

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php

SPIRITUALITY FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

KENNETH B. E. ROXBURGH
PRINCIPAL, SCOTTISH BAPTIST COLLEGE, GLASGOW

Introduction

There is a phenomenal interest in 'spirituality' in our contemporary culture. David Tracy, the American theologian describes what he calls the 'strange return of God' to our secular society.¹ The concept of 'spirituality' which many have adopted is not limited to the Christian religion. Indeed, the 'widespread decline in traditional religious practice in the West runs parallel with an ever-increasing hunger for spirituality'² because Christianity is not always associated with spirituality. Thus many people adopt a 'pick-and-mix' approach to religion in general, taking a little bit of this and then a little bit of that from this and then that religion, without becoming committed to any religion in particular. Roszak, in a study in 1976, commenting on the rising curiosity in the West for mystical experiences, condemned it as being 'the biggest introspective binge any society in history has undergone'.

Yet, the hunger is real and the challenge this movement offers our churches should not be lightly dismissed as a passing fad. If Augustine was correct in saying 'Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee' then the fascination which our postmodern culture has for 'the sacred' may well be viewed as an expression of God's relentless longing to share his life and love with those who are created in his image. Some years ago, Harvey Cox commented

¹ David Tracy, *On Naming The Present: God, Hermeneutics and Church* (London, 1994), pp. 42-5. Kathleen Norris' book *Cloister Walk* (London, 1999), an account of life in a Benedictine Monastery, was originally published by Riverside Books in America and surprised its publisher by selling over 200,000 copies and appearing on the *New York Times* best-seller list. The Third International Multidisciplinary Conference on 'Spirituality and Health', held at Durham Castle from 29 September to 1 October 1999, explored the relationship between spirituality, health and healing and contained workshops on movement and art therapies, meditation, shamanism, Buddhism, Christian Mysticism and Taize singing.

² Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (London, 1998), p. 5.

that humankind 'thirsts for mystery, meaning, community and even for some sort of ritual'.³

I approach this subject with some trepidation with the warning of P. T. Forsyth ringing in my ears: 'no one ought to undertake [writing or speaking about prayer] who has not spent more toil in the practice of prayer than on its principle'.⁴ Yet I also sense an affinity with F. B. Meyer's comment that the 'remedy for all our ills is a deeper spirituality'.⁵

Evangelicals and Spirituality

I'm also aware that as evangelicals we have not been good at stressing the importance of spirituality. McGrath speaks of evangelicalism as the 'slumbering giant in the world of spirituality'.⁶ Moreover, living our lives in the midst of a secular culture we may have imbibed a much more materialistic approach to life than we realise. Craig Gay, in a book which analyses the *Way of the Modern World*, suggests that the essence of worldliness is not to be found in personal morality but rather to 'go about our daily business in the world without giving much thought to God'.⁷ As such, the secularism of our society has led to the 'eclipse of God' within our lives and we are more interested in the momentary illusion of personal well-being, of success, than a hunger and thirst for God and his righteousness.

As evangelicals we are faced with the challenge of rediscovering those 'roots that refresh' within and without our own theological and spiritual tradition because 'despite its many strengths, some sense that the [evangelical] movement can too easily become dry and cerebral, lacking any real spiritual vitality'.⁸ For those of us engaged in theological education and the spiritual formation of God's people, we desperately need to set spirituality at the centre of our curriculum. Far too many ministers have left theological colleges with yawning gaps in their spiritual

³ Cited by John Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality* 2nd edition (London, 1992), p. 3.

⁴ P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer* (London, 1916), p. 9.

⁵ *Christian World*, 16 December 1920, p. 4.

⁶ A. E. McGrath *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (London, 1994), p. 142

⁷ Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the Modern World : Or why it's tempting to live as if God doesn't exist* (Carlisle, 1998), pp. 4-5.

