

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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TRUE SPIRITUALITY

How do we understand spirituality? What is it? What makes a person spiritual? One of the most common misconceptions in our day, especially with the pervasive New Age emphasis, is that spirituality is a matter of being in touch with one's own inner being, i.e., a deep sense of self-consciousness or self-awareness. In this context an interest in spirituality turns out to be nothing more than a fascination with ourselves!¹ Donald Bloesch thoughtfully ponders, "Are we now in a spiritual renaissance, given the growing interest in the spiritual roots of our cultural heritage? Spiritual formation is high on the agenda of many churches and seminaries. *Spirituality* is now an 'in' word and is definitely more palatable than orthodoxy and doctrinal purity, even for many of those on the conservative side of the theological spectrum. The key to ecumenical renewal is increasingly regarded as lying in worship and prayer. Yet there is a disturbing ambiguity in spirituality. The paradox is that the growing fascination with things that are spiritual may highlight the death of true spirituality."² Many who claim to be Christian have embraced a New Age view of spirituality—a view that links spirituality directly to *feelings*, an inwardness of experience.³ "At its core" writes my friend Phil Johnson, "it is anti-Christian. It moves freely in and out among various occult, Gnostic, and pagan themes. It seems to favor fringe religious ideas and 'alternative' beliefs, which are lavishly borrowed, modified, and adapted from these sources. It replaces the doctrine of Christ's deity with belief in the divinity of nature itself—and finally teaches the divinity of every individual. It eliminates the significance of good and evil and thereby obviates the entire concept of redemption. And it is wholly reliant on a blend of practices and beliefs borrowed from an almost boundless array of extrabiblical, occult, and pagan sources. New Age spirituality is therefore at odds with every classic division of Christian doctrine. With regard to *hamartiology*, New Age selfism all but does away with the biblical concept of sin. New Age *anthropology* starts with a denial that humanity is in any way uniquely above the rest of nature. As far as *Christology* is concerned, New Age beliefs utterly eliminate the uniqueness of Christ. And when it comes to *soteriology*, New Age beliefs overthrow the gospel itself with a completely different message. Of course, the heart and soul of biblical soteriology is the doctrine of the atonement. The forgiveness of sins, the imputation of righteousness to the repentant sinner, and a host of truths regarding justification by faith all flow from that. By contrast, the centerpiece of New Age spirituality is individual self-fulfillment and empowerment. It is actually a kind of anti-soteriology. As a matter of fact, it is the very quintessence of every kind of works-religion, because if New Age spirituality is correct, *I'm* the one I have to please. *I'm* the only one who can chart my own spiritual journey. *I'm* the one whose standards I have to live up to. And *I'm* the one I ultimately have to turn to for help. The inevitable result is the systematic deification of self. And the quest for individual self-deification is the very essence of the single most destructive religious lie of all time. As numerous Christian critics of New Age spirituality have already pointed out, the whole New Age belief system flows from the same falsehood the serpent enticed

Eve with in the garden: “You will be like God” (Genesis 3:5).”⁴ One of the more disturbing trends in much of contemporary Evangelicalism is its willingness to heavily accent the sensate and subjective dimension over against the cognitive and objective side of Christianity. The very real danger here is that this leads to a decidedly unbalanced mystical understanding of spirituality. In light of this, David Wells issues this sober warning: “The day will shortly be upon us when evangelical spirituality will become indistinguishable from New Age spirituality.”⁵ This is increasingly becoming a reality. Spirituality is now declared to be something that can exist apart from any association with organized religion, especially Christianity. “In fact,” as F. W. Baue observes, “it can be positively antagonistic towards Christianity.”⁶ In the Bible, *spirituality* is always associated with *holiness*, and holiness *only* comes from the Holy Spirit. “Holy living,” writes MacArthur, “does not come from *our* performance for God but from *His* performance through us by His own Spirit.”⁷ Holiness is the fruit of the Spirit, displayed as the Christian walks by the Spirit. “Holiness,” says Packer, “is consecrated closeness to God.”⁸

I. THE EXHORTATION TO WALK BY THE SPIRIT

The apostle clearly assumes that the Christian will always be active in the formation of personal godly habits and in the desires to be more Christlike.

