not spending enough time in focused attention to actually learn how to pay attention? Sometimes our spiritual antennae are just weak. On the other hand a person may have been listening long and hard and not felt the Lord's nearness because they are tired and depressed. Depression makes misery out of all our relationships. The most prolonged period of silence I have felt in my life was during a family crisis which did not resolve itself no matter how intensely I prayed. It got to the point that I told the Lord that he knew exactly how I felt and that I was going to leave the matter with him. It was a kind of act of faith. But I can't say that it did wonders for mine and God's sense of intimacy. Sometimes it is possible that God seems silent because he has already spoken the answer to our petitions, and we did not like the answer we got. So, we keep assailing him with the same request until he no longer tells us, "no"—but rather he leaves his word where it has been in silence. Sometimes we cannot come close to God because there are structural problems with our spiritual lives that we refuse to address. Sometimes we do not feel close because we may be under some kind of spiritual attack or encountering some kind of spiritual resistance or discouragement we need to move past. Yet, other times God may giving us some space, so to speak, to free us from the notion that he is overbearing or that our prayers are tools to force his hand. Perhaps we need to realize that God is not a dog that we can control with every call. Our relationship is possible because of his self-emptying. And we must be reminded that he is Lord of our prayer lives. Figuring out why there is discouraging silence is a matter of discernment for us and our close prayer partners.



### *What Should We Do about this Sense of God's Absence?*

- 1) Keep praying, trusting in the truth of the Spirit's presence regardless of our feelings or ecstatic life. C. S. Lewis insisted that the most faithful prayers are not the ones that we pray when we feel like it, but when we trust that God is faithful, regardless of our emotional state.
- 2) One of the favorite phrases which my great uncle Cletis taught me through his own praying was the petition that we might *feel God's nearness*. He trusted God was near, but he wanted to feel that reality in his spirit. We should pray for greater intimacy with God.
- 3) Depending on the reason for the seeming silence, one might consider praying a **prayer of examination: Ps 139:23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.** This may be a dangerous course if the reason for lack of intimacy with God is that the Accuser has already heaped up false shame on a person for things he could not control. But in recognizing that we are feeling shame for not being in control of things is an important discovery. A great truth that can be of help is to realize that situations are what they are. "*It is what it is.*" We can own up to that without shame or without trying to change the situation. We may then be in a position to relinquish our sense of responsibility that we proudly have taken upon ourselves when it was never ours to begin with.
- 4) Many folks more spiritual than myself suggest that one reason for a sense of distance with God is that God wants to free us from our dependency on results in our lives and in our ministries. In such cases, it may be appropriate to pray a **prayer of surrender. We pray with Jesus or Stephen, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.** (Luke 23:46) Perhaps the surrender is not merely in ourselves but a grief and a releasing of others into the hands of God. One of the best pieces of spiritual direction I received when I was going through my own sense of turmoil over loved ones was to rest in the knowledge that God cared for my loved ones more than I ever could. We can trust God with their care. This is what Abraham learned on Mount Moriah—in surrendering our loves to God, he is able to safeguard them better than us. "*On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.*" (Genesis 22)
- 5) I will also suggest that, depending on how the sense of silence is understood or discerned, it may be a good idea to pray the **prayer of relinquishment.** Grief is a very essential part of growth. We have to learn in the school of Gethsemane: "I want this or don't want that Lord, **but nevertheless not my will by yours be done.**" In letting go of dreams, finances or relationships, we make room for the next movement of our lives. Bitterness can disappear immediately when we realize that the end of our dreams can be the beginning of something better. We, then, may be in a position to pray a **prayer of resurrection: "Bring back to life in me some passion in some new way, God."**

## *Why Does God Not Answer Some Prayers?*

At a 1991 faculty meeting I and my colleagues learned that a young Muslim science teacher at Sam Rayburn High School would not be at work that day. His new-born baby seemed to be dying. My principle, off the cuff, asked me to say a prayer for the child and family at the faculty meeting. And I did so. The next day at work the faculty was all abuzz because we had learned that almost from the precise moment we prayed, the child got dramatically better.

About five years later in my congregation prayed for the child that was about to be born to one of our young families. I received a call from the hospital a day or so later. The Dad said that the their baby had died and that they were about to deliver the child still-born. I arrived at the hospital. I held the baby, prayed, and wept with the parents, who a week later forgot that I was even there.

Christian spirituality must deal with the frightful, dissonant mystery of these two stories. And the first thing any Christian should do is admit that we have no clue why some babies are quite dramatically rescued and others are strangled in their own life-giving umbilical cord. Let it be said again. We do not know. The church has to resist the temptation to speculate. That is itself is an important spiritual discipline. We will not figure God out. His ways of moving with the freedom of the world and its creatures are beyond searching out. The Almighty limits himself to be in relationship with the world. That we know. But how he maintains control of the universe within certain bounds amidst enormous forces of chaos and creaturely sin, is a huge mystery at the heart of our accounting of the world. If he appeared out of the whirlwind like he did for Job, he would not give us any different answer than he gave Job. He's been providentially bringing life out of chaos for a long, long time. Silence is the best answer. We are clueless—except that God loves life and will see it through to the end.

What do we **do** in response to this mystery? 1) I suggest we thank God that he will set all the evil in the world to rights. One of the most important things anyone has ever said to me is what Allen Ketchersid said to me after my Dad was killed in a car accident in 1994. Kent, "God will make this right." 2) In the mean time we thank him that he is not aloof, but present in the world of mysterious suffering. He is present in human dying in Jesus Christ. And Jesus is present to us even in the grave. 3) Pray for rumors that speak of this good news ahead of time. That is one thing the raising of the Muslim baby so dramatically must be about. Christ, in whose name I prayed at that faculty meeting, is unleashing resurrection power—unifying power into the world. 4) This means that we do not treat all prayers as if God is going to do what God is going to do regardless of what we ask. We keep petitioning God without giving up. (Luke 18:1) God is responsive to his creation. But neither do we put ourselves in the place of God as if we know the trillions of things he must know in answering a single good and holy request. We believe we can influence his will, but it is his will that must hold sway.

The thrust of this book, is not to plumb all the theological mysteries associated with the topic of prayer. This handbook is about praying so that we can reflect the glory of Jesus, the image of the invisible God. Michael Card wrote a beautiful song 30 years ago with the concluding question to God, “Could it be the only answer that means anything is you.” To those who delve into the experience of *being hidden with Christ in God*, all else pales in comparison. And so we turn now to courting a deeper relationship with Christ in the Gospels. The texts and the type of exercises we will be using are located in the calendar on pages 7-8.

### ***Ignatius of Loyola and the 4 Weeks***

The tradition of holy reading is as old as the Bible. These practices were continued in monastic communities and among the Protestant Reformers. My own subset of Churches of Christ have a peculiar method of collective reading and discussing. But in my view the best way to learn the basic movements of this kind of prayerful bible study is to break down the movements much the way Ignatius of Loyola did in suggesting that we approach the scriptures with 4 different intentions or prayerful exercises. Collective discussions with your brothers and sisters will no doubt be free-form, but that will be sustainable and productive if the essential habits of study, listening and prayer are practiced individually as well as corporately.

The first of Ignatius’ prayer exercises is that of personal examination. In a full-blown Ignatian retreat, this would last a whole *week*. Here, the purpose is to discover in ourselves the plank that is in our eye. It is to ask God to search us and try us to see if there is any offensive way in us. And we do that by staring repeatedly at Jesus in the text of scripture. The second is a prayer of union in and with the life of Christ. The third is a prayer of union in and with the passion of Christ. And fourth, the prayer asks that we participate in the resurrection. We ask God to bring to life some important joy, mission, or blessing. Of course Paul set this agenda—not Ignatius—when he declared, “*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*” (Phil 3:10-11) 1) Knowledge. 2) Christ 3) Fellowship of suffering 4) resurrection witness.

