

QUESTION

JUSTIFY THE USE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, IN SHAPING TWENTIETH CENTURY SPIRITUALITY.

INTRODUCTION

‘Spirituality’ - This ambiguous term is new to many and objectionable to some. Although it is a clumsy word, it is used so much because it seems to do a task that no other word does. Bradley P. Holt describes it as *‘a word which has come much into vogue to describe those attitudes, beliefs, practices which animate people’s lives and help them to reach out towards super-sensible realities’*. This I consider to be precise and adequate a definition bearing in mind the above question.

Christians have in their keeping this document, **‘The New Testament’**, that has all the mark of the real thing. They have been reading and meditating on it for nearly two thousand years. Every kind and sort of Christian has tested it against every kind and sort of circumstance and condition of living and stood up to give witness to its validity. Tested against the reality of actual lives, it turns out to be not another of many *‘guesses’* about spirituality, but spirituality itself.

It is a great gift to offer the world in all matters of spirituality. There is nothing quite like it. It is the greatest gift we can provide for people who are fed up with the hand-to-mouth existence of mere appetite. It is the perfect gift for people who are bored with the head-trip existence of mere intellect. It is the exactly right gift for people who have gone stale on second-hand religion. However, in this account I would try to justify the use of the New Testament in shaping the twentieth century spirituality by illustrating some of the components of the New Testament spirituality.

THE NEW TESTAMENT SPIRITUALITY

In the New Testament, we learnt that the followers of Jesus are to **‘Love’** not just their neighbour but also and even their enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). Paul teaches similarly: persecutors should be blessed; vengeance eschewed; injustice tolerated (Romans 12:9-13; 1cor. 6:7;). Further more, Paul urges his gentiles in Galatia to be “servants of one another through love, for the whole law is fulfilled in one word, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’” (Gal. 5:13-14).

Reading from the New Testament, we observe that there are sufficient evidence that Jesus Christ Himself took **‘Scripture Reading’** very seriously during His time. For example, His response to the devil when tempted (Luke 4:1-13), and how He made constant reference to the Scripture when discussing with the Sadducees and other religious leaders. Writing to his convert, Timothy, Paul referred to the fact that it was acquaintance with the sacred writings which had brought him to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Paul went on to say *‘All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work’* (2 Tim. 3:15-16). These verses also make it obvious that if we are to be effective witnesses, then we must have a good grasp of the Scripture to help others to become Christians.

The New Testament teaches that it should be our daily ambition to be filled with the **‘Holy Spirit’** (Acts 1:5, 2:38; Eph. 5:18). Further, we must be especially concerned that the Spirit may grow

his fruit in our lives of love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal.5: 22-23). We must also seek to exercise all the gifts that the Spirit has distribute to us to be used for the common good. Some of these may be the special gifts (1Cor. 12:1-11), others may be the ‘natural’ gifts like teaching or administration, which we must dedicate consciously to God’s service. The supreme aim is that ‘we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’ (Eph. 4:13).

‘Worship’ is a corporate way of placing all that we are before God and this must include the physical side of our life, our emotions and our intellect. All that it means for us to be ourselves needs to be brought before God in worship; our strength and weakness, success and failure, joy and sadness. In worship we take ourselves honestly to God and place ourselves before his love and healing power (Heb. 10:1; Romans 12:1; John 4:24). This of course is an aspect of corporate spirituality contain in the New Testament.

According to the New Testament, **‘Confession’** is about admitting that God is Lord in the totality of our life. In confession we realize the seriousness and radical depth of sin in our own lives as well as the grace and the love of God in Jesus Christ. Confession is about extending our conversion to more and more aspects of our life (Matthew 3:6; Mark 1:5). Confession is not just a human act it is also about God’s refining, purifying and healing. The New Testament teaches that it is important to realize that conversion itself is God’s activity; it is the gracious call of God himself, which motivates our turning to him. And it is in this light only that confession can have any real significance in our life.

The New Testament teaches that ***‘Fasting and prayer’*** is important and it must always center on God. Jesus included it in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:16-18). He also fasted before setting out on His public ministry, and towards the end of it in Gethsemane, the Bible says *‘Being in agony He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground’* (Luke 22:44); the Church of Antioch did before being guided to send Barnabas and Paul on what became known as the first missionary journey Acts 13:1-2). But centered on God, fasting more than any other single discipline reveals the things that controls us; anger, bitterness, jealousy, fear. In fasting we learn just who we are. Fasting also aids us to maintain our orientation in life towards God. Fasting is a way of ensuring that the physical and emotional aspects of our life can find their goal in God.

