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## Evangelicalism's Favorite Priest Is Henri Nouwen a Friend or Foe?

by G. Richard Fisher

Roman Catholic priest Henri Nouwen once wrote, "We prayed for many people, living and dead."<sup>1</sup> With allegiance to this and similar doctrines, there should be no question how Evangelicals should regard Nouwen. And yet this oft-quoted — and seldom examined — writer has a large cheering section in the "evangelical" world.

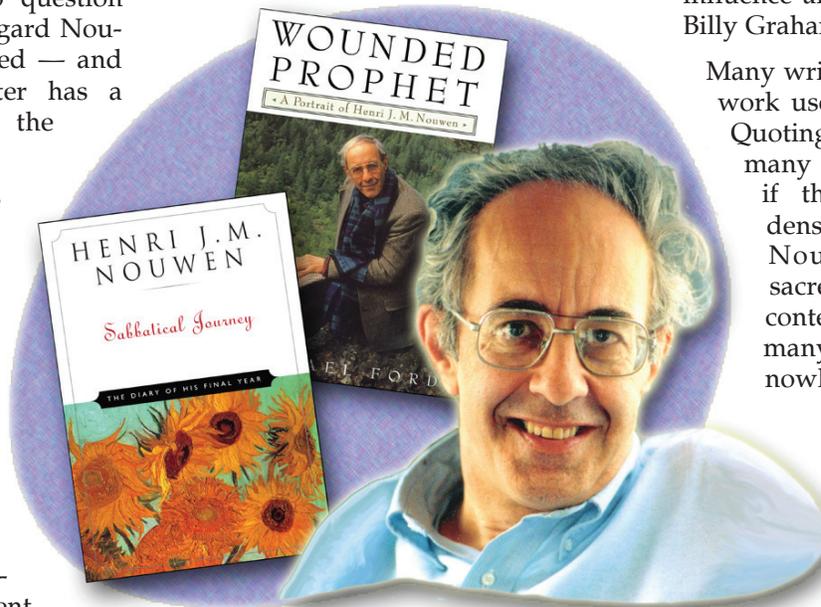
Nouwen is quoted by the likes of Richard Foster, Tony Campolo, Rick Warren, Charles Swindoll, Brian McLaren, and even Ravi Zacharias. *Crosstalk* host Ingrid Schlueter featured on one of her broadcasts an audio clip of Zacharias referring to Nouwen "as being a great saint of recent memory."<sup>2</sup> Zacharias' organization defends Nouwen's endorsement of contemplative practices simply because these have been part of the Roman Catholic and Byzantine tradition for centuries. However, Evangelicals should use Scripture — not necessarily Church history — as the benchmark.

Nouwen was introduced to the Protestant world in the early 1990s by Robert Schuller when he preached for

three consecutive Sundays at the Crystal Cathedral. He gained mainstream exposure and credibility, and by 1994 he was said to have more influence among Protestants than did Billy Graham.<sup>3</sup>

Many writers have found Nouwen's work useful for religious citations. Quoting him became popular and many authors did so, especially if they were groping for a dense and esoteric statement. Nouwen's works became sacred without background, context, or examination. For many, he was the man from nowhere — sort of a modern Melchizedek — who says lofty things.

Nouwen's quotes have appeared in the *Our Daily Bread* devotionals published by  
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Radio Bible Class.<sup>4</sup> He has been referred to as the prophet to millions. So one may wonder how could there be anything wrong or questionable about Nouwen.

The problem seems to be that there are two Henri Nouwens. One is a quotable Nouwen; the other a questionable one. Evangelicals citing Nouwen seem unwilling to look into the questionable aspects of his statements and writings and few ever have read Nouwen's primary works. A writer who quotes someone then has to defend himself and it becomes personal and a matter of pride. People who do this fall into the trap of deception by investment.<sup>5</sup>

### HENRI WHO?

Some pronounce Nouwen's name as *now-win* (which is the correct pronunciation), while others pronounce it *new-win*. Views and opinions of him vary as well. In many cases, citations of Nouwen are drawn from a quote book or from a Website of quotations. If someone has an emotional conviction from a Nouwen quote, it is used to bolster an argument.

It could be contended that Nouwen lived a life not grounded in reality. He had very few private thoughts or private places in life because it appears that almost everything he did or said was monitored and turned into a book. He knew he was constantly on the public stage and all of his ideas and movements would be reported far and wide. A phalanx of editors constantly reworked and rewrote Nouwen's material and sermons, as well as his thoughts and activities, producing 45 books for Nouwen. It is reported that, at times, there were 3-5 books in progress.

