

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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### TRUE SPIRITUALITY (Part III)

Much of modern Evangelicalism is busy keeping in step with the spirit of the age. It is preoccupied with being successful—and only fools, we are frequently reminded, quarrel with success. Pragmatism reigns supreme among those who are driven by the mega-church-growth model. We may try, as one church-growth expert does, to sanitize this mentality by calling it “consecrated pragmatism”<sup>1</sup>—but it is still a result-oriented model that is driven by expediency—and this affects everything the church does. One mega-church pastor wrote a book on reaching the unchurched with this underlying assumption—people outside the church really do not care about the question “Is Christianity true?” but “Does Christianity work?”<sup>2</sup> Well, that seems to be a valid question, but it requires qualification. Work for what? “Is there a time when Christianity doesn’t work? Yes. Christianity does not work when there is a false expectation regarding what the Christian life is all about. It doesn’t work when there is little or improper teaching of Biblical precept standards. It does not work when there is a lack of commitment to the disciplines involved in perseverance and growth. It does not work in isolation from other believers. Most important, it does not work apart from the saving grace of God through Christ—but Christianity does work for sinners.”<sup>3</sup> The so-called *seeker-sensitive, user-friendly* church model that is so popular today caters to the “me-first” mentality that so characterizes our society. People are consumed with self-absorption.<sup>4</sup> Naturally, they come to church expecting the church to provide them another means of self-gratification. They want personal wholeness and satisfaction first and foremost (and on their terms)—and if Christianity cannot bring them this, they will quickly turn away to other pursuits.

In verses 16-26 of Galatians 5, Paul makes *seven* references to the Holy Spirit. It is obvious that the Apostle understood the Christian life as primarily being oriented by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the source and sustaining power of the Christian’s spiritual life and serves as the regulative principle for Christian conduct. What characterizes the Spirit-directed life? As we have noted, there are many today who teach that this is chiefly some type of emotional high that is accompanied by ecstatic experiences. *Spirituality*, according to them, is something that is *felt*. This has a tremendous appeal, especially in our day and age. We are obsessed with our feelings; after all, everyone has feelings but not everyone has the desire (or ability) to take time to think and analyze. Feelings are easily aroused; thought requires effort. And so we trust our feelings, we follow our inner impulses and intuition which in some Christian circles is viewed as the only way to be in touch with the Spirit. This has a devastating effect on the centrality of scripture. If guidance and truth is something we arrive at subjectively, then the Scriptures are simply an appendix. The Bible merely serves to corroborate the validity of what we have already found within our own religious consciousness. In the words of David Wells, this is only “another way of saying that we are putting ourselves in place of the Bible.”<sup>5</sup>

The Spirit-directed life is the Word-directed life and has as its reference point Christ and Him crucified. This, and this only constitutes *True Spirituality*.

## I. THE SPIRIT'S FOCUS

The Holy Spirit does not promote Himself, rather He seeks to bring glory to Christ (John 16:14). “The indwelling Christ,” wrote Warfield, “is the source of the Christian’s spiritual strength. This is, of course, not to set aside the Holy Spirit. But he has read his New Testament to little purpose who would separate the Holy Spirit and Christ: Christ abides in the heart by the Spirit. The indwelling of the Holy Ghost is the means of the indwelling of Christ and the two are one and the same great fact.”<sup>6</sup>

### A. On Christ

I cannot underscore this enough. The life that is under the direction of the Spirit will always be centered on Christ, not in some quasi-mystical sense<sup>7</sup>--a sense that not only is popular in New Age circles,<sup>8</sup> but one that, regrettably, is gaining acceptance in some evangelical circles.<sup>9</sup> What does it mean? In Hebrews 12:1, 2, we are exhorted to *look to Jesus*. What does this involve? The verb in this text is APHORΩNTES EIS and it implies a definite looking *away from* other things and directing one’s attention on Jesus. “It suggests,” says Guthrie, “the impossibility of looking in two directions at once.”<sup>10</sup> Focusing our attention on Christ means we look to Him and to Him *only* as our righteousness. This is what it means to trust Christ. True Christianity is Christ-trusting. In the words of Warfield, it “finds absolutely nothing but Christ in which to repose any trust, but [the person] actually trusts—*trusts*, with all that means—in Christ.”<sup>11</sup> This trust rests, not on some vague concept of Christ, but upon Christ as set forth as the Savior of sinners—as the crucified Christ that Paul preached to the Galatians (Galatians 3:1; compare with I Corinthians 2:2).

