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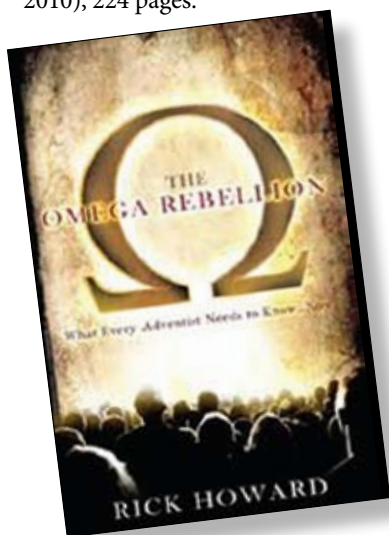
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Is Spiritual Formation Bad for Us?

By Kenley D. Hall

Howard, Rick, *The Omega Rebellion: What Every Adventist Needs to Know...Now.* (Coldwater, MI: Remnant Publications, 2010), 224 pages.



Beginning in 2009, a growing debate emerged in the Seventh-day Adventist Church over the teaching of spiritual formation in various Adventist universities and in particular at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. The proliferation of books and websites promoting a form of mystic and Eastern spirituality has alerted Christians of all denominations to the dangers of certain approaches to communion with the divine. Seventh-day Adventists are rightly concerned about avoiding mystical and Eastern practices as a way of communing with God. Authentic Christian spirituality is a topic that is near and dear to all of us, since it has been one of our core values since our formation as a movement in 1863. However, without an open and honest discussion of the issue of spiritual formation, we face a twofold danger.

First, there is the danger of uncritically embracing all forms of spiritual formation. Second, there is the danger of the proverbial “throwing the baby out with the bath water.” We risk rejecting all forms of spiritual formation, including principles taught in the Bible and espoused in the Spirit of Prophecy that are the very things that promote true spirituality and discipleship. We need these principles now more than ever, as the church makes an appeal for reformation and revival.

Rick Howard’s newly published book has fanned the flames of the growing debate over spiritual formation in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. But has his book made a positive contribution to a discussion that the Seventh-day Adventist Church does need to have?

According to the back cover of his book, Rick Howard has pastored for 33 years in the Eastern and Central United States. He claims that his five-year involvement in the occult world, and the subsequent light of the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy, provide him with unique insight into the last-day deception that God’s people will face.

Exposing End-Time Omega

In the introductory paragraph in Chapter 1, Howard states that the purpose of the book is “to expose what may be the end-time omega from presently gaining a foothold in our beloved church” (p. 17). In order to expose what he thinks the omega may be, he recounts the trials faced by the Adventist Church at the turn of the 20th century, brought on by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg and the publication of his pantheistic ideas in *Living Temple*. Howard offers this lesson in history because, as he points out, according to Ellen White the church will face a similar deception in the last days. The title for Howard’s book and his method of exposing the final deception

are not unique. His title and his arguments are similar in many ways to Lewis Walton’s book *Omega*, published in 1981. The most fundamental difference between the two books is the speculative interpretation that each author gives to the Omega deception. Walton wrote his book as a counter attack to the teachings of Desmond Ford, Walter Rea, and Ronald Numbers. Thus he saw the Omega as the evils of modern critical thinking that were entering the church. Twenty-nine years later, using the same historical framework as Walton, Howard has reframed the speculative interpretation of the Omega as the practices of spiritual formation that are entering the church.

The sources Howard uses to make his case cannot be analyzed, since the book contains neither a bibliography nor a reference list. Devoid of sources, he resorts to rhetoric, emotionalism, and questionable reasoning to make his case.

In the first chapter, before even beginning to lay out evidence for his claims, Howard seeks to encourage readers to accept what he will say based on faith and not reason. He claims that “there were many undeniable providences of God that brought together those who recognize this deception” (p. 19). Thus it is “God’s leading to expose and explain those teachings hidden under the innocent-sounding term of spiritual formation” (p. 19). Whether by intent or not, the implication is that if readers disagree with or challenge the arguments that Howard makes in the chapters that follow, they are not questioning Howard; they are questioning God.

