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TRUE SPIRITUALITY (Part II)

To speak of *Secular Spirituality* appears to be an oxymoron. But the kind of New Age Spirituality that has gained an enormous following – even among professing Christians – is really pseudo-spirituality, and is in fact very secular. Anytime the surrounding culture shapes and gives direction to Christianity, natural revelation is substituted for special revelation and corruption takes place and idolatry occurs. Despite the current appearance of the complete secularization of Western Society, religion is actually thriving. This is one of those good news/bad news scenarios. Human beings are religious beings. Avoiding religion is thus impossible. But having said that we must recognize, as the acclaimed French thinker Jacques Ellul, has pointed out, that instead of the older faith of Christianity, modern man now places faith in modernity (technology and the advance of science to mention only two of the new god-substitutes).¹ To this, we must acknowledge that many new religious movements have *emerged*. Some are closely tied to mainstream Christianity but have departed in significant ways from historic Christianity with distinctives that put strong emphasis on experience (i.e., Charismatics involved in such things as ‘Holy Laughter’). Others range from groups that draw directly from Eastern mysticism (Buddhism, Hinduism) to New Age Gnosticism and spirituality (Shirley McLaine). “Religion,” observes William Edgar, “is in one way quite uniform being derived from a sense of dependence on something or someone that has ultimate value. Much religion, however, has gone wrong. Instead of trusting the true God, people turn to other objects of devotion. Though extremely varied throughout the world, at heart is a universal dynamic, the paradox of knowing and yet imprisoning the truth. In other words, the essence of religion is neither ritual nor creedal formulation nor ethical code but *faith*.”² David Wells’ analysis, as usual is spot on. “There was a time when American evangelicals prized and cultivated biblically chaste Christian thought and an incisive analysis of the culture from a perspective apart from it. But the past few decades have seen an erosion of the old distinctions, a gradual descent into the “*self*” movement, a psychologizing of faith, and an adaptation of Christian belief to a therapeutic culture. Distracted by the blandishments of modern culture, we have lost our focus on transcendent biblical truth. We have been beguiled by the efficiency of our culture’s technique, and sheer effectiveness of its strategies, and we have begun to play by these rules. We now blithely speak of marketing the gospel like any other commodity, oblivious to the fact that such rhetoric betrays a vast intrusion of worldliness into the church.”³ Paul followed in the steps of our Lord who said, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal” (Matt. 6:9-20). The exhortation to seek the things above begins with the conditional clause, “If ye then be risen with Christ.” The construction is such that the apostle does not doubt the fact that the believers have been raised with Christ. The “if” is that of the assumption of the reality of the statement, as is plain from verse twelve (cf. v. 20). The apostle, then, assumes their resurrection with Christ, and on the basis of it calls upon them to “seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.” A person seeking after divine things is in itself remarkable, for elsewhere Paul says, “there is none that

seeketh after God” (cf. Rom. 3:11). Here, however, he refers to a seeking believer, not a seeking unbeliever. This is the only human search for God, and it is divinely initiated and motivated (cf. Phil. 2:12-13). The great puritan theologian John Owen is instructive when he observes, “we have all grace and holiness from Christ, or we have it of ourselves. The old Pelagian fiction, that we have them from Christ because we have them by yielding obedience unto his doctrine, makes ourselves the only spring and author of them, and on that account [it was] very justly condemned by the church of old, not only as false, but as blasphemous. Whatever, therefore, is not thus derived, thus conveyed unto us, belongs not unto our sanctification or holiness, nor is of the same nature of kind with it.”⁴ *You have fallen from grace*, is a phrase that has caused no little confusion in the minds of many Christians. Large numbers of Christians have been taught that this means that believers may actually lose their salvation. Let's be clear here. Is it possible for a truly born again believer to lose his salvation? All will grant that there are false professors who fall away from the faith and commit apostasy. But can a genuine Christian apostatize? You will often hear people speak of eternal security as implying that once a person makes a profession of faith (signs on the dotted line a salvation contract with God) the deal is done--that person is now saved and "once saved always saved" becomes a motto. Regardless of the life style that person leads, despite the fact that he or she may actually renounce Christianity, they are still eternally secure. Really? Don't you believe it! The true Biblical doctrine was rightly referred to as The Perseverance of the Saints.⁵ True believers will, as the expression implies, persevere in the faith. They may stumble badly. They may go through periods of darkness, but they will not fall away completely from Christ. Well, then, what does Paul mean when he declares to the Galatians: *You have fallen from grace?*

I. THE APPEAL TO FREEDOM

Christ did not set us free that we might become slaves again. Christianity is freedom, not bondage. But what does Paul mean when he uses the word freedom?

