RECLAIMING THE PSALMS IN TEACHING PRAYER TO THE YOUTH OF FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, OKLAHOMA CITY

A PROJECT REPORT AND THESIS SUBMITTED TO
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
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To the Dean of Brite Divinity School:

I am submitting herewith a project report and thesis written by Jeffrey Chadwick Fetzer entitled "Reclaiming the Psalms in Teaching Prayer to the Youth of First Baptist Church, Oklahoma City."
I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content and recommended that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry.

Dr. Russell W. Dalton_____
Russell W. Dalton, Major Professor

We have read this professional paper
and recommend its acceptance:

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Dr. Jeffrey Williams_____
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Accepted

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ABSTRACT

Project Director: Dr. Russell Dalton. Recent studies measuring religious trends among American Christian teenagers indicated a curious disconnection between the spiritual practice of prayer and feelings of spiritual commitment. A high majority of American teens prayed frequently, yet barely half of these characterized their faith as “very important.” These same studies also indicated that many teens who identified themselves as "Christian" had adopted a peculiar deist belief system far removed from most traditional understandings of faith. The practice of prayer in the United States has not informed the faith for many Christian teens and has become merely a reflection of the consumer culture in which they exist. Not surprisingly, the evangelical church in North America, during this same time, has lost the ability to meaningfully instruct students in the practice of prayer, mainly because student ministry has abandoned the Psalms, the “Prayer Book of the Bible.”

The project sought to determine if reintroducing the Psalms as a tool for teaching prayer could help Christian teens at the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City as well as others in similar contexts: 1) Develop and demonstrate a more healthy theological understanding of God as personal and close; 2) Demonstrate confidence, comfort, and proficiency in the spiritual discipline of prayer; and 3) Develop a healthy spiritual outlet for anger and hatred. A prayer retreat for teens utilizing the Psalms was developed. Various concepts from the Psalter and methods of prayer were

adapted for use with teenagers. Data was collected through comparisons of pre- and post-retreat questionnaires, interviews, and students' prayer journals from the retreat.

The results indicated that the Psalms did aid in giving voice to many of the emotions teenagers were experiencing. Prayers resulting from the retreat suggested new intimacy and comfort with God. Participants realized, through the example of the Psalms, that they could share with God the full scope of their feelings, both positive and negative. Students discovered new styles of prayer with which they connected. Developing future opportunities for students' prayer to be informed by the Psalms should continue the growth of healthy theological practices and understandings.

INTRODUCTION

Who will pray for us?

It was time for the youth group to pray once more. And again, the same sequence of events ensued, as if by clockwork. First, immediate silence; everyone was certain that the last person talking would be arbitrarily chosen to run this most perilous gauntlet. Next, the group commenced a series of silent glances to each other, their eyes sending the same desperate message, "Not me – you do it!" Finally, a beleaguered hand rose from the group followed by an exasperated grunt and the words, "I'll do it." What followed was the similar half-hearted sputtering of words that formed the latest "kimono" prayer, the prayer that spiritually covered everything and revealed nothing of God, pain, suffering, joy, or ourselves. As the "amen" ensued and the remainder of the group breathed a sigh of relief, it was alarmingly obvious that this moment of prayer provided little or no meaning to those who had just experienced and participated in it. As the leader of this group, a thought began to stir in me and continues to stir to this day.

Prayer should be more than this!

This incident was not just an issue of students being shy or uncomfortable with public praying. It was no less than a systemic breakdown in the understanding of what prayer is and how it should be approached. The students were not entirely to blame. The church, as a whole, has done a poor job of teaching the discipline,

passion, pain, and joy of prayer – holy conversation with God. Though there have been a few recent attempts to provide resources to instruct youth in prayer, none of these works seem to comprehend or acknowledge the spiritual dynamics of contemporary American youth Christianity that are draining prayer of its value. Worse, virtually none of these offerings utilize the one book of the scripture that is completely consumed and saturated with prayer, the book many consider "The Prayer Book of the Bible." Why has contemporary youth ministry abandoned the Psalms? Do the Psalms remain relevant to Christian youth spirituality? Can the Psalms be reclaimed as a prolific and poignant tool for instruction in prayer for young people? This study expects to determine if reintroducing the Psalms as a tool for prayer can help Christian teens at the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City as well as others in similar contexts: 1) Develop and demonstrate a more healthy theological understanding of God as personal and close; 2) Demonstrate confidence, comfort, and proficiency in the spiritual discipline of prayer; and 3) Develop a healthy spiritual outlet for anger and hatred.

The first chapter, entitled "Youth and Prayer: Illusion and Reality," examines recent statistical data on youth, spirituality, and prayer in an attempt to reach a foundational understanding of the state of prayer among American youth, as well as investigate the theological presuppositions underpinning this understanding.

The following chapter, "The Church Teaching Prayer," investigates several recently produced publications regarding the subject of teaching youth about prayer

in an attempt to discern whether the Church in North America has any grasp of the problematic nature of youth prayer or how to respond to it.

In "Reclaiming the Psalms," the writer will build on the study and writings of Eugene Peterson, Walter Brueggeman, C.S. Lewis, Toni Craven, and others, in order to propose that a return to the Psalms as a vehicle of teaching prayer may be an effective foil to much of the depersonalization and distancing of God that has occurred in Christian youth culture in the past decades. Relevant prayer concepts demonstrated in the Psalms will be evaluated for potential effectiveness in instructing Christian teens to pray.

Next, "A Youth Prayer Retreat with the Psalms," outlines the rationale and design of a three-day prayer retreat for the young people of the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City that took place in September 2009. Utilizing worship, fellowship, and contemplative prayer practices, an example of how the Psalms can be authentically harnessed as a teaching tool for prayer will be presented. The following chapter, "Retreat Results and Reflections," will summarize the retreat event and attempt to draw some conclusions on what was learned, what was discovered, and the effectiveness of utilizing the Psalms to teach in this manner.

A final chapter, "Sustaining Psalms Momentum," discusses practical strategies for continuing to keep young people at First Baptist connected to the Psalms and praying beyond the initial retreat. The chapter will present possibilities for the student ministry to lead the entire congregation towards a new appreciation of the Psalter.

In his book, *Answering God*, Eugene Peterson likened his work in the Psalms to "Isaac digging again the wells that the Philistines had filled . . . to clear the ground and cart off the debris so that what was so excellently done once will again be usable."[1] May this work be considered another "shovel in the well," reclaiming and reintroducing a resource for meaningful prayer that so many young people have lost.

[1] Eugene Peterson, *Answering God, The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), 7.

CHAPTER 1

YOUTH PRAYER: ILLUSION AND REALITY

For many years, it has been a widely accepted notion that American Christian youth have a strong personal sense of spiritually and practice their spiritual beliefs with a certain degree of dedication. Stories abound of young believers in large numbers flocking to summer camps, evangelism events, and religious conferences, seeking to deepen their faith in God. Perhaps more than at any other time, youth in this country are involved in events that could be described as "missional." Vans and buses carrying students to home-building blitzes, urban soup kitchens, and impoverished communities crisscross our nation every summer as examples of this relatively newfound affection towards service. Youth also have the reputation of consistently and frequently engaging in the spiritual practice of prayer, especially throughout the "Bible Belt" of the American South. Prayer events such as, "See You at the Pole," – a coordinated morning prayer meeting at school flagpoles across the country, garner much media attention. While one might be tempted, on the surface, to appraise optimistically the spiritual condition of Christian youth in America, a closer examination revealed that not only are these notions misleading, recent findings present a much more sobering view of teenage Christianity and the theological foundations underpinning teenage understandings of spirituality and prayer. Within the past ten years, two groups have undertaken the task to accurately measure the

spiritual practices and beliefs of teenagers in America. The most well known of these, especially among conservative evangelical Christians, is the Barna Research Group. Founded in 1984 by George and Nancy Barna, the Barna Research Group (hereafter referred to as BRG) affirmed as their vision "to provide Christian ministries with current, accurate, and reliable information, in bite-sized pieces, at reasonable cost, to help them be more strategic in their decision-making."[2] In 2001, Barna published the book, *Real Teens*, which was the culmination of an almost three-year BRG study and analysis of American teenagers. Utilizing a randomly generated sampling, BRG surveyed approximately three thousand young people across the country. Two-thirds of the surveys were completed by phone. Mail surveys filled out the remaining third. Though Barna attempted to study a wide swath of teen culture, much of the attention in *Real Teens* focused on the spiritual beliefs and habits of both self-described "Christian" teenagers and teenagers the BRG defined as "born-again." These students answered in the affirmative questions concerning a personal relationship with Jesus and a belief that they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins to Jesus and have asked Jesus to be their savior.[3] Once authenticated, these students were asked a series of questions concerning their beliefs, their spiritual practices, and their commitment to the church. On the surface, Barna's results appeared quite positive. When it came to the practice of religious activities such as prayer, BRG's

[2] George Barna, *Real Teens* (Ventura: Regal Books, 2001), 165.

[3] One could spend a great deal of effort debating the true subjectivity of statistical analysis that relies on such narrow definitions regarding belief. For the sake of this project's scope however, the BRG quantifiers will be accepted.

study indicated that 84% of born-again Christian teens had prayed in the past week[4] and a full 97% believed the statement, "Prayer can change what happens in life."[5] Teen participation in prayer was actually significantly higher than any of the other religious activities listed in the survey, including attending worship (52%), reading the Bible (36%) or attending a Sunday school class (40%).[6] While the research optimistically pointed to a large component or quantity of teens that seemed to pray rather consistently, the content of said prayers and their effectiveness in deepening spiritual faith among teens, results were less than favorable. Though there were no direct studies by the BRG dealing with the content of prayer, some results concerning spiritual faith could be deduced from other findings. Of the born-again Christians in Barna's study, only 48% claimed to be absolutely devoted to the Christian faith.[7] Nearly half of the BRG's prime teen faith group claimed to be genuinely ambiguous about their faith commitment! Almost as stunning was the revelation that the exact same percentage of born-again teens agreed with the statement "If a person is generally good, or does enough good things for others during his or her life, he/she will earn a place in heaven."[8] The Barna study findings indicated that, for the teens surveyed, there was little or no connection between praying and spiritual growth or understanding, no matter how frequently they prayed. This was further confirmed in Barna's study when again, almost half of the born again believers (44%) agreed with

[4] Ibid., 133.
[5] Ibid., 131.
[6] Ibid., 133.
[7] Ibid., 121.
[8] Ibid., 131.

the statement "A person can lead a full and satisfying life even if he or she does not pursue spiritual development or maturity."[9]

How could this be? How could the practice of prayer become so disconnected from the idea of spiritual growth in the minds of Christian young people? The BRG's study seemed unable to provide any real explanation for the phenomena. Barna appeared to be satisfied with the rather self-evident conclusion that, "Teenagers are a study in contradictions. One of those is their simultaneous desire to be portrayed as religious people while they invest little of themselves in true spiritual pursuit."[10] This was obvious in Barna's statistical findings and offered no new or useful information to the reader. What was the cause of this behavior among teenagers? It appeared Barna's best guess was to blame all of the spiritual problems of Christian youth on postmodern philosophy. Barna had a consistently negative view of postmodernism throughout *Real Teens*. Postmodern thought was attacked at several points in the book. The epitome of his thought on the subject was most clearly expressed in passages such as this:

> Without any insight into the vacuous and dangerous philosophy they have unwittingly accepted, teenagers are facing a rapidly changing world armed with a worldview that places them at the center, lifts up personal experience and emotion as the arbiter of decency and righteousness, and rejects historical experience as relevant to today's world. Postmodernism, unfortunately, is the perfect compliment to Mosaic thinking. And it will ultimately undermine the capacity of

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[9] Ibid., 132.

[10] George Barna, "Teenagers Embrace Religion but are Not Excited about Christianity," *The Barna Update*, January 10, 2000, http://barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=45 (Accessed November 17, 2008).

> America to be a beacon of goodness, sanity, morality, and purposeful faith.[11]

This seems to be an oversimplification of postmodern thinking and perhaps misunderstands the nature of postmodernism itself. Postmodernism should not be thought of as "an invading force" that the church must vigorously oppose, confront, and repel as Barna suggested. Rather, the church must view postmodernism as the "playing field" on which the church must now, for better or worse, operate. Continually attacking and denigrating postmodernism has become pointless and even misguided for the Christian. Many believers have now come to even embrace the new possibilities for faith development that postmodernism offers. Tony Jones perhaps explained it best when he wrote:

> Postmodernism is not the evil that some Christian thinkers make it out to be. On the contrary, many postmodern critiques of modernism should be welcomed by the church. No longer are we beholden to the scientific proof model evangelism – everything does not need to be explained and rationalized. This should come as a relief to Christian youth workers who have been attempting to explain great mysteries like the incarnation, the resurrection, and the Lord's Supper. There is new room in our faith for experience, for mysticism, and for mystery. [12]

If postmodernism indeed offers room for experience, mysticism, and mystery it would seem natural that the spiritual discipline of prayer would have found the perfect environment to proliferate among teens, resulting in unprecedented growth in spiritual formation. Yet Barna's results prove this has not happened. It seems unlikely that postmodernism was the culprit that disconnected prayer from spiritual

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[11] Barna, Real Teens, 97.

[12] Tony Jones, Postmodern Youth Ministry: Exploring cultural shift creating holistic connections, cultivating authentic community (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 39.

commitment and growth. One must move beyond Barna to determine a resolution to this mystery.

Fortunately, a second, lesser-known, group has also recently completed a comprehensive study of teen religious practices in the United States that perhaps offers an explanation to the detachment of prayer from spirituality. Known as the National Study of Youth and Religion (hereafter referred to as NSYR), this survey was conducted between 2001 and 2005 by two religious sociologists at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. Their findings were published soon after in a work entitled, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. In some ways, the NSYR is quite similar to the studies of the BRG. Both utilized random-sampling telephone interviews of American teens and surveyed approximately three thousand teenagers. Whereas the BRG study was interested mainly in the religious and spiritual practices of conservative Christian teenagers, the NSYR intentionally sought to broaden the religious scope to encompass all major Christian religious traditions as well as what Smith described as two "minority" traditions, Judaism and Mormonism. Perhaps the most important distinction between the BRG study and the NSYR study was the NSYR's use of face-to-face interviews. In all, a total of 267 teen respondents, representing forty-five states, took part in an in-depth interview by one of seventeen trained researchers. The importance of these face-to-face interviews should not be minimized. They provided researchers not only the opportunity to collect and process "agree or disagree" answers, but also the opportunity to analyze in greater detail the

theological, social, and philosophical thought process of Christian teens based on free-flowing conversation and discussion. As Smith explained:

> There is no substitute for talking with someone for a long time if you hope to understand him or her. Surveys are very useful for providing big-picture descriptions of, and sorting out, associations between different variables in human life and society. But surveys alone rarely provide enough insight to really understand people's lives. To get beyond the surface descriptions that surveys provide, to get to the important experiences, feelings, contradictions, processes, and complex layers of meaning in most people's lives requires using other methods, such as directly observing and talking with people at length.[13]

The importance of these interviews was certainly validated while analyzing prayer and spirituality. Statistically, the findings published by the NSYR were not significantly different from those collected by the BRG. On the subject of the frequency of prayer, the NSYR found that 65% of American adolescents pray at least once a week.[14] Though at first this seems much lower than the 84% finding of the BRG, the discrepancy can be accounted for considering that the NSYR was a measure of all U.S. adolescents whereas the BRG findings concerning spirituality involved only Christian believers. The NSYR's findings also closely matched those of Barna's on the subject of teen's spiritual commitment. Only 51% of the NSYR respondents categorized the importance of their religious faith in daily life as "Extremely Important" or "Very Important" while 49% categorized this importance as "Somewhat," "Not Very," or "Not" important.[15] The NSYR findings confirmed again

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[13] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 118.

[14] Ibid., 46.

[15] Ibid., 40.

the disconnection in teen's lives between the spiritual practice of prayer and personal spiritual commitment. It would indeed seem that many teenagers felt quite comfortable with a relatively high frequency of prayer while maintaining a rather tepid commitment to religious faith. Perhaps Barna was correct to simply conclude that teenagers were indeed "a study in contradictions." Smith also discovered similar types of teen apathy in regards to spirituality. He explained this fundamental teen thought very concisely in a film based on the NSYR:

> American teenagers, for the most part, are incredibly conventional when it comes to religious faith. They are happy to go along with however they were raised. For the most part they have a benignly positive view of how they were raised . . . They think religion is a good thing. It's good for people. It helps to give people morals. But they're also not terribly invested in it either. It's just part of the furniture or the wallpaper of their lives. It's just there like, "Yeah that's how I was raised. What's the big deal?"[16]

This was not the only unfortunate finding in the study. By analyzing the myriad of statements concerning religious faith made by students in face-to-face interviews, Smith and Denton felt confident in proposing that a new "de-facto" belief system referred to by the authors as "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" has infected the beliefs and theological understandings of most spiritual teenagers. Parasitic in nature, this set of beliefs can attach itself to any religious faith, regardless of origin. This "pseudo-religion", for no one would ever refer to themselves as Moralistic Therapeutic Deists, seemed to center around several key beliefs which emerged from the interviews. These beliefs, as explained by the authors, included the following:

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[16] Christian Smith, Soul Searching: *A Movie about Teenagers and God*, DVD. Directed by Michael Eaton and Timothy Eaton (New York: Revelation Studios, 2007).

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.[17]

Of course, all teenagers do not adhere entirely, or at all, to this set of beliefs. However, if what the NSYR suggested is indeed occurring, if the beliefs of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism are creeping into and colonizing the faith systems of more than a few teenage believers, then one may be able to piece together an initial understanding of what is happening with Christian youth and prayer. Statements three and four above are most revealing for this study, especially statement four. A basic tenet of most all modern Christian belief systems has been the understanding of a God with whom one can relate personally – a God who intimately knows us and who, to some extent, can be known as well. Historically for conservative Christians, the primary question one must answer has been "Do you have a *personal* relationship with Jesus Christ?" The entire notion of Jesus as the incarnation of God, strikes right to the heart of this idea of a relational God who is close. Prayer then, the dialogue between God and God's people, was understood as a way to build intimacy with God, much like young lovers develop intimacy through hours chatting on the phone or computer.

If what Smith and Denton have suggested is true, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism has deconstructed this idea of a personal God, and replaced it with a distant,

[17] Smith and Denton, 162.

impersonal God, with one important exception. Smith explained that "the Deism here is revised from its classical eighteenth-century version by the therapeutic qualifier, making the distant God selectively available for taking care of needs."[18] In this understanding, God is to draw near when one needs God to solve a problem or to help one feel better. One can easily see the connection at this point to statement three. Since the goal of life is to be happy and feel good, prayer exists to inform God of what is needed in order to be happy. At this point, one can more easily grasp this disconnection between the high percentage of teens who pray and the much lower percentage of teens that are spiritually committed. For many teens now, prayer is no longer relational. It is transactional. It consists of words of request delivered to an impersonal God who, in turn, is to provide happiness. Prayer is no longer the mysterious opportunity to relate to the sovereign creator of the universe in wonderful intimacy. Rather, God is much more like the freckle-face clerk at the department store who one doesn't need to know personally since the clerk's job is to provide the sought-after products that will make one happy and satisfied. This also helps to explain the rather poor theological understating demonstrated by teens as they pray or attempt to articulate their faith – after all "As long as one is happy, why bother with being able to talk about the belief content of one's faith?"[19] More than a few young people in this writer's own group seem to share this understanding of God. "I'm glad God is always there when I need Him," were the words spoken one night by a

[18] Smith and Denton, 165.
[19] Smith and Denton, 164.

sixteen-year-old young man who regularly attends the group. One fifteen-year-old girl shared, "I know God is doing something in my life, because I'm much happier now." For these and many other young believers, a belief system similar to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism seems to have temporarily won the day.

Is it possible, from this point of understanding, to go even deeper? Is there a foundational social culture or philosophy that may breed the type of religious understanding demonstrated by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism? Barna seemed to think postmodern thought was to blame. The foundational thought of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism hardly sounds like the vacuous philosophy of Barna's postmodernism. There are definite moral rules and guidelines in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. The dynamic at work actually sounds much more like American consumerism – which is the primary culprit behind this mutated theological understanding. Joyce Ann Mercer, in her work with developing a theology of childhood, has touched upon an interesting dynamic that is the genesis of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Quite often, the church now seems to replicate consumerism in its theology. As she explained:

> In far too many mainly church contexts, faithfulness is conflated with being happy, cooperative, and nice. In such an environment the act of nurturing or educating children into a Christian faith identity means little more than socializing them to be the same kinds of smiling, ever-happy little people who populate television commercials and cartoons.[20]

[20] Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A practical theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), 120.

The church now has a generation of teens whose theological understandings have been heavily influenced by the culture of consumerism. Is it any surprise that these same teens have developed an understanding of God where the Almighty essentially exists in order to make them happy? The praying habits and patterns of young people seem to indicate this is exactly what is occurring. This is the reality of youth and prayer that pokes through the fog of illusion regarding teen spirituality. It is a sobering realization that must give pause to one who is attempting to teach and lead young people to a more thoughtful and mature approach to prayer.

CHAPTER 2

THE CHURCH TEACHING PRAYER

Though the findings concerning youth and prayer might suggest otherwise, the church has by no means been silent to this generation on the subject of prayer - although one could not honestly characterize its effort as particularly aggressive either. During the past decade, religious groups and publishing houses have produced several Bible-based studies and teaching aids designed to teach youth how to pray. The church in America has also witnessed, during this same period, a religious writer grow a short-lived publishing empire by way of an obscure prayer in the Hebrew Bible, mercilessly marketed to adults, children and teenagers as the new "revolution" in prayer. Have these offerings been helpful to the cause of youth and prayer? Have youth learned to pray with the PRAY method or the "Jabez Revolution", or do these methods simply emphasize the fact that the church has lost the ability to meaningfully engage teenage Christians concerning prayer? Are there yet reasons to be hopeful about the future of teaching youth how to pray?

Though certainly not an exhaustive study of all Christian materials produced in the past decade, a sampling of currently available resources regarding youth and prayer uncovered serious errors in methodology that have compromised the church's ability to instruct young, postmodern believers in how to pray. An unfortunate method that appeared in most every teaching publication examined was the use of acronyms and

lists to determine the content of prayer for students. For example, in Michael Warden's *Teaching Teenagers to Pray*, students were invited to "Discuss the various PARTS of a healthy prayer life."[21] Through handouts and scripture references, students discovered the PARTS of prayer to be praise, ask, repent, thank, and share (meaning "share" with God as one would with a close friend). Students were further encouraged to memorize these elements in order to always remember the correct PARTS while praying. They were additionally asked to discuss which element of the prayer PARTS was most important, easiest, or hardest for them. This was certainly not the only proponent of the prayer acronym. In the Abingdon Press study series, *Closer to God: Youth Experiencing Prayer* by Brian Hardesty, the author promised, "The experiences of this book will help participants get closer to God by means of prayer [by] using the easy-to-remember PRAY idea."[22] In this study, the elements of prayer described by the acronym were praise, repent, ask (for others), and yourself. In a brisk thirty-two pages, the author seized the PRAY method and constructed a trail of proper prayer for teens to follow. They were then released, prayer journals in hand, with a congratulatory "Go in Peace." If this was not enough, Delia Halverson, author of *Teaching Prayer in the Classroom*, offered yet another acronym for understanding prayer. She suggested "By using the word ACTS, we can remember four important elements in our prayer life."[23] The acronym ACTS stood for adoration, confession,

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[21]Michael Warden, *Teaching Teenagers to Pray* (Loveland: Group Publishing, 1994), 10.

