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## DONALD WHITNEY AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

### SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

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*"These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence." (Colossians 2:23)*

In 1971, when I was a new Christian and in Bible College, I had the desire to be the best possible Christian. And while the Holy Spirit imparts to all Christians a desire for holiness (an obvious good thing), potential pitfalls that can lead us off course and harm us always exist. I have shared my story before in *CIC* but it is pertinent to the topic of this article. My desire to be an exceptional Christian led me to pietism, which led me to a Christian community where I worked on practicing holiness in a communal setting. In that community we tried any practice that anyone claimed would bring us closer to God. Sadly, my desire to be closer to God led me away from the truth because I was not committed to the principle of scripture alone. That brings me to our topic.

Many people concerned about Donald Whitney's endorsement of Richard Foster and Dallas Willard (two popular evangelical mystics) have asked me to review his book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*.<sup>1</sup> These people have wondered how someone who claims to be Reformed<sup>2</sup> in theology and teaches at a seminary known for Reformed theology could endorse Foster and Willard. They also wondered if Whitney's own teaching contains Foster's and Willard's same errors. This article is my answer to these requests.

Before I begin my critique, I want to place before you the areas where Whitney and I agree. Whitney has the

gospel right and explains it (Whitney: 28).<sup>3</sup> He is correct that it is the Holy Spirit who imparts a desire for holiness and does so for all Christians. He is correct that the purpose of sanctification is to conform us to the image of Christ. Some of the practices he endorses are valid means of grace (such as the Word of God and prayer). He cites in valid ways many orthodox teachers from church history. He understands that evangelism includes the call to repent and believe and that sharing the gospel constitutes "success" even if people refuse to listen (Whitney: 103). I appreciated his emphasis on the need to study the Bible in a scholarly way in his chapter about learning. And his thesis that we ought to make holiness a priority and take action to that end is a valid implication of his theme verse: "Discipline yourself for the purpose of 'godliness' (1Timothy 4:7b). But I disagree with the manner in which Whitney uses Paul's athletic metaphor in his applications. Paul implies neither asceticism nor sanctification by human effort."<sup>4</sup>

Had Whitney's book been written when I was in Bible College, it would have proven toxic to me. I would have eaten up his ideas and embarked on a plan to put into practice everything he teaches. In fact, taken as a whole, the errors I pursued as a young Christian would be the most practical way to implement Whitney's approach to holi-

ness: join a Christian commune or a monastery. I am very concerned that Whitney will harm young Christians who wish to be the best Christians they can be, just as I was. Because it contains the true gospel and begins with a respect for the scriptures, I believe Whitney's book to be even more seductive than were the teachers I was reading—like Watchman Nee. Ordinary life does not lend itself to the high level practice of asceticism, pietism, and mysticism.

The problems with Whitney's book are these: serious category errors, a lack of boundaries, failure to understand the means of grace, pragmatism, the endorsement of false teachers such as Richard Foster and Dallas Willard without caveat, and his own toned-down version of mysticism. I shall proceed to show what I mean by interacting with his ideas.

### Spirituality Without Boundaries

The Emergent/postmodern crowds speak of "open source" spirituality (a metaphor borrowed from current internet and software practices). This is a colorful way of describing syncretism (the blending of religious beliefs and practices). One can take an idea and make it work within his own system. Like Wikipedia, the users create the content. Whitney has a similar approach. He has blended beliefs and ideas from various sources into a program that promises to sanctify those who follow it.

That he has done so can easily be shown from his opening chapter on "spiritual disciplines." He writes:

This book examines the Spiritual Disciplines of Bible intake, prayer, worship, evangelism, service, stewardship, fasting, silence and solitude, journaling, and learning. This is by no means,

however, an exhaustive list of the Disciplines of Christian living. A survey of other literature on this subject would reveal that confession, accountability, simplicity, submission, spiritual direction, celebration, affirmation, sacrifice, 'watching,' and more also qualify as Spiritual Disciplines. (Whitney: 17)

Notice he states, "and more." It is not a minor claim. This *more* exposes the fundamental flaw in Whitney's thinking that leads him and his followers astray. The practices that purport to sanctify Christians qualify as "open source." There are no boundaries. Some of those listed above are from the Bible, but many are not. We do not find new scriptural sanctifying practices from a survey of "other literature." I have done such a survey and have written a *CIC* article about it entitled "Contemporary Christian Divination."<sup>5</sup> Can just any practice invented by someone in a "Christian" context actually move people closer to God and be legitimate and truly sanctifying? If not, what criteria would Whitney give to determine the boundaries of valid versus invalid practices? He has provided no such criteria.

