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## THE REVIEW

### The Theological Error of Spiritual Formation

By Dr. Bob Payne, Moderator IBFNA

Many years ago when my daughter was looking for a Christian college to attend, she, my wife, and I visited the campus of a well-known, now-defunct fundamental Christian college. In one of the buildings, I recall seeing a sign for one of the administrators that read something like, "The Director of Spiritual Formation." Although *spiritual formation* was a rather strange term that gave me pause, I could not just outright reject the term based upon my apprehension. As far as I knew, it was simply a new, trendy term for discipleship. I had a lot to learn!

#### The Background of Spiritual Formation

As time went on I learned that the term *spiritual formation* actually came from ancient paganism and Roman Catholic mysticism. One author describes the term as:

A movement that has provided a platform and a channel through which contemplative prayer is entering the church. Find spiritual formation being used, and in nearly every case, you will find contemplative spirituality and its 'pioneers' such as Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, and Henri Nouwen. Spiritual Formation is based on 'spiritual disciplines' that can be practiced by people of any faith to make them more 'Christ-like.' Rebirth through Jesus Christ and regeneration through the Holy Spirit are not essential. Rather it is a works-based 'theology' that has strong roots in Roman Catholicism and ancient paganism.<sup>1</sup>

The article just cited went on to describe the related term *contemplative spirituality*. The author describes it this way:

A belief system that uses ancient mystical practices to induce altered states of consciousness (the silence) and is rooted in mysticism and the occult but often wrapped in Christian terminology. The premise of contemplative spirituality is pantheistic (God is all) and panentheistic (God is in all). Common terms used for this movement are 'spiritual formation,' 'the silence,' 'the stillness,' 'ancient-wisdom,' 'spiritual disciplines,' and many others.<sup>2</sup>

Gary Gilley also describes the roots of the spiritual formation movement:

Some trace the roots of the Spiritual Formation Movement to 1974 when Father William Menninger, a Trappist monk, found an ancient book entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing* in the library at St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts. This 14th century book offered a means by which contemplative practices,



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long used by Catholic monks, could be taught to lay people. As Menninger began teaching these contemplative practices, his abbot, Thomas Keating, along with Basil Pennington, another Trappist monk, began to spread the concepts Menninger was teaching. But it was Richard Foster's 1978 book, *The Celebration of Discipline*, that launched the popularity and present interest in spiritual formation. It was by this landmark book, described by *Christianity Today* as one of the ten best books of the 20th century, that Catholic and Eastern Orthodox disciplines, practiced by the Desert Fathers and Mothers as well as monks and hermits, were introduced to evangelicalism. These disciplines were not completely unknown to evangelicals who were familiar with church history, but they were now being repackaged and offered as a means of spiritual growth and maturity. In fact, the implication was that without the use of these ancient contemplative methods true 'spiritual formation' was not possible.<sup>3</sup>

To those holding to this false doctrine of spiritual formation, prayer, Bible study, walking with Christ, and becoming active in the local church are not enough. We need to return to the ancient spiritual disciplines that are able to keep our flesh in check. As these false teachers expound their twisted doctrine, it is common for them to use just enough biblical terminology to lure unsuspecting and uninformed believers over to their side, even though what they are teaching is incredibly divergent from sound doctrine.

According to those who adhere to the spiritual formation movement, our prayer life is not good enough unless we practice "contemplative (centering) prayer." This practice has roots in the occult. Matt Slick rightly connects these "spiritual disciplines" with the emerging church movement, and says that contemplative prayer, "is the practice of relaxing, emptying the mind, and letting one's self find the presence of God within. It involves silence, stillness, patience, sometimes repeating something, and the practice of 'not knowing' as the person seeks God's presence."<sup>4</sup> This definitely does not fit the description of prayer that we find in the Word of God!

We find that in the spiritual formation movement Bible study is not enough either. Another "spiritual discipline" needs to be practiced, known as "sacred reading" (*lectio divina*). This is more than just reading the Bible, or the type of meditation of which David speaks in Ps. 119:148: "that I might meditate in thy word." A downloadable brochure from [contemplativeoutreach.org](http://contemplativeoutreach.org) gives some details about this strange practice:

*Lectio Divina* is one of the great treasures of the Christian tradition of prayer. It means *Divine Reading*, which is reading the book we believe to be divinely inspired. This tradition of prayer flows out of a Hebrew method of studying the Scriptures which was an interactive interpretation of the Scriptures by means of the free use of the text [allegorical hermeneutics] to explore its inner meaning. It was part of the devotional practice of the Jews in the days of Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

On the back page of the brochure it says in very new-age fashion:

Being transformed into the Word of God is a process that happens as we faithfully read, reflect, respond and rest in God's Word.