A. The Command (5:16)

The word translated “walk” (ESV), or “live by” (NIV), is PERIPATE□ and is used in the imperative present tense and shows that Paul is not exhorting them to do what they have not done before; but rather, as Guthrie notes, “he urges them to *keep on walking by the Spirit.*”⁹ Note the *promise*¹⁰ that is given to those who walk by the Spirit, “You shall not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

NOTE: Paul does not say that we will be free from any sinful inclination—only that the Spirit-led walk will keep us from *fulfilling* the desires of our sinful natures. This is *not* a promise of perfectionism. Listen to the words of B.B. Warfield “The Apostle Paul says, ‘the flesh lusts against the Spirit, the Spirit, however, lusts against the flesh’ (Gal. v. 17). The assertion applies to us, to Christians. We may be preserved now from many actual sins, if we let ourselves be led by the Spirit of God. But so long as we are involved in this body of death the old man does not cease to stir or to move. We have every reason to take heed to these movements and to combat them. When the Apostle gives the exhortation, ‘walk in the Spirit,’ he does not add the conclusion, ‘And then you will have nothing more to do with the lusts of the flesh,’ but ‘And then you will not *fulfil* the lusts of the flesh.’ There is no longer need to fall into the gross works of the flesh and there should be no falling into them. But the impulse and the provocation to do so remain in our sinful nature, and therefore the necessity of conflict and of watchfulness abides. And therefore there abides the petition: ‘Forgive us our trespasses.’”¹¹

B. The Cause (5:17)

The struggle is a real one—and that is why we *need* to walk by the Spirit. Apart from the Spirit, the desires or strong urging of our sinful natures would go uncontested. Note here that Paul teaches that our inner spirit *apart from the indwelling Holy Spirit* is also part of our sinful nature. We do not naturally possess the power to resist sin (Romans 8:7). “The human spirit in itself and unaided does not stand in direct antagonism to the flesh.”¹²

C. The Consequences (5:18)

Again, note Paul’s assumption—all believers are led of the Spirit; it is their birthright (cf. Romans 8:9-17). Since they are led by the Spirit, they are *not* under the law. This is one of the contrasting themes of the book of Galatians. Paul has

repeatedly sought to demonstrate that these are incompatible. To be under the law is to be under its curse (cf. 3:13), bondage (cf. 3:22, 25; 4:1-3), impotence and spiritual death (cf. 3:21). If man has only the law, he is defenseless against the sinful nature. Those who walk by the Spirit learn to obey God with a gladness of heart that is the product of the Holy Spirit- BUT this cannot be the case if justification before God depends on either our personal sanctity (as in the covenantal moralism of N.T. Wright's view of justification as well as that being proposed by the advocates of the Federal Vision) or on our cooperating with grace (as in Roman Catholicism).

