

The Quarterly Journal



THE NEWSLETTER PUBLICATION OF PERSONAL FREEDOM OUTREACH

VOL. 28, NO. 4

OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2008

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There's No Place Like Rome? Understanding the Ancient-Future Faith Movement

by Gary E. Gilley

Rumors are starting to circulate that the emergent church movement is running out of steam. After making the biggest splash and the most noise of anything in the Christian community for many years, it appears to be approaching exhaustion. Some such as Rob Bell and Erwin McManus who are clearly in the "emergent conversation" have denied their involvement. And people seem a bit tired of hearing about postmodernism, its rejection of universal truth, and its promotion of relativism. These things play out nicely in philosophy class and college coffee shops, but have serious limitations in the real world.

But the emergent church has not died; it is just morphing. Emergent has largely been a backlash against the seeker-sensitive movement with its slick programs, high-octane entertainment, and superficial worship.

Where the seeker-sensitive movement attempted to make the Church look like the world, emergent youth



want a sense of the sacred. Where the seekers wanted to offer everything the world offered in purified form, the emergents want experiences the world cannot offer. Where the seekers repudiated Church history and behaved as if the Church had been born yesterday, the emergents want not only a link to the past but a return to the past. These elements have always been present in emergent but are just now rising to the top of the conversation. It is not enough to complain about the modern Church or to brush aside all claims of truth as relative. Roots of some kind must anchor the movement if it is to last. What gives this conversation a point of reference and at the same time

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held to a biblical standard. Hull's new discipleship content is a mixed bag of mysticism and visionary hallucinations. Hull is moving in the wrong direction.

Going back to old errors is not discipleship. It is not choosing life, but confusion. It is amazing that the emergent church leaders accuse conservative evangelicals of being out of touch. One cannot be more out of touch than when trying to revert to pre-Reformation practices that spawned error upon error. One is much safer choosing another discipleship author who is more concerned about staying on a biblical track rather than the track of the so-called emerging church. The Church needs to go forward, not backward. The rush to Rome is a race into the dark.

Endnotes:

1. Bill Hull, *Choose the Life*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007, pg. 44, note 2.
2. *Ibid.*, pg. 17.
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4. *Ibid.*, pg. 18.
5. *Ibid.*, pg. 19.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, pg. 21.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 202, 210, 215, 221.
9. See further, Ray Yungen, *A Time of Departing*. Silverton, Ore.: Lighthouse Trails, 2002, pp. 64-65, 134-136.
10. Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing

- Company, 1998, pg. 51.
11. Nouwen cited in Roger Oakland, *Faith Undone*. Silverton, Ore.: Lighthouse Trails, 2007, pg. 90.
12. *Choose the Life*, op. cit., pg. 24.
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 48.
14. *Ibid.*, pg. 49.
15. See further, G. Richard Fisher, "What a Marriage! Why Did Evangelicalism Marry Catholicism's Stepchild?," *The Quarterly Journal*, April-June 2005, pg. 16.
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17. *Choose the Life*, op. cit., pg. 35.
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19. *Ibid.*, italics in original.
20. *New Geneva Study Bible*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995, note on 1 Corinthians 11:1, pg. 1812.
21. Lorne Zelyck, "An Evaluation of Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, Autumn 2005, pg. 88, ellipsis in original.
22. *Choose the Life*, op. cit., pp. 62, 68.
23. *Ibid.*, pg. 130.
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26. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
27. "Teresa of Ávila," from Wikipedia, bold in original. Document available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Teresa_of_Avila.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Cathleen Medwick, *Teresa of Avila*. New York: Doubleday, 1999, pp. ix-x.
30. *Ibid.*, pg. 32.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 61, 63-64, 185-186, 204-205.
32. *Ibid.*, pg. 104.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.
34. *Ibid.*, pg. 126.
35. *Ibid.*, pg. 127.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 207, 169.

37. *Ibid.*, pg. 4.
38. *Choose the Life*, op. cit., pg. 94, italic in original.
39. Joseph Henry Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1966, pg. 511, italics in original.
40. Everett F. Harrison, Editor-in-chief, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1973, pg. 209, italics in original.
41. G. Richard Fisher, "The Mindless Mysticism of Madame Guyon," *The Quarterly Journal*, January-March 1997, pp. 4, 12-15.
42. Madam Guyon, *Madame Guyon An Autobiography*. Chicago: Moody Press, no date, pg. 239.
43. *Choose the Life*, op. cit., pp. 128-129.
44. *Ibid.*, pg. 203.
45. *Ibid.*, pg. 217.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 216-217.
47. See further, "What a Marriage!," op. cit., pp. 17-18.
48. *Choose the Life*, op. cit., pg. 218.
49. *Ibid.*
50. See further, Gary E. Gilley, "The Lure of Mysticism," *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2005, pp. 18-19; and Gary E. Gilley and Brian E. Gilley, "The New Mystic Youth: No Longer Just Pulp Fiction," *The Quarterly Journal*, October-December 2007, pp. 8-10.
51. For a well documented and in-depth treatment of the desert monks and desert communities from a favorable perspective, see Derwas James Chitty, *The Desert A City, An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism Under the Christian Empire* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999).



NO PLACE LIKE ROME?

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launches it into the next stage is what some call "ancient-future faith."

