Oswald Chambers’s devotional My Utmost For His Highest has been read by millions of Christians. When I was in Bible College in the early 1970’s someone gave me a copy. I started using it but found that what he said rarely made any sense to me, so I quit. I assumed it was because he was British and I simply did not understand his idioms. Ironically I ended up unknowingly reading and following the same theology through Watchman Nee. It is just recently that I managed to discover that Nee’s (slightly later than Chambers) teachings were nearly the same as Chambers’.

Over the years CIC readers have asked me to critique Chambers. Some have told me that his teachings led them into mysticism that was hard to get out of. I set out to do so about six years ago by carefully reading Utmost, taking notes on every page. I found much that was Biblically wrong but still was not sure why. So the article was not written. Finally, reading his biography and other writings has led me to the basis of his theology. There are two key issues: 1) the allegorical method of Biblical interpretation 2) a second blessing teaching in which total surrender is the key to sanctification. The allegorical method takes us away from the meaning of the Biblical authors. The second blessing doctrine colors what he says in Utmost. Not knowing that he believed these things was the cause of confusion in my reading. Knowing his theology has put Utmost into perspective. I will also address the issue of his body, soul and spirit teaching in regard to sanctification.

I am not criticizing Chambers’ personal piety. By all accounts he was a highly dedicated Christian. He would do anything for anyone and was not concerned with personal benefit. As I read his biography I was reminded of the group I joined as a young Christian. We too were about complete dedication to Christ and willingness to forgo personal benefit. I belonged to a Christian commune where we lived together with no personal assets and no salary. We lived by faith and dedicated ourselves to serving Christ by helping others. But our personal piety was also combined with flawed doctrine, that in my case, was very much like Chambers’. I studied Watchman Nee’s book series The Spiritual Man and did my best to live accordingly.

Nee taught a similar total surrender idea combined with an anatomical scheme of sanctification. I used my copy of Nee’s three-volume work until it was dog eared. I finally gave up. I could never satisfactorily distinguish between my soul and spirit as Nee’s teaching required. I was very inadequate at being a mystic. When I read the Bible I kept seeing what it actually said rather than deeper life theology. The literal meaning of Scripture was what eventually got me out of my pietism and back to the gospel.

However, the group we were part of was comprised of blessed Christian people who truly wanted to serve God and others. Some of them I have known my entire Christian life. I know that it is possible for people to live dedicated lives while listening to bad doctrine. So as I read about Chambers’ life, I related to him, remembering my years in that Christian community. Sadly, his bad doctrine lives on in his writings. This article will explain what is wrong with it and why it will harm us if we believe it.

The Allegorical Method

Some years after Chambers, the neo-orthodox view of Scripture became popular. Purporting to raise the status of Scripture, it ultimately gutted it of meaning. Norman Geisler explains three views of Scripture, including the neo-orthodox view:

> There are three main views within Christendom in the contemporary scene regarding the Bible. These views may be summarized as follows: The Bible is the Word of God—orthodox. The Bible contains the Word of God—liberal. The Bible becomes the Word of God—neo-orthodox.¹

The battle for the Bible that was fought by early evangelicals was for the truth that the Bible IS the Word of God. The plenary inspiration of Scripture was the formal ground for everything else we believe. The idea that inspiration happens for the reader rather than the writer of the Bible led to endless abuse. Those who held to that view may have ended up with some version of orthodoxy, but if they did not, no one could correct them. They could claim that the Holy Spirit gave them their version of personal truth.

My research reveals that Chambers held to a similar view even before neo-
There is another dangerous tendency, that of closing all questions by saying, “Let us get back to the external authority of the Bible.” That attitude lacks courage and the power of the Spirit of God; it is a literalism that does not produce “written epistles,” but persons who are more or less incarnate dictionaries; it produces not saints but fossils, people without life, with none of the living reality of the Lord Jesus. There must be the Incarnate Word and the interpreting word, i.e., people whose lives back up what they preach, written epistles, “known and read of all men.” Only when we receive the Holy Spirit and are lifted into a total readjustment to God do the words of God become “quick, and powerful” to us. The only way the words of God can be understood is by contact with the Word of God. The connection between our Lord Himself, who is the Word, and His spoken words is so close that to divorce them is fatal.¹

