

# The Great "Spiritual Formation" Kerfuffle

BY DAVID E. THOMAS

**O**ver the past few years in the Adventist community, the phrase "spiritual formation," long used in other Christian communities but, by comparison, only recently used within Adventism, has come to be very well known. When it first came into use, it connoted some very good things, namely that Adventists were beginning to realize that the internal, spiritual dimension of humans, if it was to do well and grow in good ways, needed some deliberate and careful tending—"forming"—rather than being left to grow as best it could on its own. It can also be said that this phrase, when it first came into use, carried with it the understanding that other Christian communities were more advanced than we in terms of knowing how to deliberately care for the inner person. The appearance of this phrase in the midst of Adventism signaled a joy at this new realization as well as a willingness to study and learn from the experience of other Christians by exploring and experimenting with ideas that were not deemed to be contrary to the Bible. For a number of years, this concept of deliberate spiritual formation grew happily within the Adventist community, receiving more and more attention in churches, but particularly in educational institutions where things of a spiritual nature were taught.<sup>1</sup>

At the present time, however, the term "spiritual formation" signals something very different. In a rather short time, it has come to be a highly controversial, even toxic phrase, signaling the very worst of things church people could imagine. Spiritual formation has become a touchstone for great suspicion and hostile interchanges. Letters full of hostile language,<sup>2</sup> bearing damning, unsubstantiated allegations against individuals and institutions are being sent through the mail and over the Internet. One letter, written by a certain Lois Kind of College Place, WA, has now gone viral. Books and articles are being written alleg-

ing that certain people are secretly (or not so secretly) infiltrating church ranks with various forms of great wrongdoing. In particular, it is said that "spiritual formation" is really a code word for the surreptitious infiltration of mysticism (in most places, this word remains rather undefined) and even Satanism. Behind the scenes there is believed to be a great conspiracy involving a long laundry list of people and agencies, including a host of Adventist leaders and educators, who are conspiring together to achieve these diabolical ends. The greatest fear is that if one gets involved with spiritual formation, the devil will gain access to the inner sanctum of life and will hypnotize a person without their even knowing it. Even the very elect are cautioned to beware lest they be deceived. Astonishingly, and very cunningly, the key avenue for the devil to perpetrate his designs is thought to be by way of devotional exercises themselves. Even the simple act of sitting in silence while meditating is feared as a possible avenue for the devil.

What are we to make of all this? Are these fears legitimate? Are they well founded? Is there really a great conspiracy overtaking us? Should we all be alarmed and run for cover? Or is this the latest form of eschatologically-driven frenzy that periodically overtakes Adventism, the latest manifestation of eschatomania? These are the questions that offer themselves up to us for consideration. On a personal note, I must admit that until quite recently, I had little interest in the growing kerfuffle. But because the congregation I am part of and the place I work got all embroiled in the issue, by force of necessity I have had to go investigating in an attempt to discover what this is all about.<sup>3</sup> The discoveries have been quite amazing and, to be frank, in some ways quite disheartening.

One does not have to read long into the disturbance surrounding spiritual formation before encountering the names of two gentlemen who appear to be at the bottom

of the whole matter. Their names are Ray Yungen and Roger Oakland. These two gentlemen currently collaborate in the operation of an organization known as Lighthouse Trails Publishing,<sup>4</sup> which also has a research branch known as Lighthouse Trails Research.<sup>5</sup>

Consider Roger Oakland, a man who has quite a life story to tell. He began his professional life as a biologist and atheist who had a lot of problems in early adulthood, but some hard experiences brought him to belief in God after which time he took up an active life of faith. For a long time, Oakland was associated with the Calvary Chapel movement, a movement founded by Pastor Chuck Smith that today boasts some of the largest megachurches in the nation. A little time spent studying Smith and his ideas will be enough to reveal that he is quite extreme in his dispensationalist ideas, several times predicting the time the rapture was to take place, as well as making the repeated assertion that the generation alive in 1948 (the year of the establishment of the nation of Israel, something of great significance to dispensationalists) would be the last generation before the rapture. The fact that Oakland was for a long time part of the Calvary Chapel movement testifies to the fact that he is sympathetic to this kind of strident dispensationalism. Because of his newly developed ideas about spiritual formation, Oakland had a rather dramatic falling away from Calvary Chapel, and he now travels the nation and the world speaking and teaching. He has a remarkably long list of travels and presentations and publications to his credit.

Some specific description of what drives him onward is helpful. What follows is a description taken from one of his websites. Through his research, he finds a connection between evolution and the New Age. He discovers that multitudes of people are rejecting the idea of a Creator God and replacing it with an impersonal pantheistic "God." Much to his alarm, Roger learns that New Age concepts, such as this evolutionary "God," are being absorbed into mainstream Christianity.