- A. Freedom from the Guilt of Sin. This freedom comes through the cross work of Christ (Romans 6:18-22).
- B. Freedom from the Law of Moses. This is Paul's point in Galatians 3:24-25; 4:4-5. Believers are free from the Law. This does not mean that they are free to sin. They are not over the Law, but neither are they under the Law (4:21).

II. THE ARGUMENT AGAINST CIRCUMCISION

Note the imagery Paul uses--the yoke of bondage. The figure of a yoke is an apt metaphor for bondage, since an animal in a yoke has no alternative but to submit to the will of its master.⁶

- A. The Danger of False Doctrine. Why is Paul so concerned over the Galatians submitting to the rite of circumcision? Paul enunciates four reasons.
- B. Christ is of No Benefit. This must have come as a shock to the Galatians! Why would circumcision make Christ of no benefit to the Galatians? Because that would be relying on something else as a means of gaining acceptance before God.
- C. Obligated to Keep the Whole Law. Circumcision brings with it legal obligations. Note how this is stated in terms of alternatives. It is either wholly Christ or the whole law.
- D. Fallen from Grace. To submit to circumcision is to seek justification by law and that severs one from Christ--thus to fall from grace.

NOTE: Could the Galatians become unjustified? Paul's language will not allow this. He is simply saying that after having believed in Christ (as the Galatians did when Paul first preached the gospel to them), to turn away from Christ alone and faith alone is to turn to a legal method of gaining acceptance before God. Instead of relying on Christ, they were now relying on something else. Thus, they have fallen from grace. Any time we trust in our efforts (or feelings or whatever) as the grounds for God's favor, we have fallen from grace and this is exactly what characterizes the new spirituality.

- E. Excluded from Righteousness. Legality does not bring righteousness. You remember the character Mr. Legality from The Pilgrim's Progress? He was rightly referred to as a cheat and could never produce righteousness. It is faith in Christ only that saves, and this faith issues in love, and this love is effectual.

III. THE ADMONITION AGAINST FALSE TEACHERS (5:7-8)

Having exposed the nature of false doctrine, Paul now exposes the true character of false teachers. They had detoured the Galatians. Paul now reveals them for what they really are.

- A. They Hinder the Truth. False teaching will always be detrimental. Note how it takes only a little bit of false doctrine to corrupt.
- B. They Are Not of God. They are, in fact, ungodly and Paul does not hesitate to say so!
- C. They Will Be Judged. Because the Judaizers were seeking to displace Christ (although they would have claimed otherwise), the Apostle declares that God will judge them.

NOTE: One of the characteristics of false teachers is that they oppose the truth and they mean that they will aggressively persecute true teachers like Paul. The Church today is full of arrogant, self-proclaimed (and infallible) teachers. "Christian" television (most of it is anything but Christian) is overrun with false teachers who claim divine inspiration for their teachings. This is not new. Calvin wrote over four hundred years ago: "It is an illusory belief of the Enthusiasts that those who keep reading Scripture or hearing the Word are children, as if no one were spiritual unless he scorned doctrine. In their pride, therefore, they despise the ministry of men, and even Scripture itself, in order to attain the Spirit. They then proudly try to peddle all the delusions that Satan suggests to them as secret revelations of the Spirit. Such are the Libertines, and frenzied individuals like them. The more ignorant a man is, the greater the pride with which he is bloated and puffed up."⁷ Paul's final words in verse 12 may strike us as coarse, but it expresses his utter contempt for the pernicious teaching the Judaizers had introduced in the Galatian churches.

