

The Spiritual Formation Movement—A Critique and a Call to Renew Christian Education: Balancing Bible Study, Spiritual Disciplines, and Behavioral Outcomes

Pastor Edward D. Seely, Th.M., Ph.D.

Introduction

An aspect of Christian education ministry where balance is especially important involves the balance among Bible study and what are referred to in the Biblically-based Christian literature as spiritual disciplines or spiritual practices together with the behavior the Lord calls us to exhibit, e.g., “speaking the truth in love,” a participial phrase from Ephesians 4:15 that contains all three key dimensions of human learning that also need to be kept in Biblical balance. As will be seen throughout this paper, the terms Biblically-based and Christian are essential.

These three important parts of the Christian life—Bible study, spiritual practices, and accompanying behavior—necessarily involve three parallel and key dimensions of human learning and development. These three dimensions of human learning and maturity in Christ are: ***cognition*** (cf., e.g., knowledge, facts, truth, reasoning; [HEAD]), ***affect*** (e.g., feelings, emotions; motivations; love; [HEART]), and ***behavior*** (e.g., deeds [including speaking], action, applying and putting into practice [HANDS] the cognitive information with the attendant affect in order to obey and please God, accomplishing his purposes in the calling he has given us).

These three components of our human mental processing that function in the cerebrum, are three distinct—but not completely separate—elements. They lie on an interconnected continuum.¹

For example, the word, heart, especially when read in the Bible, must be correctly understood as it is used in God’s Word; it includes but refers to more than emotions. In the Bible the human mind and heart are connected and lead to behavior. One of the all-time outstanding Greek scholars, R. C. H. Lenski, in his commentary on Philippians 4:7 explains:

In the Scriptures the heart is the center of the personality. There dwells the νοῦς [*nous*, mind] which produces the νοήματα [*noēmata*], the thoughts, theoretical and practical reasonings with their purposes, plans of action, and personal decisions. Heart, mind, and thoughts are constantly subject to assaults which distress, harass, and worry us. The νοῦς [*nous*] or mind

¹ For more information on this subject see [Christian Education Goals and Objectives with a Focus on Level III Objectives: How to Be Sure Your Students Are Understanding and Doing What You Have Taught Them PowerPoint Presentation](#). This PowerPoint is a sentence outline program with important details.

bravely tries to hold the fort but is ever a poor guard and protector. The peace of God exceeds all mind in this function.²

The Biblically-based Christian life is most productive for the Lord, most fulfilling, and most enjoyable, when all three dimensions of the Christian life and human learning are kept in balance with the cognitive prioritized, e.g., “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1) In Matthew 28:19-20, we read our Lord calling us to “¹⁹...disciple all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; ²⁰teaching them to obey all things whatsoever I commanded you. And behold, I am with you all the days until the consummation of the age. Amen.” [Author’s translation]

In the original Greek of Matthew 28:19-20, the verb “disciple” is μαθητεύσατε (*mathēteusate*), and it’s grammatical inflections are highly significant. It is in the imperative mood, i.e., it is a command—thus a very high *priority*—from the Lord. Jesus is not giving us an option or expressing a wish. The verb is also in the second person plural, thus including all of his believers and followers, and it’s in the aorist (past) tense, emphasizing that it is to be actually done (behavior) and without delay. The verb is also in the active voice, which denotes that the recipients of the command—we who are Jesus’ believers and followers—are to do it, i.e., to obey (behavior) the command to disciple the nations. Wherever we are, we must be alert to opportunities to talk about Christ Jesus.

So, how are we doing on obeying Jesus’ command to disciple all nations? For those of us in the United States, let’s start right where we are. A close look reveals that we are not doing very well in obeying Jesus’ command to disciple even people in our own country, according to empirical data disclosed by the international Christian ministry, Back to the Bible, in its annual report of an ongoing 50-year empirical study on Christianity in America. Among several alarming findings in its “2025 State of Christianity in America” report, 50% of Americans don’t read the Bible, and pertaining to mentoring and discipling, while 61% of Americans identify as “followers of Jesus,” only 14.3% of Christians mentor or disciple someone. An especially alarming finding on that subject is that 13.8% of non-Christians are mentoring people, and they are certainly not doing so according to Jesus’ command to his disciples.³

Notice in Matthew 28:19-20, and indeed throughout the whole Bible, the focus is on the Word, Jesus himself, who he is and all about him; “teaching” (not only content [cognition] but also method and results [behavior]); and “whatsoever I commanded you” (cognition [the content of Jesus’ commands] and behavior [He expects us to do what he has commanded and will hold us accountable for doing so.]). The importance of the

² R. C. H. Lenski, [The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians and to the Philippians](#) (Columbus, O.: Lutheran Book Concern, 1937), pp. 879–880.

³ “STATE OF CHRISTIANITY IN AMERICA 2025 SALT [Scripture Absorption & Life Transformation] Index—U.S. General Population,” Back to the Bible. The study analyzed data from 4,922 respondents. The organization explains that “The SALT Index was developed to help the global Church answer the question—*Has the seed taken root, and is it bearing fruit that remains?*” This is an essential question in [Christian Education](#). <https://www.backtothebible.org/scripture-absorption> (Accessed 02/18/2026)

cognitive is indicated in the words disciple and teach. The Lord and people everywhere expect disciples and teachers to have knowledge and be able to explain the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to answer their questions substantively. Notice that God refers to Jesus as the Word—**not** to Jesus as the Feeling—is obviously intentional and significant.

Be careful also to always observe the balance between word and behavior, knowing and doing. Throughout the whole Bible, word and deed are a unity; God requires us to believe but also to put that belief into practice: He hates hypocrisy (cf., e.g., Matthew 7; 23).

We need to balance our words, our deeds, and also our affect(ion). For example, love is on every page of the whole Bible—Old Testament and New Testament—not always the actual word, but its applications as seen in God’s love in Christ for us humans, whom he has made in his image, and for the rest of his creation, which he is in the process of restoring in and through Jesus Christ. The whole Bible is about Jesus, what God is doing through him to redeem and renew his creation, and what he is doing in and through us, his covenant people (Galatians 3:26-29), the body of Christ, to accomplish his redemptive purposes in Jesus. As we obey (behavior) God’s Word (content, cognition), we do so in love for God and other people. (Matthew 22:36-40) The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to succinctly state what we are to do when he told the Ephesians—and by extension, us—to mature in Christlikeness in order to accomplish our work by “**speaking** [behavior] **the truth** [content, cognition] **in love** [affect and behavior].” (Ephesians 4:15)

Yes, love in God’s Word is both affect and behavior, as we see in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 where Paul defines the highest form of love, ἀγάπη (*agapē*), as being patient, kind, not envious or boastful, not arrogant or rude, does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful, does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth, and it bears, believes, hopes, endures all things, and it never ends. This *agapē* is the love in and through which we are to be speaking the truth. (Ephesians 4:15)

Everything begins with God, specifically who he is, what he is like, what he wills, what he has done, how he relates to us who believe in and follow him, and what he has said he will do in the future. We know these realities from the cognitive processes of reading and studying God’s Word—called his special revelation in historic Christian theology—and from careful reflection on what he has built into his creation—his general revelation—which is a sufficient basis for humans to believe and in the final judgement will be without excuse for not doing so. (Romans 1:18-20) We love, because God is love (*agapē*, 1 John 4:8) and because he first loved (*agapē*) us (1 John 4:19). All of God’s Word and will come from his *agapē* love.

We also see another word for love, φιλέω (*phileō*), in such Bible passages as Matthew 10:37 and John 21:15-17. The outstanding New Testament Greek scholar, R. C. H. Lenski, distinguishes the difference between the two types of love in his commentary on Matthew 10:17, when he explains that *phileō* denotes natural affection as distinct from *agape*, the love of intelligence and purpose.

Consider one more pertinent statement from God's Word: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Romans 12:2) Here we see again the necessary prerequisite emphasis on our cognition (the renewing of our mind), which is essential in order to discern God's will—and to test our decision as to what we think his will is—so we can do his will and experience the pleasure of pleasing him with our obedience. Thus, while the heart is linked, the emphasis is on the cognitive and our behaving in accord with God's will.

In other words, in order to discern God's will, we need to make sure that what we think is his will, in fact matches what he says in his Word. Many people say, "God is leading me to do..." or "God told me to..." However, God would never lead or tell us to do something that he has long ago told us in his Word that we should never do. So, by prioritizing knowing the Word of God, thus enabling us to obediently behave according to his Word, we will have the affective pleasure from doing so. The converse is **not** true: Prioritizing the affective desire for pleasure, e.g., fun, titillation, euphoria, by following a sinful heart (Jeremiah 17:9), does not lead us to spiritual maturity, to Christlikeness and the obeying of God's will that pleases God, which is to be our priority (cf., 2 Corinthians 5:9).

Therefore, we need to keep the three main modes of the Christian life in the right priority, and to do so requires keeping them in balance. If they come out of balance, for example by focusing on any one or two of the three while neglecting or even downplaying either or both of the other two, the result is counterproductive to our maturing in Christ. It is also counterproductive to our ability to effectively serve him; discipling the nations (including the one in which God has placed us) is greatly reduced and often largely negated. For example, if we focus on affect and make seeking pleasure for ourselves most important to us, we will be less inclined to engage our cognition, i.e., to daily read and reflect on God's Word, and to behave accordingly—obeying him—and accomplishing his purposes for and through us.

Maturing in Christ, called sanctification (*op cit.*) in the Bible and in Christian theology, has throughout church history been done by regularly engaging several spiritual disciplines. The spiritual disciplines historically have included such activities as Bible reading, meditation, prayer, fasting, simplicity, and others. Every good Biblically-based Christian education program, including youth ministry, has always involved teaching about such practices—all in accord with God's Word—which throughout the Bible and church history have been recognized as helpful and necessary for maturity in Christ. However, these largely—but not only—affective-oriented disciplines have been so recognized when necessarily kept in Biblical balance together and connected with cognition and their God-commanded behavior outcomes: fruitful obedience. (See, e.g., John 14:21, and many other Bible texts where all three are mentioned in the same verse.)

When any one, let alone two, of these three dimensions of human learning and sanctification⁴ (maturing in relationship with and holiness to God for his service) are overemphasized or underemphasized *too much*, one or more unbiblical outcomes occur. *However, here is a very important understanding of this reality:* As indicated above and elsewhere in this paper, the cognitive teaching of the Bible must be emphasized. The balance herein refers not to quantitative equality but to maintaining the Biblical meaning and priority of each of the three dimensions of human learning and development.

When the **cognitive** receives *too much* emphasis, an uninspiring and passionless, self-contained and unproductive intellectualism can and does occur. When the **affective** receives too much emphasis, an information-deprived, superficial, and even heretical “follow your [deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9)] heart” orientation leads to a disregard for knowledge and a lack of concern with obedience that Jesus and the Father neither view as love (John 14:21) nor accept (Matthew 7:21ff.). When the cognitive and affective dimensions are minimized—or, worse, neglected—together with expanded emphasis upon the **behavioral** dimension, an unbiblical “works righteousness” and misplaced pride emerge. (Luke 18:11) Further, when the cognitive is minimized or neglected the Word is not known, understood, taught, or obeyed. Jesus’ command to disciple others, including all nations, is not done, first and foremost because in order to do so, one has to know the Word—both in its written form and in its embodiment in the One to Whom it points, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, the Second Person of the triune God—and have a relationship with Him.⁵ No one can disciple someone else when he or she doesn’t know what and who he or she is supposed to be talking about.

How does such neglect of the Bible impact a society, a nation, even a civilization? Here is one analyst’s observation:

As America approaches its 250th anniversary, the nation finds itself preoccupied with familiar concerns: political polarization, civic deterioration, institutional distrust, and cultural fragmentation. These are serious realities, but they are not the ultimate ones. They are symptoms of a deeper disorder—biblical illiteracy.

⁴ The brief parenthetical description of the Biblical sanctification process, must be understood in the more complete explanation in traditional Christian theology. For such an explanation, see [Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology—With a Focus on Its Very Practical Dimensions, Including Answers to Our Great Questions of Life—for Now and Eternity \(PowerPoint\)](#). Everything on both of my websites (see below, “Resources”) is free and both websites are secure.

⁵ Since our discipling is to help people come to know Jesus, who he is, what he has done, and what he will do—his identity (see his vital questions to his disciples [Matthew 16:13,15])—we must know (cognition) what to say. For more information about who Jesus is and the answers to these and other questions about him, see [Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology—With a Focus on Its Very Practical Dimensions, Including Answers to Our Great Questions of Life—for Now and Eternity \(PowerPoint\)](#).

I have become increasingly convinced that the central problem confronting both church and culture is not merely moral rebellion against biblical truth, but widespread unfamiliarity with it.

We see this in public officials who invoke God in the language of prosperity, national sentiment, or self-affirmation rather than repentance, moral accountability, and divine authority.⁶

Troy Miller also documents in this article that 83% of Americans have never read the Bible. Noting the disconnect between this statistic and the Founders' basing their philosophy of government for the new nation on the Bible, and quoting John Adams' famous caveat, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people," Michael Ringer writes in *Crusader's Call*,

...Miller contends the American constitutional framework was never designed to function in a moral vacuum. When people lose familiarity with Scripture's moral framework, they lose what he calls "the conceptual architecture" for understanding justice, freedom, and responsibility.

The consequences are visible across public life. Public officials invoke God without theological rigor. Media personalities handle Scripture without discipline. Christian audiences cannot distinguish sound doctrine from charisma. The result, Miller warns, is "freedom emptied of purpose" and "rights detached from responsibility...."

Miller's proposed solution calls for recovering Scripture as authoritative teaching, not as civil religion, partisan ornament, or a reservoir of selectively quoted affirmations. Churches must provide better catechesis and theological training. Media platforms bear responsibility for clarifying rather than confusing biblical truth.

The American Bible Society's 2026 State of the Bible report confirms the scope of the problem: only 17% of Americans say they have read the entire Bible [again, the philosophical foundation of our nation], while shallow preaching, weak catechesis, and the prioritization of relevance over doctrinal seriousness have left many Christians without the framework necessary to recognize error.

...You cannot defend what you have never read. You cannot stand on truth you have never studied. Every church that replaced verse by verse

⁶ Troy Miller, "America's Real Crisis is Biblical Illiteracy: A Civilizational Problem," *The Christian Post*, April 23, 2026, quote from *The Daily Citizen*, April 27, 2026. Troy Miller is President and CEO of the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB).

teaching with coffee shop theology helped build this disaster. Every pastor who chose relevance over revelation contributed to the collapse.⁷

So, referring again to the 2025 SALT study, why are only 14.3% of Christians obeying our Lord's command to disciple others (meaning that 85.7% are disobeying the Lord)? Part of the answer is in the same study: 50% do not read the Bible, which contains the true information about Jesus that we are to be helping others learn and do to function (behavior) accordingly. Again, we cannot disciple someone if we don't know what we are talking about! Yet, this raises another question, "Why are 50% of Christians not reading the Bible?" The rest of this paper will answer that question and address a major and serious reason why God's Word is being ignored.

It should be noted that the preceding are common—but not exhaustive—results of the failure to keep all three dimensions of human learning and development in their proper priority (cognition, behavior, and affect) and in proper balance. The failure to do so results in stunted sanctification that neither satisfies even us nor produces the continual⁸ bearing of fruit—including obedience—that God has called us to do and that pleases him. Further, the day is coming when all will have to give account for what they have done and not done. (Matthew 12:36; 24; Hebrews 4:13; 1 Peter 4:5; cf. also Matthew 13:18-23)

Many readers at this point may be thinking—or even saying out loud—"Obviously, this makes sense, so who would ever do such a thing as ignore God's Word in these ways?" I'm glad you asked, and the rest of this paper is my answer to that question. But first, buckle up, because this matter is serious, and most who engage this subject for the first time, or early on in the process of doing so, will be alarmed, and many even shocked, by what has been taking place in that part of the church which until recently has been charged with the responsibility for Christian education.

The Rise of the "Spiritual Formation Movement"

In recent decades, a movement in the field of church education, called spiritual formation or the Spiritual Formation Movement (SFM), has arisen.

Since the latter part of the 20th century, it has become vogue to no longer refer to education programs in the church—and to educational ministry divisions in seminaries—with the terms, education, or Christian education, due to a dangerous downplaying, and even a spurning, of the cognitive dimension of human learning and discipleship together

⁷ Michael Ringer, "[83% of Americans Have Never Read the Bible: The Crisis No One Is Talking About](#)," Crusaders Call, April 23, 2026.

⁸ Jesus' will is that we continue to bear fruit in an ongoing process. See for example, Matthew 7:16, every good tree "bears" [NIV, ESV, NASB, NRSV; Greek: "produces"] and John 15:16, "bear," where the verbs for "bear," "produce," (fruit) and "remain" are all in the Greek present tense, indicating a durative, continuous, and never-ending action (behavior), never "one and done." Here's a very important—indeed, vital—question to ask the Spiritual Formation Movement proponents (see the following section): "How would you ever know all this about Jesus' will without studying his Word and commentaries on his Word?"

with a simultaneous desire to overemphasize the affective dimension. The leaders of the SFM, and their followers, now want to highlight and focus on the affective dimension—often to the exclusion of the cognitive (e.g., see below the section, “Emptying the Mind,” its use *sic passim*, and its related SFM practices herein explained)—and thus only use the term, “spiritual formation.” What we then see is an overemphasis on the affective followed by many negative and counterproductive effects pertaining to the sanctification of Christ’s followers and the ill-equipping and misinforming of Christians that hinder their ability to disciple the nations and teach and practice God’s Word.

Thus, what is not mentioned—and often not even considered—is the major change that thereby takes place. The change causes at least two serious failures to occur. First, it results in the failure to nurture God’s people—thus impoverishing them by not equipping them with what they need to mature in Christ, to help others mature in him, and to be Christ’s witnesses, to fulfill our calling—by using the gifts given to his church by our Lord,

who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹²to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:11-16)⁹

Second, by failing to prioritize and balance the cognitive, behavior, and affective, dimensions of human learning and development, by not teaching the whole counsel of God—as seen and experienced in the diligent and prayerful study and practice of God’s Word—SFM misinforms and misleads the church into spiritually dangerous unbiblical and non-Christian worldviews and practices, including, as will be seen below, exposure to and involvement with the demonic.

Theresa of Avila

An example of this occurrence was observed already over half a millennium ago by the priests and other nuns who counselled Theresa of Avila (1515-1582), a very confused (see her own words below) Spanish Carmelite nun, a key figure in church history who,

⁹ See also Romans 16:17; 1 Timothy 1:3,10; 4:6,16; 6:3; 2 Timothy 3:16; 4:2-3; Titus 1:9; 2:1,7,10; 2 John 1:9,10; Revelation 2:24.

ironically, the current SFM highly touts and points to as a model practitioner of contemplative prayer (*op cit.*). During these times of prayer, that involved mystical experiences, observed by others, which at times also included involuntary levitating half a meter off the ground for half an hour, Theresa went into such a deep state she said

The soul is suspended in such a way that it seems to be completely outside itself. The will loves; the memory, it seems to me, is almost lost. For, as I say, the intellect [cognition] does not work,...it understands nothing.

...they [her counselors, priests and nuns] told me my visions were the work of evil spirits!...Yet still the trances and favors have become more violent and frequent...oh, I am in distress, such great distress. I am weary, and so tired...so very, very tired.¹⁰

Author Carolyn Greene adds,

The practice of the prayer of quiet continued to bring Teresa into what she called the *state of union*, the place where intellect [cognition] and will [behavior] cease to function over which she soon had no control. As the years passed, Teresa's headaches and visions began to take their toll. She was counseled by the Jesuit Fathers to give up her "interior" prayer, but that didn't help.¹¹

Theresa was exceedingly troubled and tormented by her spiritual experiences, actually living in fear of the next rapture that would emerge within her without warning, and by the priests' admonishment that the source of her experiences was Satan, which Theresa disputed, saying that they were from the Lord. Thus, Theresa engaged in inflicting tortures, including self-flagellation, upon herself for the purpose of disciplining herself and sharing in Christ's sufferings. Greene further explains that Theresa was "hearing voices and experiencing visions during ecstatic states of rapture in which she felt herself being lifted from the ground by a powerful force outside of her control."¹²

¹⁰ Theresa of Avila, quoted in *Teresa of Avila – An Ancient Mystic Who Helped Shape Today's Spiritual Formation Movement* by Carolyn A. Greene, Lighthouse Trails, 2009. Visitors to Avila, Spain, will likely hear, as I heard, only about what Theresa did that contributed to the church and the Christian life, specifically the attempt to reverse the trend at that time in the Roman Catholic Church away from prayer, meditation, and worship. However, what is not typically mentioned about Theresa, is that she did so with an excessive emphasis on affect (Heart) over cognition (Head), which resulted in much dangerous teaching about spirituality. As Arthur H. DeKruyter, who also studied at a conference in Avila, wrote: "This nun was a doer, not a thinker." *Journey into Joy* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1985), p. 13. As you will see in this paper, Theresa's out-of-balance emphasis on affect and behavior, disregarding the cognitive that examines and requires concepts to comply with God's Word, led her to incorporate unbiblical content and practice in her advocacy for change, which the clergy noticed and challenged, and that the Inquisition and Catholic Counter-Reformation largely nullified.

