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the DIVINE
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Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life

ROBERT E.
WEBBER


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THE CRISIS: HOW THE SPIRITUAL LIFE BECAME SEPARATED FROM THE DIVINE EMBRACE

- Chapter 2 The story of God's divine embrace in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus was defended by the ancient creeds and debates of the church. Spirituality and the spiritual life, situated in the divine embrace, was modified by Platonic dualism, which saw spirituality as an escape from this world, and late medieval mysticism, which interpreted spirituality as a journey into self.
- Chapter 3 The Reformers returned spirituality to the divine embrace with some modification. In the modern era spirituality as the divine embrace was redefined by a spirituality preoccupied with a forensic justification combined with sanctification guided by gratitude, and a spirituality that focused on the conversion experience followed by a flight from the world.
- Chapter 4 *Twentieth-century evangelical spirituality inherited the modifications of the past and developed privatized spiritualities of legalism, intellectualism, and experientialism.*
- Chapter 5 The present evangelical practices of spirituality, separated from the divine embrace, are inadequate to the challenge of the widespread popularity of New Age and Eastern spiritualities grounded in an impersonal, pantheistic conception of God and the world. The challenge before us is to recover a spirituality and spiritual life situated in the divine embrace.

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A MODERN DISLOCATION (1900–2000)

Rescuing Spirituality from Legalism and Romanticism

In twentieth-century evangelicalism we see the unfortunate result of separating spirituality from God's story. Spirituality has become situated in the narrative of the self. In this *privatized spirituality* evangelicals look to themselves for the confirmation of their spiritual condition. The self-focused spiritualities of the twentieth century have not emerged willy-nilly but are deeply rooted in the historical movements that separated spirituality from the vision of God, especially the modern developments of an intellectual spirituality and experiential spirituality discussed in the previous chapter. The problem of these dislocated spiritualities has been compounded by the current antihistorical, narcissistic, and pragmatic nature of evangelical Christianity. The evangelical orientation toward the self is evident also in the current attraction to the new mysticism which grew out of the late medieval era with its mystical emphasis on the journey into the self. But more about that later. First we must ask, "Who are we evangelicals who have embraced spiritualities of the self?"

Current evangelicalism can be conveniently organized into four phases: (1) the fundamentalist origins that dominated the first half of the twentieth century; (2) the emergence of traditional evangelicalism that is the primary story of the middle of the century; (3) the spread of a pragmatic evangelicalism appearing in the last third of the century; and now, (4) the current emerging church—the group I call the “younger evangeli-

cal”—is drawing a great deal of attention.¹ This exponential growth of evangelicalism in the last century has led sociologist Alan Wolfe to remark that “there is . . . a sense in which we are all evangelicals now.”² My contention is that evangelicals, having separated spirituality from God’s vision, practice spiritualities of legalism, intellectualism, and experientialism. I will comment on these forms of spirituality.

SPIRITUAL LEGALISM

The first seven years of my life were spent in Belgian Congo, Africa, where my parents were missionaries under the Africa Inland Mission (AIM). I remember my father and mother as highly dedicated servants of God who gave their lives to proclaim the gospel in a remote part of the world. They were willing to turn away from the comforts of the Western world to live in a house made of mud with a grass thatched roof without the comforts of running water, electricity, or bathrooms. During the time they served as missionaries they translated large portions of the Bible, pastored, taught, farmed, counseled, and did whatever else was needed to bring the gospel of Jesus to people who had no knowledge of the faith. My parents were servants of the people as they embodied the faith and introduced Jesus to a whole village and beyond. In those days, which was just prior to the United States entering World War II, they demonstrated what may be considered a high point of older fundamentalist spirituality—the willingness to find themselves by forsaking their own self—dying to self to find their lives.

The world is full of evangelical servants like my parents—committed, passionate about ministry, and willing to serve. I thank God for their lives and for the many evangelicals like them who have passed down a godly heritage by their example of witness and sacrifice.

There was another side, however, to the spirituality practiced by my parents and demanded of my brother, my sister, and me. That was a spirituality embraced by many in their generation with a language of spiritual legalism, expressed in the ethic of dos and don’ts, and inherent in a rigid doctrinal legalism from which it was impossible to deviate without losing spiritual status.

The Legalistic Ethic of Dos and Don’ts

I wasn’t conscious of the legalistic approach to the Christian faith embraced by my parents until we returned from Africa to the United States in 1940. My first conscious experience of evangelical legalism occurred when I was eight years old. During that summer I was sent to a YMCA camp for a month. Each week the kids were taken into town to

see a movie. Since I didn’t know better, I went. When my parents heard that I went to a movie, they were shocked and quickly instructed the camp leader that I was not allowed to attend any more movies. So for the rest of the summer, when others went to the weekly movie, I remained on the campground alone under supervision of a camp leader who was appointed to watch over me.

The question of whether or not to go to a movie is in itself not the issue. My parents’ refusal to allow me to go to the movie was symptomatic of a much larger and pervasive issue within the evangelical world—its *legalistic mentality*.³ A mentality constitutes a particular way of *seeing* reality. A legalistic mentality defines spirituality in terms of what a Christian *does not do*. Those who question the established dos and don’ts are regarded as rebels and are often ostracized in one way or another from the community. Unfortunately these dos and don’ts often get in the way of seeing the real ethics of Christian spirituality such as the growth of character, the concern for justice, and the care of the poor and the needy.

