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# **GOD TOLD ME!**

## **A CRITIQUE OF CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM**

by

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SECTION ONE  
"GOD TOLD ME!"

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A number of years ago a man emailed me, asking me to comment on a visionary event that he had undergone ten years earlier. He said that while driving late at night on a deserted rural highway, he was blinded by a bright light and received a strong inner impression that he interpreted as a divine communication. I declined to exegete his experience, pointing out that there was no way that I could be certain that his experience had happened the way he described it—or that it had happened at all. And whatever occurred that night, I urged him to turn to his Bible for spiritual wisdom and direction, rather than continue to cling to the fading memory of a decade-old experience. Predictably, he was offended that I would not simply believe and submit to the authority of his visionary experience. For him, "God told me," or "I saw a light," was reason enough for all other Christians to defer to his spiritual authority. In a word, that man was a *mystic*.

In fact, many Christians are mystics, even though they are not aware of it.

What is a mystic? A mystic is not necessarily a starry-eyed man or woman who sports flowing robes, lights candles, and chants spooky mantras. In fact, mystics are often ordinary-looking Christians who, *rather than run their lives by the Bible, find their spiritual authority in experiences, feelings, inner impressions, voices, dreams, or visions that they consider to be divine messages*. A mystic is any person who claims to possess a private pipeline of communication from God that cannot be tested or validated by anyone else.

A mystical Christian believes (or simply hopes and pretends) that his inner impressions are divine promptings. However, verification is an obstinate, lingering problem. When someone says, "God told me ... I heard God say ... I got a word from the Lord ... I saw a light ...", there is no way to confirm that his experience was actually a divine revelation—except by consulting another mystic to see if he also believes the message was from God. Unfortunately, two mystical experiences do not add up to one confirmed truth. Nonetheless, in spite of that yawning credibility gap, mystics persist in believing that their feelings and experiences are divine oracles—authoritative both for themselves and, if they are bold enough, for other people as well. And all too often, a mystic's feelings, prophecies, and dreams eventually begin to supplant the Bible as his practical authority when it comes to shaping his theological beliefs, moral standards, worship practices, and daily decisions.

That is a *very* dangerous situation.

If a Christian's inner impressions are genuinely divine promptings, they cannot be less than authoritative. But that's the rub. How can a man know (for example) that his lingering

impression that he should to move to Durban and start a business is actually a *divine* prompting? Maybe it is from God; maybe it is just his own idea. His dilemma is simple: "Is my pipeline from God trustworthy?" While everyone agrees that the Holy Spirit prompts believers from time to time, how can he be sure that what he feels *at that moment* is a divine email? Just how strongly does he have to feel an impression to be able to confidently say, "*This one* is from God!"?

And depending on the strength of his impression, does a warm glow in his upper left abdomen give him grounds to downplay or ignore biblical revelation? For example, 1 Corinthians 7:39 indicates that Christians should marry only other Christians. Can a professing believer marry an unbeliever because God "told him" it was acceptable in his case? Must his church leaders simply believe and submit to that prospective bridegroom's private revelation? Are they helpless before his assertion that God "said" it was okay?

The chaos worsens. Let's say that you have a Christian friend who claims that God "told him" to start his own business. Based on more objective criteria, you are convinced that he has neither the skill nor the financial resources to do so. But how dare you advise him to ignore a *divine* directive? Moreover, what if God told him that you are going to invest your life savings in his flawed business venture? If *God* told him, how can you decline? The deeper we probe, the more alarming Christian mysticism becomes, and the more the potential for manipulation, deceit, and disaster is exposed. That is because what is at stake in the situations that I have described is nothing less than *a Christian vs. a non-Christian view of spiritual authority*.

## SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

Some years ago, the famous Welsh preacher, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, wrote: "If I understand the modern religious situation at all, this whole question of authority is one of the most important problems confronting us."<sup>1</sup> It would be hard to disagree with him. Regarding Christian mystics, Lloyd-Jones said:

*Their own authority, [mystics] tell us is not the Scriptures, but the Lord Himself. Now, this sounds very impressive and very imposing at first .... It sounds as if it were a highly spiritual position until ... you begin to examine it carefully. The obvious questions to put to those who make such statements are these: 'How do you know the Lord? What do you know about the Lord, apart from the Scriptures? Where do you find Him? How do you know that what you seem to have experienced concerning*

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<sup>1</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Authority*, 7.

*Him is not a figment of your own imagination, or not the product of some abnormal psychological state, or not the work perchance of some occult power or evil spirit?*<sup>2</sup>

Christian mystics don't like to be asked those questions. In fact, if you try to disagree with such a person, you quickly discover that it is impossible to reason with a convinced mystic. You strive to direct his attention to the Bible; he responds with a catalogue of secret experiences and invisible divine promptings. Eventually you realise that his authority (experience) and your authority (Scripture) are so divergent that meaningful communication on spiritual matters is virtually impossible. Is the mystic's approach to authority God's design? It isn't.

