



# A FRESH LOOK AT CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

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While in the USA last year I bought a book called, *“Thirsty for God – A Brief History of Christian Spirituality.”*<sup>1</sup> This

compelling title captures the essence of what the modern Christian spirituality movement is about – an earnest search by ardent souls for God himself.

This of course is not just a modern phenomenon. A thirst to know God, theologians tell us, is inherent in human hearts. It flows from being made in his image and designed for friendship with him. Nineteenth century Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck spoke of God as “man’s highest good,” that is, as the One in whom we find the fulfilment of all our created longings. Augustine of Hippo had expressed the same idea centuries before when he said that God had made us for himself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him.

As universal as the quest for fellowship with God is there are times in history when it becomes an absorbing concern, especially within the Christian church. The latter decades of the twentieth century seem to have been such a time. From the 1980’s to the present there has been an explosion of interest in spirituality within all branches of the church. It is not claiming too much to say that spirituality is the “in thing” in the church today.

## CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY TODAY

Current interest in spirituality – which we can think of in terms of experiencing God deeply – shows itself in many ways.

### Popular Interest

Gary Moon and David Benner describe an aspect of the present scene in the preface of their book *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls* when they write,

Clergy, Christian educators, youth ministry specialists, counsellors (both mental health and pastoral) and large numbers of Christians without any formal ministry involvement in soul care are all reading books on spiritual direction and attending conferences and retreats on spiritual formation. In large sectors of the church, few would have ever heard of the concepts of spiritual formation or direction until recently. Yet the seminaries and colleges of many of these traditions are now busy refashioning departments of Christian education

into programs in spiritual formation, while clergy and laity alike seek opportunities to learn about spiritual direction.<sup>2</sup>

Others see the multiplication of conferences, retreats on spirituality, and the emergence of scholarly journals as evidence that what was once described as the “neglected step-child of the Christian movement”<sup>3</sup> has indeed been rediscovered. J.I. Packer commented in 1989,

Today it [Christian spirituality] is a field of specialist academic interest, with its own journals, books, editions of key texts, and professional conferences. It is the focus of ecumenical pastoral and devotional interest at lay level, and hence the retreats, retreat centres, schools of prayer and writings on the inner life that abound at the present time. All branches of the church are involved, and a great deal of wisdom is currently breaking surface. These may be lean days for some other of the church’s endeavors but they are good days for spirituality.<sup>4</sup>

### Proper Concerns

For all of its popularity this new movement raises concerns in the minds of some. For one thing, the loose way in which the term “spirituality” is used disturbs people like D.A. Carson. While applauding revived interest in spirituality where it represents “a self-conscious rebellion against the profound sense of unreality that afflicts many churches,” he is nevertheless “frightened” that spirituality

has become such an ill-defined, amorphous entity that it covers all kinds of phenomena that an earlier generation of Christians, more given to robust thought than is the present generation, would have dismissed as error, or even as ‘paganism’ or ‘heathenism.’<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, and related to this, spirituality within this new movement expresses itself in a wide variety of forms. The core concern to relate to God authentically shows itself in fresh appreciation of nature, music, and art, in discovery and actualization of the true self, in quiet contemplative retreats for prayer, in various techniques claiming to enhance higher consciousness, and even in physical routines and meditation mantras akin to Eastern religions.

Common to all of these manifestations – and this is the third characteristic of modern spirituality – is the absence of doctrinal depth and precision. Commenting on this Packer observed that the current framework in ecumenical spirituality studies

seems to me to need more biblical and theological control; too often the emphasis remains egocentric, and the inward journey with its rhythm of time and place and its alternations of desert and oasis, feast and fast, solitude and fellowship, is expounded from the experience of saints, in whatever pattern of significance impresses the expositor, without any theological assessment being directly made. Spirituality books are written that contain no application of Scripture, just as theological tomes are written that contain no application of truth to life.<sup>6</sup>

Such is the concern over this divorce between theology and spirituality that two notable institutions, Beeson Divinity School (Birmingham, Alabama, USA) and Wycliffe Hall (Oxford University, England) jointly sponsored a conference in 2003 entitled “For All the Saints: Evangelical Theology and Christian Spirituality.” Its aim was to affirm the essential “coherence” of theology and spirituality – that is, to promote the “full and mutual sharing of one thing [evangelical theology] in the complete reality of the other [Christian spirituality].”<sup>7</sup>

