

Using Devotional Classics

Forrest L. Bivens¹

What precisely do we seek?

Why does a seminary offer a course on devotional classics? Why would an instructor prepare such a course or students enroll in it? A number of answers can be given. We wish to gain an increased awareness of and knowledge about devotional works that have passed the test of time. We see value in weighing possibilities of making personal use of these classic writings in our own devotional life. As leaders among God's people we also want to counsel those entrusted to our care when they come to us for advice in selecting devotional reading materials. Perhaps we enjoy history, and church history in particular, so we take advantage of this opportunity to study those whose writings have made a noticeable impact on the church. There may be other reasons as well.

Isn't it personal spiritual growth?

But I suspect that, at the heart of it, all is a personal desire coupled with a personal dissatisfaction or at least search for improvement. And it has to do with our own devotional lives and activities as believers who know the high calling of spiritual growth, our personal inconsistencies in this regard, and the suspicion that others who have gone before us might be of help to us as we approach the same kind of challenges they faced. Tony Jones expresses what most of us have also experienced:

I had been taught that the way to connect with God on a daily basis is to have a 30-minute "quiet time". That is, you should sit down with your Bible open, read it a little, and then lay a bunch of stuff on God, making sure to mention how excellent he is before running through the list of all the things you need.

I found this style of personal devotion to be a pretty shallow well, and it wasn't long before I was doing it only every other day, then once a week, and then, well, never. Taking the place of my 30-minute quiet time, however, were hours and hours of that great religious tradition: guilt. Here was the equation: God is out there + God wants to hear from me + I'm not talking = failure by me.

After about 10 years of this . . . something occurred to me: People have been trying to follow God for thousands of years, Christians for the last two thousand. Maybe somewhere along the line some of them had come up with ways of connecting with God that could help people like me.²

The hunch confessed by Jones in the preceding paragraph is, to a large degree, what led me to several "devotional classics" a number of years ago. Like you, I have long known that there is a long tradition of searching among Christians – searching for ways of connecting with God in a special, growing way. I also knew that this was done by some of the most bright and spiritually devout people in history. And at least to some extent I was thankful many of them wrote down observations about what they learned or recommend to others. My being assigned to teach this summer quarter course forced me to expand my knowledge of works in this genre of literature and to take a second look at the whole subject. But at the heart of it all remains my desire for spiritual growth and the suspicion (and hope) that fellow believers from previous generations had some assistance to offer me through their writings.

¹ This article is reworked material originally prepared as a course introduction for 2007 WLS summer quarter students. The summer quarter course consisted primarily in reading and reporting on material from approximately thirty so-called devotional classics produced in the history of the Christian church.

² Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way*, p. 15.

So what is it that we want? For one thing, growth. “Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.” (2 Pe 3:17,18). Peter is correct in saying we currently enjoy a secure position in Christ. He is also correct in seeing the need for growth in Christ lest we forfeit what we have. “Growth” is a good word to use here. So are words like “spirituality”, “piety”, “devotion” and several other terms that denote a strong and meaning relationship with Christ.

The terms “spirituality” and “spiritual” are used a lot in this genre of literature. If we draw definitions of these terms from their etymology and (especially) use in Scripture, we will learn that we speak of that which is derived from, resembling or expressing, empowered or created by the Holy Spirit as he works upon a human being. In short, to be πνευματικός assumes and reflects the πνεῦμα of God. With some variations, this is what most Christian writers also say, but they do not always explicitly mention the Holy Spirit.

A fairly academic definition of spirituality comes from Alister McGrath: “Christian spirituality concerns the quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian experience, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of the Christian faith.”³ Presbyterian pastor Marjorie Thompson, who has written a lot on spiritual topics, defines “spiritual life” as “simply the increasing vitality and sway of God’s Spirit within us.” She has also written, “It is a magnificent choreography of the Holy Spirit in the human spirit, moving us toward communion with both Creator and creation. The spiritual life is thus grounded in relationship. It has to do with God’s way of relating to us and our way of responding to God.”⁴ The seventeenth century mystic Brother Lawrence, in one of the better-known “devotional classics” in history, used the phrase “the practice of the presence of God.”

Lest unnecessary confusion be created in this, we do well to note that “spirituality” as meant in this kind of study does not merely refer to the reality of spiritual life that every believer has [a relationship with God by faith in Christ], but expressions of, reflection on, enjoyment of, and the cultivation of those expressions that come from this spirituality. The connection between having life and expressing life, of between saving faith and fruits of faith, should not be overlooked – or confused. There is no desire to deny the former or to downplay the latter.

Mentioning and seeking to define these terms can be helpful. “Spiritual” and “spirituality” sometimes have bad reputations. Maybe it’s because, since the Enlightenment, intellectual knowledge and doctrine have been the primary focus of many churches and the assumed means for people entering religious life. Maybe it’s because of the irresponsible use of the terms by the New Age movement or because to some irreligious people it points to human-divine relationship without aspects of organized religion. “I’m not religious but I’m a very spiritual person.” So sometimes it’s a hard word to use – it’s hard to know what baggage people bring to the discussion. But we are thinking of faith and the fruits of faith created and maintained by the Holy Spirit.

Another word frequently used in this kind of study is “piety”. What is usually meant here is an inward devotion to Jesus Christ; daily repentance under the cross and renewed dedication to the will of Christ. It is not only a quality of the human emotion. It involves a sharpening of one’s faculties since the closer one grows to God, the more aware he becomes of the need to discriminate between truth and error, good and evil. “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God (Phil 1:9-11).

Piety is heartfelt devotion and consecration to God. It is intimately linked to organizing patterns of lifestyle – the way we seek to give concrete or practical expression to our faith. It involves a commitment of every aspect of life. It involves a synthesis of a fear of and love for God. A key enemy of piety is secularization as well as shallow intellectualism or emotionalism.

³ Cited by Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way*, p. 26. McGrath, in *Spirituality in an Age of Change*, further says that classic evangelical spirituality “represents a systematic and coherent approach by which the totality of the scriptural witness to the real and redemptive action of God through Christ could be focused upon and channeled into the everyday world.” (p. 18,19).

⁴ Cited by Tony Jones, *ibid*, p. 26,27.

This mention and clarification of piety is to serve as a warning against the “piety” endorsed by Friedrich Schleiermacher and those who continue to echo his ideas. He spoke of piety as only a feeling of utter dependence on God. This ends in surrender and resignation, but not active obedience or ethical pursuit. Personal religious experience cannot be the source or norm of theology, but the channel through which it is mediated. Similarly, we also want to beware of Schleiermacher’s idea that, to awaken piety, there are other “bibles” comparable to Scripture.

Other terms are commonly used by people who write about this and related subjects. “Devotion to God” and “communion with God” are phrases often mentioned. For the most part we recognize the legitimate use of them, since the Bible speaks frequently about consecration, dedication, and commitment to the Lord and the things of God, as well as the fellowship, intimacy, and relationship all believers enjoy with God. Pietism and mysticism in church history have misused terminology like this, but the language itself is acceptable and often useful.

This, then, is basically what we all want and yearn for in our Christian lives. We want spirituality and spiritual growth, piety, Christian devotion, and an intimacy with God that reflects a strong relationship. But how might we best go about obtaining this?

How do we get spiritual growth? Is it God’s work or is more involved?

Spiritual rebirth, life, and transformation are works of grace. It is all God’s work. It is a pure gift. This is not said to deny the post-conversion cooperation (synergism) of the new self within us, but to remind ourselves that in matters of sanctification the power of God surrounds our efforts and leads us along the way. It may be rightly understood to say what we bring to the process is our submission, willingness to change, and assent to God’s grace. “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.” “Be it done to me according to your will.” But the Holy Spirit had to make the unwilling willing. It’s all about grace and we know it.

In the history of devotional yearning and writing this grand truth has sometimes been lost or obscured, so we want to speak the truth clearly. It simply must be recognized that authentic renewal and intimacy with God rests upon the Holy Spirit. He alone enables us to pray (or preach or teach) with conviction, empowers us for service, or pours meaning into the language of faith, or enlightens those who receive this language. A rediscovery of the role – and means – of the Spirit is always needed during our earthly pilgrimage to glory.

C.S. Lewis is one among many who said he could not give advice on “pursuing God” and also said he “never had that experience.” Then he said, “It was the other way around; He was the hunter (or so it seemed to me) and I was the deer. He stalked me, took unerring aim, and fired.”⁵

I recall coming across this statement in my reading: “The goal of Christian spirituality is to be enlivened by God’s Spirit.” We note the passive – when and where the Spirit moves is not fully predictable or controllable. He gives; it is not ours to achieve or earn on our own. God is the giver, we are recipients. So is there any room for human participation?

