

A discriminating spirituality

Gerald Gerbrandt, President
Canadian Mennonite Bible College

On the pages of *Time* magazine and *Christianity Today*, among movie stars and pastors, in academic courses and self-help seminars, spirituality is a hot topic. Interest in spiritual matters appears to unite strangely disparate groups. What is the appropriate response of the church to this reality?

The church's first response should be to recognize good news in our contemporary fascination with the spiritual. After all, the church is about spiritual business. For most of the twentieth century, society was dominated by materialistic assumptions that ruled out of order any consideration of the divine, or of anything beyond what could be empirically established. Now, perhaps unexpectedly, our culture exhibits a new openness to talk of a God beyond this world. The intense longing for the spiritual reflects the sense that something is sadly missing in our culture. More and more people are recognizing that there is—or should be—more to life than the material, than today. The truth of Augustine's prayer, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you," is supported by the experience of those who have tried to live without God. The church should ask how it can most effectively turn this longing into a response to the God who created us, and who wishes to be in relationship with us. Here is an opportunity to present the Christian message. This is good news for the church.

On the other hand, the popularity of spirituality also creates challenges for the Christian church. First of all, the church needs to communicate clearly. It is difficult to think carefully about a topic that people think they understand. Matters become even more complex when the subject is one the church has come to understand in a Christian manner, but which has developed a new set of connotations in popular discourse.

Spirituality certainly fits into this category. Although the terms "spiritual" and "spirituality" are widely used today, there seems to

Sometimes people use the term “spirituality” simply to give a statement a certain atmosphere. How is an encounter with God different from a *spiritual* encounter with God?

be little shared understanding of their meaning. Do these words refer to an indomitable human spirit? To some amorphous spiritual power beyond us? Or to the Spirit of the God of Jesus Christ? These meanings are widely divergent. If “spirituality” is used in one of the first two senses, the reference may have little in common with the Christian understanding of the term.

Sometimes, especially within the church, people use the term “spirituality” simply to give a statement a certain feeling or atmosphere. When I hear the word I frequently ask how the meaning of the sentence would be changed if it were deleted.

For example, is an encounter with God different from a *spiritual* encounter with God? The first challenge for the church is to develop a way of using terms related to spirituality that communicates precisely. Understanding and growth become possible only when communication is clear and not clouded with meaningless or ambiguous terms.

A second challenge the church faces is to know how to distinguish between popular spirituality and Christian spirituality, the kind of spirituality it wishes to foster. The church is about spiritual business, but not everything called spiritual in our time is consistent with the church’s business. The popularity of spirituality today has made it a profitable enterprise for the unscrupulous. And even the sincere and devout can promote causes and practices that are not constructive or life-giving for the people of God. The church needs to discriminate.

In the process of discrimination the church’s theological affirmations and traditions are a valuable resource, and must be used. Here are some questions we may ask in this process.

1. Is the spirituality under consideration human-centred, or God-centred? For the Christian, true spirituality brings a person closer to the spirit of God. Unfortunately, much contemporary spirituality seems to be more focussed on the human spirit than on God’s Spirit. To speak about the human spirit is not wrong, but it is not necessarily Christian. Biblical theology teaches

that God invites us to be reconciled with God and the neighbour, not with ourselves. After all, our human and imperfect nature is such that reconciliation with our deeper self still leaves us unsatisfied.

2. Does the spirituality sufficiently recognize the Christian theology of grace? It is possible for an emphasis on spiritual disciplines to become a works righteousness. And yet the biblical affirmation is clear: we are saved by grace. Salvation is a gift of God which cannot be earned through works, be they acts of mercy or spiritual disciplines.
3. Is the spirituality individualistic or communal in its focus? An important theme in Anabaptist theology is the emphasis on the communal nature of the Christian life. One is not a Christian all by oneself, but in fellowship with brothers and sisters. True spirituality should enhance the life of the church and not undermine it.
4. Is the spirituality holistic? Much popular spirituality assumes a dualism of body and spirit, as well as of intellect and emotion. Spirituality is then understood as bound up with the human spirit, or the emotion, and in tension with ethics or intellectual endeavor. True spirituality is holistic, and shapes the total being.
5. Does the spirituality move the person beyond himself or herself into the world? The Christian message is clear: we are called to witness to those around us in word and deed. True spirituality will always move the person or the group beyond self-preoccupation into service of the neighbour and society.

The contemporary interest in the spiritual is good news for the church, but it also challenges the church to think carefully about spirituality, and to use its theological heritage as a valuable resource in the process.

