Chapter 2: The Nature of Solitude

In this chapter, the goal- rather than to merely justify solitude as a biblical practice- is to lay out the meaning of solitude in its various dimensions. I will concede that the dimensions I have highlighted are not "properly" arranged; rather, they are brought up according to how Nouwen perceives solitude. In the context of what this thesis is trying to achieve, I believe this is the right approach to achieve my goal. Take note that even though the boundary is set within Nouwen's approach to solitude, this research will still employ other writers as an entry point to the subject or as support to Nouwen's ideas. Again, the writers that have been brought up are those who share Nouwen's thoughts in the matter of solitude. In this approach, therefore, the chapters will be divided into five parts: First, a discussion of solitude and its general traits, then the relationship of solitude with silence, its inner quality, prayer and community.

2.1. Preface to Solitude. In "Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter", Philip Koch begins his first paragraph with the question "what is solitude?" and end it with "is it possible to say what solitude is?"[30] His opening paragraph perfectly sums up the complexity of the term and to that extent, the difficulty in formulating a simple definition of what solitude is. This is why we have to approach solitude layer by layer to get a clearer picture of what it is. First, solitary life is not unique to Christian religion. In fact, apart from "a short period with the Essenes in Palestine and the Therapeutae in Egypt," it is not even deeply rooted in Judaism.[31] A short survey of religion easily shows that Christianity has no monopoly on monasticism or solitude. Thus, even from a socio-religion point of view, the

[30] Philip Koch, *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 1994), 11
[31] Dorothea Wendebourg. "Monasticsim", *The Encyclopedia of Christianity: Vol.3 (*Grand Rapids: Eerdsman, 2008), 625

concept of solitude must be formulated in its plurality. When we focus into Christianity, things do not get any simpler. The understanding and lived application of solitary life, even since its beginnings, is varied, due to its encounters with many "different regional situations and traditions."[32] The increasing differentiation caused by numerous cycle of decline and renewal throughout history makes it even more improbable for a simple, linear definition.[33] In this growth and change, even Calvin bemoans the way monastery has been twisted and wrongly practiced in his day in comparison to the time of Augustine.[34]

2.2. Dimensions of Solitude. Turning to Nouwen, we see that rather than giving a clear-cut definition of solitude, he chooses to speak of solitude in relation to what it entails. Such a strategy results in solitude being portrayed from a diverse and even random perspective. In certain place, he calls solitude a "furnace of transformation;"[35] in other, "to live in the world without being of it;"[36] and elsewhere he speaks of solitude as a place where we can experience real "family or community."[37] Merton, a great advocate of solitary life and a mentor to Nouwen in this regard, gives us, yet, another abstract concept of solitude:

> "I should be able to return to solitude each time as to the place I have never described to anybody, as the place which I have never brought anyone to see, as the place whose silence has mothered an interior life known to no one but God."[38]

These ideas from both Nouwen and Merton should suffice for us to see that in solitude, we are dealing with something that can be external and internal; individual and

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[32] Wendebourg. "Monasticsim", *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, 626
[33] Wendebourg. "Monasticsim", *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* 628
[34] Calvin, *Institutes, IV.xiii.10*
[35] Nouwen, *The way of the Heart*, 25
[36] Henry Nouwen, *Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2004), 25
[37] Henry Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer and Contemplation* (New York: Image Books, 2000), 13
[38] Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1999), 112

communal; personal and relational, all at the same time. While there is no easy way to approach solitude, this research will start by borrowing Koch's paradigm who has pointed out three features that are common to all practices of solitude: (1) physical isolation, (2) social disengagement and (3) "reflectiveness" or contemplation.[39] We have to take note here that while these three features is a good starting place to understand solitude, "they are not all that the term suggests."[40]

2.2.1. Physical Isolation. Derived "from the Latin word *solus*, which means alone," it is difficult to take apart the involvement of withdrawal from the practice of solitude. Nouwen concedes that, while not impossible, it is probably difficult to embody a lived life of solitude "without any form of withdrawal from a distracting world."[41] It is this emphasis on physical withdrawal which links solitude and monasticism together, making both of them virtually inseparable. This physical isolation, though, cannot be understood in the sense of being "locked up." It is neither an enforced isolation (as in a convict in a solitary jail cell) nor an escape from the cruel reality of life. In addition, Nouwen warns that solitude and its isolation also cannot be understood as a modern "me time". Solitude is not a place where the "I" can take a breather, recharge, and move on with our lives with renewed strength. Solitude is neither "privacy" nor a "private therapeutic place."[42]

The physical isolation of solitude must be first and foremost understood in the background of Jesus' teaching that Christians do not belong in this world any more than he does (Jn.17:14). Seen in this light, the physical isolation serves as a special time and

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[39] Philip Koch, *Solitude: A philosophical Encounter* (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 44.8
[40] Koch, *Solitude,* 47.2
[41] Henry Nouwen, *Reaching Out: the Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press), 37
[42] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 27

space whereby Christians can break free from the pangs of this world to seek greater conformity unto Christ. In this ever busy and success-oriented world, solitude gives us the opportunity to take a step back and see all the invisible compulsions that are revolving around our lives. This enhanced sensitivity will not be attained if we are always in the midst of people who are driven by the wave of the world. It is when the people are gone and we are all but alone that it forces us to see things in a greater clarity. Bringing this danger to context, Nouwen says- in the context of a success-oriented world whereby result decides the criteria of self-esteem- life becomes

