

Richard Foster

*General Teachings/Activities**

Modern Christian Mysticism

Medieval mysticism has managed to survive within small pockets of Roman Catholicism for centuries but has gone largely unnoticed by evangelicals. It is true that a few groups, such as the Quakers, have always kept some aspect of mysticism within range of evangelical awareness, and elements of mystical practices have actually thrived in charismatic circles right down to the ranks of Fundamentalism. But classical mysticism was virtually unknown in Evangelical circles until 1978 when Quaker minister Richard J. Foster published *Celebration of Discipline, the Path to Spiritual Growth*. Hailed by *Christianity Today* as one of the ten best books of the twentieth century and voted by the readers of that magazine as the third most influential book after the Bible, *Celebration of Discipline* has blown the doors off evangelicals' understanding of spirituality. What Foster has done, in essence, is reintroduce to the church the so-called "masters of the interior life," as he likes to call the Medieval mystics. He declares that they alone have discovered the key to true spiritual life and slowly, over the last few years, convinced multitudes that he is right. It seems to me that Foster's recipe for Christian living has been simmering in the pot for over two decades, but as of late has caught fire. New forces and new players have popularized Foster's ideas to a new set of Christians and it seems to be rapidly taking hold. This is due to the efforts of organizations such as Youth Specialties, numerous Bible colleges, and a rash of books and speakers, all introducing mystical practices and theology to our young people and our young ministers. Many of these, having grown up in churches that no longer major on the teaching of Scripture, and are thus lacking Biblical discernment, are easy prey for spiritual sounding techniques, especially those that promise such personal and life changing encounters with God. Following is an overview into Foster's key teachings.

In General

Celebration of Discipline alone, not even referencing Foster's other writings and teachings and ministries, is a virtual encyclopedia of theological error. We would be hard pressed to find in one so-called evangelical volume such a composite of false teaching. These include faulty views on the subjective leading of God (pp. 10, 16-17, 18, 50, 95, 98, 108-109, 128, 139-140, 149-150, 162, 167, 182); approval of [New Age](#) teachers (see Thomas Merton below); occultic use of imagination (pp. 25-26, 40-43, 163, 198); [open theism](#) (p. 35); misunderstanding of the will of God in prayer (p. 37); promotion of visions, revelations and [charismatic gifts](#) (pp. 108, 165, 168-169, 171, 193); endorsement of rosary and prayer wheel use (p. 64); misunderstanding of the Old Testament Law for today (pp. 82, 87); mystical [journaling](#) (p. 108); embracing [pop-psychology](#) (pp. 113-120); promoting [Roman Catholic](#) practices such as use of "spiritual directors," confession, and penance (pp. 146-150, 156, 185); and affirming of aberrant charismatic practices (pp. 158-174, 198).

Foster's Mystic Heroes

Foster introduces to the unsuspecting reader literally dozens of mystics, some from the Christian tradition, some not. Many of these, he assures us, have traveled to depths of spiritual experience that we moderns cannot even imagine. Foster wants us to know that these individuals knew the secrets to an encounter with God. If only we would follow their pattern, we too could enjoy what they enjoyed. Just who are these mystics? Here is a thumbnail sketch of three of Foster's favorites:

Meister Eckhart

Eckhart, a Dominican monk who lived in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, ranks among the great Roman Catholic mystics such as Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, and Julian of Norwich. Toward the end of his life, Eckhart was charged (and found guilty after his death in 1327) with heresy for his mystical assertions, which the Catholic Church determined had bled over into pantheism. Eckhart "believed that in every human soul there is something of the very nature of God. Here it is that the human soul meets God... [His] doctrine of the human soul has lasted to the present, and is reaffirmed whenever one speaks of a Divine Spark within each of us."^[1] Eckhart made statements such as these, "Henceforth I shall not speak about the soul, for she has lost her name yonder in the oneness of divine essence. There she is no more called soul: she is called infinite being." And, "She plunges into the bottomless well of the divine nature and becomes one with God that she herself would say that she is God." Such statements not only bothered the Medieval Church, but some more modern researchers have found agreements in Eckhart's philosophy with all the major points of Hindu mystics.^[2] Other scholars are not so certain about Eckhart's pantheism, but his statements certainly leave the door open for such interpretations. Yet Eckhart is considered to be one of the most important Christian mystics of the Middle Ages, and both ancient and modern mysticism reflect his views. Eckhart's Divine Spark corresponds almost directly with the teachings of Eastern Mysticism, with the difference that the Divine Spark in Christian Mysticism is defined as God who resides in every human being.