[22]Brian Hardesty, *Closer to God: Youth Experiencing Prayer* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 4.

[23] Halverson, 13.

thanksgiving, and supplication. Halverson was concerned however, that supplication was a word too seldom used in today's language and suggested petition as a better alternative (although that ruined a fine biblical acronym). The author provided several activities to help students learn the ACTS elements, such as creating matching games by putting sentence prayers representing each element of ACTS on a card, then attempting to match the type of prayer on the card to the appropriate part of the ACTS acronym.

While the use of acronyms is indeed a helpful teaching method for many areas of learning, their use in teaching the discipline of prayer to postmodern teens is ironically counterproductive. This is because acronyms ultimately serve to define and set boundaries. As an example, in the biological act of animal cell mitosis there are no other phases of division than the five represented in the acronym IPMAT.[24] The parts of the process always occur in the same order, without any appreciable variation. The acronym in this case rightly limits and defines the process. Prayer, however, is not such a process. It is mysterious and defies simplistic definitions. By attempting to lay any acronym over prayer, even with good intentions, the resulting form unjustly limits and defines prayer as well as strips away its mystery. Prayer is definitely more than the sum of its PARTS. Acronyms reduce – prayer expands. Acronyms are limiting – prayer is powerful. Acronyms encompass – prayer is unbridled. To teach prayer in acronyms removes the practice out of the realm of the mysterious and

[24] Interphase, Prophase, Metaphase, Anaphase, Telaphase. Much thanks to my tenth grade Biology teacher, Mr. Whipkey.

spiritual, where many postmodern teens are comfortable, and places it in the realm of the classroom, where postmodern teens can be quite skeptical. All of which made Tony Jones' warning more succinct: "Never make lists! Things are simply not objectively quantifiable . . . so when you make a list or attempt to quantify something, you will surely leave something out, and you will definitely betray your own subjectivity."[25] Postmodern teens can readily identify the subjectivity inherent in acronyms that do not address praying in anger to God, or praying one's hatred, or simply allowing for mysterious and spiritual silence to be a part of prayer. The acronym (and the teacher utilizing it) quickly lose authenticity and relevance in the eye of the postmodern teen because of these critical omissions. For the church to be effective it must be willing to teach the discipline of prayer in its entirety and not merely in a way that is simple, easily explained, or fits nicely into an acronym.

An additional difficulty which also appeared in almost every publication teaching youth to pray was the nearly exclusive use of New Testament passages concerning *who* prayed; which seemed to imply an aim of producing students who primarily prayed extemporaneously. It was quite surprising to see the weighting of each study towards the New Testament in regards to their focal teaching passages. The lone exception, Halverson's *Teaching Prayer in the Classroom*, did provide a listing of eight Psalms for teens to study. Unfortunately, she suggested these be used mainly for "special times." Otherwise, the vast majority of scripture utilized in her work came from the gospel accounts of Jesus praying. From Matthew to John, Halverson

[25] Jones, 27.

identified forty-seven verses pertaining to Jesus' prayer life. Students were asked to read these passages and for each one answer questions such as, "When did Jesus pray? Where was Jesus when he prayed? Who was with Jesus when he prayed? What kind of prayer did Jesus pray? Why do you think Jesus felt the need to pray?"[26] It seemed these passages were being employed to teach about Jesus rather than prayer. This same type of New Testament emphasis continued in the other works. Brian Hardesty's *Closer to God, Youth Experiencing Prayer* cited forty verses from the New Testament as opposed to only twelve from the Hebrew Bible. Warden's *Teaching Teenagers to Pray,* cited a total of twenty-three focal verses - ALL from the New Testament. When did the Hebrew Bible become so unnecessary for instruction in prayer? Though integral to Christian theology and understanding, the New Testament is only part of the canon, the collection of sacred works Christians, for centuries, have embraced as God-inspired. To deny the Hebrew Bible any position in training the next generation of believers in prayer is like attempting to play a sport using only the strategies developed in the past ten years, not realizing that everything that is part of the present game has been built upon the fundamentals and strategies of long ago. Eugene Peterson's metaphor of the canon as an animal corral, filled with a variety of creatures, is very helpful for one's understanding of the proper use of the canon for teaching and interpretation:

> All the creatures are related in some way or another to all the others, and each in its own way serves the common purpose. Each is necessary but none is complete in itself. Each must be used (interpreted) in the light of

[26] Halverson, *Teaching Prayer in the Classroom*, 70.

> all the others. It is not permitted to take one of the creatures out of the corral, leaving all others behind, and ride out across the prairies sentimentally into the sunset, searching for conditions congenial to sublimity. There is no gate in the corral fence.[27]

To ignore, or place in a secondary role, the Hebrew Bible for instruction in prayer denies today's young person any understanding of the experience of prayer as practiced by believers for generations before the first letter of the New Testament was ever written. Without the Hebrew Bible, Christian teens only get part of the story regarding prayer and completely miss, as this writer will later argue, the enormous amount of prayer knowledge and experience afforded by the one true "Prayer Book of the Bible."

The problem with the New Testament-only method regarding prayer is further exacerbated when considering the texts utilized for study. A favorite passage among all the publications teaching prayer was Philippians 4:6-7, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."(NIV) Though this passage is indeed relevant and powerful for the believer, in actuality it does very little to instruct the reader about prayer itself. This passage speaks about praying, but not necessarily *how* to pray. How does one present requests to God? What does that look (or sound) like? How should one pray when one is indeed anxious? To utilize that passage to teach prayer assumes a foundational understanding of the language and purpose of prayer that, as both Barna

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[27] Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as tools for Prayer* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 16-17.

and Smith have successfully argued, no longer exists. Another example of this was found in the popular use of Ephesians 6:18, "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."(NIV) Again, there is nothing in this passage that is theologically wrong or problematic concerning prayer. The book's author rightly used this passage to teach about the importance of developing a discipline of faithful prayer. Yet this is once more, at its core, a passage relating an approach to prayer. It says nothing as to what prayer is, or what it means to pray "in the Spirit." It speaks nothing about the language of prayer, which is ultimately the downfall of this approach. Today's Christian youth do not know the language of prayer. Though Christian Smith was explaining this condition regarding religion and teenagers as a whole, its application to the discipline of prayer is perhaps even more appropriate:

> I've come to think that in our culture, increasingly the language of faith is like a second language. It's like Spanish, French or German. It's not a primary language that people learn and speak. And we know about second languages that you don't just pick it up by osmosis. You need to be around people that speak it. You need to be instructed in it. You need to have practice talking it. I think one of the things that was clear in what we found was that very few adolescents are having much practice in speaking their second language of faith.[28]

In no place is this problem more pronounced than in the discipline of prayer. None of the above teaching materials gave any effort to teach the language or the context of prayer. Even teaching from the passages of Jesus' prayers seemed misdirected towards a theological understanding of Jesus rather than discovering the language of

[28] Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: A Movie about Teenagers and God*, DVD. Directed by Michael Eaton and Timothy Eaton (New York: Revelation Studios, 2007).

prayer. Ultimately, what the church has produced from this method of teaching is a generation of teens that know they should pray, but are uncomfortable and unsure about how to pray. Where do teenagers get the opportunity to develop a "language of prayer" and "practice in the discipline of prayer" itself?

Ironically, the answer to most of the material was to set them loose with extemporaneous praying. Each one of the above teaching documents stressed the importance of (1) creating personal or private prayer, (2) using a prayer journal and (3) praying corporately, or in a group. This approach is misdirected since it assumes that teens can adequately put into spoken words, or prose, all they need or want to say in prayer without ever having the opportunity to "practice" prayer from the scripture. This is not to say that God does not hear or respond to sloppy or misdirected prayer. Peterson was right to point out that "God hears everything we whisper or shout, say or sing. Right words and correct forms are not prerequisite to a heavenly audience. God is not fastidious in these matters."[29] One must remember, however, that a goal of ministry must be at a foundational level to lead and point people to a closer relationship with God. Part of that task should involve helping parishioners gain increased confidence and understanding of how to relate personally and authentically to a mysterious, yet intimate God. It is a necessary task. A minister cutting students loose to begin immediately praying almost entirely extemporaneously could be considered something akin to teaching a semester class in French grammar, then dropping the students off in Paris for the summer. Using Christian Smith's analysis,

[29] Peterson, *Answering God,* 3.

how effective would a student be in communicating in a foreign language without any understanding of a base vocabulary or even a few practiced and memorized phrases as a foundation to begin dialogue? Yet this seems to be exactly how the church has attempted to develop the skills of prayer. Young Christians don't need lessons in prayer improvisation. Young Christians need a "school of prayer" where they can observe, imitate, and become an authentic, growing student in the discipline of prayer. This idea will be explored further in subsequent chapters.

Since most North American churches do not operate with the idea of a "school of prayer," is it any wonder that the prayers of teenagers invariably drift towards the self-absorption characterized by Smith's concept of Moral Therapeutic Deism? A poignant example of this was found in the book *The Prayer of Jabez for Teens*, by Bruce Wilkinson. To this writer's knowledge, that was the singular work on prayer directly written and marketed to teens in the past decade. It is, in fact, a rewritten version of *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* which topped the *New York Times* bestseller list in 2000 and sold close to nine million copies. The popularity of the original book motivated its publisher to develop a staggering line of further Jabez-themed books and merchandise aimed at a wide variety of audiences from preschoolers to women to senior adults. The book was basically a devotional treatise based on an "obscure prayer by an obscure man" named Jabez, which is found in 1 Chronicles 4:9-10 (NIV):

> Jabez was more honorable than his brother. His mother had named him Jabez, saying "I gave birth to him in pain." Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your

> hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." And God granted his request.

Though the passage offered very little spiritual insight, Wilkinson managed to construct an entire theology of prayer that proved to be immensely popular with American Evangelicals, Catholics, mainline Protestants and, surprisingly, non-believers as well.[30] For Wilkinson, the fact that God granted the request of Jabez indicated that Jabez had stumbled upon a way to pray that compelled God to answer his request. Wilkinson then seemed to reverse the cause and effect, suggesting that Jabez was honorable *because* he had figured out the right way to pray. Therefore, if believers (and perhaps unbelievers) were to mimic the prayer of Jabez, repeating it daily with unshakable faith, then God would be compelled to answer their prayers as well. In essence, Wilkinson was something akin to the spy who spotted the millionaire enter the code for opening a safe and is now sharing the combination with us. For Wilkinson, the Jabez prayer contained four foundational elements: (1) A request for blessing, (2) A request to enlarge Jabez' territory, (3) A request for God's hand to be with Jabez, and (4) A request to keep Jabez from harm or evil. Wilkinson's questionable interpretation focused primarily on Jabez' request to "enlarge his territory" since granting this request would be a sign of God's blessing , while God's presence and protection from harm would allow Jabez to keep and enjoy his enlarged territory. For Wilkinson, "enlarged territory" ultimately meant "more". "More" and "bigger" were key terms in the Jabez theology of prayer. In the chapter, *Born for*

[30] John Beard, "Book Review- The Prayer of Jabez," http://rapidnet.com/jbeard/bdm/BookReviews/jabez.htm (accessed December 15, 2008).

More, Wilkinson explained to teens why it was indeed acceptable and advisable to want more:

> So when Jabez prayed for a larger territory, he was asking God for a raise, a promotion, a bigger and better life…all rolled into one. Why? Because Jabez knew that the size of his territory exactly equaled the size of his opportunity. And the little patch of ground he could see now just wasn't enough. He wanted more. In fact, he felt deep down in his heart that he was born for more . . . Jabez was born for more. . . I was born for more . . . *You* were born for more, too. And right now, God is waiting to prove it.[31]

In order to cash in on what God had waiting for them, Wilkinson encouraged his teen readers for the next thirty days to take part in the "Jabez Challenge," which consisted of the following steps and ended with an assurance:

1. Every morning, pray the Jabez prayer.
2. Mark each day off a calendar to show how well you keep your promise.
3. Write out the Jabez prayer and tape it somewhere where you won't miss it.
4. Reread *The Prayer of Jabez for Teens* once every week for four weeks. Ask God to show you the important stuff you might have missed.
5. Tell one other person about your thirty-day plan. Ask him or her to check up on you.
6. Keep a journal of your Jabez adventures.
7. Start praying the Jabez prayer for your family, friends, church, youth group and school.

> If you put this simple plan to work, you will develop a permanent habit of reaching for God's best.[32]

Though some acclaim should probably be offered to Wilkinson for challenging young people to renew their prayer discipline, this work fatally misses the point when it comes to teaching prayer. Whereas it is indeed healthy to memorize and pray

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[31] Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez for Teens* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2001), 47-49.

[32] Ibid., 96-97.

passages of prayer from the Hebrew Bible as previously suggested, Wilkinson has transformed this practice into something akin to a magic spell. Wilkinson did not want to teach youth prayer; he wanted to teach youth THE prayer – the prayer that always works. Prayer in this instance was reduced to an incantation – rote practices that, when faithfully and correctly performed, obligated God to respond in a big way. Prayer can hardly be more counterfeit and useless than when it is utilized in this fashion! Though it may not have been Wilkinson's intent to present the prayer of Jabez in this way, it certainly is the conclusion that must be drawn.

Of further interest was just how cozy the theology of Wilkinson's Jabez was with U.S. consumerism and consequently the beliefs of Christian Smith's Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as explained in chapter one. In regards to consumerism, Smith argued:

> For mass-consumer capitalism to grow, therefore, it must constitute masses of people as consumer selves who misrecognize new wants as essential needs, whose basic sense of necessity always expands. Consumer demand must always escalate, if capitalism is to succeed.[33]

How fortunate for the cause of consumerism and capitalism that Wilkinson has replicated this model and molded it into a theology where God WANTS one to always desire more – where the only question one need ask is "What could 'more' look like in my life?"[34] It was not a long jump from this point into the waiting arms of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Wilkinson seemed to make the leap easily. Jabez

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[33] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, 178.

[34] Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez for Teens*, 49.

could quite nicely serve as a mantra for most of the thought encompassed in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. For example, Wilkinson had no problem with the assertion in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism that God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other. He made the same claim - "Ask God to keep evil away from you and do your part to cooperate by keeping yourself as far away from sin as possible. Then you will be on your way to a permanent place on God's honor roll."[35] What about the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism tenet that the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself? Wilkinson embraced this thought as well when he spoke of God's blessing:

> God wants to bless you and me because it is in His nature to bless. That's why you need to make a life-long commitment to ask God every day to bless you – and while He's at it, to bless you a lot . . . God's personality is to give – and give again – to someone like you![36]

With God's blessing coming through the unleashing of the power of the prayer of Jabez, happiness seemed almost assured. There was also the thought in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism that God did not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God was needed to solve a problem. Wilkinson did make a flaccid attempt at the close of the book to convince people they needed a personal relationship with God through Jesus, which he referred to as "The Jesus Advantage." But honestly, by that point, who was listening? Who would be compelled to get to know God personally when Wilkinson had spent so much effort convincing the reader

[35] Ibid., 93.
[36] Ibid., 43.

that God's main job was "to make it happen in your life"?[37] It was clear that while intending to bring a revolution in prayer, Wilkinson's Jabez was simply a theological repackaging of American consumerism which only propelled the thought and belief of teens towards the morass of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. This most certainly explained the wide appeal of the book among various Christian denominations and even to non-believers. As stated before, this parasitic belief system can attach itself effortlessly to virtually any religion or denomination.

Before leaving Jabez however, it is necessary for later conversations in the chapter to examine one further misunderstanding about prayer that emerged from Wilkinson's work. In belief systems, such as those espoused directly by Wilkinson, and indirectly by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, prayer is almost completely characterized by the concept of asking. Continually asking God for things was not a problem for Wilkinson:

> You see, even though there is no limit to God's goodness, if you didn't ask Him for a blessing yesterday, you didn't get all that He wanted to give you. That's the catch – if you don't ask for His blessing, you forfeit those that will come to you only by asking. God's blessings in our lives are limited only by us, not by His resources, power, or willingness to give. [38]

While Wilkinson does cite James 4:2b *"You do not have because you do not ask God,"* (NIV) to support his assertion, he misappropriates its meaning by neglecting to include the very next sentence in verse three, *"When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your*

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[37] Ibid., 21.
[38] Ibid., 40.

pleasures." Wilkinson's silence on this would seem to indicate that, for him, there are no bad motives in asking God for blessings. What results from this misunderstanding is an approach to prayer that is completely absorbed with asking God for blessings of all types. A most appropriate acronym for this type of prayer would be AAA – "Ask! Ask! Ask!" This type of prayer is noisy prayer, more concerned with talking and petitioning than listening or relating. This is the epitome of the transactional prayer discussed in chapter one. And since the language of transaction eventually overtakes and smothers all other elements of prayer, the one praying is usually reduced in character to something not unlike the chatty relative that won't be quiet. It is not long before this type of prayer loses its vitality. Thomas Merton described all too well the stale product of this brand of prayer:

> So we go to Him to ask help and to get out of being punished, and to mumble that we need a better job, more money, more of the things that are praised by advertisers. And we wonder why our prayer is so often dead – gaining its only life, borrowing its only urgency from the fact that we need these things so badly. But we really do not think we need God.[39]

More often than not, this is the common terminus of the Jabez journey, – bitter and almost resentful prayer stripped of intimacy, praise, or even space to listen for God.

Despite this rather gloomy appraisal of many of the more current methods and approaches to teaching youth to pray, there is an emerging reason for renewed optimism in this area. Much of this optimism can be traced to the work of the California-based Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project (YMSP). Created in 1996 as a partnership between the San Francisco Theological Seminary, the Youth Specialties

[39] Thomas Merton, *Praying the Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1956), 10.

Inc. (a youth ministry publishing house) and the Sleepy Hollow Presbyterian Church, the project endeavored to foster Christian communities that are attentive to God's presence, discerning of the Spirit, and authentically journey with young people towards the way of Jesus. Between 1997 and 2003, the YMSP worked with sixteen diverse congregations in an effort to move the model of youth ministry away from consumer and personality-driven approaches towards a design which reclaimed and celebrated the mysterious and sacred character of the relationship with God. Mark Yaconelli, director and spokesperson of the project, as well as the son of youth ministry pioneer Mike Yaconelli, further clarified the desires of the project:

> To reform youth ministries, we must return to that which makes the church unique. Any secular organization can provide fun events, dynamic recreation leaders and good moral instruction. Only the church knows how to awaken people to the liberating presence of God. This, our greatest gift, should be the center of our discipleship practices.[40]

As a result of their approach, the YMSP soon came to reject virtually all of the educational methods described earlier, mainly because of their focus, which emphasized understanding the facts of prayer (prayer elements and biblical lessons) or the results of prayer (Jabez). Yaconelli believed these information-based approaches to be "discipleship through spiritual information rather than transformation . . . the youth minister acts as the bearer of knowledge and develops effective ways to dispense the knowledge, just as a math teacher would."[41] Another

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[40] Mark Yaconelli, "Youth Ministry: A Contemplative Approach," *Christian Century*, April 21, 1999, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_13_116/ai_54588515 (accessed December 18, 2008).

[41] Ibid.

YMSP criticism would be that none of these methods provided an *authentic experience* of prayer. Though not speaking specifically to prayer, Yaconelli spoke of this same type of problem in relation to his previous experience as a youth leader:

> I finally understood that our programs had taught plenty of lessons about God but had failed to give kids the space, time and tools for experiencing God. How can young people sustain an interest in theology, the Bible, or even Christian living without first encountering the God revealed in Jesus Christ? And how can adults help youth encounter God if they are not themselves regularly encountering God in prayer and reflection?[42]

If these methods were indeed flawed, what then was the solution? The project discovered that the answer was part of a much larger paradigm shift in the approach to youth ministry – an answer not found in some new and trendy technology-based approach, but rather by returning to many of the ancient Christian practices and disciplines from centuries ago. Partner congregations across the country began to pair elements of modern-youth ministry, such as games, food and announcements, with the "dust-covered" practices of silence, solitude, and meditative prayer – an approach now known as "contemplative" youth ministry. Contemplative youth ministry has as its goal not the entertainment of youth, but the transformation of youth through programs, instruction, and relationships which are committed to intentionally and consistently dwell in God's presence. As partner groups began to reform around this "pre-modern" concept, the project began to see some very encouraging results, including (1) A drop in youth minister burn-out; (2) Young people eager to learn spiritual practices; (3) Greater discernment and impact in youth ministry

[42] Ibid.

programming; and, in almost all of the churches included in the project, (4) Church renewal.[43] The project has also spawned a new line of resources to aid ministries in developing spiritual practices. An example is Tony Jones' work, *Soul Shaper,* where the author explored the origins of several ancient spiritual practices such as the Lectio Divina meditation, in order to unlock their potential application in modern youth ministry. Another notable offering has been Steven Case's *The Book of Uncommon Prayer*, which provided youth leaders an extensive collection of youth-focused, contemplative prayers and liturgies for times of youth worship. The popularity of these works and others, including the recent release of a sequel to *Uncommon Prayer*, has verified the growing acceptance and excitement over this new/old model of ministry.

What specifically can contemplative ministry contribute to the conversation on prayer? Prayer is a foundational and cherished component of the contemplative movement. It draws ones attention and heart towards God and away from the seductive nature of the culture's marketplace. For prayer to maintain this importance and vitality, Yaconelli and those in the contemplative movement believed that prayer should be characterized by three qualities.

The first quality mentioned was that of *response*. Mature prayer must have the understanding that one is always responding to the God who has created and worked in history. Yaconelli's thought here paralleled that of another contemplative pastor

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[43] See Mark Yaconelli, "Ancient-Future Youth Ministry," *Group Magazine*, under "Articles," http:// www.ymsp.org/resources/ ancient_future_article.html (accessed December 18, 2008).

and author, Eugene Peterson, who wrote, "Fundamentally, prayer is our response to the God who speaks to us. God's word is always first. He gets the first word in, always. We answer."[44] This characteristic of prayer acknowledges that God is always at work around the one praying and in the one praying. It is an understanding that the dialogue between the individual and God was begun by God long before he or she had even thought to pray. This approach certainly stands in stark contrast to understandings of prayer proposed by Wilkinson's Jabez, which suggested that humanity's task in prayer was to perpetually ask. For the contemplatives, prayer based on asking denied this foundational truth concerning how God works which served only to hinder the relationship between the one praying and God.