> "one large scoreboard where someone is listing the points to measure our worth. And before we are fully aware of it, we have sold our soul to the many grade-givers. That means we are not only in the world, but also of the world. Then we become what the world makes us."[43]

A life without solitude, then, is highly susceptible to the force of social compulsion which leads to false self. Thus, the need for physical isolation is not merely a simple dualistic approach to life. Rather, it is a humble confession of "how hard it is not only for the individual Christian but also for the church itself to escape the seductive compulsions of the world."[44]

Next, in solitude, it is crucial to point out that isolation was taken up for the sake of union; specifically, a spiritual union with Christ. While both Budhism and Hinduism move towards a "sheer nothingness" and calls practitioners to be "autonomous and isolated,"[45] the goal of Christian solitude, according to Nouwen, was never the mere indulgence of self-recognition. Merton, turning to the desert fathers, see that what was

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[43] Nouwen, *Out of Solitude,* 22
[44] Nouwen, *The way of the Heart*, 24
[45] Kenneth Collins, *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000), 13

"sought most of all was their own true self, *in Christ*." It is important to take note that the person of Christ was and is always the object of pursuit in withdrawal. Not content with the fabricated Christianity they found within the society, the desert fathers "sought a God whom they alone could find, not one who was "given" in a set, stereotyped form by somebody else."[46] In the desire to be united with Christ, Merton adds that "the solitary life then is the life of one drawn by the Father into the wilderness there to be nourished by no other spiritual food than Jesus."[47] Similarly, Nouwen clearly states that "we enter into solitude first of all to meet our Lord and to be with him and him alone."[48]

Is the act of withdrawal then justifiable on the basis of communion with God? McGrath (who brings up Nouwen in his discussion of solitude) tends to agree when he says:

> "Why did Jesus go into the wilderness to pray? The answer is that there was no distractions there- it was a place where only *God would be found*. By deliberately preventing ourselves from being distracted, we make it easier to break our addictive dependence on work and activity."[49]

Being omnipresent, it is right to say that God can be sought everywhere but it does not mean that there is no need to have a special time and place to be physically alone before God. Even Jesus who is filled with the Spirit and one with the Father sees the necessity for him to break away from the crowd and to be physically isolated with the Father in prayer. Thus the point here is that by breaking off with something, the early Christian gains another; it is never merely about cutting loose from the world *per se*. The object and goal of withdrawal has always been clear from the beginning that is to seek and be with Christ.

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[46] Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert (*New York: New Directions, 1960), 5-6
[47] Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude (*New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1999), 108
[48] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart,* 30
[49] Allister McGrath, *Beyond the Quiet Time: Practical Evangelical Spirituality (*Grand Rapids: Bakers, 1995), 14

2.2.2. Social Disengagement. Many have criticized the act of solitude and monastery along with it as a cutting loose with the world. In this criticism, the act of solitude is just a weak escape from the harsh reality of this world. Yet, Nouwen argues that solitude "is not a movement of a growing withdrawal but is instead a movement toward a deeper engagement in the burning issues of our time."[50] In oppose to the general perception of solitude, Nouwen even says that, in fact, solitude helps us engage in social problems. He first argues that a spiritual life is not a life that denies this world by "rounding yourself by an artificial, self-induced quietude."[51] In fact, without solitude, while we look like we are engaging socially, the things that happen around us can merely "remain a random collection of disconnected incidents and accidents." A socially engaged life without solitude can easily turn into a "fatalistic chain of cause and effect." However, in solitude, we come to "listen with our inner senses to the deeper meaning of the actualities of everyday life. There the world no longer is diabolic, dividing us into "for" and "against" but becomes symbolic, asking us to unite and reunite the outer with the inner events." In other words, solitude enables us to treat all these social engagements as a personal engagement rather than an "unavoidable concomitants."[52]

This, we can also see in the lives of the early Christians who withdrew from the city and lived a life in the desert. The early Christians were not a blown-out pessimist; they did not just leave and left the world to die. To begin, a life of solitude, according to Merton, is a "paradoxical lesson." Merton notes that for early hermits, they "knew that they were helpless to do any good for others as long as they foundered about in the wreckage;" the

[50] Nouwen, *Reaching Out,* 49
[51] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 50
[52] Nouwen, *Reaching Out,* 52

wreckage of a Roman world. The hermits saw how fallen this world has become and how the church too has been compromised; being in this kind of world is like being in a sinking ship. This is the reason why these Christians left the society at the first place. It is wrong to think that the early Christians were merely escaping from the world when they were, in fact, confronting it. Nouwen adds that this departure to the desert was a new form of martyrdom; in the desert these early Christians became "witnesses *against* the destructive powers of evil, witnesses *for* the saving power of Jesus Christ."[53] Monastic movement was, then, in reality, a passive-aggressive response towards secular Christianity of the day. This form of response might not be well accepted by modern thinkers but we must not underestimate the bleak condition of the church and society back then. Merton clearly stresses that the early adopters of solitude did not just escape the world for the sake of escaping but for *saving it*; they were, in reality, present by being hidden.[54] Thus, for the early desert fathers, withdrawing from the society is in fact witnessing for the society. They were disengaged to engage the attention of the society. The early Christians who moved away from the society made their presence felt through their absence. While it is true that they were socially separated, they cannot be accused of being socially disengaged.