### B. On Grace

“It belongs to the very essence of the type of Christianity propagated by the Reformation,” observed Warfield, “that the believer should feel himself continuously unworthy of the grace by which he lives. At the center of this type of Christianity lies the contrast of sin and grace; and about this center everything else revolves.”<sup>12</sup> This is a gospel for sinners—indeed this is Christianity and there is *no* Christianity that deserves the name, that does not have this message as its gospel.

NOTE: To those who have little, if any, sense of their sinfulness and need for redemption, this type of Christianity makes very little appeal. Quite the contrary, it is extremely distasteful. Robert Schuller, the leading proponent of self-esteem (and the featured speaker on television’s most-watched religious program, “The Hour of Power”), repudiates Reformational Christianity with its strong emphasis on sin and judgment. The problem with the Reformers, in Schuller’s mind, is that they took their cue from Paul’s epistle to the Romans instead of from the teachings of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> Schuller’s brand of Christianity is not new. People have always reacted in a negative way to certain emphases that are essential to a proper understanding of the gospel. Warfield, writing around the turn of the century, accurately captured the mentality represented by Schuller. “It appears to them to foster a morbid preoccupation with faults which are in part at least only fancied. It does scant justice, as they think, to the dignity of human nature, with its ethical endowments and capacities for self-improvement. It presents, as they view it, insufficient and ineffective motives for moral effort, and tends therefore to produce weak and dependent characters prone to acquiesce in an imperfect development, merely because they lack the vigor to go forward. Men turn away from it in proportion as they are inclined to put a high estimate on human nature as it manifests itself in the world, and especially upon its moral condition, its moral powers, its present and possible moral achievements. It is a gospel for sinners, and those who do not think of themselves as sinners find no attraction in it.”<sup>14</sup> Please note Paul’s appeal (the two-fold “Let us. . .” in verses 25-26) based on

the Spirit-flesh conflict. Since this opposition is real, it follows that Christians must keep in step with the Spirit in order to have the fruit of the Spirit. What we find here is Paul's characteristic interplay between the indicative (the mood of the verb used to express an actual state—*since we live by the Spirit*) and the imperative (mood of the verb expressing a command or exhortation—*let us keep in step with the Spirit*). In other words, as Hendriksen has said, "Let them therefore *be* what they are."<sup>15</sup>

## II. LIFE BY THE SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit is said to be the source of our life in Christ. In the new birth, God sends the Spirit of His Son into our hearts whereby we cry, "Abba, Father" (Galatians 4:6). What does it mean to live by the Spirit?

### A. It is a Specific Condition.

This is spelled out in greater detail in places like I Corinthians 15:45; II Corinthians 3:6; Romans 7:6; 8:11 and Titus 3:5. The Christian has a new orientation or life-context in which the Spirit rules. The believer is a new creation in Christ. It is out of this new life that a corresponding conduct flows.

## III. WALK BY THE SPIRIT

"All the expressions of the new life of those who belong to Christ can therefore be attributed to the Spirit. Paul speaks of them as the disposition of the Spirit (Romans 8:6), the love of the Spirit (Romans 15:30), the desiring of the Spirit (Galatians 5:17), the joy of the Spirit (I Thessalonians 1:6). He is not the Spirit of slavish fear, but of childlike trust (Romans 8:15); his fruit consists in love, peace, joy, etc. (Galatians 5:22). He is also the principle and power of the new life in the moral sense of the word, the Spirit of sanctification (II Thessalonians 2:13). The requirement of the law can only be fulfilled in those who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit, i.e., in accordance with his operation and intention (Romans 8:4ff.; cf. Galatians 5:16, 25)."<sup>16</sup>

