

MEDIEVAL WISDOM
— *for* —
MODERN CHRISTIANS

FINDING AUTHENTIC FAITH
◆ IN A FORGOTTEN AGE ◆
WITH C. S. LEWIS



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To my father, Stanley A. Armstrong,
whose long-ago supertime readings of stories from C. S. Lewis
and other medieval-smitten moderns started all of this.

To the Duke University Inklings Group of the late '90s
and early aughts—Andy and Quita Sauerwein,
Edwin and Jennifer Woodruff Tait, Neil and LaVonne Carlson,
Jennifer Trafton Peterson, Brian Averette,
and other occasional attendees—who read to each other
some of the same stories I had first heard read by my father,
as well as some we had written ourselves.

And to my wife, Sharon, and children,
Kate, Caleb, Grace, Ross, and John Allen:
may they each find wisdom in the writings
of Christ-following sages from other eras.

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1

My Angle of Approach



I grew up in a home where my father, a theology professor, read to my two brothers and me the delightfully neomedieval stories of C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, George MacDonald, and others.¹ These were influences in shaping not only my imagination but also the faith I would find as a young adult. From the moment Christianity became my heart language, I searched its vocabulary and traditions for the angles of vision first opened to me in those early literary stirrings. Where I found these angles, they tended to help me move forward in my faith. Where I did not find them, I wondered why not.

Since then, I've never lost my fascination with either those modern authors or the medieval world they loved. Of course, they sometimes romanticized that world. But they also, as we'll see, took it quite seriously as a source of wisdom for living. During my doctoral program in American church history at Duke University, a band of friends formed an "Inklings" group. Together we read and discussed those same medieval-influenced authors, reaching for the older Christian wisdom from which they drew.

After Duke, I took a job editing *Christian History* magazine at Christianity Today. While there, I edited issues and wrote articles on Lewis and Tolkien, as well as G. K. Chesterton (author of two splendid biographies

of important medieval Christians), Dorothy L. Sayers (translator of Dante and medieval French literature), and others. At the same time, I was able to continue my exploration—began in graduate school—of such medieval thinkers as Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480–543/547), Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), and the scholastic precursors of the scientific revolution. In those years, I began work on my first book, *Patron Saints for Postmoderns*,² in which I explore the medieval worlds and worldviews of Gregory the Great (540–604), Dante Alighieri (ca. 1265–1321), and Margery Kempe (ca. 1373–after 1438), among others. All of this began to prepare me to see beyond modern caricatures of the medieval church to the animating Christian spirit of that age.

But at the same time, I was becoming more and more acutely aware of certain realities of the church today—especially its evangelical Protestant forms—that make it hard for modern Christians truly to receive “medieval wisdom.”

When in 2004 I flew from Chicagoland to Minnesota to interview for a church history position at Bethel Seminary, the interviewers asked what period I thought my evangelical students would most need to hear about. I did not yet entirely know why, but I blurted out “the Middle Ages.”

A One-Sided Story

I soon found ample evidence, both negative and positive, to back up that impulsive answer. In my first year at Bethel, the evangelical-authored textbook I chose to use with my classes proved embarrassingly incomplete and biased in its treatment of medieval faith. Even after I found better sources and began sharing the good as well as the bad and the ugly in my lectures on the period, some of my students seemed unable to surmount their preconceptions. Many ignored the warning attached to my standard essay question on the lessons we can learn from the medieval church (“Do not limit yourself to negative examples”). They listed only parodies and partial truths (the state ruled the church, money corrupted the church and prevented it from helping the people, the Bible was taken away from the people, the monastics failed to evangelize or engage the culture, etc.). Slowly, as I learned how to better teach the period, some of my students began to find rich resources in the disciplines of the monastics, the devotion

of the mystics, the intellectual passion of the scholastics, and much more. Formerly suspicious of all things medieval, these students began to discover and value some of the wisdom this book points to.

Increasingly, though, I wondered about the hole in modern popular accounts of church history, particularly the glaring omission of the story of medieval faith except as a cautionary tale. Why did my students and friends so often seem to assume that the church apostatized after it gained cultural influence in the time of Constantine (fourth century) and returned to God only after the sixteenth-century Reformation (or perhaps even only after the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century)? Why this dismissal of more than a millennium of church history—more than *half* of the time between Christ and today?

I don't deny that the terrain of the medieval church seems alien to most of us. Before us, relics peer out from within gilded boxes, and the devout approach them as conduits to divine power. Above us, saints hover supernaturally, and the earthbound plead for their intercession. At the high altar, the priest, with his back to the congregation, performs an elaborate sacred drama, elevating the bread and wine and speaking the Words of Institution while the devout await the ringing of the bell, gazing at those elements and seeing the literal body and blood of Christ. Within the confessional, the penitent kneels, receives absolution, and hears the works of satisfaction she must perform for her soul's sake. And in cathedrals, cloisters, and cow pastures, mitred bishops pronounce on doctrine, tonsured monks sing psalms, and ragged peasants supplicate Mary with weeping.

Lenses of Relevance

It seems to me, however, that the chasm between us and our medieval forebears in the faith has to do less with any intrinsic oddness of the Christians of that time and more with certain philosophical and cultural presuppositions of our own. Though it may seem odd for a book about “medieval wisdom” to start with an assessment of the church today, mine will, for two reasons.

First, this is my scholarly center of gravity. I come to the wisdom of medieval faith not through long technical study of the church of the Middle Ages (though I have read many of the key primary works in translation,

along with many helpful secondary sources) but through scholarship on American Christianity that, alongside a decade of teaching in an evangelical seminary and daily experience in many Western evangelical ecclesial settings, has given me an acute sense of some deep needs of these churches today.

Second, although the historical guild warns us against pressing historical periods to answer modern questions alien to their own realities, an approach to history that does not account for its modern relevance may quite literally be worse than useless.³ Finding moral, intellectual, and spiritual value for our own lives is the whole *point* of doing history. There is no way to understand the value of the past for our present experience without understanding our own time well.

Of course I see the Middle Ages through modern lenses, but so do even the most careful of scholar-specialists. Indeed, the best of them do this not only unconsciously but also quite intentionally. They know that when we study a past period without connecting it to our own, we fall into mere antiquarianism—like the numismatist collecting rare coins for no purpose higher than the sheer pleasure of having them. Chesterton thought you could not be a proper medievalist until you cared deeply enough about today to apply medieval insights to your own life and thinking.⁴ I think he's exactly right. To be an antiquarian—beguiling yourself with stories and collecting facts like butterflies but never asking what it all might mean for us today—is to fail to be a useful historian, no matter what era turns your crank.