⁸ Alister E. McGrath, *Roots that Refresh: A Celebration of Reformation Spirituality* (London, 1992), p. 1.

development. Overwhelmed by the day to day ministry of local congregations, their evangelical activism has often left them sensing the barrenness of a busy life. With little awareness of the rich resources of Christian spirituality down through the ages, they have been unprepared to offer direction to the 'soul hunger' of many in their congregations who are looking for someone to guide them in their journey into the vast landscape of spirituality.

One of the most unfortunate reactions of many evangelicals to the resurgence of interest in Christian spirituality is that of scepticism. There is the feeling that the whole issue is far too 'Catholic'. The cumulative impact of this caricature is the massive ignorance of our spiritual tradition. Christianity, East and West, has given birth to an immense range of spiritual wisdom, much of which we share as Protestants and Catholics. As Christians we need to dig deeply into the common heritage of spiritual wisdom which we can discover across the barriers of time, space and even theological controversy so that 'with all the saints' we might 'discern the length and breadth, the height and depths of the love of Christ and be filled with all the fullness of God'.

Spirituality: A Definition

But what is Spirituality?⁹ Although the word is commonly used it is difficult to define. Geoffrey Wainwright speaks of a 'combination of praying and living'¹⁰ which tends to limit our understanding of the spiritual life to what 'we do' although it grounds spirituality in personal experience and in daily living. Philip Sheldrake describes spirituality as 'the whole of human life viewed in terms of a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and within the community of believers'.¹¹ Sheldrake helpfully sets the concept of spirituality within a Trinitarian and ecclesial framework which rejects any

⁹ For a discussion on Christian Mysticism see Martin Henry, 'How Christian is Christian Mysticism?', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 64 (Spring 1999), pp. 29-54 and Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford, 1999).

¹⁰ Geoffrey Wainwright, *The Study of Spirituality*, edited by C. Jones, G. Wainwright and E. Yarnold (London, 1986), p. 592.

¹¹ Sheldrake, p. 35. Macquarrie states that 'fundamentally spirituality has to do with becoming a person in the fullest sense.' *Ibid.*, p. 40.

mere privatisation of spirituality, along with a concentration which many place on an interiority of personal experience.¹²

At the height of the Great Awakening, a young woman convert wrote to Jonathan Edwards to seek help as to 'the best manner of maintaining a religious life'. More than 250 years later we face an equally daunting task of developing a spirituality that will enable the people of God to 'grow in grace and in the knowledge of God'. What kind of Spirituality do we need for the twenty-first century?

Spirituality and Theology

First and foremost we need a Spirituality that is theological and a theology that is spiritual. Theology is meant to be lived. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that 'God [is] not on the boundaries, but at the centre...in the middle of the village.'¹³ Theological reflection and spiritual renewal are, ideally speaking, intended to be a seamless whole. Theology was always meant to be more than an intellectual exercise, a matter of belief and behaviour, of heart and of head. It was William Perkins who said that 'Theology is the science of living blessedly forever.'¹⁴ A theology that is not intimately related to spirituality will inevitably become removed from the realities of daily discipleship and life in the world. On the other hand, spirituality needs theology so that it doesn't descend into a narcissistic quest for personal fulfilment, and so that some sort of theological criteria of evaluation and interpretation can be given to our experience.¹⁵

Some writers have traced the change which took place in the twelfth century when scholars such as Peter Abelard (1079-1142) began to treat theological reflection as a process of intellectual speculation. Whereas Anselm's *Proslogion*, a theological treatise that plumbs the mystery of

¹² Andrew Louth suggests that the move towards subjectivity took place around the twelfth century. See article on 'Mysticism', in G. S. Wakefield (ed.), *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London, 1983), pp. 272ff. Mark McIntosh agrees that 'Eucharistic piety and confessional practices both began to alter by the later eleventh century from a corporate piety towards a more private and personal devotion.' *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London, 1971), p. 282.

¹⁴ William Perkins, *Works* (Courtney Press, 1970), p. 177.

