

NEWS FROM BIBLE SOCIETY

TRANSMISSION IS PROVIDED FREE BY BIBLE SOCIETY AS PART OF OUR MISSION TO EQUIP THE CHURCH TO LIVE OUT THE BIBLE'S MESSAGE. WE ALSO WORK CREATIVELY AND WITH PASSION TO SHOW THAT THE BIBLE RESONATES WITH ISSUES TODAY – AND TO MAKE SCRIPTURES AVAILABLE WHERE THERE ARE NONE.



Sometimes review editors in our national newspapers depart from covering the latest hot new releases and ask reviewers to select an old classic. If it were me, my first choice would probably be *The Dark Night of the Soul* by St John of the Cross. It fits perfectly with the practice of contemplation which is so largely missing from the church today.

When I first joined Bible Society in 2003 there was still a lingering view around that with one more heave, revival would break out across Britain. Leading churchmen (they usually were men) in some quarters reckoned that if we just put our shoulder to the wheel then the nation would turn and start coming back to church.

There were only two organisations at that time that I felt realised how deep the gulf is between the Church and the culture or Bible and society. One of them was Bible Society. Now, as I complete seven years as Chief Executive, I pay tribute to those who brought us to that point in our journey as a Christian organisation in the contemporary world.

There are several reasons why I do not think the 'try harder' method is appropriate for now and the most obvious one is the state of our church leaders. If you look around you then you will see that such good men and women look exhausted. Most of them are run ragged with meetings, multiple churches and messed up people. If effort was the answer then I think we'd have got there by now.

The *Observer* magazine recently ran an article called 'Sleepless? Stressed? Anxious? Exhausted? Relentless consumption, spiralling debt, information overload. Is modern living making you ill?' According to William Leith the answer is probably yes. 'Everything around us – the phones and the clocks and computers – makes us busier. After a certain point we become overloaded', he writes.

The board of a Christian organisation that I was on for a number of years was a classic example of this. Looking around, I saw one member so busy that they could not fit in a short emergency meeting for several

months. Another I knew had marriage difficulties and another was just recovering from a nervous breakdown. Finally, one had just stepped off a plane and literally didn't know what time it was, and they were chairing the meeting!

And we are going to win the world for Christ? Not in the state we're in. I sometimes say to staff at Bible Society that I don't want them going around looking exhausted. It doesn't look good for the gospel. But I know the temptation myself to push on through tiredness and dose up on caffeine to hit an impossible deadline. We need to learn to be accountable to each other and guard each other's inner life when this happens.

Sometimes, the most supreme act of faith we can do is not to preach that monumental sermon or, like Superman, save that train wreck that's about to happen in our workplace. More faith-filled by far might be to go to bed. For in going to bed we have to trust God for the outcome, for him to deal with those outstanding emails in the Inbox and to submit to the supervision of a loving God in our lives. The first habits of the holy life are undoubtedly the disciplines of sleep and Sabbath.

And contemplation. My favourite translation of *The Dark Night of the Soul* is by Mirabai Starr which, although probably the most liberal version available, is also the most readable. For St John of the Cross 'the dark night of the Spirit is the intake of God into the soul'. Written in the hills of Andalucía in southern Spain, it is reminiscent of *The Cloud of Unknowing* written only a few years earlier in the British Midlands.

The call of *The Cloud* is to 'shoot an arrow directly at God'. It is to push on through the competing loyalties of our hearts and meet God in Christ. Both of these books express a commitment to the practice of contemplation that is much needed in our 24-hour culture. My firm belief is that we will not win the world by simply having

the latest technology, the hardest working leaders or even the best theoretical models.

The secret of our success is surely to be found in the habits of contemplation and surrender to God, a broken and a contrite heart offered up to him alone. As I look forward to the future of Bible Society and its staff, this is what I long to see amongst us.

Try Mirabai Starr's paraphrase of St John's own attitude towards God as a focus for contemplation:

*Beloved ... please remind me again and again that I am nothing.
Strip me of the consolations of my complacent spirituality. Plunge me into the darkness where I cannot rely on any old tricks for maintaining my separation.
Let me give up trying to convince myself that my own spiritual deeds are bound to be pleasing to you.
Take all my juicy spiritual feelings, Beloved, and dry them up, and then please light them on fire. Take my lofty spiritual concepts and plunge them into darkness, and then burn them.
Let me only love you, Beloved. Let me quietly and with unutterable simplicity just love you.
Amen.*

James Catford
Chief Executive

St John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (trans. Mirabai Starr; London: Rider & Co./London: New York: Riverhead, 2002)

The Cloud of Unknowing (edited by Halcyon Backhouse, with a foreword by James Catford; Hodder Christian Classics; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009).