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EMOTIONAL UNCERTAINTY AND THE SILENCE OF GOD

PAPER 2

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## ABSTRACT

Thesis: Many of the cases of contemporary Western Christians experiencing the “silence of God” result from the absence of meaningful community through which God has chosen to provide encouragement and direction. In this paper I will demonstrate that the common problem known as the “silence of God” experienced by many contemporary, Western Christians is largely due to the following reasons:

First, the high rate of divorce and absence of fathers in the home creates distrust among children as to the benevolence of authority figures in general. Second, the decline of quality relationships combined with the increase of virtual communication leading to isolation and depression due to the loss of true community and substantive friendships. Third, the ever increasing compartmentalized life that does not allow for sufficient time to seek after God in the disciplines of prayer and fasting. Fourth, a profound disconnect from the world of nature that bars one from experiencing the serenity and mental balm that time spent in the natural world yields.

To remedy this common malady I propose the following solution: First, the affected person should reject the notion of living solely as an individual and seek out an active Christian community and become involved in living out the gospel with that community. This will provide the platform for mutual accountability and encouragement whereas a secluded lifestyle breeds complacency and depression. Second, the affected person should routinely “unplug” from every aspect of non-essential technology for an established period of time for the purpose of meditation on Scripture, prayer, and fasting.<sup>1</sup> This will provide a regular appointment to detoxify the mind of the kind of incessant activity that makes hearing from God virtually impossible. Third,<sup>2</sup> the

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<sup>1</sup> For those whose professions require the continual use of technology during work hours, established periods of personal time outside of work should include regular periods of time in which the use of all non profession related technology is avoided.

affected person should establish regular times of retreat into natural environments and thus experience a time of respite from the constant pressures of urban life as exemplified in the Bob Marley song, “Concrete Jungle.”<sup>3</sup>

#### DIVORCE, ABSENCE OF FATHERS & BREAKDOWN OF THE FAMILY UNIT

The first possible cause of Western Christians experiencing an apparent period of the silence of God, as stated in the abstract, could be rooted in the high rate of divorce and absence of fathers in the home. These factors have the potential to create distrust within children of the benevolence of not only their parents but of authority figures in general. Such suspicion, unless confronted by meaningful Christian community, usually continues a path of solidification into one’s adulthood evidenced by a nihilistic misanthropy; persons are to be treated with suspicion and skepticism and hence, are not to be trusted. Sartre’s character, Garcin, captures this sentiment well in the play “No Exit,” where he exclaims, “Hell is—other people!”<sup>4</sup> Such presuppositions about other persons render true community and friendship is virtually impossible. Contrary to divorce being a mark of shame as in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, George Barna reports:

There no longer seems to be much of a stigma attached to divorce; it is now seen as an unavoidable rite of passage . . . Interviews with young adults suggest that they want their initial marriage to last, but are not particularly optimistic about that possibility. There is also evidence that many young people are moving toward embracing the idea of serial

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<sup>2</sup> The third resolution addresses both the third and fourth cause of Western Christians experiencing the seeming silence of God.

<sup>3</sup> *Concrete Jungle*, written by Bob Marley & The Wailers (1973; New York, NY: Island Music Group, 2001), CD.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1976), 45.

marriage, in which a person gets married two or three times, seeking a different partner for each phase of their adult life.<sup>5</sup>

Such a view of marriage and divorce leads to anything but a security among children and teenagers as to the commitment of the parents to the survival of the family unit. When a child lacks the necessary security of knowing that the relationship between her father and mother is grounded upon an unwavering commitment to one another, the door opens for a variety of anxieties and emotional disorders. With the absence of fathers in the home, whether it be physical or emotional, not only have many children experienced frightening levels of separation anxiety but also never having felt a true connection with a father figure.