So the only sensible reason to care about the past is that, through knowing it, you believe you can make a better present. The chief purpose of history is moral improvement. This means we must derive *lessons for today* from our study of history. But to do so, we must discern our own time, too.

A Church in Need of New Life

The American church today is in turmoil. We have tried, by turns, rational apologetics, pop-culture inflected consumerist church programs, ecstatic charismatic experience, and postmodern experimentation. But none of these has proved lasting.

- The rationalism of modern apologetics has collapsed as the questions of the unchurched have turned away from doctrine, and the

agonies of the church have centered on spirituality and practice rather than belief.

- The beguiling concerts and spectacles of the church-growth technicians have fallen short of their promise, revealing the dimly shallow spirituality behind the curtain.⁵
- The experientialism of the charismatic movement has faltered in the quest to build lasting, faithful, disciplined churches as worshipers have bounced from one high to the next.
- The postmodernism of the now-faded “emerging” movement never found a positive program for reform to accompany its often strident critique of current church culture.

Could it be that God is driving us out of these failed experiments and into the wilderness, traveling as pilgrims toward a more solid faith and a more faithful church? Turning to a more dire metaphor, could it be that the contemporary church lingers in a twilight between vitality and morbidity, sustained by a kind of spiritual life support? And if so, what is our prognosis?

I believe there is hope, for we are on the list for a life-giving transplant. It had better come soon, to be sure, but when it does, it promises to revive and strengthen us in ways unimaginable. This transplant, like most others, will involve the surgical implantation into the patient of living organs taken from a dead donor.

What living organs? The life-giving beliefs and practices of our own spiritual heritage. Which donor? Our mother, the church, in her first two thousand years. This is not *traditionalism*, which as Jaroslav Pelikan famously quipped is “the dead faith of the living.” To transplant a dead organ will only kill the patient. Rather, it is tradition: “the living faith of the dead.”⁶ Weak and on our sickbeds, we await a transfusion of that life.

So far, surgeons such as D. H. Williams, Robert Louis Wilken, and Thomas Oden have found vital organs in the doctrinal formulations of the church’s first six centuries, and they have rushed them to modern Christian hospitals. And individually, though not yet as *ecclesia*, a few here and there are beginning to receive these transplants and new life is flooding into them.

Other medics such as Richard Foster, Eugene Peterson, and the late Dallas Willard have turned to organs of spiritual practice. They provide

from any and every Christian tradition a piecemeal infusion of intentional spirituality that, while still largely unformed and understudied, now sustains some. From the rich medieval tradition of spirituality in particular, these good doctors are leading modern Christians to rediscover ascetic practices, grow under spiritual directors, go on retreats at monasteries, and meditate after the manner of the *lectio divina*.

Yet many modern Protestants still believe that they can be faithful to their Reformation heritage only by rejecting the medieval heritage. They perceive medieval faith as not just catholic, but Roman Catholic (or in its Eastern forms, Eastern Orthodox) and thus hyper-sacramental, semi-Pelagian, institutional, nominal. For these folks, as for the Hollywood of *Pulp Fiction*, to “get medieval” is to do violence. It is to do violence both to the Reformation doctrinal heritage of salvation by faith and to the revivalist spiritual heritage of direct, unmediated access to God in Christ.

Those who succumb to these stereotypes do not know how badly they misconstrue the continental Reformation (and to a lesser degree American revivalism) and, especially, the medieval traditions from which they insist on cutting themselves off. God did not, after all, leave his church in the emperor Constantine’s (272–337) day only to reappear with Martin Luther (1483–1546), John Wesley (1703–91), and Billy Graham (b. 1918).

The Shorter Way

To begin to understand the barrier that stands between us and medieval wisdom, consider this vignette from the period that defined American evangelicalism more than any other: the Victorian era.

In 1850, Methodist laywoman Phoebe Worrall Palmer (1807–74) published a book called *The Way of Holiness*. In it, she said about the traditional Methodist teaching of sanctification: “Yes, brother, THERE IS A SHORTER WAY! O! I am sure this long waiting and struggling with the powers of darkness is not necessary. There is a shorter way.”⁷⁷

These words would turn out to be momentous for nineteenth-century American evangelicals. Already by that year a flood of church leaders, including several Methodist bishops, had for more than a decade been visiting Palmer’s New York City parlor to attend her “Tuesday meetings for the promotion of holiness.” And within a decade more, her “holiness

movement” jumped denominational lines, initiating Presbyterians, Quakers, Baptists, and Episcopalians into this optimistic creed.

The essence of Palmer’s message is this: No more would Christians have to pursue a fraught and painstaking path to holiness (reminiscent of the slow, agonizing road to conversion once trod by English and American Puritans). By simply gathering their resolve, making a single act of consecration, and “standing on the promises”—certain Scripture texts that seem to hold out entire sanctification as an attainable reality—they can enjoy total freedom from sin.

This message galvanized a generation and set a tone for evangelicalism that continues to ring out today. It may be fair to say that the teaching of a “shorter way to holiness,” whether in Palmer’s more Wesleyan formulation or in the Reformed-influenced “higher life” variations introduced later in the century, fueled the single most prominent and widespread movement among postbellum and Gilded Age evangelicals. It swept across the nation’s West and South like a sanctified brushfire, birthed new denominations such as the Nazarenes and Christian & Missionary Alliance, fed the all-consuming fervor of temperance activism, and laid the groundwork for the Pentecostal movement of the following century.

Why? What made Palmer’s “shorter way” such a natural fit for evangelicals in their century of growth and social prominence? And what does this have to do with the project to recover past wisdom in the church?

I’d like to suggest that the essence of this teaching, so essential to the formation of modern American evangelicalism, may be found in one word: “immediatism.”

The first definition listed in *Merriam-Webster Unabridged* for “immediatism” is “immediateness,” which Webster’s defines as “the quality that makes something seem important or interesting because it is or seems to be happening now.”⁸ I would relate this to what C. S. Lewis calls “chronological snobbery,”⁹ or what one might simply call an obsession with novelty. Moreover, I think this quality can be recognized in the evangelical movement.

The second definition offered is “a policy or practice of gaining a desired end by immediate action.” I would relate this to a syndrome of *pressurized pragmatism*, which Alasdair MacIntyre has identified as the chief cause of many American ills, militating as it does against careful reflection on accumulated wisdom.¹⁰ I take the temperance movement

as nineteenth-century-evangelicalism’s Exhibit A, illustrating the sort of silver bullet solution to all social problems offered by many evangelical social causes of that day—and many today. Get people to stop drinking, and it will fix all our problems. Take these three simple steps and your church will grow.