Nouwen was Dutch-born and his official name was Henri Jozef Machiel Nouwen. His birth date was Jan. 24, 1932. He died of cardiac arrest in a Holland hospital Sept. 21, 1996, and is buried in Ontario, Canada. Nouwen did his early studies in psychology and psychiatry. His career included teaching at Notre Dame, Yale, and

Harvard. He had a number of honorary doctorates. In 1987, he suffered from clinical depression and had a mental breakdown, which lasted into 1988. Nouwen writes about the six months of this breakdown in his book, *The Inner Voice of Love*.<sup>6</sup> His last days were spent at L'Arche Community in Toronto, Ontario, working with the handicapped. Michael Ford's biography of Nouwen titled *Wounded Prophet* offers detailed insight into the priest's life and beliefs, including his conflicted sexuality and his anti-Vietnam War and anti-Gulf War efforts.

It is widely known that Nouwen was an avid fan of the desert mystics, which alone should give one pause in quoting him. Desert mysticism included cave-dwelling, starvation, and, at times, bodily mutilation. Solitary mystics and those in monasteries still exist in the southern portion of Israel today. All of this is unnatural and unbiblical, and certainly not to be applauded (1 Timothy 4:1-5). The New Testament is all about community and outreach, not isolationism and self-destruction. Jesus did not say go into the desert, but rather go out into the entire world. Infiltration, not isolation, was His command.

### WIDER MERCY OR JUST PLAIN HERESY?

It must be stressed that we are not just talking about a few questionable peripheral interpretations or applications by Nouwen. Some, such as Roger Oakland, have asserted that Nouwen was a Universalist (meaning he believed that everyone will be accepted into heaven). Oakland quotes Nouwen's book, *Here and Now*:

"The God who dwells in our inner sanctuary is also the God who dwells in the inner sanctuary of each human being."<sup>7</sup>

In other writings, Nouwen sounds like a committed Universalist:

"The Spirit of Jesus comes to dwell within us, so that we can become living Christs here and now. Pentecost lifts the whole mystery of salvation out of its particularities and makes it into something universal, embracing

all peoples, all countries, all seasons, and all eras. Pentecost is also the movement of empowering. Each individual human being can claim the Spirit of Jesus as the guiding spirit of his or her life. In that Spirit we can speak and act freely and confidently with the knowledge that the same Spirit that inspired Jesus is inspiring us."<sup>8</sup>

This next statement, done in a Christmas setting, makes him sound like a dyed-in-the-wool Universalist:

"...stay close to the small, vulnerable child that lives in our hearts and in every other human being. Often we do not know that the Christ child is within us. When we discover him we can truly rejoice."<sup>9</sup>

So it appears that Nouwen believed there was a mystical inner space where God dwelt in every human being and that through mystical meditation we could unite with the God within. His statement does not seem to be about something potential for all, but something already applied to all.

There are four forms of Universalism. The first form is true Universalism, which teaches that all automatically go to heaven in the end with no strings attached. The second form is that all will have a chance to accept or reject Christ after death so we all can be in if we want. This is also known as post-mortem salvation. The third type of Universalism offers a purgatorial type of punishment for a short duration after which all enter heaven. It will take time to get us all in. And the fourth form teaches that all are in unless they want out. This is what Nouwen taught.

Universalism, in any of its forms, distorts God and tries to rob Him of His right to justice and judgment by stressing only His love. Certainly the Bible does not teach anywhere of a universal indwelling by God or a universal salvation (John 1:12, 8:24, Revelation 20:12-15, 21:27). God will not drag unwilling or unwitting rejecters into heaven. So at times Nouwen sounded just like a Universalist,

but there is a twist and a caveat. He has in reality created what we might call a “modified Universalism.”

Nouwen’s sermons are posted on the Internet. In a number of them he told his audience they are in the Beloved and that they can claim Matthew 3:17 (“This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased”), just as much as Jesus did. It is shocking to suggest that a general audience is on the level of Jesus and that salvation consists only of a realization of that. That very thing was expressed again in Nouwen’s well-known sermon, “Being the Beloved.”<sup>10</sup> The title says it all. That we just *realize* that we are already in the Beloved and possessing salvation seems central to Nouwen’s theology. It does not take into consideration unrepentant child molesters, murderers, or embezzlers, for example. Years ago, one take-off on this shallow view of man and sin was referred to as “I’m OK, You’re OK.”

### IT’S AUTOMATIC

It is impossible to deny Nouwen’s own words and his decidedly unbiblical soteriology (doctrine of salvation) when he says:

“It is not the task of the Christian leader to go around nervously trying to redeem people, to save them at the last minute, to put them on the right track. **For we are redeemed once and for all. The Christian leader is called to help others affirm this great news,** and to make visible in daily events the fact that behind the dirty curtain of our painful symptoms there is something great to be seen: the face of Him in whose image we are shaped.”<sup>11</sup>

Nouwen was not clear as to when this “once and for all” redemption takes place, whether it is at birth or some other time.

