

The False Mystics, the Evangelical Rationalists and the God-Hungry Christian

The 17th century philosopher Blaise Pascal said,

“There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.”

That is true. Most people sense the vacuum, but do not understand what can fill it.

Through the years, a kind of religion has arisen which tries to fill that vacuum. It is called *mysticism*.

Mysticism seeks to meet a genuine need. We genuinely need to commune with God. We genuinely need spiritual experience. We genuinely need to know God personally, not just theoretically. Whenever Christianity has been a dry, hot desert of theory with no practice; doctrine with no devotion; knowledge with no illumination, the dark thunderclouds of mysticism will be brewing on the horizon.

Mysticism has exploded in popularity in the last century. In reaction to the deadness of modernism, mysticism has returned in force. We see it in the renewed interest in Eastern religions. People want transcendental meditation to take them to new states of consciousness, new experiences.

People are turning to New Age religions to give them spiritual experiences. Some go to fortune tellers, or use Tarot cards to give them guidance. Some turn to astrology, believing the stars hold the key to specific guidance. Some believe they have angel guides to whom they speak. Some have their palms read, or have aura readings.

People are turning to mediums and spiritists who supposedly contact the dead and allow communication back and forth. People are using ouija boards to have a real experience with the spirit world.

Young people are turning to Wicca, learning to cast spells, to experience something real in the spiritual world. Some are turning to Satanism to experience real spirituality.

But the sad thing is that mysticism is not just restricted to false religions, cults or the occult. Mysticism is operating under the name of Christianity. And it isn't new, either. Mysticism is found as early as the church at Colosse.

In Colosse, there were false teachers promoting a kind of mysticism. Paul describes this mysticism as something which will cheat Christians of their reward. He says – ‘*don't let anyone rob you. Don't be disqualified by believing the false teaching of the mystics.*’ And then in a few words, he outlines some of the components of their system of belief.

I. False Humility and Worship of Angels

The false teachers claimed to be so humble that they would not approach God directly. They would go to the angels, who would mediate for them. Angels, they taught, are the go-betweens for us and God. It's interesting, because angel-worship is back - 'Touched by an angel', angel readings, books on angels, getting in touch with your personal angel. It is back.

Mysticism always avoids dealing with Christ directly through His Word. There is always another means – a special prayer, a chant, a picture of Jesus, a picture of the saints, someone laying hands on you, some kind of music, or they have some kind of spiritual antenna which picks up these experiences. You do not go to Jesus Himself in the Word and prayer; you use some other medium to get in touch with Him or to be one with Him.

II. Special Visions

These teachers went into detail about the visions they had received, the inner meaning they had obtained, the secret knowledge they had found. They liked to act as if they had a special link with God, a special spiritual mind which received knowledge direct from God.

Mysticism always hooks people with its claims of special knowledge, special experiences, special and unique spiritual encounters for those who follow their pattern.

III. Selfishness

Paul exposes the false teachers as being vainly puffed up. They are inflated with their visions and experiences, but in fact, their minds are fleshly, sensual, sinful. Paul exposes false mysticism as a form of pleasing self. It is not loving Christ; it is self-gratification, using the things of God as the means.

Mysticism, as I said, is alive and well in the church today.

Let me sketch three ways false mysticism has crept back into the church.

1. Contemplative Prayer

Contemplative prayer is a false kind of prayer which some are recommending. You may have heard of the emerging church, or the post-modern church. It is being practised by them and others.

It is a practice from the Middle Ages. In contemplative prayer, you empty your mind completely, focus on an image of Jesus, or God, in your mind, or even one word from the Bible, and you keep focusing on that one word, or that one image, until you lose all other thoughts and enter into a metaphysical union with God. You imagine Jesus or a scene with Jesus, picturing Him in your mind and you focus on that image with no other thoughts, until you feel yourself merging with that Person. It is a mystery how it happens.

Mystics like this believe that thinking about God gets in the way of union with God. So you are encouraged to empty your mind and allow yourself to melt into God.

