

## **“What does it mean to be ‘spiritual?’”**

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The words “spiritual” and “spirituality” have become very ambiguous words in the English language today.

Those who attended Woodstock Festival in 1969 said it was a very “spiritual experience”  
Those who summit a high mountain, like Mt. McKinley, say it is a “spiritual experience.”  
An NFL coach refers to a particular player on his team as a “spiritual leader.”  
A reporter indicated it was a “spiritual experience” to be at Obama’s victory celebration.  
To appreciate a work of art (Mona Lisa/Michelangelo’s David) is called “spiritual.”  
The loss of consciousness in drugs and alcohol is identified by some as “spiritual.”  
The ecstasy of a climactic sexual intensity is sometimes referred to as “spiritual.”  
Bird-watching, star-gazing, becoming “one with nature” is touted as a “spiritual experience”  
Eating health-food, practicing yoga, the bio-feedback of mental relaxation is identified as sp  
The adrenalin of exercise ... running, surfing, sky-diving .... is called “spiritual”  
To engage in humanitarian causes, like Mother Theresa, is called “spiritual”  
The anonymity recovery groups say that the serenity of sobriety is “spirituality.”

The words “spiritual” and “spirituality” are used so loosely and ambiguously in contemporary English vocabulary that they have become almost meaningless. When the words “spirit” and “spiritual” are employed for psychological states such as enthusiasm, excitement, emotion, passion, personal well-being, contentment, or ego-building self-satisfaction, then the concept of “spiritual” has been psychologized and we proceed to the point where the selfish and the sinful are regarded as “spiritual.” ... And this is almost a complete reversal of meaning from the traditional understanding of “Christian spirituality.”

But we have to remember that there is a spirit-source other than, and opposite from, the Spirit of God. Paul wrote in Eph. 2:2 that “the prince of the power of the air is the *spirit* that works in the sons of disobedience.” There is a “spirit of *error*” and a “spirit of *truth*” (I John 4:6) explains the apostle John. To the Corinthians Paul explained, “we have received, not the spirit of the *world*, but the Spirit who is from *God*, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God” (I Cor. 2:12).

In one sense it might be said that all persons have a sense of spirituality, a spiritual connection, but it is not necessarily “*Christian* spirituality.” Our discussion of “spiritual” and “spirituality” this afternoon will necessarily have to do with that which is related to the “Spirit of God,” the “Spirit of Christ,” the Holy Spirit – for our concern is indeed “Christian Spirituality.”

But even “*Christian* spirituality,” through the centuries of Church history has taken many various forms and expressions, as different faith groups attempt to encourage Christians in their spiritual progression:

The Eastern Orthodox churches (of Greece, Russia, Serbia, etc.) emphasize their historical continuity with the early church. The spiritual path they pursue involves purgation, illumination, and the goal of deification (*theosis*), participation and union with God. In that pursuit they use icons – images of Jesus and early church personages to draw

their attention to God. Orthodox Christians often repeat the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me,” and engage in *hesychasm*, the inner quietness of silent prayer.

The Roman Catholic Church emphasizes a spirituality that is liturgical and sacramental. Participation in the Eucharist as a “means of grace” is a necessity for connecting with the “real presence” of Jesus. The intercession of the “saints” and the adoration of Mary, the mother of Jesus, are components of Catholic spirituality. Personal confession to a priest, and the repetition of the prayers of the rosary are individual responsibilities.

The Anglican Church is also quite liturgical and sacramental. Spirituality is centered around the *Book of Common Prayer* which provides guidance in Christian virtues and prayer life.

Methodists have emphasized a life of holiness, an inward assurance of relationship with God, and accountable discipleship in small groups.

Evangelical Protestantism has always had a strong emphasis on the Bible – on Bible reading and Bible study. The availability of the printed text of the Bible coincided with the advent of Protestantism. Bible reading and prayer in a personal “quiet time” have been emphasized in Protestant churches. That along with an emphasis on personal conversion through evangelism.

So, what has been the emphasis in Baptist spirituality? Consistent with the emphases in evangelical Protestantism as a whole, someone has characterized (or should I say, caricatured) Baptist spirituality with a phrase that sounds somewhat like a football expression – “3, 10, and out” – which refers to traditional Baptist emphases on attending church services **3** times a week, giving **10** percent of one’s income in a tithe, and going **out** to share the gospel with others in visitation evangelism. That is a less than fair oversimplification of the Baptist approach to spiritual concerns.

