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CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER IN THE UNION OF FREE EVANGELICAL
AND BAPTIST CHURCHES OF ESTONIA

Graduation Thesis

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I have written the submitted graduation thesis independently. I did not use any outside support except for the quoted literature and other sources mentioned in the paper.

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INTRODUCTION

The **aim** of this thesis is to describe Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia members' understanding of prayer, and how it could be enriched by contemplative elements. **The problem** that motivates this graduation thesis starts with the observation that there is a lack of writing on the topic of prayer and contemplation amongst Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia (from now on UFEBCE or union churches) authors and that prayer amongst union church members may be seen narrowly and is one-sided and can be understood as a tool that is used to get God to give answers or to ask God to act as a helper or healer.

I argue that there are aspects of prayer, such as contemplative practices, that are little known or underestimated in union churches. These practices are crucial in helping a believer to focus on who God is, instead of solely on what God does, as well as helping the believer to experience God without preconceptions and expectations. The graduation thesis makes some suggestions for deepening and expanding the prayer experience – adding and combining silence, reflecting on the Biblical passages, and focusing on quiet time in God's presence to the existing prayer patterns. Expressing it in paradox: saying less in prayer brings more depth to the prayer life.

My interest in writing a thesis on the topic began with learning about contemplative prayer and seeing the benefits it brings for those who practice it. The word “contemplation” comes from the Latin word *contemplatio*. *Contemplatio* was used to translate the Greek word *theōria* meaning theory, doctrine, view, or notion. Contemplation is most commonly known by Roman Catholic and Orthodox monks, but it ties back all the way to the 3rd and 4th centuries when it was practiced by Desert Fathers. The first mention of contemplation is found in the book *The Conferences of Desert Fathers* by John Cassian (360-435). He describes how the most important practice is to focus on contemplation of God and: “the consideration of God alone, so as to get beyond those actions and services of Saints and feed on the beauty and knowledge of God alone.”¹ Contemplation is a practice of intentional quietness, observation, and a wordless way of communing with God, but it often finds its beginning in the Word of God (Lectio Divina) or through written prayers.

¹John Cassian, *The Conferences of Desert Fathers*, ebook, 2006, http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0360-0435,_Cassianus,_Institutes_Of_The_Coenobia_And_The_Remedies_Vol_2,_EN.pdf. Accessed 11.11.2022.

Union Churches highly value free prayer, but it seems that congregants tend to have a narrow look at what prayer is by seeing it mostly in relation to their subjective experiences. In his afterword for *Palved pühadeks ja argipäevaks* Toivo Pilli states: “Estonian Baptist congregations are not usually very enthusiastic users of written prayers, although it seems that caution in this regard is beginning to recede. Written prayers, if used creatively and from the heart, can enrich the experience and service of God. Free prayer has great value, but it can easily become bogged down in the personal experience, forgetting the diversity of life and the world waiting to be surrounded by prayer and transformed by prayer.”²

The **research question** is how is contemplative prayer reflected and understood in union churches and whether it is seen as a necessary part of prayer. I identify two main research **objectives**: to observe union church members’ perceptions of prayer and to assess whether contemplation is seen as a *welcomed* and *beneficial* practice for the advancement of the spirituality of congregants. The **method** employed in this work is simple: to describe the present situation, followed by and linked with analysis and ‘conversation’ with literature in the field, and last but not least – suggesting some further steps for UFEBCE believers for developing their prayer experience.

In UFEBCE prayer is commonly understood as a base for faith and a relationship with God. Tõnu Lehtsaar in his sermon about prayer says: “Prayer is something that belongs to religion, there are religious researchers who claim that religion begins where prayer begins. If there is prayer then there is religion, if there is no prayer then there is no religion. Every religious person, every God-fearing person prays.”³ This work sets out to bring attention that there is room for developing an understanding of the importance of quietness and listening to God during prayer times.

Key concepts

Prayer in this thesis is used to describe communion with God. It is communication and a way of connecting with God. It encompasses thanksgiving, praise, requests, worship, and quietness before God. The *Popular and Critical Bible Encyclopedia and Scriptural Dictionary* describe prayer as lifting a request, confessing of sins, and acknowledging God’s mercy. It must be coming from a sincere heart with knowledge, faith, repentance, sincerity,

² Palveraamat. *Palved pühadeks ja argipäevaks*, tlk Toivo Pilli (Tallin: MTÜ Allika kirjastus, 2006), 106.

³ Salem Church Service, Video, *YouTube*, October 23, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RsQof_7Hm2Y&ab_channel=Salemikogudus. Accessed on 02.11.2022.

fervency, and perseverance. Prayer is described as asking, seeking, lifting up of the soul, pouring out of the heart, taking hold of God, meditating, inquiring, crying, sighing, and even breathing. Prayer is wrestling with God and talking to him.⁴

The concept of **contemplative prayer practices or contemplation** is used when describing a particular type of prayer. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines contemplation as a mystical awareness of God's being, an act of considering with attention.⁵ It is being in quietness before God and an inward process of observing and beholding God. ".../ becoming receptive and dropping, as much as possible, our own ego desires and projections. It is only from this space of openness and wonder that we truly see the movement of God in the world."⁶

The Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia comprises 85 independent churches, all members of the Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia (UFEBCE). As a church body, historically merging Pentecostal, Baptist, Evangelical Christian, and Revivalist Free churches, UFEBCE came into being in 1945-1947.⁷ Over the decades it has become an organic network of actively cooperating churches that consists of 6513 registered members in 2022.⁸ The UFEBCE are multicolored in their spirituality and worship, ranging from word-centered to more charismatic style, but they no doubt agree that prayer can not be separated from spiritual growth and experiencing God. In addition, prayer is linked with intercessory calling for a Christian church and for individual believers.

Structure of thesis

The graduation thesis consists of theoretical and empirical parts. The **theoretical** part explores the definitions, teachings, and descriptions of prayer and contemplative prayer practices as found in the theological literature and the Bible. As a basis of my study on teaching about prayer, I analyze works by authors like E. Bounds, Philip Yancey, O. Hallesby, and others. I have chosen these works because they have been translated into Estonian and seem to have had a big influence on UFEBCE members' understanding of prayer.

In the **empirical** part, qualitative research methods, such as **semi-structured interviews** are used to observe and describe how members of union churches understand and practice prayer.

⁴ Edited by Rt. Rev. Samuel Fallows, *The Popular and Critical Bible Encyclopedia and Scriptural Dictionary*. (Publisher: Howard - Severance Co. Chicago, 2022), 1365.

⁵ Prayer Definition <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prayer> Accessed 25.09.2022.

⁶ Christine Walters Painter, *Eyes of the Heart* (Notre Dame, United States of America: Sorin Books, 2013), 17.

⁷ Toivo Pilli, "The Forced Blessing of Unity: Formation of the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Estonia", *Teologinen Aikakauskirja*, nr. 6 (2003), pg. 548-562.

⁸ Eesti EKB Liit <https://kogudused.ee/eng/> Accessed 23.10.2022.

It was important that a wider range of participants would be chosen to take part in the interviews to guarantee reliable data for analysis, therefore fifteen interviews of members ranging in age twenty to eighty that belong to ten union churches were conducted.

In chapter 3.3 of the thesis I describe and analyze a partial experiment of contemplative prayer exercise experience that five volunteers agreed to take part. Oftentimes there is hesitancy when it comes to learning about or trying contemplation because it is not well-known practice and when some of the methods of contemplation are described, UFEBCE believers are often associating or comparing them with meditation which is seen as Buddhist or New Age practice.

My hope is that presenting these experiences will help to give a sense of the usefulness of the practice and can also help to break the prejudice about contemplation.

I thank the supervisor of the graduation thesis Toivo Pilli, for giving me guidance, encouragement, and support in writing this work. I also want to thank Kertu Rajando and Einike Pilli for giving me their time, support, directions, and encouragement throughout the process of writing. Most of all I thank my husband and children for their patience and love.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

1 A Biblical look at prayer and contemplation

In this chapter, I provide a brief look at the topic of prayer as found in the Bible and argue that besides directly asking for help and material blessings, contemplative elements are present in the Biblical narrative in both the Old and New Testament. Old Testament describes God answering practical prayers of those who pray by providing in supernatural ways, but alongside this type of prayer, there is also David's passionate prayers for closeness with God and for His spiritual provision. With the coming of Christ, this type of prayer increases. Paul and other authors of the New Testament often pray for blessings and provisions of spiritual nature. In this new period of history, believers gained new perspectives and ways to communicate with God. Christ expanded the understanding of prayer by teaching about it through parables and directly and also by modeling taking time to set everything aside to be in God's presence individually.

