

THE TERMINOLOGY TRAP OF "SPIRITUAL FORMATION"

By Rev. Ken Silva, Southern Baptist pastor-teacher, Nov 6, 2008

"...knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:20-21, ESV)

Physical Training Is Of Some Value, But Godliness Has Value For All Things

Apprising Ministries has brought this up before and here I'll say it again: No one credible writing in the area of Contemplative Spirituality/Mysticism(CSM) is saying that spiritual growth is unnecessary nor are we saying "discipline" is bad thing. Men and women, any of my football players who enjoyed their success on the field the years I was a head coach at the local secular high school will gladly back me in this. The very first talk I would give them along with their parents each season explained what discipline is and its very beneficial role in life.

I would explain that discipline was rooted in teaching and in this case it would help them to become better football players. Each year I would begin by asking them: "Is discipline a bad thing?" The new players would answer, yes; and it was kind of rewarding to watch as the veteran players would immediately begin to explain to the new ones what I had already taught them: "Discipline is good; punishment is bad. If you don't break your discipline there will be no need for anyone to be punished."

The major issue which is going to have to be addressed by the Body of Christ today is terminology like Spiritual Formation (SF) as well as that associated with subsequent “spiritual disciplines,” or practices, said to have come emerging from it. This spurious CSM/SF was allegedly rediscovered by Living Spiritual Teacher and Quaker mystic Richard Foster and then this reimagined “Christian” mysticism was given a pseudo-intellectual veneer by Foster’s friend and spiritual twin SBC minister Dallas Willard, who was once a member of the Quaker church Foster used to pastor.

However the late Roman Catholic monk Thomas Merton, mystic mentor to Richard Foster and longtime practioner of CSM, is in a much better position to tell us where it actually originated than either Foster or Willard. And so we turn here to Merton’s book *Spiritual Direction & Meditation*. In my personal copy of his book Thomas Merton, the apostate (at best) whom Foster says shared “priceless wisdom for all Christians who long to go deeper in the spiritual life,” informs us why spiritual directors — who taught so-called spiritual formation — would become necessary in the first place.

Merton tells us that the:

original, primitive meaning of spiritual direction suggests a particular need connected with a special ascetic task, a peculiar vocation for which a professional formation is required. In other words, spiritual direction is a monastic concept. It is a practice which was unnecessary until men withdrew from the Christian community in order to live as solitaries in the desert.

For the ordinary member in the primitive Christian community there was no particular need of personal direction in the professional sense. The bishop, the living and visible representative of the apostle who had founded the local Church, spoke for Christ and the apostles, and, helped by the presbyters, took care of all the spiritual needs of his flock.

(11, emphasis mine)

You should now be able to see that this is already in contradiction to what Jesus told His Christians we must be doing — “As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). So if today’s perpetrators of this reformed Romanism of CSM/SF within evangelicalism e.g. like Emerging Church pastor Rob Bell can make the case that Christ Jesus—and His Apostles—spent their lives living “as solitaries” in secluded caves then we have indeed rediscovered “ancient/future” Christianity; but they can’t.

As a matter of fact my friend Bob DeWaay, pastor of Twin City Fellowship who—just as I do—has personal experience with charismatic Pentecostalism, pointed out the problem of this rebirth of asceticism-lite within Protestantism in his scholarly article *Colossian Heresy, Part 2: How Colossians Warns Against Spiritual Elitism and False Spiritual Warfare Teachings*. DeWaay is dead on target when he says, “part of the problem in Colossae was asceticism. The idea is that self-denial can create a higher level spiritual situation.”

DeWaay then explains that:

Today these matters still “appear” to be pious and exemplary. This version of elitism will be around until Christ returns. It has never disappeared in church history. There are always those who can be convinced that if they have stricter rules, dietary laws, or some other version or rigorous self-denial, they can get closer to God... We need not restrict Paul’s warning to any particular kind of legalism or asceticism. It applies to any that arise at any time in history from any source... One cannot escape the hostile powers, better his fate or destiny, or get closer to God by the means of following man-made rules. The idea is that one can “ascend” to a higher place by such practices... (Online source)

Or in the case of the “man-made rules” of CSM, as I showed you in “Heaven, We Have A Problem!”, even evangelicals such as respected apologist J.P. Moreland will now tell you that CSM is about “the development of sensitivity to the inner affective movements of the soul.” In fact in his book Kingdom Triangle it becomes patently obvious that Moreland’s personally involved in this type of spurious CSM when he praises the supposed great “contributions and achievements” of “the Desert Fathers to Henry Nouwen and Richard Foster.”

