

The true spiritual direction of “Spiritual Formation”

Posted By Marsha West, 2015, Berean Research

A large number of evangelicals are involved in spiritual formation (SF) which are “disciplines” that those who wish to experience spiritual growth must practice. Where do the disciplines come from? Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox mystics, which should be a big red flag right there. In this piece Pamela Couvrette tells of how she was led into (Spiritual Formation (SF) by “mature believers.” But before long she came to know the truth — she had been led into false teaching by people she trusted.

Last year, I was at a spiritual crossroad and I had some decisions to make. Any direction would have been ‘biblical’, but I was convinced there was one specific, narrow path that God had painstakingly planned; as such, I believed that if I missed that path it would ruin my life, ruin the world around me...and Jesus would never return!

Without vocalizing that insanity (and hyperbole), I sought guidance regarding my life’s direction from the teaching pastor at my former church. He suggested spiritual formation (or spiritual direction). I asked around, and a friend who was in full time ministry assured me that spiritual formation was biblical. Satisfied, I booked my appointment with a Spiritual Director through the Tyndale University & College Seminary. Its states,

“Spiritual Directors are those who have received specific training in Bible, Theology, and Spiritual Formation, who assist individuals (called directees) in their spiritual journey. Spiritual directors are interested in the spiritual health, well-being, and spiritual growth of the directees they serve. Spiritual Directors provide this ministry through regular one-on-one sessions (or group sessions) that are focused on listening to, and working with both the directee and the Holy Spirit.”

I now clearly see the red flags in this description; however, back then this definition seemed okay. Famous last words, right? Additionally, not only did my pastor recommend it, but the sessions were also going to be held at Tyndale, which exists in part *“to honour William Tyndale, the early English reformer whose commitment to making the Scriptures available to all persons led him to undertake the first English translation of the Bible, at the cost of his own life.”* Surely, the college would not permit anything that would disgrace this martyr’s name, would it?

At the time, I was completely deceived by many false teachings, but had somehow managed to escape the practices of Roman Catholic mysticism. That was about to change.

Eager to begin my new direction in life, I met with my Spiritual Director, whose quiet way of being and acceptance was exactly what I needed in this confusing time. In the early sessions, she explained that God had made me a certain way; subsequently, she shared many “impressions” about my relationship with God, and these impressions were often paired with Scripture verses. In determining ‘God’s will’ for my life, my first assignment was to make a scrapbook of my interests and of everything that was important in my life...because it’s all about me, right?

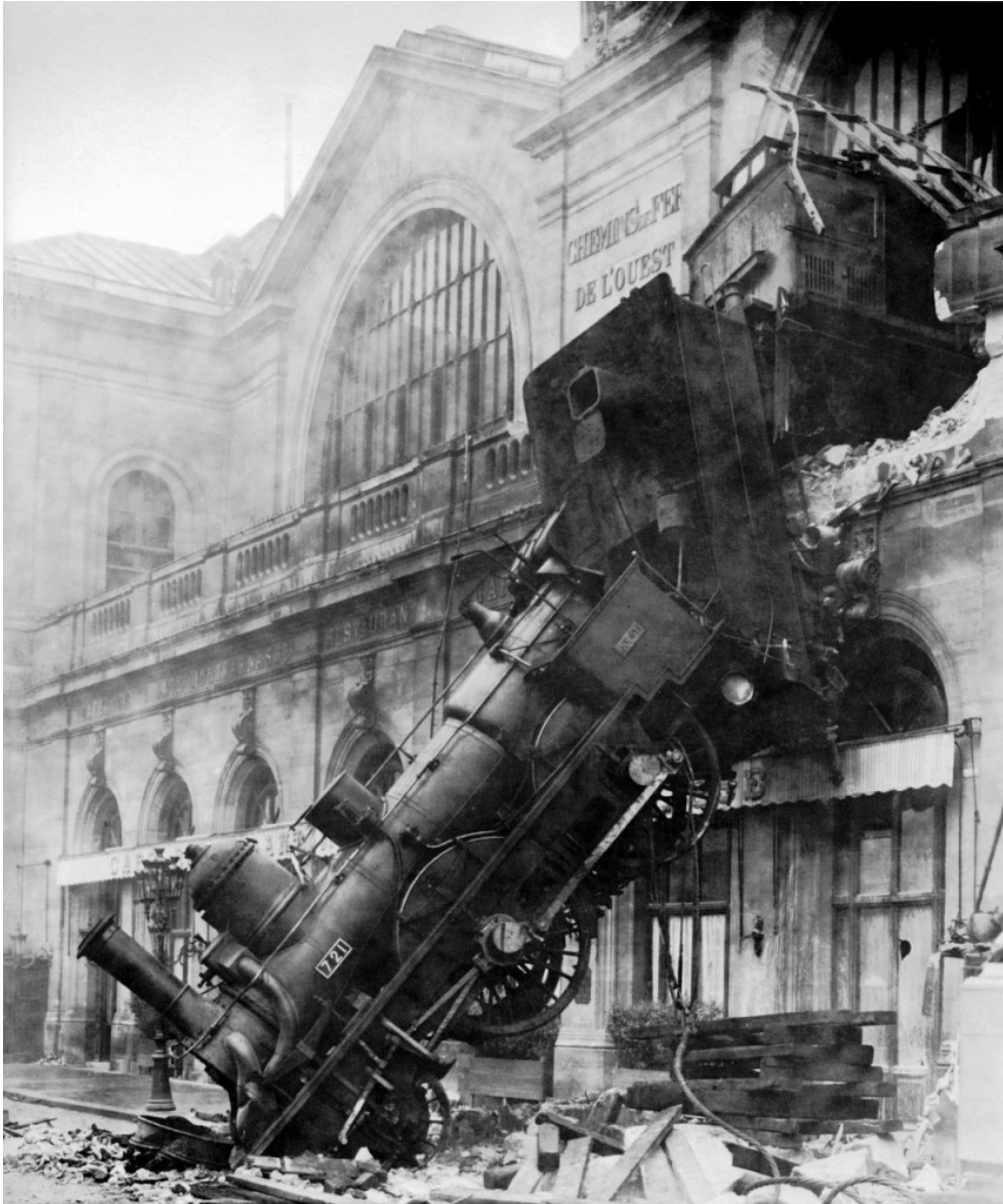
During one session, I was directed (a spiritual formation technique) to think of the scene in Matthew 8:23-27 in which Jesus calmed the storm. I was asked to imagine myself in the scene and to ask Jesus what He wanted me to do in my life. I asked my director if this was contemplative prayer, because I had heard that it was dangerous. She assured me it wasn’t since we were filling my mind with Scripture and scenes from the Bible. My mind assuaged, I continued with the exercise.

