

New Age Spirituality

Heavenly Father, we thank You for today, for such a lovely time of the year, for the beauty of Your creation, for the wonder of Your love for us, and for the newness of Your care for us every day. Thank You, Father, for Your desire to renew our understanding and to enable us to walk in Your ways. Thank You for what you have been teaching us through this course. We pray that You will write those things that are faithful to Your Word on all of our hearts that we may put them into practice this day and every day of our lives. Father, teach us today, and help us as we seek to pull some loose ends together. In Jesus' name, amen.

I want to say a little bit about the New Age movement. Let me recommend a couple of books to you before we get started. First, I would recommend a couple by Vishal Mangalwadi. He is a good friend of ours. He wrote *When the New Age Gets Old* and *Looking for a Greater Spirituality*. He is an Indian believer. He lives in India much of the time though he is in the West at the moment. He also wrote a book called *The World of Gurus*. He is thoroughly familiar with the Hindu roots of New Age thinking and understands it, so to speak, from the inside. Another book that I recommend is *Apologetics in The New Age: A Christian Critique of Pantheism*. This is a fairly challenging and heavy critique in terms of its style by Norman Geisler and David Clark, but there is a lot of very helpful material in it. Douglas Groothuis has written several books on the New Age movement, and he tends to write with sufficient grace and respect. His books are very helpful. One is *Revealing the New Age Jesus*. I also recommend several other books by James Redfield whose books, of course, have sold millions and millions of copies. First, *The Celestine Prophecy* is a very helpful introduction into New Age thinking at a very popular level. Because it is written in the form of a novel, it is one of the reasons people find it so accessible and easy to read. The next book he wrote after that is called *The Tenth Insight*. There are also a couple of other books at a much more scholarly level on the New Age movement, but they are very helpful. A few of them are books by Joseph Campbell. One is the series he did on public television where he was interviewed by Bill Moyers called *The Power of Myth*, and that is one of the most helpful introductions by someone who is deeply enamored by Hindu and Buddhist thinking. He gave his life to communicating those ideas in the West. It is a very, very thoughtful reflection on what we call "New Age thinking." You can borrow the videos from the public library. They show them occasionally on public television. Joseph Campbell hated Christianity, and you see him constantly drawing a distinction between the teachings of Christianity and the New Age movement. In another one of his books, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he was actually a scholar of mythology. There are many, many books by Joseph Campbell that I think you would find worth your reading. Many of the people who are into New Age thinking will have read things by James Redfield or Deepak Chopra. Others will have read things by people like Joseph Campbell and been very influenced by them.

Let us spend a little while looking at some New Age ideas. As Christians we need to beware of guilt by association. Do not assume that because someone uses New Age terminology that means they are buying wholeheartedly into New Age ideas. Christians can get quite foolish sometimes in the way they respond. I know a pastor who was challenged by members of his church because he was talking about the Lordship of Christ over the whole of life. His church said any sort of holistic thinking is New Age, which is of course just ridiculous. But sadly, sometimes Christians become afraid of language. I have previously challenged us to recognize that the apostles adopted the equivalent of New Age language to teach the Gospel in the first century. They sometimes used the language of the culture, the mystery religions, to communicate biblical truth. We should not be afraid to do that. We need to watch for conspiracy theories. Christians are very fond of those. Even though Frank Peretti's books are novels, sometimes people take them as if they were the literal truth, just like a lot of New Age people took

James Redfield's books. I have met people who thought James Redfield's books were not novels at all but were really the truth. They thought his books were a true account of something that really happened. Well, they are not. He says, quite clearly, they are novels and so does Frank Peretti. But whether you recognize them as novels or not, it is not helpful to think of all New Age people as being involved in some vast conspiracy to undermine the church. That simply is not the way sinful human beings are. Just as not everybody in the Christian church is absolutely united and working together. Sadly, we are dreadfully divided. That is part of the human condition—our sin.

