

The Emergence of Mysticism in the Emerging Church

Ron Rhodes

Having read a substantive volume of material on today's emerging church movement, I find myself in agreement with a writer who said, "Any author attempting to profile the phenomenon of the 'emerging church' faces a daunting task."¹ Indeed, as another put it, the emerging church "is a rather slippery name for a rather slippery movement. By slippery, I mean that the movement is so new (originated in the late 1990s), so fragmented, so varied, that nailing it down is like nailing the proverbial Jell-O to the wall."²

No movement emerges in a vacuum. In any given culture, there are always reactions and counter-reactions to current predominant philosophical ideas. With that backdrop in mind, many people in postmodern western society are unsatisfied with traditional religion and are looking for something new. The emerging church movement seeks to meet this need, exploring new modes of expressing the gospel to postmodern western culture. Not surprisingly, no one in the movement is quite sure where they're going to end up. Emerging church leaders "do not all agree on where the church goes from here but they all believe that it must go somewhere, for they believe the modern church cannot connect with the postmodern mind."³ Many say the movement has arisen as a reaction against—some would say a *protest* against—the institutional church, modernism, and seeker-sensitive churches. Many would also say, however, that the real issue is not so much to protest the old but rather to find new ways of simply "doing church."⁴

In the emerging church movement, one will encounter a number of central themes. As will become clear below, some of these themes seem innocuous enough, while others are quite dangerous:

1. Participants in the movement serve God “out there” in the real world rather than isolating themselves “in here” within the walls of the church or within tight-knit Christian communities of like-minded people. They do not passively sit in pews, but rather want to stay actively involved in things.

2. Participants are community-oriented in their lifestyle. They are “people” persons who value relationships. Instead of merely *going* to church, they want to *be* the church.

3. Participants seek authentic experiences in preference to superficial religion. They also seek to be relevant in today’s changing culture.

4. Teaching in churches in this movement involve skits and narrative presentations as opposed to dry systematic theology or mere expositional sermons. Moreover, postmoderns are not just open to but *desirous of* the use of images, artwork, film, and video in church services.

5. Churches in this movement are open to new and creative ideas when it comes to worship. Because postmoderns are so experientially oriented, they want to enter into worship as an experience of the senses. Indeed, they seek what has been called *multi-sensory worship*.

6. Participants believe the Bible should be reanalyzed in varying contexts with a view to unveiling a multiplicity of valid perspectives as opposed to fixating on a single valid meaning of the text.

7. Participants believe theology ought to be more flexible, as opposed to being fixed and rigid.⁵

Among key players supportive of the movement are Robert Schuller, Richard Foster, Brennan Manning, Dallas Willard, Bruce Wilkinson, Erwin McManus, John Eldredge, and Leonard Sweet. Brennan Manning, a former Catholic priest who has written such popular titles as the *Ragamuffin Gospel* and *The Signature of Jesus*, has famous Protestant fans the likes of Max Lucado, Amy Grant, and Michael Card.⁶

This article will not attempt to be a general treatment of the emerging church movement, for such treatments are widely available. Rather, this article will more narrowly zero in on the mystical element within the movement. As a preface, however, it makes sense to first briefly address how the movement views the Bible, for it seems clear that a weak view of the Bible has opened the door for this plunge into subjectivism and mysticism.

A Weak View of the Bible

Many in the emerging church movement deny that there is any such thing as absolute truth, and also deny that the Bible is infallible. The Bible is appreciated not for any so-called absolute truths but is rather appreciated for its mystery.

Further, many choose not to use an objective approach to interpreting Scripture but rather believe there is a multiplicity of valid perspectives as opposed to a single valid meaning of the text. Emerging church leader Tony Jones says “we must stop looking for some objective Truth that is available when we delve into the text of the Bible.”⁷ It is thus not surprising that many in the movement say we can no longer look to the Bible *alone* as a guide for spiritual living. No longer is Scripture the *normative* standard of truth. It is claimed we cannot reach the new generation using the old ways. Many now look to tradition instead of the Bible. What this

ultimately means is that many in the emerging church movement end up embracing a *Christianity without the Bible*. For example, instead of drawing their beliefs and practices from the pages of the Bible, many in the emerging church movement want a more experience-oriented Christianity and thus incorporate various forms of liturgy borrowed from Roman Catholic tradition— prayer beads, icons, and the like—even though scriptural justification for such liturgical practices is completely lacking. This allegedly leads to a much richer and more authentic spiritual experience.

Many are now taking a more experiential approach and seek some kind of spiritual encounter with Christ in the pages of the Bible. As Patrick Flanagan put it, “Take a passage of Scripture, read it and reflect on it. Let it filter through you and notice the words, ideas, and feelings that draw you. Pick a word, a phrase, a sentence in the Gospels. Ask the Lord to reveal himself while you are listening. Let yourself become absorbed in what he is like, what he cares about, what he is doing.”⁸ Patrick urges: “Scripture is not the Lord, but a privileged place to meet him. We need to have a contemplative attitude toward Scripture; let the Scriptures be themselves, listen to them, and ask the Lord to reveal himself while we are listening.”⁹ “Imagine you are in a given situation with Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Peter, James, John, or any of the men and women disciples in the Gospels. Apply your senses—let yourself be at the place, see it, hear it, taste it, smell it, sense its atmosphere.”¹⁰ Such interaction with Scripture is obviously highly subjective in nature.

Theology has also apparently fallen into disfavor. We are told that in these postmodern days, evangelism is to be done not by persuasive theological arguments but by showing love to others. We are told that the credibility of Christianity’s truth claims hinges not on the strength

of apologetic arguments and the prowess of theologians who can “make a good case” for Christianity, but rather solely via the love and good deeds that flow from the Christian community.