No pastor would be biblically correct by telling people that apart from repentance and a personal saving faith, “we are redeemed.” Such a declaration is the opposite of John 3:16, Ephesians 2:8-9, and other Scripture verses. Nouwen’s universal

application of redemption is a gross denial of the Gospel. It is devoid of the doctrines of sin, repentance, and salvation by grace through faith in Christ. The preacher committed to the authority of Scripture is confidently sharing the Gospel, relying on the Word of God and the Holy Spirit for God’s outcome. There is no “great news” that we are somehow already redeemed.

Nouwen did give lip service to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. However, Nouwen’s Universalism leaned toward Inclusionism as it seems that the merits of these acts of Christ are not individually received by faith in Christ (in Nouwen’s system), but rather somehow automatically applied or imputed on most everyone apart from them even knowing it. Inclusionism teaches that almost all will be saved through the sacrifice of Christ with or without personal faith. Only those who hear and reject the Gospel will be lost. The late theological professor, Ron Nash, explains:

“Even though Jesus is the only Savior for [Inclusivists], they argue that it is not necessary for people to know about Jesus or to believe in Jesus.”<sup>12</sup>

This is the theological digress of liberal Protestants such as the late Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, and other similar teachers who erred in their soteriology. Nash also tells us that the second body of advocates for Inclusionism is Roman Catholics and that this teaching infiltrated Catholicism by way of Pope John XXIII and Vatican II.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, many cults and aberrant groups tip their hat to and acknowledge Jesus’ atonement on the cross and His resurrection. However, they distort the meaning and application of what Christ did. For example, in Nouwen’s Catholicism, all of the merits of Jesus can only be accessed through a series of traditional beliefs, religious works, rote prayers, rituals, indulgences, and through the intercession of saints. Christ’s work is not only hidden behind these things, but is only accessed through them. What Nouwen was teaching (that, in fact, we are all already redeemed) is not

even traditional Catholicism. In traditional Catholicism, works plus grace saves. But in Nouwen’s Inclusionism, awareness and affirmation of our already redeemed state is all one really needs. We just need to become aware that we *are* redeemed. That’s his “great news.”

In the last year of Nouwen’s life, he kept a diary that has been published under the title, *Sabbatical Journey: The Diary of His Final Year*. He wrote in that book that he had broadened his view of Jesus’ saving work:

“Today I personally believe that while Jesus came to open the door to God’s house, all human beings can walk through that door, whether they know about Jesus or not. Today I see it as my call to help every person claim his or her own way to God.”<sup>14</sup>

It is abundantly clear that his inclusionistic and universalistic thinking was not only a part of his immature early thought, but of his late and finally developed mindset. Biblically speaking, Jesus did not come to open the door. He is the door.

Theologian Henry Clarence Thiesan addressed the error of Universalism:

“There is a necessary order in a man’s salvation; he must first believe that Christ died for him, before he can appropriate the benefits of His death to himself. Although Christ died for all in the sense of reconciling God to the world, not all are saved, because their actual salvation is conditioned on *their* being reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:18-20).”<sup>15</sup>

### YOU ARE IN, UNLESS YOU WANT OUT

Having said all the above, Nouwen’s Universalism was not a consistent Universalism. Like his detour into Inclusionism, other aspects of his soteriology were confusing and contradictory. He did, after all, believe in hell and eternal punishment.<sup>16</sup> He believed in eternal punishment because he believed that, apparently, we could opt out of being the Beloved. It appeared that what he

meant in the end is that everyone automatically gets in, or is in, unless they opt out:

“God offers us a choice. To say yes or no to love. To offer me a choice is to respect me as a free human person. I am no robot or automaton who has no choice. God, who loves me in freedom, wants my love in freedom. That means that no is a possibility. Eternal life is not a predetermined fact. It is the fruit of our own human response.”<sup>17</sup>

So it is not yes or no to Jesus, but yes or no to God’s love *already possessed*. The closest analogy we have is that of a child divorcing his parents.

It appears from all that Nouwen wrote and believed that the choice to say no is not a choice about getting into salvation or accepting Christ. When he spoke of those that he’d met who had accepted Christ, he wanted it known that his views were much broader than that.<sup>18</sup> The concept of a personal faith in Christ did not resonate for him. Because everyone in his audiences was already addressed as “being the Beloved,” the choice had to be whether people remained so. This is possibly the only way to reconcile Nouwen’s conflicting statements. For Nouwen, Universalism was a possibility for all, but he taught that there was a back exit for all. He might have argued that he was not a Universalist, and in a strict sense that is correct. In Nouwen’s construct everyone is in the Beloved unless they decide they would rather be out. This is what is meant by a modified Universalism. We could also label it Nouwen’s “gospel of majority inclusion” or perhaps even conditional Universalism. Apologist Ron Rhodes referred to it as a quasi-Universalism.