Chambers tied the meaning of the scriptures to the reader, albeit the Holy Spirit-filled reader. This sounds pious but opens the door to much mischief and makes it impossible to correct error. He further stated: “When the Scriptures are made quick and powerful by the Holy Spirit, they fit every need of life. The only interpreter of the Scriptures is the Holy Spirit, and when we have received the Holy Spirit we learn the first golden lesson of spiritual life, which is that God reveals His will according to the state of our character.”² Notice that the Holy Spirit is the “interpreter” of Scripture rather than the inspirer of Scripture. Our ability to know what God said is said to be determined by our personal character, not the objective truth of the Bible.

I call this the allegorical method because that is precisely what it becomes. Scripture is seen to have various meanings according to the state of the readers. We can see how Chambers practiced this in Utmost by his use of Mark 9:2 in his devotion for October 1st:

> Jesus leadeth them up into a high mountain apart by themselves. Mark 9:2. We have all had times on the mount, when we have seen things from God’s standpoint and have wanted to stay there; but God will never allow us to stay there. The test of our spiritual life is the power to descend; if we have power to rise only, something is wrong. It is a great thing to be on the mount with God, but a man only gets there in order that afterwards he may get down among the devil possessed and lift them up. We are not built for the mountains and the dawns and aesthetic affinities, those are for moments of inspiration, that is all. We are built for the valley, for the ordinary stuff we are in, and that is where we have to prove our mettle. Spiritual selfishness always wants repeated moments on the mount.³

The passage cited has nothing to do with the application he makes. This is not sound Biblical interpretation. The Mount of Transfiguration reveals Jesus as that Prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15) who would speak bindingly for God. It has nothing to do with our personal, spiritual life having highs and lows. Chambers’ misuse of the passage may seem harmless enough, but his method opens the door for endless mischief and leaves readers with no means of correcting error. If the Holy Spirit told Chambers that this is the meaning, who are we to go against the Holy Spirit and say that it is not? It was this type of problem that led to the breaking up of the group I was a part of. Eventually the allegory becomes more harmful.

I had the opportunity to ask Norman Geisler about this in person in the 1980’s when an apologetics group I was a part of had him as our speaker. His response to my question about the allegorical method was this: “When problems arise, they always retreat to the literal.” Let me explain. Consider the command “You shall not steal.” Suppose the person who claims that Holy Spirit inspires the reader says, “this means ‘you shall not steal unless you are very poor and need what someone else has worse than they do.’” The allegorist will typically reject that saying, “such an interpretation is absurd, it cannot mean that.” Thus they “retreat” to the literal as Geisler said. It is only the literal that binds our thoughts and actions. Anyone can claim that the Holy Spirit told them just about anything.

Knowing that Chambers taught that the Holy Spirit’s meaning is not found in a literal reading, but rather by the pious reader, explains a lot of what is found in Utmost. In many cases, the passage cited has little or nothing to do with the spiritual meaning he asserts. That is why so much of it is confusing. Pragmatically, Chambers was a godly person in his dealings with others. He was exemplary in his selfless way of life. I do not doubt that. But divorcing the meaning of Scripture from what the text says leaves the barn door open, as the farm analogy goes. Perhaps some cows stay in the barn, but there is nothing forcing them to. Chambers’ allegorical method does nothing to keep people within orthodox Christian doctrine, however pious he was as a person.

Total Surrender

Chambers’ biographer includes a chapter entitled Dark Night of the Soul.⁴ The experience of this dark night has been referenced by Christian mystics. Catholic mystic Saint John of the Cross is often cited as the source of this idea. Roman Catholics consider this a crisis on a journey toward union with God. One source says that Mother Teresa’s entire life was a such a “dark night.” A Catholic website describes her life as such.⁵ In Chambers’ case his experience was a byproduct of a subjective approach to the Christian life. His biog-
rpher states, “Only three times during the past four years had Oswald been conscious of God speaking personally to him.” The biographer then describes Chambers’ experience with the Holy Spirit that brought him out of the dark night, citing Chambers own words: “And like a flash something happened inside me, and I saw that I had been wanting power in my own hand, so to speak, that I might say—Look what I have by putting my all on the altar.” He got out of his horrible state and spent the rest of his life in service for God and others.