Then fourthly, contemporary Christian spirituality has a distinctive bias toward subjectivity and mysticism. In the quest to experience God apart from his self-revelation in the Bible people are looking to find him through experiences that offer self-fulfilment and an awareness of the divine. Spiritual techniques, many of which have been revived from monasticism, take priority over careful study. Renewed interest in *Lectio Divina* (sacred reading) is a case in point. This ancient practice advocates reading small passages of the Bible reflectively each day (or several times each day), much in the manner of the devotional Bible reading of evangelicalism’s Quiet Time. Its latter stages, however, involve the step of contemplation, described and illustrated by Ben Campbell Johnson in the following way:

Contemplation begins with a text but uses it as a means to enter into the presence of Christ (God)... [It] constitutes a state of being beyond thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions. The way into contemplation demands ‘letting go’ of everything but our awareness of and love for him.... In my act of contemplation [on a specific occasion], I closed my eyes and began to think about two texts alternately: ‘Apart from me you can do nothing’ and ‘With me all things are possible.’ I repeated these in mantra-like fashion two or three times. Then the words began to fall away, and I found myself saying, ‘Nothing. Possible. Nothing. Possible.’ Finally, all words left, and I was in the Other Dimension.<sup>8</sup>

This mystical journey into the “Other Dimension” points to a final concern raised about contemporary spirituality, namely its openness to interfaith dialogue. Its focus on “experiencing the transcendent” finds an

echo in the mystical elements of other faiths, especially Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. This kinship has stimulated interaction between leaders in these various groups, creating the basis for interfaith ecumenism and syncretism. In the mid-1970’s for example, three Trappist monks from Massachusetts USA, Thomas Keating, William Meninger and Basil Pennington, decided to become “more knowledgeable about these other faiths through dialogue with believers from these traditions” as a means of revitalizing contemplative prayer within the Roman Catholic church.

Fathers Keating, Meninger and Pennington entered into intense, sustained dialogue with leaders from other traditions ...They invited ...ecumenically orientated Catholic theologians, and Eastern Zen master, Joshu Roshi Sasaki... and a former Trappist, Paul Marechal, who taught transcendental meditation. The interaction between these Christian monks and practitioners of Eastern meditation helped distil the practice of Christian contemplative prayer into a form that could be easily practiced by a diverse array of ‘non-monastic’ believers: priests, nuns, brothers and lay men and women.<sup>9</sup>

These concerns compel us to be cautious about modern Christian spirituality. Yet the widespread thirst for deeper relationship with God that exists in the church at large demands that we do something. It seems to me that we need to begin by taking a fresh look at Christian spirituality from both historical and theological perspectives.

## THE POLARIZATION OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

In a book published shortly before his death last year,<sup>10</sup> former Wheaton College Professor Robert E. Webber provides a helpful survey of the development of Christian spirituality from apostolic times to the present. He shows that throughout history people have expressed their faith in ways that tend to drift in one of two directions. They incline either toward rationalism – the intellectualization of the faith – or romanticism – the experientializing of the faith.

While both intellect and experience are components of Christian spirituality, Webber contends that there have always been forces at work pushing Christians toward extremes. Some think that being spiritual means knowing a lot; others insist that it means experiencing God deeply. In either case the basis of spirituality shifts from God to self. No longer does it rest on what God has done in Christ but on how much we have either learned or experienced. And this, Webber claims, is exactly what happened during the modern era of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

## Its Intellectualizing

The roots of this modern polarization between mind and heart go back to the period of medieval scholasticism. Webber claims that they can be found in the advent of universities and the recognition of theology as a formal science. Up until then, he says, God had been thought of as an active personal being (a great Subject) whose works in history were contemplated and admired. With the development of a more scientific and intellectual approach to the study of theology, however, God became a more remote Object to be investigated. People didn't talk about his mighty works as much as they speculated about his infinity. A technical language of theology developed, and the science became abstract.

Along with that, the Scholastics separated theoretical and practical aspects of theology into what they called dogma and moral theology. Previously the two had been inseparably linked. How people lived flowed directly from what they knew about God. The spirituality of the early church, for example, was essentially a practical response to God's saving act in Christ. God had entered human history in Christ to restore relationship with himself, and the Christian life was the grateful embrace of that saving act reflected in every aspect of existence.

