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The Nature and Purpose of Spiritual Theology

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WHY THE CONTEMPORARY INTEREST IN SPIRITUALITY?

'Spirituality' is still such a recent term that it requires some definition. Clearly it starts from a religious base, although it is now being used more widely. But the definition given in the *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* is broad enough:

A word which has come into vogue to describe those attitudes, beliefs, practices, which animate people's lives and help them to reach out towards supersensible realities.¹

That we live, in the Western world, within an environment of spiritual deprivation and impoverishment, is very obvious. However, this is not only true of our secular life, but it is becoming obvious also with our religious life and its service. What is notional may not be transformational, so the hunger for spirituality is for what is personal, as opposed to what is impersonal, firsthand as opposed to what is secondary, and applied as opposed to what is merely theoretical. Spirituality involves then the enlargement of our awareness of God, of what gives a living, growing relationship before God and with each other.²

Spirituality is identifiable with the intensification of the self-consciousness that we see in contemporary society. So it is not necessarily evidence of religious renewal within our secular world. In the 1960s the eruption of the drug culture with its Dionysian frenzy of sexual freedom, was a defiant rebellion against Technological Society. The 1970s followed with the powerful *Drang am Osten*, the journey eastwards and inward, with Transcendental Meditation, Silva Mind Control, occultism, est, and the new eclecticism of Zen Buddhism, Gurdjieff, and the religious writings of the East. The 1980s have followed with the culture of self-fulfilment, transactional analysis, and p. 119 personality tests to find out one's own type of personality. For all these movements, from 'sex' to 'spooks' to 'spiritual,' spirituality is in vogue!

However, in this lecture we are concerned only with Christian spirituality, which has to do with what lies at the very heart of the Christian faith. It focuses on our personal prayer life, on communion with God, on what Christians in the past have called 'the interior life.' Not that we should ever seek either to privatize the faith, or ignore what unconscious motives may control behaviour. Such insights may gain us greater freedom and more consistency between belief and action, attitudes and service. It calls then, for much greater discernment, a richer relational and personal life, and more realistic guidance in the application of doctrine to behaviour.

Passing fads are dangerous. As George Santayana wisely observed, whoever is married to the spirit of the age is condemned to be widowed in the next. But there are too many multiple indications to suggest that the contemporary interest in Christian spirituality is

¹ Gordon Wakefield, ed., *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: S.C.M., 1983):361.

² Simon Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection: An exploration of Christian Spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984):7.

merely a passing whim.³ I shall outline four major interrelated reasons for this remarkable interest in Christian spirituality today. Not all the motives and reasons are positive and true, which perhaps explains why not all Christians are fully convinced of the validity of this emphasis. But reluctance is often associated with a fear of losing self-control, either rationalistically so, or from fear of personal intimacy being opened up. So the challenge of Christian spirituality is cause for some confusion and concern about one's personal life and thought.

The first reason for the contemporary interest in Christian spirituality is the practical concern that beyond any intellectual pursuit of theological studies, we should seek to know God more personally and intimately. In other words, it stems from the desire to experience the reality of the Kingdom of God in daily life. The faithful are desperate to experience the living God beyond the heavy rationalistic framework of Western Christianity, with its hierarchical structure of authority, its abstract teachings, and its liturgical ritualism. Moreover, the shift from a more intellectual to a more existential approach places more emphasis upon daily behaviour and the ethic of faith, upon 'Living the Gospel', as our colleague Klaus Bockmuehl wrote about.

We know so little of God in spite of all our theological literature. Indeed, much of the literature seems merely to play scholarly games that trivialize, rather than enrich, our faith. Meanwhile, the radical p. 120 cultural changes we are living through today give us a deep impulse and hunger for inner experiences that we sense only God can satisfy. We know so little about ourselves, so we seek to explore more of the inner recesses of our own hearts, in prayer. There is a growing conviction that only in prayer will a man or woman be more fully one's self, as a person-before-God. So there is such a real hunger to become prayerful, meditative Christians today.

At the same time, many are abandoning the verbal expressions of prayer, learned merely by rote. Oral prayer is being probed for its own integrity, and also being expanded by more emphasis upon meditation, recollection, and other historic traditions of spirituality. Likewise, there is more questioning of what it means to be a 'Bible reader.'⁴ Does it only involve inductive Bible study? Is it the mere acquisition of biblical knowledge? Letting the Word of God get into the heart, through the head, is a renewed concern, in order to help us be more consciously enriched believers. We have hints of such personal knowledge when we see the serenity of presence in a friend, and catch the heart-felt convictions of life and behaviour. It is what the early Church Fathers called *pneumatophoros*, a carrier or vehicle of the Spirit. Many Christians long to experience Christ more intimately, to see Christ actually formed in them.

What keeps many Christians from being freed of their alienation from God is ignorance of their own emotional and relational handicaps, regardless of their theological education and intelligence. This, of course, is the consequence of the unfortunate fact that theology and psychology are both independent of each other today. The conviction of all the great thinkers of the Church has been that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self cannot be separated. 'Let me know Thee, O God, let me know myself,'⁵ the prayer of Augustine, has echoed consistently in all true Christian aspiration. What exacerbates this absence of intimacy with God is 'the barrenness of a busy life'. In a function-orientated

³ See the essays in *Can Spirituality be Taught?* ed. Jill Robson and David Lonsdale (London, Association of Centres of Adult theological association and the British Council of Churches, 1988).

⁴ James Houston, 'The Act of Bible Reading: Towards a Biblical Spirituality' in *How do you Read?*, ed. Elmer Dyck (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press) (forthcoming).

⁵ Augustine, *Soliloquies*, 11,7.

society, activism is viewed as the norm of Christian life. Perhaps many have grown up in families that only knew a merely 'functional way' of relating. They 'did' what was required of them in family expectations. So their usefulness in Christian ministries is the norm of acceptance, and church programmes are the definition of fellowship. It is essentially an outward-orientated consciousness that *shallows* inward reflection and relatedness. This [p. 121](#) explains the spiritual emptiness and disillusionment of so many well-intentioned Christians. So just when there is a major societal shift taking place away from 'Rational' towards 'Psychological' man, evangelical leadership finds itself with little tradition of giving guidance to 'the interior life' of their fellow Christians.

A second reason for the growing interest in spirituality is the desire of many of the laity to become more truly 'the people of God.'

The growth in public education has led many lay people to become discontented with religious platitudes and sermonizing. They want to use intelligent minds intelligently. Relating their own faith to their own professions, they need to think for themselves. To do so, they need to de-institutionalize a 'churchy faith,' to embrace a broader basis of ordinary life under the realm of the gospel. They resent the unspoken assumption that whereas the clergy 'are the Church,' the laity 'go to church.'⁶ Yet there is still hesitancy to trespass across professional boundaries into another discipline, even if that discipline is simply a more skilled tool for the understanding of theological education.

