

# **QUESTION**

*WHY STUDY SPIRITUALITY? IS IT NOT ENOUGH THAT I AM A CHRISTIAN?*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Through the convicting and converting work of the Holy Spirit we are brought to acknowledge Jesus Christ's saving work done for us on the cross at Calvary, resulting in the forgiveness of sins. This experience of grace for the first time may come to us in a blinding flash, as it did to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road, or it may have been a growing awareness over a period of time. The important thing is that we know that we belong to Christ now and we want to spend the remainder of our days upon earth as His followers and soldiers. Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians we read of his confidence that, because God has begun a good work in them, He will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Later he says: *'Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure'* (Phil. 2:12-13).

From Paul's statement, it becomes obvious that it is not enough that we become Christians and that the outworking of our Christian life from first becoming a Christian until our death, or Christ's second advent, is what we should understand by the study of *'Christian Spirituality'*. The Bible uses a number of metaphors that especially describe this experience; one is of a journey, indeed of a race, straining every nerve towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. John Bunyan had the same metaphor in his mind in his *'Pilgrim's Progress'* as Christian, having found forgiveness at the cross, makes his journey, via many perils, to the Celestial City. Another

metaphor is that of growth. Our Christian life begins with being born again (John 3:5-7), and then with the right nourishment of spiritual food, milk and meat, grows to spiritual maturity in Christ. (1Peter 2:2, 1Cor. 3:1-7, Heb. 5:11-6:2, Col. 2:6-7).

The word spirituality is used to indicate the recognition that the way we are with ourselves, and the way we are with people, depends upon the way we are with God. Another definition, wider and arguably more satisfactory for the purpose of the above question, is: *'the whole life of the Christian as lived in the presence of God and for God'*. T.R. Albin in the *'New Dictionary of Theology'* gives a similar definition of Christian's spirituality. It involves, he says, *'the relationship between the whole person and a holy God, who reveals Himself through both Testaments-and supremely in the person of His unique Son, Jesus Christ'*.

It is note worthy that, contrary to the Biblical spirituality which is *'down-to-earth, practical and embodied'*, spirituality has become *'mystified, clericalised and privatised'*. For instance, Evangelical spirituality among other things has focused on three marks: Sunday service attendance, the Mid-week prayer meeting and Personal daily devotions. Today these are almost dead issues and largely not practised. Catholic spirituality has traditionally been monastic (*the contemplative life is lived away from the normal pressures of life*), mystical (*in the narrow sense of exalting transcendent experiences of God that lead to what is called a 'spiritual marriage' with God*), and clerical (*those who handle the things of God in sacrament and word are invited to live a superior life not possible for those who live and work in normal society*). The Charismatic version of this is not very deferent. Against this background, I would try to explain the reasons that seem to me to

be most persuasive on why we need to study spirituality based on *'both Testaments and the person of Jesus Christ'*.

### **REASONS FOR THE STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY**

Biblical spirituality is a tool for Christian meditation. *'It enables us to fix what is passing around us and it offers a private opportunity to promote honest search and discovery of who we are and where we are with God'*. For example, first-person narratives in the Old Testament reflect the central characteristics of the spirituality, which runs through all its books. It derives from a strong sense of God in history; such a formula as *'The God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob'* points at once to His transcendence, and to the specific nature of His action in time. He is a God with whom people have relationships, which can be paralleled with human friendship, and He also sustains a relationship with a whole race of people over many generations. On this note, Christians from widely different educational and cultural backgrounds, with widely different emotional make-ups would certainly need to study spirituality.

Studying the biblical spirituality will certainly give us *'basic understanding on biblical principles that could help us observe and analyse our spiritual experience, development, change and growth'*. For instance, biblical spirituality teaches that, if we are Christians then we have been baptised in the Spirit, and should have received water baptism as an outward sign of it. It should now be our daily ambition to be filled with the 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 distributed 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*' gift 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).

We see in the New Testament. The disciples in the period of the Acts of the Apostles were under immediate pressure to give an account of their faith. For many occasions, in the injunction of 1 Peter 3:15, '*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have*', will mean giving account of life, death, and resurrection, of Jesus Christ, and answering the kind of questions with which Christian apologetics is familiar. But the following sentence seems to indicate that Peter has in mind some form of personal account, as well as the kind of argument he gave in Acts 2- '*do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slanders*'. This of course is one of the reasons makes our study of biblical spirituality a necessity and a thing of prime importance.

Further more, studying biblical spirituality is '*a way of giving form to our lives*'. For instance, the spirituality of Jesus calls us to '*live in the consciousness of the eternal world as well as in time*'. Jesus lived His life constantly in the conscious presence of His Father and He viewed life from that standpoint. By this He was able to enjoy the essential goodness of eternity. There was only one occasion when this was not true, and it is the very exception that makes the point, that moment when He cried out from the cross '*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*' This will mean that in dealing with the problems that occur in time we will be able to stand back and have a more

detached view of the problem (*i.e. ability to perceive God's activity in our lives and the lives of those around us*). It is splendidly illustrated by Joseph in the Old Testament, when his brothers feared he would take vengeance on them for their selling him as slave: *'Fear not, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today'* (Gen.50: 19-20).

Supremely, Jesus' life was meavellously balance as a result of *'His clear priorities'* and so must ours be. In His case the cross was His ultimate priority, but next to that He gave priority to prayer, preaching, and to people. For instance, His teaching to His disciples, in the Sermon on the Mount, on giving, praying, and fasting, certainly implies that He expected His followers to be disciplined in these matters. No only that, Jesus Himself rose early each morning to go to the hills to pray and attended the synagogue on the Sabbath, as was His custom (Mark 1:35, Luke 4:16). Each of us has to study this spirituality and so be better able to apply the principles evident in His approach to time to our own situation, enjoying the liberty that He came to bring, without erring on the side of licence or legalism.

At first this could almost sound blasphemous, but it was He who acknowledged His absolute dependence on His Father (John5: 19). Further, He delegated His work to the Twelve and to the Seventy, who shared in His preaching, teaching, and healing, ministry. He came primarily to the *'lost sheep of the house of Israel'*, so He had very little to do with spreading His message amongst Gentiles. The Christian life is a very full and often busy life, but that means that we must often delegate work, often admit that we cannot take on any more (*or we shall do it all inefficiently*), take

proper rest, and above all recognise that we, too, are utterly dependent on our heavenly Father. Finally, He took adequate rest, encouraging His disciples to do so as well.

In conclusion, I want to say that spirituality should be seen most importantly as a way of life rather than a theoretical exercise of academic study, and bearing this in mind, we should study with complete dedication of life to God. This involves being open to the will of God as it shall be shown us. Therefore, we must be willing to follow wherever truth leads us. We must not except only comfort, but rather be willing to sell all that we have to find the peace which no one can take from us and the joy which nothing on earth can destroy. Next, we must put into concrete practice what we come to see is our necessary action. We must not delay in doing so, for delay leaves room for a protective reasoning that makes it increasingly unlikely that we shall ever do what we see we ought to.