The diversity of emphases in the various “denominational spiritualities” doesn’t really define Christian spirituality, for Christian Spirituality cannot be defined merely by particular religious expressions. Paul made this clear in Col. 2:16 – 3:2

**16** Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. **17** These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. **18** Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his *unspiritual* mind puffs him up with idle notions. **19** He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

**20** Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: **21** “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? **22** These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. **23** Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship (self-made religion), their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. **1** Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. **2** Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

Christian spirituality does not have to do with religious regulations and prohibitions, but it has to do with “setting our hearts and minds on things above” according to Paul. Christian spirituality is necessarily subjective, internal – not just external religious practices. Some have faulted Protestantism in general for having very little emphasis on

“spirituality.” There has been a tendency in Protestantism to focus on an over-objectification of concern for the justification by faith that establishes a new status and standing before God as the righteousness of Christ is imputed or reckoned to the believer. The Baptist portion of Protestantism countered the general trend by emphasizing personal regeneration – the need to be “born again – allowing for a greater sense of interiority and spiritual recognition.

As we discuss “Christian Spirituality” today, I want to consider 3 points:

- 1) The Essential Element of Christian Spirituality
- 2) The Struggle of Christian Spirituality
- 3) The Collective Importance of Christian spirituality.

### **The Essential element of Christian Spirituality**

The singular essential reality in Christian spirituality is **JESUS CHRIST** – the Spirit of Christ. Everything “Christian” is grounded in Jesus Christ, God’s Self-revelation of Himself in His Son, Jesus – incarnated as the God-man, lived without sin as the Perfect Man, crucified to take the death consequences of the sin of mankind, and raised victoriously to restore God’s life to man, made available at the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit that the living Lord Jesus might live in and through those who receive Him.

The passage that Paul wrote to the Corinthians provides a context for discussing the essential element of Christian spirituality. I Cor. 2:14–3:2.

“**14**The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are *spiritually* discerned. **15**The *spiritual* man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: **16**“For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ. **1** Brothers, I could not address you as *spiritual* but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. **2** I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.”

....

The essential element of Christian spirituality is Jesus Christ by the Spirit, but it appears we need to note two facets of the singular element of Jesus Christ in our lives.

- a) Christian spirituality involves the *indwelling presence* of the divine Spirit in our spirit.
- b) Christian spirituality involves the *active function* of the divine Spirit in our behavior.

Christian spirituality necessitates the indwelling presence of the divine Spirit in our spirit. Rom. 8:9 – “If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they are none of His.” A Christian is defined as one who has the indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ, and therefore can be called a Christ-one, a Christian. Apart from the presence of the living Lord Jesus in us, it is impossible to be called “spiritual” in a Christian sense, and impossible to engage in Christian spirituality.

How does the presence of the Spirit of Christ come to dwell in us?

John 1:12,13 – “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on His name; who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

John 3:1-6 “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit...You must be born from above.”

Col. 1:26,27 – “the mystery hidden for ages but now manifested to his saints ... is “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

Gal. 2:20 – “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, the Christ lives in me.”

II Cor. 13:5 – “Do you not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you, unless you believed in vain”

I Cor. 6:17 – “He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.” (spiritual union)

Regeneration is a crisis with a view to a process. Not an end in itself. Just the starting point of receiving Christ’s life. Just getting “enrolled in the course,” so to speak.

It is possible to have the Spirit of *Christ dwelling within* – to be Christians – as I believe the Corinthians were when Paul wrote to them, but Paul states that he could not speak to them as “*spiritual*,” but as “babes in Christ.” Why? Because they were not allowing for the *active function* of the divine Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, within their behavior, and were allowing for worldly and fleshly expression rather than Christ-expression.

What are we seeing here? There is a two-fold qualification for Christian spirituality. There is the “*spiritual condition*” of having received the Spirit of Christ by faith. And there is the consequential necessity of “*behavioral expression*” whereby the character of Christ is allowed to be exhibited in our behavior. Spiritual condition and behavioral expression! The *indwelling presence* of Christ, and the *active function* of Christ. Jesus Christ *living in us*, and Jesus Christ being allowed to *live out His life through us*. These are the two facets of Christian spirituality. Both are requisite to Christian spirituality.

