

YEARNING FOR GOD: THE POTENTIAL AND POVERTY OF THE CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY OF FRANCIS DE SALES

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There is renewed interest among evangelicals, as well there might be, in what is now known as spirituality or spiritual formation. For too many the distinctively evangelical phrase “a personal relationship with Jesus Christ” has deflated to a cliché, and the vital experience it once honestly represented has faded to a memory or, sadder still, remains a plaintive wish. A new generation of evangelicals wants to know just how personal and transforming the presence of God can actually be in its experience today.

To some extent the renewed evangelical interest in spirituality is our own in-house expression of the much larger (indeed, culturewide) recoiling of the human spirit from the ethos of our materialistic, technological and ultimately alienating way of life. The contemporary cry of the human spirit is our cry too. We must not dismiss the divine impulse in all of this simply because spiritual hunger spills out beyond ecclesiastical boundaries or because it often manifests itself in offensively narcissistic ways.¹

Whatever the generic and very slippery word “spirituality” may mean to others, for Christians spirituality is about experiencing the Triune God in a personally transforming way. Intimacy with this God, by reason of his infectiously holy nature, is necessarily purging and sanctifying. For this reason there can be no artificial division between spirituality and ethics.

An assumption underlying the renewed evangelical interest in spiritual formation is that such a “transforming friendship”² is not automatic: It requires an intentional and disciplined approach. Here we have been at a bit of a loss. It is not as though the evangelical tradition lacks a heritage of spirituality. But our collective memory is weak, and we have grown unfamiliar with the rich resources of a host of evangelical mentors, women and men alike, from John Bunyan to Hannah Whitall Smith to A. W. Tozer.

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¹ L. G. Jones, “A Thirst for God or Consumer Spirituality? Cultivating Disciplined Practices of Being Engaged by God,” *Modern Theology* 13/1 (January 1997) 3–28.

² For a profound exposition of this as the essence of Christian spirituality and prayer see J. M. Houston, *The Transforming Friendship* (Oxford: Lion, 1989). To appeal more to an American audience the book was recently retitled *The Transforming Power of Prayer* (Colorado Springs: Nav-Press, 1996).

Yet there is also another factor involved here. One of our strong suits as evangelicals has always been our vigorous activism,³ which has led to many achievements for which we may be properly grateful. But busy people tend not to cultivate the interior life with a lot of sophistication. Often we are at a loss when we try to move, as Charles Nienkirchen has put it, “beyond the Quiet Time.”⁴ So it is entirely appropriate that we cast our net more widely and explore the resources of Christian traditions beyond our own. And the tradition closest to hand is the rich one of our “separated brethren” here in the west: Roman Catholic spirituality.

Among these resources evangelicals are regularly attracted to the spiritual legacy of Roman Catholic bishop Francis de Sales⁵ (1567–1622). He won a name for himself (plus sainthood) in part through his success in winning back the spiritual descendants of John Calvin to Catholicism in the environs of Geneva. De Sales, whose influence continues to extend well beyond Roman Catholic boundaries, was a compelling champion of a life of ready obedience rooted in a passionate love for God. This together with the relative accessibility of his approach to meditation and other spiritual disciplines accounts in large part for his appeal to evangelicals today.⁶

The sphere of spirituality is often viewed as fertile ground for an emerging Christian ecumenicity. With modernity in a seriously geriatric condition the postmodern spirit is ascendant, and with it an attitude that experiencing God is both possible without theology and infinitely more important than a rational understanding of God and his ways. There is growing sympathy for the notion that our head games—that is, our doctrines—only lead to logically irreconcilable differences and push us apart when, in fact, we are one in the Spirit. Our experience of God and our interpretations of it are one and the same. Theology only gets in the way of spiritual reality.

³ D. Bebbington cites activism as one of four defining features of the evangelical movement in his *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 2–19. M. Noll ruefully reminds us in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) that it has also led to a relative neglect of the intellectual life.

⁴ Some years after Nienkirchen coined this term and used it for a series of spiritual retreats it found its way into the title of a work on evangelical spirituality: A. McGrath, *Beyond the Quiet Time: Practical Evangelical Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

⁵ His name ought to be written either as Francois de Sales (French) or Francis of Sales (Anglicized), but he has traditionally been designated in English literature by the conflated title of Francis de Sales. He has been described as “one of the strongest single influences on spirituality from the seventeenth century to the present day” (J. Aumann, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition* [San Francisco: Ignatius; London: Sheed and Ward, 1985] 211). The definitive collection of de Sales’ writings is the 27-volume French-language *Oeuvres de Saint Francois de Sales* (Annecy: J. Niérat, 1892–1932, 1964). In English there is the seven-volume Library of St. Francis de Sales, edited and translated by H. B. Mackey (1873–1910). Individual volumes and selections of de Sales’ writings have also been published by others.

⁶ Samples of evangelical attentiveness include *Devotional Classics* (ed. R. Foster and J. Smith; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990) 26–32; P. Toon, *Spiritual Companions: An Introduction to the Christian Classics* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1990) 81 ff. Generally, evangelical writers cite the writings of de Sales only eclectically; cf. e.g. D. Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988) 70, 203.

