

LATIMER STUDIES 52

A CRITIQUE OF SPIRITUALITY

BY J. F. D. PEARCE



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i. Suspect Spirituality

THERE is no doubt that books about spirituality sell like hot cakes in these days. Even secular bookshops have considerable displays of books on mysticism, the new age, meditation and Yoga. The Christian presses are constantly publishing paperbacks on prayer and spirituality, suggesting some new technique or a re-working of old ways. It is perhaps significant that so much writing today is concerned with experience. Prayer is equated with the experience of the numinous, whether that be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ or whether it be some spiritual force – good or evil. And there is a considerable number of people who practise meditation as a helpful and healing experience unrelated to any particular context or belief. In many ways it is seen as a process of coming to terms with the inner self or becoming ‘in tune with the infinite’ – which is not necessary defined in terms of a personal God.

The use of mantras which may or may not have any Christian content (unlike the ‘Jesus prayer’ of the Orthodox) is commended on every side. Similarly, it is thought to be helpful to contemplate a candle, a piece of rock, a flower or a piece of sculpture. And there is no doubt that these aids to prayer may be very useful if they are allied to an apprehension of their Christian context. However, in themselves, they may be only a means of relating to a world-order which is fallen and corrupt. Even nature is ‘red in tooth and claw.’

Another method of finding spiritual experience is through the use of drugs or sexual activity – both of which certainly may give temporary peace, a sense of well-being, even exaltation and a satisfaction with the self and with life as it is.

There is a temptation also to seek peace and spiritual experience in the use of tongues, which may be the tongues of the

New Testament or may the the ‘glossolalia’ which are found in many religions and milieux, or indeed even in baleful contexts. The attraction of this experience is essentially the short cut, or the abandonment of the rational for the experimental, whether understood or not.

This is paralleled by the tremendous interest which is generated by the whole subject of healing where the ‘I want it now’ longing is expected to be satisfied not so much by the painstaking work of doctors and nurses as by the short cut of the Christian (or indeed the non-Christian) faith healer. God or the spiritual is seen as a method by which we may avoid suffering and the labour of slow healing with the aid of the physician – or indeed the deterioration and suffering by which God may ask us to share in the ‘fellowship of His sufferings.’

And yet Christian spirituality involves at least four things which all too rarely appear in modern spiritual writings. First of all there must be a rational content – a meeting with the God who is revealed in the Word and in the written word.

Secondly, there must be a faith which is more than vague hopes, and has a real content as its object and a serious obedience in its commitment to God in Christ.

Thirdly, there has to be a real repentance which is more than remorse and regret, a repentance which involves a change of life, so that we pass our days in constant response to the challenge to live holy lives under the call of God by His Spirit.

Therefore, and fourthly, there must be a serious ‘holiness without which no man may see God.’

All spiritualities need to be tested by these four biblical principles. It is important that the Christian church does not sell people short, and is prepared to make a critique not only of secular and pseudo-christian spiritualities but also of its own practice.

2. The Bible as Determinative

IT is an extraordinary fact that many writers about prayer and liturgy do not think it is necessary to test spiritual experience by the Scriptures, whereas they would certainly test doctrine by that authority.

Of course, there are many whose attitude to the Bible is simply that it is important and authoritative only because it is the record of how men and women met God, and of how, in their cultural milieu, they were grasped by the attractive nature of God in Old and New Testament. In our own fresh cultural setting, it is assumed, our attitude to Christ may be different, and we shall most certainly interpret ethics and spirituality rather differently. Such is one approach to the Scriptures.

There is another approach which holds that the Bible is authoritative not only because it is the only record of the facts of the faith but also because it is inspired and perspicuous. That last statement is highly controversial even among evangelicals today, many of whom would find it difficult to speak of the Bible as infallible and totally inspired. An even greater number would be very unhappy to recognize that the Scriptures are perspicuous, that is that they can be understood in the ways they were originally intended at their face value, and that anyone who cares to take time can be spoken to by the Holy Spirit through the Bible today.

But, whatever theory of the authority of the Scriptures we hold, most would take the view that the New Testament is rightly used to test the various aspects of Christian experience down the ages, and that the Scriptures are the bar to which all claims must be submitted, whether within Christianity or without.

It is normal to test doctrine in this way and often we so test ethics and even liturgy, although with more reluctance. What we do

not do is test 'the spiritual writers.' Logically we should do so.

For example, what does the New Testament say about the life with God?

A writer who wrote one of classics on holiness, by that name, was J C Ryle. In his book on page 45 he enforces the question in a context in which experience was once again becoming the norm.

'Are you yourself holy this very day or are you not? And why do I ask so straitly and press the question so strongly? I do it because the Scripture says, "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord". It is written, it is not my fancy; it is the Bible, not my private opinion; it is the word of God not of man: "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord" (Heb 12:14).'

Is it not worth asking whether ANY book which speaks of the prayer life but says nothing or very little about moral holiness is really to be trusted or taken very seriously? The great aim of the chief spiritual writers is that man may see the vision of God, but Hebrews makes it crystal clear that this is quite impossible without moral holiness, for in the scriptures holiness is not merely contact with and experience of 'the Other.' It is also a life which is conformed to His likeness and this is the great priority for all serious Christians.

3. **Separating the Person**

THERE has always been a danger of failing to treat the human person unitively, as if it were possible to deal with the mind on the assumption that there were no body, or to treat the soul as if the mind were irrelevant to it. Man is a unity and we have been relearning the biblical principle that we are a psychosomatic whole – although that very word, for some people, appears not to include the soul or spirit of man.