Thomas Merton

Foster cites and/or quotes Merton on at least nine separate occasions in *Celebration of Discipline*, yet Merton was not a Christian. He was a twentieth-century Roman Catholic who had so immersed himself in Buddhism that he claimed he saw no contradiction between Buddhism and Christianity, and intended to become as good a Buddhist as he could.^[3] But despite his doctrinal views and New Age leanings, Foster considers Merton's *Contemplative Prayer*, "A must book,"^[4] and says of Merton, "[He] has perhaps done more than any other twentieth-century figure to make the life of prayer widely known and understood."^[5] Merton wrote, "If only [people] could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other."^[6]

Ignatius Loyola

We know Loyola today mainly due to his founding of the Society of Jesus, or the order of the Jesuits, in 1534. One of the missions of the Jesuits was to fight the battles of the church against infidels and heretics, in what is now termed the “Counter-Reformation.” For our purposes, Ignatius’ contribution lies in the creation of his *Spiritual Exercises* which provided specifications for spiritual self-examination and the mental and spiritual conditioning of the Jesuits. Foster’s disciplines seem to draw heavily upon Ignatius.

St. John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila are also mystics of note, involved in the sixteenth century Counter-Reformation seeking to overturn the Reformation. These mystics believed that through contemplation a union with God could be obtained which would eradicate sinful actions and tendencies.

Foster’s Main Teachings -- *Celebration of Discipline*

As are concerning as many of Richard Foster’s teachings and mentors, far more disturbing are the two main thrusts of his spiritual formation system. The first is his use of what he calls the “Spiritual Disciplines.” The second is closely related—“Contemplative Prayer”—which is rapidly becoming the rage throughout much of evangelicalism, especially among the youth.

Spiritual Disciplines as a Means of Grace

It might be best to begin this section by relaying an experience that Foster shares in *Celebration of Discipline*. Having come to the conclusion that there must be “more spiritual resources than I was experiencing,” he prayed, “Lord, is there more you want to bring into my life? I want to be conquered and ruled by you. If there is anything blocking the flow of your power, reveal it to me.”^[7] God seemed to answer this prayer through a growing impression that something in his past was impeding the flow of life, so he set aside blocks of time on three consecutive days to listen to God in absolute silence, through the use of journaling, a process whereby God is supposed to reveal His mind to the silent participant. After the third day, Foster took his lists to a friend, who volunteered to serve as his confessor, who prayed for healing for all the sorrows and hurts of Foster’s past as presumably revealed by God. It was following this experience of [journaling](#), an experience not taught in the Bible but common in the occultic world, that it seemed to Foster that he “was released to explore what were for me new and uncharted regions of the Spirit. Following that event, I began to move into several of the Disciplines described in this book that I had never experienced before.”^[8]

It is most disturbing that Foster’s *magnum opus* stems from a questionable Divine encounter of a dubious nature. But it is also significant to realize that Foster’s system for spiritual formation is not drawn from the Scriptures, but from subjective experiences involving unbiblical methodologies, and reinforced by Roman Catholic mystical practices. At the very least, this should give pause to any seeker of truth. It must not be automatically assumed, as many seem to do, that Foster has rediscovered the missing jewels of spirituality.

Or as [Eugene Peterson](#) describes it in the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Celebration of Discipline*, “Like a child exploring the attic of an old house on a rainy day, discovering a trunk full of treasure and then calling all his brothers and sisters to share the find, Richard J. Foster has ‘found’ the spiritual disciplines that the modern world stored away and forgot, and has excitedly called us to celebrate them. For they are, as he shows us, the instruments of joy, the way into mature Christian spirituality and abundant life” (p. 206). Even more to the point, the dust jacket of this edition assures us “that it is **only by and through these practices** that the true path to spiritual growth can be found” (emphasis mine). If spiritual growth is dependent upon the spiritual disciplines described in Foster’s book, should not we have expected to find this truth in the Scriptures? Why did God reveal them, not to the apostles, but to apostate Roman Catholic mystics, and then to Richard Foster as he studied the mystics and used occultic techniques of meditation? We need to tread very carefully through this spiritual minefield.