Looking at historical records, it should further make clear to us that a life of solitude is still a life engaged with the society. Simon Chan, who concurs with Nouwen with regards to the need of solitude, rightly points out that monks "who, when faced with a conflict between service to neighbor and their own personal rule of life, unhesitatingly chose

[53] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 14
[54] Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert,* 23

service to neighbor."[55] Those hermits did not forget that their calling was to love one another. Merton adds that for the hermits,

"Charity and hospitality were matters of top priority, and took precedence over fasting and personal ascetic routines. The countless sayings…should be sufficient to take care of accusations that these men hated their own kind."[56]

Both Merton and Chan would agree that a life of solitude was not merely an individualistic attempt to not be part of this world. Contrary to popular perception, it ought to be emphasized that Early Christians who took up solitude were still very much involved with the both the church and society. Nouwen is also against this idea that solitude is a movement towards social disengagement and in fact, an opposite of it. Rather, for him, solitude is a movement which makes it "possible to convert slowly our fearful reactions into a loving response."[57] Nouwen argues that, without solitude, our social engagements are merely "reactionary"; it is more of an impulse towards changes rather than "an action that was born out of our own center."[58] Again, it is through solitude that gives us the ability to "break through the fatalistic chain of cause and effect and listen with our inner senses to the deeper meaning of the actualities of everyday life."[59] Therefore, solitude in its proper place and function ought to enable us to better engage the social problems that we are facing.

2.2.3. Contemplation. Solitude is never about inactivity even if, physically, it seems so. Nouwen warns us against understanding solitude as "a station where we can recharge our batteries, or as the corner of the boxing ring where our wound are oiled…" Rather, solitude is very much involved in the internal activities; once again, it is a "the place of

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[55] Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 102
[56] Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert,* 16-17
[57] Nouwen, *Reaching Out,* 49
[58] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 49-50
[59] Nowen, *Reaching Out,* 52

conversion, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born."[60] The point that this research is trying to bring out here is that solitude aims for the change in the being. To be more specific, in its very heart, solitude is in itself contemplation. To contemplate or meditate is "to let us see our world as a transparent world, a world that points beyond itself."[61] Dr. Demarest, who relates meditation to Nouwen's idea of solitude, gives us a good definition of meditation when he says that

> "To meditate as a Christian is to cultivate the soil of the soul, which the traffic of the world compacts and hardens. It is the replanting of the Word's seed, the uprooting of sin's weeds, the nurturing of truth into fruitful activity. It is the cooperating with God himself as he moves among us, his tress of righteousness planted by the river of the Spirit's living water."[62]

To a great extent, this is what solitude is trying to achieve in practice. In solitude we are brought wholeheartedly and without distractions to contemplate about ourselves, the world and of God. Thus, the nature of solitude is contemplation and contemplation itself is work. A solitude without work is not a real solitude.

The danger, however, is to think of solitude only as an initial step towards a contemplative life. Dr. Bruce Demarest, for instance, says that "a quieted heart is our best *preparation* for all this work of God, which begins as we meditate on the Word of God."[63] In this view, solitude serves only as a tool or a stepping stone that better help Christians to contemplate on the riches of Christ. While it is not wrong to treat solitude as a spiritual tool towards contemplation, it can be very shallow if we do not go beyond this realm. Against this idea, Nouwen writes that "Solitude is *not* simply a means to an end. Solitude is *its own end*." For Nouwen, solitude cannot just be a ladder towards a higher

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[60] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart,* 26-27
[61] Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*, 86
[62] Bruce A. Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul: Restoring the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Navpress, 1999), 133
[63] Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul*, 133

goal; solitude is a place of being where "Christ remodels us in his own image and frees us from the victimizing compulsions of the world. Solitude is the place of our salvation."[64] Similarly, Merton warns us that "Christian solitary does not seek solitude merely as an atmosphere or as a setting for a special and exalted spirituality. Nor does he seek solitude as a favorable means for obtaining something he wants- contemplation."[65] To this end, a life of solitude must now extend itself from merely an act of spatial withdrawal to contemplate life to become, in itself, a state of contemplation. We are not to grow unto Christ through solitude but unto solitude with Christ; it is not just to make peace but be at peace with God. In this sense, solitude is no longer just a tool but a relationship. It is a development of the withdrawal of the inner heart from the world to a state which actively seeks to know more of God and of oneself. Understanding this unity enables us to see that solitude is not just a spiritual discipline that leads us to a certain goal but it is also a gift of the goal. It is also a gift which Reformed tradition can highly relate and agree with, especially in the light of Calvin who says that

> "no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he "lives and moves" (Acts.17:28)...Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself."[66]

For Calvin, to know God is to know oneself; to know oneself is to know God. In the light of Nouwen, this relationship is brought together in the being of solitude. One can argue that this expression of solitude has become too abstract and elastic; however, it is important to point out that Nouwen does not shy away from reflecting solitude in this manner. It is on this note that I would like end this portion with Nouwen's short

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[64] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 32
[65] Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 103
[66] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.i.1- 2

reflection of solitude which I believe will easily reveal its commonality, in idea, with what Calvin has to say with regards to the knowledge of God.