Another contemplative characteristic of prayer was that of *awareness.* This characteristic motivates the one praying to acknowledge and be aware of the presence of God when praying. For Yaconelli, "Through prayerful awareness, every activity becomes an opportunity to deepen our intimacy with God, every habitual practice becomes a conscious participation in God's divine activity."[45] This particular aspect of awareness in prayer was conspicuously absent from most materials that attempted to teach youth about prayer, particularly those from a conservative, evangelical background. Could this be perhaps because awareness required the one praying to be mindful of something other than self? Contemplatives readily admit that increasing

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[44] Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: A Study in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 104.

[45] Mark Yaconelli, "Focusing Youth Ministry Through Christian Practices," in *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry*, ed. Kendra Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 158.

one's awareness is a strangely uncomfortable, passive stance in praying, for it requires learning the skill of discernment and restraint. Yet when applied, prayerful awareness was powerfully liberating, for it "[kept] us receptive and available to God's nurturing, even in the most demanding of spiritual disciplines."[46]

Finally, contemplative prayer had to embody the understanding of *relationship* with God. For contemplatives, there could be no meaningful prayer outside of this relationship. As Yaconelli again explained:

> When we seek to engage in contemplative prayer, all we're doing is seeking to rest attentively with the presence of God . . . Our human relationships involve times of talking, listening, and working together, but any long-term relationship also involves moments of simply resting in the presence of one another. This is the same disposition we seek to incorporate in our relationship with God.[47]

Above everything else, contemplative prayer nudges one to the reality that whether one is a youth minister or a student leader, a Bible study member or an irregular attendee, one is, before anything else, part of an intimate relationship with God. It is a relationship where, very often, individuals must simply be silent and find rest in God's presence. Being married, this writer has come to know very poignantly the satisfaction that comes from times when one simply "rests" in the presence of a special and intimate partner. It is a rest where one's identity is not drawn from what one does, but from whom one is – a relationship beyond actions and beyond words. To pray in this way requires one to move beyond the prayer acronyms and beyond the

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Mark Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 82.

intellectual knowledge gained from Bible studies about prayer, and instead enter the realm of emotion, passion, intimacy, and rest. God desires relationship. As one prays in the context of relationship, both spoken and unspoken, the impersonal and distant God conceptualized in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism must melt away to reveal a God who is personal, caring, and loving. In contemplative prayer, God is close – perhaps uncomfortably close at times. In true relationship, there can be no other choice.

There is certainly much about contemplative approaches to prayer and spirituality that is encouraging. At its best however, contemplative prayer practices are promising *forms* for spiritual growth. To be most effective, they must have *content*. To have a valid form without content would be similar to possessing a superior coffee maker while lacking coffee, a most crucial ingredient to producing a desired result. It seems logical then that contemplative practices concerning prayer should be anchored by scripture in a way that allows freedom of movement, yet keeps the practice from drifting too far away from home. This might look like something akin to a balloon on a long cable, anchored solidly to the ground. The balloon repositions itself in accordance with atmospheric conditions, yet never strays too far away from its anchor. Is there a place in scripture where this type of authentic prayer can be taught and demonstrated to students? Is there a place in scripture where contemplative practices can be adequately and honestly utilized where appropriate? Is there a place in scripture that invites one to speak to God, as well as rest in God's presence? Is there a place in scripture flexible enough to adjust to ever-changing conditions, yet strong enough to remain anchored close to home? The answer to all these questions is

a resounding “yes!” There is indeed a place in scripture that satisfies all of the above criteria. But unfortunately, it is also a place that has been virtually forgotten in modern youth ministry – the Psalms.

CHAPTER 3

RECLAIMING THE PSALMS

"Whenever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure vanishes from the Christian Church. With its recovery will come unsuspected power."
-Dietrich Bonhoeffer[48]

Whatever happened to the Psalms? A quick glance at any youth (or adult) section of a Christian bookstore will quickly confirm that, while the church may be very interested in having "The Best Life Now" or "Fireproofing" one's marriage, much less attention has been given to understanding the Psalms, let alone learning to pray from them. Thomas Merton once believed that "It is quite possible that our lack of interest in the Psalms conceals a secret lack of interest in God."[49] With so many young people and adults stammering along the precipice of a deistic understanding of God, it is easy to see how prophetic Merton's words have become. It is difficult for students to be interested in God while bathing in a culture that constantly preaches to only be interested in oneself – a culture that mercilessly appropriates students' time and attention to a point that they can only focus upon the next immediate concern. Youth pastors and leaders have also discovered that an understanding of the Psalms (or any part of scripture for that matter) is not essential in attaining the consumer-styled markers of success many churches covet. A trendy, flashy event that attracts a

[48] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1970), 26.
[49] Merton, 11.

crowd is all many need to validate the "success" of their ministry. The Psalms, however, possess the power to call both student and minister away from the siren song of consumer-driven religion. The Psalms possess the power, as well as the means, for students to discover a deeper relationship with God through the discipline of prayer.

Though certainly not an exhaustive study of the Psalms, (many of which exist, written by scholars of greater reputation than this writer) it seems clear that the Psalms can be immensely helpful and necessary to teenage believers in the practice of prayer.

What exactly can the Psalms offer teens? At its most fundamental level, the Psalms offer teens a "School of Prayer,"[50] where the language of prayer can be observed, practiced, and learned. This connection can be better understood when considering how one learns to speak. It is highly doubtful that any of us can pinpoint an exact moment when we learned this most basic skill or how exactly our first coherent speech came about. Eugene Peterson captures very well the initial process which brings language skills to children:

> We are plunged at birth into a sea of language. We swim in words. We are soaked in nouns and verbs. Gradually we realize that some of these words are directed to us – personally targeted words that name, love, and comfort. Then slowly, syllable by syllable, we acquire the capacity to answer: mama, papa, bottle, blanket, yes, no. Not one of these words was a first word. Hundreds of thousands of words, for days and weeks and months were spoken to us before we began to answer, to speak our own

[50] This term has been utilized in many different forms by Christopher Barth, Eugene Peterson, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and others.

> words. All speech is answering speech. We were all spoken to before we spoke.[51]

Children learn speech because someone has spoken to them. It is the same for the believer. The believer responds to God because God has spoken to the believer. This response is prayer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer echoes this understanding as well, writing, "The child learns to speak because his father speaks to him. He learns the speech of his father. So we learn to speak to God because God has spoken to us and speaks to us. By means of the speech of the Father in heaven, His children learn to speak with Him."[52] This answering speech to God, this element of response currently emphasized by the contemplative movement in youth ministry, begins as very simple language – thanksgiving, request, and perhaps praise. This is not, however, the breadth of what can be communicated to God. While God certainly hears our sighs and groans, just as a parent hears the cries of a child, life experience pushes us beyond rudimentary babble. There lies within all believers a desire to place into words the scope of anguish, the longing, and/or the joy one desires to share with God. As much as one celebrates a toddler putting together basic sentences, there is also the desire to see the child's language grow beyond "I see the dog," "That is my toy," or (our son's favorite), "I do it my own way." It is the Psalms that can provide the student-believer a place to explore and mature in the language of response to God. The Psalms historically have been the place for believers to learn this language.

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[51] Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 49.

[52] Bonhoeffer, 11.

Peterson affirms this as well, "The great and sprawling university that Hebrews and Christians have attended to learn to answer God [and] to learn to pray has been the Psalms. More people have learned to pray by matriculating the Psalms than any other way."[53] The Psalms was the prayer book not only of the Hebrews, but of Jesus, of Paul, and of the early church fathers. All were taught, at one point or another, to pray utilizing the prayer poetry of the Psalter. It not only served as an example and model, but also as a platform for further prayer as well. As Walter Brueggemann explains:

> The Psalms function both as *acts of prayer* themselves and as invitations to other prayers beyond these words . . . We not only reiterate these prayers in their timeless words, now found timely, but are authorized and nourished by these words to find our words, fresh words that are more resonant to our own experience, more congruent with our own life, more crucial for our own faith.[54]

The writers of the Psalms have handed us these prayers, as if to say, "Watch. Observe and learn this language of response to God." Yet, at the same time, the Psalms give the student the freedom to invent and create a prayer language appropriate for their specific moment. Allowing the Psalms to teach young people about prayer pushes the student to model something deeper and more important than mere vocabulary. Toni Craven further clarifies this concept, writing that:

> To follow the way of prayer in the psalms is not to learn how to say a particular type of prayer – hymn, lament, or thanksgiving. It is not to learn *the* right name for God – YHWH, Elohim. It is not to define correctly God's nature with transcendent or supra-human analogies, human likenesses, animal likenesses, or likenesses to inanimate realities. The psalms do not teach by way of a fixed script. They teach an

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[53] Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 50.

[54] Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 33-34.

> orientation to conversation with God, an orientation of openness to hear God's voice in experiences of all kinds.[55]

Above all else, the language of the psalms models human willingness to respond authentically to the voice of God. Though this can be a difficult jump for many, much of the Psalms work intentionally to make this dialogical reorientation a smooth one. The text of the Psalter is so often written in such a general and nondescript style that it allows one who prays the psalms to easily slide their existence into the text. As Patrick Miller suggests:

> The language of these psalms with its stereotypical, generalizing, and figurative style is so open-ended that later readers, on the one hand are stopped from peering behind them to one or more clearly definable sets of circumstances or settings in life, and on the other hand, are intentionally set free to adapt them to varying circumstances and settings.[56]

Rather than learning to drive from the back seat, the Psalms allow the reader to slide quickly in the driver's seat. Its language is so designed that even the novice can quickly gain a certain level of orientation and comfort. The importance of orientation and comfort cannot be overstated when introducing something new to young people. This characteristic, present in so many of the psalms, makes them quite a helpful tool for young people.

The Psalms serve as a language-expander for teenagers in a culture that habitually reduces language. In the age of texting, sentences and concepts are reduced to easy and vacuous abbreviations. "Ttfn," "Lol" and "Bff" have reduced the language of

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[55]Toni Craven, *The Book of the Psalms* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 128.
[56] Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 8.

goodbye, joy, and friendship to their most distilled form. The Psalms will have none of this. The elements of the Psalter tug and press the reader to expand the language of response to God. Though there are innumerable concepts in the Psalms that could be developed for the benefit of the praying teenager, this writer would propose that there are four particular concepts present in the Psalms that, if reintroduced to Christian teens, have the potential to dramatically alter prayer among this group, with the result being a broader language of prayer and a more authentic, healthy relationship with God.

The first concept from the Psalms that would be important for teens to consider is the concept of "pray-back." Though other theologians have grazed this thought somewhat in passing, it is Walter Brueggemann who has supplied its most complete development. Brueggemann observed that the writers of the Psalms used a somewhat limited vocabulary to speak of what they knew of God. In Brueggemann's words, "Israel has only a few things to say about this peculiar You [God] and has only a few words with which to say those things."[57] Words and phrases such as "steadfast love," "slow to anger," "faithfulness," "peace," as well as a few others find frequent repetition throughout the Psalter. Take, as example, the terms revealed as part of God's character as seen in this encounter with Moses in the book of Exodus:

> The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished . . . (Exodus 34:6-7a NIV)

[57] Brueggemann, *Life of Faith,* 44.

Brueggemann emphasizes the fact that most all of these terms of description for God are recycled into the texts of many of the Psalms including this passage:

> But you, O lord are a
> compassionate and
> gracious God,
> slow to anger, abounding in
> love and faithfulness. (Psalms 86:15 NIV)[58]

Brueggemann identifies this peculiar prayer concept as pray-back. In effect, "Israel 'prays back' to Yahweh in an imperative, Yahweh's own words of self announcement."[59] For the Hebrews, the Psalms became a vehicle to reflect back their understanding of the revelation of God's character. This type of prayer has its very roots in relationship. They were, in essence, saying to God, "This is what I know about you." It contained an understated beauty similar to that of a young child who, for the first time, walked around the house in the father's shoes. The big, gangly shoes didn't fit very well, but the child demonstrated in a very loving way, that something about the nature of the father was understood and what the father was like. The child reflected back to the father what was seen. It would seem to be one of the most basic relational responses, and therefore a good place for teens to begin a new prayer journey with God.

The notion of pray-back which is exemplified in the Psalms could be helpful for Christian teens in many areas. Teens tend to struggle with developing a language of prayer that moves beyond asking for things. To use a golf analogy, "asking" is the

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[58] See also Ps. 25:10, Ps. 33:4-5, Ps. 85:7, Ps. 103:8, 17-18, and Ps. 145: 8.
[59] Brueggemann, *Life in Faith*, 45.

only club in the bag of many Christian teens and, as mentioned before, is inherently transactional by nature. Pray-back, however, presents teens with an entirely different mode and concept of prayer, a mode that is simple, relational, and revelatory in nature. Whereas the Hebrews practiced pray-back as a type of "creedal disclosure," suggesting that, "Israel prays God's character back to God, insists that Yahweh be who Yahweh asserted God's own self to be, and reminds Yahweh that Yahweh can be 'no other God,'"[60] teenagers could perhaps utilize pray-back as an initial step of reintroduction to God, a God that many teens have decided is distant and detached. This distant, deist relationship many youth now have with God has stripped them of any real knowledge of God's character or what God is like. It would seem that if teenagers could begin with a simple prayer, praying back to God the character of God revealed in scripture, worship, or experiences in ministry, a prayer similar to the model one finds in the Psalms, this might provide a platform for a true dialogical relationship to be reborn. This type of prayer is indeed the "answering speech" referred to by Peterson earlier in the chapter and requires the one praying to be carefully listening for God's voice responding to their declaration of God's nature. One cannot underestimate the importance of listening when utilizing pray-back. As one listens and contemplates the character of God that has just been prayed-back to God, that prayer moves beyond pray-back. This is often demonstrated in the Psalms. Quite often, pray-back draws the one praying into praise of God, which is another area of prayer where teens struggle. As Brueggemann again suggests:

[60] Ibid, 47.

> This characterization of Yahweh becomes a way of speaking about God in praise, gratitude, joy and amazement. Israel knows that the faithfulness of Yahweh has derivatively made possible a faithful world in which one need not be anxious and at risk.[61]

An example of this progression can also be seen in Psalm 86. The Psalmist initially prayed back to God a revelation of God's love and forgiveness:

> You are forgiving and good, O Lord,
> Abounding in love to all who call
> to you. (Psalms 86:5 NIV)

As the Psalmist contemplated this loving reality of God's character, the prayer immediately transformed into an explosion of joy and praise to God:

> Among the gods there is none like
> you, O Lord;
> no deeds can compare with yours.
> All the nations you have made
> will come and worship before
> you, O Lord;
> they will bring glory to your
> name.
> For you are great and do marvelous
> deeds;
> you alone are God. (Psalms 86: 8-10 NIV)

Could Christian young people, when presented with the concept from the Psalter of pray-back, discover hidden wells of understanding and praise in their souls which has been covered over by their own distance from God and a lack of contemplation of the reality of God's love which is revealed time and again in scripture? Could teenagers break out in words of praise similar to those in Psalm 86 and others? The Psalms idea of pray-back would seem to offer much promise in this area.

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[61] Brueggemann, *The Life of Faith,* 47.

Another prayer concept found in the Psalms that could be helpful to teens is that of metaphor. The Psalmists were careful in their prayers to not allow their language to reside only in the realm of the spiritual. Their prayer language utilized objects and instances gathered from everyday life and applied them to their understanding of relationship with God. Their tool for accomplishing this was metaphor. Peterson provides perhaps the clearest understanding of metaphor in the Psalms when he writes:

> Metaphor is the witness of language that spirit and matter are congruent. Metaphor uses the language of sense experience to lead us into the world of the unseen: faith, guilt, mind, God. . . So, when the psalmists pray, they call up lions and snares and dirt to talk about sin, sun and shade and king to address God, tree and mountain and lamb to designate lives blessed by God. There is not a single psalm without its metaphor or metaphors. Metaphor is the characteristic language of prayer.[62]

A classic example of this use of metaphor can be observed in Psalm 18 when the author, presumably David, proclaims:

> I love you, O Lord, my strength.
> The Lord is my rock, my fortress
> and my deliverer;
> my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.
> He is my shield and the horn
> of my salvation, my
> stronghold. (Ps. 18:1-2 NIV)

This passage bypassed any attempt to describe God in an over-spiritualized or eternal manner and instead framed God in earthly, everyday images – God as rock, fortress, refuge, shield, horn, and stronghold. For any shepherd who had raised a shield in defense of their flock, or hastened to a fortress or stronghold to take refuge from an

[62] Peterson, *Answering God*, 73.

invader, these images would be all too meaningful. Prayer is kept in the moment, rather than drawn away to a realm of disconnected spirituality. This understanding of prayer would be important to young people, who too often are guilty of trying to spiritualize the language of their prayer, with the result being a rather incoherent assortment of "prayerisms" fashioned together with no real authenticity or relevance. As Peterson correctly states, "In prayer, the task is not to rarify language into an abstract spirituality, but to thicken it with metaphors of weather and geography and enmity into a spirituality of honest and actual experience."[63]

The concept of metaphor in the Psalms could also be helpful in unleashing the imagination of teens in prayer. At this stage of their development many teenagers are beginning to engage a new ability for thinking and imagination. Swiss epistemologist Jean Piaget termed this new mental capacity, formal operations. With the onset of formal operations, teenagers gain the ability to think symbolically and on multiple levels of meaning, both literal and suggestive. One of the products of this new level of thinking is an expanded capacity for symbolic expression. As child psychologist David Elkind explains:

> Formal operations also allow young people to use language in more colorful and creative ways than was true during childhood. Adolescents can use puns, metaphors, sarcasm, and satire without fully realizing they are using an allegorical mode of speech. They also can create poetry of great power and beauty, of great sadness and of great joy.[64]

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[63] Ibid, 74.

[64] David Elkind, *All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis* (Cambridge: DaCapo Press, 1998), 32.

Formal operations allow teenagers to unlock the poetic and imaginative capacity of the metaphor as it is utilized in the Psalms. This opportunity to practice the newfound capability in their prayers should prove energizing to students. Complimenting this newfound mental capacity is the fact that a high percentage of teens have now been exposed to the imaginative "fantasy lands" of Harry Potter as well as other fanciful films and media, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The X-Men* and *Star Trek*. This genre of storytelling creates and encourages minds that are rife for the capacity to dream and imagine. Tragically, part of the adult world has been uneasy and fearful of the imagination of teenagers. Worrying about what teens might be imagining, adults have too often sought to stifle imagination and creativity of teenagers rather than to encourage it. Because of this, the church, for all intents and purposes, has lost the ability to help Christian teens harness their imagination to pray creatively and authentically. Through the use of metaphor however, the Psalms have shown us a way to remedy this omission. It would seem that the metaphor, as utilized in the Psalms, could be integral to returning imagination and creativity to youth prayer. As William Brown explains:

> As a figure of speech that cavorts with the visual, the metaphor has its home in the imagination. It instantiates the poetic role of imagining, of saying and seeing one thing in terms of something else, or several things at once, in order to create something new.[65]

As Christian young people are exposed to the metaphors they find embedded in the prayers of the Psalms, it is quite possible that what they find could rekindle the fire of

[65] William Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 9.

imagination for prayer, utilizing their own discovered and developed metaphors. What could prayer look like released in the imagination of teens? One could almost guarantee that it would be much more real, accessible, and relevant than much of what teens are currently praying. This is a rather safe assumption to make, since that is what metaphor does for us currently in the Psalms. As Brown again proposes:

> The Psalter has remained a book in season because it continues to perform evocatively, owing in no small measure to its masterful deployment of the metaphor. By generating novel associations that open up new vistas of interpretation and application, the metaphor makes the Psalter eminently appropriable for readers in various settings and circumstances. Through the performance of metaphors, the reader becomes the psalmist.[66]

It is perhaps this use of metaphor in prayer, as demonstrated in the Psalms, which provides the greatest potential for transformation in the prayer of teenagers. Along with pray-back, metaphor offers an antidote to many of the ills of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. It grounds prayer in reality and utilizes the language of everyday life. It naturally brings God closer to humanity because the metaphors used to describe God, as well as our condition and circumstances, remain closer to human existence as well. The metaphors of the Psalms trust the imagination of the one praying and the providence of God, who speaks, reveals, and comforts through these powerful prayers. And again, the Psalms encourage and bless the one praying to imagine and create new metaphors for prayer. The possibilities for spiritual growth in this area indeed seem limitless.

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[66] Ibid, 214.

Just as the Psalms contain the potential to teach the concepts of pray-back and metaphor, they also model emotional broadness and openness in prayer language to God. This openness and honesty can also be especially helpful to teens. Unfortunately, teenagers in America currently exist in a broader culture that encourages them to keep certain emotions concealed, believing that it is unseemly to expose the rougher edges of our feelings to others. This culture has even penetrated the American church. Mark Yaconelli keenly observes this as well:

> Most of us have been trained to keep the agony and pain of our lives a secret. Ironically, churches seem particularly averse to human suffering. People dress up for church, greet one another with serene and pleasant faces, and keep things neat and orderly in worship. Church often feels like a place for pretending, a place for hiding all the mess and anguish of human living.[67]

Any competent counselor would encourage people in a relationship to be open and honest about their feelings. How ironic that when the modern American teen comes to worship, to the place where the church professes to experience God in relationship, they are encouraged to smile and suppress everything going on in their lives, feign happiness, and pray that way as well. Teens are often taught, both covertly and overtly, that one should not express their frustrations and disappointments to God. At times this lesson is conveyed rather unpleasantly, as when this writer heard a youth speaker tell a group at a summer camp that it was a sin to "get mad at God and tell Him about it." What is perhaps most troubling about this dynamic of suppression is

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[67] Mark Yaconelli, *Wonder, Fear and Longing: A Book of Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 58.

that it plays right into the thought of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, particularly the belief in a God who is distant. Brueggemann speaks to this danger quite clearly:

> In most arenas where people live, we are expected and required to speak the language of safe orientation and equilibrium, either to find it so or to pretend we find it so. . . As a result our speech is dulled and mundane. Our passion has been stilled and is without imagination. And mostly the Holy One is not addressed – not because we dare not, but because God is far away and hardly seems important.[68]

This is not the approach one finds in the Psalms. The Hebrews of the Psalter embraced relationship with God. If God was going to offer relationship to Israel, then Israel would settle for nothing less than full authenticity and full disclosure in the dialogue. Nothing could be off-limits in prayer. One quickly discovers that the words of the Psalms are abrasive. Their tone and texture percolate from lived experience, not contrived tranquility. Because of this, one can find that all the emotions of real life exist in the words of the Psalms. Yaconelli correctly asserts:

> There is a wellspring of life within the Psalms. The Psalms express all the gratitude, anguish, hope, suffering, lust, jealousy, joy, peacefulness, vindictiveness, grief, grace, contentment, fear, love, hatred, and compassion that human beings carry within their hearts.[69]

What would be the response of the typical, angst-ridden Christian teenager to the discovery that the chosen people of the Hebrew Bible had the boldness and audacity to approach the Most Holy God in prayer and demand:

> How long, O Lord? Will you forget
> me forever?
> How long must I wrestle with my

[68] Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms,* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2007), 7.
[69] Mark Yaconelli, *Downtime: Helping Teenagers Pray* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 119.

