

NEW BOOKLET: Is Your Church Doing Spiritual Formation? (Important Reasons Why It Shouldn't)

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Editors

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Is Your Church Doing Spiritual Formation? (Important Reasons Why it Shouldn't) by the editors at Lighthouse Trails is our newest [Lighthouse Trails Print Booklet Tract](#). The Booklet Tract is 16 pages long and sells for \$1.95 for single copies. Quantity discounts are as much as 50% off retail. Our Booklet Tracts are designed to give away to others or for your own personal use. **Below is the content of the booklet. To order copies of *Is Your Church Doing Spiritual Formation? (Important Reasons Why it Shouldn't)*, [click here](#).**

Is Your Church Doing Spiritual Formation? (Important Reasons Why it Shouldn't)

Is your church involved in a Spiritual Formation program? If so, you might want to ask the question, what exactly is Spiritual Formation? It's a fair question, and one that, if not asked, could end up surprising you when your church changes in ways you never imagined.

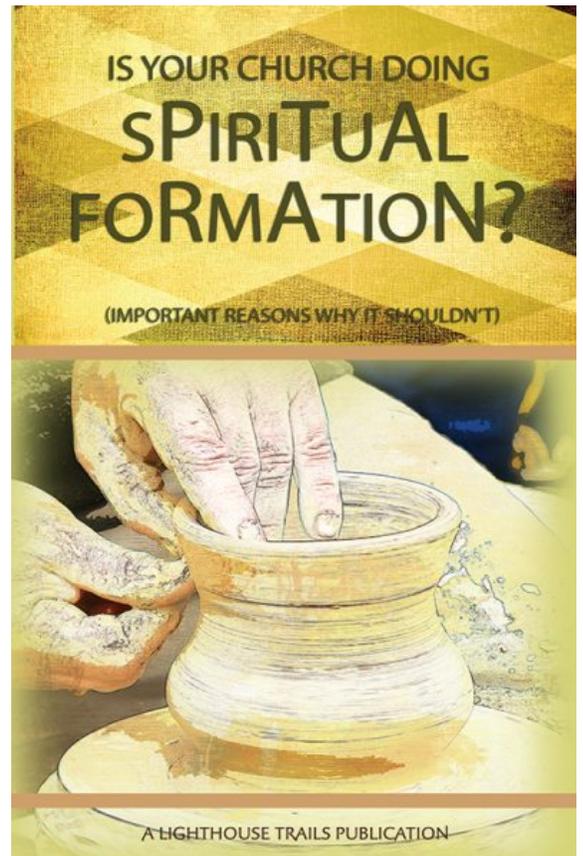
A Christianity Today article states: "Spiritual Formation is in." The article defines Spiritual Formation in this way:

Formation, like the forming of a pot from clay, brings to mind shaping and molding, helping something potential become something actual. Spiritual formation speaks of a shaping process with reference to the spiritual dimension of a person's life. Christian spiritual formation thus refers to the process by which believers become more fully conformed and united to Christ.¹

Such a definition would hardly send up red flags. But what this definition excludes is how this "process" of conforming and uniting to Christ takes place and who is eligible to participate in such a process.

The "how" is done through spiritual disciplines, primarily through the discipline of the silence. The silence is an altered state that is reached through a mantra-like meditation, breath prayers, or some other meditative practice. The idea behind it is that if you go into this silent state, you will eliminate distractions (thoughts) and be able to hear God's voice. He in turn will transform you to be like Christ. The "who" (who can practice these disciplines and become like Christ) is anyone (according to Spiritual Formation pioneer Richard Foster and other proponents of Spiritual Formation). A Christian, a Buddhist, a Muslim, even an atheist—anyone at all can benefit from the spiritual disciplines and become like Christ (the question is which Christ?).