The fact is that the ability to pray may be affected by our posture, by our heavy dose of influenza, by our sense of unease or because of some dislocation in our relationships. Body, mind and spirit must be treated and thought of as one, at least in the religion of the Incarnation. We are not seeking to escape from the body into some ‘higher state.’ In fact, the Christian faith sees even the after life as summed up in the concept of ‘the resurrection of the body.’ Body, mind and spirit are all to be redeemed and, in a new form, to be translated into heaven.

It is therefore very dangerous to imagine that the use of some specified ‘mantra’ will lead us to a higher state of spiritual consciousness. It may of course lead us into an experience of dislocation and even exaltation. This sort of experience may be obtained by the constant repetition of the same chorus, and, of course, by many hypnotic techniques. The important point to note about all these techniques is that none of them are necessarily ‘spiritual.’ They may be relaxing; they may be ‘exalting’; but even hearing Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony may not necessarily consist of a spiritual experience, properly defined. We may feel a sense of peace like that experienced as we rest in a deck-chair on a summer’s day, but there may be no content which can be defined as of God.

Another division which is to be resisted is the division of theology itself into sections, as if the deity himself could be

separated into component parts. Often we divide our study of God into natural theology, biblical theology and the rest. This is dangerous. It is no less dangerous to separate mystical and ascetic theology. All theologies need to be related to the Scriptures, and mystical theology may be no more than musing about the divine under the influence of a heavy incense, unless it is set against the touchstone of the religious, in the Bible.

Therefore, in considering the nature of a true spirituality, it is vital to ensure that every variety of writing and experience is submitted to the authority of Scripture. For example, we might decide that most of what our Lord teaches on prayer is concerned with intercessory and petitionary prayer. If this were shown to be true, we should wish to make this determinative of most normal prayer, and we should therefore look with some misgivings at those 'higher' forms of prayer which are less 'down to earth' and direct, and less obviously biblical.

4. **Ladders to God?**

THERE has been a very long tradition of writing about prayer which has conceived that there are gradations of the spiritual life, that the normal Christian prayer life passes through a number of steps until it reaches the highest levels of religious experience, and that this is the normal way in which the soul progresses. For example, one of the most seminal books, by F P Harton, *The Elements of the Spiritual Life*, approaches its subject in precisely this way, suggesting that the soul begins with vocal prayer and then graduates via meditation and contemplation to the prayer of union.

Again, the majority of writers on ascetical theology write as if prayer were a life of concentrated effort and the keeping of careful rules of prayer, as a result of which it is possible to climb up to the higher reaches of the spiritual life.

Similarly, the mystical theologian often seems to suggest that the experiential life of prayer develops into a deeper and deeper knowledge of God in a series of experiences, or a development of experience, which leads in due course to a form of prayer which is almost impossible to describe adequately in human language. St John of the Cross is probably the most important of these writers. It is significant that his *Ascent* and *Dark Night* sometimes seem to owe a good deal to that kind of Manicheism where the physical and the natural, and even the delights of the soul, are barriers to meeting the eternal God. Perhaps we need to remind ourselves that the God of the Christians is not an Influence but a Person. Perhaps we need to remember that the Bible, and the New Testament in particular, is fundamentally world-affirming rather than world-denying.

When St John of the Cross says 'that the soul must journey by knowing God through what He is not, rather than through what He is' (p 215), it may be that the alarm bells will begin to ring. It seems to this writer that St John is not just warning about the

dangers of the experience-orientated spirituality, but is seeking a nirvana, which is a good way away from the prayer life recommended in the New Testament. St John of the Cross says that the soul 'obtains more joy and recreation in creatures through the dispossession of them. He cannot rejoice in them if he beholds them with possessiveness, for this is a care which, like a bond, fastens the spirit to earth and does not allow it freedom of heart.' And yet we read that 'all things are yours ... whether ... the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours and you are Christ's and Christ is God's (1 Cor 3:21-23).

It seems to me that there is a persistent strand of thought in many spiritual writers which sees a true experience of God as the abandonment of the mind, and the flight from this earth and its delights, into some realm of the spirit which is basically discontinuous with the world of the Carpenter of Galilee, discontinuous also with the world of London at the end of the second millennium.

Of course there is much that is highly valuable in St John of the Cross but what I am seeking to point out is an underlying tendency about which we need to be on our guard, a tendency which is far more clear and pronounced in the less distinguished writers, and certainly in many modern authors.

5. **The Importance of the Mind**

ONE of the characteristics of our day is the decline of content in our services, whatever the denomination. We are becoming aware of the serious decline in the standard of educational attainment (although not necessarily of intelligence) in our society, as a result of the decline of the educational system in certain parts of the community. Even the press itself gives evidence of this gradual decline, and ministers are becoming aware of the fact that many worshippers have but very limited numerate and reading skills. In this situation, the words of Scripture and the language of many of the great hymns of the Christian church are losing their power. More and more churches are relying upon a diet of frequently repeated choruses, often with a very limited doctrinal and religious content – Christian though they be. The loss of the Psalms and of the Old Testament is but the most serious sign of the decline in the content of worship which has occurred over the past 30 or more years.

As a result a good deal of what passes for meditation, and which would at one time have been full of scriptural material, is now replaced by the use of objects for ‘meditation.’ For example, the writer recently went to an entire quiet morning where the content of the prayer time was concentrated upon a few stones, a draped curtain and a few candles. At no time was the Bible used, and the exercise had a content which might have been appropriate to any religion, although in this case there was a Christian basis.

It is interesting that it is now common to deride the ‘Quiet Time’ or ‘the Morning Watch’ as if it were a simplistic discipline of prayer. The writer has been at many ABM conferences where candidates for the ministry have been regarded as having rudimentary prayer life if they simply read the Bible in the morning and meditated thereupon. And yet the Quiet Time properly undertaken in a disciplined way every morning ought to be the

foundation of any serious prayer life.