The origins of the dos and don’ts in American evangelicalism go back to the revivals in the frontier days of the nineteenth century. All of us have seen the western movies and the depiction of life in the western spread of the American frontier. The center of town is the bar with its heavy drinking, gambling, card playing, and lewd women. As Christianity spread west in the revival tradition, it was imperative for Christians to distinguish themselves from the crude, boisterous, drinking, smoking, dancing, card playing, gambling, and lascivious crowd. Christians, therefore, swung the pendulum to the other side and insisted on a cleaned-up life as a demonstration of a converted life and a spiritual walk with God. In time these outward expressions of a cleaned-up life turned from sin became the external marks of the spiritual life.

While abstinence from worldly practices was a genuine choice of an original generation of Christians, the dos and don’ts became for the second and especially the third generation of Christians an *imposed* structure of spirituality. The inner convictions that generated the original choice to refrain from worldly practices was lost. In its place now stood a legalistic ethos, that is, restraint from worldly practice became the sum and the substance of the spiritual life. Contemplation and participation was replaced by “keeping the rules,” even if it was done only in an external manner.

Doctrinal Legalism

This spirit of legalism is true not only in matters of behavior but also in the approach to theology. Each evangelical subgroup has its fixed doctrines. For example:

All evangelicals agree that the Bible is the final authority in matters of faith and practice; legalism adds that biblical authority can be expressed only with full, plenary, verbal inspiration of the Bible.

All evangelicals agree that God is the Creator; legalists add a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 and insist that Scripture teaches that God created the world in seven days.

All evangelicals agree that the Bible is to be interpreted by God's people; legalists insist that there is only one valid interpretation of every text reached through the biblical, historical, theological methodology of interpretation.

All evangelicals agree that the church is called to reflect on Scripture and develop a theology of the Christian faith; legalists insist that there is only one kind of theology—propositional truth.

All evangelicals believe in the church; legalists insist that their church or fellowship is the pure church and all others are apostate.

All evangelicals believe in the second coming of Christ; legalists insist that their particular view of the end time (i.e., pretribulation rapture and premillenarian) is the one true understanding of Scripture.

All evangelicals believe in the ethical life supported by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love modeled by Jesus; legalists deduce teachings from the ethical admonitions of Scripture and create a handy list of dos and don'ts to be followed scrupulously.

All evangelicals believe in the spiritual life; legalists define spirituality as reading the Bible daily, praying regularly, going to church every time the door is open, witnessing to everybody you meet, and maintaining the rules that define an evangelical spirituality.

Doctrinal legalism emerged in the struggle with liberalism in the first part of the twentieth century. The fundamentalist movement sought to protect historic Christianity through inerrancy, propositional theology, evidential apologetics, and the concept of a pure church. This resulted in a us/them mentality. By the time the battle with liberalism ended (because of the culture shift), the evangelical legalism created out of that situation had become sacrosanct, so that any questioning of it, even in the face of new issues and new battle fronts, was regarded as an unfaithfulness to truth.

This attitude created another legalism. What had been added to the faith as a way of protecting it now became the faith. Because legalists are passionate about their dos and don'ts and to the specific interpretations they add to the faith, they fight with people who don't agree with their ethos, their method, or the particular spin they give to biblical authority, theology, the church, behavior, or spirituality.

A Critique of Legalism

The problem with legalistic mentality is that it adds to the gospel and in some sense denigrates the Good News. It goes beyond biblical faith and practice to require adherence to systems of behavior and belief that go beyond the story of God and the freedom to live in the new life modeled by Jesus. These added features of the faith are usually systems of control that proceed from some historical movement when a group was forced to express its faith or lifestyle in a particular way at a particular time over against a movement that was threatening them. This is what happened to Christians on the American frontier. In order to distinguish themselves from the sinners, they developed their list of dos and don'ts as the sign of true spirituality. What may have been a genuine expression for the originators became a means of control in the next generation.

In the end legalism subverts the gospel. God's grace, which is the antidote to legalism, becomes so lost in the legalistic system that when grace is presented to those who are legalistic, grace is often rejected as untrue. Recently, for example, I spoke to a pastor who tried to bring his congregation out of legalism and into a fresh hearing of God's *freeing grace* by teaching God's story, only to be dismissed from his church and charged with teaching heresy. In this instance truth had been turned on its head and exchanged for the false security of legalism.

For a legalist, spirituality is tantamount to saying, "I think the right way, live the right way, associate with the right people, read my Bible, pray, go to church, and avoid worldly ways; therefore I am spiritual." This person might be a "good" person, live a straight and disciplined life, be a good friend and neighbor, and support the church and its ministries. But legalism is not true Christian spirituality, for in the end it looks to *self* to achieve a condition of spirituality by adhering to a predetermined set of rules and fixed doctrinal interpretations. It goes beyond what the Bible teaches and what the common tradition embraces.

Legalistic spirituality is not directly situated in God's story of creation, incarnation, and re-creation. Legalistic spirituality is situated in derivative rules and doctrines determined by a particular cultural expression of the faith. This sort of spirituality, instead of contemplating the mystery of God's vision and participating in the life purposed by God, measures a person's spiritual state by the secondary rules and doctrines that ask: "Are you keeping the rules?" "Are you adhering to the doctrinal particulars espoused by this particular church?" Legalism focuses on the self and how well the self adheres to the group expectations.

INTELLECTUAL SPIRITUALITY

Another kind of evangelical spirituality is the quest to *know* God. I encountered this emphasis in my seminary training. Like most seminarians, I did not know much about the Christian faith. In the early months of my seminary training, a concerned brother took me aside and said, "Bob, you have a great deal of zeal and passion for God, but you lack knowledge." He was right! So I took to my seminary studies like a fish to water. I loved all my courses and was determined that I was going to attain knowledge.

