

Opening to GOD

DAVID G. BENNER
IN CONVERSATION
with
GARY W. MOON



LECTIO DIVINA as PRAYER



David G. Benner needs no introduction to the readers of *Conversations*. As a founding editor, David has poured much of himself into creating a space for honest dialogue about transformation. Now living on Vancouver Island and semiretired from all things not fun, David has been sailing in exotic places around the world and working on some new writing projects, such as his just-released book, *Opening to God: Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer*. His recent thinking about that book and the theme of this issue—contemplation and action—serves as the backdrop for this conversation. So pull up a deck chair and listen in.

GARY W. MOON: David, you begin your book with a provocative reflection: “Just imagine how different your life would be if moment by moment by moment you were constantly open to God.” How is your life different when you are able to live with that kind of openness to God?

DAVID G. BENNER: My experience of that openness is far from constant...

GWM: So why are you writing in this area, David? Just kidding; please continue.

DGB: Hmm. As I was saying, the moments when I have known this openness are rarer than I’d like, but they leave a taste I can never forget. It’s a sense of being at one with myself and, in the same moment, with all that is. It’s a feeling of alignment, wholeness, and everything belonging. Like any taste of God, it leaves me hungering for more. And this is the way it most impacts life. Once you taste this oneness and experience even for a moment the sense of being sufficiently open to God to allow God to flow through you, desire, not willpower, becomes all

that is necessary to lead you forward. And that desire comes from the lingering taste—the residual memory—that remains within you. How does that make my life different when this is my experience? I am spoiled for any lesser goods, any lesser gods.

GWM: *That is very poetically and invitingly said. Thank you.*

David, you also say somewhere in your book, “Perhaps the best way to understand the transformational possibilities of contemplative prayer is to describe them in terms of the removal of blocks to openness to God.” From your work as a spiritual director, what would you say are the primary barriers people have to becoming open to God?

DGB: I prefer to think of myself as a spiritual companion rather than a director, but I understand your question and so will resist the temptation to get sidetracked in talk about the differences between these roles.

GWM: *I appreciate that, David. As a former editor of this publication you know we don’t have the space for getting diverted. But I do understand the advantages of “journeying with” versus “leading toward.”*

DGB: That’s it exactly. But, to answer your question, I’d say that ego is the first major barrier because ego resists surrender, and because openness to God is at core an act of surrender, it brings us right up against the ego’s quest to be god.

The decentering of the ego is one of the primary benefits of openness to life and to God.

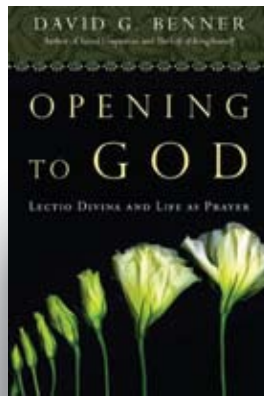
GWM: *And by “decentering” you mean...*

DGB: I mean a softening of the ego’s quest for control that allows us to move from an egocentric life to a theocentric one. Genuine openness to God will always do that. It cannot help but displace ego from its role as CEO of the self. This is the shift I describe as from the kingdom of self to the Kingdom of God.

Beyond this, there are many other blocks, but one more I might mention would be the misunderstanding of openness to God that suggests it is primarily a matter of behavior (i.e., faithfully *doing* certain religious or spiritual things) or will (being willing to do God’s will) rather than a matter of the heart (opening my heart to God’s love and life).

God is love, and any knowing of God that will be transformational must be a knowing in love. Transformational openness to God will always be a response to love. All we are asked to do is turn in openness and trust with whatever measure of each we can offer in response to whatever grace we are able to receive. It’s as simple as that. Moment by moment that is all I can do and everything I am invited by Love to do.

GWM: *Thank you, David. Continuing with this theme of*



intimacy with God, you say, “Prayer is the natural language of the soul. So there is something seriously wrong when it feels like something we must do.” Please say more about prayer as the soul’s natural language.

DGB: Behind this assertion of prayer as our natural language is the assumption that being in God is our natural home. Our very being, therefore, has meaning only in relation to the being of God. There is, therefore, a deep and natural communion that grows out of this fact that we and God belong together. Prayer is simply the native urge to experience this union and communion.

GWM: *Okay, and speaking of prayer as the language of the soul, how would you help someone discover his “natural prayer dialect”: that is, whether he is more comfortable with, for example, silence, words, images, activity, reflection, service, creativity...?*

“Once you taste this oneness and experience even for a moment the sense of being sufficiently open to God to allow Him to flow through you, desire, not willpower, becomes all that is necessary to lead you forward.”

