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Series editor: D. A. Carson

Hearing God's Words

EXPLORING BIBLICAL
SPIRITUALITY

Peter Adam



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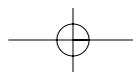
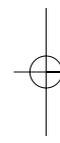
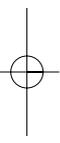
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This book is dedicated to the students, faculty, staff and Council of Ridley College, my fellow-servants in the Lord Jesus Christ. May God continue his gracious work in and through us, for his glory. May the word of Christ dwell in us richly by his Spirit, and may God train us for gospel service in his world.



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Series preface

New Studies in Biblical Theology is a series of monographs that address key issues in the discipline of biblical theology. Contributions to the series focus on one or more of three areas: 1. the nature and status of biblical theology, including its relations with other disciplines (e.g. historical theology, exegesis, systematic theology, historical criticism, narrative theology); 2. the articulation and exposition of the structure of thought of a particular biblical writer or corpus; and 3. the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora.

Above all, these monographs are creative attempts to help thinking Christians understand their Bibles better. The series aims simultaneously to instruct and to edify, to interact with the current literature, and to point the way ahead. In God's universe, mind and heart should not be divorced: in this series we will try not to separate what God has joined together. While the notes interact with the best of the scholarly literature, the text is uncluttered with untransliterated Greek and Hebrew, and tries to avoid too much technical jargon. The volumes are written within the framework of confessional evangelicalism, but there is always an attempt at thoughtful engagement with the sweep of the relevant literature.

In recent decades the notion of 'spirituality' has become astonishingly plastic. People judge themselves to be 'spiritual' if they have some aesthetic sense, or if they are not philosophical materialists, or if they have adopted a pantheistic view of reality, or if they feel helped or reinvigorated by the 'vibrations' of crystals. Even within a broadly Christian heritage, many writers appeal to 'spiritual disciplines' that are utterly divorced from the gospel and detached from the teaching of Scripture. Against the backdrop of these cultural developments, Dr Peter Adam encourages clear thinking: he traces the notion of spirituality through some of the turning points of Scripture, and finally grounds it in the gospel of Jesus Christ and its

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full-blown application to our lives. By appealing both to the Bible and to influential voices in the history of the church (notably John Calvin), Dr Adam manages to combine biblical theology and historical theology in an admirable synthesis. His academic training, years of pastoral ministry, and now principalship of a theological college, ensure that this book simultaneously informs the mind, warms the heart, and strengthens the will. And from the vantage of three decades of personal friendship, I gratefully attest that what Dr Adam writes, he also lives.

D. A. Carson
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Author's preface

My interest in Christian spirituality was first kindled by Harrie Scott Simmons, who not only converted and discipled me, but also introduced me to the spiritual writings of Ramon Lull, Gerhard Teerstegen, Samuel Rutherford and Amy Carmichael. He showed me the riches to be found in the devotional use of good Bible commentaries, and we also shared a passion for the Christ-centred Lutheran Pietism of the music of J. S. Bach.

My thanks are also due to John Cockerton, who, when Principal of St John's College, Durham, asked me to lecture on the history of Evangelical spirituality, and who inspired me by his own studies in spirituality.

I am grateful to God for both of these saints, and for the doors that they opened for me.

This is a wide-ranging book, as I use material from the history of Christian spirituality, and also from Old and New Testament, church history, and theology. I am well aware that I do not have specialist knowledge in all these areas, but I hope that this wide-ranging survey will be helpful for gaining an overall perspective.

In chapter six, the section on Word and Spirit in Puritan-Quaker debate is based on the St Antholin's Lecture for 2001. I am grateful to the Trustees of the St Antholin's Lectureship for their invitation to give that lecture.

I have used some modern reprints of older works, as they are more accessible to most readers.

The words quoted in the chapter headings are from John 8:47; Psalm 78:1; John 6:63; Romans 10:17; John 17:17; 17:6; and Psalm 119:130.

This book is a companion to my *Speaking God's Words* (IVP 1996), and reflects the truth that we must listen to God before we speak on his behalf.

My thanks are due to Don Carson for his encouragement and advice, and to Philip Duce and the staff of Inter-Varsity Press for

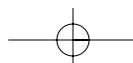


AUTHOR'S PREFACE

their patience and professional assistance. Thanks too to Nicole Harvey for preparing the indexes.

I also want to thank all those who pray for me, and in this way support every part of my life and ministry, including my teaching and writing.

Peter Adam
Ridley College



The instructions of the LORD, sweeter than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

(Psalms)

It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

(Jesus Christ)

The words you gave me I gave to them, and they have received them, and believe that you sent me. Whoever is from God hears the words of God.

(Jesus Christ)

The Spirit searches the depths of God: we speak of these things in words taught by the Spirit. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing from the word of Christ.

(St Paul)

The crown is given for field-service (martyrdom) in time of persecution: in times of peace it is given to him who is certain of God's word.

(Cyprian of Carthage)

The Scriptures are the public oracles of the Holy Spirit: here the living words of God are heard.

(John Calvin)

The Scriptures are God's Voyce: The Church is his Echo.

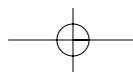
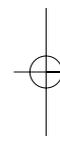
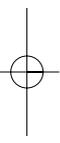
(John Donne)

The Scriptures are one of the Church's greatest sacramentals.

(Thomas Merton)

God is love, but get it in writing.

(Gypsy Rose Lee)



Introduction: A strange silence

James Smart gave a haunting title to the book he wrote in 1970 – *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*. It is one of the curious features of contemporary Christianity that at the very time when the Bible is most freely available in a multiplicity of versions and mediums, it is also effectively silent in many areas of church life. It is also strange when we realize that the increasing access to the Bible by ordinary church members in the Roman Catholic denomination has been matched by a decreasing attention to the Bible in much of Protestantism, as is evident in Christian bookshops.

This is especially obvious when looking for resources on spirituality. In secular bookshops it is easy to find books on every kind of spirituality, we might say from Aztec to Zoroastrian! In Christian bookshops books on spirituality will include many sources, including Catholic, Celtic and Orthodox. There is curiously little available on the Bible as a source of spirituality, or on biblical views on spirituality.

What an irony that the assumption that the Bible has little to do with spirituality is often found among Protestants. It is the Roman Catholic John L. McKenzie who has published *The New Testament for Spiritual Reading* (McKenzie 1969–71) following the long Catholic tradition of *Lectio Divina*, the reflective and meditative reading of Scripture. It is the distinguished Roman Catholic writer Lucien Joseph Richard who has written his moving account of the spirituality of John Calvin (Richard 1974).

Another common idea that has affected our assumptions about the status of biblical spirituality is that spirituality is only concerned with the exotic, the abnormal, the exciting, so the Evangelical preoccupation with the Bible means that it will have little to offer in the area of spirituality. The evidence for this idea is that Evangelical faith and practice is often now regarded as a good first step in spiritual growth, but that people must then grow up to maturity in other traditions: Catholic, Celtic, Eastern Orthodox or charismatic.

There are strange dilemmas and confusions in these modern

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assumptions, but the result is clear and tragic: we pay little attention to the Bible as a source of spirituality, fail to enjoy the riches that it offers, fail to apply the biblical test to what other sources of spirituality offer, and fail to use the Bible as a guide and source of true spirituality. This is not the place for me to attempt to demonstrate the authority and sufficiency of the Bible, but I do hope to demonstrate its usefulness and effectiveness in the area of spirituality.

It is important for us to be confident in the model of spirituality taught in the Bible. It is important for all of us to recover biblical spirituality, and to test our spirituality by the Bible. It is important for those Christians who have left the Bible behind to recover the Bible and its spirituality.

While I disagree with David Yeago's claim that propositional revelation and verbal revelation are untenable, I agree with his plea for us to return to a passionate and careful study of Scripture:

Such a project presupposes that we have reason to care about the judgements rendered in the biblical writings. The Fathers, scholastics and reformers had such reasons: they believed that when we conform our thinking to the pattern of judgements embedded in the prophetic and apostolic scriptures, our understanding is illuminated by a divine light (Ps. 36:9) and so we come to share in the *nous Christou*, the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16).