Of course, emerging church leaders who argue in this manner—rejecting the “old way” of apologetic and theological argumentation in favor of the “new way” of love and good works—have succumbed to an *either/or* mentality that is utterly unbalanced. The better policy is to adopt a *both/and* approach—that is, utilize both apologetic and theological arguments, *and* exercise love and good works.

In any event, of great concern is the fact that many in the emerging church movement do not place a high premium on what must be considered essential doctrines of the Christian faith.¹¹ Indeed, it is not uncommon to find many shying away from the view that the Bible is the absolute Word of God, that Jesus is the only way of salvation, and that Jesus is God in human flesh. Traditional Christian morality is also being challenged with many, for example, shying away from the view that the Bible takes a clear stand against such sins as homosexuality. Such dogmatic claims are said to be a part of a rationalistic Christianity that people are no longer interested in. People desire not the hard facts of absolute truth but rather stories, skits, media presentations, proverbs, and the mystery and mysticism that are involved in seeking to know and interact with a transcendent God. As Christian apologist Gary Gilley puts it, before the emerging church leaders are done, “all the essential teachings of the Bible have been deconstructed, redefined, or dismissed. And what has been put in their place? Oddly, but consistent with postmodern thinking, nothing but mystery and questions.”¹²

To many in the emerging church movement, theology is and always will be in a state of flux. It will never be absolute. Many hold that there has not been much consistency in Christian beliefs throughout the history of the Christian church and within Christianity's many diverse traditions. Scot McKnight, himself favorable to the emerging church movement, argues that "the emerging movement tends to be suspicious of systematic theology. Why? Not because we don't read systematics, but because the diversity of theologies alarms us," and "no genuine consensus has been achieved," and besides, "God didn't reveal a systematic theology but a storied narrative." The emerging church movement "doesn't have an airtight system or statement of faith," for those in the movement do not believe that "any one theology gets it absolutely right." Hence, "a trademark feature of the emerging movement is that we believe all theology will remain a *conversation* about the Truth who is God in Christ through the Spirit, and about God's story of redemption at work in the church. No systematic theology can be final."¹³

One emerging church leader goes so far as to propose a "heretical orthodoxy." Heretical orthodoxy means moving theology away from "a study of God as object, or a theology that seeks to believe the right things" and toward an idea of "Christianity as trying to live in the right way." So, it's more about *daily experience* than *right doctrine*.¹⁴

An Inclusivist Approach

In keeping with a denial of absolute truth and an infallible Bible, Brian McLaren, a noted leader within the emerging church movement, is representative of others in his inclusivistic approach when it comes to different religions. He asserts, "I don't believe making disciples must equal making adherents to the Christian religion. It may be advisable in many (not all!)

circumstances to help people become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish contexts.”¹⁵ Such a view seems preposterous in view of the fact that Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism have radically different concepts on God(s), the identity of Jesus Christ, the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, the doctrine of sin, and the means of salvation. Christianity and Judaism also have radically different views on Jesus Christ, not to mention Scripture (Christians accept the New Testament as the Word of God). But in the subjective, experiential, and mystical world of the emerging church, such contradictions don’t seem to bother anyone.

One emerging church leader credits Hinduism with helping him to become an inclusivistic Christian: “I am a Christian today because of a Hindu meditation master. She taught me some things that Christians had not. She taught me to meditate, to sit in silence and openness in the presence of God....I believe that all people are children of God.”¹⁶

It is sobering and disturbing that emerging church leader Leonard Sweet, whose books have been endorsed by famous Christian leaders, has introduced New Age ideas—brimming with subjectivism and mysticism—into the Christian church. In this movement, Christianity is literally being synthesized with other religious beliefs, as will become increasingly clear below.

Experience Oriented

I’ve already briefly touched on the experiential aspect of the emerging church movement, but I must now consider a few more details. In his book *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, D. A. Carson made the observation that “for almost everyone within the movement” there is “an emphasis on feeling and affections over against linear thought and

rationality, on experience over against truth.”¹⁷ Researcher Don Closson likewise comments that in this movement, “feelings and affections matter more than logic and reason, one’s experience more than propositional truth claims.”¹⁸ Dan Kimball, author of *The Emerging Church*, observes that “the basis of learning has shifted from logic and rational, systematic thought to the realm of experience. People increasingly long for the mystical and the spiritual rather than the evidential and facts-based faith.”¹⁹

Those in the emerging church movement don’t want to wade through the “hard facts” of systematic theology but are rather more interested in a sense of the supernatural, of the spiritual mystery that goes along with knowing God. Gary Gilley notes the backward reasoning of the movement: “The old paradigm taught that if you had the right teaching, you will experience God. The new paradigm says that if you experience God, you will have the right teaching.”²⁰ Subjectivism rules in the emerging church movement!

It seems quite clear that emerging church enthusiasts yearn for a sense of the transcendent. And they are open to anything that might help facilitate this sense of the transcendent. For this reason, many in the movement are open to such things as medieval ritual, candles, incense, icons, stained glass, prayer stations, labyrinths, and Benedictine chants. They are also open to contemplative prayer, which I will discuss at length below.

An Increasing Openness to Mysticism

So far I have demonstrated that many today are embracing a *Christianity without the Bible, a faith without truth*. At the very least, the Bible is being marginalized and minimized, and is not viewed as infallible and inerrant. In keeping with this, many in the emerging church

movement are increasingly open to various forms of mysticism. This includes (but is not limited to) deep breathing, yoga, chanting (like Benedictine monks), the use of mantras (involving the repetition of holy words to help induce a deep meditative state), and contemplative prayer (which typically involves an altered state of consciousness and a sense of oneness with all things). It is believed that such practices will yield a richer, more authentic spiritual experience, even though there is no mention of such practices in the Bible, and even though this is much more akin to Eastern religions than to Christianity.