The third definition of “immediatism” follows: “An epistemological theory that views the object of perception as directly knowable.” This was the philosophical mother’s milk of nineteenth-century evangelicals, emerging from eighteenth-century Scottish Common Sense Realism.¹¹ This immediatist epistemology allowed its devotees to bypass all mediating traditions and interpretations and go directly to the supposedly commonsense meaning of Scripture. The typical one-page faith statement used by evangelical organizations and churches today is a legacy of this intellectual immediatism, or “shorter way.”

Going Straight to the Throne

For my purposes I offer a fourth definition, and though it amounts to a new coinage, it works etymologically and fits hand in glove with the first three definitions. The immediatism of American evangelicals is also *a way to God without mediation*. I would relate this to both the “heart religion” modern evangelicals have inherited from the Pietists and the related impatience with all priestly and sacramental mediation bequeathed to us by the Puritans.

Among evangelicals, immediatism in the first three senses—love of novelty, pressurized pragmatism, and Common Sense epistemology—both supports and is supported by immediatism in this fourth sense.

This fourth sense of immediatism is, I believe, the most potent and ingrained idea that stands between today’s evangelical Christians and the wisdom of their medieval heritage—that is, our fancy that we can always, in every daily need and difficulty, go straight to the throne of God and receive both a direct and emotion-inflected sense of God’s presence and clear, divine answers to our questions and problems. Or rather, our fancy that this unmediated, individual access is the *only* kind we need—to be set against all priestly, institutional, or material mediation. The revivalist heritage of modern evangelicals tells us that we can and indeed must access

God directly, coming to his throne without consulting any human, or any “human-made traditions” of liturgy, catechism, discipline, or doctrine.

If I am right about this, then an open exploration and application of truths and practices from the medieval period requires from modern evangelicals a new stance toward faith that goes against our deepest inclinations. To move toward medieval wisdom is to swim against a powerful immediatist undertow. For this direction is not the “shorter way” by any stretch. It is a way that requires (at least from our teachers) long and careful study, wise cultural adaptation, and (from each of us) habituation to new rhythms of worship and life. This book takes C. S. Lewis as guide, recognizing his considerable wisdom. And it launches only in the most preliminary way the long study that would be required truly to bring us “medieval wisdom.”

A Nutshell History of Protestant Allergy to Mediation and the Modern Challenge

The belief that the average layperson has direct, individual access to God, with no other mediator beside Christ, can be found at evangelicalism’s Protestant roots. Since the Reformation, Protestants have distrusted tradition as potentially leading people back into what Martin Luther called the “Babylonian Captivity of the Church.”¹² Luther and the other Reformers sought to strip away a mass of rituals and requirements that had accumulated, as they imagined, like malignant barnacles on the ship of the church during Christianity’s thousand-year “middle age.” These traditions, it seemed to them, obscured the central truth of salvation by grace through faith—God reaching directly to the believer and achieving the work of salvation without human effort.

An irony here is that the theologian who looms over the whole medieval period—and on whose thinking, as Jaroslav Pelikan has said, all of medieval theology served as something like a set of footnotes¹³—Augustine of Hippo (354–430), taught unequivocally that salvation can come to us by no other means than God’s unaided grace. This was still the official teaching “on the books” of the medieval church right up until the Reformation—though a group of “modern” theologians, to whom Luther was reacting, were trying to import categories of human effort into the picture of how salvation takes place.

Augustine, however, was wise enough to see that the individual believer cannot come to faith outside the community of the church. And he had been willing to make some strong claims for the role of the church in salvation. The Reformation may even be considered, as some have said, the triumph of Augustine's soteriology (his understanding of salvation) against Augustine's ecclesiology (his understanding of the church). Those Protestants, however, who think that the whole Western medieval church believed in "salvation by works" are following a long tradition of Protestant insult-hurling that ignores much medieval evidence to the contrary.

Luther was not himself a thoroughgoing immediatist. He maintained, for example, a strongly sacramental liturgy. When attacked in his thoughts by the devil, he did not content himself with hurling inkpots but rather stood on his Baptism, insisting that that sacrament had separated him forever from the works of the enemy. But Luther is not the end of the story. The French moderate Reformer John Calvin (1509–64) anchored his famous *Institutes* in the believer's union with Christ, beginning the book from the standpoint of religious experience, and the more radical Swiss leader Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) pushed hard to protect this privilege of the believer against "Roman traditions," even nailing shut the organ and stripping the religious art from the walls of his Grossmünster church in Zurich.

This immediatist trend intensified in the Puritans, turning in a more affective direction. Theirs was "an emotionally vibrant and spiritually vigorous group in the tradition of Platonic idealism and Augustinian piety; their zeal came from an insatiable quest for the spiritual ideal of union with God despite their human imperfections."¹⁴

In that quest, the Puritans distrusted both sacerdotalism (*human* mediation of God to individuals) and sacramentalism (*material* mediation of God to individuals). They resisted all claims that in order to meet God people must use mediating objects such as statues, images, or vestments as well as physical actions such as rituals, gestures, or postures presided over by ecclesiasts (which they lumped together in the epithet "priestcraft").

The proto-evangelical "free church" Protestants—first the Anabaptists, then all their theological kin in the Anglo stream—further intensified this allergy to church hierarchy, extending it to state control and involvement. How dare any human authority tell Christians that they must do this or that to reach God! Each person stands before God on his or her own two

feet, and God, in turn, stands ready to meet each person in every time and situation of life, without the poor helps of human tradition.¹⁵

On the early nineteenth-century American frontier, a new generation of free, self-sufficient Protestants extended the immediatist quest, now fighting for freedom from *intellectual* elites (the educated ministry with their laborious and elite four-year degrees) and from all the forms of tradition over which they claimed to be the masters and gatekeepers.¹⁶

Along the way, heart religion became similarly intensified. We may trace a straight and unwavering line from the sixteenth-century Puritans' "Augustinian Strains of Piety,"¹⁷ which led them to require a compelling and heartfelt conversion narrative from each new church member, to John Wesley's Aldersgate experience of having his heart "strangely warmed," to the ecstasies of the nineteenth-century camp meeting and the twentieth- and twenty-first-century charismatic worship service. What we are doing in stepping back into the Middle Ages with Lewis's guidance is attempting to challenge that "line of immediatism" in two ways.

