

Christian Mysticism Within Evangelicalism

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“The Lord spoke to me.” “I feel led to...” “The Holy Spirit prompted me to...” “I have peace about my decision.” “I got a message from the Lord.” No doubt you hear Christians use these phrases frequently. You may even say them yourself. Such jargon is becoming increasingly popular. Conservative evangelicals reject the validity of mystical experiences claimed by Catholics, past and present, and by adherents of eastern religions, yet the above statements should *‘prompt’ us* to be concerned about the growing accommodation of mysticism within our movement. Why? Because it threatens the sole authority of God’s already revealed word, which He has recorded in Scripture. Is the power of a Christian’s so-called spiritual experience becoming the rule of authority and basis for decision-making for Bible believing Christians today? While mystical activity has always been present to some degree in the life of evangelicals, the explosion in popularity of spirituality by feelings or subjective/emotional experiences as a vehicle whereby one can become in tune with God should be a matter of grave concern.

Such experiences often have a mixture of biblical truth and may not contradict anything in Scripture. Instead they concern what has been called “guidance” for personal decisions. Rather than individuals evaluating options by what would be best for them and their family spiritually, they justify decisions by claiming, “I prayed about it and this is what God told me to do.” They are in many cases well meaning, but often rise to the level of “this is what I must do to please God.” And while most Christians would adamantly deny that God gives present-day revelations equivalent to Scripture, isn’t everything God reveals a primary, not a secondary, revelation with equal authority whether spoken, written, or supposedly whispered?

As this conference focuses on “Contending for the Faith in the Last Days,” we must consider adding the practice of Christians seeking mystical experiences

to the growing list of misleading or heretical dogmas that are threatening the primacy and sufficiency of the written Word of God.

The purpose of this paper is to examine in a small way the current trend (among those who should know better) of being deceived by mystical activity in spiritual experience. No attempt will be made to explore or research mystical activity through the years of church history, as enlightening as that might be. The last 20 years to the present will be the primary focus. In addition, we will briefly examine some of the popular writers and speakers within the evangelical camp who are promoting mystical activity. Finally, the title of this paper makes reference to “*Christian Mysticism*” as if there is such a thing. A better title may well be “*Mysticism Within Evangelicalism.*”

Listening to the “Still Small Voice”

Amid the many noises and messengers in the world today, we must learn to recognize the whisperings of the Holy Spirit. Following are some of the principal ways the Holy Spirit communicates with us: He speaks to the mind and heart in a still, small voice. Sometimes the Holy Spirit will help you understand a gospel truth or give you a prompting that "seems to occupy [your] mind, and press itself upon [your] feelings." Although such revelation can have a powerful effect on us, it almost always comes quietly, as a "still small voice." He prompts us through our feelings. Although we often describe communication from the Spirit as a voice, that voice is one that we feel more than we hear. And while we speak of "listening" to the whisperings of the Holy Spirit, we often describe a spiritual prompting by saying, "I had a feeling..."

Ministering as an evangelical pastor in the shadow of four LDS (Mormon) temples in the Salt Lake Valley for almost 40 years has made me sensitive to the mystical activity of so-called religious people. The standard mentality Mormon people are taught to embrace is: *When the prophet speaks the thinking is done.*¹

¹This statement originally appeared in the *Improvement Era*, in June 1945, as the Ward Teaching message for the month.

From this point onward LDS people are told that truth will be confirmed to them through feelings of peace or through warm, burning sensations. An example of this is found in a 2004 LDS Church publication entitled *True to the Faith*:

Amid the many noises and messengers in the world today, we must learn to recognize the whisperings of the Holy Ghost. Following are some of the principal ways the Holy Ghost communicates with us: He speaks to the mind and heart in a still, small voice. *The Lord taught: "I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart. Now, behold, this is the spirit of revelation" (D&C 8:2-3).* Sometimes the Holy Ghost will help you understand a gospel truth or give you a prompting that "seems to occupy [your] mind, and press itself upon [your] feelings" (D&C 128:1). Although such revelation can have a powerful effect on us, it almost always comes quietly, as a "still small voice." He prompts us through our feelings. Although we often describe communication from the Spirit as a voice, that voice is one that we feel more than we hear. And while we speak of "listening" to the whisperings of the Holy Ghost, we often describe a spiritual prompting by saying, "I had a feeling... *Note the Lord's final words in D&C 9:8 "Therefore, you shall feel that it is right." The burning described in this scripture passage signifies a feeling of comfort and serenity.*"²

As you can readily see, the quote on the previous page, which sounded like something we hear in evangelical circles today, was actually from the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I merely hid the proof texts and changed the word *Ghost* to *Spirit*, since Latter-day Saints use only the King James Version.