My argument, however, is just the opposite: Our doctrines (and by this I mean our real convictions, and not necessarily those to which we may officially and even officiously subscribe) do affect our spirituality. Evangelicals should be in mutually respectful dialogue with Roman Catholics.⁷ Who would deny that we stand to learn a thing or two from Catholics—even from those older writers like de Sales who lived and moved in the fierce anti-Protestant ethos of Tridentine Catholicism? And, for that matter, who is to say that the current glimmers of reformation and renewal in the Roman Church will not flourish someday? Who but a cynic would insist that this centuries-old divorce of ours is destined to be an everlasting one?

In precisely the same spirit of openness and humility we ought to access the works of Francis de Sales and, for that matter, other resources of Roman Catholic spirituality.⁸ At the same time, however, we must do so with discrimination, combining an appreciative spirit with a critical eye. As Wendy Wright and Joseph Power, two authorities on Francis de Sales and his (Salesian) spirituality, themselves admit: “Any spirituality rests upon, or better yet, includes a set of assumptions about God and humankind and about how they are related to each other.”⁹ Such assumptions need to be identified and their consequences traced. The thesis of our appraisal is that evangelicals can profit from a selective appropriation of Salesian spirituality, at the heart of which lies a profound yearning for God.

I. THEOLOGY AS BIOGRAPHY: FRANCIS DE SALES AND HIS TIMES

All theology is colored by autobiography, and the shortest and most direct route to the heart of Salesian spirituality is through an examination of de Sales’ personal pilgrimage in its historical context.¹⁰ As in our own day, life in early seventeenth-century Europe was a time of spiritual aridity and soul-sickness. The Reformation impulse of the previous century converged with powerful forces of nationalism and economics to twist and transform the “crazy-quilt geography”¹¹ of Europe and at ground level to precipitate turmoil, massacres and wars that would leave the landscape of Europe burnt and devastated and its population degraded and calloused by its own dark war crimes. The Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), ostensibly about religion,

⁷ Recent evenhanded but uncompromising works like N. Geisler and R. Mackenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), and *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (ed. C. Colson and R. Neuhaus; Dallas: Word, 1995) are exemplary.

⁸ J. M. Luti argues that Protestants can profit from the writings of “heavy users of the whole Catholic apparatus” (“Reappropriating Classic Texts of Catholic Spirituality for Protestant Devotion Today,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 16/1 [March 1997] 56–68).

⁹ W. Wright and J. Power, *Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist, 1988) 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 18–33.

¹¹ K. Brégy, *The Story of Saint Francis de Sales: Patron of Catholic Writers* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1958) 26.

reduced the population of Germany, for example, from sixteen million to less than six million. As Williston Walker observed, "little evidence of spiritual life was manifested in this frightful time of war."¹²

Yet in the incubator of this pending holocaust also developed a remarkable though smaller counterpoise movement of renewed spirituality within the ranks of French Roman Catholicism. It was a movement characterized by "a thirst for the ascetic, the mystical and the visionary."¹³ It claimed many notable figures besides its leader Francis de Sales, including Vincent de Paul, Francois Fenelon, Marie of the Incarnation, and Jean de Chantal. It is perhaps significant that unlike the contemporary battlefields it would make space for women, and some remarkable women at that. In contrast to the brutality of the times, to the politicized strategies and anathemas of Trent, and even to the relative severity of the Jesuit spirituality of the Spaniard Ignatius Loyola, its distinguishing feature continues to be recognized as its gentle humanism. No mere quietist movement of affluent salons, it produced an enduring social conscience (Vincent de Paul) and actually created the motive and religious *raison d'être* for *Nouvelle France* (now French Canada). "The love of God has," de Sales mourned, "because of the overflowing of iniquity, grown cold . . . in almost all souls."¹⁴ His distinctive emphasis on love of God was a deliberate counter to the spirit of the times.

De Sales was the firstborn child of an older Savoy aristocrat and his fifteen-year-old wife. His education in the humanities in Paris and his subsequent law studies at Padua in northern Italy gave him a rich insight into the intellectual life of the times—one remarkably similar to that acquired by John Calvin a couple of generations earlier.

The Huguenot alternative in French life was still strong and viable during these years, and Lutheran ideas exerted a powerful and unavoidable influence in the Paris of his day. Reading theology voraciously under Jesuit tutelage, de Sales explored Augustine's and Aquinas' views on predestination.¹⁵ No doubt his reflections were further stimulated by his encounters with the contemporary Protestant doctrine of predestination. As he approached his twentieth birthday, this fixation precipitated a spiritual crisis that had a profound and lasting effect upon his life and outlook. The crisis revolved around the panic he experienced over the possibility that he was in fact, his religious aspirations notwithstanding, already and nonetheless predestined to damnation and permanent estrangement from God.

In his personal case the crisis was not resolved in the classic evangelical Protestant way through a settled, inner assurance of salvation. Rather, it was resolved by his decision to unconditionally love God while he could, and regardless of God's final determination of his destiny.¹⁶ As de Sales put it: "If I am condemned not to love you in eternity, I can at least love you with

¹² W. Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (3d ed.; New York: Scribner's, 1970) 396.