¹¹ Carolyn A. Greene, Lighthouse Trails, 2009.

¹² Carolyn A. Greene, Lighthouse Trails, 2009.

Notice here, without the cognitive balance provided by the careful study of God's Word, she—and others to this day—who practice such spirituality, have failed to understand that nowhere in God's Word do such experiences ever come from God; instead, the opposite: God brings peace and joy in Christ Jesus; further, we do not need to punish ourselves with such practices as flagellation, because Jesus has taken on himself the punishment we deserve. (Isaiah 53:5-6; Romans 3:25; 2 Corinthians 5:17-18; Hebrews 2:9,17)

Theresa also spoke of the Lord throwing her into a trance—nowhere a Biblical practice—which lasted sometimes for days at a time. Theresa referred to the trances as the “transport of the soul.” Others, too, had such spiritual experiences.

Do Theresa's fears and tormentation—that are nowhere advocated, taught, or practiced in God's Word—indicate a model God would have his people practice today? *Of course not!*

Greene also reports that

Teresa referred to the final stage of her “spiritual betrothal” prayer process as “rapture.” In this deepest trance state, she experienced “delectable pain” that penetrated the bowels of the soul....

Teresa often used erotic metaphors to describe these violent mystical experiences that overpowered her. She also wrote that it felt like she was being torn apart, and the aftermath of the detachment was so severe that at times she lost consciousness, being racked with torment and her bones disjointed....

Greene observantly and wisely concludes,

The Bible teaches us that the believer who is born of the Spirit is still in control of his senses or as Paul puts it, “the spirit of the prophets are *subject* to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in *all* the churches of the saints” (1 Corinthians 14: 32-33; emphasis added). A Christian is not taken over by the Holy Spirit like a demonically possessed person. While God often works in ways we can't understand, we will not experience weird things like levitation and psychic detachment that knocks us out and leaves us feeling physically sore. Anyone who practices the contemplative prayer techniques of mystics like Teresa of Avila is stepping into dangerous spiritual territory.

Such loss of one's God-given intellect in prayer or in any other spiritual practice is not taught anywhere in God's Word. To the contrary, see such passages as Isaiah 1:18, “‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD.” The “dangerous spiritual territory” to which Greene refers, and how this danger occurs will be documented in what follows.

However, for now, here's an advance organizer to alert you to recognize the dangers: God's Word clearly reveals the great importance of the cognitive dimension of human learning, e.g., Isaiah 1:18; 5:13; Hosea 4:6; 1 Corinthians 11:28; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 6:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Yet, notice carefully how out of balance the SFM skews the three dimensions of learning. Observe the strong emphasis on the affective, "feeling," and "emotion," over the cognitive, such as "reason" and "examine." In other words, in SFM, the heart eclipses the head (knowledge, facts, information even being

disparaged), resulting in empty hands not serving the Lord as he has called and provided the equipping we need to do so and also putting hands in places contrary to God's will.

This popular movement—among practitioners—does not have one specific driving force, such as a leader or a formal organization—though there are several well-known authors and speakers, many mentioned below, who are vigorously advocating and promoting SFM—but it is more of an amorphous bandwagon-type movement that in many ways is resulting in the replacement of traditional educational programs in the church, thereby producing individual and corporate outcomes that are less than desirable: being counterproductive to believers' sanctification in Christ Jesus and to accomplishing the mission of his church. In academe, which is also very inclined to bandwagons, the movement is being driven by several well-known personalities who have gotten off track, who've influenced key practitioners who drive the bandwagon.

Too many leaders of the church are not serving the Lord and the church well by being more concerned about appearing avant-garde, innovative, "with it," and "up on all things new," that they thoughtlessly and without discernment jump on this bandwagon (and several others) so that no one will think they are "not up-to-speed," unaware of what is going on or, perish the thought, "old-fashioned." This is not to say that new ideas are not good. Not at all! In fact, I've been involved in innovation in the church for over 60 years, including implementing many new concepts, methods, programs, and ministries. I have also done much study and teaching in a subfield of communication called diffusion research (empirical cross-cultural investigation into how anything new spreads throughout a social system, including what helps and what hinders its spread) as well as teaching a seminary course on how to successfully implement innovations, including using the findings of diffusion research.¹³ Many innovations are good, *but not the SFM*.

Church congregations must also do better in requiring such pastor(s) to help them learn what they need to know in order to "all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:13) We will see more of what that involves in what follows.

When incorporated into church congregations, denominations, and seminaries by leaders who have not thought enough about and carefully examined this movement, what it entails and its effects on the church, the SFM *reinterprets* and *replaces* Biblical spiritual

¹³ For much more helpful information on the successful implementation of innovations, see my program, [Defusing Fear of Innovations: Facilitating Change in the Church](#).

disciplines that have been a key part of Biblical—including historic Christian education—nurture the church needs in order to fulfill its commission the Lord gave us. (Matthew 28:18-20) The *reinterpretation* involves using many familiar terms but with new and unbiblical meanings. As will be seen in what follows, these historic Christian terms are combined with and corrupted by spiritual practices from pagan religions that are contrary to God’s Word and do **not** help “all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:13)

The SFM also *replaces* programs and practices that have historically been seen by God’s people as essential for learning God’s Word—the whole counsel of God—including being able to apply it according to his will, and also for facilitating the development of wisdom and maturity in Christ. Further, as we will see more below, the SFM also imports aspects of pagan religions into its teaching in the church and other communities in our society. Traditional education programs are diminished or eliminated entirely, such as exegetical Bible study, systematic theology, and church history, among others, to the detriment of youth and adult development in sanctification. In the case of ignorance of church history, we see unawareness of—with the resultant tendency to repeat—the mistakes of the past, including the result of inadequate spiritual development.

I have a question for you: If the Apostle Paul were in on this conversation we’re having, what would he say? You only need to think a moment to answer, for you recall he has received the Holy Spirit’s inspiration to write the answer to this question, and he did so in his letter to the Ephesians, immediately following the above quote, when he said,

¹⁷So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. ¹⁹Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. ²⁰You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. (Ephesians 4:17-20)

Obviously Paul is not referring the church in Ephesus—or any other church—to turn to the Gentiles—the pagans—for spiritual insight. The Holy Spirit through Paul is saying just the opposite: “You...did not come to know Christ that way.” (4:20) He’s telling Christ’s children to stay away from pagan religion in order to mature in Christ, be blessed by him, and serve him as he has called us to do.

Now, I have a follow-up question for you. Since we must not “live as the Gentiles do” (4:17); since their thinking is “futility” (4:17); since “they are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to the hardening of their hearts” (4:18); since Paul mentions much else in the Ephesian 4 passage as well as in the following verses; and since the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to reveal that the worship of pagans is actually offered to Satan and not to God (1 Corinthians 10:20), how can we disobey God and bring pagan religions’ teaching into the

church via the SFM and replace historic Biblical teaching with paganism that will very dangerously harm his people? We must not do so!¹⁴

The Biblically-based website, *GotQuestions*, offers a sound yet succinct summary statement of the SFM, including its problematic dimensions. Comments in brackets [] are by Edward D. Seely.

The spiritual formation movement is very popular today. It is, however, in many ways a move *away* from the truth of God’s Word to a mystical form of Christianity, and it has infiltrated, to some degree, nearly all evangelical denominations. This idea of spiritual formation is based on the premise that if we do certain practices, we can be more like Jesus.¹⁵ Proponents of spiritual formation erroneously teach that anyone can practice these mystical rituals and find God within themselves. [Then the question arises, “Without a strong knowledge of God’s Word, how do they know it’s not a demonic being who is actually speaking to them? Again, God never contradicts himself; he has not done so anywhere in the Bible, and he will not say one thing in his Word and say the opposite to someone in a mystical manner.”]

Too often, adherents of the current spiritual formation movement believe the spiritual disciplines transform the seeker by his or her entering an altered realm of consciousness. The spiritual formation movement is characterized by such things as contemplative prayer (also called centering prayer), contemplative spirituality, and Christian mysticism [that is drawn largely from non-Christian Eastern philosophies and religions¹⁶. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit led Paul to write,

¹⁴ On a few occasions, e.g., in Acts (17:22-25,28) and some of his letters (e.g., Titus 1:12), Paul has referred to a pagan practice but only as a segue or an illustration, **never** to teach Christ’s followers the content of—or to engage in—the practices of that religion.

¹⁵ When they put forth this argument, SFM proponents are thoughtlessly and dangerously misleading people. For just two examples, recall (a cognitive process) how Jesus overcame Satan’s temptations by quoting God’s Word (e.g., Matthew 4:4,7, and 10), and recall also the many times Jesus referred people to Scripture (e.g., Matthew 12:3; 19:4; 22:31).

¹⁶ Examples of such Eastern influences include Zen in Mahayana Buddhism, Yoga and Vedanta in Hinduism, Sufism in Islam, the Cabala in Judaism, and what Yoga practitioners call kundalini or serpent power occultic energy (conceptualized by practitioners as a yogic “life force” lying at the base of their spine until aroused and sent to their head to cause enlightenment) that has long been known in Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, the elements of which are included in selected expressions of contemplation in Christianity. For more information on such mysticism, see “[5 Things You Should Know About Contemplative Prayer](#)” by Ray Yungen. Other popular—but spiritually dangerous—practices include balancing chakras (from India); Qi Gong (from China, originally developed for spiritual growth and longevity, older than Tai Chi, but both have same roots); Tai Chi (from China and rooted in Taoism and Confucianism); Reiki (from Tibetan Buddhism); Pilates (derived from Yoga); some acupuncture, and others, usually presented in the form of healing procedures.

²⁰Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules.... ²²These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. ²³Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. (Colossians 3:20-23)]

True *biblical* spiritual formation, or spiritual transformation, begins with the understanding that we are sinners living apart from God. Our faculties have been corrupted by sin so that we cannot please God [without his regeneration and sanctification in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit]. True spiritual transformation occurs as we yield ourselves to God so that He may transform us by the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. At least half of every New Testament epistle is geared toward how to live a life well pleasing to God—by obedience and submission to the Holy Spirit in all things. Scripture does not only call us the redeemed, saved, saints, sheep, soldiers, and servants, but teaches us that only through the power of the Spirit we can live up to what the names mean.

The following passages address various aspects of spiritual formation, the work of God in the life of the believer.

“For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” ([Romans 8:29](#)). Here is the aim of transformation: that we may be like Christ.

“But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” ([2 Corinthians 3:18](#)). This is part of a passage that teaches that we are changed into the image of Christ not by following rules and laws, but by following the leading of the Spirit by faith.

“At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we

had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” ([Titus 3:3-7](#)).

Here, Paul reminds us of our before-and-after life. We have responded to the “kindness and love of God” shown to us by the death of Christ for our sins, repented of our sins, and now respond to the Spirit’s continual prompting and empowerment to live differently as God’s children. As a result, we have been transformed by the “rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (v. 5). This, then, is true spiritual formation—the reforming of our spirits by His Spirit into the image of Christ.¹⁷

The editors at Lighthouse Trails, with similar observations, have produced a series of booklets documenting the departure of the SFM from the Bible and historic Christian interpretation of God’s Word. Pertaining to the statement above, in particular the focus of the SFM on to “be more like Jesus,” the Lighthouse Trails editors ask the vital question, our Lord himself asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” and “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:13-17) This is also the same question we should ask in our own understanding of who the true Jesus is and of those with whom we have this conversation. As the editors explain:

[The SFM includes references to how believers supposedly become more fully conformed and united to Christ, but what is excluded] is how this “process” of conforming and uniting to Christ takes place and who is eligible to participate in such a process.

The “how” is done through spiritual disciplines, primarily through the discipline of the silence. The silence is an altered state that is reached through a mantra-like meditation, breath prayers, or some other meditative practice. The idea behind it is that if you go into this silent state, you will eliminate distractions (thoughts) and be able to hear God’s voice. He in turn will transform you to be like Christ. The “who” (who can practice these disciplines and become like Christ) is anyone (according to Spiritual Formation pioneer Richard Foster and other proponents of Spiritual Formation). A Christian, a Buddhist, a Muslim, even an atheist—anyone at all can benefit from the spiritual disciplines and become like Christ (the

¹⁷ GotQuestions, “What is the spiritual formation movement?” <https://www.gotquestions.org/spiritual-formation.html> (Accessed 05/02/2025)

question is which Christ? [which is why Jesus' questions in Matthew 16:13-17 are, and always will be, important in this age.]).¹⁸

An example of leading contemplative prayer/SFM proponents proclaiming a false Christ is cited by Ray Yungen in his reference to Roman Catholic priest, Richard Rohr, who has influenced many popular evangelical authors who have drawn on his work. Yungen writes:

...Rohr is a prominent champion for the idea of a global religion that would unify the world...In echoing [leading contemplative prayer/SFM proponents, Roman Catholic monk, Thomas] Merton and [Dutch Roman Catholic priest, Henri] Nouwen, Rohr also advocates the concept of dharmakāya.¹⁹ This is the recurring theme of the "school" of contemplative prayer. Rohr states:

God's hope for humanity is that one day we will all recognize that the divine dwelling place is all of creation. Christ comes again whenever we see that matter and spirit co-exist. This truly deserves to be called good news. [Rich Heffern, "The Eternal Christ in the Cosmic Story" (*National Catholic Reporter*, December 11, 2009...)]

To dispel any confusion about what Rohr is saying, he makes it clear in the same paragraph what he means by God dwelling in all creation. He uses a term that one finds throughout contemplative literature, which signifies that Christ is more of an energy than a personal being. Rohr explains the term "cosmic Christ," telling readers that everything and everyone belongs to God's kingdom. [Rich Heffern, "The Eternal Christ in the Cosmic Story" (*National Catholic Reporter*, December 11, 2009...)]

...If these things are true, then there was no need for Jesus Christ to die on the Cross for the sins of mankind. We would not need a Savior because we would already be divine ourselves. In truth, contemplative spirituality

¹⁸ Lighthouse Trails Editors, ["Is Your Church Doing Spiritual Formation? \(Important Reasons Why It Shouldn't\)."](#)

¹⁹ Dharmakāya refers to one of the three main bodies or aspects of existence portrayed in the doctrine of trikāya, i.e., three kāyas, in Mahayana Buddhism. Kāya signifies body, an aspect of existence, and refers to three such bodies: dharmakāya, sambhogakāya, and nirmānakāya, primarily characteristics of a Buddha. The term, Buddha, refers to an enlightened being; thus there are held to be many, but it is generally maintained that there can only be one fully enlightened Buddha at a time in any world system. In this world that being is believed by Buddhists to be Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 563-483 BC), a Hindu prince, in northern India in what is now Nepal, who renounced his high status and wealth to seek enlightenment in an ascetic lifestyle and in the process founded Buddhism. Dharmakāya means truth body, the ideal body or the essence of the Absolute; sambhogakāya is the enjoyment body; and nirmānakāya is the transformation body. The three bodies individually signify three different forms and manifestations of an enlightened mind and what Buddhists believe to be the nature of reality.

is the antithesis of the Gospel. That is why there are countless mystics who claim to know God (or Jesus) but will have nothing to do with the Cross.

...Merton's dharmakaya cannot be reconciled with justification through faith by the blood of Christ.²⁰

Yungen insightfully provides another clear example of the contemplative prayer/SFM proponents' contradiction of the Bible. Citing New Age author, Neale Donald Walsch, in his book, *Tomorrow's God*, Yungen quotes Walsch:

The Big Idea is that there is only One God, and this one God does not care whether you are Catholic or Protestant, Jewish or Muslim, Hindu or Mormon, or have no religion at all.²¹ This is basically what Richard Rohr is saying in *Everything Belongs*.²²

Have they not read; or do they not know; or do they not care; or do they blatantly reject the Bible? In one of the most well-known passages of the Bible, Jesus plainly said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) Clearly God does very much care!

Do not fail to notice the straightforward contradiction of God's Word. Walsch, Rohr, and their ilk say that everybody—and everything—belongs. Jesus said "No one" enters the Father's most holy presence—much belongs—who does not come by, i.e., believe in and follow, Jesus. Many other passages in God's Word refer to the same reality. Jesus said,

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Matthew 7:13-14)

The word, few, by definition, does not mean anybody and everybody. These words from the Lord's lips telling us that many choose the way to destruction and few find the way to life, very clearly reveal that not all do or will belong. The whole of Scripture states that God does very much care, so much that he gave his only begotten Son at great cost to himself so that the relatively few who do believe in and follow him will have eternal life. Yes, God cares; he cares greatly!

And what about Rohr's everything belongs? Another contradiction of God's Word! While God is in the process of restoring his creation, we also read that it will be a new creation that will not contain everything that is now present. (Cf., e.g., 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15) In these passages, the Holy Spirit led the Apostle Paul to use a special Greek word for "new." The word is *καίνος* (*kainos*), new in nature or in quality,

²⁰ Ray Yungen, [*A Serious Look at Richard Foster's "School" of Contemplative Prayer*](#).

²¹ Neale Donald Walsch, *Tomorrow's God* (New York, NY: Atria Books, 2004), p. 241.

²² Ray Yungen, [*A Serious Look at Richard Foster's "School" of Contemplative Prayer*](#).

i.e., renewed, not νέος (*neos*), new in time or in origin, i.e., brand new. Thus, when Jesus returns for the final judgment and restoration of the original creation, it will include the original perfect creation and also—but only—the good that has been added from the beginning (Revelation 21:24-27), for it will be a new (*kainos*) heaven and the new (*kainos*) earth (Revelation 21:1ff.), the evil now present having been eliminated, in fact destroyed. (2 Peter 3) In Peter's passage fire graphically refers to the cleansing judgment of sin and destruction of evil, none of which will be in the *kainos* new heaven and *kainos* earth referred to in 3:13. God clearly reveals that nothing evil will be in the new heaven and the new earth. Nothing denotes not everything, contrary to Rohr's concept that *Everything Belongs*. Also, 2 Peter 3 states clearly that not everybody will be included in the new heaven and the new earth. (3:3-7)

Yungen concludes,

Contrary to what the contemplatives teach, there is duality, and the Bible teaches it—there are the sheep and the goats, the wheat and the tares, the saved and the unsaved, and the righteous and the unrighteous. [EDS Note: Also, there is heaven and hell and, as Abraham explained to the rich man in hell, “between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.” (Luke 16:26)] New Age thinkers would reject this because they believe *all is God*. In the contemplative camp when Richard Rohr says everything belongs, this is what makes it New Age. The golden calf and Yahweh are not the same God. It was the cause for God's anger. Simply put, everything does not belong!²³

Can you see how dangerous this movement is and why we cannot have the SFM replacing historic Bible-based Christian education in the church...or in seminaries? Throughout the whole Bible, God's revealed Word, we are commanded to teach his Word, never a distortion and never a contradiction of his Word as is common in the SFM.

Furthermore, as Jesus himself warned us, “many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many.” (Matthew 24:5; cf. Mark 13:6; Luke 21:8) It is crucial when people claim to know, have talked with, and pray to Jesus, to listen to, or ask them, what he is saying to them. If what they say is contrary to what the Bible says about Jesus—including what therein he says about himself—we need to inform, or remind, them of Jesus' warning in Matthew 24:5. One way to do that is to gently and lovingly but firmly and resolutely say that God doesn't contradict himself; i.e., he will not tell everyone something in the Bible—which the historic Christian church through all the ages calls the Holy Spirit-inspired Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21)—and then tell individuals something different that contradicts what he has said in his Word. Those contradictory comments are from a false “Jesus;” they are not from the real Jesus, the only Lord and Savior!

²³ Ray Yungen, [*A Serious Look at Richard Foster's “School” of Contemplative Prayer.*](#)

We should take a moment here to address a common error that is promoted in the world. In society a deceptive falsehood is often spoken—and written—that one “should not offer unsolicited advice.” Of course, people, especially those who do not care about God, much less his Word, are not receptive to any corrective feedback from any source. Still, it is counterproductive to see someone doing something that will harm him or her and/or others; indeed, it is unloving and uncompassionate.

Moreover, in the church continuous, unacknowledged, and unrepentant sin is all the above and also spiritually dangerous for the wrongdoer, the observer, and others, including when widely known, the church. God’s people are told throughout Scripture to admonish one another. (Leviticus 19:17; Matthew 18:15-17; Romans 15:14; Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12,14; 2 Thessalonians 3:15) When done by the Biblical principle, “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15), the one doing wrong is helped to make the needed changes and grow spiritually; the one whose admonishment is done in obedience is blessed; the church is spiritually strengthened; and God is honored.

