

True Christian Spirituality

- by Wayne Northey

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matt 22:34-40)."

It seems that we Christians always have had difficulty keeping together Christian points of tension. Whether the two natures of Christ, our will and God's choice, faith and works, etc., we tend almost invariably towards extremes. Likewise on the issue of spirituality.

I was raised in a conservative evangelical church tradition. The spirituality sought in that tradition was almost entirely God-directed. Church attendance, prayer meetings, and quiet times were greatly emphasized.

Mission understandings reflected this spirituality – with an additional twist: it was to “rescue the perishing”, get them “saved”, so that they too could join in similar devotion to God – and escape hell.

God was almost as much to be feared as to be loved. For some, it was hard in fact to distinguish between God and Satan, since God was determined to relegate all unbelievers to an ultimate and endless punishment that only the worst of demonic tyrants in all history could even begin to dream of! (Larry Dixon's *The Other Side of the Good News* (BridgePoint, 1992) is for example disturbingly explicit on this.) God as “Hanging Judge” was a hard entity to warm to. How could one love a stern disciplinarian Scrooge who leaned over heaven's balcony just waiting to catch us out in some misdeed? It is accurate to describe this kind of extreme as a “spiritual abuse” form of spirituality that too often centred on a fearmongering theology.

More positive kinds of this spirituality nonetheless produced great works of devotional literature such as *My Utmost For His Highest*. God was supremely loved and sought, according to the first of the Great Commandments.

In my missionary career, I also encountered Christians strongly oriented towards service, justice and peace as central to Christian mission. But devotion to God sometimes did not get mentioned, or was shunted to the back of the bus. In fact, one Home Church we joined had adherents who simply denied all the exalted language about Jesus in John's Gospel and Hebrews for instance, and defined spirituality in terms of service. Worship of God in Christ lost all importance. It felt strange singing Christmas carols with this group that denied the Incarnation and adoration of Jesus. I used to think: “They have taken the Lord and we don't know where they have put him!” (John 20:2) When I expressed

this to one of the leaders, he said simply that this group had chosen “not to appropriate” certain portions of the Scriptures it found distasteful. One distasteful aspect was a high Christology. We sadly left that church fellowship disillusioned, even though they were great on service to others!

Both traditions seemed to put their eggs into the basket of *only one* of the Great Commandments. *But there are two, not just one!*

The Christian Gospel is an astounding Charter of Freedom (John 8:32, 36; Gal. 5:1)! It is a spirituality centred *not* in sentimental pious devotion to God, nor in only service to others. Jesus taught that such pious devotion was a religious form of idolatry characteristic of hell – a state in Jesus’ teaching of the religiously smug caught in a downward spiral of self-righteousness (Matt. 23:15).

And service of others apart from worship of God is good but ultimately unsustainable. “Can We Be Good Without God?” (*Atlantic Monthly*, December 1989), by Glenn Tinder best demonstrates that. Further, as Gil Bailie argues: “The Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel [22:36ff] did not say that the greatest commandment was to *believe* in God and love humanity. He did not say that we should be nice to one another because that’s the way God would like us to behave. He said the first and most essential thing is to *love God* with a paramount love. It is the most hackneyed notion in the world, but once or twice in a lifetime its dulling familiarity vanishes, and one feels for a moment the unfathomable significance and centrality of Jesus’ suggestion for breaking the grip of sin and death: to *love God*. Partly due to the humanists’ romantic idea of basic human benevolence and partly to the rationalistic “where-there’s-a-will-there’s-a-way” spirit of the Enlightenment, the modern world came to believe that it could fulfill the requirements of the second commandment without having to bother with the first. We moderns came to believe, in effect, that, by itself, the second commandment was a civilizing force sufficient to the task at hand. The creaking and groaning, indeed, the shouting and shooting, that we now hear all around us is (*sic*) coming from the collapse of that assumption (*Violence Unveiled* (Crossroad 1995), p. 272).”

True Christian spirituality demonstrates central devotion equally to *God* and the *other* – the neighbour near and the enemy afar – through whom we however uniquely discover God and our true selves.

As the texts say:

- “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen (I Jn 4:20).” Love of God is unthinkable outside love of neighbour.
- “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ (Matt 25:40).” Devotion to the “least of these” is devotion to Jesus.

- “But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do (James 2:18).” James draws centrally on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount which spells out the “what I do” of James. James is reiterating Jesus’ teaching: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven (Matt 7:21).” God’s “will” has just been spelled out by Jesus in the preceding “Sermon” as “acts of justice” (Matt. 6:1), which in Matthew are invariably demonstrable love and mercy towards others, to be done by those of whom Jesus then says: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine *and puts them into practice* is like a wise man who built his house on the rock (Matt 7:24, emphasis added).”

There is biblically no Christian salvation nor spirituality outside love of neighbour and the enemy. Likewise though, love of the other is dependent ultimately solely upon our love of God.

But for evangelicals, whose tradition I know best, since I am one, I must continue. Our devotion to the other is the only legitimate demonstration of devotion to God. “[T]he double love command [Matt. 22:37 - 40] becomes a hermeneutical filter – virtually synonymous with Hosea 6:6 [“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”, quoted twice in Matthew] – that governs the community’s entire construal of the Law... Those who are trained for the kingdom of heaven are trained to evaluate all norms, even the norms of the Law itself, in terms of the criteria of love and mercy. In the community that lives this vision, then, acts of love and mercy should abound (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Richard Hays, Harper, 1996, p. 101).” In light of our opening Scripture, and this commentary, it is hard to understand evangelicals’ support of war, the death penalty, or any other kind of mistreatment of the neighbour.

