

Roots of the Spiritual Formation Movement

-Dr. Gary Gilley

During the past two years most of the articles sent out by *Think on These Things* have dealt with the issue of the Spiritual Formation Movement. And while we have examined the birth of the modern movement as well as its key beliefs, leaders and teachers, both past and present, we now want to turn our attention in this final article to their ancient roots. Coupled with this it would be of value to discuss the attraction of the movement, especially for evangelicals. Having already documented in previous articles serious errors in doctrine and practice, why do so many evangelicals embrace the disciplines and look to the so-called “spiritual masters” for guidance? These issues of origin and attraction overlap but we will look at them separately for clarity’s sake.

Roots

All trees are sustained by a root system and, while there are many roots of various sizes within the system, there is usually a main root or two from which other roots sprout. There are two ancient main roots of spiritual formation that need exploring: the theological root and the experiential root.

Theological roots

Even a casual reading of the New Testament reveals that the church, even in biblical times, struggled with doctrinal errors and heresies. Virtually all the epistles, with the possible exception of the short and personal letter to Philemon, addressed one or more theological concerns which run all the way from the person of Christ to the gospel message to abuse of gifts to eschatological confusion. There has been no perfect church or church age in which doctrinal inaccuracies cannot be found. But as the last of the apostles passed from the scene, by the end of the first century, theological blunders began to escalate both in number and in nature. Serious deviation from apostolic teaching began to multiply throughout the church. I will detail a few of these below but first the cause of this heterodoxy needs identification, which I believe primarily to be the hermeneutical approach adopted by the earlier Church Fathers, beginning with Origen.

Origen (A.D. 185-254) rejected the single meaning of a text of Scripture and adopted the Greek allegorical approach popular in secular mythological literature especially in the Alexandria, Egypt, region in which he lived. Before him the Jewish scholar Philo had done the same with Scripture and rabbinical literature. From this backdrop Origen popularized a view of biblical interpretation which taught that every passage of Scripture had various levels of meaning from the literal, which was the simplest, to the allegorical, which was the most profound and was considered the deeper and richer form of biblical interpretation. Origen, and those who accepted this hermeneutic, looked for hidden, symbolic meanings within the biblical texts, meanings that in actuality were not intended by the author. The net result was that, rather than attempting to understand what the Scriptures were actually saying, foreign ideas were being read into the passages. This method was guided by personal imagination instead of informed study which of course led to all sorts of fanciful and, at times, heretical, interpretations. Origen himself ultimately developed a number of recognized heresies such as universalism and the pre-existence of souls.

Perhaps Origen's most influential book, at least as far as interpretation of Scripture goes, was his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* in which his allegorical model was put on display. The groom in the Song was interpreted to be the Word of God and the bride as both the church of Christ and the individual soul. One author, who is supportive of Origen's views, wrote, "Almost all Christian spiritual and ascetic literature, ever since, has been indebted to Origen's foundational architecture of Christian mysticism." [1]

Later the desert fathers followed in Origen's footsteps. Gerald Sittser wrote concerning this group,

Their overall approach to the Bible seems—and, in fact, is—foreign to the modern age. They jumped from text to text, as if by free association, making connections that would appear odd to us, and they interpreted the Bible allegorically, which gives the impression that their interpretation is informed more by fanciful imagination than by careful exegesis. [2]

This approach to Scripture ultimately led to numerous schools of spirituality (ways of living out the gospel) such as Augustinian,

Dominican, Benedictine, Ignatian and so forth. But ultimately they all had one thing in common, the so-called tripartite division of spiritual life. The *sine qua non* of this three-fold division consists of purgation, illumination and union and is found in all forms of mysticism, not just Christianized forms. Greg Peters defines these terms:

The purgative way consists in one's active cleansing and is aided by spiritual exercises and ascetic practices, through the cultivation of humility and by practicing the virtues. Further advancement is made with the assistance of meditation, prayer and contemplation. The illuminative way is characterized by further meditation, prayer and contemplation, combined with the reception of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, additional spiritual exercises and a devotion to the Virgin Mary. The unitive way involves the exercising of proper Christian love until one experiences or achieves mystical union with God as Trinity. [3]

Said more simply, purgation is emptying oneself not only of sin but of passion, desire and even of intellectual thought. Illumination is what takes place when the Lord fills the emptiness of our souls and minds with extrabiblical knowledge and experiences and union is that mystical contact with God that cannot be rationally described, only experienced. This is the goal of all mystics, yet the three-fold way of spirituality is not found in Scripture. It is mystical invention rooted in the errant theology of those who were foundational in what we are now calling spiritual formation.