We must keep in mind that the whole focus of the Bible is on Jesus Christ, through whom the triune God is carrying out his plan to redeem and restore his creation. As I have elucidated in detail in my [Bible Digest Overview of the Bible](#), which is a commentary on the [Bible Digest PowerPoint](#) program, the Old Testament points to Jesus Christ, and the New Testament explains him, specifically, how he accomplishes God’s plan to redeem his creation and in particular how his redemption is applied to us. This most important message in the world is what the Lord has called and commissioned us to

“go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

The Holy Spirit gave further instructions through the Apostle Peter, who wrote, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,…” (1 Peter 3:15)

We must also observe and remember that Biblical spiritual formation involves much cognitive consciousness of reality pertaining specifically to our sinful human nature. This historic Christian education in the sanctification process (e.g., Ephesians 4:11-16ff.), also involves a growing cognitive understanding of what behavioral changes we need to engage in order to mature in Christ Jesus and to please our triune God who loves us and whom we love (affective as well as cognitive and behavioral) and are called to serve (behavior). Biblical teaching and learning from the beginning of God’s covenant with his people, involve a balance of all three dimensions of human learning and development.

Further, within the Spiritual Formation Movement, there exists a wide range of what is called spirituality. Other terms, e.g., New Age, are also used in this contemporary popular orientation to spirituality, but the focus in this essay is on the new (from an historical perspective) orientation to Christian nurture, which is heavily—almost

exclusively—weighted to the affective dimension of human learning, that aspect of which is commonly referred to as spiritual formation or the Spiritual Formation Movement. The range extends from those who hold to a Biblical orientation to those who broaden their understanding to include various non-Christian concepts. Much of the SFM literature frequently includes quotes and practices from Buddhist, Hindu, New Age, Muslim and other religious persons and texts along with Biblical texts, but the penchant for these additional sources of “spirituality” is for thought from Eastern religions.²⁴

When church congregations and denominations abandon the historic Christian education ministry and replace it with the SFM, and when Christians fail to attend sound education that is still offered in some churches, is it any wonder why many—even evangelical—believers are confused, even to the point of espousing heretical views that have long ago been condemned early in the history of the church? With so much exposure to the intentional and unintentional infiltration of non-Christian beliefs in Christian churches, and “to suit their own desires” people “will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead... they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.” (2 Timothy 4:3-4; cf. 2 Peter 1:16-21) We see this phenomenon also in the desire for elementary, repetitive, and superficial music and messages instead of sound doctrine. Such Scripture and thoughtful observance enables us to see at least one reason why careful empirical research is showing that even many evangelical Christians don’t see much difference between pagan beliefs and (what they know of) Christian theology.

Dr. Jeffrey J. Ventrella, reporting on the latest findings of a biennial longitudinal study by Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research over the past decade, reveals key and alarming findings in the study that include the following: 61% of evangelicals believe—contrary to the First Commandment—that God accepts the worship of all religions, including Islam, an example of the interspirituality (see below) that characterizes the SFM and other immature and unbiblical thinking many people engage in pertaining to their views of God. Such a belief is not only a spiritually deadly contradiction of the First Commandment; it is contrary to the whole Bible. The Scriptural teaching that only the God who reveals himself in his Word, the Bible, is the one true God, and he forbids his people to worship any false god, is one example of what Biblical scholars call a major motif. A major motif is a theme, doctrine, or subject that occurs throughout the entire Bible. This major motif that only God is God, and there is no other, is especially emphasized in the Old Testament. In this alarmingly high statistic, 61%, we see the result of the contemporary phenomenon of many evangelicals saying they only need the New Testament and don’t need the Old Testament. Ventrella, Professor of Law at Trinity Law School, observes that “This erroneous notion rests on a decidedly pagan premise: all religions are essentially one.” The Bible, and historic Christian theology, explain why this pagan premise is not true.

²⁴ See for example the excellent studies by Lighthouse Trails Research. In particular see, [“Is Your Church Doing Spiritual Formation? \(Important Reasons Why It Shouldn’t\).”](#) Also, check out the links within the article. In addition, see this article, [“Mirror, Mirror on the Church Wall: Paganism in the Pews,”](#) several key findings from which follow on this and the next page.

Further, only 87% of *evangelicals* agree or strongly agree that Jesus is the only way to salvation, which means that 13% of *evangelicals* believe that one can have eternal life without believing that Jesus alone is necessary. Have they not read John 14:6? (“Jesus said, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”) Also, 61% believe that Jesus is a created being—an ancient (< Arius, 4th Century A. D.) heresy held now by Jehovah’s Witnesses and others—not the only begotten Son of God who shares the same substance with the Father and the Holy Spirit. (John 3:16; 10:30; Hebrews 1:3) Further, 44% of evangelicals believe Jesus is not God, just a “great teacher.” This belief reveals that many evangelicals not only hold false pagan beliefs about Jesus—that deny his divinity!—but they also think superficially and illogically: “Great teachers” do not lie; Jesus claimed to be divine and part of the Godhead with the Father and the Holy Spirit, which is also the testimony of the whole Bible about Jesus.

Many *evangelicals* also deny the Trinity with more than half, 55%, believing (in accord with Arius, Star Wars, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses, among others) that the Holy Spirit is an impersonal “force” and not a personal being.²⁵ Among the many serious implications of that unbiblical, unpleasant, and unsatisfying view of the Spirit are these questions: “How can you have a relationship with a ‘force’ who is not a personal being?! How would a ‘force’ even care to help you, much less be able to do so? How can a ‘force’ be a counselor, teacher, and an advocate for you and testify about Jesus?” (John 14:16,26; 15:26; 16:7) Consider carefully that this awareness and its implications come from cognitive reflection that significantly impacts our affective learning—including our feelings—and our behavioral responses. Alarming, the SFM does not offer that depth of Bible study or any real study.

Also, the research reveals much more that evangelicals believe which is contrary to the Word of God, and these unbiblical beliefs are documented in Ventrella’s report. Notice that this vital information—that all Christians need to know—is received, understood, and processed by the left hemisphere of the cerebrum, the portion of our human brain wherein cognitive reflection occurs. This essential learning comes from a Christian education ministry with a Biblically prioritized cognitive-affective-behavioral balance; it is not included in spiritual formation programs.

These are not “disputable matters” (Romans 14:1 ff.); they are salvific issues. How can we not teach them in accord with historic and sound grounding in God’s Word together with Biblically-based historic Christian systematic theology?

This paper will cite several examples of the SFM drawing from non-Christian religions instead of from the Bible; they are illustrative, not exhaustive. Examine them and all other SFM methods carefully in the light of God’s Word. If you need further information, read other trustworthy resources on the SFM, such as those cited herein. One of the most thorough, detailed, and carefully researched and documented of these

²⁵ Jeffrey J. Ventrella, “[Mirror, Mirror on the Church Wall: Paganism in the Pews.](#)” *The Aquila Report*, May 6, 2025.

reliable resources is the series on SFM published by [Lighthouse Trails Research](#). However, if your time is limited, you have a sufficient rationale in this essay to equip you with enough Biblically sound documentation to avoid (or if already present, abandon) SFM and build a strong Christian education ministry in your church. The Resources identified at the end of this paper will help you do so.

Hence, we see much emphasis in the SFM writings on looking inward, within the heart, contrary to God's Word for us to look to him and to reach out to the whole world to fulfill his mission for us. (Genesis 12:1-3; 17; Matthew 28:19-20; Galatians 3:29; 1 Peter 2:9-12; Revelation 7:9) For example, a prominent feature of the non-Christian religions typically cited in the SFM literature regarding [meditation/transcendental meditation](#) and [contemplative prayer](#) is the instruction to look inward for insight and enlightenment. The orientation is very much internal. The website, *GotQuestions*, explains:

The website for the Center for Contemplative Spirituality sums it up well: [SFM proponents say,] "We come from a variety of secular and religious backgrounds and we each seek to enrich our journey through spiritual practice and study of the world's great spiritual traditions. We desire to draw closer to the loving Spirit which pervades all creation and which inspires our compassion for all beings." There is absolutely nothing biblical about such goals. Studying the world's "spiritual traditions" is an exercise in futility because any spiritual tradition other than that which exalts Christ is falsehood. [Cf., e.g., 1 Corinthians 10:20] The only way to draw closer to God is through the path He has ordained—Jesus Christ and the Word.²⁶

These and other terms SFM proponents use **must** be carefully understood and critiqued in the light of our criterion, our standard, God's Word, a cognitive process, the prerequisite of which is to read, study, meditate, memorize, and live according to God's Word. (Cf., e.g., Psalm 119:9-16; 2 Timothy 3:14-17) For just one example, look closely at Psalm 119:9-16.

Observe carefully the inclusion of all three components of human learning: cognition (C), affect (A), and behavior (B). Notice the distribution of each.

⁹How can a young man keep his way pure? (B)

By living (B) according to your word. (C)

¹⁰I seek you (B) with all my heart; (A)

do not let me stray (B) from your commands. (C)

¹¹I have hidden your word (C) in my heart (A)

that I might not sin against you. (B)

¹²Praise be to you, O LORD; (B)

²⁶ *GotQuestions*, "What is contemplative spirituality?" <https://www.gotquestions.org/contemplative-spirituality.html> (Accessed 05/02/2025)

- teach me your decrees. (C)
¹³With my lips I recount (B)
 all the laws (C) that come from your mouth.
¹⁴I rejoice (A) in following (B) your statutes; (C)
 as one rejoices (A) in great riches.
¹⁵I meditate (B) on your precepts (C)
 and I consider (C) your ways. (B)
¹⁶I delight (A) in your decrees; (C)
 I will not neglect (B) your word. (C)

What is the priority scale; where are the emphases? The focus is on understanding (C) and doing (B) God's Word. Affect (A), joy, results from C and B. Notice also the number of occurrences of all three in the text: (C), the cognitive reflection and action on God's Word: 10; (B), the behavior God intends as a result of the cognitive processing of his Word: 11; (A), the affective response to reading and pondering God's Word and God himself together with obedience to God's Word and will: 5.

While affective responses such as joy are important, they occur as a result of knowing and doing God's Word; they occur in the light of and are God's intended outcomes of doing the deeds learned in his Word. The affect is directly linked to knowing God as he reveals himself and his will in his Word—not a euphoria that comes from an attempt to empty one's mind.

Notice verse 15 in particular. We see the typical Biblical practice of pondering (נִשְׁמַח [siach, meditate, ponder, consider, quietly reflect]), but that practice of thinking about the one true, triune, God and praying to him only is always done in the light of his Word. Furthermore, we are not taught in the Bible to consider only a part of his Word; he calls us to know all of his Word and to respond accordingly.

What the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to write to Timothy, he intends for all of us.

- ¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed [θεόπνευστος (*theopneustos*, God inspired)] and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.
 (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

Historic Bible study and spiritual nurture is **not** sought, as the Center for Contemplative Spirituality (CCS) says, "through spiritual practice and study of the world's...spiritual traditions" that have a different source, center, and focus, which is contrary to God and his Word, e.g., 1 Corinthians 10:20. The CCS wrongly continues, "We desire to draw closer to the loving Spirit which [not who as in the Bible] pervades all creation and which

inspires our compassion for all beings.” Read such statements as in this CCS quote very carefully, for they are thus dangerously deceptive and destructive.

Notice how the terms are not defined and sometimes are redefined²⁷ to include concepts counter to the Bible, e.g., “the loving Spirit which pervades all creation....” The upper case “S” is deliberately intended to refer—for readers who are not careful—to the Holy Spirit, but that statement is untrue and contrary to Scripture, which He Himself inspired. (2 Timothy 3:16) The Holy Spirit does not “pervade all creation.” The word “pervade,” as defined by Merriam-Webster denotes becoming diffused throughout every part of, which is a tenet of pagan panentheism (not pantheism, the concept that everything is god), which is **not** the one true God, and specifically **not** an attribute of the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the triune God, revealed in the Bible. The Holy Spirit does not even dwell in all humans; he only dwells within those who believe in Jesus (1 Corinthians 6:19), i.e., those who confess with their mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in their heart that God raised him from the dead and are thus saved (Romans 10:9), which the Holy Spirit enabled them to do (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Neither is Biblical spirituality seeking to “inspire...our compassion for all beings.” Satan and the demons are beings, beings who not only hate God and us but are trying to destroy us for eternity. Historic Christian education, including creeds cited in worship, teach us to renounce and fight Satan and his demon forces. Scripture informs us that we are in a spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:10-20) that is essentially against Satan and his fallen angel followers, the demons (6:12). We are to fight and defeat them in this spiritual war with them; Scripture does not teach God’s people to have compassion on these thoroughly evil spirits. *Got Questions* is right on target in its evaluation of the preceding CCS quote: “There is absolutely nothing biblical about such goals. Studying the world’s ‘spiritual traditions’ is an exercise in futility because any spiritual tradition other than that which exalts Christ is falsehood. The only way to draw closer to God is through the path He has ordained—Jesus Christ and the Word.”²⁸ We must explain this truth to the church and to the SFM proponents.

Contemplative Prayer/Emerging Church

Consider one of the essential and formative components of the SFM, the concept of contemplative prayer, which has been referred to as [the Western bridge to Far Eastern spirituality](#). *Lighthouse Trails* editors offer this insightful explanation after 15 years of careful study and research.

²⁷ In addition to the very serious Biblical and theological problems with redefining terms, especially employing meanings of non-Christian religions—the most prevalent being Eastern religions—redefinitions are also logical fallacies. For an explanation of why in the field of logic redefining terms is a logical fallacy, see [Logic: A Primer on Common Logical Fallacies](#), by Edward D. Seely.

²⁸ Got Questions, “What is contemplative spirituality?” <https://www.gotquestions.org/contemplative-spirituality.html> (Accessed 02/08/2026)

The real crux of this matter comes down to the contemplative prayer movement, which because it has its roots in panentheism (God in all) and interspirituality (all paths lead to God²⁹) as we have been able to document in our writings these past many years, it is basically a synonym for the emerging church [movement]. In fact, without contemplative prayer, the emerging church would not have had the success (if you will) that it has had because contemplative prayer is the force that drives it. And given the fact that there are so many variables equal between the two, if someone is a proponent of contemplative prayer, we classify him as part of the emerging church. Many people mistakenly think that the emerging church would just be those of the caliber of Brian McLaren or Rob Bell. But we cannot agree with this at all. We believe the documentation we have gathered these past 15 years clearly shows that the two movements are one in the same.

That being said, one of the problems is that many Christians do not understand what contemplative spirituality is. They believe that contemplative prayer is just prayer that contemplates (ponders) the things of God. Or that it is likened to a time of solitude (e.g., a quiet time with the Lord, perhaps sitting by a creek or turning off the radio). But contemplative prayer, as Richard Foster has very often made clear in his writings, is a practice that requires one to remove all distractions of the mind by practicing some type of mantric-like meditation (breath prayers, centering prayer...) and allowing the mind to enter a neutral state where all thought is gone. If contemplative prayer were just normal, but perhaps more focused, prayer, then why has there been so much differentiation in the church regarding it, whereas now through Spiritual Formation programs, countless Christian colleges and seminaries have brought contemplative spirituality into their schools?³⁰

²⁹ Ray Yungen explains that one of the key characteristics of the contemplative prayer movement is interspirituality, which “means that you stay in your present religion but you absorb the spiritual perspective of those within Eastern thought.” He observes and points out how the SFM method in contemplative prayer is identical to the method used in New Age and Eastern thought. See “[5 Things You Should Know About Contemplative Prayer](#).” See also “[Is Your Church Doing Spiritual Formation? \(Important Reasons Why It Shouldn’t\)](#)” by Lighthouse Trails editors, 2014. This practice is especially and eternally dangerous for those who do not keep the reflective and discerning cognitive capability in balance and fail to notice the spiritually harmful contradiction of these non-Christian practices against God’s Word. They allow their (affective) heart to eclipse the (cognitive) discernment of their head, which would inform them of the dangerous departure from the Bible and turn them away from unbiblical actions (behavior).

³⁰ Lighthouse Trails Editors, “[Dallas Willard, John Ortberg, Richard Foster—Are We Wrong in Calling Them Emergent/Contemplative?](#)” From the Lighthouse. (Accessed 07/06/2025) In another publication, the editors quote Foster as saying, “Today...[s]eminary courses in Spiritual Formation proliferate like baby rabbits. Huge numbers are seeking to become certified as Spiritual Directors [not Directors or Ministers of Christian Education (DCEs)] to answer the cry of multiplied thousands for spiritual direction.” Richard Foster, “Heart to Heart: On Christian Spiritual Formation” (Renovare, May 2003, <http://blog.renovare.org/2003/05/20/heart-to-heart-on-christian-spiritual-formation>), quoted in “[Is Your Church Doing Spiritual Formation? \(Important Reasons Why It Shouldn’t\)](#).” *Op cit*. Accessed 08/11/2025.

In his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, referred to by some as a spiritual formation primer, Foster emphasizes and guarantees that what he is advocating will not lead to the cosmic consciousness worldview of Eastern religions. He asserts, “It involves no hidden mysteries, no secret mantras, no mental gymnastics, no esoteric flights into the cosmic consciousness.”³¹ On the contrary, Ray Yungen explains that “Foster’s attempt to assuage any suspicion of practicing contemplative prayer is countered by William Shannon’s assertion that it was precisely contemplative prayer that brought Merton into his embracing of this Buddhist worldview.”³²

Significantly, contemplative prayer advocates apparently intuitively sense they are entering dangerous territory. Lighthouse Trails editors perceptively cite a number of instances where this uncertainty appears.

In a quote from the long-time and highly influential promoter of contemplative prayer, Jan Johnson, they quote her as saying,

“In the beginning [when learning the initial stages of contemplative prayer], it is usual to feel nothing but a cloud of unknowing...this *unknowing* will be unnerving.” (p. 120)

We have never heard of a prayer in the Bible that would cause us to feel “unnerving.” This is typical language of and explanation by contemplatives. We know that those who practice occultic or eastern style meditation will often have experiences that could be described as unnerving. Richard Foster says that before one practices contemplative prayer, it is wise to say prayers of protection. (Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, 1992, pp. 155-157.) But where in Scripture are we instructed to pray prayers of protection from prayer?³³

Indeed, as Christians pray to the triune God—who has revealed himself in the Bible as all love (1 John 4:8; cf. John 14:21), sovereign (Job 42:2; Isaiah 43:13; Ephesians 1:17-22a; John 16:33), and inviting us to commune with (including pray to) and walk with him (Matthew 6:9-13; Ephesians 6:18-20; 1 John 5:14-15), and doing so in accord with his Word and his will—he blesses his people greatly. Contrary to being “unnerved” we are rejoicing and at peace with God in and through Christ Jesus. (Cf. also Philippians 4:4-9)

It does not surprise us to read and hear those who are drawing on other religions to say they sense being “unnerved” and needing protection. God’s Word says that all other religions are worshipping demons (cf., e.g., 1 Corinthians 10:20). No wonder they feel “unnerved” and needing protection; they’re departing from God’s Word and his will.

³¹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (HarperCollins, 2009, Kindle Edition), p. 17, quoted by Ray Yungen in [A Serious Look at Richard Foster’s “School” of Contemplative Prayer](#).

³² Ray Yungen, [A Serious Look at Richard Foster’s “School” of Contemplative Prayer](#).

³³ Lighthouse Trails Editors, [“Dallas Willard, John Ortberg, Richard Foster—Are We Wrong in Calling Them Emergent/Contemplative?”](#) August 19, 2017. From the Lighthouse. (Accessed 08/02/2025)

God clearly explains in his Word, that when people pray while deliberately and constantly disobeying his will, he does not hear their prayers.

...your iniquities have made a separation
between you and your God,
and your sins have hidden his face from you
so that he does not hear. (Isaiah 59:2)

The original Hebrew words explain much more about this passage in God's Word that is not evident in the English translations. The grammatical conjugation of the verb, מִבְּדִילִים (*mabdilim*, separating < בָּדַל [*bādal*, separate]), denotes an ongoing active causative connection between the sins of the people resulting in their distancing themselves from God who is not only holy, but holy, holy, holy, and will have no evil in his presence. (The only way in the Biblical Hebrew of indicating the superlative, i.e., most or greatest, is by repeating the word three times; cf. Isaiah 6:3). The word, holy, in both the Old Testament Hebrew (קָדוֹשׁ [*qādôsh*]) and the New Testament Greek (ἅγιος [*hagios*]), means uncommon; separate from common condition and use; that which is consecrated, and when used of persons, it means pure, righteous, separate (from worldly values and evil contrary to God's will). Cf. 1 Peter 3:12.