Let us apply some simple logic to this matter. Who determines what constitutes valid, sanctifying practices? Does God or does man? Unless we want to open the door to everything (e.g., "Christian Yoga,") we must say God determines them. Furthermore, if God exists and God has spoken, then obviously God determines the pathway to Himself. Any version of Christianity outside of liberalism would agree in principle to that. If we reject that idea we must embrace the concept that "all paths lead to God."

Since God determines how we come to Him and how we grow in Him, either God has spoken once for all to reveal the pathway to Him or this pathway is discovered mystically by persons in church history, as the Roman Catholic Church teaches. Reformed Theology, such as that taught at Southern Seminary<sup>6</sup> where Donald Whitney teaches, has always stood on the princi-

ple of *sola scriptura*. Scripture alone is binding and authoritative; mystical experiences or pragmatism are not. So if God determines how we come to Him and grow in Him, He has done so in Scripture (unless we choose to reject the principle of *sola scriptura* in the manner that many do today).

Since Scripture alone reveals how we come to God and grow in God, then Scripture alone must reveal sanctifying practices. Unless God said (through Scripture), "If you come to me in faith according to these terms and means, I will meet you," then we cannot proceed validly in faith by any particular practice. I will discuss specifics later. For now we are showing that sanctifying practices are determined by God, are revealed in Scripture, and are exclusive. That is to say that God has determined the boundaries of how to legitimately pursue sanctification. We are not denying that mystical experiences exist; we are denying that God has promised to sanctify us through them. What is certain concerning God and how we pursue sanctification is already completely revealed in scripture. If we pursue other means of sanctification, what we obtain is not true sanctification but something else.

In Whitney's case, he gets the first part right (how we come to God through the true gospel by faith) but fails on the second part (how we grow in God in sanctification). His list of practices includes many that are not revealed in Scripture. They are apparently pragmatically determined.

Let me illustrate. What does "Bible intake" have in common with "silence and solitude"? Nothing. (I do not like his terminology "Bible intake" but will assume he means something like the Word of God being a means of grace.) God has promised that he will sanctify us through His word (as Jesus prayed in John 17:17) but He has not promised that we will become sanctified if we sit in solitude. It is not a sin to sit in solitude, but no one can claim that solitude is necessary for sanctification if God has not said that it is. The claim that solitude is necessary based on the idea that Jesus went into the wilderness to pray

amounts to shabby exegesis. Sanctifying practices are not determined by what Jesus did, but by what He commanded us to do. He told us to pray, but He did not make a universal command that all Christians must practice solitude any more than He commanded all of us to walk on water.

So Whitney is out of bounds to tell us we must do certain things that are not in the Bible if we want to achieve godliness on no other grounds than he said so. He provides arguments in order to justify some of his other practices, but shabby and weak arguments are not valid and should not be heeded. For example, when he teaches us to practice journaling he says this: "Though journaling is not commanded in Scripture, it is modeled" (Whitney: 205). The proof he offers are the Psalms, parts of Jeremiah, and Lamentations. This provides us a good opportunity to practice our hermeneutics. Whitney's claim is that journaling will make us more like Jesus (Whitney: 206). The writing of the Psalms and Lamentations was not done because God had made a general promise that if people of faith were to write a journal about their own feelings, experiences, and issues, that God would thereby sanctify them. David and Jeremiah were Holy Spirit-inspired Biblical authors, not people who "modeled" the practice of journaling so that others would do the same. The writers of Psalms and Lamentations wrote scripture that is binding and true. Despite Whitney's claims, our own journaling is a product of our imaginations—and not of scripture. Scripture is a valid means of sanctification and our own imaginative writings are not. What is descriptive (that David, God's prophet, wrote about his feelings and concerns in the Psalms) is not thereby prescriptive and binding. The practice of journaling is not a valid implication from the very existence of the Psalms. Therefore Whitney has "modeled" something himself: the practice of abusing the Scriptures to make them say what they do not say. His modeling concept introduces confusion and reduces the uniqueness of scripture simply to the journaling efforts of yesteryear.

This sloppy thinking is becoming endemic in today's church. When I had opportunity to speak with Rick Warren face to face I described this very issue and problem to him. I told him that he says "keep a journal" with the same degree of authority and tone as when he teaches us to believe and apply Romans 8:28. I told him that I am bound to believe and apply Romans 8:28 because it is Scripture, but I am not bound to keep a journal and I can safely ignore everything Warren says about journaling. He listened politely but neither defended his teaching nor addressed the issue.

