

# **Mysticism: A False Model of the Christian's Communion with God and Sanctification**

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Human spirituality has suffered more from the assault of mysticism than from any other enemy. Even among Christians, mysticism is overwhelmingly misunderstood, rampantly practiced against every caution, and is a vital conduit for the introduction of a great volume of false doctrine into the world. Today, mysticism is wildly popular among Christians. Movements such as contemplative spirituality, spiritual formation, and in large part the charismatic branch of evangelical Christianity all have significant elements of mysticism.

Because of extensive involvement in mysticism, the result to Christianity through the ages has been nothing less than devastating. In generation after generation mysticism has produced heresy and war, and from association with the name of Christ has done significant harm to the reputation of Christians and the church.

The purpose of this presentation is to define mysticism, and then to determine whether the biblical description of communion with God, and of sanctification, meets that definition. Other benefits will accrue in the journey.

## **The Definition of Mysticism**

According to the concise *Oxford English Dictionary*, a mystic is “a person who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to attain unity with the Deity or the absolute, and so reach truths beyond human understanding.”<sup>1</sup> While anything mystical is something “having a spiritual, symbolic, or allegorical significance that transcends human understanding... relating to ancient religious mysteries or other occult rites.”<sup>2</sup> The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* adds this illumination, “In modern usage ‘mysticism’ generally refers to claims of immediate knowledge of Ultimate Reality whether or not this is called ‘God’ by direct personal experience;”<sup>3</sup> Finally, Francis Schaeffer emphasizes the unintelligibility of mysticism, “Mysticism is nothing more than a faith contrary to rationality, deprived of content and incapable of communication. You can bear witness to it but you cannot discuss it.”<sup>4</sup>

Conclusion: Mysticism is an ancient and persistent heresy, emphasizing the inward and subjective experience of alleged communion with God, brought about by the effort of the individual, and resulting in the attainment of an unintelligible and indescribable mental state. Since it is false communion with God, it is always detrimental to the person who practices it.

## **The Course of Mysticism**

We may follow the course of communion in three steps: a misunderstanding of the nature of God and communion with God; human initiative and effort as the means in bringing about the false state of communion; and then its results in false revelation, fallacious life guidance, and emotional emptiness and depression.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. rev., (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1134..

<sup>4</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*, (IVP: Downers Grove, 1968), 61.

Mysticism often goes astray with a false concept of God. Pantheistic mystics may substitute “nature,” or the universe for “god.” Idol-worshipping mystics substitute a false god, like Dionysus or Diana, as their god-object. Some Christians hold to an orthodoxy regarding the Object of their worship, but fail in their conceptualization of communion with Him. Mysticism is defined by its subjective, ineffable experience where one loses consciousness of self and is consumed into the god-object. This comes from the wrong assumption that communion with God must be so awesome as to be unintelligible and ecstatic.

From this faulty assumption follows a compulsion toward human effort in attaining the ineffable. An emptiness of thought and consciousness is sought, usually by intermediate means: In Christian circles through music, working up emotions, and meditation. Pagan mysticism adds drugs, sex, dance (whirling dervishes!), self-inflicted injury and pain, sleep deprivation, yoga, and a variety of rituals including the blackest of magic. In every case, both Christian and pagan, it is human initiative, and human effort that achieves the “emptiness.”

What follows is the ineffable, ecstatic, indescribable experience of the mystic, his communion with his god-object. It is his “high.” Although he cannot describe what he has experienced, it has left him with a temporary sense of well-being. But who, or what, has the mystic communed with?

The alleged result is revelation, insight and guidance toward life’s difficulties. If one is a Christian mystic, the tale is that their mystical experience leads to sanctification, a state of holiness. Yet mysticism is a significant gateway of surrender to the doctrines of demons, and for unbelievers, demon possession. In the long run, after the experience of ecstasy has worn off, confusion, discouragement, and depression prevail.

