

The
M Y S T I C
W A Y
of Evangelism

A Contemplative Vision
for Christian Outreach

Second Edition

ELAINE A. HEATH



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*For my mother,
Helen Louise Madon Heath*

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PREFACE

It has been ten years since I wrote *The Mystic Way of Evangelism*. Around the time of its publication I launched a small cluster of experimental Christian communities with some of my students and friends in Dallas, in which we practiced the theology of *The Mystic Way*. Those first microcommunities soon gave birth to a nonprofit organization, the Missional Wisdom Foundation, which now serves in four regional hubs across the United States.¹ The Missional Wisdom network of intentional communities, social enterprises, missional microchurches, and educational programs are all expressions of new forms of theological education that connect to established churches and educational institutions. *The Mystic Way of Evangelism* became a foundational text for this pioneering work in the church and theological education, along with subsequent books I wrote or cowrote emerging from this volume, especially *Longing for Spring: A New Vision for Wesleyan Community* (coauthored with Scott T. Kisker), *Missional.Monastic.Mainline: A Guide to Starting Missional Micro-Communities in Historically Mainline Traditions* (coauthored with Larry Duggins), and *God Unbound: Wisdom from Galatians for the Anxious Church*.

During the past several years I have also had the privilege of traveling around the world, where I have been able to meet, learn from,

1. <http://www.missionalwisdom.com>.

and teach leaders of Fresh Expressions² communities, new monastic networks, and other emerging expressions of church. I have been gifted with the opportunity to teach and learn from many congregations, regional and national gatherings of clergy, and gatherings of bishops and other judicatory leaders. I have worked closely with church-planting organizations, especially Path One of the United Methodist Church.

Throughout these travels and in my on-the-ground ethnographic research in the Missional Wisdom hubs, it has become very clear that the North American church of the future will be different from the church of the twentieth century. There will be much more bivocationality among the leaders. Institutional structures of denominations will shrink and, in some cases, merge with other denominations. Faith communities are likely to be smaller, and will include more decentralized networks, although some megachurches will continue to exist, especially in urban areas of the South. Established churches that do survive and thrive in the future will do so because they figure out how to connect missionally in their own context, in ways that are noncoercive, nonviolent, and nonmanipulative. They will connect through loving their neighbors well.

Questions of diversity, difference, and equality will be crucial to the church's vitality. While fundamentalisms of various kinds will flourish during periods of political and economic upheaval, as was the case during the change of the US presidential administration in 2016, the church that reflects gospel priorities in the future will be the church that pays attention to issues of social and environmental justice in the name and spirit of Jesus. Just as the nineteenth-century Holiness movement birthed social reforms that changed the landscape of North America, Christian movements for human rights, civil rights, and environmental justice will become stronger and more influential during the next decade of the twenty-first century.

Theological education has already begun to undergo significant shifts to make it more contextually grounded and more affordable and accessible. Many seminaries and schools of theology will close

2. For Fresh Expressions in the United Kingdom see <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk>. In the United States see <http://freshexpressionsus.org>.

in the years ahead because they cannot or will not make the necessary changes fast enough. Those that survive will do so because they take seriously the deep cultural shifts of society at large, with their impact on changing leadership needs in the church.

Finally, the church in North America will probably lose its remaining government benefits—such as tax-exempt status and the minister’s housing allowance. It may be that individuals will no longer be able to claim income-tax deductions for tithing. If these changes take place, they will have a significant impact on the financial viability of congregations.

My conviction is that God will sustain the one holy, catholic, apostolic church, come what may. The shape of the church may change. The “center of Christianity” has already changed, moving to the global South and East. The message of the gospel will not. May this book in some small way contribute to the strengthening of the saints, mystics, and yes, martyrs of our day—the men and women who give themselves fully to God in union with God’s work in the world.

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In so many ways this book reflects the wisdom and love of those who have joined me in my journey. I especially want to thank my dear friends the late Betty Jeavons, Morven and David Baker, Jerry Flora, Mary Ellen Drushal, and John Jorden. Mind-sharpening, soul-enriching conversations with colleagues have been invaluable, especially those with William Thompson-Uberuaga and William J. Abraham. I am so grateful to have worked with diverse and incredibly gifted colleagues at Perkins School of Theology as I wrote the first edition of this book. In the revised and updated edition my gratitude extends to colleagues at Duke Divinity School as well as many pastors, lay leaders, bishops, and others across the United States and around the world for rich conversations and innovative ministry that is emerging and that connects deeply with the themes of this book. Much of the work that I have done in this volume began in discussions with my students, who ask wonderful, difficult questions and who teach me far more than I teach them. Along those lines I especially appreciate the probing questions of former students JoAnn Shade, Nick Swirski, Abril Goforth, Betsy Randall, Ryan Klinck, Geoffrey Moore, Brandon Lazarus, Cecilliah Igweta, Jacob Keega, Adam White, Jonathan Grace, George Battle, Amy Proctor, Amy Spaur, Shellie Ross, Vance Goodman, Larry Duggins, Bret Wells, and many others. My heartfelt thanks go to my graduate assistants at Perkins/SMU, Mark Teasdale and Ken Loyer, who helped with the

original text, and to my research assistant at Duke, Brent Levy, who helped with the revision. Many thanks are also due to my editors at Baker Academic, especially Jim Kinney. I am indebted more than I can express to faithful intercessors who prayed for me as I wrote.

The prayers and companionship of my community, Spring Forest, are a constant gift. My deepest gratitude goes to my beloved husband, Randall Bell, whom my mother referred to approvingly as “a good workin’ man,” meaning someone who knows how to build things with his hands and cook a fine meal as well as be a great partner in prayer, conversation, and all the adventures of life. Randall is, in the way of the mystics, one who in his own way exemplifies a life of faith, hope, and love.