It is not at all clear that much of contemporary Western Christianity shares any longer in this motivation. Mainline theology has failed to replace the untenable early-modern doctrines of propositional revelation and verbal revelation with any account of scripture's role in the purposes of God which provide reasons for a passionate and attentive engagement with the texts. Indeed, such engagement would only hinder many contemporary theological and ecclesiastical projects; institutional interests of all sorts are best served by an instinctive tarring of any attempt to commend a posture of deference towards the scriptural texts with the dreaded fundamentalist brush. Anti-fundamentalism has become a powerful ideological tool in the mainline Western churches which almost guarantees the marginalization of any call to 'biblical seriousness', however clear its actual differences from fundamentalism. (1997: 97)

In this book I am trying to explain biblical spirituality because of

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what I believe about the significance of the Bible. If the Bible is God-given and therefore has God's authority, then biblical spirituality will express God's will. If the Bible is the sufficient word of God, then biblical spirituality will be sufficient spirituality. If the Bible is the effective Word of God, then biblical spirituality will be effected in us by those words.

I am writing

- to show how the Bible is a rich and fruitful resource for spirituality, that is, what we can learn from the Bible about spirituality, or what spirituality it contains;
- to show the fundamental shape and structure of the 'spirituality of the Word', or, how it works;
- to show the spirituality that the Bible teaches and encourages, or what spirituality results from using the Bible.

In *The Gagging of God* D. A. Carson ends with an appeal for Christian spirituality that has the following characteristics (1996: 566–569):

- *Spirituality must be thought of in connection with the gospel.* This means that the gospel itself must be the interpretative or heuristic device by which spirituality must be assessed. Spirituality must begin and end with the gospel, and not draw away from it or have an independent existence apart from it.
- *Christian reflection on spirituality must work outward from the centre.* The point here is that it is not good to assume the centre or heart of the Christian faith, and to develop peripheral matters and interests. If we avoid rehearsing the core of biblical faith then it will be lost in one generation. If it goes without saying, then it needs to be said!
- *At the same time we should be rightly suspicious of forms of theology that place all the emphasis on coherent systems of thought . . . but do not engage the affections, let alone foster an active sense of the presence of God.* Carson comments:

Sometimes this stance is simply an overreacting to the obvious excesses of the charismatic movement. But whatever its cause, it stands against both Scripture and the entire heritage of the best of Christianity, where men and women, by God's grace, know God. (1996: 568)

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- *Nevertheless, what God uses to foster this kind of Gospel spirituality must be carefully delineated.* In order for us to receive the life that God gives, he has decided to use what the Puritans called 'means', such as the Bible, prayer, fellowship, the Lord's Supper and the created world. We should be careful to make full use of the means that God has given us. One of the neglected means in discussions about spirituality is the Bible. We need to recover the spirituality of the Word. This spirituality will come in various forms, including private reading, meditation and memorizing of Scripture, sermons and Bible studies, mutual exhortation and encouragement. This will also in turn lead to the spirituality the Bible commends, including the sacraments, fellowship, and enjoying the life and the wonderful world God has made and given us to enjoy.
- *Finally, such Word-centred Reflection will bring us back to the fact that spirituality, as we have seen, is a theological construct.* This means that as we continually check that our theology is being reformed by the content and shape of the Bible, so we will do the same with our spirituality. It will mean that there is no dissonance between our minds and our hearts, between what we know to be true and what we put into practice in our life with God.

I hope that this book will help to achieve these aims.

Meditation

Use the quotations listed before this chapter. Memorize a few that strike you, or write them on memory cards and carry them with you for a few weeks, looking at them when you get the opportunity.

Chapter One

Biblical spirituality: Whoever is from God hears the words of God

Biblical spirituality?

The words ‘biblical spirituality’ could mean using the Bible as a resource for spirituality, or could refer to that spirituality which the Bible commends and that results from using the Bible as a guide to spirituality. I intend both meanings in this book. I am writing about biblical spirituality in the context of the use of the Bible by different Christian traditions over the last 2,000 years, and I want to explain the Evangelical and Reformed traditions of spirituality. I also want to show the usefulness of biblical theology in forming a spirituality of the Word.

For the Bible is a great God-given resource and guide to true Christian spirituality. Its common neglect results in confusion about spirituality. One of the wonderful gifts of the Bible in every area of Christian life and practice is to clarify what is godly and what is not.

I also want to show something of the spirituality the Bible encourages and enables, which includes the right use of other resources of spirituality, including the creation, prayer and fellowship. Indeed we are likely to misuse these other resources unless we make good use of the Bible, which gives us spiritual discernment. Calvin uses the image of the Bible as glasses that help us see everything more clearly, that is, from God’s perspective. Reading the Bible will help us assess all forms of spirituality.

Using another image, we can think of spirituality as being a kind of spiritual diet, in which the various resources provide necessary elements of that diet. Here are some examples: (1) A good dose of *the creation* reminds us of God’s eternal power and greatness. (2) *Christian fellowship* provides personal encouragement, support, rebuke and correction. (3) *The Bible* gives us God’s point of view on every area of our lives, and is the means God uses to speak to us.

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It is easy to see what will happen if any of these three examples is missing from our spiritual diet: (1) If we neglect the great world God has made, which he sustains every moment, we may become overpressured by humanity, its needs and achievements, and forget God's greatness and that he does not need us or our achievements. (2) If we neglect fellowship, we may easily become erratic, unloving, unrealistic, self-centred, or hardened by the deceitfulness of sin: close Christian fellowship is a gracious provision of God to help us live in reality! (3) If we neglect the Bible as a spiritual resource, we will easily slip into confusion, error, imbalance, idolatry, lack of spiritual discernment, and be seduced away from the worship of Christ. We will not make the right use of the varied spiritual resources God has given us. To find God in fellowship but to neglect the Bible will leave us vulnerable to the pressures of the people around us, to be too concerned about the approval of other people rather than the approval of God, and subject to the spirit of our age and friendship group.

So I am not claiming that the Bible should be our only spiritual resource, because the Bible itself encourages the use of many other resources, including reflecting on God's creation, enjoying Christian fellowship and taking part in the Lord's Supper. If the Bible is not used, our spirituality will easily and quickly lose its moorings.

The Bible points beyond itself to God and to his Son the Lord Jesus, and results in more than Bible knowledge. I am not assuming that the Bible has some kind of magical quality, so that however it is used, true biblical spirituality will result. Any of us can misuse the Bible, or find ways of avoiding its message. Of course God is gracious, and often blesses us in the middle of our misuse or confusion, but we should not trade on God's grace. In the next two chapters we will study resources for spirituality from both the Old and New Testaments. I will now note the relationship between biblical spirituality, Evangelical spirituality and Reformed spirituality, note the usefulness of biblical theology in the study of spirituality, and then outline the shape and structure of biblical spirituality.

Evangelical spirituality?

Why is there a lack of confidence in the possibility of Evangelical spirituality? This lack of confidence is likely to be felt both by Evangelicals and by those of other traditions within Christianity.

The question is important for our subject, because it is Evangelicals who today are most likely to assert the unique and sufficient

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authority and power of the Bible under God. Does the doctrine of the Bible alone, *sola scriptura*, result in a deficient spirituality, or even no spirituality at all? Must biblical spirituality be supplemented with spirituality from other sources? Does the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture extend to spirituality? There is a popular assumption that Evangelicals, who in theory depend so much on the Bible, do not have any spirituality, and so they must take as much as they can from Eastern Orthodox or Roman Catholic spirituality, or even from the religions of the East.

In fact one of the distinctive features of Evangelical Christianity is its spirituality. The development of the habits of spiritual living is one of the characteristics of Evangelicalism, and personal Evangelical spirituality is one of the most important external signs of biblical truth. In Adam 1988 I attempted to indicate the rich and long heritage of Evangelical spirituality. Other recent studies include Stevenson 1979, the introduction to Pooley and Seddon 1986, Gordon 1991, McGrath 1993, Cockerton 1994 and Randall 1999.