First, from the seventeenth century to today, the inherited, communally affirmed religious authorities of Scripture and tradition have increasingly given way to a new structure of religious authority that is grounded in individual reason and experience. To desire to learn from the cloud of witnesses or "church triumphant"—those on whose shoulders we stand—is to shift authority back to the older style, weighting Scripture-read-through-tradition more heavily than the dictates of our own freely exercised reason and experience.

Second, from the seventeenth century to today, the primary way individuals have met God has shifted from a church-mediated mode to an individual, unmediated mode. Any full and useful appropriation of the past—that is, one not content to offer only doctrinal direction—will likely seek to return to some form of churchly mediation (whether of liturgical forms, priestly roles, or both) in an attempt to reverse this post-Enlightenment trajectory.

The Look, Feel, and Results of Immediatism

What, then, does immediatism look like in evangelical Protestant (and many other) churches today, and how does that degrade our ability to gain benefit from the church of the past?

The Narrative of (Individual) Desire

David Bebbington famously defines evangelicalism with a fourfold typology: biblicist (the Bible as the ultimate authority on all matters of faith and practice), crucicentrist (the atonement secured for us by Jesus on the cross as the central reality of our faith), conversionist (a “born again” crisis experience as necessary and definitive for the faith of each believer), and activist (the tasks of evangelizing individuals and reforming churches and societies as imperatives for all believers).

I suppose that when we talk about evangelical immediatism, we are talking about something like Bebbington’s “conversionism,” but that category by itself is inadequate to describe the habitus of unmediated communion so central to this movement. To understand the continued impact of immediatism in evangelical faith, we need to expand Bebbington’s “conversionism” to include a focus on personal relationship with God in Christ, which are not only accessed (immediately, in several senses) through a crisis conversion experience but also experienced in a continuing way through a series of direct, transforming encounters with God.

Again, in order to fully take into account the impact of immediatism on evangelicalism, we would also have to understand that evangelical “biblicism” has taken on a similarly direct, unmediated character: through reading the Bible as individuals, apart (as the movement has falsely imagined) from any communal or traditional filters, we have clear and immediate access to the mind of God.¹⁸

We are shaped by the stories we tell ourselves. The ruling reality of modern evangelicalism is unmediated access to God. As the twentieth-century ambassador of Pentecostalism David Du Plessis puts it, “God has no grandchildren.” That is, no individual—and for that matter no generation—may claim faith based on his or her forebears (which is, after all, in a sense, the claim of all tradition!). All must meet God for themselves.

The Pragmatic Shape of Church

Now, how does this look in our churches?

Structurally, evangelical immediatism is inherently individualistic and impatient with organizational structures and constraints. It has therefore created a kind of “hole in the ecclesiological donut” where everything that inhabits the realm between the mystical communion of the “church

invisible” and the immediate communion of the individual with God is negotiable and, ultimately, a matter of *adiaphora* (that is, these mediating forms are considered inessential for salvation).¹⁹

Yes, the local church has often played a strong role in the lives of evangelicals, but one might argue that its primary role is not to mediate but to celebrate and foster the individual’s immediate communion with God.

In other words, as historian Bruce Hindmarsh argues, the evangelical movement has always represented “an unparalleled subordination of church order to evangelical piety.”²⁰ Thus almost all inherited forms—such as the practical, ecclesiastical wisdom of the early and medieval church, for instance—have been held lightly, as negotiable. (This has been true notwithstanding the tradition-oriented tendency of evangelicalism’s Anglican parent, which much of evangelicalism has inherited, to center Christian identity in the forms of corporate worship.²¹)

This allergy to churchly mediation has given evangelical churches a decided lean toward democratic, participatory forms of worship and leadership. Congregationalism has been the movement’s favored leadership form, and worship styles tend to follow whatever seems to relate most naturally and directly to the worshiper. This means preaching in plain language and singing in popular styles (famously, even tavern tunes!); if God meets people immediately where they are, then people should use in worship whatever contemporary popular-culture material already feels natural and “homey” to them.

So far, I have discussed two things: First, a narrative of direct encounter and relationship with God drives immediatism. Second, immediatism drives pragmatic, plastic ecclesiology (and ecclesiastical authority is a subspecies of mediation, so immediatism seems best served by nonhierarchical forms of organization).

Recent Attempts to Reclaim Past Wisdom

Let’s pause to consider how these immediatist values have already prevented the contemporary church from accessing the wisdom of the past. In recent interviews with Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, and others involved,²² in the last few decades, in trying to woo modern Christians to ancient disciplines

and understandings, I heard the same refrain repeatedly: that the “spiritual disciplines” movement seems to have stalled out. Why?

First, discipline requires, by definition, *submission*. Still marked by the antitraditionalism and pragmatism of their fundamentalist roots, evangelicals seem by and large unwilling to submit their spiritual growth to anything that looks like a mediating practice or tradition. True, many evangelicals have been opened to the riches of Christian spiritual tradition, but like their ecclesiology, these experiments seem to have been mostly an ad hoc adjunct to the central experience with God.²³

As an example, in his many books on worship the late Robert Webber offers evangelicals a way to incorporate the liturgies of the historic church through a simple order: the Gathering, the Word, the Table, and the Dismissal. He also recommends a restored commitment to the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, as part of the weekly worship event. Such liturgical borrowings open up a greater role in worship for ritual gesture, symbol, and visual art, which point (as they always have) to spiritual realities beyond themselves. By reentering these historic practices, evangelicals can “capture the mystery and transcendence of God in a way that modern forms of Protestant worship do not,” thereby emphasizing the unity of the church.²⁴ But these practices also require liturgical leadership, which looks suspiciously like sacerdotal mediation. And they tend to require material mediation, which looks like sacramentalism.

Second, the attempt at spiritual *ressourcement* led by Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Eugene Peterson, and others, insists that words—preaching, instruction—are simply not enough. As Willard puts it in his 1990 *Spirit of the Disciplines*, “The gospel preached and the instruction and example given” to evangelical congregations “simply do not do justice to the *nature of human personality, as embodied, incarnate.*” Willard contrasts this situation to “the secret of the standard, historically proven spiritual disciplines,” which “do respect and count on the bodily nature of human personality. . . . They show us effectively *how* we can ‘offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable unto God’ and how our ‘spiritual worship’ (Rom. 12:1) really is inseparable from the offering up of our bodies in specific physical ways.”²⁵ Customary evangelical modes of Christian living were simply not enough. They “did not even,” as Willard says, “take life—our lives, the ordinary minutes and hours of our days—seriously in the process of redemption.”²⁶ But this, of course, raises the red flag of sacramental mediation.