As one who has been studying these issues for a couple of years now from primary sources I have purchased personally I can tell you that Moreland speaks the jargon of CSM well as he enlightens us in words, which could have been written by Thomas Merton himself:

The empty self is now as epidemic in America (and much of Western culture) and...the empty self undermines growth as a disciple. The empty self is actually a ubiquitous incarnation of what is more broadly called the false self. Roughly, the false self is the self we present to others, perhaps unconsciously, in order to make the world safe for us,...the false self is a tangled web of internal tapes...the true self is the person we really are,... Our practice of discipleship and spiritual formation must be done with a clear view of the empty self... (141)

However, this type of psycho-babble is also quite reminiscent of Norman Vincernt Peale disciple Robert Schuller as well and is at its core a repudiation of total depravity bordering on semi-pelagianism; and being charitable, if not outright pelagianism. And since the focus here isn’t on this spiritually sick love of self I will simply refer you to The Real Truth About Your “True Self”. For now we’ll begin to wrap this up as DeWaay goes on to inform us:

Given the spiritual climate of Ephesus and Colossae, Paul is likely countering any idea that Christians are still under the sway of the stoicheia

["elementary principles"]. People living in convents and taking "oaths of poverty" cannot thereby get one iota closer to God if they even know Him at all. Early in church history, after Constantine popularized Christianity, people fled into the desert to seek escape from the corrupting influences they saw around them. However, what they found was that the old sinful self came out there with them. Paul said that however pious such strict religious practices may seem, they "are of no value against fleshly indulgence."

Very early in my Christian life I was taken in by this kind of teaching. I tried my very hardest to be the best Christian I could. I was either fasting or feeling guilty about not fasting. I was trying to force myself to pray more and more, day and night. Anything that seemed desirable, I felt the need to give up. I loved football and tried so very hard to give up watching it and not let any thoughts about football teams enter my mind. I gave up all the music I liked. I gave up all TV. I labored to be the best "Christian" in Bible college. The whole sad experiment ended in dismal failure. I was trying to get closer to God and be a great man of God.

What actually happened was that after seven months of this, I became so angry and judgmental of all the "lesser" Christians around me (whom I called "carnal" simply for going about normal life) that I was actually robbed of the basic fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, etc. All my "higher" level Christian living turned out to be as "carnal" as any of those I looked upon as lesser. God kindly brought me back to His grace and mercy, where there is everlasting joy. (Online source)

In closing, I'll give you one quick example about what's at stake here. We take Lectio Divina (means "sacred reading"), which is becoming all the rage as a neo-pietism spreads through evangelicalism from these artificial "spiritual disciplines" Foster supposedly rediscovered. Um, right; the Lord's Reformers missed these disciplines rooted in the asceticism and mysticism practiced by Counter Reformation figures like Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa of Avila so God then had to choose an ecumenical non-Protestant Quaker mystic to restore them to the Church in 1978. Yeah, nothing cult-like there.

Apostate Roman Catholic Practices Cannot Be Redeemed By Protestants

But things like Lectio Divina cannot be made “safe” because they didn’t originate with Protestants; we don’t get to then redefine these practices of apostate Roman Catholicism. Yet this is exactly what is causing such a huge problem in the Body of Christ right now as men like Donald Whitney mean well while they labor to make it appear as if some of these monastic practices were ever part of what Dr. Walter Martin (1928-1989) so often called “the historic orthodox Christian faith” to begin with. As further illustration of what I mean we take the following from well-respected Reformed blogger Tim Challies.