What makes this quote rather tragic is that 25 years ago evangelical Christians would have viewed it with suspicion. Yet today, many would agree with

² "True to the Faith: Revelation," LDS Church publication, 2004. From an email sent June 2, 2011 from Pastor Chip Thompson, Subject: "The LDS Doctrine of 'Feelings' = Truth."

it and find it helpful for guidance and Christian growth, thus engaging in the same practices as adherents to the cult of Mormonism.

This provokes several questions. Can believers trust their intellect or their feelings as a way God speaks to them regarding courses of action they should take? (Emotions are deceptive. Human reasoning and logic can also mislead us.) Since all humans are created by God with intellectual and emotional capabilities, and because our present sinful condition can contaminate our motives, is there a need for current revelation from God for individuals? Must there be a *fresh* word from God or some kind of supernatural confirmation so one may be certain they are following what God wants for them?

In short, does God speak today to individuals—who have the Scriptures available to them—through feelings, impressions, or brain flashes? If the answer is yes, does this allow the door of present-day revelation from God and mystical experiences to remain ajar, not only for evangelical Christians but for unbelievers, cult leaders, and false teachers as well? If the answer to God speaking extra-biblically today is no, then one would have to agree that the Scriptures are our sole and sufficient source and guide. A closer look at this trend toward mysticism is needed.

Mysticism Defined

Evangelicals view the miraculous gifts of the Spirit in one of two ways. Cessationists teach that with the end of the apostolic era, sign gifts ceased for the Church Age. Although God still works miracles today, He does not gift individual believers with the ability to perform them. Continuationists on the other hand teach that the miraculous gifts have not ceased and are normative for believers today. Some evangelical leaders are writing about a third position called “Open but Cautious.”³ Gary Gilley describes these adherents as being “afraid to limit the power of God and fear that they might be missing out on a close personal relationship with the Lord if they do not allow for the possibility of God speaking

³ Dr. Les Lofquist, “Cessationism and IFCA International,” *VOICE* magazine, Nov/Dec 2012, p. 7.

today apart from Scripture.” Gilley believes most evangelical Christians are now embracing this view.⁴

One of the most difficult tasks in understanding mysticism is determining what it is and how it works. Herein lies the problem. There is no agreement on a formal definition in modern day evangelical literature. That being the case, a dictionary definition states that *Mysticism* is “the belief that direct spiritual apprehension of truth or union with God may be obtained through contemplation or insight in ways inaccessible to the senses or reason.”⁵

The strongly worded opinion of John MacArthur leaves little doubt as to how he defined the phenomenon twenty years ago:

Mysticism is the belief that spiritual reality is perceived apart from the human intellect and natural senses. It looks for truth internally, weighing feelings, intuition, and other internal sensations more heavily than objective, observable, external data. Mysticism ultimately derives its authority from a self-actualized, self-authenticated light rising from within. Its source of truth is spontaneous feeling rather than objective fact or sound biblical interpretation.⁶ The mystic disdains rational understanding and seeks truth instead through the feelings, the imagination, personal visions, inner voices, private illumination, or other purely subjective means.⁷

Elements of Mystical Experiences

Based on these definitions and what will be considered in this paper, we may expect the following elements when Christians practice mysticism.

1. Certain spiritual disciplines can facilitate interventions by God.
2. Contemplation will be a vital and/or necessary element.

⁴ Gary Gilley, “Cessationism, Revelation & Prophecy,” *VOICE* magazine, Nov/Dec 2012, p. 30.

⁵ The New Lexicon Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language, 1990 Edition (New York: Lexicon Publications, Inc.) p. 660.

⁶ John MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991) p. 32, p. 181.

⁷ John MacArthur, *Reckless Faith*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), p. 27.

3. A heightened use of senses or feelings will be involved.
4. Cognitive reasoning may or may not have a role.
5. One will feel or “sense” a special emotional connectedness with God.
6. These experiences, while humbling, will cause a sense of superiority.
7. Any insights obtained will be considered truth from God.
8. This will be expected to be normative for the entire Christian community.

When applying these essentials to the practice of mysticism in the evangelical community, especially when it promises an enhanced relationship with God, no wonder it is on this rise. Genuine serious Bible study need not be part of the equation. Careful contextual analysis of Scripture need not be done. The result: Anything goes! How can one’s experience be denied? Are we living in parallel times to the period of the judges when everyone can do what is right in his/her own eyes? Could the next step be a partial or wholesale denial of the sole authority and finality of Scripture?