DGB: That part is easy. Simply ask him. We all know our comfort zone. Much harder is getting us to be open to the possibility of moving beyond it. We have a thousand rationalizations for staying within the small space we set aside for God. Some of them are theological—for example, we might have absorbed silly teachings that certain ways of praying are unbiblical just because there may not be explicit biblical reference to people praying in such a manner.

GWM: *Do you have an example?*

DGB: I think of someone who recently challenged me to find a verse in Scriptures that even mentions contemplative prayer, for example.

GWM: *I would have loved to hear your response to that.*

DGB: My response was that I couldn’t think of a verse, but neither could I think of one that mentions cars or computers, and I was pretty sure this hadn’t kept him from using both.

GWM: Actually, David, cars were mentioned in the Bible. There was an occasion where all the disciples were in one Accord.

DGB: Good one! But back to moving beyond our natural prayer dialect. The major reason for staying in a small, safe place with both God and ourselves is simply that this place feels so comfortable. People say to me, “I am an extrovert. Pondering and contemplating are not for me,” or “I am a scientist. Don’t expect me to try to learn to engage with God by means of my heart.” But our prayers should not be limited by our personalities. Openness to God means opening all the channels of ourselves. Holistic prayer is bringing my whole self to the Divine encounter because this is the only way in which I will become whole. The goal isn’t balance; it’s opening my whole self and not being limited by the familiar and comfortable ways of being that are my personality. We will always retain our natural prayer dialect, but opening ourselves to God always makes us more than we were.

GWM: Thank you. David, in your book you say, “The prayer conversation always begins with God; not with us. Prayer is our response to a Divine invitation to encounter.” What is your advice for learning to allow prayer to be God’s responsibility?

DGB: Stop praying and be open to allowing prayer to emerge from you as a result of God’s action in you.

GWM: I may need you to clarify that a bit.

DGB: I confess to a little hyperbole in saying that you should “stop praying,” but what I mean is that prayer is more than praying—more than saying things to God. Prayer is communion with God, a communion that is initiated by God, who has already come to us and who is openly attentive to us and communicating to us before we begin to pray. We should begin, therefore, with silence, not words. If we truly believed that God is already present with and to us and that God has no more ceased being communication than God has ceased being love, we would do much less talking and more listening. We would also realize that communion starts with presence to the One with whom we seek to be in communion, and so we would start with stillness and attentiveness, not words.

Ultimately, prayer is not primarily a form of communication, but a way of being. It is being with the God who is with me, and allowing God’s being to infuse, realign, and then flow through my own. If there is something to do in this, it is simply to turn toward God moment by moment in openness and trust. It is to take my hands off the controls of my spiritual life and simply learn to open myself to God and to meet God in the midst of my experience. As this happens, my life becomes my prayer. Of course, there is an important place for saying prayers, but once I learn prayer as communion, these now became a response to God in me, rather than my effortful reaching out to God to catch God’s attention or obtain divine favors.

GWM: So the first step is turning to God in more and more moments of the day in openness and trust. You also describe prayer as “being in love” and mention Teresa of Avila’s comment that the important thing in prayer is not to think much but to love much. What advice do you have for someone who wants to learn how to pray this way?

DGB: I wouldn’t suggest learning to pray but learning to be. We need to learn to go beyond prayer as something we do to prayer as our whole life—including our doing, but never starting there.

So the question is how to learn to be in love—or, with more theological precision, *to be in Love*—that is, how to ground our being in the being of God, who is love.

GWM: Okay, so how do you do that?

DGB: Get to know God in love. Knowing *about* God can never be *knowing in Love*. If God is love, we can know God only in love. It’s only as we taste God’s love and allow it to touch us that we have any truly meaningful knowing of God. This knowing comes only from stillness before God and one’s own self. The depth of this knowing in love and therefore of our being in Love will be directly related to our willingness and ability to be still and know God.

GWM: So, and we’ll get into this a bit later, it sounds as if you are saying that learning to become more aware of what already is, is the foundation.

Okay. David, I believe you have suggested that prayer is an encounter of the true self and the true God. This is what gives prayer its transformational potential. To quote you, “Only when we love him enough to prefer his ways to ours, his language to ours, and his will to ours, only then will we discover him.” That was well said, but please provide your working definition of what the “true self” is.

DGB: Talk of true and false selves is a bit overly simplistic.

GWM: You do realize I was quoting you.

