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Pentecostals and the Mystical Threefold Path in Historic Christian Spirituality: Strengthening the Inner Being with Power through the Spirit

Roger Heuser

Abstract

Increasingly, scholars have framed Pentecostals' theological identity and spirituality flowing in multiple streams of Christianity, including the historic, mystical stream. What can we learn from the mystical forbearers of Christian faith? What does mystical theology have to offer a Spirit-empowered global Christianity? Could the mystics' theological understanding of the soul's journey towards intimate union with God inform Pentecostal understandings of sanctification and spiritual formation? My aim in this paper is to explore the theological-metaphorical frameworks used by Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross who, among others in mystical theology, described the soul's journey in what has come to be known as the Threefold Path – the Way of Purgation (Purification), the Way of Illumination, and the Way of Union. I will also summarise potential lessons for Pentecostals to consider in accentuating the Spirit-abiding presence of the soul's journey towards Christlikeness.

Key Words: John of the Cross, mystical experiences, mystical union with Christ, Pentecostal spirituality, Threefold Mystical Path, Teresa of Avila

Introduction

The early Pentecostals believed that the *inner life* of the Spirit, bearing witness to their deep, spiritual hunger, was indispensably related to divine experiences of *outward manifestations* of the Spirit. Describing the spiritual desires of participants at the Azusa Street Mission, Cecil Robeck recounts how those present were challenged to “wrestle with God” and know “beyond a shadow of a doubt that God stands ready to pour out His Spirit in fresh ways once again, if only our souls, like the deer that pants after streams of water, would pant with the same level of passion after God (Ps 42:1). Something new, something

wonderful had happened before their eyes. They had encountered God in all God's fullness!"¹

Over a century after the Azusa Street revival, the experiential spirituality of Pentecostalism continues to be the wellspring that energises its rapid, far-reaching expansion into developing nations. Marius Nel describes an African Pentecostal spirituality that he believes is best understood in the mystical stream of Christianity. The interactive worship experiences of believers reveal their deeply felt emotions expressed in dance, laughter, weeping in joy or sadness, and waiting in stillness.² Nimi Wariboko explains that "For some believers, the pleasures come from the excitement of the body and its senses; and for others, they are from *pure contemplation of the divine*"³ (emphasis added). Amos Yong points out that this "... pietist-Pentecostal border-and-boundary-crossing missionary movement that has shaped large swaths of contemporary world Christianity ... [its] palpable heart-devotion and religiosity are now manifest in many regions, cultures, and languages around the world."⁴ The energising message of Pentecostalism promotes the normalcy of persons being vessels of the Holy Spirit, who are not only engaged in expressive worship but also embrace an inspired agency that empowers innovative leadership and expressions of sacrificial service. The multiple forms of Pentecostalism and respective spiritualities are expressed in different cultural contexts that include different phases within revival movements and different stages of institutionalisation.⁵

The origins of Pentecostalism and its ensuing renewal movements have continued to flow through porous boundaries – to and from multiple traditions in Christian faith. Perhaps surprising to some, scholars are increasingly framing the theological identity and spirituality of Pentecostalism among the mystical streams of Christianity.⁶ Along with Pentecostal renewal movements, there

¹ Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., *The Azusa Street Mission & Revival: The Birth of the Global Pentecostal Movement* (Thomas Nelson, 2006), 3.

² Marius Nel, "African Pentecostal Spirituality as a Mystical Tradition: How Regaining Its Roots Could Benefit Pentecostals," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 4 (June 2020): 4, DOI:10.4102/hts.v76i4.5904.

³ Nimi Wariboko, "West African Pentecostalism: A Survey of Everyday Theology," in *Global Renewal Christianity: Spirit-Empowered Movements: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Vinson Synan et al. (Charisma House, 2016), chap. 1, loc. 695 of 8374, Kindle.

⁴ Amos Yong, "Many Tongues, Many Formational Practices: Christian Spirituality/Formation across Global Christian Contexts," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 22, no. 1 (2022): 59-60, 10.1353/scs.2022.0005.

⁵ Sociological theorists have outlined the core stages of institutionalisation, including Emergence of charismatic origin, Formalisation, Routinisation, Legitimation, and Sedimentation (resistance to change). See Margaret M. Poloma and John C. Green, *The Assemblies of God: Godly Love and the Revitalization of American Pentecostalism* (NYU Press, 2010), 120.

⁶ Steven Land describes the flow of Pentecostalism as a "paradoxical continuity and discontinuity with other streams of Christianity ... it is more Eastern than Western in its understanding of spirituality as perfection and participation in the divine life (theosis). In this regard it has much to learn from persons like Gregory of Nyssa, Macarius the Egyptian, and St Symeon, the New Theologian. It is both ascetic and mystical. ...

continues to be a growing interest in spirituality that has resulted in an ecumenical fountainhead of writings from Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant backgrounds, which has crossed the denominational boundaries of readers as well. Contemporary writers have probed and expanded the lessons learned from mystical writers in historic Christian spirituality, whose main focus was on the believer's inner dynamics of being transformed into intimate union with Christ.

Pentecostal spirituality accentuates the expressive, often dramatic experiences of the Spirit rather than the contemplative, often hidden, interior life of the Spirit. Embracing the contemplative and expressive dimensions of Christian spirituality, Frank Macchia highlights the beauty of humanity's transcendent experiences, explaining that

Our inner self lives from and yearns for God. It seems there is no other way of fully explaining the persistent and widespread reach of humanity for transcendence apart from our existence as souls. The theological correlate of this insight is that we were made for a divine presence that indwells us deep within so as to bring the life of the soul to fulfilment. ... In the Spirit, we are driven toward ecstasy, to find ourselves beyond ourselves in God and (after Christ's image) for others. We are led to transcend ourselves in worship (ecstatic delight and celebration), in communion (mutual participation in life), and in witness (declaring the wonders of God). Yet we maintain our unique centres in God.⁷

One's intimate experience of God that accentuates divine attributes of power, light, goodness, beauty, or joy has been described by James Thomas Dubay as a "mystical touch" – a divine union when God gives someone the unspeakable experiences of himself in contemplative immersion.⁸

Pentecostals are well acquainted with biblical texts that accentuate the more dramatic, mystical encounters with God, such as Elijah's encounter with nature's disruptions, but thereafter concluding that God was in the "sound of sheer silence" (1 Kgs 19:11-13).⁹ Luke records the hallmark passage for Pentecostals that included the phenomena of "a sound like the rush of a violent wind ... divided tongues of fire resting on each of them ... [and those who were all] filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them the ability" (Acts 2:1-4). Pentecostals do not question the authenticity of Peter's vision of unclean animals in a sheet lowered from heaven with a voice that told him to kill and eat them against his deeply held convictions according to Hebrew dietary laws (10:9-16). Paul reports in 2 Corinthians

[thus,] more Catholic than Protestant in emphasizing sanctification-transformation more than forensic justification ..." Steven Jack Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (CPT Press, 1993), 18. Daniel Castelo has made a strong argument that "Pentecostalism is best framed as a modern instantiation of the mystical stream of Christianity recognizable throughout its history." See Daniel Castelo, *Pentecostalism as a Christian Mystical Tradition* (Eerdmans, 2017), xv-xvi; and Daniel E. Albrecht, *Rites in the Spirit: A Ritual Approach to Pentecostal/Charismatic Spirituality* (T&T Clark, 1999).

