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# A spirituality of Word and Spirit for a post-modern world

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**W**e are at a significant time in human history. For the last 220 years our thinking has been shaped by the assumptions of that period which historians call the Enlightenment, with its emphasis upon human reason and its exaggerated optimism about human potential. It is a period that elevated the potential of the mind above the necessity for God's revelation. It encouraged the view that science and human achievement give a god-like capacity for understanding and controlling the world. Such arrogance has not only witnessed astounding technological advance, it has also seen a collapse of morality, resulting in horrendous brutality and horrific degradation. A major by-product of this period where rationalism reigned supreme, has been the fracturing of knowledge and life into increasingly minute compartments. Everything has been coolly dissected and separated from its other component parts and as a result genuine evangelical spirituality, with its emphasis upon the comprehensive grace of God, has been severely disabled, and for the last 200 years has shown stunted growth.

Yet something is happening. The Enlightenment has been slowly dying for the last 20 years and is on the point of expiring. Rationalism has been exposed as phoney and its presuppositions knocked away. Peter Drucker, the management guru, wrote in the *Harvard Business Review* – “Every few hundred years throughout Western history, a sharp transformation has occurred. In a matter of decades society altogether rearranges itself – its worldview, its basic values, its social and political structures, its art, its key institutions. Fifty years later a new world exists. And the people born into that world cannot even imagine the world into which their grandparents lived and into which their own parents were born. Our age is such a transformation.”

As a result of these changes many believers are re-discovering spirituality. For some, it has never been lost but for others, shaped by the mind-set of the age, there comes the discovery that genuine spirituality should no longer be derided as ineffective and irrelevant. Assumptions that we made twenty years ago have been radically challenged. Our whole mind-set is undergoing a re-tuning operation. God's word has not changed but the way that we approach God's inerrant, all-sufficient word has probably been changing. But this change is not a journey out into the unknown, rather it is a journey back into the riches that have been so long neglected. It is to be approached not with fear but with excitement.

It is my major contention that genuine spirituality consists in a re-discovery of the cohesive and comprehensive nature of the grace of God in the life of a believer. It rejects the isolating, fracturing and compartmentalising effects of the last two centuries, and looks back to the time of the Puritans and Pietists, when there was an approach that was far healthier, vibrant, holistic, real, scriptural and God-honouring.

There are **three main areas** where this must be worked out. **Firstly**, we must rediscover the comprehensive nature of God's grace. By this I mean there are significant areas of our experience that may have been unconsciously excluded from the far reaching effects of God's grace. It was Martin Luther who insisted that Christianity is concerned with "*totus homo*" – the entire human person. Of course, he had an excellent precedent for saying so – it was Christ himself who said, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength". During the last 200 years, however, Protestants have placed great stress on a coolly detached intellectualism, that has separated the use of the mind from the other faculties of our human personalities. As Bruce Demarest wrote "Protestantism suffers from the scourge of intellectualism when it believes that deepest human needs can be satisfied by right thinking about God." And Martin Kelsey observed, "In Protestantism, God became a theological idea known by inference rather than a reality known by experience".

I am not arguing for an anti-intellectualism. We do not need to think less, on the contrary, we need to use our minds more. But when we truly do so, when we begin to comprehend the stench of our sinfulness and the wonder and vastness of Christ's saving grace, then this will transfuse every part of our being. There will be tears of repentance, or there will be the overflowing joy of forgiveness. We will not be ashamed of those legitimate displays of emotion that flow directly from our understanding of God's truth. We will not brand as passionate, fanatical or Welsh anyone whose response to God's truth bursts through that cool English reserve. And of course, the way we approach God's word will be with a greater hunger and expectation than has previously been the case with so many. We will not read it simply to get sermon ideas or answers to questions that might pop up in some game of Religious Trivial Pursuits ("what was the name of Abraham's chief servant?"). Rather we will read God's word in the expectation that the living God will meet us there, and that such a meeting will not only stimulate the mind, it will move the heart and challenge the will. Alister McGrath commented, "Intellectual resilience must be supplemented by a spiritual vitality. As evangelicalism moves to claim the intellectual high ground in Western Christianity, there is a real danger that in scaling these heights of the human mind, it may neglect the needs of the human heart."

We must be very careful, therefore, that we understand genuine spirituality as comprehending both a rugged, clear and rigorous understanding of God's word alongside those appropriate responses of the emotions, spirit and will. We must never elevate one above the other but must wrestle to hold them all in a proper equilibrium. We will therefore be careful about those who manipulate the emotions whilst telling us to empty our minds, as we will equally be concerned about those who promote truth as something which can be coolly detached from the rest of our human personality.

**Secondly**, another effect upon us of the Enlightenment's fracturing philosophy can be seen in the way that family life and spiritual responsibilities have become uncomfortably divorced from each other. It would appear that many children from Christian homes learn more about God from their school assemblies and from their Sunday School teachers than from their parents. We have copied the individualism of the age, and have failed to see a godly overflow into every area of family relations. Sadly, so few men seem to pray for their wives or with their wives. So few give care

and attention to the nurture of their partner's spiritual life. So few share and talk openly about the things of God. There is an embarrassment and a reticence. It does not seem to be the "natural" thing to do.

