

DOCTRINE AND DEVOTION: A REUNION DEVOUTLY TO BE DESIRED

By Donald S. Whitney

I was the guest preacher for a few days at a church on the West Coast recently, and the pastor took me sightseeing. Our longest stop on this warm autumn day was the bookstore of one of the largest and best-known evangelical seminaries in the country. Since we didn't have the luxury of half-a-day or more to browse, I headed straight for the section on spirituality and Christian living (I teach the courses in this field at the seminary where I'm a professor). I was delighted to find eight entire bookcases devoted to the subject. Shelf by shelf, however, my delight evaporated into disbelief, then discouragement. Seven of the eight bookcases were crammed with volumes dubiously connected with biblical and evangelical Christianity. Most were written by scholars or churchmen with impressive academic credentials, but who would not sincerely subscribe to one of the established confessions of faith found in historic Christian orthodoxy. These books championed things such as the pursuit of mystical experiences, adopting New Age meditation methods, blending Buddhist thought and devotion with Christianity, incorporating Native American spirituality into the church, harmonizing karma with the Bible, and to one degree or another, showing sympathy with Hinduism, shamanism, paganism, and eco-spirituality. The lesson: errors in theology tend to breed errors in spirituality.

Granted, a well-stocked seminary bookstore or library may offer numerous texts outside its own tradition for purposes of research, comparison, or refutation. What troubled me was the presence of *so many* books *so far* from historic evangelical moorings, especially in comparison to the small percentage of titles from recognized and proven evangelical writers. Why so many Catholics, mystics, New Agers, Quakers, Hindus, and Buddhists, and why so little from the likes of Bunyan, Edwards, Müller, and other Reformation-heritage evangelicals?

I started reading in the area of Christian spirituality in the mid-1970s. I have observed through the years a steady increase in the number of books by writers *from the evangelical mainstream* whose work betrays the influence of men and women whose spirituality is not rooted in an evangelical understanding of God's revelation. They quote extensively those who speak more of direct experiences with God than Scripture-inaugurated ones. When they discuss prayer it doesn't sound at all like the prayers of the New Testament, but rather mystical encounters. Their meditation techniques sometimes remind you more of relaxation methods or eastern religions than the Bible. This kind of spiritual counsel is found not only in obscure books from a seminary far away, but in best-sellers at your local Christian bookstore. Many are probably in your own library or that of your church. They are penned by people whose names are common to ministers and laypeople alike.

Nowadays I almost never pick up a book by an evangelical on Christian spirituality that doesn't rely heavily on Catholic and other non-evangelical sources. I have on my desk at the moment a new book on the Christian spiritual disciplines. It is written by one of the pastors of one of the ten largest churches on the continent. The list of endorsers on the back jacket reads like a Who's Who of contemporary evangelical leaders. By my count there are, except for Scripture citations, one hundred fifty-two footnotes in the book where others are quoted. Of these, approximately one hundred eight references are from presumably Christian sources. Only half this number are from writers who would be considered evangelical, even in the most generous definition of the term. Twenty percent of the religious quotations are from Catholic sources. Almost one in eight are from Quakers. This book is not an exception, rather it is typical of books on spirituality from evangelical writers and publishers today. True, this pastor/author doesn't quote from the more outrageous books I saw at the seminary. In fact, I'm very confident he would speak adamantly against most everything I oppose in them. So would almost all evangelicals. But he does, as do many other evangelicals, lean frequently upon sources that differ primarily in *degree*, and not necessarily in kind, from the most hazardous writers on spirituality. If errors in theology tend to breed errors in spirituality, and evangelicals are learning their spirituality from teachers with an aberrant theology, then we have a serious problem.

As the rest of this book makes plain, despite all her real and apparent successes, these are not the best days of the Church. Part of the contemporary crisis in evangelicalism is the frequent separation of a couple married in Scripture.

Who is this couple? They are devotion and doctrine, the Christian life and the Christian mind, spirituality and theology. But it's as though the Church has come to believe that the Bible declares, "Choose you this day which you will serve—devotion *or* doctrine." In reality it says, "Watch your life *and* your doctrine closely" (1 Timothy 4:16, NIV, emphasis added). One of the great needs of the Church in every age, but especially today, is a spirituality that is theological and evangelical, as well as an evangelical theology that is spiritual.

A SPIRITUALITY THAT'S THEOLOGICAL AND EVANGELICAL

Each person's spiritual practices are, of course, informed and shaped by his theology. In one sense then, there is no such thing as a spirituality that is not theological. A man or woman prays (or doesn't), for example, on the basis of what he or she believes about God and prayer. Furthermore, the *way* that man or woman prays—reciting Hail Marys, following the A-C-T-S or some other formula, devoting extensive time to praise or the confession of sin, praying through a passage of Scripture, viewing prayer as either primarily supplication or contemplation—reflects that person's theology, though he or she may have never perceived the relationship between belief and prayer.