Very significantly, holy is the only one of God's attributes that is repeated three times. His Word also reveals that God's essence is love (e.g., 1 John 4:8); all his attributes flow from his love, including his holiness and his patience, the former indicating why he will not permit evil in his presence, and the latter indicating that God will—when the time is right in his sight—destroy all evil. This is why from Bible times, early in Christian worship services, we offer a prayer of confession in Jesus' (righteous) name, which is followed immediately by the assurance of pardon which is typically a passage from God's word assuring us of his gracious forgiveness for those who sincerely repent with a commitment to obey God and do rightly in his sight. We are forgiven, because we are credited with Christ Jesus' righteousness due to our faith. (Romans 4)

Contrary to being unnerved in prayer, we have peace with God in Christ. God's Word does assure us that he hears the prayers of those who are holy to him, who love and believe in Jesus, whose behavior demonstrates the genuineness of their faith, and are thereby credited with Christ's righteousness. (John 14:21) See also Romans 4:3, "For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Later in Romans 4 we read the further revelation we have in the new covenant,

²³ But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his [Abraham's] sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, ²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (4:23-25)

Indeed, far to the contrary of the unknowing and unnerving anxiety engendered by the contemplative prayer movement, notice instead the blessings God offers to his righteous believers in and through Christ Jesus:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
(Philippians 4:4–7)

Further, the SFM writings that quote sayings from other religious sources—“the world’s ...spiritual traditions”—do not comment on the context and content of these other religious teachings, the other religions of the world, which are contrary to God’s Word and, therefore, false (in fact demonic [1 Corinthians 10:20]); the result is to mislead and mitigate the Bible’s teaching regarding spiritual development. The average church member is left with the impression that all religions are on the same page concerning the subject at hand.

Be careful also concerning the recommendations made by well-known and respected authors. The Lighthouse Trail editors cite many examples; here is one pertaining to

...Dallas Willard’s book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, a book that remains highly popular in Christian circles. On the back cover of the book is an endorsement by goddess worshiper Sue Monk Kidd...along with the name of her book, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*. It is in that book that Sue Monk Kidd says God is in everything, even human excrement (pp. 160-163)! And in speaking about mysticism in that book, Monk Kidd says:

As I grounded myself in feminine spiritual experience, that fall I was initiated into my body in a deeper way. I came to know myself as an embodiment of Goddess.... Mystical awakening in all the great religious traditions, including Christianity, involves arriving at an experience of unity or nondualism. In Zen it’s known as samadhi³⁴.... Transcendence and immanence are not separate. The Divine is one. The dancer and all the dances are one.... The day of my awakening was the day I saw and knew I saw all things in God, and God is all things. (pp. 161-163, *Dance of the Dissident Daughter*)

³⁴ Samadhi is conceptualized in Buddhism as the concentrated meditation that is the last step in the Eightfold Path to achieve freedom from suffering and to attain enlightenment. In Hinduism it is a state of deep concentration, even a trance, that is believed to result in being united with or absorbed into ultimate reality. In Jainism it is considered to be enlightenment, self-fulfillment.

Does *Dance of the Dissident Daughter* sound like a book that should be included on the back of a Christian book (*The Spirit of the Disciplines*)? Hardly!³⁵

Ray Yungen explains more. He cites SFM techniques including

silence, appropriate body posture and above all, emptying the mind through repetition of prayer—have been the practices of mystics in all the great world religions. And they form the basis on which most modern spiritual directors guide those who want to draw closer to God....³⁶

Yungen illustrates the extreme degree to which those who claim to advocate “Christian mysticism,” contemplative or centering prayer, or Spiritual Formation, etc., depart from cognition when he quotes Willis Jäger. Jäger writes, Do not reflect on the meaning of the word; thinking and reflecting must cease, as all mystical writers insist.”³⁷

On the contrary, **examine carefully all the passages in God’s Word** wherein the Holy Spirit leads the prophets and apostles to write of the essential cognitive dimension of the believer’s walk with God **in order to know and love God and obey his will**. For example, Isaiah records God as saying, “‘Come let us reason together,’ says the LORD.” (1:18) The Spirit emphasized the proper balance between affect and cognition and behavior when he inspired Peter to write, “in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect....” (1 Peter 3:15)

Also, let us always keep in mind that the whole Bible is God’s Word and is to be read, studied, understood, and applied, including obeyed. The practice of this teaching throughout the Bible has led church theologians to bring the main doctrines of God’s Word into a very helpful historic Christian systematic theology to aid our understanding and sanctification. The lack of that historic Christian education—the sanctification—that produces maturity in Christ (cf., e.g., Ephesians 4:11-16ff.) leads to the dangers in the SFM that stem from the practice of contemplative prayer and other Eastern religions. Yungen exposes the root of the practice and some of its key theological and anthropological departures from God’s Word under the heading, “Finding the ‘God’ Within.”

It is important to note here that the purpose of contemplative prayer is to enter an altered state of consciousness in order to find one’s true self, thus

³⁵ Lighthouse Trails Editors, “[Dallas Willard, John Ortberg, Richard Foster—Are We Wrong in Calling Them Emergent/Contemplative?](#)” August 19, 2017. From the Lighthouse. (Accessed 08/02/2025)

³⁶ Ray Yungen, “[5 Things You Should Know About Contemplative Prayer](#),” citing a quote from *Newsweek* magazine.

³⁷ Willis Jäger, *Contemplation: A Christian Path* (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1994), p. 31, quoted in Ray Yungen, “[5 Things You Should Know About Contemplative Prayer](#).”

finding God. This true self relates to the belief that man is basically good [contrary to the Bible, e.g., Jeremiah 17:9; Mark 7:21-13; Romans 3:23]. Christian proponents of contemplative prayer teach that all human beings have a divine center and that all, not just born-again believers, should practice contemplative prayer. The belief is that in the heart of man we find God (i.e., that we are God).³⁸

Again, the Lighthouse Trails editors point out the essence of the problem with the SFM. “This is actually the crux of the Spiritual Formation (i.e., contemplative prayer) movement, that man realizes his divinity through mystical experiences.”³⁹

Pertaining to this last point, well-meaning—but dangerously misinformed—Christians, who are involved with the SFM, confuse the concepts of the Holy Spirit dwelling in believers in Christ (which is Biblical) and the concept that humans can be one with God, i.e., divine (which is **NOT** Biblical). The Bible does teach that the Holy Spirit **dwells within** those he has enabled to believe in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 12:3; 6:19), **BUT** the Holy Spirit is **not one with them**. The Bible **nowhere** teaches that solely human beings are—or ever can be—divine.

Only Jesus Christ is both human and divine, as he is the only begotten Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, our triune God: the Father, together with the Son, and together with the Holy Spirit, Three-in-One, three distinct divine beings who share one substance (cf. Hebrews 1:3). For more information to help understand the Biblical teaching about God—including that there is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4), in whom subsist three distinct beings (1 Peter 1:2), who constitute one God, sharing one substance (Hebrews 1:3, Greek ὑπόστασις [*hupostasis*, underlying essence, substance, being])—see [Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology](#) and also [Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son, Divine and Human, As Revealed in John 3:16 and Hebrews 1:3](#).

Are the SFM advocates and practitioners not rather guiding people away from God and his Word when they teach people to do what is contrary to the Bible? Contrast the concept of “emptying the mind” with Ephesians 5:18-21, where the God-inspired Apostle Paul teaches that we should be continually “filled with the Spirit,” as we’ll shortly study in pages that follow.

I’ve had a considerable number of people say to me, “Everybody believes in the same god anyway.” At that point, we believers in and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ—we who have been called to be Jesus’ witnesses—need to and must correct that very serious and ultimately tragic heresy. What can you say? Consider a statement like this (which I say in these situations):

³⁸ Yungen, [5 Things You Should Know About Contemplative Prayer](#) (Updated, Expanded Edition).

³⁹ Lighthouse Trails Editors, [“Is Your Church Doing Spiritual Formation? \(Important Reasons Why It Shouldn’t\).”](#)

“Now hold your next thought; I want to hear all you’d like to tell me, but first, we need to talk about what you just said, because it is not true,⁴⁰ and I know you don’t want to be wrong. First of all, I can prove to you that no one of any religion—who takes his or her faith seriously—would agree with what you just said, that he or she worships the same God you do if you are not an adherent of that religion.

“One of the easiest examples is with Islam, in which the Qur’an adamantly states that Muslims do not believe in the same God as Christians.” If the person(s) with whom you are having this conversation would like you to document what you have just said, refer him, her, or them to these suras (chapters) in the Qur’an: 4:171ff.; 5:70ff.; 109:1,6.)

Then say, “Now what else did you want to say to me?” Always be patient, addressing the questions and comments others have, and do so “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15), which love the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to define as

patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

In Contrast to the Bible, the SFM Includes Spirituality from non-Christian Religions without Discerning and Distinguishing the Dangerous and Demonic Differences.

As we briefly examine the following examples, keep in mind 1 Corinthians 10:20 and related passages from God’s Word. The following are just a few examples to alert us and to avoid such doctrines and practices, also called exercises, that in the light of God’s Word are spiritually very dangerous.

⁴⁰ Be prepared for possible pushback by some—mostly by non-Christians—who are functioning in the contemporary postmodern mentality, i.e., influenced by the philosophy of postmodernism, which postulates that there is no criterion standard, thus no objective truth, and therefore they resist our saying that we know what is true and not true. One way to adequately respond is to view the objection as a good opportunity to witness for Christ. We can begin by explaining these aspects of postmodern philosophy and “do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15), stating that we are persuaded by the empirical evidence Jesus supplied in his resurrection from the dead and appearing to more than 500 witnesses between his resurrection and ascension into heaven (1 Corinthians 15:6; cf. 2 Peter 1:16-21), most of whom were still living when Paul wrote that letter to the church in Corinth (ca. A. D. 55), implying, “Talk with them.” In so doing, in addition to the many miracles Jesus performed (John 10:25,38; 14:11), he provided sufficient evidence supporting his revelation that he is “the way, and the truth, and the life.” (John 14:6) Notice the definite articles. Notice also what Jesus did not say: He did not say I am one of several ways; he did not say I know the way; he did not say I am a good way; he did not even say I am the best way; he said he is the only way to the Father. In that very verse Jesus further explained: “No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Yoga

Conversely and contradictorily, some of these other religions teach that to find spiritual peace the adherent should empty him or herself and clear the mind. This is one of the procedures in Hinduism, including one of its now popular practices, Yoga, when Yoga is performed, as it usually is to a greater or lesser degree, as it is intended in Hinduism. The object is to remove all thoughts and connect with the cosmos in a monistic oneness with the universe. Such an attempt, even when not mentioned, is actually a precursor to what Hindus, Buddhists, and others of this Eastern mentality conceive as nirvana (*op cit.*), where, when a person finally escapes what they call the law of karma, he or she enters the ultimate monistic oneness, nirvana, which is conceptualized as a cosmic consciousness, wherein adherents lose their individual identities and diffuse into the cosmos, like a drop of water entering the ocean. Thus, contrary to widespread and tragic misconception, nirvana is absolutely nothing like the heaven the Lord has prepared for eternity for all those of us who believe in and follow him.

Before proceeding farther, it is vital to keep in mind the teaching of God's Word that participation in the practices of non-Christian religions is making an offering "to demons, not to God..." (1 Corinthians 10:20; cf. Isaiah 44:6; John 8:44; 14:6) I have talked with Christians who participate in Yoga, even holding such sessions in a church! I have explained how Yoga is part of Hinduism and a very dangerous involvement with demonic religion, and these others have said, "Oh, we just do the exercises; we don't get into the religious stuff." I reply, "Then why call it Yoga?"

In fact, the whole process is spiritually dangerous, for the Hinduism cannot be extracted from Yoga no matter what it is called, the reality of which is recognized not only by Christians but also by Hindus. Further, there is also **no such thing as "Christian Yoga"** or "YogaFaith," which many are trying to promote. Those two terms are mutually contradictory, an oxymoron, a fact not only recognized—but strongly affirmed—by Hindus, such as Professor Subhas Tiwari of the Hindu University of America, in his article, "Yoga Renamed is Still Hindu."⁴¹

Thus, referring positively to, advocating, and becoming involved with Yoga is offering a positive witness to the Hindu religion and to Satan, not to Christianity and to our only Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The result is acting contrary to our calling to witness for Christ Jesus, who said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) Notice the definite articles: Jesus is not a way; he is the way—the only way—to eternal life with our triune God, together with him and all other believers in and followers of Christ forever in "the new heaven and the new earth," which is **absolutely nothing** like the Hindu concept of nirvana. Jesus has given us a Great Commission, which the original Greek verb shows is a command that we go into all the world and make disciples for him. How can Christians affirm another religion that does the very opposite, drawing people away from—rather than toward—Jesus Christ?!

⁴¹ Subhas Tiwari, quoted in ["Warning: Stay Away from 'YogaFaith'—So-Called Christian Yoga,"](#) Lighthouse Trails Research, May 5, 2025.

Jenn Nizza, a former medium and now a Christian, was asked by Allie Beth Stuckey on her podcast focusing on demonism, “Yoga. Is it fine for Christians to say, ‘These Yoga positions; they’re doing it to worship music, and they’re not thinking about yoking themselves to a Hindu god.’ Is that fine, or is it still opening yourself up to the demonic?”

In her reply Jenn urged, “No. You cannot do Yoga! Don’t do Yoga!...I would encourage you to stay away from Yoga, because those postures are deliberately worshiping Hindu deities. False gods. It’s idolatrous; it’s horrible; it’s demonic; and you cannot throw some praise music on and make it something that it isn’t. You cannot do that; that would be...like putting a Scripture verse on a Ouija board. You can’t do that; you’re not tricking anybody...the postures, they are worshiping and honoring Hindu deities [and it is worshiping demons, as the Holy Spirit led the Apostle Paul to reveal in 1 Corinthians 10:20]. I really would encourage people to stay away from it. It’s not just stretching and breathing. Remember, that’s the illusion;... The devil makes it look like something that it’s not, so that you would get involved with it, bringing demonic oppression into your life, leading you into disobedience to God, because even if you don’t know, you’re still doing it, and that’s dangerous for your [future].”⁴²

This is a very important point. ***Just because people don’t know what they are doing, does not mean they aren’t doing it.*** For just one analogy on another level, you can tell a police officer that you didn’t know you were going 60 mph in a 45 mph zone, but you were seen doing so, often you are on video, and you are still going to have to pay a fine for doing so. You didn’t know you were doing it, but the fact is that you were doing it.

The Lighthouse Trails editors have accurately put their finger on the heart of the matter: “In essence, Spiritual Formation is carrying on the Hindu message of: God is in all things (panentheism), and God is all things (pantheism).”⁴³ God forbids syncretism (bringing together components of different, especially false, belief systems); he does not accept people who practice the religion of false gods and also claim to be Christians and follow him too. People who believe in the Lord—but disobey him—are endangering themselves spiritually for eternity, unless they repent and stop that behavior. (See, e.g., Matthew 7:21-23) For the reasons why, see such passages from His Word as Deuteronomy 5:7; 8:19; Isaiah 2:6 [As we see in this verse, the term, “full of things from the east,” is not new.]; 1 Corinthians 8:4-6; 1 Corinthians 10:20-21; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; Hebrews 13:9; John 14:6; Matthew 6:24, among many more throughout the whole Bible.

- It is important to clarify that the unbiblical theology of panentheism is not the same as the Biblical and historic Christian theological doctrines of God’s omnipresence, i.e., that God is everywhere present, and his immanence, i.e., that

⁴² Allie Beth Stuckey: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/relatable-with-allie-beth-stuckey/id1359249098?i=1000712151438> Clip begins at 44:15. (Accessed 06/11/2025)

⁴³ Lighthouse Trails Editors, “[Is Your Church Doing Spiritual Formation? \(Important Reasons Why It Shouldn’t\).](#)” Lighthouse Trails Research Project (2014).

God is not only in heaven but also here with his people in his Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the triune God. As God reveals in his Word, he is everywhere throughout his whole creation (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:39; Joshua 1:5 and Hebrews 13:5; Psalm 113:4-6 [transcendent] and 7-9 [immanent]; 139:7-12; 2 Chronicles 2:6; Isaiah 41:10; 45:21; 57:15; Matthew 28:20), but being everywhere present is essentially and significantly different from being in everything where he is present.⁴⁴

Those misled, undiscerning, and less than mature Christians, who are teaching—even if only by non-verbally modeling—such a false spirituality, are endangering their and others’ relationship with the Lord, disobeying his Word, misleading others, and making a negative witness for Christ, indeed against our—indeed the one and only (cf., e.g., Isaiah 45:21; Deuteronomy 6:4 and Mark 12:29; Exodus 3:14 and John 8:58-59)—triune God. They are not thinking carefully; minimizing the importance of studying God’s Word and following, including obeying, his will; developing a false understanding of Biblical and historic Christian doctrine (review the above statistics); and aiding immature and weak Christians and others to harm—not at all help—their faith, thereby leading them to go astray from the Lord.

Consider two more questions on this subject of Yoga in a church setting of any kind. In any other setting, consider serious further implications.

First, “Even if, as a lot of such participants believe, there is no reference to Hinduism (other than the name—we should point out—which carries its Hindu baggage with it unhidden, and a positive affect toward a religion that worships demons [1 Corinthians 10:20]), if they have ‘a fun time’ in their Yoga meetings, how is it unlikely that some, if not many, will start thinking, and even asking, ‘I like Yoga; what else is there about Hinduism that I might like?’”

Second, “How is this or any other Hindu practice helping Christians who participate to ‘all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then...no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming...grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.’” (Ephesians 4:13-15)

If they want a good exercise program, many are available, including ones that will facilitate growing in relationship with the Lord. If one is not available near you, start one with friends in Christ. God will bless you for doing so.

⁴⁴ For just one example of panentheism in the SFM, see the song, “[God in Everything](#),” by Ben Fielding and Reuben Morgan. (Accessed 12/08/2025)

Enneagrams

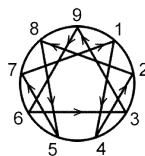
Part of the growing spiritual formation movement (SFM) is an increasing interest by Christians in what is called the Enneagram, which can be traced back to its pagan roots in Babylonian astrology. Especially concerning is the observation that the Enneagram is growing in popularity in the evangelical part of the church. Now look again at the startling statistics above pertaining to the staggering number of evangelicals who hold to unbiblical doctrines; the dots do connect! Consider the vital implications for Christian education—**not** SFM.

We must teach the Bible, and historic Biblically-based Christian theology, so believers in and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ can be and grow in him, maturing in the sanctification process (Ephesians 4:11-17). In this historic Biblical tradition, Christians have a strong perspective and framework centered in God’s Word that enables us to discern the difference between wheat and chaff, reject the latter, and feed ourselves on the former (cf., Hebrews 5:11-14), grow in Christ, and serve our triune God more and more effectively as he has called and will thereby equip us to do in the high and holy calling he has given us in the Great Commission. (Matthew 28:18-20, *et al.*)

The Enneagram is not—and never was—part of the historic Biblical tradition. So what is the Enneagram, and what do we need to know about it to avoid its deception and help others by exposing and opposing it? Lois Putnam and the editors at Lighthouse Trails succinctly explain in this excerpt, that the Enneagram is

a nine-pointed diagram used to determine personality traits and character tendencies. While it may seem harmless and nothing more than a useful tool, the Enneagram is a seducing lure to deception and an example of what the Bible refers to as “the wiles of the Devil.” [Ephesians 6:11]

...Apologist and author Mike Oppenheimer says this about the Enneagram:... “The nine lines comprise a perfect triangle and a twisted hexagon contained within a circle. This is a New Age-type mandala,⁴⁵ a mystical gateway to personality classification. The drawing is based upon a belief in the mystical properties of the numbers 7 and 3.



⁴⁵ As defined in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, a mandala (< Sanskrit *mandala*, meaning circle) is a Hindu or Buddhist graphic symbol of the universe, specifically a circle enclosing a square with a deity depicted on each side that is used mainly as an aid to meditation. By definition, it does **not** help people turn to and focus on the Lord Jesus Christ or any of the triune God; it rather leads them away from the one true God. (Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 44:6; John 14:6; Jude 24-25)

After numerous and extensive references to and quotes in context from the writings of proponents of the Enneagram (including many evangelical leaders she cites), Putnam and the editors summarize their findings as follows:

The Enneagram focuses endlessly on the self through self-awareness, self-observation, self-motivation, self-knowledge, self-love.... For as 2 Timothy 3:2 states, “For men shall be lovers of their own selves.” Through the “Sacred Enneagram,” it is said we’ll discover that underneath all our failures of our false selves, we’ll uncover our essence—that true self enabling us to make our world a better and more compassionate place.

On the other hand, God’s view of our “selves” is that at our core, we are sinners as Romans 3:23 declares, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.” Therefore, we need to believe not in the power of the Enneagram or the voice heard in contemplative prayer but in a Savior who can save us from ourselves and our sins. Scripture says:

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that *not of yourselves*: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8,9; emphasis added)

In the end, it is through the Word of God and the sacrifice on the Cross by Jesus Christ, not the Enneagram, where we can find out who we are and what we must do. In 1 Corinthians 2:5, Paul tells us:

That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

And as Proverbs 9:10 reminds us, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom...” not the Enneagram! We pray that this enticing tool of deception will be rejected by Christian believers, pastors, and leaders.