The active function and expression of the life of the living Lord Jesus in our behavior is the second feature of Christian Spirituality. How is this effected? How does this happen? We have already noted how different portions of the Church of Jesus Christ have sought to encourage the living out of Christian faith. But Paul seems to warn that human performance, whether it be religious exercises or so-called “spiritual disciplines,” are not the effectual means to Christian spirituality. Christian spirituality is *not attained*, but *obtained* from the Spirit of Christ by the single condition of our faithful receptivity. Christian spirituality is not an *achieved* spirituality, but a *derived* spirituality. It’s not what we *do* to become “spiritual,” but what *God is allowed to be and do* in our lives.

Paul explained to the Philippians, “We are confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in us will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ” (1:6). The means by which we are made “spiritual,” sanctified in spirit, and soul, and body, and preserved complete in Christ (cf. I Thess. 5:23,24) is that “Faithful is He who called us, He will bring it to pass.” The dynamic of Christian spirituality is the GRACE of God.

Our responsibility in the process of Christian spirituality is always and only FAITH – our *receptivity* of His *activity* ... our *availability* to His *ability*. Paul wrote to the Colossians, “As you received Christ Jesus (by faith), so walk in Him” (2:6). We are saved “by grace through faith” (Eph. 2:8), and we continue on in Christian spirituality, “by grace through faith.” Baptists have historically and traditionally been “clear as a bell” in their proclamation of regeneration “by grace through faith,” but have often been somewhat lax when it came to the sanctification of Christian spirituality, falling into the legalism of performance standards for the outliving of the Christian life. (remember the 3,10, & out indictment?)

To simplify Christian Spirituality, we could use Brother Lawrence's phrase: It is "The practice of the presence of God." Aware of the presence of the Spirit of Christ within us, we allow Him to conform us to His image (Rom. 8:29). We are "filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18), as Paul wrote to the Ephesians – an interior, spiritual flood of God's grace. Not an external application of spiritual blessings in addition to what we have received in Jesus Christ, but it's an "inside job" wherein the Spirit of Christ is allowed to control our thoughts, our affections, and thus our determinations to allow the life of the living Lord Jesus to be expressed in our behavior.

We are "*filled with the Spirit*" (Eph. 5:18) in order to manifest the "*fruit of the Spirit*," which Paul identifies as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and the godly control of oneself" (Gal. 5:22,23). What is this, but the character of God in Christ? The objective of Christian spirituality is not the acquisition of knowledge, but the expression of divine *character*. "By their fruit you will know them," Jesus said (Matt. 7:16,20). It is not cerebral, academic, rationalistic knowledge that we seek (that just puffs us up with pride – I Cor. 8:1), but the relational knowledge of *knowing God* in Christ. Paul's expressed his greatest desire "to *know Him*, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings..." (Phil. 3:10). Not *informational* knowledge, but *intimate* knowledge. Not the knowledge of *data*, but the personal knowing of the *Divine*.

Though we have noted the GRACE of God received by Faith in Christian spirituality, we must not leave the impression that the process of Christian spirituality is necessarily easy or automatic. We must avoid the triumphalism that advocates that a Christian can participate in a "victorious Christian life" that is devoid of problems or perplexity. Christians do not just slide effortlessly into Christian spirituality. There is always a struggle.

## **The Struggle of Christian Spirituality**

We're not talking about the struggle of performance to try to be what we think God wants us to be – i.e. "spiritual." NO, that is just a system of the "works" of self-effort that produces "wood, hay, and stubble" worthy of being burned up (I Cor. 3:12) in the final analysis.

Our reference to the "struggle of Christian spirituality" has to do with the hindrances, distractions, and perplexities that seem to wage war against "Christian spirituality." "Stuff happens" and we are perplexed about the purposes of what is happening.

Sometimes our "*struggle*" is with God. Remember Jacob's struggle with God's representative. Similarly, we sometimes struggle with what God is doing in our life, or maybe even with God's claim on our life. We want to understand. We want to be "in on" what God's "up to," but often He keeps us "in the dark" – St. John of the Cross addressed this in his classic volume, *The Dark Night of the Soul*. We often only understand God's gracious working in our lives with 20/20 hindsight. That lack of clear vision and understanding sets up a bit of a "struggle" in our process of Christian spirituality, even to the extent of being "perplexed, but not despairing" (II Cor. 4:10).

