



I

WHAT MYSTICAL CHRISTIANITY IS ALL ABOUT

*The Christian of the future will be a mystic,
or he or she will not exist at all.*

—Karl Rahner, *The Practice of Faith* (1983)

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT spirituality. It is about how ordinary people can mystically experience God in the depths of their beings and the ways in which such experiences transform them. When we were drawing up plans to write this book, Mary was concerned that the words *mystic* and *mystical* would present difficulties for some readers. She worried that some might think that we were into a kind of New Age religiosity, even though she knew from her studies and personal experience that certain forms of mysticism have always been, and still are, a vital part of Christianity. We finally decided to use the term “mystical Christianity” to distinguish the kind of spirituality we are advocating from other forms known in the Christian community. For instance, using the word *mystical* makes it clear that the Christian spirituality that we are discussing here is not to be confused with the kind used as a synonym for personal piety, which too often comes with destructive legalism, or scholastic Christianity, which can reduce faith to theological propositions. Both of these kinds of spirituality can lead to a loveless religion, which the Apostle Paul strongly warned against when he wrote, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (I Corinthians 13:1).

This book is about tapping into the love and reality that go beyond what rules and reason alone can apprehend. We want to show how daily moments marked by mystical revelations of God's love reveal the limits of propositional truth. As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (I Corinthians 2:12–14).

When we use the word *mystical* we are referring to experiences that involve being filled with this same Spirit. This is Christian mysticism. William James, in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*,¹ helps us see a variety of ways in which the Holy Spirit works in our lives, even though James was not writing specifically from a Christian perspective. For James, mystical experiences transcend rational description, can defy verbal expression, and, although at times short-lived, can provide a special sense of intimate "knowing" that has a profound effect on those who have them. A mystic, therefore, is one who experiences God in transrational and nonempirical ways. This kind of transcendent intimacy with God is what is involved in "getting to know Jesus" and being "born again."

Types of Mystical Experiences

Although there are many types of mystical experiences, I explore five of them that are particularly relevant to increasing our intimacy with God: new insights, I-thou relationships, heightened awareness, conversion experiences, and breakthrough experiences. Most of us will readily admit, upon reflection, that we have experienced at least some of these.

New Insights

First, there is a kind of mystical experience that breaks into the consciousness when something you have experienced before is suddenly, with no conscious effort, perceived in a new and more profound way. This can be such a common experience that most people are reluctant to even call it mystical. Something akin to this may happen to a Christian who, while reading scripture under the influence of the Holy Spirit, suddenly gains a new and profound insight or truth. You are apt to hear the person say, "I've read that passage a hundred times, but I never before understood what I understand now." It is as though there has been a revelation from

God, and the reader cannot help but feel a special excitement upon discovering this new and deeper meaning of that scriptural passage.

Most of us have had such moments of insight when we see familiar things in completely new ways. This is something of what Jesus predicted when he told his disciples, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (John 16:13).

We hope that the spiritual practices that Mary lays out in Part Two of this book will make those who commit to them more ready for and susceptible to such moments of revelation. One of our prime goals is to enable you to find richer meanings in your reading of scripture and to gain an enhanced capacity for listening to what God is trying to say to you as you read.

I-Thou Relationships

The second kind of mystical experience involves a special subjective connectedness with another being. Martin Buber, a twentieth-century Austrian Jewish philosopher, translator, and educator, in his classic book *I and Thou*,² helps us understand something of what happens during such mystical encounters. Although Buber wrote mainly about such interactions with humans, he also believed that these encounters can occur with nonhumans as well. Buber distinguishes between knowing objectively *about* another being and *knowing* that being. For example, when we know *about* someone we might have pertinent information regarding that person, but that data fails to connect us with that person’s essential self. Buber called this an “I-it” relationship.

Beyond these I-it relationships, in which other people or animals are viewed as objects or “things out there in the world,” there are mystical encounters that Buber calls “I-thou” relationships, in which we connect with others in such a way that we feel a oneness of mind and heart. These I-thou experiences prove to be so profound that each individual feels he or she knows the deepest thoughts and emotions of the other. In such encounters there is a spiritual unity so intense that it seems that each knows the other as if he or she *is* the other. These are holy moments and are, in part, what the Apostle Paul was trying to explain to us when, in his great love chapter, he wrote, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (I Corinthians 13:12).

