

Christian Mysticism in Meditation
William H. Gross – www.onthewing.org
8/23/2005

I'm sure that most of us would agree that private interpretation of Scripture is a problem.¹ What is less clear is that private interpretation is what results from Benedict's *Lectio Divina* and similar techniques developed by Roman Catholic mystics over the centuries. *Lectio Divina* is not a form of bible study. It is a way to read the Bible with a deeper personal involvement with the text. But no matter how we use it, it is still a form of Christian Mysticism. Although the reformers practiced meditation, they didn't seek a personal "experience" of God as this practice does. Thomas Keating, a Franciscan monk and outspoken advocate of contemplative prayer, is after a personal religious experience. He describes it this way:

In the monastic way of doing *Lectio Divina* we listen to how God is addressing us in a particular text of scripture. From this perspective there are no stages, ladders or steps in *Lectio Divina*, but rather there are four moments along the circumference of a circle. All the moments of the circle are joined to each other in a horizontal and interrelated pattern as well as to the center, which is ***the Spirit of God speaking to us through the text and in our hearts.***
<http://www.centeringprayer.com/lectio/lectio.htm>

If this sounds transcendental and New Age, that's because Keating often speaks of his affection for eastern meditation. He's written a number of books on its techniques and application in Christian meditative practices. Note this description: "***Christian Contemplative Prayer*** is the opening of mind and heart –our whole being– *to God, the Ultimate Mystery, beyond thoughts, words and emotions...*" Is that Protestantism? Is that what the Reformers fought and died for? I don't think so. David Wells writes this caution in his book, *No Place for Truth*,

The Reformers insisted that God was not savingly known through created nature (paganism), or human nature (mysticism), or the church and its sacraments (Roman Catholicism). He is known directly by the work of the Spirit and the truth of the biblical word. The Holy Spirit internally and supernaturally creates a spiritual environment in which Scripture may be received. The only intermediary between God and the sinner is Christ himself. That unique role cannot be usurped without destroying the Christian faith...

The bible is not a remarkable illustration of what we have already heard within ourselves; it is a remarkable discovery of what we have not and cannot hear within ourselves. Unless we steadfastly maintain this distinction in the face of modern pressures to destroy it, we will be putting ourselves in place of the bible. It would reassert the old paganism, and preaching would degenerate into mere story-telling. Meaning comes from the theology of Scripture evidenced in external events, not our personal interpretation or intuition of some internal truth.

A Christian mind sees truth as objective. It seeks to understand reality as it is in itself, not as it seems to the subject. The Christian mind accepts God's pronouncements concerning the meaning of life as the only true measure in that regard; the modern mind rejects such revelation as the figment of a religious imagination. Today, reality is so privatized and relativized that truth is often understood only in terms of what it means to each person. The modern mind believes that truth varies from person to person, time to time, and culture to culture just as consciousness varies across these boundaries. The Christian mind, by contrast, believes that truth does not vary and cannot be changed because it is based on external historical events. P. 280.

Thomas Merton was a life-long practitioner of *Lectio Divina*. By the end of his life he was no longer a Christian – like Mother Teresa, he embraced all religions as viable paths to God. This was not because he felt that they all taught the truth, but because they all taught this type of personal experience of God. Merton's early works were wondrous contemplative explorations of his relationship to the Father through the work of Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. They were based exclusively on the truth of God's

¹ Private interpretation sets aside the author's meaning in favor of whatever the reader thinks the text means.

word. But in his later works, he had set aside the Scriptural foundations of his contemplation in favor of the mystical, private experience of God promoted by *Lectio Divina*.

Is there a link between personal meditation of this kind, and wandering from the path of Christ? I believe there is. I believe its outcome is to experience God in a private, withdrawn sphere of life, rather than to acknowledge and respond to the truth of God in the context of the wider Body of Christ. I believe it ignores the taint of our corrupt nature which ought to make us suspicious of what is spoken "to our heart through the text." I believe it opens up its practitioners to voices other than the voice of God, as rationally heard through his word. I believe it rejects the idea of a biblical framework within which to understand individual passages of Scripture. Such "interpreting" is what Christ provided his listeners on the road to Emmaus. It should not be the object of derision.

But what I believe is not conclusive. Let's look at what the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics* has to say about this personal experience of God. I think the points you are about to read should be given as cautions every time this type of meditation is considered or recommended.

Article IV

WE AFFIRM that the Holy Spirit who inspired Scripture acts through it today to work faith in its message.

WE DENY that the Holy Spirit ever teaches to any one anything which is contrary to the teaching of Scripture.

Here stress is laid on the fact that the Holy Spirit not only is the source of Scripture, but also works to produce faith in Scripture He has inspired. Without this ministry of the Holy Spirit, belief in the truth of Scripture would not occur.