But institutional loyalties generally are reaching a low ebb within post-modern study.⁷ In place of hierarchical structures, lateral shifts to more customized, less mass-produced relationships, are taking place—in business, and in education. Our churches then, cannot afford to remain content with the mass-production of the sermon, and the liturgy. The growing trend of the adjunct counselling services in our churches reflects this demand to address the individual's needs. Clearly then the need for more training in spiritual direction will be the trend of future ministry.⁸ Yet we have been happy to allow our secular poets and writers to explore inner consciousness, as James Joyce's *Ulysses* does fabulously. But in Protestant tradition we have little experience today of giving guidance to the 'interior life'. Now spontaneously, a new literature is filling this void.

Spirituality today, then, is in part a protest movement against the hollowness of much Christian activism. Many para-church movements are like shadow companies, where the stock-holders are beguiled by the promotion of non-existent products. They are bureaux of information about human needs, though not necessarily involved in actually giving bread to the hungry, clothes to the naked, freedom to [p. 122](#) the captives. Hence we have expensive conferences which describe ministry situations yet are led by 'experts' who are not actually engaged in such ministry. So Christian spirituality would call the bluff to appearances, primarily in dealing with the hearts of men and women and women. For clearly, 'out of the heart are the issues of life.'⁹

A third cause of interest in spirituality today is the eclecticism that drives the East and the West to come together, to live with one religious faith within the 'global village.' This exploits the deeply-seated conviction that the interior life is always the better life, and indeed that inwardness leads to truth and even divinity.

⁶ Anne Rowthorn, *The Liberation of the Laity* (Connecticut: Morehouse, Barlow, Wilton, 1986).

⁷ George Barna, *The Frog in the Kettle. What Christians need to know about life in the Year 2000* (California: Regal Books, 1990): 169–182.

⁸ William Barry and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982).

⁹ [Proverbs 4:23](#).

In fact, the journey inward is often the way to deepen the autonomy of the individual, which is a strong tendency of secular man today. The cult of self-fulfilment which 'pop psychology' has promoted in our generation, has unleashed a fragmentation of social life. In the past, self-fulfilment was strongly cultivated in Buddhism as a way of satisfying the human need of a spiritual life outside all religion. From the original *Hinayana*, deliberately areligious, Buddhism developed toward the *Mahayana*, a new form of popular religion that now worships the Buddha as a god, who himself was an atheist who had detached himself from the gods! Such a spiritual life may seem paradoxical but it is predictable that new forms of such atheist spirituality are in the making today.

The way such secular spirituality is being argued is, of course, as ancient as the Gnostics, who confronted the early Church. This secular or 'New Age' spirituality assumes that the inner dimension of the person is 'the spirit.' This 'spiritual core' is the deepest centre of the person. It is here that the person is open to the transcendent dimension. It is here that the person can experience ultimate reality. When post-modern Man dismisses dogma as Enlightenment Man did, and now dismisses rational explanation, then it becomes acceptable to embrace all forms of spirituality—of Islam, of Buddhism, of the ancient Greeks, and indeed even of all primitive religions as well. Indeed, some feminists would advocate recovery of the Mother-Goddess of the ancient Near East, and of reinstating paganism.

Today, comparative religious studies are often tracing the continuity of the archaic to the contemporary spiritualities since, of course, the humanity of man has not changed. But in upholding the intrinsic worth of such spiritualities, such scholarship shows a contempt of dogma, as the Enlightenment also did. New expressions of Gnosticism are in the p. 123 making, notably in a major scholarly enterprise called 'World Spirituality,' where some 450 scholars are being organized to produce sixteen volumes, concluding with dialogues and new syntheses. The general editor, Ewert Cousins, claims:

The series is attempting to forge a new discipline in the field of religion, the discipline of spirituality ... We might say there is emerging a new discipline: global spirituality. Such a discipline would study spirituality not merely in one tradition or era but in a comprehensive geographic and historical context. And it would take into account this vast body of data, not in isolation but in inter-relationship ... By drawing the material into the focus of world spirituality, it can provide a perspective for understanding one's place in the larger process. For it may well be that the meeting of spiritual paths is the assimilation not only of one's own spiritual heritage but that of the human community as a whole—as the distinctive spiritual journey of our time.¹⁰

In other words, instead of upholding the uniqueness of Christian spirituality by encouraging the ecumenicity of the communion of saints across the ages, now global spirituality will express the syncretism of all world religions in a new amalgam for the next century.

This relativization of the Christian faith is not new. Neo-Platonism has been a persistent influence within Christendom. The common religious experience of 'mysticism'

¹⁰ Ewert Cousins (General Editor), Preface to the Series, *World Spirituality, Christian Spirituality*, vol. 16 (New York: Cross Roads, 1985):13.

was advocated by W.R. Inge,¹¹ Rufus Jones¹² and Evelyn Underhill¹³ in the early part of this century. The World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 saw a public demand for it. But what is new is the post-war theological advocacy of such religious pluralism by renegade Christian theologians such as William Hockings, Wilfred Cantwell Smith,¹⁴ and John Hick.¹⁵ In 1987, a prominent group of theologians published a series of essays on *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*.¹⁶ Karl Rahner led the initiative in Vatican II conciliar reports, notably, *Nostra Aetate*, to generate the p. 124 image of 'anonymous Christians' in other religions.¹⁷ This opened the way to dialogue with other leaders of world religions, as in Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. Such an approach assumes all religions have some natural knowledge of God, some supernatural elements of grace. 'Spirituality' becomes, then, the basis for a new global religious ecumenism.

Along with this spiritual syncretism, there is the contemporary tendency to exalt psychology as one variety of religious experience. Its introspective skills, its explanation of inner consciousness, and the hidden assumption that what lies closest to the soul lies closest to God, or is indeed divine, lead to a congenial relationship between secular psychology and New Age thinking. In reaction to the Enlightenment, then, the dam of the human mind has broken down, and the flood of consciousness, is creating havoc with former landmarks of behaviour, of relationships, as well as of faith and the habits of the heart. 'Spirituality' itself is being devalued, to include all kinds of consciousness, some more emotional, others more metaphysical. The danger of the former is subjectivism, so that people are tempted to believe they can make their spirituality turn-on, turn-off, like a drug trip. The danger of the latter is Gnosticism: having such a detached, observational stance that one is tempted to be superior in one's esoteric knowledge to the rest of the human species. Both approaches tend to be preoccupied with the *attributes* of spiritual experiences, either in terms of emotional sensations or else with metaphysical thoughts. Neither are really concerned with the true *essence* and *source* of spirituality, namely the Holy Spirit of God himself.