The Place of Human Effort and the Use of Spiritual Disciplines

C.S. Lewis did more than credit the Lord with giving spiritual life and the believer’s enjoyment of the presence of God. He also reminded people that there is a fairly reliable way to promote God’s absence: “Avoid silence, avoid solitude, avoid any train of thought that leads off the beaten track. Concentrate on money, sex, status, health and (above all) on your own grievances. Keep the radio on. Live in a crowd. Use plenty of

⁵ Cited by Lon Allison in a message, “God the Evangelist” and quoted by Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, p. 122.

sedation. If you must read books, select them very carefully. But you'd be safer to stick to the papers. You'll find the advertisements helpful; especially those with a sexy or a snobbish appeal."⁶

Yes, there are things within our power to discourage or hinder the gracious working of God for our spiritual growth and health. And there are things God has put on our agenda that are not only God-pleasing but carry with them the promise of spiritual growth and vitality. This is basically exposing oneself to and making diligent use of the gospel in word and sacrament, the means of grace. After a brief encounter with Professor emeritus Harold Johnes and the mention of this upcoming course, I received this email message from him:

During our recent, very brief conversation, you mentioned input regarding your Summer Quarter course on devotional material. For whatever it may be worth, I would like to express my opinion regarding a pastor's personal devotional life.

I believe that it is very important that a pastor's relationship with our Savior continue to mature day by day throughout his entire life. I believe that healthy maturing requires continuing personal study of the ENTIRE Bible and prayer.

Without doubt such maturing, or the lack of it, will have a determining effect on all aspects of his life such as his thinking, his ministry, his family, etc.

The good professor's counsel is not to be taken lightly. Not only do we acknowledge the importance of lifelong spiritual growth and admit that we may place hindrances to the Spirit's gracious work in it, but we also ask if there are methods or procedures that might enhance or facilitate a fruitful use of the means of grace. This kind of question takes us directly toward the subject of "devotional classics" and the "spiritual disciplines" exhibited or endorsed in so many of them. Though they sometimes worked with different definitions of key Bible terms (grace of God, saving faith, even Word of God) the authors of the so-called devotional classics all claimed to delight in the revelation of God in Scripture and looked to the grace of God as the primary cause of spiritual growth and illumination. But they also invariably practiced and recommended accompanying spiritual disciplines that they found helpful in the quest for intimacy with God.

Kenneth Boa offers a succinct summary as a starting point:

There is no standardized list of spiritual disciplines, but some are more prominent in the literature than are others. Richard J. Foster develops a three-fold typology of inward disciplines (meditation, prayer, fasting, and study), outward disciplines (simplicity, solitude, submission, and service), and corporate disciplines (confession, worship, guidance, and celebration). Dallas Willard divides the disciplines into two classes: disciplines of abstinence (solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice) and disciplines of engagement (study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission). Other writers categorize other activities, including journaling, dialogue, witness, stewardship, and listening, as disciplines.⁷

Boa then lists twenty such disciplines and says these are merely "tools to help us grow". He also cautions against trying to practice all of them rigorously and admits that temperament and circumstances will lead people to more of one and less of another in their lives. Finally, he also encourages everyone not to dismiss any discipline completely lest unique benefits be forfeited. This is Boa's list of twenty disciplines: solitude and silence, prayer, journaling, study and meditation, fasting and chastity, secrecy, confession, fellowship, submission and guidance, simplicity, stewardship, and sacrifice; worship and celebration; service, and witness. To one degree or another, more or less of these disciplines will be found in the devotional classics within Christendom.

⁶ Quoted by Philip Yancy, *ibid.*, p. 121-122.

⁷ Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, p. 82.

Mel Lawrenz⁸ categorizes “types of Christian spirituality” into four main groupings and then supplies descriptive terms to each group in this manner:

<u>The Activist Approach</u>	<u>The Contemplative Approach</u>
Action	Quietism
Engagement	Withdrawal
Visibility	Hiddenness
Pursuing God as holy	Pursuing God as love
<u>The Intellectual Approach</u>	<u>The Mystical Approach</u>
Intelligibility	Ineffability
Analysis	Intuition
Activity	Passivity
Pursuing God as truth	Pursuing God as one

Many, perhaps most, advocates of spiritual disciplines recommend that we strive to have a variety of them represented in our devotional lives. This is to maintain a proper “balance” in our lives – and to cultivate parallel devotional “skills” so we’ll be well-rounded – much like a gymnast who desires to be good at floor exercise & balance beam, but not poor at parallel bars or vaulting. In the end, temperament as well as time and inclination will determine if or how many of the disciplines we seek to develop.

Keeping an Eye on Doctrine as well as Spiritual Disciplines

When we examine the underlying theologies or doctrinal assumptions that serve as the foundation for these disciplines, we might join most historians and conclude there are basically three different approaches to understanding the way to be holy and perfect before God. The Greek or “Eastern” approach is essentially deification, an imparting of the divine life into the soul from Christ through the Holy Spirit. The medieval Western approach is often defined as three-fold: the purifying (cleansing from sin), the enlightening (illuminating of the mind), and the becoming one with God experientially. This three-fold progression is seen as repeated experiences in the journey of the soul from being self-centered to God-centered and delighting in God’s presence. And the Protestant approach is centered on the relationship between justification and sanctification. It emphasizes the forensic (declaratory) nature of forgiveness, the alien or outside-of-us nature of Christ’s righteousness imputed to us, and the new life that issues from the sinner’s embracing this good news through faith.

Other writers and historians classify differing kinds of approaches to spirituality into two basic types: mystical and evangelical. Mystical approaches to spirituality find their source in Neo-Platonism, syncretism with mystery religions of Graeco-Roman world, later Hinduism and Buddhism – and from Bible statements that speak of mystical union or use imagery that reminds the reader of personal intimacy with Christ. What is meant here are sections like John 14 (We will come to him and make our home with him), John 15 (I am the Vine, you are the branches), John 17 (May they also be in us), the many references to the believers being “in Christ” (Gal 2:17, 2:20), and the phrase in 2 Pe 1:4 about our being made to “participate in the divine nature.” At any rate, mystical approaches are invariably centered in a direct, personal experience of ultimate reality. The immanence of God is a clear focus and the mystical experience is seen as an encounter with mystery & therefore ineffable (ultimately indescribable, indefinable). Nevertheless, it is usually said that Jesus is being experienced as perfect revelation or mirror of divine love beyond his being substitutionary sacrifice. And it is invariably linked to renewed sense of cleansing, illumination, and union.

⁸ In *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation*, p. 27.

Evangelical approaches are (in our circles) almost always described as wholly biblical rather than only partially so. The accent is on the transcendence and majesty of God, though his personal nature is highlighted. Union with God is centered in the relationship perfectly set forth in Jesus. Man is not at all a part of God. Incarnation, redemption, forgiveness, reconciliation are central (not so much medicinal, healing, or transformational). Grace is always the unmerited favor of God, not a power or substance. New life in Christ and expressions of that life are more of a focus than is union with God – so a stronger ethical note is common here than in the mystical.

Even our brief mention of these assumptions and approaches shows that the discerning reader will want to be alert and thoughtful while reading works by various church fathers. These underlying theologies are certainly of tremendous importance in any study of how sinners become forgiven and saved sinners, and how believers become spiritually strong and mature. And each of the spiritual disciplines advocated by Christian devotional advocates must also be appraised and examined in the light of these assumptions. Truthfully stated, each of the disciplines can be practiced for theologically good and right reasons and each of them can be put into practice for wrong, inaccurate or inadequate reasons.

Because using devotional classics invariably exposes the reader to differing theologies and assumptions regarding the nature and source of spiritual life and growth, we must be especially alert in distinguishing between what is good, what is bad, and what is immaterial or non-doctrinal in nature. My observation is that those who most actively encourage the use of these classical writings tend to ignore or at least downplay doctrinal distinctions. The point is often made, for example, that in basically all theological traditions God has produced saints. The conclusion is then drawn that each of the approaches is capable of producing and maintaining genuine Christians. And thus the impression is given that doctrinal issues are either relatively unimportant or at least less important than seeking spirituality according to the theology of one's choice.

We are well aware that God graciously may bring people to faith and preserve them in faith despite flawed confessions and some error mixed with the truth of the gospel. He may have done that very thing with many of the writers whose writings are normally labeled “devotional classics.” Our high calling in Christ, however, never involves minimizing error, much less ignoring or excusing it. The Lord who spoke through wicked Balaam and godless Caiaphas may allow truths to be channeled through heterodox fathers as well. Our task remains clear: “Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.” (1 Th 5:19-22)

At the Heart of It All: Divine or Spiritual Reading But What Kinds of Works Should We Read?