Some have overcome their nervousness about sacramentalism and “Romanism” enough to walk a ways down this more embodied road. However, Willard identifies a lack of holism between our biblical and theological understandings and our understanding of embodied spiritual practices.

The latter, he says, have essentially been ghettoized in the seminaries. Typically “spiritual formation” is given a place to call its own in the seminary, but it has never been welcomed or integrated in biblical studies or theology. The problem is that evangelical culture and especially evangelical higher education is still marked by that intellectual immediatism of nineteenth-century Common Sense Realism; it seeks the shortest, most immediate line between Scripture and practice. Faced with the tenuous and complex relationship between the Bible and early church practices, it hesitates to do the hard theological work necessary to make the connection. And that, in our colleges and seminaries, is the kiss of death.

Third and more specifically, since Kathleen Norris’s *Cloister Walk* (1996), evangelicals have become fascinated with monasticism. They have sought to understand it and mine it for their own purposes, and have even sought oblate or other third-order status in existing monastic communities. Usually, however, even when founding their own “new monastic” communities (which are a horse of a much more activist, outward-focused color than ancient monasticism), they have stopped short of the kind of radical communal accountability that has always been Benedictine monasticism’s beating heart.

I’ve seen this repeatedly in my students’ encounters with the principle and notion of stability within the Benedictine tradition (that is, the demand in Benedict’s Rule that the monk vow himself to a single community for his entire life). It is something they yearn for, but they balk at the commitment. Why? Certainly full monastic commitment clashes (as it always has) with commitments to family, jobs, and other realities of modern Western life. But this did not stop hundreds of thousands from committing to monasteries in the medieval millennium. For my students and other Christians today, another impediment to the monastic principle of stability arises: to commit to a single religious community is to admit that we so often need that community to mediate God to us. And our fundamental immediatism won’t allow us to submit to that—we believe we can always go directly to the throne.

Fourth, the “emerging church,” in search of Christian authenticity against acculturation of the church, has dabbled with the materials of

tradition—from candles to labyrinths to the *lectio divina*. But with its postmodern sensitivity to power dynamics and fear of having the church associated with any form of power, sacerdotal, even sacramental, forms of mediation have remained well beyond the pale. Worship forms and spiritual forms that were once (in the early and medieval church) authoritative are now, in the hands of the emerging crowd, nothing but tools for romantic individualism to be wielded at will—even at whim.

Where the Immediatists Are Right

At the risk of seeming to argue against my own case, I should admit that I have some sympathy for the anti-Catholic Reformers, Puritans, and frontier American evangelicals who turned their backs on old forms in search of the face of God. Their fear of elite religious control was born out of European and Protestant history. People in search of power, as some in the church hierarchy had been during the late medieval period, can easily exert their desired control through the forms of church life. Who can say that those democratizing evangelicals didn't see real abuses in the intellectual elites of their day as their Augustinian strain of piety melded with a free-range populism yearning to be free from the yoke of an "educated ministry"?

Who can say that the gatekeepers of tradition *today* are themselves immune to abusing their power? What may be lost when the elites take over and control the means of grace is this: immediate access to God in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Under the abuse of power, form becomes formalism, and tradition, "the living faith of the dead" (again, as Jaroslav Pelikan lamented) by traditionalism, "the dead faith of the living." Whatever healthy *ressourcement* means, it cannot mean a return to the Babylonian captivity of the church.

On the positive side of the ledger, evangelicalism's single-minded immediatism has protected and promoted a powerful relational, emotional piety; a deep commitment to the practical injunctions of the gospel; a lively expectation of the return of Christ; a passion for evangelism and missions; a legacy of thoroughgoing social reform; and long practice in concerted, ecumenical effort. Any evangelical *ressourcement* must proceed without damaging these.

Immediatism is not as new as one might think. It is deep in the tradition of Christianity, with forms and flowers in the early and medieval church. Indeed, it is present in the Old Testament writers—Hosea, for example, through whom God told his people that his relationship with him is like a marriage. Paul was caught up to the “third heaven” (2 Cor. 12:2). The direct experience of God’s power and presence is also present in the church’s earliest years—days of instant healing and deliverance from demonic oppression.²⁷ It is present in the direct, experiential communion that fed Origen’s (184/185–253/254) reinterpretation of the Song of Songs from a story about sex and human relations to a story about the communion of the individual soul with God. It is present in the powerful confessions and prayers of St. Augustine and his revolution of seeking God within his own consciousness. It is present in the entire glorious history of the Christian hospital, which accelerated rapidly in the thirteenth century as worshipers experienced Christ’s suffering and compassion for them (quite directly and emotionally) at worship and in contemplation and sought to practice that same compassion for others. It is present in the transports and high reflections of the mystics and the monastics. It is present in Martin Luther’s mystical image of the wedding ring of faith and the direct transfer of our sin to Christ and Christ’s righteousness to us.

But in all of these times and episodes, immediatism was balanced with the mediation of church and sacrament. It is only in the increasingly individualistic, reason- and experience-driven heart religion of post-Enlightenment groups such as the Pietists, Moravians, Wesleyans, and Pentecostals that immediatism has, at first haltingly, begun asserting an independent right to define *all* aspects of our faith. The multifold harvest of that development includes many more negative legacies: a suspicion of academic inquiry; an impatient push to make black-and-white moral and social judgments and offer simplistic, immediatist social solutions; a retraction of Christian responsibility from the public to a new “private” (individual and familial) sphere; a domestication of God; a divisive sectarianism; and an overrealized eschatology.

In short, immediatism in its modern evangelical form courts presumption—even arrogance. It petulantly dismisses all the helps of church discipline, doctrine, worship, and leadership as “merely human.” And in doing so, it defies most of our experience for most of our lives, which are full of the need for community, with its guidance, discipline, doctrine, and

liturgy (whether explicit or implicit).²⁸ On reflection, honesty compels us to admit that if we are to have a hope of living and working “as unto the Lord,” we need all of those mediations and more.

The Ironies of Evangelical Immediatism

None of this proves that evangelical immediatism is wrong. But there is another problem with our immediatism: it implicates us in real difficulties about some of the traditions evangelicals hold dear.

First, immediatism finds indigestible the real story—Lewis would have called it the *mere Christian* understanding—of how the Bible became a canon of texts that communicates to us the self-revelation of God. The problem immediatism has with the historical Christian understanding of canonical revelation is one, we might say, of process. As is quite easy to verify from the historical sources, that canon comes down the ages to us today not by being dropped, wholesale and intact, from heaven to earth but through an extended, circuitous communal process—that is, through human mediation.