New Age mysticism has certainly penetrated the Christian church. In his book *Quantum Spirituality*, for example, emerging church leader Leonard Sweet speaks in New Age terms in his assertion that as the church we “are connected to one another within the information network called the Christ consciousness.”²¹ The term “Christ consciousness” is common in the New Age movement, but completely foreign to the pages of the Bible. Sweet even quotes from the writings of New Agers and famous mystics of the past—including Matthew Fox, David Spangler, Ken Wilber, Joseph Campbell, Thomas Merton, Carl Gustav Jung, and John Shelby Spong. It is therefore baffling to see his books endorsed by so many major Christian leaders today.

Some in the emerging church movement seem to believe that mysticism is part and parcel of “true” Christianity. In his book, *The Barbarian Way*, Erwin R. McManus writes:

Somehow Christianity has become a non-mystical religion. It’s about the reasonable faith. If we believe the right things then we are orthodox. To know God in the Scripture always went beyond information to intimacy. We may find ourselves uncomfortable

with this reality; but the faith of the Scriptures is a mystical faith. It leads us beyond the material into an invisible reality.²²

Sweet thus suggests, “Somewhere on the journey from Jerusalem to Jericho, there must be a Damascus Road. It does not matter whether these ambushing, energy-releasing experiences of God are of the intensity of a floodlight, or a flashlight. For each person the experience will be of different candlepower.”²³ Each of us allegedly have the capacity to embrace and experience some level of mystical encounter with God.

McManus describes a mystical experience he had that is similar to what New Agers call cosmic consciousness (the consciousness that all things are one):

For a period of about 20 minutes, I felt that every tree, every blade of grass, and every pool of water became especially eloquent with God’s grandeur...These specific, concrete things became translucent in the sense that a powerful, indescribably, invisible light seemed to shine through. The beauty of the creations around me...seemed...to explode, seemed to detonate, seemed to radiate with glory. An ecstasy overcame me that I can’t describe. It brings tears to my eyes as I sit here and type. It was the exuberant joy of simply seeing these masterpieces of God’s creation...and knowing myself to be among them. It was to be one of them, and to feel and know that “we”—all of these creatures, molecules, and phenomena—were together known and loved by God, who embraced us all into the ultimate “We.”²⁴

There are quite a number of mystics who speak of the beauty of creation as a means of inducing—or at least helping to foster—a mystical state. Patrick Flanagan writes: “We should begin by focusing on something other than ourselves. It may be looking at natural beauty, listening to music or the sound of the surf, or gazing at the moon, anything that will absorb us. By enjoying nature, we begin to see beauty as the garment with which the Almighty clothes himself.”²⁵

Art work can also be used as an “entry point” for mystical contemplation. In the book *Spiritual Classics*, edited by Richard Foster and Emilie Griffin, we read:

Consider using a visual focal point for contemplative prayer. A painting of the face of Jesus may serve in this way. If you choose a painting with many different objects or people depicted (such as a painting of the Last Supper), you may wish to begin with the whole scene and then slowly narrow your concentration to a single detail. An exquisite object, such as a rosebud (being a sign also of God’s grandeur) may also serve as an entry point to contemplation.²⁶

Of great concern is the fact that many mystics believe not only that one can personally commune with God, but that God can communicate to them matters beyond what is found in the Bible. One can allegedly hear God’s voice in the mystical state. One can experience personal visions, inner voices, and private illumination.²⁷ This, combined with a rejection of the authority of the Bible, spells disaster for the Christian church.

The Mystical Practice of Contemplative Prayer

Perhaps the most significant manifestation of mysticism in the emerging church movement is contemplative prayer. Among the more vocal modern promoters of such prayer is Richard Foster, who often cites the works of famous Christian mystic Thomas Merton.²⁸ Merton's writings, in particular, have served to take contemplative prayer out of the monasteries and bring it into the Christian mainstream.²⁹ Foster says that Merton's book, *Contemplative Prayer*, is a "a must book."³⁰ Foster approvingly quotes Merton in supporting his view that contemplative prayer offers the participant "an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons."³¹ But the Christian must be willing, Merton says, to receive this light, for the Holy Spirit will not waste such gifts on the unwilling.³² Other Christian mystics of old often cited in support of this practice include the likes of Ignatius of Loyola, Catherine of Siena, John of the Cross (a Carmelite monk), Theresa of Lisieux, and George Fox.

George Fox is worthy of special mention, not only because of his significant influence in church history, but also because his writings are prominently featured in the work of modern mystics like Richard Foster.³³ According to the testimony of George Fox (1625-1691), he had endured years of spiritual conflict during which he was seeking *authentic* Christian faith (much like those in today's emerging church movement). He traveled throughout England speaking to priests and religious leaders, and he searched the Scriptures daily. He found no satisfying answers, however, and this was a great discouragement to him (much like today's postmoderns). Fox was about to give up when he encountered a glimmer of hope. He recalls: "When all my hopes in men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I

tell what to do, then, oh! then I heard a voice which said, 'There is One, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition.' And when I heard it my heart did leap for joy."³⁴

Through his direct experience with Christ, Fox came to believe that God gives every person a gift of divine Inner Light or Inner Voice. Every human heart is viewed as an altar or shrine of God. All one needs to do is wait upon God, and God will speak to the heart of the sincere seeker. Depending on how people respond to that Inner Light (God desires obedience), people can be given more light. Fox's main message thus became: "Christ is here among us, and He will directly teach our hearts if we are receptive to it."

