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Robert Richardson: Sources for Spiritual Formation in the Early Stone-Campbell Movement

CARSON E. REED

During the past 30 years, North American Christians have engaged in significant activity to discover and perhaps, recover a Christian spirituality. In 1978, Richard Foster revealed that he could find only one book on fasting written from 1861 to 1954; currently, such vast resources on fasting and similar topics exist that one would think Christians must certainly be more spiritual today than say, 50 years ago.¹ Yet I'm not so sure that simply speaking about spirituality makes anyone more spiritual—any more than wearing a Pacer's jersey makes one Reggie Miller.

Part of the struggle with the pursuit of spirituality comes because the topic is so ill-defined that "spirituality" has come to mean just about anything. The term can be attached to just about anything in order to indicate some deep feeling or a sense of divine presence or blessing. Recently, in a used bookshop, I found Sharon Janis's book, *Spirituality for Dummies*.² Her approach is quite eclectic, embracing all major world religions and allowing readers to pick and choose whatever works for them.

So to talk about spirituality in any meaningful way necessitates having some cogent understanding about what we mean by spirituality. Likewise, having some historical framework to one's own tradition would be helpful. This article will focus on the second matter—what contributions have been made within the early Stone-Campbell movement that might inform contemporary explorations of spirituality.

To provide some guide for exploration, I would suggest three significant criteria that might form the framework for healthy spiritual formation. I would like to begin with the construction of Simon Chan, who argues cogently that it is imperative to move beyond an understanding of spirituality as merely something that one feels deeply about.³

Comprehensive: Initially, Chan proposes that a particular approach to spirituality, or spiritual theology, should possess certain formal criteria. First, a particular spirituality should have a conceptual framework that is comprehensive enough to account for the wide and varied experiences that human beings encounter.

Coherent: Second, an understanding of spirituality must hang together; it should possess a certain coherence. Chan rightfully asserts that coherence does not mean that an approach to spirituality minimizes the rough and uncertain edges of life. Rather, mystery and openness to the Spirit, for example, should be a vital part of the foundation.

Integrated: Third, an understanding of spirituality must demonstrate a clear movement to godly living, bringing together both scriptural and doctrinal reflection on one hand and devotional experience on the other. Chan terms this "evocability"; I would prefer to call it integration. Perennial tension exists between the work of the theologian and common praying person. As Chan notes, "modern Christian literature continues to be plagued by the dichotomy between learned theological treatises in the style of (to borrow an expression from Austin Farrer) "Hegel with a hangover" and devotional works that are thin enough to pass under a steam-roller unscathed."⁴

Can comprehensiveness, coherence, and integration be found among early participants in the Stone-Campbell movement? Being careful to recognize that much current day conversation about spirituality uses

language and constructs that do not necessarily reflect Christians of another day, I do think that elements of all three of Chan's frameworks can be found in the contributions of Robert Richardson.

HISTORICAL RESOURCES

Anyone sifting through the early Stone-Campbell movement for signs of interest in spiritual formation would naturally gravitate to both Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone, who addressed spirituality in many and varied ways. For Campbell, whose concern was with seating conversion and Christian life in belief and acceptance of the testimony of the gospel, spiritual formation took on decidedly rational bent. Campbell's disdain for the excesses of emotional frontier evangelism gave rise to an understanding of salvation and life rooted in God's promises and the testimony of Scripture, not on a person's feelings or experiences. However, Barton Stone came to faith in the emotionally charged atmosphere of revivalism. His framework for understanding spirituality included a much larger role for the work of the Spirit. Indeed, much separated these two key figures, so that even after the union that took place in 1832 between their respective groups, much diversity of opinion continued to exist in matters of both doctrine and practice.⁵

Another voice heard among the early Stone-Campbell leaders offers some constructive melodies. Robert Richardson, professor at Bethany College and close Campbell associate, explored the formation of spiritual life in a number of his writings. And though he reflects Campbell's rational bent, Richardson is not afraid to probe that which is mysterious and unknown. More important, he shows a concern for a framework for developing spirituality.

The testimony of others adds weight to any focus on Richardson's contributions to understanding spirituality. In 1907, 31 years after Richardson's death, William Thomas Moore would claim that Richardson's greatest gift to the movement was spiritual in nature. Moore declares that four people stand out among early leaders:

Thomas Campbell contributed, perhaps, most to the union sentiment which was prominent in our plea at the beginning; Alexander Campbell contributed most the constructive element, both theological and ecclesiastical; Walter Scott contributed most of the evangelistic spirit, while Dr Richardson contributed most to the devotional and spiritual side of the movement.⁶

I think it important to point out that Moore had a deep bias against Barton Stone; hence, Stone does not show up in Moore's short list. However, Moore reflects the strong recognition of Richardson's influence with regard to spirituality.