> thoughts
> and every day have sorrow in my heart?
> How long will my enemy triumph
> over me?
> Look on me and answer, O Lord,
> my God.
> Give light to my eyes, or I will
> sleep in death; (Ps. 13:1-3 NIV)

yet direct their prayer of complaint to a hopeful and trusting closure:

> But I trust in your unfailing love;
> my heart rejoices in your
> salvation.
> I will sing to the Lord,
> for he has been good to me. (Ps. 13:5-6 NIV)

This is but one of countless examples in the Psalter of complaint and trust coexisting in prayer. Disorientation and faithfulness can find a home together. The Psalms encourage and challenge teens to be honest with God in their prayer. When that happens, this writer suggests that a newfound intimacy with God might develop. Students might begin to see God close and involved in their lives. When teenagers speak of the qualities they appreciate in their closest friends, what inevitably surfaces is that teens feel they can share anything with their confidant. That confidence in sharing develops intimacy. There is this same spirit and understanding present in the Psalms as well. Nothing should be withheld from God in prayer. Teens should be affirmed and blessed to share the breadth of their emotions as they pray to God. As Brueggemann states:

> Everything properly belongs in this conversation of the heart. To withhold parts of life from that conversation is in fact to withhold part of life from the sovereignty of God. Thus these psalms make the important connection:

> everything must be *brought to speech*, and everything brought to speech must be *addressed to God*, who is the final reference for all of life.[70]

This openness in prayer extends in the Psalms even to emotions that many find troubling and difficult – the emotions of anger and hatred. These darker emotions have consistently demonstrated to be areas of difficulty and contention for the church. The church strains with the tension arising from a perceived understanding that hatred and anger are considered to be "bad" emotions from which the church must be sanitized. How could a group of Jesus followers, who claim as their Lord the "Light of the world" and seek to model a life characterized by loving God and loving others, find space for prayers containing anger and hatred? To answer this question, some clarification may be necessary. Does God hate or forbid anger? It is difficult to point to any particular passage where God forbids the emotion of anger. God's only warnings regarding anger concern allowing one's anger to be acted out in destructive ways – both to oneself and to others. An example of this in the Hebrew Bible could be the story of Cain and Abel. When Cain became jealous and angry with his brother, God posed to him the question, "Why are you angry?" (Gen. 4:6 NIV). Nowhere in the passage did God claim that Cain sinned for being angry. Instead, God asked him to examine his motives for anger, warning Cain in the process that his anger had the potential to become destructive and sinful. Regrettably, nowhere in the story is it suggested that Cain spoke or prayed to God about his anger- unresolved anger that would eventually overwhelm Cain, causing him to murder his brother. This insight,

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[70] Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 27.

which Andrew Lester clearly expresses, should not be lost on the modern believer wrestling with this issue:

> Biblical stories and sayings assume that people experience anger, that this is part of the human condition. Hebrew Scripture does not suggest that the capacity for anger is either an aberration within God's original creation or a contradiction of God's intention for human well-being. Cain's anger was not a problem to God. The Bible contains no story in which either God or Jesus suggests that the best people never feel anger. The Ten Commandments contain no prohibition of anger, only of behavior that expresses anger destructively.[71]

If God does not forbid anger or consider the emotion of anger a sin, can one find places in scripture where God's followers exposed and shared troublesome emotions, including anger and hatred, with God in prayer? The answer is yes – and the place is the Psalms. One would be hard pressed, though, to find any of these psalms utilized in worship, preached as the morning text or diligently prepared as a Bible study. More often than not these passages are conveniently misplaced, forgotten, or simply edited out of the text. Dr. Toni Craven demonstrates an example of this in the lectionary reading of Psalms 139. In this particular reading, verses 15-21 of the psalm are removed. The excised section of the psalm includes this rather abrasive passage:

> If only you would slay the wicked, Oh God,
> away from me, you bloodthirsty men!
> Those who speak of you with evil intent,
> your adversaries misuse your name.
> Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?
> and abhor those who rise up against you?
> I have nothing but hatred for them;
> I count them my enemies. (Psalm 139:19-22 NIV)

[71] Andrew Lester, *The Angry Christian: A Theology for Care and Counseling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 147.

Craven's concern with this is indeed valid:

> Unless we happen to know the entire text of a psalm, we might never suspect that the psalmist said angry words to God from the excerpts we use liturgically. It is simply a fact that the Lectionary and our culture discourage awareness and expression of anger. The Psalms, on the other hand, do not. Negative and positive expressions stand in the psalms without the kind of editing to which we are accustomed in the Lectionary.[72]

One must recognize and contend with the brutal honestly expressed by the Hebrews in their prayers to God as found in the Psalms. The psalmists prayed their anger, hatred, and wishes for a swift vengeance to God and expected God to act swiftly and accordingly. To deny the Psalms this uncomfortable truth denies all interpreters the fullness of existence as emotional beings created by God – not to mention the fact that this denial would most likely incite many teens to question the validity of a God that couldn't "handle" our anger. God is big enough for our disappointment, our hatred, and our anger.

Can an understanding of anger and hatred in the Psalms aid the modern Christian teenager in dealing with similar emotions? Most assuredly the answer is yes. There are some developmental steps that must be understood in order for teens to pray this type of prayer in a healthy matter. The first is that one's emotions need to be put into words, regardless of how raw those words may be. Rather than condemning or looking down upon words of anger, the Psalms freely allow and affirm the sharing of intense feelings in prayer. The Psalms encourage believers to put the emotions dwelling inside them into words, as difficult or troublesome as those words may be.

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[72] Craven, *The Book of Psalms, 47.*

The Psalmists, in their anger, ask God to "break the teeth," of the wicked (Psalms 58:6 NIV) and "pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your sword" (Psalms 83:15 NIV). To be sure, there are intense thoughts and emotions in teenagers that, if placed into words of prayer, would make the above examples appear quite tame. Adults must not fear those words. They must be owned by the one praying. And though they are harsh and powerful, these words are not as grave as one might assume. Brueggemann suggests at this point, "Our feelings brought to speech are not as dangerous or as important as we imagined, as we wished, or as we feared. When they are unspoken, they loom too large and we are condemned by them."[73] When feelings of anger and hatred are put to words in prayer, the one praying can authenticate his/her emotions and rightfully claim them as their own.

Teens must also understand, when praying anger and hatred, that these verbal assaults are exactly that – verbal. The speaker must not do anything beyond speech and that speech can only be addressed and offered to God. Prayers of hatred cannot be fodder for text messaging or internet social forums. Too often, words of anger splash over into many areas of life; this is not helpful or healthy. Those intense words of prayer must be only for God. Once the prayers are brought to God, one's rage and bitterness must then, in essence, be given over to God. Otherwise, there can be no release from these enslaving emotions. For teenagers, this may be the most difficult task when praying anger. Too often, the temptation is to pull these strong emotions back to the self. Like a yo-yo, these emotions are thrown away, then just at the

[73] Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 66.

moment when the tension on the line decreases, it is pulled back into possession. There is no help in this kind of on-and-off-again submission. A certain sense of faith and trust must accompany this yielding – trust in the power and providence of God. Brueggemann confirms this thought as well:

> [Our rage] cannot be tentatively offered to Yahweh, and then withdrawn if Yahweh does not deal as we had hoped. Such a submission carries with it a relinquishment, a genuine turning loose of the issue. When God is able to say "Vengeance is mine" (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19), it implies, "not yours." The submitting partner is no longer free to take vengeance - may not and need not. So the submission is an unburdening and freeing from pettiness and paralysis for praise and thanksgiving. [74]

Psalm 109 is an example of this dynamic of praise that can ultimately arise from prayers of anger. After a scathing prayer where the psalmist requested that God mercilessly punish evil doers, the psalmist released these bitter emotions to God's care with a moving call for help;

> Help me, O Lord my God;
> Save me in accordance with your
> love.
> Let them know that it is your
> hand,
> that you, O Lord, have done it (Psalm 109:26-27 NIV)

The psalmist, now free from the bondage of anger and hatred was able to end this most unpleasant psalm on a positive note of praise

> With my mouth I will greatly extol
> the lord;
> in the great throng I will praise him.
> For he stands at the right hand of the needy one,
> to save his life from those who

[74] Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 86.

condemn him. (Psalm 109:30-31 NIV)

Brueggemann, Peterson, Craven and others will cite this psalm as an example of the benefit to the Hebrews of psalms of anger, hatred, and vengeance – the faithful release of unhealthy and destructive emotions to God's purview. The psalmist now had no need to take revenge on the enemy. In an ironic twist, Clinton McCann even claims that, "This vehement, violent-sounding prayer is, in fact, an act of nonviolence,"[75] as it is with virtually all the prayers of this type found within the Psalms. This writer is convinced that Christian teens can experience similar benefits.

There is however, one additional and ongoing step that teens should adhere to when praying darker emotions to God. When one offers up prayers of anger to God, one should oblige God to continue the conversation regarding one's motivation for their anger. This is the conversation God has been having with humanity since asking Cain, "Why are you angry?" While it has been demonstrated that God hears and accepts prayers of anger, hatred, and vengeance, one should not conclude that God legitimizes all anger and hatred. Peterson rightly points out that, although anger can be quite helpful in alerting us that something is wrong:

> What anger fails to do, though, is tell us whether the wrong is outside or inside us. We usually begin by assuming that the wrong is outside us – our spouse or our child or our God has done something wrong, and we are angry. . . But when we track the anger carefully, we often find it leads to a wrong within us - wrong information, inadequate understanding, or an underdeveloped heart. If we admit and face that, we are pulled out of our quarrel with God into something large and vocational in God.[76]

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[75] Clinton McCann, *Psalms*. Vol. 4 of *The New Interpreter's Bible (*Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 1127.

[76] Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant,* 157.

God will not allow those praying their anger to escape self examination of the motivations behind their words. Though teens may initially encounter God in prayer from a place of anger and hatred, God will not allow teens to stay there. As God provides teens with the opportunity to yield these feelings and underlying issues to God's care, it must be further understood that the last word on the matter belongs to the one who has challenged all believers to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt. 5:44 NIV). For the Christian of any age, God is continually at work, taking difficult and fiery words of anger and hatred and using them to teach and lead to "the more excellent way" of love. Any understanding of praying anger and hatred that disregards this most important and evolving step is incomplete.

A final concept from the Psalms that teens might find advantageous for expanding their prayer language is the concept of praise. It is interesting to note that many of the Psalms commenced uncomfortably with complaining, fear or uncertainty, yet ultimately closed with a triumphant blast of praise. In Psalm 41, the psalmist, feeling assailed by "enemies," cried out in panic:

> O Lord, have mercy on
> me;.
> Heal me, for I have sinned
> against you.
> My enemies say of me in malice,
> "When will he die and his name
> perish?" (Psalm 41:4-5 NIV)

In spite of this concern however, by the psalm's conclusion the psalmist is able to proclaim:

> Praise be to the Lord, the God of
> Israel,
> from everlasting to everlasting.
> Amen and Amen. (Psalm 41:13 NIV)

Regardless of the circumstances or the difficulties, the Psalter consistently leads to praise. In surprising places that one would never expect, praise breaks out. The Psalms bend the reader towards praising God. Peterson goes so far as to suggest that:

> All prayer, pursued far enough, becomes praise. Any prayer, no matter how desperate its origin, no matter how angry and fearful the experiences it traverses, ends up in praise. It does not always get there quickly or easily - the trip can take a lifetime - but the end is always praise . . . for it is the goal that shapes the journey.[77]

The very construction of the Psalter itself would seem to validate Peterson's claim. Each of the final five psalms (146-150) began with the same imperative, "Praise the Lord." Each successive psalm built in intensity towards a climax in Psalms 150, where every verse incorporated the shouts, "Praise the Lord," "Praise God," or "Praise Him." The final the notes of the Psalms symphony are, appropriately enough, "Praise the Lord." This is the message that Christian teens must hear – praise is an integral part of a balanced and healthy prayer life and may spring up unexpectedly from prayers that start with a different attitude and tone. This is because authentic praise arises from relationship and cannot be manufactured from any other source. C.S. Lewis once observed that "The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about."[78] An acquaintance of this writer, a rough, burly and intimidating fellow, could also write the most

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[77] Peterson, *Answering God*, 123.
[78] C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, 1958), 95.

beautiful and tender love notes to his wife. He wrote not out of duty or obligation, but because his delight in the relationship with his spouse was not complete until it was expressed in words. In relationships, there are things that simply must be said. It would stand to reason that, if teenage believers could be reintroduced, re-"related" to God through prayers regardless of content, that newly charged relationship to God might open new springs of prayerful praise. Transformation can take place. Mark Yaconelli seems to think this was possible as well, suggesting that "One of the gifts of prayer is that in prayer we can sometimes feel the way God has created us to be. In prayer we can come back home to who we are and feel the spirit affirming us in who we are."[79] The recovery of praise for the Christian teen however, may prove to be a daunting task. The reality of our culture may make it so. Thomas Merton rightly surmises the difficulties at this point:

> Praise is cheap today. Everything is praised. Soap, beer, toothpaste, clothing, mouthwash, movie stars, all the latest gadgets which are supposed to make life more comfortable - everything is constantly being "praised." Praise is now so overdone that everybody is sick of it, and since everything is "praised" with the official hollow enthusiasm of the radio announcer, it turns out in the end that *nothing* is praised. Praise has become empty. Nobody wants to use it.[80]

Despite this gloomy, yet honest assessment, the praise one ultimately discovers throughout the Psalms can yet provide hope for the Christian teen. Through the teachable concepts from the Psalms addressed earlier, "pray-back"; metaphor; and emotional openness/honesty (including the darker emotions of the human soul), the

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[79] Yaconelli, *Wonder, Fear, and Longing*, 131.
[80] Merton, 10.

essential raw material may exist for young followers of Jesus to expand their prayer language to God, thereby constructing a new, honest, and authentic relationship with God – a relationship that will have its fullest expression as it eventually erupts in praise. With this understanding then, how can this raw material, found in the Psalms, be fashioned into building blocks on which teens can construct a new concept of prayer?

CHAPTER 4

A YOUTH PRAYER RETREAT WITH THE PSALMS

With the theological foundations of youth prayer and the Psalms addressed, this chapter provides a rationale for proposing a youth prayer retreat and will speak to important theoretical, theological, and structural issues involved in fashioning an event of this type.

A Rationale for Retreat

How can one connect teens to the Psalms in a manner that will significantly impact their practice of prayer? Most churches provide several weekly opportunities when students gather that could be appropriate for linking teens to the scripture and spiritual disciplines. Sunday Bible study, mid-week gatherings, small group studies, and weekly worship are but a few examples of these connection points. All have potential and ultimately all have a place. (This will be explored further in Chapter 6,) When examining the particular environment of the researcher's home group from the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City, an approach different from a weekly gathering would seem necessary. Many teens, including those in Oklahoma City, live an existence characterized by busyness and overconsumption. They have swallowed the cultural myth that every moment of the day must be filled – brimming predominantly with all the things teens want or crave. Teens today feel a desire to assign all possible time to something, with the predictable result that there is little

time for anything special or different, especially from the church, which is frequently low on the pecking order of priorities. The youth from First Baptist are no exception. Many juggle at least two extra-curricular activities as well as their school responsibilities. Some rush to the Wednesday mid-week youth meeting straight from an extra-curricular activity that they rushed to immediately after school. Their time at church is generally hectic, filled with eating, choir, worship, and Bible study. As soon as the youth meeting is over, there is frequently a blitz out of the building. Several are immediately on their way to the next activity or to complete homework. An attempt to introduce young people to the Psalms and prayer in this atmosphere would certainly be a challenge. It seems that the Psalter asks the reader for time – time for meaningful thought and reflection. It is doubtful that a significant number of teens could retain enough from a multi-week study discussing the prayer concepts of the Psalms to be able to construct a new understanding of prayer. A different approach is necessary.

With this in mind, the researcher would propose that the group from First Baptist would be better served by introducing this material through the framework of a weekend retreat. A retreat would offer this group certain advantages not available in a weekly teaching format.

One of these advantages would be that a retreat could provide a sort of an initial "marker" or maturation point in the faith of Christian teens. It was David Elkind who popularized this notion of markers which he defines as "External signs of our

progress along, in Kierkegaard's lovely phrase, 'the stages of life's way."[81] These types of marker events, such as a graduation or a first date, confirm to teens, and to others, a movement towards maturity. Elkind additionally laments the fact that in much of North American culture, these markers "have disappeared in direct proportion to the rate at which the perception of adolescent sophistication has replaced the perception of adolescent immaturity."[82] It would seem possible that those attending a prayer retreat might experience the event and its impact as a distinct and identifiable faith marker, verifying to themselves and to others a movement towards spiritual maturity. Perhaps this marker for teens might involve a moment when their understanding of prayer changed, when they were invited into a new relationship with God, or when they put away the hatred and anger they had carried around for years. In the Arbuckle Mountains of Oklahoma there is a column of natural stone standing atop a peak with the letters "I.P." chiseled on its side. These letters stand for "Initial Point." From that point is constructed the entire land survey of the state. The orientation of the state flows from that marker. In the experience of this researcher, teens grasp for similar "Initial Points" in their lives – explicit markers they can look back and reflect upon as sacred as well as orient themselves to what is next. As Elkind explains, "If markers highlight where we are and where we have been, they also serve as beacons for the future, for where we are going."[83] A retreat marker of

[81] Elkind, 111.
[82] Ibid., 113.
[83] Ibid., 113.

this type could serve as a new orientation for teens to begin building new, more mature understandings of themselves and their relationship to God through prayer.

An additional advantage a weekend retreat possesses involves the idea of disconnection and withdrawal. A retreat away from normal life has the potential to provide teens something most cannot find at home – time. In this culture, life moves at a frightening pace. Teens (and adults) need time away from the noise and speed of everyday life. They need time away from school, time away from the television, time away from cellular phones, text messaging, video games, and mp3 players. More than a few teens secretly desire this, but the culture seems to criticize these feelings as self-centered and weak, the result being that the natural desire for rest is suppressed and replaced by many with the drive to succeed. In this culture the very concept of rest is distorted and muddled. "Vegging out" in front of the television or computer, which more than a few teens cite as their time of rest, seems more akin to the mental disengagement of a zombie rather than true rest and leisure. The church must be a place that advocates for something different than this – for teens to have times of disconnection and retreat *to* God. Mark Yaconelli's observation here is timely:

> There is nothing wrong with the desire to withdraw from life. God knows we all need a break from the constant activity of our lives from time to time. That's why we're commanded to take a Sabbath, a rest, a retreat, a "down day" in which we step away from the habits and routines of human life. Jesus had to withdraw in order to pray, and young people are no different.[84]

[84] Yaconelli, *Downtime,* 67.

A retreat offers young people slow time. A time where pace and rhythm might decrease to a point where God's presence can be felt and God's voice can be heard. This deceleration of pace is essential in order to properly introduce and encourage the spiritual discipline of prayer. Prayer cannot be rushed. It cannot be manufactured. A retreat then would seem best suited to provide "downtime," the ideal environment to produce the most desired results.

Theoretical and Theological Issues to Address

Though the concept of a retreat provides the general framework for an event with the Psalms, just as critical are issues regarding content and approach. Any minister desiring to teach prayer utilizing the Psalms should be careful. The temptation is to crowd retreats of this type with teaching and instructional content, with the goal being the successful transfer of religious information from the teacher (adult), to the student (youth). The wealth of information and approaches to studying the Psalms certainly intensify this temptation. Countless commentaries and study aids have been produced on the subject of the Psalms which examines the work from historical, allegorical, form-critical, and innumerable other perspectives.

There is certainly no lack of substance and content in regard to the Psalms, most of which is solid in its scholarship and makes a valuable contribution to the discussion. It is essential to remember however, that in this setting, the aim is not teaching to understand all the theological precepts of the book. The goal is to use the Psalms to understand and teach the discipline of prayer – allowing the Psalms to once again claim its role as the "School of Prayer." There is a distinct difference between the two

concepts. The former operates under the assumption that the youth minister or leader is the primary agent in the teaching event, whereas the latter requires the acquiescence of that role and responsibility to another – God. Yaconelli's reminder to ministers concerning this is especially appropriate:

> As ministers to young people, we must recognize that we are not the real teachers of prayer. It is God who teaches and directs the prayer of young people. It is the Holy Spirit that kindles prayer. It is Jesus who shows us how to pray. And it is God, the Creator, who holds and responds to our prayer.[85]

For a retreat of this type to be successful then, the leader must move to the margins, allowing teenagers the space and freedom to engage in a trichotomous conversation between them, the Psalms, and God. Leaders must be willing to allow God to speak through the Psalms as they are prayed and as they lead to other prayers rather than as they are exegetically dismembered.

A Rationale for the Use of Lectio Divina

Is there an interpretive approach to the scripture that would prove beneficial in fostering this threefold conversation between God, the Psalms, and the student? Again, it would seem that a predominantly academic interpretive model would not be the most beneficial approach for teenagers seeking to broaden their understanding of prayer using the Psalms. For post-modern teens to grasp the Psalter, its presentation must be less formal and more experiential. If prayer is to be understood as one's language of response to God, then it would be most beneficial for Christian youth to approach the Psalms from a devotional model of interpretation. The Psalms must be

[85] Ibid., 43.

viewed as a place where relationship with God can be experienced and discovered. With this in mind, the interpretive approach to the Psalms that would seem most helpful for a retreat of this type would be the Lectio Divina, or "holy reading" of the Psalms. Though one might suggest that believers have always studied the scripture in some form of holy reading, the systematic origins of this approach can be traced back as early as the sixth century C.E. with St. Benedict. Lectio Divina has at its heart a desire to meet God through scripture. Tony Jones echoes this sentiment, believing that "Lectio Divina assumes that by entering deeply into the text of God's holy Word, God will be made known to us, speak to us, and direct our lives."[86] It is a reading and studying of scripture that places a premium on dialogue, relationship, and abiding. Yaconelli seems to hint at this as well when he declares that in Lectio Divina, "We come to scripture as if it were a meeting place, a secret rendezvous where we hope to spend some time with the One who loves us."[87] For a project that endeavors to help teens find their relational voice to God in prayer, one can hardly find a more proper approach to the text of the Psalter.

Though the Lectio Divina can manifest itself in several variations, there are certain elements which remain relatively constant:

1. Silence: The Lectio Divina requires a quiet place and a restful heart. One's spirit should be relaxed and aware of God's presence. All external and internal distractions should be placed to the side.