⁷ Frank D. Macchia, *Tongues of Fire: A Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Cascade Books, 2023), 268.

⁸ Thoms Dubay, *Fire Within: St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and the Gospel—On Prayer* (Ignatian Press, 1989), 45, 47.

⁹ All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the NRSV Version.

that he knew someone “who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows” (12:2). Paul then goes on to report a “thorn in the flesh” that was given to him (a messenger of Satan) to torment and keep him from being “too elated” (v. 7b). After appealing three times in prayer, the Lord says to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (v. 9a). Paul concludes, “So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (v. 9b).

The mystical experiences portrayed in Scripture are often used as analogous arguments for contemporary experiences of the supernatural within Pentecostal movements. But these accounts of mystical experiences also point to an interior transformation that effects the participant’s reframing of reality. Paul’s statements that Christ’s “power is made perfect in weakness” is a polarity (interdependent opposites leading to “both/and” thinking) that most find difficult to understand, except for the mystics whose lives were changed.¹⁰

Though the term “mysticism” is seldom used among Pentecostals (and most Protestants), the adjective *mystikos* (“hidden”) was widely used among Christians beginning in the second century CE. Patristic theological roots (roughly 200-600 CE) eventually evolved into what became known as “mystical theology” (beginning in 500-600 CE), which continued to flourish in subsequent centuries in both Eastern and Western traditions until rationalism’s predominance during the Enlightenment period (1650-1900 CE). However, since the late nineteenth century, there has been a growing academic interest in mysticism¹¹ with particular attention on Christian mysticism that represents a recovery of patristic and medieval sources along with contemporary writings in Christian spirituality.

Of particular interest is that which Bernard McGinn points out in his lifelong study of mysticism: Christian mystical writers emphasised that one’s inner transformation towards *mystical union* with God was more important than the phenomenon itself. The distinction of inner transformation is important in defining Christian mysticism as a “... knowing and loving based on states of awareness in which God becomes present in our inner acts, not as an object to be grasped, but as the direct and transforming center

¹⁰ Philosopher/psychologist William James argues that mystical experiences are authoritatively self-authenticating even though they may not be verified by science or rational thought. But people may connect a mystical experience to a theological framework that “authenticates” their experiences (Scripture, image of God, church history/tradition, testimony of others). Hence, James believes that there are “objective” and “subjective” parts to mystical experiences. For example, a person may experience a rainbow with memories and feelings that surface from one’s subconsciousness. Another person thinks about the scientific explanation of the nature’s phenomenon. Yet another remembers the story of Noah and the flood and questions how all the animals were in the ark. James illustrates an experience of a “devout man [who] tells you that in the solitude of his room or of the fields he still feels the divine presence, that inflowings of help come in reply to his prayers, and that sacrifices to this unseen reality fill him with security and peace.” See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Collier Books, 1961), 386.

¹¹ James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

of life.”¹² Mystical phenomena were seen as part of one’s spiritual “journeying” – a biblical metaphor used, for example, to describe the people of God in the Hebrew Scriptures over several centuries as well as the life of Jesus, the missionary trips of Paul, and multiple times as spiritual pilgrims thereafter.¹³

Relevant to one’s inner life transformation journey is the continuing interest in sixteenth-century Spanish authors Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, whose writings continue to function as exemplars in mystical theology. A common spiritual framework, used since Pseudo-Dionysius¹⁴ in the late fifteenth century, was the Threefold Mystical Path – the Way of Purgation (Purification), the Way of Illumination, and the Way of Union. The mystical writers did not use the current language of “sanctification” or “Spirit baptism” that have stimulated important theological convictions and differences among Pentecostals.¹⁵ Nevertheless, I hope that the following reflections on the Threefold Path will be considered by those in the *praxis* of ministry, who desire what Paul describes as “a strengthening of the inner being with power through the Spirit” (Eph 3:16) while engaged in Spirit-empowered ministry.

The Three Ways – Purgation, Illumination, and Union

As previously stated, the Threefold Mystical Path of spiritual development – *Purgation, Illumination, and Union* – has become known as a classical framework in Christian mystical theology for describing the soul’s journey towards union with God.¹⁶

¹² Bernard McGinn, “Introduction,” in *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn (Modern Library, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, 2006), xvi.

¹³ Early Christians in the Book of Acts were called “the Way.” Later, Paul writes, “Not that I have already obtained this [resurrection from the dead] or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own ... forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:12a, 13b-14).

¹⁴ See Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite, accessed January 16, 2026, <https://ccel.org/ccel/dionysius/works/works.i.html>.

¹⁵ For a rich historical-theological understanding of Pentecostal views and tensions concerning sanctification and Spirit baptism, see Frank Macchia, *Tongues of Fire*, 299-317 and Frank D. Macchia, “Spirit Baptism and Spiritual Formation: A Pentecostal Proposal,” *The Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 13, no. 1 (2020): 49.

¹⁶ Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) described the soul in four degrees of maturing love: He writes: “And we must bear the image of the earthly first, before we can bear the image of the heavenly. At first, a man loves himself for his own sake ... Next, he perceives that he cannot exist by himself, and so begins by faith to seek after God, and to love Him as something necessary to his own welfare. That is the second degree, to love God, not for God’s sake, but selfishly. But when he has learned to worship God and to seek him aright, meditating on God, reading God’s Word, praying and obeying His commandments, he comes gradually to know what God is, and finds Him altogether lovely. So ... he advances to the third degree, when he loves God, not merely as his benefactor but as God. Surely he must remain long in this state; and I know not whether it would be possible to make further progress in this life to the fourth degree and perfect condition wherein man loves solely for God’s sake.” See Bernard of Clairvaux, “Of the Four Degrees of Love, and of the Blessed State of the Heavenly Fatherland,” *On Loving God* (Christian Classic Ethereal Library/The Fig Classic Series, 2012), chap. XV, https://ccel.org/ccel/bernard/loving_god/loving_god.

Evelyn Underhill and others have inserted the “Awakening” stage that preceded purgation.¹⁷

The language of the “soul” was used in Christian mystical writings as a biblically grounded term that made it possible for humanity to experience a divine encounter with God. John of the Cross was trained in the scholastic anthropology that viewed the soul as an “embodied” self whose ultimate purpose was union with God. The “lower” part of the soul referred to the *sensory* aspects of human *experience* (sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell), *emotions*, and *internal senses* (imagination, sensory memory). The soul’s “higher” part related to the *spiritual* aspect that – in addition to the sensory aspect – engaged the *intellect*, *will*, and *memory*. For Teresa, the soul was like an “interior” castle (or a beautiful crystal/diamond) of God’s dwelling that was made up of seven “mansions” or “dwelling places.” Within each mansion there were many rooms where one may live for a while before moving to another room or to another mansion. She was convinced that few people knew much about their soul with its unique, intricate magnificence and mystical depths. For Teresa, *prayer* was the door to explore one’s inner life of the castle. Prayer enables the soul to explore the many rooms and dwelling places on its journey to the centre where “His Majesty” dwells. Christians ever since have used Teresa’s metaphorical language to theologically understand their own spiritual growth. Explaining the soul’s sanctifying journey towards union with Christ, Dallas Willard writes:

We are meant to occupy every room or “dwelling place” [mansion] with God, and thereby to become the radiant beings which he intends ... Dwelling places Five through Seven proved to be, for me, the finest treatments of union with Christ and with God that I have found in spiritual literature ... for the phenomenology, the descriptive analysis of the details of what it is really like, nothing has ever surpassed Teresa’s *Castle*. Union with Christ – in regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification – is of all themes the one in most need of recovery today. And Teresa’s entire treatment of redemption in the spiritual life with Christ is unsurpassed and unlikely to be surpassed in the future.¹⁸

Teresa did not specifically frame her seven mansions within the Threefold Mystical Path. However, spiritual writers since have situated her first three mansions within the Purgative Way.

