

CHAPTER 19: A NEW SPIRITUALITY AND THE WHOLE OF LIFE: THE SACRED, WORSHIP, PRAYER, WORK, THE CHURCH, AND WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

“Whither shall I go from thy spirit? And whither shall I flee from thy presence?” “The earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.”
(Psalm 139:7, 33:5)

We have covered a lot of ground in this book. We have seen that because of the change in our common sense over the last twenty centuries we find a number of traditional Christian views to be inadequate and no longer tenable: Biblical literalism, the idea of a God who goes “zap”, the religious significance of miracles, and such doctrines as the Incarnation, the Trinity, and the sin and salvation complex. Perhaps more surprisingly, we have also seen that many of these traditional views are also incompatible with a proper understanding of our faith, with the love of God as preached by Jesus Christ.

But we have done more than just work at the demolition of traditional ideas. We have also suggested interpretations that are consistent with our modern common sense, with our understanding of how the world works and with our understanding of the physical sciences—interpretations that are also consistent with our faith. Thus we have suggested appropriate ways of talking about God, and a way of understanding Jesus the Christ in a functional manner, and ways of reinterpreting Christian Myth. We have done this in ways that address our deepest need, that for meaning in our lives. We have further pointed out the crucial difference between faith and doctrine and have examined the impact that our faith must have on our lives: on our character, on the way we live and the way we treat other people, on the way we deal with money, and on our economic system.

Throughout all this we have emphasized the need for integrity: a moral integrity that holds us to our principles in all areas of life. We *must* come to understand that if we sell out our selves we have lost the only thing that is truly ours. This integrity can be understood as right relation with oneself. We who profess Christianity have further grasped that this can only exist fully in partnership with right relationship with God and with others in line with the teachings of Jesus the Christ.

But integrity also includes intellectual integrity: an honesty with ourselves that includes a demand for consistency throughout the different areas of our life. We do not believe one thing in church and another in science class and another in our business. We do not deny our heart for the sake of our head, nor vice versa.

And in fact in the course of this book we have seen how we can develop a theology (which is an explanation of our religion, a conceptualization of that which gives real meaning to our lives) that is consistent with *both* our faith and our common sense. What we have done is to point towards the development of a new spirituality, one that is not restricted to "sacred" buildings or to one hour a week, one which rather encompasses all of reality. In this final chapter we will consider the nature of spirituality, the sacred, the role of worship, different forms of prayer, the integration of our work world into our faith, the nature and purpose of the Church, and where we go from here. These discussions will of necessity be brief, but it is my hope that they will nevertheless provide an adequate overview and point the way for further development of these ideas.

1. What Is Spirituality?

We must begin with the question of "what is spirituality?" It might be defined as the awareness of God and the recognition of the sacred in our life. It includes the understanding that our quest for meaning is our most important task in life and that this cannot be satisfied with shallow answers, cannot be fulfilled with possessions or status or wealth. Spirituality therefore means that our awareness of the sacred and our drive for meaning have an impact on our lives, on the choices we make and the way we live. We sensitize ourselves to the pull of God and try to align ourselves with this pull. If our spirituality is real it pervades all aspects of our life.

We have said that we need a "new" spirituality. This is because the traditional models are based on a theology that does not and cannot fit with our common sense (and all too often does not and cannot fit with our faith). Even if we were able to suspend our common sense in the area of religion in order to buy into this traditional theology—something which many people have felt forced to do because they saw no good

alternatives—we would then have a spirituality that is unable to adequately fulfill its role. Because it is incompatible with our understanding of the world it is unable to inform the rest of our life. It is restricted to a sheltered corner, walled off and protected from reality.

Therefore a spirituality that is worthy of the name—one that is able to address and inform all the areas of our life—must be founded on a theology that is consistent with the common sense that undergirds all these different areas. The main purpose of this book has been to propose just such a theology so that we now have the foundation we need for this new spirituality.

We accept our modern common sense. We accept and even embrace the discoveries of modern science. But we do not stop there, and we do not postulate a God who is in conflict with these. Instead, we see God as greater, as *including* this scientific understanding of the universe. God includes and transcends the physical universe as we know it. This physical universe itself works as a result of such an improbably fine balance of forces as to be cause for wonder at the very least; it is certainly congruent with our conception of God. Furthermore, we see this God, we feel this God, in and through the processes of this universe, coaxing us and pulling us to love and to wholeness.

Spirituality is the recognition of this dimension of the universe, the recognition that God is the context within which we live out our lives. But spirituality is more: mere recognition, mere cognitive awareness, of this dimension is not enough. Besides a sensitivity to this dimension, spirituality also includes an aligning of one's life with it, a directing of one's self towards God in the way one lives. When this is given its focus and direction by Jesus of Nazareth then it is Christian spirituality.