This Inner Light doctrine ultimately meant that, for Fox and his followers, revelation was no longer limited to the Holy Scriptures. Even though the Bible is to be valued, its words should not be taken as God's final and definitive revelation. New revelations could come today just as they did in the days of the apostles. After all, the men who wrote the Bible did so under the power of the Holy Spirit. Since that same Holy Spirit works through us today, revelations can continue today. Even when we do read the Bible, we must depend on the Holy Spirit who wrote those Scriptures to guide us in our understanding of them.

Those who have studied Fox's beliefs see definite parallels with today's emerging church movement—the yearning for spiritual authenticity, an alleged lack of answers in the Scriptures alone, discouragement with status-quo spirituality, a mystical encounter with Christ, waiting upon God, the idea that the Bible should not be viewed as God's final and definitive revelation to man, and an ongoing modus operandi of subjectivism and experientialism. Fox's views gave rise to the Quaker denomination.

Of course, the emerging church teaching on contemplative prayer also draws very heavily from Buddhism, Hinduism, and the New Age movement. One often encounters such terms as “enlightenment,” “oneness,” “emptiness,” the “void,” and the “nothingness.” During contemplative prayer, one is said to experience a profound mystical silence. Despite obvious Eastern influences, contemplative prayer is consistently presented among emerging church enthusiasts as a Christian practice—rooted in teachings of ancient Christian mystics.

In this form of mystical prayer, one becomes totally silent in order to listen to God. One becomes deeply quiet, empties the mind (as in Eastern meditation), falls into an altered state of consciousness, and goes into the “center” of one’s self where one merges with the divine. This is why this form of prayer is sometimes called “centering prayer.” In this state, one can allegedly engage in imaginative encounters with Jesus Christ in the silence of one’s soul.

Such a state is said to involve “pure awareness.” One enters into a state of complete nonthinking, letting go of all thoughts so that only pure awareness remains. In this state, one cultivates an empty mind by surrendering all thoughts. Rational thought is completely transcended. At this point, one is said to experience a sense of oneness with all things, something known among New Agers and advocates of Eastern religion as “cosmic consciousness.” One gains the sensation that he or she is utterly immersed in God so that God and the mystic are no longer separate but one. We are told that “the first and most important result [of this prayer] is an increasing sense of God’s presence in all things.”³⁵

Much of this sounds amazingly similar to Zen Buddhism. According to Zen proponents, Zen (from the Japanese word *ch’an*, meaning “meditation”) cannot be objectively described in words. One must simply subjectively *experience* it.³⁶ In a non-thinking state, in which rational

thought is excluded, one experiences the truth.³⁷ It is not without significance that Thomas Merton, whose books have introduced contemplative prayer into the Christian mainstream, is regarded by Zen masters from Asia as the preeminent authority on their kind of prayer in the United States.³⁸

Two modern authors who have written extensively on contemplative prayer, blending Christianity with Eastern mysticism, are Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington. Ray Yungen addresses these individuals at length in his book, *A Time of Departing*. Pennington's treatise is entitled *Centering Prayer*, while Keating's classic on the subject is entitled *Open Mind, Open Heart*. Yungen categorizes these two as "major evangelists for contemplative prayer."³⁹

Christian apologist Marcia Montenegro makes special note of Keating's view that the Holy Spirit will not "barge in" if a person is using merely reason and intellect. Indeed, Keating says, it is "only when we are willing to abandon our very limited human modes of thought and concepts and open a welcoming space that the Spirit will begin to operate in us at this divine level...When we Center we practice leaving our human thoughts and reason behind and attending to the Divine, to the Spirit."⁴⁰ Keating espouses the view that contemplative prayer involves a state "in which the knower, the knowing, and that which is known are all one. Awareness alone remains. The one who is aware disappears along with whatever was the object of consciousness. This is what divine union is."⁴¹ Indeed, Keating notes that "God and our true Self are not separate. Though we are not God, God and our true Self are the same thing."⁴²

Montenegro likewise notes Pennington's emphasis on "a shift in consciousness" and the need to go beyond "ordinary consciousness" into a state of "pure consciousness" in which we leave the "false self" for the "true self," thereby attaining a "unity-consciousness" with God. In

Pennington's view, "so long as a man is aware he is praying, he is not yet praying," for the person who is truly praying must "rise above thought."⁴³

Even our youth today are being drawn into participating in the mystical practice of contemplative prayer. Tony Jones, the U.S. National Coordinator of Emergent-US and a minister to youth at a church in Minnesota, was a featured presenter at the Zondervan National Pastors Conference held in early 2006. The back cover of his book, *Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Contemplative Practices in Youth Ministry* (Zondervan), states that this book "is hands down the most comprehensive primer on the study and use of spiritual and contemplative practices for the benefit of your teenagers—and especially your own soul."⁴⁴

The Use of Mantras

A popular practice commonly used to induce a mystical state in contemplative prayer involves engaging in breathing exercises (much like Taoists) and using a mantra (or sacred word), which is repeated over and over again. What is a mantra? Ray Yungen tells us:

The translation from Sanskrit is *man*, meaning to "think," and *tra*, meaning "to be liberated from." Thus, the word literally means to *escape from thought*. By repeating the mantra, either out loud or silently, the word or phrase begins to lose any meaning it once had. The conscious thinking process is gradually tuned out until an altered state of consciousness is achieved.⁴⁵

It would seem that many modern Christian mystics believe that simply because they utilize a *Christian sounding mantra* makes the practice itself a *Christian practice*. Gary Thomas urges: “Choose a word (*Jesus* or *Father*, for example) as a focus for contemplative prayer. Repeat the word silently in your mind for a set amount of time (say, twenty minutes) until your heart seems to be repeating the word by itself, just as naturally and involuntarily as breathing.”⁴⁶ By use of such a mantra, one can allegedly experience the love of God⁴⁷ as well as enter a deeply mystical state in which one feels a sense of euphoria and oneness. A mantra enables one to slip into a state “beyond our ordinary consciousness.”⁴⁸ In such a state, participants believe they have made a genuine connection with the sacred—the divine.