Gary Gilley has written extensively about mysticism, contemplative prayer, spiritual formation, and other contemporary practices that are threatening the principle of *sola scriptura*.⁸

As noted above, a key element in mystical activity is contemplation or what used to be called, “listening prayer.” Gary Gilley contends, “The heart and soul of mysticism...Christian or otherwise, is the art of meditation or contemplation. ...Contemplative prayer, also known as centering prayer and breath prayer, is rapidly gaining popularity and acceptance in evangelical circles.”⁹

Proponents call Christians to practice the discipline of being still before God and concentrating on emptying one’s mind so that God can fill it. Prayer is not merely talking to God; it is supposedly a two-way conversation. Some advocate repeating a word or phrase, but fall short of calling it a mantra. Nevertheless, the techniques they recommend are similar to those used in Hinduism, Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, and Yoga. The goal of this practice is that “God will

⁸ Subscribe to his free bi-monthly publication, *Think on These Things* for excellent analyses of current trends and book reviews.

⁹ Gary Gilley, “Mysticism – Part 3” www.svchapel.org/resources/articles/23-doctrine/547-mysticism-part-3#_edn1, accessed 10/14/12.

personally meet you in the center of your soul and communicate to you matters far beyond anything found in Scripture.”¹⁰

At this point, Gilley poses a relevant question: “If God had wanted us to encounter Him through mystical practices such as contemplative prayer, why did He not say so? Why did He not give examples and instructions? How could the Holy Spirit inspire the writing of the Scriptures yet forget to include a chapter or two on mysticism, spiritual exercises and mediation of the Eastern variety?”¹¹

Proponents of Mysticism

Two leaders are Dallas Willard, a main figure in the spiritual formation movement, and Richard Foster, an advocate for contemplative prayer. They teach that God will speak to us both audibly and inaudibly today, depending on a believer’s maturity. While these men are considered extreme, most evangelicals fall prey to the following leaders, who are a major influence in teaching that God speaks to Christians regularly, through an inner voice, hunches, promptings, feelings, and of course, circumstances.

One of the Bible studies that began to promote a veiled mysticism was *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby, published originally in 1990 but updated frequently since then. In 2005 I presented a paper on the subject of “Subjective Revelation in Christian Experience” at the GES Conference.¹² The following quote expressed my early concerns.

“Even Henry Blackaby, who calls Christians to dependence on God’s Word, also teaches, ‘No amount of reasoning and intellectualizing will discover [God’s Will]. God must reveal it. God’s Holy Spirit reveals His will to those who are seeking His mind and His heart.’ He adds that Christian leaders can grow unfamiliar with God’s voice and miss His guidance.¹³ Is Blackaby merely using Christian jargon or does he contradict himself?”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ken Hornok, “Does God Give Subjective Revelation Today?” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, Spring 2007, pp. 15-30.

¹³ Henry and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2002), p. 179 and 181.

In a more recent Bible study, *Hearing God's Voice*, co-authored with his son Richard, the promo states:

Based on classic *Experiencing God* principles, *Hearing God's Voice* is for those ready to listen. According to the Blackabys, God speaks to individuals in ways that are personal and unique to each person. God never says anything contravening what He has already said in the Bible, and He usually confirms what He has said. You'll learn to discern the voice of God, identify ways He speaks, and respond to His revelations of His will. After you learn to listen to God, hearing from God will be as natural as communicating with a close friend.¹⁴

Mystical activity as part of one's Christian experience now appears to be fully implemented into Blackaby's teachings.

Perhaps a more disconcerting trend is the pilgrimage of Beth Moore. Her Bible study ministry for many years has been used by women in evangelical churches with great profit (to the women who participate as well as to LifeWay Press!). In the early years her teachings were reliable and could be trusted. As one fast forwards to more recent times, a disturbing trend becomes clear with the following quotes from two different videos.

What God began to say to me about five years ago, and I'm telling you it sent me on such a trek with Him, that my head is still whirling over it. He began to say to me, "I'm gonna tell you something right now, Beth, and boy you write this one down, and you say it as often as I give you utterance to say it: My Bride is paralyzed by unbelief. My Bride is paralyzed by unbelief." And He said, "Startin' with you."

And I'll also suggest to you I am not the only one. And tonight I'm going to do my absolute best to illustrate to you something that God showed me out on that back porch. He put a picture...I've explained to you before, I am a very visual person...so He speaks to me very often of putting

¹⁴ Ibid., *Hearing God's Voice* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2002).

a picture in my head. And it was as if I was raised up looking down on a community, **as** I saw the Church in that particular dimension...the church, as Jesus sees it, in a particular dimension.”¹⁵

Beth Moore, in these quotes, makes no reference to scriptural insight or the Spirit illuminating truth from the Word, but seems to refer to visions of some sort. Have her experiences become her source of authority?