But this changed with medieval scholasticism's division of theology into its dogmatic and moral parts. Webber writes,

Unfortunately, moral theology was regarded as independent from dogma, and cut from its roots in theology, moral thought acquired a life of its own. Consequently, spirituality was removed from dogma and treated under moral theology as a 'practical discipline.' This separation of theology into compartments of 'dogma over here' and 'moral theology over there' proved to be disastrous for the unity that formerly existed between theological reflection and spirituality in the ancient church.<sup>11</sup>

It was this separation that dominated life in the church at the time of the Reformation. Christian dogma was in the custody of the doctors of the church and practical spirituality had degenerated into self-absorbed mysticism on the one hand and "pious practices, prayers to recite, indulgences to be gained and relics to be venerated"<sup>12</sup> on the other. The effect of this division on Martin Luther was to make him terrified of a remote, relentlessly holy and just God, and enslaved to endless fasting, confession and good works.

When Luther realised that true spirituality wasn't a matter of his works but the grace of God in Christ, he struck a blow against the separation of spirituality and theology. Luther rejected the slavery of medieval piety and taught people to live in the freedom of the gospel of grace. Calvin followed him, elaborating more fully the connection between Christian life and the saving act of Christ. He stressed the centrality of union with Christ,

arguing that faith unites us with the incarnate Lord in his death and resurrection, securing complete forgiveness, a new standing with God, and new life through the Holy Spirit. Spirituality became a matter of walking worthy of the gospel, or as theologian Alister McGrath puts it,

For the Reformers, spirituality concerned the personal and corporate response of believers to the gracious and personal activity of God, embracing virtually every aspect of life.<sup>13</sup>

In its twofold emphasis on justification and sanctification as benefits of union with Christ, however, the Reformers laid the foundation for what Webber describes was to become

a severe problem in the modern era – the separation of spirituality from a relational, lived theology to a spirituality rooted in forensic justification that did not encourage the mystery of contemplation and participation but instead turned spirituality toward intellectual knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

Webber shows how this trend was fostered by the Enlightenment emphasis on human reason and the demand for scientific verification of fact. Conservative evangelical Christians responded by seeking to show the intellectual credibility of the Christian gospel, especially by stressing the forensic character of the death of Christ and justification through faith. While not inherently wrong, this emphasis had the effect of making Christian spirituality a matter of holding to correct beliefs. The personal act of believing in Christ crucified was overshadowed by the importance of a correct understanding of "justification as a forensic act, an objective work of God that resulted in a standing before God."<sup>15</sup> Webber continues,

Spirituality rooted in justification without connection to the incarnation and Christology looks like this: We are justified by Christ who has done everything necessary to reconcile us to God. Christ is our righteousness. God looks at us through the righteousness of Christ and imputes and declares us righteous in Christ. (This is called the forensic or judicial view of establishing our relation to God.) Now that God has made us spiritual through Jesus Christ, we are called to respond to God in thanksgiving by living a sanctified life.<sup>16</sup>

This is not to say that the atonement of Christ isn't forensic in character. It is simply noting that when this idea is divorced from the overall story of redemption it has the effect of intellectualizing Christianity. It makes spirituality more about believing right ideas (having the right theological system) than about being in a right relationship (living in union with God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit). Spirituality is reduced to a largely intellectual or theoretical matter.

The story of the intellectualization of spirituality doesn't end there, but enough has been said to illustrate what it

looks like and how it developed. Many of us can identify deeply with it, and what is more, understand the relational aridity that has prompted many to reject the intellectual dimension of the faith altogether in favour of the experiential or mystical. It is to this reaction that we now turn.

## Its Experientializing

As a response to scholasticism's intellectualizing of the faith, there were those in the medieval church, Webber tells us, who sought spiritual reality through experience. Rather than contemplate on what God had done in Christ, they looked to find God in themselves. It was their experience of the saving work of Christ that dominated their thinking over the historical reality of the cross.