This is false. Prayer is not using a word or a picture we invent. Prayer is not chanting or thinking of a single word till we mystically join with God. It is speaking to God, rationally, purposefully, sincerely. But many are whispering in our ears that this practice is a secret to special intimacy with God. The Bible says – don't let anyone cheat you with this kind of thing.

A second kind of mysticism seen in the church today is

2. Ecstatic Experiences.

For a little over a hundred years now, people in some branches of the Christian church have claimed that when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will ecstatically speak things you do not understand. You experience something mysterious, inexplicable – mystical. You will speak in tongues, they call it. Others say, that if you keep praying, eventually, you come to a place where you can no longer express yourself in your own words, and so you start to pray in another tongue, in a private prayer language. And as the decades rolled on since Azusa Street in 1906, the kinds of ecstatic experiences have become more and more wild. From ecstatic babbling to people falling down, people laughing for no reason, people acting drunk, people barking like dogs, crowing like roosters, eventually losing all decency and doing things unspeakable.

In fact, some churches that seek these things use music and atmospherics, like the New Age and occult religions do, to induce a state of mind where ecstatic, non-rational experiences result. Once again, such people discourage the use of the mind. They discourage rational thought, saying it gets in the way of the experience.

Now what does the Bible say about such ecstatic experiences?

1 Corinthians 14:15 ¹⁵ *What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.*

He is not listing two types of prayer, or two types of song. Prayer is with understanding. Song is with understanding.

The truth is, true *religious experience may come to a point where words fail you*. But it never comes to a point where your *understanding leaves you*.

The Bible says – *don't let anyone cheat you with this kind of thing*.

3. Special Revelation

The topic of how God guides us is a huge one. I believe there are ways that God guides us which are subjective and internal. But because God does not contradict Himself, such guidance will never violate a Biblical principle or command. But there are thousands out there today telling us that they received a vision, a dream, a special, direct message from God. They received a prophecy the way John received the Revelation on the isle of Patmos. They received visions of heaven and hell the way Paul received his vision of heaven, of which he did not speak. And such people are saying, we do not go through the means of having to understand God's mind through the Bible. We have a direct link to God, where we hear Him audibly. It is a mysterious imparting of knowledge to us – it is automatic, unmediated.

But what does the Bible say about such revelation?

Hebrews 1:1-2 *God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, ² has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds;*

Certainly God does guide us subjectively. Certainly God reveals Himself in hundreds of ways everyday in providence, in creation. But mysticism says that they have a special connection with the Holy Spirit – He gives them visions, dreams, prophecies, words of knowledge, words of wisdom, equal to or greater than the prophets and apostles themselves.

Now all of these things hold out a promise to you. You can experience intimacy with God, you can experience spiritual ecstasy, you can experience unusual, unmediated guidance.

And these teachings would not be popular if there was not an actual experience going on. People do experience things in contemplative prayer. People do have ecstatic experiences. People do seem to receive special visions and prophecies and guidance.

But the question is – are these experiences **true** spiritual experiences? I know they are **real**, but are they true? Are they what God wills for us? The answer is no, as we have seen from Scripture. Therefore, to experience these, and to seek them is to be cheated from the true spiritual experiences.

To be cheated means someone offers you something, but what you actually get is nothing like that. A man offers you a great deal on a reliable car, and what you get is a hunk of junk that breaks down a month after you have bought it.

So these things offer you a spiritual experience, but what they give you is not a true experience of Christ. It is a substitute. Like someone who gets stuffed on sweets, till they have no space for good food – they are full, but malnourished. All across the world, there are people full of these experiences, but spiritually malnourished; unable to face life, unable to conquer sin, and above all, unfamiliar with Christ Himself.

But there is a second way we can be robbed or cheated, and it is a danger especially in conservative churches. The second danger is the opposite extreme.

2. Textualism

Whenever there is a false teaching in the church, there is a great danger that the response to that false teaching will be to over-correct, and over react. That has been the case in many heresies historically. Many people recognize that false mysticism is a real danger – the unbiblical ecstatic experiences, the false imagining of Jesus, the claimed special guidance, the supposed hidden understandings of Scripture; but all too often, the reaction is to rule out just about all spiritual experience. Since the mystics discourage rational thought, the rationalists over-emphasise it to where it becomes the sum total of your walk with God.