### ***How Long Should I Continue the “Centering” Exercise***

Keep letting your thoughts go down stream and connecting with God—focusing your intent to be attentive to Christ. Keep doing this until it no longer seems fitting to you. Its important to push past initial discomfort and unfamiliarity, t is not recommended that you stay so long that you end up with a terrible crook in your back. Get in a comfortable place and just spend time with the Lord without worrying too much about detail. Out of that time of keeping silence you may find greater clarity about lots of things. Then it will be hard to keep you from spending more and more time.

## *The Prayer of Examination*

On weeks when the exercise on the church calendar (pages 7-8) is labeled “examination” this is the movement of prayer recommended during such weeks:

- 1) List some spiritual goals. Tell God what we would like to see happen in our heart.
- 2) Spend some time considering what is at stake, for us, our family, the church, future generations etc.
- 3) Spend some time more generally praying, using the Lord’s prayer as a template.
- 4) Take a fearless moral inventory of our life. Write out where we are succeeding and where we fail and what fears and what shame is at the root of those failures.
- 5) Take the text for the week and read it in the normal fashion. Pray that the essential meaning of the words would be plain to our conscience. Pray that God would help us learn lessons in new and deeper ways. Pray that we would discover principles unseen.
- 6) Take the text again, this time looking at the scenery and imagine what Jesus’ expression is. How do the other characters feel? What does the place smell like? Think of the scriptural scene where Jesus is teaching, and think of the parabolic scene he may be painting. Pray this time seeking Christ’s own work in your heart to expose areas of needed growth.
- 7) Reading the text more slowly, playing with emphasis on different words, with the same holy imagination look at the text and pray the prayer that precedes all centering exercises: “Lord, I want to hear from no other spirit other than the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.” Then spend some time in silence over the assigned text.

## *The Life of Christ*

The preparation for this is much less involved. Use the usual preparation prayer time. Deal with the big stuff in your life as it arises in the rhythm of the Lord’s prayer. If there are a lot of requests for others and for yourself, make them. But know this exercise is just about spending time with Jesus—learning at his feet, communing with him in the Spirit, particularly basking in his love as we discover it in his presence and teaching.

The three reading movements are the same. Some texts are very conducive to using the method of imagining the setting. Other times this will be more difficult. But imagine the sound of the sea, the expressions on each face. The gospels invite our own imagination. As we use our imagination what we are really doing is bringing to Jesus our own experiences and deep images which interpret our world. We lay this psychological matrix before Christ. We enter into Jesus’ 1st century world and connect our world with it. And we pray.

The third movement can be thought of again as inviting the Spirit to inhabit our lives, bodies and psyche's. We seek a full-blown filling. We want him to minister to us in a way that he sees fit. So, we attempt to slow our mental motor so our spirit can be present to hear. Spend as much time as seems fitting.

### ***Praying the Passion***

A number of the calendar exercises are labeled "passion of Christ." The word passion means suffering. So during the first movement of this exercise, as we read, think about what Jesus gave up and offered. Think about the nature of his sacrificial love.

Again, as always, spend time thinking about the surroundings of the passage during the second reading. What does Jesus look like? What do the other characters both in Jesus teaching and those listening to that teaching look like? Smell like? Anything is fair game. Just approach the task of imagining the text with an attitude that wants to discover what is revelatory—not to create layers that obscure the meaning. The second reading, remember, is where we place our emotions before God. Our emotions often tell us important things. We need to feel them. But often emotions are out of control because our hearts desire the wrong kinds of things. Lay all of this out with the attitude of the Examine exercise, and receive the assurance of Christ's death for, but also working within you. As you look at Jesus and imagine him not only in the biblical scene but present to you and in you now, ask that the sacrificial love that renounced all things would be at work in you, so that you can be free of the negative desires and emotions that are beyond our rational control. We try to pray Christ down into our emotional center.

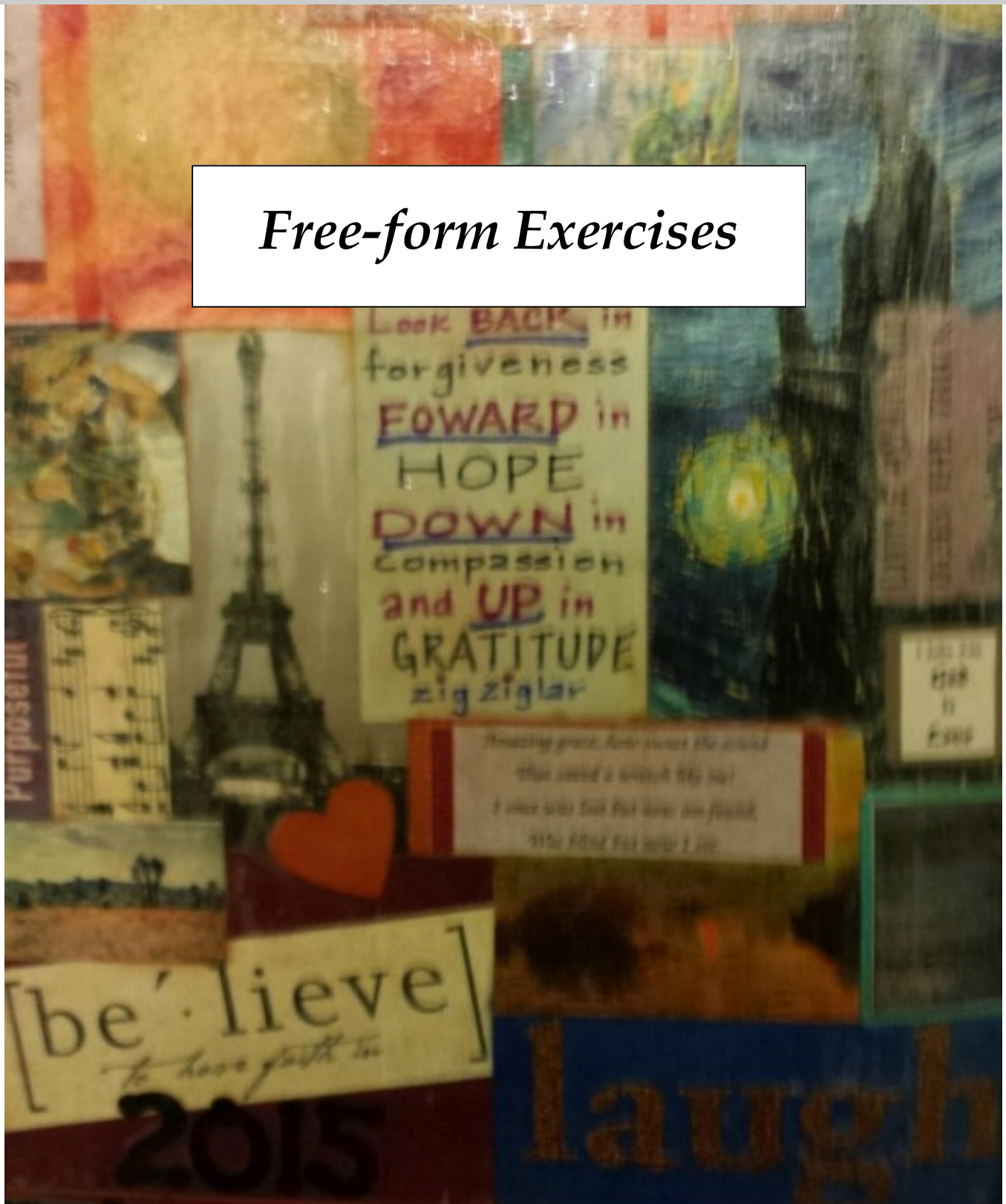
There are Pauline texts that I think are particularly appropriate for us to think about as we enter the third reading and the centering exercise. Paul speaks of *by the Spirit putting to death the misdeeds of the body*. (Romans 8:13) Here is where we tell God that we want share his suffering so that we can also share in his resurrection, and his spiritual power. We need to Spirit's help to put old negative patterns to rest. And in silence we offer ourselves to him.