### A. Its Outward Manifestation

The word that is translated *keep in step* is STOICHEIN which implies the idea of a row or steps and suggests a map by which believers follow a course set down by the Spirit.<sup>17</sup> The word was used as a military term giving us the impression that Paul is calling upon Christians to march in line following the Spirit as the leader.<sup>18</sup> "Walking by the Spirit is the outward manifestation, in action and speech, of living by the Spirit. Living by the Spirit is the root; walking by the Spirit is the fruit, and that fruit is nothing less than the practical reproduction of the character (and therefore the conduct) of Christ in the lives of his people."<sup>19</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** The Puritan Thomas Goodwin duly noted that the natural man has an habitual aversion to God. His heart is set and inclined toward sin and away from God. He therefore finds the true Gospel—a gospel that is addressed to sinners—offensive and foolish (I Corinthians 2:14).<sup>20</sup> Many in our day complain that they tried Christianity and it didn't work. They looked for it to give them something other than salvation from their sins. To those who are seeking to be justified (declared righteous) before a holy and just God, the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16)—and this gospel is what enables us to live by the Spirit. Therefore, let us also walk by the Spirit. This is true Spirituality.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> C. Peter Wagner, Leading Your Church to Growth (Regal, 1984), p. 201.
- <sup>2</sup> Lee Strobel, Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry & Marv: How to Reach Friends and Family Who Avoid God and the Church (Zondervan, 1994).
- <sup>3</sup> Richard Ganz, Psycho Babble: The Failure of Modern Psychology—and the Biblical Alternative (Crossway Books, 1993), p. 118.
- <sup>4</sup> “Modernity obliges us to turn inward, to relocate the sources of our satisfaction and fulfillment from these connections in the outer world to sources within ourselves. Modernity obliges us to psychologize life, to look to the states and vagaries of the self for the reality that was once external. For the most part, evangelicals have failed to see that this shift from the objective to the subjective, this new fascination with the self, is invariably inimical to biblical and historical faith. Robert Nisbet has argued that this self-absorption, which has been passed off by many as the very essence of evangelical faith, is in fact one of the most telling indications of our cultural decay. He quotes Goethe’s comment that ‘ages which are regressive and in process of dissolution are always subjective, whereas the trend in all progressive epochs is objective.’ The subjective obsession that also confronts us in religious dress (as is often the case in evangelicalism) sometimes appears in dress that is quite irreligious. Whatever the garb, however, it exhibits the same underlying mentality, the same habits of mind, the same assumption that reality can be accessed only through the self (and by intuition rather than by thought), the same belief that we can attain virtually unlimited personal progress if only we can tap into our own hidden resources. This fascination with the self, made bright with hope by the belief in progress, has proved to be a gold mine for the publishers. In the overall religious book market today, 31 percent of all books sold, fall into the inspirational and motivational category, and a further 15 percent work these same themes from a New Age angle.” D. F. Wells, No Place For Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology? (Eerdmans, 1993), p. 142.
- <sup>5</sup> Wells, p. 279.
- <sup>6</sup> B. B. Warfield, Faith and Life (rpt. Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), p. 270.
- <sup>7</sup> The kind of mysticism I have in mind is summarized by John MacArthur, who writes: “*Mysticism* is the idea that spiritual reality is found by looking inward. Mysticism is perfectly suited for religious existentialism; indeed, it is its inevitable consequence. The mystic disdains rational understanding and seeks truth instead through the feelings, the imagination, personal visions, inner voices, private illumination, or other purely subjective means. Objective truth becomes practically superfluous.” Reckless Faith: When the Church Loses Its Will to Discern (Crossway, 1994), p. 27.
- <sup>8</sup> The New Age advocates like to advance a concept they call *Christ consciousness*. This is stated quite blatantly by New Ager, Hayward Cole. “The right way of thinking is to see Christ in every human being. This may sound born again but it isn’t. Born-again Christianity emphasizes the personality of Jesus; what I call Christian Yoga sees Christ as a Consciousness.” Cited in Peter Jones, The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back: An Old Heresy For the New Age (P&R, 1992), p. 58.
- <sup>9</sup> Charismatic extremist, William DeArteaga, advocates a bizarre form of mystic visualization that is rooted in medieval Roman Catholicism. In this type of mysticism, the Christian is supposed to visualize Jesus in a physical sense and to experience the presence of God through our bodily senses. Cf. his Quenching the Spirit (Creation House, 1992), p. 196.
- <sup>10</sup> D. Guthrie, Hebrews: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Eerdmans, 1983), p. 250.
- <sup>11</sup> The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield VII (rpt. Baker, 1981), p. 126.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1131. Warfield goes on to say, “This is in large part the meaning of the emphasis put in this type of Christianity on justification by faith. It is its conviction that there is nothing in us or done by us, at any stage of our earthly development, because of which we are acceptable to God. We must always be accepted for Christ’s sake, or we cannot ever be accepted at all. This is not true of us only *when we believe*. It is just as true after we have believed. It will continue to be true as long as we live.”
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. his Self-Esteem: The New Reformation (Word, 1982), p. 39, and his interview in Christianity Today (Aug. 10, 1984).
- <sup>14</sup> Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 132.
- <sup>15</sup> W. Hendriksen, New Testament Commentary: Galatians (Baker, 1968), p. 26.
- <sup>16</sup> H. Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology (Eerdmans, 1975), p. 223.
- <sup>17</sup> Cf. R.Y.K. Fung, The Epistle to the Galatians (Eerdmans, 1988), p. 275.
- <sup>18</sup> The word places the accent, says H. D. Betz, “upon the priority of the Spirit as well as upon concrete ethical behavior.” A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia (Fortress, 1979), p. 294.
- <sup>19</sup> F. F. Bruce, New International Greek Testament Commentary on Galatians (Eerdmans, 1985), p. 257.
- <sup>20</sup> The Works of Thomas Goodwin VI (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), p. 206.