

No Pass for Campolo's Impasse

A Critical Review of Tony Campolo and Mary Albert Darling's book, *God of Intimacy and Action: Reconnecting Ancient Spiritual Practices, Evangelism, and Justice* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007): 210 pages, notes, index.

"This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" Galatians 3:2-3, NASB

Tony Campolo and Mary Albert Darling have recently co-authored a book titled, *The God of Intimacy and Action*. The "intimacy" to which they refer is experiencing closeness to God by engaging ancient spiritual and mystical practices, while the "action" refers to evangelism and advocacy of causes on behalf of the less fortunate in society. In the authors' view, mystical intimacy stimulates and facilitates Christian advocacy. Private spiritual experiences enhance public societal engagement. Through practicing spiritual disciplines of ancient Catholicism, mystical experiences, according to the authors' thesis, become essential for and foundational to the engagement of social justice for all. As to the possible downside of mystical intimacy, the authors seemingly write of "action" to mute criticism that engaging in mystical practices leads devotees, as typically has been the case, to disengage from society and retreat into monasteries. According to the authors, mystical experiences should not have that effect.

In difference to what has been relabeled and promoted among evangelicals as "contemplative spirituality," the authors are to be commended for forthrightly calling the spirituality they advocate "mysticism." Without reservation, they use what, from a Protestant reformation perspective, is the dreaded "M-word." Campolo candidly admits to the tension that exists between ancient Catholic mystical practices and the Protestant evangelical faith. He writes: "The evangelical Protestant faith tradition strongly emphasizes that salvation results from God reaching down to us rather than us reaching up to God." He then continues, "Many Protestant Christians, in particular evangelical Christians, have abandoned numerous spiritual practices that the ancient Catholic mystics prescribed because they say . . . that any methodology used as a way to try and reach God is a form of 'salvation by works' as opposed to salvation by grace alone." Campolo understands this to be a "seeming impasse between intentional spiritual practices and grace . . ." [1]

Before addressing the way in which Campolo seeks to resolve this tension, he ought to have clarified what he meant by his use of the word salvation. What does Campolo mean when he connects salvation to the practice of spiritual disciplines? Does he mean to suggest that engaging ancient Catholic spiritual and mystical practices can result in "salvation" from one's sins (i.e., justification and regeneration)? [2] Does man cooperate with God to affect regeneration/justification? Or, does Campolo mean to say that mystical practices assist in the development of a Christian's spirituality (i.e., regeneration and sanctification)? Does Campolo use the word "salvation" in a justifying, or sanctifying, sense? Or, does he mean to refer to a

"holistic salvation," a "salvation" that both justifies and sanctifies? To use the words of Augustus M. Toplady (1740-1778), if I would engage in intentional spiritual practices, would they "save [me] from wrath," or "make me pure," or both? **[3]** At best, Campolo's use of "salvation" to describe the results of mystical practices is conflicted. At worst, it's unorthodox and heretical.

According to the New Testament, any engaging of mystical practices contributes nothing to one's regeneration and justification. Mystical practices can no more affect one's salvation than walking down the aisle, saying a prayer, or signing a decision card at the end of an evangelistic meeting. People become right with God by His grace (i.e., unmerited favor). They are regenerated by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5). They are justified through **"repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ"** (Acts 20:21). A believer is justified by the righteousness of Christ alone (2 Corinthians 5:21). As Paul wrote, **"Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand"** (Romans 5:1-2). Mystical experiences possess no power to justify or regenerate sinners. Neither can intentional spiritual practices sanctify saints.

Spiritual disciplines originate with man. Therefore, they are works of the flesh. Such works possess no power to sanctify the human soul. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, **"Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?"** (Galatians 3:3). Of activities like spiritual disciplines that are designed to promote and engender mystical experiences, the apostle wrote to the Colossians, **"These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence"** (Colossians 2:23). Mystical experiences possess no salvific or sanctifying power. We turn now to Campolo's attempt to reconcile what he acknowledges to be the impasse between "intentional spiritual practices and grace." **[4]**

Campolo refers to Jesus' *Parable of the Sower* in his attempt to resolve the contradiction between spirituality induced via intentional spiritual practices and grace. By his use of the parable, Campolo seeks to give a pass to the impasse. Jesus' story goes,

Behold, the sower went out to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. And others fell upon the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. And others fell on the good soil, and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear. (Matthew 13:3-9).