### ***Resurrection Prayer***

Here all of the movements are the same, except that now we ask Christ to make new possibilities evident to us. We celebrate the power that is at work in the resurrection and also in us. We celebrate the love that always sees new possibility and growth. And we rejoice in it. We ask God to bring back to life our joy, our loved ones, our hopes. How does a depressed person have hope again? The answers are various, but one part of the answer is truly spending time with the Spirit.



## *Free-form Exercises*



Sometimes centering is more easily approached after a time of self-expression. Some people get in touch with their hopes and fears and loss by crafting artistic items. The front of the journal on the previous page is the result of one such prayerful time of crafting prayers on a page. The example picture is intended to convey this idea: While we focus on form, we have to adapt the forms to our own personal situation. Within the calendar, especially at mid year, we suggest some free form exercises on page 8. Perhaps these sample exercises will give us ideas about how to proceed with uniquely tailored devotional exercises.

### **Example for Week 33.**

Go to the nearest body of water outside on a day when the weather is decent.

*No matter how long you might stay at the spring,  
you would always be beginning to see the water.  
For the water never stops flowing,  
And it is always beginning to bubble up again.  
It is the same with the one who fixes his gaze  
On the infinite beauty of God.  
It is constantly being discovered anew,  
And it is always seen as something new  
And strange in comparison  
With what the mind has always understood.  
And as God continues to reveal himself  
Man continues to wonder...*

Gregory of Nyssa (337-95 AD)

### **Example for Week 34**

Go outside your house on a clear night.

*If sometime, then, in a serene night  
You gaze up at the ineffable beauty of the stars,  
You can form an idea of the creator of the universe  
Who has embroidered the sky with these flowers,  
And how in what you see necessity takes the form of the delightful  
Again during the day:  
if you consider the wonders of the day with sober thought  
And from what you see form and idea of what is invisible  
You will become a hearer, fit and made ready for the  
Fullness of this solemn and blessed theatre.*

Basil the Great (330-79 AD)

### **Example for Week 35.**

Spend some time in prayerful athletic play or gardening or do an art project.  
Then retreat to a prayerful place by yourself and read this prayer before centering:

*To know thee, O Lord is the highest learning;  
and to see Thy face, the only happiness.  
Suffer us not to go tell Thou hast given us Thy blessing  
And then my Thy blessing bind us closer to Thee.  
He who framed the heart of man designed it for himself,  
And bequeathed it unquietness till possess of its Maker.  
All Thy ways, O Lord, are mercy and wisdom;  
And all Thy counsels tend to our happiness.*

From the Prayers of John Wesley

### **Example for Week 36 and 38.**

These exercises are suggested as sample ways to prepare for communion during the fasts the congregation has encouraged. These quotes lead us into the mystery of the Lords Supper.

*Ah! It is here (at the table) that we see more of God than angels knew! It is amid the darkness of the grave of Jesus that new visions arise, more sublime and glorious than all that could precede... It is the light that renders him inaccessible, so that no man can approach him. It is rather into the thick darkness that we must enter.... It is when he shrouds his glory in the veil of our mortality; when he partakes of our deep woes and enters into the gloom of our dark and dreary prisons that we may presume to draw near to him in trustful faith, to enter a holy spiritual communion, and partake of the ineffable joys which wait upon his presence.*

Robert Richardson in *Communings in the Sanctuary* (1806-1876)

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*It is here within these sacred precincts that we should realize that divine spiritual unity which can be preserved only by the bond of peace. Partakers of one bread, we are one body. Animated by one Spirit, cheered by one hope, led by one Lord, sustained by one God and Father of all, it is here we should ever feel the eternal ties which bind us to each other. It is here amid the light of life and the joys of salvation that we may renew our vows of fealty...It is from the heights of Zion we now go forth...in compact array, aggressive and invincible and victorious to scatter the legions of darkness and fill the earth with the glory of the Lord.*

Robert Richardson

*It is a serious thing to live in a society of gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you say it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship...There are no 'ordinary' people.*

C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

# Fellowship and Mentoring



Spiritual disciplines cannot be engaged as individuals in isolation. *The Lord adds to the number of disciples all those who are being saved.* (Acts 2) Union with Christ is just another way of saying that we are members of one another in Christ. Gifts are not to be used in isolation from the local congregation—*each manifestation of the spirit is given for the collective good.* (1 Corinthians) In many ways the church does not have programs, but is the program. We offer a different way of being a community in the world. And we learn that way together.

The following are ways in which we can grow in our spiritual lives together: 1) we attend the same worship services and speak to one another about the content of the day. 2) We share in the Lord's Supper where we participate in holy mysteries together. 3) we eat the agape together. 4) We work on projects such as Mozell Sanders and Alton Redevelopment together 5) we have small group prayer groups together where these matters will be on the agenda. These are confidential places of sharing. 6) we may discuss our challenges and hopes with individual texts on the church Facebook page.

Along with our emphasis on the spiritual disciplines this year we have also decided to provide a list of people who have agreed to pray the exercises who are available to discuss your prayer life with you. Everyone needs a spiritual mentor. He or she may or may not be a member of this congregation, though he or she needs to be a person farther down the road on the spiritual journey with Christ. People need prayer partners, too. Hopefully, there will always be members of this congregation who will be willing to discuss the texts and prayers. When the list of prayer helpers is published in March, we can approach those people to see if it would be mutually beneficial to be partners, talking to one another about what is going on inside of us during prayer.

Everyone is also encouraged to come to the Sunday evening gatherings when we 1) go through spiritual exercises together and 2) Discuss what they mean for the leading of the congregation. If you have questions about how to move through the exercises, there will be examples and conversation partners present on those Sunday nights marked as "exercises" on the calendar on pages 7-8.

The people who will volunteer to have conversations do not necessarily see themselves as mentors, but they will be willing to try to listen, to point out progress that we cannot always see in ourselves, and they also serve as a sounding board for your challenges. Here at Speedway we confess our sins to one another; we do not confess one another's sins!

What about confession? Know that if you lay a heavy load on one of your listeners or partners they: 1) have to report crimes and potential crimes. 2) Know also that they may have to ask you to talk with the leaders or minister about some extra heavy matters they do not know how to handle. But short of crimes, the minister and leaders have always kept confidences. Confidences are kept here. I say that with fear and trembling. But I don't remember a single confidence being broken over the years. If you feel safe sharing, and if in sharing you are seeking healing, then do so. Do not think you are under an obligation to confess sin more widely than the circle of people you have hurt. But you will find people here who identify with every conceivable struggle—from sexual identity issues to drug addiction and family trauma and abuse. Its all here. And we are resources for one another if we will trust the process and go slow with each other.





# Purposed Giving

*Each man should give what he has decided  
in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under  
compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.  
(2 Corinthians 9:7)*

## ***Why Talk about Money?***

By this point into the handbook, we trust it is evident that our approach to spiritual formation is not to peddle guilt and pressure people with shame. Let us begin by saying that the congregation does not want money if people do not want to give it. When speaking to the Philippians about such matters, Paul said he was not "*looking for a gift, but looking for what may be credited to [their] account*" before God. (Phil. 4:17) So will not troling for money, we have to talk about money because its use is so critical to our spiritual development.

