

Chapter Three

A Brief Overview of Christian Spirituality Through the Centuries

Practice Becomes Prescription

As we continue our introduction to biblical spirituality, gaining some familiarity with what others have thought and practiced over the centuries proves invaluable. Without question, Christian theological tradition and practice have provided us with a rich and varied spiritual heritage. Understanding this heritage offers insight as to why we think about and live out our faith the way we do. Our fidelity to the Lord often expresses itself in the variety of spiritual beliefs, practices, and traditions shaping the faith we have inherited.

Before we begin our overview of spirituality in the Church, I think it is important to make a few points of clarification. First, any brief treatment of a vast subject (vast in both time span, 2000 years, and variety) runs the risk of being misrepresentative. No unfairness is intended. A thorough treatment of any era of Christian theology, let alone all of church history, stands well beyond the scope of our study. Additionally, any treatment of a given subject is likely to fall victim to the author's "spin", or agenda. I realize that spiritual expressions are born in the necessity of life's contexts, and I also realize that my understanding of Scripture and practices are time sensitive and culturally qualified. As such, my own investigation of this subject becomes unwittingly guided by the limitations of my training and biases. So, as best as I can understand my own "spin" (i.e., purpose), all I want to accomplish in this chapter is an assessment. I would like to assess whether the spiritual practices identified through Church history are, as far as I can understand, biblically prescribed. My intention in this overview is not to discredit these approaches, I'll leave that to you, the reader.¹ My intentions are to report the practice, assess its impact on our present thinking, and to ask whether the practices or beliefs were prescriptive, that is, prescribed by the biblical text as an essential means for biblical spiritual living.

Finally, the discussion below deals with trends, or how biblical spirituality was perceived and expressed, during a certain era of Christian history. Our discussions are not intended to imply that the persons or groups mentioned had no understanding about the sufficiency of Christ and the interior work of the Holy Spirit. We are assessing the practice, and in some instances, the ideas behind to practices, as they relate to the message of the Bible. Our overview below is only intended to review expressions of faith that have stayed with us and, in some sense still, for some, represent necessary markers for healthy spiritual living. We want to discover whether these "markers" are descriptive of what may be genuine expressions of biblical spirituality or whether these expressions are biblically prescribed as the divine means to achieve a transformed life with Christ.

As we overview each era of Christianity, we will settle on a few expressions of the faith characterizing that era. Some of these practices and beliefs are repeated throughout the course of

¹I recall a post graduate course in which we were to assess the content and spiritual directives to the early second century document the *Didache*. Our professor insightfully prepared the class about the variety of responses we would experience. Some would find the document highly legalistic. Others would applaud the document for its promotion of true godliness.

church history. All these practices, however, remain with us, in some fashion, and continue to influence how we think about spirituality.

AD 100 – 400: Morality, Martyrdom, and Monasticism

The first four hundred years of the Christian Church were foundational in many respects. The New Testament canon was identified. Essential theological ideas such as the deity and humanity of Christ were studied and formalized, and primary Christian practices were etched into the lives of those claiming Christ. Additionally, during this time, the Church moved from persecuted to privileged. Pertaining to the spiritual life, at least three features of this era stand out and remain with us today.

Morality

Early church writings identified true spirituality through believers' culturally distinctive moral standards. Morality, especially a morality reflective of the biblical message, is certainly not a bad thing. The question we ask, and will continue to ask throughout this chapter, is, 'Does a specific moral lifestyle provide the way or guarantee the reality of true biblical spiritual living?' For our purposes, the early church documents called the *Didache* (*Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, c. AD 115), and writings by authors such as Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian provide examples of spirituality corresponding to prescribed behavior and may help us answer this question.

The *Didache*, an early second century manual for Christian conduct and order, depicts "the two ways" of living. One path presents the way of life and the other the way of death.² The way of life serves as a spiritual conduct catechism. Throughout its pages the *Didache* supplies exhortations toward specific conduct deemed proper. These exhortations quote or reflect the content of a multitude of biblical passages, for example, chapter three begins by reading, "My child, flee from all wickedness and from everything of that sort. Do not be irritable, for anger leads to murder..."³ Later in the same chapter, the *Didache* states, "But be humble since 'the humble will inherit the earth.' Be patient, merciful, harmless, quiet, and good; and always have respect for the teaching you have been given. Do not put on airs or give yourself up to presumptuousness. Do not associate with the high and mighty; but with the upright and humble. Accept whatever happens to you as good, in the realization that nothing occurs apart from God."⁴

Similarly, Clement of Alexandria⁵ and Tertullian⁶ provided samples of "lists" qualifying how a Christian should live. According to these lists, the proper Christian lifestyle should include, "discreet laughter, calmness and composure, simplicity and thriftiness, reverence and thankfulness, self-discipline with impassibility, chastity, compassion, truthfulness, and freedom"

²*Didache*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, in Loeb Classical Library [LCL], 1:309.

³Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York, NY: Touchstone Book, Simon and Schuster, 1996), 172.

⁴*Ibid. Early Church Fathers*, 172.

⁵Clement of Alexandria was a theologian and philosopher who taught at the Catechetical School of Alexandria. Notably, Origen was one of his pupils. Titus Flavius Clemens was born c. AD 150 AD, in Athens, Achaia and died c. AD 215 near and around Jerusalem.

⁶Tertullian was an early Christian author from Carthage. He was an early Christian apologist and a polemicist against Gnosticism. Born in AD 155, Tertullian died in AD 220.

⁷ Early in Christian history, as today, Christian spirituality became equated with expected behavioral patterns.