The early 20th century saw many forms of second blessing doctrines. Most were tied to versions of the holiness movement and their various doctrines. Some were more Pentecostal. They all assumed that there are two types of Christians—the ordinary ones and those who had received a version of the second blessing. The key idea in Chambers’ theology was total surrender. Here is how his new life after finding the secondary experience is described: “Chambers’ crises of full surrender to God in 1901 profoundly altered his life.” He did not claim sinless perfection. Later when the tongues movement came on the scene he wished to distance himself from that as well. Earlier his magazine was called Tongues of Fire and their group the Pentecostal League. However Chambers’ and associates did not believe that speaking in tongues was the sign of being filled with the Spirit. He was committed to the type of Christian character that showed total surrender to God.

Total surrender as a secondary experience became central to much holiness teaching including Chambers’. During my years of devotion to such teaching, I was influenced by a Watchman Nee book entitled The Release of the Spirit. Nee’s idea was that the outer man was a hindrance to true spirituality and that it had to be broken, so that the Christian would become a broken vessel like the alabaster vial of perfume so as to release the sweetness of God’s anointing. This would be a secondary experience if one ever had it. All of these doctrines assumed that there were two types of Christian separated by an higher order experience or revelation.

When I began my latest study of Chambers I thought that he must have been a product of Keswick holiness and read some essays that stated as much. Keswick was a conference in England that people journeyed many miles to attend with the hope of achieving holiness. I found that Chambers did attend Keswick, but it was not the source of his holiness experience which he had earlier. I also found that Keswick had a key difference from Chambers. They promoted a more passive approach often called “let go and let God.” When the person felt the weight of their own sin and saw how badly they needed things to change, they let God take over. Chambers did not teach “let go and let God,” but active surrender.

This active approach is seen in Utmost where he cites Galatians 2:20 for the November 3rd devotion and explains:

These words mean the breaking of my independence with my own hand and surrendering to the supremacy of the Lord Jesus. No one can do this for me, I must do it myself. God may bring me to the point three hundred and sixty-five times a year, but He cannot put me through it. It means breaking the husk of my individual independence of God, and the emancipation of my personality into oneness with Himself, not for my own ideas, but for absolute loyalty to Jesus.

This is not compatible with the Keswick approach. When studying Keswick I wondered about that since my early teaching was from Watchman Nee who seriously warned against passivity. He claimed that passivity of will was something demons would use to our harm. Chambers promoted an active approach as well. In his teaching we must actively surrender to God.

What a “personality into oneness with Himself” would mean is debatable. Do we lose our individual identities? Some of what Chambers said sounded that way, as if it were not us loving others but Jesus loving others with us as the vessels. But in other cases Chambers accounted for individuality. Variations like that are what made his devotional confusing to me as a new Christian. Galatians 2:20 speaks of being crucified with Christ but as a status of all Christians. We have died to sin and come alive to God (see Romans 6:1-11). Chambers made it a higher order experience that was dependent on our willingness to choose it.

What seems to have escaped both Chambers and the Keswick convention is that the Bible never teaches that there are higher order Christians who have experienced total surrender as the key to holiness. Holiness is never linked in the Bible to a secondary experience that only some in the body of Christ have had. Jesus and His apostles considered all Christians sanctified. Consider Paul’s citation of Jesus:

‘to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.’ (Acts 26:18)

Those of whom Jesus speaks who have been sanctified are Christians, not just some elite ones with a special, secondary experience. Faith in God through the gospel results in the profound changes that Jesus called Paul to preach.

Let me share some of my own experiences from my years of seeking a version of total surrender. At that time I believed in a second blessing but was being taught the Pentecostal version in the Bible college from which I graduated. Later I was in the Charismatic movement and they had a different approach. The Christian community I joined was more about making a clean break with the world by forgoing careers, pay checks, higher education, and anything else our leaders deemed “Babylon.” We had left Babylon to be totally committed to the kingdom of God. Historically, second blessing doc-
trines have much variety. What they have common is that there are two types of Christians and one had to achieve the higher status by some means for fear of being "ordinary."

