

Faith Pulpit

The New Spirituality

Like many false teachings, The New Spirituality uses Christian terms and practices but infuses into them meanings far different from what we find in Scripture. Even some evangelicals have embraced various forms and teachings of this movement. In this article Dr. James D. Maxwell III, the president of Faith Baptist Bible College and Seminary, exposes the dangers of The New Spirituality and offers suggestions for how believers should respond to it.

What Is The New Spirituality?

The New Spirituality as a paradigm for devotion and spiritual formation that utilizes forms and approaches originating from the Bible and from traditions and sources other than the Bible. It emphasizes individual autonomy and focuses on experience rather than on indoctrination. It is rooted in mysticism and the occult but often wrapped in Christian terminology. The premise of The New Spirituality is pantheistic (God is all) and panentheistic (God is in all).¹

The New Spirituality goes by many names: The Spiritual Formation Movement, Contemplative Spirituality, and The Spiritual Disciplines, to list a few. High on the list of leaders of this movement are Richard Foster, a Quaker and former professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, and Brian McLaren, who is a leading theologian, or as he would say “anti-theologian,” in the Emerging Church movement.

Its Beginnings

In 1974 Father William Menninger, a Trappist monk and retreat master at St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, found a dusty little book in the Abbey library titled *The Cloud of Unknowing*. As he read it, he was delighted to discover that this anonymous 14th century book presented contemplative meditation as a teachable, spiritual process enabling the ordinary person to enter and

receive a direct experience of union with God.

He quickly began teaching contemplative prayer according to *The Cloud of Unknowing* at the Abbey Retreat House. One year later his workshop was taken up by his abbot, Thomas Keating, and by Basil Pennington, both of whom had been looking for a teachable form of Christian contemplative meditation to offset the movement of young Catholics toward Eastern meditation techniques. The preferred nomenclature became “The Spiritual Formation Movement.”

Its Goal

In the opening chapter of his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster states, “The classical disciplines of the spiritual life call us to move beyond surface living into the depths. They invite us to explore the inner caverns of the spiritual realm. They urge us to be the answer to a hollow world. John Woolman counsels, ‘It is good for thee to dwell deep, that thou mayest feel and understand the spirits of the people.’”²

The main goal of this movement, particularly among those within the Roman Catholic Church, is to recapture something that they believe was important to the church in the past but has been lost to the present generation. Dallas Willard reports,

In recent years there has been an attempt to recover the disciplines because, in fact, they were lost, by and large. That is true in places you wouldn’t expect it. I have found many Roman Catholics to whom the spiritual disciplines were almost unknown, lost. There’s a wonderful priest in Pittsburgh who has a telephone program. He’s called me occasionally when my books have come out, and one time we were on the air discussing *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, when someone called in and asked angrily, ‘Why don’t you people teach these things any more? When I was young, Sister So-and-So taught us to fast, and taught us to contemplate and be silent, and now it’s not taught any more.’ It’s true. In many quarters of the Catholic Church it isn’t taught, or at least not effectively. In Protestant churches, with very little exception, it was totally lost, until back in the ’70s, some writings began to appear.³

Key Tenets

Contemplative or Centering Prayer—Centering Prayer grew out of the reflections and writings of the Desert Fathers.⁴ Some elements of contemplative prayer come right from the Bible, but other elements are obviously from other sources. In his book *Running Against the Wind*, Brian Flynn quotes Richard Foster:

Having seated yourself comfortably, slowly become conscious of your breathing. This will help you get in touch with your body and indicate to you the level of tension within. Inhale deeply, slowly tilting your head back as far as it will go. Then exhale, allowing your head slowly to come forward until your chin nearly rests on your chest. Do this for several moments, praying inwardly something like this:

“Lord, I exhale my fear over my geometry exam; I inhale Your peace. I exhale my spiritual apathy; I inhale Your light and life.”⁵

Meditation-Foster says, “If we hope to move beyond the superficialities of our culture, including our religious culture, we must be willing to go down into the recreating silences, in the inner world of contemplation. In their writings all the masters of meditation beckon us to be pioneers in this frontier of the Spirit. Though it may sound strange to modern ears, we should without shame enroll as apprentices in the school of contemplative prayer.”⁶

Meditation is viewed from vastly different perspectives within the movement. Foster seeks to draw a clear line of distinction between Christian meditation and eastern meditation. Others are less clear.

Fasting-Contemplative evangelicals emphasize fasting as a part of worship and teach that it must be centered on God as well as on what it means to discover what really controls us. In fasting the believer focuses on God and that which is spiritual, not on the material. It is seen as a means to enrich one’s prayer life. Some see it as a way of strengthening spiritual health.

Study-Brian McLaren teaches people to exercise the mind to love God through the reading and study of Scripture and other spiritual literature. Some evangelicals in the movement encourage people to read Christian devotional literature; others recommend Roman Catholic books and even books from non-Christian perspectives.