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. (Colossians 2:8)⁴⁶

In direct opposition to the preceding and other similar Eastern religious practices, contrast the teaching of God’s Word, where we read that the whole creation (including the cosmos) has been corrupted by the powerful effects of Adam and Eve’s sin, such that “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit,

⁴⁶ Lois Putnam and the Editors at Lighthouse Trails, [“The Enneagram—An Enlightening Tool or an Enticing Deception?”](#) Lighthouse Trails Research, October 28, 2019. In this booklet, the authors document how the Enneagram draws participants away from Biblical truth in enticing but dangerous ways.

groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” (Romans 8:22-23)

Indeed, “the creation” has been subjected to “frustration” and is in “bondage to decay,” (Romans 8:20,21) which is widely observed in physics, chemistry, and other sciences, e.g., as described in the Second Law of Thermodynamics, sometimes called the law of entropy. This law states that “Any system which is free of external influences becomes more disordered with time. This disorder can be expressed in terms of the quantity called entropy.”⁴⁷ Entropy means “the degree of disorder or uncertainty in a system, the degradation of the matter and energy in the universe to an ultimate state of inert uniformity, a process of degradation or running down or a trend to disorder.”⁴⁸

Clearly, the cosmos is not something with which to try to become one. It offers no help or hope. Neither does it offer peace. Engaging in such Eastern spirituality is also engaging with—and does involve worshipping—Satan, the prince of this world. (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) It does make such a person vulnerable to demons, as we see in the next paragraphs. Most of all it does not offer eternal salvation to a perfect new life of unending joy in relationship with the triune God—Father; only begotten Son, Christ Jesus; and Holy Spirit (three distinct Persons who share one substance)—who is transcendent, far above all creation (Psalm 113:4-6) and also imminent (Psalm 113:7-9), always dwelling with (Matthew 28:20; 1 Corinthians 6:19; Hebrews 13:5) all his redeemed people throughout history “from every nation, tribe, people, and language.” (Revelation 7:9)

Labyrinth

A labyrinth is a ground level maze-like network of passages along which people walk with the hope of finding enlightenment or “the divine” at the center. The structure symbolizes the difficulty in human life of finding truth. Some have just one course with no traps, but still winding and twisting and leading to the center, the goal.



⁴⁷ <http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/hbase/thermo/seclaw2.html#c2> (Accessed 09/16/2014)

⁴⁸ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/entropy> (Accessed 09/16/2014)

Hence, another popular—but spiritually dangerous—SFM practice is the use of labyrinths to connect with “the divine.” In the highly collective and syncretistic SFM, “the divine” is not necessarily God. In fact, in its practice by pagans it is never the triune God who has revealed himself in the Bible, and where practiced by those who claim to be Christians, the concept of “the divine” is usually muddled by other religious perceptions, including its non-Christian sources.

While some claim the origin of the labyrinth is unknown, on the contrary a plethora of literature trace the beginnings to pagan mythology including the worst sort. Scholar and author, Carl Teichrib, traces the origin to Cretan and Greek lore. In this legend, the wife of King Minos of Crete, Queen Pasiphaë, acting out her abominable sexual desire for a particular sacrificial bull, produced through her perverse bestiality, a fearsome Minotaur that was so dangerous it had to be kept in a labyrinthine cage to contain him. King Minos had the inventor, Daedalus, make a labyrinth under the palace to contain the Minotaur, which was believed to have the head of a bull and body of a man. King Minos yearly required seven boys and seven girls be sacrificed by being devoured by the Minotaur, until one year a hero, Theseus, went with the children, and as he did, he unraveled a ball of twine, given to him by the king’s daughter, Ariadne, so he’d know how to leave the maze. Once he arrived at the center, he fought the Minotaur and killed it. Teichrib explains more about the development of the labyrinth concept:

...esoteric philosophers have long understood that the Minotaur maze directly corresponds to the ancient (and now modern) spiritually-connected labyrinth walk—the long soul journey with its many twists and turns, the ultimate arrival at the central convergence point, the struggle with the inner monster—and the final victory over the forces of darkness and ignorance (which can only happen when one is illumined at the center), and the repeated journey back to wholeness and the light of day. This esoteric significance of the Cretan story has never been lost on the initiates of the Mystery Schools.

Don’t forget, this Grecian/Cretan story was immersed in the pagan religious context of the day; that’s the metaphysical origin of the labyrinth as we can trace it. Hence, the story of Pasiphaë, with its labyrinth journey and inner battle, is of interest first and foremost to the world of occult lore for the simple reason that this is the intended context.⁴⁹

In his careful research, Teichrib uncovers the pagan sources of the labyrinth, all with a similar theme: it’s the path of mysticism, esotericism, and occultism. Not surprisingly consistent with much else in the SFM, as we’ve been seeing in this study, Teichrib finds Eastern religions, including the Buddhist Mandala, Hinduism, Sufi tradition, Native Americans, and more, including such syncretistic non-Christian religions as Freemasonry

⁴⁹ Carl Teichrib, *The Labyrinth Journey: Walking the Path to Fulfillment?*
<https://www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/blog/new-print-booklet-tract-the-labyrinth-journey-walking-the-path-to-fulfillment/> (Accessed 01/28/2026)

and its co-Masonic body, the Order of the Eastern Star (which used to be for women only, as Freemasonry originally was for men only), the Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis, and the Order of the Golden Dawn. The Kabbala, the school of Jewish mysticism, also uses mazes with a connection to Solomon, which provided a link to their use, that came to be called “Solomon’s Maze,” in ancient churches, none of which, however, justifies the use of labyrinths today or at any other time in Christianity.

One of the key drivers is Grace Cathedral, a prominent San Francisco Episcopal Church. Teichrib explains the connection.

Grace Cathedral...has been North America’s “pathfinder” congregation in the labyrinth movement, hosting prayer walks on their two labyrinths for years. Moreover, Grace’s outdoor labyrinth is open 24 hours, and the church now has an involved global networking organization dedicated to advancing the labyrinth experience. Hence, Grace has been viewed by many Christian labyrinth advocates as the driving influence for this new spiritual expression in North America....⁵⁰

This admission is evidence that spiritual practice which includes labyrinths is a syncretism contrary and disobedient to God’s Word to the extent that is clearly not Christianity (e.g., Isaiah 40-45; John 14:6; Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 10:20). Further, Grace explains that the labyrinth is a shared interspiritual esoteric tradition:

In Native American Culture it is called the Medicine Wheel and Man in the Maze. The Celts described it as the Never Ending Circle. It is also called the Kabala in mystical Judaism. One feature they all share is that they have one path which winds in a circuitous way to the center.⁵¹

The preceding is another unbiblical concept. God’s Word teaches us that we don’t find God; instead, God in his wonderful grace—unearned blessing—reaches out to us and brings us to him. (Romans 4-6; 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3) God never leaves us nor forsakes us, his true believers and followers (Joshua 1:5 [Hebrews 13:5]; Matthew 28:20), thus we mature in Him (sanctification).⁵²

And there is more about the meaning of labyrinth spirituality practice that all Christians and in particular pastors and Christian educators must know and guard against for the sake of the accomplishment of the Lord’s church and his redemptive purposes. Teichrib cites the following from Grace Cathedral that the labyrinth exercise should be viewed in three parts.

⁵⁰ Carl Teichrib, *The Labyrinth Journey: Walking the Path to Fulfillment?*

⁵¹ Carl Teichrib, *The Labyrinth Journey: Walking the Path to Fulfillment?*

⁵² For more on the Biblical teaching about God’s grace and his work in our lives, see [Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology—With a Focus on Its Very Practical Dimensions, Including Answers to Our Great Questions of Life—for Now and Eternity \(PowerPoint\)](#).

Purgation (Releasing)—A releasing, a letting go of the details of your life. This is the act of shedding thoughts and distractions. A time to open the heart and quiet the mind.

Purgation in the SFM involves much more than avoiding distractions. See my comments on the unbiblical, unrealistic, and spiritually dangerous SFM concept of “emptying of the mind” in the following section of this paper.

Illumination (Receiving)—When you reach the center, stay there as long as you like. It is a place of meditation and prayer. Receive what is there for you to receive.

Such an attempt to receive illumination is also unbiblical, contrary to God’s Word. Study (a largely cognitive process) Ephesians 5:8-21, beginning with Ephesians 5:8, “...you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.” (Cf. Matthew 5:16; “You are” NOT you may be, hope to be, or even should be; you—who are in the Lord—already **are** light in the Lord; in him you have the illumination of Christ Jesus himself, who is the light of the world! (John 8:12)

Furthermore, and very significantly, in the original Greek of Ephesians 5:8, the verb, ἦτε (*ēte*, “you were”) is the first word in the clause (γάρ [*gar*, “for,” is the second word), one of the ways New Testament Greek indicates emphasis; the past tense also adds emphasis. Thus, the Holy Spirit is inspiring the Apostle Paul to communicate this point in God’s Word very emphatically: “you were once darkness,” clearly indicating in the past, “but now you are light in the Lord.” You don’t need to—and should never—engage in spiritually dangerous practices such as with labyrinths.

Think of the implications. One immediately emerges: A Christian who would walk into a labyrinth is denying his or her identity as already being light in the Lord. Instead of modeling bringing the light of the Lord to the lost and confused in the world, he or she is modeling the opposite: being lost in the darkness of the world and failing to witness to Christ Jesus, the Light of the world.

Rather than enter the labyrinth, consider standing outside of it and asking someone about to enter, “Why are you entering the labyrinth?” Then inform him or her of the above and what follows, thus being the witness the Lord has called you to be and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, helping him or her to receive and/or share the Light of Christ, quite possibly—with the Spirit’s help—even exponentially.

Notice the next clause in Ephesians 5:8, which reads: “walk as children of light.” (NASB) The Greek is clear: περιπατεῖτε (*peripateite*, you walk—second person plural—i.e., as Christians, the church, always walk, meaning throughout all of life: **not** walk in a labyrinth. Also, very significantly, another way the Greek indicates emphasis is by placing the word, which is to be expressed emphatically, last in the clause, and that is precisely where *peripateite* occurs, thus literally: “as children of light walk.” Also very significantly, the Greek verb, *peripateite*, is in the present tense, which denotes durative,

continuous, ongoing, never stopping action. Our calling, our vocation, is not a 9:00-5:00 job. Thus, Paul is saying what Jesus said in Matthew 5, always keep being the light in Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, you in Christ already are. God's people receive illumination in his corporate worship, thereby being filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:8-21), and individually by reading his Word and praying to and obeying him.

See and sense what great blessings you already have and are in Christ! Notice and keep in mind also, that this understanding comes to us through the largely cognitive study of God's Word, not by purging the mind of thoughtful reflection and focusing on feelings. And yet, there are significant affective blessings in the process, but these feelings flow from the cognitive examination and reflection on the words the Holy Spirit led his prophets and the apostles to write, especially with prayer that the Spirit provides that understanding and motivates our obedient behavioral responses. The strong—and lasting—affective joys follow and emerge from the study of God's Word; they do **not** occur apart from God's Word. *These joys continue as we follow the Lord, not a labyrinth!*

Union (Returning)—As you leave, following the same path out of the center as you came in, you enter the third stage, which is joining God, your Higher Power, or the healing forces at work in the world. Each time you walk the labyrinth you become more empowered to find and do the work you feel your soul reaching for.⁵³

This statement on union is also unbiblical. Only in Christ Jesus are we are joined with God. Also, to extend the analogy, why would a true believer in and follower of Jesus ever want to go back to what he or she was? Biblical sanctification is the constant maturing in Christ. Cf. John 14:21-23; 1 Corinthians 6:14-20; Ephesians 4:11-16.

By reading God's Word and examining spiritual—and all other—practices in the light of God's Word, worldly evil is exposed and recognized for what it is by those who believe in and walk with the Lord Jesus Christ. Teichrib discerns that “Adding to its historical pagan significance is the fact that the labyrinth has never lost its occult meaning... labyrinths are still being used, and will continue to be used, as an instrument of pagan spirituality.”⁵⁴

The teaching of the Bible throughout both the Old and New Testaments exposes and condemns the rationale for and uses of the labyrinth. For just a few of many more, see Deuteronomy 12:1-14, 18:9-13 and Exodus 34:10-17. As Teichrib observes, “In each of these Scripture passages God explicitly tells His people to refrain from anything used in pagan practices. Moreover, the entire book of Jeremiah is a warning against involvement in alternative religious practices.” That is correct, for God **NEVER** contradicts himself.

⁵³ Teichrib here quotes from Grace Cathedral labyrinth homepage: <http://www.gracecathedral.org/labyrinth>.

⁵⁴ Carl Teichrib, *The Labyrinth Journey: Walking the Path to Fulfillment?*

Having condemned something in his Word, God will not then affirm its practice in the judgment to come, another Biblical doctrine generally absent in the SFM. There, too, the Bible is clear: Far from affirmation, those who do what is evil—living contrary to God’s Word—will face his wrath against the sin they identify with, practice, and promote. We see this Biblical teaching clearly in the word, “propitiation,” a more accurate translation instead of “atoning sacrifice,” of the Greek word, ἱλαστήριον (*hilasterion*), the means of removing divine wrath. See Romans 2:7-11; 3:23-26 (NASB, ESV, KJV); 1 John 4:10 (NASB, ESV, KJV); 2:2 (NASB, ESV, KJV). Jesus’ propitiation is adequate for all (cf. 1 John 2:2), but it is efficacious only for those who believe in and follow him.

As we’ve seen above, Jesus clearly states that he is the way and the truth and the life and that no one can enter the Father’s presence—or being in the presence of the whole triune God—except via genuine faith in Jesus (John 14:6), faith which is validated by obedience (James 2:17,26; 1 John 3:18) and repentance when sins are committed (Luke 17:3-4).

Since the Word of God is for us Christians our highest authority; since Jesus said that he is the way and the truth and the life and that no one can come to the Father except through him, Jesus; since throughout the Bible God condemns all other religions; and since 1 Corinthians 10:20 informs us that the worship in pagan religions is actually offered to demons, that prohibits Christians from syncretizing with other religions, thus ruling out these key tenets of SFM. Observe what the Holy Spirit also said through Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:14-16.

¹⁴Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ¹⁵What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? ¹⁶What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.” [Paul here quotes from Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 32:38; and Ezekiel 37:27.]

Again, these vitally necessary truths from God’s Word, are understood with cognition, the study of God’s revealed Word; they do not come from spiritual contemplation. But notice some of the beautiful highly affective results of the careful cognitive attention to God’s revealed Word:

Jesus said to his disciples, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

Jesus also said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” (John 14:27 ESV)

Notice carefully two exceedingly important matters pertaining to John 14:27.

1. This greatest peace we can have comes **from Jesus**, “**not as the world gives.**” In the precious small amount of time the church has—less now (due, e.g., to sports, other entertainment, public school challenges, work) than ever—to educate the Lord’s children, youth, and adults, how can we waste time and, worse, promote very dangerous and deceptive spiritual practices that not only take away from—but are contrary to and oppose—God’s Word! We need to use every opportunity we have—every moment—to read, explain, and apply Bible passages. And you know what? Doing so is precisely why true Christians—those who really believe in and follow Christ—come to church worship, Bible study, and serve on church committees that obviously and importantly serve the Lord; they want to hear God’s Word and its applications to them. This is why it is important to begin service committee meetings with a passage of Scripture and reflections on its application to one or more items on the agenda for that meeting.
2. For those of us whom the Lord has called and given the responsibility to “feed his sheep” (John 21:15-17), we must remember that he is going to hold us accountable for doing so. (Matthew 12:36; Romans 14:12; Hebrews 13:17; James 3:1) The Holy Spirit, speaking through James, reveals why the nurturing of the church is especially serious for those of us who are leaders of the Lord’s people. Far from good food, there is much poison in the SFM, and not only must we never give it to anyone, but we are also to preemptively help them recognize it (pointing it out to them, e.g., as in this section), warn them to avoid it, and also equip them to oppose it. Let us resist—and where already implemented overturn—the effort to replace historic Biblically-based Christian education with SFM.

Consider that throughout the Bible, the source of all that is done to steer human beings away from God and his Word is from Satan. He began with leading Eve to turn away from God’s command, and he lied to her. He and his demon followers are still doing so through other religions (remember 1 Corinthians 10:20) and their components, such as the labyrinth.

With the above SFM practices clearly exposed, explained, and documented, how can they even be included in—much less become the substitute for—historic Biblically-based and Christ-centered Christian education? Of course they cannot. But the SFM proponents don’t stop, and neither should we who have been commanded to always be “speaking the truth in love.” (Ephesians 4:15) Following are other related subjects we need to address.

Reike

Reike (pronounced “ray-key”) is an Eastern philosophical/religious method of healing—a form of energy therapy—which is supposed to occur by an experienced practitioner channeling what is believed by many, especially in the Eastern monistic worldview, to be a universal life energy. Reike is a Japanese word meaning “mysterious atmosphere,

miraculous sign.”⁵⁵ Reiki is a combination of two Japanese words that are transliterated as “rei” (universal) and “ki” (life energy). It is called qi in Chinese and is conceptualized as moving through the practitioner’s hands that are either hovering over or touching the recipient. Proponents hold that the effects of this procedure normalize and strengthen vital energy fields they believe exist within the human body.

The origin of Reiki is traced to ancient Tibetan Buddhism that was rediscovered by Mikao Usui, also referred to as Usui Sensei, who founded his form of Reike in 1922. Sensei built on the work of others, such as the Japanese therapist, Matiji Kawakami, who had begun his version of Reike in 1914.

While this concept is being explored in Western medicine,⁵⁶ and especially in the spa industry, there is much more to it that is not being openly disclosed, specifically its Eastern mystical roots and attendant spirituality that is contrary to God’s Word. Therefore, we should examine this relatively new and popular Eastern phenomenon, its growing influence, and the dangers of its inclusion in the SFM.

Ray Yungen supplies this needed disclosure, quoted at length below, and offers important insight into the dangers of this type of spirituality. He writes,

The Reiki technique consists of placing the hands on [or near] the recipient and then activating the energy to flow through the practitioner and into the recipient. One practitioner describes the experience in the following way:

When doing it, I become a channel through which this force, this juice of the universe, comes pouring from my palms into the body of the person I am touching, sometimes lightly, almost imperceptibly, sometimes in famished sucking drafts. I get it even as I’m giving it. It surrounds the two of us, patient and practitioner.

What is this “juice of the universe?” The answer is an important one, given by a renowned Reiki master who explains:

A Reiki attunement is an initiation into a sacred metaphysical order that has been present on earth for thousands of years ... By becoming part of this group, you will also be receiving help from the Reiki guides and other spiritual beings⁵⁷ who are also working toward these goals.

⁵⁵ Tim Newman, [“What is Reiki and how does it work?”](#) *Medical News Today*, July 12, 2024.

⁵⁶ However, as [Tim Newman](#) and others note, no medical study has found, no hard data establish, evidence of Reiki resulting in any health-related benefit.

⁵⁷ The Bible informs us that these “other spiritual beings” are demons. See, e.g., 1 Corinthians 10:20. The context pertains to worship, but the underlying principle Paul is using, together with related Scripture, includes all religion outside of Christ. Further, by definition Reiki is a religion, thus the Holy Spirit’s

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While this is not widely advertised, Reiki practitioners depend on this “spirit guide” connection as an integral aspect of Reiki. In fact, it is the very foundation and energy behind Reiki. One Reiki master who has enrolled hundreds of other masters spoke of her interaction with the spirit guides:

For me, the Reiki guides make themselves the most felt while attunements are being passed. They stand behind me and direct the whole process, and I assume they also do this for every Reiki Master. When I pass attunements, I feel their presence strongly and constantly. Sometimes I can see them.

A Christian’s initial response to this information might be, “So what? I don’t travel in those circles, so it does not concern me.” This nonchalant viewpoint would be valid except for the fact that Reiki is currently growing to enormous proportions and in some very influential circles. (It may even be in your local hospitals⁵⁸, schools, and youth organizations.) **It is essential to know that many nurses, counselors, and especially massage therapists use Reiki as a supplement to their work. It is often promoted as a complementary service**⁵⁹.... One Reiki master delightfully noted this surge of interest when he stated:

Over the years, there has been a shift in the belief system of the general public, allowing for greater acceptance of alternative medicine. As a result, we are seeing a growing interest in Reiki from the public at large. People from all backgrounds are coming for treatments and taking classes.

One very revealing statistic involves Louisville, Kentucky, where 102 people were initiated into Reiki in just a single weekend. This denotes a large number of people are drawn to Reiki in the Bible belt, traditionally a conservative part of America.

*It is important to understand the way in which Reiki is presented to the public at large.*⁶⁰ Despite its underlying metaphysical foundation, when one reads the literature put out by Reiki practitioners it is not at all apparent. One Reiki master who runs a day spa repeatedly uses words like

warning through the Apostle Paul applies. Spiritual beings who draw anyone’s attention away from Christ Jesus are anti-Christ, specifically demons and their leader, Satan. See Ephesians 6:10-20; Colossians 2:15; Leviticus 19:31; 1 Peter 5:8; John 8:44; 2 Corinthians 11:14.

⁵⁸ “More than 800 hospitals in the United States currently offer Reiki services for patients.” Tim Newman, “What is Reiki and how does it work?” [Medical News Today](#), July 12, 2024.