ORIGINS AND LEADERS

The themes found in ancient-future faith have always been part of emergent but are taking on additional weight as the movement matures. The term seems to have been coined by the late Robert Webber, professor at Wheaton College and Northern Seminary. Webber wrote a number of works that are foundational to emergent philosophy, including his 1999 *Ancient-Future Faith, Rethinking Evan-*

gelicalism for a Postmodern World. *Christianity Today* calls Webber the "father of the ancient-future movement" and mentions the Robert E. Webber Center for an Ancient Evangelical Future, which he founded.¹ Chris Armstrong, associate professor of Church history at Bethel Seminary, says the movement "exploded in a 24-month period in 1977-1978, which saw the publication of Richard Foster's bestselling *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* and Robert Webber's *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity*."²

Armstrong documents other evangelical leaders during this same period who came to similar

conclusions. Among them were Bethel College and Seminary president Carl Lundquist, Campus Crusade leader Peter Gillquist, Drew University's Tom Oden, and theologians Donald Bloesch and Thomas Howard. The latter two were instrumental, along with Robert Webber, in penning "'The Chicago Call: An Appeal to Evangelicals,' whose prologue declared evangelicals' 'pressing need to reflect upon the substance of the biblical and historic faith and to recover the fullness of this heritage.'"³

In 1982, *Christianity Today's* sister publication *Christian History* (now *Christian History & Biography*) began to encourage interest in Church history

and works of the Church Fathers (in itself a good thing). In 1988, Renovaré was founded by Richard Foster to introduce Roman Catholic mystics to Protestants and advance a mystical approach in evangelicalism.

A wide range of evangelicals now identify with A-F. In the February 2008 issue of *Christianity Today*, several of its editors, including Mark Galli, David Neff, Ted Olson, and Tim Morgan, owned up to their involvement with the movement. Anyone who has read *CT* in recent years is not

Webber believes the Church has traveled. This is important because Webber writes, “you can best think about the future of the faith after you have gone back to the classical tradition.”⁴ In other words, he is not trying to reinvent Christianity; he just wants to “carry forward what the church has affirmed from its beginning.”⁵ With this in mind, Webber looks back and sees six stages of Church history: primitive (the first century) ancient (or classical) (100-600), medieval (600-1500), Reformation (1500-1750), modern (1750-1980), and postmodern (1980-present).⁶

to say that Webber dismisses the Apostolic age altogether, referring to it as “primitive Christianity.”

However, to grasp the issues it is necessary to realize that A-F advocates begin from a different point of reference than many evangelicals. They do not argue that their views in the areas of mysticism and ritual are based on New Testament teaching or example, for they cannot. This does not deter them, however, for they are reaching back to what they consider the “rich” traditions and practices developed in the classical stage of Church history. It is their contention that it was during this era that Christianity reached its zenith, and therefore for Christianity to regain its spiritual health it is essential to return to the ancient stage with its emphasis and observances.

The argument that we should look to the New Testament for our ecclesiastical model falls on deaf ears among the A-F community, for they are convinced that the richest expression of the Christian faith is not found in the Bible but in the post-biblical early Church. It is the desire of the A-F/emergent movement to mold the future Church into the shape of the ancient Church.

An article in *Christianity Today* summarizes Webber’s tri-fold breakdown of evangelicalism since 1950 as found in his book *Younger Evangelicals*. Webber sees the years between 1950 and 1975 as the era of “*traditionals*,” who focused on doctrine or, as Webber complains, “being right.” “They pour their resources into Bible studies, Sunday school curricula, and apologetics materials.”⁸

The traditionals were followed by the “*pragmatics*” who “do” church growth, spawning the culturally engaged (and hugely successful) seeker-sensitive trend, with full-service megachurches and countless outreach programs.⁹ The pragmatics have been superseded by the “younger evangelicals” who “seek a Christianity that is ‘embodied’ and ‘authentic’ — distinctively Christian. ... The

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surprised to find its editors in sympathy with emergent-related views. Now they have clearly staked out their position.

Virtually all those involved with any aspect of the emergent conversation, as well as a growing number of mainstream evangelical leaders, are embracing A-F practices and ideas. One internet ministry, Lighthouse Trails, is dedicated to bringing to the awareness of Christians the vast number of evangelical leaders who are immersed or at least dabbling in mysticism.

OUTLINING THE STAGES

An attempt to understand A-F can begin with examining the stages of Church history through which

In Webber’s view, this final stage (postmodern) is a return to the second stage (ancient/classical) which he sees as the purest form of Christianity. He writes, “Thus, it may be said broadly that the story of Christianity moves from a focus on mystery in the classical period, to institution in the medieval era, to individualism in the Reformation era, to reason in the modern era, and now, in the postmodern era, back to mystery.”⁷

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younger evangelicals seek a renewed encounter with a God beyond both doctrinal definitions and super-successful ministry program."¹⁰

While elements of all three types of evangelicals can be found today, according to Webber and *CT*, it is the younger or emergent evangelical who dominates the 21st century and is the superior form of Christianity. Evangelicalism has finally grown up, having left behind the need for doctrinal correctness and outward success, and has evolved into the ancient faith of the early Church. The Church has returned full circle and this is for the best, so say the A-F people.

THE ROMANS ROAD

Those wondering where A-F is taking the Church should look to Rome, or at least its suburbs. This is evidenced not only in the adoption of Rome's religious practices or in embracing Catholic and Eastern Orthodox dogma, but also in the direct statements and actions of those leading the movement. For example, there has been the steady trickle of noted evangelical leaders who have openly converted to Rome or Orthodoxy. We think of Thomas Howard and Frank Schaffer of some years back. Frank Schaffer, the son of Francis Schaffer, has been seen on television saying he grew up being taught that Roman Catholicism was the "whore of Babylon," but he now has seen the light and worships in an Orthodox church, has strong leanings toward Rome, and finds little good to say about the Reformed theology of his father or evangelicalism in general.

