

SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS

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If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you (John 14:15-17).

One of the great clichés of our day, especially among younger people, is the claim to be “spiritual but not religious.” The claim is so common that in some circles people just nod in agreement, and the conversation moves on to another topic, as if there really wasn’t any more to say about spirituality and religion.

But what exactly does that mean: “spiritual but not religious”?

If you stop someone and ask, “What do you mean by that?” the first thing you’re likely to hear is, “Well, I’m spiritual, but I don’t believe in organized religion.” That is, spirituality is defined negatively as “not church.” If you press a bit further, you may hear that organized religion is boring; or that religions are the main sources of conflict in the world and we’d be better off without them; or just that the individual feels no need of religion – after all, people can have their own opinions about things without having anybody else try to tell them what to believe. And that’s often the end of the conversation, because to some people those notions seem so self-evident that there really isn’t much more to be said.

Well, there’s an element of truth in that position. Sometimes church *is* boring. In some places (not here, of course) the music is terrible, the preacher drones on without saying much, the liturgy feels mechanical and meaningless, and the people act like they’re doing some terrible duty instead of delighting in worshiping God.

It’s also true that religions have been a source of conflict in history, and in some places they still are – though human beings can fight over almost anything, and religion is hardly the only cause of conflict in the world. And it’s certainly true that people can form their own opinions without having anyone else tell them what to believe. But that’s beside the point. Contrary to the caricatures, people don’t mindlessly accept whatever the preacher says from the pulpit (I know this from experience), and in any case, religion is about a whole lot more than just having a set of opinions.

There are lots of reasons for abandoning church, but only some of them are the church’s fault. For one thing, it’s easier and cheaper not to be active in a worshiping community. You can sleep in on Sunday, or play sports, or do any number of things that are more entertaining. You don’t have to be challenged by the word that God is not satisfied with you yet, but expects you to exert more time and energy in the service of others. And you can save a lot of money. It’s a well-documented fact that, on the average, people who are active in congregations give more money and volunteer more time – not only to church but to other charitable organizations – than people who are not involved in “organized religion.”

And behind all this, there’s the egocentricity of felt need. If the main reason for going or not going to church is whether or not I feel the need, that means it’s all about me. The fact that there might be a God to whom we owe our lives, our gratitude, our devotion, and our service, and that all those things might work best in a community of believers, hardly enters the picture when the picture is all about me.

We could say more about the strengths and weaknesses of organized religion, but there’s another set of questions to ask those who claim to be spiritual but not religious. If, for them, the negative meaning of “spiritual” is “not religious,” what’s the positive meaning? What exactly is the content of all this spirituality?

I rarely hear much about that, and I wonder whether it's because often there really isn't much content. If "spirituality" consists in sighing at sunsets and being fond of nature, and thinking that there's a benevolent force behind creation who wants me to be happy and whose interests always line up conveniently with my own – well it's easy to see how that would be popular, but you might suspect that the popularity lies precisely in its convenience.

Of course it's possible to be spiritual without being religious. There are a few great souls who are friends and servants of God but whose spiritual depth has made them deeply disappointed with religious institutions, so that they want nothing to do with religion. Who *isn't* disappointed with the gap between what church could be and what it actually is? But great souls are rare, and it's worth asking the mass of people who claim to be spiritual but not religious, how exactly their spirituality shapes their lives. How does it stretch them, and make them better than they would be without it?

We Christians ought to see through this false dichotomy between spirituality and religion. The church of Jesus Christ has a rich history of deep spiritual insight and practice, which is alive and well today, and there's no better time to recover the power of Christian spirituality than the season of Pentecost.

The first Pentecost was a time when the church was saturated with spirituality. The Holy Spirit fell upon the church and transformed it from a motley crew of half-hearted and timid believers into a dynamic movement that changed the world. Just being a Christian was a powerful witness to the world. People wanted to join the church because they saw the faith and hope and love and joy and service of the Christian community. And it was precisely the religion of the church that sustained the spirituality of individual Christians.

Paul wrote to the Galatians (that is, to the organized church at Galatia): "... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Spirituality, in other words, had content. You could tell how spiritual a person was by the quality of his or her life. If a person claimed to be spiritual but wasn't kind or generous or patient or loving in relation to other people, she was deceiving herself. If a man wasn't growing in joy and peace and gentleness and self-control, then he was stifling the work of the Spirit in his life. "If we live by the Spirit," Paul said, "let us also be guided by the Spirit."

