



Thomas a Kempis and Medieval Mysticism

Introduction

The error of mysticism has never been absent from the church of Christ in the new dispensation. It appeared early in the Montanist movement in the third century and has, in a remarkable way, maintained itself to the present. The church has always had to fight off mysticism.

Not a single period in the Middle Ages was without its mystics. Sometimes they were present in multitudes; sometimes only individual mystics kept the flame of mysticism burning. But never did the church free itself from them. In fact, the church had no interest in condemning the mystics. They were never considered heretics. One gets the impression, on the contrary, that the church encouraged them. I suspect there were good reasons for such encouragement. The mystics were, almost without exception, faithful and loyal members of the church and supporters of the hierarchy. But, perhaps more importantly, the church seemed, almost unconsciously, to recognize that, in the cold formalism of Roman Catholic liturgy, the warm and experiential piety espoused by the mystics was a necessary and healthy counterbalance.

Mysticism is a term with a very vague and fuzzy meaning. It covers a wide range of views and practices and describes a broad spectrum of people. In some instances mysticism cannot be distinguished in any significant way from genuine orthodoxy. In other instances mysticism is radical, extreme, and as far removed from orthodoxy as pantheism is from the truth of creation. Indeed, some mystics were pantheists, a heresy which identifies God with the creation itself. Between these two extremes was such a wide diversity of opinion that no single book could contain all the differences and nuances between various branches of mystical thought.

That makes our present task a daunting one, and forces us to limit our discussion, for the most part, to the main ideas which mysticism of every sort had in common.

It is also for this reason that I have chosen Thomas a Kempis as an example of medieval mysticism. He was by no means the worst of the mystics. In fact, he was a late mystic from the Netherlands who was one of a group of mystics who had an influence on the reformers and the Reformation. His book, *The Imitation of Christ*, is considered a classic and is still read by Protestants as well as Roman Catholics.

He is, therefore, ideally suited for our purposes. From him we can learn what mysticism is all about and what are the dangers in mysticism against which we have to fight.

The Life of Thomas a Kempis

The surname, a Kempis, means "from Kempen." That was the name of the village in which Thomas was born in 1380, a little less than 200 years before the beginning of the Reformation. The village of Kempen is near Cologne, Germany. His birthplace helps us explain, I think, the mysticism to which Thomas was committed, for Cologne and Kempen are both in the Rhine Valley, and the fogshrouded Rhine River Valley was the center of the mystical life.

Thomas was born of poor parents who were unable to provide any kind of education for him. Their surname was Hemerken, a name almost totally unsuited to Thomas, for it means, "Little Hammer." Thomas was about as gentle a man as it is possible to find.

A biography of Thomas a Kempis would hardly fill ten pages, for he was determined that nothing would happen to him in his life; and so, under God's providence, it turned out to be.

He was a studious young lad and very serious-minded. He resolved, therefore, at about 13 years old, to seek an education someplace where he could receive it at an affordable cost. Such a place was to be found in the circles of "The Brethren of the Common Life." One community of these "Brethren" was to be found near Deventer in the Netherlands, a city straight east of Amsterdam, and on an arm of the Rhine.

A word about the "Brethren of the Common Life" might be in order. In a sense one could call "The Brethren of the Common Life" a community of mystics, but that designation would not be entirely accurate. They were made up of a fairly large number of communities stretching from Strassburg all the way to Rotterdam. They were loosely tied together with little or no organizational unity, but brought together by a common desire to cultivate the Christian life and emphasize genuine piety. These communities put a great deal of emphasis on establishing schools for children and educating them in the knowledge of godliness. They built hospitals and were assiduous in caring for the poor. They were very influential, produced some outstanding theologians in the tradition of mysticism, and influenced the Reformation in Germany and the Netherlands.

During the years of his study, Thomas developed his skills as a copyist and used these skills to support himself. All his life he continued in this work, copying books for the libraries of theologians of the "Brethren of the Common Life," copying various manuscripts of importance to the community, and copying Scripture. There was as yet no such thing as a printing press, although the invention of a movable type printing press was just around the corner. Thomas made in his lifetime four copies of the Scriptures, one of which is extant.

