



GOD'S REVEALED WILL UNDERSTANDING GOD'S BOUNDARIES

BY BOB DEWAAY

"God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world." (Hebrews 1:1, 2)

Many Christians labor under the notion that there is an unrevealed, perfect will of God for their life that must be discovered in order for them to truly please God. I know because I used to believe that myself. My belief was not without consequences.

The most serious one for me started in the 1970's. A fellow came to me for Christian counseling because of severe problems in his marriage and personal life. He seemed so remorseful and showed an apparent strong desire to change. As I first prayed about helping him, I was certain I heard the Lord say to me (internally), "I want you to do everything in your power to help this man." That "word from God" was the beginning of a ten-year odyssey that consumed thousands of hours, caused stress for my family, and ended with me on a dangerous trip to Mexico. The man had gone there with his wife, had a mental breakdown, and landed in a Mexican prison. The story of that Mexican trip to try to rescue that couple is like something out of a movie script.

The end result was that I determined I could no longer put myself and my family at risk by trying to help him. I totally extricated myself from the situation. A few years later that man murdered his father, and he now is spending the rest of this life in a hospital for the criminally insane. I could just as easily

have been the one murdered. My wife had been telling me for a long time to remove myself from that situation; but my "word from the Lord" coupled with youthful zeal spurned me on, not to mention a burdensome theological error.

Many others think like I used to. They believe, based on a misinterpretation of **Romans 12:2**, that there is a "perfect" will of God that covers all of the details of life (at least the important ones). Since this will is specific to each individual, it is not found in the Bible but must be discovered through some means of personal revelation. I wrote an article about this in 2003¹ that covers the basic issues—but the subject needs to be revisited. In this article we will explore how God has made His will known.

GOD'S REVEALED WILL IS GIVEN THROUGH A MEDIATOR

Fallen humanity desires information that God has not revealed—secret, spiritual knowledge not contained in Scripture. This desire goes back to the Garden of Eden where Eve desired the "wisdom" (**Genesis 3:6**) that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil offered, but that God had not chosen to reveal. Since the Fall, humans have inherited her yearning. In fact, all pagan religions are based on some version of that secret

spiritual knowledge.

God has given us only two valid categories of knowledge: general revelation and specific revelation. General revelation provides what can be understood about the physical universe using human senses and human reason. Specific revelation refers to the Bible—the Old and New Testaments. When referring to the third category, the Bible says: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law" (**Deuteronomy 29:29**). Notice that the phrases "the things revealed" and "the words of this law" are synonymously parallel—God's truth is revealed in Scripture. All other spiritual knowledge falls into the category "secret things." Seeking such knowledge is the essence of divination.

The distinction between what is revealed and what is forbidden, secret, spiritual knowledge is discussed in Deuteronomy 18. There, processes designed to obtain the "secret things" that belong only to God are forbidden:

When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. (Deuteronomy 18:9-11)

The term "divination" is a general term that covers practices that people invent to gain unrevealed information from the spirit world. An earlier CIC article describes how Christians have invented

their own ways to practice divination.² The reason for this, I think, is fallen humanity's universal lust for contact with the spirit world and the allure of the spiritual knowledge contained there. The irony is that Christians think they can get God Himself to satisfy their lust for spiritual information He has not chosen to reveal. False teachings even make them think that their desire for this information is a sign of superior piety. I know because I used to think that way.

Deuteronomy 18 presents the issue: "For those nations, which you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners, but as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you to do so. The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him" (Deuteronomy 18:14, 15). Moses mediated God's revealed will to His people. God promised the Old Testament saints also that in the future He would raise up a prophet like Moses, and when He did, they should listen to Him. This would be a unique prophet inasmuch as He would be like Moses. The Old Testament prophets were not lawgivers; they applied God's Law as given to Moses and predicted the future. They also brought special revelations of God's will for the theocratic Kingdom, Israel. But the Old Testament prophets were not that special prophet who would be like Moses. The special Prophet was Jesus Christ who is the Mediator of the New Covenant. Later, I will show this from the New Testament.