I am not shocked that this diminished view of Scripture has entered evangelicalism through the seeker movement. But I am shocked that it has shown up as a means of sanctification in a Reformed version of conservative evangelicalism such as what Whitney represents. Neither Rick Warren nor Donald Whitney can threaten me with lessened sanctification for my refusal to keep a journal. I do not have to obey these men as though they can speak for God bindingly outside of Scripture. I hate writing about my own thoughts feelings, musings, or whatever. I would rather spend my time understanding scripture and learning what God is saying to us there.

That Whitney cites the famous throughout church history who kept journals has no bearing on the topic and does not make it God's law. They were exercising their Christian liberty. What of all the heroes of the faith listed in Hebrews 11? Did they actually fail to reach their true potential by failing to journal? But if journaling was necessary for godliness, why did God fail to tell us so? The same goes for solitude, silence, and other practices not commanded in Scripture. By claiming that such practices are necessary for godliness Whitney is indicting God for failing to adequately inspire the Biblical authors to teach us "everything that is profitable for life and godliness" (2Peter 1:3). Whitney can tell us how he and other nice people value journaling all he likes, and there is no problem. But when he tells us that an extrabiblical practice is

necessary for holiness, it becomes a serious error not to be tolerated. Why? Because now he has opened the door for an unlimited number of possible practices to enter that someone can claim will result in sanctification. Whitney's approach attacks the authority of scripture by removing the boundaries found there. He abuses the church by pushing people to do something with the threat that if they do not obey him, they will fail God (and be less sanctified).

### Faith Needs an Object

We are saved by grace, through faith (Ephesians 2:8). We are sanctified the same way. Consider what Paul wrote: "*This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?* (Galatians 3:2). Paul said this to rebuke them for thinking that they could progress in the Christian life on some different basis than they began. We cannot be saved by faith and then sanctified by works. Whitney, being Reformed in theology, would agree with me on this point. He does discuss the need for faith and the work of the Spirit. But his teachings imply works in many ways, by the metaphors and terminology he uses in order to urge Christians to follow his practices. But there is a huge problem: faith is not some self-existing metaphysical entity; it needs an object.

Christian faith has God and His promises as its object. The book of Hebrews emphasizes this. Consider how the author of Hebrews discusses Abraham:

*For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, . . . so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. (Hebrews 6:13, 18)*

The two unchangeable things are God's oath and God's promise. God cannot lie, and if He has promised, we can, like

Abraham, believe God. The recipients in Hebrews were exhorted to believe God's promises in Christ. God has not promised to meet us under the New Covenant if we keep Sabbath, return to the temple sacrifices, the Day of Atonement, and return to the Levitical priestly system. To do so now would be apostasy. But He has promised to meet us in Christ if we come in faith to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16).

This underscores the problem with "spiritual disciplines" such as taught by Donald Whitney. Since only some of them are commanded in Scripture, and the list of practices is amorphous, they are not based on faith but on syncretism. Why? Because faith needs an object—God and His promises. If God had said, "If you practice journaling in faith I will meet you and make you like Christ," then not only would I have to practice it, I could do so in faith. My hope would not be based in my "work" of journaling, but in my faith that God will keep His promise. But since no such promise exists, I have only my work. Thus in every extrabiblical practice that Whitney calls a "spiritual discipline" necessary for sanctification, he teaches sanctification by works—which Paul rebukes in Galatians. "*Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*" (Galatians 3:3). Faith with no object is not faith as defined in the Bible.

This is the reason that, historically, Reformed and Lutheran theology has taught means of grace, not spiritual disciplines. Means of grace are defined by the Bible and attached to God's promises. If we come to God in faith according to the means He has defined, He has promised to graciously meet us. Lutherans define means of grace as the Word and sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper). Some Reformed theologians such as Charles Hodge have taught that prayer is a means of grace (and I agree with Hodge because of Hebrews 4:16).<sup>7</sup> Whitney's syncretistic, man-made "spiritual disciplines" are replacements for scriptural means of grace as can be seen by his own statement: "The Spiritual Disciplines then are also like channels of God's trans-

forming grace” (Whitney: 19). Whitney’s “means of grace” are largely discovered by mystical spiritual innovators like Richard Foster, not defined by God in Scripture.