DGB: I do. But even my own writing on this topic has not been sufficiently clear on this matter. The problem with these concepts is that they suggest a binary state; they imply that our “self” is either true or false. This is misleading. The falsity in our self is a result of our inordinate or disproportionate attachments (loving anything more than God—including things like our possessions, our reputation, our image, etc.)—that keep us from knowing the truth of our self-in-God. We all have some of these disordered attachments, and to the extent to which we do, we live in a place of illusion rather than truth. But the truth of our being is even deeper than this. In truth, we are not who we think of as ourselves. In truth, I am in God. We all are. Only infrequently and to a limited extent does this truth become part of my awareness as opposed to my beliefs. But this is who I am. My true self is my self-in-God, my being in the one I call Love.



"Consent is the first and most important step to receiving God's grace. I don't think we should seek union with God because that sets us up to try to accomplish it. Our job is simply to consent to the action of God in us. Union is God's responsibility, not ours. Our responsibility is turning in openness and trust toward God as and when we can. That is the way in which we open ourselves to the inflow of grace, and that is our job—to receive grace and then to respond to it by letting it flow through us. The rest is up to God."

GWM: David, let me transition to your use of the four stages of *lectio divina* as the outline for your book. I don't believe you were born into a "high church" or "ancient church tradition." How did you come to discover *lectio divina*?

DGB: I first encountered *lectio divina* in my early thirties when I used a sabbatical to soak in the classic literature of Christian monasticism from the East and the West. This was also when I first encountered the Jesus Prayer of the Eastern Church and a number of other spiritual practices that have shaped my life since that time. As I mention in the book, my friendship with Fr. Basil Pennington—one of the people most responsible for dusting this ancient monastic practice off and bringing it to the attention of contemporary Christian seekers—was the impetus to think about *lectio* as a framework for all of life, not simply as a way of reading Scriptures.

GWM: I don't believe you mentioned in your book that I'm the one who introduced you to Basil, and I reread that section twice. I assumed you were simply trying to help me decenter my ego. But moving on, how would you explain the stages or movements of *lectio divina* to someone who had never heard about it?

DGB: How could I have ever overlooked your crucial introduction! My thanks for that. The four movements that I describe draw on a framework for prayer that was first outlined by the twelfth-century Carthusian monk, Guigo II. He identified four stages of monastic prayer and labeled them as *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. He taught that prayer was a journey from the biblical text (*lectio*), to inquiry (*meditatio*), to response (*oratio*), and finally to the gift of God's presence (*contemplatio*).

Guigo II interpreted these steps in quite a linear manner. In fact, the image he offered was of a ladder with four rungs. While I think this hierarchical organization has led to some very serious misunderstandings of prayer (for example, suggesting that contemplative prayer is some-

how a higher form of prayer than others), I would suggest that what these four Latin terms describe is four broad prayer paths—prayer as attending, prayer as pondering, prayer as responding, and prayer as being.

PRAYER AS ATTENDING

GWM: Okay, let's focus on that foundational practice of attending. You say, "Our spiritual life will be no deeper than our capacity to pay attention. And our capacity to pay attention to God will be no greater than our capacity and practice of paying attention to that which is within and beyond our self in the present moment." What are some suggestions for how I can become more attentive to God and His love?

DGB: I wouldn't start by trying to attend to God or even God's love if you haven't already learned something about being attentive in general. Paying attention is not scrunching up our mental focus but opening our self and allowing our self to be absorbed by something. Paying attention to anything is a doorway to the transcendent. Christians are often too quick to try to turn spiritual practices into religious practices and are mistrustful, therefore, of something as apparently non-religious as simply learning to be present to the present moment. But the place and time to start is this present moment—not by thinking about an idea (like God's love), but by being present to your present experience. This demands that you be still and recall what I have already said about the importance of that if we are to learn to know God in love. Where does God fit into this present moment and my experience of it?

Well, that's the critical question. Asking where God is in the moment-by-moment flow of experience—daring to assume that we are never far from God even if God seems far from us. The great assertion of incarnational theology is that this is where God abides, but believing

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Steps to Examen

- 1 -

Affirm that you are in the presence of God.

- 2 -

Allow your attention to roam over the present day, looking for times of consolation and desolation. Ask for forgiveness for the times of movement away from God, and give thanks for the times of awareness and consolation.

- 3 -

Ask for the grace to be even more open to God tomorrow.

that doesn't count for much. Learning to know it by attentiveness is what makes a spiritual difference.

GWM: Continuing with this theme of attentiveness, I loved your use of Rowan Williams' lightbulb imagery as a way of describing our being dependent on God's being—and also the importance of our attention. Would you say a bit more about the importance of that imagery in your own prayer life?