Purgation

Persons on the *Purgative Way* experience a growing awareness of God’s holiness that sheds light on one’s deep-rooted habits of the heart. The story of Zaccheus illustrates that, when the divine invitation meets human desire, there is potentially a *metanoia* experience that results in a dramatic shift within the human heart that impacts radically changed behaviours. Regardless of the

¹⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness* (A Meridian Book, 1955, 1974), 169-70.

¹⁸ Dallas Willard, “Dallas Willard on Teresa of Avila’s Interior Castle,” Dallas Willard Ministries, accessed January 16, 2026, <https://dwillard.org/resources/articles/introduction-teresa-of-avila-selections-from-the-interior-castle>.

dramatic shifts in one's "conversion," Teresa believed that there often remains a continuing struggle to navigate one's internal resistances and the lure of external enticements to stay on the narrow path.¹⁹

Teresa's First Three Mansions

In the *first mansion* of the soul's interior castle, Teresa describes the journey to the Bridegroom's dwelling place in the castle's centre. On the way, young believers are distracted with specific enticements described by Teresa as "possessions, honour, or business affairs" that dim the inner chamber's light. Spiritual desires may be occasionally expressed, but this pattern can be more transactional. Teresa believed that the real need was to know the soul's inner beauty of a maturing love.

In the *second mansion*, believers are drawn into a deeper study of Scripture and into the community's fellowship. At the same time, evil's compelling forces can persist with more intensity. As a result, some turn back to the "broad" road outside the gate. Like the rich young ruler, any threat to one's wealth, status, and worldly pleasures can reveal one's attachment to them. However, those who have persevered in prayer enter the *third dwelling mansion*. Teresa writes that those who enter the third mansion through prayer guard themselves "against venial [minor] sin, are fond of ascetical practices and periods of recollection, seek to use their time well, practice charity towards their neighbour, and maintain a balance in the use of speech and dress and in the management of their household. They are good Christians."²⁰

The characteristics described by Teresa are certainly desirable in today's congregations. However, both Teresa and John of the Cross argued that believers who were active in ministry could become "spiritually feeble," primarily because they did not see their need to continue the path of purification amidst their active ministries. Perhaps our own experiences of vibrant worship and fruitfulness in ministries depict a spiritual atmosphere that begs the questions, "Who needs a dark night experience?" and "What exactly needs to be purged?"²¹ But Paul's letters to the rapidly growing Early Church communities revealed a spiritual enthusiasm that co-existed with ruptured relationships, sexual misconduct, and the human capacity to rationalise one's transgressions. Could it be that the "miracle workers" whom Jesus addressed in no uncertain terms believed that they were ministering to others in good conscience (Matt 7:21-23)? Any view of sanctification primarily concerned with external actions does not go deeply enough into the human *psyche*. Jesus offended the Pharisees, who wanted to keep

¹⁹ Jesus alerted his followers, "Enter the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life; and there are few who find it" (Matt 7:1-14).

²⁰ Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, trans., *Teresa of Avila: The Interior Castle* (Paulist Press, 1979), 22.

²¹ Simon Chan argues that the dark night of the soul's mystical journey would contribute something vital to Pentecostals, but they "have no place in their schema for the dark night. More often, they are likely to dismiss such an experience as due to lack of faith or an attack from the devil." See Simon Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and The Christian Spiritual Tradition* (Wipf and Stock, 2000), 75-76.

things that defile in behavioural terms, when he taught that “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles” (15:11-20).

John’s Understanding of Attachments and “Dark Night”

John of the Cross called deeply engrained habits “inordinate attachments,” which he believed became “idols” whenever the soul over-identified with them and ended up with an “enslaved heart.”²² The progression of inordinate attachments is a familiar pattern. We become convinced that idols will satisfy our appetites, and perhaps they do, initially, but we never sufficiently reach a satisfying threshold. The more satisfaction we want from the addiction, the more it demands of us, while delivering less. In this state, John contends that the person is “unfree” to cultivate an intimate relationship with God, with oneself, or with others. As a result, the believer learns to rationalise and compartmentalise the God who is worshipped on Sunday from the “gods” who demand more of one’s soul during the week. The idols which individuals had hoped to satisfy their needs have become the masters they serve.

According to John of the Cross, human effort alone is woefully insufficient in freeing one’s enslaved heart from addictions. Instead, God transforms one’s inordinate attachments through the soul’s spiritual journey of “passive” surrender during a journey of the “dark night.” A common misunderstanding of dark night experiences assumes they are negative and better to be avoided. But the Spanish word for “dark” that John used is *oscura*, meaning “obscure.” Thus, the Spirit’s transforming work is often “hidden” in one’s experience of the “apophatic” dark night. This may be excruciatingly difficult, to be sure. But for John the dark night is, necessarily, spiritually powerful and purposeful. Psychiatrist Gerald May explains:

We cannot liberate ourselves; our defenses and resistances will not permit it ... To guide us toward the love that we most desire, we must be taken where we could not and would not go on our own. ... Deep in the darkness, way beneath our senses, God is instilling “another, better love” and “deeper, more urgent longings” that empower our willingness for all the necessary relinquishments along the way.²³

May substantiates the earlier claims of John of the Cross that the work of the Spirit, interiorly, was seen, not primarily as behavioural modification, but rather as a divine work of love that transforms the soul (psyche) into intimate union with Christ.

John’s Dark Night of the Senses – Purgative Transition into the Illuminative Way

John contended that, when involved in dedicated, fruitful ministry, God continues to nourish the soul through spiritual consolations, like a mother who caresses and nurses her child with nourishment. As time goes by, and the child grows older, the mother weans the child and teaches it to walk on its own. By

²² John Welch, *When Gods Die: An Introduction to John of the Cross* (Paulist Press, 1990), 73.

²³ Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection between Darkness and Spiritual Growth* (HarperCollins, 2004), 71, eBook.

analogy, the grace of God brings satisfaction to beginners through the spiritual nourishment of worship, fellowship, and prayer. As stated earlier, these consolations can become a false sense of security when beginners seek consolations from the spiritual experiences themselves.²⁴ John agreed with Teresa that the gratified soul could be more spiritually “feeble.”