Richard Foster, the "Father" of the Evangelical Spiritual Formation Movement



Now many evangelical seminaries offer programs in spiritual formation. Renovare, which Richard Foster and others founded in 1989 to cultivate spiritual formation (especially among evangelicals), today offers retreats and resources worldwide.²

In 1989, Richard Foster began an organization called Renovare, but eleven years earlier (1978) his book *Celebration of Discipline* first came out, and that has been a Spiritual Formation primer ever since. The following quote by Foster, written in a “pastoral letter” sheds light on the roots of Spiritual Formation (the Catholic Church) as well as how prolific it is today:

When I first began writing in the field in the late 70s and early 80s the term “Spiritual Formation” was hardly known, except for highly specialized references in relation to the Catholic orders. Today it is a rare person who has not heard the term. Seminary courses in Spiritual Formation proliferate like baby rabbits. Huge numbers are seeking to become certified as Spiritual Directors to answer the cry of multiplied thousands for spiritual direction.³

Countless evangelical leaders have gotten on Foster’s Spiritual Formation bandwagon. One example is Rick Warren who considers the Spiritual Formation movement to be a worthy wake-up call to the evangelical church:

From time to time God has raised up a parachurch movement to reemphasize a neglected purpose of the church. . . . [the] Spiritual Formation Movement. A reemphasis on developing believers to full maturity has been the focus . . . authors such as . . . Richard Foster and Dallas Willard have underscored the importance of building up Christians and establishing personal spiritual disciplines. . . . [this] movement has a valid message for the church . . . [it] has given the body a wake-up call.⁴

There are some who are deeply concerned about this movement. Author and missionary Roger Oakland expresses concern about this supposedly “valid message” and says Spiritual Formation came upon the church like an unsuspecting avalanche:

A move away from the truth of God’s Word to a mystical form of Christianity has infiltrated, to some degree, nearly all evangelical denominations. Few Bible teachers saw this avalanche coming. Now that it is underway, most do not realize it has even happened.⁵

Oakland explains how this paradigm shift has come about:

As the Word of God becomes less and less important, the rise in mystical experiences escalates, and these experiences are presented to convince the unsuspecting that Christianity is about feeling, touching, smelling, and seeing God. The postmodern mindset is the perfect environment for fostering Spiritual Formation. This term suggests there are various ways and means to get closer to God and to emulate him.⁶

So exactly what is Spiritual Formation, and what is its premise? In this booklet, we hope to answer these questions.

When Richard Foster told research analyst and author Ray Yungen that “Thomas Merton tried to awaken God’s people,”⁷ what he meant was that Thomas Merton saw one element missing within Christianity—the mystical element. Merton had learned from a Hindu swami named Dr. Bramachari that one could obtain mystical properties from Catholic mystics like the Desert Fathers and didn’t need to leave one’s own tradition to do it.⁸ But Merton realized that most Christians didn’t know about this. So, he set out to bring mysticism (i.e., contemplative prayer) to the Catholic and Christian world. However, Merton died a sudden early death in 1968 and was unable to accomplish his goal. But somewhere between 1968 and 1978, Richard Foster picked up the mantle of Thomas Merton and carried it forward.* Now today, untold numbers of churches (and millions of people) are going forth with Thomas Merton’s (and Richard Foster’s) message of Spiritual Formation. To understand the true nature of Spiritual Formation, consider the following quotes by Thomas Merton, Richard Foster’s mentor:

I intend to become as good a Buddhist as I can.⁹

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race . . . now I realize what we all are. . . . If only they [people] could all see themselves as they really are . . . I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other. . . . At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusions, a point of pure truth. . . . This little point . . . is the pure glory of God in us. It is in everybody.¹⁰ (emphasis mine)

I believe that by openness to Buddhism, to Hinduism, and to these great Asian [mystical] traditions, we stand a wonderful chance of learning more about the potentiality of our own Christian traditions.¹¹

The most important need in the Christian world today is this inner truth nourished by this Spirit of contemplation . . . Without contemplation and interior prayer the Church cannot fulfill her mission to transform and save mankind.¹²

This “Spirit of contemplation” is what fuels the Spiritual Formation movement. Merton believed that God dwelled in all people and that we are, in fact, all a part of God. Richard Foster has done much to carry forward Merton’s message through the Spiritual Formation movement. The question you must ask yourself is, do you believe what Merton said? If not, then Spiritual Formation does not belong in your church or in your family’s spiritual structure.