Experiential Roots

During the first two centuries of church history persecution and martyrdom were not uncommon. The church stood against the corrupt world system and the devil and many Christians suffered as a result. The heroes of the faith were the martyrs who willingly made the ultimate sacrifice for Christ. With the legalization of Christianity in A.D. 312 by Constantine the cultural dynamics changed. But accompanying social and legal acceptability of the Christian faith was a watering down of dedication. The church was flooded with new "Christians," the majority of whom were Christian in name only. And, with martyrdom a thing of the past, who would become the spiritual heroes of a new generation? Stepping into this void were the hermits and monks who later became known as the desert fathers and mothers. They originally

moved to the deserts of Egypt, and similar areas, because it was their belief that Satan still ruled there and they sought battle with him as Christians had battled him during times of persecution. And in the face of a softening approach to the Christian life they wanted to demonstrate dedication. As their reputations grew, the desert fathers and mothers became the Christian heroes of their day. Many flooded to the deserts to see these living martyrs, to perhaps learn from them, and some to join them.

In misguided attempts to demonstrate and foster dedication these hermits and monks practiced extreme forms of asceticism including fasting, prolonged days without sleep, exposure to the elements, loneliness, celibacy and voluntary poverty. As time passed these practices became the badges of a select group of people called “spiritual athletes” and “bloodless martyrs.” Their ascetic behavior became codified and imitated. It was under these extreme, self-induced physical conditions that some of the “spiritual athletes” began to claim visions and revelations from the Lord. These were passed down orally by their followers and then recorded in books to be spread throughout the Christian community. These writings became the basis for new forms of spiritualities that continue to have an impact on the church to this day. Those in the Spiritual Formation Movement today look continually to this group, which they call spiritual masters and physicians of the soul, for insights into a deeper life with God. The roots of spiritual formation are planted in the desert fathers and mothers of the second to sixth centuries.

However to these early formers of mystical and ascetic spirituality must be added a number of others who mostly appeared in the Medieval Era, an era variously pegged as from 325 (the council of Nicaea) to 604 (the death of Pope Gregory the Great) and ending from 1453 (the fall of Constantinople to the Turks) to 1517 (Luther posting his “Ninety-Five Theses”). Developers and promoters of these forms of Christianity included Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Bonaventure (1217-1274), Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 500), and Thomas á Kempis (1380-1471), to name a few. Around the time of the Reformation a number of efforts were made by Rome to draw those who had adopted Reformational theology back to

the Catholic Church. This Counter-Reformation was led in part by those who supported mystical and ascetic views and insights. This same group popularized their ideas by means of their own experiences, supposed visions and writings. St. John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Ignatius of Loyola (the founder of the Jesuits) were among the luminaries.

Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) is somewhat representative of this latter group. She was a nun in Norwich, England, who was locked in a cell that was attached to a church and lived there in seclusion (such women were called anchoresses). These cells or anchorholds would have a window that looked into the church so the individual could participate in the worship services. There would also be another window in which to receive food and water. While living in this condition, and at a time of extreme sickness, Julian claimed that she received 16 “showings” (revelations) on May 8, 1373, when she was 30 years old. These showings are held in high regard by the mystics and became somewhat of a pattern for the visions of others, which became increasingly common during this era.[4]

Consistent throughout the history of the mystical and ascetic spiritualities, including those promoting spiritual formation today, has been the four-fold hermeneutical approach to Scripture attempting to follow the three stage pathway to spirituality (purgation, illumination, union), as well as openness to extrabiblical visions, revelations, traditions and practices. It is the acceptance of these three foundational premises that has enabled this branch of heretical Christianity to survive and flourish.

Most evangelicals, one would think, would recognize these obvious problems and turn away, yet so enamored are many with this approach to life with God that even relatively strong evangelicals are willing to drop their safeguards and minimize the clear teaching of Scripture in order to glean from these mystics what they believe will be spiritual insights. This is true even as these evangelicals are aware that the theological foundation of this system of spirituality is often corrupt to the core. One of the most interesting and puzzling examples of this is Dr. Bruce Demarest, former professor of theology at Denver Seminary for more than thirty years. Demarest is a man who has studied and taught evangelical theology for virtually his entire life and recognizes true