These distinctives in Christian piety and love received notice throughout the Roman Empire. In an apology written to Emperor Hadrian (c. AD 125), Aristides, an early Roman historian, attempting to testify on behalf of the Christian community, gives us this description regarding Christian behavior.

They do not worship strange gods, and they go their way in all modesty and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God.”⁸

Beginning early in the movement and continuing through the present day, the quality of one’s Christian profession has always been associated with a unique and consistent moral lifestyle. Certainly, biblical spirituality leads to a distinctive morality. The question remains, does the pursuit and/or achievement of certain moral practices equal biblical spirituality? All too often Christians attempt to emulate the exhortations and moral lists in Scripture without realizing that there is a divine enlivening necessary to experience new life. It seems that transformation, rather than reformation, is the objective for the Christ-like lifestyle.

Martyrdom

Though Christianity represented less than one percent of the Roman Empire, Christians’ devotion to the Lordship of Jesus Christ was considered a threat by many of the emperors. Because of the threat to their sovereignty, the early church experienced periodic persecution. With persecution, martyrdom ensued and remaining true to Christ through death became a supreme expression of Christian spirituality. Inevitably “martyrdom became a means of witnessing to the lordship of Christ.”⁹ Depicting this sense of spirituality, as one of the thousands of Christians put to death before the legalization of Christianity in AD 313, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch (c. AD 110) wrote,

I am corresponding with all the churches and bidding them all realize that I am voluntarily dying for God—if, that is, you do not interfere. I plead with you, do not do me an unseasonable kindness. Let me be fodder for wild beasts—that is how I can get to God. I am God’s wheat and I am being ground by the teeth of wild beasts to make a pure loaf for Christ...if I suffer, I shall be emancipated by Jesus Christ; and united to him, I shall rise in freedom.”¹⁰

⁷Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 521-22.

⁸Aristides, *Apology*, 15, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10:276-77.

⁹Gerald L. Sittser, “Survey of the History of Christian Spirituality,” in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Glen G. Scorgie, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 95.

¹⁰Ignatius, “Letter to the Romans,” in *Early Christian Fathers*, Cyril C. Richardson, trans. and ed. (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 104.

Hence, a certain elite expression of spirituality became associated with martyrdom. Christopher Hall writes,

The Holy Spirit was believed to be especially active and vibrant in the martyrs, supplying supernatural strength and courage, not only to the martyr's minds and souls, but also to their bodies. Because of the ancient church's sacramental and incarnational worldview, the bodies (often ashes) of the martyrs were venerated as still holy and powerful...and the day of the martyrs' death celebrated as the "birthday."¹¹

Dying for Christ certainly appears to be the supreme act of devotion to Christ. Biblical spirituality (our relationship to God through Christ by the Spirit), however, should best be understood as an issue of the heart. As with moral lists, we need to ask ourselves whether martyrdom, while certainly the most notable of testimonies, of itself, be understood as the necessary and prescribed means for a deeper spiritual life?

Monasticism

As Christianity and Christians passed from being persecuted to privileged, the quest for genuine spirituality expressed itself through the self-mortification of the flesh (a "bloodless martyrdom"). With the secularization of the Church, spirituality became defined by one's relationship to anything pertaining to culture (the world in which Christians lived).

Several factors influenced the Church resulting in moving spirituality toward asceticism. First, certain popular Greek philosophies such as Platonism and Stoicism claimed that the material and earthly (including one's human passions) were detrimental to spiritual development. Second, following Constantine's peace with Christianity (AD 313), devotion to Christ and Christian spirituality needed deeper expression. At a time "when churches in large cities were flooded by thousands demanding baptism,"¹² thousands fled the diminished spirituality of the Church for various forms of monasticism.

These early attempts of isolation from the secularized church often took strange forms. One such model was known as desert monasticism. The early expression for this style of separation from the world found a champion in Antony. Antony became the prototype for Egyptian desert monasticism.

Antony sold all he possessed, gave the proceeds to the poor, and lived as a hermit in the desert. Over his lifetime of 105 years, his spiritual wisdom and counsel influenced thousands. Athanasius' biography about this man entitled *Life of Antony* (c. AD 356), "popularized monastic ideals and provided a model of spirituality that later Christians (like St. Augustine) sought to emulate."¹³

While biblical spirituality leads to a certain expressed separation from "the world", perhaps reenforced by such passages as 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, a lifestyle of separation may or may not be an actual expression of the Holy Spirit in and through the believer. In fact, asceticism may well be

¹¹Christopher A. Hall, "Ancient Christian Spirituality (AD 100-600)," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Glen G. Scorgie, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 106.

¹²Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: the Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2001), 137.

¹³John R. Tyson, *Invitation to Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Anthology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 87.

a result of one's ego, consider Colossians 2:20-23, thus having no value for true transformation. Nevertheless, in the early centuries of the Church, the monastic lifestyle became associated with the quest for a deeper spiritual relationship with the Lord.

Summary

Morality, devotion, and self-deprecation (martyrdom and monasticism) may well qualify as genuine expressions of our spiritual zeal for and obedience to the leading of the Holy Spirit. The question remains, however, 'Are these the biblically prescribed means to a full spiritual life or are these the results of another dynamic working in and through the believer?' I have known morally upright people who have had no sense of God or expressed any personal relationship with God the Father through Christ by the Spirit. We have all experienced well-meaning preachers and teachers giving us moral lists and imperatives. Lists by themselves, however, have always proven powerless to internally change my life. While these ideas remain with us as some tangible means of measuring our dedication to Christ, it seems we should insist that a biblically prescribed spiritual life is not achieved merely by maintaining certain moral standards, isolating ourselves from our culture, or even dying for one's cause. As I hope we will discover, prescribed Christian spirituality emanates from somewhere other than ourselves.