In essence, Spiritual Formation is carrying on the Hindu message of: God is in all things (panentheism), and God is all things (pantheism). If such a message is true, then the Gospel message of Jesus Christ—that man is sinful, that he is heading for eternal destruction because of sin, and that he needs a Savior—would become null and void.

Richard Foster’s Meditative Prayer

For more insight into the backbone of Spiritual Formation, let us turn to a small book Richard Foster wrote called *Meditative Prayer*. Foster says that the purpose of meditative prayer is to create a “spiritual space” or “inner sanctuary” through “specific meditation exercises”¹³ Foster references several mystics in the book who can point the way to these exercises: Madame Guyon, Teresa of Avila, Francis de Sales, Henri Nouwen, and Thomas Merton. Foster breaks the contemplative process down into three steps. He says:

The first step [into meditative prayer] is sometimes called “centering down.” Others have used the term re-collection; that is, a re-collecting of ourselves until we are unified or whole. The idea is to let go of all competing distractions until we are truly centered, until we are truly present where we are.¹⁴

Foster suggests that practicing visualization methods helps us center down. In the second step of meditation, Foster suggests that mystic Richard Rolle experienced “physical sensations”¹⁵ (kundalini) during meditation which perhaps

we may or may not experience as well.¹⁶ Step three of meditation, Foster says, is that of “listening” to God. Once the meditative exercises have been implemented and the “spiritual ecstasy” is reached, this entered realm is where the voice of God can be heard.¹⁷ However, as any New Age meditator knows, this ecstatic state is an altered state of consciousness where everything is supposed to be unified and one with God. Foster acknowledges the interspiritual attribute linked to contemplative prayer when he states: “[Jesus] showed us God’s yearning for the gathering of an all-inclusive community of loving persons.”¹⁸ Foster defines more of what he means by “all-inclusive” in his book *Streams of Living Water* when he says this “all-inclusive community” includes everything from a “Catholic monk” to a “Baptist evangelist.”¹⁹

Two Spiritual Formation Practices:

Lectio Divina

Often, Richard Foster has made favorable reference to the practice of lectio divina, which is being heralded in many Christian settings as a Christian, biblical practice. People are persuaded to believe that repeating words and short phrases of Scripture over and over again is a deeper way to know God. They believe that since it is Scripture being repeated (and not just any words), then this validates the practice and that this sacred reading is sacred because it is the Bible being used. But Foster himself proves that it has nothing to do with Scripture. It’s the repetition that is effective, not the words. He states:

[L]ectio divina includes more than the Bible. There are the lives of the saints and the writings which have proceeded from their profound [mystical] experiences.²¹

Foster obliterates the supposed premise of lectio divina by saying this. That is because as a meditation proponent, he knows that meditation has nothing to do with which words are repeated over and over; it is the repetition itself that puts one into an altered state. Thus whether you say “Jesus,” “Abba,” “Buddha,” or “OM,” it produces exactly the same effect.

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius are named after the founder of the Catholic Jesuit Order and have typically been used by Catholics. However, according to one source, “[b]eginning in the 1980s, Protestants have had a growing interest in the Spiritual Exercises. There are adaptations that are specific to Protestants which emphasize the exercises as a school of contemplative prayer.”²² Traditionally, Ignatian Spirituality is practiced in a retreat center setting usually with the assistance of a spiritual director. As with other Spiritual Formation exercises, it is believed that if the Ignatian exercises are practiced, the practitioner can conquer self and become more Christ-like (this is why Ignatian Spirituality is often included in Spiritual Formation programs).

When the Catholic church elected their new pope (Pope Francis), a statement was issued from the AJCU (Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities) reaffirming the pope’s “Ignatian spirituality,” stating that:

All Jesuits share the experience of a rigorous spiritual formation process marked by a transformative experience with the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola.²³

Spiritual Formation—A Dangerous Substitute For the Life of Christ

Sometimes we think of spiritual formation as formation by the Holy Spirit. Once again. That’s essential. . . . But now I have to say something that may be challenging for you to think about: Spiritual formation is not all by the Holy Spirit. . . . We have to recognize that spiritual formation in us is something that is also done to us by those around us, by ourselves, and by activities which we

Aside from the fact that Spiritual Formation incorporates mystical practices into its infrastructure (remove the contemplative aspect and you don't have "Spiritual Formation" anymore), Spiritual Formation is a works-based substitute for biblical Christianity. Let us explain.