To make his point, John examined the subtle ways in which the seven capital vices as a framework – pride, avarice, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth – are not manifested as they normally did before conversion. Now, the vices are “hidden” under the believer’s public display of enthusiasm and ministry.²⁵ To grow beyond this spiritual vulnerability, God “weans” the beginner like a loving mother. The maturing process of “weaning” from dependence on spiritual pleasures – “loving God for self’s sake” – includes a season of “spiritual dryness,”²⁶ which John believed was important for two reasons: first, the soul becomes aware of its *dependence* on spiritual pleasures that was previously unknown; and second, spiritual dryness eventually reveals the soul’s need for more of Spirit’s purification.²⁷ This purgative journey of spiritually maturing love is what John called the “Dark Night of the Senses.”²⁸ The soul learns to love God, implicitly, in the absence of spiritual delights while continually abandoning oneself to “loving God for God’s sake.” In apophatic dryness and darkness, the soul begins to embrace a spiritual humility that “purges” pride and all the capital sins (pride, greed, envy, anger, lust, gluttony, and sloth). John explains:

They will no longer become impatiently angry with themselves and their faults or with their neighbor’s faults. Neither are they displeased or disrespectfully querulous with God of not making them perfect quickly ... Finally, insofar as individuals are purged of their sensory affections and appetites, they obtain liberty of spirit in which they acquire the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit. They are also

²⁴ Bernard’s second degree of love, “Loving God for the sake of oneself.”

²⁵ For example, a secret pride can grow in the beginners’ lives in which they downplay (or are unaware of) their own faults while criticising others who do not have the same level of devotion as they have. John observed that believers can become angry when they do not receive satisfaction from spiritual practices, or they may express anger in their judgement of others while setting up themselves as righteous. See Kieran Kavanaugh and Ernest E. Larkin, trans., *John of the Cross: Selected Writings* (Paulist Press, 1987), 164-78.

²⁶ John identified three signs that determine if one is in the dark night of the senses. The *first sign* is when the soul experiences little or no spiritual satisfaction from the things of God or any creatures (worldly delights)—nothing seems to bring back one’s spiritual delights. The *second sign* is that persons believe that their experience of “dryness” means that they are not serving God, or that they are turning their backs on God. The *third sign* is the feeling of powerlessness in the face of one’s spiritual desires and efforts. See Kavanaugh and Larkin, trans., *John of the Cross*, 181-84.

²⁷ Kavanaugh and Larkin, *John of the Cross*, 189.

²⁸ The *sensory* aspects of human experience (sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell), emotions, and internal senses (imagination, sensory memory), according to John, are accentuated during spiritual delights, but they no longer deliver the spiritual consolation they once provided during the Dark Night of the Senses.

wondrously liberated from the hands of their enemies, the world, the flesh, and the devil.²⁹

Importantly, then, purification is a process of the Spirit's revealing the heart's interior movements, exposing the wounded dimensions of the human personality that need healing. This is the purpose of the Purgative Way.

Illumination

The *Illumination Stage* – sometimes called *the way of light* – is marked by one's deepening awareness of the divine's indwelling presence that is manifested in intimacy, solitude, and soul's rest (Matt 11:28-30; John 14:15-17; 15). While believers are encouraged to maintain and expand their normal spiritual practices, they may also notice how their motives are changing. There is less compulsion, and more interior freedom.

Teresa's Mansions – 4, 5, and Part of 6

Persons in the *fourth mansion* experience the Spirit's illuminating presence in longer periods of attentiveness to God's presence even when the mind "continues to move about."³⁰ For Teresa, the important thing is to "do that which best stirs you to love."³¹ Illustrating the soul's experiences in the *fifth mansion*, Teresa used an analogy of the silkworm that is likened to the "dying of one's self" and "being raised to new life in Christ" (Col 3:1-5). God is like a "cocoon" in which a person "dies" to self. While submitting to God's divine love, the believer's life is "hidden with Christ in God" (v. 3) but then revealed as a new creation, like the "metamorphosis" of a silkworm in a liminal space becoming a beautiful butterfly.³²

The longest section of Teresa's *Interior Castle* is the *sixth mansion*.³³ Here, Teresa describes her spiritual experiences that depict theophanies, visions, and extraordinary experiences, not unlike those experiences described in Scriptures. What Teresa and other mystics described was likened to the "spiritual betrothal" of the Bride's engagement to His Majesty, the period just before one's ultimate homecoming to God. Her scriptural basis was Paul's description of spiritual marriage as "Christ who loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy ... so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish" (Eph 5: 25-27). Bernard of Clairvaux portrays the delicate love of Bridegroom and Bride, writing that

²⁹ Kavanaugh and Larkin, *John of the Cross*, 195.

³⁰ Teresa explained that these distractions of the mind are part of the human condition and cannot be avoided any more than eating and sleeping.

³¹ Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, *Teresa of Avila*, 24.

³² Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, *Teresa of Avila*, 25.

³³ Willard contends that the sixth dwelling place is "the best treatment ever written of what it is like for God to *speak* to his children." See Willard, "Dallas Willard on Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle."

... the Bridegroom who is love – asks only the exchange of love and trust. ... The stream of love does not flow equally Will the Bride's vow perish, then, because of this? Will the desire of her heart, her burning love, her affirmation of confidence, fail in their purpose because she has not the strength to keep pace with a giant, or rival honey in sweetness, the lamb in gentleness, or the lily in whiteness? No. Although the creature loves less, being a lesser being, yet if it loves with its whole heart nothing is lacking ... Such love ... is marriage, for a soul cannot love like this and not be beloved.³⁴

Mystical writers during this period expanded Paul's writings of the church as the "bride of Christ" – using creative, imaginative metaphors that accentuated relational intimacy.

John's Dark Night of the Spirit – The Illuminative Transition into Union

John described "proficients" (or progressives) in the Illuminative Way as those who "go about the things of God with much greater freedom and satisfaction ... no longer bound by ... anxiety of spirit, since it now very readily finds in its spirit the most serene and loving contemplation and spiritual sweetness."³⁵ Nonetheless, there remained ingrained habits of imperfections hidden in the "quiet deep in the soul." The soul's purgation during the first dark night may have cut away the branches, but the deeper roots remain for the purging that is yet to come in the "dark night of the spirit."³⁶ The most difficult struggle in the second night's purgation happens when God "enkindles the soul in the flame of his transforming love."³⁷ John used several passages from the Apostle Paul's writing to introduce his commentary on the second night – the purgation of the spirit (intellect, will, and memory). Paul writes:

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly; fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry) ... These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator (Col 3:5-10).

Any "disordered" attachments that are "rooted" in one's subconscious are now being transformed by the Spirit through one's immersion into the flame of divine love. Consequently, the believer's "healthy" attachment (union) with

³⁴ Bernard of Clairvaux, "The Bridegroom Loves First and More Strongly, the Bride Must Love with her Whole Being," *On Loving God* (Christian Classic Ethereal Library/The Fig Classic Series, 2012), https://ccel.org/ccel/bernard/loving_god/loving_god.

³⁵ E. Allison Peers, ed., *Dark Night of the Soul* (Dover Publications, 203), loc. 912 of 2415, Kindle.

³⁶ Peers, *Dark Night of the Soul*, loc. 942 of 2415, Kindle.

³⁷ In the second dark night, God purifies the soul's *spiritual* aspect (e.g., intellect, will, and memory). John explains that God "divests the faculties, affections, and senses, both spiritual and sensory, interior and exterior. He leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness, and anguish, by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings." Kavanaugh and Larkin, *John of the Cross*, 195, 198-99.

Christ begins to reflect one's *imago Dei* in Christ. The second night – the Dark Night of the Spirit – is the soul's journeying from the Illuminative Way into the Unitive Way.