We also need to beware of the assumption of deep commitment. Many of the people you are going to meet who are into New Age thinking are only just beginning to scratch the surface. They have very little idea (even if they have been involved in some group for two or three years and read lots of books) what the ideas are that underlie New Age thinking at a deep level and have not committed themselves to them. They are not necessarily consistent or carefully rational and reasoned in the way they think about it. It is one of the attractions of the New Age movement. So do not assume people are deeply committed.

Over the last 130-140 years, you begin to see the growth of what we call "New Age ideas" more and more in the culture. The term "New Age" itself is simply a reference to the end of the age of Pisces, the fish. In other words, it refers to the end of the age dominated by Christianity and the beginning of the Age of Aquarius, the water carrier, one of the signs of the Zodiac. That is what the term itself refers to when people use it. When you read New Age books, if you read James Redfield, for example, you will find him talking about this a lot. He would say that the age dominated by the Christian church, the age dominated by reason, is over and done with and we are now in a New Age where we are following our spiritual intuition rather than our rationality. That is fundamentally what people mean when they use the term "New Age."

I want to give you a few major points on the development of New Age thinking over the past 130-140 years. From the 1960s and onward when immigration restrictions were lifted in the United States and several very significant Hindu gurus started coming to the States and teaching widely, there has been a mushrooming growth so that today these ideas are a part of the mainstream of American life. They are not at the edges of the culture anymore. You can go to any bookstore and find vast sections of New Age material. You can turn on your television and watch sitcoms and talk shows and you will hear people come out with New Age ideas all over the place. Many of the shows talk about angels and the afterlife—a confused blend of vaguely biblical ideas, Hindu ideas, and other ideas all mixed up together—because there is simply an interest in spirituality in the culture right now. So this is part of the mainstream of the culture, and it is going to continue to be. I am no prophet, but I do not see this diminishing. It is becoming more and more a major part of the culture all the time. And, of course, people like Oprah, with a confused blend of Christian ideas and New Age ideas together in terms of what she is promoting, have an enormous impact on millions of Americans, both inside and outside the church. Lots of influential people are promoting New Age ideas in one way or another, often not being aware of it, even if they may still use the term "Christian."

What attracts people to the New Age movement? There are many reasons, but I will just mention a few. The fundamental one is a loss in confidence that reason is going to lead us to truth and especially to truth that is going to liberate us in any kind of way. Another reason is the lack of faith in the orthodoxies of rationalism. The third reason, which is very interesting, is that people are coming to terms with the contradictions built into materialism.

John Walk was a commentator who wrote about the New Age movement rather than participating in it, but what he said was really profound. He said, "We are living out the contradictions built into

positivistic materialism. If you believe that man is purely rational, then you must eventually conclude that pure matter can know, think, feel, and love as men obviously do.” We can express it like this: secular thinking is that we do not live any longer in a world in which there is God or spirits. Then there are humans who cross the line between the spiritual and material world—the physical world down here, our plants and animals and our physical nature as human persons. What the materialist has said is that this world up here does not exist at all. Secular humanism teaches that human beings are just part of this physical world. That is what the doctrine of evolution teaches—that you and I and everything else has come about simply as a consequence of chance operating over vast periods of time to produce the complexity of the world in which we live, including human beings. And in the end, we are ultimately just physical. That is all we are. You and I are just a bag of water and chemicals mixed up together, dependent upon other material things that we eat (plants, animals, and so on) and the air we breathe, and that is all we are. However, there is a problem here. “Human beings,” as John Walk says, “think and feel and love and have spiritual longings.” That is the practical reality of all human beings everywhere throughout all of history. The New Age movement suddenly says, “If human beings are simply a product of the physical world and they think, feel, love, and have these spiritual longings, then these are true of the physical world too. They do not come from nowhere. It is one of the contradictions built into the very heart of secular humanism of all materialistic thinking—humanity is so clearly spiritual, rational, etc. If we are and we come from the physical world, then the physical world is spiritual, emotive, and thoughtful, etc. There is a deep contradiction which secularism struggles with there. If you read somebody like James Redfield or almost any other New Age thinker, they will completely accept the ideas of evolution. However, they are no longer speaking about human beings evolving from a physical world but a world that is divine, thoughtful, intuitive, and spiritual. And it is this tension built into the heart of secularist thinking that is one of the deep factors in the development of New Age thinking.