Richardson wrote an essay in 1849 looking at all the various systems of life. As one would expect from a medical doctor, Richardson notes the vegetable world and the animal world; he then goes on to define an intellectual and moral world as well. The highest of all systems is the spiritual one. Without proper formation of the spiritual system, all other systems that the human participates in lack the fullness and richness that is possible. He concludes with lyrical prose to the joy the Christian possesses who is in spiritual union with God. The spiritual life culminates all other systems. Physical life along with the intellectual and moral realms, are mere scaffolding to the true structure of the spiritual life.⁷

So in turning to Richardson for some insight into spirituality we find one who honors the task of shaping and forming spirituality in Christian people. Indeed, as Stephen Berry has noted: "As a resource for Christian growth and the development of a deepening relationship of the Christian with the Lord, Richardson's body of literature has no equal among the early leaders of the Stone-Campbell Movement."⁸

THE GOSPEL AND SPIRITUALITY

Richardson asked some vital questions about the teleological purpose of the gospel. He was quick to critique the common and popular notions of the day that Christianity's purpose was to uphold a higher morality that would help correct the excesses of humankind.

They suppose that faith, penitence, pardon, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the word of God, with all its divine promises and institutions, are simply intended to make men moral, in the common acceptation of the word; that is, to keep them from running into those gross excesses to which unbridled passion leads. So that they conceive the great end of the gospel accomplished, if men are rendered quiet and well-behaved members of civilized society.⁹

The purpose of the Christian faith, according to Richardson, was not to make people moral or kind or nice; rather, the purpose of the Christian faith was to transform.

Richardson develops his thesis in his essay "Spirituality of the Gospel" by identifying that the gospel's work is "the renovation of heart alone, manifested by its proper tokens, that can secure man's restoration to the divine favor and fellowship."¹⁰ Here, Richardson is offering his readers a beginning place for Chan's criteria of comprehensiveness. To understand the dynamic nature of the gospel as anything less than reuniting humankind to God "in a holy spiritual fellowship which is never to be, for one moment, interrupted," would, for Richardson, be an inadequate foundation.¹¹

Richardson passionately argues that the gospel must be freed to do what God intended: to restore the relationship between God and humankind. Reducing Christianity or spirituality to rules, regulations, or rote ritual empties the living and mysterious work of the gospel of its power. In characteristic 19th century prose, Richardson drives home his point about gospel:

It is not a system of philosophic rules, based upon individual selfishness. It is not an arbitrary code of laws, to be engraved on stone, or written on parchment, or committed even to memory. It is not an outward conformity to the proprieties of civilized society, or a partial restraint of the grosser animal desires. On the contrary, it is a fixed principle of action, emanating from self-renouncing love. It is an ever-present statute enrolled upon the human heart—a talisman, whose magic power is felt in every pulse of life. It is an inward purity, which pervades the secret thoughts; a holy charm, which subdues the wayward feelings; an ever-active energy, which controls the action of every faculty of human nature.¹²

In sharp contrast to the ever-present temptation to reductionism, reducing Christianity to rules and practices, Richardson holds out the dynamic transformative power of the gospel as the suitable place to understand spiritual formation.¹³ As he states in a communion meditation:

The Christian religion, in short, proposes nothing less than an entire transformation of the human character. ... It is not by the establishment of mere formal or ceremonial relations with the Deity or with the Christian Church that this is to be attained. True relations indeed, exist only as effects or consequences of a change of heart. And these are not mere abstract relations but true relationships.¹⁴

Such understandings give rise to a strong, comprehensive foundation for spiritual formation. The living gospel, dynamic and engaged, connects with all of life. If the gospel creates adequate foundations for a comprehensive approach, then what about cohesiveness and integration? To explore these concepts, I would suggest looking at Richardson's understandings about the nature of faith.

NATURE OF FAITH

What is the nature and content of Christian faith? If such a question is to be answered by exploring doctrine and correct belief, then any conversation about spirituality would necessarily be shaped by such answers. Likewise, if faith is to speak to all of life, light and shadow, then it must be appropriated in a way that holds the varied experiences of life and of spiritual together. Because spirituality, as we have already noted, intentionally incorporates that mysterious and the unknown, understanding the Christian faith primarily as a set of doctrines would severely limit any real room for spirituality.