### **The Logical Fallacy of Mysticism**

Prior to examining the text of Scripture, we must first illuminate the glaring fallacy of all mysticism. The mystic experience by its very nature is an ineffable state where the mystics’ own consciousness is overridden by the experience. Therefore to claim to be able to articulate the inexpressible is self-contradictory proposition:

The insistence that the self is totally absorbed into the religious infinite, in an ecstatic union that transcends subject-object distinctions, would moreover seem to cancel out the mystic’s ability to give a personal report of the actual state of things. For lapse of self-consciousness can only mean the surrender of any personal knowledge whatever. It is one thing for a person to claim that he has seen a flying saucer, and on that basis to argue—contrary to those who have not—that such weird mechanisms exist, but it is more preposterous for someone to describe a reality which is said to be inherently inexpressible. It simply makes no sense for anyone publicly to claim that he has intuited the inexpressible.<sup>5</sup>

All mysticism remains subjective allegation, with no possibility of verification. Therefore, the pure and perfect verification of Scripture must prevail.

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<sup>5</sup> Carl Ferdinand Howard Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1999) 1:71.

## **Christian Mysticism and Sanctification**

The Bible is both exacting and abundant in its description of sanctification. Christian mysticism fails to meet three essential biblical criteria for sanctification: the communion with God criterion, the grace criterion, and the revelation criterion. With regard to the first, the Christian mystical experience fails to meet the intelligibility test of communion with God; regarding the second, Christian mysticism is based on a human system of works, and third, Christian mysticism is in opposition to the biblical doctrines of inspiration, illumination, and the completed canon of Scripture. We will consider each in turn.

### **The First Test: the Communion Test**

We revere Scripture as authoritative over all life and religious practice. Therefore, we may design a scriptural test for the authenticity of Christian mysticism's claims to communion with God. Essentially, do the Scriptures offer mystical rapture as the norm for communion with God? In order to test this, we must look for interactions between God and men, communion with Him. Then, do these interactions depict a mystical rapture? Furthermore, because this behavior must be the biblical norm, if there are any passages that meet the above criteria, do they depict this as a positive experience and are they set forth as the norm for the Christian experience in the current age? Along the way, we may even gain insight on the true nature of communion with God and its bearing on sanctification.

In the following three interactions intelligible conversation occurs between the human participant and God. No indications of an ineffable experience are found.

### **Abraham's Vision and Interaction with the Word**

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward." But Abram said, "Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!" And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir." Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." (Gen. 15:1–5)<sup>6</sup>

### **Abraham and Yahweh Elohim**

When Abram was ninety–nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying:

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<sup>6</sup> All Bible quotations are from the New King James Version

“As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations.” (Genesis 17:1–4)

### **Moses and the burning bush**

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. And he led the flock to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. Then Moses said, “I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn.” So when the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.”” (Exodus 3:1–4)

### **David’s Communion with God in the Psalms**

The Biblical record of personal communion with God has a significant body of material from King David. His Psalms illuminate the spiritual life of one whose heart longed for God. In a general sense, the Psalms are the words of his prayers and demonstrate the intelligibility of his understanding of God both from sources of general revelation (Psalm 19:1) and the special revelation of Scripture, and as reinforced by God’s immanence in human lives. Again, let’s take a few examples.

The aforementioned Psalm 19 is an excellent example of this, for it divides into two parts. The first section, Psalm 19:1–10, is entirely doctrinal, declaring the greatness and goodness of God in a variety of ways, from creation to revelation and even to salvation. Then Psalm 19:11–14 turn to supplication, direct communication to the Father.

Moreover by them Your servant is warned,  
And in keeping them there is great reward.  
Who can understand his errors?  
Cleanse me from secret faults.  
Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins;  
Let them not have dominion over me.  
Then I shall be blameless,  
And I shall be innocent of great transgression.  
Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
Be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19:11–14:)

From revelation, David *communes* with God, and continues to *communication* in prayer as a result. This pattern is repeated exhaustively in the Psalms of David and others.

### **What about the Prophets?**

Peter, in his second epistle, gave us the pattern for how God inspired the Old Testament prophets to preach and write:

And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:19–21)

Peter seems to speak directly against any kind of mystical communion with God. He writes in verse 20 that no prophecy is a matter of personal explanation (οὐκ ἰδίας ἐπιλύσεως οὐ γίνεται – [idias epiluseos ou ginetai] literally, “does not come into existence from his own explanation”). The communication is definitely not subjective in its origin. The key to understanding the prophetic utterance is Peter’s use of the Greek verb φέρω (*phero*), which means to carry, both literally and figuratively. In verse 21, he indicates that prophecy is not carried by the will of men, but that holy men of God spoke as they were carried by the Holy Spirit.