Of all of the “spiritual disciplines” referred to above and among the various “approaches” to spiritual growth mentioned above, our focus on devotional classics takes us mainly to the so-called “contemplative” and “intellectual” kinds of discipline. More narrowly defined, the use of devotional classics usually involves (in differing degrees of intensity) the practice of “divine reading” (*lectio divina*) or “spiritual reading”. Historically, the practice of *lectio divina* is said to have been introduced to the Western church by the Eastern (but transplanted to southern Gaul) desert father John Cassian in the early 5th century. The standard definition or description of the divine reading of Scripture usually comprises four elements:

1. *Lectio* (reading) – usually a short text; read it several times (may be few verses of a chapter or more read in morning or evening reading).
2. *Meditatio* (meditation) – take a few minutes to reflect on words & phrases. Ponder the passage, asking questions & using the imagination to picture events and conversations.
3. *Oratio* (prayer) – having internalized it, offer it back to God as personalized prayer.

4. *Contemplatio* (contemplation) – this consists largely of silence and “yieldedness” in God’s presence. This is fruit of dialogue in the first three elements.⁹

In this discipline of a meditative and contemplative use of sacred writings, a few clarifications are important. The first has to do with the relationship of the Bible itself to supplemental writings based on or reflecting the canonical Scriptures. For Christians the Bible is the *primary* book for spiritual reading. Perhaps for some Christians it is seen as the *only* book to be used for one’s devotional life. But I suspect that Eugene Peterson, in the following words, aptly describes the perspective of the majority of believers:

In the course of reading Scripture, it is only natural that we will fall into conversation with friends who are also reading it. These leisurely, relaxed, ruminating conversations continue across continents and centuries and languages by means of books – and these books offer themselves for spiritual reading. After a few years of this, as with the Scriptures themselves, most of our spiritual reading turns out to be rereading. C.S. Lewis once defined an unliturgical person as “one who reads books once only.”¹⁰

For several reasons we want to be clear in this matter of selecting reading material. For us there is no book to replace the Bible; no other literature can ever be of equal worth to the sacred Scriptures. All other books, however deeply pervaded by a genuinely Christian spirit, must be assigned a secondary and a supplementary role. Only in the Old and New Testaments is found the authoritative record of God’s saving, redeeming and reconciling work for humankind. The Bible is unique and irreplaceable.

Why, then, it may be asked, should we bother with other books about faith, morals and spirituality? Peter Toon offers this explanation:

If a Christian has only a small amount of time to read then she or he surely ought to read only the Bible, and perhaps only the Gospels. However, if it is the case that there is sufficient time for reading alongside and with the sacred Scriptures, then what could be better than the reading of what we may call the classics of spirituality produced in the Church over the centuries since the death of the apostles. These books have a particular way of sending their readers back to the Bible with more insight and commitment to benefit from hearing it aloud or meditating upon it personally. Further, the reading of these classics produces a desire and a tendency (as meditating upon Scripture also especially does) to seek God – “My soul thirsts for the living God.”¹¹

The *sola Scriptura* principle of the Reformers is firmly embraced by us. Yet, like the Reformers, we do not exclude the use of extra-biblical works. We recall Martin Luther’s and Martin Chemnitz’s familiarity with the writings of the church fathers as well as Luther’s work with the *Theologia Germanica*. In his Preface to that volume Luther wrote, “Indeed, this book does not float on top, like foam on water, it rather has been fetched out of the rock bottom of Jordan by a true Israelite.” To cite an example beyond our doctrinal fellowship, we note how John Wesley prayed he would be a man of one book (*homo unius libri*) – yet enthusiastically & profitably read other books (and edited and published *The Christian Library* in 50 volumes between 1750 and 1756, containing edited selections from wide variety of writers on the Christian life). The wholehearted allegiance to the Bible coupled with an appreciation and secondary use of other writings is, with few exceptions, reflected among us. W.B. Sprague is quoted on this subject by D.A. Harsha as follows:

Though the Bible is *the* Book above all others, yet it is by no means the only book from which the spirit of devotion is to be inhaled – the world is full of books which have drawn their materials substantially from the Bible; some of which are designed simply to explain its meaning; others to enforce and impress its blessed truths; and not a few, like the Psalms of David, bring the soul into direct communion with

⁹ See Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, p. 96-97.

¹⁰ Eugene Peterson, *Take and Read*, p. x.

¹¹ Peter Toon, *Spiritual Companions*, p. 2.

God. . . . Notwithstanding the deluge of trash that has come in under the assumed character of religious literature, the world abounds with works that reflect the truths of the Bible in sunbeams, and that bring these truths in direct contact with the conscience and the heart. Such works, judiciously selected, it is desirable that every Christian should avail himself of, in the prosecution of his religious course; and in so doing, while the general tone of his religious life will be quickened, he will secure to himself a larger measure of that dependent, grateful, confiding spirit that loves to breathe out its offerings at the throne of the Heavenly grace.¹²

C.F.W. Walther expresses the same kind of viewpoint regarding our use of extra-biblical writings for spiritual growth and the obtaining of wisdom. In a sermon based on 1 Tm 4:13 and delivered at a pastoral conference, Walther said this:

But with his admonition: “Give attention to the reading”, that is, in the Scripture, the apostle is in no way showing that a preacher is not allowed to take time to also read other human writings, but it is much rather requiring him to seriously do that by the words: “Give attention”. Remember the apostle says specifically in another place: “Can all exposit?” He is saying: No! For in another place he goes on to say: “To one is given by the Spirit to speak of wisdom; to another is given to speak of knowledge, according to the same Spirit; to another prophecy”, that is, Scriptural exposition. But now this same apostle says that those gifts are given to the individuals “for the common use”, and St. Peter writes, “Serve one another with the grace that you have received as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. . . .”

So it is in vain if a preacher boasts of his diligent reading in the holy Scripture, who in this uses his own gifts but wants to leave the expositions of those who truly understand Scriptures and the right application of the Scriptures lay [sic], which God has already bestowed on the church in the writings of an Augustine, a Luther, a Chemnitz, a Gerhard and other abundantly gifted teachers. . . . This [“Give attention to the reading”] stands as a command to the preacher to avail himself of the food pantry and the arsenal of Scripture and to press ever deeper into it. By this the apostle shows to every servant of the church . . . must never stop wanting to learn The apostle is here making an exception of no one. Whether a preacher has already reached the Scriptural knowledge of a Timothy, and he is eloquent and mighty in the Scripture as Apollos, or weak in knowledge and gifts; whether he might have his office in a major city or in a despised Bethlehem; . . . The apostle cries out to each one: “Give attention to the reading.”¹³

The accumulated wisdom of the Church, much of which has been expressed in so-called devotional classics, should not be dismissed out of hand. In the spiritual gifts distributed by the Holy Spirit among his people and listed in Bible sections like Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, the gifts of teaching, encouraging, and wisdom are prominently displayed. We do well to seek the gift of discernment as we appreciate and make use of works made available through gifts to fellow pilgrims who have gone before us.

A second and closely related issue that surfaces in the matter of divine or spiritual reading is that of which non-Bible books should be used. By definition, any focus on “devotional classics” directs us to works produced by people who have passed on – “dead Christians”, to use Eugene Peterson’s attention-getting phrase. That means these writings have been tested by more than one generation and have been given passing marks. It means that what these Christians wrote has been validated by something deeper than short-lived fashion or fad. For a writing to be a “classic” means simply that many people over a sustained period of time have testified that they have drawn strength from its insights and attest to its value. Peter Toon offers this definition: “I would say that a classic is a book which is, and has been, recognized in large parts of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church as an important, formative influence towards holiness and Christian maturity. Further, it can be read over and over again and nearly always with profit.”¹⁴

¹² D. A. Harsha, *Devotional Thoughts of Eminent Divines*, p. xii, xiii.

¹³ C.F.W. Walther, in an unpublished manuscript of a portion of the original *Lutherische Brosamen*, translated by Joel Beasley.

¹⁴ Peter Toon, *Spiritual Companions*, p. 3.