The Scripture Union method of prayer, which involves a serious reading of a number of verses (and not just one, as is the case with Every Day with Jesus), means that the Christian founds his day upon the Scriptures, in context. He then thinks about the passage, meditates upon it, turns it into prayer and perhaps also uses the notes to inform and inspire his prayer time.

Of course, this is but one amongst many methods of prayer, and there are many ways in which the Bible may be used intelligently, not least by the disciplined study of a good commentary, but serious meditation with real content must surely be the best of all bases for a lively prayer life. And yet one reads of many who have 'grown out' of this discipline. One suspects that what they mean is that they want an easier and less demanding way of keeping in touch with God. But still there is no better way, and every other method is in danger of developing somewhat limited and immature Christians.

Of course, for those who are lacking in adequate reading skills (and indeed for many folk in order to provide variety), it is very helpful if contemplation can also be practised. This is essentially the use of pictures and the imagination. It is well exemplified by Studdert Kennedy in his writings on prayer. There is a great deal to be said for the imaginative use of pictures, but it is important always to avoid the lightweight and the deliberately obscure use of imagery. Some kinds of Ignatian prayer are in danger of reading so much INTO the Scriptures, that we fail to see what can be read OUT of the plain story recorded in the gospels. And, even though we may believe in a perspicuous Bible, it is still true that we sometimes need help if we are to understand and to worship the Lord in spirit and in TRUTH.

6. The Blessing and Delusion of Feelings

ONE of the considerations which is given little thought by some writers on prayer is the possibility of the emotions being manipulated either by external forces or by oneself. It is perfectly possible for the astute minister so to plan a service that many of those in attendance will experience a sense of exaltation which is almost wholly due to the precise form of the service, the kind of music used, the use of silence and the 'togetherness' of the congregation. The writer was at a great event in a sea-coast town where about 5,000 people were present to hear a well-known speaker. After he had said a few sentences, he stopped and called for silence. A great silence fell upon the five thousand. It was predictable that before long there was a tittering which grew into laughter. The speaker proclaimed that this was the Holy Spirit. Now it might have been, and the Spirit of God can use any human emotion to fulfil his purpose, but what was evident was the fact that, unless the speaker was extraordinarily naive, he was deliberately manipulating that great crowd. And the point is that anyone with a commanding presence could have done it.

Again, the writer has been in assemblies – quite small ones – where the use of a simple chorus played at considerable volume and repeated not twice but perhaps one hundred times has produced a sense of euphoria in the congregation, with the result that phenomena like being 'slain in the spirit' have readily occurred, with other evidence of euphoria. Heat and light or cold and dampness, likewise, can have a deep effect upon the personality.

On the other hand, there is no less danger when the worship of the congregation seeks to be merely cerebral and refuses to recognize that man is an emotional animal as well as a person controlled by the mind. Both parts of the human psyche need to be kept in tandem by the wise leader of worship.

If group psychology can be used (intentionally or unintentionally) to produce certain results, it is also true that the same may be evident in personal devotion. For example, Ignatius Loyola's advice on fasting and personal flagellation is bound to produce some personal reactions which would not be produced without them. This is not to say that fasting is always unsuitable. In fact, the Lord specifically required it of his followers (Mat 6:16), but the wise spiritual guide must be aware that a sharpened sense of the supernatural may be produced simply by abstaining from food, which, in itself, is neither good nor bad.

'Darkness' is also an experience which, while it may be given by God to souls who are being taught to walk by faith and not by sight, can also be produced by something as simple as post-flu depression. We are indeed psychosomatic beings. (Perhaps, most of all, we need to remember that what most frequently cuts us off from a sense of God is simply sin!).

None of this is to say that we should not fast or kneel for long periods, or repeat the 'Jesus prayer,' but we shall be sensible if we recognize that the 'feelings' which ensue may not in themselves be a sign of a higher spiritual state. It is surely greatly to be desired that we go on reading our Bible, meditating and interceding during long periods of 'dryness.' That, it may be thought, is more truly in the spirit of true Christian prayer. Emotional 'highs' may come, as they did to Paul, but they are a by-product not the aim of our devotions. Our real intention in prayer is to conform our will to that of our Lord, and to receive from him the teaching he would give us through the Scriptures, with the result that we become serious intercessors and petitioners at the throne of grace.

What must be determinative for the Christian is the place of the will in our devotional life. That must be what controls us, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. This means that the objective will almost always be more important than the subjective. It will not so much be 'I felt' as 'God has spoken to me through His word.'

The Christian life is, as we will need to recognize, summed

up in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, where the journey to the Heavenly City is really the story of an endless battle with temptation, and of the readiness to go on with the journey in spite of all the difficulties set in our way.

'It cost Christ and all his followers sharp showers and hot sweats ere they win to the top of the mountain. But still our soft nature would have heaven coming to our bedside when we are sleeping, and lying down with us, that we might go to heaven in warm clothes; but all that came there found wet feet by the way, and sharp storms that did take the hide off their face, and found to's and fro's, and ups and downs, and many enemies by the way' (Samuel Rutherford).

7. **Cross Bearing**

ONE of those notes of the Christian life which tends to disappear from evangelical religion is the right place of suffering in the pilgrimage of the mature Christian. This characteristic has always had a secure place in 'catholic' spirituality and has indeed often led to the bizarre.

Of course there have been those within the mainstream of Christianity who have seen the significance of suffering, and Amy Carmichael immediately springs to mind as one such. In her poem 'No Scar' she writes:

No wound? No scar?
Yet, as the Master shall the servant be,
And pierced are the feet that follow Me;
But thine are whole: can he have followed far
Who has no wound or scar?

