

Bible Colleges and False Teaching

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The New Testament gives clear warning that false teaching will arise from within the church, not just from the outside.

Peter wrote that there would be “false teachers among you” who would “secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought [you]” (2 Peter 2:1).

Jesus warned: “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name” (Matthew 24:4, 5), claiming to be Christ.

All through the Old Testament, too, weak leaders of Israel allowed (or caused!) false teaching to replace true worship. Think of Elijah telling King Ahab to his face that in following the Baals, Ahab had “abandoned the LORD’s commands.” Then Elijah told all Israel, “If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” The sad next sentence tells us that the people—who were supposed to be God’s people—“said nothing” in reply (1 Kings 18:18, 21).

Perhaps the most touching of this type of warning is Paul’s farewell to the church elders of Ephesus. He reminded them to “keep watch” in their role as “shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” What was Paul’s concern? “After I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.” It’s one thing for trouble to “come in” from the outside; but Paul’s continuation makes the blood run cold: that from within the church, “even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.” Paul’s concern was so intense that he’d spent the past three years warning them “night and day with tears” (Acts 20:28-31).

Night and day and warnings? For three years? With tears?

It’s creepy to imagine darkness coming from within or that there could be false teachers...well, “among” us. And it’s embarrassing to find out (and then hard to admit) that strange teaching we should have noticed actually *has* slipped right past us. Perhaps we even inadvertently accepted or promoted it.

But try to think like the enemy might think: *Hmm, how can I deceive these Christians?* It doesn’t take long to come up with some tactics: Even in ancient times, one might introduce ideas that seemed new, cutting edge. No one wants to be left behind, labeled as being out of date. Or people might suggest that certain practices were part of the original church but became lost; how fortunate that they’ve now been rediscovered.

If we zoom forward to our modern age with Christian bookstores, we might find books with a warm tone that use Christian terminology (but disguising the fact that those terms have been given different meanings). Such books could steer readers to spiritual guides who are into Eastern religion/occult practice—by quoting only the benign parts of those guides’ writings. Get the information to become wildly popular in the Bible colleges, the conventions, and large churches so that it is soon being read and recommended broadly; leaders of smaller churches, as well as the general Christian population, will soon follow. And of course, once it’s all the rage, anyone who doesn’t go along will be labeled as out of touch, divisive, legalistic...

Here’s how it happened once before—

A key player in the early part of the 1900s was Harry Emerson Fosdick. A *Christianity Today* article paints the picture:

“From 1918 to 1925, Fosdick, though a Baptist, served as minister of First Presbyterian Church in New York, where his eloquence earned him a reputation among liberals and conservatives alike. The pressure built as fundamentalists worried aloud about Fosdick’s brand of Christianity. Fundamentalist intellectual J. Gresham Machen asked, ‘The

question is not whether Mr. Fosdick is winning men, but whether the thing to which he is winning them is Christianity.’

“In a May 1922 sermon, ‘Shall the Fundamentalists Win?’ Fosdick replied by repudiating the core beliefs of the fundamentalist faith: belief in the virgin birth was unnecessary; the inerrancy of Scripture, untenable; and the doctrine of the Second Coming, absurd. Though he ended on a note of reconciliation, in the sermon he castigated fundamentalists as ‘bitterly intolerant.’”¹

(We should note that the term *fundamentalist* has picked up varied definitions, and a lot of baggage, along the way. At that time it simply referred to those Christians who believed Christianity’s core doctrines—the fundamentals—like those doctrines we’ll be discussing here.)

In 1954 R. C. Foster (who would become known as one of Cincinnati Christian University’s most beloved professors, and who is not to be confused with the currently popular writer Richard Foster) published an article that described events that had occurred during that same time frame.

R. C. Foster wrote: “It was keen strategy for the radicals to strike first at the colleges to capture the source of supply for the pulpits.... Swift and terrifying was the change that swept the colleges into the hands of infidels. It was all accomplished practically within the first two decades of this century [*the 1900s*].... The old ruse of the Trojan horse was worked again with ridiculous ease: shining doctors of philosophy suddenly appeared without the college walls and were promptly hauled in by unsuspecting brethren.”²

R. C. Foster gives us a peek into the intentional nature of this infiltration when he describes a Mr. George Rutledge, who “was an unbeliever and a member of the radical clan. He had shared their infidelity and their plots in the secret mid-night sessions in smoke filled hotel rooms during the conventions.... The death of his wife brought George Rutledge down into the valley of the shadow where he found Jesus Christ again. He came back to his Christian faith. He then arose in the pulpit of the Broad Street Christian Church, Columbus, Ohio, and made frank confession of his previous infidelity, announced his withdrawal from the radical clan, and dedicated his life to fight the forces of unbelief.”³