C.S. Lewis is on record as saying, “A new book is till on trial, and the amateur is not in a position to judge it. . . . The only safety is to have a standard of plain, central Christianity (‘mere Christianity’ as Baxter called it), which puts the controversies of the moment in their proper perspective. Such a standard can only be acquired from old books. It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between.”¹⁵

All of this is not said to despise or even discourage the use of more contemporary writings. They might be worthy of our attention and might stand the test of time. But in general it is very difficult to judge which currently popular books really deserve the title of “classic.” On the selection of reading materials for ourselves, I heartily recommend the counsel of Eugene Peterson:

Can I suggest a goal? Goal-setting is, for the most part, bad spirituality. But there can be exceptions. I think this might qualify as an exception: over the next five years, develop your own list of spiritual friends. Start with my list, but then gradually remake it into your own. You have to start somewhere. Start here. Eliminate. Substitute. Develop your own list, which over the years will become not a “list” at all, but a room full of friends with whom you have “sweet converse.”¹⁶

A third important question to be asked, following the selection of material to be read, has to do with the reading itself. What exactly is meant by “spiritual reading” or “divine reading”? First of all, spiritual reading does not simply mean reading on spiritual or religious subjects, but reading any book that comes to hand in a spiritual way, which is to say, listening to the Spirit, alert to the voice of God through what is written. Sometimes the phrase “reading with the heart” is used by writers on this topic. In a sense it is a “yielding to the text”, or “letting the message flow into us” rather than by attempting to master the lesson at hand.

In this kind of endeavor we are repeatedly cautioned to read slowly, meditatively, reflectively. But reading leisurely and repetitively doesn’t mean lazily or slovenly. We are told to focus on remembrance, and allow ourselves to be reminded of values that remain of eternal consequence. We may enjoy many new things, but values are as old as God’s creation. The goal is not to seek information as much as inner reformation that we think and live wisely – involving obedience, submission of the will, a change of heart, and a tender, docile spirit.

Most reading today is informational (to fuel ambition or careers or competence), analytical (to figure something out) or frivolous (to kill time). For this reason spiritual reading, for most of us, requires either the recovery or acquisition of skills not currently emphasized by our culture: leisurely, repetitive, reflective reading. As Peterson puts it: “In this we are not reading primarily for information, but for companionship. . . . It is a way of reading that shapes the heart at the same time that it informs the intellect, sucking out the marrow-nourishment from the bone-words.”¹⁷ Repeatedly the counsel is highlighted: read slowly or at measured pace, reread, rethink, word for word. From time to time make short pauses to allow for entrance into heart, soul. If the mind wanders, resume reading. Go beyond information to formation, that we might be formed and molded by what we read.

Mel Lawrenz offers this summary of what he calls “formation reading” as opposed to “information reading”:

- Formational Reading is not concerned with quantity.
- Informational reading is linear, formational reading is in-depth
- Informational reading is to master the text; formational reading is for the text to master you
- Informational reading is problem solving; formational reading is openness to mystery
- Informational reading reads words; formational reading seeks “the Word exposed in the words”¹⁸

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, p. 201-202.

¹⁶ Eugene Peterson, *Take and Read*, p. xiii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. x

¹⁸ Mel Lawrenz, *Spiritual Formation*, p. 63,64.

In reality this whole concept is not a new one in our circles. Do you recall this familiar collect or liturgical prayer? “Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of Thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou has given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.” This began as the Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent and appeared in the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer*. Then it was brought to *The Lutheran Hymnal* in the 1940s, adapted for Christian Worship in the 1990s, and has been appreciated by us all. The “spiritual reading” of Scripture and supplemental material is here to stay. Precisely how we shall go about this and how often we shall do it is what we individually must determine.

**How might we best go about this?
What are things to be kept in mind?**

In regard to the devotional life as exhibited by practitioners of *lectio divina*, mainline Protestantism in general has tended to view it with suspicion. And there are serious historical reasons for this. Reluctance to adopt full-blown spiritual reading techniques and disciplines comes partly because of the protest against works-righteousness, false asceticism, imbalanced quietism, and mysticism largely divorced from the sacred Scriptures. It is no challenge to compile a catalog of spiritual dangers that too often accompanied those who devoted their lives to spiritual disciplines. On the other hand, it is good for us to recall that various spiritual disciplines were to be found in the lives of many of the Reformers. Lutheran and Protestant Reformers didn’t emphasize them because of other issues that merited more focus at the time. The most discerning Reformers freely critiqued excessive displays of asceticism among the fathers, but remained familiar with legitimate uses of various disciplines. “Fasting and other outward preparations may serve a good purpose, but . . .” We desire to remain alert to the dangers that had surfaced in the fathers and were increasingly abused in the medieval church. We also want to remember that spiritual disciplines, in method and procedure, are essentially neutral and potentially valuable. Perhaps a bit of self-examination is also in place, as voiced by Albert Day:

We Protestants are an undisciplined people. Therein lies the reason for much dearth of spiritual insights and serious lack of moral power. Revolting, as we did, from the legalistic regimens of the medieval church, we have forgotten almost completely the necessity which inspired these regimens, and the faithful practices which have given to Christendom some of its noblest saints.¹⁹

A relatively early Lutheran historian, Johann Mosheim (1694? – 1755), offered this balanced and discriminating appraisal of the writings of mystic and monastic fathers:

[These writings] would be perused with greater profit, were it not for the gloomy and morose spirit which they everywhere breathe. . . In what estimation they ought to be held, the learned are not agreed. Some hold them to be the very best guides to true piety and a holy life; others, on the contrary, think their precepts were the worst possible, and that the cause of practical religion could not be committed to worse hands. . . . To us it appears that their writings contain many things excellent, well considered, and well calculated to kindle pious emotions; but also many things unduly rigorous, and derived from the Stoic and Academic philosophy; many things vague and indeterminate; and many things positively false, and inconsistent with the precepts of Christ.²⁰

There are dangers in spiritual disciplines that remain potentially deadly or crippling in our midst. Here is a partial list of prominent errors that call for our vigilance:

¹⁹ Quoted by Donald Bloesch, *The Crisis of Piety*, p. 64.

²⁰ Johann Mosheim, *Ecclesiastical History*, cited by W.H.T Dau in *Luther Examined and Reexamined*, available on the Internet at http://www.ihaystack.com/authors/d/w_h_t_dau/index.htm, p. 3.

- *Moralism* as an attempt to make oneself worthy to God is never far from any of us because of the inborn *opinio legis*. (It has been wisely observed that a holy life divorced from sound doctrine soon becomes moralism or legalism just as doctrine apart from a holy life is rank intellectualism.) Repeatedly we must recall that spiritual disciplines are never meritorious, though practical value in sanctification. Not on account of our works – nor apart from our works – is the reality of justification.
- *Escapism* and *false asceticism* also surface too often here – to seek to lift ourselves above the world or withdraw from it into a private world of contemplation. In this connection we need only remember the many ways that Neo-Platonism or Manichaeism had undesirable impacts in the history of the church. Service *in* the world, not isolation from the world is the will of God.
- There has been and still frequently is that brand of *mysticism and subjectivism* that separates the practitioner of spiritual disciplines from the Word and makes personal experience the judge or criterion of truth. Closely linked to this kind of error are exaggerated forms of mysticism like *quietism*.
- *Pharisaism or elitism*, the pretense of being more spiritual than we really are or superior to our brothers and sisters, is sadly an observed companion of too many people who seek spiritual growth via these disciplines.
- *Perfectionism*, the false view that entire sanctification is possible this side of glory, merits mention on the list of potential dangers. Being perfect is to remain our goal, but it will be unfulfilled this side of the second resurrection.
- *Rigorism* (rigoristic legalism) has been observed in this sphere of activity as well. This refers to a kind of mindset that sees rigid and demanding efforts as a condition for one's relationship with God, or makes the disciplines into inflexible standards that burden the conscience, or turns the activity into something oppressive rather than liberating, seeing it as compulsory rather than voluntary.

Returning briefly to the subject of mysticism and quietism, perhaps there is value in observing that differentiating between kinds of “mystics”. Mysticism is a broad term, but what is usually assumed is a belief that one can achieve direct consciousness of God or truth or guidance through meditation and intuition *aside from the written Word of God*. With that kind of definition we are quick to ask, “Why is there a need for absorption in the Cloud of Unknowing [the subject of a 14th-century writing on mystical contemplation] when we have sufficient information spelled out so clearly in the inspired and inerrant Scriptures? And isn't that emphasis on personal experience a bit egocentric? Isn't this also an invitation to subjectivism of the worst sort?” These often very valid suspicions gave rise to the famous saying that “myst-i-cism begins with mist, puts the I in the center, and ends in schism.” Frankly, we want no part of that.

Among the most dangerous and unacceptable kinds of mysticism is quietism. Though the Roman Catholic Church has been the seed bed of much of this malformed approach to spirituality, Catholicism itself acknowledges the problems inherent in this approach. Consider this entry in the Catholic Encyclopedia (at “Quietism”):

Quietism (Latin *quies, quietus*, passivity) in the broadest sense is the doctrine which declares that man's highest perfection consists in a sort of psychical self-annihilation and a consequent absorption of the soul into the Divine Essence even during the present life. In the state of “quietude” the mind is wholly inactive; it no longer thinks or wills on its own account, but remains passive while God acts within it. Quietism is thus generally speaking a sort of false or exaggerated mysticism, which under the guise of the loftiest spirituality contains erroneous notions which, if consistently followed, would prove fatal to morality.

