

Contending For The Faith

April 15, 2020 Lesson #12 Desiring A Spiritual Experience: Spiritual Formation Part I

Consider: Desire For Spiritual Experiences Is Increasing

We live in an age of mysticism with people lusting for spiritual reality and spiritual experiences.

The danger: Unbiblical practices will give people a real spiritual experience, but not from God.

Deception is the likely outcome.

Col. 2:8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

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The cover story for the February 2008 issue of *Christianity Today* was "The Future Lies in the Past." It describes the "lost secrets of the ancient church" that are being rediscovered by evangelicals. The referenced ancient church is the Roman Catholic, beginning with the so-called "church fathers" of the early centuries.

The article states: Many young evangelicals dislike both "traditional Christianity" and the seeker sensitive churches. Traditional Christianity is described as too focused on "being right," too much into "Bible studies" and "apologetics materials." The seeker sensitive church is too much of a show and entertainment. Instead, the young evangelicals are lusting after "a renewed encounter with a God" that goes beyond "doctrinal definitions."

Mysticism refers to experiencing God beyond the boundaries of Scripture.

They desire to "break out the candles and incense," pray the "lectio divina" and learn the "Catholic ascetic disciplines" from "practicing monks and nuns."

TRUTH: God puts a boundary around the means by which we come to Him and grow in Him for our own protection.

John 14:6 Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

II Pet. 3:18 But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

- The Living Word of God + Power of Holy Spirit = transforming power in me
- Ignoring the boundary set by Biblical guidelines, could be a matter of life and death or a matter of our spiritual growth.

"For 2000 years, since the crucifixion of Jesus Christ the Bible has been attacked.

Alongside the Apostolic Church, based on the teachings of Jesus Christ and his apostles, counterfeit Christian heretics, apostate denominations and false movements have proliferated."

I Tim. 4:1 Now the Spirit speaks expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;

Remember: Expect deception to look good and sound good!

Ecclesiastes 1:9 "There's nothing new under the sun."

Leaders of the Movement & Their Writings

1. In 1974, Father William Meninger, a Trappist monk and retreat master at St. Josephs Abbey in Spencer, Mass. found a dusty little book in the abbey library, The Cloud of Unknowing. He was delighted to discover this anonymous 14th century book presented contemplative meditation as a teachable, spiritual process enabling the ordinary person:

To enter and receive a direct experience of union with God.

Its underlying message suggests: The way to know God is to abandon consideration of God's particular activities and attributes, and be courageous enough to surrender one's mind and ego to the realm of "unknowing," at which point, one may begin to glimpse the nature of God.

2. Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington and others began to disseminate these teachings.

Finding Grace At The Center: Roman Catholic monks Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington write:

"We should not hesitate to take the fruit of the age-old wisdom of the East* and "capture" it for Christ. Indeed, those of us who are in ministry should make the necessary effort to acquaint ourselves with as many of these Eastern techniques as possible.... Many Christians who take their prayer life seriously have been greatly helped by Yoga, Zen, TM and similar practices, especially where they have been initiated by reliable teachers and have a solidly developed Christian faith to find inner form and meaning to the resulting experiences."

*Isa. 2:6 For You have forsaken Your people, the house of Jacob, because they are filled with eastern ways; They are soothsayers like the Philistines, They are pleased with the children of foreigners.

[East (qedem) denotes antiquity or that which is of old as well as the East.]

Thomas Merton is seen as a reliable spiritual guide to spirituality. He wrote,

"The life of contemplation...is the life of the Holy Spirit in our inmost souls.

The whole duty of contemplation is to abandon what is base and trivial in [your] own life, and do all [you] can to conform...to the secret and obscure promptings of the Spirit of God."

3. 1978> Richard Foster wrote >The Celebration of Discipline which launched spiritual formation into mainstream evangelicalism. It has sold more than 2.5 million copies and was selected by Christianity Today as one of the top ten books of the 20th century. It says:

a. To meditate effectively, a person must overcome the obstacles of the devil which include noise, business, and crowds, and find silence through contemplative prayer.

b. "Christian meditation is an attempt to empty the mind in order to fill it" (p. 15).

Fill it with what? In Eastern religions a person empties his mind in order to become one with the universe (or the Cosmic Mind).