Further, I show the presence of contemplation in the Bible through the exegesis of psalm 27, 2. Cor 3:18 and Luke 10:38-42.

1.1 Prayer and contemplation in the Old Testament

When looking at Old Testament (OT) it is apparent that even in the pre-Christ age when serving and following God had rules and regulations, and depended on a mediator- either prophet, priest, or king, prayer was one of the things that could be done by anyone. God answered earnest prayers, even the ones from outsiders, as in the example of Nebuchadnezzar who prayed and was released from his insanity. (Dan 4:34). Prayer for the OT people was an outpouring of the heart, a natural turning to God, knowing that He is able to help.⁹ Additionally OT prayers are concerned with earthly blessings and needs (except many of David's Psalms).¹⁰

Contemplative prayer can be found all throughout the books of the Old Testament. Such stories as Moses spending 40 days on Mount Sinai (Ex 19), Elijah experiencing God in the gentle whisper (1. Kng 19:11-13), and prayers in the Psalms that command "take delight in

⁹ Herbert Lockyer, *All the Prayers of the Bible*, Revised (Zondervan, 1990), 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 173.

the Lord” (PS 37:4) “be still before the Lord” (Ps 37:7) or “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10) are some of the examples.

The book of Psalms, written by eight different authors in the time period between Moses and Babylonian captivity¹¹ is the longest book of the Bible. Because of its long history and many authors, it holds a variety of genres and perspectives. Many of the psalms were written as songs for centralized and ritual prayer.¹² “Some psalms feature actual Temple liturgy; others were presumably composed for dispersed Jews who orientated themselves toward the Temple from distant places (1. Kgs. 8:35; Dan. 6:10; 1 Esd. 4:58).”¹³ There are also numerous psalms that would not be used for communal worship, but rather are personal “prayers to be heard by God, not by others.”¹⁴

While a number of prayers in the Old Testament focus on asking for health or justice in everyday situations psalms also include prayers for spiritual needs and pointers to contemplation. One such prayer is psalm 27. Following is a closer look at verses 4, 7, 8, 13, and 14 which talk about contemplative experiences such as dwelling, seeking, gazing, and waiting.

Psalm 27 is a hymn, and its author oftentimes is assumed to be David, but some scholars argue that it must be combined not just of two different authors but also entirely different hymns.¹⁵ In his commentary on Psalms, German theologian Artur Weiser states: “Psalm 27. 1-6 is a powerful song which expresses unshakable trust in God and, being complete in itself, exhibits a distinct character of its own.”¹⁶ Further, he explains that verses 7-14 express lamentation of a person who is in distress and needs help. Because of the contrast of the verses, he assumes the different authors. The reason for combining this hymn might have been the similarity of verses four and thirteen.¹⁷

4 One thing I ask from the Lord,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord

¹¹ *The Life Application Study Bible: New International Version* (USA: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Zondervan, 1997), 820.

¹² Brown William P., *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

¹³ *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁵ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms A Commentary* (Louisville: The Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 245.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 245.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 245.

all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the Lord
and to seek him in his temple.

Verse four reflects the psalmist's active desire to be with God. Verb dwell (*yashab*) describes living in a (temple) but also remaining or sitting in the house of the Lord.

In Strong's Exhaustive Concordance verb *chazah* is translated as: "to gaze at; mentally, to perceive, contemplate (with pleasure); specifically, to have a vision of -- behold, look, prophesy, provide, see."¹⁸ Psalmist is praying to be able to contemplate on God in His Temple for the remainder of his days. It conveys the "Desire to live in perpetual communion with God."¹⁹

7 Hear my voice when I call, Lord;
be merciful to me and answer me.
8 My heart says of you, "Seek his face!"
Your face, Lord, I will seek.

Weiser in his commentary of verse seven assumes that prayer for God to be merciful and answer implies the psalmist's repentance of sin therefore verse eight, in his view, is a measure through which to restore the communion with God.²⁰ I, however, do not see the implied sin in verse seven. Rather, in my opinion, it is a plea and hope that God would answer because of his mercy. In this case, verse eight repeats the longing and commitment of the psalmist to "seek his face". This also seems more suitable because repetition is used throughout the psalm. It also conveys the action on the psalmist's part to be the seeker.

13 I remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.

¹⁸ "Strong's Hebrew: 2372. חָזַח (Chazah) -- See, Behold," n.d., <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2372.htm>. Accessed 29.10.2022.

¹⁹ Weiser, *The Psalms A Commentary*, 246.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 252.

Verse thirteen conveys that the psalmist has regained the certainty that he will witness the goodness of God while he lives. This assurance has been acquired through the time he has spent in prayer and contemplation.²¹

14 Wait for the Lord;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the Lord.

Verse fourteen is expressed “in confident expectation. The last clause /.../ as if expecting new measures of help.”²² Weiser compares the last verse to Isaiah 40:31

Looking at these verses practice of contemplation can be clearly seen. Gazing on the beauty of the Lord describes precisely the spiritual practice of contemplating, Throughout the psalm dwelling, seeking, beholding, and waiting are named. These are actions that take time and cannot be rushed. In the same way, contemplation is something that cannot be done in rush.

But perhaps the prayer that describes a state of contemplation the best is Psalm 131. One of the shortest chapters in the Bible psalm 131 expresses the humbleness and thankfulness that David feels toward God in whose presence he has found peace.

A song of ascents. Of David.
1 My heart is not proud, Lord,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.
2 But I have calmed and quieted myself,
I am like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child I am content.
3 Israel, put your hope in the Lord
both now and forevermore.

²¹ Weiser, *The Psalms A Commentary*, 254.

²² *The Bettany Parallel Commentary on the Old Testament* (United States of America: Bettany House Publishers, 1985), 1005.

This psalm is said to be written as David's answer to king Saul's accusations of trying to acquire the kingdom under the pretense of divine appointment.²³

Verse 1: David starts the prayer with a statement of humbleness and pureness before God, he declares that he has no intention of getting involved in "great matters" or care for "things too wonderful for me." This verse especially affirms the possibility that it is in answer to some accusations. David speaks as if God already knows what he is talking about.

Verse 2: David is comparing himself to a child who is no longer at the age of needing to be nursed, because such a child would be fussy and restless, but also weaned child is still dependent on his mother as David is dependent on God. He is describing this state as contentment, he is calm and quiet just to be in God's presence. Matthew Henry compares this verse to Mt 18:3 where Jesus teaches about humility through the comparison of becoming as little children.²⁴

Verse 3: Is inviting Israel to trust in God. In Henry's commentary, he points out that this last verse is implying David reassuring Israel and those who wanted him to be the king, that God will take care of everything in His timing.²⁵ However, it is also possible that this is a part of liturgy as Wiser suggests: "The psalm concludes with a call upon the cult community 'Israel' to hope confidently in God; this is couched in a stylized liturgical form and shows that such personal confessions of an individual also had had their place in the covenant cult."²⁶

Psalm 131 encompasses the essence of contemplation, it is calmness, quietness, and contentment that being in God's presence produces. Contemplation, as shown in Psalm 131, can also be described as "a reality of grace, experienced by the believer as God's gift."²⁷

1.2 Prayer and contemplation in the New Testament

When it comes to the New Testament (NT), types of prayer remain the same as in OT, but there are some significant changes²⁸ that happen with the coming of Christ:

²³ *The Bettany Parallel Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1177.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms A Commentary*, 777.

²⁷ https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_12081980_the-contemplative-dimension-of-religious-life_en.html Accessed 30.10.2023.

²⁸ Herbert Lockyer, *All the Prayers of the Bible*, 173.