(Towards Jerusalem, p 85)

For too long we have failed to expound and understand Heb 12:3-11, with its clear assumption that the way of the Christian will be hard just because he needs to learn discipline for his own good, and because he has a Father who loves him.

Again, Jesus' own words often remind us of the same truth. Luke 9:23 speaks of a radical discipleship to which new Christians are rarely introduced. Far too often it is suggested that the embracing of Christianity will make life easier, whereas in fact precisely the opposite is the case. Hundreds of new Christians have complained to the present writer that 'they never expected it to be so hard'! This is the fault of ministers who are so eager to gain a convert that we do not make it clear that Jesus' invitation to 'Come' to the heavy-laden is conjoined with a call to take his yoke upon us. That yoke is easy when we walk in the way of Christ, but sin, and

what have been called ‘petty experiments in self-assertion,’ lead to much pain.

Further, there is no doubt that it is Jesus’ specially favoured ones who are called to go through much pain and suffering. St Paul spoke of ‘filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ’ (Col 1:24). He longed to experience ‘the fellowship of his sufferings’ (Phil 3:10). He could say ‘I am crucified with Christ’ (Gal 2:20).

One of the most important books recently published on this theme is Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship*. It was a product of his early days and is sometimes compared unfavourably with the *Letters and Papers from Prison*, but it seems to this writer that it is a singularly balanced treatment of the negative way – the way of self-denial.

It was Luther who said ‘Not the work which you choose, not the suffering you devise, but the road which is clean contrary to all that you choose or contrive or desire – that is the road you must take. To that I call you and in that you must be my disciple. If you do that, there is the acceptable time and there your master is come’ (quoted in Bonhoeffer *Cost of Discipleship*, p 83).

In contrast to all this, we find that there are very few books on the spiritual life which even begin to deal with this element in the normal Christian life – for it is normal and not simply the privilege of holy souls. I have met very few Christians who have not had to go through many difficulties and indeed real sufferings. And this is what we should expect from passages like 1 Pet 2:21-23 and 4:12-19. Now, it is perfectly true that the background there was persecution, and that that situation is not replicated in all parts of the world at all times, although at any one time there are usually thousands of Christians who are suffering. Indeed, one sometimes wonders whether the reason that we, in the West, are not persecuted might be because our witness is less than robust. But in any case there are myriads of Christians who do suffer as a result of sickness and accident. It is cruel and unscriptural to encourage such folk to believe that, if they had enough faith, they would not have to suffer

as they do. The fact is that ‘man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward’ (Job 5:7), and that very few people go through life without encountering pain.

But the important consideration is how we deal with and face suffering when it comes.

There is the way of resignation – that rather effete response which is stoically prepared to put up with whatever the ‘President of the Immortals’ throws at Tess or me.

But this is a sub-Christian attitude. Our way must be to see beyond the present pain and loneliness or whatever, to the loving hand of a merciful and kind God, who ensures that ‘all things work together for good to those who love Him’ (Rom 8:28). During the pain, this is very difficult to accept, but, looking back, men and women constantly say ‘I now understand what God was going in me.’ This is the victory: when we accept suffering and even embrace it, longing to be rid of it, but being prepared to say ‘as for the Lord, his way is perfect’ (2 Sam 22:31).

At the same time, we must be prepared to ask for healing. It is right to come to the Lord three times, as Paul did with his ‘thorn in the flesh’ but, having done that, we then have to conclude that this evil thing (which suffering fundamentally is) can be transfigured by God and used to make us holy. For what matters most for us is not healing but holiness, and there are many ways in which the dear Lord will bring about that most desirable of consequences.

8. The Rule of Life

SUCH a phrase is simply a dirty word to many Evangelical and Protestant Christians – it smacks of earning our salvation, of Pharisaism and of dull routine. But is routine necessarily dull? Do we not all live by valuable and indeed essential routines such as washing, cleaning our teeth and paying our bills? Actions such as these are the bed-rock upon which human life is built. Of course, there may be exceptions to such rules, but rules or patterns of life there must be.

The same is surely true of the Christian life. First of all, there must be a pattern of daily prayer. Whether that comes first thing in the morning or at some other convenient time of day, it is simply a fact that, without a firm rule in this regard, our Christian life will founder. This writer knows a person who for forty years has kept the morning Quiet Time with Scripture Union Daily Notes. That woman is a very mature and stable Christian because her life has been based on such a rock and such a routine.

Secondly, there must be a rule of corporate worship, and not least of Holy Communion. If we once begin to go to church ‘because we feel like it,’ we shall soon cease altogether. It is amazing how many clergy do not go to church much on holiday. What does this say about their spiritual life?

Thirdly, there will be a rule of giving, of tithing. If we give what we can afford, our donations will become less and less as our responsibilities increase. Giving is an essential part of the life of a Christian for ‘God loves a cheerful giver’ (2 Cor 9:7).

Fourthly, there will be regular fasting, unless of course we are physically incapable of obeying this injunction of the Lord. He said ‘When you fast,’ and we cannot avoid this implicit command which was as vital to our Lord as prayer itself.

Then there will be some sort of plan about keeping Sunday and about regular intercession, self-examination and confession, as well as thanksgiving.

Every person's rule of life will be different but, for all who wish to grow as Christians, there must be self-discipline.

9. Fasting in the Life of the Christian

IN a way, fasting is another form of suffering, but one which is freely embraced.

It is important to note that there is nothing masochistic in the practice of fasting. We do not take it upon ourselves in order to punish our bodies but in order to free our minds and spirits for a deeper and more clear-sighted form of prayer, thinking and worship.

It is for this reason that we need to look much askance at the tradition of self-inflicted pain which may be exemplified by Ignatius Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises, where he commends the practice of chastising the body 'by scourging or beating ourselves.' (One wonders who many of those who, in these days, commend the Exercises so warmly actually pay much attention to this part of Ignatius's teaching!) But all this is a long way from the world of the New Testament which is always sane and sensible.