#### THE CONFESSIONS OF A CHRISTIAN MYSTIC

Contrary to what many Christians believe, ascribing spiritual authority to private messages and mystical experiences is both dangerous and unbiblical. In fact, it causes believers in Jesus Christ to live in a fear-dominated spiritual environment. First, *mystical Christians live in fear of making decisions*. Mystically minded Christians fret and worry; they twist and turn on a torture rack of anguish when they need to make a decision. Why? They have come to believe that they cannot make significant life choices unless they receive a secret message informing them of God's will for that matter.<sup>3</sup>

Some years ago a young lady who attended our biblical counselling course said to me, "When you taught us about decision-making and debunked all the mystical approaches that I had always employed, I was very angry at you. However, over time, I began to realise how comforting the biblical approach to decision-making is. As a mystical decision-maker, my life was dominated by fear. When I faced a decision, I was petrified. I was terrified to do anything without a message from God, without an inner prompting or a dramatic coincidence that I could interpret as divine guidance. And, when I experienced a strong impression or when a dramatic coincidence occurred, I was no less apprehensive, because I couldn't be sure if those things actually were divine messages. And if I convinced myself that they were private communication from God, I couldn't be sure if I was interpreting them as God intended. When I finally left all that behind and turned to God's Word and began using sensible, biblical, Proverbs-based wisdom to make decisions, all my paralysing fears disappeared."

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>3</sup> My booklet, *Biblical Decision-Making*, provides both a biblical critique and a biblical replacement of mystical approaches to decision-making. You can download it for free at [www.gracefellowship.co.za](http://www.gracefellowship.co.za).

If you are a person who regularly waits for God to "tell you" what to do before you make a decision, you know exactly how she felt. When it comes to decision-making, mystical Christians are dominated by fear.

It is also true that mystical Christians *live in fear of other people's divine messages*. When a man approaches a nineteen-year-old Christian girl and announces, "God told me that we are supposed to get married," what is she to do? If that man actually received a message from God, it would be disobedient and rebellious for her to ignore it. But how can she know? The source of his impression—and thus its authority—is untestable. Should she put the next sixty years of her life in his hands based on his unverifiable claim to have received a divine oracle? By the way, girls, if a man ever has the audacity to say that to you, I suggest that you respond this way: "God might have told *you*, but He didn't tell *me*. But maybe he told my dad. And he is right over there, so why don't you go and ask him?"

If you have been in the Charismatic Movement, undoubtedly you have occasionally been subjected to a "word" from a fellow congregation member that you were not convinced was actually a message from God. But dare you ignore his prophecy? If his inner impressions are divine messages, you can't submit to his prophetic announcements only when they appeal to you. You intuitively understand that if you accept his prophecies only when the matter is inconsequential, but ignore them when something significant like marriage, changing jobs, or buying a house is on the line, then the whole notion of modern prophecy is exposed as a farce—a child's game to be abandoned the moment an adult decision needs to be made. Because of your Charismatic background, you might be hesitant to call the entire modern prophecy movement into question. Nonetheless, dare you grant that friend or fellow congregation member authority over your life based on his secret divine message? Christians in the prophecy movement live in fear of other people's prophetic words—and if they don't, they should.

And that fear only skyrockets when the person bearing a divine message or heavenly "anointing" is a church leader.

#### A FEAR OF VISIONARY LEADERS

Mystical Christians also *live in fear of visionary leaders*. For people in the Prosperity Movement, the fear of a visionary leader is usually *the* operative power in their lives. They live in the shadow of some captivating, magnetic, compelling personality, some "transcendent soul," who claims to possess an exclusive connection to God. To the outside observer, the Prosperity preacher's power is nothing more than mystical posturing and spiritual bullying. But to the person he dominates, the preacher's prophetic words are divine law.

Moreover, all Prosperity preachers claim to be "anointed"—a divine stamp of approval that confers a virtually unassailable authority status: "Do not touch the Lord's anointed!" they bluster (absurdly misapplying Psalm 105:15). But has the preacher actually received a special commission from God? How can you test an invisible, self-proclaimed anointing? In fact, all that you, the spiritual peasant and commoner, can do is believe and submit—even if the preacher says, "Give me your money and your daughters," as most false teachers eventually do. Mystical churches are dangerous places for sheep. Those churches are often led by wolves—unscrupulous, domineering men and women who maintain a powerful sway over their terrified congregants by claiming to have received special approval and secret powers from God.

#### FERTILE SOIL FOR FALSE TEACHERS

Mystical churches are fertile soil for false teachers. All the best-known cults were founded by self-proclaimed visionaries, such as Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, Smith Wigglesworth, and Kathryn Kuhlman, who claimed to possess a heavenly authority that excelled the Bible. Alleging to have received private revelations, they gave birth to heretical sects that are typified by sensuality, greed, and a disdain for biblical truth. A mystical environment is *the* ideal breeding ground for false teachers. Once personal visions and inner promptings become authoritative, anything goes. Once the guardrails of biblical authority are torn down, mystics can—theologically and morally speaking—drive in the ditches and fields on either side of the road. Since nothing can be checked against Scripture, there are no restraints. A church where the Bible is consistently supplanted by "fresh words" from God is a church where biblical doctrine and practice will eventually become a speck in the rearview mirror. The prophet Jeremiah cautioned God's people about this more than two thousand years ago: "You will no longer remember the oracle of the LORD, because every man's own word will become the oracle ..." (Jer 23:36).

Mystical Christianity is a fearful place to live. In fact, it is a place to be rescued from. That's because it is unbiblical. The faith taught by Christ and the apostles in the New Testament is not a mystical religion. In fact, the New Testament authors rebuked and rejected mysticism at every opportunity. They consistently downplayed visionary experiences—even their own—ascribing no authority to them. Instead, they persistently elevated the written Word of God as a Christian's enduring authority in every sphere. Let's discover that reality together in the next section.

