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**Review of Jason Cherry, *The Making of
Evangelical Spirituality***

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Jason Cherry. *The Making of Evangelical Spirituality*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2023. 178 pages. Paperback, \$27.00.

Pastoral Historiography: A New Look at the Old History of Evangelical Spirituality

“The Lord told me. . . . I heard the Spirit say. . . . God led me to”—few phrases are more ubiquitous in the American evangelical milieu. Many of the Reformed evangelical persuasion lament—and even lambast!—such language, while the majority of more broadly evangelical pastors and teachers disciple their congregations by speaking to them in just this way. Yet, no matter toward which evangelical ilk one tilts, the origin of such language is rarely, if ever, considered or critiqued. Often, the knee-jerk reaction of critics is to chalk it up to that ever-assailable monster of (post)modernity—namely, subjectivism. One must wonder if there is more to this story. Here is where Jason Cherry’s *The Making of Evangelical Spirituality* fills that gap in the literature. Cherry, whose historical oeuvre also boasts a book with an Ian Murray-like critique of revivalism entitled *The Culture of Conversionism and the History of the Alter Call* (2016), probes three essential questions in his quest to discover the historical root and the practical rot of this quintessential hallmark of contemporary American evangelicalism. First, when did the idea of immediate communication with God enter the evangelical vocabulary? Second, how did the idea of immediate communication with God develop in the broader Christian tradition? Third, what is the harm and the hope of the idea of immediate communication with God in evangelical spirituality? Along the way, Cherry helpfully charts key developments (for example, the “head versus heart” dichotomy; 33ff), notes key figures, and provides key biblical assessments that will be discussed in more detail below.

Preeminently, *The Making of Evangelical Spirituality* is diagnostically lucid. There seems to be an ever-evolving quest to nail down precisely the meaning of the term *evangelical*. Yet

while most of these proposed definitions center around the Reformation, political persuasion, or doctrinal distinction, Cherry has presented a hitherto ignored thread that runs through not merely a strand, but the entire fabric, of evangelicalism. The tapestry of American evangelicalism is woven together not merely by a denominational, political, or doctrinal affinity to the *euangelion*, though he appropriately acknowledges these threads (3-5), but by what Cherry terms “mystericalism” or “evangelical esotericism” (8).¹ Mystericalism is “the expectation that God will reveal himself [*sic*] to a person apart from Scripture” (8), and one may summarize his view on the relationship between the two as such: as being is basic to doing, he presents mystericalism as an essential rather than accidental element of evangelicalism *insofar as* mystericalism is the objective presentation of the internal consciousness of an average American evangelical, all the while masterfully avoiding the tautology of suggesting that mystericalism is the *sine qua non* of evangelicalism.

Yet, Cherry’s diagnosis is anything but anecdotal. *Au contraire*, after spending some time differentiating between mystericalism and its ugly cousin’s mysticism and outright heresy (13-23) and outlining the philosophical-theological background necessary to understand the concept (24-49), one quickly discovers that his is a work of historical theology. Though not simplistic, the historical survey that takes a tidy third of the book is simple: *from the Desert East to the New West, from Pachomius to Protestant Pietists, Christianity has always had a mystericalistic branch* (53-80). For some, in fact, Cherry’s history may be too simple. Indeed, those looking for the direct, detailed, and documented connection from Alexandria to America will be only slightly disappointed. However, as discussed below, this critical observation may not be as unflattering as it sounds. All things considered, Cherry *still* ably takes a ponderous dose of thirty pages of

¹*Nota bene*: This review will only make use of the term *mystericalism* for expedience, though the author notes that the words are used interchangeably throughout the book (8).

history and makes it feel like a brisk walk through the corridors of time, the gift of any true historian.

Above all, what makes *The Making of Evangelical Spirituality* a truly great work is its pastoral fecundity and biblical fidelity. The entire final third of the book is Cherry's exposure of the damaging disease that is the opacity and inscrutability of mysterialism. As an expert surgeon, he wields the scalpel of Scripture steadily, theologically surveying the Bible's own account of its proper place in the Christian life—namely, at the absolute center, given that “the words of Scripture are boundaries *setting forth the relationship between Creator and creature* (136, emphasis original)—and the Bible's account of the Spirit's role in the life of the believer—namely, as the One who transforms the believer into the image of Christ *by His Word* rather than new prophetic revelations (149). Most helpfully, the chapter entitled “Enablement: The Spirit's Sovereign Sway” seeks to clearly delineate and champion the biblical concept of the Spirit's swaying, which is ultimately Word-based wisdom (158), over and against mysterialism's unbiblical concept of the Spirit's speaking, which He does not do apart from His Word, by surveying every major purportedly mysterialist passage on God's supposed speaking; in a concluding reflection, Cherry says, “The New Covenant represents not the privileging of subjectivism, but the promise of Spirit-empowered divine enablement that works internally to transform the new creation into conformity to the external and objective law of God” (155). Buttressed by thoughtful close readings of Edwards' magisterial *Freedom of the Will*, Owen's *The Work of the Spirit*, and Lloyd-Jones' *Knowing the Times* among other substantial works of theology and beyond, Cherry's work enables him to conclude five biblically based and pastorally alarming manifestations of mysterialism that are damaging to the health of the evangelical church in America (160-169). Though—to stick with the ongoing metaphor—he recognizes that

mystericalism is a blight in the biology of American evangelicalism, amidst the cuttingly critical work, Cherry also takes more than one small section to deal gently with his patients, showing that the mystericalists are right to react against both the secular materialists and the Church's widespread acedia (160-161), demonstrating by his treatment and tone that he "plies the steel. . . resolving the enigma of the fever of chart" ("East Coker," 4.137-141);² that is, he cuts to heal rather than to kill. Moreover, the book even ends with three reasons why mystericalism, like a good cell gone bad, has even *aided* the evangelical church in the short term but will kill her in the long term (167-169).

Thus, history and practicality meet; orthodoxy and orthopraxy kiss. In fact, so interdependent is this work of history on its telos of ecclesiastical application that it is almost in a genre all its own. Of course, in an age where novelty is prized for its own sake, it is nevertheless true that Cherry's style is new in that it attempts to retrieve, or rather resurrect, a historical, theological, and pastoral pastiche long buried beneath the post-Enlightenment ideal of so-called objective or amoral history. His may be called a *pastoral historiography*; that is, a work of history that does not merely tell but exhorts, a history not only *of* the Church but *for* the Church. It is a historiography that eschews the diffident "church history" of modern scholarship in favor of something broaching the doughty ecclesiastical histories of Eusebius and Cassiodorus, Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, and Beza's *Icones*.

If anything, this reviewer desires for Cherry's and other historians' future work to own this style, to be pastoral all the more—never mind Noll and Marsden. In an era bent on theological retrieval, *The Making of Evangelical Spirituality* has paved a way, not only for the course of American evangelicalism to pull back from the brink of self-destructive subjectivity,

²T. S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*, in *T. S. Eliot: Collected Poems, 1900-1962* (New York, NY: Harcourt Inc., 1963), 187.

but to pull back from that brink by means of a pastoral historiography that will—once again!—form rather than merely inform, a history that will not only instruct the academy but disciple the nations, a history that will teach, a history that will preach. As such, it should be a necessary addition to every shelf.