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RICHARD FOSTER — CELEBRATION OF DECEPTION EVANGELICAL MYSTICISM

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In February 2008, *Christianity Today* ran a glowing cover story about Evangelicalism's recent embrace of medieval Roman Catholic mysticism entitled *The Future lies in the Past*.¹ The article traced the beginning of the movement as follows: "The movement seems to have exploded in a 24-month period in 1977-1978, which saw the publication of Richard Foster's best-selling *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* and Robert Webber's *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity*."²

The article views Foster as one who continues to guide the movement: "From Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, and living practicing monks and nuns, they [those going back to Roman Catholic mysticism] must learn both the strengths and the limits of the historical ascetic disciplines."³ So Foster was instrumental in starting a movement that is still growing more than 30 years later.

The irony about this particular *CIC* regarding Foster's 1978 book is that in 1978 I myself was living in a Christian community committed to practicing much of what he promotes in *Celebration of Discipline* (even though we had not learned it from him directly). So I am not criticizing a practice about which I know nothing (or one in which I have no experience). I am criticizing a practice I foolishly allowed to deceive me for a significant portion of my early Christian life. When it comes to being deceived by mysticism, I have had abundant involvement. The only

way I escaped it was through discovering and adopting the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*.

In this article I will show that Foster's "journey inward" is unbiblical and dangerous. I will show that most of the spiritual disciplines that he calls "means of grace" are no means of grace at all—but a means of putting oneself under spiritual deception.

THE JOURNEY INWARD

The Bible nowhere describes an inward journey to explore the realm of the spirit. God chose to reveal the truth about spiritual reality through His ordained, Spirit-inspired, biblical writers. What is spiritual and not revealed by God is of the occult and, therefore, forbidden. We have discussed this in many articles and have produced DVD seminars on the topic. But the concept of *sola scriptura* is totally lost on mystics such as Richard Foster. They, like the enthusiasts that Calvin and Luther warned against, believe they can gain valid and useful knowledge of spiritual things through direct, personal inspiration.

Foster describes the idea of the disciplines that are the topic of his book: "The classical Disciplines of the spiritual life call us to move beyond surface living into the depths. They invite us to explore the inner caverns of the spiritual realm."⁴ So Foster has conceptually repudiated *sola scriptura* on page one to replace it with a journey inward to explore the realm of spirits. Something must have been seriously amiss in evangelicalism already in 1978 to render this

book a bestseller! It ought to have been repudiated on the spot. In a footnote to that statement Foster writes, "In one form or another all of the devotional masters have affirmed the necessity of the Disciplines" (Foster: 1). The devotional "masters," by the way, are mostly Roman Catholics who never were committed to the principle of *sola scriptura*. It is not surprising that they looked for spirituality through experimentation. But as an "inner light" Quaker, Foster never was committed to *sola scriptura* either.

Forgetting that the Bible forbids divination, Foster explains what he is after:

[W]e must be willing to go down into the recreating silences, into the inner world of contemplation. In their writings, all of the masters of meditation strive to awaken us to the fact that the universe is much larger than we know, that there are vast unexplored inner regions that are just as real as the physical world we know so well. . . . They call us to the adventure, to be pioneers in this frontier of the Spirit. (Foster: 13)

Realizing that his readers would likely take this as an endorsement of Eastern religions, he makes a disclaimer that it is not Transcendental Meditation (TM) or something of that ilk: "Eastern meditation is an attempt to empty the mind; Christian meditation is an attempt to empty the mind in order to fill it" (Foster: 15). But what Foster wishes us to fill our minds with are personal revelations from the spirit realm that we naively are to think are the voice of God. This sort of meditation is not meditating on what God has said, but uses a technique to explore the spirit world. In other words, it is divination.

What we learn about the spirit realm either is revealed by God (once for all in Scripture) or gleaned by man-made techniques. That distinction is the difference between Christianity and paganism. Only Bible believers know what God has said about Himself and what He wishes to reveal about the unseen spirit world. Foster's material continues to be popular because we live in an age where being spiritual pioneers on a journey into the unseen realm of the spirits is the essence of popular piety. It is the spirituality of secular talk shows.

To fully understand the degree of Foster's deception, he even calls these techniques to the inner journey "means of grace": "They [the Disciplines] are God's means of grace" (Foster: 6). As with all who teach spiritual disciplines, there are no boundaries to these false "means." For example, consider this recommended practice: "After you have gained some proficiency in centering down, add a five- to ten-minute meditation on some aspect of the creation. Choose something in the created order: tree, plant, bird, leaf, cloud, and each day ponder it carefully and prayerfully" (Foster 25). This after he had just taught breathing exercises (a means of "centering down"). Then he makes a startling claim: "We should not bypass this means of God's grace" (Foster: 25). And there we have it: meditating on a leaf can be a means of grace!