For me, as for almost the entire historic church, this long and contentious process does not call into question the Bible’s status as revelation. This is because the church has always affirmed that the process of canon formation was guided and in a sense guaranteed by God. It certainly does, however, call into question the naive hermeneutic of those modern Christians who presume that a clear-eyed reading of those same mediated documents provides direct, unmediated access to the mind of God.²⁹

The Bible is, as a set of human-mediated texts, complex, quirky, and many-layered—and therefore open to a wide array of interpretative approaches and understandings. It needs to be read and understood in and through human community, freshly for each context and historical moment. There are certainly many areas in which the voices of the canon speak, as it were, “singly,” or in unison (in fact, I would join the historic church in affirming that *all the areas required for our faith and flourishing* speak in unison). But it cannot do so for us apart from a mediating communal process and context—that is, the Holy Spirit speaking through the church, both historically and in the modern moment. Its truths cannot be accessed with any sustained effectiveness immediately (without mediation) by the individual

believer, reading his or her Bible alone in the closet by the light of a flashlight and individual reason, divorced from the community of the church.

Along with the doctrine of revelation, immediatism also causes problems for another historically held “mere Christian” doctrine, or more accurately, a precious and widely shared cluster of beliefs affirmed without hesitation by evangelicals but rarely examined to see whether it comports with our immediatism. This is the linked set of teachings that Christ is and always has been divine and that he is a coequal member of a “Trinity” with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. As in the case of the Bible, evangelicals tend to treat these important doctrinal foundations of faith as if dropped directly from heaven—or at least from a clear-eyed, direct, and obvious reading of Scripture. But, to take just one (quite crucial) example, anyone familiar with the fourth-century Arian controversy and the series of councils that followed knows the truth: the development of today’s orthodox understandings of the Trinity and Christ’s divinity, which we affirm in our creeds and faith statements, is *not* directly obvious from Scripture. It *did* travel a circuitous and tortuous human path—political, contested, and contentious—that was by all appearances historically contingent (though again, as the church believes, guided by God’s Spirit).

So we are in a dilemma. How do we at the same time both foster the immediatism that is part of the modern church’s heritage (especially of evangelical and other pietistic groups) and push back against its most arrogant claims? How may we, this side of the Enlightenment, acknowledge the necessity to our human condition of mediating forms at the same time that we recognize the tremendous gift of God that is his direct communication to our individual hearts and minds? How do we admit that we dwell neither in the glow of the seventh heaven nor in the rare flashes of direct illumination and that we need human, communal mediation, with its firm but still fallible checks and balances of liturgy, of church discipline, of doctrine?

Though we cannot ourselves (of course) become medieval in any direct sense, if we read the period honestly we will find something like the ordered minuet of immediate and mediated modes of faith—here a sober celebration of church and sacrament, there a joyful riot of ecstatic personal encounter with God.

The answer to the question is not either/or; it is both/and. But we have lost the “and” of tradition, and we’ve lost the “and” of mediation. Because

we see through a glass darkly, we need to hear the whole community of the church, including the church triumphant that's gone on before. We need again to submit our worship to forms past and present, our theology to communities past and present, our practice to time-tested spiritual disciplines. And inasmuch as we can do so in the secular, pluralist space of modern Western culture, we need to find ways to mediate our arts and sciences and education through the Christian history of art, the Christian history of science, the Christian history of all human cultural activity that has gone before us (and in doing so we return, really, to our own recent past, since most universities in the United States were founded out of this Christian cultural impulse).

This is as T. S. Eliot argues in his essay about what it is to be a writer:³⁰ you can't hope to become a writer worth reading without the tradition. So too, although you can *start* to be Christian by the great and direct grace of God, you cannot hope to become a well-formed person of faith without modes of mediation to go *along with* the amazing direct encounters God has always, quite astoundingly, granted to those who seek him. To do otherwise is arrogance.³¹

New Roads Opened by Past Wisdom

As we launch into this study, let me offer some aspects of medieval faith that I take to be both potentially powerful for us today in our moment of need and all too absent from our own habits of life and devotion—hidden from us by our hyperactive immediatism. I'll put these in the form of a series of questions that medieval Christians dwelled upon deeply, but that many today ignore altogether:

1. Why should we commit ourselves to the wants and needs of mortal life when eternity looms?
2. What meaning can the material world have to us as spiritual, not carnal, beings?
3. What does suffering mean and how is God present to us in it?
4. If we have faith, then how much more should we do works of mercy?
5. How does human reason reflect the *logos* through which the Father created the world?

These were not the incidental but rather the organizing questions of medieval Western Christianity.

Medieval answers to the question of the significance of temporal life in light of eternity were fraught. First came the medieval division of religion workers into the “religious” (those who live according to a rule, in a community dedicated in a special way to the purposes of God) and the “secular” (those, including parish clergy, who deal daily with the concerns of others caught up in the *saeculum*, the hurly-burly of this age). From the fourth-century desert fathers and mothers to the twelfth-century preaching friars to the late medieval (that is, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century) laypeople who imitated their disciplines, the brightly burning life of the ascetics captivated everyone who sought salvation. By the time Henry VIII (1491–1547) started dismantling the monastic superstructure of England in 1536, every town of any size in England had at least three or four sizable monasteries.

But from the high medieval period (1000–1300) through the Reformation, a rebirth of education and the arts swept Europeans into a new era of cultural engagement in arts, sciences, and practical social disciplines. The culture was reawakened to Gregory the Great’s assertion that the active, earthly life and the contemplative life serve each other and that every aspect of our mortal, material life can serve as a conduit of divine communication and a forum for redemptive living. The preaching orders of the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians rapidly blanketed Europe, bringing not only the message of the gospel but also a reborn tradition of the liberal arts.

The question of creation’s sacramental meaning spurred medievals both to a special attention to the ways God speaks to us in flowers and birds (following the time of Francis of Assisi [1181/1182–1226]) and to the most stunning and luminous achievements of a millennium of religious art—icons, reliquaries, cathedrals, and canvases of spiritual power and aching beauty.

Animated by the perennial question of the meaning of suffering, medievals plunged into the passion of their Lord, finding in that mystery a profound sense of connection with a God who cares enough to suffer together with his creation and who urges us to imitate him in this—walking with others in their sufferings too.

The medieval solution to the problem of the place of good works in a system of grace set off a social explosion as rank upon rank of hospitals

burst forth and spread over Europe, caring above all for the poor and sick who had no resources to keep themselves comfortable in their illnesses or to surround themselves with help and companionship in their dying days.

