

DYNAMICS OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY¹

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SYNOPSIS

Drawing on the rich resources of historic Christianity, this article presents a biblical framework for understanding the dynamics of genuine Christian spirituality. Three essential dynamics will be highlighted. The first, the *relational*, deals with being in a healthy relationship to God and others. The second, the *transformational*, examines the sanctifying and healing changes God's Spirit works in our own souls. The third one, the *vocational*, considers the new life and mission to which we are called. From a Christ-centered perspective, the first is about Christ *with* us, the second is Christ *in* us, and the third is about Christ working *through* us. The three are inter-connected, and each is essential to life as God intended it to be. Authentic Christian spirituality (or the Christian life, which is the same thing) can thus be defined as a relationship with the Triune God that results in healing progress toward Christ-likeness and self-denying participation God's purposes in the world.

INTRODUCTION

Not so long ago Thomas Cahill wrote a remarkable book entitled *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. It is a captivating tale of how the Christian faith fared during the first millennium. After its dynamic apostolic launch, Christianity eventually fell under the spell and control of the powerful and administratively-gifted Romans. The outcome was the near extinction of the faith and the onset of the Dark Ages. In God's providence, however, Christianity survived and eventually flourished again. Its recovery was not due to the Romans, though, but to the contribution of some obscure but saintly, Spirit-filled Celtic missionaries from Europe's most remote off-shore island. Cahill concludes his book with this prophetic application to our own time: "The twenty-first century," he says, "will be spiritual or it will not be."²

Cahill's remark stimulated my desire to re-discover, if I could, the essential dynamics of Christian spirituality as these are indicated in Scripture and were grasped at the higher points in Christian history. As part of my research, I visited sites of historical significance in Italy and Turkey (ancient Asia Minor), and participated in some active centers of spiritual practice closer to home. During these travels and afterward, I pored over Scripture and got into the literature of Christian spirituality. The amount and breadth of

¹ This article was published as "Dynamics of Christian Spirituality," *Malaysian Baptist Theological Seminary Bulletin* 30, no. 3 (2005): 1-4.

² Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 218.

this latter material proved daunting, and I soon discovered that the best I could do was perform biopsies on its vast corpus. Nevertheless, certain themes emerged quite strongly and persistently. In this article I share some observations about the timeless dynamics of genuine Christian spirituality, and their implications for the church today.

WHAT WE MEAN BY SPIRITUALITY

But first of all, what exactly are we talking about? Gordon Fee has described spirituality as “that most slippery of words to pin down.”³ It is challenging to define because, generally speaking, there are two definitions of it circulating these days. Let’s call them the narrow and the holistic alternatives. The narrow definition is “*experiencing* the presence of God.” It is concerned, sometimes exclusively, with encountering God in a direct, immediate “right here, right now” way.

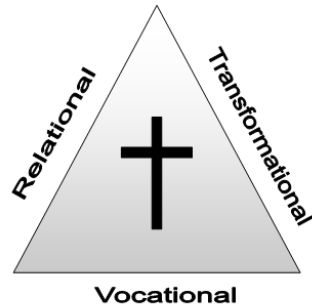
Authentic Christianity has always affirmed the possibility, and celebrated the reality, of *experiencing* God in this direct and interactive sense. At the same time it has insisted that there is more to being a Christian than this. And this brings us to what we described as the holistic definition of spirituality. Spirituality (or *Spirit-uality*, as the New Testament writers would have us understand it) is about living *all of life* before God in power of the Holy Spirit. In its full sense spirituality is synonymous with *the Christian life* lived out with God and in response to his Spirit. It involves more than existential experiences, although it has an important place for those. It also encompasses repentance, moral renewal, soul-crafting, community building, witness, service, and faithfulness to one’s calling.

We need to model and defend this more holistic understanding of Christian spirituality. But we need to do so with an awareness that the enthusiasts for the narrower definition of spirituality have put their finger on the weak spot in the dominant brand of religion being offered today by organized, institutional Christianity. We want to move forward using the holistic definition of spirituality, but with a respect for the importance of the experiential dimension emphasized by the narrower version.

