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## ROMANTIC PANENTHEISM

### A REVIEW OF *ONE THOUSAND GIFTS* BY ANN VOSKAMP

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If I were to write this review in the style Ann Voskamp used in writing her book, it would read like this:

Sunlight streams through window. Shadows on keyboard. I sit here. I want to separate substance from style and deal only with substance as I contemplate a book. Before me lies *The Thousand Gifts*, a book written by Ann Voskamp, farmer's wife, Canadian. Ann writes in person first, tense present, style poetic. Two hundred thirty-seven pages speak of angst personal and thankfulness God-given and quote Julian of Norwich, Annie Dillard, Brennan Manning, Henri Nouwen, Teilard de Chardin and others. The style I find difficult. Of that I will not speak. The substance is of concern. Of that I *will* speak.

But let us leave the first person present poetic to her and deal with her message.

Let me state this clearly: Ann Voskamp has written a book sharing her pain and offering help through her discovery of *eucharisteo* (to give thanks). She chose a literary style that I and other reviewers found difficult to work with, but the style she chooses is her prerogative. Where her work warrants challenge is in her reliance on panentheism, romanticism, sensual language and those whose viewpoints she approvingly cites. What follows is my evaluation of Voskamp's contribution, and,

through my analysis I intend to protect her readers from the errors she has introduced.

We live in a postmodern theological age where the sensual and mysterious have replaced the rational and cognitive; where many churches promote the idea of worshiping God with all five senses; where feelings trump clear Biblical exegesis, systematic theology, statements of faith—rational approaches to Christian theology. Into this milieu comes *One Thousand Gifts* by Ann Voskamp, a book that takes romanticism to a new level, using sensuality to invoke religious feelings and, ostensibly, true devotion.<sup>1</sup>

Voskamp weaves a tale of discovery, finding devotion to God through encounters with nature and art, and in her experience, uncovering the secret to joy through what she calls *eucharisteo* ("giving thanks" transliterated from the Greek).

Begrudging Voskamp her religious feelings is not my purpose here, nor is disagreeing with the basic thesis that Christians ought to give thanks to God in all things. But I do object to the panentheistic worldview Voskamp espouses in the book and the accompanying romanticism. First we will explore panentheism and romanticism to show why these ideas are of concern.

## PANENTHEISM

Voskamp sees God in everything, and that concept has a name—panentheism. We must distinguish panentheism from pantheism, the belief that God is

everything. If we accept that God is in everything, then we accept that God can be discovered and understood through encounters with nature. Voskamp shows that she knows what is wrong with pantheism:

Pantheism, seeing the natural world as divine, is a very different thing than seeing divine God present in all things. I know it here kneeling, the twilight so still: nature is not God but God revealing the weight of Himself, all His glory, through the looking glass of nature. (Voskamp: 110)

But she falls into a trap when she replaces it with panentheism.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, her conclusion that passages like those in Psalm 19 and Romans 1 speak of God in everything is not a valid implication. Why? Because these passages speak of general revelation. Nature, the vehicle for God's expressing general revelation, is fallen and does not reveal "all His glory." Christ does that, and what can be discerned about God through nature is not saving knowledge, but condemning knowledge. The book of Romans makes that clear:

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. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. (Romans 1:20-23)

The nature religions of the pagans see God in creation, worship creation, and do not come to messianic salvation. Paul claims that salvation comes only through the gospel, which comes to us through special, not general, revelation. Voskamp confuses these two categories throughout her book. For example: "And every moment is a message from the Word-God who can't stop writing His heart" (Voskamp: 86). Voskamp claims that the ability to see God in everything is the key to getting such messages. Pagans live in the same time-space world we do and do not receive infallible, inerrant, and binding revelation from God from that world. Instead, they live in darkness, and if they seek messages from God through the moments in this world, what they receive will lead to pagan mysticism and not anything that is clearly and bindingly revealed by God.

Voskamp would likely recoil from the notion that she is promoting pagan nature religion. But she puts Christians on the same footing as the pagans by taking them on a journey to find God in nature and art. She thereby promotes mysticism. Her concepts about God that are distinctively Christian are borrowed from special revelation (the Bible). But she never makes a distinction between general revelation and special revelation, and by integrating the two so seamlessly, she elevates nature to the status of saving revelation. Since God is supposedly in everything, then God can be found in everything. And that is panentheism.