Knowing God in Systems of Theological Thought

I especially embraced the study of Calvin and in a short time became an "expert" on Calvin—or so I thought. I wanted to *know* God. I devoured the system of thought taught by Calvin. I studied the decrees of God and embraced supralapsarianism; I studied predestination and affirmed double predestination; I studied the nature of man and confessed belief in total depravity; I studied election and decided the case in favor of unconditional election; I studied God's grace and confirmed it as irresistible; I examined the atonement and became convinced that it was limited to the elect; and I studied perseverance and argued that all the elect would persevere until the end.

I had the Calvinist system down so cold that when I first started to teach I invited people who disagreed with my positions to come into my course and debate. I went so far with my Calvinism that I defended Calvin for burning Servetus at the stake for not believing in the Trinity. I thought my advanced knowledge made me more spiritual than those who did not "know" the full system of truth.

I am not the only one who has been influenced by an intellectual spirituality. Pat Allison writes the story of her husband, John, whom she describes as a "true blue conservative, influential type minister for 40 years." "One day," she writes, "while shaving he looked in the bathroom mirror and heard 'You're a phoney.' At first he disregarded this disclosure but as time went on he struggled constantly with these words finally recognizing 'I have prided myself in my excellent doctrine all these years.' Excellent doctrine," Pat writes, "had become an idol." For the next five years John rested and "came to know Jesus as he had never known him before."⁴

The Origins of Intellectual Spirituality

The origin of the modern notion of an intellectual spirituality as knowledge is rooted, as we have seen, in the Enlightenment emphasis on reason and science. Reason always has played an important role in

Christian thought, and it should. But the particular way evangelicals have used reason and science to affirm the spirituality of knowing is found in the seventeenth-century method of Descartes, whose vision of truth is caught in the statement he made famous: "I think, therefore I am." Christian intellectuals turned Descartes's dictum into something like, "I think about the knowledge of God, therefore I know God." Spiritual thinking became an intellectual spirituality.

For Descartes, knowledge was rooted in fact. And the way to get to fact was the scientific method of observation, analysis, and systematization. Evangelicals translated the method of Descartes into their study of Scripture and elevated knowledge to the level of participating in God. Whoever attained the greatest insight was the most intellectually spiritual. The method went something like this: The Bible is the mind of God revealed. God has created us in his image. Intellect, which distinguishes us from everything else God has made, is the highest aspect of our likeness to God. Therefore, if we wish to know God we must use our mind in the study of God's mind. God's mind and the human mind meet in the pages of Scripture.

In the pattern of Enlightenment methodology, evangelical scholars adopted the historical, grammatical, theological method of Scripture study. Scholars who had attained the knowledge of God told their students, "You have before you the tools to open up the Scripture and understand the mind of God." In evangelical circles this methodology led to a proof-oriented Christianity. The faith was to be regarded as true because it had been tested and proven to be true through the Enlightenment method of gaining facts in history and science. Consequently, Christianity became a fact to be believed, a truth upon which one could stake his or her life. The resurrection, for example, became an article of faith based on fact, diminishing the ancient emphasis that we are to live a new life through contemplation and participation in the resurrection of Christ. Adherence to the fact became more important than living into the resurrection of Jesus.

Unfortunately, the same Enlightenment methodology was used by the liberals. They went to Scripture and saw stories that reason and science could not prove. How could you prove that God and man were united in the womb of the Virgin Mary? How could you prove that Jesus's death was an atonement for sin? How could you prove that Jesus rose from the dead? For liberals, these mysteries of the faith, subjected to the Enlightenment method of reason and science, could no longer pass the test of facts. So the liberals had to find a new language for these mysteries. Such mysteries were, they said, myths. Rather than throw Christianity away, they argued that the myths must be demythologized; we must, they said, "get behind the myth to discover the truth." And what they found was love. Love alone is truth, and the myths, subjected to reason and science, took us to the one indisputable

fact of the Christian faith: Jesus's message in a nutshell is "Love God and love your neighbor."

Factualism brought us to two spiritualities. The spirituality of "I know the truth of the mind of God, and here it is in these facts," and "There is only one discernable and trustworthy truth derived from the demythologized Jesus—love."

For me, being an evangelical in the 1950s meant that I embraced the intellectual spirituality of believing and arguing for the facts. It engendered a spirit of pride. I knew the facts about God, I thought, and to know the facts is to know God. *I cannot associate with those liberals who are wrong, I thought. And then there is all that Catholic witchcraft and Orthodox voodoo. What a shame that all those people think of themselves as Christian when they live in the darkness of tradition and falsehood. If only they could see things the true way—my way. If only they could have the true knowledge that we evangelicals have. We should pray for them and witness to them so they can see the light and come our way.*

This problem of pride and separation caused by a distorted view of spirituality through knowledge is certainly not a problem peculiar to the evangelical community. For example, early in my teaching career I was asked to teach a course on Protestant theology in a Catholic seminary. On the day of the first class I shared the typical evangelical attitude toward Catholics, none of which was very positive. When I was finished, they told me their stories of growing up with a negative view toward all Protestants, fearing that they were the heretics. I have had a similar experience talking with my Orthodox friends as well.

Knowledge is very important. As Christians we should think and study Scripture, the creeds, and the thoughts of great Christian thinkers. But knowledge in and of itself is not to be equated with the spiritual life. The problem with a so-called intellectual spirituality is that it is often a reflection of modern culture and not a true Christian spirituality.

This intellectualism spawned the discipline of apologetics—the attempt to defend Christianity with reason, science, philosophy, and other disciplines. In time conservative apologetic Christianity elevated an intellectually defensible Christianity to a state of supremacy. A person who can argue for the faith on the basics of evidence and can use logic to explain the Trinity or the doctrine of inerrancy or who can use science to prove creation or an "early earth" theory or who can argue from Scripture to prove predestination or its opposite, the freedom of the will, may feel himself or herself to be spiritually superior.