In Christian mysticism one empties the mind in order to become one with God.

c. Following detachment is the step of illumination, in which the newly emptied mind and heart is filled with supposed communication from God. "Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center."

d. Shares the practices of the Roman Catholic & Orthodox churches that originated with the Desert Mothers & Fathers -4th Cen. They were ordinary Christians living in solitude in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Arabia who chose to renounce the world in order to deliberately and individually follow God's call. They embraced lives of celibacy, labor, fasting,

prayer and poverty, believing that denouncing material goods and practicing stoic self-discipline would lead to unity with the Divine. Their spiritual practice formed the basis of Western monasticism and greatly influenced both Western and Eastern Christianity.

e. Foster promotes visualization, guided imagery, mantras, silence, walking the labyrinth, channeling the light of Christ, healing of memories, direct experiential communion with God, even out-of-body experience, and Carl Jung's interpretation of dreams.

f. Foster advises, "In your imagination allow your spiritual body, shining with light, to rise out of your physical body. . . . Reassure your body that you will return momentarily. Imagine your spiritual self, alive and vibrant, rising up through the clouds and into the stratosphere. . . . Go deeper and deeper into outer space until there is nothing except the warm presence of the eternal Creator. Do not be disappointed if no words come; like good friends, you are silently enjoying the company of each other" (p 27). This activity bears a striking resemblance to astral projection and an out-of-body experience, both occult practices that are strictly forbidden in Scripture.

g. Foster says Spiritual formation is attainable through the "spiritual disciplines" which are a means of growing in spiritual maturity and depth. It IMPLIES that without the use of these ancient contemplative methods, true spiritual formation is not possible.

4. In 1988, Dallas Willard an American philosopher known for his writings on Christian spiritual formation, wrote *The Spirit of the Disciplines* which reveals how the key to self-transformation resides in the practice of the spiritual disciplines which affirms human life to the fullest. He says, "Spiritual is not just something we ought to be. It is something we are and cannot escape." Dallas Willard: We have a problem today in Evangelical circles. We're not only saved by grace, we're paralyzed by it. I'm Southern Baptist, and we often preach to you for an hour, telling you: you can do nothing to be saved. Then sing to you for forty-five minutes trying to get you to do something to be saved. That's confusing! I hope we can see within God's Word the union of passivity and activity because spiritual formation requires us to take wise steps in accomplishing it. The "old man" will not be put off, and the "new man" put on, unless I do something--and, indeed, unless I do the right things. So the need as we approach the topic of spiritual formation, is to understand as well as we can what is our part and what is God's part, and take care of our part that God may be able to work with us in bringing us to be the kinds of people that we need to be and he wants us to be. If the idea that we must do something to "enable" God to do something bothers you, you have just hit a major barrier on the pathway of spiritual formation. We came to think that, in the language of some Protestants, the Word of God is the only sacrament; that we're saved and transformed by hearing the truths of the Scriptures. David Cunliffe: The transformation of the soul can best be achieved through the contemplative act of meditation and prayer.

5. 1988 > Richard Foster founded *Renovare (Renewal)*: an organization which seeks "to resource, fuel and model and advocate more intentional living and spiritual formation among Christians and those who want a deeper connection with God; To Obtain the "with-God life"

The release of the Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible in 2005 has packaged the mystical thinking of Renovaré scholars into "study notes" for the Bible itself. [Life With God Bible]

- a. Renovaré is unabashedly ecumenical. "Wisdom" is gathered from Catholic, Episcopal, mystic, and Protestant sources alike, with no regard for the serious theological differences.
- b. Renovaré places a heavy emphasis on mysticism to the detriment of solid theology.
- c. Renovaré preys upon the spiritually hungry and points them not to the cross of Christ or God's inerrant Word but to man's traditions and emotional human experience.

Col. 2:8 Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. The wise and discerning Christian will examine carefully all claims of the Renovaré movement and compare each with Scripture. That which contradicts the Word of God must be rejected.

6. Thomas Merton, one of the modern fathers of centering prayer, claims that "the simplest way to come into contact with the living God is to go to one's center and from there pass into God" (Finding Grace at the Center, p. 28).

7. Presently> Spiritual formation is a primary teaching in the emergent church. Brian McLaren, a key leader, has acknowledged that Foster and Willard are considered "key mentors for the emerging church."

a. Brian McLaren > "Godfather" of the emergent church movement.

Voted by Time as one of the 25 most influential evangelical pastors.

b. "We could look at Ghandi's life as an example of self-sacrificial love or Martin Luther King Jr's life. There would be a lot of people we could look at. So wouldn't it be better to just talk about Jesus as ONE AMONG MANY, rather than lift Him up as some extraordinary example. Because by doing that we create, we perpetuate this Christian elitism and exclusivism."

Geri Ungurean: The proper spirituality of the Christian, being sola Scriptura, is being replaced by spiritual mysticism, which can be traced back to the Roman Catholic church.

Acts 20:29-30 For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."

Ken Silva: [Apprising Ministries] "When preachers lose sight of their need to depend on and teach from the Word of God alone, their lofty and contrived ideas land them on a slippery slope which eventually leads to total apostasy."

Gary Gilley (speaker for Biblical Discernment): "The Spiritual Formation Movement has rocked the Church. Ancient disciplines, most often practiced within the monastic movement in the early centuries of Christianity, have been dusted off, repacked, and resubmitted to believers as the means whereby spiritual growth is obtained. There is increasing discussion in Christian literature, books, seminars, etc. Do we, as believers in Sola Scriptura, take our marching orders from the written Word, or do we look to the 'white spaces' in Scripture to determine how we live?"