Another attraction to New Age is that it is a new spirituality blending all sorts of different religions: eastern religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Paganism, and mystical Christianity. This is one of the things you will constantly find. People into New Age thinking happily quote from religions of every kind and put it all together. And that, of course, fits in so well with the spirit of the age that nobody is concerned for what is consistent, what is rational, or what is objectively true. They are simply asking, “What appeals to me?” I recently read an advert from a local Unitarian church that said, “Come to a church where you are encouraged to find your own truth.” Well, that is exactly what is appealing about the New Age movement to so many people. You can make your own blend of all these different religions and you can have God exactly the way you want to, however you want Him to be. It is one of the great attractions, and it fits in with the pluralism of the culture—with the loss of an emphasis on truth and an emphasis on the individual.

An additional attraction to the New Age movement is that there are no strict moral demands. The New Age movement does not challenge people morally by saying, “This is how you must live.” Morality is something you find for yourself. You have to be true to yourself. This is one of the great attractions of it. So you can leave somebody in their promiscuous or whatever other kind of lifestyle and they can still be very spiritual. One of the great challenges of Christianity to our culture is it demands that people bow before God, repent, acknowledge that their lives are messed up and sinful, turn away from sin to God, and live in obedience to Him. It is extremely challenging in the culture. I have said this several times now, but if you do not challenge people in this area (the autonomous personal freedom that says I can be a law to myself), then you are not preaching the Gospel at all in this culture. But wherever God is truly at work, people are going to be challenged, and they are going to have to deal with the reality of sin. I had a young man call me yesterday who is a car salesman. I am getting to know him as I am in the process of buying another car. He was converted a couple of years ago. He does not go to church. He

has no church to go to. He has nobody to talk to, but he has been involved in a very sinful relationship. He just called me yesterday and was just stricken. He said, "First, I want to try to save my marriage, but more importantly, I have to get myself straight before God. Sometimes I feel like the sun is shining, and sometimes I feel like my whole life is weighed down with heavy clouds. I am overwhelmed by what I have done." Anybody who truly comes to know Christ is going to have to deal with the reality of sin. If we belong to God, He is going to discipline us when we turn aside into sin of one kind or another. You can expect that. You can look forward to it. It is proof that you are a legitimate child of the King. He is going to discipline you if you fall into flagrant disobedience in some area or another. The New Age is very attractive because it does not come with this kind of moral challenge to people.

Let us look at some of the beliefs first encountered as you get involved in the New Age movement. We may think of the New Age like a vast castle with many rooms and all different beliefs in it. But at the very center, there are some solid sets of ideas that are very, very powerful. When you first meet people in the New Age movement, they are not even inside the castle. They are just wandering around the grounds, basically sampling wares at little booths and stores. These booths and stores are selling candles, forms of meditation, and all sorts of other things like this—or teaching them yoga. They really have no idea what the beliefs are that are at the heart of the New Age movement. They are just interested in these things that are being offered at the surface level. One of the beliefs you first encounter is a belief in the self. The whole New Age movement is encouraging people to look inside themselves for truth, to find spirituality within themselves. The New Age says not to look outside to God and what God has spoken in His Word or to what He has revealed in the person of Christ but to look within. That is where truth is going to be found. That is where true spirituality will be found. Fulfillment will be found in being true to oneself and in realizing oneself. If you were to pay to go on one of these New Age liberating weekends, that is what you would find. You would be encouraged to set aside all the beliefs, all the moral demands, and all the boundaries that have been imposed on your life. And during that weekend you would be taught to start being true to yourself, to listen to what is within you and realize who you are, not letting anybody else tell you who to be. You would be taught to be true to yourself. In particular, you would be taught not to be true to some set of rational ideas but to be true to what you feel at the deepest level, to what is going on inside you.