¹³ Wright and Power, *Francis de Sales* 24.

¹⁴ Quoted by R. Kleinman, *Saint Francois de Sales and the Protestants* (dissertation; Columbia University, 1959) 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 5.

all my power during this life.”¹⁷ For him this became a pure love, purged entirely of self-interest. In this, he believed, he had discovered the freedom to exercise his own volition in a fashion and to an extent that he had been led to understand that the Protestant doctrine of predestination denied.

Before long he came to adopt a very modified doctrine of predestination, one that leaned away from the dark and troubling side of double predestination and affirmed both God’s heart for the whole world and human freedom of will to respond accordingly. He thus acquired a deeper sense of God’s love undergirding human living and choices, even though it never quite issued in the settled confidence in God’s provision and application to oneself that the Reformers cherished and celebrated.¹⁸

To the disappointment of his ambitious father, de Sales declared his sense of call to a church vocation. In 1592 he was promptly catapulted up into the significant role of assistant to Claude de Granier, the exiled Roman Catholic bishop of Geneva. With much chagrin, de Granier was obliged to maintain his headquarters in Annecy, a much smaller Savoyan community about fifty miles to the south. For a time the French-speaking Chablais region just south of Lake Geneva (which was part of de Granier’s diocese) had been controlled by Swiss cantons of Protestant conviction, and its residents had largely converted to the newer faith. Subsequently, however, these territories had been returned to Duke Charles Emmanuel of Savoy, and in time he decided to exercise his influence to reconvert the Chablais to his own Roman Catholic commitments.

De Sales became the primary apostle through whom this religious reclamation initiative (1594–1602) was carried out. In the face of sometimes life-threatening hostility, he pressed on all fronts for the reestablishment of Roman Catholic institutions, services and, most of all, authentic Christian discipleship. His compelling ministry and personal charisma were instrumental in reconverting an estimated sixty thousand Chablais back from Protestantism to Roman Catholicism.¹⁹ He even had the temerity to attempt (albeit unsuccessfully)—by clandestine visits to Geneva in disguise—to personally reconvert the much older Theodore Beza, Calvin’s aging successor there. Evidently in this instance de Sales was treated with a modicum of tolerance and was permitted to enter and leave the city with impunity.

¹⁶ W. Wright, “Francois de Sales: Gentleness and Civility,” *Roots of the Modern Christian Tradition*, vol. 2 of *The Spirituality of Western Christendom* (ed. E. R. Elder; Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1984) 132–134.

¹⁷ Quoted in *ibid.* 133.

¹⁸ “Unlike the young Luther, whose own spiritual struggle this recalls, the discord did not give way to the dominant chord of certainty. Rather, it resolved itself in an act of ultimate surrender to and trust in the uncertainty” (*ibid.*).

¹⁹ When dealing with individual Protestants, de Sales always began with respectful and persuasive entreaties. When these proved insufficient he was prepared to supplement them with political pressures and economic discrimination and, indeed, recommended such measures to the Duke of Savoy. “Francois de Sales believed it legitimate, when religious appeals for conversion had been tried and failed, to apply all forms of pressure short of physical violence and open war” (Kleinman, *Saint Francois de Sales* xi). In this de Sales was essentially a person of his times.

Geneva had asserted its independence in 1535, with the dukes of Savoy bent on recovery of their principal city ever after. In 1602, in the very month that de Sales was consecrated bishop, the Duke sent about two thousand men up to take Geneva by night. The attack (known as the Escalade) was repelled. More than fifty Savoyards were killed and another thirteen captured, and though the following day was Sunday the thirteen were promptly executed. Sixty-seven Savoyard heads appeared on the city wall and remained there for six months. Though Protestants accused de Sales of coconspiracy, there is no conclusive evidence that he was personally involved in the plot.²⁰ He did say, however, that “the Blessed Virgin . . . will trample and *crush the head* of the poisonous serpent which has sought refuge in Geneva and Lausanne.”²¹ Throughout his life he remained an implacable foe of the Protestants, all the while cautioning his followers that ultimately “love alone will shake the walls of Geneva.”²²

De Sales’ tireless commitment to fostering authentic discipleship among many lapsed and often-decadent residents of his diocese (for he had become bishop himself in 1602) involved him in extensive spiritual directing. His two most influential works, the spiritual classic *Introduction to the Devout Life* (editions from 1608 to 1619) and the lesser known but more substantive *Treatise on the Love of God* (1616), emerged directly out of such efforts. Another means by which de Sales worked toward his goal of “a society infused with the spirit of true devotion”²³ was by cofounding, with Jane Frances Frémyot, baroness de Chantal, a female order known as the Visitation of Holy Mary. By the time of de Chantal’s death in 1641 the Visitation had expanded outwards from Annecy to become a network of some eighty houses. Its rule was somewhat less rigorous, and thus more accessible, than certain existing alternatives for women. Its goal was to cultivate “a deep interior intimacy with God.”²⁴

II. POTENTIAL: THE COMPELLING FEATURES OF HIS SPIRITUALITY

De Sales has exercised a tremendous influence both within and far beyond the boundaries of Roman Catholicism, and there are good reasons for this: the cheerful spirit that animated his love for God, the level of personal disinterest in his brand of Christian consecration, his focus on the interior life of the heart, and the accessibility of his spirituality to ordinary people.