AD 400 – 1500: Monasticism, Sacramentalism, and Mysticism

Over the next one thousand years, Christian spirituality added several new forms and expressions. As monasticism continued to develop, the Church (both in the East and the West) embraced sacramentalism, and, in certain quarters specific forms of Christian spirituality known today as mysticism. These practices are important to mention as they continue to be a part of today's spiritual landscape.

Monasticism

Monasticism, or expression of the idea regarding separation from our culture, did not disappear in Church history. The fourth century monastic movement, generally regarded as a means and an expression of true spirituality, continued to flourish throughout the Middle Ages. During this Middle Age era, however, monastic asceticism took two major forms, Anchoritism and Cenobitism. Anchoritism was the hermit-like lifestyle that gained notoriety through the lives of men such as Antony (mentioned above). Cenobitism, on the other hand, sought spirituality in the communal lifestyle.

Saint Benedict of Nursia, founder of the Benedictine order, has been credited with establishing the standard for Cenobitism. In his work, "*The Rule of St. Benedict*," which became the standard for later monastic orders,"¹⁴ Benedict helped codify monastic living. Through his writings we are told, "If we want to escape the sufferings of hell and reach eternal life, we must hurry to do now what may benefit us for eternity....Never abandoning God's rule, but persevering in his teaching in the monastery until death, we will patiently share in the sufferings of Christ, so that we may deserve to be sharers in his kingdom as well." [Benedict, c. 529, *The Rule of St. Benedict*].

Monastic living functioned, then, as both a means and an end for Christian spirituality. The monastic rule of life became equated with spiritual means for life. Because of this, monasticism

¹⁴Allison, *Historical Theology*, 528.

flourished both in Eastern and Western Christianity, and, while enriching Western civilization at many levels, became equated with the process of achieving what was deemed true spirituality. By separating from regular worldly or cultural pursuits, and by adhering to a set monastic rule, it was believed that a deeper and more genuine spiritual advancement could be experienced. Monasticism, or at least its ideals, was understood, at many levels, to be prescriptive.

Sacramentalism

While monasticism was held with high regard, most could not and would not insulate themselves in the monastery. For the majority living outside the monastic community, the Church provided the usual and more attainable means for spiritual expression and vitality. By the end of the fourth century, the setting and function of the Church became the primary venue for a non-monastic spirituality. Christian spirituality, namely, the experience and expression of Christ, was achieved through the formalization of the sacrament.

From some of the earliest extra-biblical literature there seemed to be a special sense of spirituality attached to participating in church rituals.¹⁵ The formal explanation of the sacrament, however, came through the writings of Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430). While being recognized as one of the most influential theologians in church history,¹⁶ Augustine provided the framework for what we know as the sacrament. Augustine taught that, through certain liturgical practices, God and man developed in spiritual relationship. For Augustine, any many since, baptism and the Lord's Supper, in particular, represented the outward sign of an invisible reality. Historically, as Augustine engaged in debates with the Donatists, a framework for sacramentalism emerged that later informed medieval theologians in their presentation of the Sacrament as a means of spiritual well-being. For Augustine spirituality consisted of the interior transformation of the soul into the image of Christ and the communal/institutional expression of this transformation. The grace necessary for this transformation, however, was sacramental. For Augustine God's grace in Christ became accessible to man through the institutional Church, Christ's visible bodily presence. Mary T. Clark points out

Augustine compared the visible church with its liturgy and material signs which effected communion with God and neighbor to the flesh the Eternal Word used to lead humanity back to its invisible God. And so, when one says that his spirituality centers upon Christ, it is clear that he means the total Christ, the risen Christ, and the baptized who are incorporated into him and nourished by the Eucharist.... Spiritual growth is fostered by the institutional church making available the grace of Christ, who reforms the human image of God (Trin. 9.1.1).¹⁷

¹⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1999), 34. "Quite impressive is the way all second-century authors speak of the meaning and benefits of baptism. Among the blessings ascribed to baptism in these writers are: remission of sins, salvation, illumination, eternal life, new birth or regeneration, and the gift of the Holy Spirit." Ibid.

¹⁶Consider just a few: *De Trinitate* (The Trinity); *De gratia et libero arbitrio* (On grace and free will); *De spiritu et littera* (On the Spirit and the Letter); as well as *The City of God*; *Confessions*, and his defense against the writings of Pelagius.

¹⁷Mary T. Clark, "Spirituality," in *Augustine Through The Ages: An Encyclopedia* Allan D. Fitzgerald, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 815.

The idea of sacrament became, and remains, a deeply ingrained expression of Christian spirituality. God's grace, while solely originating in the Person and work of Jesus Christ, was now understood as being accessed through participation in a visible "form" or "sign." This form serves as the efficacious vehicle of an invisible reality. Christ is understood present in the sacrament and through participation in the sacrament we partake of Christ, or at least His transformative grace. Through Augustine, who provided the philosophical and theological groundwork for formal sacramentalism, many branches of the Church have since understood Christian spirituality to have some necessity for the outward practice explaining and providing an inward reality.¹⁸

Mysticism

A final major development in Christian spirituality during the Middle Ages is known as mysticism.¹⁹ By mysticism we mean generally mean the "reality" certain Christians experience regarding God's presence through union with Him.²⁰ Harvey D. Egan writes