Jesus had the capacity for these I-thou encounters *par excellence*. The Bible tells us that “he himself knew what was in everyone” (John 2:25).

Whenever we imagine how Jesus interacted with people, it would help if we tried to understand them in terms of these I-thou encounters.

Heightened Awareness

The third kind of mystical spirituality is that in which the Christian senses a “hyperawareness” of the glorious presence of God in the everyday experiences of life. The spiritually alive person enjoys the ordinary things in life in a most extraordinary manner. All of us can experience Christ in more mystically transforming ways by starting with the ordinary—it is as simple as that. Through these inklings of mysticism, we begin to see our lives and the world with a new awareness.

In Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town*, the main character, Emily, discovers the joy of being fully alive too late. After she dies, she pleads to be allowed to return and look in on one day of her life, one last time. She picks her twelfth birthday. During the play, Emily becomes dismayed as she recognizes how little the people she loves comprehend the joys of life or experience them with any depth of awareness. She cries out to be taken away, so that she does not have to witness how little her family and friends pay attention to the preciousness of life. Listen to Emily’s words:

Goodbye, Grover’s Corners. . . . Goodbye to clocks ticking . . . and Mama’s sunflowers—and food and coffee—and new-ironed dresses and hot baths—and sleeping and waking up! Oh earth, you’re too wonderful for anyone to realize you! Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?³

One of the marks of mystical Christianity is a growing awareness of the wonders of our everyday, ordinary experiences, which leads to a greater sense of how precious the ordinary really is. As writer and minister Frederick Buechner once said, “There is no event so common place but that God is present within it, always hidden, always leaving you room to recognize Him or not to recognize Him.”⁴

I hope that everyone can have those mystical times when, endowed by the Holy Spirit, the world comes alive in ways that thrill the soul. The grass appears greener, the sun shines brighter, the flowers exhibit new and magnificent luster, and the whole Earth radiates beauty that is almost intoxicating. As Paul told us in Romans 8:10, those of us who were experiencing a deadness to life are suddenly “made alive.” We experience life in a new way in these moments, and we experience it “more abundantly” (John 10:10 KJV).

A “heightened awareness” type of mystical spirituality not only changes the way we perceive the world, it also infuses the ordinary experiences of everyday life with a mysterious thrill and a divinely inspired meaning. This is the kind of spirituality that is movingly taught in the writings of Brother Lawrence. This seventeenth-century Catholic saint showed us ways to “practice the presence of God,” so that even while completing his mundane chores in the kitchen of his monastery he consciously moved his heart and mind toward God. We too need to cul-

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tivate mystical moments such as these so as to better see the holy in the everyday places of our lives, as Brother Lawrence did—even in the pots and pans. He prayed, “Lord of all pots and pans and things . . . make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates!”⁵ For Brother Lawrence, his time of daily chores did not differ from his time of prayer. He said he could “possess God in as great tranquility”⁶ in the midst of the bustle and clatter of the kitchen as he could when he was on his knees, alone with God. That is because he took great pains to do each task purely for the love of God, praying throughout his day for the strength to do this. Whenever his mind wandered, he brought it back to God “always as *with me* as well as *in me*.”⁷ Brother Lawrence eventually came to a state where he could say, “It would be difficult for me not to think of God as it was at first to accustom myself to it.”⁸ He had learned to live with his mind “stayed on Thee” (Isaiah 26:3 KJV). This glorying in the ordinary is a kind of mysticism that can make our lives into heaven on earth.

There is an ancient saying: “Before enlightenment—chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment—chop wood, carry water.” Those who become spiritually alive in the ordinary may go on doing the same things they did before, but they will do them with an entirely new frame of mind and heart. Everything will be changed. In scripture we are told, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men” (Colossians 3:23 NIV). Putting ourselves into *every* task, as the scripture tells us, requires that we be invaded by the Holy Spirit in such a way as to energize us and give us passion in all that we do.