The idea that “new means” can create a better Christianity in American evangelicalism can be traced to Charles Finney. Finney opted for new measures and taught human ability to do anything God has commanded.<sup>8</sup> The various versions of Arminian evangelicalism that arose after Finney have minimized or rejected any concept of means of grace. As human ability has been taken as a key assumption (both in deciding for salvation and in practicing sanctification), the idea of means of grace is foreign. Various “higher life” theories and spiritual disciplines were embraced to fill the vacuum.

Thus I am very alarmed about Donald Whitney bringing spiritual disciplines and implied human ability into Reformed theology. If the trend for syncretistic spiritual disciplines and spiritual formation takes over the Reformed versions of evangelical education there will be very few options for young people who want an education grounded in the *solas* of the Reformation. Scripture alone and grace alone are compromised—if not rejected outright—when spiritual disciplines are adopted.

The book of Colossians deals most decisively with this issue. Like the Galatians, they were tempted to begin with Christ and progress by some other means:

*Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. (Colossians 2:6-8)*

Where do extrabiblical spiritual disciplines come from? They come from the

tradition of men. These practices purport to make Christians holy, or even superior to ordinary Christians, but Paul says they make them captive. Illegitimate means of sanctification cause us to stray. We do not begin though faith in Christ, by grace, and proceed according to the traditions of men. Journaling is a tradition of men, and Whitney admits it when he says that Scripture does not teach journaling—only to try to prove his case by citing famous Christians who practiced it. Some might wonder why I am being so hard on him about this. They consider such things as journaling, solitude, and the like to be harmless. That they are harmless is disputable. I would agree they are harmless if those that taught them stated that they had absolutely no value to make you holy or godly. But let us assume for the moment they are harmless (e.g., sitting in the forest in silence is not going to hurt anyone). The harm comes when spiritual value is attached to ordinary practices within the realm of one’s own Christian liberty. Suppose I claimed that eating Cheerios for breakfast would make one more like Christ. Since every Christian has the need to be more like Christ, they would have to eat Cheerios if they believed me. But making food laws is a doctrine of demons (1 Timothy 4:1). What is harmless in other contexts becomes toxic when spiritual value is attached.

Consider another section of Colossians:

*If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence. (Colossians 2:20-23)*

The Colossian heresy was a version of syncretism.<sup>9</sup> Syncretism is the melding together of beliefs and practices from various sources. The key issues are “teachings of men” and “self-made religion,” which are the source of the practices in question. Spiritual disciplines fit both categories: “teachings of men” and “self-made religion.” Extrabiblical spiritual practices indeed have “the appearance of wisdom,” but they also “are of no value against fleshly indulgence.” If someone claims these have spiritual value, they are worse than a waste of time as far as sanctification is concerned. They lead Christians away from the sufficiency of Christ, Paul’s major theme in Colossians.

### **Results of Sanctification are not the Cause of Sanctification**

A number of Whitney’s category errors have to do with cause and effect. The Lutheran and Reformed understanding of means of grace is that when we come to God on His terms, by faith, God graciously works to change us (sanctification). This is by grace through faith. These means are limited to what is ordained in scripture. Luther and the other Reformers needed to define these means in order to apply the principle of scripture alone to refute the claims of Rome. Rome had instituted many practices that supposedly had sanctifying value, and they operated under the principle of “by the work done” (*ex opere operato*)—you get the grace because you did the work.

The reformers, in rejecting Rome and her innovations, had to define where a true church existed. Luther and Calvin solved that problem by stating that where the Word is purely taught and the sacraments (meaning for them baptism and the Lord’s Supper) administered according to the Lord’s institution, the church exists there. If they are there and genuine faith exists, God is at work by His grace saving and sanctifying. The many practices of Rome that claimed to be of spiritual benefit were rejected outright. Grace comes to us by God’s ordained means, not through an unbiblical priesthood teaching unbibli-

cal practices. The church was defined by means of grace.

The means of grace must not be mistaken for the results of grace. There are of course many passages in the Bible that exhort the church, binding us to biblical living. These tell us objectively what sanctification looks like. Obedience to God's commands is the result of grace, and not the cause or means of it. If we teach that we must obey first and then God will give us grace we are teaching sanctification by works, not faith.