Another well known proponent of contemplative prayer, Dom John Main (who studied meditation in the Far East and was heavily influenced by the fifth-century writings of mystic John Cassian⁴⁹), suggests using the word *maranatha* as a mantra:

Sit down....Breathe calmly and regularly. Silently, interiorly, begin to say a single word. We recommend the prayer phrase MA-RA-NA-THA. Recite it as four syllables of equal length. Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything—spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts and images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning to simply saying the word.⁵⁰

Popular Catholic mystic Brennan Manning likewise teaches: “Choose a single, sacred word...Repeat the sacred word inwardly, slowly, and often. Enter into the great silence of God. Alone in that silence, the noise within will subside and the Voice of Love will be heard.”⁵¹

Christian apologist Gary Gilley explains that “it is apparently the repetition of the mantra that triggers the blank mind. With the mind blank and the heart open to whatever voices or visions that it encounters, accompanied with a vivid imagination, the individual enters the mystical state.”⁵²

Among Manning’s famous fans are popular Christian singers Michael W. Smith and Michael Card, and popular Christian authors Larry Crabb, Eugene Peterson, Max Lucado, and Philip Yancey. Contemplative prayer *truly has* gone mainstream in today’s church.

Misreading the Bible

Amazingly, many who practice contemplative prayer try to argue that there are verses in the Bible that support such a practice. Victoria Pierce claims that the practice of silent contemplation has been a part of the Christian tradition for thousands of years. “There are many examples in the Bible where people spent time alone in silence communing with God....Even Jesus spent time alone, at one point wandering the desert for 40 days in solitude.”⁵³ Of course, Pierce fails to mention that there is a big difference between people spending time alone with God (like Jesus) and the mystical practice of contemplative prayer in which an altered state of consciousness is induced.

A common verse often cited is Psalm 62:5, where we read: “My soul, *wait in silence* for God only, for my hope is from Him” (emphasis added). Some take the *waiting in silence* as being a form of (or at least something similar to) contemplative prayer. In context, however, the verse has virtually nothing to do with prayer or contemplation, but rather simply encourages believers to wait without distraction in eager expectation for God to act in deliverance.

Another verse often taken out of context is Psalm 46:10, where we read: “*Be still, and know that I am God*” (KJV, emphasis added). The act of being still is taken to be an act of deep contemplation. Again, however, in context this verse has virtually nothing to do with prayer or contemplation. As Ray Yungen put it, “once the meaning of *still* is examined, any contemplative connection is expelled. The word means to *slacken*, to *cease* or *abate*. In other words, the context is to slow down and trust God rather than get in a dither over things. Relax and watch God work!”⁵⁴ Marcia Montenegro thus concludes: “This verse is not about becoming absolutely still to ‘listen’ to God. There is no biblical support in this verse or any other for practicing certain breathing techniques, for repeating a phrase over and over, for letting the mind go blank, or for going beyond thinking in order to experience a ‘merging’ with God, as taught in spiritual techniques adapted from Buddhism for Christians, or as taught in mystical teachings usually labeled as contemplative or centered prayer.”⁵⁵

A Christian Assessment

It is difficult to know where to begin in critiquing the emerging church movement—especially in regard to its marginalizing of the Bible and its openness to mysticism. Suffice it to say that from a biblical viewpoint, the movement is truly a target-rich environment. In fact, we might say that the *emerging* church is more accurately called the *diverging* church since it diverts from orthodoxy on its view of the Bible and its openness to Eastern mysticism. It seems clear that what this movement has “emerged” into is not Christian in any traditional, historic, or orthodox sense of the word. Indeed, it has emerged from the orthodox to the unorthodox;

from objectivism to subjectivism and mysticism; and from absolutism to relativism.⁵⁶ Let us now consider the details.

God's People Are Being Deceived

One might initially find it difficult to believe that so many Christians in the church could be so woefully deceived. However, the biblical testimony is that God's people can indeed succumb to false doctrine. Ezekiel 34:1-7, for example, indicates that God's sheep can be abused and led astray by wicked shepherds. Moreover, Jesus warned His followers: "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (Matt. 7:15- 16). Why would Jesus warn His followers to "watch out" if there was no possibility that they could be deceived?

Jesus also warned His followers: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many....Many false prophets will appear and deceive many people" (Matt. 24:4,11). Why would Jesus warn His followers of such deception if it were not possible that they be deceived and end up believing a lie.

In 2 Corinthians 11:2-3 the apostle Paul warned Christians: "I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ." Paul clearly saw the possibility that Christians could be deceived and led astray by false doctrine.

In Acts 20:28-30 the elders of the Ephesian church were warned: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of

the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.”

Ephesians 4:14 likewise warns that people can be “tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive.” Second Timothy 4:3-4 warns us that “the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.”

In view of such passages, it seems clear that Christians can indeed be deceived and led astray by false doctrine. Those who are ungrounded in biblical truth are especially vulnerable. In today’s experience-based culture, the deception is massive indeed. If there’s ever been a time when Christians need to contend for the faith once-for-all delivered to the saints (Jude 3), that time is now.