We now consider the *fourth reason* for the popular interest in spirituality, that I believe is the most fundamental. It is expressive of a rapid dissatisfaction with *modernity*, so that many thinkers now perceive themselves to be *post-modern*. It rejects the worldview developed since the seventeenth century, that created the Age of Enlightenment, and that continues in the scientific rationalism of the modern Technological Society. It is a reaction of fear that the continuation of modernity threatens the very survival of life on our planet. It is a confession of despair that the Enlightenment culture no longer enlightens.¹⁸

¹¹ W.R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, The Bampton Lectures (London: Methuen, 1899).

¹² Rufus Jones, *The New Quest* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

¹³ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism, a study in the nature and development of man's spiritual consciousness* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1911).

¹⁴ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987).

¹⁵ John Hick, *God has Many Names* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

¹⁶ John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: towards a pluralistic theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987).

¹⁷ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4 (New York: Seabury Press, 1971).

¹⁸ See for example, Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951): 158ff.

If 'post-modern thought' is in reaction to 'modernism', what is this cultural groundswell that is challenging us, even in the way we p. 125 continue to 'think theologically'? Clearly, it is radical, as radical as the shift from the Middle Ages to the Modern world. Heidegger attacks the 'subjectivism' of Western thought. Gadamer re-orientates the interpreter's understanding from rationalized reconstruction to mediation with the past, translating past meaning into the present situation.¹⁹ Michael Polanyi writes against the false objectivism of scientism, in the light of 'Personal Knowledge'.²⁰ Enrique Dussel speaks of the need to move '*outside*' of ideological perspectives.²¹ Richard T. Bernstein, writes of 'Beyond Objectivism and Relativism',²² and Alastair McIntyre writes of 'Beyond Ethics'. In various ways, these thinkers and others like them, are all rebelling against the universalism of a scientific scholarship whose inflated claims have suppressed self-knowledge, let alone divine revelation.

To summarize these critiques we can say then, that like other major paradigmatic shifts of knowledge in the past, this mental revolution is about the conviction of 'explanation'. An explanation commands our assent with immediate authority when it presupposes 'the reality' or 'the truth' of what seems to be most real, most true. One cannot define 'explanation' absolutely, according to a more universal 'scientific' canon. One can only say that it is a statement which satisfies the community of a particular time and culture.²³ This is borne out by events in the eighteenth century. As the expansion of scientific enquiry grew, thinkers became increasingly unconvinced by the dogmatism of non-investigative churchmen. The demand grew then to 'explain' more 'scientifically'. In turn, this tended to squeeze out external sources of authority, heteronomously given, such as divine revelation. Instead, reason was assumed to be autonomous in its authority, in René Descartes' famous dictum: 'I think, therefore I am'. Doubt, which had previously been viewed negatively, was now elevated to a position of honour, with scepticism becoming the first principle of knowledge. There was now a new readiness to question everything.

In this growing climate of rationalism, Immanuel Kant forcefully p. 126 separated 'belief' from 'knowledge', assuming certainty can only be established rationally.²⁴ Belief was now assumed to create only uncertainty. 'The tearing apart of belief and knowledge' as Colin Gunton has expressed it,²⁵ created an exaggerated over-esteemed capacity for mental detachment with which we still live. Now reason in turn has become dissociated also from our whole emotional life, as well as from our historical heritage.²⁶ Cut off from self-knowledge in rationalistic alienation, we are also cut off from history in modernism's death of the past. That is why post-modernism is merely man's disillusionment with 'the

¹⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. by David E. Linge (Los Angeles, CA.: University of California Press, 1977): 15.

²⁰ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge, towards a postcritical philosophy* (London: Routledge, Kegan, Paul, 1958): 3117.

²¹ Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and the Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978): 120–148.

²² Richard T. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985): 46.

²³ Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934): 10.

²⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, The World Council of Churches (Geneva, 1984): 49.

²⁵ Colin Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

²⁶ John McMurray, *Reason and Emotion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961).

Technological Society'. For the rationality of modernity has been weighed in the balances and found wanting. As one of our students recently complained to me: 'my wife and I have been trained in the techniques to become competent counsellors, yet we remain woefully inadequate in our own personal relationships with each other!'

However, as Lesslie Newbigin²⁷ and David Bebbington²⁸ and others are showing us, our own evangelical faith has been influenced by the Enlightenment culture that no longer 'enlightens'. We see this in such statements that 'truth is propositional' or that the Bible's authority lies in its 'inerrancy'. These echo the Enlightenment's assumption that certainty is only rationalistic. So we need Michael Polanyi to remind us that our fundamental beliefs cannot be demonstrated merely by rationalization; they can only be held by the primacy of faith:

We must now recognize belief once more, as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside of such a fiduciary framework.²⁹

Thus, we are being forced back to the wisdom of Augustine, Anselm, and the other Church Fathers when they insisted: 'I believe, that I may understand'.

The biblical vision of reality places at the centre of personal life a p. 127 living relationship of trust in a personal God, who is infinitely more trustworthy than all our efforts to 'explain'. Rational explanations are relativized by the cultural sanctions we live with, but our faith abides in the unchanging God. That is why each generation has to go on doing its theological explanations, as evidence of a living faith, but these three abide: Faith, Hope, and Love. It is the Johannine message, then, of branches that abide in the Vine, of sheep known by the Good Shepherd, of a disciple in the bosom of his Lord.

Renewed Christian spirituality in the post-modern world has then more to do with personal experience and faith in God than in explanations about him. What it means to be a 'person' likewise reflects more of our relationship to the 'personalness' of God than to psychological insights. What it means to be 'human' is more in our relational 'one-anotherness', than in the individualistic separatedness of modern man, with his insistence upon 'rights'. The centre that holds together, is Christ, 'who though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we through his poverty might become rich'. Our riches then are spiritual for they are relational; they are the offspring of love. Faithful relatedness to each other mirrors the faithfulness of God in our lives. It is our relationships then that truly 'explain', and not just our faculty of reasoning. These can be lived, not merely described and talked about. Thus the break with the Enlightenment ushers in a new challenge to the interpretation of theology for the future.

We have explored, then, four sources of the contemporary interest in Christian spirituality: the hunger to know and experience God more intimately and personally so; the demand of the laity to have a new identity within the established Church; the redirection of the interior life, no longer isolated as Western Man, but living in a more ecumenical, global world; and the quest of post-Enlightenment Man, to be freed from his own rationalist alienation. The latter, we have agreed, lies at the centre of these issues. This, too, we shall have to consider further.

²⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *op. cit.*

²⁸ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

²⁹ Michael Polanyi, *op. cit.*, p.267.

