

# The Growth of Spiritual Formation Programs in Evangelical Seminaries and Colleges

By John Haller

As many discernment ministries have noted, ministry methods have been elevated and promoted, sometimes above the Word of God in the modern evangelical church. It is now well documented that these methods do not come from scripture, but from the marketing methods of Peter Drucker, a man who admitted in an interview a couple of years before his death that he was not even a Christian.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Peter Drucker was a communitarian (some might use the term “fascist”) who saw churches in general, and megachurches such as Saddleback and Willow Creek in particular, as a method to create a better world through social control. Leadership Network, Saddleback and Willow Creek adopted Drucker’s methods and marketed them to numerous churches. Paul Smith documented how this shift occurred in his book [New Evangelicalism: The New World Order](#). Smith notes:

Drucker was completely committed to the existential philosophy of Danish writer Søren Kierkegaard. The platform of Kierkegaard's thinking was built solidly on the writings of German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. . . In Drucker's quest for optimum community, he discovered that the most effective agent of change in American life is the megachurch.

*New Evangelicalism The New World Order* (Kindle Locations 93-95, 97-98). Without going into great detail, Drucker found pastors of evangelical megachurches more than willing to foster his secular view of a better world. These pastors and churches would serve as his change agents. Smith also documents Drucker’s devotion to a blend of Zen and German mysticism. *Id.* (Kindle Locations 1709-1710). In short, Drucker’s methods amounted to nothing more than an application of systems theory to church growth. As Dr. Smith notes: “Whatever happened to the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church?” *Id.* (Kindle Locations 1743-1744).

One movement that has grown in recent years is the spiritual formation movement. The gist of this movement seems to be nothing more than the application of a systems approach to personal spiritual development. Again, the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit seems secondary to the new techniques. In a recent series of blog posts, John MacArthur’s ministry Grace to You has raised questions about spiritual formation programs:

[M]any of the leading voices in the spiritual formation movement stress the need for more intuitive interpretations of spirituality. They encourage believers to incorporate a wide variety of extrabiblical spiritual practices, such as contemplative prayer, silence, meditation, creative expression, and yoga. In fact, some of the most popular methods

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from six 30 minute VHS Tapes; Tapes 23-28: Peter F. Drucker Biography« 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2001, in »Drucker Archives« at <http://ccdlibraries.claremont.edu/col/dac>.

- Rick Warren: 2:05:22
- How did you get interested in the Megachurches: 2:15:46
- Drucker: “I am not a Christian”: 2:16:00
-

of spiritual formation have been lifted from Catholicism, new age mysticism, or other religions and rebranded with biblical-sounding terminology.

[What Is Spiritual Formation and Why Does It Matter?](#) (Sept. 10, 2012); see also [John MacArthur on Spiritual Formation and Biblical Sanctification](#) (Sept. 12, 2012).

This article will take a brief look at the growth of spiritual formation programs and classes in evangelical seminaries. It should not be considered an exhaustive look at the issue. I sit on the board of an evangelical seminary and have expressed concerns about spiritual formation offerings in that seminary. In talking to other seminary professors, they have also expressed concern that many leading and long-time conservative evangelical seminaries have also adopted such programs. I have attempted to summarize these concerns in this article in a generic way.

The syllabus for this Spiritual Formation class at one evangelical institution states that one of the objectives of the course is to integrate recommended course materials into the student's spiritual development. Students are given a list of suggest authors from which to read and prepare a book report, including the following:

Catherine of Siena	Julian of Norwich	Thomas a Kempis	St. John of the Cross	Teresa of Avila	Eugene Peterson
Brother Lawrence	Brennan Manning	Ruth Haley Barton	Richard Foster	Alan Jones	Henri Nouwen

Many of these courses do not critique these authors but encourage the students to incorporate their teachings into their own spiritual formation. From the list above, almost every single one of these recommended authors could be referred to as a mystic.

One recommended author is Ruth Haley Barton, one of the leading proponents of spiritual formation. Who is she? She used to be on the staff at Willow Creek Community Church (her description is that she was a pastor) and now operates the [Transforming Center](#). Her biography states:

Ruth holds a Doctor of Divinity from Northern Theological Seminary (Lombard, IL), along with a Bachelor of Arts from Wheaton College (IL) and Master's studies at Loyola University Chicago Institute for Pastoral Studies. ***She received her training in spiritual direction through the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation*** (Bethesda, MD) under the guidance of ***Tilden Edwards***, Rosemary Dougherty and Gerald May. She's also a student of family systems theory as it relates to congregational life (Lombard Mennonite Peace Center) and ***has studied the Enneagram*** with Russ Hudson of the Enneagram Institute.

