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DEVELOPING DISCERNMENT IN DEVOTIONAL READING: A Critical Examination of *Jesus Calling* and *One Thousand Gifts*

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SYNOPSIS

At their best, spiritual growth books can help guide Christians into habits of Christlike prayer and spiritual practices that foster abundant, fruitful life in Christ. At their worst, they can distort their readers' understanding of the gospel and encourage practices that foster spiritual ill-being rather than well-being. How, then, can Christians learn to discern which spiritual growth books are worth reading and following and which aren't? This article presents a list of helpful tips or principles for separating the good Christian spiritual growth literature from the bad. When used to evaluate two currently popular spiritual growth books, these principles reveal Ann Voskamp's *One Thousand Gifts* to be biblically sound and spiritually edifying, despite some controversial elements, but they highlight some serious problems with Sarah Young's devotional book, *Jesus Calling*.

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus and His apostles promise (indeed, command) a Christian life characterized by abundance (John 10:10), rest (Matt. 11:28), freedom from anxiety (Matt. 6:25–34; 1 Pet. 5:6–7), freedom from wrath (Col. 3:8), and wise discernment (Rom. 12:1). But, for many Christians, this spiritually mature, abundant life often seems out of reach. Having placed faith in Jesus for salvation from sin and death, how can we stop being controlled by our desires for the things of this world, paralyzed by worry and anxiety, isolated by anger and bitterness, buried under the weight of sin and shame? How can we overcome the sinful habits of the heart that characterized our old life, dying to ourselves, so that we might live the abundant, joy-full resurrection life available to us in Christ?

In search of answers to these questions, many turn to the latest devotional guide or spiritual growth book lining the shelves of Christian bookstores and gracing the *New York Times* Best Seller list. Unfortunately, not all "Christian" books are healthy fertilizer for the soil of spiritual growth. And popularity is no evidence of profundity. At their best, spiritual growth books can help guide Christians into habits of Christlike prayer

and spiritual practices that foster abundant, fruitful life in Christ. At their worst, they can distort their readers' understanding of the gospel and encourage practices that foster spiritual ill-being rather than well-being. How, then, can Christians learn to discern which spiritual growth books are worth reading and following and which aren't?

The following is a list of helpful tips or, rather, cautionary principles for separating the good Christian spiritual growth literature from the bad. These should not be thought of like tips on how to pick a good, ripe avocado at the grocery store. A ripe avocado will have a dark skin, it will be firm but not too firm, and the color underneath the hard plug-like stem at the top will be a vivid green. Unfortunately, sometimes I pick avocados that meet all of these criteria and when I cut them open to make guacamole, I find that they are rotten. Likewise, while it sometimes is possible to make an accurate judgment about the quality of a spiritual growth book based on its cover (i.e., its publisher, author, title, jacket description, endorsements, etc.), it is not uncommon to discover, after reading several pages, that a book that passed a superficial cover test is unhealthy in its core. Sadly, many Christians are much better at spotting rotten fruit than they are at spotting unhealthy spiritual growth literature. The following tips are thus intended as guides for distinguishing unhealthy from nourishing spiritual growth/devotional books after opening them up and digging into them a bit. Along the way, I will illustrate and explain these principles by using them to evaluate two currently popular books in the spiritual growth genre: *Jesus Calling* by Sarah Young¹ and *One Thousand Gifts* by Ann Voskamp.²

TIP 1: KEEP WATCH FOR UNBIBLICAL WORLDVIEWS

This first caution is important because even well-intentioned Christian authors sometimes inadvertently promote unbiblical worldviews in their efforts to encourage spiritual growth. Readers of spiritual growth literature should be on the lookout for especially New Age mysticism, pantheism, and panentheism. According to New Age mysticism, spirituality is more about experiences than beliefs, and salvation is found in the experiential knowledge that we are one with all that exists.³ New Age mysticism views all things as belonging to one undifferentiated reality and typically deifies that reality; hence, the New Age worldview is characteristically pantheistic—there is only one god, but all is god. Panentheism, like pantheism, denies a real ontological distinction between creator and creation, but also affirms god to be both transcendent and immanent, holding that god exists “in” the world like a soul in a body or “a hand in a glove.”⁴ In contrast to these worldviews, Christian theism holds that God exists wholly independently of the natural world, though He is present everywhere, and that salvation consists in God forgiving our sins on account of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. While this salvation does ultimately culminate in loving (comm)union with God, the union with God for which Christians hope is not a union that negates our own personal identities or God's.