Now, let's return to our discussion of Deuteronomy 18. God desired to speak to the people through a mediator, not directly: "This is according to all that you asked of the Lord your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die.' The Lord said to me, 'They have spoken well'" (Deuteronomy 18:16, 17). God approved of their statement because it was good that one person, whom God chose (Moses), would hear God and mediate God's authoritative Word to His people. This also points forward to a future person who would

speak authoritatively for God like Moses: "I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him" (Deuteronomy 18:18, 19). Twice God promises a future authoritative prophet who would be like Moses. The prophets of the Old Covenant were not like Moses because they did not mediate the Law or any new terms of a covenant.

However, even prophets had to be tested. Deuteronomy reveals two tests for prophets: 1) their words and predictions have to be true and accurate (Deuteronomy 18:22), and 2) even if accurate in their predictions, they must not tell the people to serve gods they have not known (Deuteronomy 13:1-3). So there would be true prophets who spoke for God, but only Moses was given the terms of the covenant and the true description of the God who made the covenant. Any prophet was false who deviated from the God who revealed Himself to the patriarchs and to Moses. But the promise remained that one day a prophet like Moses would arise.

Divination is to seek unmediated spiritual knowledge. For example, when Saul refused to listen to God's word through an authoritative prophet (Samuel, who gave instructions from God to Saul, a valid practice of true prophets in the theocratic kingdom), Saul's practice was likened to divination: "For rebellion is as the sin of divination, And insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from being king" (1Samuel 15:23). Saul's rebellion was likened to "divination" because Saul had circumvented God's revealed will and found spiritual direction elsewhere (from his own mind). Refusing to acknowledge and submit to God's boundaries is tantamount to divination.

THE TRUE TENT OF MEETING

God met Moses in the tent of meeting

where He spoke to Moses directly. This role was reserved for Moses:

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, a good distance from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting which was outside the camp. And it came about, whenever Moses went out to the tent, that all the people would arise and stand, each at the entrance of his tent, and gaze after Moses until he entered the tent. Whenever Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent; and the Lord would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would arise and worship, each at the entrance of his tent. Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses returned to the camp, his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent. (Exodus 33:7-11)

According to Bible scholars, Joshua's role was to guard the tent, not meet God in the manner that Moses did.³ On a recent DVD, Beth Moore makes the false claim that God intended for all of the Israelites to enter the tent of meeting to hear from God and that furthermore each of us can have a tent of meeting to hear from God.⁴ This is not supported by the text of Exodus. Also in Deuteronomy God said this: "Go, say to them, 'Return to your tents.' But as for you, stand here by Me, that I may speak to you all the commandments and the statutes and the judgments which you shall teach them, that they may observe them in the land which I give them to possess" (Deuteronomy 5:30, 31).

Furthermore, there were cases when people challenged the claim that only Moses could meet God and mediate His words to the people. In Numbers 12, Miriam and Aaron challenged Moses: "and they said, 'Has the Lord indeed spo-

ken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?' And the Lord heard it" (**Numbers 12:2**). As a result, God summoned Moses, Aaron and Miriam to the tent of meeting where Moses was affirmed and Miriam smitten with leprosy (see **Numbers 12:1-15**). In Leviticus 10, Nadab and Abihu decided to offer "strange fire" and they were consumed by fire from the Lord. In Numbers 16 Korah and others challenged Moses' authority and were swallowed alive into Sheol (**Numbers 16:1-35**). After Moses' death, the end of Deuteronomy comments: "Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (**Deuteronomy 34:10**).

Moses uniquely spoke for God, and the words God gave Moses contained the authoritative terms of the covenant He had made with Israel. But within those words were the promise that God would one day raise up a prophet like Moses who would speak for God. We shall see that Jesus fulfilled that role.

