

Christian Mysticism

The idea that the leading of God can be known through subjective experience

By Dave DeWitt

Thesis: The Bible does not endorse mysticism as a basis for decision making. Mysticism, “The belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience” (Merriam-Webster) is part of every world religion and cult. It is a part of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity [See Appendix A]. But there is absolutely no mysticism whatsoever prescribed for, sanctioned for, or practiced by any of the people, led by God, in the Bible. Christian mysticism, thinking “God told me, called me, spoke to me or led me,” disavows personal responsibility and terminates spiritual accountability. Critical thinking, and personal responsibility are given up when we look at life mystically. With mysticism, **faith becomes superstition** “a widely held but unjustified belief in supernatural causation leading to certain consequences of an action or event, or a practice based on such a belief” (New Oxford American Dictionary). Therefore, mysticism should not ever be part of the spiritual life of any Christian. The Christianity of the Bible is uniquely non-mystical.

Subjective Superstition Is Not Revelation

Although there are some, I have never had anyone tell me God told them something in verbal sentences. Most are quick to qualify their direction from God as not having been in the form of an audible voice speaking to them or in written words. They will tell you that their divine leading is consistent with the Bible, did not violate anything in the Bible and biblical things happened because of it. For example, they were led to someone who received Christ, needed help, wanted an answer to a crucial question or something else good happened. They then often find a Bible verse that seems to affirm their mystically obtained directive from God. But the calling, direction, or leading was not an application of Bible study. It was “attained through subjective experience,” an “unjustified belief in supernatural causation leading to certain consequences of an action or event” – superstition. These experiential leadings then tend to dominate their spiritual life.

The sources mystical Christians refer to, for determining the personal leading, calling or direction from God, are subjective circumstances, usually from one of three sources:

- Feelings (inklings, notions, impressions, or glimmers)
- Coincidences (events, or occurrences, “divine appointments”)
- Friends (suggestions from other “believers”)

But we need to understand something when pursuing this line of thinking.

**Nobody in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation,
ever received personal direction from God that way.
Nobody!**

The Bible tells us about a narrow band of people, like Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, the Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and the New Testament apostles, who received direct revelation from God. That’s what the Bible is—a record of God’s revelation. But we are not Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, the apostles or prophets. Also, when they were led by God, it was a clear directive from God. For example, when *Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil* (Matthew 4:1), we do not know exactly how the Spirit did that. But it was not some vague circumstantial puzzle Jesus had to figure out through circumstances, feelings, or advice from friends.

Couldn’t God Do That?

If Christian mystics coincidentally run into someone at an airport, they might consider it a leading from God. Or if several friends mention something, then they hear some preacher on the radio say something

similar, it might be considered a clue from God. They do not just mean everything is in the sovereign plan of God. They mean God specifically set this up for some reason, and they are supposed to figure it out.

“But couldn’t God do that?” Of course, God could do that. But what God could do is irrelevant to the discussion of mysticism. The question is “Did He do that?” and “How do you know that?” Here is what we do know. God never, ever, revealed His will, led, called, or communicated with anybody that way in the Bible. If God never did it then, upon what basis do we assume He is doing it now?

Humans are superstitious people. We knock on wood, wear our lucky shirt to the ball game and carry lucky charms. We believe things happen in groups of three. We believe black cats, stepping on sidewalk cracks and walking under ladders lead to bad luck. **Stop it!** That’s just a bunch of silly nonsense! If superstitions are true, then what causes them? God? If God causes my team to win if I wear my lucky shirt, then I can maneuver God to do what I want by simply wearing my lucky shirt. That means I’m in charge of God. But most Christians would probably not think they could maneuver God into making their team win if they wear their lucky shirt. Then what does cause it? Fate? Some unknown mystical force? Is this mystical force separate from God? Well, if so, then God has competition. So, if I believe in mysticism, then either I have power over God, or something else does.

“I Think God Led Me” Is Different from “God Led Me”

If you want to say, “I **believe** God led me or called me, or I **think** God led me or called me,” I have no problem with that. Because then you are just talking about yourself. But if you say, “God led me,” or “God told me,” or “God called me,” or “it was a divine appointment,” then you are talking about God. You are speaking like a prophet.

We all believe we can see God’s hand in our lives in the past. And we certainly know God is sovereign and God is involved. Everything is predestined by God. I can tell you God is involved in my life and I can tell you exactly what God’s involvement was in my life—yesterday. It’s whatever happened yesterday. But that’s quite different from saying we know what He is now doing, or what He is calling or leading me to do. If you say, “God led me,” or “God told me,” meaning He told me what to do, then you are talking about a knowledge of God outside the Scripture. And I don’t think you know what God is doing, outside of what He has revealed in the Scripture. I don’t think you know God’s personal agenda.