In her recent study of the book of James, “Mercy Triumphs,” in her video lesson for Session Five, she begins by saying, “The Spirit of God is thick in here with us today.” While she is teaching she says, “I’m getting a word for myself. I’m getting a revelation.” Later when she talks about praying for other Bible teachers, she says, “One of the biggest surges of the Spirit I will ever get is when I am praying for another teacher to have the anointing of the Spirit...I felt it all over my skin.” (She speaks about an “anointing of the Spirit” quite often in her lectures.)¹⁶

Another popular women’s Bible teacher is Priscilla Shirer, Dallas Seminary graduate and daughter of Dr. Tony Evans. Her book, *He Speaks to Me: Preparing to Hear from God* was published by Moody Publishers in 2006. The book claims to give readers “a deeper understanding of the Holy Spirit.” Moody also published her book, *Discerning the Voice of God: How to Recognize When God is Speaking*, ©2007, 2012. The back cover states, “Is that You, God? Wherever you are in your spiritual walk, God will find a way to speak to you in a way you will understand.” Shirer teaches that God communicates personally, and “when God speaks, you will feel a surety about His word to you.”¹⁷

A Popular Phenomenon

People you used to be able to trust for biblical accuracy and practical Christian living now seem to be promoting themselves to prophet status. They write books about hearing God speak to them and make that normative for any

¹⁵ Apprising Ministries, <http://apprising.org/2012/01/11/beth-moore-the-mystic/> (accessed 10/29/12).

¹⁶ Beth Moore, *James: Mercy Triumphs*, (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 2011), Video Teaching Session 5.

¹⁷ Priscilla Shirer, *Discerning the Voice of God: How to Recognize When God is Speaking* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007, 2012), p. 108.

Christian. This trend can be noted by perusing the shelves of any Christian bookstore or goggling the Internet. In addition to books already referenced in this paper, we find titles like these:

Who Speaks to Your Heart?: Tuning In to Hear God's Whispers by Stacy Hawkins Adams, Zondervan 2010.

The God Who Speaks: Learning the Language of God by Ben Campbell Johnson Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004.

When the Soul Listens: Finding Rest and Direction in Contemplative Prayer by Jan Johnson, NavPress, 1999.

How to Hear From God: Learning to Know His Voice and Make Right Decisions (Warner Faith, 2003) by Joyce Meyer. The flyleaf says, "Joyce helps you hear God speaking to you through your own thoughts and feelings, the words of other people, your dreams, signs in the natural world, and more." Meyer says, "Ask God for the sensitivity to hear His voice" (p. 189).

The Ultimate Conversation: Talking With God Through Prayer by Charles F. Stanley Howard Books, a Division of Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2012.

4 Keys to Hearing God - You Can Hear God's Voice! (Free three-part video series – Guaranteed!) 2010. Mark and Patti Virkler. He claims God spoke to him in a "booming bass voice."

Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship With God by Dallas Willard (InterVarsity Press, 1999). Updated from its original publication in 1984 as *In Search of Guidance*.

Devotional books by Sarah Young. She claims these are personal messages she receives from God by "listening in my mind for His communications."¹⁸

One might ask, "What quirks of publishers' committees and what personal connections were operative in producing this material?" Could the driving force behind most publishing houses be—this stuff sells?

What pastor or church leader has not had well-meaning parishioners approach them with an idea or plan they say they received directly from God? It

¹⁸ Sarah Young, *Dear Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2007), p. 6.

may even have come to them while praying. If this is questioned or challenged in any way, the leadership is viewed as being insensitive to the leading of God, in danger of quenching the Spirit, and/or in defiance of God's will.

Prior to the publication of his popular *Systematic Theology* in 1994, Wayne Grudem published *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* in 1988, a popularized version of his PhD dissertation for the University of Cambridge. An updated version came out in 2002, in which he claims to have removed technical portions and added practical guidelines for using the gift of prophecy today "without compromising the supremacy of Scripture."¹⁹ The impact of this work from an influential theologian has been immense.

Grudem is a Continuationist, who believes New Testament prophecies are not bound by the Old Testament principle of infallibility. Gary Gilley quotes him as saying, "We are not expected to accept every word spoken through the gifts of utterance...but only what is quickened to us by the Holy Spirit and is in agreement with the Bible...one manifestation may be 75% God, but 25% the person's own thoughts. We must discern between the two."²⁰ How is that done? Grudem claims that over time prophets and their congregations become more adept at distinguishing a genuine revelation of the Holy Spirit from one's own thoughts. (According to Pricilla Shirer, all you need do is "feel a surety" that it was from God.)