I contend that we should be more *consciously* theological in our spirituality, striving for clear, overt connections between our doctrine and our devotion. Certain forms of prayer should be rejected and others practiced, not merely because of church tradition or novelty or how they make us feel, but as a direct result of what we believe the Bible teaches. Otherwise our spirituality will be shaped primarily by the theology of others, namely those whose practices we adopt. And while their spiritual ways and methods may appeal to us, what if they are the fruit of heterodox or erroneous theology? The truth is, many of today's evangelical writers unwittingly usher us to these errors when they say that some of the best models and teachers of Christian spirituality are also the very ones who deny evangelical beliefs.

I am also pleading for evangelicals to practice a distinctly evangelical spirituality. In his *The Crisis of Piety*, Donald G. Bloesch observed, "In the history of the Christian church two basic types of spirituality can be discerned, the mystical and the evangelical."¹ When, as here, most of Christendom is divided into two enormous groups, it's obvious that precise definitions will be impossible. Broadly speaking, mystical spirituality has been more associated with Catholic, Orthodox, and Quaker streams of spiritual thought while evangelical spirituality has belonged to the Protestant tradition and/or those groups who have espoused evangelical beliefs (as described elsewhere in this volume).

This is not to say that mystical spirituality and evangelical spirituality don't have many points in common, for they do. The boundary line between them is not always a high, demarcating wall, but sometimes a wide plain of mutually held territory where you are in one as much as the other. In recent decades, however, evangelicals have increasingly welcomed representatives from the mystical and unorthodox side, inviting them to teach in and even govern certain "spiritual" areas. Despite the confidence of evangelicals that this mystical influence can be confined to supposedly well-marked spiritual enclaves within a person's life, in reality it is hard to allow such infiltration without compromising the borders of doctrinal protection. Mystics are what they are and do what they do because of what they believe. It is virtually impossible to assimilate much of their spirituality without giving ground to the theology that permeates it. The result is that the distinctives of evangelicalism become blurred, and, as Arthur Johnson forewarns in his book on the dangers of mysticism, "If this challenge [of mysticism] is not successfully met evangelicalism will cease to be evangelical."²

So what is mysticism? Who are these mystics whose quotations and ideas and methods fill evangelical books on spirituality? As I've indicated, to comprehensively define mysticism is impossible. It has existed for millennia and has manifold connotations. Some hear the term and think of the occult, while others apply it only to mysterious or ecstatic spiritual experiences. Some associate mysticism with eastern religions or secret societies. Unlike these uses of the term, the mystics quoted so deferentially by evangelicals historically are considered *Christian* mystics. An evangelical writer with more sympathies than I to mysticism has characterized it this way: "Christian mysticism seeks to describe an experienced, direct, nonabstract, unmediated, loving knowledge of God, a knowing or seeing so direct as to be called union with God."³ With this understanding, I want to comment on four of the dangers of mysticism.

THE DANGERS OF MYSTICISM

1. Mysticism tends to overemphasize direct, subjective experiences with God rather than experiences rooted in and interpreted by Scripture and reason.

In addition to the reference to "direct" experiences with God in the definition above, notice the same terminology used by Michael Cox in his *Handbook of Christian Spirituality*. A proponent of mysticism, he writes of "the strict and generally accepted definition of mysticism—that is—the direct personal experience of Ultimate Reality, of God."⁴ Evelyn Underhill, whose book *The Mystics of the Church* is a standard text on the subject by a devotee, also characterizes mysticism as finding God "through the soul's secret and direct experience."⁵ While mysticism can't be reduced to a single and identical experience, "direct experiences with God" typify it as much as anything. For this reason I will devote more space to this danger than to the others.

The direct experiences with God encouraged by mystics are distinguished from those which the Holy Spirit mediates through Scripture. Rather than beginning with a specific passage of God's revelation of Himself and a reasoned understanding of and reflection upon that, mystics often find greater depth and spiritual riches in meditative experiences which spring from a sanctified imagination. In spiritual matters, the intuitive experience begins to take priority over the cognitive one. The inevitable result of this kind of spirituality is that the importance of the Bible is to some degree depreciated, despite assurances to the contrary.

This is not to say that believers do not have "direct" experiences with God the Holy Spirit. Nor am I saying that there is no use for God's gift of the imagination in prayer and meditation. Further, I am not suggesting that every valid experience with God must start with a time of Bible reading. I believe that every Christian has moments every day when the Holy Spirit spontaneously prompts him or her with thoughts of God or the things of God. It is every believer's privilege to improve such moments by dwelling on these Spirit-initiated thoughts, and this may lead to profound encounters with the Lord. Beyond this, even things such as a glorious sunset, the sparkling radiance of the stars, and the free laughter of children are often the means of transporting us directly to experiences of fellowship with Him. And sometimes the Lord sovereignly manifests a sense of His presence in ways that are almost atmospheric. Countless accounts from church history bear witness to the nearly tangible presence of the Spirit of God during times of true revival. Haven't you had occasions in both public and private worship when you have had an unusual spiritual awareness that "the Lord is here"?