When one becomes born again ("that if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (Romans 10:9-10), having given his or her life and heart over to Christ as Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ says He will come in and live in that surrendered heart:

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. (Revelation 3:20)

Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. (John 14:23)

To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory: (Colossians 1:27)

[I]f the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you. (Romans 8:11; emphasis added)

When God, through Jesus Christ, is living in us, He begins to do a transforming work in our hearts (2 Corinthians 3:18). Not only does He change us, He also communes with us. In other words, we have fellowship with Him, and He promises never to leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).

This life of God in the believer's heart is not something we need to conjure up through meditative practices. But if a person does not have this relationship with the Lord, he may seek out ways to feel close to God. This is where Spiritual Formation comes into play. Rather than a surrendered life to Christ, the seeking person begins practicing the spiritual disciplines (e.g., prayer, fasting, good works, etc.) with the promise that if he practices these disciplines, he will become more Christ-like.

But merely doing these acts fails to make one feel close to God—something is still missing. And thus, he begins practicing the discipline of silence (or solitude), and now in these altered states of silence, he finally feels connected to God. He now feels complete. What he does not understand is that he has substituted the indwelling of Christ in his heart for a works-based methodology that endangers his spiritual life. Dangerous because these mystical experiences he now engages in appear to be good because they make him feel close to God, but in reality he is being drawn into demonic realms no different than what happens to someone who is practicing transcendental meditation or eastern meditation. Even mystics themselves acknowledge that the contemplative realm is no different than the realm reached by occultists. To understand this more fully, please read Ray Yungen's book *A Time of Departing*.

Bottom line, it is not possible to be truly Christ-like without having Christ inside of us because it is He who is able to change our hearts—we cannot do it without Him.

It is interesting to note that virtually every contemplative teacher has a common theme—they feel dry and empty and want to go "deeper" with God or "become more intimate" with God. But if we have Christ living in us, how can we go any deeper than that? How can we become more intimate than that? And if going deeper and becoming intimate were so important, why is it that none of the disciples or Jesus Himself ever told us to do this? As Larry DeBruyn

states:

Why are Christians seeking a divine presence that Jesus promised would abundantly flow in them? . . . Why do they need another voice, another visitation, or another vision? Why are some people unthankfully desirous of “something more” than what God has already given to us? Why is it that some Christians, in the depth of their souls, are not seemingly at rest?25

Dallas Willard and the “Fruit” of Spiritual Formation

As we mentioned earlier, Rick Warren identified Dallas Willard as a key player in the Spiritual Formation movement. Willard’s book *The Spirit of the Disciplines* has become a classic within the movement. The book is filled with references to and quotes by numerous contemplative mystic figures including universalists and interspiritualists (e.g., Nouwen, Merton, Meister Eckhart, George Fox) as well as some names that would fall in the New Age/New Spirituality camp (e.g., Agnes Sanford and M. Scott Peck). And in the bibliography, there is *The Cloud of Unknowing*, (an ancient primer on contemplative prayer), the Desert Fathers, atonement denier Harry Fosdick, Ignatius of Loyola, Carl Jung, the mystic philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, Evelyn Underhill, and Teresa of Avila. All of these names are in Willard’s book for one reason only—because he resonates with their spiritual viewpoints. And while *The Spirit of the Disciplines* was released back in the late 80s, Willard maintained his affinity with most of these figures. On his website, many of these names are recommended as viable resources for spiritual growth.