The experiences of those years have made me love the truth of the gospel which I used to take for granted. I was involved with deliverance and inner healing teachings. Our group was sincerely trying to help people. I had many dozens of people coming to me for help and counsel. But over the years I noticed that the same people kept having the same problems. During my years in that community, the leaders periodically brought new teachings that were the latest and best means to find total victory. But the initial excitement would fade and the same people would have the same problems. Eventually I began to doubt the whole process. I asked the leaders if any of them had gone through the counseling and deliverance we offered. They had not, nor had I. Ironically most had gone to Bible college, although many would mock such education as "religious Babylon." I also began to see that if the allegorical approach to the Bible were taken away, most of what we practiced would go away as well.

Eventually these problems, the breaking up of that group, and the need to help the people from the group with whom we fellowshipped, led to the most important change in my ministry. Together with another pastor, I decided that these dear people could not endure any more of the latest teachings that supposedly were going to solve all their problems. We decided that the only thing we could do that would endure over the years and certainly benefit the flock, was to teach through the Bible verse by verse and interpret it according to the Biblical author's meaning. That was in 1983 and I have been doing so ever since.

Chambers certainly believed his total surrender experience changed him forever. He sincerely believed that others needed to totally surrender as well. He devoted his life to that and tirelessly reached out to whoever was hurting. He died at a relatively young age while helping soldiers during World War I. I do not write to tarnish his memory or testify of selflessness. But I do write to warn against copying his unbiblical doctrine. We do not need unbiblical doctrine to make us better Christians. We need the comfort that comes from "The God of all comfort" (2Corinthians 1:30) through the means of gospel truth.

Biblical Psychology

Chambers' biography mentioned that he often taught what was called "Biblical psychology." What this amounts to is the analyzing of the inner part of the Christian for the purpose of sanctification. It is also known as body, soul and spirit teaching based on what I consider a misuse of 1Thessalonians 5:23. Paul speaks of the entire person being sanctified and does not imply that studying the inner workings of the soul, including distinguishing between soul and spirit is the key to sanctification. It is not even clear that the verse endorses trichotomy over dichotomy. Yet Chambers and others who taught Biblical Psychology made the differences between spirit and soul of great importance for the purpose of pleasing God and living a victorious Christian life.

Biblical psychology teaching was popular in England during and after Chambers' years. I read two versions of it in my early days as a Christian: Watchman Nee's and 'T Austin Sparks' book What Is Man?. Chambers published a book entitled Biblical Psychology. In each case, the differences and interaction between the soul and spirit are emphasized and analyzed. What these authors seem to miss is that the Bible never says that the Christian can effectively analyze the inner workings of soul and spirit and put that analysis to work in serving God. I tried to do so for five years before I gave up. Let's look at some of Chambers' claims to see how this doctrine works.

The following long citation is a good example of this doctrine and should show us how onerous it could become if someone tried to believe and practice it:

Now, God is a Spirit, and if I am going to understand God, I must have the Spirit of God, and because my thinking and because God's Spirit take up no room they act very easily, work and inter-work with one another in my body, and what the Spirit of God does when He comes into me by the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ is to re-energize my spirit. My spirit in itself has no power to get hold of God; God’s Spirit comes into my spirit and re-energizes that, then the rest depends on me; if I do not obey, if I do not bring into the light of the Spirit of God the dark and the wrong things in my soul, and get them dealt with by the light of the Spirit of God which He gives, then I shall grieve the Spirit of God, and grieve Him away. (Chambers, Psychology 218).

The idea often promoted in such teachings is that the Holy Spirit becomes one with our spirit and this becomes the source of power, will, change, and direction for the Christian’s soul. Our soul contains our mind (nous), they say, and must listen to the Spirit which has perfected our spirit. If we follow our spirit in that way we have great victory and please God. As Chambers claims, if we do not, we “grieve Him away.” When I was trying to do this, I could never be sure that I was correctly identifying what was my soul and what was my Spirit energized spirit. The stakes were high. Getting it wrong meant failing God and going into darkness. But my soul was full of thoughts and motivations—which were the ones from God? With no literal Bible to decide (remember the allegorical method) there was only the subjective to judge the subjective.