Webber puts it this way:

The distinguishing mark of ancient Christian spirituality is that it focuses on God's journey into our history to redeem it. The distinguishing mark of the new mysticism is that *it focuses on the journey of the self into God...* The new mysticism differs from spirituality based on God's mystery in Christ, because it is now God's mystery taking place in *my* life... *Spirituality, which was once a contemplation of God's saving acts, now contemplated the self and the interior life.* What was once a journey into God became a journey into self.<sup>17</sup>

The implications of this shift were massive. Instead of spirituality being life-affirming, celebrating the drama of God's redemption in history and embracing the created universe as the theatre in which he establishes his glory and victory over evil, it became life-denying. The world now became Satan's domain, a realm from which we were to be delivered to another world – heaven. Consequently, Webber writes,

A new emphasis in spirituality arose: retreat from the world and cultivation of the inner private life alone. A new kind of mysticism was born – a mysticism that often escaped into intellectual fantasy and spiritual romanticism.<sup>18</sup>

Feeling and personal experience now became the touchstone of true Christianity. It wasn't that these hadn't been present in the earlier forms of spirituality – the contemplation of God's great acts in history had always aroused deep feeling and heartfelt response. Now, however, it was the pursuit of feeling itself that became the goal of spirituality. This represented a definite shift in focus, a shift that typically becomes "narcissistic and even expresses itself in bizarre, direct encounters with God."<sup>19</sup>

While the Reformers themselves rejected the mysticism of medieval piety, a strand of experientialism emerged again in their successors. German Pietism was a reaction to the sterile intellectualizing of the faith within

Lutheranism, as was English Puritanism (in part anyway) to Elizabethan Anglicanism. In Pietism there was a shift in emphasis away from justification rooted in the death of Christ to regeneration as an activity of the Spirit in the heart. This, as Webber points out, "laid the foundations for a revivalist spirituality, which dominated nineteenth century revivalism."<sup>20</sup>

As important as these emphases may have been in their time, they were nevertheless part of the same trend to move from a spirituality grounded in God to one absorbed with personal experience of God. In time this came to be expressed in the rank narcissism, romanticism and consumerism of our present generation. While there are still those who do emphasize the great objective realities of redemption – often in an intellectualized way – the predominant stance of modern spirituality reflects the experiential rejection of intellectualism.

If Webber's analysis of the history of spirituality is correct then we live in a situation where expressions of the Christian life are strongly influenced by reaction. Allan Chapple of Trinity Theological College in Perth noted that in an address in 2005. He observed that "we evangelicals have a strong tendency to develop our piety in reaction to error." He went on to elaborate the negativity and imbalance this induced, and concluded that evangelicals no less than those they were reacting against, ended up with a deficient expression of Christian spirituality.<sup>21</sup>

This calls for an urgent rethinking. If intellectualism and experientialism are both imbalanced expressions of spirituality, what is the alternative? In my view Robert Webber is correct in arguing for a relational spirituality rooted in the larger story of God's creative and redemptive activity.

## THE RECOVERY OF RELATIONAL CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Relational spirituality stresses that God is a personal being who is always in contact with his creation. It rejects that notion that he is remote, can be known only by reason and speculation, and that he can be approached only by strenuous human effort. He is a God who comes near to us, lifts us into his presence, and enters intimate, interactive fellowship with us.

This is the God revealed to us in the story of the Bible. Three aspects of that story – the creation, incarnation and recreation – demonstrate it vividly. Firmly embraced, they will reconfigure our spirituality in a way that avoids the extremes outlined above and satisfies our thirst to know and enjoy God.

## Creation

The act of God creating the heavens and the earth has always been foundational to Christian theology and spirituality. However, since the middle of the nineteenth century our understanding of the creation event has become somewhat impersonal and static. In response to secular evolutionary theories Christians have thought of creation largely in terms of an explanation of origins. We have explained it as an act by which all things were brought into being out of nothing by the powerful word of God. We have coined terms like creation *ex nihilo*, and debated endlessly issues relating to the age of the earth, the origin of the species, palaeontology and flood geology.

While this has been understandable, it has had the effect of detaching creation from the larger story. We have lost sight, for example, of God's motive and purpose in creation, and of his loving care of the world he brought into being. In our apologetic interest in the doctrine, God has often become little more than a great First Cause. Because of this our theology of creation has been impoverished and correspondingly our spirituality has suffered.