1. *De Sales sought to champion the devout life, a life of ready obedience rooted in love for God.* He identified such love for God as the true wellspring

²⁰ Ibid. 77–78.

²¹ F. de Sales, *Oeuvres* (quoted in *ibid.* 126).

²² *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (rev. ed.; ed. J. D. Douglas; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) s.v. “Francis of Sales”; cf. M. de la Bedoyere, *Francois de Sales* (New York: Harper, 1960) 10.

²³ Wright and Power, *Francis de Sales* 27.

²⁴ Ibid. 30. The transcription of de Sales’ counsel to these women (F. de Sales, *The Spiritual Conferences* [Westminster: Newman, 1943]) is his third most important writing.

of everything the Christian did. As he put it, the Pentecostal imagery of

flaming tongues was meant to indicate that the gospel was “wholly designed for the inflaming of hearts.”²⁵ He viewed the devotion that issued from this as the ardor and alacrity that motivates good deeds.²⁶ Contrary to its falsely negative stereotype, he insisted, the authenticating signature of true Christian devotion is cheerfulness.²⁷ De Sales did not want his disciples to act like those who “keep the commandments as sick men take medicines, more from fear of dying in a state of damnation, than from love of living according to our Savior’s pleasure.”²⁸ We are a long way here from the (Protestant) stereotype of a grim Catholic outlook dominated by guilt and fearfully fixated on moral duty. The depth of de Sales’ love for God and the liberty of spirit that flowed from this love remain an inspirational challenge to all who read his work.

2. *De Sales made a compelling appeal for a love for God that was purged of self-interest.* He was not the first to encourage the development of pure love through the cultivation of indifference or “detachment,”²⁹ but certainly he was one of the most articulate and influential. He insisted that the focus of one’s relationship to God had to be upon God and not upon one’s own ultimate good.³⁰ The extent of the self-denial he sought and embraced would have been completely pathological, had such self-denial not been in fact the paling of self-interest in the face of a much higher and passionate love for God.

3. *His emphasis on the interior life of the heart, rather than external actions, should be welcomed in our age, which (like his own) wallows in immorality and a dearth of vital spirituality.* As Ruth Kleinman has stated the matter, de Sales “emphasized the importance of personal religious feeling as the foundation of religious belief and practice.”³¹ “I have never been able to approve,” de Sales explained, “the method of those who, in order to reform me, begin with the outside, with faces, with clothing, with the hair. It seems to me, on the contrary, that one must begin with what is within.”³² Our goal, he explained to the devout women of the Visitation, is this: “We desire to erect within our souls a great building, even the dwelling place of God.”³³

²⁵ F. de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God* (Westminster: Newman, 1953) 3.

²⁶ F. de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (Garden City: Image, 1972) 39–41.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 41–43.

²⁸ De Sales, *Treatise* 335.

²⁹ Wright and Power, *Francis de Sales* 50.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 53. One thinks, by comparison, of Protestant social-gospel theologian W. Rauschenbusch’s stinging criticism of the common motivation for pursuing personal salvation as simply “self-interest on a higher level.” Predictably emphasizing the social plane more than de Sales, Rauschenbusch believed the corrective lay in adopting an “anthropomorphic mysticism” that recognized God in humanity (*A Theology for the Social Gospel* [New York: Macmillan, 1917] 108).

³¹ Kleinman, *Saint Francois de Sales* xi.

³² De Sales, *Oeuvres* (quoted by Kleinman, *Saint Francois de Sales* 26).

³³ De Sales, *Spiritual Conferences* 387.

4. *Recognizing that the malaise of the post-Reformation Catholic Church could not be cured without a renewal of the spiritual life of the Catholic laity,*

*de Sales devised an approach to spirituality that deliberately cushioned the rigorous demands of monastic discipline in order to make spirituality accessible to the general laity.*³⁴ De Sales' desire for the renewal of the laity is in itself quite consistent with the spirit of the Reformation and the genius of evangelical Christianity. For example, as a shrewd communicator he deliberately wrote in short chapters in order that lazy readers would not tire quickly. Even the female order of the Visitation of Mary, which he helped to found in 1610 with Jean de Chantal as an alternative to existing monastic orders, was an order with scaled-down performance demands—a sort of Bible-institute substitute for seminary in the realm of the devout life. De Sales envisioned it as “a gentle and gracious refuge” that would nonetheless encourage the practice of “the essential virtues of devotion.”³⁵

De Sales' own preference was for a contemplative life “lived without undue austerity.”³⁶ This translated into a desire to develop an accessible way for other souls to find union with God.³⁷ His relatively simple guidelines for meditation and contemplation, outlined in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, have become his most sought after advice. His articulation of a simplified and accessible approach to the cultivation of the interior life (one might call it a methodology of the spiritual life) is probably his greatest contribution. The Salesian method of meditation treated both how one should meditate and on what one could most profitably focus. The method begins with the manner in which one places oneself in the presence of God and concludes with a technique for preserving and retaining the best insights and discoveries made. In the “what” of meditation de Sales directs us away from the trivialities of life and religiosity to what is really real, the things that matter most. His method became almost normative in the Church of England, and de Sales continues to provide for evangelicals and others an intentional and disciplined approach to experiencing God in a transforming way.