Gilley comments that the continuationists claim "specific, personal words that guide them in decision making or knowledge of the future." While Grudem does not put such messages from the Lord in the same category as Scripture, Gilley asks, "Is it possible for God to speak in a non-authoritative way?...There is no such thing as partially inspired revelation or the true words from the Lord polluted by the misunderstanding or imagination of the prophet....Those who are claiming divine revelation today must wrestle with the fact that what they are supposedly hearing must carry the same authority of the divinely inspired authors of Scripture."²¹

¹⁹ Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), <http://www.waynegrudem.com/category/media/books/> (accessed 11/20/12).

²⁰ Gary Gilley, "Cessationism, Revelation & Prophecy," p. 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Rather than clarify subjective experiences, Grudem and others bring confusion to the mix, and prophecy becomes a guessing game. No longer does doctrine govern and interpret experience, but rather, application and experience control interpretation. Meanings are assigned by the reader of Scripture, rather than by the writer of Scripture, and multiple meanings are given to a single passage. The primary focus must be *What did God want the original readers to understand?* rather than *What does it mean to me?* Realizing that the entire area of hermeneutics is facing a crisis and that pre-understanding²² is now the rule, along with a growing intolerance for the common-sense grammatical-historical approach to understanding biblical truth, this paper now examines plausible sources of so-called “promptings, impression, or God’s voice.”

Many Non-Charismatic Evangelicals Rely on Subjective Revelations

With this background information it is not difficult to see a parallel in the practice of many well-meaning Christian people today. Even non-charismatic cessationist evangelicals rely on subjective-mystical revelation from God. Consider the following situations. Years ago a well known Bible teacher decided God was directing him to change ministries. I was shocked because this individual had a very unique and well responded-to ministry. When I asked him why he was changing his focus, without hesitation he said, “God told me to.” He told me he had personally heard the voice of God speak to him. This individual was a Dallas Seminary grad who did not have a charismatic cell in his body, yet the voice of God for him was the deciding factor. How many times has this story been repeated when people change ministries? Do these situations always prove to be from God? Consider also, does this make a person vulnerable to listen to other “voices,” which may ultimately damage or destroy one’s ministry?

How about the pastor who tells his congregation that he is waiting on God regarding the next series of sermons to preach? What signal does this send to the people of his flock? Does it not indicate that he expects some sort of new word from God or some feelings-centered brain flash from God before he can minister?

²² Keeping your pre-conceived ideas and biases in mind when you approach a passage and forming your interpretation based on them.

In a November 2003 *Christianity Today* article entitled, “Mr. Jabez Goes to Africa,” the author relates how Walk Thru the Bible Ministries’ founder, Bruce Wilkinson, had a “burning bush” experience at a Wendy’s restaurant while reading a biography of Hudson Taylor. Wilkinson was stunned when he realized that he may have just had a conversation with God. He asked, “God, tell me what do you want me to do,” and he sensed God’s reply: *I want you to keep the Great Commission* (p. 47). Was this a real dialogue with God, or a series of providential events directed by God, or an overactive imagination? Perhaps Bruce was bored with his present ministry and wanted an honorable way out—who can object when the source is God? Wilkinson’s conservative evangelical approach to Bible teaching hardly puts him in the charismatic arena.

Consider this from Jim Cymbala:

Then quietly but forcefully, in words heard not with my ear but deep within my spirit, I sensed God speaking: “If you and your wife will lead my people to pray and call upon my name, you will never lack for something fresh to preach. I will supply all the money that’s needed, both for the church and for your family, and you will never have a building large enough to contain the crowds I will send in response.”²³

And so it was! The book goes on to explain how God fulfilled those extra-biblical promises.

These illustrations raise questions that often plague us: *Could this kind of thing happen to me? Does this happen only to “super-star Christians?” Why didn’t God respond to me when I asked for direction? Was I not listening? Am I unworthy?* The questions are perplexing, not only for Christian leaders but for the general Christian public as well.

Dr. Charles Ryrie warned about the problem of subjective leading and mysticism in Christian living in his book, *Balancing the Christian Life*, first published in 1969 and still in print. Ryrie called a mystical approach to understanding the Bible as an “affliction.” If it was an affliction then, it is

²³ Jim Cymbala with Dean Merrill, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), p. 25.

pandemic now. Ryrie said that mysticism is an extreme that afflicts “pseudospiritual people” and must be avoided:

Some of the symptoms are: “The Lord led me not to go to church”; “The Lord gave me such a wonderful thought this morning out of such-and-such a verse”—a thought which, upon examining the verse, is nowhere to be found; “I don’t need anyone to teach me the Bible—the Holy Spirit is the only teacher I need.” ...To employ a purely mystical approach to the understanding of the Word can lead to several serious errors. ...It is very easy to pass from a mystical meditation ungoverned by knowledge to saying, “The Lord led me,” and then to justify the action on the basis of ignorance of the Word. This is wishful thinking, not spiritual leading.²⁴