All three of these kinds of mystical spirituality are available to anyone who is open to an invasion of the self by the Holy Spirit. There is no need, as an old hymn suggests, to have some supernatural dream or some prophet's ecstasy. Anyone who prays to God for redemption through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ can have these experiences. They can then be cultivated through spiritual practices and prayerful supplications such as those described in Part Two of this book.

These spiritual disciplines can make us ready to daily receive the infilling of the Spirit of Christ that gives us life. We are instructed in scripture to "watch and pray" (Mark 13:33) and to "wait patiently" (Romans 8:25) because the Spirit "blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" (John 3:8). We know that we cannot control the Holy Spirit, but we also know that we can prepare our hearts and minds so that "at the midnight hour" when the Holy One comes, we will be like the wise virgins in Jesus' parable, and will be ready to receive the Holy Spirit and be married into an intimacy (Matthew 25:1–13) that will transform us and empower us to help transform the world. It is to that end that we write this book.

Conversion Experiences

The fourth kind of mystical experience that is regularly reported is often associated with sudden and transforming conversions. There are those who, on special occasions, hear and respond to the gospel and report being overwhelmed by God in dramatic ways. William James reports such conversions in *Varieties of Religious Experience*. One woman who was converted in this manner said:

I was taken to a camp-meeting, mother and religious friends seeking and praying for my conversion. My emotional nature was stirred to its depths; confessions of depravity and pleading with God for salvation from sin made me oblivious of all surroundings. I pled for mercy, and had a vivid realization of forgiveness and renewal of my nature. When rising from my knees I exclaimed, "Old things have passed away, all things have become new." It was like entering another world, a new state of existence. Natural objects were glorified, my spiritual vision was so clarified that I saw beauty in every material object in the universe, the woods were vocal with heavenly music; my soul exulted in the love of God, and I wanted everybody to share my joy.⁹

While other testimonies are less dramatic, all of them, as William James says, denote experiences whereby "a self hitherto divided, consciously

wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified as consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.”¹⁰ All segments of the evangelical community affirm the validity of such conversion experiences. The evangelist Billy Graham has, through his preaching crusades, made conversions of this kind an almost normative part of American religion.

Breakthrough Experiences

There is still another kind of mysticism exemplified by those whom Mary and I call the “supersaints,” people who have been caught up into some mystical unity with God and who have enjoyed a kind of heavenly “breakthrough” experience that can only be called miraculous.

Moses was such a supersaint. When Moses encountered God on Mount Sinai, he experienced something spiritual that other godly persons will never enjoy in this life. The scripture tells us of this experience in Exodus 34:4–5: “So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone. The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, ‘The LORD.’” The experience was so awesome for Moses that he removed his sandals because he sensed that he was standing on holy ground. This was not just an ordinary place and an ordinary experience; it was God breaking into Moses’ world in a miraculous manner.

Consider also the experiences of the Apostle Paul. While he never met Jesus while Jesus walked the earth, Paul nevertheless claims that he was once personally taught by Jesus after being taken up into heaven to meet with him. Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians 12:1–4, “It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.”

Since Bible times there have been other supersaints who have had breakthrough mystical experiences with God that, while they do not have the same authority as the supersaints in the Bible, still challenge us and give us, if we are candid, a certain sense of uneasiness. This latter group of supersaints includes Catholics and Protestants alike. Among the Catholics, we list Saints Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, Augustine

of Hippo, Teresa of Avila, and Catherine of Siena. Each of these, along with many others, had experiences that the German scholar Rudolph Otto calls the “*mysterium tremendum*.”¹¹ These are experiences wherein God breaks into the lives of Christians at certain times so that they experience an ecstatic unity with God that transcends what most will ever know this side of heaven.