The Folly of Minimizing God’s Word

While emerging church services feature multi-sensory worship (using skits, storytelling, and various forms of media), Jesus emphasized the Word of God in making disciples: “If you abide in my word, you are my disciples indeed” (John 8:31). While emerging church leaders say we can no longer look to the Bible alone as a guide for spiritual living, church leaders according to the Bible are to preach God’s Word “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, with the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). While emerging church leaders say we

should merely “love” people into the church, biblical Christians are called to “always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (1 Pet. 3:15).

Not one to mince words, the apostle Paul sternly instructed young Timothy: “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16). He affirmed to Timothy: “From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

Paul certainly recognized the importance of the words spoken by the Savior: “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). The tragic reality is that many today have abandoned the truth—holding to a Christianity without the Bible—and consequently find themselves in bondage to a whitewashed (Christianized) mysticism that may look good on the outside, but on the inside is nothing but Eastern religion—a *false* religion.

There can certainly be no doubt that Christ is very much against false doctrine. Those who doubt this should peruse Revelation 2–3 where we read Christ’s words to the seven churches of Asia Minor. In this passage, Christ chastises those who tolerate false doctrine and commends those who take a stand against it. For example, Christ commends the church at Ephesus because it “put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false” (2:2). He commends the church at Pergamum because it “did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among

you, where Satan dwells” (2:13). But He also chastened this church, saying: “I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam,” and “you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (2:14-15). He also chastened the church at Thyatira: “You tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray” (2:20). May it burn into our minds that Christ from heaven even now observes and evaluates our own stand against false doctrines in the church. Let us not be found wanting!

Christians today are called to follow the practice of the Bereans, who examined the Scriptures daily to ascertain whether the things they had been taught by Paul were really true (Acts 17:11). The Bereans tested *all* truth claims against Scripture. As we follow their lead, we find that the mysticism and subjectivism that is part and parcel of the emerging church movement is nothing but dangerous falsehood.

Let us resolve to focus our sternest attention not on mystical encounters but on the Word of God: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom” (Col. 3:16). For, indeed, it is the Word of God alone that is “lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Ps. 119:105).

Truth Is Not Relative

It is important to notice the contradictory nature of the truth claims of emerging church leaders. Their continued affirmation that there is no such thing as absolute truth is itself presented *as* an absolute truth. Leaders of the movement relentlessly assert that we cannot know truth with any certainty—and yet they seem rather certain in making this claim. They continually criticize different sectors of Christianity for arrogantly claiming they have the

“correct interpretation” of Christian doctrine and practice, apparently blind to the fact that *their own* views claim to be the “correct interpretation” of these matters. And while claiming that these different Christian sectors are wrong in imposing their beliefs on others, emerging church leaders certainly feel free to impose their mystical beliefs on everyone. Emerging church leaders seem clueless that their thinking abounds with such self-contradictions. Contrary to their problematic views, even a cursory look at the Bible reveals that Christianity rests on a solid foundation of absolute truth (see 1 Kings 17:24; Ps. 25:5; 43:3; 100:5; 119:30; John 1:17; 8:44; 14:17; 17:17; 2 Cor. 6:7; Eph. 4:15; 6:14; 2 Tim. 2:15; 1 John 3:19; 3 John 4,8).

The Illogic of Inclusivism

The openness of some emerging church enthusiasts to other religions constitutes another example of the illogic that is part and parcel of the movement. The fact is, the leaders of the different world religions set forth radically different and contradictory ideas about God (theism, pantheism, panentheism, polytheism, etc.). Beyond this, in Christianity a person is saved by placing personal faith in Jesus Christ with no works involved, while in other religions (Hinduism, for example) people must accomplish their own salvation by works. In terms of the soul, Christians believe that we live once and die once (Heb. 9:27) and look forward to a future day of bodily resurrection after which we will live forever with a personal God (1 Cor. 15:42-57). Hindus, by contrast, say the soul is born over and over again in human bodies with the ultimate goal of escaping from the wheel of karma and being absorbed into the impersonal Universal Soul. If one of these religions is right (Christianity), then the others must necessarily be wrong, for contradictory truth claims cannot all be true at one and the same time.

The Problem with Mysticism

There are notable dangers in engaging in mystical practices. First, mysticism is insufficient as a ground upon which to build our knowledge of God. The Bible stresses the importance of objective, historical revelation.⁵⁷ For example, John 1:18 tells us: “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only [Jesus], who is at the Father’s side, *has made him known*” (emphasis added). In the empirical world of ordinary sense perceptions, Jesus was seen and heard by human beings as God’s ultimate revelation to mankind. No wonder Jesus said, “If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well” (John 14:7). Likewise, the apostle Paul stressed the importance of objective, historical revelation. In Acts 17:31, for example, he warned the religious men of Athens of the objective reality of future judgment based on the objective evidence of the resurrection of Jesus. Based on how people respond to this objective, historical revelation, they will spend eternity in a real heaven or a real hell. No subjectivism here!