⁵⁹ Emphasis in bold added by this author (EDS). Be alert to object to any such “complementary service”—offered to yourself, loved ones, or anyone else—which (knowingly or unknowingly) is demonic, and use that opportunity to witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, indeed, to our whole triune God.

⁶⁰ Italic emphasis added by EDS.

comfort and nurture in her brochure. Reiki is something that will give you pleasure. Another woman who is a professional counselor tells her potential clients that Reiki will give them deep relaxation and reduce pain. Again and again these same themes emerge from promotional literature on Reiki—relaxation, well-being, reduce illness, reduce stress, balance your mind, etc. How can one say that Reiki is bad when it claims to help people?

The reason for this level of acceptance is easy to understand. Most people, many Christians included, believe if something is spiritually positive then it is of God. A pastor friend of mine recounted a situation in which a Christian, who had some physical problems, turned to Reiki for comfort. When this pastor advised the man that Reiki fundamentally opposed the Christian faith he became furious and responded with the following defense, “How can you say this is bad when it helped me?” That is why I titled [a chapter in my book] “Discernment.” To discern is to “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1,4-6). If something is of God it will conform to the very cornerstone of God’s plan to show His grace through Christ Jesus and Him alone (Ephesians 2:7). Reiki, as I defined earlier, is based on the occult view of God.⁶¹

This assessment of Reiki is beyond question. Every Reiki book I have ever seen is chock full of pronouncements that back up the point I am trying to make. In *The Everything Reiki Book*, the following clears up any doubt about Reiki’s incompatibility with Christianity:

During the Reiki attunement process, the avenue that is opened within the body to allow Reiki to flow through also opens up the psychic communication centers. This is why many Reiki practitioners report having verbalized channeled communications with the spirit world. (emphasis mine)⁶²

⁶¹ EDS note: It is vital to discern and test the spirits while remembering that Satan disguises himself as an “angel of light.” (2 Corinthians 11:14)

⁶² In her research for the Cleveland Clinic, Melissa Evans Persensky explains that “The idea driving Reiki is that channeling the universal life force energy and encouraging its movement through your body can help to create a healthier environment within your body and mind.” Melissa Evans Persensky, “What Is Reiki? And Does It Actually Work?” Cleveland Clinic healthessentials, July 16, 2024. The article is located at <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/reiki> (Accessed 02/01/2026) However, a closer examination from a Biblical perspective reveals this “life force” is more demonic deception drawing people’s attention away from Christ Jesus. In addition, Persensky reported that one Reiki master whom she interviewed said that “when giving Reiki, she [the Reiki master] feels that she goes into a kind of trance herself.” Furthermore, the conceptual basis of the study, disclosed in the title, shouldn’t be used at all. Just because something appears to “work” in some way, does not mean it should “work,” especially when Satan and the demons are involved in it. Reiki is essentially a spiritual phenomenon, thus outside the parameters of science, which by definition is limited to that which can be observed and measured. Therefore, science cannot—and should not—transcend its boundaries and make statements about a spiritual entity, especially one that is very dangerous, due to the involvement of demonic spirits and their leader, Satan, which involvement leads to

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What is even more disturbing is that the Reiki channeler may not even have control over this “energy” as the following comment shows:

Nurses and massage therapists who have been attuned to Reiki may never disclose when Reiki starts flowing from their palms as they handle their patients. Reiki will naturally “kick in” when it is needed and will continue to flow for as long as the recipient is subconsciously open to receiving it.

Another such method is Therapeutic Touch. Like Reiki, it is based on the occultic chakra system, portrayed as the seven energy centers in the body aligned with spiritual forces.⁶³ The seventh chakra identifies with the God-in-all view. Therapeutic Touch is widely practiced by nurses in clinics and hospitals. It is seen as a helpful and healing adjunct to nursing care.

If the connection between Reiki healing and other metaphysical practices can be seen, then we more fully understand why the following quote is one of the most powerful statements as to the true nature of contemplative prayer. A Reiki master in the course of promoting the acceptance of this method relayed:

Anyone familiar with the work of ... or the thought of ... [she then listed a string of notable New Age writers with Thomas Merton right in the center of them] will find compatibility and resonance with the theory and practices of Reiki.⁶⁴

Are you seeing how this form of spirituality, the Spiritual Formation Movement (SFM), has no ability—and is counterproductive—for teaching God’s Word and historic Christian theology, which, together with the work of the Holy Spirit in every believer in Christ Jesus, is the basis of maturity in Christ and God’s redemptive purposes? Can you see its dangerous demonic dimension? Clearly, no church congregation, college, university, or seminary should replace historic Christian education with the SFM.

eternal separation from God. Since many scientists are unaware of these spiritual realities, we in Christian education must include this Biblical and scientific instruction in our education programs to help people understand and distinguish between what careful science can contribute and what is beyond its proper parameters and equip them with the ability to explain this truth to others.

⁶³ The origin of the word, chakra, is from the Sanskrit language meaning wheel or circle and is grounded in Hinduism and in Hinduism’s offshoot, Buddhism. The concept of chakra is prominent in Yoga and is unbiblical and unscientific despite Yoga advocates’ deceptive argument that it is.

⁶⁴ Ray Yungen, [“Reiki, and its Connection to the Contemplative Practices of Thomas Merton and Richard Foster.”](#) For indicated quotes of others by Yungen, click on the hyperlink to his original article.

Transcendental Meditation

Transcendental meditation (TM) is a spiritual practice in which a person tries to clear his or her mind by employing a combination of mental techniques and physical positions, typically by repeating a word or phrase—called a mantra—on which the mind focuses intently during the repetition. The goal of this practice is to lift one’s mental state to a higher level that surpasses (thus “transcends”) his or her self. The mantras “aren’t English words for objects, feelings or experiences. They’re sounds [given by a certified TM teacher] that help [a person] take [his or her] attention from active thinking to a deeper level of self-awareness...[he or she] repeat[s] a specific mantra to help direct [his or her] attention inward.”⁶⁵

Observe how opposed this practice is—and contrary to—God’s Word, where we are never to look into ourselves but instead are to turn to the triune God for “the peace of God that transcends all understanding, [and that] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) This is another of the many instances where the spiritual sources used by the SFM are demonic, following Satan’s objective from the beginning: to draw people’s attention away from God and to themselves and false gods.

We must always remember—and teach others—that Satan and his demon and human followers’ main technique for drawing people away from God is to lie. (Cf., e.g., Genesis 3:1,4-6; John 8:44) One way this deception is done in TM is by listing several alleged benefits and by falsely stating that “the TM technique doesn’t involve any kind of religion, philosophy, or lifestyle” and that it is a science.⁶⁶ It is not a science, as will be seen below, and any misleadingly cited “benefits” (resulting from Satan sometimes appearing as an angel of light [2 Corinthians 11:14]) are either not empirically validated by sound scientific research, are disproven by careful science, or are fleeting and temporary.

Pertaining to our minds, the Bible is very clear on this vital matter, teaching plainly that we are never to clear or empty our minds; we are to do the exact opposite: we are to “be filled with the Spirit.” (Ephesians 5:18) For how God’s Word says we should become filled with the Spirit, see the further explanation of this text in the following section on “Emptying the Mind.”

Note well the definition of mantra in its Eastern origins, which governs its meaning. The definition also—in addition to what follows—establishes TM as a religion and that it is outside the realm of science, which by definition is limited to that which can be observed and measured, neither of which is possible, e.g., with “mystical states,” “consciousness... manifest in the external world [i.e., beyond this world],” “sacred formulas,” and demonic involvement.

⁶⁵ “[Transcendental Meditation](#),” Cleveland Clinic, 04/16/2025.

⁶⁶ “[Transcendental Meditation](#),” Cleveland Clinic, 04/16/2025. And all this from the formerly highly-regarded Cleveland Clinic?! Here we see another example of how even historically-esteemed companies in their leadership successions hire new personnel who lack the wisdom and knowledge of their predecessors and uncarefully allow serious errors and corruption to infiltrate their organization.

The word [mantra] means ‘thought form.’ Mantra is an instrument of thought. Mantras are sacred formulas or mystical verses that contain within them primary vibratory forces that create mystical states of consciousness.

Some mystics say that these mystical states of consciousness can manifest in the external world. All sounds made by earthlings carry a mental influence which exerts itself over matter, whether or not the earthling perceives it or not.⁶⁷

Many people and organizations try to promote TM with these two main points: (1) It is not a religion and (2) It may (as Cleveland Clinic puts it)—advocates say will—have an effective impact on one’s physical and mental health, including quieting the mind and producing emotional well-being. Objective investigation has disproven both points.

First, as referred to elsewhere in this paper, transcendental meditation is another spiritual discipline advocated and promoted in the SFM. No matter how much advocates want to disassociate TM from any religion, a closer examination reveals that it has been taken from Hinduism. In fact, it is “wholly and unequivocally Hindu, but never presented as such, at least not in the mainstream,” [according](#) to the Hindu American Foundation.⁶⁸ Indications of the connection with Hinduism abound, e.g., the word “mantra,” is an Anglicization of the related Sanskrit term. Practiced for thousands of years in Hinduism, the current practice was developed by an Indian teacher, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, in the 1950s. In developing TM, he based the practice on Yoga (*op cit.*), another aspect of Hinduism.

Litigation, including its extensive objective preparation prior to court arguments, exposes the truth. As stated in the lawsuit reported on by Ben Johnson in his article in the accompanying footnote in this section, one of the students in the lawsuit, in fact the lead plaintiff, said the program in her public school—which she was required to not only attend but participate in the practices taught that are contrary to her religion—“actually consisted of a Hindu ‘Puja’ worship ceremony, complete with religious paraphernalia and the chanting of mantras containing the names of Hindu gods.” Attorney John Mauck, of the Chicago-based law firm, Mauck & Baker, that has litigated numerous religious liberty cases, said that “the initiation ceremony and daily meditation regime were effectively demonic invocation and thus violated the Establishment Clause of the Constitution.”

⁶⁷ Goswami Kriyananda, *A Yoga Dictionary of Basic Sanskrit Terms* (Chicago: The Temple of Kriya Yoga, 1996) p. 46.

⁶⁸ Ben Johnson, “School District Must Pay Millions for Forcing Students to Meditate in Class,” *The Washington Stand*, May 14, 2025. This article reports on a \$2.6 million judgment of a class action lawsuit against the Chicago Board of Education and the David Lynch Foundation for Consciousness-Based Education and World Peace, the former having contracted with the latter to provide a school “Quiet Time Program” to teach stress reduction and cognitive development. Johnson cited a crucially important quote in the contract that stated, “The key component of Quiet Time is an evidenced-based...technique known as Transcendental Meditation® (TM).”

Much worse such anti-Christ indoctrination violates God's Word and will and thereby jeopardizes the eternal spiritual well-being of the participants.

Second, purported "benefits" of TM are shown by sound science to not exist. Johnson found that,

Evidence also calls into question their efficacy for their putative purpose. When tested, so-called "mindfulness" strategies [that are the key part of TM] have consumed precious instruction time while producing minimal or negative mental health results for young people. The use of mindfulness techniques "resulted in worse scores on risk of depression and well-being in students at risk of mental health problems," according to the [report](#) of the MY Resilience In Adolescence (MYRIAD) study — which observed more than 28,000 students and 650 teachers in 100 U.K. schools over [eight years](#) — in the [Evidence Based Mental Health](#) journal.⁶⁹

True science contrasts with false science that has been produced in violation of the scientific method, and most seriously in violation of God's Word. True science is always compatible with, and illustrates applications of, respective subject matters in the Bible.⁷⁰

Emptying the Mind

The unbiblical concept of emptying one's mind, e.g., through repetition of words and phrases, is supposed to put one into an altered state, to eliminate from the mind the distraction of thoughts, to facilitate hearing God's voice and be spiritually transformed, and to bring peace among other purposes. The Spiritual Formation Movement/ contemplative prayer movement supplies spiritual directors (who are taking the place of teachers and directors of Christian education, DCEs), but they have a very significantly different purpose. They emphasize the affectively-oriented spirituality that is out of balance with the other essential teachings of the Bible: knowledge of the triune God and his Word (cognition) and obedience (behavior) in relationship with and serving him in the vocation he has given his people, i.e., to be his witnesses (Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Peter 3:15-16) and his agents of reconciliation, a priestly function (1 Peter 2:9-12) as part of God's plan of reconciling estranged people to himself (2 Corinthians 5:14-21), thereby demonstrating the genuineness of our love of God by obeying his commandments. (Cf., e.g., John 14:21) To accomplish the vital tasks in this high and holy calling, one cannot be emptying his or her mind, which is one reason why that concept is nowhere taught in God's Word.

⁶⁹ Ben Johnson, "School District Must Pay Millions for Forcing Students to Meditate in Class," *The Washington Stand*.

⁷⁰ For more on the compatibility of science and the Bible, see "[Science: Distinguishing Between Sound and Flawed Science](#)" and "[Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology—With a Focus on Its Very Practical Dimensions, Including Answers to Our Great Questions of Life—for Now and Eternity \(PowerPoint\)](#)."

In fact, it is dangerous, spiritually and otherwise, to try to empty one's mind. Recall Jesus' statement in Matthew 12:43-45,

⁴³When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it.

⁴⁴Then it says, "I will return to the house I left." When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order.

⁴⁵Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.

Be sure to notice, recall, and **continually engage in the Biblical practice that is the very opposite of emptying one's mind**. In God's Word, we read in Ephesians 5:18 that we are to "**be filled with the Spirit**." (Cf. Colossians 1:9-23; 2:2-10. Notice the filling—not at all emptying—of us is by focusing on Christ Jesus and living in accord with his Word and will.) With the Holy Spirit filling us, there is no way that any demon or Satanic activity can dwell within us, filling an "empty space" in our minds. God does not permit evil beings to dwell in his presence.

Further, the original Greek verb in Ephesians 5:18 is very important and contains much that the English translation does not include. "Be filled" is πληροῦσθε (*plērousthe*), and it is in the **imperative mood**, i.e., it is a command from God; this filling isn't something to be put off until we find some spare time in our schedule or when we feel like it.

In addition, keep in mind that the verb is in the **present tense**, which means it is to be durative, continuous, and ongoing; it is not a "one and done" experience. It is also in the **passive voice**, meaning that the Holy Spirit is doing the main work in us; we are to be continually making ourselves available to Him and cooperating with Him by engaging in the ways He will fill us with His Spirit.

Notice and always remember that the verb—much clearer in the original Greek than in English (another reason to study God's Word and seek his knowledge rather than try to empty the mind and engage in mystical contemplation)—is **plural**. Our being filled with the Spirit is not just a private matter; we are filled with the Spirit as we engage in worship and fellowship with the church, the body of Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:27, *et al.*) In the verses that follow (19-21), the Holy Spirit led the Apostle Paul to list five ways we open ourselves to the filling of the Spirit: "¹⁹**speaking** [Greek: second person plural (2P)] to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, **singing** [2P] and **making melody** [2P] with your [2P] heart to the Lord; ²⁰always **giving thanks** [2P] for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; ²¹and **be subject** [2P] to one another in the fear of Christ." (NASB)

These words from the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul, clearly seen in their grammar, emphasize the filling of the Spirit occurs in a special and necessary way in

God's unique relationship with the church. Individual devotion is important, but it can never replace or function apart from the church.

Observe how important are the Greek verb tenses in order to understand God's Word and be greatly blessed in so doing. This understanding, a cognitive process, is a necessary and vital part of our sanctification—our maturing—in our knowledge of, love for, and relationship with Jesus Christ, our only Savior and Lord, and for our effective service for him, indeed for our whole triune God. This is why it is necessary to study the original languages—cognitively concentrating on the Old Testament Hebrew and the New Testament Greek—in order to obtain the fullest knowledge of these sacred Scriptures that are the Holy Spirit-inspired Word of God. (2 Timothy 3:16) For teachers who can't study the languages—and even for those of us who have studied them—it is necessary to consult Bible commentaries written by trusted Biblical scholars who base their writing on the original languages.⁷¹ Ask your pastor and Bible class teachers to include this information in their sermons and classes; if they won't, find a church where they do and will. Recognize these require very cognitive activities, but from the insights that come from such cognitive study spring exciting affective experiences that motivate Christlike behavior by being filled with the Spirit, all of which please God. (2 Corinthians 5:9)

The Lighthouse Trails scholars offer Biblically accurate and very helpful insights also into aspects of being filled with the Spirit, contrasted with its SFM opposite. After quoting several passages, including John 14:23, Colossians 1:27, and Romans 8:11, they explain:

When God, through Jesus Christ, is living in us, He begins to do a transforming work in our hearts (2 Corinthians 3:18). Not only does He change us, He also communes with us. In other words, we have fellowship with Him, and He promises never to leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).

This life of God in the believer's heart is not something we need to conjure up through meditative practices. But if a person does not have this

⁷¹ Some—not all—one-volume study Bibles are helpful; one of the most accurate is *The NIV Study Bible*. For more extensive comments on the passages in specific Old and New Testament books, see the classic work of *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*. For the Old Testament see also another classic by Carl Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*. For the New Testament see the excellent commentaries on each book by R. C. H. Lenski. For trustworthy contemporary commentaries, there are good ones available, but be careful: many contain methodically and ideologically flawed scholarship, so be sure to ask a Christian pastor who consistently explains the Word of God faithfully—i.e., employing exegesis (drawing out the original meaning of the Biblical text) instead of eisegesis (reading into the Biblical text one's own bias)—examining the original languages of the Biblical passages, and applying the Scripture to life matters today, fully in accord with the whole of God's Word. In so doing, both the teacher and each disciple engage in a significantly cognitive activity, but the result always delightfully and joyfully (affectively) lifts their spirit and motivates their desire to live in obedience (behavior) to God's Word, experiencing in the process—and honoring—the presence of God within themselves. (John 14:23-27; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20) God dwells in—but does not become one with—us. We're still human; we do not become divine as taught by some SFM proponents.

relationship with the Lord, he may seek out ways to feel close to God. This is where Spiritual Formation comes into play. Rather than a surrendered life to Christ, the seeking person begins practicing the spiritual disciplines (e.g., prayer, fasting, good works, etc.) with the promise that if he practices these disciplines, he will become more Christ-like.

But merely doing these acts fails to make one feel close to God—something is still missing. And thus, he begins practicing the discipline of silence (or solitude), and now in these altered states of silence, he finally feels connected to God. He now feels complete. What he does not understand is that he has substituted the indwelling of Christ in his heart for a works-based methodology that endangers his spiritual life. Dangerous because these mystical experiences he now engages in appear to be good because they make him feel close to God, but in reality he is being drawn into demonic realms no different than what happens to someone who is practicing transcendental meditation or eastern meditation. Even mystics themselves acknowledge that the contemplative realm is no different than the realm reached by occultists. To understand this more fully, please read Ray Yungen’s book *A Time of Departing*.

Bottom line, it is not possible to be truly Christ-like without having Christ inside us because it is He who is able to change our hearts—we cannot do it without Him.

It is interesting to note that virtually every contemplative teacher has a common theme—they feel dry and empty and want to go “deeper” with God or “become more intimate” with God. But if we have Christ living in us, how can we go any deeper than that? How can we become more intimate than that? And if going deeper and becoming intimate were so important, why is it that none of the disciples or Jesus Himself ever told us to do this? As Larry DeBruyn states:

Why are Christians seeking a divine presence that Jesus promised would abundantly flow in them?... Why do they need another voice, another visitation, or another vision? Why are some people unthankfully desirous of “something more” than what God has already given to us?⁷²

Very importantly, we must keep in mind that God’s Word (e.g., in Ephesians 5:18-21) says the context of this cognitive-affective-behavioral filling of the Spirit within us takes place in corporate worship. Yet, contrast what the late Dallas Willard, one of the leaders of the emerging church, said about corporate worship:

⁷² Lighthouse Trails Editors, “[Is Your Church Doing Spiritual Formation? \(Important Reasons Why It Shouldn’t\)](#),” October 2, 2014. The quote from Larry DeBruyn is from “The Practice of His Presence.”

Indeed, solitude and silence are powerful means to grace. Bible study, prayer and church attendance, among the most commonly prescribed activities in Christian circles, generally have little effect for soul transformation, as is obvious to any observer.⁷³

Well, I am such an observer—and have been for well over three quarters of a century—and I don't see such a negative cause and effect relationship that's attributable to corporate worship *in churches that are proclaiming God's Word faithfully*. In fact, I see the very opposite in worship services in accord with God's Word and in the historic Christian tradition.⁷⁴ Moreover, God calls us to corporate worship of him alone; where churches do so faithfully, God's Word does not return to him empty but accomplishes what he desires and achieves the purpose for which he sent it. (Isaiah 55:11)

In addition to being a Biblically flawed statement, such SFM superficial assertions are flawed scientifically and logically.⁷⁵ Three scientific flaws are readily seen in the Willard quote.