Yet Richardson, as we observed in his conversations about gospel, continues a consistent line of thinking in understanding the nature of faith. Though faith is often construed in an informational, intellectual manner, Richardson counters to affirm the personal, relational side of faith. In sharp contrast to a faith rooted in doctrine, Richardson makes his case for a faith that is relational.

But we differ from all the parties here in one important particular, to which I wish to call your special attention. It is this: that while they suppose this Christian faith to be doctrinal, we regard it as personal.

In other words, they suppose doctrines, or religious tenets, to be the subject-matter of this faith; we, on the contrary, conceive it to terminate on a person—the LORD JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF. While they, accordingly, require an elaborate confession from each convert—a confession mainly of a doctrinal and intellectual character, studiously elaborated into an extended formula—we demand only a simple confession of Christ—a heartfelt acknowledgement that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.¹⁵

This personal or relational perspective of faith in turn creates some important foundations for pursuing faith and spirituality. If faith is personal and relational, then the forms of spirituality must, of necessity, reflect the relational dynamics that form faith. Perhaps this is why Richardson paid particular attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life.

AN ADVOCATE FOR SPIRITUALITY

In 1857, while Richardson was the primary editor for the *Millennial Harbinger*, he took up the case for what he would call ancient spirituality.¹⁶ In a series of articles published that year on "Faith Versus Philosophy," Richardson challenged a growing concern that the movement was becoming enamored with philosophical approaches to faith that reduced faith to a wooden literalism. This approach to faith, which Richardson identified with Tolbert Fanning, stripped the gospel of its life-saving power and drove out any place for the Holy Spirit and what might be called spiritual formation.

Fanning was reacting to some excesses in his day with spiritualism. Nashville was rift with controversy over the teachings of Jesse Ferguson, who had introduced the idea of speaking with the dead and communing with spirits. Understandably, Fanning was keen on avoiding anything that looked like it was open to the work of the spirit world.

However, Richardson was not willing to strip the Christian faith of its spiritual vitality. Countering the tendency to think that the purpose of the movement was to gain adherents, Richardson counters by reminding his readers that Christianity is about "renovating the heart," not proselytizing people from other groups.¹⁷ Likewise, by seeking "to resolve everything into sensation, or into mere words," philosophical or rational approaches to faith work become "directly antagonistic to everything spiritual in religion."¹⁸

For Richardson nothing could be more deadly than treating the Bible with wooden, literal philosophical constructs. He argues that this approach relieves those who accept it

from all care of their own souls; from all concern about their internal spiritual condition; from all fears of visions, ghosts or spirits. They need no longer trouble themselves with ear-

nest efforts to give themselves to the contemplation of the spiritual and unseen, for they find all this now reduced to visible words and embodied in sensible forms, and the relief they experience is like that of the idolator when he has succeeded in embodying his conception of his divinity, and is enabled to contemplate with facility, in the carved and substantial image, those features and qualities which before, were with difficulty discerned amidst the dim and shadowy visions of the soul.¹⁹

Richardson took a lot of criticism for challenging a growing point of view that faith was about correct doctrine and the talk about spiritual things was unhealthy. Fanning was able, for a short time, to turn Alexander Campbell against Richardson. However, in the end, Campbell affirmed his friend's point of view. However, Fanning's rationalism, rooted in Frances Bacon's work, took center stage after the Civil War.

THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUALITY

Richardson will disappoint if the reader is looking for quick, easy answers on how to be spiritual. In an 1850 article on religious education, Richardson takes great pains to distinguish the process of Christian maturity from other forms of learning. He states near the end of the article that no system has yet been devised for religious education, largely because its nature has been improperly understood. "It is generally supposed to consist simply in *instruction*."²⁰

For Richardson, any process of religious—or spiritual—training must be properly grounded. That grounding begins with the recognition that spirituality is not about knowledge, though knowledge is a necessary ingredient. The purpose is the "adaptation of the soul to communion with God."²¹ Not only does this process require knowledge, it also requires understanding the heart and the proper regulation and role of human feelings. Spiritual disciplines, to use a more familiar term to contemporaries, must take into account mind, heart, and emotions.