Another author who has greatly influenced my thinking is Garry Friesen, who, along with Robin Maxson, wrote *Decision Making and the Will of God* in 1980. They advocate making decisions based on God-given wisdom and common sense rather than begging God to reveal His “perfect” will for one’s life, an approach which lends itself to mysticism. The revised edition of 2004 states:

God has not promised to whisper perfect plans or omniscience into the mind of any believer who asks. Accordingly, the apostles counseled that when a decision is required, those who are “full of...wisdom” (Acts 6:3) and “prudent” (1 Timothy 3:2) will do the best job. ...Since the way of wisdom requires the believer to defend his decisions with sound reasons, he is not permitted to hide his motives behind a vague “the Lord led me.” ...The decision maker who is seeking wisdom determines which circumstances would render a given option wise and which ones would make it unwise. But he would not view those circumstances as a message from the Lord. ...While the theology of the traditional view might give immature believers undue confidence that they can find God’s will by listening to the inner

²⁴ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Press), 1969. Pp. 67-68.

impressions of their heart, the way of wisdom counsels them to seek the advice of mature believers on important decisions.²⁵

Biblical Revelation and the Role of Feelings, Emotions, and Desires

We must not divorce emotion completely from experience. Emotions make life delicious. We today, as well as the people of Bible times, do have inner promptings and impressions. These are undeniable if we are healthy humans. Good, as well as bad, desires come and go. But should we consider these as messages from God? Is a good desire motive enough and valid reason to proceed with a course of action? Do desires and impressions have the same level of authority as the Scriptures that we should obey? Consider the noble desire King David had to build the temple. This would surely have honored God and been a blessing to many. God gave a pointed message through the prophet Nathan not to proceed (2 Samuel 6-7).

Paul's *good* desire of taking the gospel to Asia (Acts 16:7), his desire to visit the saints at Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 2:17-18) and Rome (Romans 1:13) while commendable, did not work out because of over-riding circumstances. Good desires are just that—good desires. They are not necessarily a sign or message from God that we must pursue.

This leads to the conclusion that desires, impressions, promptings, and insights are not to be put on the same level as God's revelation found in the Bible. Are we to act on our impressions, ideas, or good desires if they do not violate Scripture? Absolutely, but with caution. While they may be a starting point, we must have a system of checks and balances in place so we do not go awry. We are never instructed or encouraged in the Bible to seek, listen to, or follow inner 'promptings' or 'impressions.' Those words are not biblical, and neither is the concept.

There are adequate examples of Satanic influence in the biblical record to make us realize that impressions must always be suspect. This subject alone could occupy much of this discussion, but suffice it to say that the Scriptures, wisdom

²⁵ Garry Friesen with J. Robin Maxson, *Decision Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004) pp. 248-250.

and common sense, opportunities and obstacles, and wise counsel, rather than feelings-based mystical experiences must govern our decisions and actions.

In non-moral decisions about which Scriptures are silent, “one should exercise good judgment...and choose one’s personal preference.”²⁶ Neither can circumstances or open doors be our sole guiding factor—after all, Jonah found a boat going to Tarsus, but it was hardly providential guidance.

God gave each of us intellectual capacity far beyond what any of us use. When we seem to have an original or fresh idea come to mind, it should not be construed as new revelation or a message from God. A Christian song writer may say, “God gave me this song,” or a Bible teacher may say, “God showed me this idea or insight.” Did He really? Perhaps meditation and imagination resulted in bursts of creativity from their already God-given intellect and abilities. A “new” idea may be one we previously heard or read and then forgot. Are impressions or “revelations” being mistaken for good old-fashioned creativity? God uses the ways He has gifted us, and we must acknowledge our total dependence on Him for all our godly endeavors and accomplishments. What then is the place for emotion and feelings in our Christian experience and is it a positive one?

Like every God-given attribute it can be used for either good or ill. Since all communication from God through the Bible is of a cognitive nature, it may well be that our feelings and emotions play a vital role in our *response* to that revelation. **In other words, our intellect has the role of receiving and understanding God’ Word, while our emotions have a role in responding to that revelation.** Much of our worship of God must involve our mind, but our emotions function in that experience as well. We all enjoy feeling good about worship, but that must never be the primary factor in worship. It is often said that doctrine divides and emotional experiences unite. This is misleading and false. Our human make-up differs radically, along with our biases and backgrounds, causing a diversity of emotional responses to any particular event.

Given the wide variety of ordeals we face as followers of Christ, we discover that frequently it will be in the arena of emotions and feelings that our faith will have its greatest tests. We will be discouraged, face despondency and despair.

²⁶ Ibid., 1980 edition, p. 263.