From the awareness of reason's sacred purpose emerged all of the grandeur of scholastic theology as well as the birth of the university, perhaps Europe's most powerful single institution apart from the church. This institution dedicated itself to the glorious celebration of creation's goodness, the fruitful exercise of what Dante called "the good of the intellect,"³² and the intricate exploration of the way of salvation.

The Crux: Creation and Incarnation

Is there a way to summarize the negative effects of our modern "immediatism gone to seed" and the medieval balm that could be applied to heal our self-inflicted wounds? Many ways, no doubt, but I keep coming back to the doctrines of the creation and the incarnation, particularly their eclipse in the modern scientific age and their potential recovery through clear-eyed and openhearted engagement with medieval wisdom.

I believe (and Lewis observed) that the scientific revolution and its sequels—such as the Enlightenment—began to sap the material world of its spiritual and moral significance, and that this diminishment has only continued and intensified through today. In 1954 Lewis argued that the closing of Jane Austen's heyday (1775–1817) marked a turning point in Western history,³³ whose catastrophic outcomes he had already limned in his argument "The Abolition of Man" (1943) and its novelistic outworking *That Hideous Strength* (1945). But whenever it happened, the modern disenchantment of the material universe has hidden from us the spiritual importance of both creation (God making all flesh) and incarnation (God becoming flesh).

Gregory the Great, spiritual father of the Middle Ages, whose writings filled the cupboards of the great monastic libraries,³⁴ insisted that while pastors or laypeople are engaged in the active life, *everything in their experience and in the world becomes a potential instrument of God's direct, special communication to them*. Chance meetings. Storms. Landscapes. Crafted objects. A thousand other things. God is always speaking to us, if we but have ears to hear and eyes to see. Gregory emphasized "God's

involvement with creation and the sacramental presence of spiritual truths in the things of this world.”³⁵

This sense of God at work in the material world and in our own embodied, material, social, and cultural experience became part of the orthodox Christian understanding of the world for the whole period from Gregory to the Reformation—and, in many circles, both before and after this period. This was not pantheism, but rather the sense of both God’s glory reflected in creation and God’s grace working through ordinary things in creation.

Since the scientific revolution, philosophical materialism (as Lewis argues in his *Discarded Image*) has sapped not only our physical world but also the solar system and beyond of life and mystery, including the life of God and the mystery of redemption. As a result, humankind finds it a dull fact worthy of little interest that the supreme God over all the universe came in the flesh of a human being, entering into the world(s) he had made. All the rich resonances of incarnation and all the glories and intricacies of human life within creation were left for the irrelevant musings of oddball romantic poets such as Gerard Manley Hopkins. The world, of course, did not stop being charged with the grandeur of God. It did not stop flaming out like “shining from shook foil.”³⁶ But only the poets and the mystics noticed anymore.

The medievals, on the other hand, saw God reflected and actively at work in every aspect of the created world. Theirs was “a world of built-in significance.”³⁷ What would a medieval person looking up at the night sky have actually *seen*? To become that ancient night watcher, says Lewis, “you must conceive yourself looking up at a world lighted, warmed, and resonant with music.”³⁸ The medieval cosmos was one of vibrancy and wonder. In his *Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis’s protagonist, Ransom, peers out of the window of a spaceship to see not the black void of space but a pulsing, glowing matrix of glory. This is how the medievals saw their universe, as a place where “each sphere . . . is a conscious and intellectual being, moved by ‘intellectual love’ of God.”³⁹

Medieval poets and artists dwelled on the particularities of the material world because those particularities made them feel the fitness and rightness of all things. It was the strength of that medieval worldview, says Lewis in his *English Literature of the Sixteenth Century*, to think always and at the same time in both the universal and the particular. Medievals oscillated in

their thinking and talking between boots and angels, pigs and prophecy, with stunning rapidity and naturalness.⁴⁰

Lewis found himself living in a modern age of philosophical materialism, in which everything was simply atoms. In this newer and poorer world, all the spiritual meaning that medievals had seen looking up into the night sky had vanished, leaving a Newtonian machine-universe in its place. Yet Lewis would not go gentle into that “good” night: “I have made no serious effort to hide the fact that the old Model delights me as I believe it delighted our ancestors. Few constructions of the imagination seem to me to have combined splendour, sobriety, and coherence in the same degree.”⁴¹ To which the response of many modern commentators is “How medieval!”

That is, how quaint. How backward. How wrong.

Does such mystical understanding of the cosmos reduce God to some sort of magician, meddling in material stuff to gain cheap effects among his human audience? Does it encourage rank “superstition,” which is a modern term for attributing to spiritual origins anything we still don’t understand? That’s certainly the understanding of many moderns faced with the “discarded image” of the Middle Ages.

Why Can’t We Hear the Medievals on Creation and Incarnation?

A crucial reason we cannot hear what medievals *actually* said about the world and God’s relationship to it is that we assume, from our privileged modern scientific vantage point, that they were impenetrably ignorant about the world. To take just one example: everyone knows that medieval people believed the world is flat, right? But this supposed “fact” is actually a complete fabrication, as we will see in chapter 4.

I would argue, and Lewis makes a similar argument in his *Discarded Image*, that if we are to return to the nourishing truths of the Middle Ages, rooted as they are in a very different understanding of the material world than we hold today, then we will need to tear away some significant polemical barriers erected by supposedly enlightened moderns (such as the flat-earth myth). Only by doing so can we begin to shuck off *our own* impenetrable materialist ignorance and intractable scientific superstition. Only then can we begin to take seriously the scriptural stories of creation

and incarnation as clues that the material world is not just a random collocation of atoms. We scientific moderns, who “know better,” will have to allow the possibility that all this material *stuff* is, first, the handiwork of God, and, second, still used by God to comfort, confront, discipline, and delight us. Further, we will have to open ourselves to the truth that what we do with our own stuff—our bodies, families, goods, economic work, neighborhoods, food—*does* matter to God.

In other words, Christianity is not a *merely spiritual* religion. Today many say, “I am spiritual, but I am not religious,” meaning something like, “I have spiritual thoughts and feelings, but I don’t have to act on them in organized, physical, communal worship in church or in concrete, biblical ethical action in the world to know that I’m in touch with God.” A medieval Christian would have laughed.

Our modern tendency to spiritualize faith out of all earthly recognition is not just an evasion of the unchurched. It has rooted itself deep in Christian culture. To many, faith simply does not touch the physical. This extends even to the Person of Christ: the single important thing about him is that he was divine—his humanity doesn’t matter much. We have perhaps not become, as some argue, body-denying gnostics (although there is a family resemblance). We are far too fond of our creature comforts to condemn our bodies as evil as the gnostics did. Rather, we just now assume that those comforts are spiritually neutral. This leaves us heedless of our bodies’ significance as the one and only “place” in which we meet God.