One critic of Enneagram calls it a "[Gnostic Path to Self](#)." Such a conclusion cannot be refuted. Enneagram is mystical, New Age, gnostic and unbiblical. If so, why would a proponent of Enneagram be relied on as a study guide in a spiritual formation class?

Should we be concerned about Barton? What would Barton have learned at the [Shalem Institute](#)? I suggest that you take a moment to peruse Shalem’s website. You will find an organization that [describes its various programs](#) (contemplative spirituality, spiritual direction) as follows:

### **Shalem Programs**

Shalem provides a variety of programs to support contemplative living and leadership.

All of our programs:

- Share a contemplative orientation—an open willingness to be present to God in the moment;
- Offer resources for listening and responding authentically to God;
- Encourage the personal spiritual practices to which individuals are called;
- Provide various forms of ecumenical spiritual formation experiences.

A quick review of the Shalem website as I was writing this showed an “upcoming program” that had Shalem’s blessing and endorsement:



#### **Living in Presence, An Evening with Eckhart Tolle**

on October 4, 2012

For more information and to connect with others on the Facebook event page, [please click here](#), or view the program page to register, [please click here](#).

Eckhart Tolle is not even a Christian. He is the man who Oprah Winfrey promoted as a “great spiritual guide,” the same Oprah who unabashedly declares herself to be a Christian. [Clicking on the link on Shalem’s website to Tolle’s seminar](#), you will see this description:

Experience the visionary author of *The Power of Now* and *A New Earth* in a face-to-face encounter “in the moment.” Join us for a rare opportunity to be drawn into the “spaciousness that words can only point to” by the conscious presence of Eckhart. “The most important part of us is totally unrecognized by the majority of people,” teaches Eckhart Tolle. Living in Presence will help you discover your essential nature, through Eckhart’s one-of-a-kind “pointers” about finding freedom from excessive thinking, aligning with whatever arises in the moment, the nature of consciousness, and more.

Why would Shalem promote such a thing? Clearly, historic Biblical doctrine and the Bible do not guide Shalem’s leadership. But, remember, Shalem is where Barton received her training in spiritual direction. I would submit that Barton’s training has little, if anything, do with historic Biblical Christianity.

Another source used in some spiritual formation classes is Peter Scazzero’s book [The Emotionally Healthy Church](#). This book promotes what can only be charitably described as a

heavily psychologized, contemplative mysticism. It bears no relationship to what is historic Biblical discipleship or practice. The mere recommendation of this book to anyone is deeply troubling. [Scazzero's Facebook page](#) is replete with references to Catholic and so-called "evangelical" mystics and psychologists such as Jung. This is just a sample from the past week:

 **Peter Scazzero**  
September 24 via mobile

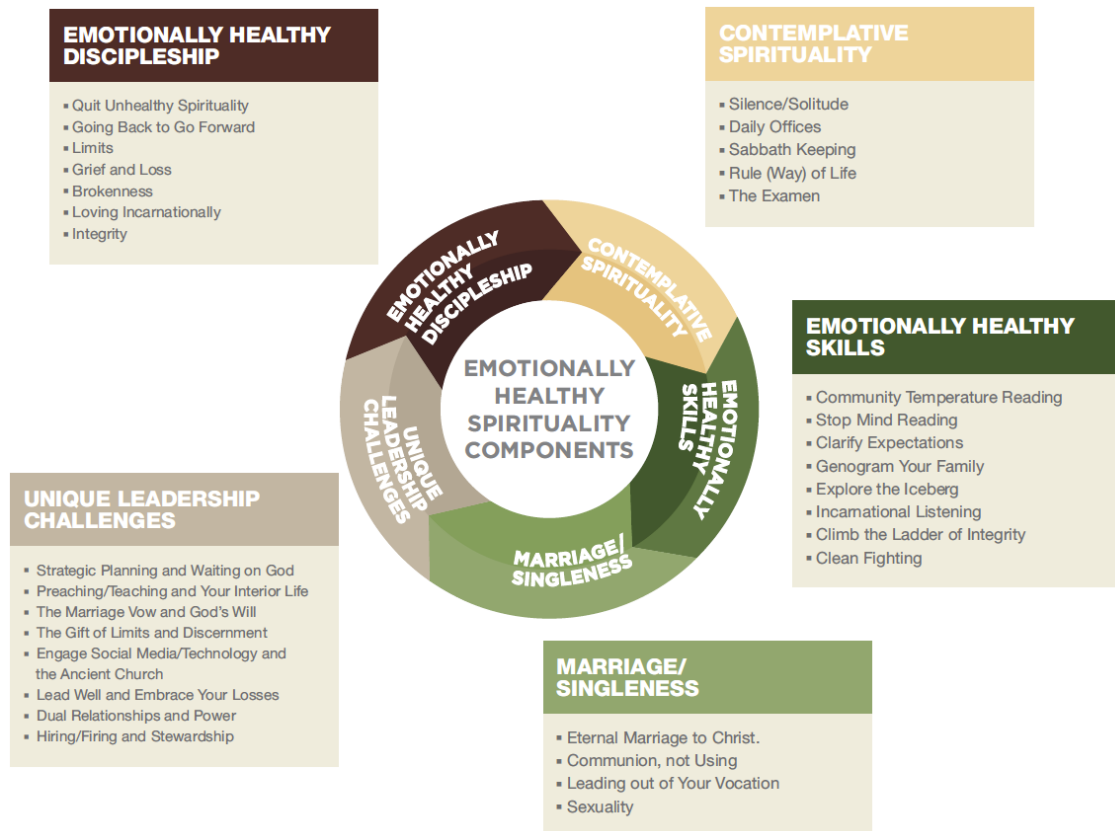
"We grow spiritually much more by doing it wrong than doing it right." Richard Rohr in *Falling Upward*. His insights on the necessity of suffering and failure are so rich.

 **Peter Scazzero**  
September 25

"First there is the fall, and then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God." (Julian of Norwich). Have wondered about this for a while. Read a quote by Jung which opened it up today "Where you stumble and fall, there you find pure gold." Thank God for grace.

[Richard Rohr is a panentheist who promotes the "Cosmic Christ"](#). Julian of Norwich is a Catholic mystic.

Scazzero's [Emotionally Healthy Spirituality website](#) raises even more concerns about his theological orientation. Note the following graphic, [Emotionally Healthy Spiritual Components](#):



Setting aside the tendency of mystics and system theorists to put things in quadrant charts or wheels, more troubling are the specific aspects of what is on this chart. For example, under "Contemplative Spirituality" reference is made to "The Examen," a spiritual practice developed by Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, unrepentant persecutors and killers of

Christians. Mars Hill Church in Grandville, Michigan (Rob Bell, Shane Hipps and Kent Dobson are recent pastors there) [promotes The Examen on its website](#). Did the Reformation mean nothing?

In addition to Scazzero's book, the syllabus for one seminary's spiritual formation class has recently required some of the the following texts:

- Larry Crabb, *Inside Out*
- Larry Crabb, *The Pressure's Off*
- Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*
- Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*

Willard is very popular in evangelical circles. [Willard has long been associated with Richard Foster](#) and together they developed Renovare's [The Life with God Bible Study Bible](#).

Most contemplative and mystics in evangelicalism eventually circle back to Foster and Willard. I recently came across two resources that take what Foster, Renovare and Willard teach and compare how their teachings compare to scripture. ([Link](#)) The conclusion is that Renovare fails miserably. Drs. Tim and Connie Davis prepared this comparison because of concerns they had with what was being taught in an Evangelical Free church where Dr. Tim Davis was an elder. The PDF document available at the preceding link, *Renovare Teachings and Practices that Contradict Scripture*, compares what Foster and Willard have said to what the Bible says. The article (PDF available at the preceding link) *Renovaré Teachings that Contradict the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America* compares what Foster-Willard say to what is in the EV Free Statement of Faith. I highly recommend both articles. These are extremely valuable and highly recommended resources.

Suffice it to say, an objective examination of what Foster and Willard teach does not stand up to the test of what the Bible teaches. I would highly recommend that you watch the interview that [John Ortberg did with Dallas Willard at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in December 2009](#) (additional links to other parts of the interview are available at that link). While Willard's leanings to a form of universalism are readily apparent in that interview, it is equally disturbing that Ortberg sits there and does not challenge what Willard says. One explanation might be Ortberg's experience as a teaching pastor at Willow Creek, the church where Ruth Haley Barton was the director of spiritual formation.