Saint Augustine described one such mystical ecstasy this way:

And I . . . beheld with the eye of my soul (such as it was), above the same eye of my soul, above my mind, the Light Unchangeable. Not this ordinary light, which all flesh may look upon, nor as it were a greater of the same kind, as though the brightness of this should be manifold brighter, and with its greatness take up all space. . . . He that knows the Truth, knows what that Light is; and he that knows It, knows eternity. Love knoweth it. O Truth Who art Eternity! And Love Who art Truth! And Eternity Who art Love! Thou art my God, to Thee do I sigh night and day. Thee when I first knew, thou liftedst me up, that I might see there was what I might see, and that I was not yet such as to see. And thou didst beat back the weakness of my sight, streaming forth Thy beams of light upon me most strongly, and I trembled with love and awe.¹²

On the Protestant side, although leaders like John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, learned much from the Catholic mystics, there has been a shying away from their ecstasies among mainline Protestants. Nevertheless, there are testimonies that should not be ignored. Consider this one from John Bunyan, author of the seventeenth-century classic *The Pilgrim's Progress*:

The glory of these words was then so weighty on me that I was . . . ready to swoon as I sat; yet not with grief and trouble, but with solid joy and peace. . . . This made a strange seizure on my spirit; it brought light with it, and commanded a silence in my heart of all those tumultuous thoughts that before did use, like masterless hell-hounds, to roar and bellow and make a hideous noise within me. It showed me that . . . Jesus Christ had not quite forsaken and cast off my soul. . . . Now could I see myself in Heaven and Earth at once; in Heaven by my Christ, by my Head, by my Righteousness and Life, though on Earth my body or person. . . . Christ was a precious Christ to my soul that night; I could scarce lie in my bed for joy and peace and triumph through Christ.¹³

Christians do not have to be supersaints to have breakthrough mystical experiences. Mary's mom, for example, told her about an experience she had on the day Mary's dad died. Her mom was called to the emergency room, having just learned that her husband had collapsed suddenly on the golf course. Although paramedics worked on his heart for 45 minutes, they were unable to revive him. When Mary's mom walked into the emergency room, she saw a ball of light between her and her husband. She could not see her husband without looking through that light. No one else saw the ball of light, but she knew it was the light of Christ. Mary believes that God gave her mother miraculous assurance of Christ's presence at that moment. This was no psychological illusion; her mother *knew* it was a mystical revelation.

We may readily accept biblical examples of these kinds of mystical experiences and yet have trouble with them in today's world. We need to honestly ask ourselves why we might criticize, ignore, or shy away from our own and others' mystical experiences with Christ. Is it because even in our postmodern times we still make scientific reasoning the foundation for all other experiences? Or could it even be that we are somewhat envious of others' experiences? If we discount these feelings and experiences and events, then we do not have to wonder why we do not have them too. These are important questions to ask, so that we can discern any blocking of the Spirit in our lives and do not hinder the Spirit's work in others' lives.

I admit that when others' mystical experiences have been described to me, my skeptical side can at times kick in. That's okay, because we are told in I John 4:1 to "test the Spirits" to see if they are from God. We must pay serious attention to mystical happenings, and discern, in the context of biblical understanding in Christian community, whether or not we believe they are of God. Discernment is crucial to mystical spirituality. Without it, anything goes. On the other hand, we must learn to doubt our doubts if we are going to be open to the work of the Spirit in our lives. Throughout the book we talk about a variety of ways to discern what may or may not be of God.

While certain kinds of mystical experiences may be foreign to many of us ordinary saints, mystical experiences, especially those of supersaints, can teach the rest of us a great deal about God and spiritual growth. The ways that these people lived their everyday lives and the spiritual disciplines that they employed can show the rest of us some vital ways to intensify our love for God and for others. Mary and I draw from their teachings and their daily devotional lives—especially the spirituality of

Saint Ignatius—in our exploration of what it means for us ordinary saints to try to live out our lives in love of and service to God and others. We do our best to show how nurturing intimacy with Christ, by following the practical guidance of these supersaints, can do two things: first, create within us a passionate evangelistic drive to bring others into transforming relationships with Christ, and, second, generate an intense commitment to work for justice.

We are *not* saying here that the kind of spiritual practices we are proposing are the only way to encounter God. God meets us and we meet God in all kinds of ways, including rituals such as communion, listening to sermons, studying scripture and other readings, and, as mentioned, experiencing unexpected awareness of God in people and places throughout our days. But we *are* saying that encounters with God, without an intentional plan for consistent growth in intimacy with Christ, will not, as a rule, produce people who are transformed into Christ's likeness. We need to be involved in regular spiritual practices that will develop and deepen our intimacy with Jesus so that we can be more like him in who we are and in what we do.