¹⁵ McIntosh suggests that 'spirituality without theology becomes rootless, easily hijacked by individual consumerism'. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

God's existence, was set in the form of a deeply moving prayer, the rise of the 'Schools' led to a more analytical and speculative theological enterprise. At around the same time, centres of intellectual enquiry began to move from the monasteries, which drew their inspiration from the traditional meditative reading of Scripture to new cathedral 'schools' which stressed academic disputation. According to von Balthasar, by the end of the 13th century Western Christianity saw 'the disappearance of the 'complete' theologian...the theologian who is also a saint'.¹⁶ Mark McIntosh maintains that 'coinciding with the growth of scholasticism, medieval spirituality's intensifying focus on individual experience and affectivity gave rise to a spiralling mutual distrust between spirituality and theology that lingers even today'.¹⁷ The Eastern Orthodox tradition continued to avoid any distinction of spirituality from theological reflection, maintaining that 'he who is a theologian prays and he who prays is a true theologian'. In a similar way, Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are essentially to do with spiritual theology.

The history of evangelicalism over the second half of the twentieth century can hardly be accused of anti-intellectualism. Our love of doctrine, our commitment to expository preaching, our emphasis on rational analysis in apologetics at times implies the very opposite. We have to remind ourselves that knowledge alone does not determine our relationship with God. As one writer observes 'great scholars do not necessarily make the greatest lovers'.¹⁸ Our apprehension of God takes place at a much deeper level than our intellectual comprehension. If this is so, then spirituality has as much to do with feelings, with religious affections, as with thinking. Richard of St Victor stresses that it is useless to know about God unless we have a passionate longing for him, because 'it is vain that we grow in riches of divine knowledge unless by them the fire of love is increased in us'.¹⁹

¹⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Theology and Sanctity' in *Word and Redemption: Essays in Theology* (New York, 1965), p. 57.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p 63. See Martin Henry, *ibid.*, pp. 41-3.

¹⁸ W. Durrant and A. Durrant, *The Age of Louis IV* (New York, 1963), p. 673.

¹⁹ Richard of St. Victor, *Selections from Contemplation* (London, 1957), p. 161.

Trinitarian Spirituality

Secondly, not only will we seek to develop a spirituality that is theological but one which is rooted in a Trinitarian understanding of God. Sheldrake makes the comment that 'the doctrine of the Trinity...is absolutely essential to the coherence and cogency of any Christian spirituality'.²⁰ Traditionally, theologians have distinguished between the 'economic' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity. The former expresses the works of God as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, focusing our attention on what God does, stressing his transcendence. The latter speaks of the eternal relationship of love and joy which are expressed and experienced between the three persons of the Trinity. The re-emergence of a relational model of the Trinity, with an emphasis on mutuality and partnership not only as essential aspects of God's inner relationship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit but also in his dealings with humankind, gives more attention to God's immanence. Our theology of God will inevitably affect our spirituality. Those who emphasise the 'economic' Trinity tend to understand their spirituality as one of 'doing' whereas those who stress the 'immanent' Trinity conceive of spirituality more in terms of 'being'.

The social model of the Trinity, espoused by theologians from a wide spread of theological traditions, such as Moltmann, Torrance and Pinnock, clearly directs our thinking to a view of spirituality which is relational and grounded in our commitment to the life of the Church. Evangelicals have not always had a strong doctrine of the Church and thus our understanding of spirituality has tended to be individualistic and sometimes pietistic. We have normally portrayed the Christian life as a solitary spiritual quest for personal holiness and peace, whereas the New Testament would emphasise an expanded capacity for communal life, selfless love and identification with the needs of others.

Some years ago Peter Berger suggested that the concept of the 'autonomous individual' was the central characteristic of the modern Western world.²¹ The modern hero of western society is the entrepreneur, the self-made individual because 'self-realisation and self-gratification have become the master principles of modern culture.'²² The individual has become 'deified' in contemporary culture as we have forgotten that we

²⁰ Sheldrake, p. xi.

²¹ Peter L. Berger, 'Western Individuality: Liberation and Loneliness', *Partisan Review* 52 (1985), p. 324.

