Spirituality – What is it?

by Wayne Price
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The word spirituality is often used to describe worked-up-emotion, which is a horrid caricature of the sober and sacred idea. The New Testament uses the adjective *pnumatikos* (translated spiritual) twenty-six times. What is spirituality?

Paul's Spiritual Man

Paul contrasts the natural man and the spiritual man, and describes the natural man as one who "receives not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things" (1 Cor. 2:14-15). Martin Luther pictured man in his natural state "like a pillar of salt, like Lot's wife, yea, like a log and a stone, like a lifeless statue which uses neither eyes nor mouth, neither sense nor heart, incapable of understanding the things of God until he is enlightened, converted, and regenerated by the Holy Ghost."

According to Luther, the natural man cannot understand the Bible. He needs special illumination from the Spirit to discover the message of the Scriptures. The spiritual man, according to this view, is, at first, like a lifeless statue incapable of understanding the scriptures, but after being regenerated by a direct operation of the Holy Spirit, he is illuminated and converted. The teaching of Luther does not agree with the teaching of the New Testament, but is popular with many well-meaning, deceived people.

Paul contrasts the gospel he preached with false doctrines of false teachers. In first Corinthians chapter one, the apostle

helps us to understand the term spiritual. The words “foolish” and “foolishness” are used seven times and “wise” and “wisdom” twelve times to contrast God’s wisdom with man’s wisdom (foolishness). “Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world” (1 Cor. 1:20). Paul is discussing God given teaching versus human philosophy.

Paul affirms that his preaching was “not with enticing words of man’s wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:4). In the first two chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul develops the theme that Christianity is a revealed religion, and that man, without revelation, cannot know the blessings of redemption. God reveals redemption, and also its interpretation and explanation (see 1 Pet. 1:10-12). Paul proclaims, “God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit; for the Spirit searcheth all thing, yea, the deep things of God” (1 Cor. 2:10). The plural pronouns of verses 10-13 do not refer to Christians of all ages (the very thing that Luther misunderstood), but to the apostles and other inspired teachers of the first century who were involved in revealing “the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3).

Paul’s “natural” man is the uninspired man, and his “spiritual” man is the inspired man. Paul uses the word “spiritual” in 1 Cor. 14:37 with the same meaning: the spiritual man was guided by the Holy Spirit, and miraculously empowered.

Paul contrasts inspired revelation with false teaching. To make the passage mean a sinner who cannot understand the Bible until the Holy Spirit interprets it for him is a terrible perversion. If the sinner cannot understand the gospel until he receives supernatural illumination, and if illumination never comes, God is at fault.

The Spiritual Man Today

In 1 Corinthians 3:1, Paul uses the word spiritual with a different emphasis. Paul accuses the brethren in Corinth of being carnal, and therefore of not being spiritual. The carnal man, oblivious to the gospel, is sinful. The spiritual person, influenced by the gospel, is godly. This is the way the term spiritual ought to be understood by mankind in today's religious world. Inspiration has ceased, and there is no progressive revelation of saving truth today. Paul's usage of spiritual in 1 Corinthians 2 applied only to the first century in the age of miraculous manifestations of the Spirit.

The word spiritual may mean, in the New Testament, things that have their origin with God, and are in harmony with his character. Passages such as Romans 7:14; 1 Corinthians 9:11 and 10:3; and Ephesians 1:3 are examples of this usage.

The Apostle Paul writes the brethren in Galatia that "if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Gal. 6:1). There are two classes in this verse. One is spiritual, and the other is not. Spirituality was something that was recognizable, else no one would know who was to restore who!

The spiritual person today is the one who walks by the Spirit, and does "not fulfil the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16). The fruit of the Spirit will be seen in the life (Gal. 5:22-25). Vine's Expository Dictionary points out that in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, "Paul contrasts the spiritual state of a mature Christian with that of the babe in Christ, i.e., of the man who because of immaturity and inexperience has not yet reached spirituality, and that of the man who by permitting jealousy, and the strife to which jealousy always leads, has lost it. The spiritual state is reached by diligence in the Word of God and in prayer; it is maintained by obedience and self-

judgment.”

“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and for ever. Amen” (2 Pet. 3:18).