And yet simple fasting is most definitely commended by the Lord. It is of great importance to note that it was in the same discourse where Jesus delivered his major teaching on prayer, 'When you pray' (Mat 6:5), that he also says 'When you fast.' It is an extraordinary thing that Christians who pore over the Lord's teaching on prayer, often totally disregard his equally significant teaching on fasting.

What is quite clear is that it is not just a matter of eating fish (now a considerable delicacy to many people) on Fridays.

If we look at Jesus's own practice in the wilderness, we see that it meant literal fasting for forty days. It is of interest to notice that the really fit person can fast for forty days before beginning to die. And Jesus pushed himself to that limit in order that he might pray through his coming ministry and seek his Father's clear guidance upon the nature of that ministry in the coming days.

What, then, ought we to do as Christians today?

First of all, it needs to be said that people who are not fully fit probably should not fast at all. Certainly, there are some medical conditions in which it would be highly dangerous. But most of us are not in such a situation for much of our lives.

Some people give up one meal and use the time saved for prayer and intercession. Others set aside a whole day or perhaps two or three days, taking only water. Very often these times of fasting are themselves intended as a prayer to the Lord. This writer knows one woman who fasted for twenty-nine days for her father to be converted. At the end of that time, the Lord gave her the clearest of guidance that her father would be saved. She had to wait some years to receive the answer to her prayer and fasting but, at the end, he was indeed born again in a remarkable way.

It is time that, as Bible Christians, we set aside regular occasions for fasting. It is time that we taught and commended the practice to others on the authority of the Lord Himself.

10. The Place of Silence in Christian Devotion

PROTESTANT devotion has often been corporate rather than solitary. There has, traditionally, been little patience with retreats, silence, withdrawal from the world, and the 'Religious Life.' This is not the place to write at length of monasticism, but it is important here to note the great importance of withdrawal for prayer in the life of Jesus himself, not only in the forty days preparation but frequently in his active ministry. It is also probably very significant that Jesus did not begin his active ministry until about the age of 28, and that this preliminary time was spent in the hiddenness of Nazareth. With our activist pre-occupations, we might have assumed that Jesus would have 'got on' with an active ministry from the moment that he was old enough to do so. But he did not, and in fact his public ministry was but one tenth of his life – or perhaps less.

The story of Mary and Martha is, besides other things, a reminder of the primacy of time spent with the Lord. Likewise, the period spent by John on the Isle of Patmos suggests that there is a place for stability and withdrawal even in the face of the urgent need to win the world for Christ. Old Testament incidents have much the same message for us, and especially 'the gentle whisper' of 1 Kings 19:12.

Our problem is that we are so often rushing headlong in our desire to serve the Lord and to witness to Him that we do not take time to listen to his Word. As Chautard wrote, 'We must never leave the God of works for the works of God' (Soul of the Apostolate, p 7).

It seems important therefore that we recognize that the more Anglo-Catholic tradition of times of silence and prayer is profoundly Scriptural and was characteristic of a great many Protestant leaders as well. We need opportunities to be alone with God. Even the formal Retreat is not primarily a corporate activity but the provision of a chance for the individual to be alone with God, to

get to know Him better and to hear Him speaking in the ‘gentle whisper.’ It is time that evangelicals re-discovered the importance of silence and withdrawal in order that we might know God’s will and serve Him better.

(For further reading on this subject, see the author’s Grove Booklet, *Retreat to Advance*).

II. **Petition or the Conforming of the Will**

IT is significant to note how much of Jesus's teaching on prayer is specifically about petition. In Matthew Chapter 6 the Lord's prayer is principally petitionary. In Chapter 7 of the same gospel, verses 7 following are about very definite requests. Similarly, the parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8) is an exhortation to persistent prayer with a quite specific request.

Now, this is not to say that there is no place for adoration in the teaching of Jesus on prayer. One can see the importance of the phrase 'Hallowed be Thy name,' set out at the very beginning of the pattern prayer. No doubt, in that long period in the wilderness, there was much colloquy between Jesus and his Father, much worship, much adoration, much loving. But Jesus does not think it necessary to teach us much about such kinds of prayer. It may be that He assumes it. Certainly He would assume that his Jewish hearers were deeply steeped in the Scriptures through their regular attendance at the synagogue. It was their practice, when in Jerusalem, to attend the temple daily (Acts 2:46). A considerable part of their devotional life was taken up with a meditative repetition of parts of the Old Testament Scriptures. No doubt there would be occasions when, like Isaiah, they were surprised by joy and wonder and awe (Isaiah Ch 6). We know that the writer of the Revelation was the recipient of a great many visionary experiences in which he 'fell at his feet as though dead' (Rev 1:17). Adoration did play a vital part in the life of at least some of the early disciples, and meditation upon the Scriptures was a basic discipline for them all – at least corporately and liturgically. But it is still true to say that, for the most part, Jesus's teaching was about petition and intercession. At the very least therefore we must not allow intercession and petition to be downplayed in our teaching about prayer, for here is the heart of Christian prayer – seen pre-eminently in the life of people like Rees Howells, intercessor.

What is true of our Lord is no less true of the writings of his apostles and disciples in the New Testament. Much of what we learn is by allusion rather than by specific teaching, although there are passages like 1 Tim 2:1 where 'supplication, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving' are urged to be 'made for all men.' The mention of thanksgiving reminds us that this part of prayer had a far higher place in the life of the first Christians than it commonly does for 20th century believers. Again and again St Paul begins a letter with 'I thank my God in all my remembrance of you' (Phil 1:3).