INTRODUCTION

My first foray into the world of evangelism took place when I was six years old. My family did not attend church. My parents were, in fact, hostile to Christianity, having been exposed too many times to a form of Christian witness that was shaming, exclusive, bigoted, and in other ways unsavory. Despite their aversion to all things relating to church, they did allow us children to attend church if we wanted to go with a neighbor or friend, because it got us out of the house on Sunday mornings, providing them an oasis of peace and quiet. Thus I found myself at the age of six in Sunday school for the first time, sipping Kool-Aid, coloring a picture of Zacchaeus the Wee Little Man, and listening to the teacher talk about a place called hell. Upon my return my mother asked how I liked Sunday school. I told her I liked the snack and the story but was worried about hell. It sounded like a pretty bad place. The teacher had said that everyone who smokes and drinks is going to hell, which was bad news for Mom and Dad.

That was the end of my Sunday school career for a while, and the introduction to my parents' hermeneutic of suspicion toward the church. It was also the beginning of a lifetime of questioning the meaning of evangelism: a pursuit that not only shaped my journey with my family, all of whom eventually became faithful disciples of Jesus (in some cases in spite of my early efforts to evangelize them), but also my vocation as pastor and teacher. Ultimately the quest led me to write this book.

Many volumes have already been written to explore the history of Christian missions, the biblical mandate for advancing the reign of

God, the best techniques with which to share one's faith, and practical suggestions for congregations to become more evangelistic. These are all of value and I have used many of them in research and teaching. Yet there is a striking absence in most contemporary discussions of evangelism of the wisdom of the great spiritual giants—the Christian mystics—to shape and lead our understanding of the theory and practice of evangelism. I find this absence particularly significant in light of a postmodern hunger for mysticism of all kinds, and in light of the remarkably shallow to nonexistent practice of evangelism in so many contemporary American churches. The church is in trouble in the post-Christendom West, the kind of trouble that requires leadership from those who are holy. The great Christian mystics are our exemplars of holiness. In their lives and written texts we find what has been lacking but is needed in our theory and practice of evangelism.

Defining Evangelism for the Church

Until taking up my post as dean of Duke Divinity School in 2016, for over a decade I was the evangelism professor at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. The loss of the robust, holistic primacy of evangelism in the theology and practice of the church was reflected in comments my students made at the start of every semester. On the first day of class I usually asked students to name three things they wanted to learn about evangelism. At least half the students responded that they wondered if it was possible to share their faith without “showing it down people's throats.” Some students wanted to know if evangelism has anything to do with social justice, or if it is even a Christian activity in light of the history of the Inquisition, Crusades, colonialism, and American “Manifest Destiny.” In a globalized, religiously pluralistic world, some students asked, is evangelism exclusive, fundamentalist, destructive? Doesn't it contribute to international hostility and religious violence? Their comments reflected a general mistrust and misunderstanding of evangelism in the church and exposed some of the wounds that Christians have inflicted on the world in the name of evangelism. Their questions also revealed the inadequacy of programmatic approaches to evangelism in the local church.

Happily, many of the skeptical students underwent a kind of conversion during the semester, as they came to understand that real evangelism is never coercive, violent, or exploitive. Evangelism carried out in the way of Jesus is not colonialism, nationalism, or imperialism. Evangelism rightly understood is the holistic initiation of people into the reign of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and anchored in the church. Evangelism is inherent to the life of Christian discipleship.¹ The process of evangelization is expressed in three categories of activities introduced to the church by Jesus: preaching, teaching, and healing.² Evangelism includes all aspects of the initiation of persons into the holy life, including catechesis, individual and corporate spiritual disciplines, participation in the sacraments (or ordinances, in some communions), and active membership in the life and mission of a local faith community. Evangelism as an initiatory process is complete only when individuals are fully incorporated into the church, participating in the life of the church in worship, service, prayer, and evangelistic presence in the world. Evangelism really is at the heart of everything we believe and practice as Christians. As Watchman Nee might have said were he involved in the conversation today, evangelism is at the core of the “normal” Christian life.³

Evangelism is intrinsically relational, the outcome of love of neighbor, for to love our neighbor is to share the love of God holistically. The proper context for evangelism is authentic Christian community, where the expression of loving community is the greatest apologetic for the gospel. Holiness—being given to God and God’s mission in this world—is a way of life that is expressly concerned with evangelism. To be holy is to be set aside exclusively for God’s purposes, to be the *‘olah* or whole offering that is a living sacrifice, according to

1. I am indebted to William J. Abraham for his definition of evangelism as initiation into the kingdom of God (*The Logic of Evangelism* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 95). Scott Jones builds on Abraham’s definition in *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 112–18.

2. Matthew 9:35–38.

3. Watchman Nee (1903–72) was a leader of the Chinese house church movement who spent the last twenty years of his life in prison for his faith. His most famous book is *The Normal Christian Life* (1957; repr., Wheaton: Tyndale, 1977).

Paul in Romans 12:1–2.⁴ We are not set aside and made holy for our own pursuits; we are now in partnership with God in God’s mission. Paul explains in Romans 8 that we are now “heirs and joint-heirs with Jesus,” the liberator whose mission is to redeem all of creation. The holiness of God’s people provides both hope and agency in the transformation of the world.

For this reason, the great exemplars of holiness—the Christian mystics—are without exception the first and best teachers of the theory and practice of evangelism. Their contemplative vision of the love of God and the redemptive purposes of God in the world shatter our programmatic and market-driven assumptions about evangelism. Their passionate surrender to Christ exposes imperialistic, exploitive, and manipulative versions of evangelism and highlights the falsity of accusations that evangelism is just one more way the church is in collusion with the world. Spiritual giants such as Julian of Norwich, John Woolman, and Mechthild of Magdeburg speak with an authority the church desperately needs today. These mystics are the incarnation of faith, hope, and love, the holy ones who can illumine the dark path on which the Western church finds itself.

About Christian Mysticism

To further my proposal that the mystics are the best teachers of evangelism, a brief identification of Christian mysticism is in order. For readers from traditions in which mysticism is not an ordinary category of theological inquiry, clarification may be needed to define and distinguish Christian mysticism from other kinds of mysticism.

