

DEFINING THE BOUNDARIES OF EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

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The boundaries of Evangelical spirituality are the written self-revelation of God. Thus Evangelicals should also recognize that the boundaries of their spirituality specifically include the biblical doctrines of sola scriptura and sola fide.

I monitor an email discussion group called the “Contemplative Evangelical Dialogue.” From the name of the group, you can see that its members want to dialogue about the contemplative forms of Christian spirituality, and do so from an expressly Evangelical theological basis.

In a message written on June 22, 2001, one of the active members related an event in her life five years earlier. “I had the feeling,” she wrote,

that if I put “feet to my faith” and traveled intentionally to a sacred place (not unlike a Holy Land trip), then God would honor that and the result might be a deepening of my faith. . . . I chose to visit two sites in particular, Avila, where Teresa lived and was the head of the Carmelite order for about 30 years, and Mount Montserrat, where there is a Benedictine Monastery dedicated to the Black Madonna. . . . Miracles happened and I even had several appearances of what can only be described as angels. . . . One of the miracles was that I got to stand in the cell that Teresa lived in for 27 years and feel the power of her presence there.

I wanted to bring back some memory of what my soul had experienced on this trip. I could have used photos or drawings of the places I visited but instead I chose to purchase icons (small paintings on wood) of these two influential and courageous women, . . .

When I came home it just seemed reasonable to have them around during my prayer time to remind me of what I had learned from God through them. Do I pray to them? Not

really, I pray to God and to Jesus. But sometimes I'll just lean over and say to Teresa and Mary, "Well, girls, how're we doing?" . . . I believe they are Jesus with skin on and they give me hope and courage.

Is this sort of talk and practice outside the boundaries of Evangelical spirituality? It depends entirely on which Evangelicals you ask. Some would say that, rightly understood and with the proper qualification of terms, yes, this could be within our boundaries. Others would immediately declare, "Absolutely not! Some of our Evangelical forefathers lost their livelihoods or their lives in order to withstand such as this."

Whether or not you believe that examples with strong Catholic and mystical overtones such as this one from the Contemplative Evangelical Dialogue are common practice among Evangelicals, it is quite common today to find Catholic and mystical influences permeating both popular and scholarly Evangelical writing on spirituality. Just try to find a recent volume on spirituality written by an Evangelical that isn't brimming with quotations from Catholics, mystics, and Quakers, and directly or indirectly promoting them as models and teachers of spirituality despite their theologies of revelation and salvation. And lest this claim seem extreme, let me remind you that in 1999 an American divinity school that describes itself as "Baptist in heritage" hired a Roman Catholic priest and Benedictine monk as full-time professor of spiritual formation.¹

But while it might seem that non-Evangelical influences on Evangelical spirituality have never been more widespread, the problem is not a new one. The problem of defining spirituality's borders has been acknowledged by Evangelical writers ever since the Reformation. I was able very quickly to find illustrations of this from the last four centuries. In the seventeenth century, for example, the great Puritan theologian and Oxford scholar John Owen wrote *A Discourse of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer* which included an entire chapter cautioning his Evangelical audience about the influence "Of mental prayer as pretended unto by some in the church of Rome."²

In 1720, pastor-theologian Wilhelmus a'Brakel of Rotterdam published his four-volume magnum opus, *The Christian's Reasonable Service* which went through twenty Dutch editions in the eighteenth century alone. Chapter forty-three is entitled, "A Warning Exhortation Against Pietists, Quietists, and all Who in a Similar Manner have Deviated to a Natural and Spiritless Religion under the Guise of Spirituality." There he wrote, "I have in view those who stimulate various fictitious notions and errors, such as *mystics*, *Quietists*, *heretics*, *fanatics*, *David-Jorists*, *Boehmists*, *Quakers*, and all such individuals who in our day are known as *Pietists*."³

In the nineteenth century Southern Presbyterian theologian R.L. Dabney spoke disparagingly of the "perverted piety in such saints as Thomas a'Kempis . . . , Gerson, Molinos, Madam Guyon, and the amiable Fenelon."⁴ (Incidentally, Spurgeon and a few other noteworthy Evangelicals have been more generous than Dabney in regard to the relative value of a'Kempis.)