JESUS SPEAKS GOD'S WORDS

Under the Old Covenant, the tent of meeting where God spoke to Moses was the precursor to the Tabernacle where God dwelt in the midst of His people. In fact the Tabernacle is also called the tent of meeting. When they came into the Promised Land, Solomon built the temple that became the permanent place for God to dwell in the midst of His people and for sacrifices to be offered. Given this background, John 1 makes a startling claim: "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (**John 1:14**). The passage contains at least two allusions to Exodus. The first is found in the word "dwelt" which means literally, "tabernacled." Gerald L. Borchert comments: "At this point in the Gospel, however, it is speaking of the divine presence on earth and is best rendered by "tabernacled" or "tented," which reminds us of Israel's wilderness experience of God's presence in the tabernacle or tent of meeting (cf. Exodus 25:8-9; 35:7-16; 40:1-38).

Indeed, as some commentators have noted, the three consonants in the stem of the Greek verb *skēnōō* and the three radicals or stem letters of the Hebrew *shikināh* are both *skn*. The word *shikināh* probably is best interpreted as "God's presence with them."⁵

Borchert and others have also pointed out that "grace and truth" correspond to the two key characteristics of God ("*hesed* and *emet*") revealed in the Old Testament. These are the very qualities that God Himself revealed to Moses on Sinai: "Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth" (**Exodus 34:6**). When John announced that Jesus tabernacled among us and was full of grace and truth, his words were charged with powerful allusions to Exodus. God was again in the midst of His people in the person of Christ, the Incarnate Word.

The account of the transfiguration in Mark provides another link to Jesus and Moses:

*Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone. (**Mark 9:2-8**)*

Here we have again clear allusions to God's presence with His people in the Old Testament. The phrase "listen to Him" reminds us of the Prophet Moses

predicted God would raise up and to whom we must listen (**Deuteronomy 18:15**). William Lane explains this: "The command 'listen to him,' which reinforces this insight [concerning his transcendent sonship], contains an allusion to Deut. 18:15 and serves to identify Jesus as the eschatological Prophet like Moses to whom Israel must listen because he is the final bearer of the word of God."⁶

The cloud overshadowing them links this event to God coming to the tent of meeting. James Brooks comments, "The cloud just like the bright, white clothes (v. 3) suggests the *shekinah* glory and calls to mind the tent of meeting. In the Old Testament clouds are symbols of God's presence, protection, and authority (Exodus 13:21; 16:10; 19:9, 16; 24:15-16; 33:9)."⁷ God is now present among His people and speaking authoritatively to them through His beloved Son.

Peter somehow got the idea that they could have three tents of meeting. But after the voice from the cloud announced Jesus as the true Son of God, they saw "Jesus alone." Jesus in His incarnation was the true tent of meeting. The transfiguration gave a preview of eschatological glory, but what lay ahead for Jesus was the cross where He would die for sins and be raised on the third day. William Lane comments on Peter's misunderstanding: "His proposal to build three tabernacles evidently rests upon a misunderstanding of the significance of the situation. The desire to erect new tents of meeting where God can again communicate with men implies that Peter regards the time of the second exodus as fulfilled and the goal of Sabbath rest achieved. He is anxious to find the fulfillment of the promised glory now, prior to the sufferings Jesus had announced as necessary."⁸

Further proof that Jesus is the Prophet predicted by Moses is found in the Gospel of John: "Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me. But if you do not believe his writ-

ings, how will you believe My words?" (John 5:45-47). Jesus' words are authoritative like Moses' writings. Jesus' words will be the basis for judgment upon those who do not listen: "He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day" (John 12:48). Jesus' "words of eternal life" (John 6:68) reveal God's will and His only plan of salvation. His words draw the boundaries of what is the revealed will of God outside of which are the secret things that belong to God that we cannot know.

GOD HAS SPOKEN

After Jesus shed His blood on the cross to avert God's wrath against sin for all who believe, He was raised on the third day and bodily appeared to many witnesses. He, after giving further teachings to His disciples, bodily ascended into heaven. The New Testament claims that Jesus fulfilled Psalm 110 and sits in authority at the right hand of God. What we have are His authoritative words that are contained in the Bible.

The Bible claims that God spoke through Jesus in full and final revelation: "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (Hebrews 1:1, 2). That "God has spoken" uniquely and authoritatively through Christ is a bedrock Christian claim. This passage affirms the authority of the Old Testament (God spoke to the fathers in the prophets) and New Testament (God spoke to us in His Son).