Cultivating the Good Soil of Our Spiritual Lives

Many Protestant Christians, in particular evangelical Christians, have abandoned numerous spiritual practices that the ancient Catholic mystics prescribed because they say, in line with John Wesley's critique, that any methodology used as a way to try to reach God is a form of "salvation by works" as opposed to salvation by grace alone. The evangelical Protestant faith tradition strongly emphasizes that salvation results from God reaching down to us rather than us reaching up toward God. "Salvation," declare evangelicals, "does not come from what we do, but is a gift of God, according to Ephesians 2:8–9: 'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.'" To many evangelical Protestants, being connected to God through *human* efforts diminishes the truth that our salvation is by grace. There is nothing that we can do to make us recipients of the blessings that they believe can only come through the grace of God.

Perhaps the resolution to this seeming impasse between intentional spiritual practices and grace can be found in Jesus' parable of the sower in Matthew 13:3–9:

Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds of the air came and ate them up. Other seeds fell

on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundred-fold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!

In this parable, Jesus makes it clear that seeds are the blessings of God, which by grace are scattered on various kinds of soil. Most seeds, as he later explains in this chapter of Matthew, fall on soil that is, for one reason or another, incapable of receiving these seeds and producing plants that bear fruit. Jesus compares the nonproductive soil to people God blesses who prove unable to receive these blessings and then produce blessings for themselves and for others. There are those who never really understand what the blessings are about and are easily victims of “the wicked one.” Others might have some experiences with God but never develop enough depth through spiritual disciplines to enable their faith to survive the hard times or the persecution that Christians often have to endure. Still others, said Jesus, are like those who fail to enjoy the benefits of God’s grace because they are seduced into the materialistic and consumerist values of the dominant culture, which keep them from the kind of self-surrender that spirituality requires. However, Jesus ends his explanation of the parable (Matthew 13:18–23) by making it clear that there are those who, like good soil, can receive what God wants to give all of us and make their lives blessings to themselves and all whose lives they touch.

What is important about this parable, for our discussion, is our belief that while the spiritual blessings of some—if not all—of the kinds of mystical experiences that we describe are available to any who really want them, only those individuals who are prepared to receive these blessings will consistently be transformed by them. What we hope to do in this book is explain how to be those prepared people.

The key to this preparation lies in the definition of Christian mysticism that comes from author and speaker Emilie Griffin, in her book *Wonderful and Dark Is This Road: Discovering the Mystic Path*. She views mysticism as “a deep and sustained intimacy with a loving God, sometimes marked and dramatic in its emotionality, more often anonymous and invisible to the casual observer.”¹⁴ Because intimacy is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian mystic, it is important to understand this word in a biblical context. Its Latin root is *intimare*, meaning “to make known,” and *intimus*, “innermost.” The Hebrew word for “know” is *ya da*, which means to know intimately. Intimacy is relational, in the sense of getting to know someone’s character and essence. Paul said in Philippians 3:10–11,

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” This kind of intimate knowing cannot come from reason alone; it comes from being deeply connected to Christ through mystical experiences.

In mystical Christianity we go beyond what our rational minds can comprehend. As Blaise Pascal, a French mathematician, physicist, and religious philosopher of the seventeenth century, once said, “The heart has reasons which reason can not know.”¹⁵ What we are talking about in this

Intimacy is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian mystic.

book is a kind of spirituality through which the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, is mystically alive in us, empowering us to do the work of God. It is this kind of intimacy that Jesus hoped we might have with him and with one another when in Gethsemane he prayed “that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). Jesus desired that we all might have the kind of

turning to him, or “conversion,” that leads to mystical intimacy and unity with God and with one another.