> "In solitude, we can slowly unmask the illusion of our possessiveness and discover in the center of our own self that we are not what we conquer, but what is given to us. In solitude we can listen to the voice of him who spoke to us before we could speak a word, who healed us before we can make any gesture to help, who set us free long before we could free others, and who loved us long before we could give love to anyone."[67]

2.3. Silence. Silence is a major part of solitude; when Foster- who draws upon Nouwen's mentor, Merton, when it comes to the discipline of silence- discusses the idea of solitude, he even considers it to be inseparable.[68] Nouwen, along with the Desert Fathers, are convinced that "silence completes and intensifies solitude."[69] In other words, there is no real solitude without silence. Dallas Willard, concurring with Nouwen, says that "silence goes beyond solitude, and without it solitude has little effect." Both agree that the practice of silence "is the way to make solitude a reality."[70] Thus, it should be clear that in the practice of solitude, physical isolation alone is not sufficient. The practice of solitude is not just the practice of being alone void of other human being; a man who locks himself up in his room while doing a marathon of video games is not experiencing solitude. This is why silence is integral in the practice of solitude. Silence is the space in solitude whereby all distractions can be disposed and a pathway to God is created. While silence might be viewed suspiciously and neglected in Protestant tradition[71], historically "silence is an indispensable discipline in the spiritual life." Nouwen also notes that "the

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[67] Nouwen, *Out of Solitude,* 25-26
[68] Richard Foster, *Celebrations of Discipline* (London: Hodder & Stoughton), 123
[69] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 43
[70] Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 163
[71] Demarest, *Satisfy your Soul,* 128

Desert Fathers praise silence as the safest way to God."[72] However, why do both Nouwen and Willard, along with the Desert Fathers, stress the importance of silence? Why do we need to be silent when there is communication? If God rebukes his people for having a lack of knowledge (Hos.4:6), will being silent help us in getting knowledge? Does the Bible indeed support the concept of silence as an exercise? These are just some of the questions that we will be answering in the following part.

From a biblical perspective, Christians have found solid grounds to practice silence. The Bible has amply, in many parts, shown the deceitfulness of words and words that come out from men (Prov.6:16, 18:21, 21:13, 26:20; Mat.15:11; Jam.1:22, 3:6-8). While the Bible teaches to speak true and right words, there are many parts of the Bible that teaches us to refrain from speaking (Prov.10:19, 17:27-28, 21:23, 26:20). Actively, the Bible even instructs us to be silent from time to time (Ps.4:4-5, 46:10; Ecc.3:7; Hab.2:13, 20; 1 Pet.3:4; Jam.1:19). Thus, it is no wonder, from a biblical point of view, that historically, "Christians have tried to practice silence as the way to self-control."[73]

From a social perspective, silence is also needed for us to break free from the deception and dangers of words. Especially in the context of today's world, words have even become an escape and distraction from the true reality before God. Words, according to Merton, can even be a smoke-screen which "man has laid down between his mind and things;"[74] not just mind and things, but also man and God. Pointing out the failure often found in seminary and seminarians, Nouwen critically says that many theologians find themselves (himself included)

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[72] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* 43-44
[73] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart,* 44
[74] Merton, *Thoughts on Solitude*, 82

"entangled in such a complex network of discussion, debates, and arguments about God and "God-issues" that a simple conversation with God or a simple presence to God has become practically impossible. Our heightened verbal ability, which enables us to make many distinctions, has sometimes become a poor substitute for a single-minded commitment to the Word who is life."[75]

James 1:19 teaches us that Christians ought to be "quick to listen, slow to speak" but, yet, it seems like what we are doing is the opposite. Within Christianity, there are ample of debates and arguments but many of these do not come by God's guidance, rather, by one's own passion. This is why Nouwen states that in the midst of our words-bombarded culture- words from the media, politicians, teachers, parents and even pastors- words have lost its power. More often than not, words that we received have caused us to merely say "they are just words." Additionally, Nouwen says that the function of word to communicate "is no longer realized" in our lives. The word no longer communicates, no longer fosters communion, no longer creates community, and therefore *no longer gives life*."[76] The word that we speak ought to build up life, foster communion and bring out the truth, yet, none of these are often realized. The Bible teaches us that the words of God gives life (Prov.3:1), yet, the words that we receive today is lifeless. However, why do all of us speak so much? Willard, I would argue, speak rightly when he points out that

"we run off at the mouth because we are inwardly uneasy about what others think of us…we use words to "adjust" our appearance and elicit their approval. Otherwise, we fear our virtues might not receive adequate appreciation and our shortcomings might not be properly "understood.""[77]

The root of the problem, however, as Nouwen points out is that our words "are no longer a reflection of the divine Word…they lose their grounding and become as seductive and

[75] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 47
[76] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart,* 46
[77] Willards, *The Spirit of Disciplines,* 165

misleading."[78] The reason why our words have become powerless, useless, deceptive and seductive is because we do not listen to God in silence and speak not in a God-centered way. In this sense, silence is the foundation of speech. Merton writes that "truth rises from the silence of being to the quiet tremendous presence of the Word."[79] In the topic of silence, Foster draws not only from Merton but also Bonhoeffer.[80] On the importance of silence of words towards speech, Bonhoeffer writes "the mark of solitude is silence...One does not exist without the other. Right speech comes out of silence, and right silence comes out of speech.[81] For Bonhoeffer, "silence is nothing else but waiting for God's Word and coming from God's Word with a blessing." Only when one has true silence then can he truly hear God's words and speak God words appropriately. Without silence, we would lack the stillness necessary to receive God's words; without silence we would not have the strength to hold our tongue which makes our words nothing but chatter.[82] Thomas Akempis, a Catholic forerunner who has influence on both Nouwen and Merton, too, points out the strong relationship between silence and the Word when he says that "in silence and quiet the devout soul advances in virtue and learns hidden truths of Scripture." Akempis is convinced that it the further we dive into silence, the more intimate we will be with our Creator. He even further claims that "God and his holy angels will draw near to him who withdraws from friends and acquaintances."[83]

In an attempt to prevent us from entering into a wrong type of silence, Merton reminds us that an inner silence is a "continual seeking, a continual crying in the night, a repeated