- In contrast to OT where prayers were mainly directed to God for earthly needs, such as the victory over enemies (1 Sam 7:7-12) or the coming of rain (1 Kgs 18:42) NT teaches to value spiritual needs over the material ones. The New Testament's emphasis on the importance of spiritual needs and values over material needs does not however mean that with the coming of Christ, everything becomes only spiritual. Jesus teaches us to trust God with the earthly needs when he tells the parable of stones for bread (Matt. 7:11) or unjust judge (Lk 18:7) and in other places. Throughout NT Jesus gives promises to answer prayers and to be an intercessor for believers when they pray according to God's will. Therefore it is apparent that Jesus was concerned about the social needs of people as well as their spiritual state.²⁹
- Another change is who helps in prayer when a person is not able to do so (Rom 8:26) Additionally, Jesus gives specific directions on how to pray: prayer must be presented in Jesus' name (Jh 14:13), directed to God the Father and performed in privacy with sincere and forgiving attitude (Matt 6:5-15). "Prescribed way to pray is in the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father".³⁰

When looking closer at Christ's life it is clear that Jesus prayed often and much, but apart from some of his prayer fragments, there is only one full prayer by Jesus found in the Gospels - Jesus Priestly prayer (Jn 17). In this prayer, Jesus prays for himself (verses 1-5) his disciples (verses 6-15), and all believers (verses 20-26). He also prays to be glorified by The Father, to be restored to the glory that he had before his incarnation. (verse1, verse5) This prayer takes place before Jesus is going to be betrayed and suffer and his praying to be glorified is praying to endure what is going to happen next. In her article about prayer and worship in the Gospel of John, theologian Dorothy Lee points out the symbolism of Jesus' crucifixion and ascent to the Father, described in John 17: "John 17 describes the ascent of the Son to the Father, in which Jesus symbolically reveals the exaltation of his life before God, setting forth in prayer the form and shape of the crucifixion as an act of worship, the prayer not only speaks of glory, it also enacts that glorification which encapsulates the mission of the Son."³¹ To suffer and bare the sins of the world, die, and rise on the third day is the process through which Jesus is glorified.

²⁹ Ville Auvinen, *Jesus' Teaching on Prayer* (ABO: ABO Akademi University Press, 2003), 241.

³⁰ Herbert Lockyer, *All the Prayers of the Bible*, 179.

³¹ Lee, Dorothy. "In the Spirit of Truth: Worship and Prayer in the Gospel of John and the Early Fathers." *Vigiliae Christianae* 58, no. 3, 2004: 277-97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1584622>. Accessed 11.11.2022.

Looking at Christ often taking time to pray in solitude, in instances as described in Mt 14:23, Mk 1:35, Lk 9:18, and Lk 22:39-41, there is a sense of him practicing contemplative prayer. Lockyer describes these times as Jesus recharging himself through prayer: “Those, who labor hard in Lord’s work on His day, feel like an extra hour’s of sleep on Monday. But Jesus had another way of resting in addition to sleep. Sometimes praying was his way of resting. So, before He went out to meet the old crowds of yesterday, prayer re-invigorated him, sweetened and strengthened His spirit.”³²

Even though the Bible does not describe what Jesus did in those times, it is a safe assumption that when he spent forty days in the desert or devoted hours and even nights to prayer on other occasions, he would have also spent a significant amount of that time in silence and quietness before God. Jesus knew the value of listening and contemplating. This is visible in his exchange with Mary and Martha described in the Gospel of Luke.

38 As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. 40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” 41 “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, 42 but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:38-42)

The story of Martha and Mary comes after Jesus’ teaching about loving one neighbor and the parable of the good Samaritan. Jesus is pointing out the importance of active love and underlining it with the parable of the Samaritan who is moved with compassion for the beaten-up man. Following the parable gospel of Luke places the story of Martha and Mary. In the article *Martha and Mary: Why at Luke 10,38-42?* from *Biblica*, John J. Kilgallen notes that the placement of this story is not geographically correct, because the village where Martha and Mary lived was not in the route to Jerusalem where Jesus was heading at this time. He suggests that this story is purposely placed in chapter ten to guard readers against the assumption that compassion and service are the heart of the Christian’s life and potentially forgetting the supreme importance of communion with God.³³ Martha and Mary’s story conclude the broader teaching that being before God is the necessary thing and this

³² Herbert Lockyer, *All the Prayers of the Bible*, 181,182.

³³ John Kilgallen, “*Martha and Mary: Why at Luke 10,38-42?*”, *Biblica* Vol. 84 (2003): 554–61.

placement is: “/.../ to teach that the motivation of all Christian moral action is supremely teaching of Jesus.”³⁴

Martha and Mary are also mentioned in the Gospel of John where Mary anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume (Jn 12:3) and in chapter eleven where it says: “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” (Jn 11:5) In the opening of the story Martha is described as the hostess of the house and being busy with the chores. V40 points out that Martha is distracted. Mary on the other hand is sitting before Jesus' feet, listening to him. Martha being worried and upset comes to Jesus to intervene and send Mary to help her.

In his answer to Martha Jesus tells her that she is worried and upset. He points out to her the “heart's” issue - not that there is anything wrong with what she is doing but rather with what attitude she does it.

Further follows this section's main teaching. Jesus says: “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” English Standard Version translates the beginning of Verse 42 as *necessary*. Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening and looking at him, this is the one thing that is needed or necessary and will not be taken away.

What Mary is doing can, of course, be interpreted differently, it can be said that her sitting *at the Lord's feet listening to what he said* is referring to reading Bible, as that is the main way that Christians “listen” to God and there are no implications of any contemplative practices in these verses. I, however, suggest that any “listening” that Christians do requires some aspect of quietness, and possibly the depth of understanding of what was read also depends on the willingness and practice of being quiet and still and beholding what is read through contemplation. This is done when practicing such contemplative practice as *lectio divina*, which will be further discussed in chapter two.

Prayer is at the forefront of the Bible and permeates all through the Old and New Testaments. Alongside asking God to help, save and give guidance it is also clear that Jesus as well as many other persons of the Bible saw the importance and need to take time to be quiet and contemplate God in silence and awe. Even though it is rarely directly mentioned in the Bible, and on those rare occasions it is described in a very matter-of-fact way and lacks direct

³⁴ Kilgallen, “*Martha and Mary: Why at Luke 10,38-42?*”

teaching on how to do it, still, its importance is undeniable and easily seen when looking at stories from Bible. The presence of contemplative prayer in the Bible points to its importance in the Christian life.

Altogether, there is not much direct use of the word *contemplation* in the NT, it can be seen in the context of multiple NT passages.

In his letter to Corinthians, Paul says: “And we all, who with unveiled faces *contemplate* the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” (2. Cor 3:18) Word “contemplate” in many translations is substituted by “behold”, both of the words carry the same meaning.

In this passage, Paul refers to Moses whose face shines with God’s glory after coming down from the mountain with the tablets of Law. The Lord's glory was so powerful that Moses had to veil his face to guard the people. (2. Cor 3:13) With the coming of Christ comes freedom from formal law, and because of this freedom believers can contemplate (behold) God’s glory that transforms them into Christ’s image.³⁵ By using the word transformed (*metamorphoó*), *Paul also points* back to Jesus' transfiguration on the Mount of Olives, where the same word is used in Matthew’s account. (Matt 17:1-13) and explaining how believers now have access to the process of being transfigured to the image of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Summary

In conclusion, it is seen that prayer is an important topic throughout the Bible. Old Testament focuses on its practical application whereas New Testament, through teaching and example, shows its spiritual importance, both acknowledging prayer’s two aspects. And even though there is no direct teaching or description of contemplation in the Bible, there are many occasions where the Bible implies and uses contemplation or the *beholding of God* as something that David, Jesus, or others do, therefore showing this practice's usefulness and the necessity for Christians.

³⁵ *The Bettany Parallel Commentary on the New Testament* (United States of America: Bettany House Publishers, 1983), 1062.

2. Literature review on prayer and contemplation

In this chapter, I will give a brief review of the literature on prayer by such authors as Ole Hallesby's *Palve*, Philip Yancey's *Palve. Kas see midagi muudab?*, and Edward M. Bounds' *Jõud palve läbi*. It seems to me that these books have had an influence on union church members' understanding and teaching of prayer, because they have been translated into Estonian and are accessible in church bookstalls and bookstores, and are often suggested as a worthy read between Estonian believers. And even though this review reflects only a small part of translated literature that has been influential to union church members throughout the decades, I believe it does show the main points of teachings found in the translated literature.

Further, I have chosen to use the term *evangelical tradition* to reflect the opinions that exceed the borders of the UFEBCE. Because union churches are part of this tradition that begins with the reformation they can and should embrace the common points of view expressed by other denominations that also find their roots in the same beginning.