Another young man is described as a “student done to death in the darkness of the [*already infiltrated*] classrooms of the College of the Bible.”⁴ “Faced by an avalanche of infidelity when he enrolled...and unaware of the treacherous nature of his surroundings, F. J. Gielow was swept away to extreme unbelief.” He wrote an antisciptural thesis titled “Factors Involved in the Evolution of the Concept of Deity.” Sometime later, though, “he thought himself out of the morass and was converted back to the Christian religion.”⁵

The “darkness” in the Bible college classrooms at that time might be described as a dimming of the light of Scripture. One way of doing this was in removing theologically sound textbooks. In one case, textbooks written by J. W. McGarvey were being replaced, ostensibly in order to keep up with the times. New methods. But R. C. Foster explains that the liberal teachers “could not use these text-books and hope to teach their unbelief because they found J. W. McGarvey with drawn sword facing them on every page...and cutting their infidel theories to pieces.”⁶

R. C. Foster was pretty fiery about it all. But...well, that was a long time ago. History isn’t necessarily repeating itself. Or is it? Is there a “strategy” to “strike” today’s Bible colleges? And if so, how is that being done?

The evidence indicates that history *is* repeating itself. One way that “radical” teaching is coming into the Bible colleges is via the Trojan horse of the spiritual formation platform.

We acknowledge that the term *spiritual formation* is being used by theologically sound people who simply mean “spiritual growth” or “discipleship.” That would be fine—it’s an appropriate-sounding term—if *spiritual formation* didn’t already have a definition.

Spiritual formation is a course, a path, involving what some people have determined to be the “spiritual disciplines.” That spiritual formation does not equal general spiritual growth is clear in a statement by one of the foremost authorities, Richard Foster: “By now enough water has gone under the Christian Spiritual Formation bridge that we can give some assessment of where we have come and what yet needs to be done. When I first began writing in the field in the late 70s and early 80s the term ‘Spiritual Formation’ was hardly known, except for highly specialized references in relation to the Catholic orders. Today it is a rare person who has not heard the term. Seminary courses in Spiritual Formation proliferate like baby rabbits. Huge numbers are seeking to become certified as Spiritual Directors to answer the cry of multiplied thousands for spiritual direction.”⁷

Spiritual growth and discipleship were not unknown in Protestant circles. Protestants have continually taught/experienced spiritual growth and discipleship. So it’s obvious that spiritual formation—named as specific to the Catholic Church—is something else.

Among the disciplines covered within spiritual formation is the discipline of “silence.” But within the spiritual formation framework, it does not mean normal silence. It means (or at least the goal is) the altered state of consciousness reached during mantra meditation. This mantra meditation is called contemplative prayer in Christian circles, but is essentially the same practice as Zen meditation and transcendental meditation.⁸

Today’s Bible colleges teaching spiritual formation are using textbooks written by people who do mean *that* kind of silence. And those books favorably quote/esteem many others who also mean that. It’s not hard to verify.

But people are not bothering to verify. They simply assume that the term *spiritual formation* is a new term someone came up with to mean “spiritual growth” or “discipleship.” If they never heard of spiritual formation before, they don’t realize that this term already has a definition—or that it’s not what they think it is.⁹ When the topic comes up for discussion, leaders/teachers sometimes become defensive and insist that they don’t mean spiritual formation in *that* way. But if they don’t mean *that* kind of spiritual formation, then they’re using the wrong textbooks—when those textbooks are written by people who *do* mean that kind of silence.

And how did those textbooks get into the Bible colleges? Isn’t it oddly convenient that an accrediting association requires the Bible colleges to teach spiritual formation—and even more convenient when an association’s recommended resources contain the kind of teaching in question?¹⁰ Without forming a judgment...doesn’t it at least *feel* like a strategy, when those textbooks just happen to be written by and/or heavily quote from and recommend other teachers whose spiritual family trees lead to Eastern religion/occult/New Age practices—and the theology that goes along with them?

That theology is reminiscent of what Fosdick and his liberal friends were pushing years ago; that is, a dismissal of key doctrines (the fundamentals) like the inerrancy of Scripture, the deity of Jesus, and so forth. And the pattern of such teaching reaching the pulpits by way of the Bible colleges is also reminiscent of what happened in Fosdick’s day.

