

The *SBJT* Forum: Thinking about True Spirituality

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Mark Coppenger, Joel R. Beeke, and Pierre Constant have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: Could you briefly lay out the opportunities and dangers in the current interest in spirituality?

D. A. Carson: So many books on the subject of spirituality have been written during the last two or three decades that it is an impertinence to address the topic in a few paragraphs. In the hope that brevity may serve some useful functions, however, I'm inclined to say at least the following.

Before I answer the question directly, it is worth remembering that "spirituality" has an intellectual history that is worth thinking about. I summarized that history elsewhere (in an Appendix to *The Gaggling of God*), and I need not repeat here everything I said there. Nevertheless a handful of remarks from that survey will not go amiss. (1) Until a few decades ago, "spirituality" was not an expression much used in Protestantism. Nowadays, however, the expression is used not only by Catholics and Protestants alike, but also by almost everyone, including completely unchurched people who think of themselves as in many respects secular. "Spiritual" may hint at some sort of connection to eastern religions or to new age thought, but it might mean something like "aesthetic," and it might be tied to fairly

mystical quasi-materialist beliefs (e.g., some keep crystals close to them in the belief that they vibrate and improve the holder's "spirituality"). (2) In the Western world, the term was, as I've just said, until recently tied to Catholicism. But what did Catholics mean by it? One of their usages meant something like "devotional." While Protestants might write either academic or "devotional" commentaries, Catholics might write either academic or "spiritual" commentaries—and meant much the same thing. (3) Another traditional Catholic usage that stretches back many centuries has to do with forms of *superior* Christian experience. In other words, ordinary Christians might believe certain things and act in certain ways, but to be a really *spiritual* Christian meant to engage in certain ascetic practices, adopt certain spiritual discipline, and so forth. In other words, to be "spiritual" was something akin to being a more serious Christian, or a more advanced Christian, or a more holy or godly Christian. (4) Because "spirituality" today is often applied not only to Protestants and Catholics alike, but also to adherents of completely non-Christian religions—for instance, many writers probe what we ought to be learning from, say, Buddhist "spirituality"—the word is

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less and less tied to any identifiable belief structure, and more and more tied to technique. The assumption is that techniques of “spirituality” may be readily transferred from religion to religion, from belief structure to belief structure.

So now it is time to address the question directly. *First*, some of the opportunities bound up with current interest in this vague thing called “spirituality” may usefully be identified.

(1) Although the term “spirituality” as it is now used is astonishingly broad, it usually signals a reluctance on the part of those who espouse it to embrace philosophical materialism. In other words, being committed to “spirituality” usually means one is committed to a universe that has something in it beyond matter, energy, space, and time. The sheer reductionism of philosophical materialism is thus avoided, even if the nature or even the rationale of this “spirituality” is more than a little fuzzy. That means the beginning point in conversation with such “spiritual” people is never quite the same as with, say, a scientist committed to philosophical materialism.

(2) Epistemologically, those who espouse “spirituality” are more open to diverse channels of acquiring “knowledge” than are those who buy into logical positivism. To (over)simplify: While logical positivists think that the only things human beings can “know” are those that are tied by observation and reason to the material world, those interested in “spirituality” are open to intuitions, faith, extra-sensory perception, aesthetics, and sometimes a range of supernatural beings. I am far from saying that all of these epistemological claims are wise or defensible; I am merely saying that they avoid one common form of reductionism,

and so how people may come to “know” things about Jesus, and truly to “know” him, can happily proceed along broader lines than those acknowledged by reason alone or by the senses alone.