Much of the current evangelical world is being seduced by panentheism, and we need to understand what is unbiblical about it. Many think that panentheism is a logical implication from the Christian concept of omnipresence—that God is everywhere. Their confusion has left the door open for the New Age to enter the church.

Here is what we are dealing with. God is not limited spatially—that is a valid Biblical concept. This means there is nowhere where He is not – Psalm 139:7-10. But panentheism describes an ontological (ontology—the study of

being, what a thing is in its essential nature), not spatial category. Panentheism teaches that God's essence or being is in everything. This is not the same as the doctrine of omnipresence, though panentheism would agree that God is everywhere.

Here is the problem. If God in His essence and essential being is found in everything, then there is nothing unique about Christ (which is precisely the New Age claim). Biblically, Christ reveals God and His glory in a way nature does not. Nature reveals God obliquely, not concretely and verbally. Jesus, on the other hand, spoke inerrant, binding words that will judge us on the last day (John 12:48). The moon does no such thing.

Panentheism permeates Voskamp's *One Thousand Gifts*. As an example of her panentheism, Voskamp describes an experience where she finds salvation by gazing at a full moon in a harvested wheat field:

Has His love lured me out here to really save me? I sit up in the wheat stubble, drawn. That He would care to save. Moon face glows. We are head to head. I am bare; He is bare. All Eye sees me (Voskamp: 115).

Her experience is described in salvific terms: "It's dawning, my full moon rising. I was lost but know I am found again" (Voskamp: 118). She claims an "inner eye" that sees God in a panentheistic way: "If my inner eye has God seeping up through all things, then can't I give thanks for anything? . . . The art of deep seeing makes gratitude possible" (Voskamp: 118). In Romans 1, "seeing" God through general revelation in a way that makes all humans culpable is true for all, not just for special enlightened ones like Voskamp.

The claim that salvation can be found in seeing God in the harvest moon introduces some troubling factors. One is that Voskamp implies that for her, "salvation" is being saved from an unhappy life filled with ingratitude. She never mentions God's wrath against sin (she does mention sin but not in the

context of substitutionary atonement). Another is that she completely confuses, then merges, general and special revelation. General revelation does not offer saving knowledge, whatever she meant to convey of her experience "chasing the moon" (her terminology). Yet another is that panentheism is again implied here as it has been throughout the book.

Before we go further we must consider two theological terms important in Christian teaching: immanence, meaning God is close at hand, and transcendence, meaning God is exalted above and beyond us and the creation. These are relational and ontological categories and not spatial ones as I mentioned before. Voskamp confuses these two concepts and, like many liberal and Emergent theologians, promotes God's immanence at the expense of His transcendence. I am concerned that her confusion will likely be imparted to most of her readers.

Consider this passage from Isaiah that reveals both immanence and transcendence: "*For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, 'I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite'*" (Isaiah 57:15). That God is "high and exalted" means that the Creator is separate from His creation, is above and beyond it, and thus transcendent. God is not one of the many nature gods of the pagans. "Above" and "beyond," when used in this way, denote God's essence and being (ontology), not His spatial relationship to the universe.

But God is also "with the contrite." Here we see the key to understanding immanence. It does not say that God is universally "with" all people only if they have the right "inner eye." The Bible says "*The Lord is far from the wicked, But He hears the prayer of the righteous*" (Proverbs 15:29). "Far from" and "near" in such contexts are also relational and not spatial. God hears prayers and personally relates to those who seek Him and are willing to come to Him on His terms. This relationship is available

through Jesus Christ who is to be believed and trusted and is not available through the moon. God is near to all sinners spatially, because in Him they live and move and have existence (Acts 17:28). But if they refuse to repent and believe God as He has revealed Himself through Jesus Christ whom He raised from the dead, they will remain far from Him in a relational sense (see Acts 17:30-32). The moon cannot resolve the problem of sinners' lost condition, but the Son will if they repent (Acts 17:30, 31).