III. POVERTY: DEFECTS OF SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY

Francis de Sales remained an implacable opponent of the Protestants of his day. Biographical considerations certainly help to account for this level of hostility, since throughout his professional career he felt the sting of his banishment from Geneva and viewed that nearby Protestant city as both his beloved Geneva and “the Rome of heresy.”³⁸ But this hostility was rooted at least as much in his own doctrinal integrity, for de Sales was a person com-

³⁴ In keeping with the consistent assessment of Salesian scholars, Wright views “spiritual egalitarianism” as a defining feature of de Sales' life and work (“Gentleness” 141–142); cf. also E. Stopp, “Francois de Sales,” *The Study of Spirituality* (ed. C. Jones, G. Wainwright and E. Yarnold; New York/Oxford: Oxford University, 1986) 379–385.

³⁵ De Sales, *Oeuvres* (quoted by Kleinman, *Saint Francois de Sales* 23).

³⁶ Stopp, “Francois de Sales” 382.

³⁷ U. T. Holmes, *A History of Christian Spirituality* (New York: Seabury, 1981) 106.

mitted to implementing the spirit and canons of the Council of Trent, which vigorously and pointedly anathematized each distinctive of evangelical Protestant faith.³⁹

Inevitably de Sales' spirituality was shaped by his unequivocally Tridentine Catholic commitments. Such influence is apparent, of course, in such obvious items as his veneration of Mary, his restriction of the locus of salvation to those in the fellowship of the Roman Church, and his emphasis on the sacraments as essential means of grace, the mass, confession and the saints. These features do not need to be belabored since even relatively unsophisticated evangelical readers are able to recognize these usual suspects and move on discriminately.

There are, however, some other equally significant but perhaps less readily detected features of de Sales' work that require screening. Although his own writings are rich in Biblical content, imagery and allusions, de Sales insisted that Christians needed Church authority to help them correctly interpret the Bible.⁴⁰ He opposed translating the Bible into the vernacular. He followed the Council of Trent in opposing the reading of Scripture by laypersons. Even in exceptional cases special permission must be sought, de Sales argued, as "a very reasonable precaution against putting this sharp and *two-edged* sword into the hands of one who might kill himself therewith."⁴¹ Likewise he opposed services in the vernacular (preferring a universal Latin uniformity as a sign of Church unity). The Huguenot practice of singing the Psalms in the vernacular struck him as sacrilegious. "Is it not good," he asked sarcastically, "to hear cooks singing the penitential Psalms of David, and asking at each verse for the bacon, the capon, the partridge?"⁴²

This flaw affects the meditative practices de Sales prescribes. The devout are quite properly directed to focus their reflection on such profound themes as our intended end—on sin and death, for example, and on hell and heaven. All of these themes are Biblically rooted, of course, but the invitation to meditate on these themes is not supplemented by recommendations on how also to meditate directly on the text of inspired Scripture. The classic Christian practice of using Scripture as *lectio divina* is a helpful and necessary corrective for a spirituality that connects directly with the inspired Word of God. This is essential to evangelical meditation.

³⁸ R. Ornsby, *The Life of St. Francis de Sales* (New York: P. J. Kennedy) 29. "What Rome is to the Angels and the Catholics she [Geneva] is to the heretics and devils" (E. K. Sanders, *S. Francois de Sales* [London: SPCK, 1928] 116).

³⁹ See *Creeeds of Christendom* (ed. P. Schaff; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 2.77–206; cf. F. de Sales, *The Catholic Controversy* (London: Burns & Oates, 1886).

⁴⁰ Even so de Sales offers a passionate exhortation to another bishop to devote himself to Biblical preaching: "Preach often. . . . You can do it . . . and you must do it. . . . God wills it, and men want it. It is God's glory; it is your salvation. Act boldly . . . and take courage out of love for God" (*On the Preacher and Preaching: A Letter by Francis de Sales* [Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964] 72). Scripture is essential, but that its meaning be mediated through the clergy is equally essential.

⁴¹ De Sales, *Catholic Controversy* 125. This is of course a far cry from the heuristic Protestant interpretation of the Heb 4:12 reference to Scripture's double-edged power.

⁴² *Ibid.* 135.

Evangelical students of de Sales should also be wary of tendencies toward an excessively intrusive style of spiritual directorship. Spiritual direction is a long-established practice in the Roman Catholic tradition and eminently compatible with the hierarchical structures and priestly roles of the Roman Church. Spiritual direction, as de Sales practiced it, certainly fostered a high degree of intimacy between director and directee and, in the case of his relationship with Jane de Chantal, a love relationship that was preserved from sexual impurity only by their mutual capacity for sublimation. In keeping with the gentleness that characterized his spirituality generally, de Sales did not proceed in a heavy-handed or authoritative style. In fact his approach was almost Rogerian as he saw himself as one who facilitates the emergence of embryonic goodness in the directee herself or himself.