In the Eastern Church this is related to variations in “apophatic” or negative theology, based on the idea that all human conceptions of God, including language, are inadequate. (Recall the “hesychasm” brand of asceticism and mysticism that flourished for a time in the Eastern Church, often involving the repeated, formulaic use of the Jesus Prayer.) The presupposition behind these distorted approaches to spirituality is that

the only way we can achieve union with God is by ceasing all ideas and/or all language – and then approach God in emptiness (e.g., with silence and fasting).

Mysticism of this sort merits no support or endorsement from any of us. But other writers speak of a somewhat different kind of “mysticism” which is not at all interested in quietism or apophatic disciplines. The giants of the so-called Scholasticism (ca. 1100-1500) were largely inseparable from the written Word yet retained a confidence in the Holy Spirit’s ability to reveal God to a soul in ways distinguishable from (but not contrary to) a text of Scripture being used at a given time. So they have been labeled “mystics” while their brand of “mysticism” was not subjective or egocentric as was much later mysticism. Perhaps the term “mystic” simply should not be used for them. Martin Luther, in giving counsel regarding contemplative prayer, wrote:

I repeat here [concerning the Ten Commandments] what I previously said in reference to the Lord’s Prayer: if in the midst of such thoughts the Holy Spirit begins to preach in your heart with rich, enlightening thoughts, honor him by letting go of this written scheme; be still and listen to him who can do better than you can. Remember what he says and note it well and you will behold wondrous things in the law of God.²¹

Do such words make Luther a mystic? Not by normal definition. This is simply acknowledging that the Spirit may communicate with us in a mystical manner, aside from a mental focus on a particular portion of the Word of God. The revealed Scriptures remain the standard of truth and are not far from the Spirit who brings truth to our attention or remembrance. Perhaps this divine activity is analogous to what we speak of as the Spirit’s influence with a called worker while he or she deliberates on calls received. This is never to be separated from the diligent use of Scripture yet lies somewhat beyond the citing of Scripture as such. We may say there is mystical activity, but would prefer that the term “mysticism” not be used. Not all writers dealing with writers of devotional classics are as careful to make these distinctions, however. While we can’t quickly solve the problems related to writers’ use of the term “mysticism”, we can at least be aware there are differing meanings and appraisals being used.

Other dangers and tensions that surface in periodically in devotional classics may also be mentioned. Here are three that the observant reader will confront too often:

- One would be *the failure to grasp the forensic nature of justification* grounded in the alien righteousness and merits of Jesus Christ. Donald Bloesch makes mention of this kind of error when he says, “For the mystics man is justified not on the basis of what he is declared to be in Christ but on what he might become through divine grace.”²² The failure to clarify the forensic nature of justification invariably runs the risk of blurring the relationship between justification and true sanctification and often allows civic righteousness to be treated as sanctification.
- Yet another tension that has been identified is the “ahistorical” perspective of many devotional and monastic writers. Sometimes the “birth of the Son of God in the soul” is seen as more important than the historical incarnation of Christ. Thinking along these lines the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus are used primarily as dramatizations of the death and rebirth of the soul, not as the heart of the objective and historical gospel and basis for objective justification. This is not right or spiritually wise.
- A final danger observable among some mystical writers is their seeking the immanent God at the expense of his transcendence. The God of the Bible is both immanent and transcendent, the God who is in and through all things yet whom the highest heavens cannot contain. Some who have been strong advocates of contemplative disciplines end up advocating a kind of “pantheism” that tends to make God and the world mutually dependent, while the God of the Bible can very well exist apart from the world and its creatures.

²¹ Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*, in *LW*, vol. 43, p. 201-202.

²² Donald Bloesch, *Crisis of Piety*, p. 121.

Challenges to Spiritual Reading that Are Not Doctrinal or Theological

There are also a number of non-doctrinal or non-theological tensions and challenges that will confront all who seek to develop spiritual reading disciplines in their lives. One of these is simply the language of the writings. Much of the classic works were written centuries ago and make use of archaic style, long sentences, and less familiar vocabulary. Aside from the original language style, there is often an archaic style of later editions & translations. Then there is their length, their digressions, their allusions to past cultures – all of which can discourage the modern reader. To seek the kernel & remove the husk we do well to seek abridging, rewriting, and editing while keeping the essential message and striving to retain the style of the author. But this is often a daunting task.

To speak bluntly, a kind of laziness or lethargy to devote adequate time and energy to the task is sometimes a factor. The same thing can, of course, be said about reading in general, but applies to spiritual reading as well. In this connection I think of the blunt words of John Wesley to a fellow pastor:

What has exceedingly hurt you in time past, nay, and I fear, to this day, is, want of reading. I scarce ever knew a preacher read so little. And perhaps by neglecting it, have lost the taste for it. Hence your talent in preaching does not increase. It is just the same as it was seven years ago. It is lively, but not deep; there is little variety; there is no compass of thought. Reading only can supply this, with meditation and daily prayer. . . O begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercise. You may acquire the taste which you have not: what is tedious at first will afterward be pleasant. Whether you like it or no, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way; else you will be a trifler all your days, and a pretty, superficial preacher. Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer. Take up your cross and be a Christian altogether. Then will all the children of God rejoice (not grieve) over you.²³

Another potential obstacle to our use of spiritual disciplines, especially those that call us to meditation and contemplation, is that the contemplative lifestyle is not valued in our culture. Mel Lawrenz offers this appraisal of the situation (in *Spiritual Formation*, p. 64,65):

Got the reading *done!* That is often what we think when we slap shut the pages. . . Reading sometimes is nothing more than one more check off the list. In our minds it is one more spiritual accomplishment, one more point toward some invisible merit badge. We trust that somehow, sometime, what we have read will connect with our souls. But for now, it's time to go on to other things. . . The truth is, however, that one of the most important things we can do to be shaped by the good words we read is to allow time for reflection. During such time is when the mind does its amazing work of synthesizing new information with the multitude of ideas already stored, and it's when the Holy Spirit makes connections between new insights and old issues in our lives.²⁴

Our lives have public and private aspects to them. Pressures of culture too often say the public activities, duties, and responsibilities are more important. Function is more valued than being. But often souls are starved, the inner person in us cries for fulfillment of deeper needs. We long for deeper, more spiritual life. We sense we risk becoming what is often said to be “inauthentic” -- only promoters and professors in the shallows of life. We need to nourish this task to know God and, in knowing him better, knowing ourselves more.

The final difficulty that stares us in the face every day is that of time management. How can we make time or find time for such activity on a regular basis? While each of us must answer the question on our own, I personally have found the practical counsel of Eugene Peterson, to be helpful.

²³ Quoted by Mel Lawrenz, *Spiritual Formation*, p. 61.

²⁴ Mel Lawrenz, *ibid.*, p. 64-65.

The appointment calendar is the tool with which to get unbusy. It's a gift of the Holy Ghost (unlisted by St. Paul, but a gift nonetheless) that provides the pastor with the means to get time and acquire leisure for praying, preaching, and listening. . . . It is the one thing everyone in our society accepts without cavil as authoritative. The authority once given to Scripture is now ascribed to the appointment calendar. The dogma of verbal inerrancy has not been discarded, only re-assigned.

When I appeal to my appointment calendar, I am beyond criticism. If someone approaches me and asks me to pronounce the invocation at an event and I say, "I don't think I should do that; I was planning to use that time to pray," the response will be, "Well, I'm sure you can find another time to do that." But if I say, "My appointment calendar will not permit it," no further questions are asked. If someone asks me to attend a committee meeting and I say, "I was thinking of taking my wife out to dinner that night; I haven't listened to her carefully for several days," the response will be, "But you are very much needed at this meeting; couldn't you arrange another evening with your wife?" But if I say, "The appointment calendar will not permit it," there is no further discussion.