God criticized Job for Thinking He Could Know What God Was Doing In His Life

There is a biblical example of someone who tried to use his circumstances to figure out what God was doing. Job was suffering because of a confrontation between God and Satan (Job 1 and 2). It even involved the death of Job’s children. Job’s friends thought they had it all figured out. For example,

- **Job 8:1, 4** *Bildad the Shuhite answered... “If your sons sinned against Him, then He delivered them into the power of their transgression.”*
- **Job 11:1, 5** *Zophar the Naamathite answered... “But would that God might speak, and open His lips against you”*
- **Job 15:1, 6** *Eliphaz the Temanite responded... “Your own mouth condemns you, and not I; and your own lips testify against you”*

Job’s friends all concluded that they knew what God was doing. They all said Job was suffering because of some sin for which God was punishing him. They went on for days, trying to get Job to believe that. Job agreed in principle, but he was also trying to understand what he had done to deserve this suffering from God. The one thing Job agreed with his friends about was that a person should be able to figure out what God is doing in his life from his circumstances. So, Job wanted an explanation from God.

- **Job 38:1-4** *Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now gird up your loins like a man, and I will ask you, and you instruct Me! Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”*

God went on to give Job a science quiz, asking him if he knew what God had done. But Job did not know any of the answers. Then:

- **Job 42:7** *It came about after the LORD had spoken these words to Job, that the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite, “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends, because you have not spoken of Me what is right...”*

The theme of the book of Job is that we cannot figure out what God is doing from our feelings, or circumstances, or the advice of our friends, and what God is doing in our lives, is none of our business.

God Is Involved In Our Lives

The Bible describes an involved God. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, God is working in your life. The Holy Spirit leads us and guides us. Here are four examples:

1. The Holy Spirit gives us an assurance of our salvation and future glorification. *The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are children of God* (Romans 8:16-17). [He is] *the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you* (John 14:17).
2. The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin (John 16:8). We are being *led by the Spirit of God*, not when we receive mystical messages, but when we are *putting to death the deeds of the flesh* (Romans 8:13-14). *For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction* (1 Thessalonians 1:5). *But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh* (Galatians 5:16, 24).
3. The Holy Spirit helps us understand that the Bible is true ...*a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised* (1 Corinthians 2:14). *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work* (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Believing the truth of the Bible is a work of the indwelling Holy Spirit (John 16:13-14; 2 Peter 1:19-21; 1 Corinthians 2:12-13).
4. The Holy Spirit gives us spiritual wisdom that allows us to see through the world’s lies (2 Corinthians 4:4). For example, the world believes in evolution with zero evidence. But spiritual wisdom says that’s contrary to God creating all things from nothing. *Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away* (1 Corinthians 2:6).

These are the kinds of things God is doing in our lives experientially. He assures us of our salvation, convicts us of sin, helps us to understand and apply the Bible, and gives us spiritual wisdom.

What About Hearing “A Still Small Voice” of God?

The basic problem with the idea that God communicated with “a still small voice” is that it never happened. Nothing in Scripture ever records anyone ever hearing a “still small voice” nor even a “small voice” of God (NASB search). Apparently, some preacher made up that phrase, used it as a metaphor of mystical revelation, and others kept using it. But neither that phrase, nor the mystical revelation idea, exist in the Bible. The passage being used is when Elijah was hiding from Jezebel in a cave near *Horeb, the mountain of God*. We read:

1 Kings 19:12-13 *After the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him [KJV, there came a voice unto him] and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

The Bible does not say there was "a still small voice." But, more importantly, observe what it does say. There **was** a voice. It was not a feeling, or a coincidental set of circumstances that Elijah was to use as clues to figure out the call of God. This was a distinct audible voice from God, giving a message to Elijah in complete, rational, sentences.

Can We Know What God Is Doing Today?

There are two things we know God is doing today.

1. Christ is building His church (Matthew 16:18).
2. God is conforming us [His church] to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).

But notice, those are things **He** is doing, they are not things He is asking us to do. We have no specific knowledge of exactly how He is doing that. The Bible doesn't tell us, so we would have to know more than the Bible knows.

David knew two things God was doing in his day. (1) God was establishing Israel as a nation and (2) God had already anointed David as king when he was a boy. On two different occasions, 1 Samuel 24 and 1 Samuel 26, David's friends looked at their circumstances and determined God was leading David to kill Saul as a means of accomplishing God's purpose for David.

The men of David said to him, "Behold, this is the day of which the LORD said to you, 'Behold; I am about to give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it seems good to you'" (1 Samuel 24:4).

But David refused to kill Saul, God's anointed king, because he looked at what God was doing through God's revelation (Psalm 119:97-105), not through his circumstances, nor through the urging of his friends, even though David knew God was sovereign over the circumstances (Psalm 139).