Voskamp's panentheism is not compatible with Christian theism. This worldview is very popular in today's culture, inside and outside the church, but it is not from God. Rather, it is a departure from the faith once for all delivered to the saints. My notes taken as I read Voskamp reveal panentheism on many pages (16, 31, 54, 89, 109, 110, 112, 118, 119, 124, 137, 138, 185, and 195). It is no exaggeration to say that the entire book is written from a panentheistic perspective.

Voskamp even finds Christ in everyone, including the lost encountered in the inner city: "A long night doing what we've come to do, to bless Christ in the other" (Voskamp: 185). The Bible claims that only believers are indwelt by Christ through the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9). Voskamp's panentheism spills into universalism as it does in Emergent and the New Age. It colors everything she teaches.

## ROMANTICISM

Voskamp displays Romanticism throughout her book so we must address its impact here. Romanticism—the idea that truth could be found in feelings, art, and the intuitive rather than through empirical investigation and the rational—arose in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century as a reaction against the Enlightenment and rationalism. I believe the Emergent movement is a new Romanticism,<sup>3</sup> and I am quite sure that this assessment is accurate. Romanticism, old and new, has a common enemy which is the Enlightenment.

Voskamp is not so concerned about the Enlightenment or other philosophical considerations but presents romanticism throughout her book. In fact, *One Thousand Gifts* could be mistaken for a romance novel with God the desired lover. Here is an example:

I long to merge with Beauty, breathe it into lungs, feel it heavy on skin. To beat on the door of the universe, pound the chest of God . . . No matter how manifested, beauty is what sparks the romance and we are the Bride pursued, the Lover pursuing, and known or unbeknownst, He woos us in the romance of all time, beyond time. I ache for oneness (Voskamp: 119).

The Bible speaks of the church as the Bride of Christ but does not describe the universal call of the gospel in sensual terms of a lover pursuing His love interest (who may have no interest in return). God is commanding sinners to repent. The gospel calls for repentance and faith, not romantic feelings looking for satisfaction.

Voskamp's romanticism is enhanced by her skill at describing things in a most sensual manner. The sensual terminology is designed to create a mood, a feeling, a sense of romantic mystery that longs for discovery and fulfillment. Those like me who relish clear description of theological concepts meant to be understood and discerned, will be horribly frustrated by the book. Her book is not meant to be a theological text filled with ideas to be judged true or false, but is instead a literary piece filled with feelings to be relished. For example:

The full life, the one spilling joy and peace, happens only as I come to trust the caress of the Lover, Lover who never burdens His children with shame or self-condemnation but keeps stroking the fears with gentle grace (Voskamp: 146).

This sensuality finds its apex in the last

chapter of the book which begins with this sentence: "*I fly to Paris and discover how to make love to God*" (Voskamp: 201). As a true romantic, she finds the ultimate intimacy (her term) through various experiences in Paris. I will deal with that in a section about mysticism, but for now I will point out that the term "intimacy" is not found in the Bible. It is a sensual term that enhances the romantic appeal of Voskamp's book.

As a reviewer I would like to skirt the subject of intimacy and other sensual terminology, but sensual terminology permeates the book. There is a whole chapter inspired by a soap bubble in a sink, one about driving across a bridge, and the aforementioned one on gazing at the moon. For those who have not read the book, I offer an example of over-wrought sensual (in the broad sense of appealing to one's senses) terminology:

April sun pools into a dishwasher sink, liquid daylight on hands. The water is hot. I wash dishes. On my arms, just below the hiked sleeves, suds leave delicate water marks. Suds glisten. And over the soaking pots, the soap bubbles stack. This fragile tension arched in spheres of slick elastic sheets. Light impinges on slippery film. And I only notice because I'm looking for this and it's the rays falling, reflecting off the outer surface of a bubble . . . off the rim of the bubble's inner skin . . . and where they meet, this interference of light, iridescence on the bubble's arch, violet, magenta, blue-green, yellow-gold. Like the glimmer on raven wing, the angles, the hues, the brilliant fluid, light on the waves (Voskamp: 62).

This is how the entire book reads. Sensuality pervades throughout. Romanticism, which values feelings and experience over truth and concrete data, reigns. If washing dishes can be turned into a romantic experience, the job becomes something special, as does life. Yes, this is a literary style, but I'm

afraid it is employed at the expense of truth. Voskamp delivers what she seems to want for her readers: an escape from the mundane through seeing beauty in all things.