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[78] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart,* 47-48
[79] Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude,* 83
[80] Foster, *Celebrations of Discipline, 123*
[81] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Croydon: CPI Bookmarque, 1954), 34
[82] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together,* 34
[83] Thomas Akempis, *Imitation of Christ* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1999), 21

bending over the abyss."[84] Once again, being is silent is more than just the abstinence of speaking; silence is not merely a period of introspection but is more of an active seeking. Silence is not just something we find and stay in; Merton says that when "we cling to a silence we think we have found forever, we stop seeking God and the silence goes dead within us." Being silent is in fact, leaving oneself to a continual seeking of Christ. A silence without Christ to be sought is not a true silence; "a silence in which He is no longer sought *ceases* to speak to us of Him."[85] In sum to this point, we see how silence is indispensible to solitude; some are even inclined to treat them as synonymous. Silence does not just help us to break free from the entanglement of the society but it is also the platform where we receive God's word and even come into closer intimacy with Christ. As a discipline, silence helps us in our self-control and gives us wisdom to appropriately bring out the word of God.

2.3.1 Silence and Future life. Apart from the being the discipline for us to listen to God, Nouwen additionally relates silence with eschatology. Silence is, in fact, "the mystery of the future world." While this may seem farfetched, it is not as ridiculous as we think if we go back to Calvin. In the *Institutes,* Calvin (as I will argue below) considers the mediation of future life as part of the Christian life of sanctification. Silence, then, as part of sanctification can easily find its relationship to eschatology. It is the interest of this research to further prove this relationship through Nouwen who has provided to us three aspects of silence and future life. In his devotion towards the sayings of the Desert Fathers, Nouwen distinguishes three spiritual benefits of silence that it can bring to

[84] Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude,* 86
[85] Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 86

"strengthen the idea that silence is the mystery of the future world": (1) silence makes us pilgrims, (2) silence guards the fire within, and (3) silence teaches us to speak.[86]

(1) Silence makes us pilgrims. Building on the idea that, as followers of Christ, this world is not our kingdom (Jn.18:36), Nouwen argues that the discipline of "silence is the best anticipation of the future world." For Nouwen, this life is a pilgrimage, a journey of sanctification until we can attain perfection in the everlasting life. Until then, all followers of Christ should remind themselves that they are just on a journey and that they should not entangled by this world which is not our home. This idea that we shall not be "entangled" and "polluted" by the world is where silence comes in. Using James 3:2 (…everyone of us does something wrong, over and over again; the only man who could reach perfection would be someone who never said anything wrong- he would be able to control every part of himself) as the grounds of his argument, Nouwen believes that for us to "remain untouched by the sins of the world on our journey to our eternal home, silence is the safest way." Simply said, since speaking causes us to sin, we should speak less or, better, to practice more silence. Nouwen adds that even speaking good and edifying words can be dangerous; Proverbs 10:19 says, "a flood of words is never without its faults."[87]

To sidetrack briefly, while we may argue that James was instructing control and not abstinence, nonetheless, the latter view finds its support from both Douglas Moo and Willard. Moo says that "so difficult is the mouth to control, so given is it to utter the false…so prone to stay open when it were more profitable closed, that the person who has

[86] Nouwen, *the Way of the Heart,* 48-49
[87] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 50-51

it in control surely has the ability to "keep in check" other, less unruly members of the body."[88] Commenting the same verse, Willard says that "we must also practice the silence of not speaking."[89] Furthermore, when James depicts the tongue as "a world of evil among the parts of the body (Jm.3:6)," what safer way can there be other than just being quiet? At the very least, this was the response and conclusion of the early Christians towards this verse.[90]

Not only polluted, but Nouwen also argues that words entangles us into this world. Quoting from the Desert Fathers once more, he argues that words or conversation "tended to interest them (fellow Christians) in this world, to make them in heart less of strangers here and more of citizen."[91] To be more precise, words have made human "less of a stranger" in the sense that words have often failed to produce eschatological hope but, rather, disappointment; more of "citizen" in that it tends to become a mere nostalgic lamentation.[92] In sum, silence can help remind and discipline us to be a pilgrim in this world; a lack of silence, on the other hand, makes us too easily polluted and entangled by this world.

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[88] Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 151
[89] Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines,* 164
[90] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 50
[91] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 50
[92] "How seldom have long talks proved to be good and fruitful? Would not many if not most of the words we use be better left unspoken? We speak about the events of the world, but how often do we really change for the change them for the better? We speak of about people and their ways, but how often do our words do them or us any good? We speak about our ideas and feelings as if everyone was interested in them, but how often do we feel understood? We speak a great deal about God and religion, but how often does it bring us or others real insight? Words often leave us with a sense of inner defeat. They can even create a sense of numbness and a feeling of being bogged down in swampy ground…in short, words can give us the feeling of having stopped too long at one of the little villages that we pass on our journey, of having been motivated more by curiosity than by service."

(2) Silence guards the fire within. Once again, Willard, grounding his discussions from Nouwen's idea of silence, points out that "a major problem for Christian evangelism is not getting people to talk, but to silence those who through their continuous chatter reveal a loveless heart devoid of confidence in God."[93] In light of the emerging movement which shifts the centrality of a monologue-like pulpit preaching to "progressional dialogue",[94] Willard's argument may seem to be a strong case. Willard points out that the problem that we face today is that people speak not out of their love and confidence towards God, but their lack of thereof. Nouwen, too, sees that our words, which are intended to build up communities, have flattened out our life together. Often, sharing sessions does not produce the comfort and assurance that it intends to bring but rather, "a feeling that something precious has been taken away from us or that holy ground has been trodden upon."[95] Where does the mistake lie?

