

# Solitude

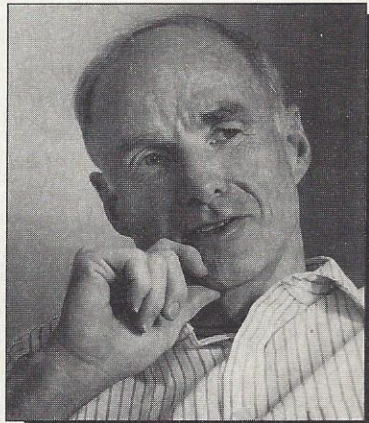
BY JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Deep inside, all of us seem to know intuitively that until we withdraw from all we consider necessary to our comfort, we will not come face-to-face with God. Only in times and places of solitude do people have genuine spiritual confrontation.

Perhaps it is for this reason that we fear solitude. As soon as we are alone, without people to talk to, books to read, TV to watch or phone calls to make, an inner chaos opens in us—threatening to swallow us like ships caught in a giant whirlpool. Thus, we do everything we can to keep from being alone. We create activity involving others, we spend long hours in meetings, we latch onto unhealthy sexual relationships or create situations that demand that others come to us. We feign need or sickness or, using some kind of twisted reverse psychology, stalk away from people, hoping someone will come running after us. “Do not leave me alone!” is the cry of many Christian leaders today.

Yet, as Jacob learned at Brook Jabbok, solitude forces us into the understanding that the real battles we face are not with others, but with self—and God.

Catholic philosopher Thomas Merton spent the last years of his life as a hermit, living alone in a solitary place. He took the robe of a monk, a term coming from the Greek word *monachos*, meaning “alone.” Merton said his contemplative solitude did not separate him from his contemporaries. Rather, he wrote in his diary: “It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The



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more solitary I am, the more affection I have for them. It is pure affection and filled with reverence for the solitude of others.”

Evangelicals, Pentecostals and

charismatics have little understanding of the Christian virtue of solitude and contemplation. We are afraid of it. Afraid if we void ourselves of activity and empty our minds of self-generated thoughts, Satan might come rushing in to deceive us. Yet, without solitude we remain victims of a society that forces us to look to others for meaning—rather than to God alone.

I remember years ago sitting in an editorial meeting at *Charisma* magazine. I had just suggested an article on modern Christian mystics. There was a gasp as these mostly Pentecostal editors turned pale. To them, mysticism was the same as the occult. That misunderstanding has been cleared. Many today now recognize the importance of the mystical approach to God.

In a beautifully photographed story in this issue, we take you behind the walls of a Catholic monastery in Ireland—where mystical men live in solitude. We are not recommending that our readers take vows of poverty and join these monks. We are, however, saying we need to understand those who have. Even more important, we need to understand the value—the necessity—of solitude in our own lives.

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