The ultimate goal for the ancient mystics was union between the mystic and God. Mary and I contend that the goal is a unity with God that involves a connectedness with those around us—especially the poor and oppressed. Ultimately this means eliminating the barriers between ourselves and God and the barriers between us and the rest of creation. This, we say, is the kind of unity with God that Jesus expressed in the “Greatest Commandment” (Matthew 22:37 NIV). After telling us that we are to love God with heart, soul, and mind, he goes on to say, “The second commandment is like it”—in other words, the same thing—to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Loving God, Jesus tells us, involves loving our neighbor. In I John 4:20 we are told, “For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.” This is because the God we want to love mystically waits to be encountered in our neighbor (see Matthew 25:37–40).

Connecting Mystical Intimacy to Transformation

Emilie Griffin, in her discussion of mystical intimacy, does not disconnect intimacy from our work in the world. She writes, “The unitive life is an intimacy with God which continues in the day-to-day course of our

existence. Mysticism transforms,” she says, “but does not take us out of the human condition.”¹⁶ Virtually all Christians agree that conversion to Christ means that we are to be transformed people (Romans 12:2), but they do not necessarily agree on what that transformation involves. Most would say that sharing their faith with others (in the sense of traditional evangelism) and serving others (in the sense of social action) are two essential tasks of the church. Many individuals and churches, however, have emphasized only one of these responsibilities of conversion at the expense of the other and have not even considered the responsibility we might have to care for other aspects of God’s creation. To make a sweeping generalization, mainline churches have tended to emphasize the social concerns of the gospel while evangelical congregations have focused on winning converts. However, many individuals, as well as churches, are realizing that something is missing.

Many Christians are questioning whether evangelicals care enough about trying to change the political and economic institutions of our society so that they will provide equal justice for all of its citizens; protect other animals and the environment; and end poverty for those who have been shut out of the American Dream. On the other hand, there are those who primarily preach a social gospel but are wondering if they have neglected that more personal connection with God that is so much at the core of contemporary evangelicalism. In both mainline and evangelical churches, congregations are coming to realize that if the whole gospel is to be lived out, it cannot be a matter of either-or. Instead, it *must* be both-and. Unless those who are won to a personal relationship with Christ are incorporated into local congregations, churches will die; and unless these local congregations are also equipping their people to work for justice issues, especially on behalf of any who are poor and oppressed, they are failing to live out biblical mandates, and their religious lives could become narcissistic.

That much seems clear, but how can we establish an organic connection between these two essential parts of the mission of the church so that they are fully integrated? This book seeks to answer that question. We believe that the nexus between evangelism and justice is to be found in the kind of Christian mysticism we are advocating.

We contend that being “fully devoted followers of Christ,” a phrase popular with many evangelical churches today, involves commitment to what Jesus was committed to: maintaining a deep, mystical connection to God that empowered him to be compassionately connected to others, particularly the outcasts of society. Jesus wanted all to know God personally and enjoy the benefits of the “full life” that God intends for all people.

Jesus' times alone with God and the Holy Spirit resulted in his being "moved with compassion" toward others. Compassion always led to action. While in the wilderness for forty days and nights Jesus resisted the devil by quoting scripture. This was not because he had just *studied* scripture; he had drawn strength and power by having those holy words absorbed into his spirit. Jesus then "returned in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14); two of his initial acts involved preaching and advocating justice. In Matthew 4:17–19, we learn that Jesus began to preach and also called his disciples to follow him. In Luke 4:18–19, Jesus declared his commitment to justice by proclaiming the year of jubilee—freedom for all, whether poor, oppressed, or captive. This theme of economic justice permeates the Gospels, especially the Gospel of Luke. As modeled by Jesus, mystical intimacy with God truly empowers our ability to carry out his mission of evangelism and justice.

From the earliest days of Christianity, when a mystical relationship with Jesus Christ was nurtured in accord with biblical guidelines, the result was the church zealously at work winning persons to a transforming relationship with Jesus and, at the same time, passionately pursuing justice. In the New Testament church, there was no disconnect between the two. Each naturally flowed into the other. We are told in Acts that

they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47)

But that is not the norm in Christendom today.

What happened?