## GOD AND TIME

In the soap bubble chapter Voskamp teaches the theological error that time is the essence and nature of God when she writes: "Time is where God is. In the present. I AM – His very name" (69). She gains that idea through wrongly interpreting the self-designation of God as I AM to be proof that time is of the essence of God, so therefore God is to be found in the present (Voskamp: 69, 70). Her ideas are remarkably similar to Eckhart Tolle's (New Age pantheist) ideas taught in his books *The Power of Now* and *The New Earth*,<sup>4</sup> where he speaks of "Presence, and I AM" as realities to be discovered by enlightened ones. Voskamp writes: "Time is where God is. In the present. I AM – His very name" (69). When God referred to Himself as I AM, His point in revealing Himself to Moses was not that God is in the present. He was telling Moses that He, God, is the eternal existent One whose being is not contingent on anything outside of Himself. Finding God in the present is the point driven home by Eckhart Tolle; it is not a Biblical idea.

Voskamp makes other statements that teach serious theological errors: "I hardly breathe . . . time is only of the essence, because time is the essence of God, I AM" (Voskamp: 69, 70).<sup>5</sup> The theological debate about God's relationship to time is very complex. Some teach that God is timeless based on the idea of God's changelessness and the fact that time involves change. But changeless and timeless are two different things—that time is God's essence is not an implication of I AM terminology and is theologically false. Tolle teaches a concept called "being present" which to him is linked to consciousness of deity. Voskamp has a similar idea: "When I'm present, I meet I AM, the very presence of a present God" (Voskamp: 70). What would it mean to be "not present"? Evidently "being present" for Voskamp

has to do with some sort of consciousness that is not always true.

God's relationship to time is a worthy topic, albeit a very difficult and complex one. But Voskamp is not really interested in theology understood cognitively, but rather in romantic feelings about God. Her chapter on time, based as it is on the soap bubble, is about feelings and discovery, not theological conceptions:

I am a hunter of beauty and I move slow [sic] and I keep the eyes wide, every fiber of every muscle sensing all wonder and this is the thrill of the hunt and I could be an expert on life full, the beauty meat that lurks in every moment. I hunger to taste life. God. (Voskamp: 71)

This is about seeing God in the moment (an art for the spiritually enlightened) and in all things (panentheism). Voskamp's chapter is not really about God's relationship to time, but about our attentiveness and awareness that will cause us to see God (Voskamp: 77). In her view, God's relationship to time is a romantic notion, not so much a theological one.

## NEW AGE SENSIBILITIES

*One Thousand Gifts* is filled with New Age ideas. For example, Voskamp cites Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a darling with New Age writers: "Nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see" (Chardin as cited by Voskamp: 122). It is possible that a false teacher like de Chardin could have some true ideas, but Voskamp cites him as part of the heading of a chapter precisely at his point of error (and hers). The idea that everything is holy and nothing profane is popular, but unbiblical, and comports with the idea of panentheism. If indeed God is in everything, then nothing is profane. Rob Bell makes the same error in *Velvet Elvis* when he claims everything is holy.<sup>6</sup> The Bible tells us to separate the holy from the profane: "Moreover, they shall teach My people the difference between the holy

and the profane, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean" (Ezekiel 44:23). The concept of the profane is also found in the New Testament. What is holy and what is unholy are revealed by God, and to say that certain enlightened ones with an elevated ability to see everything as holy is unbiblical. Heightened feelings and sensibilities that cause everything to be holy and beautiful—Voskamp's point—is a wonderfully romantic notion, but it leads her readers astray because it is wrong. She cites de Chardin because she shares his ideas.

New Age panentheist Matthew Fox also approves of de Chardin:

Teilhard de Chardin calls the Cosmic Christ the "third nature" of Christ, meaning that it takes us beyond the fourth-century conciliar definitions of Christ's human and divine natures into a third realm, "neither human nor divine, but cosmic." He comments that this has "not noticeably attracted the explicit attention of the faithful or of theologians." Clearly Chardin saw the paradigm shift that was implicit in powerful celebration of the Cosmic Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Fox describes himself as a panentheist who sees God in all things.<sup>8</sup> Though Voskamp may not have gotten her ideas from Fox, the similarity of their ideas is easy to see. But why are Christian authors like Voskamp teaching panentheism and promoting New Age ideas?