In the following weeks, many exercises started with prayer to Jesus. These prayers were followed by silence, so I could ‘listen’ to what Jesus would say. Naturally, the name of Jesus flowed constantly. We also prayed before the sessions, declaring that the room we were in was for Jesus only and demons were not allowed in there. I wasn’t sure how that provided a fortress of spiritual protection-we might as well have encircled ourselves with ‘protective white light’ while we were at it.

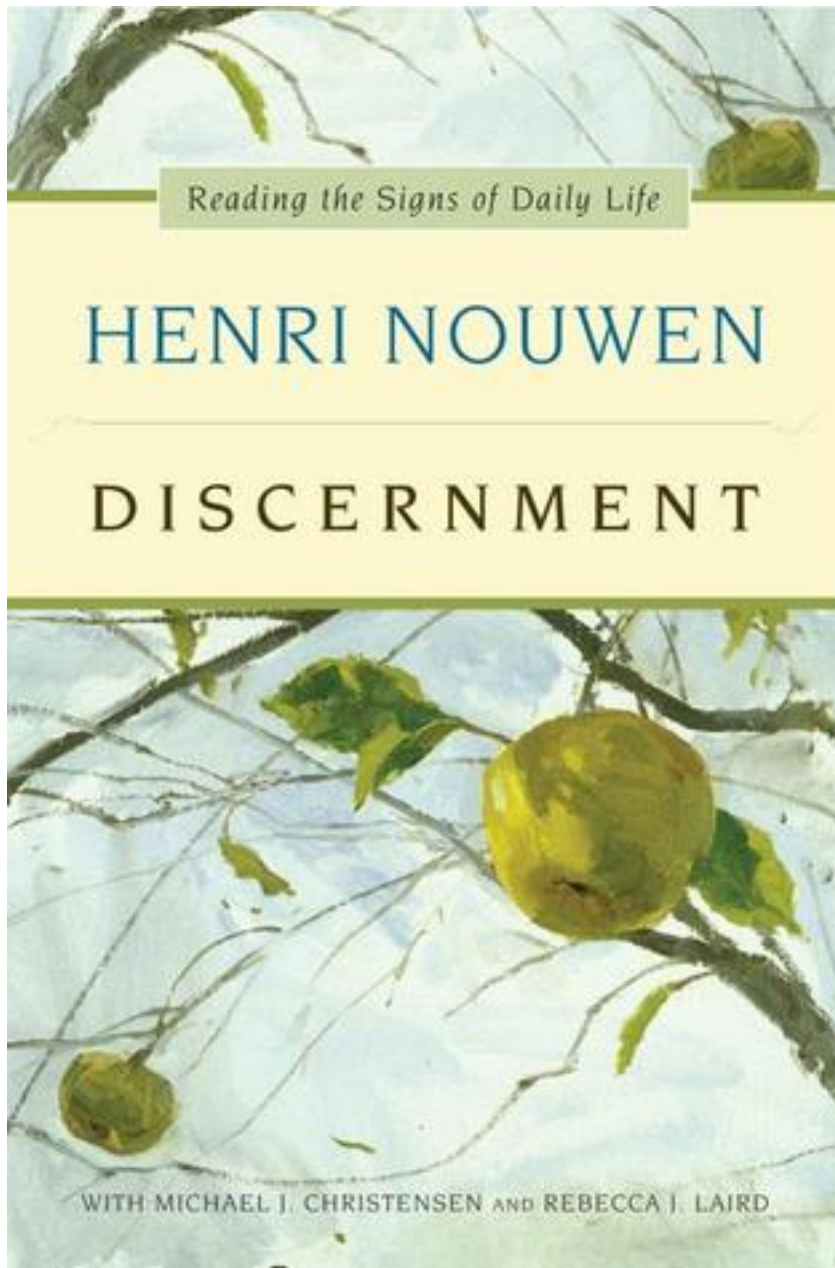
Following on, my director advised me to read works by contemplative mystic Brennan Manning, Roman Catholic mystic Henri Nouwen, and a book about interpreting my dreams, which I had read as a former New Ager (that's why I ignored this last piece of advice altogether).