heresy when he sees it. In writing the chapter “Reading Catholic Spirituality” in the book *Reading the Christian Spiritual Classics*, Demarest expresses deep appreciation for what he has learned from Roman Catholics concerning spiritual life. Yet he knows full well that the spiritual masters that he promotes and the teachings of Rome are in serious doctrinal error. He identifies a number of these himself: Catholic spiritual writers placed church tradition on par with Scripture and used faulty hermeneutics; they believed in papal supremacy and infallibility; they had a low view of the fall and human sinfulness; they did not call clearly for conversion; they did not believe in justification by faith alone; they believed in a redemptive role for Mary; they prayed to Mary and the saints; they practiced severe asceticism; they promoted unbiblical mysticism; and they were, and are, a pathway to Eastern religions.[5] Fred Sanders, another author who is supportive of who many call the spiritual masters and their classics, nevertheless admits, “These nonevangelical traditions may hold the gospel itself in stewardship, but they are messing it up, and a messed-up gospel is not the gospel; its result is dysangel, not evangel; bad news, not good.” [6]

These are hardly negotiable doctrines that can be dismissed as unimportant. The positions taken by the “spiritual masters” and the Church of Rome place them outside the realm of biblical Christianity and demonstrate a clear rejection of the gospel. What kind of spirituality can be learned from those who almost certainly do not know Christ? Why are people drawn to a methodology of spirituality promoted by people who believe false doctrines and practice extreme and unbiblical forms of asceticism? What is the attraction?

Attraction

Bruce Demarest, mentioned above as a former theological professor at a conservative seminary, and one who knows that the doctrinal positions of the “spiritual masters” are deeply flawed to the point of presenting another gospel altogether, has nevertheless become a strong supporter of the spirituality drawn from these very people. Demarest’s journey into the spiritual formation movement is similar to that of many. In his book *Satisfy Your Soul* he tells of his evangelical church sponsoring a 6-week course in the late 1980s on spiritual formation taught by a team from the Catholic Archdiocese of Denver. While he was resistant at first,

he became interested in what was being taught and entered into a spiritual direction relationship for several years with the team leader. His director later convinced Demarest to attend workshops and retreats at a Benedictine renewal community in New Mexico. Eventually in 1995 he spent 6 weeks at the community in a residential program designed for spiritual direction. This seemed to break his final resistance to spiritual formation and upon returning to Denver Seminary he began developing graduate courses to teach what he had learned. This has not been an easy journey for Professor Demarest for, “Admittedly I found that certain beliefs and traditions remained foreign to me, being based more on tradition than solidly on Scripture... But I also found that, once I got past my old prejudices and misunderstandings, I accepted more than I rejected.” [7] This journey was so bewildering that even Ralph Martin, a well-known Roman Catholic scholar, wrote in the flyleaf, “What an amazing journey Bruce Demarest has been on. While remaining solidly rooted in his own evangelical tradition, he has, with great honesty and courage, opened himself to the deep and vital spiritual life in Christian history that has much to offer us today. This book will be profoundly enriching to the Christian who desires something ‘more’ in their union with God.” [8]

As documented earlier Demarest is well aware of the doctrinal heresies and mutilated gospel that stems from the Roman Catholic Church and the creators of their ancient spirituality. But he seemed to “get over it” and accepted what good he could find while paying little attention to the bad. He believes that the evangelical community has not balanced conversion of the soul with spiritual development of the soul and thus needs aid in understanding how to maintain such balance. For help, he claims, “We can turn to our Christian past – to men and women who understood how the soul finds satisfaction as we grow in God, and how His Spirit finds a more ready home in us.” [9] He is sure that help can be found in this source because “spiritual formation is an ancient ministry of the church, concerned with the ‘forming’ or ‘shaping’ of a believer’s character and actions into the likeness of Christ... Many practices [were taught] that opened him or her to the presence and direction of God.” [10]

Demarest was looking for something “more” in his Christian life and he believes he has found it in spiritual formation, which he sees as “a form

of discipleship we are rediscovering today.” [11] He is not alone. Carl Trueman, dean of Westminster Theological Seminary states, “I think the medieval mystics should form a staple of the literary diet of all thoughtful Christians.” [12] And Jamin Goggin and Kyle Stobel assure us that when Richard Foster launched the modern Spiritual Formation Movement within Protestantism in 1978 with his book *Celebration of Discipline*, he was not creating anything new but was merely “recovering a well-worn path of ancient wisdom that helped to define evangelicalism itself.” [13] The evangelical promoters of spiritual formation warn of the need for discernment when reading the spiritual classics but promise great rewards to those who do. Their mantra is that “we should be open but cautious.” Even when some of their heroes within spiritual formation drift so far as seeing no difference between Buddhism and Christianity (as was the case of the modern Catholic mystic Thomas Merton), [14] we have little to fear. On the contrary, Merton’s case demonstrates that there is much to fear when we try to mix truth with error. Merton actually was quite consistent and took his views to their logical conclusions. He saw that Buddhism, a religion with little interest in theology or truth, offered the same mystical experiences that contemplative Christianity did. They both use similar methods including ascetic disciplines and traveling the three-fold path of purgation, illumination and union. In the end he came to the idea that since doctrine did not matter and only experience did, Buddhism and his understanding of Christianity were offering the same thing. He wanted something more and he found it. But that something was not biblical Christianity – since it did not meet the criteria God has handed down in His Word – and therefore it was false.