²² Gay, p. 192. Gay also quotes Niebuhr as adding self-glorification (p. 196).

were created in the image of a Trinitarian God who lives in a joyful relationship of love as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Sadly, because we have lost the concept of the essence of the church being that of community, we have very little to offer to a culture of impersonality and loneliness.

One of the very great challenges which postmodernity is posing society is precisely in the area of radical individualism. Andrew Walker encourages the church to become an 'icon' of the Holy Trinity, a community which will demonstrate the story of the Triune God of love in the midst of a world crying out for spiritual reality.²³ The character of God should shape the behaviour of all his children who long to indwell a community of mutuality, of co-operation, of forgiveness, of unity which experiences peace in the context of a genuine diversity of unique individuals who find their fulfilment in living in the unity of the Spirit.

Many of us live and minister in churches where there are far too many broken fellowships, broken hearts and broken lives, where believers have set up rival groups and anathematised each other. Is this an 'icon' of the Holy Trinity? Although we must avoid the danger of reducing our understanding of the Trinity to a question of relevance, it is evident that the social model of the Trinity speaks powerfully to the needs of the church as it approaches the twenty-first century. We need to deal with those attitudes and actions that divide and destroy community and to live in communion with the Triune God of eternal self-giving love.

Christocentric Spirituality

Thirdly, we will develop a Spirituality that is Christocentric. A deep devotion to Christ has marked the lives of God's saints from all Christian traditions. Ray Palmer's translation of a twelfth-century Latin hymn reflects the piety of an early medieval period:

Jesus, Thou joy of loving hearts
 Thou fount of life, Thou light of men
 From the best bliss that earth imparts
 We turn unfilled to Thee again.

In the seventeenth century, Richard Baxter wrote his great work *The Reformed Pastor* and said 'if we can but teach *Christ* to our people, we teach them all'.²⁴ John Wesley in the eighteenth century travelled around

²³ Andrew Walker, *Telling the Story: Gospel, Mission and Culture* (London, 1996), p. 200.

²⁴ Cited by John Stott in *Life in Christ* (Eastbourne, 1991), p. 111.

the country 'offering Christ'²⁵ and in the nineteenth century Andrew Bonar wrote in his diary 'my soul's cry is still for more acquaintance with the Lord Jesus'.²⁶ More recently John Stott²⁷ claimed that if 'the Christian faith and the Christian...are to be authentic' then they 'must be 'focused on Christ'.²⁸ Stott uses the numerous prepositions which 'portray the richness of a Christian's relation to Christ' to encourage the believer to 'love Jesus Christ more and more until he becomes indispensable to us, and life without him would be inconceivable'.²⁹

A Christocentric spirituality will also be Incarnational, stressing the whole theme of embodiment. Far from ignoring the body in the Christian life, or thinking of it negatively, Christian spirituality must be strongly incarnational and engaged with the world of materiality. Spirituality is not a flight from the reality of daily life, an attempt to escape this world. A spirituality that is disengaged from the world fails to appreciate the gift of creation in which 'God has given us all things richly to enjoy.' An incarnational understanding of spirituality will enable us to appreciate George Herbert's view of domestic spirituality that relates us to God in all of life so that he could describe prayer as 'heaven in ordinary'.³⁰ The shape of our spirituality must have some correlation to our world and the distinctive features of our daily lives, relevant to the whole of human life, lived out in our own distinctive cultural contexts.

Evangelicals, Romans Catholics as well as Scottish Calvinists often struggle with the strong ascetic suspicion of enjoying the world. Even such harmless activities of recreation and relaxation have often been viewed as distractions from the activism of personal devotion and Christian service. We have forgotten that the immediate purpose of God in giving the gift of 'Sabbath' was for enjoyment. Thus Jurgen Moltmann's small book *Theology and Joy*³¹ seeks to reflect on the place of play in the Christian life, suggesting that in play and in games we may well be reflecting the

²⁵ See Franz Hilderbrandt, *I Offered Christ: A Protestant Study of the Mass*, (London, 1967).