Spiritual Direction-A major element of The New Spirituality is the development and use of “spiritual directors.” There are actually organizations that specialize in cultivating spiritual directors for the movement. One such organization is Spiritual Directors International of Bellevue, Washington. In its journal *Listen* for January 2009, this paragraph stands out:

There are times in our life when we are called beyond ourselves into the embrace of something larger than we imagine possible. We can choose to respond or not. In classical spiritual language this is the time for discernment-for deep listening to our inner and outer world. We are drawn to respond, wait, or turn away.⁷

Is the New Spirituality in Harmony with the Scriptures?

While some of the evangelicals involved in this movement seek to draw a line between these disciplines as practiced by eastern religions and those centered on Christ, even Richard Foster freely and uncritically quotes from Thomas Merton, a Catholic mystic who draws unapologetically from Buddhism.⁸

If one takes the chapter titles of Richard Foster’s book, *Celebration of Discipline*, at face value, they do represent Scriptural concepts. The disciplines listed as chapter titles are meditation, prayer, fasting,

study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.

The careful reader, however, will find that within those chapters the Biblical words are filled with content that does not come from the Scriptures. Foster quotes the Russian mystic Theophan the Recluse who said, “To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all seeing, within you.”⁷

Foster describes a form of meditation other than meditating on the Scriptures as,

What the contemplatives of the Middle Ages called “re-collection,” and what the Quakers have often called “centering down.” It is a time to become still, to enter into the recreating silence, to allow the fragmentation of our minds to become centered.

The following is a brief exercise to aid you in “re-collection” that is simply called “palms down, palms up.” Begin by placing your palms down as a symbolic indication of your desire to turn over any concerns you may have to God. . . . Whatever it is that weighs on your mind or is a concern to you, just say, “palms down.” Release it. You may even feel a certain sense of release in your hands.⁷

McClaren states, “the contemplative and mystical traditions explore its full inscape, pushing to the frontier of the spiritually erotic and beyond—a daring characteristic that, by the way, the Christian contemplative tradition shares with the Sufi tradition in Islam.”⁹

Clearly, The New Spirituality is not in harmony with the Scriptures.

Are There Dangers in the The New Spirituality?

The New Spirituality utilizes and teaches spiritual practices that are not taught in the Scriptures and are not a means of worshipping the true and living God. On the website of the Institute for Spiritual Leadership in Chicago, God is defined in a footnote as “Divine Presence/Mystery, Holy Other, Higher Power, Spirit or What is life giving.”¹⁰

The source of the practices is important. McClaren has a chapter in his book, *Finding Our Way Again*, titled “Open-Source Spirituality.” His thesis seems to be that you can learn about spirituality from many different religious traditions, and learning from them will enrich your spiritual life.

Flynn makes this bold statement about evangelicals who advocate contemplative prayer:

Virtually every occurrence of the term “contemplative prayer” by modern day contemplative authors is referring to Eastern mysticism. The definition of the word contemplative as described by Foster, Manning, Merton, and many others is Eastern. And in truth, there is no such thing as biblically-based contemplative prayer. It doesn’t exist. To contemplate God’s Word is perfectly acceptable and needful, but what contemplative advocates refer to is not.¹¹

The New Spirituality is not based in Scripture, and the entire movement plays down the authority of Scripture and propositional truth. It focuses on experience, and it is undiscerning as to whether the experience is or is not in harmony with the Bible. It utilizes pagan religious forms and ways. These forms include the use of artifacts in prayer, fire, candles, and chanting. It opens the mind to spiritual influences that are contrary to the Holy Spirit. The New Spirituality is an attempt to integrate postmodern philosophical premises with Christian worship.¹²

How Should Believers Respond?

1. Read their literature with discernment so you are not captivated or misled by it.
2. In the exercise of true spiritual disciplines (e.g., prayer, meditation), do not take them farther than God intended and incorporate practices of Eastern mysticism.
3. Warn people about the dangers of this movement, especially those who may be enamored by its teaching.
4. Understand that we do not find all we need within ourselves. True fulfillment and knowledge of ourselves come from the Scripture.

Works Cited

1. <http://www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/celebrationofdiscipline.htm> (accessed April 17, 2009).
2. <http://www.contemplativeprayer.net> (accessed February, 18 2010).
3. Richard Foster. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 1.
4. Dallas Willard, "Spiritual Disciplines in a Postmodern World," <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=56> (accessed April 17, 2009).
5. The Desert Fathers were hermits, ascetics, and monks who lived in Egyptian deserts starting in the third century and continuing for several hundred years.
6. Brian Flynn. *Running Against the Wind*. (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2005), 186.
7. Foster, 15.
8. Pegge Bernecker, "Discerned Action," *Listen: A Seeker's Resource for Spiritual Direction*, 3, no. 1 (January 2009), 1.
9. Foster, 30.
10. McLaren, 92.
11. What Is Spiritual Direction? in http://spiritleader.org/direction_selfoverview.html (accessed April 17, 2009).
12. Flynn, 171.

Dr. James Maxwell, III

Former President at [Faith Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary](#) | [Other Articles](#)

Dr. James Maxwell III has dedicated over 40 years to pastoral ministry, serving congregations across Iowa, Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin. From 2007-2013, he was the president of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary. Dr. Maxwell is a sought-after speaker, sharing his insights on ministry and the call to serve. James and his wife, Leslie, reside in Florida.