An attitude of resting in God's presence becomes a part of our daily lives. We become a channel of God's presence to others.

Living in union with God, we are able to transcend ourselves as the 'center' and experience all in God and God in all.

Our energy becomes one with the Divine Energy. We become merciful, compassionate and loving as God is merciful, compassionate and loving.<sup>6</sup>

This is manmade theology that has absolutely nothing to do with the Word of God. It has more in common with Roman Catholic mysticism and the New Age movement.

There are other unbiblical and/or occultic practices in the spiritual formation movement that we don't have time or space to cover, such as fasting, journaling, silence, observing the liturgical calendar, Christian yoga, prayer labyrinths, etc. I will leave those to your own investigation and study.

## Fundamental Colleges and Spiritual Formation

Just the other day I was doing a web search for schools that have courses in “Spiritual Formation.” I was surprised to come upon one course in a school that claims to be a fundamental Baptist college. The title of the course was “Spiritual Formation and Discipleship.” Now, I cannot say that schools that have courses like this are necessarily teaching mystic and occultic practices. What I can say is that they are definitely using mystic and occultic terminology.

The obvious question is “Why would an institution that professes to hold to sound doctrine use this type of jargon?” Some may do it because it is required by their accrediting agency (a topic for another article). Others may do it because it is the latest evangelical buzz word. Whatever the reason, even though the classes may be biblical (and I do not know that they are), these terms must be avoided.

Some may object and ask, “What difference does the label make as long as they are teaching the truth?” The church that I pastor, the Baptist Church of Danbury, Connecticut, seeks to consistently interpret the Word of God with a normal hermeneutic. Let’s say that I continued to be faithful to the Word of God, but changed the church name to Danbury Church of Latter Day Saints. As a Bible believer, would you have a problem joining my church? I think you would! Why? The answer is simple: words mean things, and labels do matter.

### Beth Moore and Spiritual Formation

Surprisingly, the message of Beth Moore has become quite captivating to some ladies in our fundamental Baptist circles. Although there are a multitude of theological reasons why you should steer clear of her (such as the obvious violation of 1 Tim. 2:12), spiritual formation is definitely one of those reasons. I will provide a couple of examples of Mrs. Moore’s heretical teaching concerning spiritual formation.

Matt Slick, in his internet article on Beth Moore, provides one example of her mystic practice of contemplative prayer. His article points to a YouTube video of Mrs. Moore’s preaching that was taken down. He quotes her as saying, “A true

lover of God once spoke about practicing God’s presence. To me that’s such a part of contemplative prayer. That we are able to absorb the reality that as we commune with God through prayer that He is with us, that His Spirit for those of us who are in Christ fills us, that we are drawn near to Him, that our souls find rest in Him.” Matt Slick goes on to explain that in the video Mrs. Moore was praising Brother Lawrence, who was an apostate Roman Catholic monk.<sup>7</sup>

Another YouTube video<sup>8</sup> gives an example of her belief in what we described earlier in this article as *Lectio Divina*. The video shows Beth Moore dramatically reading a selection of Scripture. Following the reading, Mrs. Moore states, “Without any comment, please, let’s pause and be still, and ask Jesus to speak His word to us.” There follows a long period of silent, emotional meditation while the large crowd tunes in to their inner selves, presumably waiting for Jesus to “speak His word to them.” Hasn’t God already spoken His Word to us? This practice has a greater similarity to eastern mysticism than it does to the Word of God.

Stay far away from Beth Moore and her false teaching.

### A Bible-Believer’s Reaction to Spiritual Formation

False teachers of the first century threatened the early church with their incipient Gnosticism. They communicated to the Christians that faith was inadequate to have a relationship with God. Instead, they needed the mystical knowledge (gnosis) that only those teachers possessed.

Spiritual formation is a modern Gnosticism, which promises believers something deeper than what they possess. To those teachers, practices such as studying the Bible and prayer are good, but you need the “spiritual disciplines” if you want true spiritual depth in your Christian life.

Paul’s warning to the believers in Colossae rings as true today as it did then. It warns us of modern false teaching to be avoided: “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” (Col. 2:8). May God give us the grace and courage to stand against the philosophy and vain deceit of the spiritual formation movement.