²⁶ Andrew A. Bonar, *Diary and Life* Edited by Marjory Bonar (London, 1960), p. 288.

²⁷ Stott, p. 8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.15.

³⁰ See Noel-Dermont O'Donoghue, *Heaven in Ordinarie* (Springfield, IL, 1979).

³¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology and Joy* (London, 1971).

SPIRITUALITY FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

activity of God as Creator. Moltmann criticises the 'modern achievement-centred society...[where] people have lost their capacity for leisure; they no longer know how to do nothing'.³² If David Bebbington is correct in seeing 'activism' as one of the defining characteristics of Evangelicalism³³ then we need to expose the danger of the exhausting treadmill of hyperactivity which is so characteristic of the life of the church. The first biblical creation story reaches its zenith, not with the creation of human beings who find their fulfilment in work, but in Sabbath time which is 'the climax of living, not an interlude'.³⁴ Martin Luther anticipated the life to come as a time when people will 'have their fun, love and joy, and shall laugh with thee and thou with them, even according to the body'.³⁵ Thus, although the Christian life will include elements of self-denial, renunciation and discipline, the gifts of God in creation are not to be despised and our bodies, with all their potential for sensory enjoyment are not to be despised.

Our appreciation and enjoyment of creation does not mean that we have to adopt the popular notion of 'Celtic Christianity' as the most authentic form of spirituality, one which 'was environment-friendly, embracing positive attitudes to nature and constantly celebrating the goodness of God's creation'.³⁶ Thomas Clancy and Gilbert Markus believe that 'sheer delight in nature, and the way in which such delight elicits praise of God, is no more Celtic than Hebrew or Roman-African'³⁷ and cite the example of Augustine of Hippo who was moved to ecstatic praise by the mere sight of a lizard catching flies or a spider.

Life-changing Spirituality

Fourthly, a Christian Spirituality will also be Transforming. Megan McKenna states that 'to hear the word of God is to change. If we do not

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 34.

³³ D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London, 1989), pp. 10-12.

³⁴ R. Akeiba quoted in Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York, 1951), p. 32.

³⁵ Martin Luther WA XXXVI. 600; XLV. 356

³⁶ I. C. Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London, 1993), vii-viii. Bradley rejects this statement in a recent article on 'How Green was Celtic Christianity?' in *Ecotheology* 4 (1998), p. 60.

³⁷ T. Clancy and G. Marcus, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh, 1995), p. 93.

change, we have not heard. Indeed, to hear the word of God is...to be radically reformed.'³⁸ This was one of the strong emphases of Anabaptist spirituality which believed that 'the Word must be received with a true heart through the Holy Spirit and become flesh in us'.³⁹

Evangelical spirituality stresses the unconditional nature of the grace of God. Yet the grace of God does not offer consolation without a change of life, without any sense of either dying or rising in Christ. Rutherford's call to 'break off a piece of sin every day' reminds us that 'training in godliness' means unlearning the ways of the old self and learning to appropriate the attitudes and actions of holiness. An unrepentant Christian is an oxymoron. God's purpose in showing us our sin is not to condemn us or leave us in despair. Gregory Jones says that he 'exposes our wounds, both those that have been inflicted upon us and those we have inflicted on others and on ourselves...for the explicit purpose of forgiving us and healing our wounds'.⁴⁰

In a culture which calls for swift results and instantaneous success we need to speak of the Christian life as a journey in which our progress is often impeded by obstacles and is not always easy. Our pilgrimage of faith is meant to move forward but it will not always be smooth or straightforward. It will be what Simon Chan calls an 'asceticism of small steps'.⁴¹ Yet, as a proverb reminds us, 'the longest of journeys begins with short steps'. Spirituality is about growth, sometimes gradual and unseen for like a tree spiritual life grows downwards and upwards. To change the metaphor once again, spirituality is like a lifelong learning process that people are initiated into as apprentices, embracing the entirety of our lives. God is on a time-table very different from our own contemporary culture, seeking not results but a relationship, fruitfulness and faithfulness in the midst of the humdrum realities of daily life.