Being guided by the Spirit means getting an extreme makeover. Frederica Mathewes-Green has a wonderful little introduction to spirituality called *The Illumined Heart*. She reminds us that the very first word we hear from Jesus in the first gospel is, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." The Greek word for repent is *metanoia*, which means a transformation of the mind. Our egocentric, self-serving mind has to be transformed into the mind of Christ, the one who lives for others and loves others, because God is love, and we are made in the image of God. She writes:

Repentance is the doorway to the spiritual life, the only way to begin. It is also the path itself, the only way to continue. Anything else is foolishness and self-delusion. Only repentance is both brute-honest enough, and joyous enough, to bring us all the way home.*

The problem is that repentance means handing ourselves over to God to be made new, when we'd rather remain in control ourselves. *Metanoia*, transformation, is a life-long struggle of the new God-centered soul with the old self-centered soul. It's hard work. Frederica Mathewes-Green says that when she came to writing the chapter on repentance, she told her husband, "I'm having a hard time figuring out how to make repentance

* Frederica Mathewes-Green, *The Illumined Heart* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2001), 39f.

appealing.” Then, she says, “I realized that statement summarized the whole problem. We’re a nation of shoppers. Everything has to be appealing.”

It’s no wonder some people these days simply declare themselves to be spiritual, just as many declare themselves to be good people – as if we could be either good or spiritual just by saying so. Even Jesus asked, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” We want credit for virtue without the hard work of being virtuous. But that’s the very meaning of hypocrisy – to claim to be what we aren’t – and hypocrisy is hardly confined to religious people. On the contrary, the most deeply spiritual people in the Christian tradition have always known that they needed the community, organized religion, to help and encourage them in the life-long process of spiritual transformation.

Dallas Willard, another contemporary Christian writer on spirituality, says that spiritual people “are those who draw their life from a conversational relationship with God,” and that “Hearing God makes sense only in the framework of living in the will of God.” The Holy Spirit is everywhere, ready to speak to our hearts and transform our lives, yet so many people never hear a word from God. Willard wrote a book called *Hearing God* to help people do just that. Part of the problem, he says, is that people often don’t want to hear from God, for fear that God might change the way they do some things. He raises an interesting question:

If you find yourself in a position where you can honestly say, “God has never spoken to me,” then you well might ask, “Why *should* God speak to me? What am *I* doing in life that would make speaking to me a reasonable thing for him to do?”[†]

The testimony of deeply spiritual Christians is that God is ever ready to speak if we are ready to hear. As the saying goes, “If you feel far from God, guess who moved?” There is a Korean Creed that describes the Holy Spirit as “God present with us for guidance, for comfort, and for strength.” But as C. S. Lewis says, “He cannot ravish, he can only woo.” God seeks to win our hearts voluntarily, because what God wants from us is love, and love must always be chosen; it can never be forced. God will transform our lives, but only if that’s what we want. Otherwise, why should we expect to hear from God?

But when we do listen for a word from God, and watch for signs of God’s presence, we discover that God is everywhere – all around us, and within us. Then spirituality becomes, not just a set of opinions or some conjured up feelings, but the reality of everyday life.

In our staff Bible study, and at random times throughout the week, we share or hear stories of how the Holy Spirit is on the move. One person is prompted to go to a certain place, only to find that someone she meets there really needs to talk with her. A young person, doubting himself, hears a voice inside saying, “You’re more powerful than you think,” and finds the gifts he needs for leadership. One person’s anxieties are calmed, while another finds the courage to do what needs to be done, and still another finds his whole attitude about a relationship transformed after nothing else has happened but prayer for a change of heart. These kinds of things happen so often around here that many of us have come to expect the Holy Spirit to move in ways we can’t predict but trust will be good.

The notion that there is some kind of dichotomy between being religious and being spiritual is simply nonsense. The testimony of many Christians – from the great classic writers on spirituality to ordinary believers among us here at Westminster – is that the community of faith, our so-called “organized religion,” is precisely the setting in which we learn from one another, and encourage one another in the life-long work of transformation, and show one another how the Spirit is working in our lives even when we can’t see it ourselves.

[†] Dallas Willard, *Hearing God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1999), 70.

This fall we're going to offer a number of small groups and other opportunities for those who are interested to explore the breadth and depth of the spiritual life. In the meantime, part of the point of Pentecost is that our religious life together is precisely the way, for anyone who is ready, to become more deeply and genuinely spiritual.