While knowledge is an important aspect of the Christian faith, it is not to be confused with the spirituality of our mystical union with God. Often the lust to embrace higher knowledge forms within us attitudes that are the opposite of Christian spirituality. Assuming that we have the "true system

of knowledge," we may become divisive, judgmental, haughty, contentious, argumentative, arrogant, defensive, and proud. These are the attitudes the Scripture warns against. In my experience these attitudes show up in ecclesiastical separationism, which is usually based on the assumption that "I know the truth, and you don't, so I cannot have fellowship with you."

In the end an intellectual spirituality is situated, not in God's story, but in *my* knowledge about God's story, which is inherently limited. Eventually I came to the realization that my own knowledge was not a measure of my spirituality. I really didn't know God. I knew about God insofar as one system taught. But I fear it was knowledge for the sake of knowledge, knowledge that puffs up, knowledge that divides. Like other approaches to spirituality, this quest to know God through the mind was just another *self-focused spirituality*. My spirituality was rooted in *my* faith, *my* comprehension of a system of thought.

The contemplation of God, of his person, creation, incarnation, and re-creation of the world, is a different kind of knowledge. It is a contemplation on the *mysteries*, namely, the mystery of God creating, the mystery of God incarnate, the mystery of the cross and empty tomb, the mystery of God's presence in the church, and the mystery of Christ's return to claim his lordship over creation. The contemplation of these mysteries moves us to live into these mysteries, participating in God's life for the world.

EXPERIENTIAL SPIRITUALITY

Another kind of spirituality that has taken a foothold within various groups of evangelical Christians is the search for a defining spiritual experience. *Feeling* God has had a long and lively history within evangelicalism. It is presented as another way of *knowing* God. It is the opposite of knowing God through facts; it is a spirituality that claims God is known through intuition and emotion. Experience as the key to the spiritual life is often found in revivalism and among the Pentecostal, the holiness, and the charismatic movements.

The Origins of Experiential Spirituality

In the last chapter I discussed the origins of experiential spirituality in the romantic movement. Romanticism argued for knowledge based on intuition and feeling. Most of the romantics like Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Keats were pantheists. For them the universal mind was within creation. As we open ourselves to nature and to the impulses of the universal divine, we gain knowledge through feeling God. Friedrich Schleiermacher (d. 1834), the theologian of the romantic movement,

taught that God was an "intuition of the universe" experienced in the unconsciousness of oneness achieved through the Spirit of utter dependence. Spirituality was a letting go in utter dependence upon the universe, a feeling of oneness with everything. Schleiermacher has been called the "father of modern theology" because of the unity he espoused between God and creation. One can see how close this view may be to a New Age spirituality that is based on oneness.

Evangelicals do not espouse this kind of feeling. Instead, the evangelical spirituality of experience is most clearly articulated in the *born-again* experience of John Wesley. No one should deny the validity of Wesley's experience. His life, ministry, and legacy that proceeded from that experience has resulted in an enormous impact on British and American evangelicalism and the subsequent growth of evangelicalism around the world.

But as I have pointed out, Wesley's experience was universalized into the defining mark of true spirituality. The goal of evangelism following Wesley's experience became that of bringing a person to the experience of *feeling* forgiven. A ritual known as the "invitation" was developed to facilitate this experience. At the end of the service the invitation is given to receive Christ as personal Lord and Savior. As the congregation sings "Just as I Am," the evangelist calls on people to "raise your hand" and "come forward," as at a Billy Graham crusade. Counselors are stationed to lead the new converts through several Scriptures and assure them of their salvation. They are admonished then to "read your Bible, pray, go to church, and tell others about Jesus."

My father was a pastor in this tradition. Every spring the yearly revivalist came to the church to preach and bring people to the experience of salvation. Just following World War II, in the year that I was fifteen, during the revivalist's invitation my dad came to me, grabbed me by the arm, looked into my eyes, and said, "Robert, are you sure?" I remember how disturbed I was by his question. I had been baptized at twelve and found baptism to be a highly meaningful expression of God's relationship to me. Why, I wondered, would my dad speak doubt into my heart by making a revival experience more important than my baptism?

Certainly many people have been resoundingly converted at an invitation ritual. But to make this experience a criterion for spirituality is a huge mistake. It elevates *experience* as the apologetic for faith. For example, I remember hearing of a mother who wrote to her daughter and said, "I'm putting the birth dates of your children in my Bible. But I don't know the dates of their second birth. Would you please send them to me so I can put them in my Bible." Besides being controlling, this gesture says: "I can know your kids are saved when I can affirm the date of each one's experience of repentance and forgiveness."

In this approach to spirituality the criterion for being a spiritual person

is located in a particular experience that one must have at a particular time and place. Spirituality is situated in the experience. A person may then say, "I am spiritual because I raised my hand, walked forward, and asked Jesus into my heart." I do not want to deny the value of this experience. Certainly many people have had their lives completely changed through an experience of the conviction of sin and turning to God in a life-changing experience. For many this is a datable experience, a fond memory of a moment in which their life was altered forever.

What is questionable about the conversion is not the experience itself but situating spirituality in the experience. To suggest "I am a spiritual person because I *felt* the forgiveness of God in a particular experience" places confidence in my experience rather than in God's embrace of me on the hard wood of the cross. Consequently the spirituality of someone not having the experience is suspect and not confirmed until the person is able to testify to the facts of when and where the experience took place and witness to the changed life that resulted from it. In the end this kind of spirituality tends to center on the self, dwelling on the experience itself for the certainty of salvation and spirituality. Of this form of spirituality, Carol McDaniel rightly observes, "If we don't 'feel' something then we aren't being spiritual enough."⁵

Our Personal Relationship with Jesus

The notion of an experiential spirituality has several additional manifestations. A common expression is "Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?" Usually when this question is asked we assume the person asking the question has a personal relationship with God and knows what that looks like! Merrill Smoak's experience with this attitude, like mine, is concerned about this kind of question. He writes, "My evangelical, Baptist heritage has pushed me to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Personal quiet times, personal Bible studies, and discipleship programs were the formula to a personal relationship with Jesus and true spirituality. This approach has basically led to a 'works' mentality and an individual approach to Christianity"⁶ as opposed to the ancient emphasis on union with God accomplished by the incarnate Word in his death and resurrection given to us as a gift.