Are you perhaps wondering why I remained ignorant about this practice in which I was a willing participant? Well, by now my pastor, seminary graduates, and 'mature' Christians had all given their support to this. One of the formation's defenders got exasperated at my questioning and told me I needed to read the Bible more. She was correct, but oh, the irony. Looking back, I had put the opinions of man above the Word of God and had also made God's will an idol. I had been so focused on trying to find what He wanted for me that I missed Him altogether.

Back to the trainwreck.



Outside of the sessions, I studiously completed my readings, and I practiced the so-called presence of Jesus. I was also attuned to any 'signs' of God in the world, thanks to Henri Nouwen and his book, ironically named: "Discernment."



Having come out of various New Age and occult practices that had taught me how to be 'one' with everything and to look for synchronicity, I was unfortunately rather good at this. And so, once again, I started worshipping the creation and not the Creator (Romans 1:25).

I continued seeing my Spiritual Director for another month (two months in total). While I wasn't one hundred percent sure that spiritual

formation was unbiblical, I had an uneasy feeling, which was enough for me to stop attending the sessions.

Discerning the True Spiritual Direction of Spiritual Formation

The spiritual direction I was heading in was leading me to devastating eternal consequences, and the Jesus I was invoking was the one spoken of in 2 Corinthians 11:4 .

For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.”

And like so many in the visible church, I too ‘put up with it readily enough’.

Through contemplative prayer, I was unknowingly communing with a different Jesus. Looking through my well-kept journal from those sessions recently, I noticed words like ‘surrender’, ‘gentle’, ‘presence’, ‘the Way’, and ‘paths’, all words which are commonly found in channeled books (such as “Jesus Calling”), which are the products of this mystical form of prayer.

Works-Based Perfection

Spiritual formation was developed from Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox mysticism, and it promotes the idea that we journey inward and engage in disciplines to develop the likeness of Jesus Christ. Disciplines such as meditation (listening silence), contemplative prayer, and solitude are just a few of the disciplines that without we purportedly cannot experience true spiritual growth.

Spiritual formation teaches that anyone can practice these mystical rituals, and that anyone is able to find God within himself or herself. It is a works-based practice to becoming perfected, which in itself is a lie. I was told, “Once we are aware what our responsibility is, that is where the transformation will happen”. This is in stark contrast to what Scripture declares:

- Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth (John 17:17)
- Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely (1 Thessalonians 5:23)
- God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:13)
- And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6)

You see, only God is able to sanctify us; only God can make us conform to the image of Christ. True spiritual transformation occurs when we realize we are sinners who need to be forgiven and who need to be reconciled to God through the atonement of His Son, Jesus Christ. As we submit to God and the Holy Spirit, God transforms us. *He* transforms us.

While consulting my journal for this post, I noticed it was exactly a year ago (from the time this entry was posted) that I repented of spiritual formation and its dark practices. The truth did not come to me from any mystical practice or discipline, and it did not come from a sign in nature or from the silence in my mind. It came only because God had chosen to reveal the truth out of His mercy and grace, delivered through the more sure word of God, which is all we need (2 Timothy 3:16).