Remembering that Whitney claimed that spiritual disciplines are "channels of grace," let's consider some of these "disciplines." For example, one of his "spiritual disciplines" is serving (chapter 7), and "serving" supposedly is a means (his term is "channel") of grace. The implication is that if we serve God, then grace will come. It is true that we are told in many places to serve God by serving the body of Christ. We are to use our spiritual gifts. We are to care for one another. There are close to 100 "one anothers" in the New Testament. A sanctified Christian is certainly a serving Christian. But if "spiritual disciplines" are means of grace and serving is a spiritual discipline, then we have to do the work first and then grace comes. The effect of grace is mistakenly taught as the "channel" of grace.

Some might think that I am being too technical here and that most people would not see or care about this distinction. But Whitney is teaching at a theological seminary alongside others who are supposed to know these things. If he is incapable of understanding the difference between the source of grace and the results of grace, then how are the students in that seminary supposed to learn such an important doctrine? Dear readers, the difference is the difference between the Reformation doctrine and the Roman Catholic idea of "by the work done." It is the difference between believing God's promise and coming to Him on His terms and doing good works like serving and expecting the result of those works will be grace. That is not a minor distinction, but it goes to the core of Christianity itself and was founda-

tional for the Reformation.

We see the same problem in Whitney's claim that stewardship is a spiritual discipline. Yes, we are required to be stewards of all we have, including time and money, which Whitney discusses. True Christians are those who have died with Christ to the world and all its claims on us. But do we make ourselves stewards by spending more time in spiritual activities and giving away as much of our money as possible? Or do we put ourselves under God's means of grace, by faith, and as we study and believe the Bible, become stewards by God's grace? I consider Whitney's teaching on giving to be abusive. Paul refers to giving as a "gracious work" in 2Corinthians 8 and 9. That means that when God performs a work of grace, people become generous and eager to give. But Paul specifically says that giving is voluntary. Whitney says, "The proportion of your income that you give back to God is one distinct indication of how much you trust Him to provide for your needs . . . We give to the extent that we believe that God will provide for us" (Whitney: 143). Francis of Assisi took vows of poverty and founded an order of monks that did the same. Luther, before he was converted, also gave up all that he owned to pursue God. True saving and sanctifying faith was not found in these examples of self-sacrifice.

This is precisely the teaching I came under, and it led me into a Christian commune. If I want to know that I love God and trust Him, then I must give in order to prove it (or so I thought). We were told that most people were spending their lives working so they could acquire money to spend it on things like houses and cars. The "higher" way was to trust that God would provide. How do we know whether or not we trust God to provide? If we really wanted to prove it we quit our jobs, sold our houses (I did not have one at that time but others did), gave the money to the ministry in question, and moved into the commune to "live by faith." So I did. I had objective proof that I loved God and trusted Him to provide. Plus I had 24 hours a day to practice "disciplines"

like those promoted by Whitney. A side effect was that we couldn't help but look down our noses at the ordinary Christians who worked jobs and bought nice things.

Donald Whitney is not teaching people to give everything away and move into a commune. He is, however, teaching Christians to think like those who give everything away and move into some equivalent of a monastery. As I read his book I thought about what happened to me when I thought that way. We have no way of being sure of how much we love and trust God. Only God knows. He controls the trials that He providentially sends in order to help us build love and trust. We are presumptuous when we create our own trials by asceticism supposedly to prove to ourselves that we trust Him. We should give and serve by His grace and not think that how much we give is a true indication that we trust God to provide for us. A person can give everything away and yet not trust God on His terms at all.

Whitney, however, makes giving a spiritual discipline that we practice to prove to ourselves that we love and trust God:

The use of your money and how you give it is one of the best ways of evaluating your relationship to Christ and your spiritual trustworthiness. . . . If you are truly submitted to the lordship of Christ, if you are willing to obey Him completely in every area of your life, your giving will reveal it. . . . How much you give of what you have should be a reflection of how much you love God. (Whitney: 146, 147).

I have serious pastoral concerns about this statement.<sup>10</sup> The people who really do love God and want to please Him often feel that they do not give enough and likely do not love enough. Whitney's message is only abusive to those that believe him—much as the sale of indulgences only abused those that believed indulgences were effective in sanctifying the dead. To the extent

that people actually believe Whitney, his message will cause them to give more and more for relief of doubt and fear. Whitney says, "Whenever you get a raise, unless there are unusual circumstances, plan to give a greater percentage than you are now giving" (Whitney: 152). The poor saint who struggles with assurance will give as much of his income away as possible, and still feel that it is not enough. He or she will give more, but does that really assure his or her heart before God that he or she truly loves Him?