When someone asks me the question, "Do you have a personal relationship with God?" I always answer, "You're asking the wrong question. What is important here is not that I in and of myself achieve or create a personal relationship with God, but that God has a personal relationship with me through Jesus Christ, which I affirm and nourish."

My student Marie Wonders understands why this question of a personal relationship with God must be turned on its head. Most everyone, she

points out, talks about spirituality as “doing things to become a spiritual person.” But Christian spirituality is “incarnational.” “Christian spirituality,” she writes, is “about receiving from God, rather than doing something for God. This is so countercultural!” She goes on to say, “Every time I hear that the Christian life is about receiving from God I am so excited to be a Christian, but I am also mindful that I often forget this and think the Christian faith is about things that I do for God. But if I forget that the Christian life is receiving from God, I am not understanding what makes the Christian religion different from all other religions out there.”⁷⁷

Marie has it right. Experience is not what *I feel or do* toward God but a reception of what God has done for me and for the whole world. But more about that in part 2.

Critique

My critique then of the three prominent evangelical forms of spirituality is simply this: *They all situate spirituality in the self.* “I keep the rules; I know God in a system of thought; I had a born-again experience.” In contrast, historic spirituality situates spirituality in the story of the Triune God, who creates, became incarnate, took my humanity up into his, entered the suffering of the cross, and rose from the grave. God drew me up into himself and did for me what I could not do—*He himself restored my union with himself.* Now, having been baptized into this great mystery, I contemplate God’s work for me and the whole world, and I participate in God’s purposes for the world revealed in Jesus Christ. Spirituality is a *gift*. The spiritual life is the *surrendered life*.

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SPIRITUAL TRENDS DISLOCATED FROM GOD’S STORY

Toward the end of the twentieth century and now in the twenty-first century new shifts in spirituality have emerged. These shifts are related to the spirituality of the twentieth century in that they are either the opposite or they carry the twentieth-century spiritual tradition one step further. In the first category there are some who reject legalism in favor of a movement called *antinomianism*. Then there are those who reject intellectual spirituality in favor of an anti-intellectual spirituality, some going so far as to have what they consider to be a romance with God. These approaches to spirituality along with the adaptation of the church to the consumer mentality constitutes the new spiritualities emerging currently. Like the spiritualities of the earlier part of the twentieth century, these are also dislocated from God’s story and situated in the self.

Legalism Exchanged for an Antinomianism Spirituality

One of the new spiritualities is the spirit of antinomianism. (*Anti* = against; *nomianism* = law. An antinomist is against all the rules.) Unfortunately, while my generation was brought up to keep the rules as a way of “knowing you are spiritual,” the pendulum for some seems to have swung the other way. The rules against dancing, drinking, movies, smoking, and playing cards that once prevailed among evangelicals have been jettisoned for the sense of freedom in Christ. The worst form of this so-called spirituality that wrongly interprets Paul is “I’m free; I can do just about anything I want to do.”

Recent surveys among teenage Christians seem to suggest that their lives are not very different from those of non-Christians. Dale Buss notes that “ninety-one percent of born-again teenagers surveyed a few years ago proclaimed that there is no such thing as absolute truth.” Buss points out that teens are “following the moral breakdown of the broader American culture.” “This Zeitgeist,” he writes, “largely reflects a pseudo-faith that is fed by a steady diet of pop-culture feints, from the allegorical ‘Lord of the Rings’ movies to the t-shirt that recently adorned Pamela Anderson saying, ‘Jesus is my homeboy.’”⁸ What is needed is a recovery of the Pauline understanding of freedom. It is a freedom *from* legalism and a freedom *to live in Christ* and his purposes for humanity, not a freedom to do whatever I please.

I remember coming into the Pauline understanding of freedom in Christ, which is not licentiousness, in a graduate class where Romans 7 and 8 were being discussed. When the lecturer clarified Paul’s meaning, it set me free. I saw my new freedom as a freedom from the need to keep the law as a way of assuring my eternal union with God in Christ. That insight set me free from the legalistic rules and ethos of the evangelical subculture. But I did not see the freedom from the law as a license to sin. Instead I saw my freedom as the freedom to live *in Christ*, who fulfilled the law in his perfect life and left me an example to follow.

Romans 7 is in a real sense an autobiographical account of Paul’s struggle with the law. He writes of his own conflict saying, “I knew what I should do, but I couldn’t keep the demands of the law and I couldn’t get free of its condemnation. I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out” (Rom. 7:18, author’s translation). The demand of the law was an enormous source of frustration for Paul. He never found deliverance through the law by trying to keep it. The more he tried to keep the law, the more he discovered himself to be “a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members” (Rom. 7:23). But Christ was found to be the end of the law. So freeing was this experience for Paul that he cried out, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (meaning the

condemning power of the law). "Thanks be to God," he shouts, "through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:24-25).

There is something very freeing about this Pauline insight. The lecturer was describing the role of the law. "The law condemns us because we cannot keep its demands," he said, "and then it brings us to Christ where we hear the Good News." This is Paul's message. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:1-2). I am sure I had heard that message before the Lutheran lecturer explained it, but it now finally registered. "I'm free," I said to myself. "I'm free not to sin. And I'm free to live in the Spirit." This is what it means to participate in the life of God into which we have been baptized.