By any objective measure, it should be a matter of grave concern that the teachings of Foster and Willard are so popular and accepted uncritically by evangelical pastors and leaders. [Drs. Tim and Connie Davis](#) should be praised for the many, many hours that they put into their project of comparing the teachings of Foster and Willard to scripture. Because people such as Peter Scazzero and Larry Crabb build on what Foster and Willard teach and write, I have no doubt that a comparison of what they teach would result in a similar conclusion.

Another area of concern is the recommendation of two of Larry Crabb's books as required texts in this particular spiritual formation class. Much has been written about Larry Crabb. Suffice it

to say, he teaches and writes from such a heavily psychologized perspective that one can conclude he does not believe in the sufficiency of the Holy Spirit and scripture.

By all reports, Crabb is highly relational and respected by many in the spiritual formation movement. Highly relational seems to be a criteria for acceptance in much of the evangelical church today, showing that while many will speak against postmodernism, relationship will win out many times over truth. The evangelical church has become functionally postmodern. I have personally heard it said many times that, yes, so-and-so is crossing the line theologically or doctrinally, but he is my friend. That is postmodernism at work.

Why are evangelical seminaries and colleges offering spiritual formation classes? In part, it appears to be the seminary-accrediting agency. There has been a concern about moral failures of seminary graduates. While one can praise the concern, is rank mysticism and a heavy dose of psychology the answer? Is it necessary to devise a system to assist the Holy Spirit's work in an individual's life?

And, who influences Larry Crabb? [According to this article](#), one influence is the late Brennan Manning: "Brennan Manning, *Catholic* retreat director and author of *The Wisdom of Tenderness*, who has been giving Crabb occasional spiritual direction for the last 14 years."

What does Brennan Manning teach and how does it line up with scripture? Again, I would refer you to additional work of Drs. Tim and Connie Davis in their article *Brennan Manning Quotations* ([PDF available at this link](#)). Again, Manning's teachings fail the test of scripture. To quote Manning:

I am deeply distressed by what I can only call in our Christian culture the idolatry of the Scriptures. For many Christians, the Bible is not a pointer to God but God himself. In a word—bibliolatry. God cannot be coned to a leather-bound book. I develop a nasty rash around people who speak as if mere scrutiny of its pages will reveal precisely how God thinks and precisely what God wants. The four Gospels are the key to knowing Jesus. But conversely, Jesus is the key to knowing the meaning of the gospel and of the Bible as a whole. Instead of remaining content with the bare letter, we should pass on to the more profound mysteries that are available only through intimate and heartfelt knowledge of Jesus. (*The Signature of Jesus*, Manning, 1996, pp. 174-175).

Contemplative prayer is simply experiencing what we already possess. . . . During a conference on contemplative prayer, the question was put to Thomas Merton, "How can we best help people to attain union with God? His answer was very clear: We must tell them that they are already united with God. Contemplative prayer is nothing other than 'coming into consciousness' of what is already there." (*The Signature of Jesus*, Manning, 1996, p. 197)

Manning is a recommended author in many spiritual formation classes.

Another influence for Larry Crabb is the guru of spiritual formation, Richard Foster. Foster is mentioned in the standards for The American Association of Christian Counselors (“AACC”) and speaks at AACC conferences. In AACC’s published ethical standards it states:

Although rooted primarily in an orthodox evangelical biblical theology, ***this Code is also influenced (according to the paradigm offered by Richard Foster)*** by the social justice, charismatic-pentecostal, pietistic-holiness, liturgical, and contemplative traditions of Christian theology and church history.

[Link](#) (emphasis added).

Bible prophecy indicates that this the Laodicean church as what will be characteristic of the church just before the Lord returns. Laodicea received the strongest condemnation from the Lord of all of the seven churches of Revelation. Laodicea’s main problem was that it didn’t realize it was Laodicea.

Given the mixture of mysticism into formerly biblically sound evangelical institutions, there can no longer be any question but that the evangelical church has become Laodicean. Statements such as “chew the meat and spit out the bones”, “there is a broad range of what is acceptable theologically in evangelicalism” and “look for the good and ignore the bad in that book” should be categorically rejected and condemned as Laodicean.

What is the solution? Jesus gives it to the church at Laodicea:

<sup>21</sup> He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. <sup>22</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Revelation 3 (NASB)

We need to resist these movements and rely on the Word of God. At the conclusion of his letter to the messy church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul concluded:

<sup>13</sup> Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.

1 Corinthians 16 (NASB)

Sound advice. The Word of God is sufficient.

**\* Note from Eric Barger ([www.ericbarger.com](http://www.ericbarger.com))**

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