Yes, direct experiences with God are valid, but what is *normative*? Evangelicals with a consciously theological spirituality would assert that encounters with God that begin with *Scripture* should have the central place in our spiritual experiences. Scripture-induced experiences with God should be the norm in our spirituality, not the exception, and the standard by which all other spiritual experiences are evaluated.

Try as we might, our spiritual life does not begin by attempting to experience God in some direct way, but by God working toward us through Scripture. The apostle Paul put it this way: "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21). The evangelistic method of Jesus and the apostles was not to urge people to seek direct experiences with God, instead they went about preaching and teaching the Scriptures (see, for instance, Mark 1:14-15). Then once we have spiritual life, Jesus did not say that we live by direct mystical experience with God, but rather we "live, . . . on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). And why is it that "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness"? It is "*so that* the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17, emphasis added). That includes the "good work" of growing in the knowledge of God and likeness to Christ.

So in Scripture the normative method of meeting God is *through Scripture*. This is true not just because of the great wisdom in the Bible or the intellectual stimulation we gain from deep thought on it, but because by the Holy Spirit we *experience* Christ through the Scriptures (see John 5:39). The inspired words do not merely inform us, rather "the word of God is living and active" (Hebrews 4:12). The truths inflame our minds and burn in our hearts, but not just as the reading of Shakespeare or Churchill's Battle of Britain speeches might. The Spirit of God works through the

words of God to grow us in the new life He's given us. We hear God speaking through them to us in ways that nourish us, encourage us, and give us hope unlike no mortal can. We read, say, of "Christ, who is our life" in Colossians 3:4, and meditating on that, our hearts turn to Christ as flowers to the sun. Our souls are refreshed by Him. Our hearts are flooded with joy, our lips overflow with thanksgiving and adoration. Freshly kindled is our desire to live for Him and speak of Him. This is the sort of spiritual experience we need, and it comes when we seek Him through the way He has revealed Himself to us, that is, through Scripture. This is spirituality rooted in theology—first the revelation of God, then the response of the spirit. The heart is ignited by the flame of truth burning through the mind.

Suppose I decided to pursue a more mystical method. I want to spend some time in meditation, and, being a good evangelical, I do some Bible reading first, maybe even reading Colossians chapter three before I begin to meditate. But instead of meditating on what the Bible says about Christ in Colossians 3:4, however, I decide simply that I want to meditate on Christ and experience Him directly. Is this possible? Certainly. Is this ever valid? Yes. One more question, though. What will guide my meditation? I can't meditate on Christ unless I know who He is and what He is like. That information must come from my mind, and my mind must have acquired it from the Bible. Otherwise my meditation is feeling in the dark of my imagination, looking for a "Christ" about which I know nothing. In fact, I may have a mystical experience that is out of this world, and believe that I've encountered Christ. But how will I know what or whom I've encountered? By what standard will I interpret and understand the experience? We are ultimately cast back upon Scripture and Spirit-illuminated reason, not just a sanctified imagination.

Perhaps the most influential book on spirituality in the twentieth century is Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*. The first (1978) edition of his work was criticized because of his overly mystical approach in certain areas, particularly meditation. To his credit, Foster responded in the revised edition by removing his more controversial meditation techniques involving the imagination. In their place he included new material on "Sanctifying the Imagination." He did not suggest detailed methods this time, rather he contrasted an active use of the imagination in meditation with "a merely cerebral approach"⁶ I, too, am opposed to a "merely cerebral approach," and I think the giants of historical evangelical spirituality would rise up in chorus with me.

I would also insist that to give primacy to reason over the imagination in a spiritual experience is not to have "a merely cerebral approach." Whatever role the imagination plays, it must be informed by Scripture and guided by reason. A theological and evangelical spirituality is rational before it is emotional. God has made us in such a way that we are to be Spirit-filled, Scripture-saturated people steering by reason, with imagination and emotion, crucial as they are, filling supportive, but not directive roles. We want to be rational, yet not excessively so as to be *rationalistic* on the one hand, nor led by imaginative speculation on the other. This is true in our experiences with God as it is in all our other daily activities and responsibilities.

Foster's Quaker pen has done much good, but I know of no other writer who has so successfully introduced evangelicals to mystical writers. I am concerned when I read quotations like this one he cites from the seventeenth century French mystic, Madame Jeanne Guyon: "May I hasten to say that the kind of prayer I am speaking of is not a prayer that comes from your mind. It is a prayer that begins in the heart. . . . Prayer offered to the Lord from your mind simply would not be adequate. Why? Because your mind is very limited. The mind can pay attention to only one thing at a time. Prayer that comes out of the heart is not interrupted by thinking!"⁷ Is this the way Jesus taught us to pray? Does the New Testament teach that there is "prayer that comes from your mind" and that it is "inadequate" when compared to a completely different kind of prayer, "heart prayer"? Doubtless one may speak words in prayer that are not heartfelt or sincere, but that's not the same as claiming that the heart can communicate directly with God and the mind know nothing about it. How do you know when your heart is praying? How do you know that what your heart is doing is praying and not something else? Again, we cannot accept these mystical distinctions, as devout as they sound, and we must hold fast to the priority of the Christian mind.