This comes from Challies’ review of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*:

And so this book is an examination of spiritual disciplines – disciplines provided by God which are designed to help us grow in godliness, allowing us to become more and more conformed to the image of Christ. The disciplines Whitney writes about are:

- * Bible intake
- * Prayer
- * Worship
- * Evangelism
- * Serving
- * Stewardship

- * Fasting
- * Silence and solitude
- * Journalling
- * Learning

The book is prefaced with an examination of the reason for disciplining ourselves in the spiritual disciplines and Whitney teaches here that we are to do all things for God's glory. Because God requires each of these disciplines of us, there is danger in neglecting any of them. (Online source, emphasis mine)

Can anyone point to a specific list of these spiritual disciplines within the Bible; no. And "God requires" e.g. journaling in Scripture; where? We could now just as easily ask: Who made Donald Whitney a law-giver; we're not to let any man act as our judge. So suppose I say to Whitney: "Go jump in the lake—I refuse to practice the existential and highly subjective practice of journaling and you have no authority to command me to do so or to then suggest that I'm not properly 'disciplined' if I don't." Can you see how this actually ends up a transgression of Sola Scriptura; and worse, may even take us back to what DeWaay is talking about above.

Now let me be crystal clear here: In no way do I think Donald Whitney teaches CSM ala Foster/Willard et al; he is a brother in the Lord, a nice man, and does attempt to distance himself from the heretical Foster. But that said, in my firsthand study of books and materials by teachers of CSM like Foster and Willard—whose far-reaching influence within evangelicalism completely dwarfs that of Whitney—I can see that their version of spiritual disciplines is what the vast majority of people are thinking of when SF is discussed. Men and women, their materials have been used in seminaries for years in a positive fashion and are required reading in virtually every evangelical Protestant SF course, which itself then touches on many areas of ministerial studies.

I have spoken of The Cult Of Guru Richard Foster for very good reason; if he says something in the spiritual arena it is swallowed, you'd do well to think about that. And J.P. Moreland speaks the sad truth when he shows you just how far off the rails from Sola Scriptura mainstream evangelicalism is right now when he writes in Kingdom Triangle:

If I were going to launch out in this area [of spiritual formation]... I would invest myself in absorbing... Dallas Willard's *Renovation of the Heart*... Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* has earned the title of a contemporary classic...[and] Henri Nouwen's *The Way of the Heart* is a must read. (157)

1) You need to understand that Willard's corrupt contemplative teachings mirror those of Foster; and 2) the practice of CSM led Nouwen, another Roman Catholic priest/monk, to end up a universalist. From my own copy of his book *Sabbatical Journey*:

Today I personally believe that Jesus came to open the door to God's house, all human beings can walk through that door, whether they know about Jesus or not. Today I see it as my call to help every person claim his or her way to God. (51)

And still that didn't stop Ravi Zacharias, a revered evangelical apologist, from emphatically declaring, "One of the greatest saints of recent memory was Henri Nouwen." Watch for yourself in Ravi Zacharias Answers "Can A Person Live A Sincere Christian Life As A Homosexual?" But with all of these people using the same terminology, albeit with slightly different meanings, we're then led to what you'll see discussed in *Managing Editor for Biola Magazine Confirms Contemplative Spirituality/Mysticism at Biola*.

There 25 year-old Brett McCracken gives us his eyewitness testimony concerning this “Protestant” university where:

we dare to introduce students to ancient methods of contemplative, meditative prayer. We dare to engage the students in Lectio Divina, an ancient method inherited from the Desert Fathers of deeply reading and meditating upon a scripture. It’s not new-agey or mystical; it’s simple, quiet, and meaningful. The bible takes center stage. What is wrong with that? Evidently these critics of Biola are worried that by having an entire chapel service of silent meditation,... (Online source)

No; instead, one’s subjective experience and untrustworthy feelings about the text of the Bible “takes center stage.” Now from reading Whitney’s works, and from talking with people who know him personally, I understand that when he speaks e.g. about contemplation and meditation Whitney does so with a meaning consistent with that of, say, the Puritans i.e. consciously dwelling upon what God has said in Scripture. Personally I would say Whitney is speaking about means of grace such as we see in Acts 2:42 — They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

In other words “contemplation” to Whitney appears to be the completely valid expression of thinking deeply about what God is saying in a given passage of the Bible, which is not of private interpretation. However, the Roman Catholic/Foster-Willard approach ends up as an attempt to go within and “feel” what God is saying to “me” in Scripture. And so, as we *ahem* meditate further upon this you should now be able to see that this is actually an existential, neo-orthodox approach to Scripture, which first crept into neo-evangelicalism ala Billy Graham almost from its inception and would then be spread rapidly throughout the Body of Christ by its Christianity Today magazine.

And may the Lord have mercy upon us because we are only now beginning to pay the price of years of Bible studies where one goes around the room asking: “What does this verse mean to you; what does it mean to your-self?”