Some Christians resist all talk of mysticism, as if mysticism and Christianity were mutually exclusive. The great Methodist mystic⁵

4. More will be said throughout this book as to what constitutes holiness, with the great saints and mystics as exemplars of holy people. For now, the important points are that holiness is about being given over completely to God out of love for God and about how holiness expresses itself in love of neighbor.

5. Palmer’s mysticism was the source of her altar theology and the fountainhead for her powerful evangelistic ministry. Palmer is said to have led as many as twenty-five thousand people to “saving faith in Christ” in a ministry that in every way was equal to that of Charles Finney (Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld, *Daughters of the*

and mother of the Holiness movement, Phoebe Palmer, was herself opposed to what she called “mysticism” because of her narrow understanding of the term.⁶ Yet as Ann Taves demonstrates, Christian mysticism has always been present in the Methodist tradition.⁷ Indeed, the mystical element of religion is necessary for the Christian religion to remain truly Christian, according to Friedrich von Hügel, whose landmark work *The Mystical Element of Religion* opened the way for new explorations of Christian mysticism in the academy.⁸

Mysticism, contrary to popular belief, is not essentially about private numinous experiences. The earliest Christian use of the word *mustikos* was in relationship to God’s revelation in Christ, of that which was previously hidden.⁹ Christian mysticism is grounded in the revelation of Jesus Christ. Colossians 1:26–27 is an example of this understanding. As time passed, the meaning of Christian mysticism evolved to include Christ revealed in the incarnation, in the Eucharist, in Scripture, and in the community of faith.

Christian mysticism is about the holy transformation of the mystic by God so that the mystic becomes instrumental in the holy transformation of God’s people. This transformation always results in missional action in the world. The idea that mysticism is private and removed from the rugged world of ministry is simply false. All the Old Testament prophets were mystics. Their visions, dreams, and other experiences of God were for the express purpose of calling God’s people back to their missional vocation.

Those who could properly be called the great Christian mystics, such as St. John of the Cross, attained a radical degree of holy transformation as a result of their encounters with the Triune God.¹⁰

Church: Women and Ministry from the New Testament Times to the Present [Grand Rapids: Academie, 1987], 263).

6. Phoebe Palmer, *Full Salvation: Its Doctrine and Duties* (Salem, OH: Schmul Publishing Co., n.d.), 146–47.

7. Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

8. Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion* (1923; repr., New York: Crossroad, 1999), 50–84.

9. Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 24.

10. William M. Thompson, *Christology and Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 5.

That is, their inward transformation resulted in an outward life of extraordinary impact on the world. All the great Christian mystics were prophets with a vision for God's mission in the world. Most of them suffered the rejections and persecutions prophets encounter from stiff-necked religious folk.

Ecstatic Experience

But what about mysticism and ecstatic experiences? The word “ecstasy” comes from the Greek word *ekstasis*, which means to go out from (*ek*) a standing or “static” position (*stasis*). Authentic Christian ecstatic experiences are God-initiated movements of the Holy Spirit that lead Christians beyond themselves to greater identification with God and God's mission in the world. Genuine ecstatic experiences always propel the Christian (and the church) into mission.

Christian mysticism is grounded in the church, the body of Christ.¹¹ It is the God-initiated experience of being moved beyond oneself into greater depths of divine love. This movement results in an inward transformation of wholeness and integration and an outward life of holiness, an increasing love of God and neighbor. Mysticism has epistemological significance in that the experience of God is a participatory knowing. The divine encounter of mysticism carries profound authority for those who experience it, a fact overwhelmingly present in the call experiences of many of the great reformers and in the stamina of the mystics as they endured persecution at the hands of the church.

Apophatic and Kataphatic

Two terms should be defined to help navigate the conversation throughout the book. These terms are “apophatic” and “kataphatic” and are usually used as adjectives to describe mysticism, spirituality, or theology (e.g., the apophatic theology of Meister Eckhart or the kataphatic spirituality of St. Ignatius).

11. *Ibid.*, 9.

Apophatic mysticism refers to the *via negativa* or what is sometimes called the way of “unknowing,” for although God is revealed to us in nature, the Bible, and especially in Jesus, our comprehension is limited by our finitude. We “see through a glass darkly.” We tend to fixate on specific aspects of God’s self-revelation as if they were exhaustive, particularly God as Father and *only* as Father, when God is actually much more than Father and the many other images God has given us. We can know God through God’s self-revelation, but we cannot know God exhaustively. Because our Triune God is uncreated, God cannot be known or described as just one more “thing,” in the way we might describe a plant or a human or the earth. God is no “thing.”¹² Apophasia is in part the process of growing in our understanding and experience of God, who is more than we can ever exhaustively know and whose depths are to us a divine and beautiful mystery. This part of apophasia has to do with not knowing, with mystery.

By extension apophatic mysticism also includes aspects of negation or self-emptying (*kenosis*) in the spiritual journey: the renunciation of one’s own agenda, the purification of ego and all that is involved in “dying to self.” Spiritual advancement in the apophatic way involves, among other things, a detachment from an idolatrous clinging to religious images, forms, rituals, human traditions, and experiences, so that their place in the spiritual life can be cleansed and realigned.

At times discussion about apophatic mysticism can itself become a bewildering “cloud of unknowing” because of the negative language many of the old mystics use about nothingness, dark nights of the soul, detachment, emptiness, letting go, not knowing, and so forth. Yet genuine apophatic mysticism is not so much about personal, subjective, inner experiences of “darkness” and nothingness as it is about a *de-emphasis* or relativization of experience.¹³ Part one of this book is particularly concerned with purgation, the cleansing aspect of

12. Christian apophatic mysticism can help to “protect” Christian spirituality from panentheism in a spiritually syncretistic world.

13. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 23. This insightful distinction is of particular importance in chapter 3, in regard to the apophatic mysticism of Phoebe Palmer and Father Arseny.

apophatic mysticism, in relation to the church in the United States.¹⁴ One of the primary themes of this book is the life of kenosis, or self-emptying, which is a key expression of the apophatic way.