Such people tell us that the only way to be safe is to say that there is no form of spiritual experience outside of obeying the commands of Scripture, and perhaps enjoying them as we do so. They tell us that the Christian life is basically learning texts, doctrine and 'doing it'. The Bible has information, you must learn it, understand it, do it. Anything which smacks of experience, subjective guidance by God, great personal experiences of God's presence or God's truth are frowned upon.

The Christian life is intellectualised. It is made into something which can be learned like botany, algebra, car repair. Truth is a text. Read, the text, have the truth – that's all. It becomes like the Pharisees – we have the letter of the law, and that is all we need. If we have the text, we have the guidance, we have what we need. Emotions are secondary. Experiences are suspect. The truth is, while such people will not often lead you into false doctrine, they will also cheat you of true spiritual experience.

It is not infrequent that people enter such churches and say, "It is dead". And in some ways, it often is. No one gets excited over abstract statements of theology. No one's heart is warmed when gathering mere information about Christian doctrine. No one knows Christ more intimately because they can repeat correct statements about Him. No one loves Jesus more because they agree with certain propositions.

There is no expectancy of the Spirit to enlighten the hearts, there is only the gathering of people to hear another lecture. It's hard to sing of experiences you haven't had. It's hard to rejoice in experiences you haven't had. So the singing, the testifying, the fellowship is like the atmosphere in an old library - a lot of books, a lot of knowledge, a lot of silence.

People caught up in false mysticism often give off the impression that they are zealous and enthusiastic – and they are! But too often, their enthusiasm relates to a false experience. Children who have eaten candy-floss are usually quite excited too.

So the textualists try to get people to be zealous, but it is in vain. They deny their people all spiritual experience, and quench the affections which would make the place ablaze with true experiences of God. Sometimes, they become quite content with the deadness, and become quite proud of their coolness. Sometimes, they introduce all kinds of entertainments to artificially produce some life into the church. Either way it doesn't fill the heart.

In such places you may be safe from fatal error. You will be safe, I grant you. I doubt, though, that you will be warm. I sincerely doubt if you will be zealous, grateful or filled with love for Christ.

But against false mysticism, and against this dead textualism, there is a true spiritual experience awaiting Christians.

There are true spiritual experiences for Christians who come to God His way, and for no ulterior motives but to know Him. It is the experience of illumination – obtaining the mind of Christ.

3. True Spiritual Experiences

What characterises the true spiritual experience?

I. It lovingly seeks the mind of Christ

1 Corinthians 2:6-16 *However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. ⁷ But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, ⁸ which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him." ¹⁰ But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. ¹¹ For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. ¹³ These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. ¹⁴ But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. ¹⁶ For "who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?" But we have the mind of Christ.*

This passage teaches us a number of things. Firstly, no man can understand the things of God with his mind alone (v9, 14). Secondly, the Spirit of God must teach us, or illuminate us (v10, 13). Thirdly, the end result is to gain the mind of Christ (v16).

Take note of that phrase – *mind of Christ*. If you know someone's mind, then you know them for who he or she is. You know their thinking, their desires, their nature. It means you have sought to know him *personally*. To know my wife's mind is to know **her**.

But it also means that you have sought to know Christ *rationally*. You have tried to gain understanding. I could not know my wife if I emptied my mind and chanted her name to myself. I would not enjoy intimacy and closeness with her if I tried to empty my mind entirely and just imagine the word Erin. I must seek to know her by communicating with her, spending time with her.

False mysticism does not cleave to Christ Himself. It does not seek nourishment from the Head. You get the experience without having to deal with Christ directly, rationally, reasonably. You empty your mind, you sway to the music, you keep listening for whims and impression to drop into your mind, you say things out loud – but you are not seeking to know Christ through His Word.