What does it mean to be carried by the Holy Spirit, so that prophecy results? A few passages will suffice, since this principle must cover all prophecy, as Peter offers it.

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.” Then said I: “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth.” But the LORD said to me: “Do not say, ‘I am a youth,’ For you shall go to all to whom I send you, And whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of their faces, For I am with you to deliver you,” says the LORD.” (Jeremiah 1:4–8)

The crucial expression in this passage is, “the word of the Lord came to me, saying...” Nothing at all indicates that this expression describes a mode of communication any different from the audible words Abraham or Moses heard when they interacted with God in their day. Furthermore, the word of the Lord says, “Whatever I command you, you shall speak.” Jeremiah is to follow the command of the Lord in what to speak. Jeremiah is receiving rational, conscious, verbal communication from the Lord. There is no ecstasy.

Micah also “saw” and spoke, Micah 1:1: “The word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.” Daniel dreamed, but when he awoke he wrote down the dream so as to retain it as a conscious account (Daniel 7:2); later he is in a deep sleep and dreaming when the Lord wakens him to explain his dream (Daniel 8:18–19). In every case, the prophet does not initiate, nor does he do any works, and his reception of the prophecy involves no empty-headed ecstasy.

On the other hand the penalty for going outside the commanded prophecy was severe:

But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.’ And if you say in your heart, ‘How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?’—when a prophet speaks in the name of the

LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.” (Deuteronomy 18:20–22)

### **The New Testament: Jesus’ Communion with God**

Our Lord Jesus stands as our example for both life and practice. How much more so in respect to His communion with God! Two vital examples from Jesus’ last days should more than suffice for our purpose. Again, we are looking for any sign of mystical rapture in the life of our Lord, and any sign of works that bring it about.

As Jesus concluded His upper room discourse with His disciples, He began His prayer: “Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You...” Jesus communicates the highest request that He can make, toward the glory of the Father. There is no indication that mystical rapture has preceded this prayer in any way. His communion with God is intelligible, based on revelation, and this continues in communication. The communion is personal; He addresses the Father by His relationship name. It is real, the Father is present. But the intelligibility of this communion and communication comes from revelation. No indication of a rapturous experience is evident.

Our second example from the Garden of Gethsemane:

Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, “Sit here while I go and pray over there.” And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me.” He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.” (Matthew 26:36–39)

Jesus’ personal distress notwithstanding, He again enters into the presence of the Father, and from His wealth of understanding makes His humble request. No mystical ecstasy, no ineffable experience carries Jesus through the ensuing hours, only the objective revelation from God and the sustaining grace of God.

### **The New Testament Epistles**

The New Testament epistles contain numerous examples of the indwelling presence of God in the souls of believers. Indeed, the Holy Spirit indwells the human body and makes it an earthly temple for His own presence (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). But does the Christian have an ineffable mystical experience as a result? The apostle Paul’s second prayer for the Ephesians provides an example to evaluate this claim.

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and

depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:14–19)

Do we have here, at last, in Paul’s declaration that the love of Christ passes knowledge, an allusion to the mystical? Remember, in this prayer Paul is expressing intelligible ideas, so we must continue to avoid the aforementioned logical fallacy of mysticism. But aside from the logical fallacy, verse 19 does not allude to the mystical. Paul’s statement does not say the love of Christ is ineffable or cannot be known. The phrase “which surpasses knowledge” (τὸν ὑπερβάλλουσαν τῆς γνώσεως, *ten hyperballousan tes gnoseos*)<sup>7</sup> states simply that the finite nature of human knowledge is not sufficient to know the love of God comprehensively. This does not mean that man cannot have true and sufficient knowledge of the love of Christ, only that human knowledge is limited. But the information God has revealed to man, will not be contradicted by what has not been revealed.

Another significant statement by Paul is also used to validate a mystical claim.

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:6-7)

Does “surpasses knowledge” have a mystical meaning? First, peace, clearly stated to be the result of prayer and communication with God, not the essence of it. Paul explains that one result of prayer is a heart– and mind–guarding tranquility. The peace derives not from within man, but has its source from God. In a similar expression to Ephesians 3:19, the Greek participle of ὑπερέχω (*hyperecho*) describes extent of the peace as something that is beyond the scope of human finite thought or reason. Since the source of the peace is God rather than man, human systems of thought are unable to explain this peace through the limited means of human epistemology. Prayer in this context is a rational, logical communication with God expressing human dependence upon God. In turn, God shares His peace with the supplicant.