[86] Tony Jones, *Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Contemplative Practices in Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 40.
[87] Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 85.

2. Reading: The text selected should be read slowly several times, prayerfully listening for words or phrases that have weighted or extra meaning.
3. Meditation: Think and reflect upon the weighted words or phrases while letting the rest of the text fade somewhat. One should be attentive to the feelings, images, and emotions that are stirred by the weighted words in the text.
4. Prayer: One should pray specifically and intentionally – actively engaging with God about what has been discovered through meditation on the text.
5. Contemplation: This step moves beyond words to a state of peaceful rest and abiding in the presence of God. Nothing is said because nothing needs to be said. It is a sacred place of union with God.[88]

Though the Lectio Divina might seem like an intimidating, ancient prayer practice, recent results seem to suggest that Christian teens are receptive to this approach. Tony Jones has reported that in his experience, "Students have responded to it very favorably, finding it brings the Bible to life, resurrecting what some had considered a dead, boring, and irrelevant book."[89] Authentic practice of the Lectio Divina confirms that the Bible is indeed a "living book" which is concerned with a living God. It would seem a logical conclusion that Christian teens, using the Lectio Divina model while praying the Psalms, could gather personally with God in the words of the Psalter – a meeting that could also potentially generate new and more personal prayers beyond the Psalms. The resulting language would likely reflect a renewed honesty, authenticity, and intimacy with God.

[88] For a more extensive discussion of Lectio Divina see Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 86, and Jones, *Soul Shaper*, 41-43.

[89] Jones, *Soul Shaper,* 44..

A Proposed Structure for a Prayer Retreat

With the framework and background established, the particulars of the proposed project emerge much clearer. The researcher will organize a two-night retreat at the church's lodge on the grounds of the Falls Creek Baptist Assembly near Davis, OK. The assembly is located in the Arbuckle Mountains of southern Oklahoma and is approximately seventy miles from Oklahoma City. The landscape is heavily wooded and includes hiking trails, natural springs, and creeks. Most importantly, the cellular phone reception at the camp could be classified as extremely poor to non-existent. This will provide the ideal setting for disconnection from the pace and rhythm of the urban/suburban life to which most of these students are now accustomed. The retreat will take place from Friday evening to Sunday noon. This extended time-frame should allow a very relaxed pace for the retreat, since everything does not have to be crowded into one day. To further relax the pace, retreat participation will be limited to ten students, plus sponsoring adults. A prayer retreat must create a different atmosphere than a full-group retreat or a week of church camp, which are characteristically busy, high-energy events. Though the group will continue to operate as a community of believers, much of the retreat will consist of detached time from each other, as students spend solitary moments with the Psalms and with God. A smaller, more intimate group is better served to accomplish this purpose.

The retreat will seek to utilize the Psalms as instruction and inspiration for the prayers of teenage Christians. The methodology utilized to achieve this end will be fairly consistent throughout the retreat. After a very brief introduction to the Psalter

on Friday evening, Saturday will be dedicated to the prayer concepts discussed in chapter three. These will be taught through "learning points" – brief moments of instruction sprinkled throughout the day which will introduce to students the concepts of pray-back, metaphor and emotions, including darker emotions, as they are utilized and demonstrated in the Psalms. Students will think and reflect upon the assigned Psalms in each area, and at times even be encouraged to pray the Psalm as if it were their own prayer. Finally, the participants will be assigned a prayer exercise to practice and explore the particular concept introduced from the Psalm. Students will be given journals and instructed to write, color, or draw their prayers as they feel led. In this basic model it is hoped that the Psalms will function, as Walter Brueggemann observes, "not only as discipline and instruction about how to pray, but also as invitation and authorization to speak imaginatively beyond these words themselves."[90]

Though the learning points all contain a similar structure and approach, the exercises for each concept will be unique. After the introduction of pray-back, each student will be assigned a specific passage from scripture where something of God's nature and character is disclosed. An example might be, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9 NIV) Students would be asked to apply the Lectio Divina approach to reading the scripture, meditating on the significant words and phrases as they meet God in the text. The final piece of the exercise will be for students to write a prayer to

[90] Brueggemann, *Life of Faith,* 33.

God with the first sentence of their prayer consisting of a pray-back to God identifying whatever element of God's character they might find revealed in the text. The remainder of their prayer would comprise their words of response to God regarding what they discover. After journaling their prayer they will return to the group to debrief the exercise and share their prayers, if they wish. It is hoped the exercise will accomplish at least two functions. The first is to model prayer as response rather than initiation, considering that students will be responding to what they may discover about God in the passage. The second function, which will run as a common thread throughout all the exercises, is to reacquaint students with God – a God with which all too often they lose intimacy due to the culture of their lives.

For the exercise involving metaphor, students will be asked to read an assigned Psalm and identify all the metaphors they discover. After a brief discussion of the concept of metaphor in the Psalms, students will be given a block of time to go on a "metaphor walk" around the Falls Creek assembly campus. This idea of a metaphor walk will not be unlike Yaconelli's concept of a "Lectio Divina in nature."[91] During this time, students will be encouraged to prayerfully observe their surroundings as they journey – noticing what objects or sounds God may bring to their attention. Wherever the students are led, they will then spend time in imaginative meditation and rest with God while contemplating how their discovered image might be understood as a metaphor for God or as an element of God's character. Students will then journal a prayer utilizing their discovered metaphor. After they journal their

[91] See Yaconelli, *Downtime*, 131 – 133.

metaphor prayer, they will return to the lodge for a time of debriefing the exercise and sharing their prayers, if they wish. This exercise is designed to aid students in engaging their imagination and creativity in prayer.

The prayer exercise connected with praying emotions in the Psalms will borrow from an activity cited by Yaconelli in the book, *Downtime.*[92] Each student will be assigned a Psalm. As they read the Psalm, they will need to identify the various emotions that are being expressed. Students will be reminded that there may be more than one emotion operating in their Psalm. After a few minutes, the group will gather and each student will share the emotions they find present in their Psalm. These will be recorded on a chart, demonstrating the vast breadth of emotions conveyed through the Psalms. After this, the students will be released to go and pray their Psalm as if the words were theirs. Again, utilizing Lectio Divina, students will be reminded to pay attention to any words, terms, or phrases that might be expressing their feelings at the time. The group will reconvene to share what happened in their prayer time. Finally, the group will be asked to go out again and write a Psalm-like prayer of their own that "expresses his or her heart's prayer at this time."[93] It is the aim of this exercise for the participants to become more comfortable and honest with sharing all they are feeling to God in prayer. It is also hoped that students might discover and pray psalms that accurately express what they are feeling.

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[92] See Yaconelli, *Downtime*, 119 – 121.
[93] Yaconelli, *Downtime*, 120.

After an extended break the group will dive again into emotions and the Psalms, this time examining the darker emotions of anger, hatred and vengeance found in the Psalter. Several of the psalms containing these darker emotions, such as Psalm 58, 109, 137 and 139, will be read aloud to the students. After each Psalm students will have the opportunity to respond to what they hear. After a brief explanation of how the Psalms of anger, hatred, and vengeance actually served a healthy purpose for the Hebrews, the group will be given the opportunity to pray about any anger and/or hatred they might be holding to themselves. The group will be given four guidelines for praying their anger and hatred that *must* be followed or they will not be allowed to participate in the exercise:

1. The emotions they are feeling must be put into words.
2. Those words must be prayed to God and shared with no one else.
3. The emotions expressed in those words must be released to God's providence and control.
4. The one praying must be open to a continuing dialogue with God concerning the motivation for their anger, hatred or vengeance.

For this prayer exercise each student will be given a tennis ball and marker. The students will then be taken outside where they will have the opportunity to journal their feelings of anger, bitterness, and hatred on their tennis ball. They may bounce, or throw their tennis ball as they pray. It is hoped that this "active" prayer might serve as a release point for student's repressed anger, disappointment or hatred. At the end of this initial prayer time, students will return indoors where a special box will be set up. The participants will be encouraged to pray again, this time giving these painful emotions over to God's care and opening themselves to further conversation with

God about the motivation of their emotions. They will then be encouraged to place their tennis ball in the box, as a way of handing over their angry and hateful feelings to God. Adult sponsors will closely monitor all aspects of this exercise to ensure that none of the participants are overwhelmed by the strong emotions that might be stirred-up by the process. Though this is indeed a risky exercise and not for the faint-of-heart, it is vitally important to develop prayer exercises that afford students the opportunity to release strong and intense emotions rather than holding them inside. Toni Craven aptly explains and justifies the need to teach this difficult type of praying:

> Unfortunately, we have lost the practice of unrestrained expression of rage in prayer. The sad corollary to this truth is that we may have also lost the attitude that vengeance belongs only to God. Some have learned consciously, others unconsciously, to hold on to the suppressed vengeance that seethes inside them. Others practice it against family and friends. Nation rises up against nation. Regrettably, our actions speak louder than the words we refuse to say to God.[94]

The examples now are too numerous of bullied, tormented, and tortured kids attempting to salve their pain or extract vengeance with violence in the school and home. All too often, the result of this self-styled approach to dealing with anger and hatred is monumental tragedy and brokenness. The church must be willing to proclaim another way to address one's anger – by boldly proclaiming the truth of a God who is big enough and loving enough to hear whatever we wish to say. The aim of this exercise is to provide students their first steps into this risky, yet healthy form of prayer.

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[94] Craven, 53-54.

The final exercise will be a solitary period with God in rest and prayer. After reminding the students that Jesus left the cities and went to deserted places to pray, the students will gather their journals, Bibles, and blankets, and walk to a rock formation at Falls Creek named “The Devil’s Bathtub.” This is a rather remote granite rock formation which possesses waterfalls, fresh springs, and tall trees. A creek runs through the center of the formation which creates a quiet and peaceful atmosphere. The students will be encouraged to find a comfortable spot by themselves in order to pray, contemplate, and rest with God for the next hour. Each student will be asked to read Psalm 71 during the exercise. After this, their prayer time will be unstructured. They may meditate, write, draw, color, or even rest, in prayer. After the hour, the students will gather and share their experiences and thoughts concerning the exercise. The intent of this final exercise is to create an unstructured space for the students to pray, hopefully integrating some of the prayer forms learned earlier in the day. Another simple desire for this exercise is for students to simply experience a time of quiet intimacy with God.

After a restful Saturday night, the final element of the retreat will be a Sunday morning worship service. The group will pray a Psalm and then sing a Psalm. Then the group will be separated to reflect one last time on the weekend and write a prayer of thanksgiving to complete their journal. As the group gathers again, each member will be given the opportunity to share what the weekend has meant to them. If they wish they can read their final prayer. Then they will place their journal on the front table as their “offering” from the weekend. The group will take communion then

close the weekend by reading together a final psalm, Psalm 150. It is anticipated that as the aims and goals of each of these learning elements are linked through the weekend, the end result will match the stated purpose for the project, that the participating teens from First Baptist Church will be able to: 1) Develop and demonstrate a more healthy theological understanding of God as personal and close; 2) Demonstrate confidence, comfort, and proficiency in the spiritual discipline of prayer; and 3) Develop a healthy spiritual outlet for one's anger and hatred.

Data Collection and Interpretation

The last step needed to complete the proposal is a means by which to collect, measure, and analyze data in order to determine if utilizing the Psalms in this manner truly impacted the stated goals of the project. This is a formidable task. How exactly does one measure the effectiveness of prayer? There is no seismograph that can accurately record the aftershock of the Psalms. From the outset, however, there are some assumptions that should be clear. With a pool of participants as small as the one in this study, any attempt to analyze data in a quantitative manner will yield the researcher very little. There is virtually no hope for sufficient data that could scientifically prove anything with far-reaching implications for congregations across the country. What the researcher must look to then, is qualitative research and analysis. This type of analysis places more emphasis on issues in research such as how or why certain outcomes were achieved (rather than merely what was achieved) and relies more heavily on storytelling and narratives. Yaconelli again provides some precedence for this type of research in the areas of spirituality and contemplation.

During the operation of the Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project, Yaconelli had hoped to provided graphs, charts, and other "hard data" to provide credibility to his findings. But ultimately he discovered that "When the project ended in 2004 all we had was a collection of experiences, stories, and testimonies. And like the Bible, these testimonies and stories come in a variety of voices and written forms."[95] The Psalms and prayer project retreat will similarly utilize qualitative analysis to observe experiences of newfound intimacy with God. Data will be gathered by three specific means: Student pre- and post-retreat questionnaires, prayer journals, and post-retreat interviews.

The questionnaires are aimed to gather a basic understanding of when, how, and what students are currently praying as well as student's perceived openness and honesty with God. Answers will also be examined for any traces of thought or belief consistent with Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. The questions will include the following:

1. What is your definition of prayer?
2. Why should someone pray?
3. Are there parts of your life that you do not share in prayer?
   What are they?
4. Excluding prayers at meals, how many times do you pray during the day?
5. In minutes, approximately how long is your typical prayer?
6. For you, what is the most difficult part of praying?
7. Do you ever have trouble finding the right words when you pray?
8. Please circle the answer that would best describe the closeness you feel with God:
   I feel God is often close to me.
   Occasionally I feel God is close to me.
   I rarely feel that God is close to me.

[95] Yaconelli, *Growing Souls*, 11.

God is not close to me.

9. Most often, how do you cope with periods of anger or hatred in your life?
10. Have you ever prayed when you experienced anger or hatred?
11. If yes, did you find prayer to be helpful in those moments?

As part of the questionnaire, the students will also be asked to compose three prayers reflecting three distinct emotions common to teenagers: a prayer that you might pray when you are angry about school, a prayer you might pray when you are happy, and a prayer you might pray when you believe God is not listening to you. After the retreat, the students will be asked to complete an identical questionnaire. Questionnaires will be compared to determine if the participant's understanding of God and prayer changed over the course of the retreat.

All prayer assignments, completed during the retreat, will be recorded in prayer journals issued to each student at the outset of the retreat. Journaling is a helpful way for students to put language forms around their silent prayer experiences. Along with their prayers, students will be encouraged to record any thoughts or additional questions that arise during the retreat. Journals will be reviewed for new strains of intimacy and honesty with God. The prayers of students from the pre-retreat questionnaire and the retreat prayer journal will be compared to see if the study of Psalms has aided the student in discovering a new vocabulary and spirit for their prayers.

At the conclusion of the weekend, each student will schedule a personal interview with the researcher that will be completed within a week of the retreat. The interview will last approximately fifteen to thirty minutes. Student interviews will allow the

researcher the opportunity to gather experiences of the project retreat. Students will be empowered to tell their stories of change, or lack of change, through the process. From this gathering of students' most and least meaningful moments, stories and testimonies, the researcher should be able to discern if objectives have been met. Identical questions will be asked of every participant:

1. Have your prayer patterns changed since we've returned?
2. Have the Psalms made it easier to find the right words when you pray?
3. What, if anything, did you discover about the Psalms that you didn't know before?
4. Which aspect of prayer discussed was most meaningful/least meaningful?
5. What was your reaction to the Psalms of anger and hatred? Do you think those kind of Psalms can be helpful to you?
6. What is your favorite story from the weekend?
7. Where do you think we need to go from here with the Psalms and prayer?
8. What should be the next step for our group?

Additional questions will be posed as needed for clarification purposes only.

All particulars concerning data collection and interviews dealing with minors will be reviewed and approved by the Institutional Research Board of Texas Christian University. Issues specifically relating to research with minors must be clearly addressed. Upon the onset of the retreat, students will draw a number and record the number next to their name on a key. All journals, questionnaires, and interviews will utilize this identification number in the place of personal names. Only the researcher will have access to the key. Students will also be required to sign a confidentiality covenant with their fellow participants to heighten their awareness that what is shared with each other during the course of the retreat must be kept confidential and should not to be divulged to other students or posted to online social networking sites, text

messages, etc. The only exceptions to this covenant concern the legal requirement to report cases of abuse and the ethical requirement to report to the researcher, or other adult, if another student participant had shared thoughts or plans of self harm. At the conclusion of the research, all data, including journals, questionnaires, and tape recorded interviews will be gathered by the researcher and stored in accordance with TCU policies. Upon the expiration of the required holding time, all materials will be destroyed.

The methodology for data collection represents the last piece of the project puzzle. The completed image reveals an intimate retreat with the Psalms – a period of time for young people to be away from the rhythm and pace of their normal life. Their primary instructor will be God, their resource book will be the Psalms, and their product (hopefully) will be a newfound love and appreciation of prayer.

CHAPTER 5

RETREAT RESULTS AND REFLECTIONS

"It's just opened my eyes to a whole new world."
-Student Participant

On Friday evening, 26 September, eight students and three adult sponsors arrived at the foot of the Arbuckle Mountains to begin a two-day journey of prayer with the Psalms. The participating students covered a wide range of ages and experiences. Both new-to-the-group seventh graders and veteran seniors were part of the research group, as well as juniors, sophomores and freshmen. Some had been members at First Baptist since they were babies, while others had been part of the group for only a short time. One student was a new adherent to the Christian faith. One student was African-American. The remaining participants were Caucasian. Female students outnumbered male students five to three. The economic background of the participating group was predominantly lower-middle class.

A Summary of the Retreat Event

The schedule for the weekend was straightforward and simple. Friday evening would be given to completing confidentiality agreements, initial questionnaires, and a basic introduction to the weekend. Saturday's activities would consist of the learning points discussed in chapter four, with the final event of the evening being a group dinner out at a local restaurant. Sunday would be given to a morning worship service, after which the group would clean the lodge and return home (Appendix B).

Every session of the weekend, including meal times, began with a group reading of Psalm 100:

> Shout for joy to the Lord, all the
> Earth.
> Worship the Lord with
> gladness;
> come before him with joyful
> songs.
> Know that the Lord is God.
> It is he who made us, and we
> are his;
> we are his people, the sheep of
> his pasture.
>
> Enter his gates with thanksgiving
> and his courts with praise;
> give thanks to him and praise his
> Name.
>
> For the Lord is good and his love
> endures forever;
> his faithfulness continues
> through all generations. (Psalm 100: 1-5 NIV)

This Psalm served as a starting point for each session – a beacon to draw the group's attention to the moment, making them ready to hear and hopefully, appreciate the Psalms. This seemed to harmonize with the advice of Thomas Merton who suggested that "One of the best ways to learn to appreciate the Psalms is to acquire a habit of reciting them slowly and well. And for this it is decidedly helpful to be able to limit one's recitation to just a few Psalms or to one Psalm only.[96] It also served as an instrument to affirm God's presence among the group as they focused on the Psalms.

[96] Merton, *Praying the Psalms*, 22.

After breakfast on Saturday morning, the group gathered at 9:15 a.m. to commence their adventure into the Psalms. After reading Psalm 100, the first learning point concept was that of pray-back, the method of prayer where students prayed back to God elements of God's nature and character. After a brief moment of instruction, identifying where pray-back was present and demonstrated in the Psalms, each student was assigned a passage and dismissed to meditate and journal a prayer utilizing this concept. The group reconvened thirty minutes later to talk and reflect upon their experiences. Initially, the group seemed to have very positive impressions of prayer using this type of approach, indicating that "they liked it," and "it was good." As some of the students began to share what they had written, their prayers seemed to lack the authentic response to God that had been hoped. From the outset of the retreat, the group had heard and seemingly understood the definition of prayer as "our language of response to God." The group was challenged then, and throughout the weekend, to pray their authentic response to God without holding back. The participant's pray-back prayers seemed to miss this understanding altogether. As an example, one student received Deuteronomy 31:6 as their passage:

> Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you or forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. (Deuteronomy 31:6 NIV)

The student spent a great deal of time and journal space to exegete the passage – selecting various words and phrases and writing out their meaning. "He's waiting to help and talk to us and never gives up and leaves if we don't listen," and "He gives us courage to believe He's there and to block out everyone else and listen to His voice,"

were just a few of the thoughts the student had written in the margins of the journal. When the student composed an actual prayer however, the result was rather benign:

> I will be strong and courageous. I won't be afraid or terrified because of them. My God goes with me. He will never leave me or forsake me.

Whereas the researcher was looking for a heartfelt response to the God who promised to never leave or forsake the student, the student's pray-back seemed to merely bounce-back the words of the text while holding-back any authentic personal response to God. This response seemed widespread. 1 John 1:9, the beautiful passage of confession of sin and God's forgiveness, elicited this pray-back response from another student:

> Dear God – If I confess my sins to you, you are faithful and just and will forgive my sins and purify me from all unrighteousness. I thank you Lord. I thank you for being just and forgiving even though I may not deserve it. I thank you for purifying all of my unrighteousness and cleansing me of my sins. Amen.

Again, what started off as promising pray-back quickly dissipated into just a restatement of the passage with a miniscule element of response or personal intimacy to this beautiful promise from God.

Of the eight respondents, only one seemed to approach anything close to the authentic and personal response hoped for. This student, who was assigned John 3:16-17, prayed the following:

> God, you sent your only Son to save the world and not to judge. He came to seek and help the lost, to give us eternal life. You loved us that much that you would do so. There is love from you God – always – never hurt, although it's there. Jesus wasn't sent to hurt, but to show us God's total love and grace. God, this day, right now, show that your love is there; that I'm forgiven of everything I know and believe to be wrong. I want that

> eternal life; to live a life that is pleasing to you. I am at a point where I know I am near but I forget you gave your Son not to judge, but to help or save. Save me this day. Thank you Jesus and God!

Rather than simply restating the verse, in this prayer, the pray-back, restating the understanding of God's love, which was manifested in this verse by sending Jesus to the world, moved an authentic response from the student – a response that was personal, intimate, and authentic. In the mind of the researcher, many questions were raised as to why the results for pray-back were less than expected. Did the students understand the exercise? Was it too early on a Saturday morning for students to apply themselves? Was the subject group too emotionally guarded to truly open up to God in prayer? All could account for the weak response.

After a shaky start with pray-back, it was hoped that the next element of the retreat, praying with metaphors, would prove more fruitful. After discussing the definition of a metaphor, the participants were paired up and assigned one of four selected psalms (42, 28, 61, and 62), listing as many metaphors as they could discover. Several took to this exercise quickly and latched on to metaphors they savored, such as rock, fortress, and refuge. After further explaining the benefits the writers of the Psalms found in utilizing imagination in prayer through the use of metaphors, the students were released for thirty minutes to walk around the grounds of the assembly while prayerfully looking for metaphors that might engage their imagination in prayer to God. The students seemed much more energized with this exercise than they had been with pray-back and immediately scattered throughout the camp to begin their writing. During a walk around campus, the researcher observed

several students sitting by the creek busily writing in their journals. Others were sitting by a rock formation and seemed to be staring off into space. Still others were lying down on nearby benches. At the end of the prescribed period the students returned to the lodge. The group was visibly different returning from their experience with metaphor than with pray-back. There was energy and excitement in the room. Students were sharing stories with each other regarding where they had been and what they had seen. When asked for their appraisal of this exercise, the students energetically affirmed the experience. “I didn’t want to leave [to return to the lodge]. I was so peaceful,” was the initial response of one participant. The group unanimously responded that this exercise was much easier than “that other one” they had done earlier in the day. They were eager to begin sharing their stories. One common thread that was present in many of the student’s experiences was that they left the lodge *having already decided* what metaphor they were going to utilize. Yet, as they hiked out into nature, they were drawn to different things. “I had my mind kinda set,” one student confessed, “but when I started walking, I felt something pulling me in another direction.” Another student then interrupted, “Yeah I was going to write about a tree, but when I got out there I just sat by the creek and wrote a prayer that used thirteen metaphors!” This fresh excitement was reflected in the student’s prayer:

> God, you are the foundations of a mountain; the warmth of the sun on my face, glittering in the water. You are like the water, which quenches my thirst and is what every living thing depends on. You are like the plants, which give me the comfort of protection and the shade to sit and rest. You are like the birds, which sing to me and give me joy. You are like the blue

> of the sky and the green of the leaves, the white of the waterfall and the gold of the love I have for you and you have for me. You are my everything – my calm, my excitement, the beauty I see you provide by giving and being in nature.