More recently, it has been the celebrated defection of the president of the Evangelical Theological Society, Francis Beckwith. Beckwith was willing to lay down his coveted position with ETS in order to join the Catholic Church. Indeed, some see no choice. John Henry Newman, of the old Oxford Movement (a mid-19th century move toward Rome), stated, "to read deeply in history is to cease being Protestant."¹¹ And, as Chris Armstrong notes, "At least some

evangelicals have concluded that therefore, the only option left is to jump [the Protestant] ship."¹²

Others do not want to go that far, but are open to a deeper ecumenicalism than in the past. Armstrong, in his article for *Christianity Today* summarizes, "In short, the search for historic roots can and should lead not to conversion, but to a deepening ecumenical conversation, and a recognition by evangelicals that the Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox are fellow Christians with much to teach us."¹³

Apparently many agree with this sentiment. InterVarsity Press has released the *Ancient Christian Commentary* series to draw modern believers of all stripes back to the views of earlier Church leaders; the 2007 Wheaton Theology Conference chose as its theme "The Ancient Faith for the Church's Future"; and as mentioned earlier the editors of *Christianity Today* have come out as supporters of A-F. Liberty University observed the liturgical season of Lent; and Thomas Nelson is just now publishing a series of eight books on "The Ancient Practices," the first written by Brian McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again, The Return of the Ancient Practices*.

The movement probably owes as much to Richard Foster as anyone. When Foster wrote his bestselling *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* in 1977, it hit the evangelical community like a bombshell. Here was a card-carrying evangelical (although a Quaker) urging believers to return to the mystical teachings of ancient Roman Catholicism to unearth the "great treasures of spiritual reformation." Foster introduced numerous mystics, most, but not all, from the monastic and Counter-Reformation periods, to modern evangelicals who had never heard of them. He then propounded that following the practices of these "spiritual masters of the past" was essential to spiritual development.

Since that time, Foster and his many followers have flooded the evangelical

community with mystical practices that promise a deeper level of spiritual life than witnessed since the Reformation disastrously (in their opinion) convinced believers of the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. And the race has been on to return Protestants to the Mother Church. The distinctions that have been recognized between conservative Protestant and Roman Catholic/Eastern Orthodox churches since Luther and Calvin have been rapidly disappearing.

The mood of the moment is not only that the three traditions can learn from each other, but that they can be reunited. This reunion will not take place by returning to the Bible, because "doctrine divides." But if we can put our doctrines on the back burner, seeing them as secondary issues at best, and return to the ancient practices and creeds, we can recognize our commonality in the ancient Church. We will therefore be able to identify each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, despite insurmountable doctrinal differences. Unity between the major traditions will never be found as long as we adhere to our theological distinctives. But if we can lay these aside and unite over our experiences, common ancestors, and ecumenical creeds, we revitalize the Christian faith. It should be observed that most, if not all, of the moving is being done from the Protestant side, not the Catholic/Orthodox side. This is because the A-F movement sees the Reformation as an unnecessary schism perpetrated by Protestants. Because it was the Protestants who split and went astray, it is necessary for them to come home. Of course, some in the emergent conversation want to take this further and roll into community those of other religions as well. But that is another story.

MONASTICISM

Hand-in-hand with the A-F movement is a revival in traditional monastic and religious orders. What is most interesting is that this resurgence is not unique to Christianity or any

particular branch of Christianity. A recent article in *U.S. News and World Report* documents Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant interest in more traditional and liturgical forms of worship, especially among young adults.¹⁴ But an almost inexplicable aspect of all this is an attraction to monastic practices. The term “new monasticism” is becoming common on the internet and among emergent and mystical-oriented writers such as Richard Foster, Tony Jones, and Brian McLaren.

The winter 2007 issue of *Christian History & Biography* is devoted to the monasticism of sixth century monk St. Benedict and states, “No topic touches young evangelical students more than monasticism.”¹⁵ This fragmented, success oriented, materialistic age is running out of gas for many. Something more is needed, something with depth, something beyond the superficial entertainment-oriented Christian tradition that many have grown up with. There also has been a whole line of books (the writings of Richard Foster, Kathleen Norris’ *The Cloister Walk*, and Eugene Peterson’s *Eat This Book*) and numerous promotions of *lectio divina* and contemplative prayer, along with the general rise of mysticism and the emergent church which has pushed these concepts into the minds of young people.

Between the combination of restlessness/disillusionment and the promise of better things in solitude, asceticism, and a life of spiritual discipline, monasticism has a certain draw. To be sure, this is a “new monasticism” with a 21st-century twist. The origin of early Christian monasticism came in the fourth century following the legalization of Christianity. Until then martyrdom was “the ultimate test of devotion.” But in a post-Constantine world, Jennifer Hevelone-Harper writes, “The Christian ascetic inherited the mantle of the martyr ... Monks sought to live an angelic life on earth, neither marrying nor having children. By refusing to participate in the continual process of physically repopulating the earth, they recognized that

Christ’s coming had initiated a new age and believed that their lives could help usher in his kingdom.”¹⁶

Contemporary young people attracted to monasticism are not likely to abandon conventional life and live as hermits in caves or even monasteries. More likely they will continue to keep their jobs, live in standard dwellings with family or friends, and carry out the normal activities of modern society. But they are yearning for some sense of serenity, quiet and simpler times, and therein lies the pull of monastic and ancient practices. Whether they are the answer to these problems and whether they are biblical are the real issues.

THE PRACTICES OF A-F FAITH

In a recent sermon dealing with the emergent/emerging church, Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill in Seattle and self-described emerging church leader, identified four lanes in which the emergent/emerging movement is traveling. In the first lane are emerging evangelicals who believe in basic Christian doctrine, such as the Bible being God’s Word and Jesus dying for our sins. They also tend to form the “hip, cool church,” according to Driscoll. Pastors who may fall in this category include Dan Kimball and Donald Miller. It is debatable whether Miller is a supporter of basic Christian doctrine. Kimball, on the other hand, does hold to certain doctrinal positions such as the three ancient ecumenical creeds, but would not want to drift much beyond them.