Union

Teresa's Mansions – Remaining 6 and 7

The "Third Way" of the spiritual journey is ultimately *Union* with God. As seen in the first part of Teresa's *mansion six*, the metaphor of "betrothal" expresses a divine intimacy, but Teresa claimed there were more intense trials of the soul's final preparation before its intimate union with the Bridegroom. Teresa explains: "Just as there was a tempest and tumult that came from heaven when Saint Paul was hurled to the ground, here in this interior world there is a great stirring."³⁸

Dwelling in the *seventh and final mansion of the soul*, Teresa reported that when reading the words of Jesus (John 14:17b, 20), she began to enjoy the habitual company of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in an "intellectual" vision, taking place as a union of marriage between the Bride and His Majesty:

When the soul is brought into that dwelling place [mansion], the Most Blessed Trinity, all three Persons ... First there comes an enkindling in the spirit in the manner of a cloud of magnificent splendor [that] these Persons are distinct ... [and] as a most profound truth that all three Persons are one substance and one power and one knowledge and one God alone. It knows in such a way that what we hold by faith, it understands, we can say, through sight – although the sight is not with the bodily eyes nor the eyes of the soul, because we are not dealing with an imaginative vision. Here all three Persons communicate themselves to [the soul], speak to it, and explain those words of the Lord in the Gospel: that He and the Father and the Holy Spirit will come to dwell with the soul that loves Him and keeps His commandments.³⁹

Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez sum up Teresa's description of the soul's union with God:

... the butterfly dies with the greatest joy because its new life is Christ. In Paul's words, "He that is joined or united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" [1 Cor 6:17]. The ultimate goal, then, of Teresa's journey, the spiritual marriage, is a union with Jesus incarnate ... risen and connotated by the attributes of His earthly adventure, especially those of His resurrection. With the passing of time, the soul understands more clearly that its life is Christ. ... the purpose of all these splendid favors is that one might live like Christ and that the fruit of the spiritual marriage must be good works.⁴⁰

But good works are not the soul's purposeful end. Near to the end of her final words, Teresa writes that "we shouldn't build castles in the air. The Lord doesn't look so much at the greatness of our works as at the love with which they are done."⁴¹

³⁸ Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, *Teresa of Avila*, 58-59.

³⁹ Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, *Teresa of Avila*, 175.

⁴⁰ Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, *Teresa of Avila*, 29.

⁴¹ Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, *Teresa of Avila*, 194.

John's Description of Divine Union

Of the many descriptions of the divine union with God, John's Christological path was most poignant in describing one's spiritual abandonment as central to the potential spiritual marriage of union with Christ. When the disciples asked for places to sit on his right and left, Jesus offered them the chalice he was about to drink. Choosing the chalice meant that the disciples must also choose the narrow road of self-denial, carrying their own cross, which signified that they were detached from everything, save ultimate obedience and union with Christ. John writes:

If one fails in this exercise (of taking up one's cross), the root and sum total of all the virtues, the other methods would amount to no more than going about in circles without any progress ... A person makes progress only by imitating Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one goes to the Father but through Him ... St. John [14:6]. Elsewhere he says: *I am the door, anyone who enters by Me shall be saved* [John 10:9]. I would not consider any spirituality worthwhile that wants to walk in sweetness and ease and run from the imitation of Christ.⁴²

To explain the mystical union with God, John applied his anthropological understanding of the soul to the life of Christ, explaining that Christ died to the "sensory" aspect during his own life – since he had no place to lay his head (Matt 8:20), and at his death, even less. John expressed his own theological understanding of the moment of Christ's death:

Christ experienced the annihilation of His soul, without any consolation or relief, since the Father had left Him that way in innermost aridity ... He was compelled to cry out: *My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?* (Mt 27:46). This was the most extreme abandonment, sensitively, that He had suffered in His life. And by it He accomplished the most marvelous work of His whole life surpassing all the works and deeds and miracles that He had ever performed on earth or in heaven. That is, He brought about the reconciliation and union of the human race with God through grace ... [that] those who are truly spiritual might understand the mystery of the door and way (which is Christ) leading to union with God, and that they might realize that their union with God and the greatness of the work they accomplish will be measured by their annihilation of themselves for God in the sensory and spiritual parts of their souls. When they are brought to nothing, the highest degree of humility, the spiritual union between their souls and God will be effected.⁴³

Expressing the poetic imagery of the "spiritual marriage" that was inspired by the Song of Songs, John writes,

The bride has entered
The sweet garden of her desires,
And she rests in delight,
Laying her neck
On the gentle arms of her Beloved.

Here is the final exchange between the soul and the Bridegroom:

Now I occupy my soul

⁴² Kavanaugh and Larkin, *John of the Cross*, 96-97.

⁴³ Kavanaugh and Larkin, *John of the Cross*, 97.

And all my energy in His service;
 I no longer tend the herd,
 nor have I any other work
 now that my every act is love.⁴⁴

As a result of the Spirit's inner transformation, "tending the herd" (serving God) or any other work comes *not* from one's own appetite, obligation, or pleasure.⁴⁵ All we do is a result of our ultimate union with Christ, as proclaimed by Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).⁴⁶ While poetic imagery of one's inner life in mystical union with God is not as common today as it was in mystical theology, the ultimate desire and fulfilment of one's personal relationship with God has been part of the human story since the beginning of creation.

Summary: Lessons from Historic Christian Spirituality

Scholars have begun to chart new territory when likening Pentecostalism to the mystical, contemplative streams of historic Christianity. Daniel Castelo expresses his own insights about the "family resemblance" between Pentecostalism and Christian mysticism, including the Threefold Path of Purgation (sanctification), Illumination (maturation), and Union (transformation). Castelo nuances a distinction that Pentecostals do not generally think about "going deeper within" but rather are encouraged to "get more of God." But there is no dichotomy here. Both mystical writers and Protestant reformers believed that encountering God necessarily implies an encounter of oneself. Summarising his claims, Castelo writes that "Pentecostals implicitly operate out of mystical sensibilities in the ethos they sustain regarding worship and how it in turn reflects their belief that God engages and encounters those who thirst after God. The ultimate goal is a sense of the divine that is, in short, transformative."⁴⁷ However dramatic the external experiences, most important is

⁴⁴ Welch, *When Gods Die*, 193.

⁴⁵ John writes, "Let those men [and women] who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe here that they would profit the church and please God much more, not to mention the good example they would give, were they to spend at least half of this time with God in prayer, even though they may not have reached a prayer as sublime as this. They would certainly accomplish more, and with less labor, by one work than they otherwise would by a thousand ... Without prayer, they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm." See Welch, *When Gods Die*, 195.

⁴⁶ John of the Cross carried the Bible with him constantly; he believed it was the main source of his teaching. For him the Bible was inexhaustible in its wisdom and knowledge of God and the divine activity that John hoped to apply to the spiritual life. See Kavanaugh and Larkin, *John of the Cross*, 22. John also believed that individuals who increase their love of God will increase their prayer and labour for others in all kinds of work. He spent time in spiritual direction for university professors and for the uneducated. Both sinners and saints searched him out to be with him. When giving spiritual direction to nuns in their communities, he would also spend free time laying bricks and working in their garden.

⁴⁷ Castelo, *Pentecostalism as a Christian Mystical Tradition*, 76-82.

one's surrender to the inner abiding presence of the Spirit, whether a divine presence or inner change is felt or not.