This may even come as a result of doubt and disbelief in the revealed revelation of God. No child of God is immune from such major hurdles in Christian experience. It is therefore, all the more important to have an objective standard to follow. That standard is the primacy and sufficiency of biblical revelation. Are we willing to trust it completely? With that in mind, this paper concludes with cautions regarding present-day mystical experiences.

Cautions Regarding Personal Mysticism

Satanic Warning

The mystical, spiritualistic realm includes Satan. He undermines and opposes God by counterfeiting Him. Satan disguises himself as an angel of light in order to deceive. In Genesis 3 he claimed to speak for God and he mixed lies with truth in order to distort God's revelation and successfully deceive God's people. In Matthew 4 he even quoted God's written revelation. Knowing this, how can anyone be sure the "voice" they hear is God's. Could it not be said that every false religious system has roots in dogma which Satan at some point "revealed" to someone vulnerable enough to run with it?

Retired pastor, Bill Cox, said, "In these last days, the absoluteness of Scripture will have to be done away with, and personal experience will be the rule. Otherwise Satan won't be able to have control. Mysticism is the next big move, and it even infiltrates the thinking of Bible-believing Christians. It is becoming more and more unpopular to preach the Word. People would rather hear your experience, so popular preachers today "disguise" the Word. As the authority and supremacy and sufficiency of Scripture dies out, there will be no anchor, and Satan will be able to convince the world to believe his lies.

Self-deceit Warning

Not only does Satan attempt to deceive, but we easily deceive ourselves (Jeremiah 17:9 and James 1:16, 22, 26). Not every coincidence, burst of inspiration, sudden realization, warm feeling, or vivid dream has a supernatural origin. We are creative individuals with tremendous mental and emotional capacities. Scripture promises God-given wisdom and skill for living to those who

fear God. If we need to wait for a “word from God” before making decisions involving career, marriage, major purchases, etc., then shouldn’t we expect God to reveal all decisions to us? What tie to wear, which gas station to use, what passage to preach? God has given us a capacity for logic, decision-making, assessment, intelligence, and wisdom—no doubt He wants us to use them.

In a secular magazine, *The Writer*, Jerry Cleaver recommended that writers begin their work day like this: “Go off by yourself and sit for five minutes a day and *do nothing*...Let your mind wander anyplace it wants to go without interfering.” Cleaver said the following will result:

Eventually your imagination will kick in, and you’ll begin to think of things and have ideas and insights during your five-minute sessions....Great inspirations come in a flash....Einstein said all of his great ideas just came to him, in a flash, just jumped into his mind. When? When his mind was clear and he wasn’t putting pressure on himself to perform....You get your best ideas not when you bear down, but when you let up.²⁷

While I have already referred to the role that subjective revelations play in the lives of Mormons, suffice it to say that one of their books, *Hearing the Voice of the Lord: Principles and Patterns of Personal Revelation*,²⁸ could have been written by some of the evangelicals mentioned in this paper.

If the average person can receive brain-flashes after five minutes and unbelievers can receive personal revelations from God, then how can Christians affirm that these same experiences come to them from the Holy Spirit?

Arrogance Warning

Roman Catholic nun, Mother Theresa, had mystical experiences early in her life. For the last fifty years however, she admitted that she never heard from God and called it her “dark night of the soul.” In writing about this, Bishop Raymundo J. Pena’s said:

²⁷ Jerry Cleaver, “5 ‘Nothing’ Minutes a Day—Just Try It,” *The Writer*, September, 2011, pp. 40-41.

²⁸ Gerald N. Lund, *Hearing the Voice of the Lord* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2007).

If we have rid our lives of gross sin and are seeking the Lord, we should not be concerned if we find ourselves without any sense of God's presence. Our senses and emotions are no safe guide to judging God's presence or absence. So long as we are not living in grave sin, we can be confident that the Lord is with us. In the normal course of spiritual growth, God provides moments of consolation, and allows long periods of desolation in order to purify us and perfect our faith.

St. Theresa of Avila warned against the pursuit of revelations and mystical experiences of God. First, she said, "We can easily deceive ourselves about the nature of spiritual experiences. Second, receiving special revelations or graces easily tempt us to sinful pride. Third, we should not desire for God to manifest Himself to us because selfishness is hidden in that desire; rather we should be seeking to manifest ourselves to God. That is, we should present ourselves to Him in prayer and focus on loving Him with all our mind and heart and strength and being."²⁹

I cannot vouch for Bishop Pena's theology, but he makes an excellent point regarding the prideful element inherent in spiritual experiences.