As other students continued to share prayers the icy distance and detachment of the prayers that had been observed in the pray-back exercise was beginning to thaw. These prayers were considerably more personal, reflecting the real-life experience of the student. One of the students, who had been a bit disengaged with the pray-back exercise, seemed to find a more personal voice with metaphor:

> God, You're like the Sun when all we have been going through is darkness. You give us the warmth in our cold moments. You shine on us with all your power and let us see your amazing glory. You help us wake up in the mornings. You also let us see all of your amazing creations. You are the water to fill up our cup when it is dry. You are the footsteps we follow on the path. You are the light at the end of the tunnel. Amen.

The use of imaginative metaphor provided this student with a language equal to the situation and emotions being experienced. Metaphors were aiding the student in sharing the true emotions of the soul. This deep, personal language to God was exactly what the researcher was hoping to observe.

Even students who didn't particularly enjoy writing prayers were sharing experiences of imaginative inspiration through metaphor. One student, who previously had rarely participated in any exercise that involved writing, shared this prayer, written while hiking around the camp:

> God, You are like the river [spring] flowing from a rock. You are the rock – sturdy like one. Yet your love flows like water from it – clean and pure – calm, yet fast. You start off small but become bigger as you flow.

From these initial observations there seemed to be two dynamics operating that were principal contributors to this positive response to metaphor. This exercise seemed to truly tap the creative energies of many of the students. They enjoyed using their complex thinking skills characterized by David Elkind's "formal operations"[97] in constructing relevant response language to God. There was another element of students, however, that seemed to enjoy the exercise not as much for its instructional value regarding metaphors, but for the peace and rest they found in contemplating God's presence in nature. One student's metaphor prayer had the word "rest" colored prominently on the page, while others spoke of the peace they experienced while thinking about their prayer. This seemed to correspond more to Mark Yaconelli's thoughts regarding young people's need to slow down in order to experience God's presence.[98] It appeared at this point that perhaps the group was finally beginning to slow down to "God speed."

Following a bathroom break, the participants began a study of emotions in the prayers of the Psalms. Students were assigned a specific Psalm and asked to identify all the emotions they believed might be operating in their Psalm. It didn't take long for the flipchart to fill with a variety of identified emotions. Frustration, fear, anxiety, guilt, shame, joy, excitement, confusion, disappointment, anger, and desperation were just a few of the emotions readily identified by the students. After some time discussing how the entire breadth of emotions can be found in the prayers of the

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[97] See Elkind, *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*, 32.
[98] See Yaconelli, *Downtime*, 71-76.

Psalms, including the darker emotions (that would be discussed after lunch), the students were asked to take some time to pray their specific Psalm as if it was their own words, writing down any words or phrases that seemed to strike their interest. Most of the students, at this point, left their traditional translations of the Bible at their places and took Eugene Peterson's *Message* paperback version of the Psalms to read in this exercise. (Each student was provided a copy as part of the retreat.) As the students again assembled they were queried as to any reactions from praying their assigned Psalm as their own words. Some students found praying the words of someone else to be a challenge. One student complained:

> It's hard for me to take someone else's words and use them as my own even if I'm kinda paraphrasing them. So for me . . . this is one of the hardest things for me to do.

Other students, however, seemed to take to it very quickly and discovered these ancient prayers could connect very well to their modern circumstances. Another participant admitted, almost with surprise, that when praying Psalm 55, a Psalm of anger, fear and frustration with God over the enemies in the Psalmist's midst:

> It made me angry . . . because I was praying what they were praying and so, I got . . . I got pretty mad because . . . there's kind of a situation in my life where it's . . . not this bad but it kind of goes with the same thing, so I really connected with it.

Many students echoed this same sentiment of surprise that the words of the Psalmist could speak so precisely to the emotions and situations they were themselves experiencing. There seemed to be a feeling of relief in the room, at this point, with the realization that the retreat wasn't an academic exercise which sought to lecture and

theologize over a large book of the Hebrew Bible. Many students were beginning to realize that the Psalms were giving them permission to speak the words to God they had longed to speak, but didn't know how. As the conversations continued, students began to feel brave enough to share more of how praying their psalm affected them. Another participant quietly disclosed that:

> Some of it, some parts . . . it doesn't connect so I just skimmed over it to find parts that hit home . . . which turned out to be over half of the Psalm. I want to read it to you.

This teen then picked up a copy of the *Message* version of the Psalms and read excerpts from Psalm 51, a Psalm of confession and repentance:

> Wipe out my bad record.
> Scrub away my guilt . . .
> You've seen it all, seen the full extent of my evil . . .
> Whatever you decide about me is fair . . .
> I've been out of step with you for a long time,
> In the wrong since before I was born.
> Enter me, then; conceive a new true life. . .
> Bring me back from gray exile . . .
> A flawless performance is nothing to you.
> I learned God-worship
> when my pride was shattered.
> Heart-shattered lives ready for love
> don't for a moment escape God's notice . . .
> -repair Jerusalem's broken down walls. (From Psalm 51, *The Message*)

For several seconds, the room remained quiet as the students took in the sacredness of what had just been shared with them – understanding perhaps that the words they had just heard were no longer the words of a prayer written by someone thousands of years ago. It had become the prayer of a peer standing in the room with them. The student had eased into the Psalm and now owned it personally. It appeared, at this

point, that many of the students were moving to a new level of intimate dialogue with God. Not long after this, it seemed to be the appropriate time to ask the students to journal one final prayer before the lunch break. The aim of this prayer would be to share with God the emotions of their heart as they understood them at that moment.

The prayers that students composed during this time were some of the most beautifully honest, as well as the rawest, of the entire weekend. The span of emotions covered in the prayers of these eight teenagers was comparable those found in the entirety of the Psalter. Though these prayers were not shared with the other students during the course of the exercise, the post-retreat review by the leader seemed to indicate that the participating teens seemed comfortable in sharing their frustration and fear such as in this excerpt from a student who exclaimed:

> Lord, please stop being silent! I'm lost and I need comfort. I don't want to be a stray sheep. I want what you have. I know <u>you</u> know what's best for me, but I don't! Please tell me! I have no idea if what I'm doing is right. I try to listen, but nothing comes. I feel peace, but I want confirmation. I'm scared. I realize I'm blessed beyond imagination, but I fear it's going to shatter one day.

Excerpts from other prayers such as the following, although more reserved in tone, nonetheless incorporated new and exciting strands of honesty and intimacy with God about the struggles, the mystery, and the angst of teenage life:

> School is so much better than last year and thank you for that. My family is great, friends are ok, but I feel like something huge is missing or I'm missing something you're trying to say to me. I pray for peace with life. Things should be great but everything feels like it's coming up short. I'm struggling with something I'm missing. If it's you trying hard to talk to me, God, I'm here. I'm listening. In the quiet, I'm here. I pray that I can take school on and remember you are ahead of homework and in the end you are more important in every way.

Yet other prayers defiantly requested answers and action from God. One student angrily questioned God as to:

> Why can't you give me a sign as to what to do? I need help! People say you see your children in pain, well, how come you've never washed away my tears and pain? . . . I'm tired of it! . . . I need to know. I hate waiting. It has been long enough.

It is interesting to note that the above student was assigned for this exercise Psalm 13, a complaint psalm where the writer frustratingly demands of God "how long." One can readily observe how the emotions of that charged psalm of anxiety and impatience found its way to the syntax of the student's prayer. The student later confided to the researcher that during the writing of this particular prayer, the emotions were so hot and real that there existed an urge to stab the pages of the journal with the pen. This was definitely not the disengaged language of transaction characterized by Christian Smith's Moralistic Therapeutic Deism!

There were also teens that pushed the emotions of their prayers further than frustration and impatience, venting to God in the unrestrained language of anger and rage:

> God, what the F***! Why did you give me such an overactive imagination and why did you let all the s*** in my life happen to me that was bad!?! I f***ing hate when people say stuff to me and making me think about only the possibilities that are bad. I hate it when [name] says it and then I listen to them. God smack the hell out of [name] for it.[99]

Though undeniably shocking on the surface, the student was aiming for full transparency with God utilizing language shaped by the raw experience of the

[99] Expletives deleted.

student. One's initial reaction to this type of prayer might be shock and disappointment, perhaps believing that to pray this way might be somehow inappropriate. Though the words are uncomfortable, they mirrored Eugene Peterson's observations regarding much of the prayer in the Psalter:

> Psalm language is not careful about offending our sensibilities; its genius is its complete disclosure of the human spirit as it makes response to the revealing God. Given the mess that things are in, it will not be surprising that some unpleasant matters have to be spoken, and spoken in the language of our sin-conditioned humanity, for the language of prayer is most emphatically, human language. It is not angel talk.[100]

Even the rawest prayer offered during the exercise, seemed to be confirming that students were grasping some of the meaning and the empowerment found both in praying the Psalms and praying *like* the Psalms.

Not every prayer validated this hope though. The researcher was quickly brought back to reality by another prayer during the session:

> God, today I am praying for more happiness. Today I am content but I wish for more of your love. Allow me to drink from your river.

Though there certainly is nothing wrong with being content and desiring happiness, there seemed to be something rather detached and disingenuous with a surprisingly brief and impersonal prayer, only requesting "more" from God. This prayer served as a sobering reminder that, even in the midst of our small group, the virus of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism was continuing to lurk in the shadows. The teenagers in Oklahoma City were no more immune to this theological malaise than were students

[100] Peterson, *Answering God*, 41-42.

anywhere else. Imitating the Psalms in this instance had not affected this student as had been hoped.

Following lunch and an extended break to play and rest, the group gathered to begin the conversation regarding the darker emotions found in the Psalms. Four Psalms containing these emotions (58, 109, 137 and 139) were read, one at a time. After each reading the group responded to what they heard. Consistently after each reading the students responded with strains of nervous laughter and disbelief. Most could not believe this type of prayer existed in the Psalms. None of the students had ever heard anyone at church ever talk about this side of prayer. When the group discussed whether or not prayers such as this were appropriate, opinions seemed to lean somewhat to the negative side. One of the quieter students remarked very passionately that:

> In my opinion, whenever they are saying these dark things they might as well be praying to Satan in my opinion because they are wishing evil upon others when God tells them to love their enemies.

Others considered the prayers to be selfish, unreasonable, and ethically confusing:

> You know I look at these people say all these things like, "I want them to die but let your blessings fall on me." It just looks really hypocritical and it's hard for me to wrap my mind around these and I'm kind of like putting up a barrier because it seems hypocritical and I just . . . I can understand where it comes from, but I don't sympathize with it. I've never experienced it.

There were students though who did seem to grasp a little of the intent of these type of Psalms. One student likened the prayer to someone telling God, "I'm putting the ball in your court – You do something about it." The group then spent some time

discussing the four components of praying one's darker emotions that had been suggested in chapter four:

1. The emotions they are feeling must be put into words.
2. Those words must be prayed to God and shared with no one else.
3. The emotions expressed in those words must be released to God's providence and control.
4. The one praying must be open to a continuing dialogue with God concerning the motivation for their anger, hatred or vengeance.

The students agreed that these were reasonable boundaries for praying in this manner.

After the time of discussion, the participants were asked to participate in the exercise regarding praying one's anger and hatred. Tennis balls and markers were passed out to each student. The exercise was explained and the students left to find a place to bounce the tennis balls. Rather than split up, as had been expected by the researcher, the students quickly discovered a nearby cabin with one wall completely built of cinder block. The group as a whole remained at this spot, throwing and writing as they had need. Occasionally, students would chuckle and share a comment with each other, but for the most part the mood was very quiet. Some students relaxingly threw a clean tennis ball, as if warming up for a baseball game. Others busily scribbled on their ball and threw with great energy and passion. Three adults, including the researcher, were carefully observing the proceedings. As the exercise continued it became apparent that two of the students were becoming more and more agitated as they threw. As this was unfolding, a wave of anxiety poured over the researcher. Perhaps this part of the project was indeed pushing too far. There were some students getting really angry! Eventually, the decision was made to intervene in

both cases. Adults stopped the exercise with the two students and inquired if they wanted to talk. Both accepted the invitation and shared stories with the sponsors of frustrations concerning home and relationships. As this was happening however, the remaining students continued to write and throw.

When thirty minutes had elapsed, the group returned to reflect upon the experience. As one would expect, some participants really had nothing to say about the exercise due to the fact that they weren't angry or upset about anything or anyone. Their tennis balls had no writing at all. This was actually much appreciated by the researcher, who had reminded the students not to manufacture anger or hatred they didn't have just for the sake of the project.

Another group of participants, interestingly enough, began the exercise thinking they had no anger, yet as they prayed and threw their tennis ball, issues of tension began to arise. One student explained the experience this way:

> For me, starting off, I didn't have any anger at all; like all the stuff that I was angry about was, uh mainly stuff I thought I had got over forever ago and uh . . . so [then] I started throwing it around and it just kept coming back up.

Other students shared similar experiences of facing anger and hate issues they had simply chosen to repress over time. Yet other students wished there had been more time to throw, along with a second tennis ball to write all that they were feeling.

Though the participants' response to the first part of the exercise had been promising, it would be their response to the second part that would prove or disprove the merits of this type of risky praying. This final element involved giving over and

releasing the issues related to these dark prayers to God. A box was placed in the center of the group. All participants were then invited to say a silent prayer giving the issues they had written on their tennis balls over to God. When they had finished praying they could place their tennis ball in the box as a symbolic act of letting those issues go. The room was silent for five to ten minutes. Eventually all the teens entrusted their tennis ball to the box – except one. This was an unexpected turn. The researcher had assumed that all students would welcome the opportunity to let go of painful feelings of anger and hatred. The look on this student's face, however, signaled to the researcher that the tennis ball was not going to be given up, at least not yet. The exercise was then closed. Afterwards, a few of the other students expressed concern about the lone teen's refusal to place the ball in the box. It was explained to them that people cannot be made to do something in prayer that they are not ready or willing to do, but that the student would give those things up when ready.

As the students were relaxing during their break, a quick examination of the legible writing on the tennis balls revealed issues common to teenage angst and anger. Parents, friends, boyfriends, girlfriends, and school were common themes. "A guy keeps making fun of me at school," one student scribbled. Another wrote a long narrative that wound around the tennis ball sharing hurt and anger concerning an absentee parent that had just reappeared. Another teen shared harsh words to God, asking "Why don't I feel your presence when I'm down or hurt?" Much of the writing was indecipherable to the researcher, though certainly meant something to the teen who had written it. Also during the break, the researcher talked at length with the

student who chose to keep the ball. This student related that this anger and hatred had existed for a long time and things weren't quite right to trust God and let it go. The student was reassured that no one would force something done that would be uncomfortable or coerced. However, the student was encouraged to continue to follow through on the steps discussed regarding praying one's strong emotions. The suggestion was made that the upcoming period of prayerful contemplation might be a good opportunity to continue the dialogue with God regarding the motivation for this anger and the desire to keep it. The student agreed to try.

By late afternoon, the students were ready for their final prayer element of the day – a time of prayerful contemplation with the Psalms. Students were asked to gather their journals, pens, crayons, a *Message* version of the Psalms, and a blanket. The group then began the twenty minute trek to the "Devil's Bathtub" rock formation. Upon arriving, instructions were given to the group – this block of time would be given to prayerful contemplation with God using Psalm 71, a powerful prayer of God's presence and strength during difficult times, as a starting point. Students were to read that Psalm, then spend the next hour praying, writing, drawing or even resting in God. With the instructions understood, the students then spread out to begin their time of contemplation. Some climbed to the top of the formation while others hunkered down low in the shade by the waterfalls. The group settled in quickly despite an unexpected distraction. Another group was meeting at the same site as well, participating in a Bible study. After approximately ten minutes, however, the

other group completed their study and departed, leaving the research group alone in the area for the duration of the prayer time.

The group responded to this unstructured time in a variety of ways, similar to those observed during the metaphor exercise. After reading the Psalm, some appeared deep in thought while others were writing away in their journals. It was clear that some were coloring or drawing something. There were even a few who lay on their blankets in the shade resting with their eyes closed. Thirty minutes had elapsed with no one speaking or moving. There were students still writing, but at this point most of the students had adopted a restful posture. At the forty-five minute mark, the researcher began to observe movement and talking among some students. Group members were coming down from their perches and gathering at the water to talk. Though the initial inclination was to press a continuation of the exercise for the full hour, the students were making it clear that they had gone as far as they could with contemplation. The remaining few were then called in to join the group and discuss the experience.

Standing by the water, the researcher asked if any of the teens had ever been a part of a prayer time this long. The answer was overwhelmingly no. When asked for their reactions to this prayer time, the groups' feelings were split evenly. Half of the group seemed to struggle not only with the initial distractions at the location but also with exactly "what to do" after they read the Psalm and "prayed a little bit." Unfortunately, these students recorded *nothing* in their prayer journal during this time. Though writing in their journal was not an explicit requirement for the exercise, it was

interesting that contemplation seemed to inspire in this group so little response. All students did confirm they had read Psalm 71 during the time, but nothing seemed to happen afterwards for this half. Perhaps fatigue was beginning to set in for these teens and journaling, at this point, seemed more like a writing assignment than prayer. It is certainly not uncommon for teens to disengage or shut down when they have had enough. It could also be the case that perhaps this type of communication with God was too intimate and uncomfortable for these teens to embrace. Further probing failed to produce any helpful clarification, but rather a repeat of the original explanations. Regardless of the reason, very little insight could be gathered from this group for the exercise.

The other half of the group, however, considered this time to be a truly meaningful experience. “Loved it,” one of the students blurted out, “I loved resting in God’s presence.” For this group, Psalm 71 had been a powerful springboard to some meaningful conversations with God about their lives. Many of these students had even written portions of the psalm in their journals to reflect upon. What was most exciting, however, were the prayers that emerged from the contemplation time of these students. In their first opportunity to pray without any firm guidelines from the leader, several of the teens were beginning to integrate prayer concepts learned earlier in the day. One of these students gratefully prayed:

> Dear God, Psalm 71 was shown to me in a different way than any other scripture. For me this is a very powerful psalm and I want people to know that. I feel you put a little tune in my head for certain phrases and then a song just came out of them. Thank you so much for showing me this.

Though this prayer is simple and short, one could easily identify the beginnings of metaphor involving musical images. This was certainly a good first step. Other students were stepping out with their new prayer understandings even further. Take, for example, another student's prayer which emerged from the contemplation exercise:

> Dear God, I have forgotten You in many ways. Yet now I'm able to let you get me out of this mess and up on my feet – to let everything go and be at your will. You're my guest room to retreat. I take no anger or hatred with me, only to God. I'm learning that you let trouble come, I can turn away. I know there is talking about me, but I don't care. There is no one quite like you. I will tell everyone that and sing praises to you and about you – spreading the word of You. God, thank you for keeping a tight grip on me.

This teen composed a beautifully authentic and honest prayer, which was also bathed in the influence of the Psalms. Not only had the student clearly expressed concepts of metaphor and praying anger to God, the student had also borrowed patterns and in some cases, *direct language* from the Psalms to construct a prayer that was unique to the student. It was very thrilling and affirming for the researcher to observe the retention and application of concepts that had been taught earlier in the day. The walk back seemed much shorter.

Once back at the lodge, the group cleaned up and headed out to a local restaurant for dinner. When the meals arrived, the leader passed around a printed copy of the Twenty-third Psalm, the beautiful Davidic prayer of gratitude, envisioning God as the "Good Shepherd" who safely brings God's flock to God's house. All members were to read and pray this silently as their prayer of gratitude and thanksgiving to God for a bountiful meal. Later in the evening, the leader had planned to insert a short talk

regarding the use of Psalms such as this for occasions like as mealtime, bedtime, etc, but a fall by one of the participants required a return drive to town – this time to the emergency room for nine stitches. By the time the leader and student had returned, most of the group, tired from the day's events, had already gone to sleep. This subject would have to wait for a different time.

The last element of the retreat, closing worship, took place Sunday morning. Prior to beginning worship the group was given one final prayer exercise. As part of the worship service the students would be handing in their prayer journals as their offering from the weekend. With this in mind, the students were asked to complete their journals with a prayer of offering and thanksgiving for the weekend. After fifteen to twenty minutes all of the students had finished and were ready to begin the worship.

The worship time began the way every element of the weekend had begun, with the reading of Psalm 100. It had been hoped that the students would be able to memorize this Psalm early in the weekend. This turned out to be a bit far-reaching, as none of the students were able to complete the task. It was interesting to watch as the weekend progressed however, that there seemed to be a palpable shift from simply reading the Psalm to praying the Psalm. By the time the group recited this Psalm for the last time, many of the students had lowered their sheets and were repeating much of the Psalm from memory. The group also sang a chorus entitled, "As the Deer," the text of which is based on Psalm 42:

As the deer panteth for the water
So my soul longeth after you
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship you

You alone are my strength, my shield
To you alone may my spirit yield
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship you

You're my friend and you are my brother
Even though you are a king
And I love you more than any other
So much more than anything

You alone are my strength, my shield
To you alone may my spirit yield
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship you

After a brief devotion by the leader concerning prayer ultimately leading to praise over time (though it may be a long time), the group entered a time of sharing. Each student was invited to share something about the weekend and read a final prayer. Upon finishing, the students would then place the prayer journal on a table in the front of the room, where the elements of communion had been set. Very quickly students began to share. One student sheepishly confessed:

> When I heard about a prayer retreat I thought "That's totally not me." I realize now that I didn't know how to pray before. This has totally opened up . . . like, I'm able to write my prayers better than saying them and it's . . . the greatest thing ever and I realize that I have been going through the motions of everyday life and not looking to God and going the way He wants me to - and I came to the realization that He is my God and He's going to lead me.