## Endnotes

1 Lighthouse Trails Editors (Nov. 15, 2011). *An Epidemic of Apostasy – Christian Seminaries Must Incorporate “Spiritual Formation” to Become Accredited*. Retrieved January 23, 2019 from <https://www.lighthouse Trails research.com/blog/?p=7733>.

2 Ibid.

3 Gary Gilley, *Roots of the Spiritual Formation Movement*. Retrieved January 23, 2019 from <https://tottministries.org/roots-of-the-spiritual-formation-movement>.

4 Matt Slick, *Centering Prayer* (Feb. 25, 2008). Retrieved January 23, 2019 from <https://carm.org/centering-prayer>.

5 *Lectio Divina: Listening to the Word of God in Scripture* (PDF Brochure). Retrieved January 23, 2019 from [https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/sites/default/files/private/lectiodivinabrochure\\_2018\\_0.pdf](https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/sites/default/files/private/lectiodivinabrochure_2018_0.pdf).

6 Ibid.

7 Matt Slick, *Beth Moore*. Retrieved January 24, 2019 from <https://carm.org/beth-moore>.

8 Posted by Tom Manning (Jan. 12, 2014). *Beth Moore Leads Lectio Divina-Lite at Passion 2012*. Retrieved January 24, 2019 from <https://youtu.be/JX9HcmxfyDQ>.

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# Birth and Adoption in the New Testament—Part 1

By Pastor Paul Gustine

In a recent article,<sup>1</sup> the authors try to present a compassionate view of infertility and childlessness. To support their position, they cite the relationship of God the Father to Jesus as the adopted “son of God” through his baptism. They also support their ideas with a notion that people enter the family of God by adoption when they choose to follow Jesus.

I disagree with this article concerning the understanding of procreation and of adoption in the New Testament text. Every child of God (John 1:12) is born of God (v. 13).

## God and the Believer

This concept of *birth* is repeated many times in the First Epistle of John. See 1 John 3:9, where God’s seed corresponds to the concept of birth. Jesus taught that one must be born twice to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5; compare 3:4, “second time”). The birth by water is natural birth (shared by all humanity, so that, one is “in Adam”). The birth by the Spirit is the birth from above (shared by those in the family of God, so that, one is “in Christ”).

The reality of two births continues in the Apostle Paul’s teaching on Adam’s fall and the grace of God through Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:12-21, where there are two classifications of mankind and two destinies). Paul, again, speaks of this birth by the Spirit in Titus 3:5 as “regeneration.”

Peter, too, uses similar language for entrance into God’s family (1 Pet. 1:18-23; especially v. 23, “being born again”). It appears to me that the parent-child relationship is presented in biological terms in the New Testament. One who is born of God is a child of God receiving the nature of God (2 Pet. 1:3-4).

In contrast, *adoption* is used by Paul alone in a few passages. Gal. 4:1-7 illustrates the meaning intended for this word. Here the one “adopted” is a natural-born child of his father. He plays with the children of the slaves who are his tutors and governors. When he is adopted (v. 5), at an age determined by his father (v. 2), he assumes the position and the privileges of the heir (v. 1).

I conclude that the New Testament teaches that a human person enters the family of God by being born of God, receiving the Divine nature, and is adopted by God to have position and privileges in the family of God. The term *adoption* is associated with the word *son* and does not convey entrance into the family. *Birth* is “the driving metaphor” in the New Testament, not *adoption*.

## God the Father and God the Son

Now I move to the discussion of the relation of God the Father and Jesus. Luke 1:35 reveals that the conception of Jesus involved a supernatural fertilization of Mary’s ovum. According to the genealogy of Luke 3, Jesus has a genetic inheritance that linked

him back to Adam. This identifies Jesus with the prophecy of “the seed of the woman” (Gen. 3:15).

Heb. 2:14-18 indicates that, in order for Jesus to be the deliverer and the high priest for His brethren, He had to be truly human (2:14, “flesh and blood”). Heb. 10:1-18 reveals that One Divine Person came from heaven and added to Himself a human nature along with His Divine nature (10:5, “when he cometh into the world”).

At the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:9-11), He was revealed to be the Son of God, and His baptism inaugurated His public ministry presenting Himself as Messiah (Luke 4:16-21). John 1:1-4 declares Jesus was a Divine Person who always had a Divine nature, but at a point in time also became a human (John 1:14). I contend that the New Testament does not teach that Jesus became the Son of God by adoption through water baptism by John the Baptist.