Howard makes an interesting secondary claim to unique authority on the subject of the omega. He argues that the five years he spent in the occult make him more qualified to see the last deception. It is a curious argument if you follow it to its logical conclusion. It

could suggest that time spent with the Devil is more important to discerning the counterfeit than time spent with Jesus Christ.

Questionable Reasoning

The most disturbing aspect of Howard's book is not his claims to authority. Rather, it is his questionable reasoning and the lack of evidence to support his conclusions. In Chapter 2, Howard begins to expose the teaching or program that he sees as the omega: spiritual formation. However, he very narrowly defines spiritual formation in the context of the Roman Catholic tradition and practice of spiritual formation arising from the teaching and practices of Ignatius Loyola. He has thus set up a clear word association that he will use throughout the book. When readers hear the term *spiritual formation*, he wants them to hear *Roman Catholic* and *Jesuit*.

He uses such a word association for his sweeping claim that the spiritual exercises of Ignatius (of the Jesuit order) are the foundation for all spiritual formation. Notice his logic. Because he narrowly defines spiritual formation in a Roman Catholic context, it follows then that all spiritual formation is based on the theology of a Jesuit; thus this must also be the theology behind the teaching of Adventist leaders who have been trained in spiritual formation.

Howard conveniently ignores (or is ignorant of) the fact that in academic circles the expression *spiritual formation* is used for growth toward spiritual maturity through the process of discipleship and sanctification. Of course, this is because the omission of a bibliography or reference list suggests that he has not really researched the topic.

It is unfair and untrue to state that the

term *spiritual formation* is inherently evil and should be associated only with Catholic mysticism. Through his narrow interpretation of spiritual formation, Howard seeks to make people "an offender for a word." Perhaps he should heed this counsel of Ellen White: "There are some who imagine that it is their duty to be church tinkers. It is agreeable to their natural feelings to be seeking spot and stain in others; they watch diligently for something to reprove, and they become narrower and narrower in their ideas, until they are ready to make one an offender for a word."¹

Sweeping Accusations

Throughout the book Howard makes sweeping accusations yet offers no evidence of their validity other than word association. Note how, in the examples below, he makes someone an offender for a word. He offers the following quote from an Adventist pastor:

"Without spiritual formation, a person would be 'spiritually uncivilized.' It is the process by which they can go from being an infant to spiritual maturity ... developing the potential that God's put within you" (p. 119). Howard then makes the sweeping claim that "the opinion exists with [Richard] Foster, [Henri] Nouwen, and the unnamed Adventist pastor that spiritual advancement will only take place when one masters the ability to enter into the mystical silence of contemplative prayer" (p. 120). This claim is completely unsupported by the pastor's quote, in which there is no talk of mystical silence or contemplative prayer. Very literally Howard has put words into this pastor's mouth.

Notice how Howard again manipulates a quote from an unnamed Seventh-day Adventist pastor:

"Real spiritual formation is a process

of growing more and more in tune to discernment of *God's voice* as well as more and more tuned to discernment of God's moving in my life, in the ordinary of life, as well as even in the difficult times of life. That's where real spiritual formation, or at least the value of spiritual formation, is seen" (p. 124).

It should be noted that we are not told the context of the larger conversation of which this quote was a part, nor is any reference given for the quotation. We are just supposed to trust that some Adventist pastor, at some unknown time and in an unknown context, made this statement. After presenting the quotation, Howard follows his word association argument. He tells the reader to note "how this pastor spoke of 'the discernment of God's voice' as a part of his experience" (p. 125). He then suggests that because discerning the voice of God is often the main attraction of contemplative prayer, the pastor must be talking about contemplative prayer. Yet note that the pastor never talks about contemplative prayer. Howard is merely trying to make him an offender for a word.

In an interesting contradiction, the author asserts under the chapter titled "Rebellion" that in response to his personal cry to God for help to understand why people are chasing after his interpretation of the omega deception, he heard the answer "Rebellion!" He goes on to say: "It was unmistakable. I knew it was not my mind's voice, but the Lord's" (p. 156). How did he know it was not his voice but the Lord's? He had to be able to discern the Lord's voice. So Howard can discern the Lord's voice; but when a pastor expresses that desire, somehow it is inherently wrong? Of course, in the dizzying logic of Howard, that is because the pastor was talking about discerning God's voice in the context of spiritual formation, and according to Howard, all

spiritual formation is Roman Catholic and Jesuit.