The trick, of course, is to get to the appointment calendar before anyone else does. I mark out the times for prayer, for reading, for leisure, for the silence and solitude out of which creative work – prayer, preaching, listening – can issue. I find that when these central needs are met, there is plenty of time for everything else. . . . I venture to prescribe appointments for myself to take care of the needs not only of my body, but also of my mind and emotions, my spirit and imagination.²⁵

Spiritual Reading – a Long-Term Commitment

Assuming that we have given due consideration to potential dangers, faced the related tensions, and dealt with other obstacles involved in the cultivation of a personal version of the *lectio divina*, we may begin to devote ourselves to "spiritual reading". It is not an overnight accomplishment, but an ongoing process. Richard Foster makes a pertinent (and encouraging) observation on this: "We need not be impatient; we need take no measurements."²⁶

In my (admittedly limited) reading on the subject, I have noted a common theme that recurs in the writings of those who encourage us: "This will not be easy." And again, "But the more you practice the better you get." Tony Jones draws this helpful analogy:

It seems like the Christian life is more like being a baseball shortstop: A young player can watch videos, read books by the greatest shortstops of all time, and listen to coaches lecture on what makes a good shortstop; but what will make him a truly good shortstop is getting out on the field and practicing. The only way he'll really get a feel for the game is to field ground ball after ground ball, to figure out when to play the ball on a short hop, how to get his whole body in front of it, why he needs to cheat over when a pull-hitter is at bat, and how to cheat toward second base when the double play is on. The more practice he has, the better he'll be.

Getting a "feel for the game" in following Jesus is much the same. You can listen to innumerable sermons and read countless books, but the true transformation happens only when you practice the disciplines that lie at the heart of faith. . . . There is a noteworthy difference, however, between athletic discipline and the Christian spiritual life. While athletic practice makes us stronger, physically and mentally, so we're more present during a competition, spiritual discipline means making less of ourselves so we can be more aware of what God is up to.²⁷

Also to encourage us to begin the cultivation of *lectio divina* habits – with their related disciplines, Richard Foster offers this counsel:

²⁵ Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, p. 22-23.

²⁶ Richard Foster, *Spiritual Classics*, p. xiv.

²⁷ Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way*, p. 31-32.

We must not be led to believe that the Disciplines are for spiritual giants and hence beyond our reach, or for contemplatives who devote all their time to prayer and meditation. Far from it. God intends the Disciplines of the spiritual life to be for ordinary human beings: people who have jobs, who care for children, who must wash dishes and mow lawns. In fact, the Disciplines are best exercised in the midst of our normal daily activities. If they are to have any transforming effect, the effect must be found in the ordinary junctures of human life: in our relationships with our husband or wife, our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbors.²⁸

Sooner or later – and sooner if we behave like products of our impatient and success-oriented culture – we will want to see or experience results of our disciplined lifestyle. Those who have been involved in this kind of activity and who then write books about their experiences, usually offer assurances that the spiritual disciplines generally do yield observable results. Tony Jones makes an attempt to explain why or how traditional devotional disciplines work:

The funny thing is, I can't really tell you *why* they're helpful. I know they work because they have for me, but I'm still confounded by their effectiveness. Maybe it's because the ancient spiritual disciplines cause us to slow down and shut up, something at which most of us are not very good. Maybe it's that there's something mystical and mysterious about these ancient rites, like we're tapping into some pretechnological, preindustrial treasury of the Spirit.

But I think they work because of Jesus. I'm afraid you're not going to get much more explanation from me than that. . . . Christians engage in these spiritual practices not out of duty or obligation but because there is a promise attached: God will personally meet us in the midst of these disciplines.²⁹

On the other hand, we do well to have what might be called realistic goals – perhaps modest goals in a sense. My observation is that the best writers promise no easy steps to instant holiness, no guaranteed plan for personal prosperity, no surefire technique for peace of mind. Nor are these classic books to be viewed as “how-to” kits or texts. The goal is to be fed in the inner self and not necessarily to pick up pointers that promote professional expertise. And sometimes, to state it honestly, we might be working with an unrealistic and inappropriate set of definitions about what true spirituality is in daily life. Philip Yancey relates this story with its application:

Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, in a meeting with sociologist Peter Berger, commented on how every Christian is called to engage in “radical obedience” to “God’s program of justice, righteousness, and peace.” Berger responded with the observation that Mouw seemed to be working with a rather grandiose notion of radical obedience. He said, “Somewhere in a retirement home there is a Christian woman whose greatest fear in life is that she will make a fool of herself because she will not be able to control her bladder in the cafeteria line. For this woman, the greatest act of radical obedience to Jesus Christ is to place herself in the hands of a loving God every time she goes off to dinner.” This is a profound point. God calls us to deal with the challenges before us, and often our most “radical” challenges are very “little” ones. The call to radical obedience may mean patiently listening to someone who is boring or irritating, or treating a fellow sinner with a charity that is not easy to muster, or offering detailed advice on a matter that seems trivial to everyone but the person asking for the advice.³⁰

To dish out a good helping of realism, Yancey has also gathered assorted quotations from people who were, in their lifetimes, recognized as “masters” of various spiritual disciplines. I found them quite sobering and instructive, and here are three of them:

²⁸ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 1.

²⁹ Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way*, p. 17-18.

³⁰ Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, p. 180-181.

- [Henri Nouwen, in the final year of his life] So what about my life of prayer? Do I like to pray? Do I want to pray? Do I spend time praying? Frankly, the answer is no to all three questions. . . My prayer seems as dead as a rock. . . I have paid much attention to prayer, reading about it, writing about it . . . and guiding many people on the spiritual journeys. By now I should be full of spiritual fire, consumed by prayer. . . . The truth is that I do not feel much, if anything, when I pray. There are no warm emotions, bodily sensations, or mental visions. None of my five senses is being touched—no special smells, no special sounds, no special sights, no special tastes, and no special movements. Whereas for a long time the Spirit acted so clearly through my flesh, now I feel nothing. I have lived with the expectation that prayer would become easier as I grow older and closer to death. But the opposite seems to be happening. The words *darkness* and *dryness* seem to best describe my prayer today Are the darkness and dryness of my prayer signs of God’s absence, or are they signs of a presence deeper and wider than my senses can contain? Is the death of my prayer the end of my intimacy with God or of a new communion, beyond words, emotions, and bodily sensations?³¹
- [Thomas à Kempis] And I, unhappy one and poorest of men, how shall I bring you into my house, I who scarce know how to spend a half-hour devoutly? And would that I spent once, even one half-hour worthily!³²
- [John Donne] I neglect God for the noise of a fly, the rattling of a coach, the creaking of a door.³³

I am tempted to react to such statements by casting doubt on the whole enterprise of developing spiritual disciplines. But I am quick to recall how many of the Bible psalms recount times of “dryness and darkness” too. A thoughtful reader of Scripture may well concur with what Yancey observed: “Paul and other letter-writers of the New Testament may describe the Christian life in glowing terms, but reading between the lines you realize that few of their readers were experiencing anything like the victory toward which they were being exhorted.”³⁴

The truth is that all of us are, by nature as well as in our rebirth, related to Dwight L. Moody. When asked if he was filled with the Spirit, he reportedly said, “Yes. But I leak.” No wonder, then, that many who write about the Christian life often report that it gets harder, not easier, as the years go by. And in the opinion of many, despite their personal failures and frailties, at such times the spiritual disciplines offer a worthy effective remedy. Someone who climbs Mt. Everest must rely on years of conditioning; a crash course before the ascent will not suffice. That is something worth remembering since it is by no means unusual for God to allow mountains of inner distress and disappointment to rise before us periodically during our earthly pilgrimages.

Concluding Encouragements

Assuming that you, the reader, are interested in sampling devotional classics as part of your personal devotional regimen, I offer the following summary encouragements:

- *Let us be clear on what we mean by “devotional classics”.* For some people “devotional” means otherworldly or irrelevant. To others the word implies sentimentality, superficiality, or even an unwillingness to face the realities of life. Genuine devotional writings, however, have little to do with these modern misconceptions. Rather, they are writings that aim at “the transformation of the human

³¹ Quoted by Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, p. 185-186.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 186-186.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

personality. They seek to touch the heart, to address the will, to mold the mind. They call for radical character formation. They instill holy habits.”³⁵ Likewise, when some hear the word “classic” they tend to think of obscure, hard to read, and perhaps out of touch with modern concerns. Mark Twain once quipped that a classic is the kind of book everyone wants to have read but no one wants to read. But at this time we are referring to those works that have stood the test of time, have been identified as helpful by more than a few generations of professing Christians, and are therefore likely to be recommended to us or those we serve as desirable tools for spiritual growth and health.

- *Let us also be clear on our purposes and goals in doing this.* Francis Schaefer wrote that spirituality is “not just that we are dead to certain things, but we are to love God, we are to be alive to Him, we are to be in communion with Him, *in this present moment of history*. And we are to love men, and be alive to men as men, and be in communication on a true personal level with men, *in this present moment in history*. . . . Anything less is trifling with God.”³⁶ We agree that this is serious – and wonderful – business. The Bible is hardly bashful in speaking of the Christian’s union with Christ and transformation (metamorphosis) in Christ, as passages like the following testify:
 - I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. . . . My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you. (Gal 2:20, 4:19)
 - 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. (Ro 12:2)
 - And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect (NIV fn: contemplate; Gr: ἀνακαλύπτω) the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Co 3:18)

We are talking about real change: in attitude, in spiritual knowledge, in ethic, in the way we relate to other people, and in character. Bible images linked to “spirituality” include: fruitfulness, growth, maturity, sanctification, holiness, and love. We don’t want to fall into the trap of thinking of the “Christian life” as involvement in political, economic, social concerns that wear us out and result in depression, or merely as activity which keeps the church intact and doctrinally pure. Our primary function cannot be to an institution or some great cause or even other people, but first, foremost, and forever to God. The rest will follow as fruit.