The Denial is directed at those alleged "revelations" which some claim to have but which are contrary to Scripture. No matter how sincere or genuinely felt, no dream, vision, or supposed revelation which contradicts Scripture ever comes from the Holy Spirit. For the utterances of the Holy Spirit are all harmonious and noncontradictory (see Article XX).

[In other words, if we say that our "impressions" of the Spirit's leading are valid, despite the fact that they contradict portions of Scripture, it is a denial of biblical truth. It is error to say that "I think that I too have the Spirit of Christ" and then come up with an interpretation that is not shared by the Church Body. The Spirit does not say different things to different believers about the same truth of God. - WHG]

Article VI

WE AFFIRM that the Bible expresses God's truth in propositional statements, and we declare that biblical truth is both objective and absolute. We further affirm that a statement is true if it represents matters as they actually are, but is an error if it misrepresents the facts.

WE DENY that, while Scripture is able to make us wise unto salvation, biblical truth should be defined in terms of this function. We further deny that error should be defined as that which willfully deceives.

Since hermeneutics is concerned with understanding the truth of Scripture, attention is directed here to the nature of truth. Several significant affirmations are made about the nature of truth.

First, in contrast to contemporary relativism it is declared that truth is absolute. Second, as opposed to subjectivism it is acknowledged that truth is objective. Finally, in opposition to existential and pragmatic views of truth, this article affirms that truth is what corresponds to reality. This same point was made in the "Chicago Statement on Inerrancy" (1978) in Article XIII and the commentary on it.

The Denial makes it evident that views which redefine an error to mean what "misleads," rather than what is a mistake, must be rejected. This redefinition of the word "error" is both contrary to Scripture and to common sense. In Scripture the word error is used of unintentional acts (Lev. 4:2) as well as intentional

ones. Also, in common parlance a statement is in error if it is a factual mistake, even if there was no intention to mislead anyone by it. So to suggest that the Bible contains mistakes, but that these are not errors so long as they do not mislead, is contrary to both Scripture and ordinary usage.

By this subtle redefinition of error to mean only what misleads but not what misrepresents, some have tried to maintain that the Bible is wholly true (in that it never misleads) and yet that it may have some mistakes in it. This position is emphatically rejected by the confessors of this document.

[This asserts that the shared body of truth that all Christians subscribe to is comprised of a series of propositional statements that are objective and absolute. These exist independently of our personal perceptions of it. Without such an interpretive framework, there can be no church discipline, no heresy, no apostasy, and no differentiation from false belief systems and cults. The truth of Scripture is not what we make of it. To say that it can mean something to me that it doesn't mean to you is to assert that one or the other of us is wrong, not that both of us are right - WHG]

Article VII

WE AFFIRM that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed.

WE DENY that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application.

The Affirmation here is directed at those who claim a "double" or "deeper" meaning to Scripture than that expressed by the authors. It stresses the unity and fixity of meaning as opposed to those who find multiple and pliable meanings. What a passage means is fixed by the author and is not subject to change by readers. This does not imply that further revelation on the subject cannot help one come to a fuller understanding, but simply that the meaning given in a text is not changed because additional truth is revealed subsequently.

Meaning is also definite in that there are defined limits by virtue of the author's expressed meaning in the given linguistic form and cultural context. Meaning is determined by an author; it is discovered by the readers.

The Denial adds the clarification that simply because Scripture has one meaning does not imply that its messages cannot be applied to a variety of individuals or situations. While the interpretation is one, the applications can be many.

[This is nothing more than what constitutional lawyers refer to as "strict construction." Any bible passage means what it was intended to mean by its author and not what we think it means to us. Its meaning is not reader-driven, but author-driven. This directly contradicts Lectio Divina which pursues a personal and private revelation from God as to a passage's meaning - WHG]

Article IX

WE AFFIRM that the term hermeneutics, which historically signified the rules of exegesis, may properly be extended to cover all that is involved in the process of perceiving what the biblical revelation means and how it bears on our lives.

WE DENY that the message of Scripture derives from, or is dictated by, the interpreter's understanding. Thus we deny that the "horizons" of the biblical writer and the interpreter may rightly "fuse" in such a way that what the text communicates to the interpreter is not ultimately controlled by the expressed meaning of the Scripture.

The primary thrust of this Affirmation is definitional. It desires to clarify the meaning of the term hermeneutics by indicating that it includes not only perception of the declared meaning of a text but also an understanding of the implications that text has for one's life. Thus, hermeneutics is more than biblical exegesis. It is not only the science that leads forth the meaning of a passage but also that which enables

one (by the Holy Spirit) to understand the spiritual implications the truth(s) of this passage has for Christian living.