Christian mysticism is a way of life that involves the perfect fulfillment of loving God, neighbor, all God's creation, and oneself. It is the fundamental human process through which one becomes fully authentic by responding throughout life to a God who gives himself unconditionally as love and as the ultimate destiny of every person. It is an ordered movement toward even higher levels of reality by which the self awakens to, is purified and illuminated by, and is eventually fully united with, the God of love.²¹

Several factors aided the emergence of the mystics. First, while the monastery and the sacrament flourished, these expressions of spiritual life failed to satisfy the inner needs of many seeking God. With the invasion of tribal groups and the rise and spread of Islam, spirituality for both the East and West entrenched itself deeply in the monastery and church liturgy. Thousands of monasteries formed providing "libraries and schools, pharmacies and hotels, and centers for scholarship and mission work."²² Sittser observes, "The spirituality of the medieval period, therefore, tilted in a monastic direction. It was ascetic, rhythmic, and hierarchical."²³ Additionally, the church provided, through its services and the sacraments, spirituality for the faithful commoner. Yet for all their influences, these spiritual pursuits, were impacted by events of the day.

¹⁸ Emmanuel J. Cutrone, "Sacraments," in *Augustine Through The Ages: An Encyclopedia* Allan D. Fitzgerald, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 746. Cutrone concludes his article writing, "Augustine inherits the language of *sacramentum*, which he incorporates into his philosophy of signs. Applying this to the liturgical life of the church, he sets the scene for a complete theory of sacraments which has continued to the present day. His theological reflections provide new ways to consider God's word made visible in and through the church. His response to theological controversy provides both formulas and theological insight. His thought moved from the patristic period into Scholasticism and into Reformation theology. Western sacramental theology clearly bears the stamp of Augustine." Ibid.

¹⁹For further reading see Egan, Harvey D.. *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 2nd edition. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996, as a helpful collection of writings by the various mystics.

²⁰ Dennis D. Martin, "Mysticism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book house, 1984), 744. "Briefly and generally stated, mystical theology of Christian mysticism seeks to describe and experienced, direct, nonabstract, unmediated, loving knowing of God, a knowing or seeing so direct as to be called union with God," Ibid.

²¹ Egan, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, xvi.

²²Gerald L. Sittser, "Survey of the History of Christian Spirituality," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 97.

²³Ibid.

For example, not only did threats from Islam challenge these forms of Christian spirituality, during the fourteenth century the Black Death shaped Christian spiritual pursuit. From the years 1347 to 1351 bubonic and pneumonic infections wiped out upwards of thirty to forty percent of Europe's population. Because of these challenges, the focus about life became oriented toward one's mortality and personal suffering. A person's experience with God now became focused upon the inner connection one had with himself in life's rhythms and trials. Mysticism provided a personal experience with God that other more liturgical means did not necessarily supply.

The term mysticism refers to a wide variety of approaches to Christian spirituality. Not only did mysticism develop and express itself differently between the Eastern and Western churches, effectively creating two distinct traditions, but each of the mystics emphasized their own approach to a spiritual reality. The Eastern Church developed and maintained an emphasis upon *theosis*,²⁴ or deification, as well as the simplistic ideals stressed in Athanasius', *Life of Antony* (and other writings). Western mystic spirituality, on the other hand, followed a monastic, Augustinian trajectory locating the spiritual experience through sacramentalism.

In the East, as with the West, the liturgical and sacramental life within the church was the primary means to effectually communicate the gospel to the common man. Eastern liturgy, however, officially incorporated the veneration of icons at the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787. The Church and iconoclastic expressions became an important common factor for Eastern spirituality.

Along with iconoclasm and sacramentalism, certain individuals played an important role in Eastern spirituality. John of Damascus, for example, centered spirituality in the presence of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word. John insisted that "[t]he incarnation of the Word stood at the very center of the church's life, which transfigured believers into the divine likeness."²⁵ Gregory Palamas, another important voice in Eastern spirituality, detailed the theological foundations as to how one comes to know God. Practicing a method of prayer known as *hesychasm* (a holy silence incorporating certain breathing techniques and the short petition known as the Jesus prayer) some were able to experience a vision light that radiated from Christ (as during the transfiguration). Finally, Pseudo-Dionysius, the Areopagite, influenced Eastern spirituality by popularizing the apophatic way²⁶ to know God. Bradley Nassif tells us,

²⁴Greg Peters, "Deification," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 392-94. "Deification, also known as *theosis*, is the term used to describe the spiritual journey of believers from their baptism/initiation into the Christian tradition to a state of greater holiness in union with God. Principally, the theology of deification is rooted in the biblical teaching that humankind has been created in the image and likeness of God. That humanity is made in God's image makes it possible for all postfall humans to return to their pre-fall state of being like God." Ibid., 392-93.

²⁵Bradley Nassif, "Byzantium and the East (600-1700)," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 110.

²⁶Bruce A. Demarest, "Apophatic and Kataphatic Ways," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 271-72. "Apophatic ('without images') is a way of knowing God by negation. Advocates of this way aver that the divine Reality, dwelling in a world beyond human understanding and thus ineffable and inexpressible, cannot be known by ideas, images, and language...No name from Scripture adequately describes Him. Rather, God is known in the darkness by detachment, prayerful silence, and contemplation." Ibid., 271. In , the "Kataphatic way ('with images') is a way of knowing God by affirmation, namely, through his self-revelation mediated by the intellect and senses." Ibid.