Other scholars have observed the commonality of Pentecostal spiritual encounters with "mystic" forerunners several centuries earlier. Harvey Cox in his study of Pentecostalism concludes that those who experienced Spirit baptism saw it as a mystical encounter, and that their testimonies "sometimes sounded like Saint Teresa of Avila or Saint John of the Cross, although they probably never heard of either one."⁴⁸ Simon Chan in his analysis of contemplative prayer observes that Spirit baptism as described by Pentecostals has linguistic similarities with Teresa's "prayer of quiet."⁴⁹ Though Pentecostals might feel dismayed when compared with earlier mystics, Chan argues that there is a strong affinity between Spirit baptism and contemplative prayer, claiming that "Glossolalia is a form of nondiscursive, passive prayer, arising from one's yielding fully to the Spirit."⁵⁰ Chan suggests that a fruitful discussion for Pentecostals to consider is Teresa's explanation of "spiritual consolations" that come from one's participation in discursive, ascetical prayer with the "spiritual delights" that come from the "infused" prayer of the quiet that is not dependent on human effort.

In recent years Pentecostals, among Evangelicals and other Protestants, have intentionally begun exploring the contemplative, inner life of the Spirit through their participation in silence and solitude retreats, their enrolment in academic programmes that require the study of Christian mystical writings, their participation and training in spiritual direction, and their exposure to an upsurge of publications that embrace the mystical, contemplative expressions of Christian spirituality. Authors from various academic backgrounds are exploring integrative links among biblical frameworks of spiritual formation, spiritual practices described in mystical writings, and insights from psychology and neuroscience. Christians are learning a new, integrative vocabulary that enables them to recognise the ego's self-justification and defensiveness as a necessary release to the work of the Spirit and sufficiency of Christ in one's sanctifying journey. Chris Green explains:

In contemplation, the Holy Spirit broods sweetly over my spirit, slowly and secretly freeing me from "slavery to cravings and fantasies," making me permeable to Christ so that his character begins to alter mine, filling me with the goodness of his own Spirit – joy and peace, gentleness and self-control. In contemplation, in other words, we open ourselves up to the sanctifying work of God, a work that takes time and happens almost entirely below the level of our conscious awareness.⁵¹

The illuminating light of the Spirit continues to shine into the darker corridors of the soul's castle that need to experience the "cruciform" fellowship of love in

⁴⁸ Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven* (Addison-Wesley, 1995), 70.

⁴⁹ Simon Chan, "Contemplative Prayer in the Evangelical and Pentecostal Traditions," in *Embracing Contemplation, Reclaiming Christian Spiritual Practice*, ed. John H. Coe and Kyle C. Strobel (IVP Academic, 2019), chap. 12, loc. 252 of 293, Kindle.

⁵⁰ Chan, "Contemplative Prayer," chap. 12, loc. 254 of 293, Kindle.

⁵¹ Chris E. W. Green, *Surprised by God: How and Why What We Think about the Divine Matters* (Cascade Books, 2018), loc. 94, Kindle.

Christ. It is the darkest corners where Christ desires intimate fellowship of vulnerable confessions and the heart's expressed longings. In this intimate space, we learn to abandon ourselves into mystical union with Christ because he is the righteous one who has experienced ultimate abandonment for the sake of the world. The splendid ruins of the soul's castle now will continually be transformed into a radiant beauty that depicts a Bride without spot or wrinkle in mystical union with His Majesty.

Paul's prayer for the believers at Ephesus is an important cornerstone for mystical writers, praying that the Father may grant that they "be strengthened in the inner being with power (*dýnamis*) through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in [their] hearts through faith" (Eph 3:16b-17). Spirit and power are closely related throughout Paul's writings, and the same word for *power* is also used by Luke in the last words of Jesus spoken to his disciples before he ascended: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). There is a price to pay, however, when Spirit's *empowerment to witness* neglects the Spirit's *power to strengthen one's inner being*.

A hallmark of Pentecostalism is human engagement with Spirit's empowerment that has changed the global religious landscape and which rightfully continues to be its ongoing legacy. This kind of engagement with power, however, can also operate in the "pride" of those in whom Thomas Merton calls an "illusory" false self. This takes place, according to Merton, when

... the clean peace of a will united with God becomes the complacency of a will that loves its own excellence. The pleasure that is in his heart when he does difficult things and succeeds in doing them well, tells him secretly, "I am a saint." Then he realizes other people admire him. The pleasure burns into a sweet, devouring fire. The warmth of that fire feels very much like the love of God. It is fed by the same virtues that nourished the flame. He burns with self-admiration and thinks: "It is the fire of the love of God." He thinks his own pride is the Holy Ghost.⁵²

The mystics recognised that continuing spiritual discernment of the Spirit's inner life is needed for the soul's transformational journey with God. As Merton expresses above, at times the conflicting forces between Spirit and "flesh" can subconsciously be rationalised or denied because of the human capacity to compartmentalise. If so, we are not truly "at home" with ourselves. The radical assumption of Christian spirituality is that God desires to make God's home in us. This is possible because of Christ whose "whole mission was that kind of indwelling – "so that the love with which [the Father has] loved me may be in them, and I in them" (John 17:26). With Christ, the whole Trinity comes to dwell in each individual and in the people as a whole" (14:23; 17:22-23).⁵³ Or, as the mystics would say, "a spiritual marriage of mystical union in Christ."

Beyond the scope of this paper, there remain important lessons to learn from Christian spirituality about the inner life of transformation that will be explored

⁵² Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, rev. ed. (A New Directions Book, 2007), 24.

⁵³ Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *The Home of God (Theology for the Life of the World): A Brief Story of Everything* (Brazos Press, 2022), 8, Kindle.

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A Classical Pentecostal Reading of the Mystical Framework of Purgation, Illumination, and Union

Sun Ho

Introduction

Professor Roger Heuser from his research observes that African Pentecostal spirituality can be “best understood within the mystical stream of Christianity.”¹ This insight may also apply to much of Asian Pentecostalism. Yet, out of fear of offending fundamentalist critics – who often feel uneasy or even dismissive towards Catholic, Orthodox, or other non-scholastic expressions within the historic church – some Pentecostals have tended to avoid association with mystical theology, fearing that it might lead to doctrinal compromise or syncretism with what they perceive as superstition.²

I feel encouraged by Heuser’s observation that more scholars are now exploring “the lessons learned from the mystical writers of historic Christian spirituality, who focused on the believer’s inner dynamics of divine love in transforming one into union with Christ.”³ For Pentecostals passionate about wrestling with God, such reflection is timely and needed. It assures them that their longing and lived experience of a deeper, transforming union with God are not misplaced but rooted in the heart of Christian spiritual tradition.

Pentecostalism has always been a movement of both *passion* and *power*. The early believers at Azusa Street understood the inner transformation of the Holy

¹ Roger Heuser, “Pentecostals and the Mystical Threefold Path in Historic Christian Spirituality: Strengthening the Inner Being with Power through the Spirit,” in *Asian Voices Amplified*, ed. Kong Hee et al. (Regnum, 2026), 57.

² David Yonggi Cho, founding pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church, embodied a profoundly experiential spirituality rooted in prayer, the Word, and the power of the Holy Spirit. In the 1980s, some theologians, including Harvey Cox, described elements of Cho’s worship practices (such as fervent singing, dancing, shouting, and extended corporate prayer) as resembling shamanic ritual forms, suggesting a supposed syncretism between “shamanism” and Christianity. See Kirsteen Kim, “Korean Pentecostalism and Shamanism: Developing Theological Self-Understanding in a Land of Many Spirits,” *PentecoStudies*, accessed January 19, 2026, <https://journal.equinoxpub.com/PENT/article/view/14018>, 60. Such criticism, however, is deeply unfair. Cho’s life, teachings, and ministry were never a departure from historic Christian spirituality. Yet, within a fundamentalist framework, any non-rational experience not explicitly mentioned in Scripture must often be rejected.