An excerpt of this student's final prayer reflected this newfound sense of intimacy:

> I will continue to seek you in every way possible. I have forgotten you no longer. I won't be going through the motions of everyday life. That's not what I want and it's not what you want for me. This weekend I have placed myself back in your hand, which is leading me to sing praises about you and tell of your ways. I was lost and you have sought me out. Thank you.

After a few seconds another student rose and spoke briefly about how enjoyable the weekend had been and that much more had been gained from the weekend than anticipated. This student mainly wished to read a closing prayer, which integrated some of what had been learned from the weekend:

> Dear Lord, I thank you for pushing me to go this weekend. I love how I have a found a deeper connection with you through prayer. You showed me that you are my salvation, my vast granite fortress. I wouldn't have it any other way. Give me clarity throughout these next few days so that my life may be in your control. I want to follow your footsteps on the path you have made for me. Thank you for allowing me to have a deeper connection with you. Thank you. Amen.

As soon as this student finished, another jumped in to share:

> This weekend was great. It's hard slowing down. This weekend taught me to refocus my priorities and my time. I don't spend any time at all resting. I read a Psalm every night but it's just part of the checklist – get it all done. I would go "OK, I didn't get that," or I would just blow off the things [in the Psalms] I didn't really connect to so I think that I will look at the Psalms in a completely different way.

This student's prayer also reflected a desire for change:

> -God, In the stillness of this week[end] you've made your presence extremely known to me. I've forgotten how much it means to slow down and listen. Thank you for this and helping me refocus my priorities and where you fit. Thank you for answering every prayer I asked at the beginning of the weekend. God, you have been everywhere I walked . . . I pray for peace when we enter our homes and schools. I pray for help in what can be a really fast-paced life. I pray for guidance. Thank you for being the God you are. You have lifted me up so many times.

Students continued taking turns sharing their experiences from the weekend, though most were choosing not to share a final prayer with the group. Near the end of this time, one teen, who had raved about the greatness of the weekend, shared this final prayer of the retreat:

> So God, today is the last time I will be writing in this journal. I thank you for all that you have done in my life this weekend. You have shown me how to pray better. Thank you for the little things too, like keeping me safe. So- THANK YOU.

Though certainly sincere, the prayer seemed not to reflect the stated experience of its composer, nor the prayer intimacy hoped for by the leader. The God of this prayer seemed rather detached and impersonal, perhaps an indication of the student's slight leaning towards Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Still, perhaps thanks for safety was an appropriate response after witnessing a peer taken to the hospital!

One of the final students to speak was the teen who had refused to give up the tennis ball. This student had the undivided attention of the room, and confessed:

> I realized this weekend that I was holding on to a lot of stuff – certain things made it worse. Though I wanted to give it to God, I couldn't because I wanted that anger to stay there. So it was eating me up really badly. When we did that tennis ball thing, I held on to it because I couldn't let it go. God told me later I had to let it go. So I gave the ball to [the leader] last night.

Though most of this student's final prayer dealt with other issues, the teen did admit to God, "You had to show me I was still able to let go. I didn't need to hold on. Thank you, my Lord, for everything."

Following this emotional time, the group took communion and closed the worship by reading together Psalm 150, the grand finale of praise in the Psalter. It was an

appropriate ending to an exhausting, yet fulfilling, weekend in the Psalms with the students from First Baptist. After packing and a quick lodge clean-up, the group loaded in the van and started for home. By the following Wednesday, all post-retreat questionnaires and interviews were completed. These along with the prayer journals and the retreat itself composed the data that would be analyzed regarding the project retreat.

Analyzing the Data - Prayers

Perhaps the most apparent data gathered from the project regarded the participants' prayers themselves. In an unusual reversal of order, the researcher was exposed to the later prayers first, since the initial questionnaires were sealed until after the retreat. These prayers, many of which were cited in the retreat summary above, provided several examples of the prayer growth of teenagers during the retreat event. How might these prayers compare to prayers written prior to the weekend encounter with the Psalms? As part of the questionnaire completed before the beginning of instruction, students were asked to compose a prayer one might pray when 1) You are angry about school; 2) You are happy; 3) When you believe God is not listening to you. An analysis of these preliminary prayers seemed to indicate that, on the whole, most of the participating teens had prayer habits which were not particularly healthy, characterized by an emotional disengagement from God, an unhealthy focus upon themselves, and an incomplete understanding of what can be shared in prayer.

Prior to the retreat, it seemed that for more than a few of the teens personal intimacy with God was a difficult task to accomplish in prayer. An example of this could be observed in one student's pre-retreat prayer regarding anger at school, which was simply "Dear Lord, You know that I am angry and You know why I am angry. Please help me to cope with this." Rather than honestly sharing with God honest feelings about the situation, the student instead chose to fall back upon the well-worn theological cliché that since God knows everything why does one really need to pray. It is also important to notice that the student nowhere in the prayer gave the situation to God. Rather the student asked that God help *the student* cope with the problem, thereby continuing to hold the anger close. This is clearly a view of God not unlike Christian Smith's "Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist"[101] of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism – a God with whom one doesn't need to get close, because God's job is just to solve the problem.

This notion of the divine butler seemed to surface again in the pre-retreat prayers concerning happiness. In this area, although most teens were careful to utilize the phrase "thank-you" (almost to excess in many cases), it was hard to miss their self-absorbed focus. A dominant theme throughout these prayers was the desire for God to keep students happy. Consider this "happy" prayer by one student:

> God, Thank you- Thank you- Thank you! These few days have been amazing. I feel so happy. Please don't ever let this stop. Dear Lord, every time I get happy something bad always happens. This time I really don't want that to happen. Let this happiness last a lifetime.

[101] Smith and Denton, 165.

Not only is praise of the Holy One completely absent in this prayer, the student overtly confirms a belief that God's job is, apparently, to suspend the reality of the human condition in order for the student to remain perpetually happy. Many students, in fact, included as part of their prayer a desire for God to sustain their happiness. These students were by no means demanding towards God, but again, the insidious thought of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, had crept into their prayer life.

The student's preliminary prayers also seemed to indicate an incomplete understanding of what can be shared in prayer. When it came to writing an example of "a prayer one might pray when they believed God is not listening", there were only a few teens that completed this prayer with candid honesty, which was surprising. What was even more surprising, however, was the number of participating students who categorically refused to compose a prayer of this type. "I don't pray like this because [God] is always there listening," was the conviction of one participant. Another simply stated that "This is absolutely invalid to my prayer methods." Others responded with similar statements. Though the leader was initially puzzled by this response, a thought from Walter Brueggemann regarding the use, or more accurately, the lack of use of the Psalms of complaint, began to offer some clarity to the dynamics at work as well as an explanation for the students' refusal at this point. Brueggeman believed that;

> Serious religious use of the complaint psalms has been minimal because we have believed that faith does not mean to acknowledge and embrace negativity. We have thought that acknowledgment of negativity was

> somehow an act of unfaith, as though the very speech about it conceded too much about God's "loss of control."[102]

It seemed that, for some of the participating teens, there was an underlying feeling that the expression of frustration or anger at God in the form of a prayer of complaint was indeed an act of unfaith, and therefore had to be rejected outright or countered with some unwavering statement to the effect that "God is always there – God always hears."

With this understanding of the students' preliminary prayers serving as a background, it would appear that, in the course of the Psalms retreat event, the prayers indicated the beginnings of transformation and development in a healthy direction. Examples were abundantly evident. The student who, before the retreat, shared nothing to God in prayer about their anger because "God knew it all anyway," was also the same student who, later in the retreat, composed the brutally raw prayer (referenced earlier) demanding to know "Why, God, did you let all this s*** happen in my life."[103] Another student, whose main desire from God before the retreat was to "let this happiness last a lifetime," now prayed to a God better understood, not as a divine butler, but as a "vast granite fortress," with the desire being, not perpetual happiness, but rather "to follow your footsteps on the path you have made for me." Students who before the retreat couldn't fathom sharing any frustration with God for fear it was a sign of unfaithfulness, now felt empowered by the Psalms to tell God "I want to be led down the right path. I don't appreciate other people telling me your

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[102] Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms,* 26.
[103] Expletive deleted.

word; I want to hear it from you!" Although there were students whose prayers did not show such drastic growth and transformation, (prayers for all students displayed some measure of inconsistency between exercises) for many teens on the retreat, exposure to the Psalms made a difference in their praying. This was as an important and valuable outcome from the project.

Analyzing the Data - Questionnaires

With the dramatic changes that had been observed in the prayers of the teenagers from First Baptist, it was hoped (actually assumed) that the data retrieved from comparing the pre- and post-retreat questionnaires would easily confirm this transformation. When working with teenagers, however, one should always remember nothing is ever easy. Analysis of the written questionnaires (Appendix C), though promising in some areas, failed to produce the comprehensive changes in prayer patterns the researcher had assumed would occur.

When it came to identifying significant change in the prayer definitions and patterns among the participating teens, positive evidence was hard to identify in the questionnaires. In nine of the eleven questions directed to the teens on the form, more than half of the students recorded no significant change in responses from the pre-retreat questionnaire to the post-retreat questionnaire. Student responses, regarding the definition of prayer, the number of prayer times during the day, and what was the most difficult part of praying, remained basically unchanged from one test to the other. Of course, this was not necessarily a negative outcome in all instances. Almost all of the students seemed to have a fairly healthy definition of prayer, which included

terms such as *talking, communication,* and *listening*. Only two of the eight students, however, added to their post-questionnaire the concept discussed on the retreat of prayer as *a language of response to God*. From these results, it would seem that the prayer retreat did not spark wholesale prayer revival and upheaval among its participants. The argument can and should be made at this point that prayer is ultimately an organic, growing process. Long-lasting change in prayer can not be characterized by flipping on a light switch, with change occurring instantly. Prayer is organic, like a plant. Once the prayer seed has been planted it needs the elements of spirit and presence, as well as time, to allow it to grow healthy and strong. The prayers of the students, compared with the answers on the questionnaires seemed to suggest that, although the seed had been planted, time was going to be needed to allow this new discipline to grow to maturity. Exposure to the Psalms would need to be sustained. This notion of sustainability will be discussed in chapter six.

Although widespread change was not evidenced from the questionnaire data, some healthy change was indicated on every question by at least one of the students and often a few more. One student's initial answer to the question, "Why should someone pray?" was the almost Jabez-like, "Because how can God help you if you don't ask for it?" After the retreat this same student's answer to this question had changed to "To know the Lord, to talk to Him, to walk with Him. You know it's hard to walk with someone and know them if you don't talk to them." This was a dramatic reversal of thought that could readily be attributed to the emphasis during the retreat of God as personal and close as exemplified in the focal psalms. In another example, only two

students recorded a change in their answers to the question, “Are there parts of your life that you do not share in prayer.” Their answers though, changed from a defiant, “yes” to “no. I now try sharing everything because He knows it anyway,” and “Just a little bit now, but I’m working on it.” Because students observed in the Psalms the example of God-followers sharing everything with God through their prayer, it would stand to reason that they emerged from the retreat feeling more comfortable and confident to share all that was on their hearts. These important changes resulting from the weekend should not be minimized. Although not everyone was changed at every point of their understanding of prayer, change did seem to occur in smaller numbers and in specific areas of prayer understanding.

As referenced in the initial questionnaire findings, two questions did record significant changes in answers from participants. The first of these asked, “Do you ever have trouble finding the right words when you pray?” Half of the students responded to the question in a manner indicating improvement to this condition as compared to their pre-retreat answer. One student responded by admitting, “Sometimes what I feel can be hard to express, but over the retreat it’s helped me with that. I’ll now pray better in the future. I love it.” Another student’s response to this question simply evolved from “often” in the pre-form to “seldom” in the post-form. Curiously, none of the respondents specifically mentioned their recent exposure to the Psalms as contributing to the improvement of their condition though it was hard to imagine this would not be the case. Just as in the example of the prayer of Jonah in chapter three of the book by the same name, nearly all of the students had taken part

of a Psalm they had studied and adopted it as their own prayerful words. For these students, the Psalms had become a mentor to prayer, gently prompting the students with words that matched the longings of their hearts.

Another question which elicited a change by at least half of the participants involved their response to the statement, "Please circle the answer that would best describe the closeness you feel to God." Four of the eight teens changed the answer they had circled on the pre-test, moving from "Occasionally I feel God is close to me," to "I feel God is often close to me." This is a significant shift for teens to make in such a short amount of time. Perhaps the participants were discovering and experiencing anew the understanding that God is present and responding to them as they pray to God. In any relationship, increased dialogue will lead to increased intimacy. As Yaconelli suggests, "Every time we invite young people to turn to God and pray, we are inviting them to hear and express that very intimate conversation that is already taking place between their own heart and the heart of God."[104]

Analyzing the Data - Interviews

By the Wednesday following the retreat, all participating students had completed a personal interview with the researcher regarding their impressions and observations of the Psalms retreat. The responses were quite revealing.

Several of the questions asked during the interview revealed close to unanimous responses of change and new understandings. When asked if their prayer patterns had changed since returning from the retreat event, seven of eight students answered in

[104] Yaconelli, *Downtime*, 36.

the affirmative. The changes articulated by the students, however, were quite different. Two of the students said they were “more open about their anger,” while other students cited being restful in prayer and writing out prayers as new changes from the weekend. Other students responded that their prayers “were longer and more serious.”

Another question asked specifically if the Psalms helped in finding the right words when they prayed. Again, seven of eight students gave affirmative answers ranging from “sometimes” to “yeah, a lot.” One student answered, “It relates so much to what I want to say. It’s more the right words.” Another participant agreed, stating that the Psalms “Helped me put a structure and form to my prayer.” Another student, when asked this question, answered affirmatively and even admitted that “I was surprised that they actually mean something. I thought they were just lines.” Yet another student admitted, “I have trouble repeating myself over and over. This really helped.”

Without a doubt, the response that brought absolute unanimity from the participants concerned what they discovered about the Psalms that they didn’t know before. To a person, every student response involved angry prayers. None of the students realized that these types of Psalms existed and most expressed shock concerning the raw content present in them. More than one student responded that “I didn’t know those were in there before.” “The Psalms we read in Sunday School were only the happy ones,” one student mentioned. “Oh, my gosh! I thought the Psalms were all like happy, joy, praise songs! And now it’s like ‘kill their babies?’ Holy Cow,” another student chuckled. Even a student, admittedly familiar with the Psalms,

seemed at a loss to explain how these types of prayers hadn't been noticed before, admitting:

> Even though I've read every single Psalm, I don't ever remember reading [angry Psalms]. So I guess I just skimmed over it or something, or I guess I thought "that isn't right," or something. So, yeah, I definitely think about [those Psalms] differently. I'm more interested in [those Psalms].

Because these students did not know these type of Psalms existed, most also did not realize that these type of emotions could be prayed to God. One could have randomly selected any of the interviews and have heard the phrase, "I didn't know you could pray that," or something similar. One teen confessed that:

> I didn't really understand that I could be mad and pray at the same time. I want to be able to vent. I knew I had to give my anger over to God, but I didn't know I could say "God kill this person," you know, even though He's not going to make it happen, it's still the fact that you're able to get it out, to pour it out to somebody that will listen and actually care. . . I thought you had to pray happy things . . . and no one ever sees the dark as part of it. And it's just like . . . I didn't think you could do that.

Another teen, of close age, but of the opposite sex, repeated the same sentiment:

> Before this, I didn't know how to express my annoyances [to God] and I didn't really know I could do that. I [thought], "Well God knows everything, he knows I'm angry so why do I have to pray?" . . . That tennis ball [exercise], that just really made me see "Oh, I can express this to God. I can let it go." It really made me calm.

One student however, did respond negatively towards the angry Psalms. "I'm still not sure [dark Psalms] are helpful. I think, 'You (the Psalm writer) really want that to happen to somebody,'" was the uncomfortable response to the dark words found in the Psalter. Interestingly enough, though the student was uncomfortable with the

angry and dark sentiment in the Psalms, the same teen responded favorably to being able to pray anger and hatred themselves, saying:

> I was able [in the anger prayer exercise] to get rid of so much anger that I had bottled up and it has been building for a while now. The person the anger was towards was back around and everything that I thought I had forgotten about just kind of built and built.

It would seem that, even though the student understood the value of being able to pray their anger to God, they were uncomfortable with those sentiments being present in the Bible.

A final finding to consider from the interviews involved the student's most and least favorite exercises from the retreat. In the interviews, students were reminded of the different prayer exercises from the weekend – pray-back, metaphor, praying emotions (including the tennis ball exercise with darker emotions), and contemplative prayer utilizing a Psalm. They were then asked to share which prayer exercise was the most meaningful to them during the weekend, as well as which exercise was the least meaningful. During the interviews, every exercise was named as most meaningful by at least one person. Four students listed metaphor praying as most meaningful. "Metaphors really helped me realize who God is and helped me expand my thinking and praying," one teen responded. Two teens each named praying emotions as their favorite, one believing that "The tennis ball exercise gave shape to my emotions because I had to put what I was feeling on the ball using words." One student thought contemplative praying was the most meaningful exercise. This teen surmised, regarding contemplation, "The thought that, in that time, 'I'm meeting [God] and I'm

getting time for understanding,' it just cleared up a lot – it was the final thing and put it all together." A final student listed pray-back as the favorite exercise. "I like going back to that agreement with God," this student explained.

Though it was indeed interesting that all prayer exercises from the Psalms were listed by at least one student as most meaningful, what was just as interesting, perhaps even more so, was that all prayer exercises were identified by at least one student as the *least* meaningful. Three students listed pray-back as their least meaningful. "I was sketchy on that one," one teen remarked. Another confessed, "It was confusing and I didn't know how to approach it or what to do with it." Two students felt the "tennis ball" exercise with emotions was least meaningful, simply because they believed they had no strong or angry emotions to share. Two other students named contemplative prayer as their least meaningful. One of these students confided that contemplative praying "Didn't hold as much meaning for me, at least this time, because it was distracting there with other people around and I just couldn't get into it." A final student listed the metaphor praying as least meaningful, simply stating that "It was hard for me." That student didn't wish to elaborate further.

Project Conclusions and Reflections

With the wealth of data from the retreat event now combined and evaluated, what conclusions can be drawn from the project experience for the youth of First Baptist and perhaps other students in similar contexts? Though there are a multitude of possible conclusions that might come out of a study of this type, there are some that merit special consideration.

One of the most fundamental conclusions that can be drawn from the project is that, in this context, the Psalms helped teenagers learn how to pray better. Exposure to the Psalms, imitating the concepts observed in the Psalms, praying the words of individual Psalms as one's own, and spending time in prayerful contemplation of a Psalm definitely aided in training students to develop their prayer language of response to God. Not only did students specifically cite the Psalms in post-retreat interviews as beneficial for finding the right words in prayer, but also comparison of prayers before and after the retreat demonstrated growth and maturity in prayer content for many of the attending teens. There is no escaping or denying the instructional value of the Psalter for these students. As David Firth so aptly surmises, "At the most basic level, the majority of Psalms offer instruction on how to pray, simply because they are examples of prayer in action."[105] It should be imperative that those who work with Christian teens consider anew where and how the students in their charge will be introduced and exposed to the Psalms. Will students be served a simple "proof-text" verse in a worship song or sermon, lacking context or background? Will a smattering of verses be printed under an inspirational poster which hangs in the youth center? Will the pace and poetry of the prayer of the Psalms be neatly dissected in exegesis for an informational Bible study on the nature of God in a particular psalm? Or will Christian teens be given the opportunity to explore the Psalms as the prayers of an earlier generation of God-believers, prayers which also

[105] David Firth, "*The Teaching of the Psalms*," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, eds. David Firth and Philip Johnston (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), 163.

have the ability to instruct a new generation of God-believers? Will students be given the opportunity to pray the words of the Psalms as their own, allowing the Psalter to give voice to the groans and the longings which they struggle to express to the Holy One? Will students be shown the concepts the Hebrews utilized in the prayers of the Psalms and be taught how to utilize those same concepts to expand and broaden their understanding and experience of prayer? It seems past time for a recovery of the Psalms for just this type of utilization among Christian teens and student groups in North America. It is time for student ministers to once again bring back the Psalms as the "School of Prayer" for young people.

Another important conclusion drawn from the project was the need for teens to learn and undertake different styles and types of prayer. The prayers of the students during the retreat, as well as the results of questionnaires and interviews, all confirmed that different styles of praying appealed to different types of students. Each of the four concepts of prayer demonstrated from the Psalms and studied during the retreat was identified by at least one of the students as most meaningful. There was no singular prayer form that was ideal for everyone. In hindsight, this seems completely logical – all people are created with different skills and abilities, strengths and weaknesses. Why then, has the church, for the better part of a half-century, settled for proposing one pattern, one acronym as the way to pray? Why have student ministers laid one pattern of prayer conformity on students? Is it any wonder that students' prayers seem so weak and their relationship to God so distant? Yaconelli warns that when we conform to a singular style or pattern of praying:

> The prayer seems to come from a script and is done as a duty, an obligatory act with little relevance or meaning. There is no sense that God might respond to our prayer, or that our prayer is in response to God's presence with us. This is the most common form of mistrust affecting the prayer life within churches. Soon prayer becomes a sacred monologue, rather than a living relationship.[106]

There is more than one way to pray, more than one pattern of response to God. Again, this is not to suggest that the elements of the ACTS prayer are not necessary or in any way unimportant. However, just as those who lead young people should be intentional about introducing different styles of music, worship, and mission/ministry projects to their students, they should also be just as intentional about introducing different types and styles of praying to students as well. By doing this, teens get the opportunity to discover and connect with a particular way of praying that excites and energizes conversation with God. This type of excitement was observed firsthand in students during the prayer retreat. When students land upon concepts in prayer that they connect with, the different elements of the prayer acronyms then become useful and relevant. There seems no better place in the scripture for students to begin an exploration of different types of praying than the Psalms. Their variety of styles, approaches, and content, all of which flow from lived experience, offers the broadest net with which to capture student's attention to prayer. If leaders miss the teaching opportunities found in the variety of the Psalms, then students most likely are destined to be continually instructed, if at all, into one way or pattern of prayer.

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[106] Yaconelli, *Downtime,* 38.