Paul's image of there being a temple store house with account books with our names on it is very interesting in the context of this study on how to cultivate Christ-like desires. Jesus said, "*But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*" (Matthew 6:20-21) In other words, placing our offerings in the temple treasury forms our heart. Our hearts follow our investments. Invest in Lilly stock and we will be drawn to paying attention to how the company is doing. Invest significantly and sacrificially in the Kingdom and our interest level in the things of God will soar exponentially.

We wish to protect against the wild abuses of the so-called "health and wealth gospel." We cannot have our affections set on money, give God a bribe that is tantamount to the practice of magic, and then depend on him to serve our idolatrous financial desires. Having said that, we affirm that Jesus did speak of being, "*rich toward God.*" The rich man who did not share his crop but who built bigger barns for himself, in Jesus' parable is to be considered a foolish loser of wealth. (Luke 12:21) By contrast Paul was clear that giving was a spiritual discipline that carried with it a great reward. By giving, "*God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*" (2 Cor. 9:8) Giving to God is its own reward, in a sense. But it does bring abundant blessing, financial discipline and capacity for greater and greater ministry. Again, in the context of giving, Paul uses an agricultural image which leads us in the same direction, "*whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.*"

Perhaps we do not emphasize enough the practice of giving as a means of seeking transformation. Paul says by being willing to share we can, "*lay up treasure for [ourselves] as a firm foundation into the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.*" (1 Tim 6:19) Giving, here, seems to anticipate and begin to participate in the building of the coming age. We take hold of true life now—the kind of life that will be in glory—through the practice of sharing. Wow. The possibilities for our transformation are huge!

Let me (Kent) speak entirely for myself from this point. I think it does no good to leave this teaching at the level of platitudes and generalities. When I first started making an income, it occurred to me that none of us should want a free ride on the backs of our brothers and sisters. *Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.* (Corinthians 8:13) The apostle is not talking about giving the same amount, but he wants us all to meaningfully share in the burden of carrying on our collective work.

How do we do that?



## ***How Much?***

If we are interested in practicing giving as a spiritual discipline there are clear guidelines about about the starting point for how much we should give. Abraham gave a tenth to the priestly order of Jesus and Melchizedek. The Law commanded the Israelites give 10% of everything. (Exodus 13:2) The prophets made it clear that failing to give a tenth of one's income was simply a form of theft. (Malachi 3:8) Jesus said that we should practice righteousness *along with* the tithe. (Matthew 23:23) In other words, while our whole lives are to be offered to God, God expects us to cultivate that spirit of martyrdom and generosity by practicing giving from the first-fruits of our income. God is not ambiguous about what amount is. Divide by 10. Again, the point of saying this is not to shame us into behavior by a powerless laying down the law. The purpose is to be honest about the Bible's wisdom about how to cultivate the Spirit's desire to be completely generous. Remember, Paul says this lays a foothold or foundation in the coming age! Giving is transformative!

## ***What if I am on a Fixed Income?***

Those who are stretched financially may find other ways of contributing to the financial life of the church. Some have began budgeting for God more carefully, and rearranged some priorities, finding more income than they realized for eternal investment. Some have volunteered to do work for the church instead of the church having to contract it out. Others have decided to mow an extra couple of yards and donate the money to church. This is huge! Others have committed to running garage sales and other fundraisers to contribute their share to the financial life of the church. Women have made craft items and sold them in an effort to make their contribution to the congregation's witness. There are usually ways to give what amounts to 10% of one's income even when a person has fewer financial resources than he or she would like.

It is hard to calculate how much of a self-esteem boost there is in doing this. People who are able to enjoy the blessing of giving, know that they feel more a part of a community. They feel a healthy pride in themselves; they feel more energized; they feel like they have more ownership in the future of the congregation; They sense that others look to them for guidance more; they know joy more; they look for opportunities to serve more; They are more and more like Christ. What a blessing to excel in the grace of giving!

## ***Another Action Step***

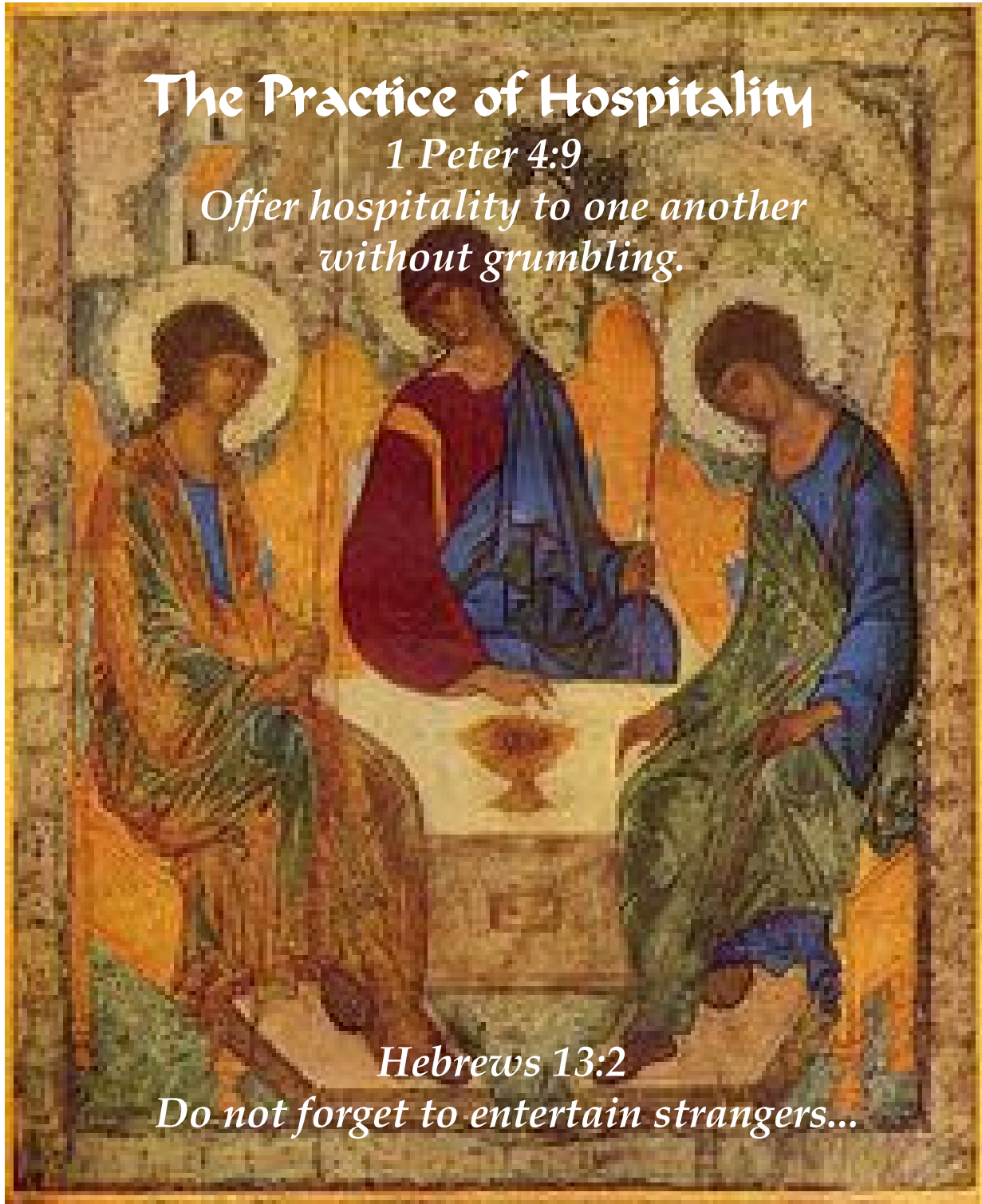
The congregation has [purposed giving forms](#) published on the website. We can download one of these forms and turn it in to the leaders, or ask for one and it will be provided. The forms are absolutely confidential. They are not binding. They only are ways for us to set goals that we have "*purposed in our heart.*" On the form congregation members may choose to indicate that they would like to talk with or pray with the leaders about their experience and practice of giving.