Conclusion

Mysticism, the idea that God told me, called me, led me, or spoke to me, reduces faith to superstition "a widely held but unjustified belief in supernatural causation leading to certain consequences of an action or event" (New Oxford American Dictionary). Biblically, faith is trusting reasonable evidence. Superstition is a perversion of faith held by all of the world's religions and cults. God gave us real, verbal, audible and written revelation through His prophets with *many convincing proofs* (Acts 1:3). Then He asked us to trust that revelation. He did not ask us to go looking for an ongoing personal "unjustified belief in supernatural causation leading to certain consequences of an action or event."

- Could God do that today? Of course, He could. But He never did that in Scripture, and to claim God is doing something different today, and we know specifically what that is, seems unlikely.
- Do we think God has worked personally in our lives? Of course, we do. But that's about ourselves, what we think, not a pronouncement of what God is doing.
- Does God work in our lives? Of course, He does. He assures us of our salvation, convicts us of sin, helps us apply the Bible, and gives us spiritual wisdom. But there is nothing in Scripture that says He works in mystical ways to be determined through superstition.

For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel (Ezra 7:10).

Appendix A

Definitions of Mysticism

mysticism | 'mɪstəˌsɪzəm | noun

“1 belief that union with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute, or the spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect, may be attained through contemplation and self-surrender.

2 belief characterized by self-delusion or dreamy confusion of thought, especially when based on the assumption of occult qualities or mysterious agencies” [New Oxford American Dictionary].

“The belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience (such as intuition or insight)” [Merriam-Webster Dictionary].

“Broadly defined, mysticism can be found in all religious traditions, from indigenous religions and folk religions like shamanism, to organized religions like the Abrahamic faiths and Indian religions, and modern spirituality, New Age and New Religious Movements” [Wikipedia].

“**In Islam** it [mysticism] is Sufism which includes: “the experience of ecstatic states (*hal*), purification of the heart (*qalb*), overcoming the lower self (*nafs*), extinction of the individual personality (*fana*), communion with God (*haqiqah*), and higher knowledge (*marifat*).” [Wikipedia]

“**In Hinduism**, various sadhanas (spiritual exercises or practices) aim at overcoming ignorance (*avidhya*) and transcending the limited identification with body, mind and ego to attain moksha (freedom from the cycles of reincarnation).” [Wikipedia]

“**Buddhism** is mystical in the sense that it aims at the identification of the true nature of our self, and live according to it.” [Wikipedia]

Judaism has many forms of mysticism. “The most well-known” is called Kabbalah which “means ‘received tradition,’ a term previously used in other Judaic contexts, but which the Medieval Kabbalists adopted for their own doctrine to express the belief that they were not innovating, but merely revealing the ancient hidden esoteric tradition of the Torah.” [Wikipedia]

Appendix B

The Sign To Jonathan in 1 Samuel 14:9-10

Some say the sign of the Lord to Jonathan in 1 Samuel 14 is a circumstantial leading of God. The passage reads as follows:

1 Samuel 14:9-10 *“If they say to us, ‘Wait until we come to you’; then we will stand in our place and not go up to them. But if they say, ‘Come up to us,’ then we will go up, for the LORD has given them into our hands; and this shall be the sign to us.”*

Elsewhere in the Bible, the claim *the LORD has given* is not a claim of personal direction from God, but thankfulness for the gifts of God. The phrase ***the LORD has given*** is used 26 times in the Old Testament. It’s an acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God, not a reference to the personal leading of God.

- David said, “***for the LORD has given me many sons***” (1 Chronicles 28:5).
- Gideon said, “***when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand***” (Judges 8:7).
- Moses said, “[*manna*] ***is the bread the LORD has given you to eat***” (Exodus 16:15).

Even if we assume Jonathan’s claim is for the direction of God, it’s just Jonathan’s idea, not something God initiated. Except for His sovereignty (God directing things according to His sovereign plan for everything), we have no indication that God gave any direction for this battle at all.

Appendix C

The Answered Prayer of Abraham's Servant – Genesis 24:12-18

This was an answer to a prayer for Abraham's servant who was on a mission to get a bride for Isaac, who will become the mother of Jacob, who's 12 sons are the 12 tribes of Israel. This was not just any believer looking for personal direction from God. The servant of Abraham knew this was a leading of God because Abraham had told him

“The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and who swore to me, saying, ‘To your descendants I will give this land,’ He will send His angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there” (Genesis 24:7).

It was not a coincidental message through circumstances that Abraham's servant was to figure out. A coincidence is “a remarkable concurrence of events or circumstances without apparent causal connection” (New Oxford American Dictionary). These events were a specific fulfillment of the verbal prophetic statement of Abraham that God will *send His angel before you*. So, unless we assume Abraham was wrong, this was part of a verbal revelation from God.