Christian spirituality also involves a *struggle*, because everything in the context of the world system in which we live runs counter to God's purposes. The "ruler of this world" (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), the "god of this age" (II Cor. 4:4), has objectives that are antithetical to, and in opposition to God's ways. Everything around us – education,

entertainment, politics, etc. – is pervaded by selfishness. And people are filled with cynicism, nihilism, and despair. We need to remember in our quest for Christian spirituality that Jesus has “overcome the world” (John 16:33), and we are “overcomers” in Him (I Jn 2:14). In the “finished work” of Christ (Jn. 19:30) on the cross, Jesus “destroyed the works of the devil” (I Jn. 3:8) and “rendered powerless him who had the power of death, that is the devil” (Heb. 2:14). In our journey of Christian spirituality “we are in the world, but not of the world” (John 17:11,14), and this can be a struggle.

Yes, we encounter trials and tribulations. The Christian life is not “membership in God’s red carpet club.” Jesus promised us that “in this world you will have tribulation” (Jn. 16:33), for the servant is not greater than His Master (John 15:20). Trials are those experiences of life that “pierce our status-quo” and tend to “upset our applecart.” Everyone has problems, but Christians know Who to turn to in the midst of the upsets. “No trial has overtaken you, but such as is common to man (I Cor. 10:13),” Paul told the Corinthians. And James even wrote, “Count it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, because the testing of your faith produces perseverance” (James 1:2,3).

We all *struggle* in the midst of our Christian walk with temptation. The tempter solicits us to derive expressions of character that are contrary to the character of Christ – to sin. These are not from God, for God never solicits us to evil (James 1:13,14), but temptation is always from the Evil One, the devil, the “deceiver of the brethren.” But it is not wrong to be tempted. Temptation is not sin. Jesus was “tempted in all ways as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). There is a spiritual warfare going on in the world, and in our lives, but “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation” (II Pet. 2:9).

We are often tempted in those areas where we have developed “fleshly desires” – habituated and repetitive patterns of sinful and selfish behavior. When Paul refers to the conflict and struggle between Spirit and flesh, saying, “walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh; for the flesh sets its desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another...” (Gal. 5:16,17), he is not indicating that our physical body is a problem to our Christian spirituality, but he is referring to the compulsive, obsessive, and addictive patterns that we have developed over the years that run counter to the Spirit’s desire for our spiritual maturity.

Despite the *struggles* we encounter in our quest for Christian spirituality, we must ever be aware of the sufficiency that is ours by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. “Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is of God” (II Cor. 3:5). “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness” (II Peter 1:3). “Greater is He who is in you, than he who is in the world” (I John 4:4). His grace is sufficient (II Cor. 12:9).

## **The Collective Importance of Christian Spirituality**

The Christian life is not just an individualistic experience, even though portions of Protestantism (in particular) have projected an overly individualistic gospel. The Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, have emphasized more of a corporate Christian spirituality. It is important that we maintain both an individual and collective approach to Christian spirituality. Though we have a personal relationship with God in Christ, we are at the same time born into a family. We are “members one of another” in the “Body of Christ” (Col. 1:24), the Church.

We are not alone in this journey of Christian spirituality. We are not “lone-ranger Christians, fighting the battles alone. We are “in it together.” We need each other. The spiritual journey is a mutual journey! That is why we are encouraged not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, for there is a continuous need to encourage one another (cf. Heb. 10:24,25). Unfortunately that mutual encouragement is often lacking in contemporary churches today. The church service is too often structured so that we sit in rows, looking at the back of someone else’s head, listening to a monologue sermon. Local churches need to arrange for more time for people to participate and interact and be involved in each others lives in a spiritually encouraging way. ... Not just shaking hands and saying, “Hi; It’s nice to see you,” during a Sunday morning greeting time, but time to share personal struggles and insights with one another. That is why many churches are promoting the small group gatherings of the local church. Most people who are involved in these small groups will tell you that it is there that they experience the “growing edge” of their spiritual pilgrimage as they progress in Christian spirituality.