Traveling down the second lane are the house church evangelicals who are doctrinally Christian brothers and sisters, Driscoll said. They do not support creating large churches and instead form little house churches or churches in other smaller settings such as coffee shops. Driscoll places himself and Mars Hill in the third lane that he calls emerging reformers, who believe in all of the evangelical distinctives and embrace Reformed theological traditions.

Emerging reformers also try to find ways to make the Church relevant, accessible, and culturally connected; they tend to be charismatic and many are involved in church planting.

In the fourth lane is a group of emergent liberals whom Driscoll says have “totally gotten off the highway and is lost out in the woods.” Although Driscoll was initially connected to this group, which also tries to find innovative ways to do church, he left, “citing that they call into question many parts of the Christian doctrine.” Some of their questions include: “Do you need Jesus to go to heaven?” “Is anybody really going to hell?” “Is sex outside of marriage including homosexuality sinful?” Leaders in this lane include Brian McLaren and Rob Bell.¹⁷

Like most movements, the emerging church has changed form and is becoming increasingly difficult to define. Many, in all of Driscoll’s four lanes, are distancing themselves from the emergent label itself since it has become somewhat pejorative. What all lanes of emergent/emerging have in common is the desire to be relevant to the postmodern culture. Some have sacrificed the faith in this effort; others have been more biblically sound. But out of this junk drawer category (as Driscoll calls it) springs the Ancient-Future Faith emphasis that is common to most of those in all of the emergent lanes. This is the belief that the purest expression of Christianity was found in the ancient period of Church history (100-600), and it is to this era that we must return.

The appeal of this era to emerging church Christians is that the early church rituals, traditions, and liturgies were developed at that time along with the notion that mystical practices began to define spirituality and close encounters with God. This is the era of Church history which many believe we must appropriate to our times if we are to experience authentic Christianity. Let’s take a look at some of the specific practices which are

returning to favor through the A-F resurgence.

LECTIO DIVINA

This term and practice is increasingly popping up in evangelical circles. Many who have been told that *lectio divina* is nothing but a devotional, contemplative reading of Scripture, have been little concerned. However, a closer look is warranted. According to Wikipedia, "**Lectio Divina** is Latin for *divine reading*, spiritual reading, or 'holy reading,' and represents a traditional Christian practice of prayer and scriptural reading intended to engender communion with the Triune God and to increase in the knowledge of God's Word. It is a way of praying with Scripture that calls one to study, ponder, listen and, finally, pray from God's Word."¹⁸

Given this benign definition one could be justified in asking what is wrong with slowly reading and meditating on Scripture. Scriptural meditation has been practiced and prescribed throughout biblical times to the present. Eugene Peterson (author of many evangelical books and the paraphrased Bible, *The Message*) published *Eat This Book* in 2006 to promote *lectio divina*. Peterson writes, "*Lectio divina* is not a methodical technique for reading the Bible. It is a cultivated, developed habit of *living* the text in Jesus's name. This is the way, the *only* way that the Holy Scriptures become formative in the Christian church and become salt and leaven in the world."¹⁹

If *lectio divina* is in fact the *only* way that the Scriptures become formative in the Church, and the *only* way they become salt and leaven in the world, as Peterson claims, it would be wise for us to understand and become practitioners of *lectio divina*. *Lectio divina* can be traced back as far as Origen (A.D. 220). Various monastic rules have practiced *lectio divina*, most notably those of Benedict and Ignatius of Loyola, although 12th century monk Guigo II is credited with systematizing the method as it is currently used today. Pope Benedict

XVI recently recommended its use as a means of promoting spiritual formation.

Mike Yaconelli, a strong proponent of this ancient tradition, tells us, "When we engage in *lectio divina*, we are not seeking to read the Bible for knowledge or instruction (although both of those may come), nor are we seeking the escape of a good story. Instead we come to the words of the Bible seeking to be with God."²⁰ Ken Boa, another recent promoter of mystical Christianity, explains that

"*Prayer (Oratio)* ... is a time for participation in the interpenetrating subjectivity of the Trinity through prolonged mutual presence and growing identification with the life of Christ."²⁴

And finally:

"*Contemplation (Contemplatio)* ... is a theological grace that cannot be reduced to logical, psychological, or aesthetic categories. ... it is best for us to stop talking and 'listen to Him' in simple and loving attentiveness. In this

Yaconelli tells us that one technique to help in this process is take a word or phrase (in essence a mantra) and "repeat it to yourself, allowing the rest of the text to fall away. As you prayerfully repeat it, different thoughts, feelings, and images may arise."

lectio divina involves four movements.²¹ Boa maps out these actions:

"*Reading (Lectio)* ... Since *lectio divina* engages the whole person, your bodily posture is important. A seated position that is erect but not tense or slouched is best ... Remember that unlike ordinary reading, in *lectio* you are seeking to be *shaped* by the Word more than *informed* by the Word."²²

"*Meditation (Meditatio)* ... Meditation is a spiritual work of holy desire and an interior invitation for the Spirit to pray and speak within us (Romans 8:26-27) ... Meditation will do you little good if you try to control the outcome."²³

strange and holy land we must remove the sandals of our ideas, constructs, and inclinations, and quietly listen for the voice of God."²⁵

Boa points out that to the uninitiated, contemplation often is confused with meditation, but they are not the same. In ordinary circles, meditation describes deep thinking and analyzing with a rational mind, and some may use contemplation as a synonym for this activity. But in mystical circles contemplation and meditation are considerably distinct.

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rest of the text to fall away. As you prayerfully repeat it, different thoughts, feelings, and images may arise." And by this methodology, Yaconelli further tells us, you can "Pray yourself empty" and "Sink into God beneath all your thoughts and feelings."²⁶

As can easily be seen, *lectio divina* is not a devotional method of Scripture reading, but a highly mystical approach. The reader does not encounter Scripture in order to grasp the understanding of what God has communicated to us and apply it. Instead, a super-rational experience is sought in which God speaks to an individual beyond the written page in imaginative and non-cognitive ways.