In contrast to and in creative tension with apophatic mysticism is kataphatic mysticism, which is, conversely, a path of spiritual advancement in which images, forms, subjective spiritual experiences, creation, incarnation, and discursive thought all lead to union with God. Kataphatic mysticism is the most notable form of mysticism found in the Hebrew prophets. It is a mysticism of affirmation (*via affirmativa*), with God as the source of all that exists.¹⁵ God speaks to Moses in a burning bush, not in silence and nothingness. The prophet Ezekiel sees visions of God, as do Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and others. In the New Testament the incarnation of Jesus adds to the Old Testament foundation of the kataphatic way. As the apostle Paul writes, “[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation . . . for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:15, 19). Stories of mystical visions, dreams, actions, experiences, and encounters can be found throughout the New Testament. Indeed, kataphatic mysticism is overwhelmingly present in the New Testament. Thus it is safe to say that from a standpoint of Scripture alone, Christian mysticism must include the kataphatic.

Again, however, it is important to note that Christian mysticism is not essentially about kataphatic experience or the apophatic de-emphasis on experience; it is essentially about the transformation of God’s people. Mysticism, Evelyn Underhill writes, “is essentially a movement of the heart, seeking to transcend the limitations of the individual standpoint and to surrender itself to ultimate Reality; for

14. Contemporary discussions around apophatic mysticism hail this form of spirituality as the one most helpful in building bridges of understanding between Christian and non-Christian spiritual traditions, since some form of apophatic spirituality is present in all major religious traditions of the world. From a standpoint of evangelism, knowledge of a broad spectrum of apophatic traditions is enormously helpful for faith-sharing in a religiously pluralistic world. See John Sahadat, “The Interreligious Study of Mysticism and a Sense of Universality,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Spring 1985): 294–96; William Johnston, *Arise My Love: Mysticism for a New Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000); and Harvey D. Egan, “Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticism,” *Theological Studies* 39 (September 1978): 399.

15. Johnston, *Arise My Love*, 116–17.

no personal gain, . . . purely from an instinct of love.”¹⁶ Mystics are irresistibly drawn to become one with God and God’s purposes in the world. Underhill dryly comments that the true mystic is the one who “attains to this union, not the person who talks about it.”¹⁷

The mystic, then, is one for whom the immediate presence of God and the drawing of God toward union are lived, fundamental realities. God’s presence is both immanent and transcendent, transforming the mystic inwardly while compelling him or her to an outward life of increasing love and compassion.¹⁸ The radical transformation of mysticism is a possibility for any believer and is really what God has in mind for all Christians.¹⁹ Yet the reality is that many Christians do not appear to attain, in this life at least, radical transformation. Thus while mysticism or mystical experiences may be found among believers who are at different levels of spiritual maturity, the one who could properly be called a mystic seems to be much less common.

Regardless of the presence or absence of specific mystical experiences—including visions, dreams, prophetic foreknowledge, spiritual combat, dark nights of the soul, and other phenomena—for all mystics there is a process of growth into increasing holiness.²⁰ Whether the mystic is predominantly apophatic or kataphatic in his or her experience, the result of Christian mysticism is an ever-increasing capacity to love God. The greatest “proof” of mysticism is its fruit: love of God *and neighbor*. This is a love that is enfolded in action. Mysticism brings about prophetic action that is compassionate and sacrificial, the Eucharistic life in which God’s people become “broken bread and poured out wine”²¹ for the world. The Eucharistic life is always evangelistic.

16. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: Meridian, 1955), 71.

17. *Ibid.*, 72. Bernard McGinn prefers the term “presence” rather than “union,” finding it more useful in describing the “immediate or direct presence of God” in and through the mystics (Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God*, vol. 1, *The Foundations of Mysticism* [New York: Crossroad, 1992], xv–xvii).

18. Underhill, *Mysticism*, 90.

19. Thus the title of another of Underhill’s books, *Practical Mysticism* (Columbus, OH: Ariel, 1986).

20. Underhill, *Mysticism*, 75–90.

21. This is a favorite phrase of Oswald Chambers in describing the eucharistic life. See Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1935), 33, 41, 46, 56, 136, 197, 274, 320.

The Threefold Way

The following chapters are organized into three parts named after the classical threefold contemplative path: purgation, illumination, and union. In part one, purgation is presented as a process the church must go through to be revitalized and to reclaim its prophetic, healing, evangelistic presence in the world. Chapter 1 describes the decline of the church in the United States using the conceptual framework of the threefold contemplative path, advancing the proposal that the decline is best understood as a corporate dark night of the soul. Because this is a process that the church must go through, it means that the night is initiated by God and could lead the church to a new and vibrant life.

Part two, “Illumination,” presents the key elements of a contemplative vision for evangelism that should characterize the church emerging from the night. Each chapter is thematic, drawing from the life and writing of two mystics, demonstrating the centrality of the theme in how we should think about evangelism. These themes include: love as God’s meaning, holiness for the sake of the world, coming home to God’s love, healing, and the redemption of creation. The first of these themes, love as God’s meaning, should be understood as primary, integrating the other four themes into a unified whole. The church in the night will be able to emerge from its torpor only as it is cleansed and healed of its brokenness in these five areas.

Julian of Norwich called union with God the “one-ing” of the soul. Part three, “Union,” casts a vision for ways in which the church can take a contemplative stance, evangelistically living in union with God in day-to-day life. Each of the chapters in part three include a narrative portraying one possible model for a contemplative church that reflects the embodiment of the themes presented in part two. I have chosen narrative theology for this part of the work because it makes the most sense to postmodern readers and because it is evocative rather than attempting to be exhaustive in describing the contemplative church. Narrative theology serves the contemplative way better than many other forms of theology.