Nonetheless there is a hierarchicalism implicit in the spiritual direction structure itself that de Sales is unable to escape. He was fawned upon as a veritable guru by the women of the Visitation, and his visits to their establishment were treated as virtual theophanies. To maximize the effectiveness of spiritual direction, de Sales counsels that devout disciples must “submit their will” to their guide. They must view him as an angel—“Do not look on him as a mere man”—who has come from heaven and will lead them there. In keeping with this, prayers of confession are to be expressed while kneeling before one’s confessor. In a huge understatement, de Sales cautions the devout to choose their spiritual guides carefully.⁴³ In his *Spiritual Conferences* he addresses the women of the Visitation as “my dearest daughters”⁴⁴ and in other language that, in view of its context, falls on contemporary ears as quite patronizing. In short, evangelicals who borrow from the Salesian model of spiritual directorship need to be careful to prevent unwholesome dependencies or control dynamics in mentoring relations.⁴⁵

Also of concern are de Sales’ very optimistic assumptions about the capacity of human nature to reach upward to God, assumptions that led him to place an almost exclusive emphasis on human agency and initiative in the pursuit of God. In fact it has been suggested by Salesian scholars that optimistic Christian humanism constitutes a seminal theme of this particular spirituality.⁴⁶ Consistent with Tridentine theology, de Sales emphasized “the

⁴³ De Sales, *Devout Life* 45–47, 71–72.

⁴⁴ De Sales, *Spiritual Conferences* 16.

⁴⁵ On her deathbed a nun intimates (according to an account in *St. Francis de Sales: Selected Letters* [ed. E. Stopp; New York: Harper, 1960]) that she has a secret she does not wish to share. De Sales, dutifully stationed at her bedside, is determined to pry it out of her, first by request and then by persuasive tactics. Finally she discloses her secret when he warns her not to make him command her to tell. She tells and then dies. We are a long way here from the priesthood of all believers. Contemporary spiritual mentoring is becoming increasingly sensitive to these issues; cf. the “Guidelines for Ethical Conduct” (1996) adopted by Spiritual Directors International, a predominantly Roman Catholic but ecumenical and interfaith organization in which some evangelicals participate. See also the careful treatment of spiritual directing in M. J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) chap. 7.

⁴⁶ See for example Wright, “Gentleness” 130–132; cf. M. J. Buckley, “Seventeenth-Century French Spirituality,” *Christian Spirituality: Post-Reformation and Modern* (ed. L. Dupré and D. Salliers; New York: Crossroad, 1991) 39–40.

centrality of human freedom in the divine scheme of things," a freedom that, he added, finds its ultimate test in our decision to love God or not to love

him.⁴⁷ No doubt de Sales was encouraged in this orientation by the humanism he absorbed in his formative years as a Parisian student and also by his recoiling from the fatalism he assumed to be implicit in the Protestant doctrine of predestination. A further explanation may lie in de Sales' understanding of the nature of the true love God seeks to elicit from his creatures. He wrote: "Love should not force the will but should leave it in its freedom."⁴⁸ Certainly there is little here to resonate with the magisterial Reformers' wonder at being forcefully wrested from the dominion of darkness and captured and claimed by God through his irresistible grace.

Protestant spirituality has different anthropological assumptions and, consequently, predominantly theocentric syntheses. Any Protestant who happens to be browsing through a devotional library and spies a volume entitled *A Treatise on the Love of God* will instinctively assume that it is on an attribute of God and is written in the adoring theocentric spirit of F. Lehman's great hymn:

O love of God, how rich and pure!
 How measureless and strong!
 It shall for evermore endure,
 The saints' and angels' song.⁴⁹

This is because Protestant spirituality has tended not to focus so much on the activity or cooperation of the human spirit in allowing Jesus to live through us.⁵⁰ It is significant that when de Sales speaks of the love of God he almost invariably has in mind a devout human love for God rather than divine love for humanity. The love of God is something we learn to exercise rather than something we behold and receive.

De Sales' *Treatise on the Love of God* begins by stressing the pivotal role of the human will in spiritual formation. The emphasis of the first book of the *Treatise* is that our natural inclination to love God is real enough but, sadly, somewhat weak. All devotional advances consequently presuppose God's enabling grace just as much as they require our laborious and careful response. The purpose of the grace of God, as de Sales conceived it, is very much to enable us to answer the bell.⁵¹ While de Sales' spirituality can offer a healthy corrective for those who are indifferent to their spiritual responsibilities, the countervailing risk lies in accepting the false, anxiety-creating and ultimately secularizing assumption that spiritual formation is entirely a human task with its own techniques.

⁴⁷ Wright and Power, *Francis de Sales* 49.

⁴⁸ De Sales, *Treatise* 75.

⁴⁹ F. Lehman, "The Love of God," *Hymns for the Family of God* (Nashville: Paragon, 1976) 18.

⁵⁰ Wright and Power, *Francis de Sales* 9–10 n.

⁵¹ De Sales, *Devout Life* 69–71; cf. Wright, "Gentleness" 130–132.