It is also the case that many of the internal disputes within the Evangelical tradition over the past few centuries have been about appropriate expressions of spirituality. The debates about the possibility of Christian perfection, about a 'second blessing', the higher life, the Keswick movement, faith healing, and the charismatic movement are all debates about spirituality.

Another factor that complicates the subject is that many Evangelical Christians are wary of the word 'spirituality', fearing that it is far removed from authentic Evangelical faith and experience. In my opinion this attitude creates the problem it fears, and the best way forward is to state what is the nature of authentic biblical and Evangelical spirituality. John Newton had no such hesitations when he wrote of 'spirituality' as 'A spiritual taste, and a disposition to count all things mean and vain, in comparison of the knowledge and love of God in Christ, [which] are essential for a true Christian' (1831: 62).

For Newton, spirituality, a spiritual appetite and tendency to recognize the surpassing value of the knowledge and love of God in Christ is what distinguishes the true Christian from the person who merely professed Christianity, whom we would call a nominal Christian.

In fact Evangelicals have made a major contribution in the area of spirituality, often described as 'devotion', 'piety', 'the Christian life', 'the spiritual life'. For example, we find the traditional issues of

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Evangelical spirituality expressed in the writings of Richard Baxter (1615–91), who illustrates the range and concentration of Puritan spiritual writing. In his *The Divine Life* he writes of 'The Knowledge of God', 'On Walking with God' and 'Of Conversing with God in Solitude' (1981: 125–748). In his *Christian Directory* (1838) he outlines the responsibilities of the Christian in four main areas of life, that of ethics (private duties), economics (family duties), ecclesiastics (church duties) and politics (duties to our rulers and neighbours). In this he covers a wide variety of cases, including such issues as friendship, taxes, gluttony, marriage, prayer, the sick and poor, fraud, trusts and secrets. His aim is to help those who profess to be Christ's disciples 'to learn of him, to imitate him, and be conformed to him, and to do the will of God' (1838: 7). He reflects the wide-ranging rigour and detail of Puritan spiritual writings.

Evangelicals have conveyed their spirituality by Christian biographies. These were first in the form of funeral sermons, some of which were later published. Books have included 'lives and letters' or biographies, which include those of Samuel Rutherford, David Brainerd, Hudson Taylor and Elisabeth Elliot.

Bibles published with devotional and theological comments have included the Geneva Bible of 1560, and those by John Bengel (*Gnomon Novi Testamenti* 1742), Matthew Henry (1708–10), Thomas Haweis (1765–6), Thomas Scott (1788–92) and J. C. Ryle's *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (1865–73); the modern equivalent is Scripture Union Bible reading notes. Sermons have been formative, especially when published (and more recently taped); for example those of Heinrich Bullinger, John Calvin, John Wesley, Charles Spurgeon and Martyn Lloyd-Jones. This reading of the Bible with heart and mind is the subject of a recent book by Tremper Longman III (1997), in which he develops the ideas of reading the Bible as receiving the life-giving seed of the Word, as seeing ourselves in a mirror, and as a life-giving encounter with God in Christ. This is a practical guide to the spirituality of Bible reading.

Books on the spiritual life have included Bayly 1714, Ryle 1956, Nee 1961, Murray 1962, Burroughs 1964, Bunyan 1965, 1966, Owen 1965, Wesley 1968, Schaeffer 1972, Packer 1975, Doddridge 1977, Arndt 1979, Lovelace 1979, Edwards 1986, Piper 1989, Wilberforce 1997, Veith 1999, Larsen 2001, Lowman 2001.

Earlier books that have been widely appreciated include Augustine's *Confessions* and *On the Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. Christian leaders from Martin Luther, John Calvin, John

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and Charles Wesley, to Moody and Sankey and Billy Graham have used the words and music of hymns and songs to foster spirituality.

The use of the Bible as the definitive, authoritative and sufficient source of true spirituality was the rediscovery of the Reformation, though of course the use of the Bible as a spiritual resource is as old as the Bible itself. This contribution of the Reformation was then intensified by the Puritans and Pietists who followed up this work of reformation.¹ It was the Puritan ministers who were 'physicians of the souls' as they applied the Bible to their people in public preaching and private admonition. It was the German Pietists who pioneered the study of the Bible in home fellowship groups, each a little church within a church, *ecclesiola in ecclesia*. In the words of the Pietist Philip Spener:

Thought should be given to a more extensive use of the Word of God among us . . . The more the Word of God is among us, the more we shall bring about faith and its fruits . . . It would not be difficult for every housefather to keep a Bible . . . and read from it every day . . . in addition to our customary services with preaching, other assemblies would also be held . . . several members of a congregation who have a fair knowledge of God . . . meet under the leadership of a minister, take up the Holy Scriptures, read aloud from them, and fraternally discuss each verse in order to discover its simple meaning and whatever may be useful for the edification of all. (Spener, in Erb 1983: 31–33)

Various Evangelical movements have contributed their own spiritualities, including the Pietists, the Puritans, the Methodists, and Keswick and other Holiness and Higher Life movements. The Puritans pioneered the practice of keeping a diary of one's spiritual life. The Moravian movement contributed such aids to spiritual life as the Bible text for the day (now secularized to become helpful thoughts on calendars!), the promise box, prayer meetings, heightened emotional response through music, and overseas missionary interest.

Indeed the missionary movements have had great effect on Evangelical spirituality, and have been significant promoters of it.

¹ Pietism was a movement for the renewal of Lutherans in the seventeenth century. It did not at that time imply introspection or lack of positive action in the world. In fact the early Pietists were very active in social concern.

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Significant contributions have been made by lay people, and the lives of heroic men and women have had a profound effect. These special saints have set a standard for many.

The Evangelical strands of spirituality are clearly present in modern studies of spirituality, such as Senn 1986. He covers various strands of Evangelical spirituality, including Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, Anglican, Puritan, Pietist and Methodist.

Some Evangelicals may feel that the word 'spirituality' is a dangerous one to use because it may be confused by association with other Christian viewpoints or New Age movements. Any word has its dangers. 'Devotion' places too much emphasis on our actions. The 'Christian life' becomes too easily a way of dividing life into sacred and secular. 'Piety' sounds pretentious and old fashioned. 'Holiness' sounds individualistic and elitist, and promotes a misunderstanding of the way the word is used in the New Testament (Peterson 1995). 'Spirituality' may sound introspective, too otherworldly, or as if it is in opposition to our physical existence, to matter. As 'spirituality' is a popular word in our society, I think the best communication strategy is to use it and fill it with biblical truth. 'Spirituality' is also a useful word to help us understand the Bible.

For a great need of our time is authentic gospel and biblical spirituality. The Bible also teaches us that as the gospel is easily distorted, so gospel spirituality is easily lost. J. C. Ryle explained it with his customary clarity:

The Gospel in fact is a most curiously and delicately compounded medicine, and is a medicine that is very easily spoiled.

You may spoil the Gospel by *substitution*. You have only to withdraw from the eyes of the sinner the grand object which the Bible proposes to Faith, – Jesus Christ; and to substitute another object in His place, – the Church, the Ministry . . . and the mischief is done . . .

You may spoil the Gospel by *addition*. You only have to add to Christ, the grand object of faith, some other objects as equally worthy of honour, and the mischief is done . . .

You may spoil the Gospel by *disproportion*. You only have to attach an exaggerated importance to the secondary things of Christianity, and a diminished importance to the first things, and the mischief is done. Once alter the proportion of the parts of the truth, and truth soon becomes downright error . . .