I will take a look at contemplative practices as described in contemporary literature by such authors as Richard Villodas' *The Deeply Formed Life* and Peter Tarben Haas's *Contemplative Church* and others.

I also provide arguments on the role contemplation has in building up personal and community faith, in what ways can it help to advance the mission of the church, and describe one of the most known contemplative practices- lectio divina.

2.1 Prayer and contemplation in the books translated into Estonian

In the following section, I will describe the common topics of the three books translated into Estonian mentioned above.

- Prayer is a place of meeting

All three authors suggest that prayer is a meeting between a believer and God, they liken it to a door through which God enters.³⁶ A believer is the one that initiates this meeting, but the outcome of it depends on God's grace. Sometimes it might seem that prayer is one-sided, a necessary chore, and maybe even empty and pointless. Such questions as "is God even there? What am I doing wrong that my prayers are not answered?" may bring anxiety and stunt the

³⁶ O. Hallesby, *Prayer* (Augsburg Press, 2022), 5.

discipline of prayer, this is a common problem. Yancey describes it and offers the solution: “If prayer stands as the place where God and human beings meet, then I must learn about prayer. Most of my struggles in the Christian life circle around the same two themes: why God doesn’t act the way we want God to, and why I don’t act the way God wants me to. Prayer is the precise point where those themes converge.”³⁷ He expresses how the proper roles can be reversed expecting that God should do what is asked and forgetting that Christians are the ones who are to serve God.³⁸ Hellesby adds to this by describing how due to Christians' unbelief that all that prayer requires is simply letting God know their needs, but instead thinking, there must be something else that they must do for God to answer. Because they cannot understand what is missing, anxiety arises and makes prayer hard.³⁹ He concludes: “All this is changed when we /.../ learn to know Him so well that we feel safe when we have left our difficulties with Him. To know Jesus in this way is a prerequisite of all true prayer. This, therefore, is what the Spirit of prayer tries to teach us. It is His work to explain Christ to us and glorify Him (John 16:14).”⁴⁰

- Prayer is wrestling

The aspect of the struggle that prayer creates is discussed in all three books mentioned. Such scriptures as Genesis 18:16-33,⁴¹ Corinthians 12:8, and Mark 9:24⁴² are listed as examples of persistent prayer. Importance to stay engaged, and to persevere in prayer as Jacob wrestled with God to get His blessing.⁴³ The authors also discuss the persistent wrestling against one's flesh and the fact that believers sometimes end up wrestling against the spirit of prayer⁴⁴ instead of wrestling against the dark spiritual forces. (Ephesians 6:12)

- Prayer and silence

There are two aspects of silence that are discussed by authors, one is that of feeling God to be absent and silent. This state oftentimes is referred to as the dark night of the soul. And even though it is different from contemplative silence it is inevitable and even needed for a person to grow and understand the importance of being close to God. Yancey explains: “Evidently a season of dryness or depression or spiritual aridity—a state of God-forsakenness—is normal,

³⁷ Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (Zondervan, 2006), 17.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 21.

³⁹ Hellesby, *Prayer*, 23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 23.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 91.

⁴² *Ibid*, 14.

⁴³ Bounds, *Power Through Prayer*, 22.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 31.

to be expected.”⁴⁵ He points out that even Jesus experienced this state when he prayed on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46) Answer to this lies in examining one’s life, recentring it to the will of God, and asking God to use this time for future growth.⁴⁶

Contemplative silence is experienced when waiting on God. “The greatest victories are often the results of great waiting - waiting till words and plans are exhausted, and silent and patient waiting gains the crown.”⁴⁷ Hallesby notes: “It is not necessary to maintain a conversation when we are in the presence of God. We can come into His presence and rest our weary souls in quiet contemplation of Him. Our groanings, which cannot be uttered, rise to Him and tell Him better than words how dependent we are upon Him.”⁴⁸

2.2 Contemplative practices in the evangelical tradition

Contemplation, as described in previous chapters, has a role in deepening the relationship with God. It not only helps people to stay grounded in God and not to focus only on the problems and everyday circumstances but also to better understand who God is. In addition to this, multiple scientific researches on spiritual exercises involving silence have been shown to reduce stress, lower blood pressure,⁴⁹ and help reduce depression and anxiety.⁵⁰ More and more people are turning to secular meditation and mindfulness practices for mental health support. Surveys show that in the last decade practice of meditation has tripled.⁵¹ (This data concerns the USA, but, due to the wide spread of information over the internet, it is safe to assume somewhat similar statistics in Europe.) At the same time, Christianity in the western world is on the decline.⁵² 2020 survey commenced by the Estonian Council of Churches concludes that in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic interest in alternative spirituality has increased by seven percent compared to two percent raise in interest in Christianity.⁵³

⁴⁵ Yancey Philip, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?*, 200.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 198.

⁴⁷ Bounds, *Power Through Prayer*, 57.

⁴⁸ Hallesby, *Prayer*, 78.

⁴⁹ J Altern, 2018. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29616846/> Accessed 6.11.2022.

⁵⁰ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6418017/> Accessed 6.11.2022.

⁵¹ 28 *Meditation Statistics* <https://www.thegoodbody.com/meditation-statistics/> Accessed 6.11.2022.

⁵² Pew Research Center, May 29, 2018, *Being Christian in Western Europe*, 35.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2018/05/Being-Christian-in-Western-Europe-FOR-WEB1.pdf> Accessed 6.11.2022.

⁵³ *Elust, Usust ja Usuelust* http://www.ekn.ee/doc/uudised/EUU2020_esmased_tulemused.pdf Accessed 6.11.2022.

The importance of spiritual life has always been at the center of the Christian faith, but it seems that there is a lack of presenting a match for contemporary methods of alternative spirituality. As more research on the positive effects of meditation, mindfulness and other spiritual topics emerge,⁵⁴ it becomes clear that this is no longer a topic concerning only churches and theologians, but that spirituality has now been accepted as a legitimate scientific topic to be explored. The danger of this is that separating spirituality from religion can lead to creating a kind of pseudo-spirituality that has nothing to do with deepening a person's faith and concentrating on the grace of God but instead creates a self-centered and self-serving view of the spirit-mind-body dynamic and God-human relationship.

If the church is to continue to progress in its main goal of being proclaimers of the Gospel (Mk 16:15-20), and advance (Eph 4:11-12) Christ's goal to ransom and give life to many (John 3:16, Mark 10:45) then it is important to join, more actively, the ongoing conversation about the importance of the advancement of the inner spiritual-life and mental health, to which contemplative practices play an important role. This can be done by offering a point of view and guidelines for Christ-centered spirituality that embraces and promotes contemplative prayer as one of its aspects. Perhaps, “/.../ our very own Christian spirituality and contemplative practices are a means back to the table of humble wondering in the public square about the ongoing mystery and blessing of being human.”⁵⁵

In Christianity call to be transformed into the likeness of Christ is at the core of the message, but depending on the faith community this transformation can mean different things. In his book, *Deeply Formed Life* pastor Rich Villodas (key speaker for Emotionally Healthy Discipleship - a movement formed by pastor and author Pete Scazzero) writes: “I thank God that for more than twenty years, I’ve spent time in a variety of Christian traditions that seek him and offer great gifts to the world. Yet I’ve also witnessed a kind of dichotomizing of faith where the emphasis is on the outward at the expense of the inward.”⁵⁶ He further lists that some conservative traditions see transformation as having the right theology but overlook the inner work of the person, some progressive traditions understand transformation to be concerned with right actions and engagement of the world but forget mercy and humility, and in some Charismatic and Pentecostal traditions transformation is about the right experience, unfortunately, neglecting “loving well”. In fact, for the person to be truly transformed, a

⁵⁴ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29616846/> Accessed 23.10.2022.

⁵⁵ Peter Traben Haas et al., *Contemplative Church: How Meditative Prayer and Monastic Practices Help Congregations Flourish* (ContemplativeChristians.com, 2018), 32.