Nouwen argues that it comes by a lack of a discipline of silence. Silence, for him, is a "guard of the Holy Spirit." If Holy Spirit is the fire within the heart, silence, then, is "the discipline by which the inner fire of God is tended and kept alive." The question is: how does silence keep the Holy Spirit burning within us? First of all, we have to see that a heart "on fire" or "burning" is a biblical term (Lk.24:32). With regards to this verse, Calvin agrees with Nouwen by calling the fire within the heart as a work of the Holy Spirit when he says that Christ "inflames their (the two disciples) hearts inwardly by the

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[93] Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines,* 165

[94] "The intentional interplay of multiple viewpoints that leads to unexpected and unforeseen ideas. The message will change depending on who is present and who says what." Jim Shaddix, *to preach or not to preach",*283

[95] Nouwen, *The way of the Heart*, 53-54

warmth of the Holy Spirit."[96] This inner fire is an inner heat; a passion; a religious emotion; even an energy coming from the Holy Spirit who works within us. Crudely, we may even be able to consider this as the strength of the Holy Spirit. It is this fire or vigor within us that Nouwen strongly encourages us to tend and make it alive.[97]

To further make clear this idea, we have to turn to 1 Thessalonians 5:19, where Paul- in his final instructions to the church- warns them not to "quench the Spirit." This "Quench", according to Morris, "properly applies to the extinguishing of a flame of some sort, such as that of a fire (Mark 9:48) or a lamp (Matt. 25:8)…it has particular relevance when used of the Spirit, for his presence is aptly symbolized by fire (Acts.2:3)."[98] However, as Paul was speaking metaphorically, what does it mean by putting out the fire of the Holy Spirit? Going back to Morris once more, he tends to agree that the fire is a "power within the believer which enables him to overcome evil and to produce the "fruit of the Spirit"[99] I would argue that the "power" which Morris speaks of is highly relatable to Nouwen's "inner fire". While sounding highly abstract, Nouwen's idea of "guarding fire within" is not very far from what Paul said to the church of Thessalonica.

Once this is settled, we have to return to speak about the relationship between silence and guarding this power within us. Nouwen argues that silence is the place where true guidance of the Holy Spirit in emotions and ideas are "cultivated." Sometimes, our words do not come from the guidance of the Holy Spirit in silence and that it has become

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[96] Calvin, Harmony of the Gospels: Calvin Commentaries, 365
[97] Nouwen, *The way of the Heart*, 52
[98] Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*. The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 175
[99] Morris,. *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 175

merely "an expression of our doubt than of our faith." The reason why so many ministers have become burn-out, is because that they "say many words and share many experiences, but in whom the fire of God's Spirit has died." What come out of the mouth of these ministers are merely words of their own.[100] In sum, the words that come out of our mouth ought to be words from the Holy Spirit. For the Spirit to speak, one must guard this fire of the Spirit within our heart just like what Paul has instructed us. It is this fire within us that can truly bear fruit of the Spirit. By speaking too much and neglecting silence, we are in the danger of giving too much output without cultivating what is within us. To speak without the fire of the Holy Spirit within produces words that lack faith. According to Nouwen, it is "precisely this wordy unbelief that quenches the fire."[101] Silence, then, is eschatological in the sense that it guards the power of the Holy Spirit, who is eternal, within us to bear true fruits in this world. Without silence, there will be no inner cultivation of the Spirit within us and thus, no fire and no eschatological hope within our words.

(3) Silence teaches us to speak. How would our speaking show that silence is the mystery of the future world? It is when the word that comes out is borne out of "divine silence". Nouwen argues that there is a mystery in the relationship between silence and the Word, more specifically, between silence and God's own speaking. In a fashion of which I am incapable to paraphrase, Nouwen says this with regards to the mystery of divine silence:

> Out of his eternal silence God spoke the Word, and through this Word created and recreated the world. In the beginning God spoke the lands, the sea and the sky. He spoke the sun, the moon, and the stars. He spoke plants, birds, fish, animals wild and tame. Finally, he spoke man and woman. Then, in the fullness of time, God's Word, through whom all had been created, became flesh and gave power to all who believe to become

[100] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 54
[101] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart, 56*

the children of God. In all this, the Word of God does not break the silence of God, but rather unfolds the immeasurable richness of his silence.[102]

From the above paragraph, we can separate Nouwen's thoughts to a few points: (1) God's works in creation comes from silence. (2) God's work of creation does not reveal his fullness of but rather leaves room for imagination towards his "silence". (3) The Son, who is the incarnate Word, too, came from this silence. (4) Christ, as the Word of God, has this power from the eternal silence of God. (5) Jesus Christ, though he was the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being (Heb.1:3)," does not eradicate the image of the unseen God; in other words, he "does not break the silence of God." It is on these grounds that we can say that to "participate in the creative and recreative power of the divine word," one must first enter into the divine silence. [103] Not only that our words must emerge from this silence, it must also bring us back to this silence. From a sequential point of view, I would argue that Nouwen's argument find resemblance and commonality to Paul's "from Him, through Him and to Him (Rom.11:36)." The point here, I would say, is our words ought to bring others into the silence of God. The silence of God is an eschatological reality of which we could only have a foretaste of today. To be able to speak with such words, we have to, first and foremost, come into this divine silence ourselves. To be united with the God who is silent, gives us the ability to speak words that bring others into His silence. While this does not fully explain how we can and ought to draw from this silence, yet, it cannot be denied that there is a mystical relationship between silence and speaking.