If then, broadly speaking, petition is the most characteristic form of Christian prayer, there remains the problem of how the believer is to know the nature of the petition he is to make. The extraordinary tenses of Mark 11:24, 'when you pray believe that you have received it and you shall have it' suggest a conviction about petition which is not characteristic of much prayer today. Here we need to learn from the great exponents of the prayer of faith such as George Muller and Hudson Taylor. It was Taylor who said 'I have been impressed lately with the thought ... that people fail in praying the prayer of faith because they do not believe that God has answered but only that he will answer their petitions. They rise from their knees feeling that God will answer them some time or other, but not that He has answered already. This is not the faith that makes prayer effective' (The Fire Burns On, OMF, 1965). The struggle in prayer is primarily one of the conforming of our will to God's will rather than vice-versa. As we gradually attune our thoughts and understandings to God's will through a deepening acquaintance with the Scriptures, we become more confident in our petitions and are able to receive the answer, whether the response from God comes swiftly or after much waiting.

12. Liturgy and Repetition

IN the past 30 years much of the Church of England has lost an entire section of its life. We have ceased – broadly speaking – to worship liturgically, except when the Holy Communion is administered. Even then the liturgy is impoverished in language and inadequate and even downright heretical in doctrine, as booklets in the Latimer Studies have made clear.

But I am referring primarily to the collapse of Morning and Evening Prayer on Sundays and weekdays. The majority of Evangelical churches hold a Family Service in the morning of the Lord's Day, if they do not have Holy Communion. Evening Prayer has often given way to 'Praise and Prayer' and, in many cases, there is no service at all – at least in the majority of Church of England churches right across the spectrum. We have lost those incomparable services which were compiled from the old monastic offices and developed into richly Biblical events. Morning and Evening Prayer are becoming obsolete.

What has also gone from much of the Church of England is the thinking of the Reformers about the daily offices. It was intended that these should replace the daily Mass and Angelus, and that the incumbent should toll the bell and call as many as possible of his people either to come to worship with him or to stop and pray in the fields and businesses of the parish. Few evangelical incumbents actually do this any more, in spite of the clear directions of the Prayer Book and of the Canons.

The fact of the matter is that a great many evangelical Christians, and a good many others as well, have come to believe that there is something second best about repetition in prayer, as if this was what our Lord inveighed against when he condemned 'vain repetition.' But the repetition of Scripture passages which have real content and are repeated with clarity, sincerity and devotion is in fact

an ancient form of prayer which Jesus himself used in the synagogue. We only have to remember the many quotations He made from the Psalms to see this. On Calvary he quoted Psalm 22.

It has often been pointed out that there is no church in Christendom which uses as much of the Scriptures in its public worship as the English church. Psalms, Canticles and even Responses are almost entirely in the words of Scripture – at least when the Prayer Book is used.

But even when occasionally non-Scriptural material is used, such as the Te Deum, we are entering into a heritage which is rich beyond compare. It is time that we re-discovered this inheritance.

It is interesting to find that some other Protestant Christians are entering into this tradition in our day. It is instructive to study and use the Taize offices in order to see how they have valued this heritage and how thousands of young people – and not so young folk – have entered with profit into this kind of worship.

The Community of the Word of God (Hackney) is an example of a modern evangelical Community which has built into its life the practice of liturgical prayer twice a day – supplemented by free prayer at midday intercessions. In this way it is not dissimilar to the community founded by Nicholas Ferrar at Little Gidding, although the C W G is far more evangelical in ethos.

To sum up, it may be that, as a church and, in particular, as evangelicals, we need to rediscover the liturgical offices and to remember that they were never intended, in our reformed Church of England, as an esoteric exercise for the clergy but, rather, as an expression of the ‘seven whole days not one in seven’ of worship for the laity also.

13. Repentance – The Joy Filled Life

MOTHER Basileia Schlink once wrote a book entitled Repentance, the joy-filled life. It had limitations as a result of its over-emphasis on Arminian theology but the title of the book was superb and it blessed many souls. In recent years there have been many phenomena abroad in the Western world which have been called 'revival.' In fact, however, one of the most significant characteristics of the true revival has always been not only a deep desire to pray (and pray for long periods) but also a deep sense of conviction of sin and sins. We saw this pre-eminently in the East African revival before the Mau Mau tragedies. It was seen in a very different milieu in Dundee as a result of the ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne – while he himself was in the Holy Land (see the Memoir and Remains, by Andrew Bonar, Banner of Truth). Similarly, J Edwin Orr in his *The Light of the Nations* (Paternoster, 1965) says 'the meetings are orderly and generally marked by deep solemnity' (p 146, quoting a Methodist minister) and he comments that 'nowhere in the stirring accounts of Revival in London was there any evidence of prostration or hysteria' (p 150).

It is significant that one of the most frequently urged objections to the Book of Common Prayer of 1662 was its emphasis upon sin and the 'heavy' content of its confessions. These have all been toned down considerably in the new liturgical forms. No longer is 'the burden of them intolerable.' And yet true religion must emphasise the very serious gap that exists between the creature and the creator in moral nature. Of course, there can be a morbid and 'overburdened sense of our own unworthiness' (Bishop George Ridding), but it is a healthy sense of sin that must lead us to the renewed joy of grace and forgiveness and acceptance, the sense of being set free from the past to serve God gladly in the days ahead.

Daily repentance and the daily – or indeed hourly –

reassurance of absolution (release) is the secret of the joy-filled life and is profoundly Christian and sane. It needs to play a far larger part in our private and public praying today.

14. **Spiritual Direction**

IT has become fashionable in recent years for many people, including Evangelicals, to use the spiritual ‘Director’ or ‘Soul-friend.’ The latter title is much to be preferred and was, I believe, coined by Kenneth Leech. There is a case for using a more experienced Christian as a guide to enable one to grow in holiness, in prayer and in maturity.