⁵⁶ Richard A. Villodas Jr., *The Deeply Formed Life* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2020), 14.

deeper look within and focus on profound formation is needed.⁵⁷ This formation takes place when the individual becomes proactive in their wish to be formed and become more like Jesus. Villodas names contemplative practices as one of the necessary aspects of deeply formed life.⁵⁸ He talks about such contemplative practice as Silent Prayer and recounts a story from Mother Theresa's life when she was asked in an interview what she says to God in prayer and her answer was: "I don't talk, I simply listen." and when asked what God tells her she answered: "He also doesn't talk. He also simply listens."⁵⁹ This illustrates the essence of contemplative practices in a very clear way. People often assume that if they take time to be quiet they must hear from God, but contemplation most often is about silence itself and not what can be heard in it. This is hard for people to understand at first. Such obstacles as boredom, specifics of technique, and distractions seem too big to overcome to stay present at the moment, but they all are natural parts of the process, and embracing such obstacles helps to put them aside and be able to dwell in God's presence.⁶⁰

It often seems to be the case that people who seek this true transformation sense the need for something that they do not readily receive within the teaching of their traditional evangelical communities. This need leads them to such authors as Tomas Merton, Philip Yancy, Eugene Peterson, and Thomas Keating, amongst others - writers who focus on contemplative aspects of faith and teach about contemplative practices such as silence, stillness, solitude, and meditation.⁶¹

Contemplation has been part of Christian tradition for centuries and is still practiced in orthodox and catholic churches and monasteries. Due to the restrictions of the graduation thesis I have not described the history of the contemplation nor its connection to these traditions, these topics are not the focus of my research. The reason why contemplation's place in evangelical tradition is not as prominent is found in the fact that with reformation most all of the monastic aspects of spiritual practices were purged.⁶² Haas notes though that during the last fifty years they have been slowly returning to evangelical communities. Indeed, there seems to be a shift in understanding and acceptance of contemplation not only in science, as mentioned above, but also in evangelical churches. It seems that younger generations do not find such ideas as meditation and contemplation to be dangerous religious

⁵⁷ Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life*, 15.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 17.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 24.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, Chapter 2.

⁶¹ Haas, *Contemplative Church*, 56.

⁶² *Ibid*, 21.

practices borrowed from the east, but older members of churches sometimes still can have great caution regarding such themes.

One of the practices that greatly improve the depth of the relationship with God is lectio divina. Lectio divina in translation from Latin means sacred reading. In this contemplative practice, four aspects of Christian spirituality are united: reading the Bible - this is to be done slowly and thoughtfully. Meditation - thinking about what God has said to the reader through scripture. Prayer - answering God through prayer. And contemplation - enjoying the fruit of this practice that results in joy and peace from being in the presence of God. All of these steps together ultimately are leading a person toward an action that is expressing itself through Christian serving, or in other words, becoming more Christlike. Each of the steps has to be done slowly and mindfully and has a specific role in the practice. In his book *Ladder of Monks* Guigo, a Carthusian monk of the 12th Century, describes this practice as follows: “One day when I was busy working with my hands I began to think about our spiritual work, and all at once four stages in spiritual exercise came into my mind: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. These make a ladder for monks by which they are lifted up from earth to heaven.”⁶³

In this practice, meditation is described as active thinking and comprehending of what was read but contemplation is described as the treasure given by God to be enjoyed.⁶⁴ This describes the essence of contemplation in a very clear way, as a process of being in God’s presence.

This practice has been popular and known among Christians for centuries, and now the practice’s worth is recognized even in secular teaching as the version of it is also used as a valuable tool that combines different intellectual disciplines to connect with the text during philosophy classes. Jake Wright senior lecturer of philosophy at the University of Minnesota Rochester describes its benefits as “increased attention to cognitive and noncognitive reactions to the text, willingness to engage with the material in novel ways, and the opportunity to engage in the independent disciplinary practice.”⁶⁵

The same benefits and more are enjoyed by the believers using lectio divina as a way of connecting with God.

⁶³ Guigo II, *The Ladder Of Monks* (Michigan: Cisterican Publications), 67.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 80.

⁶⁵ Jake Wright, “*Using Lectio Divina as an in-class contemplative tool*”, 2019.

Many of the authors emphasize that monasticism and its teachings about contemplative life and prayer have great importance in the pursuit of deeper spirituality. Even though evangelical tradition does not include monasticism, its theology stems from the teachings of early Desert Fathers and Mothers and such thinkers as Augustine of Hippo, John Cassian, and many Benedictine and Franciscan monks who all either practiced monasticism or wrote favorably about it, not to also forget that the Great Reformer Martin Luter himself was a monk. Villodas writes: “Monastic spirituality means slowing our lives down to be with God.”⁶⁶ He continues on by stating that the cultural baggage that the word monastic carries lead to theological misunderstandings and rob Evangelical tradition of its gifts and culture.⁶⁷ Embracing and welcoming the practices of monastic tradition would most definitely advance the spiritual formation of the evangelical churches. In his book *The Monkhood Of All Believers*, Greg Peters states: “All monks are Christians and all Christians are monks, though most monks do not live in monastery proper but live monastically interiorly.”⁶⁸ He recounts an article by monks of Conception Abbey that listed five ways that define a monk: to cultivate silence, to be faithful to prayer, form authentic community, make time for lectio divina and practice humility. Peters notes that these are basic commendable practices of a believer that can and should be done by every Christian.⁶⁹

What happens to individuals who do not find the messages of these and similar Christian authors? The possibility of them embracing the alternative way of pseudo-spirituality could be a motivation for evangelical tradition to speak loudly about the possibilities that Christian contemplative practices offer.

Summary

In summary, contemplative prayer practices that had always been an important part of Christian spirituality became forgotten by the evangelical tradition that union churches share a common history and are a part of. In the last decades, there have been increased interest in returning to the practices that help believers connect with God on a deeper level, these efforts are reflected in new books and articles written about contemplation. I find that what lies at the core of the message of those who speak and write about the contemplative way of life is the hope and desire to deepen the faith of individual members. Therefore, learning, writing,

⁶⁶ Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life*, 11.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Greg Peters, *The Monkhood Of All Believers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 179.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

and talking about contemplation are important not only for the wider evangelical community but also for union churches.

It is also obvious that silence and being in God's presence is seen as good and needed practice, authors whose writings I reviewed touch on this in their works. UFEBCE would benefit from accentuating and teaching practical parts of how to practice silence and other contemplative prayer practices.

EMPIRICAL PART

3 Prayer practices in UFEBCE

To examine union church members' understanding of prayer and contemplation, I conducted a three-part empirical research. In chapter 3.1 I describe how UFEBCE teaches and talks about prayer using as examples their official documents, webpages, and sermons.

In chapter 3.2 I describe the process and results of conducting fifteen semi-structured interviews with members of different churches of union and analyze the findings.

The third part- chapter 3.3 describes the partial experiment in which I observed the results of five members of union churches who for a time period practiced contemplative prayer.

3.1 Prayer in the texts and sermons of the union churches

Further, I provide an overview of the understanding and use of prayer in the Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia. I base my findings on the research of statutes of union churches and spiritual practices that are listed on their websites as well as information and resources connected to prayer and teachings that have been used in sermons.

As one of its main goals union churches' statutes name "conducting religious rituals at the request of believers or other persons at their home or in the social institution where they are staying (hospital, nursing home, prison, etc.)" These main religious rituals are baptism, blessing as a member of the congregation, prayer with anointing, Holy Communion (breaking of bread), engagement, wedding, the blessing of children, funeral, ordination, blessing and consecration service (home blessing, the consecration of a sacred building, etc.).⁷⁰ All of these rituals are prayer-centered, observing them and taking part in them undoubtedly expresses the unions' understanding of prayer. Another goal states the importance of strengthening believers spiritually, both doctrinally and morally (point four under the union's statutes subsection about the goals of the activity) even though this does not directly mention prayer, it is understandable that spirituality cannot be strengthened unless there is sound teaching on different topics of it, prayer being one of those.

⁷⁰ Põhikiri EKB Liit <https://kogudused.ee/dokumendid/pohikiri/> Accessed 11.09.2022.

Apart from a statement that “Reading the Bible, mutual brotherly counseling and prayer will help us to find our way in following Christ.”⁷¹ found in Joosep Tammo and Peeter Roosimaa’s *Bible teaching in the Union of Estonian Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches* and a mention of the weekly prayer meetings on some of the websites, there is no additional information or guidelines on prayer practices listed. The exception to this is the *Alpha Course* and 3D church program *Vedur* - a popular resources for believers that discuss prayer in more depth. It seems that prayer is understood as something self-explanatory. Additionally, I was not able to find any books written by the members of the Union on prayer, but I do not exclude that such works might exist.