³⁸ Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected Stories from the Bible* (New York, 1994), p. 216.

³⁹ Hans Hut quoted by C. J. Dyck in 'Hermeneutics of Discipleship' in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* edited by W. M. Swartley (Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), p. 37.

⁴⁰ L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, 1995) p. 146.

⁴¹ Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology* (Downers Grove, 1998), p. 11.

Spiritual Disciplines

Fifthly, Christian spirituality will be disciplined. There are no short cuts to godliness. In the words of John Cassian 'there is no arrival unless there is a definite plan to go'.⁴² Every human being lives a scheduled life. Unless we create time and space for prayer, Scripture reading, meditation and worship then we will always find reasons to become distracted. However, as Evangelicals we must be careful to recognise that some approaches to the spiritual life were developed at a time of greater degrees of leisure time than is available for many people who live in highly stressed worlds of business, travel, and family life where time and space for reflection is at a premium. Furthermore we must remember that people are different in temperament and in circumstance. A melancholic personality will naturally gravitate toward a more contemplative type of spirituality – no single type of spirituality will satisfy everyone. Furthermore, people are at various stages of physical, emotional and spiritual development. They are profoundly affected by the circumstances of life in which they find themselves. The circumstances of the married differ from those of the unmarried, the young are different from the elderly. While each is called to a life of disciplined discipleship, every person is unique and their spiritual pilgrimage is set within a distinctive context. Peter Adam speaks of a 'spirituality of simplicity' where we develop a 'spirituality of ordinary suburban and urban life'.⁴³ This calls for a flexible approach to the spiritual disciplines of prayer *etc.* realising that there is no single 'rule' which has to be used for evermore or by everyone. The rediscovery of various traditions of spirituality, with their diverse approach to reading Scripture and engaging in prayer can be liberating to those who have only followed one particular pattern of devotional life.⁴⁴

Indeed, a spirituality for the twenty-first century will be truly ecumenical as we learn from 'all the saints' of different centuries and diverse cultures. We must be willing to listen to voices from continents and theological traditions other than our own. Many Protestants are beginning to discover the classic texts of the long, diverse and fruitful Catholic spiritual tradition. Christians who are intent on discipleship will discover wisdom across the barriers of time, space and theological

⁴² John Cassian, *Conferences* (Paris, 1955), 2:26.

⁴³ Peter Adam, *Roots of Contemporary Spirituality*, Grove Spirituality Booklet 24 (Bramcote, 1988), p. 3.

⁴⁴ See the *Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series*, edited by Philip Sheldrake (Darton, Longman and Todd).

controversy. I think of the spiritual power of African and Latin American Christianity. We will be willing to learn from the 'base Christian communities' of Latin America who emphasise the need for social justice, the quiet mysticism of Asia, the silence of much Catholic spirituality and the joy and vibrancy of Pentecostals and Charismatics with their expectancy of the 'surprising work of God'.

Part and parcel of our discipleship will be a continuing commitment to the Bible as the primary source of our spirituality. Christians have read the Bible assiduously, not merely as a source book of doctrine, but seeking a prayerful encounter, as in the Benedictine tradition of 'sacred reading' which was seen to encourage a disposition of the heart towards prayer.⁴⁵ Benedict encouraged a 'holy leisure, during which time' people undertook 'the business of their souls'.⁴⁶ The reading was to be slow and prayerful, often linked to memorisation which had the purpose of deepening one's awareness of the presence of God and engaging in 'a conversation with God about one's life'.⁴⁷ Thomas Keating suggests that 'listening to the word at deepening levels of attention is the traditional method of apprenticeship to contemplative prayer'.⁴⁸ Such reading allows the word of God to take hold of us. Many of us who are so shaped by a rigorous study and analysis of Scripture, seeing sermons in every portion of scripture just waiting to be preached, can find it even more difficult to allow the word of God to be loved and lived out in our daily lives. Richard Hays comments that the 'right reading of the [Bible] occurs only where the word is embodied. We learn what the text means only if we submit ourselves to its power in such a way that we are changed by it.'⁴⁹