1. The unsupported cause and effect conclusion that traditional Bible study, prayer, and church attendance have “little effect for soul transformation” is asserted without documentation, and the Lighthouse Trails editors have been exceedingly careful to consider the context of their quotes. Willard's statement is also untrue as will be seen in the following observations.
2. The statement generalizes without evidence. A social scientist's first question of those who make such statements is, “Show me your data; where is your evidence that corporate worship produces such ‘little effect for soul transformation?’” Due to the difficulty of conducting careful scientific research, and due to the SFM disregard for cognition, they are unwilling and unable to produce such evidence, but the question is essential and must be raised.
3. In the quote, no distinction is made as to differences in how each of the three historic practices—Bible study, prayer, and church attendance—have been done. Each of the three when done in accord with God's Word, produce much soul transformation and maturity in Christ. Certainly, at some times, in some places, and throughout church history, all three have been done inadequately—and are still being poorly done in

⁷³ Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Disciplines, Spiritual Formation and the Restoration of the Soul,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, Spring 1998, Vol. 26, #1, pp. 101-109, quoted in Lighthouse Trails Editors, “[Dallas Willard, John Ortberg, Richard Foster—Are We Wrong in Calling Them Emergent/Contemplative?](#)” *From the Lighthouse*. (Accessed 07/06/2025) Willard's book, *Spiritual Disciplines*, is considered a classic in the SFM.

⁷⁴ For an explanation of, and the elements included in, such Biblically-based historic Christian worship, see my e-book, [Worship: A Course on Worship in the Christian Church](#). It is also available in Chinese.

⁷⁵ For more on these two subjects that is not widely known, see [Science: Distinguishing Between Sound and Flawed Science](#) and [Logic: A Primer on Common Logical Fallacies](#).

some places—thus not producing the desired results, but SFM does not make those necessary distinctions.

The SFM assertions also exhibit flawed logic. Typically, several logical fallacies recur within the movement, and two are readily observed in the above Willard quote.

1. The first is the fallacy of *the unsound premise*. Willard is stating his assertion based on the unwarranted assumption that the Bible studies, prayer, and church attendance have all been done the same way, with the same types of leadership, with the same content, and with other similarities. That assumption is provably false. Many Bible studies have been led by leaders who have a mistaken understanding of the Bible and heretical theology that is contrary to God’s Word; the same can be said for many preachers who should not be anywhere near a pulpit, much less in it. Jesus warned—and even commanded us (note the imperative)—“Beware of false prophets” [Προσέχετε (*Prosechete*), beware, is in the imperative (command) mood and in the present tense, meaning continue, don’t stop, your vigilance] and “many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.” (Matthew 7:15; 24:11) Further, have the SFM proponents forgotten the command in 1 John 4:1? This command states, “...do not believe [μὴ (*mē*, not) πιστεύετε (*pisteuete*, believe)] every spirit, but test [δοκιμάζετε (*dokimazete*, test, prove, scrutinize, examine)] the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” Very importantly, both of these verbs—“do not believe” and “test” —are in the imperative mood and present tense.⁷⁶

Contrary to SFM premises and proponents, there have been and are countless faithful Bible study leaders and pastors throughout church history and all over the world who have taught—and are teaching—God’s Word faithfully. They have Biblical assurance their service for the Lord has had a transformative effect in the lives of the people they have served, as the Holy Spirit uses the Scripture they have taught and made it effective in the hearts and minds of those who have heard. Two of many Bible passages giving them such encouragement are Isaiah 55:8-11 and 2 Timothy 3:15-16.

⁷⁶ A vitally important application of 1 John 4:1,4-6, and this section in this paper, for the church today is to take time to reflect (yes, a cognitive and essential activity) on its implications. One important implication that has been largely neglected in the past half-century pertains to the historic practice of church discipline and its application out of love for both church leaders and church members—who believe and teach false doctrine and behave in disobedience to God’s Word—to discipline them for their own sake and for the sake of the church and God’s redemptive purposes for individuals, for the church, and for his whole creation. (Cf., e.g., Romans 15:14; Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12,14; 2 Thessalonians 3:15; 2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Corinthians 4:14; 5:1-5, *et al.*) For another implication see James 3:1. This text indicates that the church needs to carefully verify its teachers have been called by God to teach. The church elders must monitor those who teach to make sure they are continuing to teach God’s Word faithfully, speaking the truth in love. For more information on this vital subject, see [“Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology—With a Focus on Its Very Practical Dimensions, Including Answers to Our Great Questions of Life—for Now and Eternity \(PowerPoint\).”](#)

The same is true with prayer. God answers the prayers of his righteous believers. (James 5:16) However, some people do not obey God and then expect he will answer their prayers, and some people don't pray to the triune God who has revealed himself in his Word, so no, he won't bless those prayers, as he has explained in his Word, e.g., Isaiah 59:1-2.⁷⁷

2. The second is the fallacy of generalization. In logic there are two main fallacies involving generalization, the fallacy in the Willard quote is called *the sweeping generalization*. As I explain in my [primer on logical fallacies](#), the sweeping generalization involves taking a general rule, that may or may not be sound, and applying it to a specific individual or subject in which, due to the specific elements present in the individual or subject the rule does not truly apply; thus, the conclusion is not logical. Therefore, when Willard and others in the SFM say that Bible study, prayer, and church attendance have “little effect for soul transformation,” they are making a sweeping generalization to all churches in all times and places throughout the world without distinguishing any of the multitude of Christians throughout church history, including today, where such transformation has occurred and—as indicated above—they do so without scientific evidence for the generalization.

The SFM does not take into account God's work in his faithful believers. Since the SFM does not value cognition, which is a necessary aspect of Bible study, it is easy to understand, but not accept, how SFM proponents make such assertions as in the above Willard quote. If they studied—and believed—such passages in God's Word as Philippians 2:13 (ESV), where Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, writes, “for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” 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 ESV), they would neither teach nor follow such unbiblical statements. In [historic Christian Biblically-based systematic theology](#), the life-long process of sanctification is seen in Scripture as accomplished with the believer cooperating with the work of the Holy Spirit within him or her.

As some know, the knowledge and practice of logic is in short supply today. Even those SFM proponents who have some awareness of logic readily ignore the Biblical, scientific, and logical fallacies in their argument pertaining to spirituality, because all three are cognitive matters, and, as we saw above, they disregard cognition. In the words of the patron saint of the SFM, Theresa of Avila (*op cit.*), “the intellect [cognition] does not work,...it understands nothing.”

Yet to disregard logic does not nullify it. In fact, their disregard undermines their movement, for those who give it a modicum of reflection. God has made us in his image, one aspect of which is our ability to think and reason (cf. Isaiah 1:18), albeit at a much lesser—but not insignificant—level than God's ability which is infinitely higher than ours. (Isaiah 55:8-9) Because of this dimension of God's image in us, normal healthy

⁷⁷ I have written much more on prayer that pertains to this discussion. See my general website at <https://fromacorntooak12.com/>, and in the Search bar type Prayer.

human beings are not satisfied when they sense something is unreasonable, so if the SFM is all they know about Christianity, they will tend to avoid rather than approach the Good News about Jesus Christ and his Word.

One of the great dangers threatening the church's maturing in Christ (Ephesians 4:13; cf. 4:11-16) is the lack of that "modicum of reflection" in too many in the church in this era. We need a renewal and resurgence of commitment to Christian education that maintains a balance of the cognitive, behavioral, and affective components of human learning and development—firmly based on God's Word—that fosters a maturing relationship with our triune God. Without that maturing in Christ, his children (of all ages)—**contrary** to his Word and his will—remain "infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming." (Ephesians 4:14)

How can we respond to SFM proponents? Social science research reveals a reality—from brain functioning, mental development and processing, human learning and communication studies—that shows why questions are especially effective. Moreover, notice how frequently Jesus used questions, especially with those in opposition to him.

Theologians and every other Christian should ask SFM proponents—and all others who espouse, promote, and practice anything contrary to God's Word (such as the above-mentioned tenets of the SFM)—questions such as these:

1. "How do you fit what you just said with what the Bible says here..., which contradicts what you are saying?"
2. "Do you know what you just said is incompatible with God's Word?"
3. "Do you also know that God does not contradict himself? Nowhere in the Bible do we see a contradiction." When historic principles of hermeneutics (axioms governing the proper interpretation of literature, in this case the Bible) are correctly used in order to study and understand the context and the content of the passages of God's Word, any verses that appear at first superficial glance to be contradictory are with closer examination seen **not** to conflict; any initial apparent conflict is resolved.

Notice also how the SFM emphasizes what the individual does by him or herself and not within the Spirit-led body of Christ, including the licensed, called, ordained, and well-educated pastor(s) whom Christ has equipped and commanded to feed (John 21:15,17) and take care of (John 21:16) his sheep. In the SFM, even when others are present, the practices done are typically heavily focused on the individual. Especially when these SFM practices are done individually and under the auspices of a leader who is oriented toward non-Christian mysticism—and oriented away from the Holy Spirit-indwelted body of Christ with the Spirit's protection and guidance—can you see how Satan is employing this means to lead such vulnerable people away from the Lord? Satan deceptively misuses Biblical practices (e.g., prayer, meditation, good works), distorting

them by using the same names (prayer, meditation, etc.) but filled with content from false religions to mislead people to turn to him instead of to God.

This is the spiritual warfare to which Paul refers in Ephesians 6:10-20, which is exacerbated today by the SFM mindlessness. Without a careful study of God's Word, a very engaged cognitive and behavioral process, but not at all devoid of affective caring, many Christians are in the middle of the war and don't even know they're in a war, much less have the armor they need for protection and victory.⁷⁸

Such statements as Willard made in the above quote, also contradict 1,500 years of the corporate worship of God's people in the Bible since the time of Moses and over 2,000 additional years of corporate worship since Jesus' first coming. Historic Christian worship, based on Scripture, has held that God's Word teaches—contrary to what Willard said in that quote—that the means of grace are the preaching of his Word, baptism, and the Lord's supper. Protestant churches hold to that proclamation of God's Word and to those two sacraments as the three means of grace through which God blesses his people in corporate worship, because those are the only two that Jesus commanded. Roman Catholics have seven sacraments in which they see God blessing believers; other Christians have a different number of sacraments, but they are historically administered in and through the church.

The learning of God's Word and its application does not come from emptying one's mind in private practices; on the contrary—and *just the opposite*—it comes from continually being filled with the Spirit. God's people need to hear this teaching, and many who know about it long to hear more and more, but since a significant amount of this teaching involves cognition and behavior, they won't be receiving what they need from the SFM.

We see clearly that the Biblical orientation is in the opposite direction from Hinduism and other false religions. Pertaining to all other religions, see 1 Corinthians 10:20. A huge difference—a great and impassible gulf—exists between what the Bible teaches about these subjects, e.g., meditation, and what the other religions teach. By contrast, the Bible teaches that we obtain insight, understanding, wisdom, and such related knowledge from God, his revelation, and his guidance: directly from him as his Holy Spirit works in the mind and heart of each of us, and indirectly from him as he works in and through the body of Christ, the true church, i.e., those who teach and walk in accord with God's Word and Spirit. Consider, e.g., Psalm 1:1-2, “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.

²But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and *on his law* he meditates day and night.”

(NIV; *ital. mine*) Notice at least two very important aspects of these two verses:

1. Carefully observe the balance of all three components of human learning and development (including especially spiritual development) being mentioned: cognitive

⁷⁸ For more on this vital subject, see “[Spiritual Warfare: Equipment for Engaging the Battle in the Public Square and the Urgency of Telling Others about Jesus Christ—An Exegesis and Contemporary Application of Ephesians 6:10-22.](#)”

("the law of the LORD"); behavioral ("does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand...or sit...," "meditates"); affective ("Blessed," "delight").

2. Furthermore, notice in the first verse the direct implication and application for each of us individually and also for parenting and youth ministry regarding the guidance that we all need and that will be very helpful to young people and others who are especially vulnerable to the influence of peers.
 - a. Be careful whom you select to be your friends. Be especially careful who you choose to be your best friends.
 - 1) Sociologists and social psychologists refer to careful social science research, which reveals that people typically have what is referred to in the literature as their "reference group;" i.e., at the most four or five people who strongly influence what they think, especially value; how they feel; and what they do.
 - 2) Therefore, make sure your best friends are fellow believers in our only Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and are maturing in him, being "filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18), including by regularly (preferably at least weekly) and gladly attending church worship. An old Spanish proverb puts it this way: "Tell me with whom you walk, and I'll tell you who you are."
 - b. A caution for parents, youth ministers, and directors of Christian education:
 - 1) For Parents: Be continually monitoring who your child's friends are—even when they become young adults—including who influences your son(s) and/or daughter(s).
 - 2) For youth ministers and directors of Christian education: Keep careful watch over Jesus' sheep, the children whom you've been charged to feed and to help mature in Christ, not only while they are children, but—as much as you can—continue to watch them, including with whom they walk, especially in their early years of adulthood.

Consider the infinitely greater alternative God offers to us who are affected by the law of entropy. One of the passages my wife and I have found most comforting, especially during the years she struggled with an increasingly disabling disease before she died, is the following passage from 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, which we memorized together and often repeated together with great comfort, peace, and joy. Just before these verses, Paul has described what God has done for us who believe in and follow Christ Jesus. Then he says

¹⁶Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far

outweighs them all. ¹⁸So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Notice how realistic is this Biblical teaching! Paul does NOT say that one should try to escape his or her problems or go to some quiet place and try to “empty his or her mind” to find peace. In this world where Christians are in a constant spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:10-20) and where our sinful nature is attacked by our demonic enemies, there is no place to escape. But we **do** have the One who alone can give us peace, the One to whom Paul was referring, Christ Jesus, who said, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

Some may be inclined to say, “Well, Paul’s troubles aren’t anything like mine!” Actually, they were much worse. See his list of some of the troubles he was regularly encountering:

false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. ¹⁵It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.... I have... been in prison...frequently, been flogged...severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?” (2 Corinthians 11:13-29) In other passages he reveals more of his suffering, e.g., in the very next chapter where he indicates that he has a “thorn in the flesh” that tormented him (12:7). No solely human being knows what that thorn was, but the text indicates that it was an agonizing incurable matter with which he had to undertake all these other troubles.

Consider closely and carefully what Paul is saying. In the light of Jesus’ answer to his request to be relieved of his thorn in the flesh in which the Lord says, “...my power is made perfect in weakness,” (12:9) Paul completely changes his view of his weakness; he understands that this weakness about which he can do nothing makes him totally reliant on the Lord, which transforms the whole situation: He concludes, “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses.... For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (12:10)

Focusing on Christ Jesus, as “we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen,” (4:18; cf. John 20:29) is transformative, life-changing, powerful. That perspective is what enables Jesus’ followers to see our troubles as “light and momentary” and that “our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” (4:17) Indeed, God’s Word is most realistic and most helpful! We receive this grace from God when we fix our eyes on Jesus and his teaching, including on our relationship with him, indeed with the triune God—not by seeking to empty oneself! Just the opposite! We seek to be filled with the Spirit who points us to, enables eternal life in, and helps us fix our eyes on Jesus Christ!

Furthermore, we’ve already been doing so for ages—including with a spiritually healthy balance between cognition and affect—by singing such great music as the beautiful hymn, “Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus,” written and composed by Helen Howarth Lemmel, published in 1922.

1. O soul, are you weary and troubled?
No light in the darkness you see?
There’s light for a look at the Savior,
And life more abundant and free!

Refrain:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.

2. Through death into life everlasting
He passed, and we follow Him there;
O’er us sin no more hath dominion—
For more than conqu’rors we are!
3. His Word shall not fail you—He promised;
Believe Him, and all will be well:
Then go to a world that is dying,
His perfect salvation to tell!⁷⁹

This is the spirituality that brings life in its fullest, now and forever. That life includes Biblical hope, not the hope of the world, a wishful thinking (like, “I hope our team wins the World Cup this year.”), but a firmly-grounded hope that in the Bible is a realized

⁷⁹ Helen Howarth Lemmel, “Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus,” *Worship and Service Hymnal: For Church, School, and Home* (Chicago: Hope Publishing Company, 1957), No. 220. To hear recent renditions of this great hymn by Rosemary Siemens, while still remaining close to its original beautiful melody, [listen here](#) and by a choral and instrumental ensemble [listen here](#).

expectation—already here in part due to Jesus, yet with its fullness and completion to come when Jesus returns—and joy found nowhere else. *Such cannot be experienced in an empty head (actually unattainable anyway) and by uniting with a universe in decline.*

Mixing the teaching from other religions with teaching from the Bible—which disobeys God—and that is done in SFM literature is confusing to—and misleads—many people, spiritually endangering them forever. Many if not most in the SFM are unable to discern what is right and what is wrong (a word not appreciated and disavowed in related postmodern thought today) about other religions, because they don't know [the Bible](#) and [historic Christian theology](#) well enough and can't use it as a standard for understanding what is true and what is false. Biblical illiteracy is rampant. It especially confuses people when these non-Christian religions are spoken of affirmatively—and only affirmatively—in the SFM literature. It is good to include instruction in church education programs about other religions, but that should be done in a course where the Bible is contrasted with the teaching of those religions. To be sure, most other religions have some good in them, “And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.” (2 Corinthians 11:14; 1 Corinthians 10:20). Such good, however, is used in the demonic attempt to draw people away from God, diminish his glory, and undermine the accomplishment of his purposes. Any good in other religions is also present and far surpassed in the Bible and in historic church tradition.

Never forget that Satan steers the founders and leaders of false religions to use terms that appear in the Bible and in Christian theology—but to distort and redefine those terms—in order to deceive and lead astray everyone they can. This is one of the reasons why the word, watch (in the sense of being constantly on guard, vigilantly discerning truth from falsehood, in all that is being presented to us and preparing ourselves for Jesus' service and his second coming, which could be any moment), is used frequently throughout the Bible to keep God's people from being deceived.

Moreover, always remember what the Holy Spirit led the Apostle Paul to write in the Word of God: “...the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.” (1 Corinthians 10:20-21) This passage is a strong refutation of the theology of syncretism, a “make-your-own-religion,” taking something one likes (but God abhors) out of different religions and putting those elements altogether. This syncretism is an essential part of the SFM, examples of which we saw in the preceding pages.

Further, when taught from a Biblical perspective, the context and focus of these terms and doctrines are rightly stated (e.g., contrasting approaches to meditation as indicated above) which produce results pleasing to God. (Psalm 1, cf. Proverbs 1) In this age in the West, people have such limited knowledge of the Bible and theology, and are only willing to give such limited time to studying those and other important subjects, it is most urgent that we focus on the Bible and Christian theology whenever we have the opportunity. Don't waste a minute on momentary minutiae; moreover people long to hear the true God's Word—including its explication and application—for whether they

know that or not, it's the only resource that meets their/our deepest needs. As we teach the Bible, with the Holy Spirit's help, they will sense that great reality. Truly, truly, God's Word offers infinitely more than anything else in the world.

It is also commonplace for proponents of the spiritual formation movement to criticize the historic and traditional approach to church education as being "too cognitive and ineffective. It doesn't produce the needed change in people." If you listen carefully, they offer no empirical evidence or logic to substantiate that claim. They downplay, and in some cases disavow, the cognitive, especially exegetical Bible study and systematic theology, thus depriving or at least hindering believers from developing a realistic Biblical worldview that they can use to make sense out of life, filter out wheat from chaff, and help others to do so in a strong witness for Christ. (Ephesians 2:8-10; 4:11-16) They either ignore or are unaware of the historic wisdom that spiritual growth comes from engaging the Word and the Spirit together. Through Bible study and prayer, individually and with the church, one grows in what the Bible and historic Christian theology refer to as sanctification, growth in Christlikeness in word and in deed.

Pertaining to the accusation that traditional Christian education doesn't produce the needed change in people, two important responses need to be made. First, that assertion is a value judgment, which needs to be explored with its proponents. When the epistemological question (the philosophical inquiry into, "How do you know?") is discussed, it becomes apparent that the SFM proponents are focused on a limited and (as we've seen above) distorted part of what God's Word says we need to teach children, youth, and adults. Instead, we need to teach "the whole counsel of God," not only the affective dimensions pertaining to the heart. And, when the epistemological question is focused on the heart matters pertaining to spirituality (which the SFM proponents do not define with Biblical, measurable, and visible manifestations), the lack of maturity in accord to what God's Word is calling for becomes apparent.⁸⁰

Ray Yungen draws an excellent conclusion pertaining to this aspect of the SFM described in the preceding discussion.

The Bible...clearly warns against repetitive prayer and also tells us we cannot find God unmediated (i.e., without Christ).

But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. (Matthew 6:7)

For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5)

⁸⁰ See "[Christian Education Goals and Objectives with a Focus on Level III Objectives: How to Be Sure Your Students Are Understanding and Doing What You Have Taught Them](#)" (PowerPoint presentation) and related articles on my free and secure website, [From Acorn to Oak 12](#).

