

Chapter Two

The Importance of Studying Biblical Spirituality: A Life We Can't Live Without

In seeking to understand Christian spirituality, and before we get to the 'what' or the 'how' of spiritual living, let's briefly ask ourselves, 'why?' Why study spirituality? What purpose could we serve in making another attempt to discover what the Bible has to say about our spiritual lives? Haven't attempts to understand God and humanity in relationship been done time and time again?

Of course, the answer to this last question is 'yes.' Yes, studies about spirituality have been the focus of many good and helpful courses, projects, and books. But, with all these attempts to discover how our relationship with God works, our spiritual lives still remain shrouded in enough mystery and ambiguity to warrant further study. We still ask, "What is God like? Who are we? Whose perspective is the correct perspective? And what difference does it really make?"

God's Existence and Nature: God is and God is Spirit(ual)

First, there's the notion of God.¹ Humanity has had a history of assuming that there is a higher, more powerful, being, consider Romans 1:19-23. This assumption is almost a cultural universal. When it comes to Christian spirituality, we not only believe God exists,² we know, because of God's own self-revelation, certain things about God. We affirm, for example, the God of the Bible as "the only true God," John 17:3. We also insist, upon the words of Christ in John 4:24 that, "God is spirit...". God, then, is, by His very nature, spiritual. Furthermore, according to the biblical record, God made us like Himself, Genesis 1:26. Thus, by virtue of God's own spirituality, and that He has made us in His likeness, we should consider our own spirituality to be important. Consider how the Apostle Paul, while in Athens, made this connection proclaiming, "in Him we live and move about and exist...".³

But God's spirituality moves beyond non corporeality. Not only is God spirit (spiritual), the God of the Bible has also revealed His spirituality to exist as three distinct Persons. God's spirituality expresses itself in and through His triune relationship. In being both spirit and inherently relational, God Himself provides a foundational⁴ aspect for proper human spirituality that is both essential and functional. Not only must our worship and service be spirit to Spirit, our divine-human spirituality must be relational. This means that our spirituality involves a relationship with the Father, with the Son, and with the Holy Spirit.

¹Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 128-29. Anselm's argument for the existence of God serves as a reference for the idea of God. "So it is true that there exists something than which nothing greater can be thought, that it cannot be thought of as not existing." Ibid., 128.

²Hebrews 11:6.

³Acts 17:28.

⁴I did not think it appropriate, at this time, to have a full discussion about the implications of the immanent and economic trinitarian nature of God. I do believe that it is 'safe' to say that the relationality of the essential/immanent Trinity does, at least, provide a foundation for relational aspects to our spirituality which results from the economic trinity.

Taking this relationality as step further, as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit eternally exist in relationship to each other,⁵ so we, made in God's likeness, must express our spirituality through relationships. Robert Letham observes, "we are called to worship the Holy Trinity, to live in loving and joyful union and communion with the Holy Trinity, and—precisely because of that—to live in loving communion with other human beings."⁶

The Christian notion of spirituality begins with, and emanates from, the existence and nature of God. This spirituality should not only produce and infuse our worship and service, John 4:24b, but qualify our spiritual development in communion with God expressed through our relationships with one another. We study Christian spirituality because spirituality is the very essence of God and, because of this, the very nature and expression of our existence.

The Nature of Human Beings: We are spiritual.

Because of God and our creaturely connection to our Creator, a second, and obvious reason for studying spirituality has to do with who we are. As mentioned earlier, every human being is spiritual. Each of us operates, at some level, through our own spirituality. Our thoughts, our feelings, our moods, all imply a spiritual self.

As we might expect, the Bible assumes that spirituality is a universal human reality and experience. Both Old and New Testaments assume the human spirit. For example, in Genesis 41:8, we read that Pharaoh's "spirit" was troubled. First Corinthians 2:11 and James 2:26⁷ both mention that human beings have a "spirit." The Apostle Paul's visit to Athens makes this spiritual reality clear. Not only was there a synagogue attended by Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, but also this city was "full of idols." The Athenians expressed their spirituality through many diverse means, Acts 17:22-23.

In first-century Athens, as today, human spirituality is a universal experience. Whether we give credence to a higher power or simply live with the ebb and flow of our own inner self, the essence of who we are is more than the sum of our physical parts. We have a spirit. We are spiritual. The study of human spirituality is important because we are spiritual beings. As followers of Christ, because we have embraced spiritual reality, the study of our spirituality is vital.