Catholic Mysticism

Howard offers another quote taken from an Adventist website to prove that Catholic mysticism is slipping into the church. In response to a question about a favorite memory from GODencounters, a pastor answered, “lingering in the presence of God” (p. 114). Before offering the quote, Howard suggests that the answer is most telling. It seems that according to Howard, it should concern us that a pastor desires to linger in God’s presence. According to his argument of guilt by word association, he points out that Ellen White talked about people during the omega being deceived about the personality of God and where his presence is. Thus what this pastor says regarding lingering in this presence of God must equal the omega deception about the presence of God.

The context of Ellen White’s statement on being deceived about where the presence of God is was made in the context of Dr. Kellogg’s pantheistic views that God is everything and in everything. However, Howard twists this argument to suggest that those who talk about having Jesus in their hearts have displaced the presence of Jesus from the temple in heaven and cancelled out the need for a sanctuary in heaven. Somehow he misses the fact that Scripture presents not an either/or but a both/and. Jesus works as our high priest in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 5:14-16; 9:12) and also dwells within our heart temples through the presence of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor. 6:18; 2 Cor. 4:10).

Ultimately Howard’s whole argument about the presence of God should be disconcerting for Seventh-day Adventists. He narrowly defines the presence of God, arguing, “could it

be considered that those who practice spiritual formation have their own personal sanctuary which they carry with them in their hearts; a sanctuary replacing the genuine, the one the Lord pitched and not man? ... To place the person of Jesus inside all human hearts is without a doubt pantheistic (p. 135). His argument turns the Apostle Paul into a pantheist for claiming that “Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20, NIV). Additionally, his narrow argument turns Ellen White into a pantheist when she says: “We may drink, and drink again, and ever find a fresh supply. He in whom Christ dwells has within himself the fountain of blessing, ‘a well of water springing up into everlasting life.’ From this source he may draw strength and grace sufficient for all his needs.”² Ultimately, Howard’s position about the presence of Jesus in the light of “the law and the testimony” must be seen as doctrinal heresy.

In addition to these very isolated quotations, which Howard seeks to use as evidence based on word association, he makes other very broad and sweeping claims without presenting any evidence. The following are a small sampling:

“It is a fact that many in our beloved church have received training in spiritual formation, where they have learned to practice ‘contemplative/mystical prayer’” (p. 142). Yet Howard offers no evidence to back up his supposed fact.

“It is a fact, that there is a movement spreading rapidly through the Protestant community, called the ‘emerging church,’ whose influence has reached all the way from the local congregations to the universities and leadership of our Seventh-day Adventist Church” (p. 154). Once again, he offers high-volume rhetoric and no evidence to back it up.

Do Not Listen to Non-Adventists

Another argument that Howard makes in his book is that Seventh-day Adventists should never attend seminars, listen to DVDs, or read books by non-Seventh-day Adventists for the purpose of receiving teaching. He supports his argument with various Ellen White quotations. However, he never addresses the context of the statements that he uses. Nor does he address the fact that at times Ellen White encouraged Adventists to attend the meetings of others and to invite them to speak at our meetings.³

“The Lord knows that our knowledge of the truth is not enough to protect us from Satan’s final work of deception. ... the only way to victory is to have a personal knowledge of Satan’s plans and activities” (p. 177). This argument, taken to its logical conclusion, would suggest that it is more important to have a personal knowledge of Satan than of Jesus Christ.

While an honest and open discussion of spiritual formation is needed in the Seventh-day Adventist church, Howard’s book does not make a positive contribution to this discussion. Ultimately, Howard’s book is high on rhetoric with few facts to back up his assertions. It is a book that will appeal to Adventist conspiracy theorists, who do not allow facts or the truth to get in the way of a good story.

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¹ Ellen G. White, *Pastoral Ministry* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference Ministerial Association, 1995), p. 268.

² Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 187.

³ For an example, see her book *Temperance*, p. 218.