Second, those who place faith in mysticism seem blind to the possibility of spiritual deception. What if that which mystics assume to be genuine “god-consciousness” is in fact less than God, or at worst Satan, the great impersonator of God and the father of lies (John 8:44; 2 Cor. 11:14)? R. D. Clements wisely warns, “Satan is quite capable of providing spiritual experiences for the undiscerning. And there is evidence that some, if not all, of the mystic experiences obtained by using Eastern meditative techniques are being exploited by Satan in this way.”⁵⁸ Even mystic Richard Foster admits it is possible to encounter “spiritual beings” who are not on God’s side when participating in contemplative prayer. He says he surrounds himself

with “the light of Christ” and verbally requests that all bad spirits leave. Former New Age psychic Marcia Montenegro says this reminds her of her psychic days when she and other psychics would invoke a “white light of protection” against evil spirits.⁵⁹

Related to this, Christian apologists John Weldon and John Ankerberg warn that “almost all meditation other than biblical meditation develops psychic powers, inculcates a nonbiblical, occult worldview, and can open the door to spirit contact.”⁶⁰ They also warn that the number of well-meaning people who have embarked on a visualization program for physical health, psychological understanding, or spiritual advancement and ended up involved in the occult is not small. Books on visualization carry numerous anecdotes of how even the well-intentioned and seemingly nonoccult use of visualization catapulted people into the New Age movement, psychic development, and/or spirit contact.⁶¹

Third, altered states of consciousness can be dangerous and can lead to harmful consequences. For example, there are increasing reports of people who have found the practice of Transcendental Meditation to be harmful.⁶² Altered states of consciousness have been found to lead to contact with spirits.⁶³ Moreover, some deep meditators have developed increased anxiety, confusion, and depression.⁶⁴ Too much deep meditation can hinder logical thought processes.⁶⁵ Finally, one researcher found that “as a person enters or is in an ASC [altered state of consciousness], he often experiences fear of losing his grip on reality, and losing his self-control.”⁶⁶

Fourth, contemplative prayer’s emphasis on attaining a sense of oneness with all things (including a sense of oneness with God) lies in direct contradiction to the biblical view of the eternal distinction between God the Creator and His creatures (Isa. 44:6-8; Heb. 2:6-8). Put

another way, the Eastern worldview (monism) directly conflicts with the Christian worldview (theism).

And fifth, mystical contemplative techniques can actually hinder *true* contemplation, as defined in the Bible. Again, it is former New Ager Marcia Montenegro who warns:

God's Word teaches us to think and use our minds. Rational thinking and reason flow from the nature of God. We can be still or quiet, of course, in order to contemplate God and His perfect love, justice, and mercy. We can be still and appreciate His might. But we do not need to numb our brains or create a mystical experience to do so; in fact, these techniques will hinder us from practicing true contemplation.⁶⁷

In other words, we can't really *use* our brains rightly to mentally contemplate God in His Word if we've *numbed* our brains via Eastern meditation. That makes about as much sense as me purposefully crashing my computer before trying to use it to write this article.

The Case for *Christian* Meditation

Scripture defines meditation in terms of the individual believer objectively contemplating and deeply reflecting upon God and His Word (Ps. 1:2; 19:14; Josh. 1:8) as well as His Person and faithfulness (Ps. 119; cf. 19:14; 48:9; 77:12; 104:34; 143:5). There is obviously a big difference between subjectively emptying one's mind to meditate on nothing and objectively filling one's mind with the Word of God to meditate on the Living God.

Christian meditation calls us to look upward to God so that our minds may be filled with godly wisdom and insight, and so that our hearts may be filled with comfort, happiness, and joy. To echo the opening words of the psalmist, “Blessed is the man...[whose] delight is in the law of the Lord, who meditates on his law day and night” (Ps. 1:1-2).

Many words in the Hebrew language are rich with nuances of meaning that sometimes fail to come across in the English translation. The Hebrew term for “meditation” is such a word. In different contexts, “meditate” can mean to *utter, imagine, speak, roar, mutter, meditate, and muse*. For example, the word is used in Isaiah 31:4 to express the roar of a lion. It is used in Isaiah 38:14 in reference to the sound of the mourning of doves. In both cases, the idea seems to be that outward expression is an outgrowth of strong inner emotions and thoughts.

The Hebrew term for “meditation” seems to carry the basic idea of “murmuring.” It portrays a person who is very deep in thought, mumbling with his lips as though talking to himself. When David meditated on God’s Word, he concentrated so intensely that he no doubt murmured with his lips as he read. *This* is the kind of objective meditation Christians may participate in.

A Closing Warning from Charles Hodge

Charles Hodge was a Reformed theologian of days past who issued a strong warning against reliance upon mysticism. His words, though uttered long ago, are still relevant for our day: “The prophets came saying, ‘Thus saith the Lord.’ Men were required to believe and obey what was communicated to them....It was the outward and *not the inward Word* to which they were to attend.” He stated: “In no case do we find the apostles calling upon the people,

whether Jews or Gentiles, to look within themselves, to listen to the inner word. They were to listen to the outward word; to believe what they heard, and were to pray for the Holy Spirit to enable them to understand, receive, and obey what was thus externally made known to them.” Indeed, Hodge says, “without the written word, men everywhere and in all ages, are ignorant of divine things, without God, without Christ, and without hope in the world.” He warns that “there is no criterion by which a man can test these inward impulses or revelations, and determine which are from the spirit of God, and which are from his own heart or from Satan, who often appears and acts as an angel of light.” Therefore, “to tell men to look within for an authoritative guide...is to give them a guide which will lead them to destruction.”⁶⁸

¹ Eddie Gibbs, “Emerging Solutions—and Problems: Review of D. A. Carson’s Theological Analysis of Brian McLaren,” *Christianity Today*, October 19, 2005, Internet edition.

² Gary Gilley, “The Emerging Church,” Part 1, *Think on These Things*, April 2006, Volume 12, Issue 4, Southern View Chapel web site.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Gibbs, “Emerging Solutions—and Problems.”

⁵ See Gilley, “The Emerging Church,” Part 1.

⁶ Ray Yungen, *A Time of Departing* (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails, 2002), 77.

⁷ Tony Jones, cited in “Emerging Church,” Wikipedia Online Encyclopedia.

⁸ Patrick Flanagan, “Contemplative Prayer Lifts Hearts and Minds to God,” *The Record*, February 26, 1998, Internet edition.

⁹ Flanagan.