While in Deventer, Gerhard Groot observed the studious and pious ways of the young boy and took him into his own house. This put Thomas in the centre of the life of the "Brethren," for the house of Gerhard Groot was the headquarters of the community located in the city. The influence of the mysticism of the "Brethren" moulded his entire life.

After completing his studies, and being attracted to the ascetic life, Thomas entered an Augustinian convent in Zwolle, twenty or thirty miles north of Deventer. Thomas' brother was prior of this convent, and in it Thomas found a congenial home. He was ordained a priest in the Roman Catholic Church in 1413, and in 1429 he became sub prior. After his brother died, Thomas was prior for a short time, but he found the administrative work too burdensome and asked to be relieved of that position.

From that point on, his life can be summed up in a few sentences. He spent his time in three activities: copying, devotional exercises, and writing. It was a quiet life, removed from the bustling world about him, placid and serene, noiseless and routine, without any variation in the activities of the day. He himself wrote: "In all things I sought quiet and found it not save in retirement (from all aspects of life in the world, HH) and books."

Thomas died in Zwolle in 1471 and was buried in the convent cemetery.

The Imitation of Christ

Thomas possessed a prolific pen. Yet, of all he wrote, he is remembered for only one book, The Imitation of Christ. No less a theologian than Charles Hodge has called this book the "pearl of German-Dutch mysticism." It has been given the highly honoured place of being one of three great devotional books, of which the other two are Augustine's Confessions and John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress.

Today there are more than 2000 editions of the book, over 1000 of them found in the British Museum in London. It was written originally in Latin, in which over 545 editions exist. It was translated into many languages, including English. Over 900 editions exist in French alone. Its English editions are available today and are read by many. Dr. Samuel Johnson, the great English lexicographer and friend of James Boswell, learned Dutch by reading The Imitation of Christ.

One writer says the following about the book:

It consists of four books and seems to have been written in meter and rime.... The work is a manual of devotion intended to help the soul in its communion with God and the pursuit of holiness. Its sentences are ... pitched in the highest key of Christian experience.... Behind and within all its reflections runs the council of self renunciation. The life of Christ is presented as the highest study possible to a mortal.... That which makes it acceptable to all Christians is the supreme stress it lays upon Christ and the possibility of immediate communion with him and God.

At the same time, it was written by a Roman Catholic mystic and has references in it to the merit of good works, transubstantiation, purgatory, and the worship of saints, although these references are few in number and easily ignored.

A few quotes from the book will give the reader a taste of its contents.

- Love to be unknown and to be reputed as nothing.
- Where the crowd is, there is usually confusion and distraction of heart.
- Love solitude and silence, and thou wilt find great quiet and good conscience.
- Choose poverty and simplicity.
- Humble thyself in all things and under all things, and thou wilt merit kindness from all.
- Let Christ be thy life, thy reading, thy meditation, thy conversation, thy desire, thy gain, thy hope and thy reward.
- Zaccheus, brother, descend from the height of thy secular wisdom. Come and learn in God's school the way of humility, long-suffering and patience, and Christ teaching thee, thou shalt come at last safely to the glory of eternal beatitude.

The Prevalence of Mysticism

The Medieval Period of church history was filled with mystics, individuals and communities. In the years just prior to the Reformation, many communities of mystics were crowded into the Rhine Valley in Germany and the Netherlands. Mysticism flourished in these fog-shrouded valleys.

Mysticism did not stop with the Reformation. Very early in the history of Luther's Reformation, Luther was confronted by the Zwickau Prophets in particular and the Anabaptists in general, who possessed their own brands of mysticism.

Charles Wesley was heavily influenced by medieval mysticism, translated books of the mystics, and infused Methodism with his mysticism. (See Robert G. Tuttle, *Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition*.)

In the Netherlands the *Gezelschappen*, or *Conventicles*, which arose during the Later Reformation were often characterized by a mystical tendency, a tendency from which the Dutch churches never completely escaped.