We are being told that we now live in 'the post-modern world'. By this is meant the reaction to rationalism and technocracy, and indeed, to all forms of totalitarian consciousness. The reaction then, is towards 'openness', indeed making 'change' a new ideology. With the loss of moral values today, such 'openness' can be a dangerous contributor to contemporary chaos. As G.K. Chesterton once remarked, if you open your mouth, or indeed your mind, then you need to close it again on something solid! So if we as Christians are open to new subjective challenges of 'Spirituality' then we need also reliable, objective spiritual theology as its counterpart. Of course, both are needed: a p. 128 spirituality that becomes more theological, and a theology that is more spiritual.

Perhaps the dilemma in theological education is not unlike that found in the Soviet Union today. How can communists, long habituated to living within a closed society, re-think and re-live democratically within a new, open society? Likewise, though the analogy may be too harsh, how can theologians, trained and motivated by the intellectual society of the Enlightenment of Kant or of Hegel, suddenly repent and re-think theologically in a manner more appropriate to post-modernity?³⁰ Yet while we ask such a radical question, we might make it more radical still, by asking how we ought to 'think theologically', if by the knowledge of 'God' we mean the Holy Trinity? For it has been our fallen tendency to allow the pre-theological autonomy of human thought to dictate our theological investigations, without reflecting upon what we are doing. Hence the objective reality of God's own Being has readily been eclipsed and distorted by our ways of thinking and of behaving towards him.

The true quest of theology is still that of faith seeking understanding. It is the conscious experience of this quest of Faith, this synthesis of thought and action, this self-consciousness of how we can know God personally, and experience him in our daily lives that is the nature and purpose of Spiritual Theology.

It is expressive of a prophetic posture to warn that when theological education fails to promote the spiritual life, it risks losing its own centre and even its *raison d'être*. We need a re-interpretation of spirituality and theology today, in a grammar appropriate to the mystery of the Holy Trinity. A mere theoretical knowledge of God is impossible. Knowing God is to be changed by God. It is improper then, to separate the elements of the spiritual life of the believer from the study of theology itself.

The subtitle of Dr. Richard F. Lovelace's well known book, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, is 'a Manual of Spiritual Theology'. This, he explains, is 'a discipline' combining the history and theology of Christian experience'. He further comments: 'Catholic Christians have long recognised the existence and central importance of this study, and it is time that Protestants realized that they share with Catholics a deep interest and a rich heritage in Christian Spirituality'.³¹ It is one of p. 129 the unfortunate reactions of the Reformation that Protestants cut themselves off from the whole medieval contemplative heritage of the church, on the grounds that the gift of contemplation was 'popish'. The Protestant endeavour to return to the 'primitive church' was also a denial of the communion of saints, resulting in ahistoricism. The renewed contemporary interest in spirituality is awakening evangelicals to their resultant spiritual losses. Dr. Lovelace makes the further point

Since virtually all the problems of the church, including bad theology, issue from defective spirituality, the attention given to spiritual theology—that is, to the question of how to

³⁰ See John Milbank, 'The second difference: for a trinitarianism without reserve', *Modern Theology* 2, 1986, p. 213–234.

³¹ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p.11.

keep all the cells in the body of Christ in optimum health and running order—should culminate in a new vitality in the church.³²

Yet Spiritual Theology remains ignored in the Protestant world and this chair at Regent College may be the only one of its kind in evangelical colleges and seminaries. We are happy to know that a younger generation of theological teachers are now making it their new focus.

THE HISTORICAL NEGLECT OF SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY

In the great tradition of theology as experiential knowledge of God, from Irenaeus and Origen in the second and third centuries A.D. through Gregory the Great (sixth century) and Bernard of Clairvaux (twelfth century) and on to Richard of St. Victor (twelfth century) and Bonaventure (thirteenth century), the Western church was educated in the contemplative, trinitarian tradition. But the first step towards the divorce of spirituality and theology occurred with the rise of Scholasticism in the late Middle Ages.³³ Whereas Gregory the Great had said, 'love is knowledge', Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth century) now distinguished the knowledge of God arising from love, as strictly different from proper theological science or Dogmatics. Then ensued in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the distinguishing of topics of spiritual life from theology, as well as of their subdivision. Thus the normal struggles and disciplines of the ordinary Christian became known as 'Ascetical Theology', while the confessions of the penitent became known as 'Moral Theology'. The more elitist mystical experiences of 'The Religious' were now studied under 'Mystical P. 130 Theology'.³⁴ Meanwhile, morality itself could no longer be seen as a consequence of Dogmatic Theology, nor could Ascetical or Mystical theologies be given enough theological guidance to prevent them from degenerating into speculative and subjective areas of questionable pastoral value.

The Reformers therefore swept aside all these distinctions, and reconstructed theology as confessional and biblical. 'Practical Divinity' among the Puritans, 'Pastoral Theology' elsewhere, as well as 'Theological Ethics' later provided the role of spiritual guidance. But confusion remained as to the distinction between meditation and contemplation, with a bias towards verbal prayer and upon a mentally alert style of meditation, rather than upon the loving gaze of the contemplative. Today, even prayer has little or no relevance in theological education, and seminary is often experienced as the place where students have lost their desire to be daily exercised in prayer. Now, fortunately, a change is taking place. The heightened self-consciousness of the barrenness of a busy life is challenging many of us to question our spiritual needs. We are becoming aware of our need for a holistic Christian consciousness, rather than just having an intellectual frame of mind with which to entertain a Christian worldview. Indeed, the rationalistic approach, together with the imperialism of propositionalism, is now generally viewed as too reductionistic to support and nurture the faith and life of the contemporary Christian. As Pascal said it long ago: 'the heart has its reasons that reason knows not of'.

THE RECOVERY OF SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY

³² *Ibid*, p.58.

³³ Roch Kereszky, 'Theology and spirituality: the task of a synthesis', *Communio*, winter 1983, p. 314–331.

³⁴ P. Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality* (London: Burns, Oates, & Washburn, 1922), p.v.

Plainly then, as evangelicals, we need to teach personally the theology of Christian experience as it is grounded in biblical truth and sound doctrine. It has a pastoral intent. On the other hand Dogmatics deals with the theology of Christian beliefs and tends towards more of an apologetic stance as it defends those beliefs in dialogue with an unbelieving world. Nevertheless, there cannot be a neat separation of Dogmatics from Spiritual Theology. Indeed, as Newton Flew has observed: 'I would rather say that the *Theologia Dogmatica* of the future may be built on the *Theologia Spiritualis* of the past'.³⁵ Perhaps the secular wastelands of today and tomorrow need to be replenished **P. 131** by the spiritual gardens of past traditions. Certainly, different traditions of spirituality do exist, and learning from them does enrich us today. Just as A.W. Tozer was renewed by the medieval mystics, and Charles Spurgeon and many since were renewed by the Puritans, so the contemporary resurgence of interest in the early Cistercians is inspiring many others today.