As time progresses, Roger realizes that the Christian church is heading down a dangerous road of apostasy. He comes head-to-head with Christian leaders whom he learns are guiding believers toward a one-world religion via the Roman Catholic Church, through mysticism and the emerging church.

The cost of telling the truth and warning the church is high for Roger Oakland. Within his own denomination, Calvary Chapel, he begins to see signs of spiritual deception. He works tirelessly to teach and warn about the coming apostasy. Eventually, he realizes that both he and his message are being rejected by leaders of the movement that he tried to support for so many years.<sup>6</sup>

Yungen's origins and early associations, on the other hand, are a bit more obscure, but he also tells a rather dramatic life story. On his website it is said of him that he is an "author, speaker and research analyst [who] has studied religious movements for nearly twenty five years."<sup>7</sup> This work he began after an "escape" from the Masonic order where he claims to have once taken blood oaths to the effect that he would be killed if he ever tried to leave. Yungen bills himself as a researcher of religious trends and movements, and he operates a ministry of his own called "Time of Departing Ministries." This title is illuminating in that it provides a window into the fact that Yungen, like Oakland, is also a dispensationalist who lives in the shadow of the imminence of the secret rapture. He makes himself available as a speaker who focuses particularly on evidence he deems to be indicators of the immediacy of the rapture. A major indication would be a "falling away" of the Christian church into some kind of idolatry.

Along the way, Yungen made a discovery that has become the driving force in his ministry. He discovered eastern mysticism, which he links to Satanism, and he also discovered that this mysticism is now sweeping into the church in the western world at an alarming rate. This invasion is perceived to be so massive it has all but totally absorbed Yungen's attention and interest. In fact, his signature piece of writing is a book titled A

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*Time of Departing*, which is described as being “a revealing account of a New Age spirituality that has infiltrated much of the church today. [He] exposes the subtle strategies to compromise the gospel message with Eastern mystical practices cloaked under evangelical terminology and wrappings.”<sup>98</sup>

While I suspect it was Yungen who first discovered and described the infiltration of mysticism into the church and the subsequent falling away of the church into apostasy, I cannot be sure of this. But what is certain is that, at some point, Yungen and Oakland discovered each other, shared their ideas, and forged some kind of partnership that has infused this whole issue with considerable life. They say of themselves that in the year 2000 they “learned that a mantra-style meditation coupled with a mystical spirituality had been introduced to the evangelical, Christian church and was infiltrating youth groups, churches, seminaries, and Bible studies at an alarming rate.”<sup>99</sup> In consequence, by the spring of 2000, they had begun Lighthouse Trails Publishing “with the hope of exposing this dangerous and pervasive mystical paradigm.”<sup>100</sup>

The writings of Yungen and Oakland make it very clear that they are entirely convinced they have stumbled upon the great apostasy of our time, one that others have simply missed largely because they have not been careful enough in their research, and one that is likely to bring us to the end of the age. They write, “As we learned more about contemplative spirituality (also known as the spiritual formation movement), we came to realize it had entered the church through a number of avenues—Willow Creek, Purpose Driven, and the emerging church just to name a few of the more prominent ones.”<sup>101</sup>

The intensity of Oakland and Yungen’s investment in this issue is evidenced by the fact that they name names, listing educational institutions and seminaries that they believe are at the forefront of disseminating the apostasy.<sup>12</sup> The list is both long and impressive and involves all kinds of significant people and institutions.<sup>13</sup> They also have a list of safe schools. And they have a list of publishers who are leading the way into apostasy. Between the two of them, Oakland and Yungen have managed to create something of a stir in the evangelical world. How big a stir is a matter of opinion, but they have created enough of a stir that they are now out on their own, working hard to be heard in every quarter possible and apparently earning a living while doing so.