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You may completely spoil the Gospel by *confused and contradictory directions*. Complicated and obscure statements about faith, baptism, and the benefits of the Lord's Supper, all jumbled together, and thrown down without order before hearers, make the Gospel no Gospel at all. (Ryle 1964: 12–13)

What we describe as 'heresies' in the New Testament churches can more accurately be described as 'false spiritualities'. What happened at Corinth, Ephesus, Colossae and Galatia was not so much a clearly articulated 'heresy' as another spirituality, another way of living as a Christian, another way of praying, another way of relating to God. If this is the case, then the importance and relevance of studying the subject of spirituality will be obvious to all. Indeed people today also move from the purity of the Gospel because they adopt a different spirituality, more than because they adopt a different theology.

Another reason why Evangelicals may be reluctant to pursue the subject of spirituality is because they are single minded about primary evangelism. Their question is often 'What is the irreducible minimum of the gospel the unbeliever needs to hear?' rather than 'What is the fullness of the Gospel God has revealed?' Their preoccupation with initial conversion may have led them to neglect growth in the Christian life. If this is so, then there is room for repentance, for God's gospel is effective, not only to make new Christians, but also to produce mature Christians and mature churches.

Oddly enough, for many years Evangelicals have been accused of being too emotional and not intellectual enough, whereas now the accusation is more likely to be that they are too rationalistic, and not aware of the emotional and non-rational aspects of religion. This is relevant to our discussion because it is often assumed that spirituality is found more in the non-rational than in the rational.

The situation is further complicated by our common assumption that heart and mind are far removed from each other, that the emotional cannot be the intellectual, that passion and truth cannot exist together. This assumption forces us either into mindless passion or passionless truth! While mindless passion and passionless truth are certainly options, they are not the only possibilities. We will discuss this issue further in chapter five.

To say the same thing another way, one reason for the silence of the Bible in current discussion of spirituality is the assumption that spirituality functions at 'a deeper level' than words. This means that the wordy Bible is left behind in favour of dreams, sacred objects and

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places, visions, ecstatic experiences, miracles and feelings. It is the loss of the belief in the inspiration of the Scriptures that leads to a loss in expectancy in their impact on our spirituality. In the words of Austin Farrer:

Anyone who has felt, even in the least degree, the power of these texts to enliven the soul and to open the gates of heaven must have some curiosity about the manner in which the miracle is worked . . . When verbal inspiration was held, men nourished their souls on the Scriptures, and knew that they were fed. Liberal enlightenment claims to have opened the scriptural casket, but there now appears to be nothing inside – nothing, anyhow, which ordinary people feel moved to seek through the forbidding discipline of spiritual reading. (1948: 36)

I am not assuming that Evangelicals have an exclusive claim on true spirituality. I am concerned about Evangelical spirituality because the growing tendency to discount or ignore Evangelical spirituality does damage both to Evangelicals and to those who are not Evangelicals. It should also be the case that if Evangelicals are those who are governed by the principle of *sola scriptura*, the Bible alone, then pure Evangelical spirituality ought to be pure biblical spirituality.

I do not believe in the infallibility of Evangelicals or of the Evangelical tradition, for in some areas of spirituality Evangelicals have missed the message of the Bible. Two main weaknesses in Evangelicalism are reflected in its spirituality: reaction and individualism.

Evangelical reaction reflects the reactionism that seems to be a characteristic of some forms of Protestantism. Here doctrine, theology or practice is shaped by a reaction against error in another tradition, such as Catholic or Liberal. So theology and practice are shaped by reaction against error, rather than by obedience to Scripture. This is sure to be wrong, and the situation becomes worse if it sets up a contrary reaction in the other tradition! The dynamic of reaction means that the agenda is still set by something other than the Bible. Evangelicals need their spirituality from the Bible, not from reaction against those they regard as in error.

Individualism was not a product of the Reformation, but of the Enlightenment. This individualism has meant that the gospel itself has been distorted into a message for individuals. Only one summary of the gospel in the New Testament comes in the form of Christ's love

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for the individual, and that is Galatians 2:20, where Paul writes of 'the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me'. In every other case it is corporate, as in God's love for the world (John 3:16), Christ's love for the church (Eph. 5:25), the gospel for all the Gentiles (Rom. 16:26), the need to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19).

God's love for the individual is a consequence of the gospel, not the heart of the gospel. This has big implications for Evangelicalism, which has always prided itself on getting the gospel right! Here it has particular implications for spirituality, for it means that genuine biblical spirituality will reflect and express this corporate gospel. Many traditions of spirituality tend towards individualism: Evangelical spirituality, if it is biblical, will not fall into the same trap. Stanley Grenz tells us that spirituality for a postmodern age will need to be communitarian rather than individualistic, and Christianity that is lived as well as believed (Grenz 1996: 167–169). This is biblical spirituality.

There are other weaknesses in Evangelical spirituality. It is sometimes legalistic about matters of little importance. Simplicity can lead to superficiality. A focus on emotional response can lead to anti-intellectualism: a warm heart and a clear mind are not always found together! And despite its suspicion of the world, it easily and unconsciously adopts worldly ways, and is unable to critique its own society. As James Gordon writes:

[T]he Evangelical spiritual tradition is a continuing witness to the power of the gospel and the mission of the Church in the modern world. John Stott, who stands as one example of the tradition at its best, has always insisted that Evangelical spirituality is by definition Christ-centred: 'The hallmark of authentic Evangelicalism has always been zeal for the honour and glory of Jesus Christ.' (1991: ix)

We all need to learn what true biblical spirituality is.

Reformed spirituality?

Because I believe the Reformed theology provides the pattern of thought that corresponds most closely with the theological structure of the Bible, I also believe that Reformed spirituality is most likely to reflect biblical spirituality. Of course one of the principles of Reformed theology is that of continual reformation by the Bible, and

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so it holds the corresponding principle of its own fallibility, as it needs continual reformation. So I do not think that Reformed spirituality always succeeds in reflecting the Bible, as I do not think the Reformed theology is always correct.

We do well to look at the shape of Reformed spirituality. Morton Kelsey, in his foreword to a book on *Reformed Spirituality*, comments, 'What puzzled me most as I read Rice's book was how this rich tradition was largely lost or neglected within the Reformed churches, and totally ignored and overlooked by writers outside that tradition interested in the spiritual life' (Rice 1991: 2). He then suggests that this may have happened because writers in the Reformed tradition used the word 'piety' rather than 'spirituality', though they cover much the same area of interest.

It is certain that the Reformation resulted in a rich spirituality. It was a spirituality firmly based on original documents, namely the Bible. It focused on Jesus Christ, and avoided the distractions of post-biblical inventions. It was grace-based, in that repentance is not the first step towards grace, but a response to grace. It was grace-based, and so produced a spirituality of grateful response and joy, rather than a spirituality of uncertainty. It was a spirituality for ordinary people, and not for a spiritual elite. It was open to the world and to what we call secular work and duties, and was able to engage the family as a unit of spiritual development. Because of the invention of the printing press, and a great commitment to education, it was a literate spirituality, and able to engage lay people in spiritual formation. Alister McGrath has written a helpful and positive account of general Reformation spirituality (1992).

Here I am referring to the Reformed tradition as one strand of the Protestant Reformation. This Reformed tradition is of course expressed in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, but is also found within Anglican and Baptist denominations. It has been represented within Anglicanism by leaders like Nicholas Ridley, John Jewel, George Whitefield and John Newton, and within the Baptist Church by John Bunyan, John Gill and Charles Spurgeon. Whereas Ian Randall (1999), in his study of English Evangelical Spirituality 1918–39, studies such groups as the Keswick movement, the Anglican Evangelical movement, Wesleyan spirituality, the Oxford Group and the Pentecostals, there is no study of any Reformed tradition within Evangelicalism. Were he to write a complementary book covering the second half of the twentieth century, he would need to find room for such leaders as Martyn Lloyd-Jones, John Stott, Alec Motyer, J. I. Packer, R. C. Lucas

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and David Jackman, and the resolutely contemporary biblical and Reformed pattern of Evangelicalism they have promoted.