This is the danger facing everyone traveling down the spiritual formation corridor. In search of something more and being convinced by the many spiritual formation authors, past and present, that they are missing out on something, many are buying into the false teachings and false promises of spiritual formation. This journey, begun sincerely, will end badly for many.

A Final Word on the Disciplines

The Spiritual Formation Movement claims to offer an almost unlimited number of spiritual disciplines that will aid in forming Christian

character. As I have tried to demonstrate in past articles, while some of these have a bit of basis in Scripture, others have none, and even those which seem to be drawn at least in part from the Bible go beyond the Word in either their actual practice or what they promise or both. It is important to affirm that the word “discipline” is a good one and found in Scripture (e.g. Col 2:5). The issue is not whether discipline is helpful, even necessary, for spiritual development – it is, for self-control is one facet of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:23). Nor do I deny that there are specific disciplines that aid in progressive sanctification. At issue is what disciplines have actually been given to believers as a means of discipleship. It is my conviction that any means which the Lord has ordained for our use in the process of spiritual growth would be identified in the Scriptures. If the Bible is God’s complete, authoritative revelation to us today, and if it is designed to make us “adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17), then we should have every confidence that the inspired text would include, with clarity, the instruments or means by which God would have us grow. We do not need to reach beyond the written Word to seek practices for spiritual development and intimacy with our Savior. The Lord is desirous that we know these things and has made no effort to hide them from us. It is not necessary for monks or hermits or other spiritual leaders from the past (or present) to unearth some secret formulas designed to teach us spiritual formation. All that we need to know on this subject is found with certainty in God’s divine revelation, the Scriptures.

This does not mean that we cannot learn from fellow believers; we surely can and must. For example in 2 Timothy 2:2 Paul instructs Timothy to take the things Paul had taught him and teach them to other faithful men who in turn will teach others. But what Timothy was to pass on was not his own views and experiences and visions but the truth of the Word of God given him by the inspired apostle (see 2 Tim 1:13-14; 2:14; 3:10-4:5; Jude 17; Heb 2:3-4). The early church gathered primarily to devote themselves to the apostles’ teaching (Acts 2:42), not to study the supposed revelations of uninspired men and women. The body of Christ is essential in our spiritual development (Eph 4:11-16) but we aid that development as we “speak the truth in love” to one another (Eph 4:15). We also help one another with practical application of biblical truth. For example in Titus 2 older women are instructed to “encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their

children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the Word of God will not be dishonored” (vv. 3-5). It should be noted that what the older women are to do by way of encouraging the younger women is to facilitate appropriation of truth already revealed in Scripture, not add ideas and revelations to Scripture.

When we turn to the Word of God to discover the Lord’s clear teaching on discipleship what do we find? First, admittedly the Bible is a big book with many layers of wonderful truths about God, ourselves, the world, future events and more, waiting to be explored. It is a multi-faceted revelation from God that reveals the wonders of Christ “in whom are hidden all the treasures and wisdom of God” (Col 2:3). This leads to perhaps the primary distinction between the Spiritual Formation Movement and biblical discipleship. Both camps would claim Colossians 2:3 for themselves and both would agree that it is in Christ that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge of God are hidden. The divide comes largely in the arena of revelation. Scripture promises believers divine power which will grant “us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him [Christ] who called us by His own glory and excellence” (2 Pet 1:3). The question is, where is such knowledge of Christ found? Is it found in the Holy Scriptures or in extra-biblical revelations and dreams or both? As I argued in an earlier article (“Discernment”), I believe that the only inspired revelation from God for our times is the Bible. All other claims to revelations, however sincere or well-intended, lack the authority of Scripture. In addition, all other doctrines, methodologies, philosophies, traditions, and spiritual practices that do not emerge directly from the Word of God are at best suggestions and opinions, some helpful, others not, and still others harmful. But when understood as having divine sanction these things fall under the condemnation of Jesus who warned the Pharisees that their traditions actually invalidate the Word of God (Mark 7:13). Similarly Paul warned the Colossians, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ” (Col 2:8). The Spiritual Formation Movement, as I have tried to demonstrate, has violated these principles and “are teaching as doctrines the precepts of men” (Mark 7:7).