In some Christian spiritual growth books, God's relationship to creation is depicted in a way that resembles New Age mysticism or panentheism more than

Christian theism. Fortunately, neither *Jesus Calling* nor *One Thousand Gifts* clearly encourages such non-Christian views of God's relationship to nature, despite some passages that might seem to suggest otherwise. In one poignant narrative in *One Thousand Gifts*, for example, Voskamp recounts her experience of running outside to gaze at the harvest moon in childlike wonder, thanksgiving, and worship to God for this magnificently beautiful scene. Some readers might worry that her worshipful reaction to this natural scene reveals a latent pantheism or panentheism. To her credit, though, she takes care to distinguish her Christian view of nature from these non-Christian worldviews:

Is worship why I've run for the moon? Not for lunar worship, but for True Beauty worship, worship of Creator Beauty Himself. God is present in all the moments, but I do not deify the wind in the pines, the snow falling on hemlocks, the moon over harvested wheat. Pantheism, seeing the natural world as divine, is a very different thing than seeing divine God present in all things. I know it here kneeling, the twilight so still: nature is not God but God revealing the weight of Himself, all His glory, through the looking glass of nature. (p. 110)

In a book focused on the spiritual value of thankfully attending to God's presence in all the details of life—from the magnificent to the mundane—it is important to acknowledge, as Voskamp does, that these details of life and the natural world are not God or parts of God. Rather, they are parts of God's wonderful creation that allow us to see glimpses of His beauty and majesty. While the language of "God present in all things" might suggest to some a kind of panentheism, the metaphor of nature as a looking glass through which we can see God, together with her reflections throughout the rest of the book, suggest a classical theistic conception of God according to which God exists "outside" of the world, though present and revealed to us through the world (cf. Ps. 19; Rom. 1:20).

TIP 2: KEEP WATCH FOR THE SUGGESTION THAT ECSTATIC MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE IS THE MEASURE OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

In addition to presenting pantheistic or panentheistic views of God's relationship to nature, some Christian spiritual writings reflect New Age mysticism by treating ecstatic mystical experiences as the measure of spiritual growth and as the primary goal of spiritual disciplines. In the introduction to *Jesus Calling*, Sarah Young recounts a time when, while out for a walk, she "became aware of a lovely Presence with [her]" and another time when she "felt an overwhelming Presence of peace and love come over [her]." She then notes, "During the next sixteen years, I lived what many people might consider an exemplary Christian life....However, not once during those sixteen years did I vividly experience the Presence of Jesus. So I was ready to begin a new spiritual quest" (viii-x). She later recounts a third mystical experience: "When I prayed for myself, I was suddenly enveloped in brilliant light and profound peace. I had not sought this powerful experience of God's Presence, but I received it gratefully and was strengthened by it" (xi). Despite her claim that she did not seek out this final mystical

experience, the whole of Young's introduction suggests that it is precisely in search of such experiences that she engaged in her devotional practices and that she encourages others to do likewise.

Similarly, in the final chapter of *One Thousand Gifts*, Voskamp emphasizes the goal of "Mystical union. This the highest degree of importance" (213). She notes that "the intercourse of soul with God is the very climax of joy....we're called to do more than *believe in God*; we're called *to live in God*. To enter into Christ and Christ enter into us—to cohabit" (218, emphasis in original). Recounting her own mystical experience of the presence of Christ, which occurred during a visit to Paris, she writes, "This was the holy moment I knew the warmth of union with Christ, not union only *positionally*, but communion with Christ *experientially*" (219, emphasis in original).

Voskamp's description of her experience bears a resemblance to Young's, but it differs in being informed and explicitly interpreted in light of biblical theology. While Voskamp identifies such intimate union with God as the ultimate culmination of the Christian life, she does not present it as the proper expectation of Christians this side of death; nor does she suggest that our spiritual disciplines are unsuccessful if we have no such experience. She explicitly notes, albeit in her characteristically poetic voice, that it is not the achievement, but rather the desire for intimate loving communion with God that is the sign of true spiritual growth: "Communion with God, what was broken in the Garden, this is wholly restored when I want the God-communion more than I want the world-consumption" (220). Indeed, the true measure of spiritual growth and sign of spiritual maturity for the Christian is not ecstatic mystical experience but rather self-sacrificial love of God and neighbor, together with the other elements of the fruit of the Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:22–23).