Nouwen was never clear as to how he arrived at his position of all being the Beloved, but after reading a number of his books one can assemble the following improbable scenario. Jesus in the Incarnation (His coming in flesh) shared humanity. Because we are all human and part of humanity, we automatically share Christ. Apparently just being human does the trick. So the Incarnation of Jesus alone

somehow includes us in salvation and now all we have to do to find real fulfillment is realize it. This is not a highly detailed and systematized teaching of Nouwen, but becomes obvious after wading through many of his rambling statements. However, nowhere in the Bible does it say that the Incarnation alone saves. Christ’s death and resurrection are the basis of salvation.

If anyone would cite 2 Corinthians 5:19, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself,” in support of Universalism, they could not be more wrong. The word “reconcile” in this verse does not mean to automatically save, but simply means to look with favor. Whereas in the Old Testament God looked with favor on the Jewish nation (and not all were saved), He now looks with favor on the entire world. In reconciliation we could say in a sense that God’s posture toward mankind changed. Paul then urged individual hearers to be “reconciled to God” in verse 21. Sinners can be assured that God is willing to save and is favorable to mankind.

### SEND IN THE CLOWN?

Nouwen also had a startling Christology, which may simply have been a bid for sensationalism and attention. He once cast Jesus in the role of a clown:

“But the clown saves us: He is our man, because he fails, like we do, he makes mistakes like we do, he says to us, nonvirtuosity are OK too. And in his white face we recognize ourselves in our daily tasks of which so many fail. ... Christ is the clown who came into our circus and made us laugh because he came to tell us that we are not what we perform. He came for the crying, the persecuted, the weak, the hungry, the poor. He who is called to be a minister is called to be a clown.”<sup>19</sup>

Nouwen wanted to write a book on Jesus the Clown, but never did. Yes, Jesus came for the poor and weak, but for the poor and weak *who repent and trust Him*. No comparison of Jesus with a clown should be tolerated.

Note that Nouwen said that Jesus came to make us laugh because “he came to tell us that we are not what we perform.” In other words, our poor performance, our failures, and our sins are permissible with Jesus. In biblical fact, we *are* what we perform and we are in desperate need of being redeemed from our sins. While Jesus may welcome and accept us where we are and as we are, He does not leave us that way.

### POOR, POOR ME

For a man so admired and quoted in Christian books, Nouwen had a dead spiritual life:

“So, what about my life of prayer? Do I like to pray? Do I want to pray? Do I spend time praying? Frankly, the answer is no to all three questions. After sixty-three years of life and thirty-eight years of priesthood, my prayer seems as dead as a rock. ... The truth is that I do not feel much, if anything, when I pray. ... the words *darkness* and *dryness* seem to best describe my prayer today.”<sup>20</sup>

Some may want to give Nouwen credit for honesty, but that’s about all. Yes, there are times in which we all struggle in prayer or even pray against feelings. But no true believer’s prayer life should be a constant time of “darkness and dryness” and “dead as a rock” for years on end. Isaiah’s experience was that waiting on God brought renewal of strength (Isaiah 40:31). Likewise David knew that God restored his soul as he says in Psalm 23:3.

Nouwen as a mentor and model does not give us much. His book, *Sabbatical Journey*, is filled with incessant subjective inquisitions and introspection which leads him to mental torment. It is terribly self-focused:

“The feeling of being abandoned is always around the corner. I keep being surprised at how quickly it rears its ugly head. Yesterday I experienced that nasty feeling in my innermost being. Just raw anxiety, seemingly disconnected from anything. I kept asking myself, ‘Why

are you so restless, why are you so anxious, why are you so ill at ease, why do you feel so lonely and abandoned? ... What to do with the inner wound that is so easily touched and starts bleeding again? It is such a familiar wound. It has been with me for many years. I don't think this wound — this immense need for affection, and this immense fear of rejection — will ever go away."<sup>21</sup>

Nouwen's writings are filled with these kind of mawkish quotes. Christians, however, are to get their focus off themselves and set their mind on things above (Colossians 3:2) and look unto Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-2). Self-focus is a dark morbid dead end. Nouwen's obsession with needing affection and feeling rejection seems to have marked his life.

Yes, the psalmist spoke of his downcast soul and his ragged emotions, but he always included God's deliverance as he retreated from self-focus. God was always there to deliver him from his ruts. Obsessive self-focus is not to be a biblical way of life.