The mediatorial role of Christ was moved to heaven: "And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3). The first three verses of Hebrews claim that the Creator God came to earth, spoke His words, made purification for sins, and ascended to

rule at the right hand of the Father. Hebrews calls Jesus the "mediator" of the new covenant (Hebrews 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). He has superseded Moses (Hebrews 3:3). This is also shown by the fact that Moses appeared with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration and then disappeared after the voice from the cloud declared Jesus to be the divine Son to whom the people must listen.

It is important to affirm that the "red letters" in the Bible do not exhaust Jesus' authoritative words. Jesus commissioned His apostles to teach everything He had commanded them (Matthew 28:20). The book of Hebrews includes the idea that Jesus' authoritative words were taught by His apostles who were eyewitnesses and confirmed as authoritative by mighty works of God:

For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will. (Hebrews 2:1-4)

This means that the teachings of Christ's authoritative apostles that are inspired by the Holy Spirit and preserved in the New Testament are considered Jesus' words as well. If we fail to listen to these words we neglect our salvation and shall not escape God's wrath. We must pay closer attention to the authoritative words of the Son as preserved in the New Testament.

THE EVIDENCE OF UNSEEN THINGS

The reason for the warnings issued in Hebrews is that the early Jewish Christians were tempted to go back to

the tangible sacrifices and system of worship that were still going on in the temple. They were in grave spiritual danger. The writer of Hebrews said that "faith is the evidence of things not seen." What they had come to in the New Covenant was unseen blood (shed once for all); an unseen savior (who is in heaven) an unseen High Priest (unlike the Jewish high priest in Jerusalem) an unseen sanctuary, unseen witnesses, and an unseen holy place within the heavenly tabernacle. Like their fathers in the wilderness who, once Moses was unseen on Mount Sinai, built a representation of God they could see (the golden calf) these Christians were sorely tempted to go back to a more tangible religion as practiced in Jerusalem. The author of Hebrews tells them however, that what they have come to is far more awesome than what their fathers came to: "For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them" (Hebrews 12:18, 19). All of those things were tangible and scared them so badly they wanted no more words spoken. But what we have come to is more profound, though not seen:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel. See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. (Hebrews 12:22-25)

Jesus is speaking, not new mystical revelations, but through the words given to us in the Bible (**Hebrews 1:1-3; 2:1-3**). If we do not listen to His words we shall not escape His judgment.

The valid tent of meeting is in heaven (**Hebrews 4:14-16; 8:1, 2; 9:11, 12**). The throne of grace that we approach is where we find help in our time of need, not new words from Jesus not found in the Bible. The Bible is God talking to man; prayer is man talking to God. We have to decide if we are willing to be content with God's authoritative words spoken through the Son, or if we lust for something more. Anything beyond the teaching of Christ that we already have is too far: "Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son" (2**John 1:9**).

CONCLUSION

For ten years I believed that a subjective voice in my head (God?) had authoritatively commanded me to help a man who ultimately would not be helped. We (my family and I) paid a price for that. I wish I could tell you I learned from that one experience, but the truth is, I continued for some time following similar guidance. I had a theological problem that caused me to think I had to "hear

from God" on matters that God has not revealed.

The problem with mystical guidance that we assume to have come from God is this: If we accept it as God's authoritative word, the impression rules over us even if it is not from God. The true word of God found in Scripture is inerrant and authoritative. If we take words to be authoritative but are not inerrant, then we let potentially false words rule over us in God's name. This is always harmful.

Despite this, many Christians believe that there is a secret will of God for their lives that can only be determined by some manner of personal, special revelation. They wait to hear His voice in their minds. Since this special revelation is not infallibly inspired by the Holy Spirit, it "reveals" a flawed and unreliable "will of God." In the next issue of *CIC* we will explore that idea and show that God's revealed moral will and His providential will are all that we can know in this life.

END NOTES

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What Shall We Practice?