Mysticism has reached new heights in the modern day Charismatic Movement.

Characteristics of Mysticism

Searching around for a general definition of mysticism, especially that of the medieval church, I found the following paragraph in the book of Tuttle referred to above. He writes:

Perhaps as good a definition as any could begin with the statement that mysticism is anything that gets one in touch with reality beyond the physical senses. Furthermore, mysticism embraces a "right brain" awareness of God and all mystics stress (more or less) the essential unity of God, nature, and humankind; therefore, union with God can be

achieved (more or less) through the mystical contemplation of the unity. More specifically, mysticism is in essence that "deep sense of union with God in the inmost depths of the soul," an immediate awareness of a unique relationship with God. "It is religion in its most acute, intense, and living state."

A bit further on, the same author writes:

Several characteristics have been listed as common to all mystical experience. First of all, mysticism defies expression, and its ineffable character makes it virtually impossible for mystics to describe their experiences adequately. Another characteristic of mysticism lies in its "noetic quality." To understand mysticism one must experience mysticism. Its thoroughly esoteric nature plunges the soul into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. The mystical experience is also transitory because the mystical heights cannot be sustained for long, but this is not to imply that no growth has taken place. Ideally, after each experience the mystic returns to a level of devotion even higher than before. In fact, these "mystical heights" are nonessential to mysticism and can be justified only if the mystic returns to the senses with a higher level of devotion.

It is easy to understand how mysticism in many cases began to emphasize dreams, visions, and other forms of revelation which one would receive directly from God apart from the Scriptures. When the Zwickau Prophets boasted of the revelations they had received from the Holy Spirit, Martin Luther responded, "I hit your holy spirit on the snout." Luther's point was that the Holy Spirit speaks only through the objective Scriptures.

It is also easy to see how in many instances some sort of mystical experience was considered the decisive determination of the Christian life.

The Explanation of Mysticism

We can find, I think, an explanation for mysticism and its constant attractiveness. In a sense, mysticism is an effort of the church to pay her unpaid bills. Mysticism arises when the church does not preach the full gospel of Jesus Christ, or, at least, does not live fully the gospel which she preaches.

Man is created by God as a creature with a soul. The soul includes mind and will. And the will, in turn, includes the powers of choice and the powers of emotions. God has determined that fellowship with Him through Jesus Christ includes the whole man in body and soul, in mind and will. My only comfort is that I, with body and soul, am not my own, but belong to Jesus. A true religion which is undefiled satisfies the whole man in body and soul. Basically that means that a true religion satisfies man's mind and will, both. It brings the whole man into fellowship with God.

But the church has had trouble maintaining that proper balance. When Montanism arose and Tertullian chose to become a part of it, the reason was partly because, during a period of rest from persecution, the church had become worldly. Eusebius makes that point in his History of the Church; and Eusebius was a contemporary of Nicea in the early part of the fourth century.

In the Middle Ages the Roman Catholic Church developed a religion in which the worship of God was reduced to outward liturgical forms and actions. The inward worship of the heart was ignored. One needed only to go through the motions of ecclesiastically prescribed liturgy; that was enough. When scholasticism was in favor, the appeal of religion was to the intellect, and the one able to make the subtlest distinctions, the most difficult analyses of intellectual propositions, was the one hailed as being the most religious. No passion, no intensity of feeling, no emotional content, no concern for godly living. Religion was in externals or intellectual attainment.

And so mysticism flourished as a reaction to what was often a cold, formal religion without heart. Man is more than a head which thinks. He is also a soul which feels, loves, hates, grieves, sings; and this part of man has to be caught up in his religion.

Then again, when mysticism flourishes and religion is reduced to feeling and emotion, the mind is left empty. The child of God has nothing to chew on with his mind, nothing to think about, nothing to remember, nothing to learn. How does he feel? Does his religion make him feel good? Those are the only questions that count.