Emergent writers speak of the "rhythm of God in the world." In their thinking one can tune into this rhythm through man-invented practices.<sup>9</sup> The ideas that nothing is profane and that God's rhythm can be found in all things are panentheistic, not Christian. The Christian view is that the created order, because of sin and rebellion, contains good and evil, the holy and the profane. Satan deceives people into thinking that they can tap into something good by using the right techniques rather than by listening to what God has said in the Bible.



Voskamp promotes a means of “seeing” that reminiscent of Emergent teachers:

I speak the unseen into seeing and I can feel it, this steady breathing in the rhythm of grace—*give thanks (in), give thanks (out)*. The eyes focus, apertures capturing Beauty in ugliness. There’s a doxology of praise that splits the domestic dark. (Voskamp: 128).

What she means is that seeing God (holiness) in all things is a special spiritual ability obtained by those who learn how: “Contemplative simplicity isn’t a matter of circumstances; it’s a matter of *focus*” (Voskamp: 127). Voskamp cites postmodern mystic Annie Dillard favorably in regard to “seeing” in the contemplative sense (Voskamp: 127). Voskamp tells her son about “seeing” as she understands it—which is so very New Age:

“The practice of giving thanks . . . *eucharisteo* . . . this is the way we practice the presence of God, stay present to His presence, and it is always a practice of the eyes. We don’t have to change what we see. Only the *way* we see.” (Voskamp: 135).

Seeing God in all things in Voskamp’s view, becomes the mechanism for transcending the sorrows of the mundane and finding good feelings to overcome the bad ones. She continues to teach: “The only way to fight a feeling is with a feeling” (Voskamp: 136). I counter that Biblical truth would be an alternative. Like all postmodern panentheists, for her the subjective rules over the objective. This, by the way, is also the essence of romanticism.

The real problem is not our failure to see God in everything, but our failure to believe what God has said, and by grace obey. The grand claim of the Bible is that “God has spoken” (Hebrews 1:1, 2). The question is whether we will listen to what God has said or not. Those who are totally alienated from God and

teach pagan ideas claim to see God in everything (e.g. Echart Tolle). Voskamp offers what is also offered by the New Age panentheists. The reality is that feeling close to God is not the same as the drawing near to God as discussed in the Bible. Voskamp offers romantic feelings.

### A ROMANTIC ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

Voskamp’s romanticism reaches its pinnacle in chapter 11. There she describes a trip to Paris where she has an intimate encounter with God through art and architecture. God “woos” her through this encounter and she falls in love. She writes, “I am falling in love. . . . I’m accompanied by this Voice whispering to me new words, new love—urging me, *Respond, respond*” (Voskamp: 206). The entire chapter is laced with sensual terminology.

At Notre Dame Cathedral, carried away by the experience, she claims to have found the holy: “This air is old, the ground, holy” (Voskamp: 207). Hold it. On the contrary, the New Testament does not describe holy places, especially not Roman Catholic cathedrals filled with pagan icons and grotesque gargoyles such as at Notre Dame (which means “our lady” referring to the virgin Mary). What exactly, from a Biblical perspective, makes Notre Dame Cathedral “holy”? Are Roman Catholic buildings and statuary inherently holy? Evidently Voskamp thinks so. But then again, a romantic will see that which is good and desirable in any and all things.

There, in a Roman Catholic cathedral which ought to invoke our objection, Voskamp, as do her role models, the mystics of the Middle Ages, finds “intimate union” with God. She describes her experience in this way:

My eyes follow the stone arches rising over us, granite hands clasped in prayer over souls. I think of all who have gone before, the hands of medieval peasants who chiseled the stone under which I now stand. I think of those long-ago believers who

had a way of entering into the full life, of finding a passage into God, a historical model of intimacy with God. I lean back to see the spires. (Voskamp: 208).

As mentioned before, the Bible never uses the term “intimacy.” We take a huge leap of faith to assume that medieval mystics found a secret to intimacy with God through means other than the gospel itself. Medieval mystical practices are not prescribed in the Bible. Yet Voskamp favorably cites Catholic mystic Henri Nouwen (Voskamp: 205). Mystical teachers and a pagan religious site inspire Voskamp’s journey to find romantic intimacy with God.

