

Christian spirituality Following the way of Jesus

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This text was originally presented as a sermon.

Last year, while on my way to a conference in another city, I fell into conversation with the man seated next to me on the airplane. After the usual introductory comments—where are you going, where are you from—and after the usual polite inquiries—what do you do, how long have you worked there—our conversation turned to more serious matters of faith. “I do believe in a Higher Power,” the man said to me. “I’m a spiritual person.”

Not long ago, I read an item in the newspaper about a Women of Faith rally held in Spokane, Washington. Twelve thousand women came together for the inspirational weekend of worship, prayer, and special speakers. One woman, who had flown in from Oregon to take part in the rally, said, “I’m very interested in things spiritual, as opposed to things religious.”

Spirituality seems to be everywhere these days. Books on spirituality line the shelves of our bookstores. Christian radio stations and interfaith television networks offer a host of programs on religious and spiritual themes. A search for spirituality on the Internet yields 399 categories, 711 web-sites, 250,000 web pages.

What’s more, there seem to be as many different definitions of spirituality as there are different people and different sources of information. To the man on the plane, spirituality meant a personal belief. To the woman at the rally, spirituality was something different from religion. One book promotes spiritual growth through meditation. Another book describes how to find your spirit guide. One TV program is devoted to Islam, another to Hinduism, another to Orthodox Christianity. One web page is devoted to spirituality in the workplace. Another is all about spirituality and humour.

So how are we to understand spirituality? Is it whatever we want to make of it? Is it religious? Is it Christian? Is there a Mennonite spirituality? If so, what does it mean for you and me?

Perhaps one way to answer these questions would simply be to read Article 18 of our confession of faith, which is titled “Christian Spirituality.” This article talks about our relationship with God, about discipleship, about various spiritual disciplines, including prayer, study of Scripture, reflection on God, corporate worship. I read through all of that again as I thought about this theme. As I continued reading through the article and through the commentary that follows it, I came across this line: “Christian spirituality is defined by Christ and his way, in accordance with the Scriptures.” Christian spirituality is defined *by Christ and his way*, in accordance with the Scriptures. So perhaps another way of answering our questions about spirituality is to look at the life of Jesus. How did Jesus experience and express spirituality? What spiritual disciplines were part of Jesus’ life?

Jesus’ spirituality

From the Gospel accounts, it is clear that for Jesus, all of life was Spirit-led and Spirit-filled. Matt. 1:20 tells us that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. In Matt. 4:1, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. In Luke 4:18, Jesus announced the start

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of his public ministry with the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” Even on the cross Jesus cried out to God, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). And three days after his death, the Spirit of God raised Jesus from the dead (Rom. 8:11). All of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection was marked by a spiritual awareness and a spiritual depth.

In fact, during his earthly life, Jesus’ relationship with God was so close and so personal that he often talked about God—and often talked to God—as “my Father” (e.g., Matt. 10:32, 26:39; John 5:17, 15:1). Jesus could say, “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30). Jesus could see the kingdom of God in a farmer sowing seed or in a woman baking bread. He could draw spiritual truth from the lilies

of the field, the birds of the air, or a cup of well water. Even at a wedding or a funeral or a dinner party, Jesus was aware of God's presence and engaged in God's work. All of Jesus' life was spiritual, because he lived it all in a constant, personal relationship with God.

For Jesus, spirituality was more than just the latest fad. It was a way of life. Spirituality was more than a weekend retreat of contemplation or a daily hour of meditation. It was an ongoing communion with God. Spirituality was more than belief in a supernatural power, more than an impersonal sense of oneness with nature. It was a personal relationship with a living God.

One of the ways Jesus expressed this ongoing, living relationship with God was through prayer: "In the morning, while it was still very dark, [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed" (Mark 1:35). During the day, when Jesus had just fed a huge crowd of people with the five loaves and two fish, he dismissed them, sent his disciples off in a boat, and "after saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray" (Mark 6:46). After the Last Supper with his disciples, while even his closest followers were falling asleep, Jesus "threw himself on the ground and prayed" (Mark 14:35). According to the Gospel record, Jesus prayed in the morning, in the daytime, at night.

In addition to prayer, Jesus' spirituality also expressed itself in reading and reflecting on the Scriptures. In Matthew 4, when he was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, Jesus answered each temptation with the words of Scripture. In Luke 4:18, Jesus announced his public ministry by quoting from the scroll of Isaiah. In John 7:14–24 and in other portions of the Gospels, Jesus could talk with the religious authorities on their own terms and on their own topics and still astonish them with his teaching.

Jesus' spirituality also found expression in ethical action and good works. His prayer life and his understanding of Scripture were not practiced in otherworldly isolation. Instead, Jesus welcomed the outcast, fed the hungry, healed the sick, even raised the dead. Jesus called others to a personal relationship with God (John 17:3) and to holy living (Matt. 5:48). He taught them how to pray (Matt. 6:5–15). He taught them the truth of the Scriptures (Matt. 5:21–48; Luke 24:45). He sent them also to

share the good news of God's kingdom and to continue his kingdom work (Luke 10:1–16; Matt. 28:18–20).