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[102] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart,* 56-57
[103] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart,* 57

To add briefly the aspect of silence in solitude, we see that the Bible, too, actually encourage us to take time to be silent. Without silence, our words lack wisdom. Proverbs 15:23 says that, "a person finds joy in giving and apt reply- and how good is a timely word," and, in 25:11, "a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver." From these two verses, we see the idea of speaking the right words at the right time.[104] There is no need to constantly speak; in fact, a fitly spoken word could only come from silence in God. In his commentary on Proverbs 15:23, Charles Bridges supports this idea when he says that "many a good word is lost, by being spoken out of season."[105] For our words to bear true fruits, it is not enough that we stick to the narrow sense of *Sola Scriptura*. Wisdom and efficacy of the Holy Spirit must accompany our words; these, as Nouwen argues, comes from being silent in God. In agreement to the mystery of silence, Willard points out that we should "live with quiet, inner confidence," and that this "inward quiet is a great grace we can receive as we practice not talking."[106] Silence, as pointed out above, is an important discipline in our meditation towards our future life. From the perspective of eschatology, silence keeps us off from becoming too attached to this world, keeps the fire of hope burning strong in our hearts and gives us the room to speak of the eternal words in this temporary world.

2.4. Inner solitude. While solitude is, in itself, an external practice, it does not deem its goal merely to be externally isolated. As I have pointed out above, even the Desert Fathers do not practice solitude just to be alone; their goal was always *Uni Cum Christo*.

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[104] Paul E. Koptak, *Proverbs: From Biblical Text-- to Comtemporary Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 401

[105] Charles Bridges, Geneva Series of Commentaries: *Proverbs* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust), 213

[106] Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines,* 165

It was neither merely a discipline exercise nor a stepping stone. Solitude is a being with Christ; it is a place of encounter; a state of union. Especially in Reformed tradition whereby we reject the dualism of body and soul, a bodily solitude must also signify a spiritual solitude. When Nouwen says that "solitude is its own end," he does not mean that the goal of a Christian life is to be alone physically.[107] Such a conviction is absurd and foreign in Nouwen. Solitude can be its own end only from the perspective of an inner disposition. This is why Nouwen warns us against understanding solitude merely as being "alone by yourself in an isolated place." The solitude "that really counts is the solitude of the heart; it is an inner quality or attitude that does not depend on physical isolation." Yet, it does not take away the need of physical isolation as steps to achieve the state. On St.Anthony, Nouwen says that "the solitude that at first had required physical isolation had now become a quality of his heart, an inner disposition that could no longer be disturbed by those who needed his guidance."[108] To have solitude of the heart means we are no "longer pulled apart by the most divergent stimuli of the surrounding world but is able to perceive and understand this world from a quiet inner center."[109]An inner solitude is being at peace with Christ by the way of flesh-killing and clinging unto Christ. The discipline of solitude signifies and strengthens the spiritual killing of the flesh in order that the inner solitude might, through faith, live unto Christ. In the discipline of solitude, its path starts from solitude to solitude. It is here that I want to borrow Merton's view of "returning" with regards to Christian contemplation, to show how an internal solitude works to bring an individual to come to terms with oneself and God.

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[107] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 32
[108] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 32
[109] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 37-38

For Merton, a Christian contemplation must not be an intellectual contemplation. It must also not be a hedonistic and outwards contemplation for things like "perfect happiness" where it is destined for frustration. For him, a Christian contemplation is a return. In sin, man has been estranged from God and from his most inmost self. Thus, his contemplation as a Christian is a journey inwards: to reject the external and go deep to find God and himself within. If the Christian is renewed, Christ is in him. Therefore, the truth should not be sought outside but inside. It is through this kind of contemplation that man can recognize God and also find his true self.[110] Likewise, in this sense, an inner solitude can also be considered a return. Whereby man has been spiritually exiled and becoming part of this world in sin, now man has to return to the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. An inner solitude, then, is a conscious state of walking and being with Christ through faith; a peace with God strengthened by the renunciation of the flesh and the world.

2.5. Solitude and Prayer. In the opening paragraph of this thesis, this research mentioned Carson who points the lack of prayer as the foundational reason why the West is spiritually stunted. It is from this problem that the discussion was brought into the bigger picture of Christian spirituality. The introduction makes much sense because there is, in fact, a close relationship between solitude and prayer. As a practical discipline, solitude does not stand alone by itself; when we go into solitude, it does not mean that we avoid ourselves of any other means of discipline. The discipline of solitude, in fact, becomes the ground whereby other types of discipline can be carried out; one among them being, prayer. As I have pointed out above, the goal of solitude is not to be alone but as being

[110] Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton, Spiritual Master: The Essential Writings (New York: Paulist Press, 1992),* 325-326

alone with God; silence is not merely keeping quiet but a listening to God. Therefore, "solitude and silence are the context within which prayer is practiced."[111] In solitude, we become silent so that we can listen and we listen by the means of prayer. Nouwen points out that Jesus spent the night in prayer to listen.[112] In Reformed tradition, listening to the word of God is, generally, understood as an insight of the word of God that satisfies either our minds or hearts. However, Nouwen would argue that "God's mind is greater than the human mind and therefore transcends our insights and good ideas."[113] Listening to God, in its various forms, includes the listening through prayer in silence. In Mark 1:35, it says that "very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." We must take note that Mark points out that Jesus not only went out to pray but that he went out to a "solitary place". It is important for Jesus to be alone, to be in silent so that he could listen to the voice of God. With regards to the act of lone prayer by Jesus, Nouwen says that "when Jesus enters into prayer in the night he is totally free from everything and totally open to the voice that calls him the Beloved."[114] When we come back to Mark, we see that Jesus solitary prayer has a stark outcome: Jesus had a totally different idea of what he ought to do next in comparisons to the disciples. It ought to be clear for us that Jesus did not have this guidance through the written word but through prayer. To be more specific, he received the voice and directions of God through silence and prayer. Thus, when it comes to solitude in prayer, solitude does not just merely prepare us to pray but it actually becomes our *direction* in prayer. Nouwen notes that "every time we enter into solitude