But even more necessary than historical enrichment, is a recovery of trinitarian spirituality. The great majority of Christians today are, in their practical life, almost mere 'monotheists'. Devout Christians will argue, 'But is the doctrine of the Trinity really taught in the New Testament?' Karl Rahner, the modern Roman Catholic scholar, has argued that: 'should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged'.³⁶ For many believers, the doctrine of the Trinity remains an isolated item in the total dogmatic system of thought. So the Trinity does not play a vital and central role in many Christians' thought and practice. But when it does, it brings a new vitality and inner conviction of living truth that is transforming indeed. Then it gives new force to the declaration that 'in him we live, and move, and have our being; and without him we can do nothing'.

For the God of the Bible is not a Greek deity, metaphysically static, passive, impersonal and distant. He is Immanuel, God-with-us. Therefore the revelation of God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit requires of us a wholly living, personal response, rather than a merely cognitive and theoretical framework of truth. Christ's claim to be 'the Way, the Truth, and the Life', when taken seriously upsets our descriptive and informative styles of teaching, for that is the nature of the personal God. He is alive, loving and interpenetrating. Indeed, in the Incarnation, the perfect communion of the divine and human in Jesus Christ, is expressive of the *perichoresis* of the Trinity, a term that John Damascene first used to refer to the intratrinitarian life and relationships of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As this Greek term was translated into Latin in the Middle Ages, it was given added significance. In the twelfth century it was translated as *circumincessio*, of the divine life in one another, and then a century later there appeared *circuminsessio*, of being in one another. Such then is the nature of the divine life given to us, of 'the things that pertain to life and godliness' ([2 Pet 1:3](#)). There is a threefold *perichoresis*: of the Trinity, of God in himself; of the Incarnation, of God in human form; of the **p. 132** *Ecclesia* or Church, of God in the midst of his people. Thus the *koinonia* or fellowship of God's people is the outward sign of the inward life of the Holy Trinity. Abstraction of thought knows nothing of this divine fellowship, and that is why it is only what it is: abstraction!³⁷

The recovery of the doctrine of the Trinity in personal and communal life is thus the key to the vitality of Spiritual Theology. The scholarly revival of patristic studies is one

³⁵ Quoted by Gordon S. Wakefield, *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1983), p. 361–362.

³⁶ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. by Joseph Donceel (London: Burns & Oats, 1970), p. 1011.

³⁷ Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary* (London: Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 271–272.

reason for this renewed theological interest in the Trinity, since the Greek and Latin Fathers were so vitally concerned with the mystery of the Trinity. Major theological changes in Catholic theology after Vatican II, notably the documents of *Lumen Gentium* are a second reason.³⁸ More interest in Orthodox theology, especially of such theologians as Vladimir Lossky,³⁹ is a third reason. The cultural concern for being human and personal in an inhuman and impersonal world has also generated a focus upon the personalness of God.⁴⁰ Finally, the challenge of pluralism and the denial of the uniqueness of Christ and of his atoning death, has forced the defence of apologetics to a more vigorous trinitarian stance.

SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY IS TRINITARIAN

If Christian belief then, is centred on the Trinity, why is it that there is still resistance to seeing it as vital for our faith? We have already noted the objection that the New Testament does not seem to give and teach a developed doctrine of the Trinity. Perhaps it does not do so in order to expose man to the mysterious life of God and to effect a way of knowing him that is intrinsic to his own character and not human ways of thought, in reconciliation, obedience and eternal fellowship. So the human traditions of 'doing theology' have all had their own weaknesses in grappling with the mystery of God for they remain human systems of thought, whether in Greek or Latin, East or West. Traditionally, theologians have made the distinction between the 'economic Trinity' and the 'immanent Trinity'. The former expresses the functional life of God, of what he 'does' as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. The focus is upon the manifestation of the Trinity in the **P. 133** history of salvation. This has been much more the bias of thought in the Western church, because of the enormous influence of Augustine, who considers first the one essence of God, and then proceeds to explain how the One God is also 'triune', in a unity of deity that consists of Three Persons.⁴¹ This habit of mind lends itself to discussing the attributes of deity, his Essence, as Greek philosophers themselves argued about. Perhaps this is why our western philosophical style of theology has readily opened the way for non-Christian theologians, since the eighteenth century, to enter into theological debate. It is not an approach that sufficiently acknowledges humanity's intellectual inadequacy when probing the mystery of the Trinity and the ineffability of God. Rather Anselm, Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, the theological 'giants' since Augustine, have been expressive and descriptive of God's reality, not silent and awe-struck.

In contradistinction, the Eastern Fathers have been more concerned to relate to the 'immanent Trinity', that is to the Three 'Hypostases' or Persons who are relationally One God. Thus the word 'triadic' is used of God, and not just three in unity. The Orthodox tradition of theology considers then the personalness of the Three Persons of the Trinity first of all, rather than the One Essence of Divinity. So we offer ourselves first to personal encounter with God as the immediate response to him, whereas Augustine, by starting with God's oneness, tended to explain the Three Persons in human terms and analogies. Today, this Eastern theological approach has much attraction to our impersonal culture,

³⁸ John J. O'Connell, *The Mystery of the Triune God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).

³⁹ See for example, Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (N.Y.: St. Vladimir Press, 1976).

⁴⁰ Colin Gunton, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ I have developed this theme in my essay, 'Spirituality and the Trinity', in *Christ in our Place*, edited by Trevor A. Hart and Daniel P. Thimell (Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1989), p. 48–69.

with its intellectual bankruptcy. Knowing God personally, then, is the first experience we can have of God, by the indwelling of his gracious Spirit, given us by Christ. In other words, it is God alone who by his triune Being enables us to know him. But as for his Essence, it is mystery all, so that we can only speak 'negatively' of what he is not in human terms.⁴²

Unfortunately, both traditions of theology have been infected with their own forms of scholasticism, so today in the intermingling of both traditions, deeper theological discernment is required of us.⁴³ Nor will it do for us to flatten the distinctives of God's 'economic Trinity' and of his 'immanent Trinity' in the way that Karl Rahner and other modern p. 134 theologians are now doing, even though it is wondrous indeed to see how God's character is expressive of his way of salvation for man. So we have to hold in balance these two truths, emphasised respectively by the western and the eastern traditions, that God is both revealable, and that God is also relational.