I should have known this truth, but I didn't, at least not clearly. Legalism had been such a part of my Christian experience that, like many others, I had become numb to grace. All I heard was "Do this; make an effort at that; achieve here." Legalistic spirituality was terrorizing me, making demands on me that I could not achieve. But my answer to legalism was not in an antinomian attitude of "I'm free to do whatever I want to do." Antinomianism situates freedom in the self, not in Christ, the central person of God's story. Spirituality grounded in Christ is simple and profound. It is simple because anyone can get it; it is profound because it has to do with all our living, all our values, all our relationships, all our work, all our leisure, all our worship, in fact, everything in life. It is a spirituality going deep, to the roots of our very being—living in God's pattern of death and resurrection 24/7.

Intellectual Spirituality Exchanged for an Anti-Intellectual Spirituality

The shift into postmodern culture is a shift from objective knowledge to subjectivity, to relativism, and to mystery. The new fashionable thing is to say phrases like, "I don't know. That is very complex. It is buried in mysticism." The mystery at work in the universe is the mystery of God creating, becoming incarnate, and re-creating. This Christian mystery and fashionable cultural mystery, however, are two different realities. The Christian who unthinkingly refers everything to mystery may be embracing cultural mystery, which is not at all the mystery of true Christian spirituality. Paul writes of the "mystery of Christ" that "has now been revealed" (Eph. 3:4-5). God's mystery in Christ can be freely explored, talked about, contemplated, and participated in.

Recently I was speaking at a conference designed to help younger people with the journey from modernity to postmodernity. During the question and answer time a person raised this question: "I have been

told that we no longer know anything, that everything is mystery and ambiguity, but you seem to suggest there are some things that we do know. How do we know these things?"

I answered, "It is not that we do not know anything anymore. It is not like all that we have held to be true is simply up for grabs. Truth has not changed. It is our way of knowing that has changed and what we are willing to bleed and die for."

"The Christian way of knowing," I continued, "is reflection on Scripture within community." We in Christ belong to a community of faith connected with Israel that goes all the way back to the beginning of things. This community has been reflecting on what it perceives to be God's actions in history and on God's self-revelation in Scripture for centuries. Out of this reflection comes the *first order* truths that all Christians embrace—mainly the story of the Triune God, creation, fall, incarnation, death, resurrection, and re-creation of all things at the end of history. It is the *second order* systems that people now question as truth. These systems of theology (both conservative and liberal), rooted in the Enlightenment, attempted to answer all questions with certainty, leaving no room for ambiguity or mystery. Because these modern systems are now in question, we are able to get behind them to the narrative of faith from which they sprang. We do have truth. It is the story of God handed down in Scripture, in the church, and in its ministry of worship.

The antidote to an intellectual spirituality is not an anti-intellectual spirituality but a spirituality rooted in God's story that stands on its own. What I mean by this is that God's story is a vision of reality that does not need to be supported by reason, science, or any other discipline. Instead of interpreting God's story through the academic disciplines, God's story is the vision of reality through which the world, its history, and all the structures of existence are to be interpreted. So an anti-intellectual spirituality is as much rooted in the self as an intellectual spirituality. When we stand within God's story and interpret all of life, we see life through God's vision. And it is an intelligent vision that speaks the truth about life.⁹

Experiential Christianity Shifts into Narcissism

The third problem appearing now at the beginning of the twenty-first century is the shift toward narcissism. In his book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch points to the antihistorical attitude that is so prevalent today as a major cause of narcissism. He writes, "The devaluation of the past has become one of the most important symptoms of the cultural crisis to which this book addresses itself, drawing on historical experience to explain what is wrong with our present arrangements."¹⁰

The same devaluation of the past can be said of the church's current

spirituality. The experiential message of pietism and revivalism, even in its early twentieth-century form, was more grounded in God's story than it appears to be in our current narcissistic culture. Evangelism's focus on God's story taking experiential root in our lives is in itself not narcissistic. It only becomes narcissistic when one becomes fascinated with his or her own journey and gives priority to self-reflection. Our contemplative wonder and awe is not to focus on the spiritual journey of the self but on the journey of God who creates and became incarnate in his own creation to re-create. And our participation in the spiritual life is not a continuous search for a transcendent experience but the transfiguration of this life through a life lived in the continual pattern of baptism—dying to sin and rising to the life of the Spirit.

Worship Narcissism

One place where a narcissistic preoccupation with the self is evident currently is in worship. The church's emphasis upon worship fits the *experience culture* in which we live today, and the expectations of the worship experience seem to be misplaced. I am not sure that anyone has defined the expected experience one should have in order to claim a spirituality formed by worship. But the current popular phrases surrounding the worship experience seem oriented around personal perception. "Did you like the worship?" But this may mean, "Did you like the sound?" "Did you like our performance?" "Did you like the preaching?" These questions have more to do with style and preference than the transformation of thought and action. Some have suggested turning the words toward God and asking, "Did God like our worship? Was God pleased with what we did today?" These questions, however, equally misunderstand the purpose of worship. In worship we proclaim and enact God's story of the world. Therefore, the more appropriate experiential question is "Did God's story, which was proclaimed and enacted today, make a transformative impact on your life?" Or, "How has the weekly rehearsal of the meaning of human life that is rooted in God's story changed the way you treat your family, your neighbors, the people with whom you work?"