Wrestling with Brother Lawrence's Concept of "Practicing the Presence of God"

by Ryan Habbena

I recall a conversation I had with an individual early in my Christian life regarding the high calling of living in light of the Gospel – the need for devotion to the Word, the need for prayer, the need for fellowship, and the task of evangelism. His response took me aback: "All those are fine for some," he noted. "But I can glorify God by washing the dishes for Him." Although I wasn't aware of it at the time, this individual had been influenced by a teaching called "Practicing the Presence of God."

A century after a certain German monk nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenberg door, another monk quietly engaged in his own soon-to-be influential endeavors. Nicolas Herman, better known as Brother Lawrence, was a 17th-century monastic best known for his teachings on "practicing the presence of God." These teachings originated in a secluded French Catholic Monastery but have since disseminated throughout Christianity.¹ In this article I will wrestle with the concept of "practicing the presence of God," and challenge some

of its implications. If we look at this teaching through the lens of the word of God, we find many deficiencies. Brother Lawrence purports to have found the secret to a higher spiritual life. However, there are several theological and practical problems evident in his teachings. These endanger those who follow his lead to neglect what God *has* called us to practice – a life centered on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In what follows, I will highlight several of the deficiencies of "practicing the presence of God" and respond to the question

“What then shall we practice?”

Practicing the Presence of God The Teaching

The primary source for “Practicing the Presence of God” is a posthumous collection of recalled teachings and personal correspondences credited to Brother Lawrence and listed by the same name. The work consists of two sections: “conversations” and “letters.” In the “conversations” portion of the work, the interviewer, Joseph De Beaufort, captured the heart of Lawrence’s practice:

Our sanctification did not depend upon changing our works. Instead, it depended on doing those things for God’s sake which we commonly do for our own. He thought it was lamentable to see how many people mistook the means for the end, addicting themselves to certain works which they performed very imperfectly because of their human or selfish regard. The most excellent method he had found for going to God was that of doing our common business without any view of pleasing men but purely for the love of God.²

The writer further noted:

It was observed, that even in the busiest times in the kitchen, Brother Lawrence still preserved his recollection and heavenly-mindedness. He was never hasty nor loitering, but did each thing in its turn with an even, uninterrupted composure and tranquility of spirit. “The time of work,” said he, “does not with me differ from the time of prayer. In the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great a tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Supper.”³

Here, in few words, is the heart of

Brother Lawrence’s teaching: The prime discipline of the Christian life is to devote oneself to “God’s presence” in all tasks. That’s it. He believed that all tasks are of equal value—if one “sees the presence of God” in the task.

Brother Lawrence’s teaching has spread not only throughout Christian circles but is also present in eastern religion and practice.⁴ While the book itself has certain commendable elements,⁵ it contains several dangers and deficiencies. In exposing these concerns we must first define the Biblical teaching of God’s presence. Secondly, we must compare the practice itself to what God has instructed His people to do.

The Biblical Precepts of “The Presence of God”

The Scriptures unveil two ways in which we can understand “the presence of God.” First, we should understand that God is indeed omnipresent (all-present). There is no place one can hide from the Almighty. He is the Creator and Sustainer of all things, both visible and invisible. King David poetically teaches on this precept of God’s presence in Psalm 139.

Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, You are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.
If I take the wings of the dawn,
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
Even there Your hand will lead me,
And Your right hand will lay hold of me. (Psalm 139:7-10)

It also is true that the attributes of God are evident everywhere throughout His creation. In the convicting opening chapter of Romans, Paul notes, “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse”⁶ (Romans 1:20).

Yet, beyond the omnipresence of

God, the Scriptures consistently present the reality of the “special presence of God.” God’s special presence in His people’s lives is both “redemptive” and “relational.”⁷ We see God’s special presence highlighted in the establishing of the Tabernacle following the Exodus: “Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I am going to show you, as the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furniture, just so you shall construct it” (Exodus 25:8-9).