To help remedy the problem in my case, we had the shepherding movement. More advanced Christians who were our shepherds would decide for us what was from God. I am not saying that Chambers had such a movement,
but his teachings and others like them created an acute need for some means to decide. When the shepherding movement hit the rocks around 1980 so did our movement. I had to admit that after years of trying, I could not tell the inner difference between my soul and spirit or decide what God was saying. I had only the Bible and its objective meaning to which to turn.

Chambers’ teaching creates a need for mysticism. If I fail to obey the inner promptings of the Spirit of God in my life, I could lose everything when I “grieve Him away.” One had to be some type of mystic to know what God was saying. I needed a method where the Holy Spirit tells us what the Bible means, we had to be mystics to even follow the Bible. The historical, grammatical method was rendered useless. In my case, I had been trained in that method in Bible college. But now it could not help me.

Here is some more of Chambers’ teaching, the sort that he taught his students:

In the beginning of the spiritual life we have the “Spirit of God” but not the “mind of Christ.” The “mind of Christ” means that we have formed the same intelligent, responsible outlook on things that the Son of God had, and one of the greatest benedic-
tions of God’s grace is this, that some people who do not seem to have any natural “nous” can construct one in the realm of grace by the Spirit of God, and the right use of it in the temple of the Holy Ghost. (Chambers, Psychology 244)

He alludes to 1 Corinthians 2:16 regarding the mind of Christ. Here again there is a pietistic, elitist interpretation. Some lesser Christians do not have the mind of Christ so they need to construct a “nous” (Greek for “mind”) that can become it. As we will see it gets even more confusing. But does the “mind of Christ” that Paul says we have support teachings like Chambers’ and many others?

Gordon Fee’s commentary on 1 Corinthians came out in the late 1980’s and was life changing for me. I knew that the deeper life teachings I had laid aside were wrong, but I lacked the ability to fully explain why. Many of those teachings depended on passages from 1 Corinthians, like those about being “soulish” that Nee referenced. Fee showed that Paul was using irony to rebuke the false teachers in Corinth who called themselves the “spiritual” ones. Consider this profound statement by Fee concerning the passage about the mind of Christ:

This paragraph has endured a most unfortunate history of application in the church. Paul’s own point has been almost totally lost in favor of an interpretation that is nearly 180 degrees opposite of his. Almost every form of spiritual elitism, “deeper life” movement, and “second blessing” doctrine has appealed to this text. To receive the Spirit according to their special expression paves the way for people to know “deeper truths” about God. One special brand of this elitism surfaces among some who have pushed the possibilities of “faith” to the extreme, and regularly make a “special revelation” from the Spirit their final court of appeal. Other “lesser” brothers and sisters are simply living below their full privileges in Christ. Indeed, some advocates of this form of spiritualty bid fair to repeat the Corinthian error in its totality.1

Chambers is a good example of what Fee warns against. The “mind of Christ” is the message of the cross, according to Paul. His opponents claimed to have some special revelation that was a higher order version of wisdom and knowledge. God’s wisdom IS the cross!

When I read Fee’s commentary I finally could put the deeper life error I had embraced behind me and start warning others with clarity. Chambers’ version of the “mind of Christ” gets even more confusing:

Let us look at the subject of “Nous” under three headings, the Natural Nous, the Spiritual Nous, and the Bewildered Nous. Jesus Christ is the responsible expression of the intelligence of God, Jesus Christ is called the “Logos.” We have the same thing in man, we have spirit, and immediately we form a responsible intelligence, our words are responsible, all the things we express, the statements we make, and the thoughts we form are all stamped with responsibility. (Chambers, Psychology: 244)

So now we not only have to determine what our spirit is doing in relationship to the soul which includes “mind” (nous), we have to further divide the mind into possible components so that we can be “responsible.” When I studied Nee’s version of this it was no less confusing, though his categories were somewhat different. Rather than feel like we must not be truly spiritual, we need to dump this “Biblical psychology” teaching and read the Bible for what it actually says. We are never given anything like this material in the Bible.