A third objection is sometimes based on Romans 8:26–27,

Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

The “unutterable groanings” phrase is sometimes used to justify the gift of tongues, a heavenly prayer language, or some other mystical experience. However when close attention is paid to the text, none of this can be supported. Is it the magical mystical Disneyland experience? It is none of the above.

First, the Scripture states that this is the Spirit alone, without any cooperation whatsoever from the believer. “The Spirit Himself (αὐτὸ τὸ πνεῦμα, *auto to pneuma*) completely excludes any human participation. Second, the singular verb ὑπερευγχανεῖ (*hyperenugchanei*) is singular, not plural. Again, we do not participate in any way. He does

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<sup>7</sup> All Greek quotations are from: *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Byzantine Textform* 2005, With Morphology., (Bellingham: Logos Research Systems, 2006).

so ὁ παρ ἡμῶν (huper hemon) “on our behalf,” not with us, but for us. And to whom does He intercede? He intercedes to God, of course. This is between the two persons of the Godhead, Spirit and Father. Third, the communication between the Godhead is imperceptible to us. That is the meaning of στεναγμοὶς ἀλαλήτοις (*stenagmois alaletois*) communication that is not audible or expressed. They are unspoken, and we would otherwise only know of this ministry of the Spirit to God through this passage. Again, there is no mysticism here!

### **Summary of the First Test**

In Communion with God, the Christian *always* Retains his self-identity. There is no absorption into the god-object as mysticism claims. Instead, there is conscious relationship with the personal presence of God, and intelligible conceptualization through revelation. Communication from the believer to God in prayer is also intelligible and revelation-dependent. In our limited biblical survey of communion with God we found believers throughout history who understood God, and communed with Him in intelligible fashion, communicating their love for Him and requests to Him. Truly this is the Scriptural norm. Although we are unable to do an exhaustive reading of every passage here, the norm suffices as a standard that cannot be contradicted. We also undertook three challenge passages from the New Testament epistles, and found them wanting as exhibiting the least scintilla of mysticism.

### **The Second Test: the Grace Test**

#### **What a Lot of Work!**

Every proponent of mysticism, every mystical movement from Eastern Religion to so-called Christian mysticism asserts the beneficial nature of meditation. This directly impacts experiential sanctification. Christian mysticism purports to give insight into one’s problems and result in inner peace.

But bringing about the mystical state is no easy matter. A variety of techniques are employed by mystics to enter their ineffable state. Mantras, music, drugs, dancing, breathing, and posture are some of the many techniques employed to empty the mind of all thought. One particularly pernicious contemporary movement is Contemplative Spirituality. Yoga teacher Martin Bohn lists three essential techniques to enter the empty state: Comfortable posture, breathing, and mantra repetition.<sup>8</sup>

Contemplative prayer is a meditation technique which was taught and practiced by Christian mystics such as Saint John of the Cross. Today, its practice is being revived by several spiritual teachers with a Christian background. Rather than working with the mind and developing concentration, it aims at transcending all mental processes by stilling and emptying the mind.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “The Practice of Contemplative Prayer: a Christian Meditation Technique” last modified 17 February 2011, <http://www.suite101.com/content/the-practice-of-contemplative-prayer-a128080>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Even praise and worship churches are employing techniques derived from mysticism in their repetitive choruses and pleas for God to take control. These differ little from Muslim, Buddhist, and pagan witchcraft in their techniques. If the technique is pagan, how can it be of God? If the result is emptiness, what then is the benefit?

For non-Christians, at [www.tm.org](http://www.tm.org) one can spend \$1500 to learn their techniques over the course of ten hours or so. Rest assured... this is a non-profit organization! Their course on transcendental meditation teaches a mantra-based (repetition of a single word or phrase) meditation that claims to bring inner peace and even help with high blood pressure. The goal is to reach a state of conscious non-thinking, so that insights from the universe may be gained for benefit in everyday life.

Darker forms of mysticism include experimentation with LSD and other mind-altering drugs, a technique that is strictly forbidden by the Bible. *Pharmakeia* is listed as a work of the flesh in Galatians 5:19, and as a technique for the deception of all the nations in Revelation 18:23.