Likewise, many children from such home environments where affirmation and love are scarce or absent altogether have a lingering sense of inferiority added together with a reservation of trust in parental authority. Thoughts such as, “What if I had been a better son/daughter? Would Mom and Dad have stayed together? What if my step-Dad, whom I have grown to love, one day leaves like my biological father?” have tormented countless persons ravaged by the breakup of the family. For “natural doubters” who find themselves plagued by a the nagging thought of “what if?” need constant reassurance from other persons who act as a “surrogate frontal lobe.”<sup>6</sup> The relational remedy for such persons’ anxiety ebbs away when the family structure fractures. At the very least, such experiences, while not necessarily determining an entrenched hatred of father figures or a reticence of filial trust, doubtless forge a proclivity towards skepticism. When asked the percentage of students enrolled in her alternative school due to issues stemming from a broken home life, she director replied, “100%.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> George Barna, “New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released,” March 31, 2008. <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released?q=divorce>. Accessed April 11, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Habermas, “Emotional Doubt” (lecture, APOL 900: Religious Doubt, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, February 20-24, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Kristy Pickeral, February 15, 2012. Human Resources Director, STEP, Inc. 200 Dent Street, Rocky Mount, VA 24151 (540) 483-5142 ext. 3009 [kristy.pickeral@stepinva.com](mailto:kristy.pickeral@stepinva.com)

Christians who have such a background of deficient fatherhood often project the same fractured system upon their relationship with God. Although they may view God as the rightful ruler, to view Him as “father” is, at best, confusing and at worst, morally repugnant.

#### INCREASE OF VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION TO THE DEMISE OF TRUE COMMUNITY

Secondly, the recent and rapid advance of technology has opened up many avenues for virtual communication leading to increased depression producing isolation due to the loss of true community and quality friendships. Epitomized by the Brad Paisley song, “I’m So Much Cooler Online,” there is a growing awareness in the popular culture of a bifurcation between the essence of who one truly is and one’s online perception.<sup>8</sup> While social networking has allowed for persons to reconnect, the connection is still only virtual; every Facebook “friend” does not necessarily qualify as a genuine relationship.

Since the turn of the millennium the two most culturally influential technological innovations have been Youtube and Facebook. One Baptist Collegiate Ministries director remarked, “On a college campus when you see a student staring at a laptop you can be fairly certain that they are not studying. They are on one of two sites: Youtube or Facebook.”<sup>9</sup> Although used as hyperbole in the previous conversation, there is research that documents an extremely high level of online social networking usage among college students. The Whittemore School of Business & Economics of the University of New Hampshire conducted a study tracking the correlation of the use of social networking and grades among college students.<sup>10</sup> An overwhelming 89% of the students surveyed use social media for “social reasons” and 96%

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<sup>8</sup> *Online*, written by Brad Paisley (2008; New York, NY: Sony Music Entertainment, 2008), CD.

<sup>9</sup> Conversation with Jody Jennings, North Greenville University, Tigerville, South Carolina. March 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Chuck Martin, “Social Networking Usage and Grades Among College Students: A Study to Determine the Correlation of Social Media Usage and Grades” Whittemore School of Business & Economics of the University of New Hampshire, December, 2009. Page 4. <http://www.unh.edu/news/docs/UNHsocialmedia.pdf> Accessed April 11, 2012.

claim that they use Facebook.<sup>11</sup> Yet with the ever-expanding technological tools that allegedly bring people together there is also the danger of persons neglecting true community and genuine relationships. Cacioppo and Patrick document this epidemic of loneliness:

When people are asked what pleasures contribute most to happiness, the overwhelming majority rate love, intimacy, and social affiliation above wealth or fame, even above physical health. Given the importance of social connection to our species, then, it is all the more troubling that, at any given time, roughly twenty percent of individuals—that would be sixty million people in the U.S. alone—feel sufficiently isolated for it to be a major source of unhappiness in their lives.<sup>12</sup>

Although the replacement of true friendships with virtual acquaintances has undoubtedly both spread and increased a sense of loneliness for many persons, the state of loneliness is nothing new. Sartre’s existentialism certainly predates social networking but expressed well the final product of isolation where he writes:

We are isolated from others, from past and future, from meaning and value. We can count on nobody but ourselves, because we alone, abandoned on the earth, and without help. Life is absurd and love is impossible. So, we are condemned to futility in an impersonal world and in a universe with neither heart nor meaning.<sup>13</sup>

Sartre’s pessimism bleeds through to even the most sympathetic reader. While one may not agree with Sartre’s atheistic presuppositions, the emotional aspect of a lack of genuine friendship and community, taken together with a season of God’s alleged silence, Sartre’s despair seems to detail the blueprint of the lonely soul. As the anonymous urban poet saying goes, “They are crammed and jammed in buses but each of them’s alone.”<sup>14</sup> Loneliness is not conquered by incessant activity, recreation, or entertainment. It is overcome by relationships.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 2. Accessed April 11, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> John T. Cacioppo & William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 5.