In the next article we will consult our Baptist forefathers about adoption and identify the function of the baptism of Jesus.

## Endnotes

1 Joel S. Baden and Candida R. Moss, “Reevaluating Biblical Infertility,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, September/October 2017, Vol. 43, No. 5, p. 20. “The fundamental insistence on biological procreation as divinely ordained, derived from the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, is called into question when we turn to the New Testament. There the most important parent-child relationship, that of God and Jesus, is presented in explicitly non-biological terms. Rather, the driving metaphor is one of adoption, a well-attested and well-respected practice in the Greco-Roman world. This comes out in Mark, the earliest gospel, which completely lacks a birth story for Jesus. For Mark, Jesus becomes the son of God through the rite of baptism with which the gospel opens. Even when a ‘biological’ relationship of God and Jesus is posited, it is not then imposed as normative on the community of Jesus’ followers. Quite the contrary: Paul does not value biological lineage for its own sake, but rather upholds a model of lineage by choice, as it were. Those who are part of the family are those who choose to follow Jesus. They are adopted children of God and co-heirs with Christ. Indeed, God sacrifices his biological child, Jesus, for the sake of his adopted children, the nascent Christian community.”

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# Who Were the Nicolaitans, and Why Do They Matter?

By Pastor Kevin Hobi

Nike was the Greek goddess of victory. *Nicolaus* is a name that means *conqueror of the people*. Our New Testament recognizes one man by this name. He was known widely by the first church to be “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.” He was born a Gentile in Antioch, one who had been proselytized by Judaism. He was one of seven among thousands chosen to serve the Lord as deacon, though perhaps having been a Christian for only a short time (Acts 6:5).

## Who Were the Nicolaitans?

Unfortunately, this spiritual man of faith shared his name with a group we find mentioned as a heretical threat in the Book of Revelation’s letters to the seven churches of Asia. As early as the writings of Irenaeus (c. A. D. 180), leaders held that the Nicolas of Acts 6:5 was the founder of the Nicolaitans of Rev. 2:6 and 2:15. Other church fathers believed that the group adopted only the name of their founder, who would not have approved of their heresy; but whatever Nicolaus’s role may have been, it seems clear that the Nicolaitan danger came from within

professing Christendom, not from without [see *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, “Nicolaitans,” 4.435].

The Nicolaitans, therefore, are an example from the history of the first-century church of a danger against which Paul warned the Ephesian elders: “For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also, of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:29-30). Although we may be able to discern a difference between this warning’s grievous wolves and its men seeking to draw away disciples, what both categories have in common is that they are dangers “among” the Ephesian churches, perpetrated by men arising “of your own selves” from the perspective of the Ephesian pastors.

The Lord gives the local church of Pergamum a similar citation regarding the Nicolaitan threat they faced. Drawing a parallel between the relationship of the false prophet Balaam to the children of Israel and

the relationship of the Nicolaitans to this local church, Jesus admonishes, “thou hast there them” (Rev. 2:14) and “so hast thou also them” (v. 15). Balaam spoke the word of the Lord. He was no Moabite. Nicolaitans were professing Christians in Pergamum, whose orthodoxy on many major doctrines of the faith must have been unassailable.

There was, however, a definable Nicolaitan doctrine (Rev. 2:15) that resulted in practices that our Lord hated (2:6). He describes it as the same doctrine that Balaam taught to Balak, the king of Moab. Balak desired to destroy God’s people through curses of special revelation from Balaam. The plan failed spectacularly as the prophet repeatedly and uncontrollably prophesied blessings instead. Balak reminded the prophet of the reward his inability to cooperate had forfeited (Num. 24:11), but we learn from Jude’s confirmation of Jewish tradition that Balaam’s greed found another way to get his reward (Jude 11).

Numbers 25 describes Israel’s sad fornication with the daughters of Moab and their idolatrous feasting while worshipping false gods (vv. 1-3). Jesus explains that Balak learned that plan from Balaam, and that its strategy was shared by Nicolaitan Christians. Specifically, the Nicolaitan heresy taught believers facing temptations from Moabite-like paganism to ignore the resolution of the Jerusalem Council, which counseled avoidance of meat sacrificed to idols and abstinence from fornication.

The meat from idolatrous sacrificial feasts, events that could involve acts of fornication, was not only a normal part of pagan worship, it was also a ubiquitous feature of first-century pagan culture.