The pendulum in the church swings back and forth. It swings towards mysticism during periods of worldliness and dead orthodoxy. And it swings towards intellectualism when religion is reduced to feeling. But both are reactions. Mysticism is the swing of the pendulum towards feeling.

Mysticism also takes on other characteristics. It often arises out of a genuine concern about a life of godliness and piety, especially when worldliness and carnal mindedness capture the church. Especially when dead orthodoxy is present, many within the church worry that religion is only outward. People go to church, but worship in spirit and in truth is often lacking. People have their confessions, but know almost nothing about them. People claim to have the truth, but seem unwilling to defend it, or perhaps unable as they perish for lack of knowledge.

What counts, therefore, is not these outward forms of religion, but the true religion of the heart. True piety, true godliness, a genuine devotional life, that is what counts. And so mysticism is concerned about the cultivation of the devotional life, the development of piety and holiness, the life of prayer and meditation. These are hailed as the true marks of Christianity. This was the mysticism of Thomas a Kempis. This was the mysticism so prevalent among the mystics of the Rhine River Valley.

But this too develops along a certain line. The church is composed of many people. Many are only outwardly religious. Who are the truly religious? That is (and this is the form such a question inevitably takes), who are truly godly, truly pious, truly holy? That is, who are true believers? How can one tell? How can one tell for others? How can one tell for himself?

So often, precisely here, questions which could be proper, necessary, and important become the bridge to mysticism in its worst forms. It is not wrong to be concerned for piety and godliness. It is not wrong to cultivate inner piety. These are necessary parts of what religion is all about. But the next step is dangerous. True piety and true religion are, after all, close fellowship with God. But how does one know whether he truly has fellowship with God? This knowledge comes by way of mystical experiences of closest and most intimate contact with the divine being in which there is indescribable and yet overwhelmingly sweet communion. Dreams, visions, revelations, overwhelming joy, feelings that transport one beyond life, all these are part of that sort of fellowship with God which marks genuine piety and which is, finally, the mark of the true believer.

How to Attain Fellowship with God

We are back now to what we described earlier as being the essence of mysticism: "a deep sense of union with God in the inmost depths of the soul."

The Middle Ages developed a lengthy process through which one had to pass in the attainment of that deep sense of union with God. It is worth our while to go through these steps to try to see what the mystics were talking about. The process had five distinct steps, although two things must be remembered about these five steps: one is that all five were not always necessary, nor did all agree on exactly these five which I shall mention. The other is that the order might differ from one mystic to another. But this is generally the ladder one had to climb to reach union with God.

- The first step was called "awakening." A man or a woman would come to the awareness that, while he or she had been "religious" in an external and ultimately meaningless way, this was far from genuine religion. More was required. Study, reading devotional materials, looking into what others had said would show one how he or she was missing the very heart and core of true religion and what had to be done about it. It was like a lifelong attendee at church suddenly realizing that the outward worship of God is not enough. Something more had to be there. This was surely true if, in addition to such an outward form of religion, one lived an essentially

worldly life. To acquire what was missing and how to attain what was missing was part of the "awakening."