Bonhoeffer insisted that such a prayerful approach to Scripture should be part and parcel of ministerial formation for 'the word of scripture should never stop sounding in your ears and working in you all day long, just like the words of someone you love. And just as you do not analyse the words of someone you love, but accept them as they are said to you,

⁴⁵ See Columba Stewart, *Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition* (London, 1998), p. 32.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41. Stewart suggests that such reading 'is impaired by the decline of the art of reading. Both skimming and speed-reading are antithetical to *lectio divina*.' *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴⁸ Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York, 1994), p. 146.

⁴⁹ R. B. Hays, 'Scripture-Shaped Community', *Interpretation* 44.1 (January, 1990), p. 51.

SPIRITUALITY FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

accept the word of scripture and ponder it in your heart, as Mary did. That is all... Ponder this word long in your heart until it has gone right through into you and taken possession of you.’⁵⁰

This aspect of contemplative prayer and meditative reading of Scripture is the very antithesis of the evangelical approach which emphasises the active dimension of vigorous study and endless intercession, thanksgiving, confession and praise. It is only recently that many evangelicals have discovered the art of cultivating silent listening to God in prayer. Yet there is a deep cultural resistance to silence – incessant noise and movement are the accepted and preferred norm.

One of the episodes of the comedy series *The Goon Show* is memorable for its humour, but also for its insight into much of our life. The telephone rings and is answered. ‘Who is speaking? Who is that? Who is that speaking? Who is it? Who is there? Who is speaking?’ When the inevitable pause for breath eventually comes, a rather weary voice replies ‘*You* are speaking’.⁵¹ Howard Rice believes that ‘the most essential requirement for a lively recovery of prayer today, is the practice of solitude, bringing the depths of ourselves into the presence of God’.⁵² The way of silence cannot be hurried or haphazardly chosen now and then. Such space for silence in the hustle and bustle of life in the twenty-first century requires discipline and desire, love and leisure, the ‘training of our attention, of our body, of our mind and our emotions’.⁵³

A disciplined approach to spirituality will also lead us to a realistic assessment of our spiritual lives and the expectations of the spiritual pilgrimage. T. S. Elliot once made the comment that ‘humankind cannot

⁵⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Way to Freedom* (New York, 1966), 59ff. Henri Nouwen speaks of the problem of academics and ministers coming to Scripture and calls them to come and ‘instead of thinking about the words as potential subjects for an interesting dialogue or paper, we should be willing to let them penetrate the most hidden corners of our hearts...only then can we really “hear and understand”’ Henri J. M. Nouwen *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (London, 1980) p. 124.

⁵¹ Quoted in Kenneth Leech, *Spirituality and Pastoral Care* (London, 1989), p. 17.

⁵² Howard Rice, *Reformed Spirituality* (Louisville, 1991), p. 87.

⁵³ Anthony Bloom, *Creative Prayer* (London, 1987), p. 35.

bear very much reality'.⁵⁴ Although the language of sin can become debilitating, self-examination is 'one of the great neglected duties of the Christian life'.⁵⁵ One of the features of the contemporary spiritual search of our culture is 'therapeutic, not religious...of personal well-being'⁵⁶ and any notion of sin, repentance or confession is explicitly ignored as we view self-realisation and even self-gratification as ends in themselves. As Luther commented '[Fallen human nature] is completely self-centred.... It puts itself in the place of everything else, even in the place of God himself and seeks only its own purposes and not God's. For this reason it is its own chief and most important idol.'⁵⁷ Although we may feel that some Puritans overemphasised the need for a daily self-examination which could easily become introspective⁵⁸ and self-absorbed in their longing for personal assurance of salvation, unless we have a true understanding of the nature of sin we will fail to realise the rich resources of God's grace to overcome the 'sin which so easily besets us'.