It is, however, important to choose the right person. Further, the two people concerned must have a common doctrinal basis and outlook on ethical issues. It is not going to be satisfactory if the ‘Director’ does not believe in the Christian doctrine of assurance or in the sovereignty of God, to take but two examples. It will not work if the ‘Director’ or ‘Soul-friend’ believes, for example, in sexual self-expression, even outside the limits laid down in Scripture. Therefore we need to use as our adviser a person whose general approach to Christian faith and life is broadly similar to our own.

But the whole concept of ‘Direction’ is dangerous if it means that one human being intervenes between the soul and the direct operation and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The proper role of the Director is to warn of the pitfalls, to question the self-delusions from which we all suffer, to provide signposts for the consideration of the soul and, above all, to be well versed in the Scriptures, in order that he or she may point the soul to that source of all wisdom. At times he or she will have to challenge and even rebuke but, at the end of every interview, the responsibility must remain that of the person ‘directed,’ not of the ‘Director,’ who is never more than an adviser.

Too much is made of the role of the Director, but certainly he needs to be expert in all of the following fields:

First of all, he or she must know his Bible as a whole and not merely excerpts from it.

Secondly, he or she must have some awareness of the psychology of the human mind and its capacity for self-deception.

Thirdly, he or she must have the humility to acknowledge when he is unable to help and to pass the soul on to someone else.

Fourthly, he or she must know how different souls are led in prayer and not seek to conform everyone to one particular pattern. For this purpose he must know the major writings on prayer and understand that ‘God does not lead every soul the same way’ (Julian of Norwich).

Fifthly, he or she must have some knowledge of the problems raised by personal Christian ethics, and of the Scriptural way of dealing with such issues. It will be important to understand the dark side of human nature.

Such a person would be a useful resource to many Christians. However, we all grow out of human assistants and it will be valuable, from time to time, to change our Director or Soul-friend.

This chapter cannot be left without recognizing the invaluable help which may be gained by belonging to a mutual sharing group with our peers – a time for honest confession one to another, for supportive prayer and for ministry, where necessary. The writer has known many souls who have grown richly using such a resource.

15. **Being Heavenly Minded**

ONE characteristic of Protestant Christendom is the doctrine of Christian Assurance – at least where Calvin has had a greater influence than Arminius. This is the belief that, once we are saved, we are saved eternally, and that our salvation does not depend upon our growth in holiness. This does not involve antinomianism, because moral holiness is recognized as a vital consequence of our being saved. We are saved at the point of justification, and our sanctification is a process which continues until the point of death. We are therefore secure in our relationship with God. We do not move in and out of his favour. We continue to be his children, because we are born again and made new creatures. We may at times be very wayward, naughty and disobedient children, but we remain children by adoption and grace and are sure of our inheritance in heaven. There is no doubt about our glorification one day.

Therefore it has been characteristic of biblical Christians that they have had a firm grasp upon the hereafter, a lively hope of the enjoyment of heaven. As Bernard put it,

I know not, oh, I know not
What joys await us there,
What radiancy of glory,
What bliss beyond compare.

The Bible Christian lives his life on the doorstep of eternity, with a longing to be ‘with Christ which is far better’ (Phil 1:23).

The extraordinary thing is that some of those Christians who have had the surest sense of going to heaven, and indeed have desired to do so with deep passion, have also been those who have had the greatest impact upon the world and its transformation. St Paul himself must be pre-eminent in such a list, but one quickly

thinks of men like Wilberforce and Shaftesbury as leaders whose Christianity issued in social and political change of the most radical kind. It may be simply because of a clear vision of what heaven might be like that some Christians are impatient to make this world more like it. 'Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

But, however active we may be on this earth, there will always be a sense that this is a 'vale of tears.' At least this will be so if Christians have any contact with the real world and its manifold sorrows.

J M Neale's hymn puts it like this:

'If I still hold closely to Him
What hath He at last?
Sorrow vanquished, labour ended,
Jordan past.'

It may be that the popularity of Pilgrim's Progress in earlier generations was in part due to the excitement and joy of its happy ending, when the trumpets sounded on the other side. Certainly this ought to be characteristic of true Christian spirituality today.

16. Godliness

QUITE naturally there are many Christians whose cry is constantly with St Paul: 'Who will deliver me from this body of death?' (Rom 7:24).

The battle with sin and temptation is never ending for most, if not all, Christians, and the longer we are about it, the harder the fight seems to be. When we are young Christians we assume that in twenty or thirty years the battle will be less fierce and that at least the cruder sins will be past and forgotten. However, the experience of Christians down the ages is that this does not happen, and that, on the contrary, the closer we come to God, the greater the clarity with which we see sin and the more the obstacles that are to be overcome. In this situation there is inevitably a longing for short cuts, for a deliverance which will be permanent and which will set us free from the necessity for struggle and pain and frequent defeat. The traditional way of holiness seems irksome and ineffective. It must be easier than this, we imagine.

The classic exposition of a different way is John Wesley's A Plain account of Christian Perfection. He and his brother, Charles, were convinced that complete holiness is to be achieved here on earth by the gift of God. Many of the Wesleys' hymns, which we sing so unthinkingly, are in fact expounding precisely this doctrine:

Come, Almighty to deliver,
Let us all Thy grace receive,
Suddenly return and never,
Never more Thy temples leave.

The original meaning was brought out clearly by a verse which is now omitted.

But this doctrine does not seem to be scriptural. We are saved; we are going to heaven; but the way there is a long way of

constant temptation, a way in which we learn to overcome by costly obedience and self-control.