- The second step was called "purgation." I guess we would be inclined to call this "conversion," although it was often carried beyond the boundaries of what we consider conversion to be. Purgation involved freeing oneself from one's former way of life. If one was a soldier, one ought to leave the army. If he was worldly, one ought to abandon his worldliness. If one's interest in spiritual things was minimal and peripheral, he ought to rid himself of all that formerly distracted him and concentrate solely on spiritual things. This step, in the Middle Ages, often included selling all one's possessions and living a life of poverty. It included renouncing marriage to live a celibate life. It included entering a monastery where the external world could not intrude and where all one's life could be devoted to spiritual things. It was a "purgation" of one's former life. It was often radical, extreme, but absolutely necessary on the ladder to union with God.
- The third step was "illumination." Different ideas were meant by this term. Sometimes it referred to a period in which one gradually came to the awareness of what was involved in coming to true union with God. It was a sort of study of the devotional life. It could be a study of something extremely complicated, as all aspects of a genuinely devotional and pious life were explored, understood, and put into practice. At other times, by illumination was meant brief and occasional glimpses of the transcendent glory of a true union with the divine. It was not that union itself; it was a fleeting glimpse of the ineffable blessedness that awaited one who attained to it. It was intended to prepare one for the next step, the most difficult and agonizing of all.
- That next or fourth step was usually called "the dark night of the soul." This is an interesting step. It was considered absolutely essential, and without it no union with God was possible. It was somewhat patterned after the Scripture's emphasis on the believer's personal knowledge of his sin, which is expressed in a broken spirit and a contrite heart. It had the overtones of a genuine part of the believer's life. But it was also taken over by revivalism (much of which is sheer mysticism anyway). It was a period of intense suffering of soul in which the darkness of sin, guilt, and hell dragged one lower and lower into depths of despair, hopelessness, and utter awareness of one's unworthiness and damnable worthiness. The deeper and more intense that it was, the better and more likely to lead to God. The Puritans made a great deal of this aspect of the Christian's life and they were followed by others. But oftentimes this period was such a "dark night" that it manifested itself in convulsions, long periods of rigidity of the body, unconsciousness, and screaming and hollering in terror because of visions of demons and the fires of hell. Of all the steps it was the most difficult.
- The final step was the union with God Himself. As I mentioned in describing mysticism, this step is really indescribable. It is totally a matter of feeling. The mind does not function in any sense of hearing, reading, studying, mastering intellectual propositions. This step is beyond thought. It is beyond, far beyond, all knowing, all understanding, all thinking. It is transcendent, unreal (when by "real" is meant anything pertaining to this world). It is beyond the five senses because it is direct, immediate (without means), intense, all-absorbing union with God Himself. It is to be swallowed up in and engulfed by the brilliant light of the infinite ocean of the divine being. It is pure and unalloyed joy. It is to be oblivious to anything and everything except God's engulfing and consuming love. It is the apex of the Christian life. It is the ultimate of all that is right and good and genuinely pious.

This union with God could be so complete that, because some mystics emphasized union with God via union with Christ, the very marks of the nail holes in Christ's hands came into the hands of the mystic. Such a one was so closely absorbed into Christ that the hole in Christ's side made by the soldier's spear came into the side of the mystic. The blood which Christ spilled in the dust of Gethsemane now rolled off the brow of one who had been completely absorbed by Christ, and thus by God. These were called the "stigmata" of union with Christ, which many mystics claimed to bear.

It is not difficult to see that such mysticism could become an outright pantheism. And it often did. Pantheism is that terrible heresy, the ultimate expression of the devil's lie, "Ye shall become like

God." Pantheism identifies God and the creation and speaks of man as the highest expression of the divine essence. The whole notion of union with God is only a small jump from such pantheism.

The Attraction of Mysticism

The attraction of mysticism is great and not easy to resist. Especially when the church of which one is a member falls into dead orthodoxy or confessional carelessness, the spiritual lack of a fervent and heartfelt religion weighs heavily on the soul of a believer. When worldliness lays an icy grip on the lives of the people in church (there is a close relation between dead orthodoxy and worldliness), then those who are concerned for themselves and others to walk a life of obedience to Christ search about for an alternative to the spirituality of their own church home.

There is a fervency in religious matters, a zeal for holiness, a delight in walking in covenant fellowship with God that characterizes mystics, which makes one lacking these things envious of what mystics possess.

One who understands that the deepest reality of the godly life is walking with God, as Enoch and Noah walked with Him, can easily be enchanted by the claim of a mystic that he has attained this goal.

And when mysticism tends to put all the emphasis of religion on emotions and feelings, few of us would deny that there is an attractiveness to this which tugs at our souls. To think about theological problems is often hard work and, so it seems, spiritually dry toil. To master doctrinal propositions may be intellectually stimulating, but it does little or nothing to experiencing what true religion is all about. Heavy tomes on Reformed dogmatics are far less able to nourish our spiritual life than devotional writings or biographies of unusual people who have had moving spiritual experiences. "It doesn't do anything for me!" is the plaintive cry of one who has just listened to a doctrinal sermon. And what is meant is that the preacher has not moved us emotionally either to weeping or to hallelujahs. A "feel good" religion is the thing of the day, in which all the emphasis falls on the word "feel."