### PROPER INTERPRETATION OR PRIVATE INTERPRETATION

Nouwen tended to make Scripture passages mean what he wanted them to mean. For example, he took the phrase, "Can you drink the cup?" as one of his thoughts for the day.<sup>22</sup> Nouwen handled this verse from Mark 10:38 as if drinking the cup is something we can and should be doing. However the reverse is true.

James and John had come to Jesus to request that they have places of honor in the Kingdom of God. Jesus rebukes them and tells them that in their ignorance they have no idea what they are asking. To establish His Kingdom, Jesus must first suffer horribly and die. The agonies of the cross where He becomes a substitute for sin are His "cup." The word cup was a common Jewish metaphor for judgment on sin. Jesus then informs them that they will drink a cup of martyrdom (v. 39) and that God alone gives Kingdom placement (v. 40). In the

context, Jesus' cross is His cup and martyrdom is a cup. Nouwen misunderstood the text when he put forth:

"During the last month, 'drinking the cup' has become for me the best expression for living my life."<sup>23</sup>

In Mark's context, drinking the cup is not living of life, but giving of life. It may seem a small thing, but handling the Scripture subjectively makes one an untrustworthy guide.

Another example is Nouwen's misuse of Matthew 11:28-30. Here Jesus entreats, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." Nouwen paraphrases the verse while eliminating some words and adding other words. He renders it:

"Take on my burden — which is the burden of the whole world — and you will discover that it is a light burden."<sup>24</sup>

Nouwen's interpretation is terribly flawed. The verse does not say we are to take on "the burden of the whole world." We are to find our soul's rest in Jesus and with His rest and provision take on His yoke. It was common in the first century to speak of the yoke of the law. In the Jewish setting to take on a rabbi's yoke (Greek: *zugos*) was to simply accept his authority and his teachings and become his disciple; nothing more and nothing less.<sup>25</sup> Jesus' yoke is easy and His burden light because He gives us all the grace and enablement that we need (Philippians 4:19). The Pharisees' yoke was far more burdensome than Jesus' yoke. Nouwen had no grasp of the first-century Jewish setting. He was winging it and imposing a meaning on Scripture that is not there by telling us that the Matthew passage somehow means "the burden of the whole world."

### EXTREMES IN ECUMENISM

In an early morning meeting for "meditation and reflection," Nouwen refers to "playing the shakuhachi."<sup>26</sup>

A shakuhachi is a Japanese flute used in Zen Buddhist meditation. Someone could say that the use of this instrument might be benign and just used for the soothing music. In Nouwen's case, it is much more because he believed we need what the Buddhists have:

"I think it is of great importance that Buddhists and Christians meet. There is so much they have to give to each other."<sup>27</sup>

Buddhists have nothing to give to Christians. Christians, however, have the Gospel that we are to give to them. We want to be as broad and as narrow as the Bible allows. The Apostle Paul strongly stated, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14). We can certainly witness to others without surrendering our beliefs, adopting their ways, and using pagan paraphernalia.

Nouwen was comfortable with Buddhist paraphernalia because he was wildly ecumenical. He would serve and partake of Communion every day and distribute the host to whoever was there and wanted it. Being there was all that was required to receive Communion. On one occasion he ran into heavy resistance trying to distribute Communion to all visitors in a monastery where he was staying. Those in charge blocked him.<sup>28</sup>

### THE "BLESSING" OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Nouwen also said that homosexuality is a blessing for America:

"My own thoughts and emotions around this subject are very conflicted. Years of Catholic education and seminary training have caused me to internalize the Catholic Church's position. Still my emotional developments and my friendships with many homosexual people, as well as the recent literature on the subject, have raised many questions for me. There is a huge gap between my internalized homophobia and

my increasing conviction that homosexuality is *not a curse but a blessing for our society.*"<sup>29</sup>

One wonders why those who favorably quote Nouwen never mention this kind of quote. Blessing never comes from promoting sin of any kind. Scripture declares, "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Proverbs 14:34). Nouwen, in exalting homosexuality, falls under Isaiah's condemnation: "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!" (Isaiah 5:20).

So Nouwen moved to a conviction of not just live and let live, but to the very unbiblical, as well as un-Catholic, idea that homosexuality is a blessing for our society. From the very beginning the Israelites were instructed away from any and all forms of immorality including homosexuality. "If a man lies with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall surely be put to death. Their blood shall be upon them" (Leviticus 20:13). Remember that Jesus affirmed the Old Testament law. It was godless and pagan cultures that entered into this kind of vile behavior.