With this background information now in hand, the obvious question becomes, “How did this fear of a great apostasy

discovered by Oakland and Yungen find its way into Adventism?” The answer begins with the discovery that in 2007, while doing some of his research looking for apostasy, Oakland happened upon an article put out by the Adventist News Network (ANN) reporting (at the time, this was seen to be good news!) that spiritual formation was getting increased attention and focus at the SDA seminary and in local churches. Interpreting this news in light of the opinions he and Yungen had formulated, Oakland sounded an alarm telling the world that now Seventh-day Adventists were falling for the deception, too. In a long and rather detailed article on his website, Oakland laid out the particulars, even listing the particulars of various classes and their numbers and contents. He opened his piece with the following:

*In 2007, Lighthouse Trails posted an article titled, “Church Congregations Increase Focus on ‘Spiritual Formation.’” The article, released by Adventist News Network, showed how the emphasis of contemplative/spiritual formation was moving into the Seventh-day Adventist organization. The article stated that “this subject [spiritual formation] is receiving serious emphasis in Adventist institutions, as well as in local congregations.” The following Lighthouse Trails research reveals that the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, is promoting contemplative spirituality (i.e., spiritual formation) through a new concentration in their Doctor of Ministry degree program. An October 2009 Andrews newsletter put out by Kenley D. Hall (Andrews DMin Project Coach) explains that “Discipleship and Spiritual Formation” and “Youth and Young Adult Ministry” will begin in February 2010.”<sup>14</sup>*

Interpreting this article in light of the opinions he and Yungen had formed, Oakland sounded the alarm. Adventists were also falling hook, line, and sinker into the growing apostasy. Though he appears to have no sympathies toward Adventism, Oakland apparently felt honor-bound to point to what appeared to him to be more evidence that the world is falling away from God. And somewhere, somehow, some Adventist, apparently while doing some research of his or her own, happened upon Oakland’s statement, and the connection was made.

I am not sure there is any way to discover which Adventist may have been first to make this connection, but John Witcombe, currently a pastor in the Oregon Conference, is one likely candidate. As far back as 2008, just one year after Oakland sounded the alarm about Adventism, Wit-



combe was well informed about Oakland and Yungen's formulations. In several emails directed to people at Walla Walla University, on the occasion of the university inviting Tony Campolo to campus to speak about caring for the downtrodden, Witcombe exhibited a determination to have the university rescind the invitation because, he insisted, Campolo was into "centering prayer," a major element in the apostasy which Witcombe was concerned would be taught to students if Campolo came on campus.<sup>15</sup> The emails exchanged indicate that Witcombe was very well informed about the ideas of Oakland and Yungen, quoting from them quite extensively. The other quotations in the emails indicate Witcombe had done extensive research into the matter of this proclaimed apostasy, and he even took the time and trouble to listen to the Campolo lectures and transcribe some portions that he claimed proved some on campus to be disingenuous.<sup>16</sup> Whatever the case, it is quite clear that the fear of spiritual formation apostasy in Adventism came from individuals who had become acquainted with the opinions and reports of Oakland and Yungen, in Witcombe's case as early as 2008.

The grave concern voiced by Witcombe and others about Adventists falling into spiritual apostasy sputtered along for a number of years until it received a huge infusion of oxygen, care of Pastor Rick Howard, who has now become a major player in this scenario. Rick Howard is a friendly, affable, and gentle man who has been in pastoral work for over thirty years, working mostly in the central and the northeastern parts of the United States. Like Oakland and Yungen, Howard has a rather interesting life story to tell. One part of the story that is particularly compelling involves his rather agonizing and difficult search for something to hold on to in life, some truth. That search took him, for about five years, into some systems of thought that advocate and teach transcendental meditation. It is from this experience that Howard speaks with a great sense of urgency, picking up on the opinions of Yungen and Oakland, ideas that clearly struck

fire with him at a very deep level.

As an outgrowth of his great concern, Howard has written a privately published book, *The Omega Rebellion*,<sup>17</sup> that has turned out to be something of a blockbuster. There is no way to tell from the title page who published the book, but, however that happened, the book was picked up and distributed by the Review and Herald Publishing Association, the official press of the SDA Church. How this came about is not currently public knowledge, but the effect of the action was to put the book on display in a host of Adventist Book Centers where it was discovered and purchased and read by many of the faithful. How many copies were originally printed is not known, but what is known is that it found enough of an audience that the first printing sold out, and there is anecdotal evidence that a second one is in the offing.

Rick Howard's book is quite an interesting read, and it has created a massive stir in Adventism. It is a highly impassioned appeal to readers to have nothing to do with "spiritual formation" lest they be handed over by God to the devil who could then mass-hypnotize them without their even knowing it.<sup>18</sup> There is a lot of "all-or-nothing" language in the book, language that allows for almost no nuance at all. For example, Howard's book is highly sectarian, proclaiming the SDA Church to be the only true remnant, with all other forms of Christianity being apostate and therefore dangerous. He sees no possibility of anything of spiritual value being found in non-Adventist sources or communities. Howard contends that any use of non-Adventist speakers or authors is dangerous because it could readily lead to deception, particularly through spiritual formation learned from non-Adventists. He links spiritual formation with Satanism, with Catholicism, and with many other forms of apostate religions. To help him make his point, Howard relies heavily on carefully chosen Spirit of Prophecy quotes (most of them come from the book *Early Writings*), some of which are repeated multiple times in his book. Hidden behind the whole scenario is the idea of a very