Has some of this sounded a bit esoteric to you? Are you unconvinced of the influence of mysticism in mainstream evangelical life? True, you may never find yourself in the same pew with a monkish-looking person in a hooded robe, dressed as you might imagine some medieval mystic would. But you probably can see mysticism at your church, albeit wearing modern clothing. A common way you'll see mysticism expressed today is in the desire of some to minimize preaching in order to pursue "more dramatic" experiences with God. Apparently they think that

the experiences they seek are *more* the work of the Holy Spirit than His life-giving work through the proclamation of Scripture.

Another evidence of mysticism may occur when a woman uses the Bible primarily for daily inspirational thoughts, or when a man views it mainly as a collection of principles for successful living, loving, working, or parenting. Even the familiar evangelical distinction between "head knowledge" and "heart knowledge" is a reflection of distinctives emphasized in mysticism. As we have seen, use of this terminology implies that you can "know" something in your heart without any conscious or subconscious involvement of your mind. It's true that you can have the knowledge of something, such as the work of Christ, without believing it. You can even believe all the Bible says about Jesus is factually true without committing yourself to Him. But this is quite different from saying you have a mystical faculty to perceive truth about Jesus that bypasses the mind.

And as I've said, if you really want proof of mysticism's penetration into evangelicalism, pick up a book on spirituality or the spiritual disciplines. Look for the quotations by Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, John Ruysbroeck, Julian of Norwich, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Francis de Sales, George Fox, Madame Guyon, Francois Fenelon, John Woolman, Thomas Merton, etc.

In contrast to the *modus operandi* of many mystics, one of the driving principles of the Protestant Reformation was *sola Scriptura*, that is, Scripture alone is the final authority. This was set against the claim of the Roman clergy that the collective wisdom and experience of the church was equal in authority with Scripture. While most evangelicals would reject Rome's claim, they affirm it in practice when they seek for experiences with God which are self-generated, self-interpreted, and therefore imply that the Bible is at best supplemental to the experience. A spirituality descended from the Reformation maintains that the only infallible guide to any spiritual experience is in the inspired Word written.

One of the godliest and most powerful preachers of the twentieth century was Martyn Lloyd-Jones of London. No stranger to deep experiences with God, he proposed,

Let us imagine I follow the mystic way. I begin to have experiences; I think God is speaking to me; how do I know it is God who is speaking to me? How can I know I am not speaking to man; how can I be sure that I am not the victim of hallucinations, since this has happened to many of the mystics? If I believe in mysticism as such without the Bible, how do I test my experiences? How do I prove the Scriptures; how do I know I am not perhaps being deluded by Satan as an angel of light in order to keep me from the true and living God? I have no standard. . . . 'Very well,' says someone, 'if that is your criticism of mysticism, what is the evangelical way in order that I may come to this knowledge and fellowship with God?' It is quite simple, and it is this: It always starts with the Scriptures; it says that the Scriptures are my only authority and final standard with regard to these matters, with regard to a knowledge of God. The evangelical doctrine tells me not to look into myself but to look into the Word of God; not to examine myself, but to look at the revelation that has been given to me. It tells me that God can only be known in His own way, the way which has been revealed in the Scriptures themselves."⁸

I was discussing my concerns about mysticism with Minneapolis pastor/scholar/author, John Piper. After telling him about my disturbing experience in the West Coast seminary bookstore I asked, "Where do we draw the line? At what point can we objectively say that a person goes too far in seeking an experience with God?"

Piper answered, "When he closes his Bible."

Sola scriptura.

2. Mysticism tends to assume too much of man's natural condition.

Every definition of mysticism that I've found, including those listed above, seems to assume all people have a natural capacity to experience God. Similarly, Catholic mystics are part of a religious environment that assures people that they have the power to combine their efforts with God's grace in matters of salvation. Both positions are categorically rejected by evangelicals. Mystics seldom write from the position that justification by the grace of God alone through faith alone in Christ alone is a prerequisite for communion with God. For that matter, Catholic mystics develop their spirituality in a tradition which officially rejects this doctrine. Bloesch protests that evangelicals would "be surprised at the strong defense of free grace that we find among many of these people."⁹ Of the five he cites as evidence, two lived prior to the Reformation debate on this matter. Of the small minority of Catholic mystics who might be shown to trust in Christ alone without any mixture of their works for salvation, they would be anomalies, holding to their positions in contradiction to the established dogma of their own church.