We may also want to recall the wisdom voiced by Leo Tolstoy: “Everybody thinks of changing humanity and nobody thinks of changing himself.” Yet attention to oneself remains the first and most vital priority. This path to personal renewal and then to social and relational influence should not be equated with some kind of joyless asceticism. “Neither should we think of the Spiritual Disciplines as some dull drudgery aimed at exterminating laughter from the face of the earth. Joy is the keynote of all the Disciplines. The purpose of the Disciplines is liberation from the stifling slavery to self-interest and fear. When one’s inner spirit is set free from all that holds it down, that can hardly be described as dull drudgery.”³⁷

So what do we ultimately want? Kenneth Boa identifies seven characteristics of those who attain godly goals in this kind of activity:

³⁵ Richard Foster and James Smith, *Devotional Classics*, p. 1.

³⁶ Francis Schaefer, *True Spirituality*, p. 15.

³⁷ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 2.

1. *Intimacy* with Christ
2. Fidelity in spiritual *disciplines*
3. A biblical *perspective* on circumstances in life
4. A *teachable*, responsive, humble and obedient spirit.
5. A clear sense of personal *purpose* and calling
6. Healthy *relationships* with resourceful people
7. Ongoing *ministry* investment in the lives of others³⁸

Boa then comments: “The seven key words are intimacy, disciplines, perspective, teachable, purpose, relationships, and ministry, and it is important to note that these characteristics move from the inside to the outside. The first two concern our vertical relationship with God (being), the next three concern our personal thinking and orientation (knowing) and the last two concern our horizontal relationships with others (doing).” We might disagree with some of his terms or some of the characteristics he has identified, but the overall emphasis is appreciated. And we all surely recognize that maintaining goals like these takes us beyond and above the perspective of secular worldlings. Actor Lee Marvin, who died of a heart attack in 1987, once said: “They put your name on a star on Hollywood Boulevard and you find a pile of dog manure on it. That’s the whole story, baby.” If we are citizens only of this world, that is correct. The best accomplishments will not endure and will not satisfy. But we are citizens of heaven, so our earthly goals will reflect that.

- *Let us be alert to possible uses of the information and insights we may gain in this kind of study.* Georgia Harkness asks, “How should these writings be used?” and then gives her list of possibilities:
 1. One may read them as one would any other significant writing from the past, for the interest they elicit or the information they give. They reveal many things about the period of their writing.
 2. They may serve as a manual of personal devotions on a mature level. These are of enduring value, not at all ephemeral or superficial. They may serve as the basis of fruitful Christian reflection. Personal prayers may echo much of what is given here.
 3. They may supplement other devotional material to serve a curriculum for spiritual retreats and other group use or communal study.
 4. They may serve as useful components for public worship, incorporated into introductions to Bible readings as well as used in sermons and devotional pieces for less formal worship settings.³⁹

There is value for us to ask if and how we might make use of this material in the future and, if so, how we envision the use of it for ourselves and possibly with those we serve. Speaking for myself, I have found that learning about the life and times of a devotional classic author and then reading the work produced is often a healthy reminder and illustration of how things often happen in church history. A saying I learned perhaps thirty years ago often comes to mind: “Neglected doctrines have a way of returning to the church with a vengeance.” Theological and ecclesiastical weaknesses and departures from the biblical way often end up paving the way for vigorous reactions and often overreactions. I see this general scenario illustrated in history through devotional writings and am able to use this observation while teaching others. All of this is above and beyond deriving personal transformation benefits from this activity.

- *Finally, let us read with discernment coupled with anticipation.* The need for discernment is quickly apparent whenever we make use of materials produced beyond our own theological and doctrinal

³⁸ Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, p. 451.

³⁹ Georgia Harkness, *A Devotional Treasury from the Early Church*, p. 15-16.

fellowship. The words of Philippians 4:8 call us to exercise discernment in all things: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” Blended with discernment and ongoing appraisal should also be an anticipation of divine blessing. Whenever and wherever the Word of the Lord is expressed and accurately reflected, even when unworthy ideas or falsehoods surface elsewhere in the same writing or writer, let us trust that the Holy Spirit will bless us.

Maybe some brief examples of historical writings can illustrate what is meant here. Here are three excerpts of “classic” devotional writing. Read them, ask if you find helpful insight or truths memorably expressed, and try to articulate what you like (or don’t like) about them.

Sample Excerpt #1: What Might We Learn?

Father in heaven! You have loved us first, help us never to forget that You are love so that this sure conviction might triumph in our hearts over the seduction of the world, over the inquietude of the soul, over the anxiety for the future, over the fright of the past, over the distress of the moment. But grant also that this conviction might discipline our soul so that our heart might remain faithful and sincere in the love which we bear to all those whom You have commanded us to love as we love ourselves.

You have loved us first, O God, alas! We speak of it in terms of history as if You have only loved us first but a single time, rather than without ceasing You have loved us first many times and every day and our whole life through. When we wake up in the morning and turn our soul to You—You are the first—You have loved us first; if I rise at dawn and at the same second turn my soul toward You in prayer, You are there ahead of me, You have loved me first. When I withdraw from the distractions of the day and turn my soul toward You, You are the first and thus forever. And yet we speak ungratefully as if You have loved us first only once.

This excerpt is from the Danish churchman Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). Outside our circles he is highly regarded as a theologian, but remains heterodox and existential in much of what he wrote (largely reacting to the formalistic and shallow Danish Lutheran Church of his day). Yet he here expresses helpful thoughts in clear and memorable language. Let us anticipate finding useful and edifying thoughts like this expressed in devotional classics.

Sample Excerpt #2: What Might We Learn?

God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,

If I surrender to Your will,
 So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
 And supremely happy with You forever in the next.
 Amen.

The second excerpt, including the familiar “Serenity Prayer”, was penned by Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), who was a Neo-orthodox theologian whose theology is often unacceptable to us for a variety of reasons. This piece can again remind us that the heterodox are capable of eloquent, memorable expressions of piety and fully acceptable expressions of a spiritual life.

Sample Excerpt #3: What Might We Learn?

Here’s one more sample of a writing on meditation that’s “just for fun”:

How oft it happens when one's smoking:
 The stopper's missing from its shelf,
 And one goes with one's finger poking
 Into the bowl and burns oneself.
 If in the pipe such pain doth dwell,
 How hot must be the pains of Hell.

Thus o'er my pipe, in contemplation
 Of such things, I can constantly
 Indulge in fruitful meditation,
 And so, puffing contentedly,
 On land, on sea, at home, abroad,
 I smoke my pipe and worship God.

The light-hearted *Edifying Thoughts of a Tobacco Smoker* is actually from J.S. Bach (in his personal and intended to be private *Second Little Clavier Book* <http://www.ramshornstudio.com/pipes2.htm> for Anna Magdalena Bach). Perhaps this can allow us to distinguish between different types or at least levels of contemplation or meditation. And recognize that in our own daily lives, we also practice varying levels of contemplation on revealed truths.

Confident that the Lord will bless our reading and give us adequate ability to appraise the material that is before us, let us consider giving attention to devotional classics..

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.

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

He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

Psalm 1:1-3

Personal, Initial Recommendations for Spiritual Reading

In our circles, we are not much in the habit of recommending blatantly heterodox works. To a large degree, however, to devote oneself to reading “devotional classics” is to spend time with heterodox brothers and sisters who lived and labored under inadequate definitions of theological terms and inaccurate theological systems of thought. Recommending them to potential readers is therefore not to be understood as a wholesale endorsement of the doctrines contained in them. What is being said is that despite errors and misstatements, these works still have much to offer the discerning and thoughtful reader. The most serious and consistent maladies that afflict these writings is the failure to distinguish between law and Gospel as well as justification and sanctification, the inability to grasp the nature of sin and grace, and ignorance concerning the forensic nature of justification.

It should also be emphasized that this list is quite arbitrary, since no authoritative criteria prevail in this genre of literature to tell us what is “must read” material. Those writers and works less than a century old are purposely left out. It may also be noted that some of the books might be difficult to find or even out of print. But that’s what libraries and used book stores are for. Also, many are found in translations that are less than fluent for the modern reader. But this may be a blessing in disguise since it forces the reader to read slowly and ponder the meaning.

