

***The Interior Castle.* By Teresa of Avila. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1979, 225 pp., hardcover.**

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Born on March 28, 1515 in Avila, Spain, Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada (also known as Teresa of Avila) was one of the most celebrated Catholic writers of the sixteenth-century. In 1577, at the age of sixty-two, in the Carmelite monastery of Saint Joseph in Toledo, Teresa penned what has become known as her masterpiece—*The Interior Castle*. Teresa “wrote this treatise for her Sisters and daughters, the Discalced Carmelite nuns” as their guide for their spiritual life (33). The central theme of the treatise is prayer. As she indicates in the prologue, “Not many things that I have been ordered to do under obedience have been as difficult for me as is this present task of writing about prayer” (33).

In *The Interior Castle* Teresa considers a “soul to be like a castle” (36), and “the gate of entry to this castle is prayer and reflection” (38). She adds that “this castle has...many dwelling places: some up above, others down below, others to the sides; and in the center and middle is the main dwelling place where the very secret exchanges between God and the soul take place” (36). Teresa understands these dwelling places (seven in all) as stairs that carry a person all the way up to a mystical union with God. The picture is like a pilgrim walking patiently through all these seven steps until he reaches the main place which is union with God. Thus, the underlying theology of Teresa’s book is that union with God is a process. One needs to go through all these seven stages in order to be united with God.

A close look at Teresa’s teaching shows some critical problems. In the first place, union with God is not a process, but a one-time event. By nature we are spiritually separated from God

because we are sinners (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). However, the moment we are born again by the Holy Spirit we are *instantly* brought into living union with Christ (John 3:5). Second, the true beginning of our union with God is not at our entrance into this *castle* by prayer. Prayer or communion with God is not a means to union with Christ. We do not exercise prayer in order to be engrafted into Christ. Rather, we pray to the Father as a result of our union with His Son. When does our union with God begin then? It begins mysteriously when the Spirit causes our souls to be born again. Third, union with God is not by keeping the instructions laid out throughout Teresa's book. It is not by going through the seven dwelling places. In short, union with God is not by good works. The Bible is clear that this union is only possible by grace alone apart from our works (Eph. 2:8-9). Our mystical relationship with Christ is the result of the Spirit's work alone.

In addition to the above mentioned problems, the book contains other practices that are unbiblical such as praying through Mary and saints. In Teresa's own words, "They must take His Blessed Mother and His saints as intercessors so that these intercessors may fight for them [against the devil], for their soul's vassals have little strength to defend themselves" (45). This practice is explicitly refuted in 1 Timothy 2:5: "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" and in John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (ESV). Therefore, with these serious problems, despite Teresa's commendable emphasis on holiness, her work falls short to be a biblical guide for Christian living.