Divine Revelation is God's self-communication to us of his own nature. For the Trinity is not a human postulate, not some logical conclusion we come to see, as a deduction we make from Scripture. Rather it is experienced in faith as God's revelation of himself, of his own Triunity, as the Revealer, the Revelation, and the Revealedness of God.⁴⁴ Then the divine Being, the Word, and the Act of God are interpreted together as one whole, integrated unity. For knowledge of God is through God, and in God alone. This destroys the traditional model of a God revealing certain proper truths about himself, that in fact betrays a disjunction between the nature of God himself, and what, and how, truth is communicated to us as 'propositions'. This latter falsifies the nature of the God who reveals himself, allowing a mere intellectualism to become a substitute for the Divine Revealer himself. For he is the Revelation. Rather then, trinitarian theology recognizes that God, by his Spirit, gives embodiment in Jesus Christ to the truth. The revelation of God is then the enabling also to interpret the revelation given to us.⁴⁵ The revelation of God's Word is identical with God. So wherever there is divine revelation, there is also the revealing of God's presence.

Divine relationship is likewise God's presence with us. John Zizioulas, in his thoughtful study *Being as Communion*⁴⁶, has noted the revolution of thought between the Greek philosophers and the early Fathers of the church. The latter insisted that God is infinitely personal. 'The being of God is a relational being: without the concept of communion it would be impossible to speak of the being of God'.⁴⁷ The consequence of this is that 'nothing exists as an individual, conceivable in itself. Communion is an ontological category'. 'To be' and 'to be in relationship' become then identical.⁴⁸ God as Three persons thus constitutes the nature of the Godhead. To say with the p. 135 apostle, 'God is love' ([1 John 4:16](#)), signifies that God subsists as Trinity, where love is given, love is received, and love is shared. Indeed, love is God's mode of being. Again, the relational character of God, as in his revelational character, forces us to break from our own impersonal modes of

⁴² Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: an Introduction* (Cresswood, N. Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), p. 31–35.

⁴³ See Gordon Watson, 'The Filioque-Opportunity for debate?', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 41, pp. 313–330.

⁴⁴ A statement of Karl Barth quoted by Ian Torrance, 'Does God Suffer?', *Christ in our Place*, op. cit., p.359.

⁴⁵ Eberhard Jungel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T & T, Clark, 1976), p.15.

⁴⁶ John D. Zizioulas, *Being in Communion* (Crestwood, N. Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press), p. 17.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

thought and action, that so naturally control our view of reality. 'I' was born then, not with the Cartesian frame of mind that 'I think, therefore I am'. No, argues Von Balthasar, it was when love smiled upon my birth, itself ideally an expression of love, that 'I' became an 'I', when I-responded-to-that-love.⁴⁹ The growth then of personhood is the growth in communion.

It is vital then, to appreciate that it is this trinitarian doctrine of God that invites us into his world, so to speak. Revelation then is not an arbitrary act on God's behalf, but a participation-in and a belonging-to an order of life that both precedes and transcends our natural apprehension.⁵⁰ The newness of divine revelation is that it introduces into our life the love and grace of God, in forgiveness and empowering, so that we also are called to represent his Son in the world. Likewise, it is only the trinitarian reality of his relational being that could ever give rise to the reality of persons, and to bring about the realization of community. For 'the love of God, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' are what give new birth to man, to be persons-in-communion. The church then is the *koinonia*, that is built upon and expressive of this union and communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus Christ prays for his people, 'that they may be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us' ([John 17:21](#)).

Spiritual Theology then, is engaged in spelling out this revelational and relational reality in our ordinary lives. It teaches that man's nature can only have an authentic existence in the Trinity. It means then that God is the source of *all truth*. 'For grace and truth came by Jesus Christ' ([John 1:17](#)). For we have now 'the revelation of Jesus Christ' ([Gal 1:2](#)). It means also that the Father is the basis of *all true personhood*, for he is 'the Father of whom every family in heaven and on earth is named' ([Eph 3:15](#)). It means that God is the basis of *all true fellowship*. 'We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you may also have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and the Son' ([1 John 1:3](#)). It means then that human identity is neither p. 136 individualistic, nor is it conformist. For God is three distinct Persons, yet Each-is-For-the-Other. So that 'no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' ([Matt 11:27](#)).

Yet the doctrine of the Trinity would also *centre human life in the act of obedience to God*. It is so of Jesus Christ. 'I have come from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me' ([John 6:38](#)). 'I do always the things that please him' ([John 8:29](#)). The Son's mission is one of obedience, prompted by the Spirit's presence. It is then, 'in obedience unto death, even the death of the cross' that the human life of Christ opens for us the cruciform life to follow. Faith then, for the Christian, is not merely an intellectual act, but an existential surrender of the whole person, to which the apostle exhorts us 'to offer your whole bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship' ([Rom 12:1](#)). Knowing the truth that is in Christ Jesus is much more than theological scholasticism can ever experience, for it involves participation in the death and resurrection of Christ ([Phil 3:10–11](#)). These then, are exemplary truths that we cannot teach so much as exemplify, in our whole manner of life. Personal life for the Christian then, is 'kenotic', as self-emptying, as Christ has given us the example to follow him.

In the establishment of this Chair in Spiritual Theology, it is my prayer that its reputation for teaching will always lie enfolded 'in the strong name of the Trinity'. May its

⁴⁹ John O'Donnell, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar, the form of his theology', *Communio*, Fall, 1989, p. 458–474.

⁵⁰ Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation', *Modern Theology*, 2:3, 1986, p. 197–211.

primary function in teaching Christian doctrine be regulative rather than merely descriptive. May its teaching be in every area of our ordinary human existence and experience, to live in relation to God. In other words, its primary role should be that we are taught and encouraged to pray. But clearly then, in the measure to which we are *less than persons*, to that measure we shall go on being *prayerless*.⁵¹

SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY IS CHRISTOCENTRIC

The trinitarian grammar we have attempted to spell out, however, requires utterance. Jesus Christ is that incarnate utterance of God, enacted in space and time. For Jesus was a particular man in a particular place as a particular person. He has spoken and lived out the realities of trinitarian life before the world. So trinitarian spirituality is not merely descriptive of some ideal, and remains as a spectator of its **P. 137** abstractions. As Nicholas Lash has pointed out, we can indulge in ‘the flight into feeling’, in the cultivation of our own private oases in the deserts of life as well as exercise ‘the flight into thought’, in seeking for comprehensive explanation.⁵² No, our ministry is to see lives changed concretely so that our teaching makes a difference in personal existence. This is why, then, Jesus Christ is the focus of our ministry. For ‘the Kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power’ ([1 Cor 4:20](#)). Our challenge then is to ‘Live out the Gospel’, as our dear colleague Klaus Bockmuehl has exhorted us.⁵³

May I select then *three* areas in which Christcentredness will help us to live out the Gospel.