Prayer is a fairly frequent topic of sermons throughout the union churches, but teaching tends to be either motivational like the Parnu Imanuel church sermon by Lev Bannikov with emphasis on the importance of prayer, summarized by saying: “Let's pray and cry out to the Father in the midst of the events that are happening around us because I'm sure the prayer of faith can still move mountains!”⁷² Or theoretical- Biblical teaching on the topic as the Oleviste Bible school sermon from Rait Tõnnori⁷³ who teaches about Jesus' prayers as seen in the Bible. Altogether I reviewed eight different sermons about prayer from Tartu Kolgata, Oleviste, Parnu Imanuel, Rakvere Karmel, Tartu Salem, and Tartu Risttee churches that all were either motivational or theoretical or little of both but lacked practical teaching of different prayer techniques.

In researching how union churches see and describe prayer in official documents, video recordings from sermons, and websites, I conclude that theoretical knowledge about prayer in UFEBCE is good, but it lacks practical direction and guidance. Union churches are known for placing emphasis on the importance of the personal relationship with Jesus and believers' special encounters with God through prayer are often recounted in their testimonies. Despite all that, there certainly is room for UFEBCE to help its members better understand the depth of prayer. It is sometimes taught to be quiet before God at the beginning or end of a prayer, but that is the limit of the teaching of what could be understood as a contemplative aspect of prayer. It is my impression based on the research that union churches perceive prayer as

⁷¹Piibli õpetus EKB Koguduste Liidus, Accessed 11.09.2022.

https://kogudused.ee/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Piibli_opetus_EKB_Koguduste_Liidus.pdf

⁷²Pärnu Immaanueli teenistus, Accessed 11.19.2022.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-X-8WPvVYE&list=PLnpzfOh7eT4IVmnC6KUGIFKCgeJWYRHkP&index=15&ab_channel=P%C3%A4rnuImmaanuel

⁷³ Oleviste Piibli kool, Accessed 11.19.2022.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07SYrYoOtRk&ab_channel=Olevistekogudus

self-evident, self-explanatory, a fundamental practice that is most important for the Christian life, but it lacks specific teaching and guidance and there is room for increasing the overall understanding of the depth of prayer. Just because it is a fundamental part of Christianity does not mean that it is self-explanatory nor that it is easy to master without guidance.

As one of the basic aspects of the Christian faith, prayer needs to be put at the forefront of the teaching topics especially focusing on its practical aspects. For union churches to grow and evolve it is crucial that each individual member of the congregation grow in their understanding and use of prayer.

3.2 Semi-structured interviews with members of union churches.

Research method

To research UFEBCE members' understanding of prayer, I conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews between October and November of 2022.

The qualitative method and semistructured interviews were chosen for this graduation thesis because it ensures that different opinions of union church members are expressed. Interviews give room for people to define their ideas as they speak and express their understanding fully.⁷⁴ The qualitative method also gives the interviewer opportunity to specify details and ask additional questions, therefore, accumulating a fuller view of the topic.

The main interview questions were the following:

1. How would you describe what is prayer?
2. What is the goal of prayer?
3. How have you learned about prayer?
4. What are your main prayer themes?
5. Which is the most challenging prayer aspect for you?
6. Have you heard about contemplative prayer?
7. Have you practiced other forms of prayer, such as meditation?
8. Do you practice silence during prayer?
9. Have you tried contemplative prayer practices?

⁷⁴ Cropley, A. J. *Qualitative research methods: A practice-oriented introduction*, ebook, 2022.

10. Do you want to add something about this topic?

The first three questions reflect the general understanding of prayer. The fourth and fifth questions show more of the person's personal experiences with prayer, and the following three questions six through eight describe whether a person is familiar with contemplative prayer as a concept and if they have any experience with contemplative aspects of prayer. The final question allows them to express additional thoughts about prayer.

Depending on the flow of the conversation some questions were left out (when already answered within the previous conversation) or modified to help the person express themselves in a clear and straightforward manner.

Sample

Fifteen members of eleven different churches of the union (Tartu Salem Baptist church, Tallinna Kristlik Mosaiik Kogudus, Nõmme Baptist church, Valga Betaania Baptist church, Rakke church, Tartu Risttee church, Tallinna Allika Baptist church, Tartu Kolgata Baptist church, Tallinn Oleviste church, Rakvere Karmel church, Avispea church) took part in interviews.

The churches were chosen randomly, and interviews depended on people's willingness to answer questions. To provide a reliable conclusion in the analysis questions were asked of both men and women whose ages ranged from the early twenties to late eighties, and whose Christian life varied in length from one year to all their life. People interviewed are living in both the capital and bigger cities as well as smaller towns of Estonia.

For the analysis to be as true to the actual situation as possible, I interviewed eight members who take part in church services but are not otherwise involved in serving the church or are involved in areas that are not directly related to a deepened understanding of prayer, such as serving practically, and seven members of churches who are either pastors, pastor's family members, prayer meeting coordinators, elders of the church or worship leaders. This guarantees that a wide range of views is provided.

To ensure the anonymity of the people who took part in the interviews I have coded the answers. Letter A is assigned to people who are not directly involved in church leadership and letter B is assigned to people who are involved in the leadership of the church and therefore could have a deeper understanding of prayer. Each person is assigned a number from one to fifteen and their age is shown in brackets.

Review of the interviews

The first question was: **How would you describe what is prayer?**

All people answered in a similar manner, saying that prayer is the main form of communication with God, conversation, and dialogue. A12(30+): *“Prayer is talking to God. My joy, my pain, my worries, through prayer I give it all to God.”*

What is the goal of prayer?

B2(35+) described that the goal of prayer is to keep the relationship with God fresh and vibrant. That prayer both requests and strengthens trust and faith in God. B4(30+) answered that the goal of prayer is for the person to grow in understanding of God. A3(80+) and A12(30+) answered that it is to thank God for what he has done and how he has kept the person and to bring God glory. B9(30+): *“I think that goal of prayer is for us to be able to see the world in the way that God does.”*

To the question **How have you learned about prayer?** A5(40+), A10(25+), and A15(25+) mentioned that they have learned about prayer through sermons. A5(40+), A10(25+), A15(25+), and B6(50+) mentioned learning about prayer through hearing other people's prayers. A12(30+) and A15(25+) also named learning from mentors and leaders of the church. A family has been among the main influences in learning about prayer for respondents: A10(25+), A11(25+), A14(20+), and B7(35+). Alfa, Beta courses, and 3D Vedur were mentioned by B1(50+), A5(40+), A12(30+), A13(70+), and A15(25+). Correspondents A13(70+), B8 (45+), and B9 named that reading books on prayer has taught them. Three correspondents A15(25+), B2(35+), and B9(30+) named Catholic monasteries or Orthodox churches as places where they have learned about prayer. And A14(20+), B4 (30+), B6(50+), B8(45+). noted that they have learned about prayer through God's revelation and by practice.

The first question from the personal experience section was: **What are your main prayer themes?** Here all of the respondents named practical prayer needs, praying for themselves, their friends, and their families. Some mentioned praying for the church and government and world. A12(30+), A14(20+), B1(50+), B4(30+), and B6(50+) as one of the main prayer themes mentioned being able to understand God's leading. A3(80+) and B2(35+) added that they are praying for the salvation of non-believers.

Next, I asked: **Which is the most challenging prayer aspect for you?** Here two main topics were prevalent: it is hard to pray in front of others or formulate the prayer A5(40+), A11(25+), A13(70+), A15(25+), and finding time, energy, or place for prayer, as well as having the discipline to pray was named as hardest aspects of prayer for A10(25+), A12(30+), A14(20+), A15(25+), B2(35+), B4(30+), B6(50+). A15(25+) adds: *“Sometimes I feel that I talk too much during prayer, and I should instead listen more. Other times I would like to continue prayer but I run out of words to say and therefore stop praying.”*

A3(80+) did not find anything hard about prayer and said: *“Prayer is a place of shelter for me, when I pray I am in God’s presence and everything is good at that moment.”*

B8(45+) said that lack of faith can make prayer hard, not believing that God will really answer specific requests. A14(20+) said that sometimes the hardest thing is to confess the need for God’s help.