CONCLUSION: A few years back, I contributed a chapter to a book that sought to address the deplorable state of today's Evangelicalism. What I wrote then is even more applicable than ever. "Although most of today's professing evangelicals would acknowledge that theology, in some *sense* of the word, does matter, a recent survey in *Christianity Today* revealed that this is more lip service than anything else. According to this survey (which, by the way, was attached to the lead story of the issue), theology, in *any* sense of the word, is really *not* all that important to the very people to whom it should matter most: those in the pew and in the pulpit. Both groups listed theological knowledge as *last* in terms of pastoral priorities. It was interesting, and at the same time very disturbing, to note what each surveyed group considered more important than theology when it came to pastoral priorities. For the people in the pew, *spirituality* was of first importance, followed by relational skills, character, and then communication skills. It is difficult to decipher what is really meant by *spirituality* in this survey, since the respondents so distantly removed it from theological knowledge. The nineteenth-century Scottish theologian James Orr wrote of those who would exalt spirituality at the expense of theology: Christianity, it is sometimes said by those who represent this view, is a life, not a creed; it is a spiritual system, and has nothing to do with dogmatic affirmations. But this is to confuse two things essentially different—Christianity as an inward principle of conduct, a subjective religious experience, on the one hand, and Christianity as an objective fact, or an historic magnitude, on the other. But can even the life be produced, or can it be sustained and nourished, without knowledge? How can true spirituality be divorced from the knowledge of God (theology)? 'There can be no vital spirituality,' writes Donald Bloesch, 'without a sound theology.'"¹³ What is the central message of Galatians? The gospel of justification by *faith alone* through *grace alone* by *Christ alone*. Any attempt to supplement this gospel with the slightest human contribution in an effort to *really* experience God's fullest favor meets with an apostolic anathema (Gal. 1:6). In other words a solid grasp of the central doctrine of justification is essential to understanding true spirituality. As Mark Dever comments, "The gospel was not made up by me or by any church, by some committee or some bishop, by Paul or the apostles. It is from God. And you will certainly give an account to him for having heard it. So, what laws have you observed, thinking you would thereby gain God's favor? You always put some money in the plate? You never use that word, at least not when he is listening? You are faithful, honest, good, and true? Friend, you must ask yourself, have you constructed your understanding of the world so that you think you are not a sinner? That you have no guilty stains? That you are not vile before God? That you have no need of a Savior? That is what the Galatians were in danger of doing long ago—and of being hoodwinked into thinking a little surgery could bring salvation. What about you? Have you quietly struck your own deal with God, and worked out some way you can give him a little less than everything and still be his? You can be certain of your sins. That is a given. But you can be certain of your rescue, as Paul calls it in this letter, only by believing in Jesus Christ as your Savior and by trusting in him. That is what this little letter is all about. That is what the church is all about. And that is supposed to be what your life is all about. Is it?"¹⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ The actress Shirley MacLaine, for example, sees no distinction between God and herself. Cf. Going Within: A Guide for Inner Transformation (Bantam Books, 1989), p. 100. The notion that spirituality is primarily about feeling a sense of personal well-being, or ‘get in touch with the real you,’ is now very much in vogue. “The link between spirituality and happiness is pretty well-established for teens and adults. More spirituality brings more happiness. Now a study has reached into the younger set, finding the same link in “tweens” and in kids in middle childhood. Specifically, the study shows that children who feel that their lives have meaning and value and who develop deep, quality relationships – both measures of spirituality, the researchers claim – are happier. Personal aspects of spirituality (meaning and value in one’s own life) and communal aspects (quality and depth of inter-personal relationships) were both strong predictors of children’s happiness, said study leader Mark Holder from the University of British Columbia in Canada and his colleagues Ben Coleman and Judi Wallace. However, religious practices were found to have little effect on children’s happiness, Holder said. Religion is just one institutionalized venue for the practice of or experience of spirituality, and some people say they are spiritual but are less enthusiastic about the concept of god. Other research has shown a connection between well-adjusted and well-behaved children and religion, but that is not the same, necessarily, as happiness.”

SPIRITUALITY, NOT RELIGION, MAKES KIDS HAPPY <http://www.livescience.com/culture/090109-kids-spirituality.html>

² D. Bloesch, Spirituality Old & New (IVP, 2007) p. 25.

³ This is very common in Pentecostal and Charismatic circles, cf. the comments of Pentecostal Russell P. Spittler, “The Pentecostal View” in Christian Spirituality, ed. D. L. Alexander (IVP, 1988), p. 141. Kenneth E. Hagin is representative of the Word of Faith cult that teaches a Gnostic understanding of spirituality and has more in common with the New Age than with traditional Pentecostalism, cf. his How You Can Be Led by the Spirit of God (Faith Library, 1980).

⁴ <http://teampyro.blogspot.com/2008/12/typical-beliefs-and-practices-of-new.html>

⁵ David F. Wells, God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 222.

⁶ F. W. Bave, The Spiritual Society: What Lurks Beyond Postmodernism (Crossway, 2001) p. 54.

⁷ The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Galatians (Moody, 1987), p. 152.

⁸ J. I. Packer, Keep In Step With the Spirit (Revell, 1984), p. 96.

⁹ Donald Guthrie, Galatians: The New Century Bible Commentary (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 135.

¹⁰ “The RSV,” observes F.F. Bruce, “mistakenly translates the clause as a negative command: ‘do not gratify the desires of the flesh.’ The words rather express a promise, which will be realized in those who walk by the Spirit.” New International Greek Testament Commentary on Galatians (Eerdmans, 1982), p. 243.

¹¹ The Works of B. B. Warfield VII (rpt. Baker, 1981), p. 230.

¹² J. B. Lightfoot, St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians (MacMillan, 1869), p. 206.

¹³ G.L.W. Johnson, “Does Theology Still Matter?” in The Coming Evangelical Crisis (Moody, 1996) p. 58. A sad example of the present deplorable situation is seen in the Emergent guru Brian McLaren and his book Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices where he makes the incredible claim that Islamic Spirituality is equally valid and that other Eastern Religions also have genuine forms of spirituality.

¹⁴ M. Dever, The Message of the New Testament (Crossway, 2005) p. 230.