In the twentieth century J.I. Packer contrasted the Puritans and their spirituality with the confusion of spiritual boundaries in our own day saying, “They were not less concerned about experiential acquaintance with God than we are—rather, indeed, the reverse#&151;but they did not isolate this concern in their minds from their broader theological concern about the doctrine of divine grace. Thus they were saved from the peril of false mysticism, which has polluted much would-be Christian devotion in recent times.”⁵

And in 1998, theologian David Wells began his book *Losing Our Virtue* with these words about the blurring of the borders of Evangelical spirituality: “I am going to contrast Reformation or classic spirituality with what I am going to call postmodern spirituality. . . . I might have called these two streams ‘evangelical’ and ‘mystical,’ as does theologian Donald Bloesch, except that both consider themselves evangelical.”⁶

Like the boundaries of Evangelicalism as a whole, so the boundaries of Evangelical spirituality have been as unstable in recent years as the borders of the former Soviet Union or Yugoslavia. But as I have attempted to show, the borders of Evangelical spirituality have always been subject to invasion by non-Evangelical forces. Why?

Before I attempt to answer that question, I will make an effort at some definitions. I say “make an effort” because the boundaries of both the terms I will consider are themselves more difficult to map with precision than the boundaries of Evangelical spirituality.

The first term is “Evangelical” (a term so controversial that the entire annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in 2001 was devoted to “Defining the Boundaries of Evangelicalism”). In this work I will be no more precise when defining Evangelical than to mean the theology and practice considered orthodox by a consensus of the heirs of the Reformation. In addition to the Reformation doctrines commonly known as the *solas*,⁷ this definition would include the divine inspiration of the sixty-six books of the Bible, the deity of Jesus Christ, the necessity and sufficiency of His life and death as an atonement for sinners, and the imperative of the new birth in order to have eternal life.

The other term I would venture to define is an even more indefinable one—mysticism— or more particularly, the branch of it is known as Christian mysticism. When referring to mysticism I am speaking of those forms of Christian spirituality which attempt direct or unmediated access to God. Notice the words “direct” or “unmediated” in the following definitions of mysticism:

- In an introduction to *Christian Mysticism*, Peter Roche de Coppens remarked, “What I call the ‘esoteric’ side of religion is what is generally known as the ‘mystical side,’ or mysticism, which is based upon the direct personal observation and experience of the deeper aspects of Reality with which one has united or become ‘at one’ with.”⁸

- In a review of the 1998 book, *Son of Man: The Mystical Path to Christ* by Andrew Harvey, the writer begins with “Simply put, a mystical experience is a direct inner realization of the Divine.”⁹
- In his 1991 Zondervan book, *Mysticism: An Evangelical Option?*, Taylor University philosophy and religion professor Winfried Corduan defines mysticism as “an unmediated link to an absolute.”¹⁰

What is it about non-Evangelical forms of spirituality, such as Catholic, mystic, and Quaker spirituality, that appeals to Evangelicals? What attracts Evangelicals to the means of sanctification practiced by those whose doctrine of justification they typically reject as heretical?

To begin with, those who know God desire to experience Him with the totality of their being. While the greatest commandment is impossible for a fallen human to fulfill, when the Christian hears, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Matthew 12:30), he longs for such an intimacy with God. When he hears the Apostle Paul say in Philippians 3:20, “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings,” the one who knows Christ longs to know Him with an ever deeper closeness.

This relationship with Christ is meant to be fostered by the Christian’s involvement with a local church. But if the Christian becomes frustrated or disenchanted with the nurture provided by his church, or otherwise dissatisfied with the quality of his spiritual life and depth, he may look for a solution beyond the borders of Evangelicalism. The Evangelicalism of his Christian experience may be a region of shallow flippancy or a district of antiseptic orthodoxy, and he’s convinced that the spiritual climate of his locale is representative of all Evangelicalism. And so unfamiliar forms of spirituality which cross the border from mysterious realms like Catholicism, mysticism, or Quakerism, become increasingly intriguing to him.

British theologian Alister McGrath laments, “Many of my colleagues who would describe themselves as slightly Catholic or something like that, very often will have begun their Christian lives as Evangelicals but have found when it came to spirituality, something was lacking. Realizing their need for support in the Christian life, they have begun to explore other traditions.”¹¹

What are the boundaries of Evangelical spirituality beyond which no Evangelical should explore? I maintain that . . .