As time went by, and the church became more institutionalized, an inevitable consequence was to tone down the radical justice imperatives prescribed hundreds of times throughout the Bible. Emperors, kings, and other rulers seldom want to hear about a God who came into the world to bring justice by taking down the mighty and lifting up those of low degree. Nor do rich rulers want Christians to endeavor to follow the teachings of a Savior who would see to it that the hungry would be fed while the rich would be sent away empty (Luke 1:51–53). The directives

to live Jesus' radical gospel are diminished when Christianity becomes a cultural religion, as it did under the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century and at other times since then. Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said that in a society where everyone is Christian, no one is Christian.¹⁷ In such societies, biblical imperatives get watered down to the lowest common denominator. The radical nature of Jesus' life and message becomes something of a curiosity at best, or a threat at worst, to those who are seduced into believing that following Jesus is nothing more than being a nice, honest, and decent citizen. It is much more than that.

A Holistic Gospel

Donal Dorr, a Catholic missionary, theologian, and philosopher, in his book *Spirituality and Justice* talks about conversion as having three components: personal, interpersonal, and societal or political. He bases this idea on the verse that says, "And this is what God requires of you: to do justice, love tenderly, and walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

Dorr defines a personal conversion to Christ, whether sudden or gradual, as involving the awareness that one is loved by God, who shows this incredible love through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I am required not only to understand this love intellectually but also to experience it in a subjective transformation of my inner self, which comes as a consequence of yielding to being possessed by God's Spirit. In other words, to be "personally" converted to Christ and thereby to "walk humbly with our God," I need to accept and then live intimately connected to this life-saving love.

In the interpersonal component of conversion, I become convinced that my relationship with Christ calls me to "love tenderly" in relationship to my friends, family, community, and even casual acquaintances. I become more other-centered, even to the point of experiencing Martin Buber's "I-thou" encounters. Both Mary and I have seen numerous examples of this kind of loving, interpersonal component in our own communities. Whenever someone expresses a need, the church and university communities in both Spring Arbor and Saint Davids come together in loving, practical ways to help one another. It might be anything from providing meals to someone who is sick to helping out a family with financial needs. And these are not atypical examples. Christians seem especially good at "loving tenderly" in their own communities.

In addition to the emphasis on caring for one another, we add to Dorr's second component a need to intentionally share the gospel story with

those who have not heard, based on Jesus' mandate to go into the world and make disciples (Matthew 28:10). This interpersonal component would also then include helping those who commit to this gospel story connect to a faith community in which they can grow in Christ-likeness.

The third component, to "do justice," is societal and therefore also political. That means I not only realize I am to love others in my local or interpersonal sphere, but in my work in the broader world as well. This does not only entail trying to be honest and nice in business affairs; it is about something much bigger—being converted to Christ requires that my eyes be opened to how society is structured, particularly in ways that favor certain groups to the detriment of others. This conversion implies that I am to work at a systemic level to build societies that are intrinsically just, with just infrastructures. Dorr's third component is about "constructing a society in which minorities such as homeless people are not discriminated against either in laws or in practice; and a society in which women are not second-class citizens. It means struggling against the bias in our present society, a bias which enables the better-off people to widen the gap between themselves and the poor."¹⁸ We also expand on this component to include being advocates for the world beyond humans. God created the sky, water, land, vegetation, and animals, and God called them good. If we love God, we are to value and restore whatever God created and called good.

When we read about these three components, we may be tempted to consciously or unconsciously rate them, depending on our own or our church's emphasis. The first (a personal connection to God), for example, we see as essential. The second (interpersonal relationships) probably is too, since even if it is not manifested in our attitudes or actions, we still most likely pay lip service to its importance. But the third (doing justice) is optional for far too many of us; and even those who see its value may still think it is a calling for others, not for them. Dorr, however, contends that none is optional, and Mary and I agree. These are not components from which we pick and choose. To do that is to distort the Christian faith. Being personally converted to Jesus Christ means having the interpersonal as well as the social and creation justice components, or there has been no conversion to the whole gospel of Jesus Christ. As our friend Jaime, who lives in Oakland, California, said in a letter sent to Mary, "Too often Christians are so busy trying to fight for people's salvation, they forget to fight for their lives. It is not just about people saying a magic phrase that invites Jesus into their hearts. . . . I want them to experience Jesus' love in a way that not only impacts their eternity, but in a way that impacts and changes their *now*."

