

“The Life You’ve Always Wanted” by John Ortberg

A book review

by Dan Dufek

In a culture where everyone seems to be on a journey, whether that be on a “reality based game show” or within the context of a Sunday sermon, spiritual transformation is the new buzzword. The above mentioned book is not new by any means however the topic has gained a much broader audience than once before therefore a review is in order. The author of this book, John Ortberg was formerly the teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, Mr. Ortberg is now on staff at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park, CA.

“We Shall Morph Indeed”

He begins the first chapter telling of his failures. He appeals to his readers shared experience i.e. desiring to be a better parent, spouse, Christian etc. The chapter drives toward the ultimate goal of *transformation*. We are introduced to the term morphing in this chapter. The author relates his experience with the term morphing. He says that he was introduced to the term through his children watching the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. While Mr. Ortberg rightly points out that the New Testament contains the word *morphoo* the key difference is in the usage and definition of the word. In “*The Life You’ve Always Wanted*” *Morphoo* is defined thus “the inward and real formation of the essential nature of a person” (Ortberg p.23)

Thayer’s Greek dictionary gives one definition of the word *morphoo*; *to form*. The word *morphoo* is a derivative of the word *morphe*, which can mean according to Thayer’s the *form by which a person or things strikes the vision* or it can mean *external appearance*. (Emphasis added) Even though it can become tedious, the study and definition of terms is becoming increasingly important in Christianity. What is morphing? According to John Ortberg “When morphing happens, I don’t just *do* the things Jesus would have done; I find myself *wanting* to do them. They appeal to me. They make sense. I don’t just go around trying to do right things; I become the right sort of person.”(Ortberg p. 23) The author then defines the primary goal of spiritual life...human transformation (Ortberg p.24) from the same paragraph we find that spiritual life is about the reclamation of the human race. In Phillip Wexler’s book *The Mystical Society, An emerging social Vision* we find the following quote:

“It is a mystical society because the search for deeper and more authentic experience, which has strongly characterized the under life of the corporate modern society, leads to a resurgence of religion-though not in its modern institutional forms. In the quest for authentic experience, we see efforts to revitalize social being by a host of practices, methods, disciplines, and techniques that begin with the noninstitutional, informal

educational work of changing the self, which leads finally to the recreation of historic social movements for collective transformation. Even as the alienating conditions of modernity are intensified in postmodernity, the stage is simultaneously set for the renewal and revitalization of everyday life. I describe this process of revitalization and try to show how it leads to change in the terms and categories of social understanding, as well in the character of ordinary experience. Currently, one form of this drive toward collective transformation is expressed by aspirations joining self-spirituality and collective redemption in millennialism. Yet this book is not about the millennium. The changes I describe are not sudden eruptions and, in my view, are not going to be instantly and entirely realized. We are instead witnessing an evolutionary process of change in the meaning that people give to social life, in the forms of human interrelation, images, and understandings of personhood, and of social processes". (Wexler 2)

Interestingly enough he mentions the joining of self-spirituality and collective redemption. Both are mentioned indirectly in the book as Mr. Ortberg tells us that he doesn't just do the kind of things that Jesus did, he becomes the right sort of person, this apparently apart from the Holy Spirit and the ongoing work of sanctification. These are the words that end this chapter: "The good news as Jesus preached it is not about the minimal entrance requirements for getting into heaven when you die. It is about the glorious redemption of human life-your life." (Ortberg 29) This quote begs the question, if redemption is not about getting into heaven, then what is redemption about precisely? According to Baker's Dictionary of Evangelical Theology:

Fundamental to the message of the New Testament is the announcement that Jesus of Nazareth is the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hope and that, in him, the long-awaited redemption has arrived. Deliverance of humankind from its state of alienation from God has been accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ ([Rom 4:25](#); [2 Cor 5:18-19](#)). In the New Testament, redemption requires the payment of a price, but the plight that requires such a ransom is moral not material. Humankind is held in the captivity of sin from which only the atoning death of Jesus Christ can liberate.¹ The minimal entrance requirement required the suffering and death of God himself. Denigrating the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made being scorned, scourged and crucified places the emphasis on the wrong aspect of redemption. The most important part of our redemption is that curse of sin has been removed by the blood of the Lamb. Jesus was not simply making us better husbands, wives, parents etc., he was paying the price for our sin.

¹ Elwell, Walter A. "Entry for 'Redeem, Redemption'". "Evangelical Dictionary of Theology". <<http://www.biblestudytools.net/Dictionaries/BakerEvangelicalDictionary/bed.cgi?number=T593>>. 1997.