Early papyrus birthday invitations have been found that illustrate the social importance of these feasts. One Corinthian parent celebrating the first birthday of a daughter sent an invitation to friends requesting their “company at the table of the lord Sarapis [a pagan god] at the Sarapeum [the temple of the pagan god]” [Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT), p. 361, fn. 14]. The first-century Christian could have trouble celebrating their neighbor’s daughter’s birthday unless they were willing to eat meat sacrificed to idols.

Refusing meat sacrificed to idols could also hamper political ambitions and business prospects.

The existing rule excluded members of the

Church not only from the public festivals which were the pride of the Ionian cities, but from the private clubs which connected their common meals with sacrificial rites and met in buildings dedicated to a pagan deity. Those who desired to participate in gatherings of the latter kind might have had much to urge in their defense; it was only by such wise concessions that Christianity could hope to leaven the life of these Greek cities; to stand aloof from all social reunions was to incur suspicion and dislike, and such conduct would end in a general uprising against the Church, perhaps in its suppression throughout Asia . . .

These cults were intimately connected with the interests of the local tradesmen and artisans, as well as of the municipalities and of those in authority; anyone who attacked the religion of an Asian city brought upon himself the ill-will of the whole population [Henry Swete, *Commentary on Revelation*, lxxv-lxxvii].

The Nicolaitan error taught that Christians did not need to be quite so different after all. It taught that for the church and its gospel to be relevant in contemporary times, it needed to participate in certain aspects of pagan culture, while ignoring their idolatrous and sexual overtones, so they could become better connected with and accepted by pagans. The view ultimately led to the degradation of Christian ethics, reaping pagan immorality in the church.

Whereas James had taught that the spiritual adultery of friendship with the world makes one the enemy of God (Jam. 4:4), Nicolaitans acted under the principle that greater conformity to the present evil age would be accompanied by the blessing of God on their ministry, even though Christ had given Himself to rescue them from their present evil age (Gal. 1:4).

### Why Do They Matter?

That it was necessary for the churches of the first century to understand what was wrong with the Nicolaitans, no Bible-believer today would deny. Jesus hated their deeds. He threatened the punishment of a local church for their tolerance of this error. But where are the idol-temples hosting birthday parties today? Who is the artisan whose guild meets there? What local grocery store butchers and sells meat

sacrificed to idols? Does it matter to us that Jesus hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans? Does He hate anything like them affecting our churches today?

One thing is clear—knowledge still puffs up and love still edifies (1 Cor. 8:1). In the spirit of submission to that critical admonition, please consider some other questions as I propose an answer. Does our current pagan culture include aspects that are infected with overtones of idolatry and illicit sex? Have any argued that we need to be better conformed to this present evil age in these areas of culture in order to ensure the relevance of the gospel today? The answer for both questions is, of course, “Yes, indeed.”

That answer to these questions inevitably leads the tender conscience to concern over the tolerance local churches have today for rock-n-roll music. Some would object that the term *rock-n-roll* is too nondescript to be useful when it comes to answering our question about the relationship between the Christian church and pagan culture; but is it not true that the Rock-n-Roll Hall of Fame has found the term descriptive enough for their institution? Our simple vernacular usage seems to know what belongs enshrined in that museum, so if a kind of music can be inducted there, I am referring to that kind here.

Can we say that the rock-n-roll-music aspect of our culture is infected with overtones of idolatry and sexual sin? Surely. No one at the Hall of Fame would deny that such has always been the case. They might include rebellion and illicit drug use as well. Can we say that any have argued from within Christendom that we need to be better conformed to this characteristic of our age in order to ensure the relevance of the gospel? Of course, many have, tragically following influential leaders like Rick Warren and Brian Houston. The music of once hymn-singing churches all across our nation is now the sad legacy of the Jesus Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Nicolaitan Christianity is labeled differently today – “Seeker Sensitive”; “Purpose Driven”; “Hillsong”; “Contemporary” – but the problem is still the same. Rock-n-roll includes overtones of idolatry and sexuality. So how can we say that the ministry philosophy using this part of our culture in worship and evangelism differs from the Pergamum problem? Friendship with aspects of the world that are infected with idolatry and fornication is enmity against God. Jesus still hates Nicolaitan-like practices. Let’s admit that they exist in our day and hate them too. The love that edifies begins with a love for our Father, who calls us to holiness, instead of the world (1 John 2:15).



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