# The Practice of Hospitality

*1 Peter 4:9*

*Offer hospitality to one another  
without grumbling.*



*Hebrews 13:2*

*Do not forget to entertain strangers...*

## *What is Hospitality?*

We begin our consideration of the spiritual practice of hospitality with the story of Abraham entertaining visitors under his tree. The story suggests where the writer to the Hebrews got the idea that we may still entertain angels without knowing it. Genesis 18 is a story that suggests that the Lord, himself, speaks and lives with us in the midst of hospitable action. Over and over again in scripture this theme is repeated. And we re-enact the mystery every Lord's day when we set a table but the Lord ends us being not just our guest but our host. We can expect big things from God when we take strangers under our wing. The strangers will bless and host us as much or more as we them. Helping the stranger make connections, helping him be a home in a network of welcoming relations—this is the heart of biblical morality. It is at the center of the moral code.

This past year when I was in England for three weeks I found myself repeatedly at the mercy of others. Without their directions, assistance, patience, loans, and welcome, I would have had a terrible time. Occasionally it was merely a simple thing—Simon Sykes, the librarian at Tyndale House, Cambridge University, during tea got out a map of England and shared with me his memories of his childhood home, the place where he had worked on the coast of Wales, the best roots up the old Roman Highway past York into the north country. From that moment on I felt less intimidated in a different world full of brilliant people. It was as if Gaius of 3 John had again hosted a preacher on his spiritual journey.

Sometimes hospitality was more costly. The attendant at my hotel in Bath realized that I was not going to be able to figure out the parking system, and so walked with me nearly a mile to the parking lot in order to see to it that I had a valid ticket and did not get towed.

Christian hospitality can sometimes be as simple as that. Sometimes it involves being a long-term support to people coming out of prison. An ex-prisoner is the perfect illustration of a stranger. It's not that such persons are "strange" in a negative sense of senseless, but they are estranged from networks of human support so necessary for human flourishing. At times this may involve suffering the stigma of association with someone like the "sinful woman" in Luke 7. It may require learning in this place next to thousands of African immigrants that the foreigner—the Samaritan—is the one who really knows how to be hospitable. In hosting him, we turn out to be the half-dead people in need of help. Sometimes we have to make new friends of people with disabilities and handicaps, as in the parable of the great banquet. Clearly, the essence of hospitality is extending the networks of home to people who are not in a position to pay us back.

It is easy to live our lives like the rich man in the story of Lazarus oblivious to the number of strangers and people in need around us—even within a couple miles of the church building! Many of them are children whom Jesus wanted near him. Particularly difficult is extending grace to people like Zacchaeus, who symbolize what we detest in society. But in including such people there is healing and salvation to go all around! Jesus is clear that hospitality is that fundamental matter upon which the eternal judgment hinges. Cleopas and his buddy did not know how fantastic a decision they were making when they invited the stranger in to their place of stay on the road to Emmaus. There their eyes were opened. If we are diligent in practicing hospitality, so will be ours.

## *A Strong Welcome and Covenant*

None of this is to say that there are not costs for innocent doves to pay. One night last year one of our members had an item stolen at church because he was not used to having to watch valuables like a hawk, or as Jesus would have it, “like a wise serpent.” Hospitality, if it is to be the sustained kind, must respect the host as well as the guest. Hospitality aims at the flourishing and productivity of the guest—where he becomes a member of the community rather than nursing on a permanent guest status. Hospitality offers our time, our space, our resources freely—graciously. But what is on offer is a covenant between people and God.

This church has been very hospitable to newcomers in the past. Part of the reason for this is that hospitality has been our church program. The practice of Christian hospitality outstrips, outshines, out-performs and outlasts any other benevolent program or evangelistic gimmick. Personal, costly hospitality offered, as Chrysostom said, “face to face” is something the wider church must learn to restore in this age. I want to be emphatically complementary. We have a head start. Anyone who sat through our Thanksgiving service this fall will know just how powerfully you all are making others feel at home. This accounts for our continued existence when most other congregations of our heritage are now gone. Far from suggesting that the church must *become* hospitable, this manual sees the challenge for our congregation to be one of building on long-held strengths.

How shall we do this?


## *Discerning our Forms of Hospitality*

First, we have to continue our conversations on Sunday night and at other times. Sometimes we will be **doing these exercises together**. It is hoped that some of these monthly readings can be done together during the agape love feast—a perfect example of a hospitable practice.

Second, I suggest that we **inventory** for everyone the kinds of things that *we* find hospitable. What things do we try to do to help the stranger? Obviously the Alton project trying to adopt a prisoner coming from the Indiana Women’s Prison is an example of long-term hospitality. Art Spark Imagination is a way to meet children and their parents. The Mozal Sanders thanksgiving dinner is an attempt to meet strangers and offer a meal. Listing these kinds of practices together will help us all develop an imagination that thinks more and more hospitably.

Third, this booklet attempts to take the Ignatian method of **holy reading**, holy imagination—to sanctify it with meditative prayer—and finally to seek communion with the Spirit in a period of centering prayer about how to be hospitable.

Forth, **immediately after this** spiritual exercise, we are invited here to **journal** about what is going on inside of us. We will journal also about making plans with our family to be hospitable in some specific way. We are reminded, in closing, that the process of spiritual formation is not merely academic or prayerful—it requires action. James tells us, “*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*”



# Hospitality Plan 1

## *Genesis 18:1-9*

1) Recall the events of the last month and your prayer goals. Take stock of the ways to express hospitality. 2) Prayer releasing any nagging issues to God. 3) Read the text making note of themes which emerge. 4) Pray for understanding. If you are with others ask about their understanding. 5) Read the text experimenting with the stress you place on each word. Imagine the setting and each character. Use all of your senses. Do any new meanings emerge? 6) Pray for the grace of obedience to what you are discovering 7) After sitting with the story one more time, begin a period of centering prayer, releasing thoughts with your "centering word." or perhaps use a centering word taken from the story. Listen for the Spirit's guidance. 8) Reflect on the practice of hospitality here in your journal, planning some specific hospitable action. Feel free to use more paper.

**How, in this story do Abraham and Sarah entertain new possibility again in their old age? In what ways will you express your openness to God's promise when you express openness to the stranger?**

# Hospitality Plan 2

## *Leviticus 19:34*

*The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.*

1) Recall the events of the last month and your prayer goals. Take stock of the ways to express hospitality. 2) Prayer releasing any nagging issues to God. 3) Read the text making note of themes which emerge. 4) Pray for understanding. If you are with others ask about their understanding. 5) With this text rather than trying to imagine the setting, try to imagine a time when you felt like you were not at home. What did you need in that setting? Do any new meanings emerge from the text now? 6) Pray for the grace of obedience to what you are discovering. 7) After sitting with the story one more time, begin a period of centering prayer, releasing thoughts with your “centering word.” or perhaps use a centering word taken from the story. Listen for the Spirit’s guidance. 8) Reflect on the practice of hospitality here in your journal, planning some specific hospitable action. Feel free to use more paper.