<sup>13</sup> David Jeremiah, *Overcoming Loneliness* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson: 1991), 138.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 1.



## INCREASE IN CHRONOLOGICAL EFFICIENCY AND DECREASE IN BIBLICAL PRIORITIES

Third, the ever increasing compartmentalized life that does not allow for sufficient time to seek after God in prayer and fasting can contribute to one experiencing a period of perceived silence from God. While certain persons spend large amounts of time seeking community via the online experience, others persons obsessed with chronological efficiency develop overloaded schedules. The Western, and specifically, American drive for efficiency and ingenuity can, if not properly managed, elevate economic and chronological efficiency over spiritual depth. Books such as the *One Minute Bible for Starters* illustrate that a certain segment of the Christian market seems to possibly share a favorable attitude towards the idea of a compartmentalized Christianity.<sup>15</sup> Overloaded schedules not only increase the possibility of suffering from maladies related to high levels of stress but also increase the possibility of experiencing feelings of a growing distance in one's relationship with God. The biblical priority to seek God is often choked by misplaced priorities and the demands of the pursuit of happiness.<sup>16</sup>

## INCREASE IN A DISCONNECT FROM THE NATURAL WORLD

Fourth, a profound disconnect from the world of nature that bars one from experiencing the serenity and mental balm that time spent in the natural world yields can produce a sense of the silence of God. Unlike most cultures of the past who were unable to separate their daily routine from the world of nature (primarily because their subsistence depended on it), the

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<sup>15</sup> See, Lawrence Kimbrough, *One Minute Bible for Starters* (Nashville: B&H Books, 1999). This is not a blanket condemnation against devotional books that are brief in nature. Rather, it is intended to serve as an illustration that the existence of such books indicates that, at least for the publisher, there are enough Christians who have little spare time to justify the publication of a book that is advertised as assisting in a 60 second period time of communion with God. Hence, such devotional resources reflect the current status of a fair segment of Christian readership that would be better served by books on priorities and time management.

<sup>16</sup> See Mark 4:7,18-19.

majority of Westerners today are more familiar with steel and concrete rather than farms and forests. The constant drone of city and urban life can make times of solace very difficult to attain.

### PROPOSED REMEDY

First, the affected person should reject the notion of living as solely an individual, seek out an active Christian community and become involved in living out the gospel with that community. This will provide the platform for mutual accountability and encouragement whereas a secluded lifestyle breeds complacency and depression. The early church had an incredibly high sense of community to the point that they not only worshipped together but held their property in common with one another.<sup>17</sup> Shared experiences form a common bond, or, true community. Time must be spent within the community. Even regular attendance of worship services is simply not enough. There must be quality time invested, in another word; discipleship.

Not only does involving oneself within a discipleship community of believers provide relational fulfillment but also needed accountability. The Scripture “*breathed out by God*” indeed carries out the four-fold purpose outlined by the Apostle Paul.<sup>18</sup> However, due to Western cultural conditioning, one must be careful not to interpret this text in a purely individualistic vacuum. God can and does certainly speak to individuals through Scripture but the context of 2 Timothy 3:16 is found in verse 17, “*that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*” The teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness is assumed to operate within the life of church community. Hence, being involved within a community of

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<sup>17</sup> See Acts 2:42-47.

<sup>18</sup> See 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

believers is a way of placing oneself within the avenue of God's voice being heard through the explanation and application of His Word. God does not always choose to speak directly. He often uses means such as persons speaking to other persons the truths of Scripture.<sup>19</sup> The silence of God is not always broken through the thunderings of Mount Sinai or a voice in the night such as was the case with young Samuel but to people through people.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, one should seek not only to connect with Christian community but also become involved with service within that community. One of the surest ways to break the silence of God is to serve others. If the ultimate revelation of God is through Jesus Christ then obedience to the commands of Christ and the imitation of his life leads one to experience God. Jesus informs his disciples, "*But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,*<sup>27</sup> *and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,*<sup>28</sup> *even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (Matt. 20:26b-28). Jesus was not just speaking of foot washing; he was speaking of sacrificing one's life. It must be noted that the admonition to seek out Christian community is not necessarily to receive truth being spoken into one's life by other believers but to give of oneself within that community. Such opportunities for service allow one to experience the joy that follows the act of giving. Not only this, but service in accordance with one's spiritual gifts within a Christian community draws one's thoughts away from the downward spiral of isolated depression.