The Apostle Paul also denounced all forms of immorality. Paul, in Romans 1, calls both homosexuality and lesbianism "vile" and "against nature" (v. 26) and "shameful" (v. 27). For Nouwen to call it "a blessing for our society" is totally out of touch with the stand of Nouwen's own Roman Catholic Church.<sup>30</sup> All forms of sexual immorality are condemned strongly by the Bible.

### NOW WE KNOW WHY

We learn of Nouwen's basis for his approval of homosexuality from the words of an assistant:

"It was very clear to me from the very beginning of our relationship that Henri was a gay man, but he was not able to say those words for a very long time. However, he was eventually able to share with a small circle of

friends that he was gay. That he could share this truth gave him an enormous sense of relief. The coming-out process enables you to build a sense of solidarity and community with others who have shared the hellish journey that gay people have to go through in order to come to a new sense of freedom about who we are."<sup>31</sup>

While Nouwen was reputedly a celibate homosexual, we do know that he openly championed same-sex relationships.

One of the modern tragedies today is the number of religious teachers who try to comfort people living in sin. In fact, it is not a new problem at all, but was rampant in the days of the Old Testament. Jeremiah warned:

"Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; they speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the LORD. They continually say to those who despise Me, "The LORD has said, 'You shall have peace,'" and to everyone who walks according to the dictates of his own heart, they say, "No evil shall come upon you." ... But if they had stood in My counsel, and had caused My people to hear My words, then they would have turned them from their evil way and from the evil of their doings'" (Jeremiah 23:16-17, 22).

Those who glibly quote false teachers share their blame.

### CONTACTING THE DEAD

Nouwen, like any good Catholic, sought the help of Mary:

"Today is the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. May Mary bring unity to the Americas and the world. There is so much division! There is so much need for reconciliation and healing. Mary pray for us."<sup>32</sup>

The last time Mary is presented in Scripture, she is in the posture of prayer herself as were all the others in

the upper room, according to Acts 1:14. Mary also confessed her own need of a Savior (Luke 1:46-47), and made the prescribed sinner's offering at the Temple after the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:22-24, referring back to Leviticus 12:2-8).

It is obvious that Nouwen did not believe Jesus was and is the sole Mediator as 1 Timothy 2:5 teaches. In one instance, after he lost his keys he began to plead with Catholicism's patron saint of lost items, St. Anthony:

"Please help me find the keys. Please. I promise that I will give a nice gift to someone who needs it."<sup>33</sup>

In Nouwen's telling, he found the keys and thanked St. Anthony. It is decidedly unbiblical to seek the dead for anything. This practice, called necromancy (seeking contact and information from the dead), called for stoning in the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:31, 20:6, 27). At best, Nouwen's practice is delusional, and at worst borders on outright spiritism.

In Catholic belief, prayers to *deceased saints* are permitted and encouraged, but Nouwen goes even further as he prays to a friend who has only recently died:

"As I let my head rest on the casket, I asked Don Sr. to send me his spirit of equanimity, kindness, and humor, and to guide me in the years ahead. I especially prayed to him to intercede with Jesus to take my inner anguish away and to lead me to a greater inner peace."<sup>34</sup>

Prayer is never made to people, let alone dead people. When Jesus taught the disciples to pray He taught them, "Our Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:9). All prayer is directed heavenward to God. Nowhere in the Bible are we instructed to pray to the departed. The Bible asks the question, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5, see also Isaiah 8:19). We should seek the Resurrected and Living One, Jesus, not intrude into the realm of the dead.

## HE THAT HAS NO EAR

One of the more bizarre fixations and obsessions of Nouwen was his fixation on Vincent Van Gogh, the Dutch painter who lived in the late 1800s. Van Gogh was mentally unstable and spent time in mental asylums. At one point he mutilated himself by cutting off his ear lobe and delivered it to a prostitute in a brothel. He was a hopeless drunk who died at age 37 from a self-inflicted gun shot to his chest.

Nouwen was so enamored with Van Gogh that for a time he had a small traveling road show imitating Van Gogh for his audiences and students complete with a bandaged ear. He held lectures on Van Gogh for students in New Haven. Some students expressed that with Nouwen's Dutch accent he began to take on the character of Van Gogh. Nouwen biographer Michael Ford stated:

"Van Gogh also became a guide and a teacher to Nouwen, whose future classes on compassion were fueled by his intimate knowledge of the artist's life."<sup>35</sup>

Proverbs 13:20 is clear in terms of who we choose as models, "He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed." There are better models than Van Gogh. We may enjoy Van Gogh's paintings and even express sorrow for him, but there is no good reason to try to emulate his life.