Surprised by Change

The second chapter deals with the lack of real transformation or life change within most the lives of most Christians. I strongly agree with his assessment of the state of the church. He quotes William Iverson who wrote “A pound of meat would surely be affected by a quarter pound of salt”, Ortberg then offers these comments “If this is real Christianity, the “salt of the earth” where is the effect of which Jesus spoke?” (Ortberg p. 33) While I wholeheartedly agree that change is necessary and the hallmark of the Christian experience who or what drives that change is equally important. Ortberg maintains that a lot of change is what he calls “pseudo-transformation.” This sort of transformation is the type of transformation that we attempt to make on our own. This statement is true; however one would expect a comparison of pseudo-transformation as attempted by one’s self versus authentic transformation accomplished by the Holy Spirit. Sadly no such comparison follows; in fact just the opposite occurs. He says that if we don’t change, we will settle for being informed or conformed (Ortberg p. 34). In my opinion this places the responsibility of change on the person, instead of with the Holy Spirit. The rest of the chapter discusses what Ortberg calls “boundary marker” spirituality. He decries this form of pseudo-transformation as detrimental to the cause of Christ. I would agree with this judgment, however even his home church of Willow Creek is guilty of this boundary marker theology. In fact Willow Creek through its massive amount of training material may be guiltier of perpetuating this than any other denomination.²

The chapter deals with some distortions of spirituality as outlines by Jesus himself. These distortions are real and observable in everyday Christianity. I would agree with Mr. Ortberg’s comments that many Christians have some inauthenticity in their walk with Christ. As the chapter closes I observed one seemingly innocuous quote that could have alarming consequences. Mr. Ortberg says that the real issue is what kind of people we are becoming. He says “Practices such as reading Scripture and praying are important-not because they prove how spiritual we are-but because God can use them to lead us into life.” (Ortberg p. 43) The door is left wide open for God to use other methods to lead us into a deeper spirituality. The word of God is simply considered one method among many methods to lead us into life. At the end of this chapter he makes a comparison with Sleeping Beauty and our own dilemma of being under the curse, which I found very insightful. Sadly this analogy would be lost on someone who seeks God through experiential methods as opposed to studying the Word of God where this comparison would come to life.

² Boundary marker spirituality in short is the stereotyping of certain people groups based on their outward appearances. For example the author uses the illustration of Hippies in the Haight-Asbury district of San Francisco in the 1960’s (Ortberg p. 34) The Willow Creek Association according to the Ministry Watch website (www.ministrywatch.com) has some 8000 member churches in all 50 states and 20 countries.

Training vs. Trying

In this particular chapter the author outlines the necessity of the spiritual disciplines. He considers this our training for an authentic Christian life. I would concur that prayer, fasting and even meditating on scripture are important facets of our walk with Christ. This chapter includes many scripture quotations which is very encouraging however the cast of characters (that have influenced the author) begins to emerge. By and large the chapter is well written and thoughtful even helpful in places. One particular quote however that I believe deserves a response is Mr. Ortberg's assessment of what it means to follow Jesus Christ. He says that "Following Jesus simply means learning from him how to arrange my life around activities that enable me to live in the fruit of the Spirit" (Ortberg p. 49) Contrast this assertion with the teachings of Jesus on the same matter. In Matthew 16:24 Jesus said to His disciples, If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. Complete self-denial versus arranging one's schedule makes for a sharp contrast of what it means to follow Jesus. He asserts that after reading Richard Foster's book *Celebration of the Discipline* he was exhausted and overwhelmed pursuing the twelve disciplines as outlined by Mr. Foster. The real danger is not in the material superficially but with the undercurrent of mysticism that is legitimized by the frequent quotations of Richard Foster, Frank Laubach and others. As the book continues the underpinning of contemplative spirituality emerges with continued appeal to mystics both old and new.

A dee-dah day

This chapter appeals to our human longing for celebration. As John Ortberg reminds us our God is a God of joy. This chapter offers glimpses of what I believe is the authentic joy that is offered by God. This quote is offered "Often it is the people closest to suffering who have the most powerful joy" (Ortberg p. 73). How true a statement, those suffering for the cause of Christ paradoxically have the greatest joy. The Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 7 verse 4 : My boldness of speech is great toward you; my glorying on your behalf is much. I have been filled with comfort, I am overflowing with joy on all our trouble. Again however the appeal is made to scheduling over sanctification. He says on page 71 that "we must arrange life so that sin no longer looks good to us". In the sixth chapter of Romans again Paul appeals to something other than scheduling. He says that we our old man has died and in 2 Corinthians we find that through the renewing of our minds we can have victory over sin. Arrangement if defined as resisting the devil so that he will flee from you is an agreeable

statement, however for the carnal mind arranging one's life will never provide any relief from sin or the temptation. Further this chapter offers us a quotation from Francis De Sales.

