

Spirituality (Part One)

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is”

Reflection 45 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

We live in the midst of a great transition in religious matters. And if there is perhaps one slogan that captures this transition more than any other, it could be that more and more people these days, including many church goers, declare themselves to be “spiritual but not religious.” With this they express a discomfort with institutional religion and yet a longing for meaningful sacred connection – connection to God, to others, and to their own deepest selves. And in search of this connection, they are open to new stories, new patterns, new understandings. And it’s tempting sometimes to say, as a friend of mine posted on Facebook, that “spiritual but not religious” is a fancy way of saying, “I’d rather make it up as I go.” But in truth those who say this often are coming from a place of pain. They’ve been hurt, burnt out or disillusioned by their experiences with churches, mosques or synagogues.

What’s more they no longer sense in institutional religion, at least as they’ve experienced it, the Spirit of God. That is a large, large problem. In 2 Corinthians 3:1-6, Paul, in the midst of his chaotic relationship with the church in Corinth, reminds them that “God has made us ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” Then later in the chapter, now in verse 17, he gloriously writes, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom!” And that of course is true. For centuries the church, almost all churches, everywhere, have followed the letter of the law, and it kills. It kills the human spirit; it suppresses free inquiry and truthfulness, and sooner or later it literally leads to people being killed.

I grew up in a world, many of us grew up in a world, that gave little notice to the Spirit of the Lord. Life was tidy, neat, carefully controlled. Yes, we believed in God. We told the stories of Jesus – of a time long, long ago in a land far, far away when miracles did happen and the Spirit of God hovered over the earth. But mainly we protected the sanctity and the borders of the church. Life in that world, in my experience, was cold, sterile, and Spirit-less, and the whole notion of “freedom” – well, there was none, except to be freed “from sin,” but even that got real confusing because in real life it wasn’t clear that we were freed from sin. In fact, it was clear that we weren’t.

Our whole religious lives were defined by rules and regulations, and whole lists of prohibitions, and to err on even one thing was to risk everything. But it is never meant to be that way. Never. Let’s go back to the beginning, back to the origins of our faith, and see again all the possibilities, all the deep sacred connections, the spirituality that is at the core of being alive, the Spirit of God in us and all around us. Let’s go back to that first morning, that first Pentecost in Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 2, how nothing less than a new world is being born. The Spirit of God, the Spirit of creation, is creating again, creating a community of faith on earth, and this changes everything. A new day dawns in history. It’s a new Pentecost, a new harvest festival! It’s Sinai all over again! And of course it’s extraordinary and not normative. This doesn’t happen every day.

But it does inaugurate a new world, a world wide open to the Spirit of God. The old world ends, and a new world begins. And amazing things just kept happening. A man crippled from birth jumped to his feet and began to walk. Peter who had just weeks earlier cowered in the high priest's courtyard and three times denied he even knew Jesus now boldly proclaimed Jesus to the high priest's face. Liars fell down dead in church! Martyrs died for their faith, with their dying breath praying that their murderers be forgiven. The risen Jesus appeared to Saul in a light from heaven on the road to Damascus. Racist Jews began fraternizing with Roman centurions. Churches spread across the Mediterranean world and had elders appointed in them within eighteen months. Prisoners sang hymns to God at midnight, and were released by earthquakes. Services stretched to midnight; a tired young man fell three stories to his death, but was raised back to life, and the services went on till daylight. And on and on. One amazing thing after another.

The entire Book of Acts, in fact, the entire New Testament, describes life in a new world open to the Spirit of God, a world open to the loving intervention of God, where traditions were overthrown, and formulas were broken, and people were all the time surprised by joy and miracle. And this, this is the large story of which our life stories are a part.

It's not the story I grew up in. I grew up in the church not believing much in the Spirit of God and believing that miracles belonged only to the apostolic age. In fact, we were flat uncomfortable with the Holy Spirit, for reasons good and bad. We were not persuaded by or drawn to the Holy Rollers down the street or on TV, and, in fact, we wanted to put as much distance between them and us as possible. We knew that every claim of miraculous healing set others up for heart-breaking disappointments. But more than that I think we felt things slipping out of control when the realm of the Spirit came up. We liked our faith and practice clear, exact and certain. We liked our categories neat and tidy. We liked our God tamed. And the whole idea of the Spirit seemed too spontaneous, too wild, too out of control.

There was of course a large irony to all this – churches in a Restoration Movement attempting to restore the church at first while leaving out the Spirit that was always at the center of that church. We failed to see that the church we were trying to restore attributed everything good to the Spirit of God. So there was this tension in our thinking. We were doing everything we could to deny the role of the Spirit but the church we were trying to restore was doing everything it could to celebrate the role of the Spirit. It was a church so God-conscious that it believed nothing good could ever be done apart from the Spirit of God: “No one can [even] say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). Anything good we do is a gift from God, a spiritual gift. If you serve, it's a gift from God. If you teach, it's a gift from God. If you have a message of wisdom, it's a gift from God. If you're good at encouraging people who are discouraged, it's a gift from God. If you are contentedly married it's a gift from God, and if you are contentedly unmarried, it's a gift from God. If you're good at making others more effective in their ministries, it's a gift from God. If you're good at visiting in hospitals, it's a gift from God. If you're skilled at sharing the gospel in other languages, it's a gift from God. If yours is a home always open to people passing through, it's a gift from God. If things run smoothly when you're in charge, it's a gift from God.

For these first believers, everything good comes from God, and they could not have imagined it ever being otherwise, as if a time would come when the church could make it on its own power, apart from the Spirit of God.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week