We should also have a realistic awareness of the pilgrimage of prayer which in its early stages can be likened to a honeymoon period where there is little struggle in prayer and prayer is filled with experiences of joy. Yet as the pilgrimage of faith continues we soon discover that prayer becomes difficult, filled with distractions and often dogged determination is the only thing which keeps us praying. In our desire to urge our people to pray we have not always taught them that 'through many struggles we must enter the kingdom of God' and that part and parcel of the life of faith is the discipline of prayer. Teresa of Avila speaks of both the difficulties of prayer and the delight which comes. 'Very often,' she writes, 'I was more occupied with the wish to see the end of the hour for prayer. I used to actually watch the sandglass. And the sadness that I sometimes felt on entering my prayer-chapel was so great that it required all my courage to force myself inside...[but] when I persisted in this way, I found far greater

⁵⁴ T. S. Elliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* cited by Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, p. 132.

⁵⁵ William Barclay, *Flesh and Spirit* (London, 1962), p. 72.

⁵⁶ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in a Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, 1979), p. 33.

⁵⁷ Cited by Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, 1966), p. 147.

⁵⁸ Richard Rogers advised that 'everyday we should be humbled for our sins' *Seven Treatises* (London, 1603), p. 316.

peace and joy than when I prayed with excitement and emotional rapture.⁵⁹

One further resource which we have tended to ignore is the role of a 'spiritual friend' who will encourage us in our spiritual pilgrimage and with whom we can be entirely open about the doubts and difficulties, as well as the delights of discipleship. Such accountability may keep us from self-deception with regard to our progress in godliness as well as discouragement and despair. 'If anyone makes himself his own master in the spiritual life,' warns Bernard, 'he makes himself scholar to a fool.'⁶⁰ In the words of Bonhoeffer 'a Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation.'⁶¹

Spirit-Empowered Spirituality

Finally, Christian Spirituality will be passionate and Spirit empowered. In his study of Jonathan Edwards' *Treatise Concerning Religious Affection*, Gerald McDermott comments that 'true religion is not a casual preference...it is a passionate affair of the soul – one's innermost being – that is reflected in every part of one's life...true spirituality is powerful and dynamic...a passionate pursuit.'⁶² Thus the Psalmist speaks of his soul longing for God. Jesus encourages us to have a hunger and thirst for righteousness. Paul commends the spirituality of those who 'love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love'. Edwards indicates that many believers 'don't open their mouths wide enough' in their longing to know God better.⁶³

A Spirituality for the twenty-first century will be empowered by the Spirit of God as the 'crucial ingredient of all genuinely Christian life and

⁵⁹ *A Life of Prayer by St. Teresa of Avila*, edited by James Houston, (Portland, Oregon, 1983), p. 2.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Martin Thornton, *Christian Proficiency* (London, 1964), p. 25.

⁶¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London, 1949), p. 12.

⁶² Gerald McDermott, *Seeing God: Twelve Reliable Signs of True Spirituality* (Downers Grove, 1995), pp. 34-5.

⁶³ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (Yale University Press, 1959), p. 379.

experience'.⁶⁴ As those who are baptised into the life of the church, we all participate in the endowment and empowerment of the Spirit. Unlike the disciples on the day of Pentecost, we are not waiting for the coming of the Spirit, but we are called to 'walk in the Spirit' and be 'filled with the Spirit'. In this we find a confidence and expectancy in our spiritual pilgrimage because we know that God is 'able to do immeasurable more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us' so that we might 'be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God'.

So we pray:

Come dearest Lord, descend and dwell
by faith and love in every breast;
then shall we know, and taste, and feel
the joys that cannot be expressed

Come, fill our hearts with inward strength;
make our enlightened souls possess
and learn the height and breadth and length
of your immeasurable grace.

Now to the God whose power can do
more than our thoughts or wishes know,
be everlasting honours done
by all the Church, through Christ his Son.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, 1994), p. 897.

⁶⁵ Isaac Watts (1674-1748).