#### SECTION TWO MYSTICISM VS. BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

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One of the most important passages in the Bible regarding mysticism is found in an often-overlooked text at the end of 1 Corinthians 14. At the end of that chapter, Paul was wrapping up an extended rebuke of the Corinthians' self-focused use of spiritual gifts and of their disorderly worship services. To correct their shameful behaviour, Paul laid down a series of rules to restrain them.<sup>4</sup> However, based on his experience with that church, Paul knew that his instruction would not be happily received by some of its members. Therefore, as he concluded, Paul addressed the matter of spiritual authority:

*Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. (1 Corinthians 14:36-38)*

Paul knew that the self-anointed "spiritual people" in the Corinthian church would claim to have received revelations from God that contradicted Paul's instructions. They would claim to possess an inner light or a prophetic word that was more authoritative than Paul's apostolic commands. Alleging to be led by the Holy Spirit, they would consider themselves to be above apostolic regulations and directives. Paul told those self-appointed spiritual authorities that their secret messages carried absolutely no clout in the church of Jesus Christ. Mystics, Paul said, are not recognised. They have no authority.

### THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF MYSTICS

In his rebuke of the Corinthian mystics, Paul identified *three characteristics* of mystical thinking. First, Christian mystics wrongly imagine themselves *to be the source of truth*, both for themselves and perhaps for other people as well. Paul humbled such people with a simple question: "Was it from you that the word of God first went forth?" (14:36a). Apparently the spiritual people in the Corinthian church thought that they were the source of truth. They preferred a privatised version of Christianity to the faith taught by Jesus and the apostles. "God told *me* ..." was their mantra. It is typical of mystical Christians that they do not hesitate to reshape Christian doctrine, morality, and worship practices to match their "divine" impressions and promptings.

To correct that wrong practice, Paul pointed out a chastening reality: the Christian message had not originated with the Corinthians. Rather, it began with Jesus and the apostles and was spread by the diligent and sacrificial labours of missionaries sent out by the churches of Jerusalem and Antioch. In fact, the Corinthians had no gospel message until Paul brought

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<sup>4</sup> If you have questions about the teaching of 1 Corinthians 14 on miraculous sign gifts and prophecy, let me recommend my booklets, *Questions and Answers About Healing Tongues And Prophecy* and *Testing Today's Prophecy*, both of which are available for free download at [www.gracefellowship.co.za](http://www.gracefellowship.co.za).



them the truth about Christ in Acts 18. Clearly the Corinthians were *not* the source of Christian doctrine and practice. They were subsequent. They had received the truth of Christianity from others. Naturally, then, they should have seen themselves as blessed submitters, not originators. They should have viewed themselves as recipients of the faith, not oracles. Mystics have trouble embracing that humility. Instead, they see themselves as the source of a personalised Christianity in which they determine their own doctrine, morals, and worship.

With his second rhetorical question in 1 Corinthians 14:36, Paul identified another characteristic of mystics: *they see themselves as the sole possessors of truth.*

*Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only?*  
(14:36)

Paul chided the Corinthian mystics for imagining that they possessed revelations regarding spiritual gifts and corporate worship that the rest of the church had not received. Were they—a church typified by gross immorality and outrageous conflict—a unique channel of divine authority on ecclesiastical matters? Clearly not.

Predictably, the third characteristic of mystics that Paul pinpointed was *pride*. Because mystics profess to have their own channel of instruction from God, they imagine themselves to be above all other spiritual authorities, including the Bible. If they have prayed and, in response, experienced a strong feeling or inner impression, then no other authority need be consulted. Paul did not concur.

*If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment.* (1 Corinthians 14:37)

Mystics say, "God speaks to me, so I get to make my own rules." How far can that mentality go? I once counselled a professing Christian who justified his adultery by claiming that God had given him "peace" about it. He knew perfectly well what the Bible says about adultery, but based on his inner impressions, he considered himself to be an exception to God's commands. In that tense counselling situation, I could with absolute confidence inform him that his sense of peace was *not* a message of approval from God. Why? In the church of Jesus Christ, spiritual authority is located in the written Scriptures, not in private messages supposedly from God.

Paul's statement, "Let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment" (1 Cor 14:37), confirms that Christian authority resides *in the Bible*. Therefore, no Christian gets to make up his or her own rules.

## THE THREE COMPONENTS OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

The apostle Paul rejected mystical experiences as a basis for spiritual authority. But what replaces inner impressions, prophecies, dreams, and visions? As Paul continued, he succinctly capsulised the New Testament's view of authority. Christian authority is *apostolic*, *written*, and demonstrably *from Christ*.

### 1) AUTHORITY IS APOSTOLIC

*The things which I write to you ... (1 Corinthians 14:37)*

What Paul wrote to the Corinthians was authoritative. To highlight that, consider it from this perspective: if a random member of the church of Antioch or the church of Jerusalem had written a letter to the Corinthian church, would that letter have been authoritative? No. Suggestive—perhaps even helpful—but not authoritative. In the New Testament church, authority is *apostolic*. Christ, the Lord of the church, transferred His authority to a specific group of men that He appointed to be His agents. In Greek, the word *apostolos* referred to one who had been sent as an officially appointed representative or proxy of another person. An *apostolos* had the power of attorney to speak or act on behalf of that person.<sup>5</sup> Because the apostles were sent by Christ, the Head of the church, they possessed a unique, delegated authority. Jude made that clear when he urged believers to keep the teaching of the apostles at the forefront of their minds.