Saint Francis is someone who not only understood this holistic gospel but lived it in an empowered simplicity. He was unencumbered with the kinds of philosophical and theological subtleties that enable so many of us to escape from its requirements. Can we, too, live in such a way that we do not escape its requirements? Can we live in harmony with all three parts of the gospel—spiritual intimacy, evangelism, and justice? Is everyone called to develop mystical intimacy with Jesus? Is everyone expected to share Christ through evangelism and justice? Although the answer to these questions is *yes*, that does not mean that we give equal weight to all elements in our lives. Each of us is called by Christ to manifest some ways of living for Jesus more than others, as Paul talks about in his discussion of spiritual gifts in I Corinthians 12–14. But living with our spiritual gifts does not mean we pay exclusive attention to only one part of the gospel. For example, we may be called to teach what it means to have intimacy with Christ; we may be called to share Jesus through evangelism; we may be called to work more intentionally for social or other earthly changes. But no matter our calling, each of us is to be involved in an ongoing intimate relationship with Jesus, each of us is to always be ready to give “an accounting for the hope that is in [us]” (I Peter 3:15), and each of us is to minister to the poor and to whoever or whatever in God’s creation is oppressed. This means not only working to meet any short-term needs, but also being willing to work toward building a world that is more just. All three are part of Jesus’ gospel, and each of us is called to express all three. The degrees to which these are conveyed in individuals’ lives may differ, but none is optional, even if we are not attracted to one or more of them.

We must all be in the business of connecting how we live with how we are affecting others who may be lost in their souls or in the system but are no less loved by God—no matter why they are lost, since Jesus came to save and serve us all. We therefore connect by asking ourselves questions such as these:

Are we sharing the loving, redeeming message of Christ with others?

Are we caring for our own family, our friends, and others in our social sphere?

Are we championing the rights of those who cannot champion their own rights?

Are we using our resources, such as our time, money, and our right to vote, to help the oppressed—both human and nonhuman—have a more acceptable quality of life?

These are not just individual questions, since we cannot carry out Jesus' holistic gospel single-handedly. We and others, as the body of Christ, can only accomplish this mission by being incorporated into vital churches wherein people with differing gifts and callings can complement one another, encourage and build up one another, and support one another's respective ministries, all in the context of helping God's Kingdom to come, God's will to be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven. To do this, we believe these Christian communities need the kind of mystical spirituality that early Christians practiced and that gives impetus both to evangelism and to justice efforts. In this book we outline how that spirituality can be developed.

The Body of Christ

There is something crucial that we need to add when talking about this holistic worldview: the meaning of the biblical phrase "Christ in us" in relation to our being the body of Christ. There are no believers who will question that Christ is always *with* us. As a matter of fact, before Jesus was ever born, Christ was. Christ is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Christ was before the creation of the world, and Christ is the

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one who created the universe, as we are told in the beginning of the first chapter of the Gospel of John. But two thousand years ago the Christ that always was took on human flesh. He was born in Bethlehem's manger. He lived among us as a human being and we called him Jesus. Jesus was the body of Christ; the body through which the eternal Christ brought personal and social transformation into human history. It was through that body—the body of Jesus—that Christ lived out love and rendered compassionate service to those who were in need.

In John 14:20, Jesus tells his disciples that he will be leaving them but that when he returns he will be *in* them. The same Christ who was in Jesus would be in those disciples and in anyone who would surrender to being invaded by his presence, all for the purpose of becoming "completely one" in God (John 17:23).

Being converted is allowing ourselves to become the body of Christ. Just as Jesus was the “then” body of Christ, so we are the “now” body. If you are thinking that it is one thing to say that Christ was alive in Jesus but quite another to say that Christ is alive in us, you are wrong! The Bible says that to be converted is to become the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:27). The Apostle Paul in Romans 8:11 made it clear that the same Spirit that was in Jesus will be alive in our “mortal bodies.” As shocking as this may appear, it is true. In light of this reality, we can begin to understand why Paul was so adamant when he said in Ephesians 4:1, “live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (NIV). All of us are called to be so mystically possessed by Christ that we become Christ’s “now” body through which the gospel is preached to the lost and through which the poor and oppressed are blessed with hope and justice.