

Spiritual Renewal

1 Cor 2¹⁰⁻¹⁶/ Romans 8⁶⁻¹⁷/ John 6⁶⁰⁻⁶⁵

Many years ago I was working out at Tirohanga campsite during the summer holidays on a government sponsored student work scheme. It was a great scheme which enabled charitable organisations to hire students for the duration of the holidays to work in various ways for the organisation and have the government pay for the work. Anyway, we were engaged in all kinds of work around the camp from cutting the hedges to digging drains and painting. I will never forget, however, a certain incident that occurred only a week or so into the job, an incident which etched forever into my mind how important belief is to our life and well-being. On this particular day I was with the then camp manager Bob Keith. Bob was a wonderful guy who'd been at the camp for 20 years or more at that stage. He'd held the place together for all those years and we loved him for it. Bob was inspecting some of our work and was looking over the Lodge at the top end of the camp. I was walking up the road to speak to him and was about to cross the last bit of the road when my feet disappeared into what appeared to be solid gravel. I sank up to my knees into soft mud before I managed to catch myself. For a moment or two I just couldn't fathom what had happened. One minute I was walking across a solid grave road, the next I was sinking into goodness know what.

As I dragged myself out however a shocking smell hit my nose – the smell of sewage – rich and ripe and heavy. At that point Bob caught site of me and yelled out "Sorry! I took the top off the septic tank because we're getting it cleaned out today!"

I couldn't believe it – Here I was covered in sewage which also filled my gumboots. I stank and I was disgusted but what really surprised and confounded me was that the open tank had looked so much like the rest of the gravel road. You see it was so overfull that it had filled up the hole which had been dug out to lift the cover up and it was a sort of dull yellow colour like the road gravel and I had simply seen only solid ground.

In other words – my belief or, at least, my false belief had led me straight into a hole! A false belief is leading many in our generation and beyond into another smelly hole and it's simply this – that what we can see and touch is all there is. There is no such things as a spiritual side to life. A deeply skeptical and, indeed, cynical culture has decided that what it sees is all there is to reality and in doing so it has also become one of the unhealthiest cultures in the world. Dallas Willard once said this of our western culture...

"We live in a culture that has, for centuries now, cultivated the idea that the skeptical person is always smarter than one who believes. You can almost be as stupid as a cabbage as long as you doubt."

Today we're going to be looking at the central character of both our belief and our practice as Christians which is that we are people **of the Spirit**. We are a **spiritual people** and our spirituality is, therefore, a key element of how we should live. But there is a huge issue for us in that in this modern era the very existence of spirit is deeply and profoundly doubted or, at least, replaced by a series of false beliefs.

The two major issues around our spiritual renewal today are the question of whether we have a spiritual dimension at all (and this is inspired by the more aggressive Atheistic

commentators of the last 30 years) and secondly, assuming that there is a spiritual dimension to life – what form this takes. The second question is certainly a more ‘live’ one for the newer generations of people in the west who have been greatly affected by the doubt the new atheists have been able to inspire.

However, we can’t blame the new atheism for everything. Long before this movement arose certain Christian scholars in the West began to pour doubt on the traditional understanding of the idea of ‘spirituality’ that almost every ancient person believed in or took for granted. And what was that ‘traditional’ notion?

It was, quite simply, that we live with more than we can see and that whole worlds exist in a higher place. This plane too was affected by evil and, to a certain degree, this division between good and evil in this other plane is being played out in our realm. But the fact remains that something of **our life** is spirit and that therefore we are inherently **spiritual beings**. We who are Christ-followers clearly stand in the tradition of those who believe in a spiritual dimension.

The sense that there is more to life than we can see has pervaded human society from the beginning of recorded time. We’ve made significant attempts to explain this away at times and our own society has tried very hard to do this both in recent times and over the last 500 years or so. But the nagging sense that we are more than we can see stays with us and not only stays with us but produces, in almost every generation, a ‘spiritual response’ which reflects both the fact that we are made in the image of God a deep and almost unconscious desire to express that spirituality.

So, I grew up on the trailing edge of the 60’s hippy movement which rediscovered both a deep abhorrence for war and the need to focus on love as the key to a healthy society. Now you could say they went overboard but they certainly had a huge influence for good on world powers. I then watched as the next generation discovered how destructive humankind had been to its own environment and how precious that environment was and so we saw the rise of the green movement in the 70’s and 80’s.