³ Heuser, “Pentecostals and the Mystical Threefold Path,” 57.

Spirit and his outward manifestations as inseparable realities. Their testimonies revealed a deep hunger for more of the Spirit and a desire to do more for Jesus – embodying a spirituality that united contemplation and mission.⁴ Yet as the movement matured, outward manifestations sometimes eclipsed inward formation. This imbalance has been evident in the moral failures of prominent televangelists and megachurch pastors, and in the burnout of congregants who were once “on fire” for God. Many revivals, while intense, have also tended to be short-lived, often followed by exhaustion and disillusionment.

Consequently, a growing number of Pentecostals today are turning afresh to the spiritual classics – especially Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross – as *conversation partners* who can deepen Spirit-empowered sanctification and communion with God. When read through a Pentecostal theology of love and Spirit baptism, the Threefold Path of purgation, illumination, and union emerges as a fruitful metaphor for the Spirit’s ongoing work in believers.⁵

Discerning Mystical Theology

Unlike fundamentalist critics who reject mysticism as unbiblical, Pentecostals uphold the primacy of Scripture while recognising that the Spirit still speaks and renews believers experientially. The New Testament itself overflows with theophanies and charismatic manifestations (Acts 2, 10; 1 Cor 12–14), which Pentecostals regard as normative possibilities for believers. Yet *discernment* remains central: all experience must be tested by Scripture.

Where mystical writers speak of “infused contemplation” or “intellectual visions,” Pentecostals might respond, “This is beautiful language, but does Scripture promise these exact states to all believers?” They read Teresa and John not as prescriptive manuals but as *narratives* that stir hunger for God, deeper prayer, and greater love – while leaving room for the Spirit to lead differently in each life. Pentecostals thus ensure that mystical theology does not become an extrabiblical map of the spiritual journey that supplants the Spirit’s sovereign leading.

For some, William James’s claim that mystical experiences are “authoritatively self-authenticating”⁶ will be problematic. Yet Pentecostals acknowledge that there are “deep things of God” (1 Cor 2:10) that transcend human comprehension – so long as such insights do not contradict Scripture but draw believers into deeper love, holiness, and intimacy with Christ.

A Suprabiblical Invitation

Walter Hollenweger observed that Pentecostals, in defending themselves against charges of anti-intellectualism, often uncritically absorbed the scholastic patterns

⁴ *The Apostolic Faith*, Volume 1, Issue 9 (June to September 1907), 2.

⁵ Heuser, “Pentecostals and the Mystical Threefold Path,” 57.

⁶ Heuser, “Pentecostals and the Mystical Threefold Path,” 60.

of fundamentalist and evangelical theology.⁷ Within that framework, union with Christ is treated as complete at conversion; hence, “mystical union”⁸ is viewed as unnecessary. Medieval mysticism is therefore dismissed as speculative or works-oriented, and Teresa’s *Interior Castle* is often misunderstood as an unbiblical ladder of spiritual achievement.⁹

Most Pentecostals agree that while such cautions preserve biblical authority, they risk reducing the dynamic life of the Spirit to doctrine alone. What Catholics and Orthodox describe as “mystical,” Pentecostals might call “encounter” or “being touched by the Holy Spirit.” In this paradigm, much of mystical theology is not unbiblical or *extrabiblical* – contradicting Scripture – but *suprabiblical*: moving beyond the explicit descriptions of Scripture to explore, in experiential language, the depths of divine love and communion that Scripture itself invites but does not exhaustively define. A good example of this is 2 Corinthians 12:1-4, where Paul recounts being “caught up to the third heaven” and hearing “inexpressible things.” This profound experience is left unexplained – *What* did he see? *How* did he know it was the “third” heaven? *What* were the “inexpressible” words? Pentecostals read this as an invitation to recognise that divine encounters can transcend language and rational categories, pointing to a communion with God that can only be experienced, not fully articulated.

Similarly, in Revelation 1 and 4, John writes, “On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit,” and he is taken into a heavenly throne room filled with indescribable glory. The mechanics of this “in the Spirit” state are never clarified – was he dreaming, in a trance, or physically transported? This deliberate ambiguity reveals that the Spirit may communicate divine realities through means that surpass human comprehension. Suprabiblical reflection explores such depths through symbolic language without departing from the Word.

Thus, while Scripture commands believers to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind (Matt 22:37), it does not map out how that love matures inwardly. Teresa’s description of the soul’s “interior castles” is therefore suprabiblical – a poetic attempt to express how divine love progressively transforms the heart. Pentecostals could view this as compatible with Paul’s exhortation to be “transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:2).

Visions and Contemplation

Fundamentalist critics often insist that the visions of mystical writers are non-normative, since revelation was completed with the close of the biblical canon (Heb 1:1-2). Pentecostals, however, do not reject all visions as “private revelations” because Scripture itself records that the Holy Spirit continues to grant visions, dreams, and glimpses of divine reality (Acts 2:17-18). The key is discernment within the believing community and the subordination of every experience to Scripture. Pentecostals readily affirm that no revelation may add

⁷ Walter Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Baker Academic, 2005), 303.

⁸ Heuser, “Pentecostals and the Mystical Threefold Path,” 60.

⁹ Heuser, “Pentecostals and the Mystical Threefold Path,” 63.

to or alter the biblical canon. The descriptions of divine encounter by John¹⁰ are suprabiblical – a *heightened awareness* of what Scripture already teaches: the indwelling of the Father, Son, and Spirit in the believer (John 14:23). Such experiences deepen, rather than replace, the biblical truth of communion with God.

The “Dark Night” of Transformation

Scripture speaks of trials purifying faith “like gold ... refined by fire” (1 Pet 1:6-7), but it does not describe in detail the inner processes involved. John’s notion of the “dark night of the soul,” though beyond biblical language, resonates deeply with scriptural themes of testing, hiddenness in Christ, and faith purified through suffering. Pentecostals again view this as a suprabiblical metaphor for seasons when the Spirit deepens faith by removing emotional supports. While fundamentalist critics insist that transformation occurs *only* through the Word and Spirit rather than within a medieval mystical framework, John’s insights remain spiritually diagnostic. He warns of “inordinate attachments”¹¹ that enslave the soul to created things – idols formed whenever the heart over-identifies with them. This speaks directly to the Pentecostal temptation to confuse empowerment with pride or spiritual triumphalism. Increasingly, Pentecostals understand Spirit baptism not merely as power for ministry but as God’s invitation into Jesus’s self-giving love, transforming believers from self-centredness to Christ-centredness. In this light, the mystical “dark night” can be understood as the Spirit’s sanctifying work in the whole person – mind, body, and emotions – transfiguring human nature into Christlike love.

Likewise, rather than dismissing Teresa’s image of the silkworm and cocoon as foreign, Pentecostals note that Paul himself employs similar metaphors of transformation: “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3). When Teresa writes of the silkworm spinning its cocoon and dying to itself so as to emerge a butterfly,¹² she is giving poetic expression to the paschal rhythm of death and resurrection that lies at the heart of Pentecostal spirituality.