¹⁰ Flanagan.

¹¹ See Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes, *Conviction Without Compromise: Standing Strong in the Core Beliefs of the Christian Faith* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2008).

¹² Gilley, "The Emerging Church," Part 1.

¹³ Scot McKnight, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church," *Christianity Today*, February, 2007, Internet edition.

¹⁴ J. M. Berger, "In This Theological Discussion, God is Considered Optional," *Boston Globe*, November 19, 2006, Internet edition.

¹⁵ Brian McLaren, cited in David Kowalski, "Appropriate Response to the Emerging Church Movement," posted at www.apologeticsindex.org.

¹⁶ "Emergent Manifesto: Emerging Church Comes Out of the Closet," posted at Lighthouse Trails web site, April 25, 2007.

¹⁷ D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 29.

¹⁸ Don Closson, "The Emerging Church," posted at Probe Ministries web site.

¹⁹ Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 60.

²⁰ Gary Gilley, "The Emerging Church," Part 3, *Think on These Things*, June 2006, Volume 12, Issue 6, Southern View Chapel web site.

²¹ Leonard Sweet, *Quantum Spirituality* (Trotwood, OH: United Theological Seminary, 1991), 122.

²² Erwin R. McManus, *The Barbarian Way* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 60-61.

²³ Sweet, 76.

²⁴ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 178.

²⁵ Flanagan.

²⁶ *Spiritual Classics*, eds. Richard Foster and Emilie Griffin (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 20.

²⁷ MacArthur, 27.

²⁸ See, for example, *Devotional Classics*, eds. Richard Foster and James Bryan Smith (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 65.

²⁹ Yungen, 57.

³⁰ Yungen, 74.

³¹ Yungen, 69-70.

³² Merton writes: "We have forgotten that contemplation is the work of the Holy Ghost acting on our souls through His gifts of Wisdom and Understanding with special intensity to increase and perfect our love for Him. These gifts are part of the normal equipment of Christian sanctity....But it is also true that God often measures His gifts by our desire to receive them, and by our cooperation with His grace, and the Holy Spirit will not waste any of His gifts on people who have little or no interest in them" (cited in *Spiritual Classics*, 18).

³³ For example, see *Spiritual Classics*, 127ff.

³⁴ George Fox, cited in J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1999), 91.

³⁵ Ken Kaisch, *Finding God* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1994), 283. See Yungen, 31.

³⁶ Stephen Short, "Zen and the Art of Not Knowing God," posted at Christian Research Institute web site.

³⁷ Alan Watts, *The Spirit of Zen* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1958), 18.

³⁸ *Spiritual Classics*, 17.

³⁹ Yungen, 63.

⁴⁰ Thomas Keating, cited in Marcia Montenegro, "Contemplating Contemplative Prayer: Is It Really Prayer?" posted at Christian Answers for the New Age (CANA) web site.

⁴¹ Thomas Keating, *Foundations for Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Life* (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002), 64.

⁴² Keating, 127.

⁴³ Montenegro, "Contemplating Contemplative Prayer."

⁴⁴ Tony Jones, *Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Contemplative Practices in Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), back cover.

⁴⁵ Yungen, 18.

⁴⁶ Gary Thomas, *Sacred Pathways* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 152.

⁴⁷ The book *Spiritual Classics* suggests: "Practice *lectio divina* (sacred reading) by taking a Bible text that you love, reading it over attentively, then entering into prayer through a single word or phrase. Dwell inside the text, experiencing God's love for you abundantly" (35).

⁴⁸ Keating, 51.

⁴⁹ Cassian wrote: "What is required of us is a journey into profound silence....Meditation is the way to silence because it is the way of silence....The purpose of meditation and the challenge of meditation is to allow ourselves to become silent enough to allow this interior silence to emerge. Silence is the language of the spirit" (*Spiritual Classics*, 156).

⁵⁰ Dom John Main, cited in Robert Wicks, *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1995), 467.

⁵¹ Brennan Manning, cited in Gilley, "The Emerging Church," Part 3.

⁵² Gilley, "The Emerging Church," Part 3.

⁵³ Victoria Pierce, "Retreat to Teach the Art of Silent, Contemplative Prayer," *Daily Herald*, October 8, 2005, Internet edition.

⁵⁴ Yungen, 36.

⁵⁵ Marcia Montenegro, "Meditation and Psalm 46:10," posted at Christian Answers for the New Age (CANA) web site.

⁵⁶ Credit goes to Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, "A Postmodern View of Scripture" (pending publication), for this pithy summary statement on problems in the emerging church movement.

⁵⁷ See R. D. Clements, *God and the Gurus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 38-39.

⁵⁸ Clements, 42.

⁵⁹ Montenegro, "Contemplating Contemplative Prayer."

⁶⁰ John Weldon and John Ankerberg, "Visualization: God-Given Power or New Age Danger?" Part 1, *Christian Research Journal*, Summer 1996, 27.

⁶¹ Weldon and Ankerberg, 21.

⁶² Kenneth Boa, *Cults, World Religions, and You* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1986), 163.

⁶³ Tal Brooke, *Riders of the Cosmic Circuit* (Batavia, IL: Lion Publishers, 1986), 39-50.

⁶⁴ James Hassett, "Caution: Meditation Can Hurt," *Psychology Today*, November 1978, 125-26.

⁶⁵ Vishal Mangalwadi, *When the New Age Gets Old* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 81.

⁶⁶ Arnold Ludwig, *Altered States of Consciousness*, 16; cited in Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Answers to Tough Questions* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 83.

⁶⁷ Montenegro, "Meditation and Psalm 46:10."

⁶⁸ Charles Hodge, "Objections to the Mystical Theory," *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 98-104.