The material that Chambers taught is unbelievably convoluted. Later he divides things even further under a section called “soul-making power” where he lists “particular form, personal form, and physical form.” Here is how that section proceeds:

We are now dealing with Man’s Universe, the Particular Form, the Personal Form, and the Physical Form. Remember, the whole meaning of my soul life is this, to express what my spirit means, and the struggle of spirit is to get itself expressed in my soul. Take it in the natural line, you will find when an immature mind tries to express itself, there are tremendous struggles and all kinds of physical exertions and efforts. It has not the power of expressing itself, it has not a
This material is hopeless. When I tried to live it I came to the conclusion that I would never truly be the “spiritual man” because my soul could not figure out what my spirit was saying and doing. Imagine young, new Christians being taught like this. They would have to try to become mystics whether they were so inclined or not. If they succeeded in being mystics, would they remain in orthodox Christianity or would following inner promptings lead them somewhere else? It was God’s grace that I gave up and went back to a literal Bible for my guidance. I pray, dear readers, that you stay in the literal Bible or go there if you have not. The mind of Christ that Paul says we have is not mystical guidance!

Is Mysticism True Devotion?

It grieves me that Christian devotional literature is so often coming from a mystical perspective. Chambers’ does. Many others do as well, including some we have reviewed. There is a serious misunderstanding at work here. When Christians “have devotions” they often assume that it means “quiet time” or even “entering the silence.” Devotion is not a function of how quiet one gets or how well one listens inwardly for some word from God. Such passive “listening” is not taught in the Bible as the means to true devotion. Chambers’ biography that I cited tells how he was in the dark to true devotion. Chambers’ biography is not taught in the Bible as the means Christians “have devotions” they often understand at work here. When they do not. This creates the market for the many mystical practices being promoted today.

The early Christians expressed their devotion much differently: “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). Such devotion is active, not passive. It has objective content. There is nothing about Christian devotion that implies silence or inner voices. The term translated “devoted” is _proskartereo_, which means “to continue steadfast, to remain, to stay close to someone.” It is used in instructions to be “devoted to prayer” such as in Colossians 4:2. When we pray we bring our needs and concerns to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). Paul often asked for specific prayer. To do so would require expressing objective content of these requests to God. Devotions are not “quiet time” but active time expressing ourselves to God and studying the apostles’ teaching.

I reject the idea that devotion implies mysticism. Chambers’ allegorical approach to the Bible and Biblical psychology teachings require mysticism by their very nature. If the Bible’s meaning is revealed to the reader, then the reader has to hear from God beyond the objective meaning of the Bible. If the key to the deeper life is listening to my inner spirit teach some aspect of my inner “nous,” I need to learn to go into the subjective realm of mysticism. If there is a secondary experience of “total surrender” I had better figure out whether I have it or not. This leads to introspection which does not mean believing the objective promises of God.

That _Utmost_ has been so popular for so many years tells me that modern evangelicalism is at its heart a mystical religion. People cannot see what is wrong with it. That so many mystical teachers are the most popular speakers at seminars says the same thing. That mystical teachers like Donald Whitney call themselves “Reformed” shows that the problem is wide and deep. No wonder that so many of our readers wonder where to go for fellowship.

Conclusion

We need to get back to the type of devotion described in Acts 2:42 and leave the mystical approach behind, once for all. We need to believe the promises of God all the while remembering His mighty acts in history described in the Bible. The gospel is expressed by objective truth grounded in history such as described in 1Corinthians 15:1-11. The Bible means what it says. The Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the Bible. The readers need to believe

End Notes

3. Ibid.
5. McCasland, David (1993) Oswald Chambers – Abandoned to God, Chapter 7; Discovery House Publications, Nashville
7. McCasland, op. cit. 82.
8. Ibid. 83.
9. Ibid. 85.
10. Ibid. 132, 133.
11. Ibid. 135.
12. Andy Naselli has done extensive research on Keswick holiness: andy-naselli.com/keswick-theology
13. See Gordon Fee’s commentary in the NICNT on this passage for a good discussion of the issues.
14. Chambers, Oswald, Biblical Psychology (1914) Online as PDF.