The prophets of Baal in the Prophets' World Championship of Elijah's time made every effort to bring intervention from their god:

So they took the bull which was given them, and they prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even till noon, saying, "O Baal, hear us!" But there was no voice; no one answered. Then they leaped about the altar which they had made. And so it was, at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened." So they cried aloud, and cut themselves, as was their custom, with knives and lances, until the blood gushed out on them. And when midday was past, they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice. But there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention." (1 Kings 18:26-29)

They failed.

In every mystical movement, human effort is involved. Mystical rapture requires hard work to vacate the mind.

### **"Works" Sanctification is Foolish**

The question is this: Does the Bible represent our sanctification as dependent in any way on our works? The general principle comes from Galatians 3:1-3:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?"

There is surely no wiggle room for the kind of effort that is required for the techniques of mysticism from this passage. Paul indicates someone may have bewitched them, using the

verb βασκαίνω, (*baskaino*) which is also found in tandem in other Greek literature with *pharmakeia* “drugs.”<sup>10</sup> He concludes with the universal truth that sanctification does not come by works. As Paul stated just a few verses earlier, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who lived me and gave Himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20). This Christian life we live is by faith, in contrast to works! Our faith may result in works through obedience to the Law of Christ, but our sanctification is not wrought by works in any way. The “faith” that Paul describes is first a trust in the revealed doctrine of the Bible, and second, obedience to this revealed truth.

### **The Third Test: Mysticism and Revelation**

#### **By what authority?**

In the knowledge of truth, the ultimate question is: on what authority is truth claimed? On the authority of human reason, human experience, human insight, or the external, objective revelation of God? For the mystic, the authority is the claim of immediate, direct communication from God to man independent of the Scriptures.<sup>11</sup> He claims that into his empty head comes divine knowledge and insight. Both Hodge and his successor at Princeton, B.B. Warfield, were lions of biblical orthodoxy defending orthodox Bibliology from the inroads of mysticism. Warfield’s “Mysticism and Christianity” is a tour de force. “It is characteristic of mysticism that it makes its appeal to the feelings as the sole, or at least as the normative, source of knowledge of divine things. That is to say, it is the religious sentiment which constitutes for it the source of religious knowledge.”<sup>12</sup> Carl F.H. Henry writes of the contrasts the two systems:

“Religious mysticism depicts intuition as a way of knowing that contrasts with both reason and sensation, and therefore also with intelligible divine revelation. Mystics claim that direct insight into the invisible world is available through personal illumination as a means of access to the Divine allegedly transcending all ordinary levels of human experience.”<sup>13</sup>

Let us now examine what the Bible has to say about revelation and reason.

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<sup>10</sup> Liddell-Scott, 310.

<sup>11</sup> 19th century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge wrote, “The Mystics, as already stated, are those who claim an immediate communication of divine knowledge and of divine life from God to the soul, independently of the Scriptures and the use of the ordinary means of grace.” Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997) 1:66.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Works Of Benjamin B. Warfield*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991) 9:651.

<sup>13</sup>)Henry, 1: 70-71.

## **The Life of the Mind**

Paul's letter to the Colossians has much to say about the life of the mind of the believer in Jesus Christ. Throughout the epistle he emphasizes conscious thought based on prior revelation, not development of new revelation.

For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Colossians 2:1–3)

Set your mind on things above,” (3:2).

Both of the above are exhortations toward conscious, rational thinking on the basis of existing revelation. But perhaps the climax is in Colossians 3:16:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

Three verbs describe the rich dwelling of the word of Christ in the believer: teaching and admonishing, and singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. In both cases there is the rational and conscious impartation of real information to the heart of the Christian. But it is previously existing revelation, not new information. There is no mysticism here! Sanctification is by grace, through faith – Bible doctrine, divinely inspired content.

## **Real Meditators Have Thought Content**

When the Bible does mention meditation, it is not the meditation of mystics, but reflection on prior revelation. There is an excellent example of this in Paul's letter to the Philippians:

“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.” (Philippians 4:8)

Paul commands them to “meditate (λογίζεσθε – logizesthe)” on the true and virtuous things in life. His verb logizesthe indicates logical thinking, dwelling on real content. 1 Timothy 4:15 follows the same pattern, even with a different verb: “Meditate on these things...” “Meditate (μελετάω – meletao)” is again a call to study or examine prior information. It is the presence of consideration, *with* legitimate content, that defines biblical meditation. This is not meditation unto emptiness. As such, it is not mysticism.