To summarize the directives in the chapters of Whitney's book: spend more time reading the Bible, memorize more scripture, have a Bible reading plan, obey the Bible more, apply the Bible more, pray more, do more evangelism, make more plans for evangelism, serve more, use your gifts more, work harder at serving, use more time for spiritual things and less for wasteful things like entertainment, give more, fast often and regularly, spend time daily in silence and solitude, learn to hear the inward voice of God and then obey that inward voice, keep a journal, discipline yourself to write in a journal daily, study more, persevere more, and so forth. In fact, one could summarize, "think of whatever appears to be spiritual and godly and then do more and try harder."

Am I exaggerating? No. Whitney's error was obvious in the first chapter when he made becoming holy analogous to developing various skills:

Consider the people who will work hard at learning to play an instrument, knowing that it takes years to acquire the skills, who will practice hard to lower their golf score or to improve their sports performance, know it takes years to become proficient, who will discipline themselves throughout their career because they know it takes sacrifice to succeed. These same people will give up quickly when they find the Spiritual Disciplines don't come easily, as though becoming like Jesus was not supposed to take much effort. (Whitney: 21)

If, as he claims, Spiritual disciplines are the "channels of grace," and we need to put more effort into them because they are not easy, then we must work first before grace comes. That is why Whitney's spiritual discipline doctrine should be anathema to anyone who follows Reformed theology. Work comes first; grace is the result (which is a denial of important *solas*).

So to summarize this false teaching, let me quote Dallas Willard as cited approvingly by Whitney without qualification: "My central claim is that we *can* become like Christ by doing one thing—by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself" (Whitney: 21).<sup>11</sup> Really? So why doesn't the Bible tell us more detail about Jesus' "lifestyle" and why is that lifestyle not prescribed as binding on Christians? Furthermore, the one thing we know for sure about Jesus' lifestyle is that He lived sinlessly. Willard and Whitney might as well say, "go out and live in perfect obedience to everything God said and then you will be like Jesus." If anyone could do that, then Jesus was not the unique Son of God.

### What Happened to Romans 7?

We know we should obey God in all things. Paul taught in Romans 6 that in Christ we are free from sin as our master and that we should present ourselves to Christ as servants of righteousness. In fact he says that we are freed from sin and enslaved to God (Romans 6:22). But that is not the end of the story. Romans 7 recounts Paul's lament about his own sinfulness: "*Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?*" (Romans 7:24). Was the answer to his lament "do more, try harder?" No, it was the sure hope that the work of the Spirit of God who indwells every believer will certainly keep us, intercede for us and within us, and ultimately carry us to glory.<sup>12</sup> Our hope is in God's sovereign, gracious work. That work is mediated to those who come to God in faith by His gracious means.

When I met with Rick Warren at the end of the 2008 Summit for his

PEACE Coalition, Chris Rosebrough<sup>13</sup> was there as well. He had sat through every session for several days and told Warren that what he heard day after day was "do more, sacrifice more, give more, etc.," but that he did not hear about the forgiveness of sins. Chris told Warren that he admits that he fails, doesn't serve enough, lacks self-discipline in some ways, and certainly has guilt. But, he said, Warren's program apparently offers nothing in the way of the cleansing of sin and hope for those who know they fall short. When I followed up and specifically asked Warren if he believed in the means of grace, he answered "Of course I do." If Whitney were asked, he likely would give the same answer.

Chris had raised an important, pastoral consideration. The truly converted are constantly aware of their sinfulness. Ironically, the more sanctified a Christian becomes, the more he is aware of his sinfulness, and the more it troubles him. What would happen if the troubled Christian, perhaps having the "wretched man" thoughts that Paul expressed, picked up Whitney's book on spiritual disciplines looking for hope and believed what he read there? I see only two reasonable outcomes: hopelessness or self-righteousness. If he is totally honest, the outcome must be hopeless. Pastorally we must offer hope, not an illegitimate method. The hope is found through the blood of Christ. The means of grace include the Lord's Supper because that reminds us of the reason for our hope.

There are many similarities between Whitney's book and many portions of *The Purpose Driven Life*. Unless you start with a theology of innate human ability, neither book makes much sense. Whitney makes the analogy of a boy who wants to play a guitar. The boy is given a vision by an angel of an accomplished guitar player. The guitar playing dazzles the boy with amazement at its quality. Then the angel tells him that the person playing is him in a few years, but he must practice (Whitney: 15, 16). The idea is that if you have vision of what you will become, you will be motivated to put in all the effort. The anal-

ogy itself smacks of works righteousness. Whitney claims that Romans 8:29 supports his analogy. This is patently false because in context, being conformed to the image of Christ is a certainty because of what God does in every believer and not contingent on various levels of effort between believers. Furthermore, world-class guitar players begin with innate abilities that must be developed, and I agree that if that person works hard and has great teaching and is given opportunities he will do well. But we begin with no innate ability to be holy. Even as believers holiness does not come from innate ability plus practice, but from God's work of grace. The analogy inculcates an attitude of works righteousness even if Whitney (like Warren) denies believing such.