Rowan Williams tells us that one of the dilemmas at the end of the medieval period was the gap between the art of theology and the practice of spirituality:

It was losing the sense of Christian experience as growth in direct encounter with God . . . there was less realization that the roots of theology lie in such experience and that Christian speculation is properly inseparable from engagement of a personal and demanding kind with the paradoxes of cross and resurrection. (1979: 137)

Reformed spirituality and theology was one movement that filled this gap. This tradition claims that the roots of theology lie in the revelation of God, rather than in experience. Or, to express the truth more completely, that the roots of all our theology and spirituality lie in the revelation of God in Christ, articulated by the Spirit in the Bible.

Howard Rice (1991) refers to the writings of Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger; the Scots, Heidelberg and Westminster Confessions; among the Puritans the writings of Lewis Bayly, Francis Rous, Samuel Rutherford, Richard Baxter, John Owen, John Bunyan and Henry Scougal; and, among later writers, Elizabeth Rowe, Gerhard Tersteegen and Jonathan Edwards.

The Reformed tradition employed the following methods in its use of the Bible, according to Rice:

- It paid close attention to the context of a text. According to the Puritan Thomas Goodwin, 'The right context of Scripture is half the interpretation' (1991: 101–102).
- It used the scholarly tools available. The Reformed tradition came out of the Humanist movement marked by careful scholarship, the use of original texts, the study of history and the use of language.
- It assumed the fundamental unity of the Bible, and treated it as a self-interpreting book.
- It knew that a right understanding of the Bible needs hard work, and the help of the Holy Spirit (1991: 101–104).

To which we can add:

- The Reformed tradition named and articulated its 'rule of faith',

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which it used to interpret the Bible. This 'rule of faith' would be revised in the light of the Bible, but also helped interpret the Bible.

- It knew that the Bible is a book about God, and that our highest aim in reading the Bible is not to learn what we should do, but who God is and what God has done.
- It used the Bible as the major instrument of ministry, in reading, preaching, exhortation and meditation.

Other studies of Reformed spirituality include Wakefield 1957, Richard 1974, Battles 1978, Senn 1986, Ferguson 1987, Packer 1990b, McGrath 1991, Nuttall 1992, Whitlock 2000, Nunes 2002.²

The flavour of Reformed spirituality can be seen clearly in the following quotations from Calvin's *Institutes*:

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, pure and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves . . . our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God. (*Institutes* 1.1.1)

God is not known where there is no religion or piety . . . I call 'piety' that reverence joined with the love of God which the knowledge of his benefits produces. (*Institutes* 1.2.1)

Now, in order that true religion may shine upon us, we ought to hold that it must take its beginnings from heavenly doctrine and that no one can get even the slightest taste of right and sound doctrine unless he be a pupil of Scripture. (*Institutes* 1.6.2)

Wilhelm Niesel, a modern writer on Calvin, has described the centre of Calvin's theology as the mystical union between Christ and the believer:

For Calvin . . . that joining of the Head and members, that indwelling of Christ on our hearts – in short, that mystical union is fundamental. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us, but because we put on Christ and are grafted into his body – in short because he deigns to make us one with him. (1962: 182)

² See also Toon 1987: ch. 7, and Mursell 2001a: 356–379.

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In his study of the spirituality of John Calvin, the Catholic scholar Lucien Joseph Richard places him in the context of the *Devotio Moderna*, as expressed for example in Thomas à Kempis's *Of the Imitation of Christ*, and the Humanist movement in which Calvin participated. He points out the strong commitment to the power of words in the Humanism of Calvin's day: 'The renaissance writers believed in the power speech had to move the minds and hearts of men and therefore insisted on language that was both beautiful and pleasing' (Richard 1974: 137).

Whereas 'The *Devotio Moderna* reacted against scholasticism . . . by advocating an anti-intellectual spirituality' (1974: 136), on the other hand, 'The Humanists preferred a more affective type of theology, one that could double as spirituality' (1974: 139). Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, a leading Humanist at the University of Paris, aimed to bridge the separation between theology and spirituality:

Lefèvre expressed his spirituality in his concept of *theologia vivificans* (theology that makes alive). This vivifying theology was a theological exegesis uniting spirituality and theology. It was based on an intuition of the primacy and sufficiency of the world [sc. word]. *Verbum Dei sufficit* (The Word of God is sufficient). (1974: 70)

The spiritual meaning of the scriptures illuminated by the Holy Spirit is the mystery of Christ himself (Richard 1974: 71). We find these ideas further developed in Calvin. Richard also makes the point that a common misunderstanding of Calvin is that of a cold logician. He quotes Theodore Roszak: 'He has no experiential sense of what it means to discover divinity dwelling within – a striking example of how remote head knowledge can be from visionary realization' (1974: 164). Richard comments, 'This is certainly a caricature. John Calvin affirmed many times in his writings the intensively experiential character of the knowledge of God' (1974: 164).

Richard demonstrates the important features of Calvin's spirituality in the following quotations from Calvin:

- The purpose of writing the *Institutes* is to promote piety:

My intention is only to offer some basic rudiments through which those who feel some interest in religion might be trained to true piety. (*Institutes*: Prefatory Address)

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- Piety is all that we owe God:

Piety comes from the sure knowledge of God. From it we learn to humble ourselves, cast ourselves before God, seek his mercy. (1974: 99 = *Works* 1: 31)

- This knowledge is not merely conceptual, but is a doctrine of life, life-giving teaching:

Doctrine is not an affair of the tongue but of the life; it is not apprehended by the intellect and memory merely, like the other branches of learning; but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul . . . The Gospel ought to penetrate the inmost affections of the heart, fix its seat in the soul, and pervade the whole man. (1974: 103 = *Works* 1: 1126)

- True worship or piety can only come from a true knowledge of God:

We ought not to attempt anything in religion rashly or at random; because unless there be knowledge, it is not God that we worship but a phantom or idol. (1974: 119 = *Commentary on John* 4:43)

- The result is a mystical union between Christ and the church, and therefore Christ and the believer:

We expect salvation from [Christ], not because he stands aloof from us, but because in grafting us onto his body he not only makes us partakers of all his benefits, but we also become one substance with him. (*Institutes* 3.2.24)

- So both sanctification and justification are the fruits of this God-given union:

Christ lives in us in two ways. The one life consists in governing us by his Spirit and directing all our actions, the other in making us partakers of his righteousness, so that while we can do nothing of ourselves, we are accepted in the sight of God. (1974: 106 = *Commentary on Galatians* 2:20)

- This union with Christ is through the dynamic bond of the Spirit:

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The Lord by his Spirit bestows upon us the blessings of being one with him in soul and body and spirit. The bond of that connection therefore is the spirit of Christ who unites us to him, and is a kind of channel by which everything that Christ has and is given to us. (*Institutes* 4.17.12)

- The purpose of this union is to restore us in the image of God:

Christ is the most perfect image of God into which we are so renewed as to bear the image of God in knowledge, purity, righteousness, and true holiness. (*Institutes* 1.15. 4)

- Faith and prayer are two certain signs of the presence of true piety:

The principal exercise which the children of God have is to pray; for this way they give a true proof of their faith. (1974: 121 = *Sermon on 1 Timothy* 2:1–2)

This faith must come from the hearing of the Word and from the work of the Spirit in sealing our minds and hearts. In these words Calvin distinguishes his view both from rationalism and fanaticism:

Those who do not sufficiently know the darkness of human minds imagine faith is formed naturally by hearing and preaching alone; and there are many fanatics who disdain the outward preaching, and talk in lofty terms about secret revelations and inspirations. But we see how Christ joins these things together, and, therefore, though there is no faith unless the Spirit of God seals our minds and hearts, still we must not go to seek visions or oracles in the clouds, but the word, which is near us, in our mouth and heart (Rom. 10:8), must keep all our senses bound and fixed in itself. (Richard 1974: 147 = *Commentary on John* 15:27)

So God addresses us both by his Word and by his Spirit at the same time and by the same operation: 'God has therefore two ways of teaching; for first, he sounds in our ears by the mouth of men, and secondly he addresses us inwardly by the Spirit' (1974: 156 = *Commentary on John* 14:26).