While we can never understand fully God's ultimate motives for creating the universe, we believe that he did so out of the richness of his Trinitarian life. Recent Trinitarian studies help us appreciate this more fully. These have moved beyond speculating about person and being, unity and diversity to emphasize the communal life of God. His Trinitarian being means that he has always been a God in relationship – that is, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have eternally existed in a fellowship of perfect love. And it is out of that perfect and totally self-sufficient community of love that the creation was birthed. Theologian Stanley Grenz puts it this way:

The act of creation is the outflowing of the eternal love relationship within the Triune God. The world exists because out of the overflow of his own character, which is love, the eternal God establishes an external counterpart, creation. Just as it is created in accordance with the very essence of God – love – this counterpart exists to be both the recipient of and the mirror of the divine love.<sup>22</sup>

If this indeed is the case it has major implications for the universe as a whole and for humankind in particular. Did God make the world to be “the recipient” of the divine love? This means, to use the words of Grenz again, that the world exists to “participate in the life of the social Trinity.”<sup>23</sup> God, as it were, shares his own life with what he has made. His ultimate goal is to establish perfect community in the highest sense – a redeemed people living in a renewed creation, enjoying the presence of their Triune God, loving him and being loved in return.

This understanding lifts our appreciation of creation far beyond an explanation of origins. This is the more so when we think of our distinctive character as image-bearers of God and the rulers of his creation. Whatever else being an image-bearer means it includes the idea that we are social or communal beings, destined for relationship with God, each other and the creation. And it is in that context we are to think of the dominion of the world given to us. It is never to be thought of as freedom to use the world for ourselves, but as a trust to be exercised in loving devotion to God and utter dependence upon him.

When these ideas dominate our thinking they mould the kind of life we live. They compel us to understand look at life in a God-centred rather than a self-centred way. Self-interest is swallowed up in self-giving (love) for the glory of God. They ennoble our nature and give dignity to the material universe. No Christian, rightly understanding the doctrine of creation, can entertain dualistic thoughts of world-flight. Nor can they be indifferent to matters of the environment, politics, poverty or disease. Rightly understood, the creation of the world makes us passionate for these spheres of existence because they are all part of the handiwork of a personal and loving God in which he displays his glory.

## Incarnation

The incarnation of the Son of God is a second event in God's story demonstrating his relational character and the essentially relational character of Christian spirituality. Nothing shows the commitment of the Triune God to the creation more clearly than his becoming a creature and living among creatures. A remote clockmaker God would never do that. The personal, loving God of the Bible does.

He does so to restore us to union with himself. Sin ruptured the love relationship between God and humankind and resulted in death. In the incarnation, God comes to undo that damage by taking upon himself our sin, satisfying the demands of his own justice, and overcoming the powers of evil. Through faith in the incarnate Son, Jesus, we are forgiven, adopted as God's children, and restored to communion and cooperative service with him in his kingdom. God comes to live within us and our lives become, once more, “receptacles of the divine.”<sup>24</sup> The incarnation is no mechanistic repair programme but the intensely personal and costly initiative of a loving Creator.

More than that, in coming to live among us Jesus shows us what it means to be in the image of God and to live as a son of God. Grenz helpfully writes,

As the incarnate Son, Jesus is the revelation of the eternal response of the Son to the Father within the divine reality. Throughout all eternity the Son whom the Father generates responds to the Father in humble dependence and in reciprocating the

Father's love. This filial relationship of the Son to the Father as exhibited by Jesus of Nazareth constitutes the paradigm for creation... As creatures follow the pattern exemplified by Jesus, they participate in the filial relationship the eternal Son enjoys with the Father.<sup>25</sup>

He shows us, in other words, that the only appropriate way to reflect the dynamic of love within the Godhead is by the whole-hearted giving of ourselves to God. Living according a list of rules can never adequately equate with the self-surrender demonstrated in Jesus' life.

But there is more. The incarnation demonstrates the relational character of true spirituality in that it calls us into a personal union of life with Jesus. The Son of God did not become man simply to die, or to demonstrate how we are meant to live, but also to act on our behalf. All that he did was as our representative, and all that he accomplished is for us as his people. And he calls us to himself – to a life of union within himself through faith – as the means of participating in all that he is and achieved. John Calvin understood this well. Ronald S Wallace has summarized his teaching on this point as follows:

The human nature of Jesus Christ has been made the sole channel through which salvation and life and power can flow to the church. A Christian must seek to find his true well-being in Christ and not apart from Christ... Our participation in the sanctification of Christ depends on our union with the human nature of Christ. Christ must 'present himself to us and invite us into such a relationship that truly we are united to Him, and he dwells in us in such a way that everything that belongs to Him is ours... In uniting us to himself and making us His members, Christ dwells in us and He not only brings Himself close to us by an undivided bond of fellowship, but by a wondrous communion grows with us daily more and more into one body until he becomes altogether one with us.<sup>26</sup>

This is how the Bible speaks of the work of Christ in the context of God's story. He accomplishes salvation in his own flesh and then imparts the benefits of that to us through a union established by faith. While it is possible to emphasize his vicarious atonement and the forensic justification that flows from it, to do so separated from the "story" inevitably leaves us with the shell of the gospel – a partial and intellectual appreciation of his person and work. And it is just such a partial appreciation of the gospel that bleeds relational authenticity from Christian spirituality.