I. The boundaries of evangelical spirituality are the written self-revelation of God

In 1 Timothy 1:17 the Apostle Paul extols the Lord by saying, “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.” God is invisible to eyes of flesh, and the only way we mortals can know the “eternal, immortal, invisible” God is for Him to reveal Himself to us in ways we can comprehend. “Since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have

been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made,” says the apostle again in Romans 1:20, with the result that for all who see His creation, “they are without excuse.”

But while this tangible, three-dimensional revelation of the invisible Creator is glorious and ample evidence of His existence and power, it reveals Him to us *only* as Creator. It does little, if anything, to reveal Him to us as holy, as Judge, as Son, as Savior, or as Spirit. So any who would seek to know Him directly and unmediated (although no one would, since according to Romans 3:11, “There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God”) would find the pursuit hopeless. “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). Without a revelation of God by God, man is ignorant of God.

Knowledge of God requires a message, a message from God, a perspicuous message from God. And God sent a self-attesting, manifestly clear message in Word form. And “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 14). And this Incarnate Word, given the name “Jesus,” said of Himself, “No one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6).

But this Incarnate, flesh-and-blood Word of God is not the only living Word of God. The invisible God has also given us an inscripturated word, a word breathed out by Him that is “living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12), including the thoughts and intentions of the hearts of those who seek to know Him. It can do this because, as Jesus put it in John 6:63, “the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.”

Thus this written Word which reveals God to us has a unique and supernatural quality to it, part of which is that these are the words through which God the Holy Spirit makes Himself known to us individually and calls us to Himself personally. All this is what prompted John Calvin to declare in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “God bestows the actual knowledge of himself upon us only in the Scriptures.”¹²

Suppose there were a fourth person in the Godhead (which, measured by Scripture, is an heretical notion). How would you know? The only possible way to know would be for the invisible God to reveal it. What is true in this hypothetical situation is in fact true in regards to all knowledge of the “eternal, invisible, immortal” God. The Bible alone is the divinely-inspired and infallible revelation of God. Any presumed knowledge of God based upon anything but the Scriptures is uncertain and speculative at best. The boundaries of evangelical spirituality are the words God has spoken, and we should not transgress these boundaries in our pursuit of God.

I live in Missouri, and while we might say that the boundaries of Missouri are the United States of America, yet we might also say that one of the boundaries of Missouri is the state of Kansas, and another is the state of Arkansas. Similarly, while we might say that the boundaries of Evangelical spirituality are the written self-revelation of God, we might also say that one of the boundaries of Evangelical spirituality is the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, and another is the doctrine of *sola fide*.

II. The boundaries of evangelical spirituality include Sola Scriptura

“First, however,” writes Arthur Johnson in *Faith Misguided: Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism*, “we should remind ourselves of something that is basic to historic Protestant Christianity, including evangelicalism. Scripture alone is seen as the final authority, because it alone, of all written or spoken statements, is the revelation of God.”¹³

Evangelicals hold to the Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura*, that is, the Scriptures alone—and not anyone’s individual experience nor the collected and distilled corporate tradition of the church—are our final authority. And the Scriptures are our final authority because the Scriptures are what God says. In this context *sola scriptura* means that the Bible is the ultimate authority in all matters of faith and Christian living, and thus the ultimate authority in spirituality.

I would also argue that not only are the Scriptures the final authority in our spirituality, but because they are, the Scriptures are also a sufficient guide for our spirituality. In other words, the authority for our spirituality claims its sufficiency as the director our spirituality. One text in this regard is the well-known 2 Timothy 3:16-17: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work,” including, I would add, the “good work” of spirituality. And if we understand our spirituality as being a part of our sanctification, that is, a believer’s experiencing Christ and conforming to Christlikeness, then the words of Jesus for us in John 17:17 are especially significant here. His prayer, “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth,” makes claims about the power of God Word to sanctify us that we cannot make about any other guide to sanctification or spirituality.