God and man in personal relationship: We are Created to Know and Love God

As God's creatures, made in God's representative image and relational likeness, we are created to know, love, and enjoy God.⁸ Further, the Bible inseparably connects knowing God with

⁵Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), 382. Letham writes, "The three persons mutually indwell one another in a dynamic communion. The doctrine of *perichoresis* affirms that the three persons of the Trinity occupy, in Gerald Bray's words, the same infinite divine space. Since each is wholly God and fully God, no one person is any greater than any other, while the three together are not greater than any one. Thus, the three mutually indwell each other...It is dynamic, with living relations."

⁶Ibid., 475.

⁷1 Corinthians 2:11 "For who among men knows the *thoughts* of a man except **the spirit** of the man which is in him?" James 2:26 "For just as the body without *the spirit* is dead,..."

⁸Consider John 17:3 where eternal life is used as a descriptor for knowing God (father and Son) "This is eternal life, that they **may know You**, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

pleasing God, John 14:23.⁹ Finally, our knowing and loving God is intended to be the center of a believer's life, Jeremiah 9:23-24¹⁰; 2 Corinthians 5:9.¹¹ This is where biblical spirituality becomes essential.

Our spiritual experience with God is tied to what the Bible says about spiritual living. Relating to God according to His Word keeps us vitally and dynamically connected to the Vine, Christ the Lord, and provides the divine possibility for a personal and full fellowship with God by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us from the Father by the Lord Jesus, John 15:5,11;¹² John 15:26.¹³ As the Spirit of adoption, the Holy Spirit, "bears witness to our spirit that we are God's children," Romans 8:15-16, we discover, in this divine arrangement, that we might enjoy God's intended completeness. Indeed, our fulness comes through knowing and loving God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

So, we discover that biblical spirituality is designed by God that we might live our lives knowing and loving God, Hebrews 13:20-21,¹⁴ This spiritual relationship leads us to an authentic and intimate fellowship with our Creator and Savior, John 14:21¹⁵. God through Christ and by the Spirit has provided all that anyone would need to live a life pleasing to God.¹⁶ The study of biblical spirituality provides essential insight leading to a deepening of our relationship with God "so that we might live in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might..." Colossians 1:10-11a.

The Current State of Spiritual Disciplines: There are Multiple Voices and Directions

As the twentieth century came to an end, the Church, whether Eastern, Roman Catholic, Protestant, or evangelical, began to express a renewed interest in an academic understanding of spiritual life. Essays, articles, and books about spirituality have become commonplace within both

⁹John 14:23 "Jesus replied, **'If anyone love me, he will keep my word,** and my Father will love him, and we will come and take up residence with him."

¹⁰Jeremiah 9:23-24 "The LORD says, 'Wise people should not boast that they are wise. Powerful people should not boast that they are powerful. Rich people should not boast that they are rich. If people want to boast, they should boast about this: They should boast that they **understand and know me**. They should boast that they know and understand that I, the LORD, act out of faithfulness, fairness, and justice in the earth and that **I desire people to do these things**, says the LORD."

¹¹2 Corinthians 5:9 "Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, **to be pleasing** to Him."

¹²John 15:5 "**I am the vine;** you are the branches. The **one who remains in me—and I in him—bears much fruit**, because apart from me you can accomplish nothing. I have told you these things so that **my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete.**"

¹³John 15:26 "When the Advocate comes, **whom I will send you from the Father**—the Spirit of truth, who goes out from the Father..."

¹⁴ Hebrews 13:20-21 "Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, *even* Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us **that which is pleasing** in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* the glory forever and ever. Amen."

¹⁵John 14:21 "The person who has my commandments **and obeys them** is the one who loves me. The one who loves me **will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him.**"

¹⁶ 2 Peter 1:3 "his divine power has bestowed on us everything necessary for life and godliness..."

popular and academic circles. Accordingly, Christian colleges and seminaries have begun including courses on spirituality and spiritual formation¹⁷.

While certain works have collected and discussed mainline views¹⁸ others have stirred interest beyond the traditional definitions and practices associated with progressive sanctification. Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* (1979) "encouraged a restored practice of some ancient Christian disciplines,"¹⁹ while Dallas Willard's *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (Harper and Row, 1988) and *Renovation of the Heart* (Navpress, 2002) have further popularized discussions and interests about Christian spirituality.²⁰

Additionally, certain concepts and phrases have caught our attention such as soul care and spiritual formation (defined for our purposes in chapter one). These, along with other emphases such as the role of the Trinity and the community in spiritual living have been welcomed by some and have led to debate among others.

