



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 How Mystics Hear the Song
(*Mysticism*, pp. 20-28)

Suggested Article:

📖 Yearning for God
(*Mysticism*, pp. 60-62)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

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How Mystics Hear the Song

Mystics show the power of the Song of Songs to shape our understanding of life with God. They give us hope that our languishing love can be transformed into radical eros—a deep yearning that knows only the language of intimate communion, the song of the Bridegroom and his Bride.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Song of Songs 1:1-4; 2:3-5

Responsive Reading: Psalm 34:8-14

O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.

O fear the LORD, you his holy ones,
for those who fear him have no want.

**The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.**

Come, O children, listen to me;

I will teach you the fear of the LORD.

Which of you desires life,

and covets many days to enjoy good?

**Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.**

**Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.**

Reflection

“What makes this congregation so different?” Vicki and I asked the pastor of the appealing church we were about to join. “We’re searching for a deeper, richer tradition,” he began. “We’re asking what Christians were doing more than a few hundred years ago, and letting that shape our worship and what we study together.”

As Dennis Tucker notes, we may be surprised to learn what our ancestors in the faith read and how it informed their discipleship. Christians in the Middle Ages studied the Song of Songs—a book that scandalizes us with its erotic language and sexual innuendos—and allowed it to teach them to love God. They wrote more “commentaries” on it than any other Old Testament book. How did the medieval mystics hear the Song?

▶ *They listened to the Song “with the ear of our hearts.”* That is how Benedict describes *lectio divina* (or divine reading)—a careful listening to a short passage of Scripture read aloud several times, separated by silence. The “commentaries” by Bernard of Clairvaux and Teresa of Avila are devotional reflections based on such a reading. Bernard says his goal is not so much “to explain words as it is to influence hearts,” because a meditative reading of the Song can “teach thirsting souls how to seek the one by whom they themselves are sought.”

▶ *They identified with the context of the Song.* “The wedding day envisioned in the Song became symbolic of the monastic life” especially, and Christian life generally, writes Tucker. “All of life is a liminal moment—living in this world, yet longing for the next. The language of anticipation and fulfillment in the



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Song was an ideal vehicle for expressing...the tension between the 'now' and the 'not yet' of the spiritual life."

- ▶ *They let the Song's words reshape their view of life with God.* We are inexperienced in loving God, Teresa laments. The Song rekindles our love even as it teaches us to express it. "Along how many paths, in how many ways, by how many methods You show us love!" she writes. "[Not] only with [Your] deeds do You show this love, but with words so capable of wounding the soul in love with You that You say them in this Song of Songs and *teach the soul what to say to You.*"

John of the Cross, rather than writing a commentary on the Song of Songs, "weaves together the words of Scripture with the words from previous Christian writers into a powerful prayer that expresses the intensity of his love for God." His remarkable poetry models the spiritual life for us, for as we dwell with the Song and with these medieval sisters and brothers, Tucker concludes, "we will find our own voice in this journey toward love."

Study Questions

1. What is the difference between an *informational* reading of Scripture and a *formational* reading? Do we need one or the other, or both? How would you study Scripture in each way?
2. Medieval interpreters believed the Bible has layers of meaning. Discuss what they called the "fourfold meaning of Scripture." Do you agree the Bible has these layers of meaning?
3. The relation between faith and works, or God's grace and our moral efforts, is difficult to understand. How does Bernard of Clairvaux approach this puzzle in the quote that begins, "I could not perceive the exact moment of his arrival" (p. 22)? How does John Newton address the problem in the sixth verse of "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds"?
4. In *Canticle* 34-39 by John of Cross (p. 26), what insights do you find into our love for God?
5. Read the report by Teresa of Avila of the "transverberation" (p. 61), the event portrayed in Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. Can we learn anything from Teresa's unusual vision, or does it simply make her a religious eccentric?

Departing Hymn: "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds" (verses 1, 5, and 6)

How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds
in a believer's ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,
and drives away his fear.

Jesus! my Shepherd, Husband, Friend,
O Prophet, Priest, and King,
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,
accept the praise I bring.

Weak is the effort of my heart,
and cold my warmest thought;
But when I see you as you are,
I'll praise you as I ought.

John Newton (1779), alt.