ST FRANCIS DE SALES was Bishop of Geneva from 1602 until his death twenty years later. In 1607, a certain Madame de Charmoisy, whose husband was an ambassador of the Duke of Savoy and a relative of St Francis, visited Anney to attend to a lawsuit, and while there placed herself under his spiritual direction. When she returned to court he gave her a series of written spiritual instructions, which he had begun to compile as early as 1602, for the guidance of persons seeking to live a devout life in the world. (De Sales v) These instructions were entitled *Introduction to the Devout Life*. I have included two quotations from De Sales in order to establish the thread of mysticism that runs through and under girds this book. It should be noted that neither quotation offered here appears in *The Life You've Always Wanted* however a simple search of De Sales writings exposes the strain of spirituality that he endorses. In this writing he is instructing his readers on how to practice the presence of God. These are two methods that De Sales recommends;

“The first way is to realize more vividly the omnipresence of God, in other words, the fact that God is everywhere and in everything, that nowhere and in nothing in this world may he not be found. Just as the birds, wherever they fly, always encounter the air, so we, wherever we go or wherever we are, find God present, Everyone knows this but few give it much thought.” (De Sales 54)

The fourth way is to use our imagination to represent our Lord as very near to us in the same way as we often think of our friends when we say, 'I imagine I can see such and such a person doing this or that', or when we say, 'It seems to me that he is really here'; but if we are praying in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, then this presence will be real and not merely imaginary, for our Lord is really present under the appearance of the bread which (De Sales 55)

Although the book doesn't utilize these particular quotations, they are akin to New Age principles. For example New Age author Shakti Gawain says this about visualization:

Thus, creative visualization properly performed requires contacting a "higher self" and "coming from 'source.'" And "source," Gawain declares, "means the supply of infinite love, wisdom, and energy in the universe. . . . Source may mean God, or the universal mind, or the oneness of all, or your true essence (Albanese 81)

Sadly the jump from De Sales spirituality to that expressed by Gawain is not a

broad chasm. The danger of using quotes from De Sales and others is not necessarily what is quoted, it lies within what is not refuted. Again the quote from De Sales that appears in this book is not nearly as precarious as those offered above, however the tapestry of mysticism that is being woven into these pages begins with those cited.

An Unhurried life

According to John Ortberg hurry is the devil. Actually this is Carl Jung's statement that he quotes in this chapter about solitude. This chapter brushes up against many challenges that Christians living in the United States face. Never taking the time to spend in prayer, and quiet reflection on God's word does lead to an empty spiritual life. I believe that everyone can agree on this point of fact. This chapter has real appeal to those of us who are attempting to work, write and raise a family. Solitude is dearly lacking in today's environment and should be talked about by Christian leaders. The topic is benign, however the appeal to a contemplative spirituality and psychologist like Carl Jung is perilous. Carl Jung saw parallels between "archetypes" and Eastern religious practices such as yoga. He even admitted have a "spirit guide". Consider the following quote:

"In the course of his self-analysis one of the several dream figures he encountered was Elijah (called by Jung Philemon). Psychologically, says Jung, Philemon came to represent superior insight. He was a guide through the inner darkness" (Coward and Borelli 6)

Even though Jung only embraced Philemon's existence as a "dream" figure, one cannot dispute that Jung consorted with eastern spirituality. The chapter includes additional citations from Richard Foster, Francis De Sales and others.

Appropriate Smallness

In this chapter John Ortberg covers servanthood. He outlines certain sins that stand in the way of servanthood such as vanity, stubbornness and pride (exclusion). The chapter talks about what John Ortberg calls "Messiah-Complex" He says that we all possess a little shred of this messianic delusion that causes us to want to take God's place. "We have all, in our own way been trying to take God's place ever since Eden" (Ortberg, p.99). Again as the chapter explains the discipline of servanthood, appeals to questionable sources continue. On Page 85 the author relates a story told about Pope John XXIII who apparently had an angel show up occasionally to remind him to "not take himself so seriously". Mr. Ortberg says that "We need angels to remind us that we are not the messiah. We're not even the pope." (Ortberg 85) I was left with this nagging question, Is the Pope on a "greater" spiritual plane than say the average Christian that reads this book? This quote unchecked would imply that the office of Pope is superior to the rank and file follower of Christ.

Life beyond Regret

In this chapter the benefits of confession are extolled. The author makes the case that confession is part and parcel to sanctification. Consider this quote "Confession is not mechanical. It is a practice that, done wisely, will help us become transformed" (Ortberg 122). If I am to understand confession in this sense than the cross of Christ was not the finished work. The finished work is the cross plus wisely performed confession which in turn equals transformation. This philosophy is dangerously close to semi-Pelagianism. In fact confession and the subsequent "spiritual stain removal" is a six step process according to the author. The process of confession is where according to the book, God does his work in us.