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big conspiracy that is moving us all very rapidly to the very end of things. All in all, the alarm factor in Howard's book is very high, something that those who have read it have easily taken into themselves. And, in truth, if Howard is correct, we all ought to be quite alarmed, for the Devil is about to ring down the curtain of time upon our heads.<sup>19</sup>

**W**hat are we to make of all this? Is all the alarm warranted? Are all these alarmed people right? My own studied opinion is that Yungen, Oakland, Witcombe, and Howard are onto something quite worthy of our concern in that the type of meditation they speak of is undoubtedly invading western Christianity at a very rapid rate. This new paradigm for spiritual expression is sweeping in all over the place. At its foundational level, this new spiritual paradigm proposes a radically different ontology (concept of grand reality) than does the older Protestant paradigm. A key component has to do with the human self. Under the old paradigm, the human self was corrupted by sin and therefore not worthy of trust. It had to be denied, held down, put under discipline if people were to thrive. People were admonished not to measure or test themselves by things internal to themselves, but were to measure life by comparing themselves to something more external, like a "Thus saith the Lord." Under the new system, the view is reversed, maintaining that the path to human thriving is, in fact, to be found inside the human self. People are told to look deep into themselves in order to discover whatever remnants of a pristine self they can find. Then they are to unbridle and remove all things that burden their keenest inward passions. This trusting and unbridling of self is deemed to be the pathway to the "real you." It is even perceived to be the pathway toward God. The self becomes autonomous and prime.

I suppose that it is a matter for open and frank discussion as to whether or not the journey into ourselves in search of some contact with the divine is something fit for Christians. My own opinion is that it is not. My own opinion is that Christian meditation should be something active and focused on things that pertain to God, things outside of our selves (I would certainly allow for some personal introspection, however). After all, from a Christian perspective, the doctrine of sin, if it is at all robust, does not see the inner dimension of humans as a place where truth and a pathway

to thriving can be found. The assessment of Scripture is quite the opposite, to the effect that the human heart is "deceitful and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9). Because sin has tarnished human nature, human thriving comes from self-denial, self-discipline, from those involvements that bring about internal transformation after the likeness of Christ. At least part of the fervor among the above-mentioned people who are so concerned with what they call mystical meditation and the like, is the sense that the church has simply not heard them, or is actively ignoring their concerns. Perhaps some recognition of the legitimacy of their concerns would help tone down the fervor to more understandable levels. I say, again, their concerns are not unfounded. Christians need to pay attention to their strident calls.

At the same time, I think it must be said that those who are almost frantic about some kind of Adventist slippage into mystical meditation and the like have way overplayed the issue, at least at the present time. There is a very great fear that the spiritual formation apostasy is taking over Adventism by leaps and bounds, but I simply do not see it. Where are the institutions teaching transcendental meditation? Where are our leaders teaching the use of mantras? Where are the churches divided over the fact that some leader is trying to teach people to enter into what Rick Howard calls "the silence"? Where are people trying to engender altered states of mind? I have yet to have a single substantiated instance reported to me, which suggests quite strongly that there is a lot of fear and even frenzy, but there is nothing to substantiate it. After all, the kind of meditation that is inveighed against is not something that is achieved surreptitiously nor by accident. People do not just fall into transcendental states of mind, and using the words "spiritual formation" does not produce such things. Altered states of mind come via deliberately acquired meditation skills. And these are simply not being taught, certainly not in substance, in the Adventist community, not even by Jon Dybdahl, who is at the focus of this controversy because of his book, *Hunger*.<sup>20</sup>

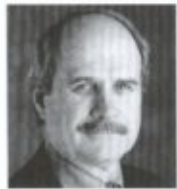
Rather, the kind of spiritual formation that is being taught falls much more in line with what Rick Howard himself observes when he writes, "Remember, many of the teachings included within the model of spiritual formation are good Christian concepts. It is the learning and practice of contemplative<sup>21</sup>/mystical prayer, which leads to altered states of consciousness and the supernatural experience of the silence...that is the idolatrous teaching we are expos-



ing.<sup>22</sup> Rick Howard goes on to say that “Spiritual formation enthusiasts...distort the accepted meaning of contemplation and meditation in their use of contemplative prayer.”<sup>23</sup> Notice the nuancing of the phrase, the effect that some enthusiasts distort the meaning of the phrase! And here lies the fulcrum of the problem. The phrase “spiritual formation” does not always mean eastern mystical meditation and its elements. The phrase can mean any of several things. This means that there is an acceptable form of spiritual formation just as as there is an unacceptable form.