The omnipresent Lord dwelt with Israel in a unique and special way. His presence in their midst was both “relational” and “redemptive.” God’s special presence took on a radical new dynamic in the incarnation of the Son as announced by the apostle John: “The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The text more literally translated reads: “The Word was made flesh and pitched His tabernacle among us.” The allusion is powerful: Just as God dwelled with Israel following the Exodus, He became human to dwell with us in a much more profound manner. Again, the reasons for this marvelous incarnation are both “redemptive and relational.” Matthew, when chronicling the incarnation, wrote:

And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins. Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which translated means, “God with us.” (Matthew 1:21-23)

While the special bodily presence of Jesus temporarily ceased with His ascension, He promised not to leave us alone but would send the Spirit to “be with us forever” (John 14:16). Those who repent and believe in the person and work of Jesus Christ receive the Holy Spirit. His presence dwells with His peo-

ple to “regenerate and renew” (Titus 3:5). The presence of God is with the believer *forever*. His presence is not dependent upon subjective feelings or even “practicing” His presence, but rather upon His sustaining and renewing activity. There may be times when we do not “feel” as if God is near, but this does nothing to undermine the reality of both His omnipresence in the world and His special presence in His children.

Many problems arise if we equate the presence of God in our lives with subjective religious experience. If we continually seek to feel God’s presence through contemplative practice, the result will be that we will experience *further* spiritual problems. This seeking will cause us to strive for “feelings” rather than obedience. This wrongful pursuit will shake our assurance because the little assurance we have will be based on subjective experience rather than on the historical reality of the cross. In the end we will neglect our primary calling.

Seeing God in the Ordinary *and* in the Extraordinary

“Practicing the presence of God” asserts that people in any position and any ordinary task can glorify God. True enough. However, is this used as a replacement, or even an excuse, not to pursue our high calling of being ambassadors of the Gospel? Practicing the presence of God places a prime emphasis of seeing God in the ordinary. However, does looking for God in the ordinary take the place of growing in our faith through the extraordinary practice of devotion to the word of God? Does looking for God in the “ordinary” cause us to become stagnant in the expression of our extraordinary Spiritual gifts?

Recall the conversation I noted at the beginning of this article. The response of “doing the dishes for God” when confronted with the high calling of Gospel-centered living highlights the danger of this practice. I grant that we do well to realize that God is all-present, all-knowing, all-powerful and every aspect of our lives is to be consecrated

to Him. However, the danger in looking to “practice God’s presence” as outlined above is that we neglect the true means of grace which God has granted.

Glaring Omissions

Brother Lawrence was a Catholic monk who lived out his days in a monastery. This alone explains the emphasis of his teachings and their glaring deficiencies. Brother Lawrence would be considered a “contemplative” teacher. His practice was one of inner meditation that took place within a monastic community. Is this the life to which God has called his children? Is “practicing His presence” the “most excellent way to go to God”? In noting the glaring omissions in Brother Lawrence’s teachings, the answer to these questions is No.

What *has* God called His people to do? In the wake of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Luke outlines God’s “means of grace” which we are to practice. “So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:41-42). Those who received the Gospel message were baptized and *continued* in the Gospel through devotion to the apostles teaching (the word of God), prayer, fellowship, and the Lord’s supper.⁸ All those who subsequently believe are to go and live likewise in this Christ-centered way. With this as the divinely prescribed framework of the Christian’s practice, how does this compare with Brother Lawrence’s teaching?

The most glaring and foundational omission in “Practicing the Presence of God” is the lack of primacy placed on the word of God. Our “practice” must be grounded on the precepts of the Scriptures. Our lives are transformed through the Holy Spirit illuminating and applying the truths of God’s word. Without this all-important devotion we will take our eyes off Christ and become susceptible to all sorts of spiritual pitfalls. Note the Spirit-led author of Hebrews’ concern:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, *who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.* (Hebrews 5:12-14)

If we are to grow in the faith and be sanctified by the Spirit we must devote ourselves to the word of God. And note very clearly this is what we are called to *practice* (5:14). We are to continually devote ourselves to the word of God. As we continue to dig into the inexhaustible treasure of the Scriptures we will fix our eyes on Christ and be trained to discern good from evil.