Again, experience in worship is not *my immediate pleasure* or even *my immediate response*. The focus of experience is not on *my* experience of God but on how God as the subject of worship forms me through word and sacrament and thereby changes my life. I have been in one too many worship services where the focus was *cheerleading for Jesus*. I have done one too many hurrahs for Jesus because somebody made me feel guilty about cheering for a football team. Football cheering is not transferable to worship. Worshipers are not a cheering section for God. The problem with this kind of worship is not only that it is an accom-

modation to culture but that it is also a severe example of self-situated spirituality, especially when it emphasizes a romantic relationship with God through experiential mysticism.

Romantic Relationship with God

A romantic relationship to God is found frequently in contemporary music, poetry, and personal diaries. Certainly there is a valid place for feelings in our relationship to God, for God made us as emotional beings, just as there is a valid place for the use of reason because God made us with intelligence. But just as reason as "intellectual facts before which we bow" is not the spiritual use of reason, so also feeling as "a romantic relationship with God" is not the true embrace of spiritual feeling.

God is not my boyfriend or girlfriend with whom I sustain a romantic relationship. Yes, we are to love God, to have a relationship with God, but much of the current talk about "falling in love with Jesus" and the language that speaks of our relationship with God using sexual innuendo is derived from our current MTV culture that is obsessed with sexuality.

The true love of God and the true experience of God are not found in the languages of experience I have referred to above but in the act of contemplating God and of participating in God, which springs forth from our union with God in Christ. We do not contemplate our own experience of God or the romantic feelings we may experience. We contemplate the wonder, the marvel, the mystery, the glory of God creating and becoming incarnate to re-create the whole world and bring it back to himself. Worship is not measured by the depth of my feelings but the deep wonder of the God whose story is so marvelous that it does in fact create feelings of love and gratitude.

Spiritual Consumerism: McSpirituality

Another problem appearing in the late twentieth century that is rather new is the accommodation of the church to a kind of spiritual consumerism. Evangelical Pastor Mike Lueken comments on a "contemporary 'McSpirituality' that resembles very little the real deal." He feels that contemporary culture has shaped our view of spirituality into "our own image." In our consumeristic world, we have "reduced spirituality to attending a few religious classes, and having a few heart warming experiences." He goes on to say, "Those of us who pastor churches, particularly larger ones, have been swept up in the adrenaline rush of having more people coming to our church, attending our classes, buying our tapes and feeling good about our church—spirituality suffocates in this arid setting—but our pastoral ambition is ignited by these promising signs—our own un-

formedness and need for real spirituality is buried under the temporary thrill of a church that is making it . . . in quieter moments, when the noise and chaos of the church carnival stops, we hear different voices asking annoying questions like—maybe God isn't in this at all? Maybe we are manufacturing this growth—are people really changing?" Lueken asks a very hard question that articulates what many other evangelicals feel: "Have we substituted real spirituality with these various silly imitations and at the end of the day while we have many more people giddy about our church, not many of them are actually more like Jesus?"¹¹

Current Influences

I know I have painted a rather bleak picture of spirituality among evangelicals. I have done this to accent the problem of situating spirituality in the self.

I would be remiss, however, if I did not mention the worldwide impact on evangelical spirituality expressed in the recent works of Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, and Eugene Peterson. These three authors, along with many whom they have educated and countless others whom they have influenced, have already initiated a return to spirituality arising from God's story, culminating in Jesus Christ, and articulated by the ancient fathers of the church.

Richard Foster, who treats the many historic models of spirituality in *Streams of Living Water*, confesses, "No one models these dimensions of the spiritual life more fully than Jesus Christ. If we want to see this river of life in its most complete form, it is to Jesus we must turn."¹² Dallas Willard writes similarly, "God's desire for us is that we should live in him. He sends among us the way to himself that shows what, in his heart of hearts, God is really like—indeed, what *reality* is really like."¹³ Likewise, Eugene Peterson, translator of the well-known Bible paraphrase *The Message*, comments, "Spiritual theology is the attention we give to lived theology—prayed and lived, for if it is not prayed sooner or later it will not be lived from the inside out and in continuity with the Lord of life."¹⁴ So following the spiritual disciplines, which has been recovered by thousands today, is not a me-centered attempt to grow my own spirituality from within me but an entrance into "Christ's character and power." The Spirit of the disciplines, then, is "nothing but the love of Jesus."¹⁵

CONCLUSION

I conclude this chapter on dislocated spiritualities by making a distinction between first-order spirituality and the second-order spirituali-

ties. I explain this by drawing on a conversation I had with one of my students.

This student comes from a background of "keeping the rules" and was highly confused by the freedom exercised by several other students who gathered to discuss worship issues while drinking beer. "I don't get it," he said. "I am offended by it. Where I come from this matter of drinking is a mark of worldliness, a sure sign of not being right with God."

I answered him by drawing on a napkin a central circle and four other circles surrounding it. In the central circle I placed a cross and said, "This is the symbol of Jesus Christ. We both agree that Jesus is the center for the Christian faith." Then, I wrote four words, one in each of the four surrounding circles: *belief*, *belonging*, *behavior*, and *experience*. I told him there is a first order of conviction in each of these areas. We *believe*, for example, that Jesus is the Son of God; we *belong* to the church, which is his body; we *behave* according to the guidelines set forth in Scripture; and we affirm the primary *experience* of the spiritual life to be in union with God. All Christians of every persuasion have in common the first-order matters of belief, belonging, behavior, and experience. These are essential to the Christian faith and to the spiritual life of being in union with God.

I then drew another set of four circles. "Out there," I said "are second-order applications." These are derivative and not binding on all Christians. In *belief* it may be affirming a particular system of faith such as that of John Calvin, Martin Luther, Menno Simons, or John Wesley; in *belonging* it may mean belonging to the Catholic, Orthodox, or one of the Protestant denominations or fellowships; in *behavior*, a second order may mean no drinking, or a group may have a rule such as no driving SUVs; in *experience* it may be the insistence on a born-again experience or a "second blessing."