Perhaps the most important observation that resulted from the project was the complete lack of knowledge and understanding of the angry and hateful prayers in the Psalms by the project teens. Every participant at some point during the retreat expressed surprise, dismay, and shock that these types of prayers existed in the Holy Scripture. Even the student who had some experience with the Psalter professed to have somehow missed, or dismissed, the true meaning and spirit of these uncomfortable prayers. It was no surprise then that these same students also admitted no understanding that these types of feelings and emotions could be part of prayers to God. This conclusion affirmed the concern voiced by many scholars, including Toni Craven, that:

> Our basic religious orientation has little room for the disorientation of resentment and anger. We act out of the belief that faithful people don't say hateful words, much less pray hateful words, and that rage is inappropriate, especially in prayer. Prayers become well-mannered words to God. So accustomed are some of us to permitting ourselves to say only 'nice' things that we do not even recognize our rage. Others of us recognize our anger but believe that we need to put it aside when we talk to God.[107]

This problematic dynamic hardly seems limited to one church in Oklahoma. Because the church has either hidden or denied the appropriateness, even the necessity, to pray the rawest and most unsavory emotions of anger, rage, and hatred to God, a generation of teenagers, at First Baptist and elsewhere, have developed an incomplete theology, not only of anger, but also of the intimacy and closeness of God. A characterization of God has been created as the distant, reigning monarch, who only wishes to hear the pretty language of prayer and happiness but is bothered or

[107] Craven, 49.

disappointed with one's honest admission of dark emotions and requests. In many respects, the results from this realm of the project indicate that many of the theological wounds of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism are self-inflicted. They cannot be attributed completely to the forces of a culture beyond the church's control. The exercise with praying anger, involving tennis balls, seemed to also confirm the same – that some students had become so accustomed to the pressure of saying nice things in prayer that they did not even recognize their own rage. When given space to explore and reflect about their lives, more than one student reported experiencing anger and hatred they thought they "got over forever ago," when, in actuality, they had merely retained and suppressed those feelings, possibly thinking they had done what God required. The implication at this point seems far-reaching. Leaders must not only begin to introduce the concept of praying anger, as demonstrated in the Psalms, they must also provide space and opportunities for students to honestly, completely, and responsibly deal with God about the heavy emotions they might be experiencing. This is not to say that leaders should force students to pray this way even though they may not be experiencing such feelings, but students should feel permission to pray their anger, hatred, and vengeance to God as they have need, within the guidelines discussed in the preceding chapter. If those who lead and teach Christian teens fail to approach this subject, then another generation of teens will be destined to accept the same inaccuracies concerning what is appropriate to share with God. The self-defeating and misguided practice of concealment in prayer will continue, perpetuating the same bad habits and beliefs.

There is another, closely-related observation that bears mentioning at this point. In order to honestly apprentice students regarding prayer, student leaders must give up any notions of perpetual safety, security, and serenity in the practice of this discipline. *Prayer is risky business and always has been*. To be honest with God and, conversely, to allow God to be honest in speaking to us should be a frightening and sobering prospect. As Walter Brueggemann suggests:

> Most of the Psalms can only be appropriately prayed by people who are living at the edge of their lives, sensitive to the raw hurts, the primitive passions, and the naïve elations that are at the bottom of our life. For most of us, liturgical or devotional entry into the Psalms requires a real change of pace. It asks us to depart from the closely managed world of public survival, to move into the open, frightening, healing world of speech with the Holy One.[108]

The church is notoriously uncomfortable with people living on the edge. Yet scholars, such as Brueggemann and Craven, as well as the qualitative results of the retreat itself, indicate this is exactly where students reside. Leaders must be ready and willing to journey into prayer with students who need to pray to God their anger and desire for something bad to happen to a parent or classmate. Leaders must be ready to journey into prayer with students who will explode at God, asking "What the F***!?"[109] Leaders must be ready for students to cry, scream or throw things (not breakable . . . or perhaps so) as a part of honest prayer with God. Again, this requires an artful touch from leaders who will permit and encourage, but not forcefully manipulate, the feelings and emotions of teens. For many churches, this will

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[108] Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 8.
[109] Expletive Deleted.

undoubtedly be an uncomfortable and controversial subject. It would seem though, that the responsible youth leader has no choice but to approach the subject and begin this relearning process not only with students, but with their local church as well.

It was the initial hope that the study project might determine whether or not an exposure to the Psalms could: 1) Develop and demonstrate a more healthy theological understanding of God as personal and close; 2) Demonstrate confidence, comfort, and proficiency in the spiritual discipline of prayer; and 3) Develop a healthy spiritual outlet for anger and hatred for the students of First Baptist and perhaps others in similar contexts. In the final analysis, were the elements of the project successfully accomplished? It would indeed seem that all were accomplished to some degree, yet not in the order listed above. The results seemed to indicate that developing confidence and comfort in prayer led to comfort in sharing with God feelings of anger and hatred; which, in turn led to a new understanding of God as close and intimate. This new sense of closeness was important. Many students were reluctant to return to the lodge after periods of praying in nature and praying contemplatively because they were enjoying the peace of God's presence. Students related during the retreat worship how they felt much closer to God then when they arrived. Students left the retreat referring to God as "my vast granite fortress" and indicating a desire for God to lead them as "*my* God". These and countless other recorded instances all testify to the newfound sense of intimacy that seems to inevitably occur when students become more comfortable and proficient in their language of response to God.

This is not to suggest that all the students on the retreat have arrived at the perfect point of authentic intimacy and sharing with God. Some students on the post-retreat questionnaire indicated they still struggle to share everything with God. Almost none of the participants indicated that the amount of time spent in daily prayer had changed since returning from the retreat. A few of the students finished the retreat still composing prayers influenced more by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism than by traditional Christian understandings. There are students yet wrestling with the anger and hatred they tried to give to God during the retreat. Some of the younger students are even now asking the researcher "Now what exactly is pray-back?" The process of learning to pray for these students, and for us, is not complete and most likely will never be complete. What the Psalms have accomplished, in this case, is to move students further along the path in prayer. The Psalms have helped students identify a way out from unhealthy prayer habits that previously had bogged them down. The Psalms have allowed these students the freedom and permission to say to God all they need to say – both good and bad. And, finally, the Psalms have become the arms of God, pulling these students closer to the Holy One. The results of the project indicate that there is every reason to believe that, if these students can continue to be directed to the Psalms, this journey of growth and maturity in prayer can continue, along with a corresponding proliferation of intimacy with God.

CHAPTER 6

SUSTAINING PSALMS MOMENTUM

Regardless of how meaningful or important an event such as the prayer retreat with the Psalms was to the students of First Baptist, the initial positive outcomes realized by these teens are destined to be short-lived if nothing of consequence is developed to intentionally sustain and build upon the momentum created by and for the Psalms. Without follow-up, the excitement and good intentions of teens will quickly deflate like a helium-filled balloon on a cold night – allowing old ways of thinking and praying to return. This chapter will briefly explore new strategies and follow-up opportunities under development at First Baptist in an attempt to sustain and expand the energy and momentum both for the further study of the Psalms and for prayer. Many of these strategies could possibly be adapted to fit the needs of other churches in similar contexts.

For momentum to continue with the students of First Baptist, the leadership should work to ensure that the faith journey of students will continue to intersect with the Psalms. Like a young child learning to swim must continue to get into the water, so too must students continue to find time in the Psalms. There is no question, at least among retreat participants, of a new excitement and curiosity concerning the Psalms. Virtually all the participants, when asked about the next step with the Psalms and prayer within their group, indicated a desire to be exposed to more of the Psalms. It

would seem that the Psalms are not unlike potato chips in the fact that no one is completely satisfied with only consuming a few. Some students thought the group, as a whole, should study one Psalm every week, while others suggested a Sunday morning Bible study series on the Psalter might be the better approach. Regardless, students seemed to enjoy the experience of reading and reflecting on the Psalms. They are anxious to discover if other psalms might exist which speak to their situations in life. One device currently in development to address this desire for more time in the Psalms is the formation of a new study group tentatively entitled "The Psalms Club." This group would be targeted towards students desiring a more contemplative experience with the Psalms. In the group, students would have the opportunity to specifically continue interaction with the Psalms through contemplation, journaling, and praying psalms as their own. It is anticipated that, after a brief introduction to the selected Psalm, the group would follow a devotional format similar to one utilized by Eugene Peterson:

> I suggest that, after praying the Psalms for ten or fifteen minutes, another five or ten minutes be spent with a journal, writing whatever is there in the mind and spirit (not trying to comment on the psalm or explain it), using the journal to pay attention to oneself, the praying person answering God.[110]

After this time of journaling, the group would spend time sharing with each other some of their reflections from the featured Psalm. The group would meet approximately forty-five minutes. The Psalms Club would resist the temptation to seek right and wrong answers to the Psalms, as well as the penchant towards simply

[110] Peterson, *Answering God*, 129.

transferring bulky theological information from a teacher. The group would continue the approach initiated during the retreat allowing the student to dialogue with God and the Psalms, thus keeping God in the role of the teacher of prayer through the Psalms. It is hoped that the simplicity of this approach would be attractive to students who are sometimes intimidated by scripture, especially the larger books in scripture such as the Psalms. The Psalms Club will not meet for an indefinite period of time, but will rather opt for a five to seven week session in both the fall and spring semesters. It has been the experience of this leader that creating student groups with clearly defined parameters as to meeting times, as well as beginning and ending dates, usually result in increased attendance and greater commitment. A challenge for this group, however, will be creating an atmosphere of "slow time" which will allow the Psalms the best opportunity to take root in the hearts of students. Though it would be most convenient to schedule the Psalms Club to meet on Wednesday evenings, this block of time is already crowded with many student events. Attendance would probably be highest on Wednesday, but can slow time truly be found in the midst of such a hectic pace? To meet on another day would most likely produce a more meaningful experience, but would also require students to carve out additional time on another day to meet together. Though a smaller group may appear disappointing to some, the retreat experience confirms that the lessons of the Psalms are quite effective and powerful in smaller settings. These lessons could possibly be lost in a larger group. Though the question of timing remains to be answered, the prospects for a favorable launch of the Psalms Club appear promising.

Together with this more individual experience with the Psalms, the student ministry will also require a more corporate intersection with the Psalms in order to sustain momentum. The Psalms cannot remain property of individual believers. They must be brought into the fullness of the group. Wednesday and Sunday student events need to become places where the Psalms appear regularly, where they can be prayed, heard, and sung together in the context of the group. Groups that pray the Psalms together can powerfully experience the recovery of community. Students from different places, different backgrounds – struggling with different issues and challenges, can discover one voice in community as they pray the Psalms together. Beyond this present context however, the group that prays the Psalms is also drawn into another community, the community of believers that spans geographical and even temporal boundaries. Again, Peterson powerfully describes these sacred connections:

> As I continue to pray the Psalms seriatim, which is the oldest practice of the praying community, I will pray all the experiences of the community both local and worldwide – the African community, the Russian community, the Guatemalan community. I am steadily and surely integrated into the community of the oppressed and blessed . . . community is always implicit in the Psalms and the moment we pray them we are drawn into the community. David danced these psalms before the ark and the Hebrews in Solomon's temple chanted them. Children running down the slope of Olivet waved palm branches and shouted these psalms and Jesus in the upper room with his disciples sang them.[111]

Utilizing the Psalms and praying them in this manner in community can pull students away from prayer that is hopelessly self-centered, and open them to the wideness, the

[111] Ibid., 90-91.

beauty, and the promise of the body of Christ, of which they are a part. In order to accomplish this task, the Psalms must become a more intentional and consistent element of youth events. Resources, such as Steven Case's *The Book of Uncommon Prayer* (Parts 1 and 2), have provided this researcher and other youth leaders creative material and ideas for weaving the Psalms into the fabric of youth events. The Psalms can be read responsively as a call to worship, they can be sung in praise, they can be read as collective prayers. The leader also will be meeting shortly with the worship planners at First Baptist to discuss how the Psalms can be better used in worship. Opportunities may develop for students to introduce Psalms to the congregation by leading in the praying of psalms or the singing of psalms. With opportunities for both individual and corporate exposure to the Psalms, the student ministry is placed in the strongest position for this book of prayer to truly be transformative in their lives.

Not only will students need opportunities to intersect with the Psalms, but they will also need continued opportunities to intersect with prayer in order for the energy generated from the project to continue. Students will need opportunities to pray silently, to pray for each other, and to lead prayer for the entire group. To successfully accomplish this goal will require clear focus and honest assessment regarding how prayer is approached in the student ministry at First Baptist. Both adult and student leadership must work together to make certain that prayer is no longer relegated to the margins of student ministry. Mark Yaconelli's warning regarding this oversight with the possible culmination in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is certainly applicable in many student ministry settings:

> What do we communicate about the presence of God when we rarely turn our attention to God? Often the message is that we would rather talk about or serve God than actually listen to or spend time with God. There's a sense that God isn't really necessary to the Christian life – so we pray less and less, we listen less and less, and over time prayer (and God) becomes a strange archaic practice. But when our prayer life dies or diminishes, we suffer. Churches become dry; full of activity and words that are uninspired, disconnected from the spring of God's Spirit . . .Young people learn that the Christian life is about doing good or holy works for a God who is distant, demanding, and increasingly irrelevant to the concerns of everyday life.[112]

With this in mind, it is supremely important that the student ministry in Oklahoma City (and all other places, for that matter) receive the right messages regarding the importance of prayer. Even this researcher has been guilty of sending the wrong messages, on occasion, regarding prayer. Take, as an example, the question posed in the first sentence of the project's introduction, "Who will pray for us?" By asking students to pray without any prior notice for preparation, the researcher inadvertently sent a message that extemporaneous praying is the proper form of prayer for students. Students who were shy or not comfortable with composing a prayer quickly never received an opportunity to participate. And those that did pray, as mentioned before, rarely prayed with emotion or conviction. One of the most immediate changes from this realization is that students are now asked in advance to prepare the opening prayer for student ministry events. The first eight weeks of this new approach have been claimed by, not surprisingly, the eight students that attended the retreat. It is hoped that, by observing students comfortably speaking prayers that have been

[112] Yaconelli, *Downtime*, 41-42.

composed beforehand, others will be willing to take part in speaking words of prayer on behalf of the group during Wednesday and Sunday meeting times.

Along with leading prayer for the entire group, students will need to be connected to smaller groups of believers where they can pray for and with each other. Yaconelli again believes that, "Perhaps the best way to help young people learn to pray is by providing them not just with a praying teacher, but also with a praying community."[113] This is an ideal place to integrate parents and other praying adults into the student ministry, which would be additionally helpful for students. Yaconelli suggests that such a group could gather before the youth meeting time to pray for specific issues or simply sit in silent prayer. Work has already begun at First Baptist to identify adults that would be interested in joining students for such periods of prayer.

Students will also need to be frequently introduced to new and innovative styles of praying. The prayer retreat merely scratched the surface of the myriad of different approaches and mediums available for students to explore the discipline of prayer. Journaling, drawing, sculpture, interpretive movement, walking a labyrinth, praying the "stations of the cross", composing prayer poetry, and contemplative silence are all examples of styles of prayer which are easily accessible and adaptable to a variety of student ministry contexts. The worship leadership has even expressed an interest in weaving some of these student prayer approaches, such as prayer poetry written by students, into the fabric of corporate worship. The student ministry is currently

[113] Ibid., 55.

seeking to integrate as many of these new forms of prayer as possible, over the course of a student's involvement with the group, with the hope that by experiencing such a wide variety of prayer experiences, students might discover ways of praying that better connect them with God.

The youth center itself will also undergo a change in order to encourage prayer among students. This discussion arose among the leadership at First Baptist from another thought-provoking question from Yaconelli:

> Most youth rooms are kid friendly with comfy couches, hip posters, and recreational furniture like pool and foosball tables. What if we made space that was also friendly to the souls of kids – rooms that youth found to be sacred, rooms that drew out their spiritual yearnings?[114]

As the leadership examined at the youth center at First Baptist, complete with all the amenities described by Yaconelli, yet lacking a place that invited prayer among students, it was decided to assuage this problem by developing just such a space. An unused education classroom at the corner of the youth center will be converted into a space specifically for prayer. A group of students will assist the leader in creating the atmosphere of the room. The room will not be overly decorated or busy, but will instead encourage peace, rest, and simplicity. A few candles and a cross may be all the accessories utilized in the space. The space will be open before and after youth meeting times, as well as during other special church events, for individuals and groups to pray. This new space should be complete in 2010.

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[114] Ibid., 82.

A final initial strategic piece for sustaining Psalms momentum is, actually, additional retreats on the Psalms. Several of the participants on the project retreat strongly indicated that additional events should be scheduled so that more students in the group could experience the Psalms and prayer in the retreat context and environment. These participants have also displayed a willingness to attend and assist on additional retreats as well. When the idea of additional prayer retreats was suggested to other students in the group, the response was generally encouraging. An attempt is now underway to develop a prayer retreat format similar to the project retreat that could be easily managed by adult leaders with student assistants. The goal for the retreat program would be that all students complete a prayer retreat by their freshman year in high school, and then participate again as a student assistant before graduation. Just as in the original study, each retreat group would be kept intentionally small, with no more than ten to twelve participants. With the current facility resources available to the church, it would not be difficult to accomplish two retreats during the course of the year, which would allow approximately twenty to twenty-five students to complete the experience annually. Retreats could also be designed in accordance with the maturity and ability of the participants. A fall retreat could be designed for younger students and utilize basic prayer concepts, while a retreat in the spring could emphasize more advanced prayer practices for mature students. Prayer retreats would be another strong opportunity for adults to be involved in student ministry, both as mentors and fellow participants. Opportunities could even exist for adult prayer retreats to coincide and operate concurrently with student prayer

retreats. In light of all the possibilities, it seems fairly certain that prayer retreats with the Psalms will remain a fixture in the student ministry's prayer formation efforts for the foreseeable future.

When it comes to strategizing and planning for the future, some churches wither for a lack of planning, while other churches collapse under the weight of chronic over-planning. To comprehend the difference is at times a tricky proposition. It is hopefully anticipated, however, that a ministry strategy where students continue to intersect with both the Psalms and with prayer will provide enough meaningful content and opportunities to positively sustain newfound prayer disciplines without dampening this new inertia under the weight of new events or programs. Both the study of the Psalms and the practice of prayer are necessary tools, not only for the discipline of prayer, but the formation of a healthy understanding of God. It would be a tragic mistake for one to operate independently of the other. The current strategy being designed at First Baptist insures that these two spiritual elements continue to work in tandem, energizing and transforming and maturing the prayer of teens.

CONCLUSION

Does anyone have any prayer requests?

It was time for the youth group to pray once more. And again, the same sequence of events ensued, as if by clockwork. Students began raising their hands and sharing requests for prayer concerning friends, sick relatives, relationships at home, and the latest test at school. As the room quieted down students began to lower their heads and look around to see who would finally pray for the group.

Tonight, however, was going to be different.

The leader announced that one of their peers, a student on the prayer retreat, had written a prayer to begin the worship time. Students were first asked to spend some time praying silently over what God had put on their heart that evening. After this, the student would pray for us. When a few sacred moments of silence had elapsed, the student prayed the following:

> Dear God – Thank you for letting us come together and for the blessing of this group and this church. You have shown your love to us in so many ways. Lord, please open our hearts to you and what you have to say. We come tonight searching for your voice. God, I don't know how everyone's life is going but I pray for every person here that they hear and see you whether they are having an amazing time or really struggling. I pray for this group that you show us and help us hear who you want us to be and do. God, every person who walks in our doors is a blessing and help us show your love and compassion to someone tonight. God, we love you and know you care for us. God, we open our hearts to you and know you are here and always will be. Let us hear your word tonight. Amen.

This journey with the Psalms now ends where it began, on a cold, autumn Wednesday in the basement of First Baptist Church. As the group emerged from *this* prayer time however, the looks on several faces indicated an understanding that what had just happened was somehow different than what they had experienced before. What had indeed been experienced by the group was the prayer of one of their friends that was honest, authentic, and intimate. It was prayer that approached God affectionately and personally. It was prayer influenced in very meaningful and tangible ways by the Psalms. Like Isaac's wells, the Psalms, once closed off to these teenagers, have become usable again. The effects of drinking from the pure springs of the Psalter should be beneficial for a lifetime. The Psalms have provided a new perspective on prayer for those who have experienced them during the course of the project. The project demonstrates that the Psalms continue to house enormous benefit for anyone willing to examine and be examined by them. The words of the Psalms can provide our teens the authentic voice they need in prayer to approach God with honesty and authenticity – ultimately discovering that the God, once thought to be so far away, is, in fact, intimately close.

APPENDIX A

PRAYER RETREAT STUDENT HANDOUT

FBC-OKC Student Ministry
Prayer Retreat 2009
September 25-27

Prayer – "Our language of response to God"

Helps in expanding prayer language:

"Pray-Back"

Psalm 145 Psalm 86 Psalm 103 Psalm 111

Metaphor

Definition: implicit comparison: to describe somebody or something with a word or phrase that is not meant literally but by means of a vivid comparison expresses something about him, her, or it.

Psalm 42 Psalm 18 Psalm 61 Psalm 62

Emotions

Psalm 13 Psalm 22 Psalm 43 Psalm 44
Psalm 47 Psalm 51 Psalm 55 Psalm 66
Psalm 111

Praying Anger, Hatred, Vengeance

Psalm 58 Psalm 109 Psalm 137 Psalm 139

Meeting God in Contemplation

Psalm 71

APPENDIX B

PRAYER RETREAT SCHEDULE

First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City
Prayer Encounter 2009
Weekend Schedule

Friday September 25

6:30 p.m. – Depart for Falls Creek
8:00 p.m. – Arrival, Preliminaries, and Introduction
9:00 p.m. – Relax and Unwind
11:00 p.m. – Lights out

Saturday September 26

8:30 a.m. – Breakfast
9:30 a.m. – Session 1 “Pray-Back”
10:30 a.m. – Session 2 “Metaphor”
11:30 a.m. – Session 3 “Emotions”
12:30 p.m. – Lunch
1:30 p.m. – Session 4 “Praying Anger and Hate”
3:00 p.m. – Break
4:00 p.m. – Contemplation, Prayer, and Resting in God with the Psalms.
5:30 p.m. – Depart for Dinner in Ardmore
7:30 p.m. – Return and play
10:30 p.m. – Talking Time
11:30 p.m. – Lights Out

Sunday September 27

8:30 a.m. – Breakfast

9:30 a.m. – Worship
10:30 a.m. – Clean Up
11:00 a.m. – Depart
1:30 p.m. – Arrive at FBC-OKC

APPENDIX C

PRAYER RETREAT QUESTIONNAIRE

Student Questionnaire
Fetzer Doctor of Ministry Project
Texas Christian University 2009

Participant # _____
Pre-Retreat

Please answer all questions as completely as possible. Remember, these questions have no right or wrong answers. All information you provide is confidential.

1. What is your definition of prayer?

2. Why should someone pray?

3. Are there parts of your life that you do not share in prayer?

What are they?

4. Excluding prayers at meals, how many times do you pray during the day?

5. In minutes, approximately how long is your typical prayer?

6. For you, what is the most difficult part of praying?

7. Do you ever have trouble finding the right words when you pray?

8. Please circle the answer that would best describe the closeness you feel with God:

I feel God is often close to me.
Occasionally I feel God is close to me.
I rarely feel that God is close to me.
God is not close to me.

9. Most often, how do you cope with periods of anger or hatred in your life?

10. Have you ever prayed when you experienced anger or hatred?

11. If yes, did you find prayer to be helpful in those moments?

In approximately eight sentences, please write in your own words:

A) A prayer that you might pray when you are angry about school.

B) A prayer you might pray when you are happy.

C) A prayer you might pray when you believe God is not listening to you.

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