THE THREE ESSENTIAL DYNAMICS

Building on our *encompassing* definition of Christian spirituality (essentially co-extensive with “the Christian life” and “the Spirit-filled life”), and taking a birds-eye view of history, I believe we can detect three essential dynamics that are always operating within “the real thing.”

³ Gordon Fee, *Listening to the Spirit in the Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 4.



DYNAMICS OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

1. The Relational

The first dynamic of Christian spirituality is the *relational*. There is a God (Gen. 1:1), and there are other creatures. The bald fact is that we are not alone. To try to live as though we were is to live in unreality and to slide downward into dysfunction. From the first chapters of the Bible, where Enoch walked with God (Gen. 5:24), to Jesus' departing assurance that he would always be with us (Matt. 28:20), the Bible attaches great importance to relationship with God.

The way we relate to God will hinge a lot on our perception of him. As A. W. Tozer has pointed out, this is the most important indicator of how we will live our lives.⁴ Perhaps the most important realization of all is that "God is good for us."⁵ For Christians, our relationship with God is positional and official. It should also be experiential and living—a matter of keeping company with God. It ought to involve listening as well as speaking. The relationship can even develop, incredibly enough, into something akin to *friendship* (John 15:15).

All this explains the central place Scripture gives to relational motifs like reconciliation, covenant, and adoption. Left alone, the sinful self remains curved inward, self-absorbed (2 Tim. 3:2) and sealed off to what is outside it. Relationship is impossible until this self is willing to risk pain by acknowledging the other and opening up to it. As soon as it does, however, everything about the soul begins to change. The life of God, which is characterized supremely by self-giving love, and to which the soul is now open, is found to be mysteriously infectious. Its transference is helped along by the imitative principle in all religions, which is, simply stated, that we tend to become like that which we adore.

This relationship with God, which is enhanced through prayer and the contemplative disciplines, begins to change the soul. A new sense of identity emerges. The believer comes to understand that they now have a father, and begins, hopefully, to experience a wonderful new sense of *belonging*, which the Heidelberg Catechism classically described as the believer's "greatest consolation in life and in death." This profound sense of

⁴ A. W. Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961), 9.

⁵ Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

belonging becomes the platform for more courageous and risk-taking approach to life. As Gordon Smith has said, “Nothing is so fundamental to the Christian journey as knowing and feeling that we are loved. Nothing.”⁶

A soul is forever changed by having opened up to the life of God. God draws us out of ourselves and “into the grand objective realm of the *not merely me*.”⁷ It becomes infected by God’s contagious character, which is naturally inclined toward self-giving. God has, Paul explains, “poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 5:5). Moreover, this newly-acquired vulnerability becomes habituated in a *general* disposition of openness, so that there is now capacity in the soul to connect with, plus an inclination to embrace rather than to exclude, other human beings.⁸ James Houston reminds us that if we remain closed to others, and incapable of meaningful relationships, it is almost certain that we will be unable to cultivate a deep relationship with God.⁹ Love for God and love for neighbor are two manifestations of the same divine impulse—two vectors from the same matrix.

2. The Transformational

Though we exist in relationships, and are profoundly affected by them, we will never *become* the other, nor will we ever be *absorbed into* the other. Our integrity and identity will always survive. This leads us to the transformational dynamic of Christian spirituality.

As we have already noted, simply being in relationship begins our transformation. True friendship with God, Houston points out, is always *transforming* friendship. It never leaves us unchanged. In 2 Corinthians 3:17, the Apostle Paul explains this dynamic by drawing an analogy to Moses on Sinai. “We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with every-increasing glory.” It is a matter of reflected glory.¹⁰

A great amount of the evil in the world, perhaps the bulk of it, originates within the human spirit—and this toxic well-spring must be repaired. This explains the central place Scripture gives to transformational motifs like regeneration, sanctification and renewal. It also explains why classic Christian spirituality took the challenge of the self so seriously, practiced self-examination, intentionally cultivated virtue and embraced spiritual

⁶ Gordon Smith, *Voice of Jesus* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 74.

⁷ Ralph Wood, in T. George and A/ McGrath, eds., *For All the Saints* (Louisville: WJK, 2003), 95.

⁸ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

⁹ James Houston, *Transforming Friendship* (Oxford: Lion, 1989), 11.

¹⁰ Thomas Smail, *Reflected Glory: The Spirit in Christ and Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

disciplines. The goal has always been the transformation of the heart—the inner command-center of one’s entire being.