Does claiming the sufficiency of Scripture for directing our spirituality mean that we don’t need the spiritual guidance or insight of others? No, for the Scriptures to be a sufficient guide for our spirituality doesn’t mean that we indwelt by the Holy Spirit are self-sufficient in our spirituality. The Scriptures themselves tell us that God has given teachers to the church, and as Jonathan Edwards put it, if God has given some to be teachers, then He intends for others to be listeners and learners. Moreover, God has so gifted and designed the church that in all our individual Christianity, including that part of it we designate our spirituality, there are experiences with Him and blessings from Him we receive only through our participation in the body of Christ. But even so, God requires us to heed the teaching and counsel about spirituality we receive from others in the church only insofar as they teach and guide in accordance with the Bible.

Let me illustrate how Jesus recognized *sola scriptura* and the sufficiency of Scripture as boundaries for spirituality. When the resurrected Lord was walking with two believers on the road to Emmaus, before their eyes were opened to recognize Him, Luke 24:27 says, “Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.” And then after they recognized who He was and He vanished, verse 32 reports that “They said to one another, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking with us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?’” Their hearts burned within them—not simply because they were in the presence of Jesus, but “while He was explaining the Scriptures” to them. A few verses later, when Jesus is with His eleven disciples shortly before His ascension, verse 45 says of Him, “Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.” The disciples here, unlike those at Emmaus, knew who the resurrected Jesus was. But in all these encounters with Jesus they didn’t simply enjoy His presence, nor did He allow let them merely to have some sort of mystical communion with Him, rather the resurrected Jesus took them to the Scriptures.

Contrast that with the Christian leader who was expressing her differences with Southern Baptists over the denomination’s adoption of the year 2000 version of the *Baptist Faith and Message* confession of faith. “We see our authority in Christ,” she said, “Southern Baptists see their authority in the Bible.” A Southern Baptist theologian present at the news conference where these statements were made asked what she knows of Jesus apart from Scripture. “I know Jesus personally” was her reply.¹⁴ We need to know Christ personally, but in the same way these disciples of Jesus did, that is, from the Scriptures.

The boundaries of the forms and expressions of spirituality for disciples of Jesus are those consistent with the Gospel of Jesus, that is, those found in Scripture, or those inaugurated, guided, or interpreted by Scripture. And we cross these boundaries, in the first instance, whenever we seek an experience with Him in a way not found in Scripture. In one sense it is difficult to think of an example of an encounter with God for which there is nothing remotely similar in the Bible. Yet in another sense mankind seems to have a unlimited capacity to invent ways to “get in touch with God.” And all these have in common the presumption of the ability to experience God apart from the forms He has selected, and/or the presumption of the ability to experience Him immediately, that is, unmediated by God’s ordained means of revealing Himself to us. This would include those forms of spirituality by which one attempts to experience God without need of the “one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5), as well as those forms whereby some Christians attempt mystical experiences with God or Christ without inaugurating or guiding those experiences by the written self-revelation of God.

That leads to a second way the boundaries of Evangelical spirituality are crossed, that is, by seeking to experience God in a way not inaugurated, guided, or interpreted by Scripture. Scripture should inaugurate many of our experiences with God, for the Scriptures are the clearest revelation of God. This is why He gave His Word to us, so

that we would experience Him. And in a real sense we might say that *all* true experiences with God are *ultimately* inaugurated by Scripture.

But many of our encounters with God may not start with reading or meditating upon the Scriptures or hearing them preached. We may have an experience we believe to be with God while ravished by the breathtaking beauty of a sunset, or in the tender moments of holding a child, or in silence while alone in a church building. Or it may be that we would have a spiritual experience we believe to be with the true God, but we can think of no example or parallel in Scripture. By what standard do we determine whether in any given experience we have “become partakers of the divine nature”? *Sola scriptura*. The Bible says, “He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). And while that is speaking primarily of our initial partaking of the divine nature at salvation, it is also true that any experience with God should either begin with, be guided by, or be interpreted by the precious Word of God.