*But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ ... (Jude 1:17)*

Spiritual authority resides in the teaching of the apostles, the group of men personally chosen and commissioned by the Lord (John 15:16). However, governing jurisdiction in the church might quickly degenerate into an ecclesiastical free-for-all once they died. How could that ugly situation be avoided? Moreover, how would subsequent generations know what Jesus and the apostles actually taught? Would they be dependent on word of mouth? Would God employ perpetual private revelations so that His people could know the mind and teaching of Christ?

### 2) AUTHORITY IS WRITTEN

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<sup>5</sup> The term *apostle* or *sent one* is also used in the New Testament in the same way that we would use the word *missionary* today, that is of someone "sent" by a local church to evangelise and plant other churches. That is why Barnabas, Andronicus, and Junias were called "sent ones" or "apostles," even though they were not numbered among the Twelve (Acts 14:4; Rom 16:7). They were, if you will, apostles with a small *a* rather than a capital *A*.

By necessity, spiritual authority in the church of Jesus Christ is not merely apostolic; it is also *written*: "The things which I *write to you* are the Lord's commandment" (1 Cor 14:37, emphasis added). The self-professed prophets in Corinth were eager to anoint their inner impressions as authoritative, but placing a strong hand on their collective shoulder, Paul firmly turned them away from mysticism and back to the written Word of God.

#### WHY WRITTEN?

The reasons that spiritual authority must be codified in a written document are self-evident. First, *written authority endures*. Have you ever reflected on the fact that what you and I read today in 1 Corinthians is (in translation) exactly what Paul wrote to the Corinthian church two thousand years ago? That's amazing! God planned it that way. Despite the passing of time, because it is written, the Bible does not change. In contrast, the doctrines, morals, and practices of mystical Christians change frequently—even haphazardly—in response to convenience or whim. In a mystically minded church, if the leaders want to do something innovative in regard to theology, ethics, or worship, they simply seek a "fresh word." The changeableness of that kind of (un)spiritual authority means that God's people are often abused and manipulated. God's plan is different. That is why He gave us the Bible, a document that endures, that never changes.

A second reason authority needs to be written is *a written document is available to everyone*. In contrast to the visions and inner promptings of mystics, anyone can access the Scripture and test someone's interpretation of it, just as the noble-minded Bereans did with the apostle Paul's teaching in Acts 17:11. In contrast, when spiritual leaders appeal to secret promptings or to private revelations, there is no way to test or validate their claims. Did they actually receive a message? Was it from God? Did they interpret it correctly? If they received it months or years ago, do they remember it correctly? Mystical approaches to spiritual authority resemble a mountain road without guardrails: danger lurks around every curve. God does not intend that His people be governed in such a perilous manner.

Because the Bible is a public document, when a negligent preacher handles a text irresponsibly or when an unscrupulous false teacher intentionally mishandles a passage, both the well-intentioned error and the crafty exegetical trick can be easily exposed. Written authority also safeguards churches against weak, self-serving leaders whose rules are based merely on external pressure or personal expediency. This is precisely why virtually all civilised countries have a written constitution. Authority that is embodied in a man or that resides only in a society's collective memory is too easily abused. In contrast, a written document can be checked to guarantee that the leaders are interpreting it correctly and applying it prudently.

### 3) AUTHORITY IS FROM CHRIST

Besides being apostolic and written, spiritual authority is also *from Christ in a provable, demonstrable fashion*: "The things which I write to you are *the Lord's commandment*" (1 Cor 14:37, emphasis added). Paul was claiming nothing less than to possess Christ's own authority. How could he make such an outrageous assertion? Paul could say that because, as an apostle, he had been chosen and commissioned as an official proxy of the Lord to lay the foundation of the church (Eph 2:20).

In other words, for an apostle's claims to be credible, his authority had to be *demonstrably* from Christ. For the Twelve, that was no problem. Their selection and commission by Jesus was a matter of public, verifiable record. Paul was the problem child. Paul had neither accompanied Jesus during His earthly ministry nor seen Jesus during the forty days between His resurrection and ascension. Paul openly acknowledged that, when it came to being an apostle, he was "one untimely born" (1 Cor 15:8). Because Paul lacked a historical link to Jesus, his apostleship had to be confirmed by those who did possess that link, the Twelve. Without their affirmation, the church would have rightly viewed Paul as just another crazy mystic claiming to be sent by God. To circumvent that, the Lord ordered Paul to go to Jerusalem to submit both his calling and his gospel to the Twelve for their approval (Gal 2:1-9). In Galatians 2:2, Paul wrote: "It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles ..." When Paul presented himself to them, they confirmed that both his commission and gospel were from Christ.

*Seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. (Galatians 2:7-9)*

The Twelve's public affirmation of Paul assured churches like the church of Corinth that what Paul wrote was indeed "the Lord's commandment" (1 Cor 14:37).

### MYSTICS HAVE NO AUTHORITY

Based on Paul's instruction to the Corinthians, how should you respond when someone, even a respected leader, claims to receive private messages and visionary experiences from God? Should that mystic's inner light, heavenly voice, prophetic visions, or frequent dreams be considered authoritative? Here is Paul's answer:

*If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. (1 Corinthians 14:37-38)*

A man (or woman) who appeals to private revelations rather than to the written Scriptures has *no* authority in the church of Jesus Christ. Paul's dismissive summary was, "He is not recognised." He is to be disregarded completely. He has no authority at all. How far we have strayed from God's plan for spiritual authority!

But is this sweeping rejection of mysticism merely a theologically convenient view that I have managed to squeeze out of three obscure New Testament verses? Is this truly God's view of spiritual authority? In fact, the whole Bible exemplifies what Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 14.