Teresa of Avila may have been the originator of the insight that the journey to God is also “a journey to the self, a movement into self-knowledge.”¹¹ As sinners, tangled up in self-deceptions and rationalizations, we tend to be out of touch with their true selves. Authenticity, an essential prerequisite to transformation, is hard to find, and for good reason. It is simply too terrifying to be honest unless we have first grasped the promise of unconditional love and forgiveness, and found in that the courage to face the truth about ourselves.

On a hillside overlooking the ancient city of Ephesus are the ruins of the once-massive Church of St. John, constructed on the order of Emperor Justinian and thought to hold beneath its altar the bones of the beloved apostle. The remains of this once-great church, now sadly exposed to open air and the elements, contain a fascinating baptistery. It was built in the shape of a cross, down into which each candidate would descend along the central channel. Even the room housing the baptistery is cruciform in shape. It remains a powerful architectural witness to the New Testament understanding of baptism as a symbolic identification with Christ in death to self and resurrection to new life. For those early Christians, baptism was a radical symbol of repentance, of contrite turning and change. The new consecrated and cruciform life into which Christians enter necessarily involves the renewing of the mind (an altered worldview) as well as the affections and will.

But there is another side to this whole story, and it is that sin (whether it is the kind we commit, or the kind committed against us) is never good for us. It is always harmful in its effects. It causes pain and suffering. It beats us up. It disables us and disfigures us. It leaves us wounded, like someone who has been the recipient of an act of violence. We are like the injured victims of a crime. Sometimes advertisers deceptively suggest that sinning is actually “cool” and fun. But in the end, the Bible warns, it turns very bitter and leads down ultimately to death.

The gospel includes the good news that God is also our *Healer* (Exodus 15:26), because he doesn’t want us to live permanently with the wounds that sin has caused in our experiences of life. We are destined to become *whole* as well as holy. *Healer* is one of the great titles for God in the Old Testament. He is the one who heals his people. Time and time again, the prophets promised the people of God that if they would return to him with their whole hearts he would *heal* both them and their land (2 Chron. 7:14). We will remember how very central the ministry of healing was in the earthly life of Jesus (Acts 10:38), and how the apostles continued this healing ministry after Christ’s ascent. In other

¹¹ Michael Ford, *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J. M. Nouwen* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 213.

words, our heavenly father’s salvation plan is comprehensive enough to encompass both the guilt and *consequences* of sin.

God wants to see us healed in every dimension of ourselves—both physically and psychologically. Throughout history Christians have sought the healing touch of God for our physical problems and wounds. But since the 1960s, at least in more affluent nations with higher standards of health care, Christians have turned more of their attention to prayers for emotional or (as it is often called) “inner” healing. This is certainly an area in which God is also vitally interested. As the Psalmist said: “He heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds” (Psalm 147:3).

This healing work of God is, in the words of the great theologian Francis Schaeffer, a “substantial healing of the total person.” It is substantial, but it is never totally complete on this side of eternity. But even here there is good news. Wounded Christians are never useless. In his now-famous book entitled *Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen eloquently declared that we can still minister to others, even out of our own deep and persistent suffering. In fact, he suggested, there is an amazing paradox here. Our own pain and continuing wounds often lend an unexpected power and effectiveness to our service for Christ. God’s strength is “perfected” in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9).

3. The Vocational

From the inner well-springs of the heart, Jesus explained, flows every decision a person makes, every word they say, every action they perform (Luke 6:43-45). Who we are becoming on the inside naturally and inevitably finds expression in our outward behavior. The Christian life is about connecting and becoming. It is also, finally, about *doing*. And this leads us to the third dynamic of true Christian spirituality—the vocational. This word is derived from the Latin *vocare*, of course, which means “to call.” My intent in using it here is to underscore the fact that we have a calling upon our lives to participate in the purposes of God—to play a role in his grand designs to care for creation, to restore humanity to himself through Christ, and to build the kingdom of God (Col. 3:17).