**Who are the alien people in our midst? Who are folks who don’t have support systems and, thus, need human connections? What will you do with and for them?**

# Hospitality Plan 3

## *Luke 7:36-48*



Who is more blessed? The host (Jesus) or the guest (the sinful woman) in this story?

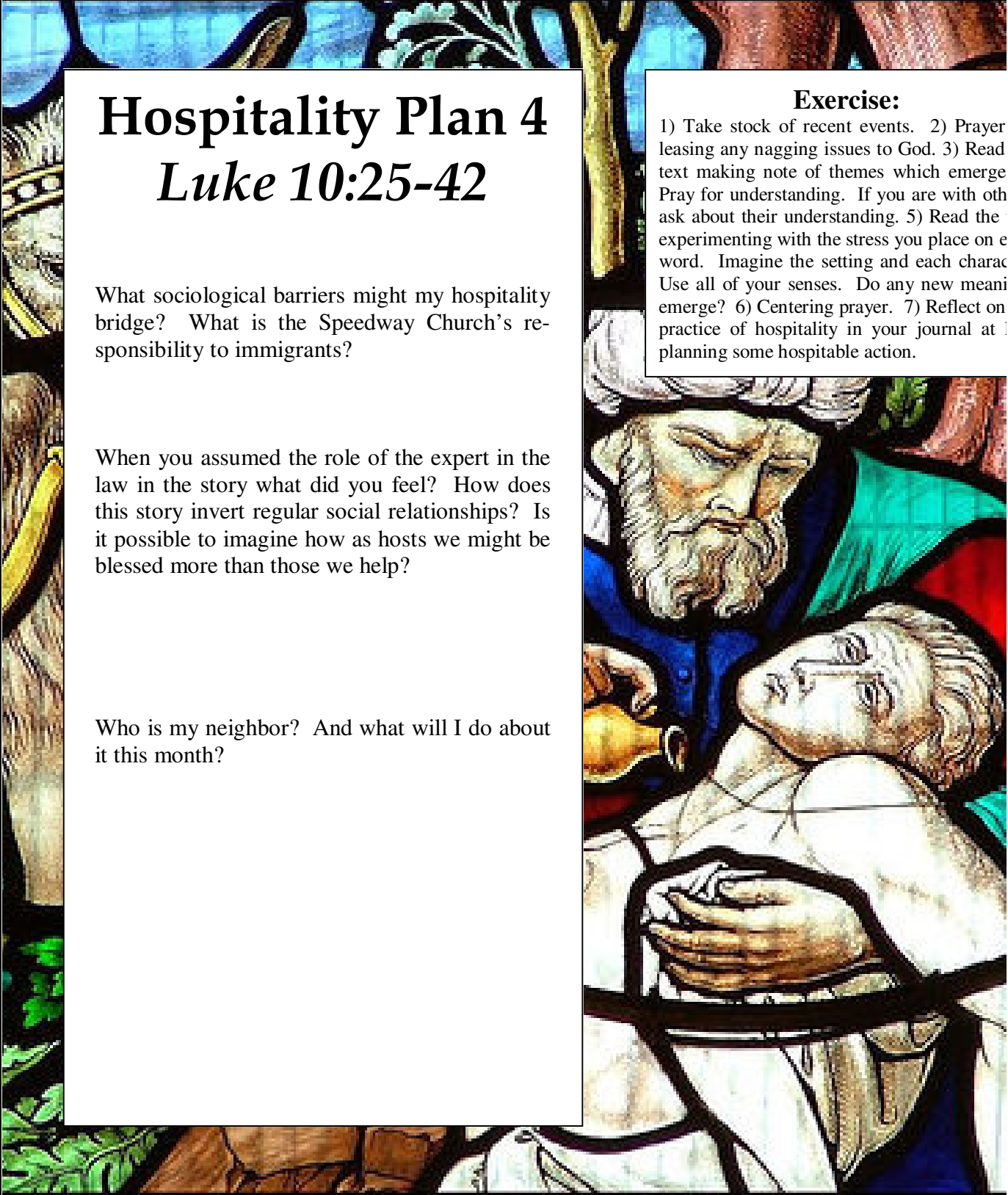
How is the woman contrasted with the official homeowner?

What facet of hospitality does this lead you to think about offering to someone this month? What might that look like?

### **Exercise:**

- 1) Recall the events of the last month. Take stock of the hopes of the ways to express hospitality.
- 2) Prayer releasing any nagging issues to God.
- 3) Read the text making note of themes which emerge.
- 4) Pray for understanding. If you are with others ask about their understanding.
- 5) Read the text experimenting with the stress you place on each word. Imagine the setting and each character. Use all of your senses. Do any new meanings emerge? Pray again.
- 6) After sitting with the story one more time, begin a period of centering prayer, releasing thoughts with your "centering word." or perhaps one from the story. Listen for the Spirit's guidance.
- 7) Reflect on the practice of hospitality in your journal, planning hospitable action.

Background: *House of the Faun, Pompeii.*



## Hospitality Plan 4

### *Luke 10:25-42*

What sociological barriers might my hospitality bridge? What is the Speedway Church's responsibility to immigrants?

When you assumed the role of the expert in the law in the story what did you feel? How does this story invert regular social relationships? Is it possible to imagine how as hosts we might be blessed more than those we help?

Who is my neighbor? And what will I do about it this month?

#### **Exercise:**

- 1) Take stock of recent events.
- 2) Prayer releasing any nagging issues to God.
- 3) Read text making note of themes which emerge. Pray for understanding. If you are with others ask about their understanding.
- 5) Read the text experimenting with the stress you place on each word. Imagine the setting and each character. Use all of your senses. Do any new meanings emerge?
- 6) Centering prayer.
- 7) Reflect on your practice of hospitality in your journal at the end of the month and plan some hospitable action.



## Hospitality Plan 5

### *Luke 12:13-21*

### *Luke 16:1-15*

The irony in these stories centers around how a host actually is enriched by giving resources away. When we give what we cannot keep, or give what we have not guarantee of using, we are discovering riches in others that can last. Failure to do this results in unimaginable loss. To have someone willing to receive from us is an invaluable gift to us! The Exercise is the same: 1) Take stock of recent events including what you are learning through all of your spiritual disciplines. Review the list of ways to express hospitality. 2) Pray, releasing any nagging issues to God. 3) Read the text making note of themes which emerge. 4) Pray for understanding. If you are with others, ask about their understanding. 5) Read the text experimenting with the stress you place on each word. Imagine the setting and each character. Do any new meanings emerge? 6) Centering prayer. 7) Reflect on the practice of hospitality in your journal at left, planning some hospitable action.

I can't exempt myself from hospitality because of a lack of resources because studies often show that the most hospitable people tend to be people without very much. I will not focus on what I don't have. What resources do I have? I recognize I have more than a few loaves and fishes with which to feed the multitudes. How do those resources and gifts match the needs of others? What is my plan for sharing this month?



# Hospitality Plan 6

## *Luke 14:12-24*



The reading and prayer are the same. Refer to the previous hospitality plans if you need help with the structure of the spiritual exercise. Jesus challenges us to go beyond providing entertainment for people we know. His challenge is to offer hospitality to the stranger or to the disadvantaged—to someone who does not have the connections she needs. Don't forget to consider your role in church dinners, the Mozell Sanders Thanksgiving Dinner, or hosting people in the Alton project. Perhaps you can go play with a neighborhood child. Let the Spirit direct you as a church member and as a unique witness.

Since this story suggests to me...

I will take these concrete steps as a way of trying to follow Jesus...

