

Saddleback IS a Contemplative Church

As Lighthouse Trails has reported many times in the past, Rick Warren (pastor of Saddleback Church) has been promoting the spiritual formation (i.e., contemplative prayer) movement for many years. This report will show that Saddleback Church is directly recommending numerous contemplative materials to those under their influence through "spiritual formation" and what they term "maturity."

First of all, it is important to understand what the contemplative means by "maturity." In Rick Warren's first book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, he said he saw spiritual formation as God's way of bringing "believers to full maturity." He named Richard Foster and Dallas Willard as being key players in that process and said that the spiritual formation movement had a "valid message for the church" and gave "the body of Christ a wake-up call" (pp. 126-127). Because Warren equates spiritual maturity with Richard Foster, it is logical for us to examine what Foster thinks about this subject.

In 1994, research analyst Ray Yungen attended a seminar in Salem, Oregon where Richard Foster was speaking. Yungen had been researching the New Age and mystical meditation for several years and had become familiar with the spiritual dynamics of the Desert Fathers and the pantheistic views of Thomas Merton. Listen to him explain what happened at this seminar with Richard Foster:

Foster seemed charming, winsome, and gifted in speech. His oratorical skills reminded me of a Shakespearean actor on stage. His program mixed serious oratory, music, and humor in just the right doses. However, his message conveyed that today's Christians suffer from spiritual stagnation, and consequently need something more. The following are a few [of his] examples:

- * There is a hunger ...
- * We have become barren within ...
- * We are floundering ...
- * People are trying rather than training.

Foster alluded to a remedy for this problem with such statements as:

- * We need a way of moving forward ...
- * We need a plan to implement the Great Commission ...
- * We need a simple mechanism ...
- * This might be new or frightening, but you are being drawn.

After the seminar ended, curious about what he meant by these statements, I approached Foster and politely asked him, "What do you think of the current Catholic contemplative prayer movement?" [this is back in 1994 before contemplative spirituality entered the mainstream church]. He appeared visibly uncomfortable with the question, and at first seemed evasive and vague....

[H]e said, "My critics don't understand there is this tradition within Christianity that goes

back centuries." He then said something that has echoed in my mind ever since that day. He emphatically stated, "Well, Thomas Merton tried to awaken God's people!" I realized then Foster had waded deep into Merton's belief system. (*A Time of Departing*, pp. 76-77)

When Foster told Yungen that Merton tried to awaken God's people, Yungen knew what that meant. Merton believed that there was one essential ingredient missing from Christianity--that is mysticism. Merton knew that if Christians would practice mysticism they would experience the *awakening* that he had experienced and thus came to believe that God dwells in every human heart.

We should make no mistake about it, Richard Foster believes that it is through contemplative prayer that one can enter into spiritual maturity. That is why in his book *Celebration of Discipline* he implores his readers: "We should all without shame enroll in the school of contemplative prayer" (p. 13, 1978 ed.). And in his book, *Spiritual Classics* he talks about the "spiritual disciplines" that help us move toward this "spiritual maturity" (p. xi).

Where does Saddleback stand when it comes to Foster's spiritual formation and spiritual maturity? According to their [Spiritual Growth Center](#) under the "maturity" section -- they are on the same page. Regarding the books they list, they state:

This website is designed to recommend the best resources for your spiritual growth. We've poured over hundreds of books, articles, and websites, interviewed numerous staff members, and studied our own book shelves in order to narrow the list of suggestions to what we think are really the *best of the best*. Whether they're the profound words of a well worn classic or the latest thoughts from today's best loved teachers, we hope these resources will help you *go deeper* and grow stronger in your walk with Christ.

If this is a true statement, then Saddleback has got a serious problem because a high percentage of the books they consider "the best of the best" are books written by those with strong contemplative (i.e., mystical) propensities. Here is a list of some of them. We have provided links to more information about each of these authors:

[John Ortberg](#)

[Erwin McManus](#)

[J. P. Moreland](#)

[Dallas Willard](#)

[Brennan Manning \(two titles\)](#)

[Henri Nouwen \(several titles\)](#)

[Philip Yancey](#)

[John Eldredge](#)

[Gary Thomas](#)

[Richard Foster \(*Celebration of Discipline and Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*\)](#)

[Bill Hybels](#)

[Brother Lawrence](#)

[Larry Crabb](#)

[Lance Witt](#)

[Max Lucado](#)

[H.B. London \(*Focus on the Family*\)](#)

[Erik Reese](#)

[Donald Miller \(*Blue Like Jazz* and *Searching For God Knows What*\)](#)

[Eugene Peterson](#)

[Michael Casey \(*Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*\)](#)

With many of these names, Saddleback is carrying two or three or sometimes four titles by the same author. This list of authors represents a large number of the books that are being recommended by Saddleback's Spiritual Growth Center. This means that contemplative spirituality is not just hanging on the fringe edges of Saddleback Church, but it is an integral part of it. This inadvertently will spill over into the [Purpose Driven network](#) (which according to Rick Warren has over 500,000 churches), and could potentially influence tens of millions of people around the world: if the average church in the PDL network is even just 250 people, this equals over 125 million. The results could be staggering.

One of the authors in the Saddleback Spiritual Growth Center that we did not list above is [Adele Ahlberg Calhoun](#) author of *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (the one Saddleback is recommending). The book is promoting mantra meditation, giving detailed instructions on several types of contemplative practices. In addition, the author quotes from many New Age sympathizers and New Age contemplatives. In *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Ahlberg Calhoun encourages the use of centering prayer, breath prayers, contemplative prayer, labyrinths, palms-up, palms-down exercises, and recommends for further reading a who's who of mystics. One of those she lists is Tilden Edwards (p. 62). Edwards, the founder of the Shalem Prayer Institute, said that contemplative prayer is the bridge between Christianity and Eastern religion. ¹ The Shalem center is a hub of New Age spirituality with an emphasis on the divinity in all. In her book, Ahlberg Calhoun also calls Basil Pennington one of her "spiritual tutor[s]." It was Pennington who stated:

We should not hesitate to take the fruit of the age-old wisdom of the East and "capture" it for Christ. Indeed, those of us who are in ministry should make the necessary effort to acquaint ourselves with as many of these Eastern techniques as possible.

By turning to Ahlberg Calhoun, along with the other contemplative authors, Saddleback is promoting methods of prayer that will bring spiritually tragic results in the long run to those who embrace these non-biblical approaches to God. Rick Warren, wittingly or unwittingly, has placed his church and many others in the sphere of Karl Rahner, the mystic who said "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all."²

Notes:

2. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Concern for the Church*, translated Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 149.