"What I am suggesting," I continued, "is that you need to make a distinction between what is central to the faith, what is first order, and what is second order. What is first order is common to all Christians; what is second order defines a particular Christian subculture. If you choose not to drink (keeping in mind the admonitions against drunkenness) or not to drive an SUV, that is a personal choice of discipline in the second order of behavior. You have no right to judge those who drink moderately or drive an SUV, and they have no right to judge you for choosing this particular discipline.

"In sum," I said, "in second-order matters there are many differences on how belief is to be systematized, how one expresses belonging to the community of Christ, how one behaves in matters not directly addressed in Scripture, or how one expresses experience. So in these matters we

are to exercise freedom, but in love and respect to others who exercise freedom in ways different than we do.”

The point, of course, is that the spiritual life is not determined by second-order commitments. Our spirituality is located not in self but in Jesus Christ. The spiritual life is contemplation of God’s story and participation in the life of God in the life of the world. When second-order convictions are made primary, they confuse the true spiritual life. If we are to understand the spiritual life and talk convincingly to others, this distinction must be made.

What is absolutely central to the spiritual life is Jesus Christ. He alone establishes our spiritual life by the Spirit to the Triune God. First-order convictions of the spiritual life include the experience of union, the belonging to the church, Christ’s body, living the Christian ethic, and

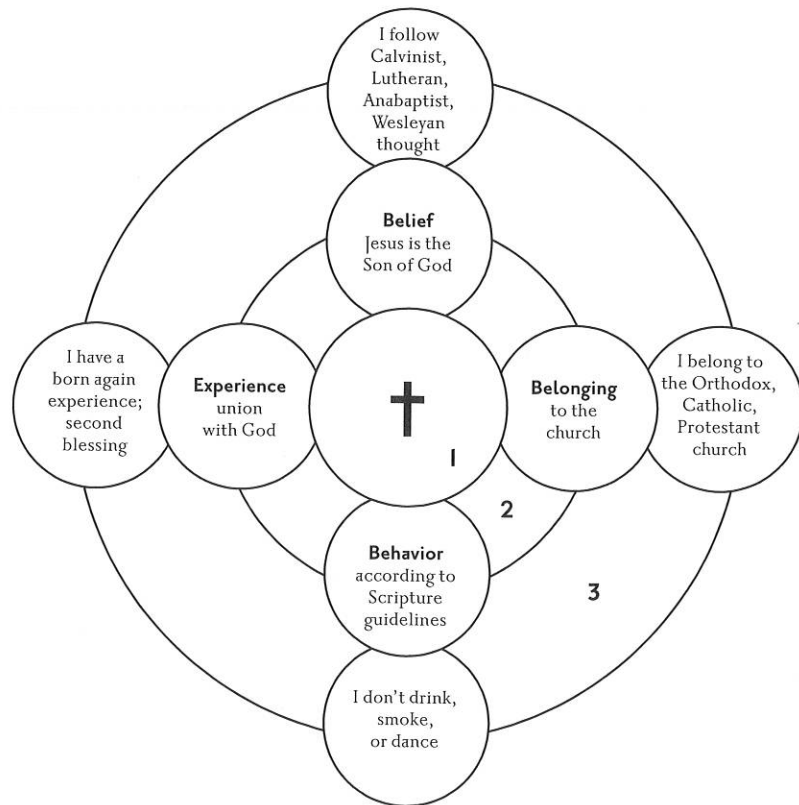


Diagram of circles—first and second order of things. 1. The central truth of the Christian faith is the person and work of Jesus Christ communicated through the biblical narrative. 2. The first order of truths are the common convictions of the church held always, everywhere, and by all Christians. 3. The second order interpretations pertain to this or that particular group.

affirming the beliefs commonly held by all Christians. All Christians are joined together in the first-order convictions.

Second-order convictions distinguish Christians from one another and include insistence on such things as having a particular experience, belonging to a particular denomination, following a set of rules, or believing in a specific system of thought. When we make second-order truths primary, the importance of first-order truth recedes into the background, and sometimes it even becomes lost. My contention is that the dislocated spiritualities discussed in this chapter are second-order convictions that are demanded by evangelicals, which in fact, distance us from the source of spirituality in God’s story of Jesus and cause us to judge our spiritual state by second-order convictions, creating a dislocation from God’s story and the first-order convictions derived from the story of God.

The consequence of this dislocation is not only a false privatization of spirituality but in the end the loss of God’s story in a culture quickly sliding into pagan debauchery. The world, no longer inhabited by the story of God, is vulnerable to be shaped by another story. And this is exactly where we are in Western culture. We live in the presence of new stories that have set out to narrate the world, mainly New Age religion and the religions of the East. A privatized spirituality, wrenched from the story of God, will have little effect in our politically incorrect world now dominated by these new spiritualities. We turn to this subject in the next chapter.

A SUMMARY FOR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

Summary

Spiritualities dislocated from God’s story

Spiritual legalism

Intellectual spirituality

Experiential spirituality

Antinomian spirituality

Narcissistic spirituality

Spiritual consumerism

Reflection

Scientific theology drives a wedge between theology and practice. Spirituality is set free from the story and becomes what we make it to be.

Measuring our spirituality by adherence to secondary ethical dos and don’ts and conformity to secondary doctrinal formations.

Measuring spirituality by knowledge acquired about God through the systems of scientific theology.

Measuring spirituality by the intensity of feelings, the conversion experience, or other ecstatic experiences such as tongues, dreams, or the romancing of God.

Asserting one’s freedom from all law. Testing God’s grace.

The focus on self in worship and spiritual experience. Making God the object of our affection.

The selling and purchasing of Jesus through gimmicks and techniques.