Among the many of Calvin's contributions to spirituality, Richard

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points to the importance of his ideas of spirituality that involve service in the world, in contrast with the world-denying emphasis of the *Devotio Moderna*; his pursuit of a spirituality that was corporate and ecclesial as well as personal and individual; and his combination of spirituality and theology (1974: 174–192). Calvin's spirituality was expressed as much in his prayers and metrical translation of the Psalms for singing as it was in his theological writings (Battles 1978: 137–166). As we will see in chapter four, Calvin had a clear understanding of how the whole Bible functions as the word of Christ, and this too was a vital aspect of his spirituality.

Reformed spirituality attempts to be a true expression of pure biblical spirituality, and it deserves our attention for that reason. As Alister McGrath comments, Calvin's emphasis on the knowledge of God has been represented and made popular in recent years in the classic *Knowing God* by J. I. Packer (McGrath 1999: 170–173).

Whereas the Reformed and Evangelical traditions have generally been opposed to the use of sacred times, places, objects and actions, they have often been strongly 'sabbatarian', placing great emphasis on setting aside Sunday for worship, edification and meditation. In the words of *The Directory for the Public Worship of God*, 'There is no day commanded in scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord's day, which is the Christian Sabbath' (Westminster Confession 1958: 394).

Why is this so? The simple answer is that this spirituality regards instructions in the Bible as binding on believers, and is opposed to going beyond the Bible's instructions. This is because of the ideal of 'spiritual chastity', of faithfulness to God and his words. So the use of the means that God has ordained to express his care for us is a strong feature of Reformed and Evangelical spirituality. These means include the study, reading and preaching of the Bible; the use of Sunday to meet with God's people for worship and edification; the use of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, mutual encouragement with other believers and receiving everything in life as a gift from God. These are the God-given means, and we should make full use of them and not distract or confuse ourselves with other man-made rules or practices. We are opposed to wrong means, not because means are unimportant, but because they are important. The wrong use of means will not only damage those who use them, but, more importantly, is an insult to God.

Richard Baxter gives a list of the means of grace in an Evangelical and Reformed spirituality:

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The reading of the word of God and the explication and application of it in good books is a means to possess the mind with sound, orderly, and working apprehensions of God, and of his holy truths.

The same word preached with a lively voice, with clearness and affection, hath a greater advantage for the same illumination and excitation of the soul.

Also in the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, we are called to a familiar converse with God: Here there appears to us by a wonderful condescension in the representing, communicating signs of the flesh and blood of his Son, in which he hath most conspicuously revealed his love and goodness to believers: there Christ himself with his covenant-gifts, are all delivered to us by these signs of his own institution.³

In holy, faithful, fervent, prayer, a Christian hath very much of his converse with God. For prayer is our approach to God, and calling to mind his presence and his attributes, and exercising all his graces in a holy motion towards him, and an exciting all the powers of our souls to seek him, attend him, and reverently to worship him. (1981: 195–196)

We should notice the importance of the Bible, the mixture of corporate and private activities, and the balance of Bible, sacrament and prayer. The use of means is also an issue in the debate between the Puritans and the Quakers, as we will see in chapter six. Reformed spirituality covers a wider range of thought and practice than we might expect. Puritan ministers served as spiritual directors, and that included the interpretation of dreams, the giving of advice about growth in spirituality, including how to pray, and how to deal with satanic attack.⁴

Even when Reformed theology found its most fervent intellectual defence, it was also marked by piety. Andrew Hofferger shows the piety that marked the Princeton theologians and their influence, and has gathered evidence from their theological and devotional writings. He quotes Archibald Alexander's sermon to his congregation in Philadelphia in 1812: 'Two things I have consistently aimed at, first to inform the understanding, secondly to impress the heart' (1981: 1).

³ For more on the Puritan use of the sacrament as a means, see Ferguson 1987: 211–233 on John Owen's view of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

⁴ For more on this subject see Rice 1991: chs. 3, 5, Jensen 1995b, Gurnall 1964 and McGinnis 2002: 665–686.

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Princeton Seminary was to be a 'nursery of vital piety as well as of sound theological learning' (1981: 1). Alexander contrasts dead with living faith:

When Christ the special object of Faith is brought to the view of the soul, a living Faith always appropriates him, chooses him as a Saviour suitable to itself, receives him as its portion, trusts and depends on him alone for salvation, resigns itself up to him alone to be governed and directed agreeable to his will, and is pleased and delighted with him above all things. (1981: 13)

While the Princeton theologians warned on the one hand against dry and non-experiential Reformed theology, they also warned against the subjectivism of Schleiermacher and the emotionalism of some contemporary revivalism in America. But they also commended piety and devotion in the practice of Christianity. Hofferker writes of Charles Hodge:

Even more influential, however, was his personal religion, evinced especially in his famous Sunday afternoon conference addresses. His real and strongly emotional piety, the heart of which was vital apprehension of the love of God in Christ, wrought his most characteristic work upon students. (1981: 44)

This Reformed piety is based on meditation on the Bible. In the words of B. B. Warfield:

You must taste its preciousness for yourselves, before you can apply it to others' needs. You must assimilate the Bible and make it your own, in that intimate sense which will fix its words fast in your hearts, if you would have those words rise spontaneously to your lips in your times of need, or in times of the needs of others. Read, study, meditate . . . until the Bible is in you. Then the Bible will well up in you and come out from you in every season of need. (Hofferker 1981: 151)

A Reformed spirituality of the Word and election is perfectly expressed in Jesus' prayer in John 17 (vv. 6–8): '[These disciples] were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word . . . for

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the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you.'

In the light of these comments, it is disturbing to find that for many the Reformed tradition of spirituality is invisible. This is because they have already decided what spirituality will look like, that it will be represented by images, pictures, statues and certain kinds of rituals in liturgical practice, or else by a highly emotional internal and personal experience. They are then blind to other forms of spirituality. They are so aware of what Reformed spirituality does not include (statues, pictures, sacred places), that they miss the spirituality that is expressed. Indeed it is a mark of the great importance the Reformed tradition places on the expression of spirituality that it is so careful about its own practice.

The tradition of passionate Reformed spirituality is no novelty. It is also found in the Reformed Anglican Richard Sibbes (1577–1635), whom Mark Dever can describe as both 'Reformed' and 'affectionate' (Dever 2000: 99–160), because Sibbes believed that 'God has opened his heart to us in his Word' (2000: 156).

Reformed spirituality can also be destructive. In some cases it is merely verbose, its prayers have been 'sermons to the Almighty', and it has descended to legalistic and negative Christianity. But this is to see the movement at its worst. As Gordon Wakefield claims in his article on Calvinistic spirituality, at its best there is a delight in the creation and music and poetry, deep joy, and moral reformation (Wakefield 1983: 66). Clear theology is no enemy to deep spirituality.

There are some tensions between Evangelical and Reformed spirituality. Evangelical spirituality tends towards an intense personal relationship with God, is naturally egalitarian, and is suspicious of formality. Reformed spirituality is more concerned with our state before God than our relationship with him, depends more on the authorized minister, and tends to be more formal in style. Spirituality that is both Evangelical and Reformed can avoid the weakness and gain the strengths of both.

The strengths of Reformed spirituality include its focus on the glory and supremacy of Christ, its realization of the sinfulness of humanity, the priority of God's grace, the call to faith, the assurance of salvation and of God's persevering grace, its belief that all God's people have an equal share in his grace, and its commitment to the transformation of the world.

Of course theology and practice that do not follow the Reformed pattern also express spirituality. For example, John Wesley promoted

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Christian spirituality through his own writings, his editions of the Christian classics, his published diary, his sermons, his hymns, and by setting up the class system of Methodism. Wesley's writings on spirituality included the controversial area of Christian perfection, and he had a profound influence in introducing Moravian spirituality to the English-speaking world, in promoting lay spirituality of regeneration, conversion, Bible study and prayer, small group as well as church, prayer meetings and above all songs.