Foster's journey inward is to discover a spirit world that is available for any who search for it: "How then do we come to believe in a world of the spirit? Is it by blind faith? Not at all. The inner reality of the spiritual world is available to all who are willing to search for it" (Foster: 18). He claims that this spiritual search is analogous to scientific experimentation. Never mind that every pagan culture that has existed has believed in the "spiritual world."

SPIRITUALITY OF THE IMAGINATION

The Bible does not have anything good to say about the imagination. For example: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Do not

listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; They speak a vision of their own imagination, Not from the mouth of the Lord'" (Jeremiah 23:16). A search of the KJV for "imagination" yields 14 verses, and in each case it is a bad thing. According to the Bible, the imagination is where people go when they do not want to listen to God.

However, for Foster the imagination is central: "The inner world of meditation is most easily entered through the door of the imagination. We fail today to appreciate its tremendous power. The imagination is stronger than conceptual thought and stronger than the will" (Foster: 22). Some of the authorities he cites on this point are C. G. Jung, Ignatius of Loyola, and Morton Kelsey. Jung is famous for his concept of the collective unconscious, and Kelsey was an Episcopal priest committed to Jungian principles. Kelsey wrote many books promoting mysticism. The advice Foster gleans from these teachers is that we must learn to think in images and take our dreams to be a possible doorway into the spirit world. Foster claims that dreams are something we already have and can help us develop the use of the imagination. He says, "Keeping a journal of our dreams is a way of taking them seriously" (Foster: 23).

There is, Foster warns, a danger to this process: "At the same time [that we ask for dreams to be God speaking to us], it is wise to pray a prayer of protection, since to open ourselves to spiritual influence can be dangerous as well as profitable" (Foster: 23). I would say that is asking God to protect us as we use various techniques to go where He does not want us to go (into the world of the spirits to gain information). The danger he warns of is far greater than Foster imagines. Those who take the journey inward will be deceived—every time! We are not equipped to gain spiritual information from that realm. That is why God speaks to us through His ordained mediators (the inspired Biblical writers); otherwise we would be fishing in the dark in a medium we are not suited for.

Foster teaches his readers to use

their imaginations to experience Biblical stories with the five physical senses. Here is what he claims will happen:

As you enter the story, not as a passive observer but as an active participant, remember that since Jesus lives in the Eternal Now and is not bound by time, this event in the past is a living present-tense experience for Him. Hence, you can *actually* encounter the living Christ in the event, be addressed by His voice and be touched by His healing power. It can be more than an exercise of the imagination; it can be a genuine confrontation. Jesus Christ will *actually* come to you. (Foster: 26)

Showing that Foster's ideas are still influential in our day, Greg Boyd cites some of Foster's words here to support what he calls "cataphatic prayer" which uses the imagination and images as a means to contact God and gain spiritual information.⁵ Those who endorse this practice assume they are not being deceived by spirits, but I cannot see on what grounds.

Foster prescribes a practice using one's imagination that mimics astral projection to the degree that he actually includes a footnote disclaimer stating that it is not astral projection (Foster 28). It begins by telling his readers to imagine themselves going out into nature into a beautiful place (Boyd describes how he practices this, as well as its results⁶). After enjoying the sights and smells (in your imagination) these are the next steps:

In your imagination allow your spiritual body, shining with light, to rise out of your physical body. Look back so that you can see yourself lying in the grass and reassure your body that you will return momentarily. Imagine your spiritual self, alive and vibrant, rising up through the clouds and into the stratosphere. . . . Go deeper and deeper into

outer space until there is nothing except the warm presence of the eternal Creator. Rest in His presence. Listen quietly, anticipating the unanticipated. Note carefully any instruction given. With time and experience you will be able to distinguish readily between mere human thought that may bubble up to the conscious mind and the True Spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart. (Foster: 27, 28)

I must ask how one knows whether the “True Spirit” is not a deceiving one? Mysticism’s fatal flaw is that it naively assumes that Christians having subjective religious experiences must therefore be having *Christian* experiences that are truly from God—even if the experiences were provoked through unbiblical practices similar to those used by pagans.

MENTAL ALCHEMY

Foster’s approach to prayer is laced with mysticism as well. He claims that prayer needs to be learned from people who have the right experiences and are “masters” who know what they are doing. Foster does not teach ordinary prayer, whereby we bring our needs and requests to the Lord and know that He hears us (because He promised that He does). Here is why he thinks such prayer fails:

Often people will pray and pray with all the faith in the world, but nothing happens. Naturally, they were not contacting the channel. We begin praying for others by first centering down and listening to the quiet thunder of the Lord of hosts. Attuning ourselves to divine breathings is spiritual work, but without it our praying is vain repetition (Mt. 6:7). Listening to the Lord is the first thing, the second thing, and the third thing necessary for successful intercession. (Foster: 34)

Of course this means we have to become mystics if we want to pray.