DGB: The point Rowan Williams was making is the importance of our knowing of the unchanging, continuous presence of God. Behind and beneath everything that is and every moment of existence is the outpouring life of God. Deists might believe that at some time in the past God acted, but Christian theists affirm that this action is ongoing and that if *it* were not, we would not be. Creation is not a moment in the past, but the ongoing sustaining activity of a very present God. So this brings us back once again to the question of where God is in the present moment. It leads me to ask if it is possible to know more of God's presence—not just in sunsets and butterflies, but in the moment-by-moment flow of daily life as it actually comes to me—and, if so, how I can experience this.

Let me say that I am convinced it is possible to become more aware of God's presence in the world. I know this from experience—my own and that of many others. Quickly, here are two resources that can help you learn this sort of spiritual attentiveness. The first is the practice from the Ignatian spirituality of the daily *examen*—that is, a regular short time of prayerful reflection on the events of the day, asking God to help you discern the divine presence.

The second is being prepared to be surprised (and perhaps adjust your theology) by what you will discover. Because, without question, what you will discover is not only that God is everywhere, but more particularly, that God keeps turning up in the most surprising places—places of sin and brokenness (my own and also that of the world) seeming to be particularly favorite haunts for God. But God is also, I am convinced, especially present in all acts of becoming. Want to know where God is in your life at this very moment? Notice where you are being invited to become more than you are. Want to know where God is in the world? Notice movements of becoming—individuals, relationships, organizations, communities, and societies becoming more than they are. This is the dough rising because of the hidden yeast.

God is at home in the world and in the midst of the affairs of our life. But you asked how this affects my prayer life. It makes my prayer start with attending rather than talking. If God is already present and active in the world, I had better shut up and watch and listen before I talk and act.



PRAYER AS PONDERING

GWM: *Let's turn now to the second "phase" of lectio, pondering. Pondering prayer, you suggest, is talking with God about our thoughts, our wonderings, and our reflections on life experience or challenges. Why is "pondering" an important part of a lectio experience?*

DGB: Pondering is an important part of *lectio* because it is an important part of human psychology. It is one of the ways we process the world. So if we exclude this reflection on experience from prayer, we exclude an important part of who we are. And the transformational potential of prayer is correspondingly truncated.

GWM: *But does not the very act of pondering bring ego back to center stage?*

DGB: Good question. It shows you are paying attention!

GWM: *Keeping you mystics straight is no small task.*

DGB: Yes, pondering is an ego function, but so is attending—which you nicely illustrate right now—and responding. Contrary to what spiritual teachers sometimes suggest, the goal is not the elimination of ego. The goal is its softening and dethronement. Freud famously described the movement to health in the following words: "Where id was, there shall ego be." I'd say, "Where ego was, there shall Spirit and ego be, ego still playing an important role, but one that is subservient to the Spirit." So there is no fear in pondering, even though it is an ego function. Pondering exercises a God-given and essential aspect of one's being that, if it is to be redeemed, needs to be invited within the tent of prayer. The same is true for all parts of our being.

PRAYER AS RESPONDING

GWM: *You've given us much to ponder. Okay, moving on to the phase of lectio that most obviously ties in to the theme of this issue of Conversations, responding, or action. In prayer, as in life, it is possible to become stuck in awareness and pondering and fail to respond with action. Can you say more about the importance of "responding" in lectio divina?*

DGB: Prayer is like breathing. What flows in must flow out if we are to have space to receive the next inflow. Prayer that doesn't lead to a response is not fully orb'd Christian prayer. It is really just talking to ourselves. Despite how it is sometimes presented, the spiritual life is not about God and me, or God and you. It's about God and the world. So my response to God can't be simply personal. Our prayers are often so personal that they are narcissistic. We need to get over ourselves.

Of course God loves us and wants us to know that love, but the reason this is important is so we can then get past ourselves and be part of God's grand cosmic

adventure of making all things new in Christ. Of course it is legitimate to bring my concerns to God in prayer, but prayer is so much more than this, and my response to being with God and God's life flowing into mine is a crucial part of this. In this response we can assume that God will lead us beyond ourselves to God's even bigger Kingdom concerns. This is why we need to be attentive to where God is in the world and what God is up to there. How presumptuous it is to assume that God is present only in and through the church! God loved the world long before God loved the church. And God is active in the world. Our challenge is to discern this presence of God—which will, as I said before, be evidenced by people becoming more than they are—and then aligning ourselves with what God is doing.