(3) In particular, those who espouse “spirituality” can be praised for their appreciation of the complexity of human existence, of a non-material component. One remembers Paul’s careful opening remarks when he addresses the Areopagus: “I see that in every way you are very religious.” He then adduces, as evidence, their “objects of worship” and even the altar “To an Unknown God.” Today, for most people in the Western world, being labeled “religious” would not be taken as any sort of compliment, ambiguous or otherwise. I suspect that if Paul were beginning his address today in New York or Chicago or L.A., he would say, “I see that in every way you are very spiritual.” Of course, that would not prevent Paul from chiding them for some of their understanding of what it means to be “spiritual,” or from providing a Christian understanding of what it means to be “spiritual”—just as he insists on a Christian understanding of true “religion.” Nevertheless, as the apostle detects some measure of common humanity in the desire to be “religious,” we ought to detect some measure of common humanity in the desire to be “spiritual.”

That brings us to the *second* part of the question: What are the dangers in the current interest in spirituality?

(1) For many people, “spirituality” is a word with only positive connotations—a bit the way “apple pie” or “motherhood” functioned in the Eisenhower years. The upshot is that encouraging people to be discerning in spiritual matters sounds hyper-critical, for it presupposes that not

everything that passes for spirituality is good. Yet diminished discernment is rarely a good thing, and so we have to make the attempt to avoid the clichés surrounding “spirituality” and try to encourage rigorous biblical fidelity.

(2) The result of the current naïveté about spirituality is that many people have begun to appeal to their own mystical experiences over against claims of truth. An explanatory aside: Historically, people have tended to base their religious claims on reason, mysticism, or revelation. This is not to say that there may not be some overlap of these categories, of course, but this analytical breakdown is helpful. The current appeal to spirituality is very largely an appeal to highly diverse forms of mysticism—forms that brook very little space for revelation in any biblical sense, and not even much for reason. Another way of saying this is that personal experience trumps everything; indeed, it becomes an end in itself, which of course feeds that which, from the biblical perspective, lies at the heart of human rebellion, namely, self-interest.

(3) To put this another way: the current shape of spirituality largely sidesteps very substantial matters dealing with history and truth. Did Jesus rise from the dead, or did he not? If he did, what does his resurrection mean? What does it say about his own personal claims and his own understanding of the human beings? Is he truly the unique Son of God, the “Word made flesh”? From a biblical perspective, can one be “spiritual” while still rejecting the Son of God? And such matters as these are nestled within huge questions of worldview: human beings are important because we have been created in the image of God; we are guilty because we have chosen to go our own

way; salvation consists first and foremost in being reconciled to the God from whom we have alienated ourselves, and whose judgment we must face; the only escape is what this God has provided. Within that sort of framework, then, Paul insists that the “natural” person, the person without the Spirit, “does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness” (1 Cor 2:14). Only the person who has received the Spirit, the Spirit whom Jesus himself bequeathed and who is the down payment of the ultimate inheritance, is truly “spiritual.” Thus being “spiritual” is tied irrefragably to the gospel itself—in the context, to “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:14). Even when Paul refines this fundamental polarity in the next chapter, and painfully writes that some who are “spiritual” in this fundamental sense are acting immaturely, he assumes they are Christians: their immaturity does not manifest itself in the repudiation of the Christian faith, but in one-upmanship and bickering (1 Cor 3). Certainly Christians are responsible to “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25). Yet the fundamental polarity of the new covenant must not be ducked: those who have the Spirit (a state bound up with saving faith in Christ and his cross-work) are spiritual, and those who do not have the Spirit are not. Whatever else is said about not quenching the Spirit, about spiritual growth and knowledge of God, about conformity to Christ—all of which are regularly tied up with “spirituality” in current discussion—must begin with this fundamental polarity, or shunt to one side the Bible and the gospel it announces.

Again, one should be suspicious of generalizations of this sort: “By all means read the evangelical literature if you want to understand the cross, but if you want to

grow in spirituality, read the Catholics.” The bifurcation is deeply troubling. Of course, some Catholics have understood the cross profoundly: we still sing, for instance, some of Bernard de Clairvaux’s cross-centered hymns (at least we did until they were largely displaced by choruses telling God that we are worshiping him). But I have not read literature that is more “spiritual” than the best of the Puritan classics, for instance—literature that is, on the whole, deeply imbued with a profound grasp of the gospel. Is it really biblically-defined spirituality which is found in traditions that are *less* clear on the nature of the gospel?