# Hospitality Plan 7

## *Luke 16:19-31*

Out of this sense of conviction or excitement, or possibility....

This month I will...



By this time you need less instruction about the mechanics of the discernment exercise. But this reading is especially challenging given the setting of Lazarus and the Rich man. On the second reading go ahead and use all of your senses even in the realm of the dead (Hades). Don't forget that as you use your imagination that you are praying that God would help you envision biblical realities in a constructive way. This story calls us to consider the ways in which we typically ignore the needs that are around us because it is convenient to do so.



In light of this powerful snapshot of the Savior where I  
See him.....

I will attempt to take these steps in showing some care  
To...

## Hospitality Plan 8

### *Luke 18:15-17*

As part of your preparation in the first step of your exercise think of young people you may be able to mentor. In a fast paced society we may think we have agendas that prohibit time with those who will drain us. Perhaps those agendas need examined. Who are the people a generation behind you? Our attitude toward the little is an important indicator of our spiritual health. Don't merely think of children at church and the teaching program here, think about volunteering to help with *Art Sparks Imagination*. Think deeply about how you may give vital attention to someone who needs mentoring.



## Hospitality Plan 9

### *Luke 19:1-9*

Salvation comes to Zacchaeus through the faith which he expresses in hospitable ways. Here the theme of hosting Jesus by hosting others is made explicit. As in the Abraham story at the beginning of the year the host is often the one actually being hosted. This is a theme to be followed up in the Emmaus story next month. As you read the text the first time for comprehension think about space, time, attention, what is a proper invitation, economics, relationships. On the second reading really take in all of the intense imagery—smell the tree, think about being small in stature. Then on the third reading listen for what the spirit may suggest to you.

This month I can be present emotionally... use my home...share my resources with...

In hopes of...

Rejoicing because...



# Hospitality Plan 10

## *Luke 24:13-25*

The reading and prayer exercise is the same. Once again, we are reminded of how the host mysteriously becomes the hosted. By entertaining others – even insisting on it when they act as if they do not want to impose – we discover Christ. Perhaps this is not just another attempt to be hospitable. Perhaps this month's plan is a means of sharing the illuminating presence of Christ.





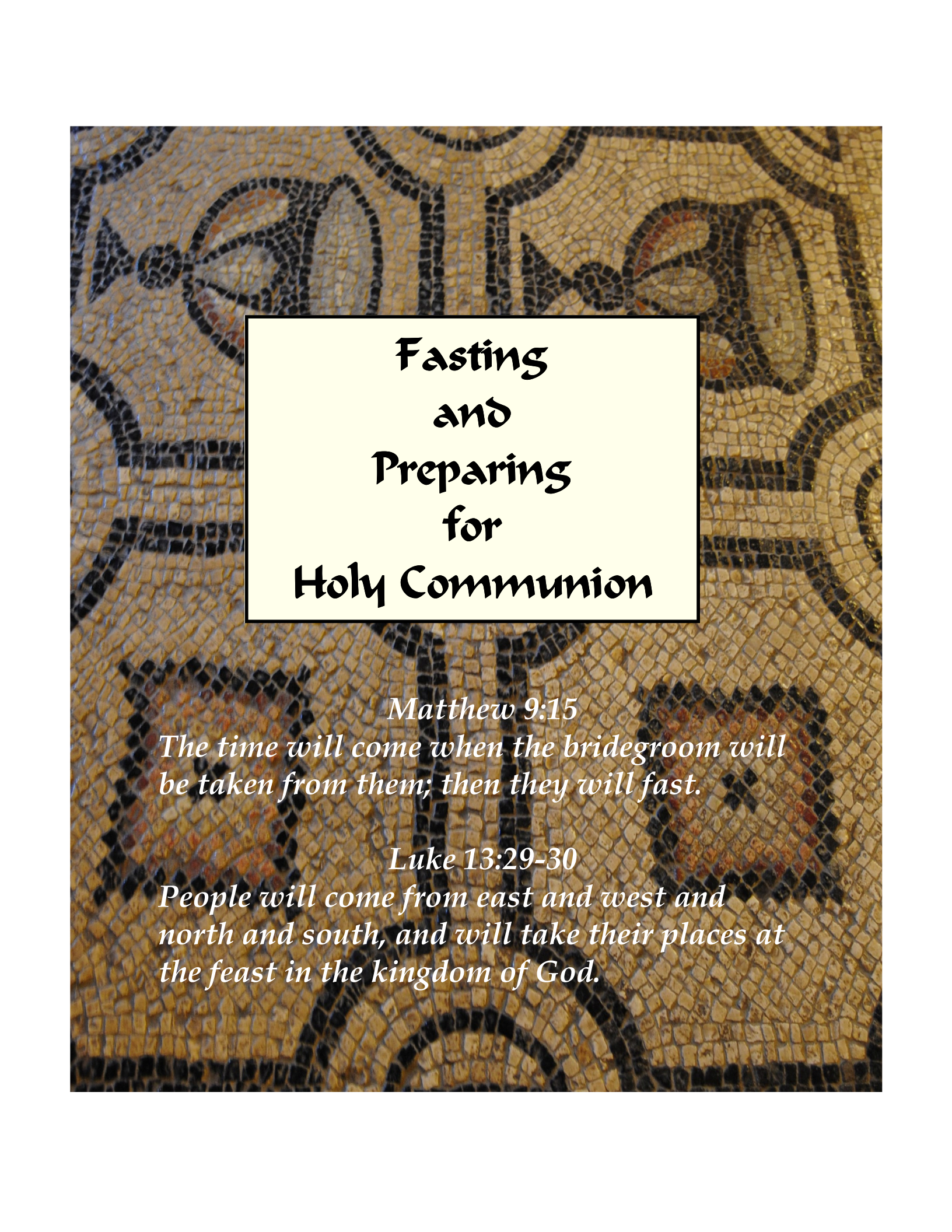
## ***Romans 12:4-16; 1 Timothy 5:9-10; 1 Peter 4:5-11***

If you are unclear about the method of reading and prayer look at the instructions in the first five exercises or hospitality plans. The second reading with the above texts will not center around imagining the narrative setting, but in playing with different stresses on different words. In Romans 12 Paul insists that Christian transformation involves using our gifts to be hospitable and loving toward the community of faith. 1 Peter deals with these issues in the context of the final judgment. Think about your participation in the agape love feast (collective church dinners) What does the prohibition against grumbling suggest?

## ***Matthew 25:31-46 and Hebrews 13:2***

We cannot escape the conclusion that the eternal destiny and final judgment of all human life will hinge on the question of whether we have in faith practiced hospitality. The first two commandments given at the climax of the sermon to the Hebrews are to keep loving the brotherhood and to continue to entertain strangers. We conclude that Christianity without vibrant hospitality is not Christianity. Linger over the words with the usual exercise knowing what is at stake.





**Fasting  
and  
Preparing  
for  
Holy Communion**

*Matthew 9:15*

*The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.*

*Luke 13:29-30*

*People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.*

## ***Fasting***

Fasting is a restriction of diet (though not a restriction of water or liquid intake) for a period of time for spiritual purposes.

Jesus fasted in the wilderness. (Matthew 4) He assumed the practice of fasting in those he taught—“When you fast...” he said. (Matthew 6:16) He anticipated his disciples continuing the practice. “They will fast...,” he said. (Matthew 9:15) The Apostolic church fasted when it was seeking guidance and appointing leaders. And so this is what our forefathers in the Stone-Campbell Movement called a New Testament institution. If we want to follow Jesus in primitive simplicity, we simply have to learn this discipline.