The *Directory for Family Worship* (written by the Westminster Assembly in 1647) suggests what should happen in homes after Sunday morning worship, "The public worship being finished after prayer, the master of the family should take an account of what they have heard; and thereafter to spend the rest of the time which they may spare in catechising, and in spiritual conferences upon the word of God: or else (going apart) they ought to apply themselves to reading, meditation, and secret prayer, that they may confirm and increase their communion with God: so that the profit which they found in the public ordinances may be cherished and promoted, and they more edified unto eternal life." Tragically, many of our children are not seeing the natural overflow of godliness into every area of family life. Mum and Dad have been infected by the spirit of the age and relegate spiritual affections to being a private matter.

Alongside the fracturing effects of the Enlightenment came the isolating effects of the Industrial Revolution. Rural communities were decimated as factories sprang up, with their need for a large, localised work force. Thus work no longer revolved around the home, and women increasingly had to take the lead in teaching moral and spiritual values to the children as fathers found their employment away from the home situation. The home, in a sense, became privatised. In this way, spiritual and religious convictions were left behind at the front door of the home or church, and the factory, office or community at large was not considered to be the place where one's faith should intrude. Sadly this division still remains with so many. We fail to be salt or light. We prefer the comfort and security of our own ghettos. How different were the Puritans who saw no such distinctions. The grace of God was to be experienced and expressed in every part of life. Richard Baxter, in his massive work *The Christian Directory* gives instructions about every area of life, i.e. Vol. 1 is entitled – The Christian Ethic, Vol. 2 – Christian Economics; Vol. 3 – Christian Ecclesiastics; Vol. 4 – Christian Politics.

Having suggested that the death of the enlightenment provides an opportunity to rediscover the breadth of God's grace in human experience, **my third contention** is that this point in time gives us the opening to reclaim the heritage of our godly forbears that has been buried by the pride of the preceding 200 years of western history.

Whereas many who come from Catholic and Orthodox backgrounds are steeped in a knowledge and understanding of their so-called spiritual heritage, the sad truth is that many of our own young people are not acquainted with the gloriously rich heritage that is theirs. Few truly appreciate that within this country just three to four centuries ago, there blossomed one of the richest flowerings of godly preaching, writing, and living that the world has ever seen. Unfortunately, the antiquated style of much that was written by the Puritans has made them inaccessible to people today and it is high time that the task of modernising their works was pursued with greater diligence, rather than our being content that we are among the elite few who can follow a John Owen sentence through to its conclusion!

It is the Puritans holistic approach to experiencing God's grace which strikes a chord with many who keenly feel the vacuum left by the Enlightenment's demise. The Puritans revelled in a grace so glorious, from a God so holy and powerful, bought by a Saviour

so loving, and mediated by the Spirit so gentle, that it could do no other than shape and control their whole lives. They had such an apprehension of the majesty and beauty of God, and such a deep-seated loathing for sin, that they were characterised by a humility, purpose and seriousness which shames us in our trivialities today.

My plea, however, for a re-discovery of a genuine evangelical spirituality in view of the Enlightenment's death, carries with it **certain warnings**. We must always remember that human nature is fallen and stained with sin in every area. As we write about the experience and outworking of God's life in us, we must exercise care. New-agers will seek to hijack genuine spirituality and make it a vehicle for self-indulgent, self-glorifying, irrational, feel-good philosophies, whilst some mystics will seek to bypass the legitimate processes of the mind, and marry their intuitive feelings with an existential encounter. As a result of the gross contamination by the spirit the age, some church groups will emphasise subjective emotionalism; others will emphasise objective intellectualism; some will place great stress on individual effort; others will encourage dependence on the gifts and insights of the community; some will advocate the use of silence, others the use of techno raves. But this should not surprise us, for even among the groups we have commended, there were also evident failings that arose as one truth was unduly elevated above another. We will do well to learn the lessons of history and avoid the mistakes of the past.

For example, there were complaints that the Pietist movement in continental Europe was indifferent to doctrine, that it was not sufficiently interested in the visible order of the church, and that it was even shifting the emphasis from God to man. And such criticisms were valid. With the Puritans in Britain, it has been observed that there was an unbalanced emphasis on sin and repentance, without the corresponding emphasis on grace and forgiveness. Ironically, a side-effect of this was to produce a spiritual insecurity, and insufficient stress on the assurance of salvation and the perseverance of the saints. Additionally, as the Puritan movement lost its original Holy Spirit driven power, some sought to legislate for activities that had previously been prompted by the Spirit through the Word. But legalism can never be a substitute for life and even the most godly of directories produced by the Puritans to guide believers in their spiritual life became vehicles for a dead orthodoxy.

If such towering giants of spiritual life could be in error at times, what hope do we pygmies have? Well, ultimately our dependence must be upon the Word and the Spirit. If ever we are to re-discover our rich evangelical heritage and apply it with wisdom, insight and relevance, we must cry out to God in our utter need. We must seek to read, understand and apply God's word, as free from our cultural baggage as it is possible to be. Though these are confusing days of change they present an opportunity for evangelicals which must not be missed. Let us not mourn the passing of the Enlightenment with its arrogant optimism, rather let us commit ourselves to the re-discovery and enjoyment of God's super-abundant grace in Christ.

*This article is based on material given at the FIEC Family Week, Caister, 1997*

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