Even worse is the statement that follows the analogy: "I will maintain that the only road to Christian maturity and Godliness (a biblical term synonymous with Christlikeness and holiness) passes through the practice of Spiritual Disciplines." (Whitney: 16, 17). But as I have shown, Whitney's spiritual disciplines are a list with no boundaries. Whitney's "only road" is through spiritual disciplines, most of which are not revealed in the Bible. What a strange and syncretistic "narrow gate" this is! But Romans 8:29 applies to all who are "foreknown, predestined, called, and justified." That would include the thief on the cross. He got there without spiritual disciplines.

### Pragmatism and Mysticism

The people who asked me to review Whitney were concerned about mysticism. I am concerned too, not merely because Whitney is a mystic without qualifications (he is not), but that he has opened the door to mysticism by his pragmatism, lack of boundaries, and belief that there is some "inner voice" we can hear and be certain that it is God speaking new revelations to us. He himself then defines no truly mystical process likely to work for most people but points them to others like Willard and Foster who do. When it comes to mysticism, Whitney would be the

kindergarten and Richard Foster the graduate school.

As I showed earlier, Whitney offers a larger list of "spiritual disciplines" than what he addresses in his book. The list includes "spiritual direction." Having read true mystics like Foster and Morton Kelsey I know what these are. Spiritual direction is the Christian version of setting oneself under a guru. Because not everyone is that good at mystically hearing inner voices they find someone who is much more advanced in the art of hearing what they naively think must be the voice of God. The spiritual director can teach others the art and guide them down the path of contemplative spirituality and practice to be a better mystic. Supposedly the spiritual director is skilled enough to guide the novice into deeper contact with God (but actually to the spirit world where they think they meet God).

The spiritual director knows techniques that will work for anyone. As in the case of clairvoyants in the occult world, some seem to have an innate ability to hear from spirits in their mind by voices or see to them through visions. But becoming a psychic is something that can be taught. The main technique is to silence the mind using a repeated phrase in order to enter the silence. Once there, familiar spirits can speak. The "Christian" versions of this are called "contemplative prayer." Richard Foster is famous for teaching this.

Whitney does not teach "spiritual direction" but calls it a spiritual discipline and praises Richard Foster several times in his book. Whitney's version is much softer. He teaches no technique other than quiet contemplation. But what one does in Whitney's version is to supposedly hear the certain voice of God. He says, "Other times silence is maintained not only outwardly but also inwardly so that God's voice might be heard more clearly" (Whitney: 184). How do we know God's voice as distinct from our own thoughts or other spirits? In reality we do not. That is why scripture alone is a valid principle and why the Reformers disregarded the Pope's

claim for authority because of his revelations. But many evangelicals, including famous ones, have bought the lie that there is some voice of God that we must learn to hear so that we can get personal revelations beyond Scripture. Whitney cites A. W. Tozer: "Stay in the secret place till the surrounding noises begin to fade out of your heart and a sense of God's presence envelopes you . . . Listen for the inward Voice till you learn to recognize it" (Whitney: 199). What exactly does God's presence feel like and God's voice sound like? We cannot know for certain, and surely Satan is capable of giving us an experience that we will think feels and sounds like God.

But worse, once people believe that they need to know how to feel and hear God, they will decide they are not very good at it (if they are honest with themselves). Then they must turn to the Fosters and Willards of the world, who have processes that are more powerful than Whitney's. Silencing the mind eventually works for everybody, whereas Whitney's unsophisticated version will only "work" for the naturally mystically inclined.