It is ironic that in the last century more Christians have died for their faith in other countries than have died in past centuries combined. Many of these Christians have departed from Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism to meet their executioners. What would these martyrs of the faith say to us if they could speak of our current western practice of intermingling Christianity with Eastern religion and the occult? The Bible warns against such mixture:

Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devil:
ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table
of devils. (1 Corinthians 10: 21)

Jesus never taught his disciples techniques to attain oneness with God, but rather spoke of Himself as the Way. In fact, the entire New Testament was written to dispute the idea that people can reach God through religious efforts and reveals that Jesus Christ is the only answer. In conclusion, the contemplative movement is founded on the following false premises:⁸¹

The heart of man is basically good and (it has a divine center). vs. The heart of man is wicked—A DENIAL OF THE SIN NATURE

Man can find God through his own efforts regardless of what religion he has embraced. vs. Jesus referred to Himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.— A DENIAL OF THE ATONEMENT...

With false premises as these, the conclusions can only be erroneous. The Bible creates the proper understanding and balance of 1) man as sinful, 2) needing a redeemer, 3) with whom he can have an abundant life.

Perhaps the most misguided view of all in the contemplative prayer movement is summed up in the following quote by a biographer of Thomas Merton:

Nor should Christians delude themselves with the idea that the grace of God is monopolized by any particular structure of belief. God isn't obeying the traffic lights of any religious system.⁸²

⁸¹ Yungen here insightfully inserts a footnote in which he points out a basic axiom. "In philosophy, every 'argument' must have a premise and a conclusion, but if your premises are false, it will inevitably lead you to a false conclusion."

⁸² Here in his footnote 39, Yungen cites James Forest, *Thomas Merton: A Pictorial Biography* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 81.

But this is not true. God did create an organism called the body of Christ, and to enter, you have to believe something very specific. If you understand the objective of true Christianity, you will clearly see that the opinion stated in the quote above contradicts the message of the Cross, which is the essence Christianity. You cannot reconcile the statement above with the following verse:

. . . that in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:7)

In Contrast to the Bible the SFM Orients to the Heart over the Mind.

Those in the Spiritual Formation Movement are oriented to the heart over the mind. This orientation comes with their emphasis on looking inward for insight and enlightenment. This SFM orientation is manifested corporately, e.g., in worship, and in individual ways in addition to those we've discussed above.

One of the often-used corporate means of facilitating SFM spirituality is by participating in Taizé worship. The word, Taizé, is taken from the name of a monastic community in Taizé, France. The monastic cohort focuses on community, simplicity, and service. Its worship involves several elements, involving sung and short chanted prayers with much repetition, liturgical readings but no preaching, a time of solitude, contemplation, and a problematic use of iconography. The GotQuestions website explains more:

There are several problems with the Taizé style of worship. Contemplative worship, in general, seeks a subjective spiritual experience apart from the objective truth of God's Word. Also, Jesus specifically forbade repetitive prayer ([Matthew 6:7](#)), and the prayers of Taizé are purposefully repetitive.⁸³

One of the most common individual motivations and manifestations of the prioritizing and practicing of heart over mind in SFM is often heard in the mistaken, misleading, and latently demonic advice, "Follow your heart!" This thoughtless and dangerous "advice" is constantly heard, e.g., in movies, on TV, and in books, magazines, and conversations. Think about it. This is **precisely the ploy** Satan used to deceive Eve into disobeying God. The devil knew Eve wanted to eat the fruit God forbade Adam and her to eat, so Satan used that desire and subtly urged her to follow her heart instead of her head. Notice that Satan used the same tactic, raising deceptive questions, on Jesus, but notice also why it didn't work. Unlike Eve, Jesus used his own perfectly balanced cognitive-affective-and behavioral desire to obey God and **not** Satan and used God's Word to reject

⁸³ GotQuestions, "What is Taizé worship, and is it biblical?" <https://www.gotquestions.org/Taize-worship.html> (Accessed 05/02/2025)

the devil's deception. Unlike Eve, Jesus turned to God's Word for His answer to Satan's temptations, which is exactly what we should do.

When I hear someone say, "Follow your heart," I reply, "Now by 'heart,' do you mean that organ God revealed to the Prophet Jeremiah as being 'deceitful and beyond cure?' You want me to follow a heart like that?! Since the human heart is that way, why look there for insight and enlightenment?!" In fact when we examine God's Word, the Bible, (a primarily cognitive activity) we see Jeremiah look into the heart and hear him lament, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (17:9; cf. Psalm 51:1-5) Led by the Holy Spirit who inspired him to write, the original Hebrew word Jeremiah used that is translated "beyond cure" is *ʾānash* (אָנָשׁ), which means a disease, illness, or wound that is usually *fatal*.⁸⁴

While the regenerated heart (the new heart, part of the new nature which the Holy Spirit has provided in the new birth, John 3:3) is essential, the mind is as well, which is necessary to provide the self-control that is a fruit of the Spirit. (Galatians 5:23) Consider also that God created us to use our minds in our relationship with him (Isaiah 1:18) in order to understand and do his will. (Matthew 22:37)

Here again, we observe that we need balance in our perspective. Because God created us as holistic beings, having hearts and minds, soul and body, there is a place for our hearts in decision-making. However, taking the whole of God's Word into account, which is an axiom of the discipline of Biblical interpretation, we see that primarily we are to discern God's will cognitively, but there is a place in that context for the heart: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) In this chapter God presents his case against his people Israel in the form of what Biblical scholars call the lawsuit *Gattung*, or category, a literary style that is very cognitive, as trials typically are. Then in verse six we see revealed that God's will involves not only cognition but also action and with heartfelt loving mercy and humility.

In Psalm 37 we read, "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart." (37:4 NRSV) The Hebrew word, *ānōgh* (אָנוֹחַ), translated "delight," means that in the sense of taking "exquisite pleasure in"⁸⁵ the LORD, clearly involving the heart, but the heart that belongs and is subjected to God. Nevertheless, we must also keep in mind that God's Word refers to the sanctification (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:2) that all believers must pursue, maturity in Christ, indeed attaining to the whole "measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:13 NASB) Paul explains in Romans 7 that we still struggle with sin which has so corrupted our being that residual effects from the old nature still hang on in our regenerated nature, and these unspiritual and corrupt parts of our old nature must be put off in the sanctification process. Rather than looking inward, let us look outward and upward to God and his Word and Spirit for our help and

⁸⁴ *The Complete Biblical Library Hebrew-English Dictionary – Aleph-Beth.*

⁸⁵ *The Complete Biblical Library Hebrew-English Dictionary – Nun-Ayin.*

our hope. (Cf. 2 Corinthians 4:18) Psalm 37:4 means that when we've done our due diligence and cognitively concluded that more than one option would be just, loving mercy, and in humility in relationship with God, thus within God's will for us, then it pleases him to allow our heart to choose which of the righteous and just alternatives before us would bring us the most pleasure and joy.

When done according to the Bible, the spiritual disciplines are not all about feelings; considerable thought, meditation, and contemplation are a significant—indeed, a very much **required**—part of these practices. However, much of what is advocated and done in the SFM is out of balance and skewed too far into a preoccupation with the affective dimension of our mentality: feeling, emotion, and passion. Can you see now—if not already earlier in this paper—how mistaken Theresa of Avila was when she said, “I say, the intellect [cognition] does not work,...it understands nothing.”

Referencing Richard Foster's writing, the Lighthouse editors explain, “Once the meditative exercises have been implemented [by following the SFM practices]...the “spiritual ecstasy” is reached....this ecstatic state is an altered state of consciousness where everything is supposed to be unified and one with God.”⁸⁶ Here is another occurrence of the very unbiblical—indeed antibiblical—pantheism.

Furthermore, minimizing and even ignoring the cognitive with an overemphasis on the affective results in an inadequate, often stunted, and errant development in sanctification. For just one example, give careful attention to the exceptional Greek scholar, R. C. H. Lenski, in his explanation of the difference between *agape* and *phileo* in his commentary on Matthew 5:44, where Jesus is recorded as saying, “But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,...

Ἀγαπᾶν [*agapan*] deserves careful attention. It signifies something that is altogether higher than φιλεῖν [*philein*], the love of mere affection and liking. This latter kind of love would be impossible in the case of an enemy: he would not accept our affection, would strike us if we tried to embrace him. Nor would we be able to like our enemies, even as we nowhere read that Jesus liked the wicked Jews, his enemies. The verb ἀγαπᾶν [*agapan*] denotes the love of intelligence, comprehension, and corresponding purpose. It, indeed, sees all the hatefulness and the wickedness of the enemy, feels his stabs and his blows, may even have something to do toward warding them off; but all this fills the loving heart with the one desire and aim, to free its enemy from his hate, to rescue him from his sin, and thus to save his soul. Mere affection is often blind, but even then it thinks that it sees something attractive in the one toward whom it goes out; the higher love may see nothing attractive in the one so loved, nor is this love called out by anything that is attractive; its inner motive is simply to bestow true blessings upon the one loved, to do him

⁸⁶ Lighthouse Trails Editors, [“Is Your Church Doing Spiritual Formation? \(Important Reasons Why It Shouldn't\).”](#)

the highest good. I cannot like a filthy, vicious beggar and make him my personal friend; I cannot like a low, mean criminal who may have robbed me and threatened my life; I cannot like a false, lying, slanderous fellow who, perhaps, has vilified me again and again; but I can by the grace of Jesus Christ love them all, see what is wrong with them, desire and work to do them only good, most of all to free them from their vicious ways. On God's ἀγάπη [*agape*] see the author's commentary on John 3:16.⁸⁷

In Contrast to Sources Promoted by the SFM, the Light We Seek that Overcomes Darkness Comes from Knowing God's Word, His Only-Begotten Son Christ Jesus, "the light of the world" (John 8:12) and His Inspired Written Word.

As we can see from the above, where many Christians individually and many church congregations corporately have neglected the affective component of human learning, and especially sanctification, including by not attending to the Biblical spiritual disciplines, the answer is NOT to eliminate the cognitive, Biblical, component and adopt SFM. Do not jump on this popular—but dangerous—bandwagon.

Replace SFM with sound, historic, Biblically-based Christian education, which includes [Bible study](#) and [historic Christian systematic theology](#), including, but not limited to:

1. soteriology (the Biblical teaching about the Holy Spirit, salvation, and the application of Christ's love and redemption), in particular the sanctification process, which includes *the spiritual disciplines as taught in God's Word*, assuring us of God's grace, cleansing us, giving us a relationship with God who loves us, and providing the awareness of our always being with him, none of which is found in non-Christian religions;
2. ecclesiology (the Biblical teaching about the church), in particular the Biblical revelation about God's will pertaining to his worship and the mission he has given to us through whom he will work to accomplish his redemption and restoration of his creation, thereby giving us meaning and purpose in our lives and the unique joy and need-meeting fellowship (*koinonia*) that is found only in the church, the body of Christ, as his believers and followers serve him together in glory forever;
3. and eschatology, the revelation of God's Word about the next phase of life, individually and corporately, and the great hope we have in God for all eternity, all of which is unique to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Doing so will attend to all three of the Biblical and human learning components: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. We will experience this growth and development as God's Word teaches us his will (cognition), and as his Holy Spirit inspires us to respond to God's love revealed in his Word with love and joy (affect) for and in relationship with

⁸⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, [The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel](#) (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), pp. 246–247.

him, together with an increasing motivation to do his will (behavior), thereby maturing in Christlikeness. (Ephesians 4:11-16ff.) That is the spirituality that God has taught in his Word, that he has made possible, that he commands, and that pleases him!

By eliminating Bible study, including in its form of systematic theology, proponents of the SFM very seriously fail to do the following, among much else:

1. The SFM fails to provide help for church people to understand the teachings of the Bible by subject (e.g., God, mankind, Christ, the application of salvation, the church, the future), which have been grouped together and logically related throughout history to provide God's answer to the great questions of life and eternity. Such answers profoundly enable God's people to engage and overcome even the most enormous of challenges they encounter in this phase of life here on earth.
2. Another of the most serious deficiencies of the SFM is its failure to equip God's people with the understanding that they are in a spiritual warfare and to have and use the armor in which to not only survive but to win the battle. (Ephesians 6:10-20) SFM cannot provide that help with its turning to non-Christian religions, for they worship the demons (cf., e.g., 1 Corinthians 10:20-21), which the Holy Spirit reveals are the enemy. Who turns to his or her enemy for help?! For an analogy, this aspect of SFM is like David asking the Philistines to give him stones for his slingshot so he can win against Goliath.
3. Also, very seriously, SFM fails to equip God's people—believers in and followers of their only Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—with the information, love, and skills to be his witnesses, which he has called and commanded us to be and do as his agents of reconciliation through whom the Lord is redeeming and restoring his creation. With its inward focus on feelings—affective orientation—the SFM is unable to equip the church, and those who will become part of the church, with the ability to serve God in the high and holy calling he has given us.

A word for teachers. In the light of the preceding, drawing upon SFM instead of God's Word, is not feeding Christ's sheep. (John 21:15-17) In verse 17, Jesus says to Peter, "Feed my sheep." The verb Βόσκει (*Boske*, feed) is in the imperative mood; i.e., it is a command. Jesus isn't kidding around, or just expressing a wish or a hope Peter can work some teaching into his schedule sometime.

In 21:19 and 22, Jesus tells Peter how to feed His sheep: ἀκολουθεῖ (*akolouthēi*, follow) μοι (*moi*, me), i.e., "Follow me." Follow Jesus, NOT a Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, or some other non-Christian leader, who is neither part of nor following Jesus himself and who is certainly NOT teaching people to follow Jesus. The verb, *akolouthēi*, is also in the imperative mood, another command. The command to feed His sheep is done by following Him, His Word and the Holy Spirit Whom He will send shortly (Who now has already been sent and is dwelling within us) and Who will never lead anyone to do something contrary to His Word that the Spirit inspired the prophets and the apostles to record. (2 Timothy 3:15-17) Always remember, God never contradicts himself. Very

significantly, both verbs—*Boske* and *akolouthei*—are in the present tense (meaning continuous, durative, ongoing behavior) and in the active voice (meaning the one receiving the command must act—no passing it off to someone else).

God has given us a special calling to feed his sheep good meat, not milk (Hebrews 5:11-14) and especially not contaminated or rotten food. With this special calling comes a special responsibility: “because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” (James 3:1)

One reason for that failure in the SFM to teach God’s Word and historic Christian systematic theology, and to teach it accurately, is that many of them do not hold to the view of the Bible as the uniquely revealed Word of God; they consider it as essentially a human document written by people who became progressively mature. Many wrongly believe the Bible is errant, that it contains mistakes, and that some books of the Bible should be eliminated! Thus, they figure, since it is essentially a human work, other religious writings can and should be included in people’s spiritual formation as well.

Notice the difference between this orientation that the Bible is a human document and that of the Apostle Paul in the text above from Ephesians and his words to Timothy: “All Scripture [referring here to the Old Testament] is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17) See also what the Apostle Peter wrote:

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:16-21)

Unless we fully utilize the limited amount of time we have with our people, who are precious to God, to whom we are accountable (James 3:1), how can we equip each person to accomplish this Biblical mandate: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15)? The Bible is essential for spiritual development—our own and those we teach, including our own children—therefore, God’s Word must be the basis of our spiritual practices and any teaching we do.

As I mentioned earlier in this essay, there is a good body of literature which provides guidance in helping the church to grow Christ-like through the historic spiritual disciplines and practices rooted in the Bible. However, they exist as wheat sown among the thorns, and it is necessary that church education administrators, e.g., directors and ministers of education, youth ministers, ministers of pastoral care, pastors, and others carefully discern which materials are helpful in this aspect of Christian education and which contain material that is counterproductive.

One such valuable resource is *Journey into Joy* by Arthur H. DeKruyter. Always be very careful when selecting resources for yourself and for others—especially for those who are not able to discern what is Biblically accurate from that which is false—that you select those resources that are consistent with the Bible and historic Christian theology, those which facilitate both cognitive, affective, and behavioral spiritual maturity in Christ Jesus.

The Christian education programs in many church congregations do need improvement, and I have offered much help for doing so on my two websites, both of which are secure. All the resources on both websites are free of charge.

My general website address is <https://fromacorntooak12.com/> (which is also accessible by edwardseely.com). My academic website URL is <https://seelyedward.academia.edu/>. All of the articles on the academic website are also available on the general website.

For the above and other reasons, the Spiritual Formation Movement must not replace the education program. In summary, the SFM contains the following (three) major flaws:

1. The SFM draws on and points people, many of whom are spiritual neophytes, toward the spirituality in other religions—which are offerings to demons and not to God in an unbiblical syncretistic interspirituality (1 Corinthians 10:20,21)—instead of teaching the Biblical spirituality in and according to God’s Word as authoritative and exclusive. The SFM thus turns people away from the triune God, who reveals himself and his will in the Bible, and the SFM thereby fails to equip God’s people with what they need to serve him in the high and holy calling he has given us.
2. The SFM is a self-oriented, inward, focus instead of looking to God and his revelation in the Bible. (E.g., Psalm 1) Doing so cuts people off from God and the mission to which he has called us.
3. The SFM downplays, and largely disavows, the cognitive dimension of human nature, especially exegetical Bible study and systematic theology, thus depriving or at least hindering believers from developing a holistic and realistic Biblical worldview that they can use to make sense out of life, filter out wheat from chaff, and help others to do so in the calling God has given us. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

Summary and Conclusion

Much more could be said about the SFM. The above is sufficient to establish why this movement is unbiblical, spiritually dangerous, and should be avoided and opposed. It also fails to teach God's people his Word and his historic Biblically-based doctrines about who he is, who we are, Jesus Christ and his redemption, salvation, the church, and eternity, essential doctrines he has called the church to proclaim, explain, and follow. In so doing, the SFM neglects to provide countless blessings for God's people and—through us—for those “from every nation, tribe, people and language,” whom God has called us to reach for inclusion in his kingdom. For the above reasons, do **not** include the teachings of the Spiritual Formation Movement in your church.

For the same reasons do not practice them in your personal life or lead your family to do so. Instead, do what Jesus has taught us to do in his Word: Follow Him. (John 21:19,22) For help to follow him, specifically to understand and apply his Word in your church and in your daily life, study also the [Biblically-based Christian theology](#) that has been taught in the historic church Christ Jesus inaugurated when he made his new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25) and that his disciples and apostles planted and developed first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, then to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

For Reflection

1. Have you had any experience with the SFM? (For example, has anyone urged you to make the changes that are taking place as described in this paper?)
2. Explain in your own words what the two categories mean (Bible study and spiritual disciplines). Then briefly describe what a healthy balance between the two would look like in an effective educational ministry.
3. How would you explain your approach (as articulated in your response to question #2) to a senior pastor, church board, or others who want you to do spiritual formation in your church? Include in your explanation your rationale for what you will do and not do.
4. What nonformal, i.e., non-program, educational uses of the Biblical balance of cognition, affect, and behavior can be used in other aspects of the life and work of the church for instructional purposes to help members and others associated with the church to grow more Christlike, and serve God in the sanctification process?

Here is how one senior pastor, Rev. Dr. Glen Schlecht of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Loveland, Colorado brought together these three dimensions of human learning in true Biblical meditation related to the stewardship aspect of the sanctification process that he included in a cover note accompanying the next month's (July 2025) offering envelopes. The words in brackets are my explanatory additions. Pastor Glen wrote:

“Why not take a few minutes today or sometime soon and read Genesis chapters one and two? [Cognitive] As you read, look and listen for the beautiful mosaic of creation, the variety, the creativity, the thoroughness of our God. [Affect] Then pause, perhaps after each day of creation, to give thanks for those things the Lord brings to mind. [Behavior]

“God has taken care of not only creation but also eternity. John 3:16 is that simple statement of faith, of love, and of life. [Cognition] What can we say to all this that the Lord has given us? That response is up to each one of us. He desires our hearts and our lives in their entirety. I would encourage you to consider again how you are living your life in thanks and praise to God in Jesus Christ and what your response to Him is. Let your financial offerings reflect your gratitude [Affect] as well as you fill your envelopes for the coming month.” [Behavior]

Resources

Much else could be—and has been—said on this very important matter. This paper has documented only a small number of—but key—aspects of this huge issue in current church teaching. For more information on the above subjects, see my general Website or my academic Website, both of which are secure—no one will be able to access any of your information and your computer will not receive any viruses—and both of which are free to use, all of which may be downloaded without charge. Pertaining to the above discussion, see [*Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology—With a Focus on Its Very Practical Dimensions, Including Answers to Our Great Questions of Life—for Now and Eternity*](#) (a detailed sentence outline PowerPoint). In addition, see [*Joys in Historic Christian Spiritual Discipline*](#) (another sentence outline PowerPoint), which also contains much more on the true Biblical spiritual disciplines.

General Website URL: <https://fromacorntoak12.com/> This Website can also be accessed by edwardseely.com. Either of these URLs will lead you to the home page. Use the Search bar to locate documents with the information you want. After locating and opening the document, use the Find feature under Edit on your tool bar to locate the specific pages that contain the specific subjects of interest.

Academic Website URL: <https://seelyedward.academia.edu/> This URL takes you to the home page. All the resources on this academic website are also on the general website. Click on “RESEARCH” in the top toolbar for the document(s) you want. Use the Find feature to quickly obtain the subject you want.