Because of this emphasis on going within, a second thing you will find is that all kinds of different techniques of meditation are taught. The purpose of meditation is to help you find out what is really going on inside you in order to truly know yourself and to control your body. You will have all sorts of exercises in which the whole point is to control your body so you are no longer aware of it and so you are not distracted any longer by feelings like hunger or discomfort. You learn to sit in the lotus position (or whatever), which is a place where you are going to be most relaxed and least aware of your body. The purpose is also to set you free from your mind. So many of us have all kinds of thoughts going around in our heads all the time. Our lives are so busy that we do not stop thinking. The New Age movement is teaching people to stop thinking, to get rid of that constant pattern of thoughts running through one's brain, so that you get in touch with your inner being and change your consciousness. Essentially, you get in touch with the divine, with God within you. That is its purpose. I am sure that you have read people and heard people talking about prayer this way. This is not what prayer is about. There is a radical difference between everything the Bible teaches about meditation and what the New Age movement is teaching about meditation. You could summarize it simply this way: biblical meditation is filling your mind with the truth. It is rich with content. We meditate on God's character and on what He has done to redeem His people. We meditate on God's promises to us. We meditate on God's requirements of us. Most frequently, when the Bible talks about meditation, it talks about meditating on the Law of God. The Law of God is the way of life that God requires me to live. It is a meditation rich in content. It is not emptying your head. God is not interested in empty heads. It sounds very spiritual to

say, “I am going to empty myself.” We have lots of songs like that in the church. It is like becoming a crystal ball. You are completely empty and free, and then Christ will come and dwell in you and take you over. That is not biblical in any kind of way. It may sound very godly, but it is not. God created you to have a mind, to have a will, and to have emotions, and He delights in those things. It is not spiritual to put them to death and get rid of yourself so that God takes over. That is not biblical Christianity. If you have any questions in that area, read my book, *Being Human*, because that is what it is about.

Fundamentally, what is the Christian life about? It is not about being emptied and being taken over by Christ or being taken over by the Holy Spirit. It is about you being transformed into the likeness of Christ. It is about you being transformed so you become more yourself as God created you to be. When you get to heaven, there is not going to be only the Holy Spirit there because you have completely disappeared. There is going to be lots of people there. We are all going to be more different from each other than we have ever been. God delights in diversity and individuality. Your problem is not that you are a person. It is not that you are a self that has thoughts, feelings, and passions. Your problem is you are a sinner. It is not a problem that you are a human. God does not want you to empty yourself. Many songs express that idea, and it sounds so spiritual. For example, “Less of me, more of Him,” is not what Scripture means when it says, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” Paul goes on to say, “The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God.” He is not talking about the disappearance of himself. However, the purpose of meditation is precisely that, in the end. It is putting yourself in touch with the divine within.

Another belief is that spiritual energy can control matter. This is one of the fascinating things about New Age thinking. If you read any kind of New Age magazine or attend any seminar, people will start telling you that if you meditate sufficiently you can basically start changing the world. You can meditate a sickness and all sorts of problems out of yourself. You have all seen these big commercial pages in the newspaper for Earth days and things like that when we are all going to think spiritual thoughts and scarcity will decrease on the planet. No, it will not. People actually have to do things, but the New Age believes that the world can change simply by thinking. There are courses in transcendental meditation, which was very popular back in the 1960s and 1970s and is probably even more popular now. We just do not think about it because it is part of the mainstream. Transcendental meditation was what the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi taught. If you graduated from that class, the next class you took was meditation where you start moving physical objects simply by the control of your mind. In that class you would levitate your own body. It is taught that spiritual energy can control matter.

This belief really brings us to the heart of things. The fundamental issue that is at the heart of New Age thinking is the belief that we live in a world of spiritual power that is available to all and that is universal and eternal. And that leads us to the New Age worldview that there is oneness of all things and we are this one. The most helpful image to understand what the New Age is saying about reality and about human persons is that of the waves on an ocean. This is perhaps the easiest way I can help you to get a handle on the ideas that are at the heart of this. Each of us, at the conscious level, is like the wave that has come up out of the ocean. The wave represents the conscious you; that is, what you are aware of in your waking moments. If you go within, which is what the New Age movement is all about, you go deeply within yourself to the subconscious level. The subconscious level is represented by the ocean. You are not just down inside you, but you are in the ocean. The ocean is where all human beings are one. This is universal, and it is eternal. My experience as myself as a self—what you are conscious of in your waking moments—is that you are an individual who is distinct from other people. The New Age movement says that is not true, and that is only a very superficial understanding of who we are. This is just an accident of time and space. In fact, Hinduism would go further and say this is simply an illusion. What you think of as consciousness and reality is actually a very superficial, transitory illusion. When