## The Stake in the Heart: Sufficiency of Present Revelation

If mysticism claims new revelation, does not the doctrine of the completed canon of Scripture completely refute the claim? For if there is indeed a completed canon, the Bible as given in its sixty-six books, any new revelation is disallowed, for any reason, and by any means. Mysticism derives from a dissatisfaction with God's complete revelation, and in turn, generates an idolatry of the soul. The doctrine of the completed, sufficient canon of Scripture is the stake through the heart of mysticism. Although a complete treatment of this subject is beyond the scope of this paper, a few passages of the passages which establish the completed canon will be examined.

In Colossians 1:24–26 Paul relates his sufferings on behalf of the Colossians. In this he refers to a certain God-given stewardship, or responsibility:

I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints.”

Paul's God-given stewardship is to “fulfill [πληρώω, *pleroo*] the word of God.” The basic semantic meaning of *pleroo* is “make full, fill.”<sup>14</sup> But, what does Paul mean when he says he is to “fulfill the word of God”? Is he fulfilling the word of God in the sense of some prophecy about his life, or is there some other way he uses the expression? The next phrase (in v. 26) begins with an appositional explanation, further expositing his meaning.<sup>15</sup> The further information we gain about the expression “the word of God” is that it is “the mystery ... now ... revealed to His saints.” This is not prophecy about Paul's stewardship; which was to communicate and write previously unrevealed information for the Church, which is now inscripturated within the New Testament. Paul's mission was to bring that portion of revelation committed to him to completion. Two verbs stand out in the apposition of verse 26 that drive home the idea of completion. The first, “has been hidden,” [□ποκεκρυμμένον (*apokekrummenon*)] is the perfect tense participle. The perfect tense indicates the mystery had been hidden in a complete state from from humanity. The second expression, “but now is revealed.” Indicates the previously unrevealed content has now been revealed.

This complete revelation of God, formerly hidden, implies a sufficiency. Two more passages, one from Paul and one from Peter, give direct reference to the sufficiency of current revelation.

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<sup>14</sup> William Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature : A Translation and Adaption of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Worterbuch Zu Den Schrift En Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Ubrigen Urchristlichen Literatur*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 670.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics - Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, (Zondervan Publishing House and Galaxie Software, 1999; 2002), 48.

## **The Sufficient Scriptures**

At a vital point in his second letter to Timothy, when speaking of false teachers and the persecution of the church, Paul impresses upon his young protégé the importance of Scripture. The profit of inspiration is doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness, and the very purpose of those is the completion of the man of God, his equipping for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17). If all Scripture may complete the man of God, then it truly must be sufficient for that same purpose.

Peter likewise claims that God has given everything necessary to live our physical life and our spiritual life (2 Peter 1:3–4). He does not say some things or most things but “all things.” Peter uses a strong verb to communicate the finality of giving (Δεδορημένης, *dedoremenes*). Again, the perfect tense shows an action completed in the past with an emphasis on the present results of that action.<sup>16</sup> Everything every Christian needs for life and godliness has been already been given. How is it available? Through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue. Christians have all they need, through already given knowledge. This verse only has significance if the canon is sufficient and closed.

## **The Dissatisfied Mystic**

Scripture is sufficient for every believer in every circumstance. Truly, it is abundant. Whenever a mystic seeks additional insight by emptying of his mind he does so in opposition and rejection of the provision of the Lord. Idolatry and false doctrine will be the inevitable results. If the Israelites in the wilderness denied God’s physical provision and received discipline, how much more with the spiritual provision of His word (1 Corinthians 10:1–11; Hebrews 2:2–3)? We have in our possession the very mind of Christ (John 16:12–13 cf., 1 Corinthians 2:16 and 1 Peter 4:1–2) and the promise of the Spirit who will guide us along that well-established path (John 16:12–13). How can we long for one morsel more than this?