He teaches that we first must hear personal revelations from God, using meditation techniques such as he teaches, before we pray. He says: “The beginning point, then, in learning to pray for others is to listen for guidance . . . This inner “yes” is the divine authorization for you to pray for the person or situation” (Foster: 35). No! Foster is wrong! The only authorization we need to pray is the Biblical command to pray—not personal revelations.

For Foster, meditation (mystical style) is necessary but not sufficient. He also brings the imagination into the process: “As with meditation, the imagination is a powerful tool in the work of prayer” (Foster: 36). He credits Agnes Sanford⁷ for helping him see the value of using the imagination in praying. Foster writes, “Imagination opens the door to faith. If we can ‘see’ in our mind’s eye a shattered marriage whole or a sick person well, it is only a short step to believing it will be so” (Foster: 36). Sanford got her ideas from Theosophy, New Thought, Jung, and Emmet Fox. These ideas, echoed by Foster, come from the unbiblical “mind over matter” thinking of that era. That kind of thinking uses creative visualization to change reality or channel spiritual power. Foster suggests, “Imagine the light of Christ flowing through your hands and healing every emotional trauma and hurt feeling your child experienced that day” (Foster: 39).

In his 1985 book, *The Seduction of Christianity*, Dave Hunt labeled creative visualization such as what Foster promotes, “mental alchemy.”⁸ Hunt warned the church that Foster promoted such mental alchemy in *Celebration of Discipline*, and as we have shown, he, in fact, does. So how is it that 24 years after Hunt’s warning Foster is more popular than ever with Evangelicals? The answer is end times deception. Now, a huge movement that claims to be a reformation promoting Foster, Willard and their versions of mysticism does exist (i.e., The Emergent Church). Things have gotten so very much worse.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS

Once mysticism and the supposed need to gain personal revelations from God are embraced, there arises a need for new “masters” who are better at navigating the spirit world. Pagan societies have always had such persons. They are called “shamans.” Eastern religion calls them “gurus.” Deceived Christians call them “spiritual directors.” Foster explains, “In the Middle Ages not even the greatest saints attempted the depths of the inward journey without the help of a spiritual director” (Foster: 159). The problem, according to Foster, is that the churches (in 1978) lacked “living masters”:

No doubt part of the surge of interest in Eastern meditation is because the churches have abrogated the field. How depressing for a university student, seeking to know the Christian teaching on meditation, to discover that there are so few living masters of contemplative prayer and that nearly all of the serious writings on the subject are seven or more centuries old. No wonder he or she turns to Zen, Yoga, or TM. (Foster: 14)

Foster’s dream has come true. Today people can even practice Yoga in a Christian church. We have Christian TM; it is called contemplative prayer. Yes, Eastern religion has come right into the church, and Foster has helped usher it in.

But what about “living masters” or spiritual directors? In 1972 Morton Kelsey lamented their lack: “Indeed I would suggest that everyone who is serious about relating to the spiritual realm find himself a spiritual director, if there were more men trained and experienced in this way.”⁹ That “problem” has been solved in a huge way. Evangelical theology schools are now offering masters degrees in “spiritual formation” in order to equip people to be “spiritual directors.” Here is what Biola University says about its program: “This degree is

designed to equip men and women for the ministry of spiritual direction, discipleship, formation and soul care in the local church and for further academic training in spiritual formation.”¹⁰ Spiritual Directors International will help you find a spiritual director regardless of your religion.¹¹ Richard Foster’s own *Renovare*, which purports to “encourage renewal in the Christian church,” has a list of spiritual direction programs.¹²

Foster explains the purpose of the spiritual director: “He is the means of God to open the path to the inward teaching of the Holy Spirit” (Foster: 160). Apparently, in a full-blown rejection of *sola scriptura* where the Holy Spirit’s teaching is mediated to the church through the Biblical writers only, we need mediators for personal revelations beyond scripture.