Many times in the Bible fasting is an expression of mourning. When we desperately need help and want our intercessions to be heard in our grief, we fast. Look at this example in Nehemiah 1:4: “*The wall of Jerusalem is broken down...When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed...*” It seems in this way to be an aid and an intensifier of petitions to God. One version of the story of Jesus driving out the demon his disciples could not drive out ends with Jesus explaining, *this kind can only come out with prayer and fasting.* (Mark 9:29)

Are there times beyond mourning and intense prayers for urgent needs where fasting is appropriate? Beyond this what is fasting trying to accomplish? At an elemental level fasting reminds us that our god is not our stomach. Philippians 3:19 suggests that sensual desires can come to rule us. When we stop eating common food we are reminded that Jesus has food some folks don’t know about. Perhaps we have not learned to fully *taste and see that the Lord is good* either. In other words, fasting is a kind of lived metaphor, where we practice transferring the objects of our hunger—seeking to fill our hungers with deep spiritual things rather than common things that do not satisfy in the same way.

It has been the experience of the church through the centuries that this practice exposes the sinful things in us that are controlling us and clouding our judgment. “*I humbled my soul with fasting.*” (Psalm 69:10 See also 1 Kings 21:27 and Jonah 3:7-8)

It is in this way, in turn, that the early church found it a very useful tool in discernment. Before people were ordained to missionary work or church leadership, the church fasted and prayed for guidance and spiritual power. (Acts 14:23)

One of the earliest ways fasting was regularly practiced was in fasting on Holy Saturday—from sundown on Friday until the fast was broken at Break-Fast when members gathered for the Lord’s Supper and fellowship on the day of the resurrection banquet.

## ***When Should I fast?***

We encourage individual fasting. Of course Jesus told us not to make a big production of it. But I doubt that this is really a temptation in our context. We have called congregational fasts before in relation to specific prayer needs. This year the leaders have decided to call for fasts in the calendar (pages 7-8) in preparation for the Lord’s Supper. These fasts will in general coincide with the larger church’s traditional fasts at the beginning of Lent, Good Friday, the beginning of Advent and before Christmas. We also will fast before the Fourth of July, perhaps for symbolic national reasons.



During these fasts it is hoped that the church collectively will be in earnest prayer for one another, for repentance, for clarity and guidance. It is hoped that we will take those fast days (Friday evening and Saturday) and restrict our diet in some meaningful way. Use this practice as a call to examine ourselves and our faith.

We should particularly examine our relationships. This is what is particularly enjoined upon us in anticipation of the Lord's Supper. 1 Corinthians 11:28 says, "*A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.*" The context of that passage makes clear that *discerning the body* involves seeing our brothers and sisters as part of ourselves—glorious members of our own body in Jesus Christ. We cannot pass judgment on and be out of sorts with our brother without at the same time causing judgment to fall upon ourselves. That is because discerning the body means that we are all united as one person in the body of Christ. Unhealed relationships are the enemy of everything the kingdom is about.

Fixing broken relationships is a big part of the business of preparing for communion. That is the kind of exercise fasting may well help. Fasting also will accentuate our sense of the glory of feasting in the kingdom to come.

## *Holy Communion*

A distinctive mark of our tradition is that we are a free-church that communes every Lord's Day. Sunday evening communion is often served by dipping the bread, and the emphasis is upon giving and receiving a blessing as we take the elements. We also are praying for one another in the circle following the epiclesis—the prayer calling the Spirit's blessing on us after we have taken the elements. Sunday morning communion need not be totally silent. It is appropriate to engage in centering prayer and meditative reflection, but it is not altogether adequate. Since it is communion—it is a sharing with the community in Christ. At least on occasion we must play our roles as priests and bless our neighbor in the pew as we pass the plate. Most of us know each other well, but even if there is a visitor, we might simply bless them with, "the Lord's welcome to you," as we hand them the plate. Part of our preparation for the supper might be thinking about what blessing we want to share with the persons who usually sit next to us. This is the reason Protestants pass the plate through the pews—every member is a priest who should bless each other in turn. Feel comfortable to do this, because we want deep sharing—mysterious sharing with one another and with Christ who graces us in this mystery.

Our usual name for holy communion is the Lord's Supper which emphasizes God's nourishment to us when we are weak. Some weeks our individual prayers and meditations ought to seek strength that is not our own. Since The Lord's supper is also communion, we may feel the urge to give someone words of strengthening. Say, "I know you can handle this.... God is with you." Sense when this is appropriate. Use discretion. But be bold when you feel led. True manna still feeds.

Another name for communion is sacrament. We seldom use this term as it has evolved, but in its origin a "sacramentum" was a holy oath or covenant. The Lord's Supper is where we make promises to God and to one another that we will remain faithful to one another and Christ. Sometimes it's appropriate for us to assure one another that, "I am here for you."

Many traditions call the Lord's Supper the **eucharist**. This is because the Greek word that Jesus uses in saying the Passover prayers is *eucharisteo*—"I give thanks." Eucharist is wonderful name, but perhaps "the great thanksgiving" might communicate more clearly. Bitterness, loneliness complaints...they all need to be brought to the table in order to have Christ call us to thanksgiving. Here at the table we learn that all the real enemies are vanquished. In the death of Jesus, God has conquered death and hell. We are immortal in Jesus Christ. We will be vindicated of all the evil others have said against us unfairly, and we are forgiven of all the rest. Be thankful. Let thanksgiving drive out bitterness. Let thanksgiving be the controlling mode of thought, and so much else will fall into line with gospel reality. Eucharist or Thanksgiving is where our devotional thoughts should center when we are frustrated and angry.

Communion for the men on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 was an act of **hospitality** that hosted a stranger and thereby discovered Jesus hosting them. The Supper and the agape love feast, which were inseparable in the early church, are thereby acts of hospitality where we may discover Jesus in our midst. Communion is where we come to mystically encounter Christ and have our hearts burn. Ultimately we seek to have Christ open our eyes to his glorious presence and power over death. These are experiences that help us overcome fear. Jesus arisen and hosting us, tells us to be not afraid. The Lord's supper is hospitable welcome, it is a kind of **illumination** where we see and encounter Christ. Perhaps these themes should structure meditation when we feel lonely, board, or in need of energizing insight or companionship.

The Lord's supper is also a **memorial**. We do this *in remembrance of [Christ.]* I personally feel it is important to say that we do not solely focus on the cross. The remembrance of Jesus also involves his life, teaching, resurrection and continuing presence. We have participated in Christ's death and resurrection, and he hosts us presently—we remember our salvation, our rescue from sin and death. This can be reassuring when we feel guilty. We focus meditation here when guilt and shame assault us.

Holy communion is also a wedding feast in anticipation of the great ingathering feast of Tabernacles, when, as in Isaiah 25, the whole world will be healed. The healing experienced at the table is a sign and a participation in the great feast that is coming. This anticipation and participation in the future age is called **prolepsis**. This is what we want this observance to be when we feel like our witness is failing. We ask that in the supper hints of glory will be revealed to us and through us. Here we proclaim Christ's death until he comes.

It is hoped that these devotional directions may occupy our hearts and minds during Communion. Imagining the scene of the cross, is only one form of devotion. And it should not be over-used. So, when you are not ministering to others—communing with them—sharing a meal with them by blessing them or touching them—these kinds of exercises can be used ways of entering the multifaceted mystery of the Lord's Supper.

One resource that I have quoted in the exercises for weeks 36 and 38 is Robert Richardson's *Communings in the Sanctuary*. I regard it as the greatest devotional book in Stone-Campbell history. It is full of the richest Eucharistic theology. Nobody's experience of the Table will be the same once they have read and digested this book!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with your spirit.  
Kent Ellett January 2015

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