According to Dionysius, the Christian experience of God is essentially unknowable: “Everything can be affirmed of God at one and the same time, and yet he is none of these things” (Pseudo-Dionysius, 27). Negative theology affirms and denies assertions about God while simultaneously leading one to a positive encounter with him.²⁷

While the East was influenced by key individuals, Western mysticism focused on life in the Church. In the West, via the sacraments, God’s saving and transforming grace was considered to change the person through Christ’s body, the Church. Whether one was a monk or a commoner, spirituality was by God’s grace through the sacraments and the disciplines of church order. It was from this sacramental, liturgical emphasis that certain “mystics” arose in Western spirituality with specific emphases for achieving and maintaining proper spirituality.

First, for some, spirituality was achieved by means of rigorous self-discipline. John Cassian’s (c. 400) *lectio divina* was made popular by Guigo de Castro (in *Scala Paradisi*, c 1000) as four rungs on the ladder to paradise. These “four rungs” were, “reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation.” Guigo writes, “Reading seeks, meditation finds, prayer asks, contemplation feels.” [Letter of Dom Guigo the Carthusian to Brother Gervase about the Contemplative Life].²⁸

For others, spirituality was love for God. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) in his classic work, *On Loving God*, provided four stages in the spiritual experience of the contemplative union with Christ. Clairvaux’ four stages of loving God included, 1) Love oneself for one’s own sake; 2) Love God for one’s own sake; 3) Love God for God’s sake; and, 4) Loving God only for God’s sake by which, “In some wondrous way he forgets himself and, ceasing to belong to himself, he passes entirely into God and becomes one with Him” [Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, 41].

For many, proper spirituality could be achieved by proclaiming and practicing various “ways” to God (ways to higher communion with God). For example, Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan Order, who wrote, *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, insisted upon the disciplines of poverty and service. Four elements characterized Francis’ spiritual order: first, a commitment to apostolic poverty; second, a life of prayer that encompassed all things; third, self-denial and suffering for Christ; and, fourth, encountering God through nature.²⁹ Bonaventure, also a Franciscan, emphasized the mystical Christ and was a strong proponent of the three ways into God. For Bonaventure, “the purgative way expels sin; the illuminative way leads to the imitation of Christ; and the unitive way brings about union with the spouse. The threefold way causes the repose of peace, the splendor of truth, and the sweetness of love.”³⁰

Finally, devoted service became the means for experiencing true spirituality. For example, as the Middle Ages ended, Thomas a’ Kempis, in his work *The Imitation of Christ*, stressed devotion to Christ in and through the smallest task as the means to know the Lord in spiritual fullness. A’ Kempis writes, “The Lord states, ‘He who follows me does not walk in darkness’. These, Christ’s words, advise us that if we wish to be really enlightened and to be freed from spiritual blindness, we must imitate the lifestyle of Christ. Our deepest desire should be to reflect on Christ’s life” [*The Imitation of Christ*, 1.1].

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Allison, *Historical Theology*, 530.

²⁹Tyson, *Christian Spirituality*, 164.

³⁰Egan, *Anthology*, 238.

Devotion to Christ appears, on the surface, to remain the central focus of Christian spirituality throughout the Middle Ages. That said, the Middle Ages maintained traditions inherent in church's beliefs and practices since the close of the fifth century. In the East the writings of Early Church Fathers and the testimonies of the desert ascetics formed the starting point and means for spirituality. In the West, Augustinian theology, with its emphasis upon sovereign grace available through the sacraments and monastic disciplines, provided the backdrop for spiritual development. Whether through the monastery, church liturgy, or an inner prescription from the mystics, Christian growth, namely progressive sanctification and spiritual experience, were seen as being achieved by God's grace in Christ through avenues of the Church. Christian spirituality certainly became prescriptive. But this prescription was located in the institution of the Church. Performance in and through the institution became the means of reaching and experiencing Christ.

Summary

Participating in a variety of liturgical traditions and embracing certain spiritual disciplines may provide great personal benefits for us as individuals. These benefits, however, become very personalized. Our assessment in this overview must remain focused on whether these practices are descriptive of practices beneficial for some, or biblically prescriptive for all. Adhering to a biblically prescribed model for spirituality may take many personalized forms but the question remains, 'Are these historic examples and trends prescribed by the Bible as the means for spirituality?' Does the Bible teach a monastic lifestyle as the means for achieving optimum spirituality? Does Scripture prescribe the various models found in Eastern or Western mysticism?

AD 1500 – 1800: Sacramentalism, Confessionalism, Pietism, and Puritanism

Both Reformation and Post-Reformation eras offer varieties in Christian spiritual pursuits that would be impossible to discuss in this simple overview. Spiritual instruction and theological-practical models for godliness from John Calvin, Thomas Cranmer, Ignatius of Loyola, John of the Cross, and Philip Jacob Spener, to mention a few, would go beyond the purpose of this study. Instead, let's limit ourselves to a few general movements characterizing and informing Christian spirituality during the Reformation and Post-Reformation eras.

Sacramentalism

Sacramentalism, as discussed above, continued to be a central aspect in understanding Christian spirituality. The Roman Catholic Church, by the reforms established through the Council of Trent (1545-63) affirmed and sustained a renewal in the monastic spirituality of Ignatius Loyola, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila centering ecclesiastical spirituality in the sacraments.³¹

Protestant spirituality, while emphasizing personal practices such as private Bible reading and individual prayer, also remained fixed to the efficacy of the sacrament, though reducing the number of sacraments from the seven sacraments recognized by Rome to two, baptism and the

³¹Catherine G. Gonzalez, Justo L. Gonzalez, and Onida E. Gonzalez, "European Reformation and Colonial Expansion (1450-1700)," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Glen G. Scorgie, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 124.