Intimate Union with Christ

Fundamentalist critics argue that Ephesians 5 presents marriage as a metaphor for Christ’s relationship with the *corporate* church, not for an *individual’s* “spiritual betrothal”¹³ to him. Their concern is that such language risks introducing an eroticised or romanticised spirituality foreign to the New Testament. Yet the mystical extension of personal intimacy with Christ is again suprabiblical – drawing out the relational implications of divine love without contradicting biblical revelation.

¹⁰ Heuser, “Pentecostals and the Mystical Threefold Path,” 61.

¹¹ Heuser, “Pentecostals and the Mystical Threefold Path,” 64.

¹² Heuser, “Pentecostals and the Mystical Threefold Path,” 66.

¹³ Heuser, “Pentecostals and the Mystical Threefold Path,” 66.

The static view that “union with Christ” refers only to a once-for-all legal status conferred at conversion must be re-examined. Theologian Frank Macchia argues that union with Christ is both a present possession and a dynamic participation: “The entire Christian life is one large journey into deeper union with Christ,”¹⁴ he writes. “It is a dynamic communion that encourages an ever deeper journey into its depths that will culminate when we are ‘swallowed up’ in life at the resurrection (2 Cor. 5:4).”¹⁵

The Apostolic Faith, the Azusa Street newsletter published in October 1906, vividly expressed this intimacy: “We are baptized with the Holy Ghost. This covenant is a marriage covenant. We are married, not for one day or year or life, but eternally married ... Hallelujah! Jesus and I are united. He baptized me with love.”¹⁶ Clearly, the Pentecostal understanding of Spirit baptism aligns more closely with mystical theology’s emphasis on transformative participation in divine love than with the static categories of Reformed scholasticism.

Passive Surrender

Pentecostals have long practised both fervent prayer and quietly waiting on God. The “prayer of the quiet”¹⁷ is, in many ways, analogous to Pentecostal tarrying meetings or glossolalic prayer, when human speech yields to the Spirit’s intercession with “groans too deep for words” (Rom 8:26).

Fundamentalist critics argue that prayer should *only* follow explicit biblical models such as the Lord’s Prayer or the Psalms, not the monastic devotions of monks and hermits like Charles de Foucauld. They also argue that assurance rests *solely* on faith in Christ’s finished work – not on inner feelings of delight or “the soul’s rest.”¹⁸ Sanctification, they maintain, proceeds *only* through active repentance and faith, not through quietism or “unknowing” contemplation.

Again, to Pentecostals, these emphases are suprabiblical: insights that flow from Scripture while remaining faithful to its spirit. Jesus himself withdrew to solitary places to pray (Luke 5:16) and often spent whole nights in communion with the Father (6:12). The apostles likewise followed this rhythm of contemplation and power – waiting upon God in prayer (Acts 1:14) before acting in mission (Acts 2). Thus, contemplative prayer and the Spirit’s inner work of love are not foreign imports but a natural expression of the biblical spirituality.

Paul speaks of the peace of God that “surpasses understanding” (Phil 4:7) and of divine mysteries revealed “through the Spirit” (1 Cor 2:9-10). The mystical idea of “unknowing” – encountering God beyond mental concepts – extends this scriptural insight. It is not unbiblical, but suprabiblical. Mystical writers simply give us the language to describe what happens when we encounter God in ways too deep for our intellect to fully grasp.

¹⁴ Frank D. Macchia, *The Spirit-Baptized Church: A Dogmatic Inquiry*, T&T Clark Systematic Pentecostal and Charismatic Theology (T&T Clark, 2021), 23.

¹⁵ Macchia, *Spirit-Baptized Church*, 18.

¹⁶ Author Unknown, “United to Jesus,” *The Apostolic Faith* 1, no. 2 (October 1906): 3.

¹⁷ Heuser, “Pentecostals and the Mystical Threefold Path,” 71.

¹⁸ Heuser, “Pentecostals and the Mystical Threefold Path,” 66.

Active Practice

A recurring concern is that mystical theology can overemphasise withdrawal, silence, solitude, and interiority, risking an inward-looking piety that neglects the Great Commission. However, Pentecostal spirituality, in its original essence, has always sought a rhythm of contemplation and action – passive surrender and active ministry. Devotion and action. Retreat to the wilderness in order to return in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:1, 14). In Acts 2, the apostles move from the upper room of Acts 1:13 into the streets, demonstrating that genuine spiritual encounter must overflow into witness. The interior stillness Teresa describes can be fully embraced, but always as a springboard for outward obedience, prophetic witness, and loving service – never as an end in itself. In this way, Pentecostal spirituality can draw deeply from the riches of the mystical tradition without losing its missionary edge.

Catholic Sources in Pentecostal Perspective

Because of their heritage of protesting against the Catholic Church, fundamentalists generally are uneasy about engaging Catholic spirituality. However, others like John Wesley¹⁹ had no such misgivings. He admired the works of Catholic writers such as Lorenzo Scupoli, Thomas à Kempis,²⁰ and Madame Guyon.²¹ Like Wesley, Pentecostals increasingly recognise that the mystical tradition offers valuable resources for deepening life in the Spirit. Writers such as Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Thomas Merton are not treated as authorities *equal* to Scripture, but as *conversation partners* whose insights can illuminate the Spirit's transforming work in love and holiness.

Since the Holy Spirit was poured out on all flesh at Pentecost (Acts 2:17-18), it follows that he has been at work throughout the history of the church – even in traditions from which Pentecostals may diverge. Historically, Pentecostalism has never been insular but ecumenical. The believers at Azusa Street sang Wesleyan hymns, read Holiness literature, and prayed alongside Catholic immigrants. Recovering this generous posture allows Asian Pentecostals to engage the wider Christian mystical tradition with discernment and confidence. For this reason, scholars such as Heuser play a vital role in *Pentecostalising* historic Christian spirituality, articulating it with academic rigour. This enables Asian Pentecostals to respond thoughtfully to critics while integrating the contemplative depth of mystical tradition with a robust Pentecostal theology of the Spirit.

¹⁹ Vinson Synan considered John Wesley as the “spiritual father” of the Pentecostal movement; Vinson Synan, cited in Sam Storms, “History of the Pentecostal-Charismatic Movements,” Sam Storms, March 4, 2009, <https://www.samstorms.org/all-articles/post/history-of-the-pentecostal-charismatic-movements>.

²⁰ Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism*, 146.

²¹ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 1. Journals, Oct. 14, 1735–Nov. 29, 1745*, Books for the Ages, The Ages Digital Library Collected Works (Ages Software, 1997), 404, https://media.sabda.org/alkitab-11/V6F-Z/WES_WW01.PDF.

A Positive Framework: Spirit-Baptised Love and the Threefold Path

The Threefold Path presented by Heuser is not a rigid ladder but a spiritual guide. *Purgation* is the Spirit's ongoing work of cleansing and freeing believers for holiness. *Illumination* deepens understanding and affection, nurturing prayer, discernment, and witness. *Union* is not an elite mystical state but a fuller participation in Christ's love and mission – a foretaste of the church's final communion with God. Yet within this inheritance, the Spirit invites believers into ever-deepening participation – sometimes through *sweetness*, sometimes through *dryness*, but always towards *love*. This is the essence of Pentecostalism – for “the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5).

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