The next section’s questions address different prayer practices and contemplative prayer. **Have you heard about contemplative prayer?** To this twelve people answered that they have not heard about it but B2(35+), B8(45+), and B9(30+) knew about contemplative prayer practices.

Have you practiced other forms of prayer, such as meditation, or written prayer? To this A5(40+), A10(25+), A15(25+), B2(35+), B8(45+), and B9(30+) said that they sometimes practice meditation or other prayer forms such as written prayers, walking in nature as a prayer, and singing worship as a form of personal prayer. A15(25+) notes: *“I think that there is not much talk about such practices as for example walking in nature as prayer, it can be a very powerful experience.”*

One correspondent A13(70+) expressed that in their opinion meditation is not a Christian practice.

To the question: **Do you practice silence during prayer?** All of the correspondents answered positively, that they have been silent during prayer times, but most do not do it often. respondents A11(25+), and A13(70+) practice such silence within prayer every day. A10 says: *“I used to take time at the end of the prayer to be quiet, to give time for God to answer, and I really like this idea and want for this to be my regular practice - listening to God more, but I noticed that doing it intentionally made me feel disappointed if God did not answer me.”* A15(25+) notes: *“I have heard about staying silent during prayer and listening*

to what God says, and sometimes it happens for me too, but it seems to me very hard and I struggle to do it.” A11(25+) says: “It is hard for me to silence my thoughts and I want to take it more seriously. It is easier to speak than to listen.”

The next question was **Have you tried specific contemplative prayer practices?** This question was asked upon explaining what contemplative prayer is.

A5(40+) said that they have not done anything like that but it seems interesting and worth trying. Some people had done it once or twice. B2(35+) and B9(30+) had tried contemplative prayer and practice some form of it from time to time. A15(25+) said: *“Even though I do not share the same understanding in regards to faith with Catholics I have borrowed such techniques as repeating a prayer, for example repeating Thank you, Jesus. It is very reassuring and during this prayer, I do not have to think what to say.”*

Lastly, I asked: **Do you want to add something about this topic?**

Here people either did not have anything to add or share some personal prayer experiences and observations. B9(30+) noted that even though prayer topic is well covered in church the richness of nuance is lacking, and A12(30+) also felt that teaching practical aspects of prayer could be better. A15(25+): *“I have an interesting observation. Having a lot of non-christian friends I see that many of them practice mindfulness and meditation, and I see that non-Christians spend more time in silence than Christians.”*

Analysis

All the respondents had a good and theologically sound understanding of what prayer is, and what is its main purpose. UFEBCE members pray either every day or multiple times a day and rarely have times when prayer is altogether forgotten. People that were interviewed prioritize prayer and see its benefits. Some of the answers showed that prayer is seen as a communion with God, where conversation with God was likened to a conversation with a friend, and an experience of being in God’s presence was cherished.

It seems that older people expressed more reverence when describing their prayer experiences and mentioned such expressions as giving God glory, and thanking God for continuous blessings. They also had greater apprehensions about such practices as meditation. Even when explained that meditation is found in the Bible, they still expressed that they would rather not use this term due to it being connected with other religions. Older correspondents

also talked about such aspects of prayer as kneeling and the importance of body posture. The younger generation was more casual towards prayer though not in a disrespectful way. They had more experiences with different prayer practices and embraced ideas about meditation and contemplation without hesitancy. Several people had read orthodox and catholic books on prayer and used some borrowed prayer practices. Three people had spent some time in monasteries where they had been exposed to contemplative prayer but lacked experience and guidance in the practice.

Many described prayer as a dialogue and a conversation but most people rarely practice listening to God while praying. Some found that they do not know how to practice silence or that they lack the discipline to take time for it, or that they feel discouraged if the experience is not what they expected. Still, everyone agreed that silence and quietness before God is a good and necessary thing to do.

Members of union churches that were interviewed are positively interested in learning more about different prayer practices and feel the need to be in God's presence in silence. Some suggested that even though there are plenty of sermons about prayer, more detailed and practical teachings could be helpful.

When it comes to contemplative practices as described and defined in this graduation thesis most people interviewed do not have a full understanding of such experience. People interviewed described very goal-oriented expectations for the time of silence, that in this time God is hopefully going to speak and give some guidance, and even though this can and does happen during contemplative prayer, its main goal is to just be with God. For some, it has been to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord as David prays in psalms.

3.3 Experiment of the contemplative exercise

To observe the effect of practicing contemplative prayer I asked five volunteers to take part in a partial experiment. This was not meant to provide any reliable and repeatable data, as I did not have a control group and other measures to ensure valid outcomes, but this is to provide insight into whether contemplative experiences are welcomed and useful.

Additionally, for the people who start practicing any kind of spiritual practice, it is always beneficial to have a mentor that helps to navigate the practice and experience, even though, volunteers could always reach me to ask any questions, it seems to me that lack of guidance could have stunted their experience in a way. Nevertheless, taking into account all of the

shortcomings of this partial experiment, it still provided worthwhile insights that are described in the following chapter.

Research method

Method of practice was described as follows: Select either a word, Bible verse or Christian quality (adoration, trust, peace, love, or other) that best supports your true wish to be in God's presence and to be open to his divine activity within you. Sit comfortably with your eyes closed, unwind, and calm yourself. Concentrate on being in God's presence and experience your love towards him. Whenever you become aware of anything (thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, associations, etc.), simply return to your chosen word, your anchor.

Volunteers were explained that the goal of the practice is to simply be in God's presence and to observe what happens. They were encouraged to take notes after each session. The review of the experience took place at the end of a two-week period during a fifteen-minute phone call.

Volunteers were asked the following questions:

1. What were your expectations for this experience
2. Did you find this practice beneficial?
3. What were your observations about this experience?
4. Would you like to continue this practice?
5. Please describe your experience in a couple of words.

Sample

Five volunteers (individually described here with code V and number) took part in a partial experiment trying contemplative exercise and sharing their experiences with me for the benefit of the research. Participants were five women ages ranging from twenty-five to fifty. They agreed to practice contemplative practice, as described, every day for twelve minutes or longer at least for one week.

Reviews of the experience

Two of the volunteers were not able to complete the experience due to the business of life. V1 did not understand the directions and lost interest in trying, V2 tried it a couple of times but understood that it does not suit her at that particular moment in her life.

To the first question “What were your expectations for this experience” V3 answered that she wondered if she will be disciplined enough to complete the experience. V4 hoped that this would help her to increase her concentration and feel God’s presence. V5 did not have any expectations.

The second question “*Did you find this practice beneficial?*” V3: “*I had heard before about this “listening to God”, but this exercise had a structure that was helpful. It was concrete and helped to keep my focus*” V4 described that sometimes it was hard to do it, but other times she experienced great lightness and well-being. V5 noticed that her anxiety decreased when doing this practice. “*Maybe this is what Jesus meant when he talked about giving us Rest.*”

The third question “What were your observations about this experience?” V3 found this experience to be a pleasant one and it enriched her prayer life. She found answers to her questions through the psalms she chose as her “anchor”, noticing that time lost its meaning. V4 noticed that it was very hard for her to silence her thoughts, but would suggest this practice to others as well. She laughed adding: “*Maybe it is especially good for likes of me, that struggle to stay in the moment!*” She described experiencing God’s lightness. (Jumal on helge.) V5 observed that time and surrounding is very important, this is hard to do in the middle of the rush.

Question four “Would you like to continue this practice?” V3 answered with a determined yes. V4 will continue this practice and try to incorporate it with her regular prayer time. V5 answered that she would come back to this practice in the future.

Question five “Please describe your experience with a couple of words.” V3 concentration, silencing of thoughts, peace. V4 challenge, curiosity, peace. V5: meditative, calming.

Analysis

From the results of the interviews, I observed that even though this certain technique did not suit all five volunteers, those who tried it found it sometimes challenging but worthwhile. Three women who practiced it regularly all had positive experiences and agreed that it is important to add such type of prayer to the regular spiritual practices.

Therefore, I believe it would be beneficial for UFEBCE to further research and advance the discussion on contemplation. Development of contemplative prayer group experiences and

training would be helpful along with discussing these practices and giving practical examples in sermons. Creating teaching materials on this topic would also be welcomed.