Lord's Supper. For the Reformers, however, the sacraments continued to convey divine grace in that they were "external expressions of internal realities."³²

Confessionalism

As the Reformation era progressed, the Protestant movement began to splinter. By the end of the sixteenth century Protestantism had begun to produce a variety of ecclesiastical traditions.³³ Through the conflicts produced by theological and practical differences, a major portion of Protestantism began to define and distinguish themselves through their confessions (or formal documents detailing their understanding of the Christian faith).³⁴ These confessions were very thorough and touched upon all aspects of a believer's life. Regarding spirituality an example as to what a confession might say is reflected in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

They who are effectively called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them. The dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified, and they are sanctified more and more quickened and strengthened, in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man will see the Lord [WCF, 13:1].³⁵

For many believers the confessions codified spiritual living. To be true to one's confession became a benchmark of true spirituality. Today, confessionalism continues to play a large role in our understanding about the faith and our models regarding our spiritual lives. Many would continue to equate true spirituality with confessional solidarity. True to the confession means true to the Lord. True to the Lord equals true spirituality.

Pietism

Confessionalism fostered to Pietism. Pietism was a movement that developed in the late 17th century in central Europe. As a reaction to the scholasticism of post-Reformation confessionalism, the Pietist movement sought to recapture the relational aspects of the Christian experience. These relational aspects included how we relate to God by His Spirit and how we engage each other in everyday life. As such, Pietism can be understood as a "religion of the heart."³⁶

The "Father of Pietism," Lutheran, Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705), published his book *Pia desideria* (*pious desire*) as a call for the Church to emphasize a personal relationship with Christ and personal piety. His work became the standard for Pietist movement. Some of the tenets

³²Gordon T. Smith, "Sacrament," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Glen G. Scorgie, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 729.

³³To name several includes: Anglican; Dutch Reformed; Puritanism; Pietism; Anabaptists; Presbyterian; and, Lutheran.

³⁴Some examples of these confessions include: The Augsburg Confession (1530); The Confession of the Council of Trent (1545-63); The Belgic Confession (1566); The Articles of Remonstrance (1610); The Canons of the Synod of Dort (1619); and The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647).

³⁵Citation from a collection of creeds and confessions compiled in a document entitled *Creeds and Confessions Study Guide for Comprehensive Exams in Systematic Theology*. This collection was made for students by the faculty at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, c. 2003.

³⁶G. William Carlson, "Pietism," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Glen G. Scorgie, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 674.

Spener proposed were studying the Bible in small groups; the priesthood of all believers; Christianity lived out rather than institutionalized; careful conduct in religious controversy; more complete pastoral training; and preaching that touches lives.³⁷ For Spener, spirituality required a “new birth” experience followed by a life of loving service toward others.

The strength of pietism, however, became its greatest weakness. By emphasizing the personal relationship experience, Pietism soon splintered into many groups. As these groups departed from the text of Scripture, their subjectivity undermined their genesis for spirituality. As these groups adhered to the biblical message, however, pietism continued. Biblical Pietism, as such, expressed a relationship with God through evangelism, the cultivation of an inner relationship with God, and social activism (e.g., caring for the poor). The convictions and ideals of early Pietism continue in many evangelical churches today. However, any regimented spiritual recipe, often regresses to another set of well-intended practices that replace the dynamic possibilities of our divine relationship. Like confessionalism before, the practices of pietism became the marks of spirituality and, as such, pietists’ spirituality was relegated to an adherence to certain values and lifestyles.

Puritanism

During the post-Reformation era a final movement became fixed on the Christian spiritual landscape. This movement is known as Puritanism. In the words of J. I. Packer,

Puritanism was a clergy-led Protestant and Reformed holiness and renewal movement, anchored in the Church of England until Parliament abolished Anglicanism in 1645, and thereafter taking Presbyterian and Congregational-Independent (both Baptist and paedobaptist) forms. It sought to glorify God by completing the reformation of English church life, by discipling the nation, and by Christianizing all public life. It was a comprehensive cultural force, pursuing intellectual, ecclesiastical, personal, and civic goals as a means to fulfilling England’s manifest destiny, to become a model for the world of true godliness.³⁸

Spirituality in the Puritan movement fostered a commitment to the strict disciplines of personal piety. Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones provide some insight into these spiritual disciplines.

The Puritans used a number of means to promote piety. These include (1) encouraging Word-focused, doctrinal, experiential, and soul-saving preaching; (2) reading and searching the Scriptures; (3) meditating on biblical truths and duties; (4) engaging frequently and at length in fervent prayer; (5) communing with the saints, particularly through conventicles or spiritual fellowships; (6) emphasizing continuing repentance; (7) cultivating an inward devotional life through daily devotions and the means of grace; (8) singing psalms; (9) monitoring and making diligent use of the Lord’s Supper; (10) obeying the Decalogue out of gratitude to God; (11) accenting the invisible church more than the visible; (12) maintaining family worship; (13) catechizing the laity; (14) publishing sermons

³⁷These categories were ‘distilled’ from course notes compiled by the author for a course taught at Grace College and Seminary, ca. 2008.