I have focused on Reformed models of spirituality because I believe that they best reflect biblical reality, and because I want to correct the common impression that Reformed theology and practice have no possible connection with true Christian spirituality. Later we will see how Calvin's theology of the Bible as the Word of Christ lies at the heart of biblical spirituality. We will also discuss the complex issues of what expressions of spirituality the Reformed tradition will include, and what expressions it will exclude.

So biblical spirituality can be genuinely Evangelical and Reformed in its ethos. I do not think that it is only found within these traditions, or is limited to them. Genuine Christianity has always been marked by biblical spirituality. James Houston shows that the Desert Fathers incorporated the text of the Bible within their oral tradition:

Scripture is interspersed within these sayings, not as the concentrated text we are habituated to in a writing culture, but diffused in the interplay of both oral and written traditions. As Benedicta Ward explains, 'The Language of the writings of the desert was so formed by the meditations of the scriptures that it is almost impossible to say when the quotation ends and the comments begin.' (1996: 157)

So too the medieval tradition of *Lectio Divina* referred to the meditative and prayerful reading of Holy Scripture that resulted in spiritual growth and transformation. Houston quotes the Carthusian Guigo II:

Reading is the careful study of the Scriptures, concentration of one's powers on it . . . Reading seeks for sweetness of a blessed life, meditation perceives it, prayer asks for it, contemplation tastes it. Reading, as it were, puts food whole into the mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up, prayer extracts its flavour, contemplation is the sweetness itself which gladdens and refreshes. (1996: 160)

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Then from von Balthasar: 'Man is the being created as the hearer of the Word, and only in responding to the Word arises to his full dignity. He was conceived in the mind of God as the partner in dialogue' (1996: 173).

Such hearing of the Word lies at the heart of Christian faith and experience, and is universal among Christians. Biblical spirituality is not the discovery of a peripheral few, but the common heritage of all believers. Evangelical and Reformed spirituality lies within what Alistair McGrath calls 'the Great Tradition' of mainstream orthodox Christianity (McGrath 2000: 139–158).

What is the shape of Evangelical and Reformed spirituality of the Word, in the light of other Christian traditions of spirituality? The best way to understand it is to realize that spirituality corresponds to revelation, both in content and form:

- Christ is the mediator of the revelation of God, so this spirituality is Christ-centred, responding with faith in Jesus Christ, and especially to his saving death and resurrection. Christ has revealed the Father, so this spirituality is that of trust in God our Father, his love and kindness in Christ, and his sovereign and providential rule over everything. Christ has sent the Spirit, so believers are sealed or anointed with the Spirit, the Spirit witnesses within them that they are the children of God, and they use the gifts of God in the service of God.
- The response of trusting Christ and obeying him, of loving God with heart, mind, soul and strength is common to all believers, so spirituality is not just an option for the advanced but is required of all the saints. It is a spirituality common to all the people of God. It is a spirituality of normal humanity, of daily life and duties, or work and play, of family and society.
- God's grace and acceptance of us in Christ means that we do not have to search for God, find him, ascend to him or journey towards him. God has come to us in his Son Jesus, spoken to us in the gospel, and welcomed us into his presence through Christ our High Priest. We stand now in God's grace, we are now at peace with God, we can now have assurance of final salvation, through trust in his promises.
- The great barrier to true spirituality is not the lack of technique in spiritual aptitude, but sin. Sin is the state of humanity in every aspect of life and personality, and the wages of sin is death. But God has dealt with our sin by the sacrifice of Christ, and has

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accepted us as his children. His holiness and righteousness are demonstrated in the death of Christ, our sin is atoned for and we are forgiven. We stand in his grace, and he works in us by the death and resurrection of Christ and by his Spirit, to change us into the likeness of Christ. God gives us faith and obedience, God transforms us, and God does his good works through us.

- God has provided 'means' by which he works in us for his glory. We must make good use of the means provided by God, and not replace or supplement them with means that we devise. The means provided by God are explained in the Bible, namely the Bible itself, the fellowship of the people of God, prayer, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and a right use of the creation. We should not neglect these means, nor use other means, such as statues, pictures, icons, silence or impressions of God's will. We should not over-value the sacraments, those visible words of God. While we will hear echoes of the Bible in our inner selves, the God-given and certain place to hear God speaking is in the Bible.
- The great means is the Bible, in which we find Christ clothed in all his promises. To love God is to love his words, and to be alert to the Spirit is to receive the words of the Spirit in the Bible. In the Bible we find God's self-revelation, God's character, God's will and God's plan. In the Bible God's mystery, Christ, is now revealed. A corporate and personal spirituality of the Word is at the heart of biblical faith and life. We do not know everything about God and his plan, but what we do know is found in the Bible.
- Prayer is an expression of our trust in God, and our dependence on him. It is gospel-shaped: we come to pray to God our Father through the power and goodness of Jesus' death on the cross. This is the means of our access to God. We pray in response to God's words in the Bible, so that we know the God to whom we pray, and what he has promised. As we read his Spirit-inspired words, the Spirit also works within us, prompting us to know that God is our Father, and that we may approach him with boldness because of Christ's death for us on the cross. We pray to God alone, and not to saints, because we pray as instructed by God in the Bible.

There are basically three schools of theology and of spirituality within Christian tradition:

1. *The Reformed and Evangelical view* is that all God's saving words and works are found within the Bible, and within that period of rev-

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elation of the Old and New Testaments. So this spirituality of the Word will focus entirely on the Bible for the content of the knowledge of God. It also expects to find that biblical faith works, and so find corroborative evidence in the lives and ministries of the saints. It expects that the witness of the Spirit within the believer and within the church will correspond with his external witness in Scripture.

2. *The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox view, and that held by some charismatics*, is that in addition to the Bible, God has continued to do his saving works and words over the last 2,000 years. He has revealed new truths, and supported them with new miracles. So this spirituality of the Word will include not only the words of the Bible, but also words given to the church since Bible times, whether recognized by Pope, Patriarch or Council of the Church, or given by a prophet in a local church.
3. *The Quaker and Liberal view* is that revelation comes direct from God today, by observation, reason, experience or emotion. It may include some ideas from the Bible and the tradition of the churches, but will find other parts obsolete and irrelevant. This is a spirituality of discerning what God is saying at the present time, in what is happening in the world around us or deep within our own consciousness. It is a spirituality of the contemporary words of God.

Views 2 and 3 both allow for new contemporary revelations, for hearing God speak today in the church, in individuals, or in society. View 1 holds to the notion that God's revelation is found in history, when he acted to save us, that God's word and works came together at the same time in salvation history.

Views 2 and 3 take the words of Jesus about the Spirit of truth, 'he will guide you into all the truth' (John 16:13), to mean that the Bible is less than all the truth that will be revealed, and that there is an ongoing work of the Spirit in new revelations, either throughout history, or especially today.

View 1 believes that Jesus' words 'He will guide you into all the truth' are in context a specific promise to his disciples, and that its fulfilment was in the apostolic witness to Christ that resulted in the formation of the New Testament. And the Holy Spirit continues to help us understand and receive the words of the Bible, given by that same Spirit so long ago. He does not guide us into more truth than is found in the Bible: we are to guard the good treasure *entrusted* to us 'with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us' (2 Tim. 1:14). In this view, as we look back in history for the work of God in Christ that saved us,

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so we look back to his work through the Spirit, the Bible, that tells us of our Christ and the salvation he won.

Biblical theology and spirituality?

If the Bible is a God-given resource for Christian spirituality, then the use of biblical theology will help us to derive as much spiritual benefit as possible from every part of that Bible.⁵ The purpose of biblical theology is to treat every part of the Bible as contributing its particular riches to a full understanding of the gospel of Christ, both in promise in the Old Testament, and in fulfilment in the New Testament. For this reason it is entirely appropriate that a series of studies in biblical theology includes a volume on spirituality.