Biblical Warning

The Holy Spirit does not draw attention to Himself. John 16:14–15 makes this clear. Much of the justification for subjective mystical experience is based on faulty interpretations of biblical passages, such as Psalm 46:10, which has a context of nations at war. God tells them to '*cease striving*' and know that God will fight for them, which focuses on the sovereign control of God over all circumstances. When Elijah heard God's "still, small voice" he was not asking God to speak to him; he was asking God to take his life! Christians also pull being "led by the Spirit" out of context to claim individual guidance when the passage is specifically discussing the contrast between godly and ungodly living.

²⁹ Unfortunately Bishop Pena does not cite his source for this quote, but his article appeared in *The Amy Awards, 2007*, "Mother Teresa's Dark Night of Faith," pp. 13-14.

The text can never mean what it never meant. We should never read a verse in isolation from its context. There is no biblical justification for a private message from God to us, coming from the text to the original readers.

The popularity of devotionals and blogs has no doubt contributed to the practice of pulling a verse or phrase out of context and deriving “God’s truth” from it. People read the Bible to discover *What is God saying to me?* rather than *What is God saying about me and about Himself?*

Popularity Warning

Whether or not something is popular should have no bearing on its veracity. God’s truth is not determined by majority rule. Christian authors and speakers like John Piper, Henry Blackaby, Beth Moore and Wayne Grudem seem to have evolved in their beliefs regarding subjective revelation today. While they still claim to adhere to the authority of Scripture, their teachings no longer support the sufficiency of Scripture. We may surmise that as their popularity has increased, they have of necessity come up with “new” teachings in order to retain and expand their audiences. Publishing houses print material they can sell at a profit. Christians today have an unhealthy hunger for personal spiritual experiences, and they are driving the market.

Conclusions

Probably every Christian has experienced “interventions” from God, often recognizable only in hindsight. This paper does not address God’s intimate involvement in the details of our circumstances, which usually come unexpectedly, not because we seek them. Nor does it address the reality of “fellowship” with the Father and with His Son (1 John 1:3, 7) that we experience during prayer, meditation, singing to the Lord, reading God’s Word and Bible-based books, studying God’s Word, and while speaking God’s truth to others.

Proponents of evangelical mysticism claim that fellowship and communion with God is a two-way conversation, and that hearing from God involves more than what He says in His written Word—we must listen to the word He supposedly speaks into our heart. Let me ask this about fellowship: when is your

fellowship with someone the sweetest—when you are doing the listening or the talking? Usually the reason we listen to someone patiently is because it gives us a chance to plan what we will say next. Wouldn't fellowship with God have a similar approach? We enjoy sweet fellowship when we open up to Him and do the communicating. To enjoy Him speaking to us, we need only search His written Word. No additional confirmation of our specialness to Him is necessary.

That being said, experience teaches us that God does intervene in vivid, inexplicable ways during certain times. These include being a newborn believer (God may give something extra to confirm His reality), during times of extreme duress, in places with obvious demonic activity, and in cultures where the Word of God is not available. I hope I have made it obvious that such interventions should not be considered normative for Christians, nor should they be pursued.

This paper has mostly centered on the practices of Americanized evangelical Christians. It is my belief that seeking supernatural extra-biblical messages from God is not necessary today, and furthermore, is misguided and dangerous. It may be one of the heretical teachings that will deceive the elect in the end times.

We Christian teachers and leaders must warn our congregations about the following deceptions that Christian Mysticism is producing:

- 1 - Subjective feelings are replacing cognitive reasoning and biblical wisdom.
- 2 - Personal experiences are replacing biblical authority.
- 3 – Attempting to discern the Holy Spirit is replacing learning from God's written word.

Some evangelicals are reluctant to discount God speaking to His own today, because they do not want to "put God in a box." An equal danger might be putting people in a box. People have various personalities, responses to stimuli, and cognitive functions. Some perceive things rationally, logically, and objectively. Others are basically emotional, sensitive, and subjective. Just as siblings raised together will have different perceptions of their dad, so God's children have different perspectives about Him. Rational people will view God cognitively. Emotional people will more likely desire sensory experiences of God. None of us

can have perfect knowledge about God. We cannot fully understand His worth, His works, His ways, or even His written Word. So how could anyone possibly know for sure that a brain-flash they experienced came directly from God? (Of course, founders of cults and false teachers do claim certainty.)

I cannot discount a believer's experiences, but my preference is to avoid the jargon that gives the impression that God has spoken extra-biblically. Even if an insight proves to be true or a decision produces great results, we cannot positively attribute them to God or consider it "normal" for God to communicate with us this way.

Is the practice of Christian Mysticism an end-times phenomenon? I hope so—Come, Lord Jesus! I cannot know the answer to that question, and as you can see from this paper, I will not be still and silent and prayerfully attempt to manipulate God into revealing the answer to me. But I will close with an extra-biblical thought: "I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which [is continually being] delivered to the saints."

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