CONCLUSION: Those who embrace New Age Spirituality have no concept of the New Testament means by *grace*. New Age Spirituality in all of its forms, is totally devoid of grace. It is based exclusively on works righteousness—very much like that being advocated by the false teachers at Galatia. The same scenario is now developing in today's Evangelicalism. Ironically, the new secular spirituality is in fact extremely hostile to everything associated with historic Orthodox Christianity.⁸ According to the latest data: The majority of American adults pick and choose their religious beliefs to create, in essence, a "customized" religion rather than adopting the set of beliefs taught by a particular church, a new study found. By a three to one margin (71% to 26%), Americans say they are more likely to personally develop their own set of religious beliefs than accept a comprehensive set of beliefs taught by a church or denomination, a Barna study, released recently, shows. Among those who describe themselves as Christians, for instance, nearly half believe that Satan does not exist, one-third say that Jesus sinned when He was on earth, two-fifths say they do not have a responsibility to share the Gospel with others, and one-quarter dismiss the idea that the Bible is accurate in all of its teachings – beliefs that are contrary to most church teachings. George Barna, founder of The Barna

Group, commented on the findings saying that a growing number of people are serving as their own “theologian-in-residence,” resulting in Americans embracing an “unpredictable and contradictory body of beliefs.” He pointed out that millions of people who consider themselves as Christians who believe the Bible is totally accurate in all its teaching also contend at the same time that Jesus Christ sinned. Others, the researcher noted, say they believe they will receive eternal salvation because they confessed their sins and accepted Christ as their savior, but they also believe that a person can do enough good works to earn eternal salvation. Americans today, Barna observed, are “more likely to pit a variety of non-Christian options against various Christian-based views.” “This has resulted in an abundance of unique worldviews based on personal combinations of theology drawn from a smattering of world religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam as well as secularism,” he said. Leading the pack of pick and choose your religious beliefs are people under the age of 25. More than four out of five (82%) of them say they develop their own combination of beliefs rather than adopt a set offered by a church.⁹ Another recent poll revealed that 75% of the Evangelicals surveyed could not give even a brief doctrinal explanation of what it means to be an Evangelical Christian. What’s wrong? Evangelical churches have jettisoned theology and, as such, lack discernment. This is a spiritual capacity, the ability to see *through* life, to see it for what it really is. Christians who have been taken captive by our therapeutic culture imagine that the chief end of man is not to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, but to improve our own private inner disposition, and that the church exists to provide them with personal satisfaction and to give inner tranquility to their hectic lives. They want psychological wholeness, marital bliss and integrated families. If God fails to provide us with this kind of prosperity and success (consumer’s satisfaction) then we become cynical and disillusioned. The best description for what I am describing is “Mall Christianity.” In the mall, everything is for us, for our comfort and enjoyment, for our satisfaction, and so many Christians have come to assume that it must be so in the church as well. The pattern of this world is seeking to conform the church, and it is hard to recognize the world’s schemes and even harder to dislodge them from the church once it has taken root.

ENDNOTES

¹ J. Ellul, *The New Demon* (Seabury, 1975). Neil Postman speaks of “Scientism”—the growing sense of absolute confidence of science to solve all our problems. Faith in science can serve in this sense as a religious substitute providing a comprehensive belief system that gives meaning to life as well as a sense of well-being, morality, and over immortality cf. his *Technology: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (Vintage, 1992), p. 147.

² W. Edgar, *Reasons of the Heart: Recovering Christian Persuasion* (Baker, 1996), p. 53.

³ D. Wells, *God In The Wasteland* (Eerdmans, 1997), p. 179.

⁴ *The Works of John Owen III* (rpt. Banner of Truth 1976), p. 222.

⁵ Cf. The Fifth Head of Doctrine in the Canons of Dort, found on p. 109 in the back of our Psalter hymnal.

⁶ “It is significant,” writes Donald Guthrie, “that Jesus used the same word for the submission of his followers to him (Matthew 11:29). Not all yokes chafe, but the Judaizers’ yoke could only be described as slavery, very different from that of Christ.” *Galatians: The New Century Bible Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 128.

⁷ *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries VIII* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 377.

⁸ Donald Bloesch astutely points out, “Priding itself on its openness and sensitivity to the winds of the age, this new brand of spirituality translates into an inflexible insistence on ‘diversity’ that tolerates no deviation from its dictates. This totalitarian spirit has come to permeate virtually every area of Euro-American society to the detriment of genuinely creative inquiry and moral sensibility, not to mention the traditional faith and values that constitute the glue that has held society together. By relativizing the standards of faith, the spiritual forces now regnant in the culture are preparing the way for a new civilization that aspires to be all-controlling as well as all-embracing—provided, of course, that people conform to what the elites deem acceptable in a new world order.” *Spirituality Old & New* (IVP, 2007), p. 115.

⁹ http://www.christianpost.com/Society/Polls_reports/2009/01/most-americans-pick-and-cho...