Nouwen also had a propensity to make up words and statements that were arcane and misleading. For example, he would write about the Christ of the "descending way." In the end this was code for Liberation Theology, which he also embraced.<sup>36</sup> Liberation Theology is a social movement that defines salvation as delivering masses of poor or oppressed people upward to a better life.

Nouwen, as a Roman Catholic priest, naturally embraced the medieval mystics and desert monks wholeheartedly with all their contemplative practices.<sup>37</sup>

Mystics such as Madame Guyon and Theresa of Avila believed that in

silence and by turning inward they could literally merge with God and become one with Him. This fusing and merging would make them in substance and essence — God! Prayer for them was obsessively seeking voices within that they wrongly believed were the voice of God. Surely this was a strong delusion. As has been shown, Nouwen picked strange models and mentors. Prayer is never to be directed inwardly to ourselves, but directed outside of ourselves to our heavenly Father. Ron Rhodes wrote:

"Perhaps the most significant manifestation of mysticism in the modern church is contemplative prayer, which draws very heavily from Buddhism and Hinduism. In this form of mystical prayer, one becomes deeply quiet, empties the mind (as in eastern meditation), falls into an altered state of consciousness, and goes into his center, where he supposedly merges with the divine. Rational thought is completely transcended. To help induce a mystical state, proponents use breathing exercises (much like Taoists) and a mantra (or sacred word, such as ma-ra-na-tha), which is repeated over and over again to aid in deep meditation. Apparently, Christian mystics believe that simply because they utilize a Christian-sounding mantra makes the practice itself a Christian practice — a dangerously wrong assumption. Amazingly, many who practice contemplative prayer cite Psalm 62:5 in support of the practice: 'For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him.' However, this verse has nothing to do with prayer or contemplation but rather simply encourages believers to wait without distraction in eager expectation for God to act in deliverance. Another verse taken out of context is Psalm 46:10 (KJV): 'Be still, and know that I am God.' The act of being still, however, has nothing to do with prayer or contemplation, but

simply indicates that one should slow down and trust God rather than get in a fuss over tough circumstances."<sup>38</sup>

## LASTLY — A PLEA

Nouwen was no friend to Bible believers. He was not a trustworthy guide or teacher. He assigned meanings to Bible passages that were not there and applied salvation universally to most except those who opt out. In his scheme there was no stated need of personal repentance and faith in Christ for salvation. He openly embraced Buddhist concepts and asserted we can learn from them. He was a self-confessed homosexual who supported the idea of homosexual unions.

The only explanation as to why so many professed Evangelicals quote him is ignorance. In defending their citations, they are defending their own undiscerning and unexamined choices. In ignorance they leave relevant facts unexamined that would help us evaluate Nouwen and they become upset, defensive, and even angry if anyone inquires or tries to bring the facts to light.

Nouwen's beliefs were aberrational, radical, and, at points, heretical. He was decidedly neither Catholic nor evangelical. He pushed Vatican II beyond all limits and interpreted its outcome as personal license to believe and teach whatever he wished. The plea we offer to those who quote him is to admit you have not done your homework and select someone more biblical and more doctrinally sound. We are, after all, responsible to our readers and hearers. We need to "Test all things and hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

### Endnotes:

1. Henri Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey: The Diary of His Final Year*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998, pg. 47.
2. Ingrid Schlueter with guest Ken Silva, "Evangelicals Embrace Mystics," *Crosstalk*, Sept. 18, 2008. A description and audio version of this program was accessed at: [www.crosstalkamerica.com/shows/2008/09/evangelicals\\_embrace\\_mystics.php](http://www.crosstalkamerica.com/shows/2008/09/evangelicals_embrace_mystics.php).
3. Michael Ford, *Wounded Prophet*. New York: Doubleday, 1999, pg. 35.

4. See David McCasland, "Pursuing Hospitality," *Our Daily Bread*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Radio Bible Class, Monday, Sept. 27, 2010.

5. For more thoughts along the line of deception by investment, see G. Richard Fisher, "What is Behind the 'Energizer Bunny' Syndrome?" *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2010, pp. 2, 22-23.

6. Henri Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love*. New York: Doubleday, 1996.

7. Nouwen cited in Roger Oakland, *Faith Undone*. Silverton, Ore.: Lighthouse Trails, 2007, pg. 90.

8. *Sabbatical Journey*, op. cit., pg. 161.

9. *Ibid.*, pg. 71.

10. Henri Nouwen, "Being the Beloved." Sermon posted on Google Videos and accessed at: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=3701709082567809182#>. This video is also posted on YouTube.