A Lighthouse Trails article titled “The ‘New’ Emerging Theology Breeds Atheism in a Generation of Young People” tells about a young man who after sitting under Dallas Willard for four years at university declared himself an atheist. We asked the question, how could a young man raised in a solid Christian home change his views so drastically? It happened, and it is happening to countless young people who are sitting under the feet of bridgers—people like Dallas Willard who point their protégées to panentheists, universalists, and mystics. Another young man, whom we came across who was looking for answers, found them by turning to Dallas Willard and Richard Foster. Listen to what he found:

*I bumped into the classic spiritual disciplines while taking a course called “Dynamics of Christian Life” in my second year of Bible school. One of our textbooks was *The Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard. The course and textbook only touched on the actual disciplines, but the concept captivated me. The following spring, I found a copy of Richard Foster’s spiritual classic *Celebration of Discipline* in a used bookstore. Opening it and discovering each discipline [including the contemplative] detailed chapter by chapter, I felt a profound sense of joy and excitement. I’d found a real treasure.26*

Later, this young man became a free-lance writer for the emergent organization, Youth Specialties. Listen to where the spirituality of Dallas Willard and Richard Foster led him:

I built myself a prayer room—a tiny sanctuary in a basement closet filled with books on spiritual disciplines, contemplative prayer, and Christian mysticism. In that space I lit candles, burned incense, hung rosaries, and listened to tapes of Benedictine monks. I meditated for hours on words, images, and sounds. I reached the point of being able to achieve alpha brain patterns, the state in which dreams occur, while still awake and meditating.27

For those not familiar with what the “alpha brain patterns” are, here are two descriptions:

Mystical states of consciousness happen in the alpha state . . . The Alpha State also occurs voluntarily during light hypnosis, meditation, biofeedback, day dreaming, hypnogogic and hypnapompic states.28

Alpha is the springboard for all psychic and magical workings. It is the heart of witchcraft.29

And from Richard Foster himself:

If you feel we live in a purely physical universe, you will view meditation as a good way to obtain a consistent alpha brain wave pattern.30

What happened to Perschon and others like him is tragic. And we just cannot fathom the idea that not only will Willard's influence continue on long after he has been gone from this planet (he died in 2013), but Christian leaders who should understand the dynamics of this movement will continue promoting him.

Is There a “Good” Spiritual Formation?

One of the most common arguments we hear defending Spiritual Formation is that there is a “good” Spiritual Formation done without contemplative prayer. To that we say, we have never yet seen a Spiritual Formation program in a school or a church that doesn't in some way point people to the contemplative mystics. It might be indirectly, but in every case, if you follow the trail, it will lead you right into the arms of Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, and other contemplative teachers.

Think about this common scenario: A Christian college decides to begin a Spiritual Formation course. The instructor has heard some negative things about Richard Foster, Henri Nouwen, and Brennan Manning, and he figures he will teach the class good Spiritual Formation and leave those teachers completely out. But he's going to need a textbook. He turns to a respected institution, Dallas Theological Seminary, and finds a book written by Paul Pettit, Professor in Pastoral and Education Ministries. The book is titled Foundations of Spiritual Formation. The instructor who has found this book to use in his own class may never mention Richard Foster or Dallas Willard, but the textbook he is using does. Within the pages of Pettit's book is Richard Foster, Philip Yancey, N.T. Wright, Dallas Willard, Thomas Aquinas, Lectio Divina, Ayn Rand, Parker Palmer, Eugene Peterson, J.P. Moreland, Klaus Issler, Bruce Dermerst, Jim Burns, Kenneth Boa and Brother Lawrence's “practicing God's presence.” You may not have heard of all these names, but they are all associated with the contemplative prayer movement and the emerging church.

Another example of this is Donald Whitney's book Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life. Whitney is Associate Professor of Biblical Spirituality at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. While his book does not promote contemplative mysticism, he says that Richard Foster has “done much good”³¹ in the area of Christian spirituality.

Our point is that even if there is a sincere attempt to teach Spiritual Formation and stay away from the mystical side, we contend that it cannot be successfully accomplished because it will always lead back to the ones who have brought it to the church in the first place.