So if in beholding the splendor of the sunset I find myself in awe of the goodness of God, the glory of God, or the power of God, I may rightly deem that an experience with God *because the Bible tells me* that God is good, glorious, and powerful. If while my heart overflows with love toward the child I am holding I perceive more deeply the love of God for me, I may believe that to be an experience with God, not just because of the nature of the feelings, but because Scripture guides me to that same conclusion. If in the silence and solitude of a church building I sense the presence of God, I may rightly consider that to be an encounter with God because such thoughts have first been informed by Scripture which tells me that God is omnipresent and that Christ will never leave me nor forsake me.

The boundaries of Evangelical spirituality include *sola scriptura*, and

III. The boundaries of evangelical spirituality include Sola Fide

Another of the *solas* of the Reformation championed by Evangelicals is *sola fide*, which means that God declares us righteous by grace through faith (in Christ) alone and apart from the contribution of any merit of our own. A huge amount of theology turns on this great doctrinal hinge, but so does a significant amount of spirituality. For one thing, apart from the kind of faith the Bible teaches, no amount of spiritual effort can either bring an unconverted person into a relationship with God or take a Christian further into a relationship with God that already exists through Christ (regarding the latter, see Galatians 3:3). The starting place for all Christian spirituality is the Gospel. A person must be born again from above and regenerated by the Holy Spirit of God before the fruit of any of his spiritual exercises or experiences can be deemed from God. “For men do not gather figs from thorns,” said Jesus in Luke 6:44, “nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush.”

Sola fide is a boundary of spirituality and we are walking close to the edge of it whenever we use as examples of spirituality those who hold to a Gospel different than a

sola fide Gospel, or when we exalt as models of sanctification those who hold to other than a *sola fide* doctrine of justification. Specifically, this means that to send our disciples by means of books and quotations to learn their sanctification and spirituality from those we would consider heretical on justification is a dangerous practice.

Does this mean that we can learn nothing from the spirituality of anyone who embraces a theology which gets the Gospel wrong? No, but we should at the very least recognize the risk that this may lead some of our disciples to conclude that if Evangelicals are not right when it comes to knowing Jesus *better*, how can we be right about how to know Him in the *first* place.

IV. conclusion

Is part of the problem simply that we haven't read from our own heritage, or only from Evangelical resources too close to our own time? Alister McGrath writes, Evangelicalism owes the modern church the duty of ensuring that its distinctive forms of spirituality remain alive. Yet it has too often become blind to its own heritage. Evangelicals are often told by their catholic colleagues that they have no spirituality worth talking about. This then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that it brings about a sense of inferiority within evangelical circles. Evangelicals, convinced that they have nothing to offer in this area, promptly draw on the resources of other traditions. It is little surprise to note that many who began their Christian life as evangelicals end up on the more catholic wing of the church on account of their perceived superiority of its spirituality.¹⁵

The true Gospel always has produced, and always will produce, the best disciples of Jesus Christ.

In summary then, the boundaries of Evangelical spirituality are the written self-revelation of God. Thus Evangelicals should also recognize that the boundaries of their spirituality specifically include the biblical doctrines of *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*.

¹ See the website of the Wake Forest Divinity School, www.wfu.edu/divinity.

²John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850-1853; reprint, Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), vol. 4, p. 328.

³Wilhelmus a' Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 2, trans. Bartel Elshout (Morgan, Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), p. 643.

⁴Robert Lewis Dabney, *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, vol. 1 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), p. 645.

⁵J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), p. 204.

⁶David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 30-31.

⁷*Sola scriptura* (Scripture alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), *soli Deo Gloria* (to the glory of God alone).

⁸Peter Roche de Coppens, introduction to *Christian Mysticism*, by Manuela Dunn Mascetti, (New York: Hyperion, 1998), p. 9

⁹Pythia Peay, "Christians Can Cultivate Mysticism Daily," *Arkansas Democrat/Gazette*, 26 December 1998.

¹⁰Winfried Corduan, *Mysticism: An Evangelical Option?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), p. 137.

¹¹Alister McGrath, "Loving God with Heart and Mind," *Vocatio*, vol. 12 no. 2, p. 2.

¹²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. and indexed by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, Penn.: Westminster, 1960), vol. 1, p. 69.

¹³Arthur L. Johnson, *Faith Misguided: Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism* (Chicago: Moody, 1988), p. 91

¹⁴Russell D. Moore, "Mohler is right, CBF members say on question of biblical authority," *Baptist Press*, 30 June 2000.

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