Conclusion

The modern Spiritual Formation Movement has been in existence for almost 40 years and shows no signs of fading away. Unlike the numerous fads that rush through evangelicalism, lasting a year or two and then being trashed to make way for the next wave, spiritual formation seems to be here to stay. It has of course morphed, matured and changed in many ways throughout the years, but at this time it seems to be gaining momentum and influence. This is due in large part to a number of factors:

- **Renovaré** : This is Richard Foster's organization founded in 1988 to promote spiritual formation throughout the globe. Foster himself has written many books and articles, as has his mentor Dallas Willard, which have been well received by all branches of Christianity. **Renovaré** has published *The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Study Bible*, since renamed *The Life with God Bible*. As would be expected this study Bible is highly ecumenical, drawing its study notes from a wide variety of Christian traditions including Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Quakerism. And of course, the study notes promote a mystical approach to the Christian life.
- **Seminaries** : Most seminaries, and many Bible colleges, now have a department of spiritual formation and are offering degrees in the disciplines. Biola University and its Talbot School of Theology is representative of many relatively conservative Christian schools of higher education that have bought into spiritual formation. Talbot offers an MA and M.Div in Spiritual Formation and Soul Care. They boast on their website, "Since we began offering spiritual direction, hundreds upon hundreds of people have experienced either individual or group spiritual direction through the ministry of the Center for Spiritual Renewal." As Bible colleges and seminaries train the next generation of pastors, missionaries and Christian leaders, we can expect that spiritual formation will continue to gain traction in the evangelical community.
- **Publishing houses** : Prior to the publication of Foster's *Celebration of Disciplines* in 1978, virtually all spiritual and mystical literature was produced by Catholic and Orthodox publishing houses such as Paulist Press or the Jesuits. Not anymore, as evangelical publishers are rushing to get to press

these bestselling books and authors. NavPress, InterVarsity, Thomas Nelson and a host of others have entered the market. Christians, who had grown accustomed to trusting these publishing houses, are being caught off-guard by what they are reading from them today.

- **Authors/books/magazines** : As the publishing houses are looking to cash in on the interest in spiritual formation, authors by the score have stepped up to meet the demand. In addition, evangelical magazines such as *Christianity Today*, which is highly sympathetic and a strong promoter of spiritual formation authors and their literature, abound.
- **Emerging and Seeker churches** : It cannot be denied that emerging churches and ministries are on the cutting edge. As movements that have reflected their culture more than Scripture, their leaders are constantly on the watch for shifts in interest and taste in the world around them. Seeker churches originally targeted the baby boomers who apparently wanted to go to church and not feel like they had been to church. Anything that would make them uncomfortable was eliminated and the church took on a secular persona. But the younger emerging demographic seems to desire a sense of the sacred. To accommodate this group the emerging and seeker leaders have turned to spiritual formation with its ancient spiritual practices that promise intimacy with God. This younger crowd, many of which have not been trained in theological thinking or biblical discernment, is easily deceived by the rhetoric and methods of spiritual formation.

For these reasons, and perhaps several more, I do not see any diminishing of the influence of spiritual formation on the church in the decades to come. This is certainly one of the greatest threats facing biblical Christianity today. May the Lord raise up a generation that will return to the Sacred Text and stand once again on *Sola Scriptura*.

- [1] Louis Bouyer as quoted by Michael Glerup, "The Church Fathers and Mothers." *Reading the Christian Spiritual Classics, a Guide for Evangelicals*, ed. Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2013), p. 177.
- [2] Gerald L. Sittser, "The Desert Fathers," *ibid.*, p. 199.
- [3] Greg Peters, "Spiritual Theology," *ibid.*, p. 82, (cf. pp. 188-189).
- [4] For a fuller account see Greg Peters, "Medieval Traditions," *ibid.*, pp. 240-242.
- [5] Bruce Demarest, "Reading Catholic Spirituality," *ibid.*, pp. 120-128.
- [6] Fred Sanders, "Reading Spiritual Classics as Evangelical Protestants," *ibid.*, p. 157.
- [7] Bruce Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul: Restoring the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1999), p. 35.
- [8] *Ibid.*, flyleaf.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- [10] *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.
- [11] *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- [12] As found in *Reading the Christian Spiritual Classics, a Guide for Evangelicals*, p. 9.
- [13] *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
- [14] See Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul*, pp. 274-277.