³⁸J. I. Packer, “Puritan Spirituality,” in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Glen G. Scorgie, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 702.

and other edifying literature; (15) stressing theological education for the clergy; (16) keeping the Sabbath by dedicating the entire day to God; and (17) keeping journals or spiritual diaries.³⁹

Summary

It would seem obvious to many of us who desire to know and love God that the practices characterizing many of the groups and trends above are both helpful and important for the cultivation of a healthy spiritual life. Monasticism, Confessionalism, Pietism, and Puritanism, all began as efforts to return the Church to, and keep the Church in its first-love devotion to Christ. Recipes for and systems intending to promote spirituality soon, however, become their own mark of spirituality. How well one keeps the monastic orders, or learns and adheres to the confession, or maintains the disciplines and lifestyles of Pietism or Puritanism soon become the standard and test for spirituality. While all these systems have a form of godliness the question remains, 'Were any of these systems prescribed by authors of the New Testament as the means and/or markers of the New Covenant life?' Jesus taught His disciples about the dynamic of those born "of the Spirit," John 3:8. They move about by the wind of Spirit. Paul informed the Corinthians about those demonstrating the reality of God's Kingdom. The Apostle tells us that the Kingdom of God is a demonstration of "power" (assumed here to be the power of a Spiritually transformed life), 1 Corinthians 4:20. While we may personally feel more comfortable with one ecclesiastical tradition over another, and in that comfort excel in our pursuit of God, I believe that the Bible teaches us, both through its history and exhortations, that we must be careful not to replace the substance of our spirituality, Christ in us, with the forms of our traditions.

The Modern Era, 1800—21st Century: Sacramentalism, Puritanism, Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, and Eclecticism

Today, when given the task of articulating a biblical model for spirituality, we discover how deeply the two thousand years of church history have influenced our thinking. While many of the formal movements mentioned above have faded, the ideals embodied in these movements and beliefs held by these traditions continue to impact our spiritual life thought processes. For example, formal Puritanism may no longer be found in a communitarian sense. Puritan ideals, however, can be found in many models of Christian spirituality. The seventeen points listed above represent many good and profitable suggestions found in today's literature dealing with Christian spirituality.⁴⁰ For me, personally, I identify most closely with what I know about the pietist movement and ideals. But I too must be careful not to equate the spiritual process and dynamic prescribed through the New Covenant with adherence to a specific regimen. When living in relationships, especially a relationship with our infinite God, we must be careful not to relegate the

³⁹ Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine For Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage books, 2012), 849.

⁴⁰ A brief survey of popular Christian books dealing with the pursuit of godliness and spirituality reveals many of the same suggestions found in Puritanism. This brief survey included: Anderson, Neil T. and Robert L. Saucy. *The Common Made Holy*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1997; Bridges, Jerry. *The Pursuit of Holiness*. Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1978. MacDonald, James. *Lord Change Me*. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2012; Willard, Dallas. *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. New York, NY: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988; Willard, Dallas. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting On the Character of Christ*. Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2002.

Author of our multifaceted universe, into a religious tradition regardless of how personally beneficial our pious practices are to us.

Perhaps this is why, in today's spiritual landscape, we have such a variety of spiritual expressions. We still have an instilled belief affirming some form of sacramentalism; there are those who have dedicated their lives to an ascetic lifestyle (even formal monasticism); there are those who cannot waver from their ecclesiastical traditions; there are many who claim that true spirituality and power is manifested through the evidence of certain mystical experiences; and, finally, some borrow from many traditions and experiences hoping to know and love God. Let's take one brief look into some of the influences impacting our spiritual thoughts today.

Evangelicalism⁴¹

Since the mid-1700's evangelicalism has been an ever-present interdenominational, grassroots movement emphasizing personal faith in Christ and continued obedience to Scripture. Generally understood, evangelicalism understands proper spirituality occurring when Bible-centered believers pursue faith, repentance, fellowship, communion, mission, as well as progressive holiness. This type of evangelical spirituality can be found in many denominational traditions as well as taught by a variety of writers from various disciplines. From John Wesley's, *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1777), Andrew Murray's, *Abide In Christ* (1882), Watchman Nee's, *The Normal Christian Life* (1938), A. W. Tozer's, *The Pursuit of God* (1948), to more recent works as Richard Foster's, *Celebration of Discipline* (1978), most evangelical publishers are providing an array of resources on spiritual growth and formation.

In its diversity, evangelicalism provides a variety of approaches toward Christian spirituality. Evangelical spirituality, however, when anchored in a genuine pursuit of biblical understanding, presses beyond doctrinal confessionalism, ecclesiastical observance, or moral rectitude to experience nothing less than what one writer calls, "the life of God in the soul of man."⁴²

Charismatic/ Pentecostalism

Evangelicalism covers a great deal of the contemporary Christian landscape. That said, it is probably prudent to mention a recent (within the last 130 years) spiritual-life emphasis that has settled in evangelical, protestant, high church, and even Roman Catholic territories.⁴³ This emphasis is known as the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement. While some of the historical

⁴¹For our purposes, evangelicalism should be understood as fitting the parameters found in John G. Stackhouse's essay, "Evangelical Theology Should Be Evangelical," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000), 39-59. For Stackhouse five basic ideals define evangelicals. Evangelical's believe and champion (1) the gospel of God's work in salvation through Jesus Christ; (2) the Bible as the uniquely authoritative Word of God; (3) individual conversion by new birth; (4) mission as the chief goal of Christian life on earth; (5) that those who value and maintain the first four ideals are evangelical regardless of denominational affiliation.

⁴²D. Bruce Hindmarsh, "Contours of Evangelical Spirituality," in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Glen G. Scorgie, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 151.

⁴³Stanley M Burgess, ed. *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, rev. and exp. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), s.v. "Spirituality, Pentecostal and Charismatic," by Russell Paul Spittler. "[Charismatics and Pentecostals] are members of a Christian subculture whose burgeoning numbers already exceed the total membership and who, in the third millennium are expected to predominate in the new church of the Southern Hemisphere." Ibid.

particulars about these movements will be covered in the following chapter (under second event models of sanctification) a few observations might be made here.

