

# CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

An article by Mark Paynter ThD.

## IS THE MODERN CHURCH TOO INSTITUTIONALISED?

By the close of the twentieth century the institutionalization of Christianity was causing Christians to lose sight of their prime focus, personal relationship with Christ and reflecting that relationship throughout the earth. In an address to the United States congress on November 19 1993 the chaplain to the American senate Richard Halverson lamented that the church of the 1990s was too institutionally focused. On that occasion Halverson expressed his concern that the Church of Jesus Christ of his day was thought of only institutionally. Halverson went on state that Matthew 13 contained seven parables, the longest of which revealed Jesus parabolic method, in the other six parables Jesus emphasized the hidden nature of the kingdom. Jesus emphasized that the kingdom is extended by God's mere presence rather than through its action or proclamation. A Christian's biggest witness is the quality of their lives and the overflowing of that life to others.<sup>1</sup> Halverson states "Now I have to believe, on the authority of the Word of God, that wherever a man or woman is indwelt by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit that person is a witness whether he or she ever says a word. They will be witnessing by the quality of their lives"<sup>2</sup> Fourteen years later we need to ask ourselves whether the church of today is still more focused on its growth and maintenance intuitively or has it begun to more openly embrace a genuine concern for the reality of the indwelling of the presence of the living God and a concern for both the quality of life and interpersonal relationship.

## A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON HISTORY

It is possible to identify three distinct approaches to how history is viewed. One possible view is to see history as a cyclical ongoing process has no plan or purpose any perceived movement in history is only illusory. Many Eastern thinkers hold to such a view.

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Halverson address to congress November March 1994 contained in article "God and Caesar" in The Evangelical Theological Society. (1994; 2002). *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Volume 37* (Vol. 37, Page 129). The Evangelical Theological Society.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Halverson address to congress November March 1994 contained in article "God and Caesar" in The Evangelical Theological Society. (1994; 2002). *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Volume 37* (Vol. 37, Page 128). The Evangelical Theological Society.

The second way in which history can be viewed is the materialistic view here history is viewed as a record of a series of causes and effects governed by evolutionary processes but lacking intent, purpose and deliberate design.

The third view of history is that history is linear in which every event is related to another and occurs under the watchful eye of a supreme being who in the events of history is outworking His intents purposes and design. Such a view is common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. A Christian view of history maintains that human history began with the creation of the first couple and will end in the second coming of Christ to establish his eternal kingdom with histories central point the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Christ.<sup>3</sup> Seen from a linear perspective human history is the theatre in which God acts to establish his eternal purposes for his creation. This view enables a person to see every event that happens in this life as a divine opportunity to grow and develop in conforming to the will of God.

If history is linear then it is vital that we maintain a relationship with God who is directing the outworking of His purposes in History. This understanding placed the ancient people of Israel in sharp contrast with the surrounding cultures.

In marked contrast to the prayers of the surrounding cultures whose petitions were preoccupied with pleas for material gain, or the manipulation of deities the prayers in early Judaism were reflections of their relationship to their God. This can be readily seen in Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego response to King Nebuchadnezzar when being bound prior to being thrown into the fiery furnace. These three men informed the seemingly powerful King “If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king.” (Dan 3:17)<sup>4</sup> The Jewish people lived out of the conviction that God was their God and both heard and answered prayer. This can be readily seen in the Psalmist statement “I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live” (Ps 116:1-2).

In the first thirty years of what Christians refer to as the first century a new movement began to spring up. The founder of this movement was of course our Lord Jesus Christ, who in the third

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Depew article *Introduction to the Survey of Church History* on Internet Website <http://pages.preferred.com/~mdew/class1.html> retrieved Saturday 10 December 2005 7.15am

<sup>4</sup>*The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Da 3:17.

decade of the first century was betrayed, crucified, resurrected and ascended. Following his ascension his followers engaged in evangelism spreading the gospel wherever they went. These evangelists established communities of Christians which were marked by its members being initialized into the community through baptism, participation in breaking bread together, a sharing of material goods and spiritual fellowship as well as a deep sense of love. In these communities racial barriers were broken down and together these communities discovered that their founder, the Lord Jesus Christ was the one who had been foretold in the pages of the Old Testament<sup>5</sup> and had come to fulfill the requirements of Old Testament law and the prophecies of the Prophets.

