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Christian Spirituality: God's Love in Us

GARY HOLLOWAY AND EARL LAVENDER

Spirituality is not the latest fad, but the oldest truth.

Eugene Peterson

Spirituality is “in.” At the largest general interest bookstore here in Nashville, the section formerly labeled “Religion,” now sports a sign saying, “Spirituality.” There are now countless videos, tapes, and workshops on spirituality. Even Oprah speaks of spirituality.

So is Leaven simply jumping on the spirituality bandwagon? What makes spirituality “Christian?” Is there a *general* category “spirituality” with “Christian” as a specific type? Some may want a general spirituality that improves life, leading to self-actualization and self-awareness. For them, something like Transcendental Meditation will do.

Christian spirituality, however, is uniquely centered in a relationship with God—Father, Son, and Spirit—and relationships with others through God. We can even define spirituality as “the mysterious process of God at work in us.” As mystery, we cannot fully explain this process. God cannot be fully explained, but he can be genuinely experienced. And so we ask, who is this God at work in us? What kind of person is he?

AN ACTIVE GOD WHO PURSUES US IN LOVE

In the Bible, God reveals his true character (that’s why we sometimes refer to Scripture as “special revelation”). God pulls back the thick curtain of our misconceptions to walk boldly on the stage of history and make himself known. From Genesis to Revelation, the picture of God is consistent. He is a God who loves his creation forever. He created all things out of love. He lovingly molded humans from the ground, breathed life into them, and made them in his image (Gen 1:27, 2:7).

But we humans soon rejected the love of God, preferring our own desires to his, wanting to be our own gods (Gen 3:1-7). But God does not reject us. He continues to pursue humanity in love. From creation, people have hungered for God because he hungers for us. God alone can satisfy our deepest longings, but we try to satisfy them in countless ways. We pursue pleasure, success, security, wealth, romance, and numerous other ways to fill the deep longing within. We worship other gods.

God clearly condemns idolatry but does not condemn that craving for something to make us whole. Indeed, when Paul goes to Athens, the city that epitomized the “spirituality” of his day, he finds it full of idols. Asked to speak about his God in front of a group of philosophers, Paul does not condemn their hunger for gods but praises it. Having found an altar inscribed “To An Unknown God,” he says, “Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23).

The God Paul proclaims is the loving God who made heaven and earth. He created humans so he could have relationship with them. “God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27). Paul then quotes not the Bible, but pagan

poets who say, “‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring’” (Acts 17:28).

So what’s wrong with pagan spirituality? It’s not simply that these idolaters are wrong about God. What is devastating is that their erroneous view of God keeps them from fully embracing his love. Although they do not know it, these idol worshippers are beloved children of God. Our God is not distant, angry, or powerless. He is a God who is near to us, near to all. He wants us to come close to him in love. He became one of us in Jesus to captivate us with gentle, endearing words, and self-sacrificing acts. At our births, he placed within each of us a hunger for happiness, wholeness, and meaning—a hunger for him. God loves and wants us for his own.

A TRINITY OF LOVE

This God reveals himself as a Trinity. Again, it is not necessary for us to fathom the Trinity completely. We cannot, for he is the ultimate mystery. We cannot define God, but we can find him. We are invited into a relationship with the Trinity, a God who reveals his love for us in three ways.

God is a loving Father. He is the Father of all in creation (“we are his offspring”) and our Father through his Son Jesus Christ. As Christians, we are as much the beloved sons and daughters of God as Jesus himself. God loves us as much as he loves Jesus. One of the great expressions of God’s love for Jesus came at his baptism. We know the story. When Jesus is baptized, the heavens open, the Spirit descends, and a voice speaks, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:10-11).

What we may not realize is that what happened to Jesus at his baptism also happened to us. When we were baptized, the heavens opened. No barriers stood between God and us. He removed the curtain of our sin, ignorance, and unbelief and showed himself to us. When we were baptized, the Spirit descended on us. God himself through his Holy Spirit now lives within us and makes us his. Most amazingly of all, when we were baptized, God said, “You are my son, my daughter, whom I love. I am pleased with you!” We are children of God by birth and new birth. We have not earned our status, but God freely gives it. God is a Father who loves his children unconditionally.

But what happens when we spurn his love? Do we then forfeit our standing as God’s children? Does God quit loving us when we refuse to love him? No. The story of the prodigal son shows that even when we abandon him, he waits patiently for our return, keeping robe, ring, and fatted calf prepared. He meets our return not with an angry face and a cold acceptance, but with loving arms and a warm embrace (see Luke 15:11-32). God is our loving Father.

God became flesh in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the great teacher of love, the human face of the love of God. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16-17). Jesus reveals the face of a loving God who wants us for his own, not one who condemns.

As the great teacher of love, Jesus gave his followers the command to love each other, to love those in the world, and even to love their enemies. But Jesus came not just to command that we love but to show us how. He calls us to be his students, his disciples, his apprentices who learn from him, our teacher and master. He came to show us what it means to live in God’s love, to know God loves us, and to show his love to others. From Jesus, we learn how to love God through hearing his word, through prayer, through service, and through sacrifice.