How wonderful it is if we can expect in our lives to be guided by special revelations, dreams to direct us in our problems, visions to solve our difficulties, and a voice of God heard in our inner souls to tell us of His love.

These things and more drove the mystics in whatever age they appeared.

That there is an emotional aspect to true religion can never be denied. We are to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, and love is intensely emotional. We are to be sorry for our sins, and sorrow is heavily emotional. We are to rejoice in the Lord always, and rejoicing is an emotional thrill.

To put it a little differently, religion is experiential. Of that there is no question at all. The Lord has ordained that the eternal life which He defines as the knowledge of the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent is an experiential knowledge. It is not the knowledge of a textbook on solid geometry. It is not even the knowledge of Abraham Lincoln which one gleans from Catton's biography. It is an experiential knowledge, very similar to the knowledge a man has of his wife when he has lived with her in love for thirty years.

God gives us the gift of salvation so that we experience the rich blessedness of salvation, and experience it over against the horror and hopelessness of our own personal hells. The Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are the children of God.

It is this experiential aspect of religion which the mystic wishes to retain or recover, but goes about recovering it in a wicked and unbiblical way.

Criticisms of Mysticism

There are various criticisms of mysticism that can be made which, as serious as they are, do not come to the heart of the matter. We mention these first. Some have said that in the quest for union with God and absorption into the divine being, the mystic bypasses Christ. There is an element of

truth in this, although it is not true of all mystics. However, when one reads the mystics one cannot help but think that the union with God which the mystic holds up as the ideal religion is such complete absorption into the divine essence that Christ is no longer the only way to the Father. One goes directly to God and hurls himself into the brilliantly shining ocean of the divine being without coming to Christ.

In the interests of a genuinely godly life, devotional exercises, meditations, solitude, and a life of prayer are held high as the ideal for one who would be saintly. It is, so the mystic says, better for a mother to read Augustine's Confessions than to wash the dirty dishes. It is better for a father to spend the day on his knees than to pick up his lunch pail and punch the time clock at Steelcase.

It all brings to mind an incident from my youth. It was in grade school where we often had chapel speakers who were missionaries or missionary helpers. This particular chapel speaker whose speech I recall (I cannot even remember whether the speaker was male or female, although I think the latter) warned us with unmistakable premillennial emphases (which I did not recognize) that, because of the fact that Christ could come back at any time we ought to spend our time reading our Bibles so that Christ would find us doing this when He returned. Being a bit puzzled by the question of how I could spend my time reading my Bible and get my Arithmetic finished in time to please my teacher, I questioned my father about it. "Well," he said, "I'll tell you. You ought really to hoe the corn in the garden this afternoon. And even if you and I knew with absolute certainty that the Lord was coming back this afternoon, you ought still to go out and hoe the corn and keep right on hoeing until you saw Christ and He took the hoe out of your hands."

The point is that, while indeed the contemplative life of prayer and meditation is to be a part of our daily existence, the fact remains that we are given tasks to perform. The position taken by mystics often led to monasteries and cubicles far removed from life, as happened to Thomas a Kempis. We have work to do. We must do our work to God's glory, that is true. But we had better do the work for all that.

The Greatest Evil

But there is one evil in mysticism which is greater than all others. It is this. It divorces Christian experience from the objective Word of God. It speaks of communion with God through contemplation of the godhead itself. Often, when mystics speak of meditation or a life of contemplation, they do not refer to meditating on Scripture or contemplating God's revelation in Holy Writ; they mean direct, immediate contemplation of God Himself without any intervening mediating means. They just sit and think about God. They do not think about various propositions concerning God, and by means of these, think about God. They do not pay attention to any objective truth which God has revealed. They just think, vaguely, ethereally, wordlessly, thoughtlessly, of God, much in the same way one would think about a bright light, not thinking about why the light is bright, where it gets its energy to give light, how it is able to be so bright, what the nature of the light is which it emits, but just thinking about light, so that the light floods one's mind simply as light. (That, someone once told me, is a good way to go to sleep.)