### SECTION 3 THE BIBLE'S VIEW OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

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When Paul urged the Corinthian mystics to submit to the authority of the written Word of God, he was not doing something novel or extraordinary. In fact, God followed the same pattern with the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. After Israel arrived at Mt. Sinai, they had a profound divine experience: God descended on the mountain and spoke the Ten Commandments in an audible divine voice. Moses recalled that powerful moment with this summary: "You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the very heart of the heavens: darkness, cloud and thick gloom. Then the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire ..." (Deut 4:11-12). As compelling as it had been to hear God speak out loud, Israel was not supposed to cling to the fading memory of that experience as their authority. In fact, God wrote down what He said, so that they would possess an immutable written record of His commands: "He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments; and *He wrote them on two tablets of stone*" (Deut 4:13, emphasis added).

Enduring, verifiable authority requires a written document. Moreover, by commanding Moses to write down His law, God protected His revelation from spiritual swindlers who, in the future, might attempt to add to or to subtract from what God had said. Moses warned, "You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you" (Deut 4:2; cp. Rev 22:18-19). Written revelation endures. Written revelation is protected.

But how did the people of Israel know that Moses (and not someone else) was God's spokesman? Anyone can *claim* to have an authoritative message from God. How was

Moses' authority authenticated? You know the answer: through the host of miracles that Moses performed both before and during the Exodus (Ex 4:1-9, 29-31). God's miraculous affirmations of Moses bear no resemblance to the dubious, invisible, fraudulent, so-called miracles claimed by mystics today. Among other things, God confirmed Moses' authority by means of the Ten Plagues, a visible pillar of fire and cloud that led the people on a daily basis, crossing the Red Sea on dry land, and by providing water from a rock and manna from heaven. When God validates His spokesmen with miracles, His confirmation is public and unmistakable!

To prove that Moses was God's man, Yahweh also guaranteed that Moses' prophetic announcements were infallible. When Moses announced that water would flow from a granite outcropping, it did. When he said that God would supply bread from heaven or that He would bring a massive flock of quail to provide food, those things happened both when and how Moses said they would. In Numbers 16, Moses told Korah (the leader of a rebellious faction in Israel), "Tomorrow morning the LORD will show who is His" (16:5). Sure enough, the next morning Korah and his subversive friends were incinerated by fire; what's more, the earth opened up and swallowed their families alive. When God establishes a man as His spokesman, He makes sure that the lines of authority run back to Him in a demonstrable and unambiguous fashion (cp. 1 Samuel 3:19-20; Jeremiah 28:5-9, 15-17; Acts 4:14-16; 11:27-28; 27:23-25).

But what happened when Moses died? Did authority die with him? Did authority turn into a melee of private revelations and inner impressions? No. As God's spokesman, Moses left Israel the Pentateuch—a divinely inspired, fully verified, written document that was available for any Israelite or Gentile to study, interpret, and apply. It was never God's plan for spiritual authority to degrade into an endless succession of private revelations delivered by mystics who profess to shuttle back and forth between earth and heaven with "fresh words" from God:

*For this commandment which I command you today .... is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it. (Deut 30:11-13)*

Mystics claim to do exactly what God rejects: they allege to go to heaven on your behalf, functioning as a pipeline from the mind of God. God's plan for spiritual authority is very different: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law" (Deut 29:29). In Israel, the "things revealed" were the Law of Moses and eventually the rest of the Old

Testament. In short, God's written Word was the source of spiritual authority for God's people. But did that pattern continue in the New Testament?

#### A FLOW CHART OF NEW TESTAMENT AUTHORITY

In the New Testament, authority starts with God the Father and flows to God the Son, to God the Spirit, and then to the apostles. And the apostles, moved by the Spirit of God—and at times employing proxies like Luke and Mark—wrote the New Testament, an unchanging, written articulation of God's mind (2 Peter 1:21). As the last link in the chain, our task today is to receive and submit to God's written Word. That is the flow chart of God's New Testament lines of authority. Let's examine each "box" in that flow chart.

No one debates that authority starts with God the Father. He is, according to 1 Timothy 1:17, "the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God." Interestingly, although God the Son is equal to the Father in every way, Jesus, the God-man, repeatedly emphasized that He gladly submitted to His Father: "I can do nothing on My own initiative .... I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 5:30; see also John 7:16; 8:26, 28).

However, the Father delights to pass on His sovereign authority to His fully divine Son. For example, on the Mount of Transfiguration, the Father said of Jesus: "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; *listen to Him!*" (Matt 17:5, emphasis added). Believers are to listen to the Son just as attentively and just as obediently as they listen to the Father. Jesus said in Matthew 28:18, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." Given by whom? By the Father, of course. There can be no mistaking it: on God's flow chart, authority starts with the Father and flows to the Son.

After Jesus rose from the dead, He ascended to His Father's right hand to await the time of His return to earth. Until He comes back, where would objective, accessible authority reside? Anticipating that problem, Jesus transferred His authority to the apostles—the men He spent three years training. They would be God's spokesmen, speaking with His authority. Because of the monumental importance of that assignment, Jesus gave the apostles the following assurances in the Upper Room:

*These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. (John 14:25-26)*

The apostles could speak for Jesus because they met two requirements. First, they had accompanied Jesus throughout His earthly ministry; therefore, they were "ear-witnesses" of His teaching. However, what if their memories failed? What if, over time, they unintentionally garbled or distorted the truths that Jesus taught them? To circumvent that

danger—indeed, that certainty—Jesus made the second basis of their authority a promise of supernatural assistance. The Holy Spirit would guarantee their accuracy: "He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:26). As they founded the church over the next five decades, because of the Holy Spirit's help, the apostles could be sure that they would accurately remember everything Jesus said.