The *first* is to see ‘Christ in all the Scriptures’. Biblical scholarship, whether in the third century with Origen, or in the twelfth century with Bernard of Clairvaux, or the sixteenth century with Luther and Calvin, has used all the resources of the time—philological, historical, cultural, scientific—to express the literal exegesis. They have used the rich range of literary genres in Scripture to express the fullness of the Word of God to all of life. But the accusation has often been made, especially of the early Fathers, that when they did not understand—nor had the exegetical tools to understand literally—they escaped by studying it spiritually. Perhaps the accusation fits the other foot today. We understand so literally that we have little spiritual dimension in our exegetical skills.⁵⁴ There is a scriptural basis for spiritual exegesis, for it is the New Testament that practices it upon the Old Testament. Firstly, this is done in the use of symbolic language, with a kinship between the use of symbol in the two Testaments. One is glad to see the renewed interest in symbolic language in contemporary theological scholarship. Then there is the use of narrative for didactic purposes, the latter needing to be uncovered to get at the spiritual meaning. John’s gospel excels in this, though the synoptics also use it deliberately. Then again there is the reference to events in the history of God’s chosen people that are re-interpreted in the New Testament in the light of Christ’s advent, for example, [1 Cor 10:11](#), or [2 Cor 3:6–18](#). Thus ‘spiritual’ exegetes often quote the passage of [1 Cor 2:13](#), ‘comparing the spiritual to the spiritual’.

⁵¹ This is the inference behind my book, *The Transforming Friendship: A Guide to Prayer* (Oxford: Lion, 1989).

⁵² Nicholas Lash, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

⁵³ Klaus Bockmuehl, *Living the Gospel*.

⁵⁴ See the fine study of H. Crouzel, *Origen*, trans. A.S. Worrall (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 73–84, on spiritual exegesis.

But the main theological justification of spiritual exegesis is the revelation identified with Christ's Incarnation. As the Johannine [p. 138](#) writings emphasize, Christ is the *Logos*, The Word of God. And the Word became man in order to translate his image into a human person, into human acts and deeds. The Word then is expressive of the *whole* life of the incarnate *Logos*. To be sure, we cannot return and imitate fully the ways each of the great spiritual theologians did their spiritual exegesis. But what is impressive is the key role this played in their own contemporary vitality to communicate Christ in their generation—Christ in all the Scriptures. The recurrent danger is, of course, that we mix and interact spiritual with speculative. So 'there is need' repeats Origen many times in his writings, 'for those who prophesy and for those who hear the prophets; and no-one can rightly hear a prophet, unless the same Spirit bestows on him the capacity of apprehending his words.'⁵⁵ True 'enthusiasm' is experienced (*en theos*, in God); it is the feeling within one that God is there, just as the hearts of the disciples on the Emmaus Road burned within them as Christ expounded the meaning of Scripture. It would be a worthwhile study then to examine in the lives of great spiritual theologians how this keynote of their exegetical power convinced them of the centrality of Christ in Scripture.

A *second* Christocentric focus of Spiritual Theology is the cultivation of the contemplative life. Explaining the Bible as one would any secular book is only a necessary first stage of exegesis. But what gives the Christian his 'daily bread' is the association of spiritual exegesis with the cultivation of the contemplative life. If the purpose of man's creation is 'sabbath rest', then to 'find rest in God alone' ([Ps 62:1, 5](#)) is an orientation for the spiritual man. Christ invites us to enter into that rest in him ([Matt 11:28-30](#)). Clearly, it is the rest of satisfied love, yet desire also for a deeper exploration of divine love. It is in this contemplative tradition we have the well-known Latin hymn translated by Ray Palmer:

Jesu, 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.

A deep devotion to Christ has marked the lives of God's saints, as it has been expressive of the great devotional literature, especially of the Middle Ages. How truly men and women have had their prayer answered, 'Thy Kingdom come', wherever and whenever devotion to Christ has been real and sustained. Unfortunately, the discipline of [p. 139](#) contemplation is largely a lost art in the activism of modern evangelical life, that needs to be profoundly renewed. Only when we read the devotional literature of the past, do we realize how much we need to regain. We shall not be convincing witnesses of Jesus, the Man who lives today, until we have become more contemplative persons.

A *third* Christocentric focus in Spiritual Theology must be the whole theme of embodiment. Psychosomatic illness, sexual issues, emotional addictions, the relations between inherited temperament and acquired personalities, generational issues in family life, all manifest the interactions of body and spirit. The place of discipline and ascetic practices has played a prominent part in the nature of spiritual life, by seeing the place of the body in the life of the soul. There is much for us to explore and study, as well as to practise and embody. Clearly, it is again a Christ-centred life that enters deeply into the experience of 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ', that we need. For surely Christian grace is the embodiment of divine love, manifest in human life. This dynamic, transforming life is therefore also developmental. So we need to be increasingly aware of the Christian life

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 173-4.

as expressive of the personal stages of development, as writers such as James Fowler have begun to do. So far from ignoring the body in the Christian life, previous generations considered it too much, though often negatively. Today, new prominence is being given to the human body but often in association with the disavowal of asceticism as being psychologically sick. So there is much confusion about the practice of asceticism *per se*, that we cannot afford to ignore.

We too confuse things, as Christians, when we do not distinguish our body from what Paul calls 'our flesh', that is 'flesh' in a theological sense. True ascetic practice, as Margaret Miles has pointed out, is a struggle for more life through strengthening the Spirit's energizing control of the whole of life.⁵⁶ We feel the bondage of what deadens us, and seek for the freedom of the children of God to be 'truly alive'. Issues such as celibacy, then, create still much emotional, as well as theological, confusion in the Catholic Church. Feminism also contributes further hurt and misunderstanding when the whole issue of sexism is misunderstood.

Perhaps we may add that a Christ-focused education in Spiritual Theology will require us to return to a more personal nature and less of the mass audience approach to teaching. In the Old Testament, judges, priests and then prophets were living sources of Yahweh's word ([Deut 17:8-13](#)). The wise statesman was the spiritual guide of his p. 140 people. The 'good' king embodied virtue in himself, so that his personal behaviour was a living model of how the kingdom should be governed. Even in Greek antiquity, the philosopher as a spiritual guide or *paedagogos* was *kathegetes*, 'one who leads, who shows the way'. The spiritual renewal associated with the Desert Fathers modeled their interpretation of discipleship upon the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, as an oral tradition. But first with the medieval copyists, then with the further removal of teacher and pupil by the printing press, and now with the electronic age, the removals from exemplary teaching have been intensified. The ideal for theological education must still be that of a personal relationship between teacher and student.

SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY IS SPIRIT-LIVED

If then the revelation of God's truth is seen to be redemptive of relationships, and not so informative and programmatic as our western culture has made it, then we still need to probe in what ways is Spiritual Theology 'spiritual'? Clearly the New Testament indicates several aspects of what is 'spiritual'. It may designate the superhuman world of spirits and demons, 'hosts' of wickedness that we need to discern as sources of confusion and evil in the world ([Eph 6:12](#)). Wise discernment would guard us from too much preoccupation with this kind of spirituality. The ability to discern and distinguish 'spirits' remains a vital task of the Christian ([1 Cor 12:10](#)), but even the elitist pursuit of insight can also be abused as it appeared to be in the Corinthian church ([1 Cor 8:2](#)). Likewise, excessive valuation of 'tongues speaking' as evidence of charism was a Corinthian trait that strikes a contemporary chord ([1 Cor 14:2](#)). The charismatic frustration of desire for God, that truly is prayer, in 'groans' too deep for words ([Rom 8:26](#)) is perhaps the more genuine cause for the spiritual hunger of contemporary Christians. For the loss of true transcendence in our secular spirit, and its rationalistic bankruptcy are forcing us to repent and be renewed by the Holy Spirit. For we live with an exhausted evangelicalism.

Implicit in what the New Testament teaches about what is 'spiritual' is that it is *divinely given*. It is that which is brought into being, or transformed by the presence of the Spirit of God. The greatest gift of all is God's gift 'of eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord' ([Rom](#)

⁵⁶ Margaret R. Miles, *Fullness of Life* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).

[6:23](#)). Gratitude for 'his inexpressible gift' ([2 Cor 9:1](#)) is then a true mark of the Spirit. Brokenness of our natural independence is then the vital necessity of being true 'charismatics', receivers of God's gracious Spirit. So we rejoice in seeing the Charismatic movement as the [p. 141](#) opening of the door to the deepening need of our contemporary church to the experience of a richer, fuller spirituality. But it needs to enlarge also into a deeper trinitarian spirituality, as Thomas A. Smail has written in *The Forgotten Father*,⁵⁷ so that we discern what truly are 'spiritual gifts'. As we begin to recognize in ourselves that our so-called natural gifts may often be expressive of emotional addictions, we may begin to recognize also that 'spiritual gifts' are more reflective of the apostle's experience that 'when I am weak, then am I made strong' ([2 Cor 12:10](#)). It is this transformation by God's gracious Spirit that gives us true maturity and stability of character ([Gal 6:1](#); [1 Cor 2:15; 3:1](#)). Clearly then, Spiritual Theology is committed to the nurture of spiritual character, in the gift of grace, in the transformation of weakness, and in the commitment to sacrificial living, that is obedient to God's will.

It is also implicit in New Testament teaching on what is 'spiritual' that the Christian life is *divinely directed*. In the deepening of human consciousness, with the contemporary stress upon inward exploration of the human psyche, modern man is encountering new forms of confusion and personal, emotional difficulties. So more than ever spiritual discernment is needed in the church. 'The ability to distinguish between spirits' ([1 Cor 12:10](#)), requires instruction and guidance that traditionally the Fathers of the Church saw as the role of the 'Abba' or 'spiritual father'. Yet with the absence of the confessional in the Protestant world, contemporary evangelicals have few insights and experience to teach troubled souls. A great need then in theological education today is for Spirit-filled persons to warn the immature against the pitfalls of the inner life, knowing how to deal with what we loosely call 'emotional problems', deep-seated as they are. For if 'the fruit of the Spirit' ([Gal 5:22f.](#)) is the outcome of the Spirit's presence in our lives, then his presence also implies growth to maturity of character.

Finally, it is implicit in biblical teaching that what is 'spiritual' is that *God himself is personally experienced*. In [Acts 19:24f](#) we read of Apollos 'a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John'. As Paul then taught about the 'baptism of Jesus' in [Acts 20:1-7](#), Apollos, and others like him, then received the personal experience of God, for 'the Holy Spirit came on them'. To experience the Holy Spirit then is to be able to personally experience God as 'Abba, Father', so that 'the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are the children of God' ([Rom 8:15-16](#)). It is truly 'the spirit of sonship'. This is [p. 142](#) a joyous possession, that takes from us our natural cynicism and despair and delivers us from our natural egotism. To experience the Holy Spirit is also to acclaim the sovereignty of Christ as enthroned in our hearts, 'for no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord', except by the Holy Spirit' ([1 Cor 12:3](#)). This is indeed an on-going experiencing of Christcentredness that never ends. It requires the daily companionship of our divine Paraclete, who will, as Jesus promised the disciples 'teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you' ([John 14:26](#)). As the Holy Spirit helps us to enter into the knowledge of God, into the very depths of his own trinitarian being, we begin to see life as having infinite light in all its transparency, and also as love, infinite in its possibilities of personal relationships.

⁵⁷ Thomas A. Smail, *The Forgotten Father* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980).

As the poet George Herbert lived out the simplicity of a domestic spirituality that relates us to God in all of life, he could describe prayer as ‘heaven in ordinary’.⁵⁸ It is that ‘godliness with contentment’ that the apostle appraises as ‘great gain’. The saints can afford to remain ‘home-spun’, when they live with the sufficiency of Christ. Perhaps, then, it is the cultural alienation of our times that would compensate by the extraordinary and the dramatic in life, precisely because of its estrangement from God. But the saints have always known that the personal experience of God brings simplicity to life. After all, we need no perspiration if we have inspiration. May then Spiritual Theology, as the Kingdom of God in daily life, and therefore in ordinary life, not be simply the teaching of one discipline but be the whole character of Regent College, now, and in the days to come. For ideally, ‘theology’ should not need any other description to be ‘spiritual’.

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What is Spiritual Exegesis?

Gerhard Maier

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‘We are in a phase of slackness’, says Jean-François Lyotard when he answers the question ‘What is postmodern?’—which was addressed to Thomas E. Carroll (1982)—as he speaks generally of ‘tendencies of the times’.

Is such a kind of slackness the reason that especially the methodical work of exegesis is seen as ineffective in our generation? That linguistic discoveries in a certain verse aA in relation to verse bB of the same verse is not seen as that exciting? That we surprisingly realize in analyzing our own sermons how few historical and philological papers or other special theological insights have been helpful? Is it such a kind of slackness that creates the clamour for spiritual exegesis, for something that is really life-giving? May be—but whether you answer this question with yes or no—one thing is sure, there is a new and deep longing for a better and more lively handling of the biblical texts and the understanding is becoming stronger that exegesis is not only or perhaps in a low degree—an explanation of the past but also—and perhaps even much more—the illumination of the future. The biblical statements are in a certain sense each and all future statements rather than processes of literature which are wearisome and limited to the past.

To quote one of the hermeneutic basics of the NT: All this is ‘written down for us on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come’. ([1 Cor 10:11](#)) How deep the discomfort has become with continually more specialized (and with that continually more mute) methods of exegesis shall be illustrated by an article of *Theologische Literaturzeitung* (1990).

⁵⁸ See Noel-Dermont O’Donoghue, *Heaven in Ordinarie* (Springfield, IL: 1979).