The mystic tips his hand when he describes his experience of God as so high, so other-worldly, so exalted that it is pure experience, beyond description in human words, ineffable (which word means indescribable), of the sort that lies beyond thought, beyond our senses, beyond cognitive powers and the rational operation of the mind. Pure experience, that is what it is.

That experience can easily embrace trances, visions, dreams, special revelations, direct speech of God to the consciousness, etc. In both cases, the Word of God is abandoned.

To set aside the Word of God is always very wicked. Some claim, and, in my judgment, with considerable justice, that Luther adopted the theory of consubstantiation (Christ's bodily presence in, with, and under the elements of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper), because he was so desperately afraid of the Zwickau prophets and their dreams, visions, and special revelations. In the view of consubstantiation, Luther gave an objectivity to the Word of God which, Luther believed, kept one from the subjectivism of mysticism.

As a side light, this is extremely interesting because Luther himself was influenced in his formative years by German mysticism. He was able, however, to throw it off completely and do fierce battle with the right wing of the Reformation, the mystical Anabaptists.

We must insist on an important truth which is being sacrificed on the altar of today's versions of mysticism. The only way we are able to know God is through His revelation to us. He is the transcendent One, so highly exalted above us that we can never climb any ladder, not even the ladder of the mystics, to contemplate Him as He is. He must first speak. He must speak in a language which we are able to understand. Calvin talked about God speaking to us in baby talk because we are so small. God speaks of Himself in His speech. He speaks of who He is, what kind of God He is, what He does, how He works, etc., etc. He also tells us that, because He is the kind of God He is, we are to be the kind of people He demands. He is holy, we must be holy. We can know this only because God speaks in such a way that He tells us these things in words we understand.

So true is this that, on the one hand, God's speech is always a miracle, whether that speech be in creation or in Scripture. And, by the way, these two speeches of God are not really two speeches, as the theistic evolutionist insists; they are one speech saying the same thing about Christ and salvation as the great work of God. Only, we are able to hear His speech in creation only when God gives us the "hearing aids" of His Word in Scripture. On the other hand, God's speech to us is always limited, finite, only a part of the whole, only a dribbling of God's infinite depths. We can never know everything in the Scriptures and in creation. But, even if we could, we would still possess less than a thimble full of knowledge in comparison with all the oceans of this world.

That Word of God is the only way to know God. There is no short cut. There is no direct path. There is no speech of God directly to the soul, not even the assurance of our salvation. The Spirit indeed witnesses with our spirit that we are the sons of God, but the Spirit speaks of our sonship only through the Scriptures. The Spirit chains Himself to the Scriptures. The Spirit confines all His work to the Holy Word of God in the Bible. Where no Bible is, there is no Spirit.

Thus we know God before we can "feel" Him. What kind of nonsense is it to say, as some do, "I felt the closeness of God?" How does one do that apart from Scripture? We must know, with our heads and in our minds, definite intellectual propositions found in Scripture to know Him. And, indeed, it is true that the more I know of Reformed dogmatics the better I know God, not simply know about Him, but know Him!

This is not intended to imply, of course, that the mere knowledge of Scripture in itself guarantees the delightful experience of God. The devil knows more about God than you and I. Hell is populated with learned theologians who have ThD and DD behind their names. But, although it is true that not all who know about God actually experience God, it is as true as it can be that those who experience God know Him first of all. And the knowledge of Him is intellectual, cognitive knowledge.

Earlier in this article I made mention of the fact that God saves the whole man, body and soul, mind and will and emotions. But the emotions are part of the mind and will and not a power in themselves. When religion becomes an emotional matter, as it ought to become, it is so only because we appropriate its truths with the mind, and desire its truths with the will.

