



Reading the Christian Spiritual Classics: A Guide for Evangelicals

Available July 2013

\$24, 340 pages, paperback
978-0-8308-3997-1

Contributor **Dr. John Coe** is the director of the Institute for Spiritual Formation at Biola University and has been associate professor of spiritual theology and philosophy at the Talbot School of Theology and the Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University, since 1987. Dr. Coe primarily teaches and writes in the areas of spirituality, theology, psychological maturity and gender issues, as well as the integration between theology, psychology, philosophy and ethics. Dr. Coe received the MA and PhD in philosophy from the University of

Why We Should (and Should Not) Read the Classics

One might be tempted ... to not take any interest in reading the ancient Christian spiritual writers, thinking, for example, that only the Scriptures contain insight into the spiritual life. This view demonstrates ignorance of the biblical truth in Proverbs that there is wisdom available to the believer from observation and reflection on creation and life.

Moreover, this Bible-only approach to understanding the Christian life ignores the importance of developing a spiritual theology in which one not only integrates the insights from Scripture regarding growth with insight and wisdom from creation, but also *applies* these truths to human experience, which requires human observation, reflection and experience. This failure to appreciate a robust spiritual theology results in a superficial understanding of growth. One might know the general prescriptions of the Bible, for example, to put aside anger and malice (Col 3:8) but may fall short in the wisdom of how to actually do this. Observation, reflection and experience will aid the believer in understanding the dynamic processes of malice and how this vice habit of the heart might be changed over time. This is the responsibility of the church to discover in dependence on the Spirit in any particular case.

This Scripture-only approach to understanding spiritual formation also goes contrary to the Bible's own affirmations about the role of the body of Christ in growth. As stated earlier, Paul clearly admonishes fellow believers to follow his example and to observe and follow the example of others in their midst who followed Paul (Phil 3:17). The biblical model is to not only study the Bible but also to be related to one another in healthy ways and to be open to the examples of others that generally have followed the apostolic example of the spiritual life. In fact, we have some of the best examples of this in the writings and lives of the saints who have gone before us. Wisdom would inform us to take full advantage of this, though not at the expense of being assisted by living believers. . . .

Of course, reading spiritual classics, though a potentially wonderful way to glean wisdom from believers living before us, can become a substitute for the communal giving and receiving of words from one another in real life. In this case a believer can be tempted to use *reading* of spiritual insights as a *defense* against being with other believers and engaging in the risk and messiness of love and community. A book is safe compared to people, but the words of saints gone by are not to be a substitute for the growth that comes about only through persons in relationship in the body of Christ, loving, helping, admonishing and encouraging one another. . . .

Furthermore, the reading of the ancient spiritual writers is no substitute for a life of obedience. One great human malady of the intellect is its penchant in the Fall to deceive the

 INTERVARSITY PRESS

Visit ivpress.com/media



FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO SCHEDULE AN INTERVIEW CONTACT:

Krista Carnet, broadcast publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kkcarnet@ivpress.com
Alisse Wissman, print publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com
Adrianna Wright, online publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4096 or awright@ivpress.com
ivpress.com/academic



BOOK EXCERPT

California, Irvine, MA in theology from Talbot School of Theology, MA in humanities from Western Kentucky University, and BA in Bible and theology from Biola University.

Editor **Jamin Goggin** (PhD candidate, University of Wales Trinity Saint David) is a pastor at Saddleback Church. He holds an MA in spiritual formation and soul care and an MA in New Testament from Talbot School of Theology. Jamin is cofounder of Metamorphia Ministries.

Editor **Kyle Strobel** is professor of theology at Grand Canyon University. He has written *Jonathan Edwards's Theology: A Reinterpretation* (T & T Clark, 2013), *Formed for the Glory of God: Learning from the Practices of Jonathan Edwards* (IVP Academic, 2013), and has edited *Charity and Its Fruits: Living in the Light of God's Love* (Crossway, 2012).

knower into construing that to know something is somehow to do or become that thing.

This is especially the temptation of those who love to study and learn—even in the best of persons. The lover of knowledge experiences so intensely the thing known that this becomes a kind of *experiential substitute* for doing and character change. This is a very subtle deception, one that is not consciously pernicious but over time distances the self from what is truly going on in oneself. It is like the person in James who is a hearer (in this case, a reader) of the word and not a doer, one who sees in a mirror something good and true but walks away from it and forgets to carry into action and change (Jas 1:22-24). Rather, the temptation may be to rush off into more experiences of knowing. Again, the reader of the classics must open the heart to God and honesty regarding whether the knowing experience has become an end in itself.

A very real temptation in reading the spiritual writers is that which John of the Cross calls “spiritual gluttony.” In this case the spiritual glutton is one who is tempted to read spiritual classics for the spiritual “feeling” it produces and not for piety and the truth of a matter. The spiritual glutton rummages through pages of the ancients, “lusting” for insight that “inspires” as a way to avoid the truth of what is going on in his or her life and attending to purity and practical holiness. This vice morphs spiritual transformation into a kind of “spiritual aesthetic,” an exchange of holiness for beautiful and splendid feelings and experiences of God. This pursuit of spiritual consolation is particularly problematic for believers who feel stuck in spiritual dryness and aridity, who in their hearts cry out with the psalmist “How long, O LORD” (Ps 13:1-2) but have wearied of this and now seek for morsels of consolation and spiritual feelings as a way to not feel their deep longings and what God may reveal in the dryness. Here believers need to trust not in spiritual feelings but in the God who indwells them and calls them to open their hearts to what the Spirit is searching (Ps 139:23-24).

Finally, there is the temptation to use reading spiritual classics as a substitute for personally opening to God in prayer. In this case the believer can be tempted to substitute opening to the living God for a spirituality of intellectualism or experientialism. So rather than honestly opening to what is really going on in one’s prayer life with its potential dryness and loneliness, the person avoids this confusion by searching the pages of some ancient for an insight, idea or experience that might console the heart or illumine the mind in order for a moment to forget the internal chaos. It is a fine and legitimate thing to employ others in the body of Christ and their ideas to find solace, comfort and insight when we are feeling distant from God or confused. Nevertheless, reading and insight should never become a defense such that we over time altogether avoid the crucible of prayer. There are seasons where prayer will decrease and the need for a brother or sister (or reading) will increase as we attempt to understand and discern the ways of God. But these times are not meant to be forever but as means and graces to once again open the heart to God in prayer.

– Adapted from Chapter 2, “Temptations in Reading Spiritual Classics” by Dr. John Coe

 **INTERVARSITY PRESS**
Visit ivpress.com/media



FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO SCHEDULE AN INTERVIEW CONTACT:

Krista Carnet, broadcast publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kkcarnet@ivpress.com
Alisse Wissman, print publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com
Adrianna Wright, online publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4096 or awright@ivpress.com
ivpress.com/academic