A final and most important consideration is de Sales' understanding of the divine-human relationship of love. De Sales' love for God was a yearning for the ecstasy of a full and complete union with him. While its complete fulfillment awaits heaven, the penultimate experiences of the union as they may be known in this life (and of which de Sales obviously knew something himself) are described in language of mystic rapture that shades at times into the erotic.⁵²

For all its inspirational qualities, however, the intense love for God to which de Sales aspired is flawed in two ways. For one thing, it is a love dominated by aspiration rather than by gratitude and confidence. In *Treatise on the Love of God* de Sales devotes considerable attention to expounding the many good reasons we have for loving God with all our hearts. These include the goodness of God's own nature, the character of his providential government, and his loving interventions in history for the purposes of redemption. They also include his gracious "assistances toward salvation," as when he infuses our hearts with inspirations to love him, and the glorious vista of an eternity in which we may hope to participate.⁵³

What is conspicuous by its absence is love for God rooted in gratitude for an assured salvation and a secured hope.⁵⁴ It is instructive to recall that de Sales had an unqualified commitment to the Canons of Trent, which among other things charge as accursed all those who claim that justification is by faith alone and who claim a certain assurance of salvation. Trent puts it bluntly: "No one can know with a certainty of faith . . . that he has obtained the grace of God."⁵⁵

Thus by reason of its disfigurement de Sales' love for God takes on a tragic-heroic character. As we noted earlier, de Sales' decision to love God despite his lack of assurance of salvation was a watershed event in his life. It converged with his understanding of the virtue of holy indifference—that is, the importance of cultivating a complete disinterest in his own selfish interests and even his eternal prospects. "Indifference," insisted de Sales, "goes beyond resignation."⁵⁶ Accordingly one must learn submission to the will of

⁵² De Sales, *Treatise* 150–164. "As we see a hungry child closely fixed to his mother's breast, greedily press this dear fountain of most desired sweetness, so that one would think that either it would thrust itself into its mother's breast, or else suck and draw all that breast into itself; so our soul, panting with an extreme thirst for the true good, when she shall find that inexhaustible source in the Divinity,—O good God! what a holy and sweet ardor to be united and joined to the plentiful breasts of the All-goodness, either to be altogether absorbed in it, or to have it come entirely into us" (ibid. 154).

⁵³ De Sales, *Treatise* 63–164, 551–552.

⁵⁴ Contrast the theme of "the exhilarating release effected by [Paul's] gospel of redeeming love" (F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977] 15).

⁵⁵ Canons of Trent, chap. 9 and canons 12 and 14, *Creeds* (ed. Schaff) 3.99, 113. Contrast Luther: "We conclude therefore with Paul 'that we are justified by faith only in Christ, without the law.' Now after that a man is once justified, and possesseth Christ by faith, and knoweth that he is his righteousness and life, doubtless he will not be idle, but as a good tree he will bring forth good fruits. For the believing man hath the Holy Ghost, and where the Holy Ghost dwelleth, he will not suffer a man to be idle, but stirreth him up to all exercises of piety and godliness, and of true religion, to the love of God" (*Commentary on Galatians* [quoted in *A Compend of Luther's Theology* (ed. H. T. Kerr; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) 104]).

God's good pleasure (i.e. whatever actually happens) while continuing to cultivate conformity to the signified will of God (i.e. his prescriptive will). Jane de Chantal suggested that the powerful appeal for the Visitants was their "total abandonment of themselves to Holy Providence." De Sales' own *obiter dictum* for this was "to ask for nothing, and to refuse nothing."⁵⁷ His vision of God was the prevailing notion of an absolute monarch whose will was ultimate and not to be challenged. Holmes summarizes De Sales' outlook thus: "If He wants us to go to Hell, that is fine."⁵⁸ Such passivity and self-abnegation may have offered an appealing consolation to women of the seventeenth century, proscribed as they were by their submissive roles, but it can hardly be viewed as appropriate for today. And it certainly fails to measure up to the bold and personally-affirming ethos of the NT gospel.

Elsewhere when speaking of the hopefulness of love de Sales seems to allow room for a qualified degree of self-interest. While it is wrong to say we love God only for the good we expect from him, it is acceptable to love him in part for such good. In other words, hope is legitimate. In this love "the love of ourselves is mingled with that of God, but that of God floats on the top."⁵⁹

De Sales addresses the matter again in his conference with devout women who had raised questions about the level of confidence the godly are entitled to possess, and in this instance his position is less concessive. The real reason we are troubled about not being perfect before God, he argues, is love of ourselves. Peaceful resolution comes in abandoning ourselves to God and leaving ourselves at the mercy of his will. Such self-abandonment "is nothing else but the acceptance with perfect indifference of all the events which may befall us."⁶⁰ It is hard to equate such an outlook with our normal assumptions of the meaning of confidence. Nonetheless, suggests de Sales, "the saints who are in heaven are so closely united to the will of God that if there were even a little more of His good pleasure in hell than in paradise, they would quit paradise to go there."⁶¹ Devout believers are encouraged to ground their confidence in "the infinite goodness of God," even though there are no guarantees of whether that infinite goodness will be able to ensure their personal salvation.⁶²

⁵⁶ De Sales, *Treatise* 9.4, 105 (quoted by Buckley, "Seventeenth-Century" 41).