Spiritual Direction with Spiritual Directors

Basically, the term “spiritual direction” is part of the contemplative prayer movement (i.e., Spiritual Formation movement). Contemplative teachers say that one must have a “spiritual director” to “teach” or guide him or her how to enter into the silence of contemplative prayer. The spiritual director will provide books and resources by contemplative authors and direct his or her student on how to implement these authors' spiritual practices. Ruth Haley Barton, a contemplative advocate who teaches thousands of pastors and Christian leaders about Spiritual

Formation said this about her own spiritual director:

I sought out a spiritual director, someone well versed in the ways of the soul . . . eventually this wise woman said to me . . . “What you need is stillness and silence so that the sediment can settle and the water can become clear.” . . . I decided to accept this invitation to move beyond my addiction to words.³²

A Christianity Today article, “Got Your Spiritual Director Yet?”³³ confirms two things, one that spiritual direction is contemplative, and two that it is on its way to becoming an integral part of evangelical Christianity. The article explains that popular Christian author Larry Crabb changed his views. Once a believer in psychology, he switched to spiritual direction. He is just one of many who have done this.

The article credits contemplatives (mystics) such as John Cassian and Ignatius of Loyola for getting spiritual direction into the church and suggests that we can learn more about it from Richard Foster, Eugene Peterson, and Dallas Willard.

In Ruth Haley Barton’s* book, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*, Barton admits that panentheist Catholic priest Thomas Keating helped her to understand the contemplative idea of “the true self” (man’s divinity):

*The concept of the true self and the false self is a consistent theme not only in Scripture but also in the writings of the church fathers and mothers. Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen (particularly Nouwen’s *The Way of the Heart*) and Father Thomas Keating are contemporary authors who have shaped my understanding of this aspect of the spiritual life.³⁴*

Merton, Nouwen, and Keating believe that man can attain to his “true self” (perfect self) through mystical practices. This is actually the crux of the Spiritual Formation (i.e., contemplative prayer) movement, that man realizes his divinity through mystical experiences.

Conclusion

Spiritual formation is sweeping quickly throughout Christianity today. It’s no wonder when the majority of Christian leaders have either endorsed the movement or given it a silent pass. For instance, in Chuck Swindoll’s book *So You Want to Be Like Christ: 8 Essential Disciplines to Get You There*, Swindoll favorably quotes Richard Foster and Dallas Willard. Swindoll calls *Celebration of Discipline* a “meaningful work”³⁵ and Willard’s book *The Spirit of the Disciplines* “excellent work.”³⁶ In chapter three, “Silence and Solitude,” Swindoll talks about “digging for secrets . . . that will deepen our intimacy with God.”³⁷ Quoting the contemplative poster-verse Psalm 46:10, “Be still, and know that I am God,” Swindoll says the verse is a call to the “discipline of silence.”³⁸ As other contemplative proponents have done, he has taken this verse very much out of context.

Roger Oakland sums it up:

The Spiritual Formation movement . . . teaches people that this is how they can become more intimate with God and truly hear His voice. Even Christian leaders with longstanding reputations of teaching God’s word seem to be succumbing. . . .

We are reconciled to God only through his “death” (the atonement for sin), and we are presented “holy and unblameable and unreprouvable” when we belong to Him through rebirth. It has nothing to do with works, rituals, or mystical experiences. It is Christ’s life in the converted believer that transforms him.³⁹

What Christians need is not a method or program or ritual or practice that will supposedly connect them to God. What we need is to be “in Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:30) and Christ in us. And He has promised His Spirit “will guide [us] into all truth” (John 16:13).

In Colossians 1:9, the apostle Paul tells the saints that he was praying for them that they “might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.” He was praying that they would have discernment (“spiritual understanding”). He said that God, the Father, has made us “partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light” (vs 12) and had “delivered us from the power of darkness [i.e., power of deception]” (vs. 13). But what was the key to having this wisdom and spiritual understanding and being delivered from the power of darkness? Paul tells us in that same chapter. He calls it “the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints” (vs. 26). What is that mystery? Verse 27 says: “To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

For those wanting to get involved with the Spiritual Formation movement (i.e., contemplative, spiritual direction), consider the “direction” you will actually be going.

And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreproveable in his sight: If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel. (Colossians 1:21-23)

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power. (Colossians 2: 8-10)

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Endnotes:

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To better understand the Spiritual Formation (i.e., contemplative prayer movement, read *A Time of Departing* by [Ray Yungen](#).