The true spiritual experience involves the use of the mind to understand, imagine and apply God's mind. It is the *body seeking nourishment from the head*. We want Christ's mind, the thoughts and will and nature and character of Jesus. We use our minds to seek His mind. And we want it lovingly. The word is '*cleaving*' – a strong word meaning to seize, to grab, to lay hold of. There is passion here. The true experience of a believer is to pursue Christ Himself.

As you seek to understand, as you seek wisdom, God promises to come and enlighten. God promises to grant spiritual understanding.

And when He does, something more is happening than simply a mental event. You are seeing and understanding what you could not have seen or understood by yourself. You know that you have been enlightened by Someone else. As that happens, there is a real sensed communion with God.

Genuine inward affections stirred up by faith in what is revealed.

Is illumination a place of ecstatic utterances or visions or swoons? No. it is nothing sensual. Illumination resembles things we do experience – understanding; appreciation; wonder; amazement; delight. The difference, however, is that we experience such things with truth, with the Bible. The difference is, the Bible is an inspired book, and these will not happen without the Spirit of God.

It may be while you are reading it. It may be while you are hearing it. It may be while you are singing it. It may be while you are praying it. It may be while you are driving or washing or changing diapers or typing or walking or eating – and as you meditate on truth, it opens up, it becomes clear, it focuses, it floods your soul.

But here is the difference between the true spiritual experience and textualism. Textualism does not expect anything more to happen than an intellectual understanding of the truth. It thinks that its own thinking will be enough. It does not expect illumination to be anything more than gaining knowledge and understanding of theology, the same way you gain understanding of physics, cookery or horticulture. The textualists are right for realising that we must seek God in His truth, but they are wrong for thinking that we can understand that truth properly apart from the Spirit of God. We all know people who were catechised and had the truth memorised, but it was an inert mass of knowledge. It had not become truth which glowed and transformed them.

Illumination does more than impress your intellect, it moves your affections.

You must use your mind, but your mind is not sufficient to grasp all the truth. Your mind is one of the means God uses, but it is not the end. The end is God enlightening you in your spirit and mind. The truth appears true, it appears beautiful, it appears wise, it appears personal, it appears desirable, it appears imperative.

II. It is not private.

But notice something else. This kind of illumination is not meant to be merely private. It is something God wants to happen on a corporate level. God makes the Body grow, but notice – the body is nourished and knit together by every joint and ligament. God is not growing individual plants. Christians are not beans under pieces of cotton wool. We are joints and ligaments in a Body. Where one cleaves to Christ, the others benefit. Where one doesn't, the others feel the pain. Your experience of Christ will be affected by your relationship to a Body of believers. It's God's way.

Ephesians 4:15-16 *but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head -- Christ -- ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.*

There is to be an experience of Christ together which we cannot have alone. The more a church is made up of believers seeking and experiencing illumination, the greater the times of corporate worship.

Now certainly, we do need to be alone at times. In a world of distraction, communing with Christ means we must withdraw at times to fellowship with Him. But hermits and lone rangers miss out on illumination in a corporate sense.

How will I experience illumination?

- 1) If you walk in the light. If you deal with God humbly and openly about your sin, confessing and forsaking it – that's walking in the light. If you desire to be pleasing to Him and treat His Word truthfully, that's walking in the light. If you speak to Him as He is, dropping all

- pretentiousness with Him and with others, that's walking in the light.
- 2) If you seek Him lovingly. If you pursue His presence in the Word, in meditating on Him, in withdrawing to be in His presence, in praying inwardly.

Either way, you can be robbed. You can take that God-shaped vacuum, and go to the false mystics, who will give you experiences that will seem to fill, but will end up to be a cheat. You will not know Christ more.

You can take that God-shaped vacuum and turn to the textualists who will try to fill it with abstract statements of doctrine, correct formulations of theology, and will leave you as empty as you came.

Or you can seek the true experience. Seek Christ Himself, in the doctrines, in the texts, in the theology, while calling on the Spirit of God to open your eyes and make the truth as real as it is true; to manifest the mind of Christ to you as you gaze upon it. The difference will be the difference between the nominal Christian life, and the life we call revival.