This amazing work of the transformation of our minds takes place by means of the work of the Spirit (consult Canons, 3 & 4, Acts. 12-14). The Spirit causes the truth of the Scriptures to be indelibly impressed upon our consciousness in such a way that these truths are reflected in our conscious experience. This is an amazing work, but it is part of God's way of saving us so that we know our salvation and can praise Him for it.

All the religious life is rooted in, based upon, empowered by, and in conformity with God's Word in Scripture. Do we desire to make confession of faith in our church? It is not enough to feel one is a Christian and to have some sense of Christ in one's heart. One had better be able to give an account of the Reformed faith as contained in Scripture and the confessions. Do we want to have the sweet consciousness of fellowship with God? Then we had better pore over His Word and

meditate upon its truths. There is no other way. Do we want such fellowship that God speaks to us and we to Him? His speech comes only and always through the Bible. Is God speaking to me? Yes, He is, because Psalm 27:1 says, Jehovah is my light and my salvation. And that is all that God says to me at the moment I am pondering that text. He may and does say that to me when I am surrounded by enemies who seek to destroy me with threats and fierce hatred. He says it to me when I need to know it and when my response is also His Word to me: Whom shall I fear? But it is there in the Bible, and sitting down and reading it is the only way I hear Him speak.

Do I have problems which need the solutions which divine guidance alone can provide? Then, foolishly and wickedly I do not say, "God put it on my heart to do this or that." I do not ask for the prayers of others so that I may know the will of God. (Maybe I ask for the prayers of others, but then it is only that others may pray that I put my nose more deeply into the Bible and receive a willingness to do what the Bible says.) I do not wait for some direct word of God, subjectively heard, spoken in my soul, to do this or that. That is nonsense and results only in doing, after all, what I had wanted to do all the time regardless of what the Bible says.

If you object and say: Yes, but my particular problem is not mentioned in the Bible because I want to know whether God wants me to build a new house, and I want to do the will of God; then the answer is: God tells you in the Bible. He tells you that a critical and important aspect of the Christian's life is to be a good steward of the earthly possessions which He gives and to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness first. And if you find that you do not have the wisdom to know how stewardship applies in this case, then ask of God who gives wisdom to all liberally and upbraids not, and it will be given you. Just ask in faith and do not be like a wave of the sea, driven by the wind and tossed. For wisdom is that spiritual, God-given gift by means of which we are able to apply the Word of God to every aspect of our lives.

The Holy Spirit binds Himself in all His work to the Word. We must do nothing less. To separate ourselves from the Word, or to separate the Spirit's work from the Word, is to get trapped in the quick sands of subjectivism. If anyone claims that the Holy Spirit speaks directly to him apart from the Word, he can make the Holy Spirit say anything that he wants the Spirit to say; and, indeed, this is precisely what he does. The Holy Spirit, in these subjective revelations, is always in full agreement with anything the receiver wants or thinks. There is never any dissent from above.

Our subjective assurance of our salvation is also inseparably tied to the Word. The Spirit speaks to us through the Word, and never apart from it. The Spirit does not use experiences, dreams, visions, inner voices, or anything of the like. The Word speaks. The Spirit speaks through that Word, also in our own consciousness.

The close inner communion of the soul with God in which we are caught up in the rapture of union with the divine may seem the ideal of the Christian life. But it is the siren call of Satan who would lead us away from the Word in which alone our souls ought to be anchored. Every child of God has times of great spiritual drought, when God is very distant and the inner life of the soul seems barren. The same thing happens to churches where zeal has been lost, love has grown cold, and piety seems a distant dream. The solution to the problem is not to pray for revival with special outpourings of the Spirit apart from the Word, outpourings resulting in bizarre behavior reminiscent of medieval mysticism. The solution is not to seek revival through some mystical contemplation of the divine. The solution for the church is the lively and faithful preaching of the Word. And the solution for the child of God wandering in a wasteland is to tie himself to the Word and await times of spiritual refreshing.

Mysticism is wrong. In every form it takes. Let us cling to the Word.

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