This explains the central place Scripture gives to vocational themes like stewardship, service, good works and rewards. This is what Klaus Bockmuehl has called the *gift* of commission. He referred to it quite intentionally as a gift rather than a duty, because it completes and satisfies our deep-seated need to be creatively useful, and gives us opportunity to invest our energies in something of significance.¹² This is consistent with Jesus’ statement that his *food* was to do “the will of him who sent [him] and to finish his work” (John 4:34).

¹² Klaus Bockmuehl, *Living by the Gospel* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1986), chap. 2.

We humans are cosmic amphibians. We stand astride the seen and the unseen. But we are creatures of the earth, fashioned from dust and destined to return to it. *This* is the sphere, full of suffering and conflict, in which we are called to do our work. The vocational dynamic properly tethers us to our station, and ensures that we will never become so heavenly minded that we are no longer of any earthly good. Authentic Christian spirituality follows the pattern of the incarnation—it becomes flesh. Vocation is following the heart of God into the world.

Each of us has a unique role to play—a special niche for which we were designed from birth (Eph. 2:8-10). We are part of a diversely-gifted team, and therefore have God’s permission and approval to be our Spirit-filled selves. As Frederick Buechner has so insightfully observed, “The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”¹³

The Christian tradition has always acknowledged that the challenge to live godly lives, to remain resilient in the face of opposition, and to be effective in advancing the Kingdom, exceeds our natural human resources. We need to be conduits of the powerful life of God, so that he can accomplish his purposes through us. Sometimes this dynamic of mediated power is depicted in Christ-centered language, as when Paul assures the Philippians that “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Phil. 4:13). More often it is expressed in Spirit-centered language that looks back to Christ’s promise that at Pentecost the church would receive power for effective service when the Holy Spirit came upon it (Acts 1:8).

FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THESE THREE DYNAMICS

Possibly these three dynamics might come into clearer focus if we took time to consider them in relation to the chief aspects of the image of God in humanity. From Scripture we know that God is communal, holy and active. These three attributes are perfectly paralleled in the relational, moral and functional dimensions of God’s image and likeness in us. If time permitted, we could also explore how these three dynamics address the fallen condition of humans as alienated, damaged and desperate for meaning. Then again, from a Christ-centered perspective, the first is about Christ *with* us, the second is Christ *in* us, and the third is about Christ working *through* us.

Finally, I hope it is clear that these three dynamics—the relational, transformational and vocational—are vitally connected, overlapping and interdependent. Each is essential to life as God intended it to be. It is not possible to choose one and neglect the others. The result will always be a mere caricature of authentic Christian spirituality.

¹³ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 95.

Evangelicals are known to be busy, activist and entrepreneurial. This is a great strength as well as a serious vulnerability. We need, therefore, to be especially alert to the fact that an undue fixation on the vocational (or, worse still, on simply *doing*) can drift toward functional secularism. We need to create more “space for God” in our lives, and give more serious attention to the relational and transformational dynamics. In summary, then, authentic Christian spirituality (or the Christian life, which is the same thing) can be defined as *a relationship with the Triune God that results in healing progress toward Christ-likeness and self-denying participation God’s purposes in the world.*

CONCLUSION

Thomas Cahill warned that the future does not lie with modern clones of the administratively-astute and technology-advantaged Romans. A positive and hopeful future will require *saints*. I thought about this one stormy evening last year in Scotland, as I walked alone with night falling to a stony bay on the west side of the Inner Hebrides island of Iona. There, some suppose, the intrepid Saint Columba and a few other wild Irish friends first blew ashore in their fragile coracle boats many centuries ago. I gazed on the scene at length—until I was soaked through and chilled to the bone. I pocketed a little stone to remember those strange saints of old, and then turned back toward my lodgings some distance away. As I did, I marveled at their courage. What kind of persons were they? What resources were they accessing? What made them tick?

Some words of Patrick, their great Celtic giant, spoke into my mind as I walked on: “I bind unto myself today the power of God to hold and lead . . . Christ be with me, Christ within me . . . I bind unto myself the name, the strong name of the Trinity.” The answer to my question, I believe, lies buried in this ancient, mystical, militant imagery. Hopefully this article provides at least a glimpse of the timeless spiritual dynamics operating behind the saint’s evocative words. It is essential that these dynamics flourish in our lives and churches, because Thomas Cahill’s prophecy surely applies to us. Evangelical Christianity in the twenty-first century will be spiritual or it will not be.