The Spiritual Disciplines

But just what are the Spiritual Disciplines which are absolutely essential to our spiritual development? Foster breaks them into three categories: **inward**, **outward** and **corporative**. The first two **inward disciplines** both deal with prayer (and will be the subject of an update to this report at a later date). Fasting is the third, and as might be expected, his instructions on fasting are purely extrabiblical. The purpose behind fasting, the value of it, and the methodology are interesting, but purely subjective and unauthoritative. The final inward discipline is study. The new reader of Foster might expect that he would direct us to the study of Scripture as the primary means of spiritual growth. But Foster has broader ideas. Actually, there are two “books” to be studied: verbal and nonverbal. Verbal books include any literature, and one of the important means of study is repetition. Here he sees the use of a rosary and/or a Hindu type prayer wheel as being effective (p. 64). After a number of suggestions on reading books, Foster finally discusses the type of books to read to enhance spiritual growth. At last, we think he will turn to the Word, and he does, for two paragraphs, before rushing off to recommend reading the Medieval mystical classics. The nonverbal book is mainly the “reading” of nature. Here, with St. Francis, he encourages “making friends with the flowers and trees and the little creatures that creep upon the earth” (p. 74). We should also be students of people, and of ourselves, and while there is undoubted value in this, many have spent a lifetime studying nature, people, and themselves and have no clue about God. Repeatedly, we find in Foster that he is just not that interested in the study of Scripture, except as it serves his purpose for contemplative meditation.

The **outward disciplines** begin with simplicity, starting with the simple life as modeled by the heretical cult known as the Shakers. Extreme mystic Thomas Kelly tells us that simplicity allows us to live out of “The Divine Center” (whatever that is), and existentialist Kierkegaard claimed it led to holiness. In attempting to find a Biblical base for his view, Foster makes the Old Testament civil laws a pattern for New Testament Christianity, and manages to misinterpret virtually every scriptural passage he uses (although he scores points on seeking the kingdom of God first). Next up is solitude. Instead of a nice chapter on the importance of breaking free from the noise and distractions of our world and focusing on God and His Word, we enter into the mystical world of Medieval Catholicism, Quakerism, and Eastern mystics. Quotes flow from Merton, Teresa of Ávila, John Woolman, George Fox, and St. John of the Cross. Terms like “The Divine Center,” “The Divine Opening,” and “the dark night of the soul,” dominate. It is here that we are taught to keep a journal as we “listen to the thunder of God’s silence” (p.108). The next discipline is “submission,” and it is in this chapter that we receive our heaviest dose of psychobabble, including: “self-fulfillment,” “self-actualization,” “loving ourselves,” and mutual submission within marriage. The final discipline is service, and as with the others, this one too is based more on writings of the mystics than on the Scriptures. This is only expected from Foster, because he places far more importance on mystical experiences than he does on the Word. For example, he writes, “True service comes from a relationship with the divine Other deep inside. We serve out of whispered promptings,

divine urgings” (p. 128). Not only does Foster consistently elevate these subjective experiences over the Scriptures, but in this chapter on service Foster recommends self-abasement: “The strictest daily discipline is necessary to hold these passions in check. The flesh must learn the painful lesson that it has no rights of its own. It is the work of hidden service that will accomplish this self-abasement” (p. 131, cf. p. 133). This is in direct contradiction to Paul’s teaching in Colossians 2:20-23, which tells us that self-abasement has no effect on the passions of the flesh.