Hopefully, before too long, the realization will strike that this whole disturbance is caused by, and its propagation depends on, just what people think the phrase “spiritual formation” means. Those who are able to nuance the word to understand that it may refer to very appropriate forms of Christian meditation and devotional exercises are not likely to be caught up in any frenzy over the subject. But those who see spiritual formation only in terms of the radical apostasy that is portrayed by Yungen, Oakland and the others, are likely to be quite stirred up for a good, long time. ■

**David E. Thomas** is a professor of theology and the dean of the School of Theology at Walla Walla University. He received his doctorate in pastoral ministry from Andrews University. A frequent speaker in churches and at seminars, Thomas’ interests are primarily in theology, apologetics, and pastoral life and function.



## References:

1. Large numbers of currently serving ministers no doubt remember being exposed, during their educational process, to Richard J. Foster’s book *Celebration of Discipline*. (New York: HarperOne, 1998).
2. I have seen a letter in which a prominent Adventist educator was told by a concerned “brother” that he was believed to be “the Devil incarnate,” and that the whole SDA church was being dragged “into an abysmal hell.”
3. This unhappy circumstance came about because of a letter, now gone viral, written by a certain Lois Kind, a long-time member of the Walla Walla University SDA Church, who became convinced that this conspiracy was unfolding before her very eyes. Without waiting to consult with congregational leaders, she sent her letter to a number of church leaders expressing her concerns. How the letter managed to go viral is anybody’s guess. Up to the time of this writing, she had not yet offered any concrete evidence to substantiate her allegations.
4. Information about Lighthouse Trails Publishing can be found at <http://www.lighthouse Trails.com/>

5. The Lighthouse Research website is <http://www.lighthouse Trailsresearch.com>
6. [http://www.lighthouse Trails.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Store\\_Code=LTP&Product\\_Code=LTBL&Category\\_Code=RO](http://www.lighthouse Trails.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Store_Code=LTP&Product_Code=LTBL&Category_Code=RO)
7. Information taken from <http://www.atimeofdeparting.com/aboutus.htm>
8. <http://www.atimeofdeparting.com/books.htm>. Because this was the first book published by Lighthouse Trails, I assume Yungen was the first to discover the great apostasy that now so absorbs him and Oakland.
9. [http://www.lighthouse Trailsresearch.com/blog/?page\\_id=2](http://www.lighthouse Trailsresearch.com/blog/?page_id=2)
10. Ibid.
11. Taken from <http://www.lighthouse Trailsresearch.com/meditationexcerptbyray.htm>
12. See <http://www.lighthouse Trailsresearch.com/Colleges.htm>
13. Interestingly, Oakland and Yungen speak of the emerging church as if it were a single entity rather than a loosely-knit reform movement!
14. <http://www.lighthouse Trailsresearch.com/blog/?p=2136>
15. Interestingly, John Witcomb has seen fit, without permission, to put a string of the email correspondence online for all to see, with his own commentary added. The emails can be found at the following website: <http://spiritualformationsda.wordpress.com/> then by clicking on “Dave Thomas Walla Walla Campolo.”
16. John Witcombe remains very active in discussing the subject of spiritual formation as can be seen at a website where some of his work can be found: <http://www.communityadventist.com/wp-content/uploads/hunger-critique.pdf>
17. Howard, Rick. *The Omega Rebellion: What Every Adventist Needs to Know...Now!* (Coldwater, MI: Remnant Publications, 2010).
18. Page 127 of Howard’s book is particularly noteworthy, laying out a very scary scenario that suggests the possibility of vast numbers of people going about their living apparently in normal fashion all the while under the hypnotic spell of Satan.
19. One wonders if the newly elected General Conference President’s now-famous remarks about staying “away from non-biblical spiritual disciplines or methods of spiritual formation that are rooted in mysticism,” made during his inaugural address, were not precipitated by the reading of Howard’s book.
20. This comment will raise the hackles of not a few, but before consigning Jon Dybdahl to the mystical heretic pile, I would urge people to call him and speak to him directly. Personal conversations will reveal he is not invested in mystical meditations no matter the interpretations given to the contents of his book. See Jon Dybdahl. *Hunger: Satisfying the Longing of Your Soul*. (Hagerstown, MD. Review and Herald, Autumn House, 2008).
21. The word “contemplative” has some appropriate meanings and practices, but Howard does not here nuance the word for readers.
22. Howard, p. 136.
23. ———, p. 137.