11. Nouwen cited by Debbie Dewart, "The Contemporary Theology Of Henri Nouwen - Wounded 'Healer' ... or Deceiver?" Hubert, N.C.: Christian Discernment Publications Ministry Inc., pg. 5, emphasis

added by Dewart. Document accessed at: [www.christiandiscernment.com](http://www.christiandiscernment.com) under the "View and Print Publications" tab.

12. Ron Nash, "Is Jesus the Only Savior? - Critiquing Evangelicals Who Have Lost Their Way." Saint Louis: Personal Freedom Outreach, 2004, audio recording, CD-0428.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Sabbatical Journey*, op. cit., pg. 51.

15. Henry Clarence Thiessan, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973, pg. 330, italic in original.

16. *Sabbatical Journey*, op. cit., pp. 57-58.

17. *Ibid.*, pg. 58.

18. *Ibid.*, pg. 51.

19. Nouwen cited in *Wounded Prophet*, op. cit., pg. 24, ellipsis in original.

20. *Sabbatical Journey*, op. cit., pg. 5, italics in original.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 25.

22. *Ibid.*, pg. 11.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, pg. 14.

25. See Gerhard Kittel, Editor, *Theological*

*Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964, Vol. 2, pp. 900-901.

26. *Sabbatical Journey*, op. cit., pg. 19.

27. *Ibid.*, pg. 28.

28. *Wounded Prophet*, op. cit., pp. 122-123.

29. *Sabbatical Journey*, op. cit., pg. 27, emphasis added.

30. See further, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. New York: Doubleday, 1994, pp. 625-626.

31. *Wounded Prophet*, op. cit., pg. 66.

32. *Sabbatical Journey*, op. cit., pg. 65.

33. *Ibid.*, pg. 171.

34. *Ibid.*, pg. 162.

35. *Wounded Prophet*, op. cit., pg. 109.

36. See further, Michael O'Laughlin, *God's Beloved*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Arbis Books, 2004, pp. 134-139.

37. *Wounded Prophet*, op. cit., pg. 111. See also Henri Nouwen, *The Genesee Diary, Report from a Trappist Monastery*. New York: Doubleday, no date.

38. Ron Rhodes, *5-Minute Apologetics for Today*. Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishing, 2010, Day 363.

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## EDITORIALS

(continued from page 2)

constituted a new dispensation. The claim that true Christianity was somehow lost over the centuries and had to be rediscovered is a myth called "Restorationism" and is the foundation plank of many cults and isms.

Some of Swedenborg's declarations border on the downright silly. He makes the claim, for example, that during one of his out-of-body experiences (while visiting heaven), he was able to convince Martin Luther to renounce his old Reformation ideas and convert to Swedenborg's views.

Also, Swedenborg claimed that during his astral travels he met with and took instruction directly from angels. But the Bible reminds us that false teachers have been corrupted by the one who "transforms himself into an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 1:3, 13-14). And we must never forget Paul's warning in Galatians about an angel with another gospel (Galatians 1:8-9).

Researcher and writer Bill Alnor reminds us, "Swedenborg rejected Christ's vicarious atonement on the cross for the sins of the world, calling it an 'abomination.'" And that, "He is one of the first to widely disseminate the unbiblical notion that following death, humans evolve into angels. His stories of heavenly society contain wild tales of sexual experiences, bizarre accounts of angels' sexual practices, their writing styles, and even of male angels' beards. Some angelic communities, he went on to say, are similar to primitive African culture where people are carefree and walk around naked!"

It is also helpful to remember that claimed angelic appearances and angelic messages launched Islam and Mormonism, and are so much a part of the faulty and heretical messages of extremist Word-Faith teachers.

The most famous adherent of Swedenborg's religion was Helen Keller. But there is a follower who has helped put Swedenborg back on the map today: Dr. Mehmet Oz, who *AARP The Magazine* calls, "America's hardest-working doctor." And he is a friend of Oprah Winfrey. It seems that pop religions and show business have become handmaidens. There is no gainsaying Oz's tremendous popularity and enormous influence.

Mehmet Cenjiz Oz, who turned 50 just last year, is a cardiothoracic surgeon, author, and television personality. He is of Turkish descent, speaks both Turkish and English, and has parents who are Muslim. He has written numerous books and hosts a daily television show, *The Dr. Oz Show*. Oz has been called a global leader, as well as being designated one of the most influential men of the 21st century by *Esquire* magazine.

Oz is a devoted follower of Swedenborg, an outspoken member of The New Church, and a lover of Transcendental Meditation, which proves that intelligence and discernment do not always go together. One can have secular knowledge and education without any real spiritual insight.

Another frightening thing about Oz is his endorsement of a New Age practice called Reiki, meaning life force energy. His wife is said to be a devout practitioner of Reiki. It is a massage technique which is not neutral or benign. The claim is made that as the therapist lays