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[111] Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart,* 69
[112] Henry Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Living* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2012), 26
[113] Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Living*, 27
[114] Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Living,* 23

we withdraw from our windy, tornadolike, fiery lives and we open ourselves for the great encounter, the meeting with Love." In solitude, we first discover our own restlessness and compulsiveness not merely to face it but to leave it behind and to "enter into the presence of Love, naked vulnerable, open and receptive."[115] This is why, in prayer, solitude can become a gift; "it is the gift of a true self, a true identity. Solitude in prayer leads us to a new intimacy."[116]

Observing the lives of people whom prayer was "indeed "the only thing needed (Lk.10:42),"" Nouwen points out three guidelines if one truly desires to be able to learn how to pray: "a contemplative reading of the word of God, a silent listening to the voice of God, and a trusting obedience to a spiritual guide."[117] Of course, in our present context, we would only focus on the second point regarding silence. For Nouwen a life of unceasing prayer (1 Thess.5:17) is unachievable "if we do not reserve a minute, an hour, a morning, a day, a week, a month or whatever period of time for God and him alone." While difficult, "being useless and silent in the presence of our God belongs to the core of all prayer."[118] This is why the practice of solitude is so highly related to prayer. Prayer itself is not an easy discipline, furthermore silent prayer. Especially in this age of efficiency, merely sitting down and doing nothing "often disturbs us more than it helps." The consistent discipline of solitude, however, "makes us quiet and deepens our awareness of ourselves and God." It is only after we have build up this awareness that we will be able to develop an inner momentum within our prayer which would "draw us

[115] Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*, 27
[116] Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*, 28
[117] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 135
[118] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 136

more and more into silence and closer to that still point where God speaks to us."[119] In fact, for Nouwen, this listening in silence has become the real work of his prayer. Speaking through his own experience, Nouwen says that

> "prayer has become more and more a way to listen to the blessing…I realize that, although I have a tendency to say many things to God, the "real" work of prayer is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me. This might sound self-indulgent, but in practice, it is a hard discipline."[120]

Far from self-indulgent, the silence in prayer is in fact the harder choice to do. The easier thing to do in prayer would be to talk, but our talk is often our way to cover up the fear of" being cursed, of hearing that I am no good, or not good enough." In a sense then, silence in prayer is a way to prevent self-rejection and come to God accepting that we are his children in Christ.[121]

2.6. Solitude and Community. Solitude has been highly criticized as being anti-community. In the Biblical faith, Christ calls believers into his body where he commands them to love one another. Therefore, it is unruly for Christians to accept any sort of ideas or discipline whereby he or she might need to abandon the community of believers. From the naked eye, it seems like the discipline of solitude promotes this kind of anti-community behavior, but on a closer look, it actually promotes true community. In fact, many theologians are convinced that there can be no true communion without solitude. The relationship between community and solitude is so vital that it must be included in the discussions of solitude.

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[119] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 136
[120] Nouwen, *life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 75
[121] Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, 76

Nouwen argues that solitude is the foundation of a true communion. While many would measure intimacy from the perspective of physical proximity, Nouwen argues otherwise. A relation that bases itself in such foundation "quickly starts fluctuating according to moods, personal attractiveness and mutual compatibility, and thus becomes very demanding and tiring." True intimacy could only come from solitude for in it, "we become aware that we were together before we came together and that life is not a creation of our will but rather an obedient response to the reality of our being united."[122] What Nouwen is trying to express here is that in solitude we come face to face with our reality and unity in Christ and within this, deeper connection that we have with one another. Using 1 John 4:19 as his argument, Nouwen plays to strength the fact that we have been loved first before we love others, to show that in solitude we are, in fact, diving into this reality. To enter into solitude, in the context of intimacy, is to "witness a love that transcends out interpersonal communications" and proclaims a relationship that is founded in Christ.[123] In other place, Nouwen calls a community founded in solitude as an inner quality which delivers us from a friendship that merely hangs on the thread of superficial gives and takes.[124] A community without solitude is a community walking on thin ice; a community as such masks the individual loneliness with reciprocal treatments and breaks away once this mutuality fades away. Our solitude, on the other hand, embraces our loneliness, brings us into Christ and into a community of an inner quality. All in all, the role of solitude in community liberates us from the fear of external concerns of being accepted or rejected and brings us into a "sense of intimacy that

[122] Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*, 14
[123] Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome,* 14
[124] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 47

transcends the emergencies of our present-day world."[125] On the importance of solitude to community, Simon Chan tends to concur with Nouwen when he says that "there is no community unless each member learns to live in solitude…for it is only in solitude that we discover a deeper bond that transcends time and space." The idea of union with Christ as the center of solitude and community is also supported when Chan says that "only the one who has undertaken the responsible act of "discerning the Lord's body" can be said to be in true communion with others around the Lord's Table."[126]

[125] Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome*, 16
[126] Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 120