## **Rejection of General Revelation Skews Reason**

We have just seen that mystics reject the sufficiency of divine revelation. The Bible has strong words for those who do. Belief in the living God of the Bible is the foundation for all sound thinking. Without this fundamental truth, all logic goes astray, no matter how well one reasons afterward. Paul addresses this in his letter to the Romans:

because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds, and four-footed animals and creeping things. (Romans 1:21–23)

Paul writes that the result for those who rejected the Creator-God is they “became futile in their thoughts,” an expression that deserves further light.

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<sup>16</sup> Wallace, 577.

The verb, “became futile (μᾶταιόω, *mataioo*)” means to “bring to naught,”<sup>17</sup> In the passive voice, the grammatical subject, “men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,” are acted upon by an outside source, in this case, their rejection of God.. This very rejection of God has epistemological consequences which empties their thought–processes (διαλογισμός, *dialogismos*), and darkens their foolish hearts. Rejection of God fatally skews the reasoning process, emptying it of value!

The mystic who yearns for divine insight while already possessing it in sufficiency, ends up with warped reasoning instead. His end-state is worse, not better.

### **Divine Guidance and Mysticism: What Exactly is the Holy Spirit GPS Mechanism?**

“The Holy Spirit led me...” “God told me...” and similar expressions come from the lips of innumerable Christians every day. Are they correct? What should we think about these sayings? Statements like this fall under the category of divine guidance. That the living God of the Bible is active in our everyday lives is hardly disputable, either from a Scriptural or an experiential standpoint. However, we must be careful not to slip over the line from providential divine nudging and claim divine revelation. At the core of determining principles for divine guidance is the role of the Holy Spirit in directing the believer, that role which Augustus Strong<sup>18</sup> and L.S. Chafer<sup>19</sup> called “true” mysticism

Jesus promised to dispatch the Holy Spirit as a guide for believers once He ascended: “...when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). The verb “will guide” (ὁδηγήσει, *hodegesei*), means “to lead along an already established path.”<sup>20</sup>

When the Ethiopian eunuch failed to comprehend the meaning of what he read in Isaiah, he pleaded with Philip to “guide” him into the Scriptures (Acts 8:30-31). The guidance which we receive from the Holy Spirit is guidance along the established path of Scripture, and not any form of new revelation.

With respect to life’s circumstances, God is an active agent in the lives of men, supplying Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and providence as sufficient guidance for everyday life. There are many times that we may rightly point to an event as the activity of God. But so also Satan deceives the nations (Revelation 20:3), and goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). He too is active in our lives. Furthermore, he is under no compulsion to reveal himself as he is, but instead appears as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). Consequently, every believer must exercise careful discernment regarding his circumstances. Mystical rapture and “feelings” are woefully inadequate guides to God’s will, and often lead in the opposite direction. Because Christian mystics lay claim to an inner guidance that is new revelation, it is best therefore it refrain from identifying the ministry of the Holy Spirit, in fact, identifying anything from God, as “mysticism.”

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<sup>17</sup>Liddell-Scott, 1084

<sup>18</sup> Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*, (Bellingham, Wa.: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004), 31.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993) 1:14.

<sup>20</sup> BDAG, 553

## **Conclusion: Mysticism or Christianity**

Mysticism is an ancient and persistent heresy, emphasizing the inward and subjective experience of false communion with God, brought about by the effort of the individual, and resulting in the attainment of an unintelligible and indescribable mental state. Since it is false communion with God, it is always detrimental to the person who practices it.

True communion with God never diverts from scriptural principles, nor does it add to given revelation in the completed canon; it is conscious and intelligible, and depends on the purity of the creature–participant through grace. The results of true communion with God are synonymous with the fruits of the Spirit and much more: every good thing in life.

“We may be mystics, or we may be Christians. We cannot be both. And the pretension of being both usually merely veils defection from Christianity.”<sup>21</sup>

## **Appendix: An Historical Listing of Mystical Religions and Persons**

The history of mysticism may well be written as much of the history of the devil’s deception of the world from the dawn of time. Every generation has had its mystics. It is no surprise that in the post-Darwin world of disdain for God’s inerrant word there should be a revival and flourishing of mysticism:

During the twentieth century the prestige of mysticism has been rising in the thought of the western world. John Dewey, in 1909, analyzing the influence of Darwinism on philosophy, stated that one effect of Darwin’s theories had been a “recrudescence of absolutistic philosophies; an assertion of a type of philosophic knowing distinct from that of the sciences, one which opens to us another kind of reality from that to which the sciences give access; an appeal through experience to something that essentially goes beyond experience. This reaction affects popular creeds and religious movements as well as technical philosophies.”<sup>22</sup>

***Likewise, the Devil is masterful at changing the names and terminology of his deceptions that he might perpetuate them in new generations. Let the following serve to shed light on a very brief history and current listing of mystics and mystical movements.***

### ***Ancient & Medieval:***

From Ancient Egypt, Isis.