GWM: *But David, I've spent many years within a tradition that might interpret what you are saying to mean what God is doing at a particular place on the planet, as opposed to what God can always be up to—through love—if I'm open to His love and to human need, wherever I find myself. Do you mind clarifying what you mean by aligning oneself with what God is doing?*

DGB: I am in fact talking about what God is up to in specific places and times rather than in general. God is always at work in movements of judgment and grace that reflect the cosmic plan of making all things new in Christ. But I think we see this activity in particular moments and in particular places. Christians have often been good at seeing them in the church and have described these moments as revivals or awakenings. They are awakenings, and they do reflect God's particular presence and activity, but as I have said, God's actions in the world are not limited to the church, and we have usually not been as good at seeing where God is working in particular places and at particular times outside the church.

It is important that we remember that the Spirit of God blows where the Spirit of God wills, and not always will this be where we expect it. Our job is to discern where God is acting in the world and participate in the healing, reconciling, and reconstructive work God is undertaking. This requires the healing of our awareness and the removal of our prejudices. All those who embark on the journey toward increased awareness become ever more attuned to the present moment, and it is in the present moment that the Spirit is at work. In this way we become aware that God to be found in the world in which we live, not in some distant heaven.

GWM: *You write, "All loving action reveals the presence of God. Love comes from God for God is love. Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est—where charity and love are, there God is." Social action, you suggest, that emerges from a heart that is open to God will reflect the heart of God—a heart*

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that always combines a passion for justice with passionate action. Say a bit, if you will, David, about the connection you have seen (or felt) between the experience of union with God and loving action.

DGB: Every time we truly touch God or allow ourselves to be touched by God, we have a fresh infusion of love. This is why the mystics are so prone to the use of sexual imagery in their talk about union with God.

GWM: *Good Lord, David, must you cause one hundred subscription cancellations with every comment?*

DGB: Well, that's your problem now.

GWM: *I'm not feeling the empathy.*

DGB: But back to union with God. Someone once said to me that union with God seemed too impersonal and not sufficiently intimate. My response was that it doesn't get more intimate than union! This is, of course, why the Bible describes sexual intercourse as becoming one flesh. The encounter with God in love is as intimate as it gets. And to experience even the most superficial touch of God's love is to be invited to allow love to flow through us, not just into us. The result is actions that reflect love. And regardless of how these actions express themselves—whether in the form of compassion, social justice initiatives, or something else—if they are a response to a taste of God's love, those actions will be part of God's work of making all things new in Christ.

PRAYER AS BEING

GWM: *We are getting short on time and space, but would you mind summarizing your definition of contemplative prayer?*

DGB: Contemplative prayer is being with God. The key word is being—not talking to, thinking about, responding to, or anything else. Usually it must begin with being in unworded stillness because our knowing of God remains shallow when we fill all the space for God with words. Words can and do have a place in contemplative prayer, but only if we don't forget the core, and that is being—being with God.

GWM: *I love the simplicity of that and your repeated comments that all of life is, in fact, lived in relationship to God. It is no more possible for a human to live apart from a relationship to God than it is possible for us to be our own origin, as you say. Our job, then, is to allow ourselves*

to be loved and then to hold others in love and to pass on to them what we have received from God. That, you suggest, is a life of prayer. Okay, a person gets what you say way well, and says, "So help me be able to do just that." What do you say?

DGB: I guess I might ask, "Which part of what I have suggested is particularly inviting?" I would not be eager to answer a question about *how to be* by launching into a discourse on *what to do*. But I suppose if I heard more about why the person feels stuck, I might have something more specific to offer, even though I am extremely wary of any attempt to turn prayer into a set of things to do.

CONTEMPLATION AND ACTION

GWM: *Fair enough, David, and thank you for that important non-answer. But if someone trapped you in an elevator and said, "I've got just 60 seconds here, but please tell me—how would practicing contemplative prayer change the way I act toward others?" What would you say?*

DGB: I would tell him I don't think we should ever use prayer as a tool in our self-improvement projects. Nor should we practice contemplative prayer or any other form of prayer to get something out of it. This is the sort of narcissistic approach to prayer that I mentioned earlier. The only reason to engage in contemplative prayer is in response to a sensed invitation from God to do so. This invitation, like most movements of the Spirit within our depths, will usually register first in our desires.

GWM: *Oops, the person had to get off the elevator. So, let me rephrase the question for that poor fellow who may feel a bit insulted. Given that the theme of this issue of Conversations is "contemplation and action," how would you describe the interplay between these two movements? That is, how might one (either one) shape the other?*

DGB: Contemplative stillness before self and God is the place where not only do we discern God's invitations to action, but also our motivations for that action are purified. It is obviously alarmingly possible to do what we think is God's work for the wrong reasons, and when we do, our actions will lack the grace that comes when we genuinely participate in God's work in the world.

Contemplation and action are complementary, not two options to be chosen on the basis of personality. For all of us, allowing our actions in the world to flow out of contemplative stillness gives them a potency that will