Notice the assumption of man's innate spiritual abilities in these examples: The widely quoted Meister Eckhart (c.1260-1327) for example, spoke of the divine "spark" in every soul, a spark "that is indistinguishable from God Himself."¹⁰ Matthew Cox, a Catholic who has written on Eckhart, says of this soul spark, "Here the presumption is that God is already within the soul, which equates with the Hindu conception of Brahman the universal deity and Atman, the eternal deity within each individual soul."¹¹ George Fox, the father of Quakerism and patron saint of Quaker spirituality, believed he was given a divine revelation from God that a divine Light shone in every person which they could follow to salvation. "This," says a note in *The Journal of George Fox*, "is the central teaching of George Fox. Everything else comes out of this elemental truth."¹² Fox believed he "was commanded to turn people to that inward Light, Spirit, and Grace, by which all might know their salvation and their way to God; even that Divine Spirit which would lead them into all truth, and which I infallibly knew would never deceive any."¹³ In *Christian Mysticism*, which Cox calls "one of the great books of Christian mysticism," W. R. Inge, says, "The Divine spark already shines within us, . . ."¹⁵

Mysticism reflects this optimism about the human condition by its frequent use of words such as "ladder," "ascent," "climbing," etc., which speak of self-effort. This is also assumed in the traditional three stages of mystical progress. As Cox explains: "Classically, the Mystic Way—the ladder of perfection or *scala perfectionis*—has been divided into three stages: The Purgative Life, the Illuminative Life and the unitive or Contemplative Life."¹⁶ Some contemporary writers see no difficulty in modifying this approach to fit evangelical spirituality.¹⁷ While passages supporting the biblical experiences of confession and repentance, illumination, and meditation abound, nowhere do we find these given as stages of the Christian life. In contrast, when evangelical theology has spoken of stages in the Christian experience it has been in terms of the biblical categories of justification, sanctification, and glorification.

The Bible does not speak of any "divine spark" of life, but rather that man's natural condition is "you were dead in your trespasses and sins, . . . and were by nature children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:1, 5). Furthermore, "a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Corinthians 2:16). That's why, contrary to what many mystics purport, "There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God" (Romans 3:11), until, by grace, the Holy Spirit begins to work through the Gospel to bring a person to Christ.

Scripture is clear that communion with God does not come through some mystical effort at ascending to God, or descending deep within oneself to find God, but through hearing and believing the Word of God: "But the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows: 'Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down), or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart'—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching" (Romans 10:6-8).

3. Mysticism tends to misunderstand the purpose of the work of Jesus Christ.

The definition of Christian mysticism at the beginning of this section spoke of it as an experience that is "unmediated," in other words, without mediator between the mystic and God. While the mystic would confess that Jesus is God, terms such as "unmediated" imply no dependence upon Christ to make the experience possible. Not that Christ is ignored, for some He is all their focus. Underhill classifies mystics as either "theocentric" or "Christocentric." But even the "Christocentric" ones, according to Underhill, tend to view "the Risen and Exalted

Christ" as "Master, Companion, and Helper of the soul." She refers to Jesus as the "Founder" of Christianity and reports that He "is to His closest followers not merely a prophet, pattern of conduct, or Divine figure revealed in the historic past, but the object here and now of an experienced communion of the most vivid kind."¹⁸ While Christ is all these things, there is no emphasis on Him as Redeemer, which is His most important work. He is mentioned as "Risen and Exalted," not primarily "because of our justification" (Romans 4:25) as the Scripture emphasizes, but for other reasons.

After broad exposure to the mystics, Donald Bloesch concludes, "Christian mystics are inclined to speak of Jesus more as the exemplar of piety than as the Saviour from sin."¹⁹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones agrees: "The danger of mysticism is to concentrate so much on the Lord's work *in* us that it forgets the Lord's work *for* us. In other words, it is so concerned about this immediate work upon the soul that it quite forgets the preliminary work that had to be done before anything could be done upon the soul."²⁰ If, through repentance and faith in the life and death of Christ, a person has not experienced the benefits of this "preliminary work," no mystical experience will be of any benefit beyond the pleasure of the moment. What is "of first importance" wrote Paul, is nothing else but "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3). Spiritual communion with God is impossible until a person comes in faith to Christ for access to the Father. No amount of "spirituality" can bring anyone to God, but only the work of Him who said, "no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6).

Lloyd-Jones' warning of the mystics' view of Christ is even more bold:

"Indeed, I do not hesitate to go further and say that mysticism, as a whole, even tends to make our Lord Himself unnecessary. That is a very serious statement, but I am prepared to substantiate it. There have been people who have been mystical and who claim that their souls have immediate access to God. They say that just as they are, they have but to relax and let go and let God speak to them and He will do so; they do not mention the Lord Jesus Christ."²¹

As there are so many mystics and with such diversity among them, Lloyd-Jones' comments wouldn't apply universally. Yet evangelicals who read the mystics, or read those who celebrate them, should not seek for "unmediated" experiences with God, "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5).