⁵⁷ De Sales, *Spiritual Conferences* 94. Evangelical mystic A. W. Tozer appears to have picked up on this Salesian theme to define the response of the twentieth-century Christian and Missionary Alliance, his own denomination, to the pentecostal phenomenon of tongues-speaking. On the Alliance's 1963 "Seek Not, Forbid Not" statement, which effectively squashed glossolalia in Alliance churches, see C. W. Nienkirchen, *A. B. Simpson and the Pentecostal Movement* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992) 139–140. It would also be interesting to compare de Sales' sentiment of holy indifference with F. Schleiermacher's absolute-dependence feeling, which he of course regarded as the universal ground of religion.

⁵⁸ Holmes, *History* 107. Such tendencies soon developed into quietism in the works of M. de Molinos (1628–1696) and F. Fenelon (1651–1715).

⁵⁹ De Sales, *Treatise* 110.

⁶⁰ De Sales, *Spiritual Conferences* 18–20.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 22.

⁶² *Ibid.* 24–28.

In his conference on hope, de Sales sounds more hopeful. He assures the Visitants (in an apparent echo of Jesus' assurance to the disciples) that those who abandon themselves to God will be compensated by God beyond comparison in both this life and the next.⁶³ Likewise he adds in the *Treatise* that it would be the ultimate torment if we had no assurance that our passion for God will eventually be satiated.⁶⁴ Still, the assurance of which de Sales speaks is consistently qualified by the specter of sabotage through the wrongful exercise of human volition. We can enjoy the assurance of paradise—and here is the grand caveat—“provided always that we will to employ the means which he has prepared for us.” God is the source of grace, but we must cooperate with his favor. Salvation is a cooperative enterprise. Hope is generated by the promise of God's strong assistance, while aspiration utilizes “means that lie in our own power.” Consequently our hope is always mingled in some way with our aspiring.⁶⁵ So he advises: “Take great care to increase in love and fidelity . . . keeping as close to Him as possible, and then all will be well with you.”⁶⁶

IV. CONCLUSION

Evangelicals can profit greatly from a selective appropriation of Salesian spirituality. It is an historical fact that de Sales, who espoused such a compelling and joyfully devout life—one rooted in heart love for God and made possible even for the laity through reasonable and accessible spiritual disciplines—remained nonetheless an implacable opponent of the Protestants of his day. Nevertheless, following the example of Theodore Beza in the early 1600s, we too ought cordially to entertain de Sales and engage him in conversation. The Roman Catholic–Protestant divide, even when we are dealing with a pre-Vatican II variety of Catholicism, should not be viewed as altogether impassable, just as the differences that exist should neither be ignored nor dismissed as insignificant. A harsh response on our part to de Sales' partial-sightedness may actually say a lot about the level of our personal pain and frustration over our own spiritual incompleteness and woundedness. In the spirit of the 1977 *Chicago Call: An Appeal to Evangelicals* we should acknowledge our need for a recovery of our full Christian heritage. As the *Call* states: “We cannot be fully evangelical without recognizing our need to learn from other times and movements concerning the whole meaning of [the] Gospel.”⁶⁷

De Sales' commendably accessible approach to meditation and other devotional disciplines is of enduring and much-needed helpfulness to evangelicals. We would simply insist that de Sales' guidelines should be supplemented

⁶³ *Ibid.* 100–101.

⁶⁴ De Sales, *Treatise* 106–107.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 107–108.

⁶⁶ De Sales, *Spiritual Conferences* 104.

⁶⁷ *The Orthodox Evangelicals* (ed. R. Webber and D. Bloesch; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978)

with provision for direct meditative encounter with the inspired word of Scripture and that his hierarchical attitude and approach to spiritual direction be nuanced by a deeper regard for the privilege and dignity of direct access to God that is implicit in the evangelical understanding of the priesthood of all believers.

Even more importantly we should draw inspiration from this compelling champion of a life of ready obedience rooted in a passionate love for God (if there was more of this in our circles, there would be fewer shrill exhortations to deeper commitment, less temptation to legalism, and no need at all for our "lordship salvation" controversy). Yet despite its inspirational qualities the love for God that de Sales sought to nurture was a love dominated more by aspiration than by firm assurance of faith. Consequently evangelicals are wise to reject the excessive passivity of his notion of "holy indifference" and should reform his exemplary yearning for God with a more profound, confident and grateful (i.e. more evangelical) sense of being unconditionally grasped and beloved by God.

This study illustrates the need for evangelicals to utilize meritorious works of Roman Catholic and other Christian spiritualities appreciatively but always with discrimination and a critical awareness of their formative theological premises. Perhaps the seminal insight with which we come away from our encounter with Francis de Sales is that the love of God is both our action and God's gift. We resonate with the invitation to put down the tools of our bustling activism for a time and learn to practice the love of God more passionately even while we behold it gratefully and receive it most assuredly. This is the substance of a truly evangelical yearning for God.