All the people I interviewed expressed positive interest in contemplation but most lacked theological and practical knowledge of the practices.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this research is to describe the UFEBCE members' understanding of prayer, and whether adding contemplative elements would enrich current prayer practices. The desire to write on this topic is based on the observation that prayer amongst members of union churches is often one-sided and can be seen as a practical tool in a relationship with God, forgetting its contemplative aspects. Even though the sample of my research is insufficient to attribute it to UFEBCE as a whole, I suspect that correspondents' opinions would be echoed in union churches.

Further, I will substantiate my opinion, that contemplative practices are beneficial and necessary for a believer's spiritual life by showing that the results of empirical studies - online research, interviews, and experiment are interdependent, and supported by theoretical research.

As shown in previous chapters, the more rushed and stressful the world becomes, the more people are searching for ways to regain stillness within, this is visible from statistics about the increase of interest in meditative practices among the secular world and also from what correspondents mentioned in the interviews- wanting to have more silence, hoping to have the discipline necessary for contemplative practices and the fact that listening to God is undoubtedly seen as cherished time and experience, and how the three volunteers of the partial experiment expressed a wish to continue the practice.

This silence was also touched upon in all three books about prayer translated into Estonian, summarized in Hallesby's observation that, while in God's presence, the conversation is not necessary, and the contemplation of God is what gives refreshment to a weary soul.⁷⁵ There is a contradiction thought that the members of union churches interviewed show: they see contemplation and silent prayer as beneficial and necessary, but have little experience in practicing it. This might be explained by the fact that the topic of contemplation could be covered more extensively in union churches. Researching contemplative prayer practices, I did not find any previously written graduation thesis or dissertations in Estonian and there is little (if any) writing on prayer and contemplation from union church authors. And also, due to the evangelical tradition's separation from old traditions after the reformation, there seems to be a little hesitancy among the older generation of believers when it comes to understanding what contemplation or meditation is, and a lack of knowledge among younger

⁷⁵ Hallesby, *Prayer*, 78.

ones - even after explaining the essence of contemplation to be “just being” in God’s presence it was still seen as a tool to hear God’s answers.

It is interesting to mention here, that the fact that the authors, cited in chapter 2.2, write about the importance of monastic traditions and practices and that some of the people I interviewed, mentioned their knowledge of contemplation coming from visiting monasteries where they practiced silent prayer, and also reading orthodox or catholic books about prayer, reinforces my claim that the empirical research described in this work is supported by my theoretical findings of the topic.

The research did not support my previously expressed opinion that prayer is seen narrowly, as it was clear that people are interested in the topic of prayer, they know that prayer is dialogue and compare it to the conversation, but it was evident that they lack a practical understanding of how to practice stillness and quietness that takes place in conversation between two individuals. I observed that even though many understand that prayer is the conversation it often seems to turn into monologue instead. Therefore, the conclusion that members of union churches need more practical guidance in contemplative prayer practices is supported by both the theoretical and empirical parts of my research.

SUMMARY

In my graduation thesis *Contemplative Prayer In the Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia* I set out to describe UFEBCE members' understanding of prayer, answer the research question: how is contemplative prayer reflected and understood in union churches and whether it is seen as a necessary part of prayer.

To gather the data I used threefold empirical research:

1. Analyzed information about prayer from the union documents, webpage, and sermons.
2. Conducted semi-structured interviews to gather information about union church members' understanding of prayer.
3. Carried out a partial experiment that gathered information on how contemplative practices are experienced.

During my research, I found that there is a lack of writing on the topic of prayer among UFEBCE authors. But even though contemplative prayer has not been a popular practice in Evangelical churches, it becomes more and more accepted. The information I gathered through empirical research showed that even though members of union churches that took part in interviews have a good understanding of prayer's purpose and theological aspects, they knew little about contemplative prayer practices. Correspondents expressed that more practical teaching about prayer would be beneficial, and that silence during prayer is a good and necessary part of prayer but is not practiced regularly.

A partial experiment showed that when practiced, contemplative prayer is beneficial, it seemed to lower anxiety and volunteers wanted to continue with this practice.

I suggest that theological and practical aspects of contemplation should be taught in sermons, and training and by creating experience-based groups. Further research on this topic could conduct additional interviews and questionnaires that would cover union churches fully. Also, more practical work of creating teaching material or video series on contemplation would be an interesting continuation of research on this topic.

KOKKUVÕTE

Oma lõputöös “Kontemplatiivne palve Eesti Evangeeliumi Kristlaste ja Baptistide Koguduste Liidus” (EKBL) püüdsin kirjeldada, kuidas EKBL-i liikmed mõistavad palvet ja kuidas oleks võimalik palveelu rikastada kontemplatiivse palve abil.

Probleemina nägin, et EKB liidu liikmed näevad palvet peamiselt kui tööriista, mille abil saada osa Jumala õnnistustest või saada palvevastuseid. Palve on aga palju mitmekülgsem.

Teoreetilises osas uurisin kontemplatiivse palve mõistet ja selle kasutust Piiblis, leides et kuigi Piibel otsesõnu ei räägi kontemplatsioonist, on siiski seda praktikat näha lugedes psalme ja uurides Taaveti, Moosese, Elija ja Jeesuse kogemusi ja palvepraktikaid.

Arusaamu kontemplatiivsest palvest on mõjutanud ka kirikuloo sündmused. Reformatsiooni tõttu loobuti mitmetest nn vanade kirikute praktikatest ja kommetest. Selle käigus kaotas kontemplatsioon oma koha evangeelsete kristlaste palveeludes. Viimastel viiekümnetel on huvi kontemplatsiooni vastu õnneks jälle kasvanud.

Töö uurimisküsimuseks oli: Kuidas kajastatakse ja mõistetakse kontemplatiivset palvet ja mil määral seda nähakse palve osana EKB liidu kogudustes?

Eesti EKB liidu koguduste kohta andmete kogumiseks kasutasin kolmekordset empiirilist uuringut:

1. Analüüsin EKB liidu dokumentides, veebilehtedel ja koguduste jutlustes olevat informatsiooni palvest, sh kontemplatiivsest palvest.
2. Viisin läbi poolstruktureeritud intervjuud EKB liidu koguduste liikmete seas, kus uurisin nende arusaamu palvest, sh kontemplatiivsest palvest.
3. Viisin läbi osalise eksperimendi, mille käigus uurisin, kuidas vabatahtlikud kogesid kontemplatiivse palve praktikat.

Empiirilise uurimistöö käigus kogutud info näitas, et kuigi intervjuudes osalenud EKB liidu koguduste liikmed mõistavad hästi palve eesmärki ja teoloogilisi aspekte, teadsid nad kontemplatiivsetest palvepraktikatest vähe. Ilmnes, et kuigi kontemplatiivne palve ei ole EKBL kogudustes kuigi populaarne, muutub see üha aktsepteeritumaks. Vastajad nõustusid, et praktilisem ja mitmekülgsem palve õpetamine kogudustes tuleks kasuks ning palve ajal on vaikus hea ja vajalik, kuid seda ei praktiseerita regulaarselt.

Oma uurimistöö käigus avastasin veel, et EKB liidu autorite seas napib palveteemalisi kirjutisi. Palvest jutlustatakse küll, aga seda tehakse kas motiveerival viisil või Piiblipõhiselt, aga puudub praktilisem õpetus sellest, kuidas palvetada ja millised palve praktikad on olemas. Jääb mulje, et praktiline palve pool on justkui iseennast selgitav.

Kolmas meetod, osaline katse näitas, et regulaarselt praktiseerides on kontemplatiivsest palvest kasu, see näis vähendavat ärevust ja vabatahtlikud soovisid seda praktikat jätkata.

Uurimisküsimuse vastuseks selgus, et kontemplatsiooni teoloogilisi ja praktilisi aspekte tuleks õpetada jutlustes ja koolitustel ning kasutada kogemuspõhiste rühmade loomisel. Täiendavad uuringud sellel teemal oleksid kasulikud. Intervjuud ja küsimustikud peaksid edaspidi hõlmama liidu kogudusi täielikumalt, et saada parem ülevaade antud küsimuses. Uuringute üldistusvõimekus suureneks suurema uuritavate hulga puhul. Samuti oleks selleteemalistele uurimustele huvitavaks jätkuks praktilisem töö, näiteks õppematerjali või kontemplatiivse videosarja loomise näol.

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