4. Mysticism tends to overemphasize the introspective, individual, and detached elements of spirituality to the detriment of the outward, corporate, and everyday aspects of the Christian life.

As always, it's possible to over-generalize with mystics, just as it is with evangelicals or any other large group. Numerous mystics were not isolationists. Eckhart, Francis, Catherine of Genoa, and Catherine of Siena are outstanding examples. Still, even an admirer of the mystics like Margaret Furse admitted, "Asceticism seems to be the ever-present companion of mysticism."²² Sometimes it is objected that mystics were not disconnected individuals, but usually were members of monastic communities. But even this is an admission that, unlike the spirituality of the Reformers and the Puritans, mystical spirituality was configured in the cloister and not the everyday world of most Christians.

"The emphasis upon detachment and separation," opines Bloesch,

accounts for the glorification of celibacy in mystical religion and the disparagement of marriage. Some mystics, such as Nicolaus of Flue, left their wives and children in order to cultivate the interior life of devotion. Angela of Folino even prayed for the death of her family so that she might be free to give her life wholly to God. John Cassian said that is impossible for married people to reach the heights of contemplation.²³

The same apostle who affirmed "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27) also declared "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). The biblical Christian will have a multidirectional orientation: both selfward and Godward, inward and outward, to himself and to others, including his family, his church, his neighbor, and his world. This is the way of Christ.

This means that believers won't wrap themselves in a spiritual cocoon and separate from all organized bodies of believers. Some want to become virtual evangelical monks, poring over mystical writings in their home monastery, disdaining the "unspiritual" people down at the church. This is neither biblical nor evangelical.

More broadly, this means that evangelicals won't isolate themselves in their Christian village to practice their spirituality. As Alister McGrath wrote in *Spirituality in an Age of Change*: "Just as the Reformers rejected a retreat to the monasteries, so their modern heirs must reject a retreat into the narrow withdrawn confines of Christian subculture. The world at its worst needs Christians at their best."²⁴

PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR DOCTRINE

The same day I visited the seminary bookstore, I perused the shelves of a sizable Christian bookstore on the campus of one of America's most famous churches. While there were plenty of books on practical Christian living by popular evangelical authors, serious theological works were almost as scarce as books advocating atheism. Why were the shelves so fat with pragmatic books on dieting, prayer, finances, and sports figures, and so lean of theological works from Luther and Calvin, or pastor/scholars like the seventeenth-century Puritans or the twentieth-century's Martyn Lloyd-Jones?

Remember the command of 1 Timothy 4:16, "Watch your life and your doctrine closely." Our spirituality goes arm in arm with our theology. One of the reasons why many evangelicals who write on spirituality esteem the mystics so highly is because they have read the Reformers, the Puritans, and doctrinal preachers like Lloyd-Jones so comparatively little.

C. S. Lewis once wrote of the benefit he had received from mystical books such as *On the Imitation of Christ*, *Scale of Perfection*, and *Revelations*. He refers to them as books of devotion. (Let me reiterate that there is a mixture of much devotional good in many of these volumes.) Then he added, "For my part, I tend to find the doctrinal books often more helpful in devotion than the devotional books, and I rather suspect that the same experience may await many others. I believe that many . . . would find that their heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology . . ."²⁵

We must pay attention to our doctrine because it is the fuel for the fire that burns in the heart. Heartfires that burn only on emotion or experience will flame out soon after the experience or once the emotion is replaced by another. R. C. Sproul is right: "There can be nothing in the heart that is not first in the mind. Though it is possible to have theology in the head without its piercing the soul, it cannot pierce the soul without first being grasped by the mind."²⁶

The truth of God is the surest foundation for passion for God. "Not to care about truth," John Piper warns, "is not to care about God. To love God passionately is to love truth passionately."²⁷ Do you long for the Spirit of God to give you deeper experiences of fellowship with the Father? Expect Him to minister these to you only through the truth of Scripture, for God the Spirit is "the Spirit of truth" (John 15:26, 16:13). Remember, too, that Jesus said that those who worship God "must worship in spirit *and* truth" (John 4:24, emphasis added).

This balance of devotion and doctrine is illustrated repeatedly in the life of the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul was never more doxological than when he was his most theological. It was after eleven chapters of the most theologically dense material he ever wrote that he rapturously exclaimed, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! . . . For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen." (Romans 11:33, 36). Do you want similar experiences of enjoying God? Delight yourself in the truth of God as Paul did.

AN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY THAT'S SPIRITUAL

After Paul finished the theology and doxology of the first eleven chapters of Romans, he then launched into a discourse on practical spirituality. Even when the theology is right, there's still a need for intentionality in spirituality. Paul combined both elements in 1 Timothy 4:16, "Watch your life and your doctrine closely." For the Christian, to "watch your life" in this context means, "Watch your *spiritual* life," for that relates to everything in life. I've been asserting that we evangelicals need to be consciously evangelical and theological in our spirituality, and I think that is the larger problem in the present evangelical crisis. But it is always wise to follow the biblical pattern and balance this concern with the reminder that we should *demonstrate* our theology with a godly *life*.