Harvest of a Disembodied Faith

We do not live outside our experience of embodiedness and relatedness with other bodies. We do not live apart from sex. All we know how to do any more is to put up barriers and proscriptions: “NO sex before marriage.” “NO homosexual activity or feelings.” “NO abortion.” We are at a loss to find wisdom in Scripture or Christian tradition for how to do sex well (though the medieval church is admittedly not the best place to look for that wisdom either!). And we certainly do not know how to use the rich imagery of marriage and sexuality to talk about our own relationship with God, as Bernard of Clairvaux (and Origen long before him) did.

What's more, we do not know how to see the motherly—as well as the fatherly—dimension of God, as Julian of Norwich (1342–ca. 1416) did.

We do not live apart from the pleasures of the table. All we do any more is to put up barriers and proscriptions: “NO overeating.” “NO laziness and lack of exercise.” We do not know how to find scriptural or traditional warrants for the good, positive use of food. And we certainly don't use the rich imagery of convivial feasting to talk about our relationship with God both in heaven and here on earth, as did Margery Kempe and many others in the Middle Ages who wrote and talked about the marriage supper of the Lamb or savoring the wine of the Eucharist as a created good—even with its potential for intoxication.

We do not live apart from emotion—strong emotion. The most our church cultures know how to do is to try to channel that emotion to God, sometimes quietly in private devotion or sitting in solemn reverence in the sanctuary and sometimes more expressively in charismatic worship. We don't know what to do with it in our relationships other than to counsel sober good sense and careful reining-in of the “passions.”

And of course, that's wise. The passions are dynamite. But if God wants to work in our everyday emotional lives—our relationships and pleasures and temptations and sins—well, we don't know anything about that. Sounds dangerous. Better keep emotion carefully hemmed in to church services and prayer closets. We certainly don't know about the outrageous everyday joy of Francis of Assisi and his merry band. I think of Francis's friend Friar Masseo; the *Little Flowers of Saint Francis* says that he was “filled with such grace of the yearned-for virtue of humility, and of the light of God, that . . . he was ever blithe of heart. And many times he made a joyous sound like the cooing of a dove. ‘Coo, coo, coo.’”⁴² Or consider the Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–67), who took surpassing joy in the fellowship of his order, so that he said “Without friends there is absolutely no pleasure in life.”⁴³

Because we think these things—sex, food, and emotion—have to do only with biological matters of reproduction and sustenance, or with unfortunate physical tendencies that cloud our judgment and confuse our ability to see truth, and that they have no spiritual significance, we live our lives with God as a giant game of pretend. We pretend that the only part of us that matters is our “spiritual” part (whatever that is, really). We pretend we can sustain a relationship with him by attending only to that part.

We pretend that a vertical relationship is enough and that our horizontal relationships with spouses, children, parents, and coworkers will simply sort themselves out if we spend enough time reaching out to God inside our heads and hearts—as if “alone” is the only place God can be met.

And because of all this, we cannot take seriously the power of disciplines such as celibacy (temporary or lifelong), fasting (brief or protracted), or stability within one community. Since the body is not a place where spirituality gets done, mortifying the body is not part of our spirituality. Fasting is no gift to God, for the material world has no significance. Keeping the heart for God by abstaining from sex is no important spiritual discipline, for God does not care about what we do with our bodies in the intimacy of our bedrooms (as long as we follow a few rules). Keeping fidelity to one community is no way to serve God, because the social dimension lacks spiritual significance. God is a God of the spiritual things, not of the material things. God is a God who seems to have come, in Jesus, as a spiritual being, not truly as a material (which is to say fully human) being. So that bodily realm has no spiritual significance for us. It is not evil, as the gnostics held. It is simply irrelevant.

Because this is in fact not true—rather, it is devastatingly false—divorce rates are the same for Christians as for non-Christians. We have no lower rate of obesity than do non-Christians (perhaps worse, as a study some time ago of Southern Baptists suggested, because eating is the one vice left to a group that has historically been hedged in with the “NO” signs). We do not make art worth looking at. We do not write poems worth reading. We do not build churches worth walking into or worshipping in. We do not give council to married people worth hearing. We do not understand how to pass on our faith to our children, who are the “fruit of our loins” (to use the colorful, and very earthy, biblical image; Acts 2:30 KJV).

On the other hand, we do not take seriously the ascetic disciplines that address our pressing, spiritually engaged bodies in ways that turn them always back to our Lord. And, it should be said, we have forgotten the art of dying well (*ars moriendi*) that was so well understood and lavishly explained in the late Middle Ages especially. If our bodily lives lack spiritual significance, then so too do our bodily deaths. And again, because we downgrade our horizontal relatedness in the quest for vertical relatedness, we find the idea of mystical communion and fellowship with “saints” who have gone on before us both irrelevant and indeed irreverent.

If we think our material existence is irrelevant, then of course we do not study how to live bodily “as unto God.” On the one hand, our devotion is not “full boisterous” and we do not engage in “dalliance” with our Lord, as was the case with the medieval lay mystic Margery Kempe.⁴⁴ In our worship, we abstain from incense, art, vestments, kneeling, prostrating ourselves, crossing ourselves, and all that other “medieval” stuff. Such things are reminiscent (say many modern Protestants) of those idolatrous, superstitious Catholics who muddy the pure and proper spiritual life with a slew of unbiblical activities. After all, to do such things in the name of religion is to be dragged back down into our embodiedness, into the material world that, as we scientific moderns know, has no spiritual significance.

As we’ve seen, this super-spiritualizing tendency sprouted up as long ago as the Reformation, growing to strength in the vineyard of Reformed piety rooted in the thought of Ulrich Zwingli. This piety distrusted all religious exercises or activities that engaged or pointed to the “outer,” physical life. Only the inner and spiritual was to be trusted, not only in worship and devotion but also in the ethic of daily life: “The outer, whether it meant Church-as-institution, the sacrament or ascetic practices was automatically reduced to the role of being no more than an expression (always suspect and dangerous at that) of the inner, or else was condemned outright as materialistic and idolatrous.”⁴⁵

This reflection on the spiritual significance of material creation is a taste of the ending as we begin. This book leads to and culminates in what I have found to be the wisest piece of medieval wisdom: creation and incarnation are not rote doctrines to be learned, committed to memory, and ignored in our daily practice, but rather are practical linchpins of what it means to lead a good human life in the light of the gospel.