The Denial notes that the meaning of a passage is not derived from or dictated by the interpreter. Rather, meaning comes from the author who wrote it. Thus the reader's understanding has no hermeneutically definitive role. Readers must listen to the meaning of a text and not attempt to legislate it. Of course, the meaning listened to should be applied to the reader's life. But the need or desire for specific application should not color the interpretation of a passage.

*[This affirms that we are to seriously consider a passage's application to how we live, practically and pragmatically. The purpose of Scripture is to reveal the will and the character of God so that we may be transformed by such knowledge, with the intent to practice it and thus experience it. But that doesn't mean that we are justified in ripping a passage out of its context and apart from its original meaning and intent. We are not application-driven in our interpretation. We apply the inherent truth of Scripture only after we have derived its meaning – and that is a rational endeavor. **We interpret before we apply.** Lectio Divina rejects this predicate, preferring to mix the two along its ritualistic "circle" of activity - WHG]*

You may not feel that this is dispositive proof that Christian Mysticism, and specifically *Lectio Divina*, is a harmful practice as far as evangelical doctrine is concerned. So I've included a number of website articles for you to review:

DEFINING THE BOUNDARIES OF EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

Donald S. Whitney

Associate Professor of Spiritual Formation

Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Kansas City, MO

<http://www.spiritualdisciplines.org/def.html>

Christian Mysticism – Gary F. Zeolla, Darkness to Light

<http://www.dtl.org/ethics/article/mysticism.htm>

[Evangelical Attraction to Mysticism](#) by Alan Morrison – historical perspective (long but excellent)

There are some troubling similarities with the New Age Movement:

<http://www.carm.org/nam/nawhatis.htm>

<http://www.faithissues.ca/OtherReligions/New%20Age/DidJesusMeditateMystically.asp>

A Layman's review of Brennan Manning's *Signature of Jesus* (on centering prayer)

<http://www.faithalone.org/journal/1997ii/Caddock.html>

The Plague of Mysticism – Richard Bennett (a bit extreme, but he examines Christ as Mediator)

<http://www.bereanbeacon.org/MysticPlague.html>

The desire to teach the *Lectio Divina* method because people are really interested in it, raises a flag that we may be teaching to please and attract our audience, rather than seeking God's approval. So consider this next one:

The Gospel According to Rick Warren (leaning towards mysticism and consumerism)

http://www.svchapel.org/Resources/Articles/read_articles.asp?ID=112

I've heard that we ought to pay attention to the ***Emerging Church Movement*** because it's a hit with the younger crowd, as if that should motivate us. Its leader, Brian McLaren, has some troubling ideas, and tends to fudge his true theology with word-games and redefinitions. If you're not familiar with ECM or McLaren, perhaps these next few articles will prove helpful.

Southern Baptism Convention Theologian warns against ECM:
<http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=20420>

David Mills reaction to McLaren's Views
www.kevers.net/mills_staley_response.pdf

Andrew Crouch on McLaren for Christianity Today – lots of links
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/011/12.36.html>

In the August 22 issue of Newsweek is an article on the American search for spirituality:
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9024914/site/newsweek/>

Now, if all this has failed to persuade you, and you're looking for further confirmation of what I have written here, please examine the articles at this site dedicated to examining the dangers of contemplative spirituality:

<http://www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/index.html>

You don't have to accept everything that has been said by me and others, but I hope there is enough to cause you to reconsider, and to ask questions about what you may want to participate in. Offering it as an interesting adjunct to prayer is certifying to a congregation that this practice will lead them to an accurate knowledge of Jesus Christ and God's grace. I reject such an assertion, as do many of my brothers and sisters in the faith. Teachers are held to a higher standard. We have to examine ourselves, our motives, our actions, and our role as protectors of the flock. It is a serious thing to consider that we may be acting like a wolf in sheep's clothing, whether that is our intent or not.

I beg you not to cater to this current trend toward modern paganism, which worships the personal experience, discipline, and insight of the creature instead of the Creator. The path of Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, and others who promote these Roman Catholic practices, is not the path of the Reformers. Evangelicals do not subscribe to Madame Guyon's style of mysticism in which we leave our mind behind to engage in some sort of heart-felt emotional melding with God.

"These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion [or will-worship, KJV] and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh." Col. 2:23.

Christianity is a reasonable and rational belief system. It seeks to discover the pre-existing, external, and objective truth of God as it is revealed in Scripture by rational means. It does not seek a relative, internal, and subjective truth by irrational means.

Rom. 7:23 - "but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." Knowing the corruption of my flesh, why would I trust a personal impression of the meaning of Scripture?

Christians are not driven by their desire for a personal religious experience. They are drawn to the historical Jesus Christ by God through the proclamation of the gospel and a God-induced hunger for his word. It requires no special tools or techniques to be understood by even the simplest among us. It is self-testifying. Please, leave it at that.