Foster explains how spiritual directors lead: “He leads only by the force of his own personal holiness” (Foster: 160). In Roman Catholicism the Pope is called “his holiness” and in Tibetan Buddhism the Dalai Lama is called “his holiness” but now evangelicals are developing a class of people who evidently deserve the title. How exactly are we to judge when someone has gained “personal holiness” sufficient to be a spiritual director and mediate spirituality to others? Foster says, “Though the director has obviously advanced further into the inner depths, the two [master and disciple] are together learning and growing in the realm of the Spirit” (Foster: 160). Foster cites Roman Catholic mystic Thomas Merton about how this works: “The spiritual director was something of a ‘spiritual father who begot the perfect life in the soul of his disciple by his instructions first of all, but also by his prayer, his sanctity and his example. He was . . . a kind of ‘sacrament’ of the Lord’s presence in the ecclesiastical community” (Foster: 161).

END TIMES DELUSION

When it comes to end times deception, Foster is on the cutting edge of embracing it. Consider what he wrote: “In our day heaven and earth are on tiptoe

waiting for the emerging of a Spirit-led, Spirit-intoxicated, Spirit-empowered people. . . . Individuals can be found here and there whose hearts burn with divine fire” (Foster: 150). Such inclinations have led to massive deception. They smack of the Latter Rain deception, now embodied in such false teachers as Rick Joyner and Mike Bickle. They are elitist. They are in line with the beliefs of the Emergent Church as well. He also says: “Our century has yet to see the breaking forth of the apostolic church of the Spirit” (Foster: 150). Now we have the New Apostolic Reformation claiming to be just that. Foster’s ideas now embody the massive apostasy and end times deception that characterize our age.

Foster’s teachings have taken the church as far away from the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* as the Roman Catholic Church ever was. The only thing left is for them to bring us all the way back to Rome. *Christianity Today* praises Foster for pointing us in that direction.

In early 2008 I wrote a *CIC* article about how abandoning the principle of *sola scriptura* would lead evangelicals back to Rome.¹³ It was partly a response to the *CT* article praising mysticism. The response I received was rather unexpected. I was contacted by former evangelicals who had rejected *sola scriptura* and had gone back to Rome! They wanted to debate me about *sola scriptura*. Sadly, my point was proven. As a response to their misguided challenge our church hosted a seminar on *sola scriptura*, called Faith at Risk 4. In the seminar Gary Gilley and I defended the scriptures as the sole authority for the church.¹⁴

The aforementioned *CT* article discusses a new monasticism, former evangelical leaders converting to Roman Catholicism, and mystical practices like *lectio divina*—and they call all of it a good and hopeful thing. Chris Armstrong, the author of the article, concluded, “That they [evangelicals] are receiving good guidance on this road from wise teachers [Foster and Willard] 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 Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox, is reason to rejoice in the power of love.”¹⁵

Who is left to defend the principles of the Reformation? One would think Reformed theologians are, but they aren’t doing their job. In the last *CIC* article we mentioned Reformed theologian Donald Whitney who wrote: “Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline* has been the most popular book on the subject of the Spiritual Disciplines in the last half of the twentieth century. The great contribution of this work is the reminder that the Spiritual Disciplines, which many see as restrictive and binding, are actually means to spiritual freedom.”¹⁶ *That* from a teacher in a Reformed seminary?

If a book that teaches Christian TM, Christian astral projection and mental alchemy by means of the imagination is a “great contribution,” then something is seriously wrong here. The delusion is so widespread that I see no other explanation for it than the end time deception predicted by Paul: “*But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons,*” (1Timothy 4:1). Another passage warns: “*For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths*” (2Timothy 4:3, 4).

That time now is here. We are accountable to God for what we believe and practice. Those who wish to persevere in the faith in this age of delusion must base their beliefs and practices only on the truths found in Scripture. Foster’s journey into the world of the spirits will deceive all who enter it.

END NOTES

1. Chris Armstrong, “The Future lies in the Past” in *Christianity Today*, February 2008.
2. *Ibid.* 24.
3. *Ibid.* 29.

4. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) 1. All subsequent citations from this book will be bracketed within the text in this fashion: (Foster: 1).
5. Greg Boyd, *Seeing is Believing*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004). Boyd cites Foster to prove that the Lord will actually come to us through our use of "imaginative meditation." I deal with this issue more fully in CIC issue 83 July/August, 2003: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue83.htm>
6. Ibid. 111-125.
7. I write about Sanford's inner healing theories in CIC Issue 96: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue96.htm>
8. Dave Hunt and T. A. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1985) 138.
9. Morton Kelsey, *Encounter With God*, (Bethany Fellowship: Minneapolis, 1972) 179.
10. <http://www.biola.edu/spiritualformation/programs/>
11. <http://www.sdiworld.org/>
12. www.renovare.org/journey_training_direction.htm
13. CIC Issue 105; March/April 2008: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue105.htm>
14. That seminar is available here: <https://youtu.be/54LTvGdaIWE>
15. Armstrong, *Future*
16. Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*

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