2. The Sacred

The sacred¹ has often been thought of as that which is set apart because of a special closeness to God. But how can that be if God pervades the universe and the world around us, if God is the context for the whole of our lives? We cannot confine God to a particular mountain top or building or one hour a week. There is nothing we do that is not in the presence of God.

In Chapter 10 we did in fact describe the sacred as that which is special and set apart, that which is beyond question, that which is of such value that it inspires awe and reverence. But sacred things are not set apart because they are somehow closer to God. Rather, the sacred is that aspect of the world, those elements in it, that point towards God,

¹For the purpose of this discussion I am considering "holy" to be synonymous with "sacred".

that help us to become aware of God and to direct our lives towards God. There is nothing in the universe that is intrinsically more sacred than anything else. To be sacred, a person or place or thing must be sacred *to* somebody. That which points us to God, that which emphasizes God's presence and makes clear God's love and reminds us of our need to respond to God—this is what is sacred to us. It is that which yields our deepest meaning to us, whether person, place, event or writings.

If we are Christians, if we are among those who try to order their lives according to the understanding of God, of love, of value and of true victory given in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, then we proclaim Jesus as the Christ: it is he who serves as the compass or focus for the meaning of our lives. And thus Jesus the Christ is for us the epitome of the sacred.

Certainly there are other people or places or things or times that are also sacred to us. Many of these are *derivative* from the sacredness of the Christ, associated with worship or meaning to which he is the central direction-giver. Included among these might be those parts of the New Testament other than the Gospels which are consistent with Jesus' teachings; other Christian writings; Christian places of worship or songs and prayers used in this worship; the sacraments; perhaps the life of a Christian we know or read about who exemplifies for us the way Jesus told us to live.

But there may also be other places or teachers sacred to us that are best described as *auxiliary* rather than derivative. That is, they have no particular connection with Jesus of Nazareth, so if we are Christians they must play a subordinate role, one that complements his role as central meaning-giver and direction-pointer. They point independently in the same direction as the Christ, much as we might use landmarks to complement our compass reading. If they assist our primary guide in pointing to the one God who is in all creation and who is pulling us to love, then they are auxiliary sacred for us. Such things might be included here as natural theology (the making of inferences about God from a study of the natural world); the teachings of other great religions—again, to the extent they are compatible; or even the Old Testament prophets, depending on how you view their relationship to Jesus.

So we see that "sacred" is not an independent characteristic of any person, place or thing. It is a relational concept. As we have said, to be sacred something must be sacred *to* somebody. It must help point them to God. And the sacred includes a variety of persons and things, writings and events, though necessarily of a quite limited number for any one person. For us as Christians the role of Jesus the Christ makes him the epitome of the sacred, but we also have other places and people whose sacredness is *derivative* from his and additional sacred things which are *auxiliary* to him.

Every one of these sacred persons or objects or events performs the same role for us: they are particular bits of reality that point to the God who is through all reality. They remind us that the whole world is full of the presence of God and that our lives are lived in this presence. Not just a portion of our lives, not just in certain times and places, but our whole lives.

3. Worship

Worship, whether public or private, involves the highlighting of the sacred and the reinforcement of spirituality. As a public activity worship also involves a reaffirmation of group identity, through shared creeds, hymns, and prayers and also through the reinforcement of human fellowship. The purpose of worship is not generally to give new information to people—after all, much the same group of people gathers regularly. In some cases worship can yield new insights as it helps people to gain a deeper understanding of religious truths. But more often it serves to remind us of what we already know and to encourage us to act accordingly. In our case, it reminds us of the presence of God in which our lives are lived, of our acceptance by God, of the pull of God towards love and wholeness, and of the direction to God pointed out by Jesus the Christ. Worship encourages us to live up to the commitment we have made (and are reminded of) to live according to Jesus' teachings.

If we are to worship privately then we must find ways to perform these functions for ourselves, by ourselves. While this is possible at times, private worship is best considered as an auxiliary to public worship; as such, it needn't fulfill the whole range of purpose that public worship does, but can be satisfied with lifting up one or two aspects. Private worship as a *substitute* for public worship is suspect and in grave danger of being one-dimensional. Not nearly as many people worship alone as say they do; even less do it well, and even in these cases it seldom (if ever) can suffice as a substitute for public worship. This is true even if one participates through radio or television in a public worship service. There is just no substitute for sharing the physical presence of other imperfect human beings who are also trying to be faithful, for we are called to support and encourage and love one another.