In keeping with this theme, a portion of each of the final chapters includes the unfolding story of a man named Sam and his process

of evangelization in a church that embodies a contemplative stance. The story is simple and plain, in keeping with the contemplative way, yet has enough descriptive elements to demonstrate the life-giving difference a contemplative stance could make. This story presents just one possible form of church in order to inspire creativity, prayer, and change. It is not meant to be the only form of church that will “work,” and thus slavishly imitated. While I have seen various elements of this church in different real congregations and communities, the composite of First Church belongs just to this story. The people in Sam’s story are not meant to represent individuals known to me. Any similarities to actual people or situations are coincidental.

It is my prayer that this volume furthers theological conversation about evangelism, drawing from the wisdom of the mystics to hear afresh the meaning of the good news, as well as the spirit in which we are to share it. Because this is a book offering an intentionally contemplative vision for evangelism, the genre is spiritual theology, integrating analysis with narrative theology in an invitation to a holy life. As Tyler Roberts notes, approaching the topic in this “space between” devotional account and analysis opens the possibility of creative new questions, not only about the religious topic at hand but also about the way we study all aspects of religion.²² This book is not intended to be exhaustive but is an introduction to a contemplative vision for evangelism. My deepest hope for this book is that it will contribute in some way to the formation of evangelistic leaders and congregations who will be able to reach postmoderns with the news that is, indeed, very good.

22. Tyler Roberts, “Between the Lines: Exceeding Historicism in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 3 (September 2006): 699.

Part One



PURGATION

ONE

Into the Night

A dark night of the soul is descending on the church in the United States. The signs are everywhere: a steady decline in church membership, especially among mainline denominations;¹ a striking increase in the percentage of Americans who do not attend church;² dropping

1. For statistical data on decreasing membership among three of the largest mainline denominations see Heather Hahn, “U.S. Church Sees Numbers Slide in 2015,” United Methodist News Service, November 18, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/u.s.-church-sees-numbers-slide-in-2015>; Paula R. Kincaid, “PCUSA 2015 Membership Loss: 95,107,” *The Layman Online*, May 18, 2016, <http://www.layman.org/pcusa-2015-membership-loss-95107>; and *Association of Religion Data Archive*, “Trends,” http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D_1415_t.asp, with Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “ELCA Facts,” <http://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/ELCA-Facts>. For National Council of Churches 2011 statistics on church membership in the largest denominations in the United States see “Church Giving Drops \$1.2 Billion Reports 2012 Yearbook of Churches,” March 20, 2012, <http://www.ncccusa.org/news/120209yearbook2012.html>. While statistical data suggests continued growth among conservative evangelical denominations such as the Southern Baptists and Assemblies of God, the percentage of growth among evangelical churches does not account for all the losses in mainline denominations. In other words, a significant number of members leaving mainline churches leave the church altogether.

2. Between 1991 and 2004 there was a 92 percent increase in unchurched people, according to the Barna Group (“Number of Unchurched Adults Has Nearly Doubled since 1991,” *The Barna Update*, May 4, 2004, <http://www.barna.com/research/number-of-unchurched-adults-has-nearly-doubled-since-1991>). And in the last decade, that number has increased again by another 30 percent. See George Barna and David

numbers of young adults preparing for ordained ministry;³ the loss of moral authority and credibility among clergy and churches due to widespread sex scandals and financial misconduct at the hands of clergy;⁴ an increasing hermeneutic of suspicion toward the church by the Internal Revenue Service; and other forms of distancing between American civic and religious life.⁵ With the growth of religious pluralism and spiritual syncretism in postmodern culture, the church's historic primacy as America's spiritual and moral compass continues to erode. As Philip Jenkins notes, while the church (especially Pentecostalism) is growing rapidly in the Southern and Eastern hemispheres, the era of Christendom in the United States is over.⁶

Many Christians view the decline of Western Christendom with alarm, as if God had fallen from heaven. Enormous effort is put forth to launch church growth programs to shore up membership, increase giving, and keep denominational ships afloat. But the history of God's people is a history of life cycles, a history of clarity

Kinnaman, *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them* (Austin: Tyndale Momentum, 2014), 33.

3. Research suggests that there has been a modest but steady increase in young clergy (under age 35) from 2011–15, but percentages are still far below levels from 1985–90. See “Young Clergy Numbers Rise, Bucking Leadership Trend,” Higher Education and Ministry, <http://www.gbhem.org/article/young-clergy-numbers-rise-bucking-leadership-trend>; and Lovett H. Weems Jr., “Clergy Age Trends in the United Methodist Church: 2016 Report,” Lewis Center for Church Leadership, August 2016, <http://www.churchleadership.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ClergyAgeTrends16.pdf>. An excerpt from Lovett H. Weems Jr. and Ann A. Michel's 2008 book, *The Crisis of Younger Clergy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008) appearing in *Circuit Rider* (Feb/Mar/Apr 2009), provides more recent justification for low numbers of young clergy.

4. Ted Olsen and Todd Hertz, “How the Clergy Sexual Abuse Scandal Affects Evangelical Churches,” *Christianity Today* 46 (March 1, 2002), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/marchweb-only/3-18-31.0.html>. Also see Daniel M. Hungerman's article “Substitution and Stigma: Evidence on Religious Competition from the Catholic Sex-Abuse Scandal” (*American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 5[3] [2013]: 227–53), which describes the phenomenon of persons who left the Catholic Church during the sexual abuse scandal and did not move to a different denomination but instead stopped attending church altogether.

5. For details on this and other recent events in which Christian organizations have come under governmental scrutiny for their positions on social justice, see Center for Effective Government, “IRS Audits Church for Anti-War Sermon,” <http://www.foreffectivegov.org/node/771>.

6. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

about call and identity, followed by complacency, followed by collusion with the powers, followed by catastrophic loss. Contrary to being a disaster, the exilic experiences of loss and marginalization are what are needed to restore the church to its evangelistic place. On the margins of society the church will once again find its God-given voice to speak to the dominant culture in subversive ways, resisting the powers and principalities, standing against the seduction of the status quo. The church will once again become a prophetic, evangelistic, alternative community, offering to the world a model of life that is radically “other,” life-giving, loving, healing, liberating. This kind of community is not possible for the church of Christendom. Christendom opposes prophetic community with its upside-down power and its exposure of golden calves.