Belief: All true spiritual growth starts with the preeminent role of God's Word in the lives of His people.

The means of spiritual growth [development] is the subject of much debate.

- Is Scripture alone enough for my spiritual growth?
- What is the Holy Spirit's role in my sanctification?
- Are there activities and disciplines that will stimulate and advance my growth?

Question: What's wrong with taking a more mystical, subjective approach to spiritual growth?

Center For Contemplative Spirituality: "We come from a variety of secular and religious backgrounds. We each seek to enrich our journey through spiritual practice and study of the world's great spiritual traditions. We desire to draw closer to the loving Spirit which pervades all creation and which inspires our compassion for all beings."

Deception Alert: There is absolutely nothing Biblical about such goals.

Studying the world's "spiritual traditions" is an exercise in futility because any spiritual tradition other than that which exalts Christ is falsehood.

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⁹ For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.

¹⁰ And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power:

Truth: One draws closer to God through the path He has ordained > Jesus Christ and the Word.

II Pet 1:3 According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue:

The increasingly popular Spiritual Formation Movement is a "God-ordained process that shapes our entire person so that we take on the character and being of Christ himself.

Properly employed...these disciplines help us attain increasing levels of spiritual maturity so that we respond to our life circumstances with the mind of Christ."

Deception Alert: I Cor. 2:16 For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But We Have The Mind Of Christ.

1. Basic premise: If WE DO certain practices and disciplines, then we can be more like Jesus.
2. The spiritual formation movement is also called, "the silence," "the stillness," "ancient wisdom," "spiritual disciplines," and many others.
3. It is rooted in mysticism and the occult but wrapped in Christian terminology.
4. It is characterized by such things as centering prayer, contemplative prayer, contemplative spirituality, and Christian mysticism.
5. It has to various degrees infiltrated nearly all evangelical denominations.

Premise: Pantheistic (God is all) and panentheistic (God is in all).

1. It is primarily centered on meditation.

Purpose: Use ancient mystical practices to enter an altered state of consciousness [the silence] in order to find one's true self, thus finding God. This true self relates to the belief that man is basically good. Proponents of contemplative prayer teach that all human beings have a divine center and that all, not just born-again believers, should practice contemplative prayer.

UNBIBLICAL VIEW OF MAN'S CONDITION

Spiritual formation teaches: Man possesses innate goodness, but his fallen state of sin is a result of "deprivation" or "spiritual starvation." Thus, the disciplines help to feed, mature and grow man's spirituality. In his Spirit of the Disciplines, Dallas Willard states: The evil that we do in our present condition is a reflection of a weakness caused by spiritual starvation. As St. Augustine so clearly saw, the deranged condition of humankind is not, at bottom, a positive fact, but a deprivation. It is one that results in vast positive evils, of course, yet depravity is no less a horror because it stems from a deficiency, and people are no less responsible for it and its consequences."

Deception Alert: Truth: Rather than having an innate ability for good, Scripture teaches that, due to the Fall, man is innately depraved [Rom. 3:11-18, 23, 5:8; Eph. 2:1] and his heart is deceitfully wicked [Jer. 17:9].

Ray Yungen states in his book, A TIME OF DEPARTING

(How Ancient Mystical Practices Are Uniting Christians With The World's Religions)

It's tough to figure out how to explain the way to identify the beginnings of the Spiritual Formation and the Emergent Church movement when it tiptoes into the church, because *it's more the absence of what should be present than it is a stark, head-on attack.*

"Deception often occurs when there is 99 percent truth and just 1 percent falsehood," according to Yungen. "It only takes a little leaven or white lie to leaven or taint the greater lump, which is truth." The transformation begins.

John MacArthur states in his book, THE TRUTH WAR:

"Rarely are their assaults on the truth open and head-on attacks. Instead, they prefer to work underground, drilling little holes in the foundations of truth itself."

Deception Alert:

1. It is a move away from the truth of God's Word to a mystical form of Christianity.
2. It seeks to lure evangelicals into ancient Catholic and orthodox contemplative practices in order to draw closer to God, experience His presence and hear His voice apart from Scripture. [God speaks to us in His Word.]

Foundational Biblical doctrines are shrugged off as secondary.

1. Methods never found in the Bible as the true means of spiritual growth and of knowing God, are emphasized. You are encouraged to incorporate a wide variety of extra-biblical spiritual practices, such as contemplative prayer, silence, meditation, creative expression, and Christian yoga.
2. Many of the leading voices in the spiritual formation movement stress the need for more intuitive interpretations of spirituality. In order to embrace this mystical form of spirituality, contemplatives are willing to compromise at virtually every turn.

Deception Warning: Any kind of subjective spirituality that draws your focus away from the Lord and His truth can have disastrous results, derailing your spiritual growth and cutting you off from God's plan for your sanctification.