Serving as Jesus' authoritative proxies was such a significant task that Jesus explained it a second time that night. As you read Jesus' words in John 16, see if you can trace the lines of authority and revelation from the apostles, back through the Spirit, to the Son, and ultimately to the Father.

*But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you. (John 16:13-15)*

The lines of transmission are clear: what the Son receives from the Father, He will pass on to the Spirit, who will disclose it to the apostles. God loves clear lines of authority!

The apostle John, for one, fully grasped the importance of what Jesus said that night. In his first epistle, John explained how Christians can discern between false teachers and true. Speaking on behalf of all the apostles, John wrote:

*We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (1 John 4:6)*

John was simply applying the implications of what Jesus said in the Upper Room. Since Jesus had appointed the apostles to be His spokesmen, any purportedly Christian teachers who did not listen and submit to them were in error; they were not from God. In Paul's succinct summary: "They are not recognised."

But how would the diverse groups of people who heard the apostles' message know that these men—and no others—were Christ's "sent ones"? The authority Jesus delegated them was too sweeping and too foundational to be verified by private or mystical means. Therefore, in addition to Jesus' instruction in the seclusion of the Upper Room, God also *publicly* confirmed the authority of the apostles.

## THE THREE NON-MYSTICAL PROOFS OF THE APOSTLES' AUTHORITY

### 1. PERSONAL ASSOCIATION AND APPOINTMENT



The apostles' authority was validated *by their personal association with Christ and their personal appointment by Christ*. As noted earlier, it was a matter of public knowledge that the Twelve had been with Jesus throughout His ministry. They were, undeniably, Jesus' men. James, the Lord's half-brother, seems to have been added to their number as an apostle as well (Gal 1:19; 1 Cor 15:5-7). Biological or otherwise, their unique, personal association with Jesus of Nazareth was indisputable, as exemplified when Peter and John healed the lame man in the Temple, and the Jewish leaders "began to recognize them as having been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

In fact, when the apostles chose a man to fill the position forfeited by Judas, Peter identified personal association as a primary criterion for being an apostle:

*It is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection. (Acts 1:21-22)*

To be an apostle, one had to be an ear-witness of Jesus' teaching and an eye-witness of His resurrection. Furthermore, an apostle had to be appointed by Jesus or by His authoritative proxies, the Twelve (Acts 1:24).

#### WHAT ABOUT PAUL?

But what about that problem child, Saul of Tarsus? Paul, as we know him, had no historical connection with Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, by his own admission, Paul's commission as an apostle had been essentially a private event. Acts 22:9 says that the men accompanying Paul on the road to Damascus saw a heavenly light but did not understand the words that Jesus spoke. Paul's report of Jesus' commissioning charge was clear enough: "I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you" (Acts 26:16). However, only Paul understood what the Lord said. Because of that encounter, Paul had seen Jesus resurrected from the dead and had been personally appointed by Christ. He also became an ear-witness of Jesus' teaching by means of direct revelation: "For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11-12).

But all that left Paul depending on the suspect authority of an unproven and unprovable private commission from Christ. Therefore, as we saw earlier, the Lord commanded Paul to go to Jerusalem to have his gospel and his apostolic ministry publicly affirmed by the Twelve.

That step was absolutely essential because authority in the church of Jesus Christ is *never* based on private revelations or secret anointings.

Today a growing number of Christian leaders claim that they, like Paul, have been chosen and commissioned by Jesus to the office of apostle in a private, visionary fashion. However, Paul said that his appointment by Christ was a unique, unrepeatable occurrence. Specifically, he told the Corinthian church that he was the *last* of the apostles to whom Christ appeared:

*He [Christ] appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.* (1 Corinthians 15:7-8, emphasis added)

There are *not* thousands of "untimely born" apostles populating the church today. Paul's experience was unrepeatable.

## 2. MIRACLES

A second divine proof of apostolic authority was *miracles—miracles that were similar in both quantity and quality to Jesus' miracles of healing*. As with Moses in the Old Testament era, God the Father validated both Jesus and the apostles with a tidal wave of public, incontestable miracles. In John 3, a Jewish leader named Nicodemus admitted to Jesus, "We know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him" (John 3:2).

God the Father confirmed the apostles' message and authority in the same way. The book of Acts records that the apostles performed many miracles of healing—miracles that bear no resemblance to the invisible, unverifiable, completely deniable, pseudo-healings claimed by today's mystics (Acts 5:14-16; 9:36-42; 20:9-12). For example, after Peter and John healed the lame man in the Temple, the Jewish leaders reluctantly admitted, "The fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it" (Acts 4:16). No critic has ever said that about the healings performed by today's mystics. In fact, their healings are always invisible and frequently include extensive medical treatment. Therefore, they both can and should be denounced as frauds. Only healings and resurrections that resemble Jesus' own miracles prove that someone is an apostle of Jesus Christ.

*After it [the gospel] was at the first spoken through the Lord [i.e., Jesus], it was confirmed to us by those who heard [the apostles], God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.* (Heb 2:3-4)

The author of Hebrews is describing the same flow chart that Jesus sketched in John 14 and 16. And, as always, the apostle Paul was not left out. The Spirit also confirmed Paul's ministry with a distinctive quantity and quality of supernatural acts.