Further, justification is not through good works alone as the Reformers discovered – *nor is it possible without them*. *Sola fide* – by faith alone is however a biblical heresy: a false, unnecessary choice. The Reformers usually failed to teach the corollary to faith/faithfulness: our salvation *is* our good works daily lived out (James 2:18; Phil. 2:12 & 13; Matt. 23:23 – based on Micah 6:8). As McClendon said of the Anabaptist embrace of this vision, violently rejected by the Reformers: “The strength of this plan of salvation lay in the tight bond it created between divine grace and a total human response. Christian conduct did not follow (by some kind of inference or induction) as a consequence of salvation: it *was itself* salvation. The salvific gift of God and its human answer in following Jesus were two sides of one reality (James William McClendon Jr., *Doctrine* (Abingdon 1994), p. 118).”

This “realized eschatology” is a spirituality most evident in the Johannine material. Jesus explicitly taught: “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out-- those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned (John 5:28-29).” This reflects the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matt. 25:31ff. The “good” done to the other is the measure of one’s spirituality and sole indicator of salvation – *which of course*

presupposes faith in Christ. It is also the “good” that overcomes “evil” in Paul’s ethical section in Romans. (See Rom. 12, especially verse 21, and succeeding chapters.)

The only mission for the church is demonstrable love towards others (beginning with fellow-believers, Gal. 6:10), which is both evangelism and acts of justice and mercy. So Jesus prayed: “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.... I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:18 & 23).” He therefore said later in the Fourth Gospel: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you (John 20:21).” The supreme model is the Father who loves the whole world (John 3:16) and calls us to a similar love. This is identical to Eph. 5:1 & 2, that summons a consistent love of others based upon Christ’s atoning death.

There is no Christian salvation, no spirituality, outside the other. *God is an idol outside the other.* Love of God apart from the neighbour who is our true self is heresy – a false spiritual choice. The only authentic biblical spirituality discovers God and our true self in the demonstrable embrace of the other. If the other is within the church, it means practising the first principle of biblical ecclesiology: endless (70 X 70!) gestures of peacemaking/forgiveness toward the other who offends (Matt. 18). If the person is without the church, it means practising just peacemaking towards all – no less our fellow citizen/neighbour than the enemy, domestic and foreign (Matt. 5 - 7; Luke 6).

There is not a footnote theology to John 3:16 whereby God’s love is proffered to the world, “except our enemies”! That has nonetheless been majority Christendom’s spirituality whenever criminals and national enemies are in view. The Christian “enemy hit list” has also variously included pagans, Jews, Muslims, heretics, witches, slaves, people of colour, whites, Communists, capitalists, socialists, gays, lesbians, straights, pro-abortionists, anti-abortionists, Liberals, Conservatives, fundamentalists, etc., etc. *Christendom throughout history is strewn with the corpses of its enemies.* That is a travesty of true Christian spirituality, its utter inversion.

Thankfully, throughout church history, true Christian spirituality has been found in believers within all the traditions – often however in spite of the dominant theologies at work. It is at least potentially true of evangelicalism, so self-consciously assertive about holding to the faith “once delivered” (Jude 1:3), what Jesus said: “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach (Matt 23:2-3).” Douglas Frank in *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Eerdmans, 1986), makes a perhaps abrasive yet poignant case for this. He writes: “We are the Pharisees of our time, if anyone is (p. 229).” At the very end of a sweeping historical and sociological analysis of Evangelicalism at the end of the 19th, beginning of the 20th centuries, he adds: “Whether in auspicious or declining times, as we have seen, we display a tenacious commitment to self-deceit. It is true that we are those who like to think that we heed Jeremiah’s words, ‘Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord.’ Our history, however, gives evidence rather of Jeremiah’s wisdom in adding these words: ‘The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can

understand it?' (Jer. 17:7,9). In our very protests of trust in the Lord, we find occasion for our deepest self-deceits (p. 278)."

Of us evangelicals it is fair to respond: "For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you (Matt 7:2)." Our "measure" is Jesus and the Scriptures. And by that very measure, we prove often to be sorely lacking. Judith Haiven's somewhat scurrilous book about evangelicals nonetheless rightly observed what her title sadly reflects about some evangelicalism: *Faith, Hope - No Charity!* This contrasts starkly with Tertullian's citation of the pagans' assessment of the early Christians: "See how they love...." A fellow evangelical was right in gently mocking us, when, dedicating a book on Jesus' teaching about wealth and power to his dad, he said: "He is an unusual fundamentalist; for he believes that inerrancy extends to the teachings of Jesus (*Your Money or Your Life* (Harper, 1986), by John Alexander)."

The biblical test for love of God is love of neighbour; the biblical test for love of neighbour is love of enemy. The measure of our devotion to God is our devotion to the other. Failure to show love to the other is failure to show love to God. *How we treat the other is how we respond to God.* There is no Christian spirituality apart from the other. Christian salvation, Christian freedom, Christian spirituality are consummated in love of the other! Paul's witness is: "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' (Gal 5:14)" James echoes it: "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right (James 2:8)." Love of neighbour is our "spiritual act of worship (Rom. 12:1ff)". Love of neighbour is "the perfect law that gives freedom (James 1:25)".

But the source for this love is God. We cannot in fact be *good* without God. However, we cannot be Christians without *doing good* to others. Such is the paradox of Christian spirituality.