### PURGATION, ILLUMINATION, UNION: MYSTICAL UNION WITH GOD

Then, without apology, Voskamp teaches “purgation, illumination, union,” the path to mystical union that has its roots in ancient, pagan, Rome. This path is taught in the Catholic Encyclopedia.<sup>10</sup> This threefold path is “common to all forms of mysticism, Christian or otherwise” writes Pastor Gary Gilley who rightly warns the church about it.<sup>11</sup>

Voskamp next extols the medieval mystics who were instrumental in the building of Notre Dame (Voskamp: 208). She writes about them:

I think how lives, whole generations, were laid down to built this edifice, to find a way in. But they thought the steps to God—consummation were but three: purgation, illumination, union. (Voskamp: 208)

She then describes these steps in glowing terms as she experienced them (Voskamp: 209).

New Age teacher Matthew Fox also endorses these steps and others as the means of a paradigm shift from the Christ of the Bible to the cosmic Christ:

In terms of the history of spiritu-

ality, this paradigm shift is from the three stages of purification, illumination, and union that mysticism inherited from Proclus and Plotinus (not from Jesus or the Hebrew Bible since neither of these thinkers was either Jewish or Christian) to the four paths of delight (*via positive*), letting go (*via negative*), creativity (*via creativa*), compassion, i.e., celebration and justicemaking (*via transformative*). Today “to enter the mysteries” means to enter the mysteries of the four paths of creation spirituality—mysteries of delight, darkness, birthing, compassion. In this section we will explore more fully how the paradigm shift can also be named as moving from the quest for the historical Jesus to the quest for the Cosmic Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Mysticism and the practices Voskamp endorses that promote it, do lead to a Cosmic Christ, that is a creation-centered one rather than the Christ who bodily ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God. The mystical Christ is immanent only, *not* transcendent. He is contacted by unbiblical, mystical means rather than through the gospel that saves us from God’s wrath against sin.

Voskamp admits that union with Christ is true for all who have repented and believed (Voskamp: 209, 210). She thereby has an understanding that was lacking for the Roman Catholic mystics she extols. So to keep the experience and practice, she posits the union of the threefold path as a higher order experience for Christians: “An ever deepening union, one we experience on the skin and in the vein, feel in the deep pit of the being, an ever fuller realization of the Christ communion” (Voskamp: 210). So, ordinary Christians have union, but not the deep union that mystics enjoy. This union is what she has as a sister to Brother Lawrence (Voskamp: 210). She describes the experience of union:

I remember this feeling. The way

my apron billowed in the running, the light, the air. The harvest moon. I remember. The yearning. To merge with Beauty Himself. But here . . . Now? Really? . . . I am not at all certain that I want consummation. (Voskamp: 211)

She then describes this consummation in yet more sensual terms, as being “courted by God” (Voskamp: 211).

### SENSUALITY

Since this idea of consummation (union) is obviously a higher order experience she seeks and finds in Paris, it is therefore something beyond what ordinary Christians have. Voskamp is a mystical pietist.<sup>13</sup> She ponders: “I am not at all certain that I want consummation . . . And who wouldn’t cower at the invitation to communion with limitless Holiness Himself?” (Voskamp: 211). Obviously, for her “consummation” is a sensual term, that is not true for all Christians or reserved for the eschaton (and still true for all Christians). It is a higher order experience for certain Christians to be had now if they have the ability to see and experience. This experience is mediated, for Voskamp, by the romantic feelings of Paris.

To state this simply: The sensuality of her terminology is inappropriate. She cites 1Corinthians 6:17 which is a warning against fornication and is about all Christians being “joined to the Lord” and applies it to the sensual, higher order experience to which she is wooed in Paris (Voskamp: 211). Since 1Corinthians 6:17 is about what is already true for all Christians, how does it apply to her invitation to some sort of sensual consummation for Christians? It does not. So she is abusing the passage to promote her unbiblical, pietistic experience. Here is her description of what happens (found in the same paragraph with the citation from 1Corinthians 6:17):

I run my hand along the beams over my loft bed, wood hewn by a hand several hundred years

ago. I can hear Him. He’s calling for a response; He’s calling for oneness. *Communion* (Voskamp: 211).