*The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles. (2 Corinthians 12:12)*

Paul's miracles had been performed "with all perseverance." An apostle was not confirmed by an occasional, invisible, impossible-to-track-down healing. In order to prove that the apostles were Jesus' men, the Holy Spirit made sure that their miracles of healing were exactly like Jesus' healings in both quantity and quality.

Today's mystics greedily aspire to the title *apostle* because of the authority that title implies. However, all they can offer as proof of their divine commissions are secret anointings and phoney miracles. If one of today's so-called apostles were to empty an entire hospital by performing visible miracles of healing (Acts 5:14-16) and if he were to genuinely raise someone from the dead, then we might consider his claims. But until then, his assertions remain empty lies—nothing more than manipulative bluster and spiritual braggadocio designed to deceive the gullible and to hoodwink the biblically uninformed.

However, as important as miracles were in confirming the apostles, miracles can never be the final test of a heavenly messenger because Satan and demons also possess powers that are supernatural (cf. Deut 13:1-5). Therefore, the apostles' authority and teaching were validated in one final way: by their appeal to *the Old Testament Scriptures*.

### 3. THE OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES

Although the apostles received direct revelation, they verified their teaching by a different means: by drawing people to the Bible (in their case, the Old Testament). The apostles followed that procedure because that is what they had seen Jesus do. When they rejected mysticism, they were simply imitating their Lord and Master.

#### JESUS WAS NOT A MYSTIC

In John 5, the Jewish leaders challenged Jesus' claim to be sent by God. In one sense, they were right to do so. No one can claim, as Jesus did, to be equal with God and to uniquely possess the teaching of God, and not provide incontrovertible evidence that his claims are true. As the spiritual shepherds of Israel, the religious leaders were supposed to protect the nation from starry-eyed mystics (Deut 13:1-5). How did Jesus prove that He was God's Messiah (literally, God's *Anointed*)? In John 5:31-47, Jesus listed *five verifications* of the fact that He was sent by God.

First, Jesus cited His own claims. Since Jesus was truth incarnate, His own assertion was a perfectly valid confirmation that He was God's messenger. However, anyone can claim to be sent by God; therefore, Jesus did not expect His opponents to accede to the debateable confirmation of His own testimony. He freely admitted to His opponents, "If I alone testify about Myself, My testimony is not true" (5:31). Mystics demand authority based on nothing more than their own claims, but Jesus was not a mystic.

Next, Jesus turned the Jewish leaders' attention to two things outside of Himself to validate His claims: the witness of John the Baptist and the miracles that He (Jesus) had performed: "You have sent to John, and he has testified to the truth .... But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me" (5:33, 36).

The fourth witness to which Jesus appealed in order to validate His claim to be God's spokesman was God the Father's heavenly announcement at Jesus' baptism: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17). However, having cited that event, once again Jesus admitted to the Jewish leaders that the Father's celestial announcement had no jurisdiction over them because they had not heard it: "The Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form" (John 5:37). They had not been there that day at the Jordan River when God spoke; therefore, Jesus did not press the authority of that event on them.

Jesus' fifth and decisive witness to the fact that He was sent by God was the Old Testament Scriptures.

*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me .... If you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words? (John 5:39; 46-47)*

Although Jesus was God in human flesh, in order to establish His authority, He directed His opponents to the Bible. Do you think there is a lesson in that? The apostles thought there was. Therefore, they consciously imitated Jesus' non-mystical stance.

#### PAUL WAS NOT A MYSTIC

Where did the apostles turn in order to establish their authority? As you would expect, at times they cited Jesus' earthly teaching (e.g., 1 Cor 7:10; 11:23-25; 1 Tim 5:18b). However,

much more frequently they validated their instruction by means of the Old Testament. Paul provides a classic example of that when he summarised his gospel in 1 Corinthians 15.

*I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (1 Corinthians 15:3-4)*

Although Paul had received his gospel by direct revelation, he appealed to something else to validate his message: twice in one sentence Paul said that Jesus died and rose "according to the Scriptures." When Paul cited the Old Testament rather than revelatory experiences as his seal of authentication, he was consciously imitating Jesus.

And it was not as if Paul had no visionary experiences to appeal to. In 2 Corinthians 12:1-6 Paul spoke of a man who had "visions and revelations of the Lord" and who had been "caught up to the third heaven." Although he initially spoke in the third person ("a man"), by the time he reached verse 7, Paul made it clear that he was referring to himself: "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh ..." Paul had been to heaven and back. How easy it would have been for him to re-establish his authority over the defiant people in the Corinthian church by giving them a stunning report of what had happened when he had been caught up to Paradise (12:4). And surely that is what any mystic would have done!

However, just like Jesus, Paul refused to give people the wrong-headed notion that spiritual authority is based on visionary encounters. In fact, Paul had been forbidden by God to divulge what he had been told during his visit to heaven: what he heard were "inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak" (12:4). Paul's explanation of that prohibition was simple: "So that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me" (12:6). Paul's authority was to be based on what the Corinthians could *see and hear*. It was to be based on Paul's personal character, genuine apostolic miracles, and biblical preaching. God wanted no one submitting to Paul because of his unverifiable claim to have undergone a visionary experience.

If Paul refused to elevate visionary experiences to a place of authority, you can imagine what he thought of people who did. When mystics in the city of Colossae claimed to possess secret information about angelic beings based on divine visions, Paul described their claims as a form of spiritual fraud:

*Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in ... the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind. (Colossians 2:18)*

Paul considered the revelations of these angel-worshipping mystics to be fleshly fantasies, self-imagined fictions magnified by their pride into divine messages. The New Testament has nothing good to say about mystics who try to market their dreams and inner impressions as divine communications.