Of the seeds, Campolo states, "Jesus makes it clear that the seeds are the blessings of God." **[5]** On this point Campolo is wrong. The "seeds" do not represent mystical "blessings of God." But as Jesus plainly states in His interpretation of the parable, the seed represents the **"the word [the logos] of the kingdom"** (Matthew 13:18). Subsequently, five times

Jesus equates "**the seed**" to be *the logos-word* (Matthew 13:20, 21, 22 [2x], 23). In contradiction to Campolo, Jesus "makes it clear" that the seed/word refers to the spoken and propositional word, not to some vague, esoteric, or mystical blessing/experience.

About the word, one scholar states: "From the divine point of view, it [i.e., the word] consists of God revealing something about himself through his spoken word, which is ultimately and perfectly personified in his Son, Jesus Christ. In a broader sense, it designates Scripture itself." [6] From this definition we can discern three points. *First*, unlike mystical experiences, the word originates from outside, not inside, a person. The *seed/word* is not self-engendered through practicing ancient spiritual disciplines. *Second*, the word is sowed publicly, not privately. It is not secretly spoken by God to a person's soul, but openly declared for all to hear. Like the prophet Isaiah who spoke public oracles of God, Jesus told his hearers, "**Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand**" (Emphasis mine, Matthew 13:13; See Romans 3:2.). *Third*, assuming this scholar's definition to be accurate, then the "seed/word" refers to the cognitive and propositional revelation-communication from God, not to what Campolo calls, the "spiritual blessings" of "mystical experiences." [7]

As one commentator summarizes the parable's point:

[T]he Word of God is proclaimed and causes a division among those who hear; God's people receive the Word, understand it, and obediently fulfill it; others fail to listen because of a hardened heart, a basic superficiality, or a vested interest in riches and possessions." [8]

The paradox of Campolo's attempt to resolve the conflict between "intentional spiritual practices" and grace is this: Three-quarters of the soils Jesus mentioned are unreceptive to the seed/word of the kingdom. For the sake of argument, let's assume that Campolo's equation is correct; that the seeds are the blessings of mystical experiences. He is still left with the irony that three out of every four mystics will not favorably respond to the very mystical blessings they supposedly seek and receive. In other words, in the vast majority of cases, intimacy does not breed action!

The parable Campolo employs to resolve the seeming impasse between "intentional spiritual practices" and grace only serves to heighten the disconnection between mystical intimacy and social action. There's a seventy-five percent chance that for reason of having a hard heart, of being a superficial soil, or of possessing a materialistic bent, the whole mystical process will be short-circuited and as such, the mystic will not bear spiritual fruit.

Such is the antagonism which exists between flesh and Spirit, of the human heart to the seed/word of God.

ENDNOTES

[1] Tony Campolo and Mary Albert Darling, *The God of Intimacy and Action* (San Francisco:

John Wiley & Sons, 2007): 12.

[2] Salvation includes regeneration. If Campolo asserts that somehow "intentional spiritual practices" contribute to salvation, then his concept of salvation is synergistic, that persons cooperate with (syn) God to cause their salvation. But regeneration is done by God the Holy Spirit alone (See John 3:8.).

[3] Augustus M. Toplady, "Rock of Ages," *Great Hymns of the Faith*, John W. Peterson, Editor (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1968): 126.

[4] *God of Intimacy*, 12.

[5] Ibid. 13.

[6] H. Douglas Buckwalter, "Word," *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible*, Walter A. Elwell, Editor (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996): 828.

[7] *God of Intimacy*, 13.

[8] Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980): 29.