While “Practicing the Presence of God” is said to be constant prayer and consciousness of God’s presence, the truth is our prayer life must be informed and guided by His word. Without the guiding light of the word of God our prayer life will be deficient; the Scriptures teach us how to pray. Furthermore, the monastic life of which Brother Lawrence partook may have been rich in community, but it lacked the critical cog of Christian fellowship—the act of fellowship around the word and through prayer that is vital to the Christian life. “Practicing His presence” cannot be held as a substitute for such essentials. While the above are a mere sampling of the dangers present in Brother Lawrence’s teachings, we do well to focus our attention upon what God has prescribed for His people.

The Purpose of His Presence The Goal of our Practice

The true purpose of His presence in our lives is that we would be conformed to the image of Christ. His presence fuels us in continuing the Gospel mission (Go, therefore, and make disciples of all

the nations. . . and behold *I am with you* always [Matthew 28:19, 20]). The presence of His Spirit causes us to grow in His word so that we may “have our senses trained to discern good from evil (Hebrews 5:12).” His presence causes us to gather together to encourage and exhort each other as “we see that day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:25). And His Spirit indeed leads us to “pray at all times” (Ephesians 6:18). In the midst of this robust matrix of Spirit-filled living we surely will see God in both the mundane and the extraordinary.

A Concluding, Convicting Example

The Scriptures declare “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men” (Colossians 3:23). If Brother Lawrence was simply affirming this Scriptural truth he would be within the bounds of God’s counsel. However, He goes beyond this. “Practicing the presence of God” is presented as “the most excellent method of going to God.” His “secret” to a spiritual life is given primacy over what God has provided. What is missing in his concept is a *Gospel-centered* way of life. Many may practice Brother Lawrence’s teaching, and even feel like God is near. Yet, if the Gospel – the person and work of Jesus Christ – is absent from their lives, this practice simply provides false assurance. Rather than follow the lead of Brother Lawrence, we should avail ourselves of God’s gracious means. This will keep us centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ and will cultivate genuine assurance.

Luke records an event that speaks to this subject:

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened

to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:38-42 ESV)

We surely need to attend to our “everyday duties,” and these should be done “as for the Lord.” Yet, the “necessary” goal we must be striving toward is growing in our knowledge of Jesus Christ. The Spirit-filled source granted for this glorious endeavor is faithful devotion to the Scriptures. Contrary to Brother Lawrence’s teaching, this endeavor *does* differ from our “everyday efforts.” May we all, like Mary, sit at our Master’s feet through devotion to His word. In doing so we will practice what He has prescribed and will have surely “chosen the good portion.”

End Notes

1. A good example of this teachings influence is seen in “*Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace*” by James Montgomery Boice (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001). In an otherwise thorough reaffirmation of the doctrines of the Reformation, the concluding chapter on pragmatic issues holds Brother Lawrence’s teachings in high regard (pp. 196-197).
2. An online version of his work is available at <http://www.practicegodspresence.com/brotherlawrence/11-practicegodspresence.html>
3. Ibid
4. Many have noted the similarities of this practice to Zen Buddhism. See <http://www.thezensite.com/zen%20essays/FormalPracticeBuddhistChristia>

- [n.htm](#), which further highlights the pantheistic undertones of the practice.
5. The unmerited grace of God, His all-sufficient enabling grace, and the need for life wholly devoted to God are evident in the work and are acknowledged Biblical precepts. This notwithstanding, the heart of the issue following these precepts is *How* do we live our lives in pursuit of God’s upward calling? The primary point of disagreement resides here, as well as in many theological definitions behind the above noted precepts.
 6. It is pertinent to note that this text notes that God is indeed “seen” through what has been made. However, in context, Paul is noting that this is a means of making humanity accountable, not a means of redemption. This highlights the need for God’s “special presence” as will be further defined below.
 7. It bears noting that the Biblical encounters with the “special presence” of God also produce a keen awareness of one’s own sin. The examples of Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5), Job (Job 42:5), and Peter (Luke 5:8) all highlight this point.
 8. For further exposition and commentary on this framework see: Bob DeWaay, Means of Grace in *Critical Issues Commentary*, Issue 84, Sept./Oct. 2004. <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue84.htm> and Ryan Habbena, Walking by the Spirit, *Critical Issues Commentary*, Issue 60, Sept/Oct 2000. <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue60b.htm>

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