## Recreation

There is a third act in God's story that demonstrates the relational character of biblical spirituality, namely the act of recreation. This is the work of renewal that begins now in human hearts and is finally brought to

completion in the restoration of the universe at the end of the age. It is the work the Triune God accomplishes through the Holy Spirit.

The role of the Holy Spirit in the works of creation and redemption is that of bringing God's plan to completion. He no less than the Father and the Son is engaged in seeing the divine vision for the universe perfected. One way he does so is by coming to live personally in the hearts of the redeemed. Through this he forms a spiritual bond between Christ and his people and communicates the riches of Christ to his body. To use the words of Ronald Wallace again, he is "the link which binds us to Christ and also the channel by which everything which Christ has and is is derived to us."<sup>27</sup>

Exactly how the Spirit lives and operates within us is a mystery. However, the Bible does describe a number of his activities. He opens our eyes, softens our hearts, sheds abroad in us his love, joy and peace, and empowers us for service (Ephesians 1:17, 18; Ezekiel 36:26; Romans 5:5; Galatians 5:22; Acts 1:8). He leads, anoints, bears witness with, and seals us (Galatians 5:18; 2 Corinthians 1:21; Romans 8:16; Ephesians 1:13). Correspondingly, we are called to be filled with the Spirit and refrain from grieving or quenching him (Ephesians 5:18; 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19). Without question, this is the language of dynamic relationship.

Furthermore, we know that the Holy Spirit accomplishes this mission through his Word, the inspired Scriptures. Through these he addresses our understanding and penetrates our hearts. He so "enlivens" the written word that we are conscious of God speaking to us. At times he does so to instruct, at other times to remind, convict and correct (2 Timothy 3:16). Through the Scriptures he comforts us in our sorrows and fills us with wisdom so that we can make choices that please God. Often we don't recognize his presence simply because he usually works along with our own thinking, feeling and willing. Nevertheless, to a degree far greater than we usually realise, he is ceaselessly at work in us causing us to will and to act according to God's eternal purpose (Philippians 2:13).

Taken together, these three aspects of the divine story establish a theological basis for a spirituality that is dynamic, personal and real. They encourage us to seek life in union with God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. As philosopher and popular author Dallas Willard puts it,

Spiritual people are not those who engage in certain spiritual practices; they are those who draw their life from a conversational relationship with God. They do not live their lives merely in terms of the human order in the visible world; they have a 'life beyond.'<sup>28</sup>

## THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

But what does this mean in practical terms? Does the relational theology and spirituality discussed above give us any guidelines as to how to live on a daily basis with God?

### Guiding Principles

Yes it does. It allows us to say at least five things. Firstly, it rules out pursuing direct, mystical experiences with God as a “contentless experience of otherness.” God is not “contentless,” some undefined transcendent spiritual force. He is a personal being who has revealed himself to us in history, supremely in the person of his Son. In doing so, he has communicated with us intelligently and called upon us to respond to him in kind. There is no hint in the Bible of mystical technique aimed at facilitating direct engagement with his essence. That belongs to paganism, not Christian spirituality.

Second, it rules out seeking God through an “inward journey” into self. New Age spirituality takes that direction, and some Christians have followed its lead. God is said to live within all things – pantheism – and the secret to spiritual fulfilment is to connect with our innermost being. In doing so, we find both God and our true selves. As attractive as this may sound, the Bible says about such an approach to spiritual life. It points us to a God who is distinct from us and calls us to look beyond ourselves to him in faith. To put it technically, true spirituality is *extrinsic* and rather than intrinsic.

Thirdly, relational spirituality rules out a formalistic or purely “religious” approach to living before God. True, there are practices that promote communion with God and distinct propositions that can be articulated about him. But spirituality cannot be reduced to believing the right ideas and performing the right actions. It is about relating to God personally with all the mind, heart and soul. It is about communication and devotion, love and obedience, delight and desire. In and of itself, assenting to correct doctrine and engaging in right practice does not constitute the kind of life God requires of us.