This sensually described invitation to oneness and consummation is presented as a union that is a higher order experience, otherwise she would not need it and would, frankly, have nothing special to offer her readers. She is being “wooed” into “mystical union” (Voskamp: 212, 213) which she calls a romance (Voskamp: 213).

The sensual terms she applies are piled one upon another, painting a picture quite graphic and I think horribly inappropriate. Terms found just on two pages include: “wooing, intimate pursuit, passionate love, caressed, making love, embrace, union, burning of the heart, intercourse disrobed, and etc.” (Voskamp: 216, 217). She makes explicit what she is speaking of: “To know Him the way Adam knew Eve” (Voskamp: 217). This terminology goes on, page after page: “intercourse, climax, cohabit, delight wildly, union experientially, leap into Arms” (Voskamp: 218, 219).

She offers a higher order experience for Christians, described in the most sensual and provocative terms. This experience is to be had now, and is not the eschatological consummation all Christians await. It helps to go to Paris and to a Roman Catholic cathedral to find this experience. There is nothing in this that is Biblical. There are not two types of Christians—ordinary ones and others who have achieved the ultimate, mystical union. This sort of false thinking is what led people into monasteries to waste their lives looking for something that evidently the gospel itself does not offer. Do we need to mimic the error of the monastic mystics?

### CONCLUSION

As fraught with theological error that this book is, its basic premise is true: as Christians we ought to be thankful people who give thanks in all things. The Bible teaches us that. But do we need to jettison Christian theism in favor of

panentheism, objective truth, romantic feelings, and higher order experiences to become thankful? No! God has already provided everything that pertains to life and godliness (2Peter 1:3). When Peter urged Christians to grow in their faith and in Christian virtues, he did not point to a higher order experience based on romantic feelings—he called them to remember:

*Therefore, I shall always be ready to remind you of these things, even though you already know them, and have been established in the truth which is present with you. And I consider it right, as long as I am in this earthly dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder, (2Peter 1:12, 13)*

Peter also mentions sensuality and it is not good:

*“For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error,” (2Peter 2:18).*

There is enough sensuality in the world without us having sensual desires stirred up under the guise of a higher order religious experience in the context of a panentheistic worldview. Voskamp's book feeds into the romantic sensibili-

ties of its postmodern readers, but it does nothing to promote the faith once for all delivered to the saints. *One Thousand Gifts* pushes the church even farther down the unbiblical road of mysticism that so many are already on. We need to reject this and instead return to objective, Biblical truth.

### END NOTES

1. Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts*; (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). All further references from this book will be in brackets within this article.
2. We first warned our readers about panentheism in 1994: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue23.htm>.
3. Bob DeWaay, *The Emergent Church – Undefined Christianity*; (Minneapolis: DeWaay, 2009), 204.
4. <http://www.eckharttolle.com/> see my review of Tolle's *The New Earth*: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue114.htm>
5. The ellipses are in the original and used to create a pause.
6. See <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue104b.htm> for a discussion of Bell's misuse of the term “holy.”
7. Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, (New York:

HarperCollins, 1988), 83.

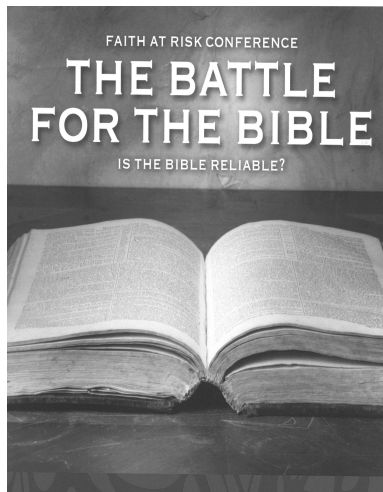
8. Ibid. 70.
9. I discuss Doug Pagitt's idea of God's “rhythm” here: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue99.htm>
10. [www.newadvent.org/cathen/14254a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14254a.htm)
11. <http://www.svchapel.org/resources/book-reviews/4-christian-living/121-finding-our-way-again-the-return-to-the-ancient-practices-by-brian-mclaren>
12. Op. Cit.; Fox, 82.
13. See this article on pietism: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue101.htm>

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