From Ancient Turkey, Cybele, borrowed from Egypt.

From Greece:

- the Eleusinian mysteries, including Orphism, the worship of Orpheus.

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<sup>21</sup> The Works Of Benjamin B. Warfield, Volume IX, page 666 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> “The Limitations of Mysticism,” Robert G. Collmer, *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 116*, 462, 126 (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1959).

- The Dionysian Mysteries, including the Maenads of Bacchic frenzy fame, see especially The Bacchae, by Euripides.
- The Cybelian mysteries, which borrowed from the Cybele cult of Asia Minor.
- Gnosticism (with several modern derivatives).

From Rome, the Magna Mater (an adaptation of Cybele).

From Roman Catholicism, the Mary cult (a Christian adaptation of the Magna Mater).

### ***Modern Mysticism***

- Theosophy
- Masonry
- Rosicrucianism
- The Golden Dawn
- Bahai
- Native American Ghost Dance
- Eastern Orthodox Hesychasm
- Kabbalah
- Eastern Pantheism/Buddhism
- Sufism
- Taoism
- Wiccan religion: “Mysticism is the pursuit of the direct experience of the Divine. Mystics aren't interested in liturgies or priests or anything but developing a personal relationship with God.” (from <http://www.wicca-spirituality.com/new-wicca.html>)
- New Age, especially: Course in Miracles: (from their website) “The world we see merely reflects our own internal frame of reference—the dominant ideas, wishes and emotions in our minds. “Projection makes perception” (Text, p. 445). We look inside first, decide the kind of world we want to see and then project that world outside, making it the truth as we see it. We make it true by our interpretations of what it is we are seeing.”

### ***Modern “Christian” Mysticism:***

- Charismatic: “The gift of tongues has provided me with a mystical sense of inner strength that comes from the indwelling Christ. I know it doesn't make any sense, but that's the beauty of this spiritual language. In order to speak it, you have to let go of natural reasoning. You must acknowledge that you are not in control. And you have to let God take over. (from *What It's Like to Speak in Tongues*, J. Lee Grady, in [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com)).
- The spiritual formation movement (interesting that the Christian counseling movement should move in the direction of mysticism)
- Contemplative spirituality: “Contemplative spirituality is the teaching that spiritual growth and true spirituality occur by contemplation not of Scripture or even of scriptural themes, but contemplation of God through emptying your mind.” He instructs the reader in the practice of centering prayer, which is a type of contemplative wordless “prayer” a technique that involves breathing exercises and the chanting of a sacred word or phrase. Manning begins “the first step in faith is to stop

thinking about God at the time of prayer” (p. 212)! What biblical support is there for this idea? The second step, according to Manning, is to “without moving your lips, repeat the sacred word [or phrase] inwardly, slowly, and often” (p. 218). Once again, where is the biblical support for this practice? None is cited, because none exists. The third step concerns what to do when inevitable distractions come. The answer is to “simply return to listening to your sacred word. Gently return your mind to your sacred word” (p. 218). Finally, “after a twenty–minute period of prayer [which Manning recommends twice daily] conclude with the Lord’s Prayer, a favorite psalm, or some spontaneous words of praise and thanks” (p. 219).<sup>23</sup>

- Mormonism (what else can you say but that the Book of Mormon came into being through a mystical experience?)
- The Quakers (they quake, get it?)

### ***Significant Figures of the Mysticism Movement***

- Joan of Arc
- Catherine of Sienna
- St. John of the Cross
- Jacob Boehme
- Henri Nouwen
- Teresa of Avila
- Bernard of Clervaux
- The Beatles, and darn near everyone involved in the modern music industry
- Rick Warren
- Larry Crabb

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<sup>23</sup> *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society Volume 10, 2, 7* (Irving, TX: The Grace Evangelical Society, 1997).