Tune: ST. PETER (Reinagle)

How Mystics Hear the Song

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, and 3 or 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To distinguish a *formational* reading of Scripture from an *informational* reading.
2. To introduce the moral interpretation of the Song of Songs given by medieval mystics.
3. To sample what we might learn about the life of discipleship from the medieval “commentaries” on the Song of Songs.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Mysticism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds,” locate the tune ST. PETER (Reinagle) in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

Dennis Tucker notes that “the sexually explicit language of the Song (which can be so problematic for modern readers) allowed the mystics to express their personal yearning for the Divine and to inspire a love of God in those under their care. Only the Song’s language of intense and intimate love could convey their longing for and separation from the Divine Bridegroom. Our own expressions of a longing for, and love of, the Divine Bridegroom frequently falter. Our language lacks the intensity and intimacy expressed by the Song and invoked by [the mystics]. While our love of God may not be any less than theirs, our ability to articulate such love has surely suffered from our neglect of such rich images. The mystics remind us that what is on our lips most surely expresses what is in our hearts” (*Mysticism*, p. 27).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking the Holy Spirit to teach us language of the heart to express our love for God.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Song of Songs 1:1-4; 2:3-5 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

What do the mystics have to teach us, and how can their writings inform our discipleship? Dennis Tucker believes the mystics can help us to recover a *spiritually formational* way of reading Scripture and to love God and other people with more focus and passion. He explains this through a brief tour of the writings of three mystics and saints—Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), and John of the Cross (1542-1591)—on the Song of Songs.

There is a distance between the mystics’ *spiritually informing* way of reading Scripture and our Enlightenment-shaped way of reading the Bible for *information*. Grasping this distinction is as important for us as

appreciating their interpretation of the Song. Early Christians recognized a “fourfold meaning of Scripture”; beyond its literal meaning, the Bible has spiritual meaning. The point is not that “anything goes,” or that the Bible means whatever an interpreter wants it to mean. Each level of meaning must be discovered and confirmed in the community of faith, as we offer our findings for examination and review by other believers.

The mystics understood the Song to be erotic love poetry that expresses the love between a man and woman on the occasion of their wedding (the “literal” meaning). But they also interpreted the poems as describing the relation between God and the soul (the “allegorical” meaning) and instructing us in how to love God and neighbor (the “moral” meaning).

Study Questions

1. The *informational* reading of Scripture is Tucker’s term for the use of historical and critical methods to gather information about the probable author and original audience, the literary form, and the historical and cultural context of a passage of Scripture. A *formational* reading yields “the insights necessary for spiritual transformation.” Correct information about a passage of Scripture can point us to a spiritually formational reading of it. But don’t we sometimes become so sidetracked in developing and judging our informational theories about a passage that we do not allow it to judge us and develop our character?

Encourage members to discuss how they pursue *informational* and *formational* readings of Scripture. How are these two forms of reading related in their experience? What methods of reading the Scripture, what additional books or information, what guidance from others, and what methods of sharing their findings with others have they found to be most helpful?

2. A passage (1) describes an historical person or event, (2) is an allegory or type of Scripture’s larger story of creation, sin, redemption, and restoration, (3) gives guidance for character development and moral living as a disciple, and (4) foreshadows God’s ultimate judgment of the world. Terms for the four meanings vary from “literal, allegorical, moral, and mystical” to “historical, typological, tropological, and anagogical.” Here is an example: the Exodus story is (1) a description of an historical event, (2) an allegory of our redemption through Christ, (3) an injunction for us to turn from sin and to accept God’s grace, and (4) a picture of our passage from slavery to sin in this world to eternal glory with God.

Many fanciful allegorical, moral, and mystical interpretations of Scripture have been proposed over the centuries, but some very odd literal readings have also been given. Does this show that no interpretation is better than any other one? To decide whether this fourfold framework of interpretation is useful today, consider how Christian readers *should* interpret a verse like “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1).

3. Bernard finds God’s empowering presence in his heart, “full of life and efficacy,” but cannot recall a moment of God’s arrival. The work of moral improvement is all on God’s side: “He moves, and warms, and wounds my heart, hard and stony and sick though it be.” Tucker says that for Bernard, “the journey to God’s love does not consist in finding a path, as much as in being found on the path by the Bridegroom who passionately seeks his bride.”

John Newton has little to contribute to his moral improvement, for “Weak is the effort of my heart, / and cold my warmest thought.” Experiencing God’s love creates Newton’s new energy and responsiveness: “But when I see you as you are, / I’ll praise you as I ought.”

4. Love is possible because creation is restored, as after the Flood. God (the Bridegroom) has been “wounded by a lonely love” too. Our soul (the Bride) longs to be “one in [God’s] beauty” and enjoy the fruit of God’s promises. We seek the “flame that fires without pain.”
5. The dramatic details of Teresa’s experience may be unlike anything we have experienced, but have we been taken rapturously into God’s love in some way that is similar to the proper and unselfish human love of a parent or child or lover?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.