TIP 3: KEEP WATCH FOR PRACTICES THAT DISTORT SPIRITUAL VISION

In addition to the worldviews and doctrines promoted by spiritual growth books, it is important to evaluate the spiritual practices such books encourage, including the practice of reading and meditating on the texts of the books themselves. Engaging in spiritual disciplines can instill habits that in turn shape our character as well as our vision of God and the Christian life, for good or for ill.

Consider the practice at the heart of *Jesus Calling*. In this book intended for devotional reading, Young wrote a year's worth of daily spiritual aphorisms *in the voice of Jesus Himself*. While she briefly acknowledges in the introduction that the Bible is the only infallible, inerrant Word of God (xiv), she nevertheless encourages her readers to engage in the daily practice of reading her words (peppered throughout with biblical phrases) as though they are the words of Jesus spoken directly to the reader. She reinforces this practice by repeatedly using the first-person pronouns "I," "Me," and "My" to refer to Jesus. She even uses the divine name "I AM" (86, 214, 355) and the phrase "I am the Alpha and the Omega" (237, 298) to give divine authoritative weight to the words she puts into Jesus' mouth. Despite the use of such biblical language, however, the voice of Jesus in the book is less that of the biblical Jesus and more that of a twenty-first-century Christian counselor, complete with references to "performance

anxiety” (114), encouragement to “take minibreaks from the world” (78), and modern colloquialisms like “user-friendly” (188) and “paradigm shift” (85).

Even if the devotional reader of *Jesus Calling* repeatedly reminds herself that these are not really Jesus’ words, she nevertheless engages in the practice of *hearing* or *receiving* these words as Jesus’ own, thereby shaping her vision of Jesus. To encourage such a practice is not only presumptuous of the author but also spiritually dangerous for the reader if the text is anything but the words of Jesus recorded in the Bible. If one desires daily to hear Jesus’ voice, one needs only to read the Gospels. Even the apostle Paul was careful to distinguish his own spiritual guidance from the commands of Jesus Himself (1 Cor. 7:10–12). Authors of spiritual growth books would do well to follow Paul’s example. Ironically, in one of the daily readings in *Jesus Calling*, Young’s Jesus character admonishes the reader to discern his voice from false impersonations: “Many voices vie for control of your mind, especially when you sit in silence. You must learn to discern what is My voice and what is not. Ask My Spirit to give you this discernment” (66). Readers who desire to heed this advice should put down *Jesus Calling* and pick up a Bible.

By contrast with the practice at the heart of *Jesus Calling*, the central practice at the heart of *One Thousand Gifts* is spiritually unproblematic. Voskamp encourages a habit she calls “*eucharisteo*,” which consists in attending to and giving thanks to God for all of the goods of life, including the seemingly minor and mundane. Less of a devotional guide and more of a spiritual autobiography (companion devotional guide sold separately), the book chronicles Voskamp’s own spiritual growth through the practice of writing down a list of one thousand things she loves and for which she is thankful, often photographing them along the way. Drawing on the writings of the medieval Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich, Voskamp explains, “If clinging to His goodness is the highest form of prayer, then this seeing His goodness with a pen, with a shutter, with a word of thanks, these really are the most sacred acts conceivable” (61). Even if her claim is a bit hyperbolic (surely the traditional sacraments of the church, including the Eucharist, baptism, and marriage, are equally, if not more, sacred), the habitual practice of giving thanks to God for His goodness to us in all circumstances is both spiritually beneficial and biblically enjoined (cf. 1 Thess. 5:16–18).

TIP 4: KEEP WATCH FOR DISTORTIONS OF THE GOSPEL

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the “good news” that, despite our having turned away from God and put ourselves at enmity with Him through sin, He loved us enough to save us from the due penalty for our sin—spiritual death. In order to forgive our sins and reconcile us to Himself so that we might live at peace and in union with Him for all eternity, God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to be the incarnate Word of God, live a perfectly sinless life, die on a Roman cross for our sins, and defeat sin and death once and for all by rising from the dead. By the grace of God and on account of the saving work of Jesus through the Holy Spirit, forgiveness of sins and union with God in Christ are available to all who place their faith in Jesus and acknowledge that Jesus is Lord over all. This is truly good news!

Any spiritual growth book that distorts this gospel by downplaying our sin or our need of forgiveness, by undermining the uniqueness of salvation through Jesus Christ, by diminishing the importance of Jesus' physical resurrection from the dead, or in any other way, ought to be rejected out of hand. The gospel is the central message of the Christian faith and thus ought to be at the heart of all efforts to grow spiritually.