God created us social beings and this is reflected in what is known as ***‘Fellowship’***- an aspect of corporate spirituality in the New Testament. The term Fellowship (*addressing one another*) is mentioned at the very beginning of the Christian Church’s existence, where the initial three thousand devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42).

It was difficult to write about ‘Fellowship’ in the paragraph above without mentioning ***‘communion’***. Indeed, both words are the same in Greek (1Cor. 10:16 and 1John 1). There is a clear command of our Lord *‘Do this’* (1Cor. 11:24-25), and the characteristic Christian response from the day Pentecost to the present day has been for the people of God to meet week by week and, as the English word puts it, *‘celebrate’* the Lord’s supper. Just as sharing a secular meal is a

bond of friendship (*and it was far mere so in New Testament times*) so we shall also find that 'Communion' with the Lord is itself a most profound and loving 'fellowship' with His people.

Jesus and His disciples saw '**healing and deliverance**' as an important part of their spiritual lives, and an evidence of the break-in of the kingdom of God. The healings, so notable in the ministry of Jesus (Mark 2:1-12; 5:34; 10:52; Luke 17:19; John 5:34 etc), are continued in the Acts of the Apostles (e.g. 3:1ff; 9:18; 20:9-10; 28:8 etc). These are the things that made the early Christians so spiritually vibrant.

One important antidote scripture suggests to man to protect him from the evil of the love of money is generous '**giving**'. The man who is generous and liberal with his money cannot be ensnared by wealth. From the amount of teaching Jesus gave about wealth we must conclude that it is an important factor in the Christian life. In Jesus' eyes money was one of the greatest dangers to the life of faith. Money acts like a magnet pulling man away from real trust in God. Money then has the power to destroy the essential humanity of a person; to draw him away from God and make him less than human. If our goal in life lies with God then this will be reflected in the way we deal with material possessions as Zacchaeus was to learn (Luke 19:1-9). If God rules our cheque books then all is set for him to be Lord of the rest of our life (Phil. 4:15-18; 2Cor. 8:7).

Concerning '**family and home**', in the text from Ephesians and Colossians, Paul addresses wives, husbands, children and parents (Eph. 5:21-6:4; Col. 3:18-21). He calls for four requirements in the family: subjection by wives; Love by husbands; obedience by children and encouragement by parents. These also justifies the use of the New Testament in shaping twentieth century

spirituality.

‘Discipline’ can mean different things to different Christians. To some it means rigid rules and restraint. To others it refers to helpful traditions about the Christian life, developed over the centuries as a way of guiding our walk with God. Common to both is the notion of some form of rule, training, or teaching, which helps to guide people in our confusing and complex world (Heb.12: 5-11; 1Cor. 11:32; Titus 1:18; Rev. 3:19). In whatever way discipline is understood, the experience of many Christians is that it can be a destructive feature in their lives, destroying their joy and essential creativity as people.

As a last consideration of the differing perspectives of the New Testament spirituality, let us consider the doctrine of the *‘End’*, *‘the last things’*, *‘the future hope’*, all that is contained under the technical term **‘eschatology’**. In the New Testament this is described as ‘the coming (*parousia*) of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering to him’ (II Thess. 2:1), and is set out classically in dramatic form in our Lord’s discourse on the future in Mark 13 and more detailed in the Revelation of John.

CONCLUSION

In the world of today, a number of factors are bringing about a new quest for spirituality. They are conveniently, if imaginably referred to under the umbrella name of *‘post-modernism’*. And they are a reaction against the bareness of the materialistic world-view, which has both freed and enslaved the human spirit since the Enlightenment. Mankind was freed from a great deal of irrationalism and superstition at the Enlightenment and for that we must be grateful. But at the

same time the human race was enslaved to patterns of endemic scepticism, dismissal of God, and the enthronement of reason above all else.

Unfortunately, the explanation offered by materialists and rationalists are too clinical, too cold and impersonal, too far inadequate to explain the mystery of life in all its fullness. A radical re-assessment is afoot; the spiritual can no longer be left out of account. It is quite obvious that the New Testament is more essential than ever in shaping the spirituality of the twentieth century. By its teachings some of which I illustrated above, we are immersed in the intricate tangle of human life as it is entered, addressed, confronted, saved, healed, and blessed by the living God. I believe that it is the great responsibility and privilege of Christians today to *'continue'* to place this proven and essential source document on spirituality in the hands of those people of this century who are bewilderingly searching through a welt of spiritualities for something authentic, something true.