Thus Walter Brueggemann describes the declining Western church as the church in exile, comparing it to the Jews exiled in Babylon. The church’s exile is cultural rather than geographic, but holds the same kind of disorientation, anxiety, and intensity of grief over the glory having left the temple.⁷ Brueggemann disturbs us with the reminder, “In the end, it is God and not the Babylonians who terminated the Temple project.”⁸ Ironically, to once again become evangelistic in the healthiest, most holistic sense, the church in America needs the “severe mercy” of great loss.

The dark night of the soul is precisely that—a divinely initiated process of loss—so that the accretions of the world, the flesh, and the devil may be recognized and released. It is a process of detachment from disordered affections, a process of purgation and de-selfing.⁹ Though the dark night is perilous, with no guarantee of a good outcome, it holds the possibility of new beginnings. Out of the night the church could emerge into a dawn of freedom and fidelity.

The dark night is here, even now. While the sun sets on Christendom in the West, the saints, mystics, and martyrs beckon to the

7. Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 1–3, 11–12. Darrell Guder, Lois Barrett, et al., see the loss of missional ecclesiology as the core issue behind declining Christendom (Darrell Guder, ed., *Missional Church* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998]).

8. Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*, 109.

9. Underhill, *Mysticism*, 397.

church as a great cloud of witnesses, calling us to transformation. The church will persevere through the night and emerge alive on the other side, not because of church programs, but because God's love has kept it.¹⁰ But to get there, we need the wisdom of the mystics, the holy ones of God.

The Gift of Detachment

While many Christian mystics and saints have described experiences of a dark night, the term is associated primarily with John of the Cross, the sixteenth-century Spanish Carmelite whose stunning poem *Dark Night of the Soul* continues to challenge and nourish Christians from many spiritual traditions. The depth and breadth of meaning in John's ascetical theology is beyond the limits of this discussion and has been well described from diverse perspectives.¹¹ John distinguishes between active and passive nights of the senses, and active and passive nights of the spirit, for example. Each of these aspects of the night is purgative, freeing the soul from attachments that hinder the ability to receive and give God's love. Jessie Penn-Lewis, writing from the Keswick movement more than three hundred years later, described the dark night using her own language and pneumatological framework, which, though less intricate than that of the great Carmelite reformer, contains the same general meaning. The night is the time to surrender the "spiritually religious self," religious views, old ways, thought patterns, and activities that have become idolatrous substitutes for God in and of themselves. "If we surrender even the manifest presence of

10. Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, Classics of Western Spirituality, ed. Edmund College and James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 183.

11. For an introduction to the writings and a variety of contemporary reflections on John of the Cross, see John of the Cross, *Selected Writings*, Classics of Western Spirituality, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh and Ernest E. Larkin (New York: Paulist Press, 1987); Susan Muto, *John of the Cross for Today: The Dark Night* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1994); Hein Blommestijn et al., *The Footprints of Love: John of the Cross as Guide in the Wilderness*, trans. John Vriend (Louvain: Peeters, 2000); Francis Kelly Nemeck and Marie Theresa Coombs, *O Blessed Night* (New York: Alba House, 1991); and Gerald May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004).

God, we become rooted and fixed in God. Not that He wants to take all away, but He wants us to surrender, that He might reveal himself as an abiding reality.”¹² In consideration of the process of the night for the church, then, it is helpful to take a broader view of the night as described from a wider theological spectrum rather than a narrow, strictly Carmelite perspective.

In the Bible we find many stories of God’s people in the night. Sometimes in these narratives the night has to do with the apparent thwarting of the divine call or promise in an individual’s life. We see this in Joseph’s years of imprisonment in Egypt, Moses’s decades as a shepherd, David’s long years of exile during Saul’s increasingly paranoid reign. The night is also revealed in God’s people as they experience the seeming absence of God during times of oppression or suffering. It is revealed in the barren yearning of Sarah, Leah, and Hannah; in Habakkuk’s complaint; in Jeremiah’s anguished cry; and in the mystery of Job’s suffering. The dark night reaches its climax in the cry of Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”¹³

The detachment described by so many who have traversed the night is often from religious rigidity, or from religious activity that has become in itself a god. This detachment takes place gradually, sometimes imperceptibly, at other times with great struggle and grief. Often those who are in the night are unaware of the nature of their attachments, especially religious attachments. One thinks of Nicodemus, for example, who surreptitiously questioned Jesus about the spiritual path. Nicodemus was unable to name for himself the religious ossification that prevented him from seeing the kingdom of God, though there were intimations drawing him to Christ.¹⁴

Gerald May notes, “Sometimes this letting go of old ways is painful, occasionally even devastating. But this is not why the night is called ‘dark.’ The darkness of the night implies nothing sinister, only that the liberation takes place in hidden ways, beneath our knowledge and

12. Jessie Penn-Lewis, *Fruitful Living* (Dorset, UK: Overcomer Literature Trust, n.d.), 19–20.

13. Hans Urs von Balthasar (see chapter 2) sees Jesus’s solidarity with humanity in such complete terms that the cry of Jesus on the cross, his experience of godforsakenness, and his descent into hell are all to be taken literally and seriously.

14. John 3:1–21.

understanding.”¹⁵ One of the clear signs of a dark night is its very obscurity, as if an opaque veil protects the cleansing, purifying work.