It is also instructive to note that this method of Bible reading is not drawn from the Scriptures themselves, but from medieval monks during a period when the Church of Rome was abandoning the clear understanding of the Word of God and seeking alternatives. The Ancient-Future Faith movement is not going back to Scripture for its teachings, but to the practices and traditions of men.

DIVINE OFFICE AND THE NEW MONASTICISM

The best known of the monastic rules is that of Benedict. Benedict's Rule, which is receiving renewed attention today, was written for 6th century monks who entered Benedict's monastery with a goal of hearing from God. The first word of Benedict's Rule was "listen." So Benedict structured each day around two activities which were designed for listening to the voice of God. Four hours a day were devoted to the *lectio divina* and four hours were spent in the "Divine Office." The Divine Office consisted of praying over the 150 psalms each week, plus other readings from Scripture, the writings of Christian authors, hymns, and prayers. The Divine Office comprises eight set times of prayer (one nocturnal and seven Offices of the day) in which certain prayers are recited.

Robert Benson, author of *In Constant Prayer*, which is part of Thomas Nelson Publisher's "The Ancient Practices Series," assures us that the Divine Office reaches back to the beginning of the human race, has been practiced by the people of God ever since, and now is even being prayed by Jesus to the Father at this time.²⁷

In fact, the Divine Office, as practiced throughout Church history, is the product of men's imagination. Our Lord has certainly called us to be people devoted to prayer, but He neither gives us, nor demands from us, a prescribed set of prayers to be recited by rote at set times of the day.

Until recently, few outside of the Roman Catholic clergy paid much attention to the Office, but there has been a renewed interest in such things swirling around the "new monasticism." The older form of monasticism and religious orders has been on the decline for a long time. The number of men in such orders has declined 46% in Europe and 30% in the Americas since 1978.²⁸ Chris Armstrong observes, "Yet most suggest that new and powerful forms of the monastic impulse may even now be arising."²⁹

These new forms, found in both Protestant and Catholic circles, consist of those who have connected themselves to some aspect of monastic living while remaining in the world. What we are finding is an increasing attraction, especially among young people, to incorporate these ancient practices into their lives. Perhaps as the world speeds up and disappoints, there is a desire for a connection with the past when things were perceived to be slower and simpler.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Eugene Peterson tells us, "Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* is one of the most influential guidebooks for directing us in listening."³⁰ Gregory Boyd goes further, "I and many others have found Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* to be the most powerful tool for helping us grow in our walk with

God."³¹ These are powerful endorsements by well known evangelical spokesmen.

Ignatius was a Roman Catholic monk during the time of the Counter-Reformation of the 16th century. He is known today primarily as the founder of the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits, and for his Spiritual Exercises. The Spiritual Exercises are a method of contemplative meditations. According to the Jesuits' website:

"The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola are a month-long program of meditations, prayers, considerations, and contemplative practices that help Catholic faith become more fully alive in the everyday life of contemporary people. It is set out in a brief manual or handbook: sparse, taciturn, and practical. It presents a formulation of Ignatius' spirituality in a series of prayer exercises, thought experiments, and examinations of consciousness — designed to help a retreatant (usually with the aid of a spiritual director) to experience a deeper conversion into life with God in Christ, to allow our personal stories to be interpreted by being subsumed in a Story of God."³²

The Spiritual Exercises are basically a means to expedite the experience of classical mysticism. Mysticism, as found in Eastern forms, the Kabbalah (Jewish), New Age, or Roman Catholicism, all follow the same pattern: purgation, illumination, and union. Purgation is an emptying of ourselves, and so the purpose of the first Ignatian movement is to create "a space within us that the Lord can fill."³³ In illumination we are filled up with images of God which is accomplished in the exercises "by imaginatively contemplating scenes in the four Gospels."³⁴ Through these practices unmediated union with God is supposedly accomplished. Ignatius' Exercises are now being adapted for use by Protestants in books such as *Sacred Listening* by James L. Wakefield

and promoted heavily by everyone from Richard Foster to Eugene Peterson.

LITURGICAL WORSHIP

James K.A. Smith, author of *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, informs us that postmodern religion will be liturgical in nature for "the rhythms of ritual and liturgy are gracious practices that enable discipleship and formation. ... Properly postmodern worship resists such reductionism by reclaiming the holistic, full-orbed materiality of liturgical worship that activates all the senses."³⁵ With this concept as foundational there is a wholesale rush to liturgical practices which originated in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Although not found in Scripture, practices such as the prayer ropes, Stations of the Cross, icons, incense, making the sign of the Cross, use of crucifixes, labyrinths, respiratory prayer, and more are encouraged as accepted forms of worship in the A-F church.³⁶

As can easily be seen, there is a major push for ancient (but not New Testament) liturgical practices in order to anchor the A-F faith of the emergent church. All of this takes the adherents a step back to Rome and Orthodoxy on a practical basis.

THE BELIEFS OF A-F FAITH

So far we have looked at the origins, leaders, basic ideas, and practices of the Ancient-Future Faith paradigm. We need to press on now to an examination of the underlying beliefs within the movement. What will be documented is that this system, claiming evangelical roots, is by-and-large in line with Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodoxy doctrine.