These quick snapshots of Jesus' own experience and practice of spirituality don't give us a complete definition or discussion of his spirituality. But from the Gospels we have these glimpses of Jesus that demonstrate his personal relationship with God. We know that he spent time in prayer, in the study of Scripture, and in serving others. At times he withdrew from others to spend time alone (Mark 1:35). At times he fasted (Matt. 4:2). At times he worshiped with others and sang hymns (Matt. 26:30).

These were all deliberate, concrete expressions of Jesus' spiritual life as recorded in the Gospels. His spirituality was religious in the best sense of the word—godly, devout, worshipful. But it was not religious in the sense of being rigid or legalistic. In

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fact, Jesus criticized the religious establishment for its legalism. Matt. 23:23: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others." In turn, the religious establishment criticized Jesus for being too liberal. He did not keep the Sabbath in the expected manner (Mark

2:23–28; John 9:13–16). At one point, Jesus is even described as "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34).

In the spiritual smorgasbord of contemporary life, it may seem as if anything goes, as if spirituality is whatever we want to make of it. And perhaps that's what the religious establishment of Jesus' day thought about Jesus' way of life—that instead of following their tradition of spirituality based on the law, Jesus was making up his own brand of spirituality with his own rules.

But for Jesus, spirituality was not a matter of "anything goes." When asked about the greatest commandment in the Law, he said, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your

neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:37–40).

In the same way, Jesus’ life of spirituality was also grounded in these two commandments, in loving God and in loving neighbour. His personal relationship with God, his prayer life, his study of Scripture, his times of worship, solitude, and fasting were all part of loving God. And in loving his neighbour as himself, Jesus called others to the same way of life through his preaching, teaching, and miraculous works. Jesus’ spirituality was a spirituality of loving both God and neighbour.

Spirituality today

During a study leave from my congregation, I’ve been visiting different churches to experience and explore different ways of worship. Or, in the terms of this sermon, I could say I’ve been visiting different churches to experience and explore different expressions of spirituality.

One Sunday, I worshiped in a Roman Catholic church. At the front of the sanctuary was a large altar, and behind the altar were two sets of benches placed facing one another. The worship service began with a processional of priests and assistants—all men and boys—who took their places at the two sets of benches. There were books with several different orders of service, but no one provided verbal instructions about which page to start on. That hardly seemed to matter. All of the men and boys on the front benches, and most of the congregation, seemed to know what to do—which page to turn to, when to kneel, when to stand, when to cross themselves. At certain points, there was the smell of incense, the sound of bells, and chanting from those who sat at the front.

I was struck by the otherworldliness of it all. There was a sense of mystery, of holiness, of an orderliness understood only by those who had been given special knowledge. I felt as if the worship in that place would have carried on whether or not I had been there that morning—as if those on the benches at the front of the sanctuary would have continued their chants and prayers even if no one else had been in the congregation.

Another Sunday, I worshiped at a United Church late afternoon jazz vespers service. The service began with a welcome

to the congregation and to the guest musicians—in this case, a jazz band of about 20 men and women. There was a printed order of service, but each musician and each piece of music was also verbally introduced by name. Between each piece of music was a prayer or a Scripture reading with a brief reflection provided by the minister. The service ended with a few brief announcements, more introductions, and an invitation to coffee with the musicians in the church foyer.

The worship service seemed part concert, part fireside chat. Instead of mystery, there were clear introductions and clear instructions. Instead of separation between leaders and congregation, there was a sense of participation in a common experience. The worship was inviting but not pushy, informal and personal, a thoughtful service that encouraged reflection.

One Saturday evening, I worshiped at a contemporary-style Mennonite Brethren church. The worship began with congregational singing led by a music team, composed of a lead singer-guitarist, four backup singers, and several other musicians with guitars, drums, and saxophone. The music team and the words for each song were projected on two large screens at the front of the sanctuary. Later, the theme for the worship service was introduced on one of the screens with a clip from the movie *Toy Story*. About half of the service was singing, with the other half devoted to the pastor's sermon.

Here, the worship felt almost like an evening at the theatre. Instead of mystery and otherworldliness, there was a sense of familiarity and informality. It was the middle of summer, and the pastor and many in the congregation were dressed in shorts. The sermon was down-to-earth and practical. The music, sound system, and movie clip were professionally done. The worship was casual, personal, with an emphasis on participation.

Three different churches, three different spiritualities. Or were they really different? I'm still thinking them over in light of Jesus' spirituality. We don't have a comprehensive checklist of spirituality dos and don'ts. Perhaps Jesus felt that would be too legalistic to leave with his disciples. But we can set these experiences—and any other spiritual experience or spiritual practice—in the context of Scripture, in the light of Jesus' own experience and expression of spirituality. We can ask ourselves:

1. Does this experience or practice draw us into a deeper and more personal relationship with God?
2. Does it draw us to prayer and to Scripture?
3. Does it result in a life of ethical action and good works?
4. Is this experience or practice grounded in love for God and neighbour?
5. Does it lead us to Christ and his way in accordance with the Scriptures?

In our world today, we are faced with many different definitions of spirituality, many different ways of expressing spirituality. But Christian spirituality, Mennonite spirituality, is defined by Christ and his way, in accordance with the Scriptures. So let us follow Jesus in faith, in life, in a spirituality that comes from a personal relationship of love for God and love for others.