Despite their many dissimilarities, *Jesus Calling* and *One Thousand Gifts* both belong within an increasingly popular spiritual tradition that subtly threatens to undermine the claim of the gospel that our deepest spiritual need is forgiveness of our sins. Neither of these books explicitly denies our need for forgiveness. In fact, both books affirm, at least in a few passages, the problem of sin and the salvation available through Jesus' death and resurrection, though forgiveness rarely is mentioned. The way in which these books threaten to undermine the gospel message of forgiveness of sins is thus less a matter of content and more a matter of emphasis.

Rather than emphasizing our need for the forgiveness of sins, both of these books emphasize the central importance of gratitude for the Christian life. In fact, these books reflect a spiritual tradition that elevates gratitude to the status of the most important Christian virtue and identifies ingratitude as the root of all sin. This tradition is exemplified in the writings of St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), who famously identified ingratitude as "the cause, beginning, and origin of all sins and misfortunes."⁵ In a similar vein, Voskamp places gratitude at the heart of the Christian faith: "This is the crux of Christianity: to remember and give thanks, *eucharisteo*. Why? Why is remembering and giving thanks the core of the Christ-faith? *Because remembering with thanks is what causes us to trust—to really believe*" (153, emphasis in original). We might call the central message of this tradition the *gospel of gratitude* since it posits gratitude as the solution to the pervasive human ills of anxiety, pride, and self-preoccupation.

Of course, there is nothing unchristian about gratitude. Gratitude is, indeed, an important Christian virtue, and Voskamp is right to observe an intimate connection between gratitude and Christian faith. The problem arises when we forget what we ultimately ought to be grateful for. The distinctive feature of *Christian* gratitude is that it is gratitude for God's gracious forgiveness of our sins through the saving work of Jesus Christ. When reading *Jesus Calling* and *One Thousand Gifts*, it is too easy to forget this essential aspect of the gospel. The casual reader of these books, unfamiliar with the Christian faith, might well come away thinking that humanity's fundamental spiritual problem is not willful disobedience of God but rather anxiety, worry, and ungratefulness; and that salvation is found not in faith in Jesus to save us from our sins but in ridding ourselves of anxiety by developing a heart of gratitude for all of God's good gifts to us, of which Jesus' death on the cross is but one among many examples. In a particularly telling passage of *Jesus Calling*, Young (again, in the voice of Jesus) admonishes readers to develop thankfulness (for what it isn't clear) and mentions Jesus' crucifixion almost as an afterthought: "As you sit quietly in My Presence, let me fill your heart and mind with thankfulness. This is the most direct way to achieve a thankful stance. If your mind needs a focal point, gaze at My Love poured out for you

on the cross” (342). It is hard to say what is more troubling, this passage or the multitude of other passages in *Jesus Calling* that encourage an amorphous attitude of thankfulness without mentioning forgiveness of sins or even specifying any object of gratitude at all.

It is important here to reiterate that I am not accusing either of these authors of rejecting or directly undermining the gospel of Jesus Christ. Voskamp is especially to be commended for her efforts to explain the connection between the virtuous habit of gratitude and the Christian faith. Nevertheless, in their focus on cultivating gratitude, both authors significantly underemphasize the fundamental problem of sin and the ultimate object of Christian gratitude — the forgiveness of sins.

In addition to the tips enumerated above, many more might be added, such as the importance of watching out for books that encourage the suspension of critical thinking and cognitive effort in spiritual disciplines, as well as books that deeply discount the cost of following Jesus by encouraging complacency about sinful habits and attitudes. Taken together, these tips can help readers to distinguish healthy and nourishing spiritual growth books from unhealthy ones. As for the two books examined here, to the careful reader who keeps the above cautions in mind, I commend *One Thousand Gifts* as a beautifully written, insightful, and edifying recounting of the significance of the spiritual discipline of gratitude in one Christian’s spiritual journey. For the reasons enumerated above, however, I strongly caution against using *Jesus Calling* as a devotional guide.⁶

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NOTES

- 1 Sarah Young, *Jesus Calling* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004).
- 2 Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).
- 3 See Elliot Miller, “The New Age Movement: What Is It?” *Christian Research Journal* 8, 2 (1985); <http://www.equip.org/article/the-new-age-movement-what-is-it/>.
- 4 Hank Hanegraaff, *The Bible Answer Book* (Nashville: J. Countryman, 2004), 178.
- 5 Letter to Father Simon Rodrigues, Letter 38, in *Letters of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. William J. Young (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1959), 55.
- 6 The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the US Air Force, the US Department of Defense, or the US government.