Following Jesus' ascension his followers collected and preserved in written form the words of Jesus were in a collection of books that became known as the New Testament. The early church maintained a belief that Jesus return was imminent, when this did not happen a new generation of leaders was appointed to replace the Apostles. The early church did not consider Christianity antithetical to Judaism but rather the fulfillment of all that had been anticipated in the Old Testament. Up until 69 A.D and the fall of Jerusalem the early church met in Jewish Synagogues, so that Christianity was seen as a form of Judaism. In the last three decades of the first century Christianity began to increasingly distinguish itself from Judaism as this happened the church began to be persecuted. Once Christianity had distinguished itself from Judaism the Romans began a series of persecutions, many of which were carried out because the Christians could not give sole allegiance to the Roman Emperor but owed their prime allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. With the acceptance of Christianity as a religion by the Emperor Constantine Christianity began to be institutionalized.

## **THE CHALLENGE OF A POSTMODERN CULTURE**

Christians must also be aware that we are living in a society that many commentators are describing as being post modern. A post modern society rejects the scientific rationalization that was a common feature of the last three centuries and out of this rejection there has emerged an increasing lack of confidence that left to himself mankind will be able to solve the human dilemma of pain and suffering that is so common to so many. Optimism in Man's ability to think through the issues of the day is replaced with pessimism. This trend however brings new opportunities for those who are able to present the gospel in a meaningful way because essentially the Gospel brings hope, hope of Salvation (1 Thess 5:8) and righteousness (Gal 5:5), of eternal life (Titus 1:2; 3:7) and a glorious inheritance (Col 1:27) along with the hope of seeing the glory of the Lord (Rom 5:2)

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew D Mayes *Celebrating the Christian Centuries* SPCK Holy Trinity Church, Marylebone Road London NW1 \$DU 1999 ISBN 0-281-05214 X page 3

## **WHAT IS CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY?**

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in what can loosely be called Christian spirituality. Today we live in a culture where the word spirituality has become part of everyday vocabulary this development has provided Christians with an opportunity to openly discuss the uniqueness of their understanding of spirituality. However in this dialogue one must constantly be on guard that Spirituality does not become what ever one wants it to be. In the world climate in which we live as Christians we must be aware of the multifaceted layer of philosophies, theologies and worldviews that we encounter on a daily basis. Our spirituality must not become a pragmatic search based on self seeking that places our concern for our well being at the centre of all that we do and think, rather our spirituality must be based on a journey towards discovering who every member of the trinity that Christians claim to serve is. Such a spirituality will be centered not on self seeking but on entering into a relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the full realization that not only is Jesus Christ the way, the truth and the life (John 14:5) but that the Holy Spirit is indeed the Spirit of truth who has promised to lead all who follow Christ into truth (John 16:13).

Throughout its pages the Bible alerts its readers to the fact that Christianity Spirituality is at its core internal. We are reminded us of this when God says to Samuel “God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart (1 Sam 16:7).” In 1 Chronicles 28:9 we read these words “As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts.” David recalls “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart. O God, Thou wilt not despise.” (Psalm 51:16-17). In the Old Testament the people of God showed their inner love for God by strictly observing the requirements of the law.

In the New Testament, true spirituality is the loving of God and people from the inside out (Matt 22:37-40). Jesus was angry with the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, they said one thing and did another and did the right things with the wrong motives. Jesus gave the entire Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) to teach his followers that God desires that our hearts be totally devoted to him. The Christian life is a life of faith. The first ingredient is to believe and trust in God for salvation (Rom 10:9-10), this leads to a willingness to obey the Lord (John 14:15) springing from an inner desire to please Him (Heb 11:6) as we realize more and more just how much he loves us..

Paul urged the Philippians to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure ” (Philippians 2:12–13). In their writings the apostles emphasized that our spirituality must avoid the extremes of legalism and

excessive freedom. The Apostle Paul taught that central to a Christian understanding of Spirituality is the fact that God created each person with the desire to do his will and work his pleasure. The Christian responds to the inner desire to do the will of God through obedience. We must always remember that Christianity is not a religion but a relationship, frequently we are tempted to turn into a religion but this only leads to frustration and a sense of lack of fulfillment because we were designed to live out of relationship with the Lord (John 15:1-11).

## **TRUE SPIRITUALITY IS CONFORMING TO THE IMAGE OF CHRIST**

Over time a person who has entered into a personal relationship with Christ and who is open to the ministry of the Holy Spirit begins to conform to the image of Christ.

This process occurs as the believer interacts with the Scriptures, the Christian community and the world as well as the contemporary situation in which they live. When it comes to theology, the Christian Theologians task is to seek to understand the challenges of the present situation while recalling the solutions put forward by previous generations, and streams in the Christian tradition to the situations they faced.