To pinpoint examples of the theology included in today’s spiritual formation textbooks that are being favorably referenced in Bible colleges, here are some quotes from a few of the writers and their influencers; that is, the people whom those writers openly recommend/credit as their mentors, or quote heavily:

“The God who dwells in our inner sanctuary is also the God who dwells in the inner sanctuary of each human being.”¹¹

“In your imagination allow your spiritual body, shining with light, to rise out of your physical body. Look back so that you can see yourself lying in the grass and reassure your body that you will return momentarily. Imagine your spiritual self, alive and vibrant, rising up through the clouds and into the stratosphere. Observe your physical body, the knoll, and the forest shrink as you leave the earth. Go deeper and deeper into outer space until there is nothing except the warm presence of the eternal Creator. Rest in His presence. Listen quietly, anticipating the unanticipated. Note carefully any instruction given.”¹²

“If only [people] could all see themselves as they really are...I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.”¹³

“At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusions, a point of pure truth.... This little point...is the pure glory of God in us. It is in everybody.”¹⁴

“We do not know who wrote [the book of Daniel].” The messianic prophecy in Isaiah 9:6, 7 refers to “human agents.” Isaiah did not really write the book of Isaiah; the book of Isaiah is “tradition” and “poetic imagination.”¹⁵

“I see no contradiction between Buddhism and Christianity. The future of Zen is in the West. I intend to become as good a Buddhist as I can.”¹⁶

“The first step in faith is to stop thinking about God at the time of prayer.”¹⁷

“I develop a nasty rash around people who speak as if mere scrutiny of [the Bible’s] pages will reveal precisely how God thinks and precisely what God wants.”¹⁸

“Yes we do [teach contemplative prayer], along with many other Christian spiritual disciplines. We often use the language of *silence*, *solitude*, *silent prayer*, and *prayer beyond words*, though, for those who might be uncomfortable with the term ‘contemplative.’ In the context of our events, we refer people to all the wonderful writers on the subject, including Fr. Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington, Richard Rohr, William Shannon, etc.”¹⁹

“Body and spirit are in the throes of a sweet, happy pain, alternating between a fearful fiery glow, a complete impotence and unconsciousness, and a spell of strangulation, intermitted sometimes by such an ecstatic flight that the body is literally lifted into space. This after half an hour is followed by a reactionary relaxation of a few hours in a swoon-like weakness, attended by a negation of all the faculties in the union with God. From this the subject awakens in tears; it is the climax of mystical experience, productive of the trance.”²⁰

“We should not hesitate to take the fruit of the age-old wisdom of the East and ‘capture’ it for Christ. Indeed, those of us who are in ministry should make the necessary effort to acquaint ourselves with as many of these Eastern techniques as possible. Many Christians who take their prayer life seriously have been greatly helped by Yoga, Zen, TM and similar practices.”²¹

“There is a sense in which the Scriptures are the word of God dehydrated.... *Lectio divina* is the strenuous effort that the Christian community gives...to rehydrating the Scriptures.”²²

“Centering is the merger of two ‘selves’—ours and his. Centering is union with Christ. It is not a union that eradicates either self but one that heightens both.”²³

There are plenty more where those came from, but you get the idea. And you can connect some dots by going to the end of this article and skimming the endnotes of those quotes.

So how does it happen that our Bible colleges would steer students to such sources as the best source for their spiritual growth? Whether or not there is an actual human strategy in place to undermine the Lord’s Word and his work, we

know that the enemy is always aiming for that end. The apostle Paul told us that Satan has “schemes,” that he tries to take advantage of and “outwit us” (2 Corinthians 2:11). And the armor of God passage ends with a caution to “be alert” (Ephesians 6:18).

But it’s easy to let our guard down when material is coming from already-popular books, Christian bookstores, and trusted church leaders—many of whom are themselves unaware of what they’re promoting. It’s easy to just accept and pass things along. And when an odd quote shows up in a certain book, it’s easy to brush it aside (having already accepted the material in general as sound), saying, “Oh, it couldn’t possibly mean *that*.”

R. C. Foster reminds us that in a spiritual battle, we can be led astray without realizing that we have drifted. He writes, “The military tactic of destroying the spiritual leadership before the people discover what is transpiring, is ancient and universal. Jezebel and Ahab executed this...with swift and ruthless precision. Before the idolatrous fires of Baal could be lighted on a thousand hill-tops in Israel, the prophets of the Lord had to be slaughtered. Shock troops, the imported prophets of Baal, quickly hunted down and destroyed the prophets of the Lord. Ahab and Jezebel did not bother to send out their state secretaries to bring law suits in the civil courts to frighten all opposition into silence and to take over the real estate. They killed and took possession.”²⁴

Yet King Ahab had the nerve to call Elijah the troublemaker (1 Kings 18:17). Just as in the early 1900s and just as is happening now, those on the side of truth are accused of being the problem, of impeding progress.