The Guided Life.

This chapter reflects on the leading of the Holy Spirit. The chapter states over and over that being receptive to the Spirit's leading is a nonoptional part of transformation. In the interest of fairness, I agree that listening to and being led by the Holy Spirit are a necessary part of the Christian's walk with Christ. There are extremes that exist in dealing with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the author points out. Christians must walk by faith and not by sight, however the bible also says to test all spirits, because not all are from God. Simply listening for a "Spirit" may open one up to hearing from spirits other than the 3rd person of the Trinity the Holy Spirit. As disciples of Christ we must examine all things and hold fast to that which is good. The author does not expound on this clear biblical teaching to test the spirits therefore leaving the reader open for guidance from another spirit. In fact including quotes from the likes of George Fox further removes the authority of scripture as George Fox himself esteemed the experience over the scriptures as the ultimate source of truth. Consider this quote from The Columbia Encyclopedia about George Fox:

"In 1646 he underwent a mystical experience that convinced him that Christianity was not an outward profession but an inner light by which Christ directly illumines the believing soul. Revelation was for Fox not confined to the Scriptures." ("Fox, George ")

Conclusion

The book continues to outline several other spiritual disciplines during the next several chapters. The book uses scripture to drive home the necessity of memorization of scripture, meditation on scripture and the importance of keeping silent. All of these represent biblical precepts that Christians should be

practicing. None of the disciplines by themselves are sinful, in fact I strongly agree with meditation on scripture and memorizing the word of God to keep us from sin. The difficulty with a book like the *Life You've Always Wanted* isn't so much the content nor is it the premise. The real problem for discerning Christians comes from the questionable quotes used by the author to drive home his points. Perhaps the best example of this comes from the Eleventh Chapter. The Chapter is entitled Life with a well-ordered Heart. The quote comes at the end of the chapter and John Ortberg says that "You and I are invited to make each moment of every day an opportunity to learn from Jesus how to live in the Kingdom of God. Every minute counts, as Frank Laubach explains so well: For do you not see that God is trying experiments with human lives? That is why there are so many of them. He has one billion seven hundred million experiments going around the world at this moment. And his question is "how far will this man or that woman allow me to carry this hour?...For I who pushed life up through the protozoan and the tiny grass, and the fish and the bird and the dog and the gorilla and the man...I have not become satisfied yet. I am not only willing to make this hour marvelous. I am in travail to set you akindle with the Christ-thing which has no name." (Ortberg 204) This quote is wrong on many levels, for one thing it endorses Theistic evolution³. Second, I would have liked to see a definition of the Christ-thing which has no name. I have read and re-read this quote and have been unable to define what Frank Laubach is saying with this statement. Third, Is God just a mad-scientist "experimenting" on millions of human beings? This quote is spurious and I have yet to determine how it explains living in the Kingdom of God.

The book ends with a chapter on suffering. The last chapter is very good and makes some very succinct points on unanswered prayer and preserving through suffering. Most of us are looking for the ideal life, and I for one believe that the ideal life only exists within Christianity. The real challenge becomes where or better yet how does one find the ideal life? Is it through a mystical experience or is it through diligent study of God's word and applying the principles found in the bible? Leaving the reader exposed to some of the questionable beliefs of the mystics, philosophers and psychologists that are cited in the book is dangerous. While I would agree we can and should use all sorts of sources to drive home points those who fall outside of the pail of orthodoxy should be used with extreme caution. It is on those grounds that I would caution a reader of the *Life You've Always Wanted*, because opening a door to the mystical can be very dangerous to the spiritual life of the reader.

³ See Appendix for more information on Theistic Evolution

Appendix A

Quotations from Mystics (from the Past and Present) The bibliography of this book clearly shows that Mr. Ortberg has been strongly influenced by Mystics and he uses the principles espoused by these contemplatives to shore up his ideas on “Spiritual Formation”. Again the danger of citing mystics/contemplatives in this book revolves around the spirituality that they endorse.

Richard Foster
Thomas Kelly
Frank Laubach
St. John of the Cross
Henri Nouwen

Appendix B

Theistic evolution is the idea that God used macroevolution in order to bring about life on this planet. Theistic evolution is an attempt by some liberal Christians, Deist's and Theist's to rectify supposed long geologic ages with the creation account of Genesis 1. For a scholarly treatment of this subject a number of resources exist.

Internet resources

www.icr.org

www.apologeticspress.com

Books

The Young Earth by Dr. John D. Morris