Sacred Meditations and *Meditations on Divine Mercy* (“*Daily Exercise of Piety*” renamed) by John Gerhard. “Gerhard’s meditations are as personal and heartfelt as anything produced by the Pietists, but they reflect a much deeper piety because they are based on a truer understanding of the nature of sin and grace and are closely tied to the power of all of the means of grace, including the sacraments” (John Brug). The theology is orthodox. This is spiritual dynamite.

Luther’s Works by Martin Luther. For present purposes I have in mind especially his devotional writings and some sermons (in volumes 42-43 & 51-52 of the *American Edition* of his works) and many of his more exegetical commentaries on books like the Psalms (volumes 10-14 of *AE*) and Romans.

The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel by C.F.W. Walther. This work was not designed as a “devotional” piece, but nevertheless serves this purpose quite well because of the illustrative examples provided and many pastoral insights every Christian will appreciate.

The Benefit of Christ by Juan de Valdés and Don Benedetto. These are selections from *One Hundred and Ten Considerations* and other writings by Valdés and *On the Benefit of Jesus Christ, Crucified* by Benedetto. The authors were Italian Protestant Reformers and these works give a solid treatment of justification especially in its relationship to sanctification. The words feed the soul and are a pointed antidote to intellectualism masquerading as orthodoxy.

True Christianity by Johann Arndt. Yes, this is a work that reflects piety somewhat run amuck with Pietism. But Arndt’s significant influence on the young John Gerhard leads me to be patient with the man and to view his work as a flawed but helpful reaction to what he perceived as a false intellectualizing and imbalanced polemic within Protestantism. Gerhard is much superior, but Arndt is worth a try.

The Confessions by Augustine of Hippo. Eugene Peterson offers this appraisal of this well-known classic: “Spirituality involves taking our personal experience seriously as raw material for redemption and holiness, examining the material of our daily lives with as much rigor as we do Scripture and doctrine. *The Confessions* is the landmark work in this exercise.”

The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis. This is not everyone's favorite but should be on everyone's list for at least a trial period. Medieval monkishness sometimes carries over into the modern world with helpful impact.

Pensées by Blaise Pascal. These are relatively unsystematic thoughts (*pensées*) from one of the most brilliant scientists and mathematicians of the seventeenth century. But they are often profound and relate a search for an authentic experience of God. The material is uneven but overall useful.

The Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan. Although this most memorable allegorical tale represents a radical Protestant stance (hyperCalvinism) and may be accused of being imbalanced (with little or no appreciation for the created world, the helpful brotherhood, or evangelism efforts), it has given names and situations that permeate much of our literature.

The Love of God by Bernard of Clairvaux. The 12th-century abbot wrote many things on many subjects, but love remains his theme – a non-sentimental yet warmhearted love that reflects knowledge of God and self. Occasionally obtuse, his works still yield food for thought.

The Dark Night of the Soul [and maybe *Counsels of Light and Love*] by John of the Cross. John has been described as a “ruthless realist” who has no time for spiritual illusions and fantasies. His goal of guiding us to build on realities of the faith rather than imagined ecstasies is commendable even when his manner of expression is less appreciated. This work, composed while the author was imprisoned and brutally mistreated (by fellow, feuding Carmelites), diagnoses spiritual maladies and warns that growth often comes through divinely sanctioned distress.

A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life by William Law. Beware: this work of significant influence and enduring popularity among Protestants is hardly evangelical in tone; it is strenuous and conditioned by the austere setting (18th-century England). The value I perceive mirrors what Eugene Peterson saw and recorded first: “The insistence that everything believed about God be at the same time lived out in daily prayer and service sets a standard from which I don't want to stray.”

As stated earlier, more recent writers and works less than a century old were left off this list of “classics”. This is not intended to demean the value that may be derived from C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, Oswald Chambers, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (sometimes), and several other bright thinkers and eloquent advocates of a disciplined spiritual life.

Also, assuming at least some proficiency in the Latin or German language (or in the case of John of the Cross, Spanish), it is recommended that people make the effort to read many devotional classics in the original. Perceived benefits of doing this include the following:

- The nuance of the original piece is retained and different ways of expressing spiritual emphases are learned.
- The reader is often slowed down to allow more time for meditation.
- The reader is reminded that spiritual reading is a cross-cultural and longstanding phenomenon.
- Foreign language skills will be sharpened.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ I thank especially Pastor Karl Walther as well as the other students in the 2007 summer quarter class for their input on reading devotional writings in foreign languages. This was a subject discussed in the class and Pastor Walther prepared a report outlining these perceived benefits, among others.

Finally, I am aware that the writings of Christian sisters are not well represented in the list. This is partly because, historically speaking, this has been a male-dominated field of labor. But the writings of Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, or Teresa of Avila, among others, are deserving of attention. This is acknowledged, although I felt their works were not as consistently helpful to me as were the ones listed.

Select Bibliography

- Bloesch, Donald. *The Crisis of Piety*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1968. [Identifies the need for spiritual renewal and recommends potential ways and means to move in that direction. Though written forty years ago, the main points in the book remain relevant for today's church.]
- Boa, Kenneth. *Conformed to His Image (Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001. [Explores 12 approaches to spirituality in a fairly comprehensive way. Thorough overview of approaches, written in college textbook style and format.]
- Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline (The Path to Spiritual Growth)*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978. [A combination of the history behind and potential ways to practice various spiritual disciplines. Foster is a member of the Society of Friends.]
- Foster, Richard J. and Smith, James Bryan. *Devotional Classics (Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups)*. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993. [Fifty-two selections that serve to introduce the reader to a wide sampling of devotional writers. The quality of chosen writers is sometimes debatable, the overall this will serve its purpose.]
- Foster, Richard J. and Griffin, Emilie. *Spiritual Classics (Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines)*. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000. [Fifty-two selections of excerpts from devotional writers, with questions and discussion starters for personal or group use.]
- Harkness, Georgia (compiler). *A Devotional Treasury from the Early Church*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1968. [Excerpts from nine writings from the second century of the Christian era. Brief introductions to the writers and their role in history accompany each selection.]
- Harsha, D.A. *Devotional Thoughts of Eminent Divines*. New York, NY: American Tract Society, 1866. [Excerpts from forty mostly Reformed writers from about 1600 to 1850. A decent introduction to influential non-Lutheran writers from the "modern era" in theology.]
- Jones, Tony. *The Sacred Way (Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005. [A straightforward and readable guide to spiritual disciplines, with definitions of terms, historical studies, and invitations to undertake the journey]
- Lawrenz, Mel. *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000. [This work emphasizes potential uses of spiritual disciplines in the corporate life of the church and normal church activities.]
- McGinn, Bernard and Meyendorff, John, editors. *Christian Spirituality (2 Volumes)*. New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1987. [A mini-encyclopedia on the history, theological characteristics, and characteristics of spiritual schools of thought and movements.]
- McGrath, Alister E. *Spirituality in An Age of Change (Rediscovering the Spirit of the Reformers)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. [Examination and exposition of the spirituality exhibited and encouraged by the Protestant Reformers]
- Peterson, Eugene H. *Take and Read (Spiritual Reading: An Annotated List)*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996. [A thorough bibliography for those interested in tasting from and building a personal

library for devotional reading – and other kinds of reading for other kinds of purposes. This is not a confessional Lutheran kind of list, but a conservative Evangelical kind of list and rationale.]

- Peterson, Eugene H. *The Contemplative Pastor*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989. [A call to pastors – and suitable counsel to all called workers – to return to the basics in priorities and activities in their ministry. Straightforward and largely on-target talk.]
- Reuver, Arie de. *Sweet Communion (Trajectories of Spirituality from the Middle Ages through the Further Reformation)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007. [From the Reformed perspective, the book defines concepts like spirituality and mysticism and then treats more in depth five major representatives, including Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas à Kempis.]
- Richards, Lawrence O. *A Practical Theology of Spirituality*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic Books, 1987. [A book that offers a definition of spirituality plus fairly thorough treatments of key elements or aspects of spirituality with suggested ways a person can develop them.]
- Schaefer, Francis A. *True Spirituality*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1972. [Here is a conservative exposition of spirituality, biblically defined; does not touch on the spiritual disciplines as such.]
- Toon, Peter. *Spiritual Companions (An Introduction to the Christian Classics)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990. [Gives 100 brief – less than two pages each – historical and special introductions to 100 classics in Christian spiritual writing.]
- Yancey, Philip. *Reaching for the Invisible God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000. [This is a straightforward treatment on the ever-present doubts and frailties that plague all people, including believers in their desire to know and experience God's presence. This offers a good dose of realism for unrealistic expectations.]