But our relationship with Jesus is more dynamic than simply following his example. It is more than asking, “What would Jesus do?” As we will see in following articles, we not only learn to pray like Jesus, but he prays in and with us. We do serve others like Jesus, but he continues powerfully to serve through us. We love because his love flows through us. God the Son loves in us.

So the spirituality we explore in this issue, the mysterious work of God in us, is Christian spirituality. We are not concerned with spirituality in general without concern for the content of spirituality. Its content is the embodied life of God in Jesus and in us. God works in us through Jesus. To be spiritual then is to follow Christ, to be his disciple, to seek his kingdom. We do not know how to love God or neighbor except through Christ who lives in us.

God is a Holy Spirit who transforms us in love. God loved us so much that he sent his only Son to give us eternal life. But Jesus did more for us than simply save us from our sins. He promised his disciples a new helper, the Holy Spirit, would be with them after he went back to his Father (John 14:15-18). Jesus did not abandon us as his followers, leaving us to do our best without him. Instead, he continues to live and love within us through the Holy Spirit.

God loves and accepts us just as we are, but in his love he does not leave us just as we are. He and Jesus make their home in us through the Spirit, and through the Spirit their love transforms us. This is what we mean by words like "holy," "sanctification," and "saint." God loves us so much that as we live in his love, following Jesus as disciples, we become more like him. We share in his nature, more and more becoming love as he is love.

God is love. The significance of the Trinity for spirituality is that God's very nature is relationship. Even before he created, God has always existed in the relationship among Father, Son, and Spirit. God therefore invites to share in this relationship, to love as he is love. He draws us into his very life.

In this issue, we will talk about different ways we can open our hearts and lives to receive the love of God. But we should never think of these practices or disciplines as "good works" we do. They do not make us superior to others. They do not make us worthy of God's love. Instead, these practices are ways God is working in us through his Holy Spirit. They are "spiritual" practices, not because they are mysterious, religious, inner, or sacred (although they may be all of these things) but because they come from the Holy Spirit of God, the Spirit of love.

PARTICIPATING IN THE KINGDOM OF LOVE

In a world full of competing "spiritualities," it is important to clarify what makes Christian spirituality unique. Christian spirituality is a lived relationship with the God revealed in the Bible. He is a God with a story, a history with humanity. He made us, pursued us, and even died for us. He wants to be our God and for us to be his people. He wants to rule our lives in love, for our own good. Falling in love with the Almighty Ruler of the Universe means we participate in the very life of God. In him, our lives take on a cosmic significance. The Bible tells the story of our relationship with the God who reigns over everything, often describing this cluster of spiritual relationships as "the good news of the kingdom of God."

Good news here is more than the death of Jesus on the cross so we might have life after death. It is the good news that through Jesus we have the opportunity to live in God's kingdom now. The purpose of Jesus was to give us the gift of living as God originally intended, not to forgive us of sins and "save us" to continue to live in self-centered rebellion. Even Christian spirituality can be twisted into a technique for personal happiness instead of the long path of obedience to the purposes of God. The purpose of spiritual growth is to know God's will in a deeper and more compelling way so that we might more fully realize the life for which he created us. Spirituality will enhance the self but only in relationship with God.

We live out the will of God in relationship with him and with others. This life in community is what God means by "church." The church is not an institution but a living, breathing relationship. As church, we become spiritual friends with one another and with God. Since God is Trinity, he has never been alone. To share in God's life means we too are never alone. Christian spirituality is both personal and communal.

GOD'S INVITATION TO LOVE

Why begin an issue on spirituality with an extended discussion of God's love? Didn't we already know all this? Perhaps, but many Christians may use spiritual disciplines and practices as techniques to make themselves better, holier, and more spiritual. They forget that God gives these practices so we may seek him. It is God we want, not religion, spirituality, meaning, or even happiness. But to truly desire to "seek the face of God" (Psalm 24:6), we must be assured that he is seeking us. God wants us more than we want him. The eternal, almighty Father, Son, and Spirit deeply desire a relationship with me.

Christian spirituality is falling in love with the God we see in Christ. That mysterious process of God lovingly at work in us is not a trick, a shortcut, or a technique. It is a way of life. Spirituality is living our faith. It is believing from the heart, the very center of our being, believing that we are loved by God. It is living in that place of deep trust and acceptance.

We do not live in that place alone. We are not only with God but also with others in love. That is why the reality of the kingdom of God and of life in community is so important to Christian spirituality. The practices discussed later in this issue are not merely for individuals but are always also group practices. There is no Lone Ranger Christian spirituality. Jesus teaches us that even when we go into our private place to be alone with God, we pray not to "my Father," but to "our Father."

Our relationship with a loving God is not always an easy one. Just as in human relationships, the closer we get to God the greater the pain and the greater the joy. Jesus calls us to take up our crosses and die so we can share his glory. Through the Spirit, we put to death the deeds of the body so we may have life. Know up front that Christian spirituality is not easy. We might even be afraid that loving God is too hard and demanding.

It is demanding. God wants all that we are. There is no corner of our hearts and lives he does not desire. But he desires them because it is truly good for us. Ultimately, he does not want to fix us, reform us, or save us (in the narrow religious sense of "save"). Instead, he wants to receive us, accept us, and love us.

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