Feminism also made further strides within this time period challenging the traditional expectation that women could not lead in the marketplace alongside men and even over men. Men also began to separate themselves from a rigid notion of maleness to one that included a more caring and sensitive self-image. Each of these movements, I believe, represents a spiritual value even if the movement itself was either directly or indirectly critical of the Church and of faith.

So the abhorrence for war and violent ways of solving disputes reflects the biblical distaste for violence. The green movement reflects God’s love for Creation and desire that it be cared for and preserved. Feminism at its deepest level reflects the needed balance between male and female characteristics in all of society and the changing nature of male self-image reflects a more balanced and nuanced understanding of men. All of these are what I call echoes of the Spirit in the flesh – it is the reflection in our fleshly life of the Spirit which gives us life.

Which brings us to our make up. I am reasonably convinced that the Bible understands humankind to be three things – Spirit, Soul and body where the spirit is the part of us that communes with God and will return to God at our death. The Soul is our thinking, feeling self and the body is our physical being. At times the Bible will refer to our ‘flesh life’ such as in this passage in Romans 7...

⁵For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. (Roms 7)

Or...

⁸Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. (Roms 8)

So the ‘flesh’ here refers to the unrestrained leading of our spirit by our body and soul such that any relationship with God is ignored. An interaction which is both bad for us and bad for the world. The fact that we are also spirit does not remedy this problem for the spirit is **subject to both body and soul.**

³²The spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. (1 Cor 14)

But the presence of **God’s Spirit** makes a huge difference as we read in Romans this morning.

⁶The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. (Romans 6)

So what we learn from all of this is that 1. We are spirit and that spirit is like the rest of us, greatly affected by sin. Secondly, we have a remedy for this which is to allow God’s Spirit to come in to our lives and lead us.

However, there’s something else we learn from all this and this is that the spirit and the body and the soul are all intimately connected and that they influence each other enormously and indeed, confer life to each other. James says this...

²⁶As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. (James 2)

Now this is crucial because it provides what I believe to be the key to a Christian notion of **spirituality** and we’re talking today about precisely this. What is that key? The key is that the spirit of a human is, according to the Bible, the source of life but that life is a life in the body, by the soul. **In other words, for us, in this life, being spiritual must involve both our bodies and our minds.** We cannot be ‘spiritual’ apart from it being expressed through our body and soul. Spirituality in this life is a matter of both our thought-life (our soul) and our physicality (our body) If one is out of kilter, then our experience of our true spiritual selves will be irreparably impoverished. That is, we will not experience the wonder and joy of our spiritual inheritance.

This means that both our body and our minds are crucial elements in our spirituality. They too must also be aligned with God's Word if we are to experience spiritual growth and maturity. And, of course, the scriptures are clear about this... As far as our minds are concerned we are told that...

²Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Roms 12²)

As our minds are renewed so we are transformed. How important it is then to be careful about what we put into our minds.

As far as our bodies are concerned we are instructed to care for them but, more importantly, to discipline them – to train them...

²⁶Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. ²⁷No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. (1 Cor 9^{26,27})

The mind is to be renewed and the body disciplined so that we may grow spiritually. Now when you think about it we ought to know this stuff but in the Christian tradition and in a number of other major traditions the notion that to be spiritual means to harm or to discount both the body and the soul persists.

What about fasting? What about self-denial? What about self-sacrifice. Are not all these themes strong in the NT? Yes, they are but they are not meant to kill the body but rather to bring the body into a better balance with both the soul and the spirit. They are designed to overcome the natural dominance that the body can have if we allow its desires and propensity for addiction to dominate our life. Both the body and the mind betray us constantly but when brought into submission to the Spirit of God – then we become truly **spiritual people**. As Paul says in our Romans passage...

⁶The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. ⁸Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.

⁹You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. (Roms 8)

So what does this mean for our spirituality? How are we to prosper in this area? How are we to grow?

1. We are to seek to allow God's Spirit to live in us and we do this simply by asking for it. This is a key issue for us.
2. We need to realise that our bodies are central to our spiritual life and that means that the whole physical environment is vital to our spiritual life. So this includes how

we pray and where we pray; when we pray; becoming aware of what our bodies need to stay focused; keeping our bodies in as good a health as possible and avoiding things which adversely affect our bodies. Finally, we need to give ourselves permission to rest – our bodies must have a certain amount and quality of rest.

3. We need to realise that our minds are also central to our spiritual development and that what we put into our minds has an enormous effect on this.