Some exponents of the Charismatic and Pentecostalist experience seem to be understanding it as a short-cut to holiness – which indeed it should be, if it were all that it is sometimes claimed to be. In fact, it is simply a blessing along the way, a renewal in the Holy Spirit, a deepening experience of God – and all this is good; but it is important to note, for example, that the gift of tongues is by no means necessarily linked to a growth in moral holiness. It seems to have little impact upon the ethical life of some people and to be a purely experiential matter. For others there can be a great leap forward in commitment.

Another example of this desire for shortcuts is to be found in certain advocates of the Religious Life, who insist that, if we fly from the world to the monastery, we shall there become holier than we would in the world. But this does not seem to be the New Testament understanding. We are to be in the world and yet not of it (John 17:14-16). Those who enter the monastery often find that the struggle for holiness is as difficult there as it is elsewhere, for the monastery is in fact part of ‘the world.’

A third example of a short cut is the belief that, if only we had a deeper experience of God, a richer contemplation of heavenly things, a more mature ‘prayer of union,’ we should be holier. Now, in one sense it must be true that the closer we come to God, the more like him we should become. But the question is, how do we come nearer to God? Is it in fact by religious experience or is it, for example, by suffering or by working for Him? It is instructive to see how St Paul’s concept of Christian maturity in Philippians 3 involves not only the ‘power of his resurrection’ but also the ‘sharing in his sufferings.’

In what has been written above I am not denying the value of the Charismatic experience nor of the call to the Religious Life, nor of the deepening life of prayer, but I am asserting that these things, while adjuncts to holiness, do not of themselves provide a

short cut to it.

There is no alternative to what J C Ryle wrote in his great book, Holiness:

I think it wiser and safer to press on all converted people the possibility of continual growth in grace, and the absolute necessity of going forward, increasing more and more, and every year dedicating and consecrating themselves more in spirit, soul and body, to Christ. By all means let us teach that there is more holiness to be attained and more of heaven to be enjoyed upon earth than most believers now experience. But I decline to tell any converted man that he needs a second conversion and that he may some day or other pass by one enormous step into a state of entire consecration. I decline to teach it because I cannot see any warrant for such teaching in Scripture.

17. **The Recurring Problem of Perfectionism**

THERE is no doubt that one of the recurring aberrations within the church is perfectionism – the belief that somehow or other things ought to be better and that the human spirit is capable of reaching a higher standard of holiness and spiritual experience than it has in fact attained.

This view is, at first sight, highly to be commended, because we ought at all times as Christians to be longing to be more holy and to know more of the God whom we worship. But, in fact, these movements are almost always an attempt to find a short cut which will obviate the hard slog of the normal Christian life. It is a dangerous line to take, because countless immature Christians will quickly be led down that path, only to discover that the way of the Cross is by no means so easy, and indeed that it is far more often the way of duty rather than the way of emotional ‘highs’ and the sudden attainment of holiness.

The Donatists were an early example of this heresy. They refused to be baptised in case they sinned afterwards, expecting that, after baptism, the norm was an un-smirched life of holiness.

Another and earlier example were the Montanists, who likewise believed that it was possible, through a richer experience of the Holy Spirit, to attain to a life of far greater holiness here on earth.

The monastic life was also in danger of the same tendency. Certainly there was a belief that one could be a better Christian in the Religious Life than one could outside it, and Benedict said as much quite plainly.

The Charismatic movement and its precursor, the Pentecostalist movement, have always been in danger of this heresy. If only we speak in tongues or whatever, we shall become far holier

people. Once again, that is the search for the short-cut. It is quite fascinating that the disciple in this movement is often invited to plead with the Lord for tongues rather than for love – which would seem to be the better request according to 1 Cor 12-13. Of course, the ‘love of God is shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us’ (Rom 5:5), but we also know that the practice of love is a virtue to be acquired slowly and with much pain and vulnerability.

No less dangerous is the temptation of the academic and the Classic evangelical to think that it is by knowing more about God and the Scriptures that we shall come to know God better, as if it were only the very intelligent or the literate who have any hope of knowing God properly. Such is Gnosticism.

The fact of the matter is that holiness is not a matter of exciting experiences of the mind or of the emotions (although, when they come, we can thank the Lord for them – an insight we need to learn from the Charismatic movement). Holiness is a matter of deep and costly obedience to be pursued by the holy discipline of much time given to daily prayer and study of the Scriptures as well as by the readiness to take up our cross and follow Him wherever He may lead. But this way often seems to be unexciting and pedestrian. The strange thing is that it is this way which in fact leads to great illumination and, indeed, often at times of great distress.

18. With Discrimination

WHAT has been written above will very likely seem to have been crudely negative and perhaps unkindly so. However, there are two balancing considerations. First of all, there are in existence two very useful and positive Latimer Studies on this subject written by D A Ousley. Secondly, I have been writing for Christian teachers, leaders and spiritual guides. Those of us with such responsibilities owe it to our communities and churches to be discriminating. It is, for example, quite appalling what dreadful books often appear on church bookstalls today.

We need to recognize that St Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises were written for skilled directors of souls and not for general consumption.

We need to remember that St John of the Cross may be dealing only with certain kinds of souls – mainly the Religious – and not with the majority.

We need to be those who freely admit that not all speak in tongues or need to do so (though for many it may be a real blessing).

We need to recognize that the Wesleyan tradition of perfectionism is simply wrong and has had a baleful influence upon the Evangelical tradition for two hundred years or more.

We need to adapt Anglo-Catholic and Roman Catholic spirituality, reading it with a deeply critical mind, and submitting it to the bar of Scripture (the same is true of Protestant writings).

We need to re-affirm the priority of that Scriptural holiness which is to be achieved by moral victories in the real world, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

For there is a 'holiness without which no one shall see God' (Heb 12:14).

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