#### PETER WAS NOT A MYSTIC

But perhaps Paul was just a spoilsport—a grumpy, anti-mystical exception among the apostles. In fact, the apostle Peter also embraced Jesus' non-mystical approach to spiritual authority.<sup>6</sup> Like Paul, Peter did not reject mysticism merely because he had never been bowled over by a divine experience. In fact, Peter had undergone one of the greatest visionary events of all time, the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-8). When Peter wrote about that spectacular happening in his second epistle, he emphasised that it was not a made-up story. However, just like Paul, Peter refused to capitalise on his transcendent experience. He refused to dazzle people with a heavenly light that they had not seen or to overpower them with a heavenly voice that they had not heard. Although the Mount of Transfiguration was a factual event, Peter turned his readers' eyes to a different light—to the lamp of the written Word of God.

*For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased"—and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. We have the even more sure prophetic word, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place ... (2 Peter 1:16-19, emphasis added)<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> The only apparent exception to this is found in Acts 11, where Peter defended the evangelising of Gentiles by referring to the vision he received in Acts 10 prior to visiting Cornelius' house (Acts 10:9-16; 11:1-18). However, we should note that Peter did not cite that vision during the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. If he did, Luke did not consider it important enough to include in his report of the Council. Instead, the final word on the matter was James' quotation of Amos 9 (Acts 15:6-19). Spiritual authority in the church was always founded on written Scripture, not private revelations.

<sup>7</sup> In the underlined portion, I am following the translation found in the column of the NASB, since I believe it to be the correct way to translate the Greek comparative. In 2 Peter 1:19, many versions supply words in English that are not present in the Greek, thus making Peter seem to say that his experience was more sure than the OT prophecies about Christ. Charles Bigg is correct when he comments, "It is very doubtful whether the Greek will bear this meaning" (Charles Bigg, *St Peter and Jude*, in *The International Critical Commentary*, p. 267). Bigg suggests this translation, "Even surer is the word of prophecy which we have ...." D. Edmond Hiebert takes the same view, "The meaning is that we have another source of assurance [i.e., the Scripture] that is even more reliable than the

The Spirit-inspired prophecies of the Old Testament were infinitely more sure than Peter's mountaintop experience. The Bible is the one-and-only place where Christians can be certain that they will find the infallible, Spirit-inspired revelation of God (2 Peter 1:21). Therefore, like Jesus before him, Peter urged his readers to fix their eyes on the lamp of God's written Word, not on the celestial brilliance of a visionary experience.

So, for a third time we find that Jesus and the apostles were not mystics. In contrast to many Christians today, the founders of the Christian faith intentionally turned people's attention away from (genuine) private visionary experiences and directed them to the Bible instead. Later in 2 Peter, the apostle again urged his readers to make their authority the Old Testament and the teaching of Christ and the apostles:

*This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you in which I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by your apostles. (2 Peter 3:1-2)*

The "words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets" refers to the Old Testament. And equal to it in authority was the teaching of Jesus, revealed through His appointed proxies, the apostles. But if the teaching of Christ and the apostles was to endure, it had to be inscribed on the pages of a book. And that is exactly what happened. Moreover, Peter confirmed that the inspired writings of the New Testament authors were just as much Scripture as the Old Testament was.

*Regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures ... (2 Peter 3:15-16)*

## CONCLUSION

Jesus and the apostles were not mystics. It is sad, then, that many Christians today continue to be overawed by self-professed "spiritual people" who frequently boast about their visionary experiences and prophetic words. Other Christians spend years enslaved by church leaders who brandish the title "apostle" or who claim to possess a secret divine endorsement called "the anointing." Wrongly imagining such mystics to be the pinnacle of

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testimony of [Peter]" (*Second Peter and Jude*, 77). Peter's meaning is clear: written Scripture is a more sure witness than his experience.

spirituality, believers assign them ascendent influence over both the church and over their personal lives. If that has been your experience, God wants to rescue you from it. Jesus and the apostles consistently rejected *all* mystical views of spiritual authority. The New Testament is clear: in the church of Jesus Christ, mystics are not recognised. They have no authority.

Some Christians express their mystical orientation in a more restrained fashion. When making decisions, they pursue inner confirmations and industriously search for divine coincidences, wrongly imagining that it is necessary to interpret feelings and circumstances as if they were divinely encoded messages to be deciphered. In fact, the New Testament does not mention those mystical decision-making techniques.

In contrast to private revelations, God's written Word is an authority outside of ourselves. It is enduring. It is unchanging. It is fully verified. Anyone can check it, making sure that it is being employed in an accurate and sensible fashion. Ultimately, the Bible stands alone as the spiritual authority to which Jesus and the apostles directed the church.

Whichever version of mysticism you have been enmeshed in, let me urge you to cut your way out of its entangling web and to leave it behind. Step out of the fear-driven environment of mysticism and attend a church where the Bible is taught clearly and accurately, a church where God's Word is upheld as the actual, practical, daily authority—a church where the statement of the psalmist, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105), is the stabilising centre of faith and practice.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This booklet cannot address all the questions linked to the topic of Christian mysticism. Therefore, let me again commend to you our church's material on decision-making, the modern prophecy movement, and New Testament sign gifts. They provide full-spectrum answers to the matters this booklet can only address in passing.