In his most recent book, *Finding Our Way Again, The Return of the Ancient Practices*, Brian McLaren, the most recognizable name in the emergent church movement, signals a shift, or at least a new emphasis within the emergent conversation, toward ancient practices of earlier periods of

Church history. As usual, McLaren believes the Church has lost its way because of its refusal to follow God's leading. The Church has become "proud and unteachable," but fortunately a few "humble and teachable" people are pointing out the right path:

"...when the community of faith realizes it has lost its way, it begins moving forward by looking back ... It looks to its ancient practices to help it reset its future course."³⁷

This means that the Church, in order to find its way again, must look to and adopt the early Church — not New Testament Church — traditions and rituals, especially the "seven ancient practices" of "Fasting, pilgrimage, common daily prayers, a weekly day of rest, annual holy days and seasons, tithing, and the sacred meal." These, McLaren tells us, "find their fulfillment in the ways they contribute to our purgation, illumination, and union with God."³⁸ What seems to have precipitated this renewed interest in ancient practices and mysticism is recognition that the emergent movement is in need of roots.

McLaren writes, "More and more of us feel, more and more intensely, the need for a fresh, creative alternative — a fourth alternative, something beyond militarist scientific secularism, pushy religious fundamentalism, and mushy amorphous spirituality."³⁹ One can assume that McLaren means the emergent church, having already rejected modern evangelicalism and fundamentalism must now move beyond a "mushy amorphous spirituality" and put down some anchors. These anchors are sinking into the soil of "ancient spiritual practices."⁴⁰

Finding Our Way Again is the introductory volume in a series of eight titles published by Thomas Nelson and edited by Phyllis Tickle. The other seven works will each develop one of the seven ancient practices deemed important for the emerging church. It would seem that this series of books marks the official marriage

of the Ancient-Future Faith movement with the emergent movement.

AN ENLIGHTENMENT BACKLASH

As with most emergent church related material, the Enlightenment is framed as the great evil of modern times, and postmodernity as the welcomed rescuer from Enlightenment thought. Then, even though the true evangelical Church has always opposed many Enlightenment teachings, it is subsequently painted as the stooge of the Enlightenment. Robert Webber provides one of the clearest presentations:

"This Enlightenment paradigm produced three convictions shared equally by Christians and non-Christians: foundationalism, structuralism, and the notion of the metanarrative. Foundationalism is 'the philosophical theological conviction that there are beliefs or experiences that are in themselves beyond doubt and upon which systems of belief and understanding can therefore be constructed with certainty.' Structuralism is the belief that societies construct texts to make meaning out of life and that the meaning which is in the text can be commonly agreed upon by its interpreters through the use of reason. The metanarrative consists of the stories of the text. These stories make sense out of life by providing an interpretation of the world from its beginning to its end."⁴¹

While this is not the place to carry on a philosophical debate with Enlightenment theory and influence, suffice it to say that postmodern Christianity (emergent and A-F) reject all three convictions. Of course, evangelicalism also rejected the secularized form of these convictions as well. For example, evangelicals did not accept the idea that truth can be found with certainty through reason alone and, therefore, always subjected reason to the revelation of Scripture. But evangelicals have believed that

the revelation of God (the Word) could be understood through reason and proper interpretative tools (hermeneutics) resulting in foundational truth. This is rejected by the postmodern church, which would say that (at least most) truth cannot be known with certainty, and therefore the views of evangelicals of the past, shaped as they claim by the Enlightenment, do not relate to the postmodern culture. Webber asks, "Where do we go to find a Christianity that speaks meaningfully to a postmodern world?" To this he answers, "The classical tradition [2nd-7th centuries] appears to be the most productive. ... Therefore, our challenge is not to reinvent Christianity, but to restore and then adapt classical Christianity to the postmodern cultural situation."⁴²

RULE OF FAITH

Webber does not break completely from the Enlightenment himself, believing that the metanarrative of Christianity is the correct one⁴³ however limited. And many within Ancient-Future would accept a level of certainty as found in the so-called "rule of faith." Webber writes, "This 'rule' was regarded as a summary of the salient features of the Christian faith, a framework for the essential truths confessed by those who stood in the tradition of apostolic teachings."⁴⁴ The problem lies in determining the content of the "rule of faith."

According to Webber, various rules of faith began popping up in early Church history in attempts to define Christian teachings in light of various heresies such as Gnosticism. "Eventually, the rule of faith became universally summarized in the Apostles' Creed,"⁴⁵ which is "the end-product of the gradual development of Western creeds. ... Today's version dates from the sixth or seventh century."⁴⁶

The Apostles' Creed, in its general summary of Christian thought, is limited in scope, however, so between 300 and 600 A.D. the universal Church formulated two other ecumenical creeds to explain what it

believed. These were the Nicene Creed (begun at the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325, but actually formulated at the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381), and the Chalcedonian Creed in A.D. 451. Between these three creeds a number of doctrines were established as orthodox, including the deity of the Son (Nicene), the Trinity (Nicene), and the two natures of Christ (Chalcedonian).

According to the A-F understanding, other confessions and statements of faith have been developed over the years that express the belief of particular groups or denominations, but none of these carries the weight of the three ecumenical creeds. As a result, A-F thinkers believe the Church can be certain of the doctrines expressed in the creeds, but must be willing to compromise on all other points of theology. Webber writes, "We need to recognize that confessions do not meet the criteria of universality, antiquity, and consensus. ... Their value is not for the whole church, but for a part of the church. ... These confessions are all secondary to the creeds and are not binding upon the whole church."⁴⁷

Unfortunately for Webber's view, even the three "ecumenical" creeds have not received "universality and consensus." According to Church historian Tony Lane, "The Apostles' Creed has always enjoyed wide acceptance in the West ... It has never been in general use in the Eastern Church, though it is treated with respect."⁴⁸ Concerning the Chalcedonian Creed, Lane writes, "The emperor intended this document to cement unity with the Eastern Church. Its effect was more like dynamite than cement. Egypt and other areas have never accepted Chalcedon to this day."⁴⁹

The Nicene Creed has been the most ecumenical of the creeds, yet the East and West have one important difference, "In the East the belief was and is that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *through* the Son. In the West, however, the belief grew

that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and* the Son."⁵⁰

While this might seem a matter of little importance to us today, it was a major factor in A.D. 1054, bringing about the Great Schism, the final dividing point between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Western Roman Catholic Church.