Thus, for Richardson, the realm of reason has its limits. And reason must have the "mystery of faith" to sustain it.²² And faith finds its true center in the presence of God. When one communes with God, through knowing and through mystery, one finds peace and discovers meaning. "It is in the sanctuary of God that the mystery of man's condition can find its only interpretation in the wonders of redemption."²³

Richardson's resistance to simplify or reduce spiritual formation to mere instruction reflects the third criteria of integration. Tensions will and do exist within the person pursuing the spiritual life, and tensions exist between what Richardson would call the practical and the mystical. Yet Richardson consistently refuses to reject one or the other. The matter is not either/or; the matter is both/and. A healthy understanding of the renovation of the heart and the pursuit of communion with God requires intellect and spirit.

Occasionally Richardson does offer a glimpse at some of the ways in which spirituality is cultivated. Spiritual "sensibility" is divinely provided through "the indwelling of the word of Christ; the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; habitual prayerful communion with God, and the keeping of his holy commandments."²⁴ The Christian who desires a relationship with God will be one who devotes much to nurturing such a relationship.

How, indeed, is it possible for us to imagine a human should imbued with the divine word; familiarized with the divine presence, and accustomed to constant spiritual intercourse, and yet attaining no higher degrees of spiritual sensibility, and gaining no deeper insight into the mysteries of the spiritual world? It is the natural and necessary result of such communion to enlarge the soul; to expand its powers; to refine and renovate its nature; to quicken all its energies, and exalt to the highest degree its spiritual susceptibilities.²⁵

CONCLUSION

In the contemporary search for sources to develop a healthy spirituality, Robert Richardson offers much to those within the Stone-Campbell tradition. He presents a corrective to the tendency to minimize the mys-

tery in Scripture with rational approaches to Christian living. He models a spirituality that possesses a foundation that is theologically aware enough to be comprehensive in its capacity to grapple with the vagaries of life. Similarly, his understanding of the dynamic nature of the gospel and the relational nature of faith creates a cohesive center for healthy spiritual formation. Finally, by encompassing head and heart, intellect and feeling, Richardson paves the way to engage the matter of integration in spiritual formation.

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Dr. Reed is minister at the Northlake Church of Christ in Tucker, Georgia.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper: 1978), 47. Recently I punched in the words "Christian spirituality" on Amazon.com. and received 23,965 responses.
- 2 Sharon Janis, *Spirituality for Dummies* (Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing, 2000).
- 3 Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998).
- 4 Chan, 24.
- 5 Carson E. Reed, "A Unifying Vision for Our Movement," *Integrity* (Spring 1998): 11-25.
- 6 William Thomas Moore, "Dr. Robert Richardson," *The Christian-Evangelist* (January 17, 1907): 83. See similar recognition a decade later by Archibald McLean, "A Herald of the Spiritual Life," *The Christian-Evangelist* (1917): 875-76.
- 7 Robert Richardson, "Spiritual Life," *Millennial Harbinger* (1849):167.
- 8 Stephen Berry, "Room for the Spirit: The Contribution of Robert Richardson," *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, 21 (1986): 87.
- 9 Robert Richardson, "Spirituality of the Gospel," *Millennial Harbinger* (1850): 315.
- 10 "Spirituality of the Gospel," 317.
- 11 "Spirituality of the Gospel," 317.
- 12 "Spirituality of the Gospel," 319.
- 13 See Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000).
- 14 Robert Richardson, *Communings in the Sanctuary*, New Edition (Orange, CA: New Leaf Books, 2000), 106.
- 15 Robert Richardson, *Principles of the Reformation*, New Edition (Orange, CA: New Leaf Books, 2002), 44.
- 16 Robert Richardson, "Faith versus Philosophy—No. 8," *Millennial Harbinger* (1857): 560; see also footnote, 448.
- 17 Robert Richardson, "Faith versus Philosophy—No. 2," *Millennial Harbinger* (1857): 193.
- 18 Robert Richardson, "Faith versus Philosophy—No. 5," *Millennial Harbinger* (1857): 329.
- 19 "Faith versus Philosophy—No. 5," 335-36.
- 20 Robert Richardson, "Religious Education," *Millennial Harbinger* (January 1850): 17.
- 21 "Religious Education," 18.
- 22 *Communings in the Sanctuary*, 25.
- 23 *Communings*, 95.
- 24 Robert Richardson, "Christian Knockings, No. V," *Millennial Harbinger* (December 1851): 706.
- 25 "Christian Knockings, No. V," 707.