Since the Lord himself is truth (John 14:6) and his Word is truth (John 17:17), surely it’s important for us to make sure we know truth and stand on it. The apostle Paul instructed Titus that leaders needed to have “sound doctrine”—in order to both teach others and to refute those who would contradict the truth (Titus 1:9; 2:1).

History does tend to repeat itself. And we’re all “making history” of some sort. Let’s be sure to make the right kind. We don’t need to feel too embarrassed if we’re among those who have been bamboozled; it can happen to anybody. And we don’t need to wring our hands and wonder what to do when we see false teaching. It’s fairly simple. Just do what the prophet Elijah, the apostle Paul, and professor R. C. Foster did: pay attention, stand on the Lord’s truth, and raise a righteous ruckus.

Notes

1. “Harry Emerson Fosdick: Liberalism’s Popularizer,” 8/8/08 article, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/pastorsandpreachers/fosdick.html>.
2. R. C. Foster, “Apostasy in Our Colleges,” *The Seminary Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1954, published by The Cincinnati Bible Seminary, p. 17.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 23. R. C. Foster’s classic *Studies in the Life of Christ* (the three books are available in one volume now: <http://www.collegepress.com/storefront/node/21>) is commentary on the Gospels, but written from the perspective of addressing liberal attacks on Scripture. He takes every opportunity to highlight “controversial” Scriptures and—with startling and scholarly precision—convincingly exposes the errors of false teachers. As I watch the early 1900s repeating themselves today (with Bible colleges and churches using material that denies the same foundational doctrines)...well, reading R. C.’s work is like reading today’s news alongside a good Gospels commentary.
7. Richard Foster, in a pastoral letter in 2004, <http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=744>.

8. I've written more on mantra meditation and the silence. My article "Can Christians Practice 'Good' Contemplative Prayer?" can be read here: <http://www.lynnlusbypratt.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Can-Christians-Practice-Good-Contemplative-Prayer.pdf>. And my article "Big Noisy God" can be read here: <http://www.lynnlusbypratt.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Big-Noisy-God.pdf>.
9. There is additional information on spiritual formation at <http://www.gotquestions.org/spiritual-formation.html>.
10. "An Epidemic of Apostasy—Christian Seminaries Must Incorporate 'Spiritual Formation' to Become Accredited," 11/15/11, <http://www.lighthouse Trailsresearch.com/blog/?p=7733>.
11. Henri Nouwen, *Here and Now*, 1997 ed., p. 22. That statement reflects universalism.
12. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 28. Note that this description of astral projection is the early edition and that later editions seem to have removed it.
13. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Publishers, 1989), pp. 157–158. Leonard Sweet uses that quote in the preface of his book *Quantum Spirituality*.
14. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 142.
15. Renovaré Bible study notes, editors Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, Walt Brueggemann, and Eugene Peterson, pp. 982, 983, 997, 1068, 1245. The notes also consider Genesis 1–11 a myth and state that Moses didn't write Genesis.
16. Thomas Merton, quoted by Patrick Hart in *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, p. 88.
17. Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus*, p. 188.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
19. Personal letter of 11/19/09 from Ruth Haley Barton's assistant at her organization www.thetransformingcenter.org. Look up the spiritual family trees of those writers named in that quote.
20. Description of medieval nun Teresa of Avila's fourth stage of the "ascent of the soul," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, p. 413. Teresa lived in terror of "committing the smallest offence against God" and said Jesus made her life a "continual torment" (*Interior Castle*).
21. Basil Pennington and Thomas Keating, *Finding Grace at the Center*, p 5.
22. Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*, pp. 88–89. Compare the Hebrews 4:12 description that "the word of God is alive and active" and "sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates." It's not in need of "rehydrating." (Eugene Peterson is the author of *The Message* paraphrase.) *Lectio divina* is another of those terms whose definition many people don't understand. But Catholic authority Thomas Keating explains that its purpose is to bring people "to the contemplative states of prayer" that "Teresa [of Avila] describes"; that is, the altered state. Source: <http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/intimacy/intimacy01a.htm>.
23. Calvin Miller, *Into the Depths of God*, p. 107. Centering prayer is another name for contemplative prayer; that is, mantra meditation.
24. R. C. Foster, p. 16.