In keeping with this, fourthly, relational spirituality involves the whole person and the whole of life. Throughout history there have been those who have believed that God is more concerned with the inward life, and specifically, the human spirit, than he is with our bodies and outward actions. But a spirituality anchored in creation, as noted above, affirms that we are both physical and spiritual beings. It glories in the fact that this world belongs to God and insists that it is used to glorify him. Relational spirituality is truly holistic spirituality.

Then fifthly, and by way of summary, relational spirituality is what can be described as conversational, interactive spirituality that encounters God and walks hand-in-hand with him in the common affairs of everyday life. It is conversational in that it involves communication both from and to God; and it is interactive in that God responds to us and we to him. What is more, it is a spirituality earthed in everyday life. This was the character of the spirituality of God’s people in the Old Testament and remains true of us in the New. On this Herman Bavinck writes,

The prophets and apostles, and the saints generally who appear before us in the Old and New Testament and later in the church of Christ, did not sit and philosophize about God in abstracted concepts, but rather confessed what God meant to them and what they owed to Him in all the circumstances of life. God was for them not at all a cold concept, which they then proceeded rationally to analyze, but He was a living, personal force, a reality infinitely more real than the world around them. Indeed, He was to them *the* one, eternal, worshipful Being. They reckoned with Him in their lives, they lived in His tent, walked as if always before His face, served Him in His courts and worshipped him in his sanctuary.”<sup>29</sup>

### Biblical Patterns

Studying the Psalms of the Old Testament is one way of seeing how relational spirituality works. These inspired prayers, praises and meditations give us a window into the hearts of Israelites who loved God and walked with him in the everyday life. They show us what it means for God to be “the centrifugal centre of life,” how he is to be worshipped and praised, to be sought in times of trouble and sin, how we can express our perplexity with remarkable honesty and confess our hope of being with him forever. Here we find intimate, conversational, everyday spirituality.

Like these believers in Israel we are to walk with God in the light of what he has revealed about himself. We are to make his word our constant delight. It is to be in our hearts and hands day and night, and as it is, it becomes the instrument of his speaking to us through his Spirit. He shows us how to live, arouses our hearts to love and worship, convicts us of our sin and guilt, and empowers us to serve.

But above all, his word shows us his great salvation and his mighty Saviour. Through the Scriptures God leads us to Christ and enables us to embrace him by faith. He produces within us a holy self-distrust, indeed, a constant brokenness and humility on account of our sin. But in our sinfulness he leads us to look outside ourselves to the living Christ and to make him the source of our life. Christ becomes our life, and day by day we become increasingly conformed to him. Like the

missionary Hudson Taylor we learn to draw “every farthing” for daily life from the bank of Christ.

But the experiences of Israel’s psalmists and modern missionaries are not the ultimate pattern of relational spirituality. For that we turn to Jesus himself. Though he was the eternal Son of God, he was also the perfect human being. It is in his communion with his Father, devotion to his will, and his total reliance upon him at all times, that we find the pattern for our spirituality. In Jesus we see what relational spirituality looks like.

This is the kind of spirituality we need to recover. It is not mystical in the sense of involving immediate contact with God’s essence – although it does involve the high mystery of our union with God through Christ by the Spirit. Nor is it mechanistic in the sense of simply entailing correct belief and proper practice. It is living, interactive and personal.

## CONCLUSION

In the light of this we cannot but applaud the thirst for God expressed by so many Christians today. If God can

be known personally; if he has made us, as Dallas Willard contends, for “intimate friendship with himself – both now and forever,”<sup>30</sup> then anything less than an ardent quest to know him relationally is sub-Christian.

As to how we are to do that, the Bible offers good news. It tells us that this quest for intimate relationship is not one-sided. In other words, finding and enjoying God is not all up to us. The opposite is the case. God has taken the initiative to seek us. What matters most is not what we do to reach up to God, but what he has done to reach down to us.

That’s what makes it so important, as Robert Webber affirms repeatedly, that our spirituality is rooted in God’s story – the story of his loving creation, merciful redemption, and ultimate restoration. If we immerse ourselves in that, we will discover that in reaching out to us God has provided us a way of reaching up to him. That way is through faith in his Son our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. In embracing him, and in drawing near to God through him by the power of the Holy Spirit, we find true Christian spirituality.

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## References

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

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