The cumulative effect of the dark night when embraced by God’s people is the deconstruction of self-centeredness and the removal of subtle idolatry in terms of mistaking God for religious feeling and activity, or created things, or viewing God as one more “thing.” God is *nada*, no “thing.” The dark night brings about a necessary detachment so that God’s people may freely love all things in and through the love of God rather than in and of themselves. Religious activities, rituals, and practices especially are cleansed so that they are now, in the oft-quoted imagery of Thomas Merton, fingers pointing to the moon and no longer mistaken for the moon itself. The fruit of the night is about the transformation of relationships into expressions of love of God and neighbor, and love of self for the sake of God.¹⁶

May is correct in his assessment that John of the Cross has often been misunderstood by subsequent interpreters, especially when used to promote negative images of God.¹⁷ For the love of God is present and active in the night, bringing about growth, healing, and freedom, gifts of detachment from enmeshed relationships, compulsions, addictions, and idolatries that are not immediately apparent to those who have yet to emerge from the night.¹⁸

In some sense the emergence from the night is never complete in this life, for the process of God’s leading to further growth and freedom in obscurity is lifelong. It is part of the process of sanctification, of being made holy. The three parts of the contemplative path—purgation, illumination, and union—are simultaneous rather than sequential, but our human finitude prevents us from seeing their

15. May, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 5.

16. Here the insights of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) in his teaching on the “four degrees of love” are helpful. These are progressive, with the fourth and ultimate degree occurring only intermittently in this mortal life. The four degrees are: love of self for self’s sake, love of God for self’s sake, love of God for God’s sake, and, finally, love of self for God’s sake (Bernard of Clairvaux, “Four Degrees of Love,” in *Invitation to Christian Spirituality*, ed. John R. Tyson [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], 149–53).

17. May, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 8.

18. For a thorough discussion of the value of John’s theology for those in recovery from addictions, see Nemeck and Coombs, *O Blessed Night*.

simultaneity, so that we perceive of them as being distinct phases. Even so, the night may still be described in a cyclical sense, for the purgation of the night waxes and wanes, along with seasons of illumination and moments of union.

Language about detachment requires careful interpretation, especially when reading texts arising from apophatic spirituality. Rather than being a process of complete separation from people and things we love (though at times it does mean separation), detachment in this context is best understood as the transformation of one's relationships with self, others, the created world, and God, so that increasingly one "holds loosely" all loves, with open hands and heart. To hold loosely is to let go of fearful clutching and control, and is to set free that which is loved.¹⁹ This kind of liberating love grows slowly, gradually, and is not possible aside from the work of the night, for we are burdened with many attachments, addictions, and idolatry. We all struggle with "disordered affections," to use the language of Ignatius of Loyola.²⁰

With this brief introduction to the conceptual framework of the first part of the threefold contemplative path, purgation, let us turn our attention to the American church of the early twenty-first century. Let us think about the church in terms of the signs of an impending night, which are (1) dryness and fruitlessness in prayer, religious activity, and life; (2) a loss of desire for the old ways of being religious; and (3) a growing desire simply to be with God.²¹

Dryness and Fruitlessness

The decline of mainline churches in America has been under way for decades, with a staggering loss of membership, the closing of

19. Sting captures the spirituality of this kind of liberating love, and the perennial problem of clutching and controlling those we love, in his song "If You Love Somebody, Set Them Free," *The Very Best of Sting and the Police*, A&M, 2002.

20. The Ignatian spiritual exercises are a systematic method of prayer and self-examination to help identify disordered affections and progress in the spiritual life. See Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, Classics of Western Spirituality, ed. George E. Ganss (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), 113–214.

21. These are nicely summarized in contemporary language in May, *Dark Night of the Soul*, 138–41.

churches, and a graying and dwindling of the flock. The widespread failure to evangelize younger generations is reflected in the rising age of clergy. In the United Methodist Church, for example, during the last thirty years, the number of ordained elders under the age of thirty-five has plummeted from 3,129 to 1,003.²² Once the largest and most robust Christian movement in North America, the United Methodist Church (UMC) has recorded annual losses in membership and church attendance for decades (more than 115,000 members in 2015, for example). Having enjoyed a membership of more than 8 million since the 1930s, in 2015, UMC membership dropped to just above 7 million, with worship attendance also dropping to 2.7 million, a nearly 3 percent decrease from 2014.²³ Similar patterns are found in the Presbyterian Church (USA), with a projected loss of 100,000 this year.²⁴ These kinds of losses or failure to grow are reported in virtually every mainline denomination in America.²⁵

Evangelicals like to think that with the growth of megachurches, such as Saddleback and Willow Creek, and the vibrant growth of evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity in the rest of the world, the decline of the church in America is limited to the mainline. Statistics say otherwise. During 2015 the number of baptisms in the Southern Baptist Church, the largest denomination in America, declined 3.3 percent, following a trend that started several years ago with only a modest rebound in 2011.²⁶ According to the National Council of Churches' 2012 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches, of the

22. Weems, "Clergy Age Trends in the United Methodist Church in 2016."

23. Hahn, "U.S. Church Sees Numbers Slide in 2015."

24. Paula R. Kincaid, "Raising the Rate By Three Percent," *The Layman Online*, February 4, 2016, <http://www.layman.org/raising-the-rate-by-three-percent>.

25. There are some exceptions, such as the 0.57 percent increase in the Catholic Church in 2010, yet immigration rather than evangelism may be the primary reason for these increases. See National Council of Churches, "Trends Continue in Church Membership Growth or Decline, Reports 2011 Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches," *News from the National Council of Churches*, February 14, 2011, <http://www.nccusa.org/news/110210yearbook2011.html>.

26. Carol Pipes, "ACP: More Churches Reported; Baptisms Decline," *Baptist Press*, June 7, 2016, <http://www.bpnews.net/46989/acp-more-churches-reported-baptism-worship-numbers-decline>; Russ Rankin, "SBC Baptisms and Churches Increased in 2011, Membership Declined," *LifeWay*, June 12, 2012, <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/news-sbc-baptisms-churches-increased-in-2011-membership-declined>.

twenty-five largest denominations or communions of churches, only six reported an increase of membership.²⁷ The remaining nineteen denominations reported either no change or a decrease in membership.

