

II. Purpose of Retreat, Philosophy, Etc.

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II PURPOSE OF RETREAT

“Retreat: - 4. a period of retirement or seclusion, esp. one devoted to religious contemplation away from the pressures of ordinary life, usually as a group activity.” (New World Dictionary)

Retreat has been a significant factor in the lives of Godly people from the beginning of time. That void within us which only God can fill creates a yearning that demands fulfillment whether we be Christian, Jew, Moslem, pagan, or whatever.

Scripture does not speak of retreat in the same manner in which we view it today. There are no specific references to retreat that can be directly brought under our dictionary definition. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that retreat was a regular and vital part of the lives of the people of God in the Bible, as in Gen 24:63 - “And Isaac went out to meditate in the field in the evening.” The Biblical record shows that David repeatedly inquired of the Lord. Moses undertook nothing of any significance without first seeking counsel with God.

We know that Jesus spent time alone with the Lord; indeed, the forty days in the wilderness, at the end of which he was tempted by Satan, undoubtedly were spent in a listening attitude, prayerfully seeking guidance for his direction. Throughout his ministry he made use of the technique of retreat. On more than one occasion he took all or some of his disciples with him. We can safely assume that Jesus and his disciples spent time together as a group, on retreat,

as it were, while Jesus led them in prayer and instruction.¹

In any event, the idea of religious retreat has been with us for centuries. Retreat provides an opportunity for retreatants to be present to God in a special way. Thomas Kelly, in A Testament of Devotion, reminds us: “There is within us all a holy, infinite Center, a Life, Who speaks to us and through us to the world. We’ve all heard this Holy Whisper at times. At times we’ve followed that Holy Whisper. And an amazing equilibrium of life, an amazing effectiveness of living set in.” The joy of being in communion with God!

Retreat is radical in the sense of being basic to that communion. It is equally useful to all without regard to rank or status. The retreat experience most generally sparks reaction. In many instances retreat brings retreatants to a point where they can deal with the reality of their lives, and helps to bring about a keener awareness of who they are and what they can become. Retreatants quite frequently are moved to reappraise and rearrange their lives. Many have become reborn.

“Retreat” is used almost as a generic term to label any gathering of people brought together in a particular place for a particular purpose, which may be to instruct or to dialogue or to fellowship or for any combination thereof. This applies to religious and

¹ Mt 4:12; 14:23; 15:21, 39; 17:1; 26:36; Mk 1:35; 6:46; 9:22; Lk 4:1-13, 42; 5:16; 9:10, 28.

non-religious gatherings alike.

For the Center for Christian Growth, “retreat” has a relatively simple definition. The Center’s purpose for existence is to assist persons to learn how to make themselves available to the presence of God. Ordinarily, this is done by planning and leading retreats for churches and others. With the start of the Retreat Leadership Academy in October, 1993, we hope to begin an ongoing process to help to equip interested and qualified individuals, including seminary students, so that they may become leaders and/or co-leaders of retreats, in their own right. It is our intent to have a certification program for this training. Those trained in this manner would not be required to lead retreats for the Center for Christian Growth, although our prayer is that some would do so.

In dealing with retreat we find ourselves trying to handle spirituality and spiritual growth. The sense in which we use “spirituality” refers to one’s awareness of the moving of the Holy Spirit, i.e., the presence of God, in that one’s life. As spirituality grows so does one’s spiritual discernment which then is made manifest in piety and service to God.

Spiritual growth can be said to be evidence of the sanctification process. It is achieved most generally by the deliberate effort of the individual to claim time on a regular basis to concentrate on the Triune God. There are many facets to this process,

different approaches, diverse environments, that have been found productive. While acknowledging and respecting other ways, the Center for Christian Growth has chosen to emphasize four spiritual disciplines: 1) prayer in solitude and creative use of quietness, 2) regular Bible study, 3) mutual support, and 4) physical renewal.

The reader is referred to the frontispiece of this manual for a statement of the mission of the Center for Christian Growth.