The fact is that even these creeds have never been given a universal consensus by the whole Church. The finger is often pointed at the Protestant church for its lack of unity and many doctrinal distinctions, but Rome and Orthodoxy have to be hypocritical to do so. Webber is either a bit naive or perhaps ill-informed when he writes, "I sense that evangelicals in the postmodern world need to affirm what the church has always believed, *everywhere and by all*, and give greater authority to the common tradition and less weight to the theology of a particular tradition."⁵¹

NON-CREEDAL DOCTRINES

Other important doctrines that fall outside the boundaries of the three ecumenical creeds present a problem when one considers the A-F system. In essence they are nonbinding, unimportant, and open to compromise. Take the crucial doctrine of salvation. No universal creed touches this issue and therefore how one becomes a Christian is up for grabs. Webber writes:

"Although the entire church is united in its belief that all are sinners and that Jesus Christ's death and resurrection procure salvation, there exists a number of explanations about our sinful nature and the means of receiving the benefits of Christ's death."⁵²

No wonder Brian McLaren states, "I don't think we've got the gospel right yet. What does it mean to be 'saved'? When I read the Bible, I don't see it meaning, 'I'm going to heaven after I die.'... None of us has arrived at orthodoxy."⁵³

This does not mean that A-F has no concept of a gospel. As is predictable A-F reaches back to the “ancient” Church, rather than Scripture, for a gospel message. Webber writes, “Evangelism in the early church was associated with the victory of Christ over evil and the establishment of the kingdom of God.”⁵⁴ He then turns to a fourth century ritual in which an individual is taken through a number of stages, lasting up to three years, and leading to baptism and entrance into the Church.⁵⁵

What is most instructive is that this tradition is not taught or found in the New Testament, but some 300 years later. It is typical of A-F to reach back to the traditions of men rather than the inspired text of Scripture. This takes us to A-F’s understanding of the Bible.

A-F AND SCRIPTURE

Webber writes, “A new feature of evangelicals in the postmodern world is the growing awareness that the Bible, which takes us to Christ, belongs to the church. The church preceded Scripture in time.”⁵⁶ As can be seen, the A-F movement rejects the *sola Scriptura* position of the Reformers and adopts Rome’s view in regard to authority. The Church presides over Scripture — final authority rests in the Church.

How this actually works out is more involved. Which church, for example, has the final word, Rome, Orthodox, Lutherans, etc.? Webber never really answers this, but seems to be looking toward Rome. As for the role of tradition and the pronouncement of the Church Fathers and the ancient councils, Webber’s response is most interesting:

“Any writing of a Father of the church, or any council or assembly of the church that stood in the apostolic tradition, was an extension of the principle of inspiration. Therefore, while the apostles were the original authority in the church, a writing of Augustine or another Father of the church, or a creed or council

that extended or expounded an idea in keeping with apostolic teaching enjoyed a kind of apostolic authority. Because the church was viewed as the one true interpreter of the faith, the authority of the church grew greater and greater through time as more and more Fathers and councils were regarded as espousing teachings in line with the apostles. Finally, the church established a magisterium for the proper interpretation of truth and positioned the pope as the true spokesperson of truth.”⁵⁷

As might be expected, placing final authority in the pope did not set well with everyone and paved the way for the Reformation in which the Reformers rejected the authority of the pope and the Roman Church and placed it in Scripture alone. In response, Webber writes, “The Reformers pulled Scripture away from the church, separated it from tradition, set it over against popes and councils, and made it stand on its own.”⁵⁸

Webber summarizes well the A-F position, “The postmodern challenge to authority is best met, not by returning to *sola scriptura*, nor by the modern evangelical defense of the Bible, but by returning to the origins of authority in the Christian faith. The church possesses, interprets, guards, and hands down truth.”⁵⁹

A-F AND MYSTICISM

As with other streams within the emergent movement there is a keen interest in mysticism. Webber highly recommends reading the so-called “spiritual classics” that Richard Foster has introduced to the Protestant church. This includes mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, George Fox, William Law, and Thomas Merton. Webber concludes, “The value of all these books as well as many not mentioned are indispensable to spirituality. Those who neglect these works do so to their harm, and those who read them do so for their inspiration and spiritual growth.”⁶⁰

McLaren devotes three chapters in his book *Finding Our Way Again* to the “threefold way” of purgation, illumination, and union,⁶¹ which is common to all forms of mysticism, Christian or otherwise. However, McLaren does not describe the “threefold way” as his mentors and the ancient mystics (such as St. John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila) do. He either does not understand his subject (highly unlikely) or he is using his winsome pen to make these approaches much more attractive than they normally would be to many people. But he definitely promotes contemplation (a mystical form or prayer), *lectio divina* (a mystical form of Scripture reading), and the daily office (a ritualistic form of prayer).