In stark contrast with seeking fulfillment for oneself, whether by accumulation of possessions or looking primarily to a Christian community to receive rather than give, Jesus gives a statement so radical that it would doubtless be considered counter-cultural in virtually

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<sup>19</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:21; Romans 10:14.

<sup>20</sup> Exodus 19; 1 Samuel 3:1-14. This is not to say that persons have the capacity to create or add to the revealed truth of God as contained in the canon of Scripture. Rather, that regenerate persons, through the power and leading of the Holy Spirit, are enabled to encourage one another to be faithful during the dark night of the soul.

every society. Jesus declares, “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*”<sup>24</sup> *For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.*<sup>25</sup> *For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?”* The crux of Jesus’ thought is embedded within the seemingly contradictory statement of verse 24; how could one save one’s life by losing it? Simply put, it is the “deeper magic from before the dawn of time” of C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, wherein self-sacrifice taps into a power so deep that it is able to overturn the power of death itself.<sup>21</sup>

Second, the affected person should routinely “unplug” from every aspect of non-essential technology (technology not necessary to one’s career), for an established period of time for the purpose of meditation on Scripture, prayer, and fasting.<sup>22</sup> This will provide a regular appointment to detoxify the mind of the kind of incessant activity that makes hearing from God virtually impossible. Dr. Thomas Van Hoose of U.T. Southwestern states, “As simplistic as it sounds, turn it off . . . if you mix isolation with feelings of negative self-worth, then you’ve got the recipe for depression.”<sup>23</sup> Although there are benefits to using technology and social media (as were previously presented), there can be an overwhelming sense of loneliness from people and silence from God. Such feelings are exacerbated when one’s connection to community is dependent upon the next incoming text message or Facebook post. In order to escape from this subtle form of technological slavery, one must unplug from things and connect with people. In addition, one

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<sup>21</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 185.

<sup>22</sup> For those whose professions require the continual use of technology during work hours, established periods of personal time outside of work should include regular periods of time in which the use of all non profession related technology is avoided.

<sup>23</sup> Aaron Smith, “Social Networks and Depression: Doctors weigh in on the Facebook phenomenon,” *The Chicago Tribune*. <http://www.chicagotribune.com/sns-health-social-network-depression.0.5533082.story> Accessed April 11, 2012.

must seek to develop the regular pattern of spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting.<sup>24</sup>

Developing such a practice fulfills a two-fold purpose: First, it is the removal of distractions that keep one from hearing from God as well as removal of causes of isolation, loneliness and depression. Instead of browsing profiles of persons whose lives seem much more interesting than one's seemingly mundane life or have many more online friends is replaced with seeking the Friend who sticks closer than a brother.<sup>25</sup>

Third,<sup>26</sup> the affected person should establish regular times of retreat into natural environments and thus experience a separation from constant pressure of urban life. If the person is located in an urban environment, times of solitude in nature (that can be combined with prayer and fasting) should be regularly scheduled.

## CONCLUSION

The combination between effective, ongoing Christian community (hearing and practicing the truth), unplugging from unnecessary technology (removing causes of both distraction and depression), and incorporating the spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting with the solace of God's creation, can serve for building up one's spiritual immune system. While these suggestions are by no means presented as a strict scientific formula or that persons who experience the silence of God after following these steps are hopeless cases. Ultimately, one must place their faith in God and resist the temptation to premature a premature judgment.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See, Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> See Proverbs 18:24.

<sup>26</sup> The third resolution addresses both the third and fourth factors that could possibly cause of Western Christians experiencing the seeming silence of God.

<sup>27</sup> Gary Habermas, *Dealing with Doubt* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990), 39.

Believers must live not based upon mechanical spiritual formulas but in faith for the day when all silence will be broken and we will see Him face to face.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See 1 Corinthians 13:12.

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