Whitney, Foster and Willard are pragmatists. That is, they judge their practices not by agreement with Scripture, but on how well they work. By "work" they mean some sort of subjective criteria that makes a person feel or think they are closer to God or more holy. The only boundaries that exist for pragmatists are subjective and rely on common sense. Whitney has more common sense than Foster, but his basis of judging the validity of a practice is the same. That is why I am alarmed that he is teaching in a seminary committed to Reformed theology. Once his pragmatism is taught as the foundation for spirituality, his students (if they are foolish enough to believe him) will become the next generation of Richard Fosters and Dallas Willards. It is hardly the case that we "need" more of them given the fact that the entire Emergent/postmodern movement is already committed to mysticism. We never "need" mystics! But conservative, Reformed theology

has been one of the last places of hope for a vital evangelicalism committed to the *solus* of the Reformation and gospel preaching.<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusion

Southern Seminary has some great theologians whom I admire. Included in this list is the president Albert Mohler, as well as theologians Thomas Schriener and Bruce Ware. But now the seminary is offering a Ph.D. in "Spirituality" under the guidance of Donald Whitney,<sup>15</sup> and this is a tragic development. I hope I have demonstrated why Whitney's theology is faulty and damaging to those who believe it. It would be far more at home in a Methodist university grounded in Wesley's idea of holiness through method.

If the leadership of Southern Seminary cannot see what is wrong with Whitney's theology and practice, then I can no longer recommend it (as I have in the past). If this article falls into the hands of any of these men, please seriously consider my arguments. I would welcome a rebuttal if you wish to offer one. Bringing spiritual disciplines into our movement to supplement the means of grace will do irreparable harm in the long run.

Reformed theology exists to resist the processes that led Luther to despair as he tried every practice the church had to offer for achieving holiness. In his despair Luther found in the Scriptures the truth that salvation is from God as a gift of grace alone. He taught that the Holy Spirit comes to us through the Word, and he rebuked the "enthusiasts" (as did Calvin) who claimed some inner "word" that was directly infused by God. Luther countered that the "external" word alone (i.e., that which comes through Scripture) was God speaking. The means of grace, for Luther, were also the Word coming to us. He considered baptism and the Lord's Supper visible manifestations of the gospel.

By Lutheran and Reformed standards, Donald Whitney is an "enthusi-

ast." He has taken it upon himself to bind Christians to practices not taught in Scripture. He has promised that there is an internal word that we can learn and follow as the voice of God. He strongly implies that we begin by grace through faith and proceed by works. He offers processes that tell us "do more and try harder" and little hope that is external to us (i.e., the promise of God). This is deficient theology by Reformed standards. I would not allow this to be taught in a Sunday School class in our church. Why is it a degree program offered in a prestigious seminary?

### End Notes

1. Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1991)
2. My concerns about Whitney will be of interest to Christians who are not Reformed in theology as well. The key issue of how we come to God and how we grow in God is important to every Christian.
3. All references to Whitney's book will simply appear in bracketed page numbers throughout the rest of this article.
4. Mounce (Word Biblical Commentary) cites Pfitzner positively: "But he too is to practice a *gymnasia*, a vigorous development and application of all his strength and ability that he might serve the glory of God with every thought and action. Such exercise is not restricted to a negative physical asceticism, nor even to the self-disciplinary 'enkrateia' of I Cor 9:25ff., but rather implies a positive developing of his strength nourished above all 'by the words of faith' (v.6)."
5. [www.cicministry.org/commentary/issue83.htm](http://www.cicministry.org/commentary/issue83.htm)
6. Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY; <http://www.sbts.edu/about/>
7. <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue84.htm> The article explains means of grace.
8. <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue53.htm> Many people do not realize how heretical Finney's teachings are because they admire him as a great evangelist and have never studied his

theological writings. Finney's belief in innate human ability is rivaled only by Pelagius himself.

9. See <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue69.htm> CIC Issue 69 for a scholarly discussion of this that is based to a large degree on the research of Clinton Arnold: *The Colossian Syncretism - The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae*, (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1996).
10. Paul taught in 1Corinthians 13:3 that one could give all of his possessions to the poor and still lack *agape* love.
11. I review Willard's popular book, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* here: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue91.htm> Much of what I say about Willard applies as well to Whitney. They are both pragmatists.
12. See <http://www.cicministry.org/commentary/issue76.htm> CIC issue 76 which is an exposition of the meaning of "led by the Spirit" in Romans 8.
13. <http://www.extremetheology.com/>
14. I intend no disrespect for conservative evangelicals who do not follow Reformed soteriology. But the fact is that most of the prominent evangelical leaders who are leading the charge for gospel preaching and Bible teaching have Reformed soteriology. I am thinking of John MacArthur, R. C. Sproul, Al Mohler and others like them.
15. Discussed here: <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5ghGk5Lj6-e5KJ0ZMpIzs-pBPVnTAD9755IOG0>

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