Biblical theology will help us to find a way to understand and find the coherent development of the practice of spirituality in the Bible. Why did Abraham set up altars? Should we do the same? Are there now places where God's name dwells on earth? Does the prohibition on graven images apply to pictures of Jesus in children's Bibles? Does God speak to us today? These are all questions about the practice of spirituality that arise from reading the Bible. Biblical theology will help us find a coherent answer.

Here are some definitions and descriptions of biblical theology. For Geerhardus Vos:

Biblical Theology . . . discusses the form and content of revelation from the point of view of the revealing activity of God Himself. In other words, it deals with revelation in the active sense, as an act of God, and tries to understand and trace and describe this act. (1980: 7–8)

Or again it is 'that branch of Exegetical Theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible' (1948: 13).

J. I. Packer describes biblical theology as

[T]he umbrella-name for those disciplines that explore the unity of the Bible, delving into the contents of the books, showing the links between them, and pointing up the ongoing

⁵ According to Richard Gaffin, it was Geerhardus Vos who in modern times added the study of biblical theology to Reformed theology (Gaffin 1976), and who thus helped to uncover the flow as well as the structure of the Bible, the gradual revelation as well as its fundamental shape.

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flow of the revelatory and redemptive process that reached its climax in Jesus Christ. (1988: 8)

According to Graeme Goldsworthy:

Biblical Theology is concerned with God's saving acts and his word as these occur within the history of the people of God. It follows the progress of revelation from the first word of God to man through to the unveiling of the full glory of Christ. It examines the several stages of biblical history and their relationship with one another. It thus provides the basis for understanding how texts in one part of the Bible relate to all other texts. (1991: 37)

The use of biblical theology is expressed in Peter Jensen's observation that our aim is to 'preach Christ so that every part of the Bible contributes its unique riches to his gospel' (Jensen 1995a: 64). So what is the relationship between biblical theology and spirituality?

Biblical theology enables us to make good gospel use of every part of the Bible; it has the potential to produce good and rich gospel spirituality, which reflects every facet and every stage of the biblical revelation. Christian spirituality needs biblical theology so that its use of the Bible is coherent, Christian, responsible, and reflects the full literary width and theological depth of the Scriptures. In particular, biblical theology enables the Old Testament to be used for true spirituality, that is, spirituality that expresses the gospel of Christ.

Biblical theology delivers spirituality from the irresponsible use of the Bible, and so delivers the Christian from an ultimately unsustainable gulf between heart and mind, between spirituality and understanding. Spirituality that is based on trivializing or psychologizing the Bible will not work. Sometimes we see in writings on spirituality a kind of 'spirituality fundamentalism', with texts taken out of context, proof texts universalized beyond their meaning, and a 'flat' use of Scripture that ignores its historical and theological context and development. The fundamentalism of spirituality is no more defensible than any other kind of fundamentalism. Biblical theology ensures a fully theological use of the Bible that reflects the way in which God has respected the human condition of the original writers, their use of language, historical context, place in salvation history, and their time within God's plan of gradual revelation of Christ and his gospel.

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Biblical theology will also foster true spirituality because it takes account of the human and historical context of every part of Scripture. Because it recognizes the historical context of every part of Scripture, and its context in salvation history, it is less likely to produce a superhistorical and therefore superhuman use of Scripture, and is therefore less likely to foster a superhuman spirituality. Biblical theology respects the varied humanity of the Bible writers (Vos 1980: 14).

In the words of Walter Moberly, 'the primary and explicit purpose of a biblical theology should be to relate the Bible to the need and concerns of the spirituality of the Christian Church, that is, it should inform the corporate and individual living of the life of faith' (1992: 149). Indeed a reading of the Bible that does not consider spirituality is likely to miss the point: 'This is why biblical theology should focus on spirituality, because it is the dynamics of life under God that is the most constant factor running through the biblical material' (1992: 155).

Some may respond to this project by asserting that the Bible is only a limited resource for spirituality. Please read this book and learn more of the riches that are found in the Bible. Some may feel that frequent quotations from the Bible are a mark of fundamentalism. Please reflect on the fact that we owe a moral duty to let a book speak for itself, explain itself and defend itself. Some may feel that the Bible is an unlikely source for spirituality. Please suspend your disbelief, and find out more of what is in the Bible as you read this book. Some may think a defence of words necessarily implies a form of spirituality that is only cerebral, dry and rational. Please read this book carefully, and discover the total, holistic and relational effect that God intends and achieves in human lives through his words. John Goldingay quotes Fishbane's *The Garments of Truth*: 'One of the great contributions of Judaism to the history of religions is its assertion that the divine reality makes itself humanly comprehensible through the structures of language' (1994: 4). Goldingay then comments, 'it is through a written text . . . that God is known' (1994: 4).

The *shape* and *structure* of biblical spirituality

What then is the shape and structure of biblical spirituality? I hope to show the following shape in the pages that follow:

- *Its content and focus is God in Christ.* It shows us God's great plan of creation and salvation, how God revealed himself in his deeds

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and words, how he spoke through law, prophets and wisdom, as he pointed forward to Christ, and how Jesus Christ fulfilled God's plan by his saving death and resurrection, and will finally complete God's saving plan at his return.

- *Its practice is hearing the word of God by faith.* It is how God speaks to his people and his world today, as he addresses us with words he spoke long ago at the time of his revelation leading up to and in Christ and his messengers, and has preserved as his personal, powerful, effective, universal, relevant and sufficient word to us, to be heard and obeyed by faith.
- *Its experience is that of meeting God in his Spirit-given words.* As we read the Bible, we hear the voice of God. We are challenged to change our world view, our lives, our relationships and our desires and our action; we are comforted, enriched, enlightened, given hope, stretched, empowered and changed by the living and enduring words of the living God.
- *Its result is trust in Christ and our heavenly Father.* As we grow in trust, thanking and praising God for his grace in Christ, praying to him and obeying him, loving his truth and his people, growing in the fruit of the Spirit and in godliness, serving God in his church and his world, using the gifts he has given us, bringing glory to him and waiting for the return of Christ.

I have outlined the shape of biblical spirituality. Here is its theological structure within the Bible, a structure expressed in part or in whole in various books of the Bible:

- God speaks, and his words create and sustain life and blessing, and establish relationships. We hear, believe and obey God, receive that life and blessing, and are brought into relationship with God.
- If we do not hear God, but reject, neglect, disbelieve or disobey, then those words bring curse and death. We must receive the words of God, and also reject alien words that will seduce us away from God.
- We receive the Spirit-given words of God in Scripture, and are called to believe and obey them as part of our response to God.
- Jesus is both the Word of God, and also the one who hears, speaks and does God's words. Jesus' obedience to God's words leads him to death and resurrection, when he dies in our place because of our disobedience.
- We trust and obey God by believing his gospel word about his Son, Jesus Christ.

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- We praise him according to his words, and speak words to others that bring blessing, not cursing. We pray to God in response to the words of truth he has spoken to us.
- We look forward to the new heaven and earth promised by God's word.

Here are the 40 most uplifting Bible scriptures on hearing God's voice. Romans 10:17 So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. John 10:27 "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." John 8:47 "Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God." Isaiah 30:21 And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left. GOD'S WORD® Translation Jesus replied, "Rather, how blessed are those who hear and obey God's word." International Standard Version But he said, "Instead, how blessed are those who hear God's word and obey it!" Literal Standard Version And He said, "Indeed, rather, blessed those hearing the word of God, and keeping [it]!" NET Bible But he replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" In other words, God's voice is hidden from the arrogant and the proud. Luke 10:21 says, "At that very time He (Jesus) rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit, and said, 'I praise You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight.' " Do you have ears to hear God? Many people believe that Jesus told parables to reveal truth, however, this simply is not Biblical! This means truly hearing God's voice in the Word. God is the master communicator and biblical history is not only the story of redemption but it is also the story of communication and revelation from God. He encodes and transmits, and we are to decode and receive. 1 Thessalonians 2:13 (NIV) And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe. Revelation 22:18 (NIV) I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. [Back to Storying Scripture | Scripture Engagement home.](#)