

CLARIFYING LECTIO DIVINA

An Ancient Practice for a Distracted Age

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August 2025

WHAT IT IS AND ISN'T

You might have heard of *lectio divina*. Maybe in a podcast, a retreat, or while skimming through a list of “spiritual disciplines.” It’s become more visible, which is beautiful. But with its popularity, I’ve noticed a quiet confusion. This essay offers a little clearing of the ground.

Let’s begin with what it is not.

Lectio divina—Latin for “divine reading”—is not a technique. It’s not a religious tool to optimize your morning routine. It’s not a productivity strategy or bullet journal for your soul. And it’s certainly not a spiritual technology that, if done correctly, guarantees an emotional or therapeutic breakthrough.

Lectio divina isn’t even about getting something out of the Bible. It’s about giving something up. Like your grip. Like your need to win, to control, to fix.

Lectio divina is a way of being with God through Scripture. That’s it.

It is not about what you extract from the Bible. Not a method or spiritual engineering. Not a fix. It’s about a slow attention to being with God. “I have called you friends,” Jesus says (John 15:15). *Lectio divina* is a way of knowing that reality by living in it.

It’s how the Word becomes fire in your bones. Not just content in your feed. It’s not control. It’s submission. A refusal to turn your soul into your own project.

A MODERN EXAMPLE

Imagine a single mom. Her house is finally quiet. The kids are asleep. She lights a candle. Not for a mood or a vibe. As a small defiance against the noise of the world. Her phone is in another room. Face-down, like a slain idol.

She breathes. Quiets her soul. She prays, quietly: “Come, Holy Spirit.” Not to manipulate an outcome. More like opening windows in a stale room.

She opens her Bible to John 15 and reads verses 1-11 aloud. Then again, more slowly. Again. Not just slow in speech, but in her thoughts and emotions. She doesn’t underline or analyze. She’s letting them soak in, like sun into cold skin.

A phrase presses forward: “Abide in me.” She stops there. Not to study it. To sit with it. Letting it turn over inside her.

She whispers, “Lord, what does it mean to abide in you right now? What am I abiding in instead?” Nothing. Then a memory: that morning, she lied to a friend about how she was doing. Ashamed of her anxiety. Afraid of being too much. She doesn’t push the memory away. She stays with it but also with the Word. With God. “Abide in me.”

She returns to prayer: “Father, I am here to rest in your unfailing love.” She sits for five silent minutes. She doesn’t try to fix anything. She doesn’t ask for anything. She sits with God in those words: “Abide in me, and I in you.” It feels as if Jesus wasn’t just quoted, but present. And He is.

That’s the heart of *lectio divina*. Presence meets presence. This is how the veil thins.

THE WORD ALIVE

One of the earliest witnesses to this practice is Cyprian of Carthage (c. 258 AD): “You should apply yourself to prayer or to reading: at times you speak with God, at times He speaks with you.”¹ That’s the essence of *lectio divina*. Not a performance. A sacred conversation.

This practice only makes sense if Scripture is not just ancient literature but divinely breathed (2 Tim. 3:16) and still speaking (Heb. 4:12). If God is still speaking, then reading becomes listening. And listening becomes transformation.

Not on demand.
Not on our timeline.
Not on our terms.

Lectio divina assumes that the Word speaks in layers. The earliest teachers believed the text speaks first in literal meaning, then moral, then anagogical, a vision of God’s eternal purpose.

But these layers aren’t unlocked by cleverness. What we’re able to hear depends on the kind of person we’re becoming. They unfold over time, through prayer, humility, and return. All by the activity of the Holy Spirit. This kind of reading never ends. Because God never runs out of hospitality. And He’s not in a rush with His children.

NOT MASTERY, ENCOUNTER

Unlike exegesis or theological study, *lectio divina* isn’t about intellectual analysis or even spiritual discernment, although it might prompt both after the practice is finished. This is not about mastering the text. It’s about being with Jesus. Not analysis, attention. Not speed but surrender.

It’s the kind of reading that dares to believe the page isn’t just ink and grammar. It’s a threshold. A sacred trespass into the presence of the One who speaks worlds into being. And sometimes says nothing at all.

The goal is not insight. It’s not information. Its *purpose* is communion. Sit with Jesus and dare to know that He’s already sitting with you.

This kind of reading disarms the desire to control God. You can’t control someone when you are really silent with them.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF KNOWING

In what we now call *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Benedict of Nursia or Saint Benedict (480-547) provides one of the clearest early examples of *lectio divina*, paired with manual labor.² The soul, like the body, must be exercised into health. It needs rhythms of exercise and discipline in the Spirit. The soul needs contact with reality.

¹ Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistles*, PL 4, col. 567.

² Rule of St. Benedict, 48.1.

In this tradition, *meditatio* “meditation” meant more than intellectual or therapeutic reflection. It was a slow turning-over of the Word in the heart until it started turning *you* toward Christ.

And *contemplatio* was not about floating above the world—it was about seeing it as it is. Not escape, but arrival. A kind of spiritual clarity where the veil thins and you begin to see things as they are. In God. In you.