Obviously those who are drawn to mystical spirituality, both the writers of evangelical spirituality books, as well as those who read them, turn to the mystics because they find something in these older authors they aren't getting elsewhere. They attend (or lead) churches, whether sedate or lively, with theologically vacuous worship, so they rarely sense the presence of God there. The preaching they hear is either orthodoxy without passion, or style without substance. Very little in their weekly evangelical orbit feeds the fire of their affection for God. Then somewhere they read a snippet from a mystic whose expression of ardor for God puts into words their own spiritual longings and they feel as though they've at last found a kindred spirit. The more they read, the more they realize how evangelicalism has spiritually undernourished them. It doesn't take long before these people believe that while evangelicals are tops in evangelism and Bible study, no one compares with the spirituality of the mystics (or those who quote them). McGrath echoes, "People need help with prayer, devotion, and personal discipline — and if evangelicalism is not providing it, is it really surprising that they may turn elsewhere?"²⁸ They won't have to go elsewhere when their church fills the worship and preaching with much of God, and teaches them how to "discipline [themselves] for the purpose of godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7b).

Lloyd-Jones believed that mysticism "almost invariably comes in as a protest against a sort of formalism and deadness in the Church. . . . Mysticism is also a protest against rationalism and a tendency to over-intellectualise the Christian faith. . . . Mysticism then is concerned to put emphasis upon the reality of the knowledge of God and communion with Him."²⁹ If he is right, then the return of interest in mysticism is itself a testimony to the reality of the current crisis in evangelicalism and of the need for reformation and revival.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

1. Choose role models and teachers of spirituality who are solid theologically.

Think what we imply when we admit that those we hail as great masters of spirituality have serious error in their theology. It's as though we're saying, "If you want to know Jesus, come to us, for we evangelicals have the true Gospel. Then, to know Him *intimately*, let us direct you to people we know do *not* proclaim the true Gospel." In other words, our ministry becomes "Come hear *us* proclaim the message of *justification*; then go read *them* for the message of *sanctification*. Hear *our* message to know Christ; then read *theirs* to be *like* Christ." Do you see how inconsistent this is?

Many of the mystics invoked by evangelicals today are post-Reformation Catholics, including Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Francis de Sales, Madame Guyon, Francois Fenelon, Therese of Lisieux, Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, etc. Why do we want to send our hungriest disciples to those who do not preach justification by faith alone, who pray to Mary and the saints, and who believe that the Bible is not the only source of God's infallible truth? I am not saying that there is nothing we can learn from these writers. I am wondering why, if our time for reading is so limited, should we go to the mystics *first*?

Evangelicals have an unsurpassed heritage of teachers and models of spirituality waiting to be discovered. Read Reformers like Luther and Calvin, both their doctrinal and devotional works. We wrongly picture them only as professors who toiled over ponderous theological tomes. They were among history's most brilliant theologians, but they were also pastors and men of deep piety. They forged both their theology and spirituality, not in the ivory towers of academia, but often under persecution and in the turbulence of great cities in a rapidly changing time. McGrath adds, "The spirituality of the Reformation was organically related to its theology."³⁰ . . . Reformation spirituality represents a challenge to return to the roots of our faith. . . . [It] is young at heart, with a long and

distinguished future ahead of it—if we are prepared to use it and act upon it. It is like a seed, dormant but not dead, which has lain inactive for many years but is capable of being reactivated and of growing."³¹

Other giants of devotion and doctrine were the Puritans. Those who know the least about the Puritans, I have learned by asking, deride them the most. Leland Ryken's *Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were*³² reveals that what most people dislike about the Puritans is myth. In his *Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, J. I. Packer writes the Puritans stand like the California Redwoods in the forest of church history. He has said elsewhere that corporately they lived more like the church in the New Testament than any other large group of Christians since the days of the New Testament. Why not find out why Packer makes such an audacious claim? Read John Bunyan's allegories, *The Pilgrim's Progress* or *The Holy War*. Dig into John Owen's masterpiece on *The Mortification of Sin*, or *Spiritual Mindedness*, *The Glory of Christ*, or *Communion With God*. You will find your heart soaring as you pray your way through *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotion*³³. The Banner of Truth has published a series of "Puritan Paperbacks" which serves as a delicious introduction to the Puritan theology/spirituality.