Because of the complexities of the discussions and the importance of the subject, the pursuit for clarity through further biblical study remains essential for the Christian interested in a healthy human and God-pleasing spiritual life. With the landscape of spiritual thinking covered with such variety of thought it seems important that we should continue giving this subject our focused attention.

Eternity: Our lives lived today count...forever

One final consideration before we move on. Who we are and what we do matter. Our lives are not mistakes. Not only do the choices we make have an immediate effect upon ourselves and those around us, the life-choices we make will also reverberate throughout eternity. More than once the Apostle Paul alerted Christians to the inevitable reality that everyone will give an account

¹⁷For example, at the time of writing this chapter I teach a course on Christian Spiritual living for a Bible college and seminary.

¹⁸ Two popular examples are: Alexander, Donald L. ed. *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988, and Dieter, Melvin E., Anthony A. Hoekema, Stanley M. Horton, J. Robertson McQuilkin, and John F. Walvoord. *Five Views on Sanctification*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987.

¹⁹ Emilie Griffin, "Europe and North America (1700-Present)," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Glen G. Scorgie, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 132.

²⁰ Briefly, other recent works, both popular and academic, that continue to further the research and interest in Christian spirituality include: Alexander, Donald. *The Pursuit of Godliness: Sanctification in Christological Perspective*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999; Adam, Peter. *Hearing God's words: Exploring biblical spirituality*. NSBT D. A. Carson, series editor. Downers Grove, IL: 2004; Anderson, Neil T. and Robert L. Saucy. *The Common Made Holy*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1997; Boa, Kenneth. *Conformed to His Image: Biblical Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation*, rev. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020; Cron, Ian Morgan and Stabile, Suzanne. *The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey to Self-discovery*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016; Ferguson, Sinclair B. *in Christ alone: Living the Gospel-centered Life*. Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2007; Issler, Claus. *Living Into the Christian Life: The Formation of Christian Character*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012; Holmes, Christopher R. J.. *A Theology of the Christian Life: Imitating and Participating in God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021; MacDonald, James. *Lord Change Me*. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2012; Peterson, David G. *Transformed by God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013; Pettit, Paul, ed. *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2008; Scorgie, Glen G. ed. *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011; Tyson, John R. ed. *Invitation to Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Anthology*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999; Wilhoit, James C. *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.

of himself to God. Romans 14:10 tells us that we will all stand before God's judgment seat. Second Corinthians 5:10 tells us that at this judgment seat the believer's works will be assessed. In 1 Corinthians 3:10-16 we learn that the assessment of our life's work in Christ will result in the loss of or the receiving of rewards. Similarly, in alerting followers of Christ about a future judgment, James informs us that we should "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty," James 2:12. This final and inevitable judgment will reward believers for lives properly lived in faithfulness to Christ. While there are differences of opinions as to what the Bible means by these rewards, suffice it to say, the lives we live today count forever. To study, understand, and implement a biblical approach to spiritual living is vital. Our lives matter, now and forever.

Evaluation and Summary

Human spirituality is inevitable. Whether we like it or not, all of us are spiritual beings. Christian (biblical) spirituality, however, moves beyond this universal experience with its speculation. For the Christian, we know God exists and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him, Hebrews 11:6. The careful pursuit of living a biblically spiritual life is important. Personally, I want to make a conscious and intentional effort to relate to God and develop in my devotion and character to please and glorify God. To know God through His Son is the essence of eternal life, John 17:3.²¹ Since becoming a Christian I have studied human spirituality as taught in the Bible because, as one made by God for spiritual fellowship with God, I have wanted to know, from God Himself, how I can love God with all my heart and express His love to others. While not a very important person in the grand scheme of things, my life is the only life I have, and I know, from God's Word, that in some way only understood by God, my life matters. Intuitively, we know, or at least we trust, that our lives matter. How we engage life also matters. Our lives count, and they count forever. Studying biblical Spiritual living is important. Christian spirituality is essential.

²¹John 17:3 "Now this is **eternal life**—that **they know you**, the only true God, **and Jesus Christ**, whom you sent."