THE FOUR MOVEMENTS

By the twelfth century, *lectio divina* took on a fourfold shape.

Lectio (reading) – Not skimming or scanning. A sacred slowness.

Meditatio – Turning the words over until they start turning you toward Jesus.

Oratio (prayer) – Letting the text become prayer. A response of the real you to the real God.

Contemplatio (contemplation) – Not effort, but stillness. Not grasping. Resting. Being with the God who has been there all along.

This isn’t a linear technique. It’s not a spiritual technology. Not a staircase to climb. More like a breathing rhythm. It’s the shape your soul takes when it remembers it was made for Someone.

A POPULAR MYTH

One of the more persistent claims that keeps some Protestants from this practice says *lectio divina* is a recent Roman Catholic import, foreign to Protestant soil and its principles. As if prayerful, contemplative reading of Scripture were some foreign ritual smuggled in from the monastic fringe. But this is historical amnesia disguised as discernment. But this, I want to say, is historical amnesia dressed up as discernment.

If you do your research, you will find the spirit of *lectio divina* runs deep in the stream of protestant spirituality.³ You can hear its echoes in:

The devotional meditations of Jeremy Taylor (1613–1667).

The Pietist sermons of Augustus Francke (1663–1727).

The field preaching and journaled prayers of John Wesley (1703–1791).

The quiet discipline of Charles Simeon (1759–1836).

The hunger of interior holiness of Charles Finney (1792–1875).

The insistence of J.C. Ryle (1816–1900) that Scripture must form us, not just inform us.

This isn’t a fringe contemplative add-on. It’s an inheritance. One that was all but forgotten.

A WAY OF READING AS DISSENT

We live in a cultural moment that worships content and speed. Attention is monetized. Everything, including spiritual formation, is at risk of being flattened into technique. As if transformation can be reduced to input/output. As if spiritual depth can be hacked. As if the Spirit isn’t the one who transforms us.

In this environment, *lectio divina* is a protest against the urge to fix yourself. It resists the impulse to consume Scripture like content. It refuses the idea that more information equals more formation.

³ See, for example, Evan Howard, “Lectio Divina in the Evangelical Tradition,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 5(1) (2012): 56–77. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/193979091200500104>

The protest looks like this: A software engineer sits with two friends and a cup of tea. Dawn hasn't cracked yet. They open to Psalm 131. She breathes deeply. Slowly reads aloud: "I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother." The line doesn't comfort. *It disrupts something in her.*

She returns to the passage. Reads it aloud as if it might read each of them back to themselves. They sit together in silence. Then a memory of her yesterday: chasing the algorithm: comparison, ambition, efficiency. Pretending peace is something you can brute-force. She feels her anxious soul. But she doesn't rush to fix it. Almost, but she listens. She waits. Surrenders in the presence of the Lord. She's letting go of everything else. Being held by the Lord.

They share their experience with each other. Their only response is to honor that space, each other, and the presence of the Lord.

This isn't a tool. It is a witness. It's not a luxury but a countercultural necessity.

WHY LECTIO DIVINA MATTERS NOW

When spiritual practices are turned into formulas—"do this and you'll feel close to God"—we lose their purpose. They become mechanisms of control. Soon we're not relating to a Person. We're manipulating mirrors.

Lectio divina can't be tamed for your results. It's for being porous with God. It reminds us:

You don't need a therapeutic breakthrough. You need presence.
You don't need to understand everything. You need to show up and listen.
You don't need to feel something every time. You need to be faithful to return.

The Spirit uses *lectio divina* to teach us to stay when we want to hurry. It teaches us to attend when we feel pulled toward distraction. To hear the Voice behind the words, in a culture of noise. Because the Word isn't just text. The Word is a Person. And He still speaks.

FINAL WORD

Lectio divina, like every spiritual discipline, is not for spiritual experts. It's for

The hungry.
The weary.
The spiritually distracted.

The prerequisite isn't advanced knowledge or experience, but desire.

It's for people who have stopped expecting fireworks and started longing for real fire. Ashes. A slow-burning, steady communion with the God who speaks by His presence. Not just once, but always.

Lectio divina will not make you efficient. It will, by the activity of the Spirit, make you awake. Attentive to the Word. Attuned to God's presence. Anchored in the kind of life that is eternal in quality now, not just later. The practice isn't the point. Communion is. And the invitation is always open: to return, to listen, to be with the One who is already with you.

HOW TO BEGIN

You don't need a monastery. You don't need a candle (though it helps). You need space. You need time. And you need to stop expecting immediate results.

Here's a simple way to begin:

- Set aside 15–20 minutes where you won't be interrupted.
- Choose a short passage. 5–10 verses.
- Read slowly. Read aloud. Let the words linger.
- Notice what stands out. A word, a phrase, a question, a memory, a feeling.
- Meditate on that. Let it echo. Don't force insight.
- Pray in response to what you've experienced.
- Rest in silence. No pressure. Just presence.
- Then close with gratitude.

And come back again tomorrow.

For a guided practice of lectio divina, see my *Lectio Divina Guide* at brandonrickabaugh.com