We need each other, and we need to interact on a much deeper, spiritual level than just superficial small talk.

The importance ... the imperative ... of such mutual spiritual encouragement is evidenced in the realization that any local church is only as healthy as the combined Christian spirituality of its members. We’ve all heard the proverb that “a chain is only as strong as its weakest link.” That analogy breaks down when applied to the church, for the strength of the church is in the dynamic of the living Lord Jesus, but there is still a truth in fact that the quality of the whole is determined by the quality of the parts.

Only as individual Christians are “growing in the grace and knowledge of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ” (II Pet. 3:18), will the local church be growing, progressing as a healthy Body, and attracting other people who want to be spiritually healthy. Unless the individuals in a local fellowship are listening to God, being taught by the Spirit, and encouraging one another, then that local church will grow stale and stagnant. The “Death of a local church” can be traced back to the failure of the individual members to grow in GRACE and develop Christian spirituality in their lives.

On the other hand, the healthy function of a local congregation is facilitated when Christian individuals are actively participating in Christian spirituality, growing in the grace and knowledge of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and thereby becoming aware of the gifting of the Spirit of Christ in them for others. The living Lord Jesus always dwells in us *for others*, not just to make us spiritually bloated and fat and proud. Baptists have traditionally believed in the *priesthood* and *ministry* of all believers. I like to think of Christian ministry as the **overflow** of the life of Jesus into the lives of others. The emphasis on “spiritual gifts” in recent decades has taken many wrong turns (trophies, power toys), but as we develop and grow in Christian spirituality the Spirit of Christ within us gifts us in unique ways to allow Jesus to minister to others through us. That is how the local body of the Church is supposed to function – Christian individuals exercising their spiritual giftedness for the sake of others, including those who have never heard the gospel.

It is importance that we recognize the *collective importance* of Christian Spirituality. We are in this Christian endeavor together! The purpose of this weekend gathering is, no doubt, to awaken us to the necessity for Christian spirituality, both on a personal and collective level – to broaden our horizons as to how this congregation, Community Baptist Church, can be all that God wants it to be!

Back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was a “Great Awakening.” It began in Massachusetts with the preaching of Jonathan Edwards. What did they emphasize: 1) Coming to Christ in “saving faith,” and 2) Growing in Christ by “living faith.” That is what I have been attempting to lay down as the essential of Christian spirituality: 1) the indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ in regeneration, and 2) the active function of the Spirit of Christ in sanctification. And the whole of such Christian spiritual is accomplished “by God’s grace through receptive faith.” There is no reason why we cannot spearhead another “Great Awakening” as we focus on the living Lord Jesus, and grow in “Christian Spirituality.”

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, let me just note that I have not offered any proceduralized “how-tos” – formulas or techniques – for achieving or attaining Christian spirituality. That is because our spirituality is not so much what *we do*, but what we *allow God to do* as He preserves us and brings us along as He desires. “He who began a good work will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). “Faithful is He to bring it to pass” (I Thess. 5:24).

We are so conditioned by the world around us to want to analyze and evaluate how well we are doing – even in the process of Christian spirituality. First of all, it’s not *our doing*; it’s HIS DOING, by His GRACE. So, it’s “none of our business” to try to ascertain our progress in Christian spirituality. It’s not for us to know, or analyze, or evaluate, or assess where we’re at on the journey, much less in comparison to anyone else. ...This goes against all of the “outcome analysis” of contemporary productivity and success guidelines, but “God’s ways are not our ways” (Isa. 55:8,9).

The more one seeks to be aware of his/her own “spirituality,” the more that person has taken their eyes off Jesus, and focused on themselves. It’s sort of like trying to evaluate one’s humility – the more you are aware that you have such, the less likely that you have such. It’s the same with “Christian spirituality.” Don’t worry about your progress. Don’t try to be your own “fruit-inspector.” Keep your eyes on Jesus; “looking unto Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). Just BE who you are in Christ – receptive and available to all that the living Lord Jesus wants to be and do through you! As you do so, the “fruit of the Spirit,” the character of Christ will be expressed, and you will glorify God. As the Westminster Confession states, “The chief end of man is to glorify God, and enjoy Him forever.”