Membership statistics are only one symptom of the increasing aridity of the American church. The loss of giving is another. Robert Wuthnow describes the growing crisis of financial problems in the church. Because churches of all sizes are riddled with financial problems, many small congregations are closing, while larger historic congregations struggle to stay afloat in massive, expensive church buildings from an earlier era. Even newer congregations are struggling financially with debt and utility costs for large buildings erected too quickly in the rush to establish a new church.²⁷

Beset with the rising cost of health insurance for clergy and staff, facility maintenance, and other financial pressures, many congregations feel unable to survive, much less to thrive as missional outposts in the world. Increasing numbers of small churches cannot afford a full-time pastor and are opting instead for part-time, bivocational clergy, many of whom lack sufficient theological education.

While these numeric signs of increasing “dryness and fruitlessness” are significant, there are other, deeper indicators of a loss of vitality in the American church. The accommodation of the church to the consumerism, competitiveness, and individualism of postmodern culture is pervasive, from the opulent lifestyle of prosperity gospel preachers to the ubiquitous “worship wars” to pseudoevangelistic “transfer growth” as churches cater to Christians who shop around for a better deal. The fruitlessness is experienced by renewal-minded pastors who are appointed to dysfunctional congregations, where they experience abuse and contempt; by evangelistic and prophetic laypeople who are stifled by insecure clergy; by pathological church board members who think that because they are “big givers” they own the church and the pastor; by a frenetic grab for every new church-growth program and strategy that comes along because denominations, judicatories, congregations, and pastors know that if the trend continues their church will not survive; by broken women and men who long to find a spiritual community and come home to

27. National Council of Churches, “Church Giving Drops \$1.2 Billion.”

God, only to be rejected for the unforgivable sin of divorce; by women who are called and gifted by God for pastoral ministry, only to be silenced or driven out because of gender. Aridity and fruitlessness are found in the consumeristic objectification of prayer, as if prayer were something that should be “tried” because it “works.”

In the midst of this desert we find ourselves face-to-face with our attachments, with the pantheon of religious idols, large and small, that have supplanted the God we claim to worship.

Loss of Desire

And so, here in the spiritual desert, in the night of increasing aridity, God’s people search through all the familiar patterns, activities, choices, and ways, all the old options that used to provide a sense of religious stability, of spiritual meaning. We think about all the ways we worked to get people to join the church and realize that often what we really wanted was enough money in the offering to pay the utility bills. We sift through the labels we have used to define our own and others’ religious identity: liberal, conservative, fundamentalist, saved, unchurched, Spirit-filled, carnal, Pentecostal, Bible-believing, middle of the road, orthodox. “Is *this* what it means to be the church?” we ask ourselves.

Redoubling our efforts we buy an old school bus to start a Sunday school bus program but can’t find children for the bus; we hold bake sales and chicken dinners to raise money to pay for a new church bell tower but the new tower doesn’t attract new people; we hold revivals and have special musical events but only a handful of “faithfuls” come; we chastise people from the pulpit for their busyness and their absence, their unwillingness to tithe, and their children’s soccer games on Sundays; we wonder why, when those children graduate from high school, they graduate from church, and we blame the secular world for this failure. Whatever happened to the days when all the Sunday school classes were filled and the parking lot overflowed?

We look around, stunned and grief-stricken at our own impotence. It is as if all the familiar religious furniture was packed into a great moving van and carried to a far country, but none of it fits

in the new house, and the old house has been torn down and we are now foreigners living in a world we do not know. After a while we sit down, exhausted from all our efforts, and think about calling it quits. We keep asking ourselves why nothing works anymore. We lose the desire to try.

The unutterable weariness initiates for some people, both clergy and lay, a disillusioned exodus from the church. They simply walk away. Some do leave for greener pastures, hoping the church with the Anglican liturgy, or the church with the praise band, or the church with a better children's program will fill the longing. For others this giving up of what used to be is the beginning of a long bitterness, a grim campaign to remain in the church but resist all things new, all ideas, dreams, and plans for revitalization, all talk of change. For some weary pilgrims hope still flickers, however dimly, calling forth yearning for love and community, for spiritual life. The way to get there is a mystery hidden in the obscurity of loss. What is not obscure at this time, what is perfectly clear to these weary but hopeful pilgrims, is that most of the elements of church that used to seem essential were nothing more than fingers pointing to the moon. What a church needed to be a church and to be evangelistic, it seemed, were the organ, the stained-glass windows, the praise choruses, the new carpet, wafers and little cups instead of intinction for communion, the altar rail, the bulletin, the donor plaques fastened to every piece of furniture in the building, the women's missionary society, the handbell choir, the committees, the youth lock-ins, the mother-daughter banquets, the stoles and vestments, and the projector and screen.

They were fingers that somehow became the moon.

This is the second sign of the night: the flailing, the striving, and the eventual loss of desire for what used to bring satisfaction; the relinquishment of the old furniture along with the old house and the old country. In the night, this detachment is bound to the third sign, which is the unremitting longing for the presence of God in the midst of so much loss. The emptying of the night prepares a readiness for the God who is beyond all our systems and forms and institutions, whose presence calls into question everything we thought about church.

A Holy Longing

The reassessment of all that we have known as church, as God-with-us-the-community-of-faith, is precisely where we find ourselves today. Throughout and beyond our denominations Christians are yearning for a simpler, unfettered relationship with God in community, for a new day for the church.

It is a holy longing, this yearning in the night. It leads to the freedom necessary for illumination. And so the church in America is in transition, with Christendom fading into memory and the religious accretions of the world, the flesh, and the devil, increasingly apparent for what they are. We are in a time of chaos and confusion, an ecclesiastical *tohu wabohu*²⁸ over which the Spirit of God broods and speaks. We are ready for a different way to think about our vocation as the church. It is time for us to discover a contemplative vision for evangelism.

28. *Tohu wabohu* is the richly nuanced phrase of Genesis 1:2, in which the raw material of creation is chaos and confusion, over which the Spirit of God hovers to bring forth ordered life.