For the Apostle Paul there is no separation between Christian spirituality and Christian life, they are identical. Authentic Christian spirituality is the outcome of learning to live in the Spirit who is at work in us to produce a obedience to God that is conscious, intentional and purposeful and which aim is to lead us to a perfect love for God and those whom we come into contact. The apostle Paul demonstrated this teaching in his own life by counting all things as loss in order that he might know Christ, the power of Christ's resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings (Phil 3:10). For Paul "to know Christ" meant having a personal relationship with Christ by faith, "to know Christ" is the essence of the Christian faith, to be saved is to know Christ in a personal way. The word "know" that appears in Philippians 3:10 means far more than mere intellectual knowledge about Christ for it involves a personal experience of him. Paul sought a going intimate relationship with the Lord, a continual every day moment by moment relationship. Paul wanted to know the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. Formerly Paul knew a set of religious rules now that he knew Christ he had someone who could be a friend, a constant companion and master. Instead of rules to follow Paul discovered that Christ was someone to walk with, pray to, and obey. Paul knew that to know Christ involved a willingness to suffer. Paul realized that such suffering would bring him into a much closer affinity and more relationship with Christ. Through all that he went through Paul would be conformed to the image of Christ. Furthermore as Paul grew in his relationship with Christ he also experienced in his own life the same power that had raised Christ from the dead working in his life and heart to make

him a person who reflected the image of Christ. Today we who live in the twenty first century must appreciate that the same power that worked in Paul's life is available to work in the believer's life today (Col. 3:1).

## **A FOLLOWER OF CHRIST IMITATES HIM**

As a result of Paul's understanding his method of discipleship was to encourage those he discipled to imitate him as he imitated Christ. To imitate is to mimic. He commanded the Corinthians to imitate him (1 Cor 4:16) as he imitated Christ (1 Cor 11:1). He encouraged the Ephesians to be imitators of God (Eph 5:1), as beloved Children, this meant that they were to walk in love, even as Christ loved us and gave himself for us (Eph 5:2) He urged the Philippians to join in imitating him, by keeping their eyes on those who walk according to the example he had set (Phil 3:17). He commended the Thessalonians for becoming imitators of Paul, Silvanus and Timothy and of the Lord (1 Thess 1:6). The key to them being able to do this was that they had received the word in much affliction and with joy in the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 1:7). In his second letter to the Thessalonians he urges them to imitate him by not being idle, paying their own way, and being willing to toil day and night that they might not be a burden to anyone (2 Thes 3:7-9) Similarly the writer of the letter to the Hebrews urges his readers to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises (Heb 6:12). They were to consider the way in which their leaders lived and imitate their faith (Heb 13:7). While the Apostle John urged his readers to imitate good (3 John 11)

## **HALLMARKS OF AN IMITATOR OF CHRIST**

As Thomas Kepler (1897-1963) the original compiler *An Anthology of Devotional Literature* pointed out it is only through maintaining a deep devotional life before the presence of the Lord that the reality of a genuine Christian Spirituality can be expressed. A person who spends quality time in the presence of the Lord will demonstrate a quality of life marked by

1. True love for God and mankind.
2. A life lived in dependence upon God which brings about freedom to live an authentic lifestyle.
3. The imitation of Christ in every area and aspect of life.
4. An openness to receive the agape love of God.
5. A desire to help their fellow man but actually turn that desire into action.

6. A willingness to especially help those in less favorable circumstances than their own including those who are as yet have not entered into relationship with Christ.
7. A strong sense of belonging to the Kingdom of God and a belief that at least to some extent that Kingdom can be realized in history along with the realization that God is presently at work within them to bring about His purposes.
8. A continuous walk of humility.
9. Every person is seen for their potential in Christ, someone they can relate potentially as a part of the universal family that the church of God is and not as someone who is to be conquered.
10. Devotion to Christ is not a matter of escaping the world, but rather through devotion a person is stimulated to better the world
11. A self perspective that enables them to perceive themselves as windows through whom the “light of the world” is able to shine.<sup>6</sup>

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Thomas Kepler *An Anthology of Devotional Literature* Jordan publishing An imprint of Evangel Publishing House Nappance, Indiana 2001. Extract is from a translation by Thomas Okey in Everymans library Edition E P Dutton & Co

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<sup>6</sup> Derived from Thomas Kepler *An Anthology of Devotional Literature* Jordan publishing An imprint of Evangel Publishing House Nappance, Indiana 2001. Extract is from a translation by Thomas Okey in Everymans library Edition E P Dutton & Co page XX-XXI