According to Russell Paul Spittler “five implicit values govern pentecostal spirituality.”⁴⁴ Briefly, these five values are individual experience, orality (in distinction from the written page), spontaneity, otherworldliness (i.e., “this world is not my home”), and biblical authority (distinguished from biblical inspiration).⁴⁵ According to Spittler,

These five implicit values...combine to yield a constellation of characteristic practices found in pentecostal and/or charismatic spirituality quite apart from the central features of speaking in tongues, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and prayer for divine healing.⁴⁶

The contemporary spirituality expressed through the Pentecostal/charismatic movements are, thus, very personal and existential. The authority behind one’s spirituality is bound to the individual (ofttimes keeping with one’s excepted ecclesiastical culture) and is assumed to be of divine origin. The individuality of charismatic spirituality leads us to a final nuance to contemporary spiritual trends, eclecticism.

Eclecticism

As one might expect from what has been discussed at above, today’s landscape is anything but orderly.⁴⁷ Various traditions, new ideas, and old ideas implemented in new settings all help make up an eclectic understanding about what Christian spirituality is and how we can experience what God intends for our lives. From the horizons of the charismatic movement through a variety of popular evangelical presentations, to the classic confessional and Reformed Puritan tradition, today’s pursuit of Christian spirituality can be found incorporating ideas from the Early Church Fathers, the monastic orders, Augustinian philosophy, as well as prominent Roman and Eastern mystics. As Emilie Griffin observes, “Today’s Christian spirituality is searching for a deeper historical consciousness.”⁴⁸

Evaluation and Summary

Two-thousand years of church history have provided us with a variety of descriptions (e.g., moral lists; mystic and charismatic experiences), prescriptions (e.g., sacramentalism, confessions), and expressions of (e.g., monasticism, mysticism, pietism, puritanism, evangelicalism, and personal spiritual experience) and about the pursuit of true spirituality.

⁴⁴Stanley M Burgess, ed. *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, rev. and exp. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), s.v. “Spirituality, Pentecostal and Charismatic,” by Russell Paul Spittler.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷Today’s landscape has been shaped by an Enlightenment, post-enlightenment, modern, post modern confluence. The views of Western-minded Christians reflect not only the variety of ideas and practices mentioned in this chapter, but the tensions inherent with the modern/postmodern ideas about truth, consider works such as Franke, John R. *The Character of Theology: A Postconservative Evangelical Approach*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005; and Grenz, Stanley J. and Franke, John R.. *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, and the implications for Christian spirituality.

⁴⁸Emilie Griffin, “Europe and North America (1700-Present),” in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Glen G. Scorgie, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 132.

Subsequently, with today's renewed interest in Christian spirituality, we discover that these major emphases are still informing spiritual models and our way of understanding and practicing the Christian life. These various traditions also affect the way we understand, approach, and relate to God. When and how we are baptized, partake of the Eucharist, adhere to a particular moral code, or even what the Bible means and how we read it, are shaped through the traditions we have inherited.

While these traditions may and, perhaps should, resonate with us at a variety of levels, appropriate spirituality and proper spiritual progress should seek to conform to the prescriptions communicated in the Bible. Religious ceremonies and duties and doctrinal positions are not a guarantee for transformation. The Apostle Paul reminds us that practicing the moral codes of the Pharisees, knowing the Scriptures like a scribe, and/or strictly adhering to the traditions of the fathers do not necessarily connect us to the life of Christ, Philippians 3:3-8.⁴⁹ Similarly, visions and revelations are not a substitute for Christ, Colossians 2:16-23⁵⁰

So, while the present-day diversity exists, the quest for biblical clarity regarding spiritual life must continue. We must seek God's prescription. To move forward in this pursuit, and continue our introduction, we will, in the next chapter, overview and evaluate several present-day models for Christian spirituality and progressive sanctification. In keeping with our goal of discovering a biblical understanding for spiritual living, each of these contemporary models will be assessed as to its consistency with the New Testament account. Our goal at here is to familiarize ourselves with today's spiritual thinking in order is to discover, in later chapters, God's prescribed means to work with our spirit to nurture our spiritual lives. So, let's continue to search the Scriptures, search our hearts, and apply whatever means is biblically appropriate for enriching our lives in relationship with God.

⁴⁹Philippians 3:3-7 "For we are the circumcision, the ones who worship by the Spirit of God, exult in Christ Jesus, and do not rely on human credentials—though mine too are significant. If someone thinks he has good reasons to put confidence in human credentials, I have more: I was circumcised on the eighth day, from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. I lived according to the law as a Pharisee. In my zeal for God I persecuted the church. According to the righteousness stipulated in the law I was blameless. But these assets I have come to regard as liabilities because of Christ...indeed, I regard them as dung!—that I may gain Christ." NET Bible.

⁵⁰Colossians 2:16-23 "Therefore do not let anyone judge you with respect to food or drink, or in the matter of a feast new moon, or Sabbath days—these are only the shadow of the things to come, but the reality is Christ! Let no one who delights in humility and the worship of angels pass judgment on you. That person goes on at great lengths about what he has supposedly seen, but he is puffed up with empty notions by his fleshly mind. He has not held fast to the head from whom the whole body, supported and knit together through its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God. If you have died with Christ to the elemental spirits of the world, why do you submit to them as though you lived in the world? "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" These are all destined to perish with use, founded as they are on human commands and teachings. Even though they have the appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship and false humility achieved by an unsparing treatment of the body—a wisdom with no true value—they in reality result in fleshly indulgence."