(4) Within the broadly Christian heritage, a very large amount of current discussion turns on technique, asceticism, monastic practice, and the like. Not for a moment would I want to deny that there are degrees of knowledge of God (as there are degrees of knowing any person), and that some Christians are more mature than others. One needs only to read Philippians 3, for instance, to remember how Paul yearned for continued growth and conformity to Christ. Moreover, disciplined practices may prove to be a helpful part of such growth for some believers. For instance, Christians who commit themselves to daily reading of substantial parts of the Bible, along with the journaling that keeps records of personal reflections as one reads the text, may find themselves growing substantially. But is it the reading and journaling, *considered as techniques*, that are achieving these ends? Or is it the truth of the Word? After all, on the night he was betrayed, Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them by your truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). There are myriads of passages that stress the importance of meditating on, believing in, obeying,

learning, memorizing (“hiding in one’s heart”), God’s truth; there are none that mandate journaling. I hasten to insist that I am not unalterably opposed to journaling. But I am deeply suspicious of any appeal to technique in spirituality that is not mandated by Scripture, the more so if it has the effect of masking what the Scripture is actually talking about.

Sometimes the technique that is being urged is so heavily horizontal that it barely acknowledges God. One recent influential book, for instance, urges us to move through distinct phases of spiritual exploration, regardless of the particular object of our faith (i.e., what we believe is unimportant; the categories of spiritual growth are sociologically determined): (1) discovery, i.e., we find God on the particular path we have chosen; (2) belonging, i.e., we attach ourselves to a particular group; (3) working, i.e., we commit ourselves to this religious cause; (4) questioning, i.e., at some point we may begin to wonder what we are doing here; (5) the wall, i.e., we hit an impasse; (6) living with uncertainty, i.e., we work through the impasse and choose deeper confidence on the God we believe in, while we hold other things more loosely; (7) living in love, i.e., we learn better how to live for God and others. Regardless of the accuracy or inaccuracy of this sociological profile, it is utterly detached from *any* particular belief system, including the gospel. We are a long way from 1 Corinthians and Galatians, from the Farewell Discourse, from Ephesians, from Matthew’s form of the Great Commission.

What we must see is that only what is valuable is counterfeited. One does not bother to counterfeit pennies; one counterfeits \$20 bills or \$100 bills. A great deal of biblically-mandated spirituality is

counterfeited by those who will not come under the biblical frame of reference, precisely because *biblical* spirituality is glorious, so it seems worth counterfeiting. Sadly, Christians are easily taken in by such counterfeits, unless they relentlessly return to Scripture to test all things.

(5) It may seem a tad harsh to say it, but in my experience, many (though certainly not all) of those who buy into contemporary approaches to spirituality have no hesitation about saying things like “I really am quite a spiritual person.” This is not surprising. Once spirituality is tied to technique, personal mysticism, and self-discipline, it can easily become a basis for pride. This is a long way removed from the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5).

Perhaps it is the fruit of the Spirit that gives us an important clue to what we should be pursuing. We often encourage people to memorize the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit, but observe carefully the references to the Spirit in the context: “So I say, *walk by the Spirit*, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to *the Spirit*, and *the Spirit* what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led *by the Spirit*, you are not under the law. . . . But *the fruit of the Spirit* is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we *live by the Spirit*, let us *keep in step with the Spirit*. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other” (Gal 5:16ff.). This is where our future lies: walking by the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, keeping in

step with the Spirit, growing in the fruit of the Spirit. Here is spirituality alive with Christ-centered awareness, a passionate desire to bring glory to God and good to his people, a love and a joy and a peace, and all the rest, that are cruciform.