you sleep, what has happened to the conscious self? You are back in the ocean. When you die, what has happened to your conscious self? You are back in the ocean. When you meditate, what is happening to your conscious self? You are back in the ocean where everything is one. We have rationality, self-consciousness, and those kinds of things. We have things that are distinct from each other—good and evil, light and darkness—but these are all parts of the superficial world. You think when you sleep you are sleeping. The New Age is really saying that that is when you wake up because that is the true reality. As Campbell puts it, “The truth is this: you are God at the deepest level of who you are. Your problem is that you experience self-consciousness and rationality and distinction and so on, and you have forgotten that you are God. That is your problem.” You see, your problem is this experience of yourself as a self. It is the human dilemma that two students think they are different persons when, in reality, underneath they are the same.

There is a song the Beatles wrote when they went through that period—especially George Harrison, Paul McCartney, and John Lennon—where they became very involved in all kinds of Hindu thinking. In fact, they gave a vast amount of money to build an enormous temple in Rishikesh on the Ganges, the biggest and most magnificent Hindu temple there. One of their songs says, “I am you and you are me and we are all together.” That is exactly what I am saying. You see, down in the subconscious level, we are all together. We are one. And that means that I am one with everything. I am one not just with other people at the subconscious level, but I am one with the whole of reality. This is what James Redfield is talking about. There is a scene in which he becomes like an eyeball, so to speak, through which the whole world is expressing itself. As he looks down within, he sees his oneness with everything. Shirley MacLaine writes the same way. She is flying in a plane over the Andes and there is a violent thunderstorm. At first, she is afraid. The plane is going to be destroyed. “We are going to crash; we are going to die.” And then she says, “Well, why be afraid? I am part of the storm. We are all part of the same thing. It is just another form of life. There is no such thing as death. There is simply waking up.”

This explains all sorts of things within the New Age movement. For example—and I do not say this to be offensive to those of you who have the gift of tongues—the New Age movement would explain the gift of tongues by saying that when I go down into my deepest level of my subconscious, I am in touch with other people, and therefore I may speak somebody else’s language. For example, I could speak Korean or Chinese or whatever because my experience of myself as an English speaker is purely superficial. It is when I get in touch with the deeper side within myself that I can speak other languages or have dreams of things that happened to other people in the past or that will happen to me or somebody else in the future because this is universal and eternal. Down there, there is no time. There is no time and there is no space. This is really what pantheism means. Pantheism is not another way of saying, “Well, there is this other view of God.” This is why in discussing deism I said the different views of God in different religions have nothing in common with each other at all. This is what God is in New Age thinking. He is this impersonal, unconscious everything. Personality is an illusion. Distinctions are an illusion. The difference between good and evil is an illusion. The difference between life and death is an illusion. Pantheism really says everything is one and everything is God. It says that you are God and I am God and the trees are God and the sea is God and the sky is God. But that is not God at all, of course, in any biblical sense. This is the great alternative to Christianity and that is the major reason the New Age movement is growing so much.

In Francis Schaeffer’s little book, *He is there and He is not silent*, in the end there are only three basic options. You can either be a total materialist—human beings are nothing but matter, you can be a Christian and acknowledge that God is personal—that we are made in His image and that our problem is sin (there are all sorts of heresies from Christianity like Islam)—or you can be a pantheist and think that everything is God and everything is spiritual and nothing is personal. In the end, those are really the only

three options. Everybody you will meet is going to be somewhere between those three. Many people in the New Age movement have no idea that this is where they are going. They still think of God in some vaguely biblical way, as some sort of being up there. But the more deeply they get involved in New Age thinking, the less contact they are going to have with any kind of biblical understanding and the more they are going to go in this direction—toward the oneness of all things.