There's no greater American figure displaying the fusion of reason and fire than Jonathan Edwards. Most associate his name only with his great sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, unaware that he preached more often on the sweetness of Christ and of Heaven than anything else. Read his work "Concerning the End for which God Created the World" or his accounts of the glorious revivals that occurred under his ministry.³⁴ He also edited the enormously influential *Life and Diary of David Brainerd*. I've read nothing in years that so overwhelmed me with a sense of the glory of God as his sermon "Nothing Upon Earth Can Represent the Glories of Heaven."³⁵

No one is more godly than these men and women. No one is more prayerful than an evangelical hero like George Müller with fifty-thousand specific recorded answers to prayer.³⁶ No one whom we could read or quote is unassailable in life or doctrine, which is all the more reason why our lives and doctrines should focus primarily on Christ and the Bible. While I have criticized Catholic, Quaker, and other mystic sources quoted by many evangelical writers on spirituality, it would also be easy to find fault with the lives and doctrines of the Reformers, Puritans, and those of their doctrinal and spiritual heritage. This is because all but Christ are sinners and imperfect, both inwardly and outwardly. However, the Bible itself commands us in Hebrews 13:7, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith." Thus while Christ is our Lord and Savior and ultimate Example, we should also remember, consider, and imitate those who have been spiritual leaders and given us the word of God. Clearly the better examples are those whose lives and doctrines, while not perfect, as a whole are the most faithful to God's Word. To be true to Scripture and our heritage, evangelicals cannot say the most faithful examples come from the ranks of the mystics.

It is one thing for evangelicals to be aware of mystical spirituality and, where it is consistent with Scripture, to appreciate its strengths. It is another to embrace it without realizing that it can never be fully separated from the family of beliefs that produced it. As Arthur L. Johnson, author of *Faith Misguided: Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism* explained, "To adopt mysticism as a legitimate way of approaching God is to reject the basis of the Protestant Reformation and the basis of evangelicalism."³⁷

2. Devote ourselves to both doctrine and the disciplines.

My observation is that most of those in both the pulpit and the pew are not studying doctrine. Consequently, we are impoverishing our intimacy with God, our discernment of error, and our growth in grace. Church leaders express concern that if they emphasize doctrine then people will lose interest. But who wants to fill a church with spiritually weak people? If the leadership does not manifest a contagious love of theology, who will? Without it we have a congregation of spiritual "children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14).

As to discipline, it is more easily admired in our spiritual heroes than imitated. And yet, the only way forward to spiritual maturity is down the path of the classic congregational and personal spiritual disciplines.³⁸ "Discipline yourself," is the word, "for the purpose of godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7b). The spiritual disciplines are not an end in

themselves, as evangelicals have sometimes made them. They are a means, and the end is godliness, i.e., growth in the knowledge and likeness of Christ. But there's no godliness without them.

Devotion and doctrine. Let the reunion begin!

¹Donald G. Bloesch, *The Crisis of Piety* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 95.

²Arthur L. Johnson, *Faith Misguided: Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism* (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 43.

³D.D. Martin, "Mysticism," in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 744.

⁴Michael Cox, *Handbook of Christian Spirituality*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 14.

⁵Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church* (London: James Clarke & Co., n.d.), 15.

⁶Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 25.

⁷As quoted in Richard J. Foster and Kathryn A. Yanni, *Celebrating the Disciplines* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 87.

⁸D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Fellowship With God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993), 95.

⁹Donald G. Bloesch, "Is Spirituality Enough?" in John H. Armstrong, ed., *Roman Catholicism* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 158.

¹⁰Margaret Lewis Furse, *Mysticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), 104.

¹¹Cox, 22.

¹²George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, with an introduction by Henry J. Cadbury (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1976), 101.

¹³Fox, 103.

¹⁴Cox, 27.

¹⁵W. R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933), 7.

¹⁶Cox, 28.

¹⁷M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. devotes an entire chapter to these stages in what he calls "The Classical Christian Pilgrimage" in *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 79-101.

¹⁸Underhill, 23-24.

¹⁹Bloesch, *The Crisis of Piety*, 117.

²⁰Lloyd-Jones, 94.

²¹Lloyd-Jones, 94.

²²Furse, 104.

²³Bloesch, *The Crisis of Piety*, 103.

²⁴Alister E. McGrath, *Spirituality in an Age of Change* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 56.

²⁵C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, Walter Hooper, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 204-205.

²⁶R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1992), xx.

²⁷John Piper, *A Godward Life* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1997), 106.

²⁸McGrath, 14.

²⁹Lloyd-Jones, 91-92.

³⁰McGrath, 32.

³¹McGrath, 190-191.

³²Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1986).

³³Arthur Bennett, ed. *The Valley of Vision* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975).

³⁴All of these are found in the two-volume *Works of Jonathan Edwards* published by The Banner of Truth. Some of these titles can be obtained separately.

³⁵Jonathan Edwards, "Nothing Upon Earth Can Represent the Glories of Heaven," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 14, *Sermons and Discourses 1723-1729*, ed. Kenneth Minkema (New Haven: Yale, 1997), 134-160.

³⁶See Roger Steer, *George Mueller* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1981).

³⁷Johnson, 149.

³⁸On the corporate spiritual disciplines, see Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1996). Regarding the personal spiritual disciplines see Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).

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