The final category of disciplines is the **corporate**—and here Foster does no better. The first corporate discipline is that of confession; and we are not surprised to discover that Foster supports the position of the Roman Catholic Church, complete with penance and absolution (pp. 146-149). And why not? For [Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#) assures us that “when I go to my brother to confess, I am going to God” (p. 146), and Foster wants us to know, “The assurance of forgiveness is sealed in the Spirit when it is spoken by our brother or sister in the name of Christ” (p. 148). Since none of this is drawn from Scripture, how can Foster be so sure? Well, not only do his favorite mystics back his view, but so does personal experience. Once, when receiving the confession of a lady she, “looked at me and ‘saw’ superimposed upon my eyes the eyes of Another who conveyed to her a love and acceptance that released her to unburden her heart” (p. 155). While nothing in the Bible remotely implies such an experience, we are left to assume that the eyes she saw were the eyes of God.

As for the discipline of worship, we find that worship “is a breaking into the Shekinah of God, or better yet, being invaded by the Shekinah of God.... We have not worshiped the Lord until Spirit touches spirit.... [And] it all begins as we enter the Shekinah of the heart” (pp. 158-162). This convoluted understanding of worship is augmented with a strong charismatic flavor. As a matter of fact, “if Jesus is our Leader, miracles should be expected to occur in worship. Healing, both inward and outward, will be the rule, not the exception” (p. 165). Such services will have prophecies and words of knowledge (p. 165), and that is because, “The mightiest stirring of praise in the twentieth century has been the charismatic movement. Through it God has breathed new life and vitality into millions” (p. 168). But even more disturbing is the idea that in the worship of God, “Our rational faculties alone are inadequate.... That is one reason for the spiritual gift of tongues. It helps us to move beyond mere rational worship into a more inward communion with the Father. Our outward mind may not know what is being said, but our inward spirit understands. Spirit touches spirit” (p. 169). Remember above how we have not worshiped until Spirit touches spirit -- now we see the process. It is as we move beyond the mind and into mystical, subjective experiences, that true worship takes place.

With all that Foster has already communicated, the discipline of guidance is predictable. “Many,” he tells us, “Are having a deep and profound experience of an Emmanuel of the Spirit -- God with us; a knowledge that in the power of the Spirit Jesus has come to guide his people himself; an experience of his leading that is as definite and as immediate as the cloud by day and the pillar by night” (p. 175). The model, of course, of this kind of guidance is the mystic. We are also introduced at this point to the Catholic concept of Spiritual Directors (pp. 185-187), something that Foster believes only Roman Catholic monastics know much about today.

Foster brings everything together with his last discipline, that of celebration. Here we are to express joy in all that we have learned thus far in the book, even participation in “holy laughter” on occasion (p. 198).

Robert Webber, professor of theology at Wheaton College, sums up Foster’s impact well, “Over the past two decades, my own personal spiritual pilgrimage has taken me away from the propositional and rationalistic mind-set that proclaims an intellectualized proof-oriented faith toward a Christianity of practice and experience” (p. 208). Webber is, of course, erecting a strawman. No one is calling for a purely intellectualized faith devoid of practice and experience. What those who draw their cue from Scripture, and not mystics, are calling for is a Christian faith, experience, and practice that is rational, intellectual, makes sense, and most importantly, is solidly grounded on the Word of God. Foster and company have taken many far afield in pursuit of mystical experiences that lead to a pseudo-Christianity that has the appearance of spirituality, but not the substance.

[1] Georgia Harkness, *Mysticism*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1973), p. 106.

[2] See Winfried Corduan, *Mysticism: an Evangelical Option?*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), pp. 106-107.

[3] See Ray Yungen, *A Time of Departing*, (Silverton, Oregon: Lighthouse Trails Publishing Company, 2002), p. 75.

[4] Richard Foster and Emilie Griffen, *Spiritual Classics*, (San Francisco: Harper, 2000), p. 17.

[5] As cited in Yungen p. 75.

[6] Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, Image Edition of 1989*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 157, 158.

[7] Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Third Edition, (San Francisco: Harper, 1978), p. 149.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 150.

* Excerpted and/or adapted from the February 2005 *Think On These Things*, "Mysticism Part II," by Pastor Gary Gilley, Southern View Chapel, Springfield, IL 62703. For a primer on mysticism, see Gilley's January 2005 *Think On These Things*, "[Mysticism Part I: Mysticism, a Way of the Past, the Wave of the Future.](#)"

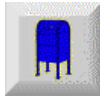




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