Another function of worship, whether public or private, is to evoke awe and wonder and to promote the attitude of worship as an appropriate response to God. Awe and wonder may be evoked by a number of facets of the universe—the sacred, beauty, the world, life itself—as well as by worship. But worship itself is appropriate only for God. We must remember that while the sacred may help us to worship God, we do not worship the sacred, but only God.

In the same way that the sacred points to the God who is in all reality,

so worship—while it may be something we do in a separate time and place dedicated to this particular purpose—must point to a life that is lived towards that which we worship. The worship experience cannot be disconnected from the rest of our life. Rather it must be an epitomizing, a lifting up and making explicit, of the pattern that is present in all our places and times. So if our worship is successful and our life is successful, our life will take on the same pattern as our worship, the pattern of living towards God.

4. Prayer

It has long been recognized that people come in a broad range of personality types, that people approach the world and interact with others in different ways. In the past century this observation has become more refined. Perhaps the best known classification comes from four basic dichotomies noted by Carl Jung and further developed into a grid of sixteen different personality types according to whether one is extraverted or introverted, sensing or intuitive, thinking or feeling, and judging or perceptive.²

For each of these sixteen “types” there has been developed a description of how people of this type interact with others, what they enjoy, what kind of occupations they do well in, and so on, even what style of worship they find meaningful.

But all this is ignored or forgotten when it comes to prayer. For when it comes to prayer there is an apparently irresistible urge to proclaim that a particular method or style is *the way*—the one and only *really* right way—to pray. For everybody. It must be that either our way of praying is so closely tied to our own personality needs that we cannot conceive of another way, or else that our way of praying is so important to us that we cannot bear the challenge of any alternatives. But in fact there is no one right way to pray.

For one thing, there are several different styles of prayer: corporate and individual, spoken and silent, set written traditional prayers and “free” prayers. Consider just this last pair: some people find prayers written by others to be meaningless for them, and find traditional prayers to become empty with repetition so that they are nothing but noise or, at best, pleasing sounds with no significance. Other people find that these same prayers focus their minds for them and contain a beauty of form and meaning that lift their hearts towards God. The important thing to say is that this is fine. There’s nothing wrong with either group of people.

²These types are best developed and most used in conjunction with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Test. See Isabel Briggs Myers, *Introduction to Type* (Palo Alto, California: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1976), and other material from this publisher.

They are different people. Why shouldn't they respond to different models of prayer? So we must expect differences in the way we pray just as we expect differences in our favorite hymns.

But still, even if we grant that different people should expect to use different styles of prayer, there are some important questions about prayer in general. What are we doing when we pray? What is its purpose? What is it supposed to accomplish? Does it make any sense to tell things to a God who already knows everything? Or to ask things of a God who doesn't go "zap", who isn't a specific interventionist? Or to give thanks to a God who didn't take any particular steps to bring about the specific things for which we are thankful?

To begin with, we do not think of prayer as communicating particular bits of information to God. God already knows. Rather than communicating, we are *communing* with God. The purpose of prayer is to put ourselves in touch with the God who is in all and through all, to reaffirm our own identities by confirming the meaning in our lives, and to verify whether we are living in the proper direction.

What about petitionary prayer, asking for help? If God isn't going to respond by making sure we win the lottery or by effecting a miracle cure then what can be the purpose in this? Well, if you want a God to pray to who will give you a red bicycle for Christmas or solve all your problems for you, what you're looking for is magic. God doesn't work this way. But petitionary prayer nevertheless accomplishes several important steps for us. In the first place, praying for God's help reminds us that we are not in control of the world or even of our own life, while reminding us that we are living in the presence of an infinite and eternal being. Besides being humbling—something that many of us need from time to time—this also helps us to take the first step toward solving a problem, namely that of admitting that we indeed have a problem and need help, even if we admit this only to God for now. And it also can accomplish the important step of putting our life and our troubles in proper perspective.

Furthermore, in praying for God's help in dealing with a certain situation or problem, we cannot help but consider God's will for us. If we pray with the right attitude, if we bring willingness to "listen" for an answer, this will make us more sensitive to the pull of God so we in fact may get an "answer" by becoming aware of the direction in which we need to go to live towards God. And lastly, this whole process prepares us to face our problems and to deal with them in the most constructive way by properly grounding us and focusing us and even energizing us.

But what about intercessory prayer, in which we pray for help for others? Will our interceding on their behalf with God lead to God's interceding on their behalf in the world? No. We must be consistent with our earlier conclusions about how God does and doesn't act. We are not dealing with magic when it comes to others any more than in praying for ourselves.