The ancient mystics, to whom the movement looks, were not afraid to state their case. For example, in his famous work, *Dark Night of the Soul*, St. John of the Cross informs his reader that the first stage of the “threefold way,” that of purgation, is a stage in which the senses, affections, and intellect are all purged or killed. He writes:

“When, therefore, the four passions of the soul — which are joy, grief, hope and fear — are calmed through continual mortification; when the natural desires have been lulled to sleep, in the sensual nature of the soul, by means of habitual times of aridity; and when the harmony of the senses and the interior faculties causes a suspension of labour and a cessation from the work of meditation ... these enemies cannot obstruct this spiritual liberty.”⁶²

The purpose behind the deadening of our senses is preventing them from hindering the way of the spirit:

“The reason of this is that the soul is now becoming alien and remote from common sense and knowledge of things, in order that, being annihilated in this respect, it may be informed with the Divine.”⁶³

Teresa of Ávila, in her *Interior Castle*, concurs by saying, "the person who does most is he who thinks least and desires to do least."⁶⁴ This is because the whole goal of mysticism is to experience something in a super-rational way. Teresa further writes, "it is quite a common experience in such cases for the understanding to be less apt for meditation. I think the reason must be that the whole aim of meditation is to seek God, and once He is found, and the soul grows accustomed to seeking Him again by means of the will, it has no desire to fatigue itself with intellectual labour."⁶⁵

The goal of mysticism is to purge the senses and intellect in order to be filled up with a nonsensical form of illumination which leads to an unexplainable experience of ecstasy which culminates in union with God. The "threefold way" is never taught in Scripture, but is a vital component of A-F and the emerging church.

Although A-F is a move back toward Rome, rather than a move back toward Scripture, Chris Armstrong assures us that it is none other than the Lord who is leading this parade:

"That more and more evangelicals have set out upon it is reason for hope for the future of gospel Christianity. That they are receiving good guidance on this road from wise teachers is reason to believe that Christ is guiding the process. And that they are meeting and learning from fellow Christians in the other two great confessions, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, is reason to rejoice in the power of love."⁶⁶

Contrary to what the proponents of the Ancient-Future Faith movement want us to believe, Christ is not "guiding the process" of this realignment with Rome and its practices. No matter what stage of Church history, true believers are those who know the Word, love the Word, live the Word, and passionately proclaim the Word. The Church needs Christians who

hunger and thirst for God's truth — not through the medieval mystical practices of Rome, but through Scripture alone.

Endnotes:

1. Mark Galli, "Ancient-Future People," *Christianity Today*, February 2008, pg. 7.
2. Chris Armstrong, "The Future Lies in the Past," *Christianity Today*, February 2008, pg. 24.
3. *Ibid.*, pg. 25.
4. Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1999, pg. 7.
5. *Ibid.*, pg. 17.
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 13.
7. *Ibid.*, pg. 16.
8. "The Future Lies in the Past," op. cit., pg. 26.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. Newman cited in *ibid.*, pg. 28.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, pg. 29.
14. Jay Tolson, "A Return to Tradition," *U.S. News & World Report*. Online edition posted Dec. 13, 2007.
15. Jennifer Trafton, "Rediscovering Benedict," *Christian History & Biography*, Winter 2007, pg. 6.
16. Jennifer Hevelone-Harper, "Radical Christians," *Christian History & Biography*, Winter 2007, pg. 7.
17. Lillian Kwon, "Mars Hill Pastor Ditches 'Emerging' Label for Jesus," *The Christian Post*. Online edition posted Feb. 27, 2008.
18. "Lectio Divina" from Wikipedia, bold and italics in original. Document available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lectio_Divina.
19. James L. Wakefield, *Sacred Listening*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 2006, pg. 22. This quote is taken from Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006, pg. 116, italics in original).
20. Mark Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006, pg. 85.
21. Kenneth Boa, *The Trinity, a Journal*. Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 2001, pg. 13.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 14, 15, italics in original.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16, 17, italics in original. Boa here recommends incorporating the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola for meditation.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 19, italics in original.
25. *Ibid.*, pg. 20, italics in original.
26. *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, op. cit., pg. 86.
27. Robert Benson, *In Constant Prayer*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2008, pp. 3, 20-26, 27-42, 113, 115-116.

28. Chris Armstrong, "Re-Monking the Church," *Christian History & Biography*, Winter 2007, pg. 34.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.
30. As quoted in *Sacred Listening*, op. cit., pg. 1.
31. As quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 1-2.
32. "The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius" from Society of Jesus, Oregon Province. Document available at: www.nwjesuits.org/JesuitSpirituality/SpiritualExercises.html.
33. *Sacred Listening*, op. cit., pg. 17.
34. *Ibid.*, pg. 18.
35. James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006, pg. 140.
36. These practices are commonly recommended in emergent and A-F literature today. For documentation see Mike King, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006, pp. 87, 95, 97, 121-126, 129-134, 170.
37. Brian McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2008, pg. 146.
38. *Ibid.*, pg. 148.
39. *Ibid.*, pg. 5.
40. *Ibid.*, pg. 6.
41. *Ancient-Future Faith*, op. cit., pg. 19.
42. *Ibid.*, pg. 24.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.
44. *Ibid.*, pg. 176.
45. *Ibid.*, pg. 184.
46. Tony Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006, pp. 62-63.
47. *Ancient-Future Faith*, op. cit., pg. 194.
48. *A Concise History of Christian Thought*, op. cit., pg. 63.
49. *Ibid.*, pg. 62.
50. *Ibid.*, pg. 41, italics in original.
51. *Ancient-Future Faith*, op. cit., pg. 200, emphasis added.
52. *Ibid.*, pg. 193.
53. Andy Crouch, "The Emergent Mystique," *Christianity Today*, November 2004, pg. 40.
54. *Ancient-Future Faith*, op. cit., pg. 146.
55. *Ibid.*, pp. 147-149.
56. *Ibid.*, pg. 189.
57. *Ibid.*, pg. 177.
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*, pg. 201, italics in original.
60. *Ibid.*, pg. 135.
61. *Finding Our Way Again*, op. cit., pp. 151-179.
62. St. John of the Cross (translated and edited by E. Allison Peers), *Dark Night of the Soul*. New York: Image Books, 1990, pg. 87.
63. *Ibid.*, pg. 123.
64. Teresa of Ávila (translated by E. Allison Peers), *Interior Castle*. New York: Image Books, 1989, pg. 88.
65. *Ibid.*, pg. 173.
66. "The Future Lies in the Past," op. cit., pg. 29. 