



L'Abri Papers #RM04

Being Human: The nature of Spiritual Experience

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“The need to re-examine so basic an element of our life as our view of spirituality requires a level of honesty we would rather not attempt.”

Whenever I hear someone referred to as a very *spiritual* person,” at least a part of me wants to ask “What do you mean?” The reason is that I am deeply skeptical about some of the models of spirituality which we have adopted within the church today. Is it “spiritual,” for example, for us to have nothing to do with “the world,” to spend the greater part of our free time within the church or in church-related activities, to insist that every one should have a “quiet time” each morning, to read only Christian books, to try to “die to self” as if nothing about our “self” has value, certainly not to become involved in what are called “intellectual issues”?

The model we find in the Bible, I suggest, is very different. That is what I want to try to clarify. Its importance is obvious. If we are wrong at this point, about the model of spirituality, we are bound to be wrong, or at least seriously limited, throughout our experience - for spirituality covers the whole of human experience. It would be like having a wrong model for playing tennis: imagine someone holding a tennis racket upside down, or having only half the number of strings. The whole game would be affected, detrimentally of course. That is what has happened within our history as Bible-believing Christians: we have been using a false model for spirituality. Therefore, despite the highly motivated efforts, the various techniques for church growth and individual growth, the crusades, the seminars and all the rest, there has been an evident deficiency in our experience.

Some, unhappily, aware of this state of affairs within the Bible-believing constituency, have reacted childishly. It has angered them. So they have become abusive towards their “parent” like a young child throwing a tantrum, which is sad. Their diagnosis about the ill-health of the patient (to change the metaphor) is frequently accurate; it is their remedy which is at fault. For soon they start questioning the fundamentals of the faith and one realizes where their protest leads, to the shipwreck of their faith, or at least to the shipwreck of those who follow them.

Against both of these trends we must show courage. It is not easy to “confess our faults” - as we all know. The need to re-examine so basic an element of our life as our view of spirituality requires a level of honesty we would rather not attempt. It disrupts our life in order to reconstruct it. So, naturally, we draw back. Friends misunderstand our motives;

others resist our conclusions about the Biblical material involved, which means further hard work to get at the truth. And, most difficult of all, if it is better spirituality we are seeking, we know we must be peacemakers. After all, it costs nothing to be critical. It costs everything to be constructive, as this following comment on Deism in the 18th Century makes clear. It stands as a warning to all who want to change (for the better of course, for change is never advocated for the worse!): “Its [*i.e.* Deism’s] critical powers far outstripped its constructive capacity.”¹

It is change we are seeking, but change which is constructive. I believe the basis for this is simple and obvious and, best of all, comprises the warp and woof of the whole Bible.

We start with Genesis 1. God made a physical reality. He made it with countless degrees of diversity - all good, all relevant to the whole, all remarkable. But man was made different. Man was made in “the image of God.” (V. 27) As male and female, mankind was made in “the likeness of God.” And man, too, like the rest of the creation, was described by God as “very good.” (V. 31)

Man’s experience, though, was “spiritual” From the very beginning, as soon as man was made, man was made within a religious framework. Man was physical: he had a body with a bone structure, a blood system, nerves, muscle tissue and all the rest. But man was more than physical. Man was what we today call a person. Man was able to relate to everything, himself and God included, as a person. He could think, love, create, discern right from wrong, communicate in language, enjoy beauty and so on.

This was man’s spiritual experience. He was being as spiritual in tending the garden of Eden as he was when communicating with the Creator, in naming the animals as he was when he was loving his wife: And let us not draw back from it (any more than Paul did in the New Testament, 1 Timothy 4:3) - this relation of love, husband and wife, included their union sexually. This was God’s design. This was God’s desire. He made man not merely to have dominion over the world, but to enjoy the world. And ruling it, and enjoying it, man was being spiritual. He was in fact having the *ideal* “spiritual experience.” No churches, no hymns, no Sunday School, no Bible reading, no evangelism. Yet Adam and Eve were perfectly spiritual.

Their relationship with God, in other words, was being expressed in the whole of their human experience. To be spiritual was to be human - and vice versa. There was no diversion between the two. Adam did not have to remove himself from his ordinary human experience in order to “come closer to God.” He was as spiritual as God himself wanted him to be!

However, Adam and Eve chose to turn away from God’s moral framework. That was where their own lives started to fall apart, and, derivatively, where the experience of all human beings subsequently - and even the experience of nature too - started to fall apart.

The solution to this, many of us are familiar with. We have heard the Gospel enough times to be able to repeat it backwards. (I’m thinking here of the evangelical churches.) But, unhappily, the good news - which it most certainly is - of how God’s own son became man in order to rescue us from the law of sin and death, has been expressed in such a way that it seriously vitiates its potential to heal and restore. For the human has been separated from the spiritual.

Some, for example, have seen the Fall in Genesis 3 as almost the end of man’s humanity. As if, to use an illustration, Adam and Eve had jumped off the edge of a cliff and been smashed to smithereens at the bottom. Certainly Adam and Eve’s rebellion back there in

history was devastating enough in its effects to warrant that kind of description, but the Bible indicates that they continued to exist after the fall as human beings - that is, with all the normal experiences which attend human life. To use Jesus' words, there was "eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage" (Matthew 24:38 NIV) back at the time of Noah - as there ever has been and ever will be right from the time of the fall up to the second coming of Christ.

This point about the continuity of human experience after the fall may seem so obvious that some may wonder why it is being stressed. Yet it is vital; for even though we have to agree that the whole of man's experience was altered by the fall, that man became - to use the language of the Anglican service book - a "miserable sinner," yet man did not lose his manliness. He did not lose those attributes which, from his creation, distinguished him from the rest of what was around him. In short, he did not lose his "image-ness." The image was horribly distorted, yet it was still an image.

He became, in effect, like a priceless painting from one of the great masters in European history which is damaged by a senseless act of vandalism. It is horribly defaced. Yet its former glory can still be recognized. And most especially, it continues to have value - so much so that a process of restoration is immediately begun.

This is why (in part at least) the restoration of man was undertaken. God did not have to save man, yet He purposely chose to. There was an inherent value in man which motivated the Creator to undertake man's rescue. "God so loved the world" means that the world was so precious to God that He designed its restoration: man was so precious to God that God even *became* man.

The fall, then, while it defaced man as the image bearer of God, did not remove his humanity. Hence, we can understand why it is that *all* men (as Paul says in Romans 2) have a conscience; why it is that even sinners (to use Jesus' expression, Matthew 7:11) can give good gifts to their children; why even our opponents who hate the truth of the Gospel can detect some truth about the universe around them. (Matthew 16:3, Romans 1:19) So all societies have stories of compassion and heroism and loyalty and love. All societies have some who long for justice, some who are creative, some who are honorable in their dealings. These qualities and achievements do not save them from the judgment. Yet they are valuable. They make a difference in the world and a difference for good. But they are what they are only because man, though fallen, continues to be "the image of God."

How, then, do we see salvation? How do we see the process of restoration, thinking of the illustration we used of the damaged painting? And, most of all, how does this relate to spiritual experience and being human?

Quite simply, like this: the process of salvation has this as its principal aim, to restore man to the kind of spiritual experience which he forfeited at the fall. This would be impossible, of course, apart from a Saviour. Man can now come back to a relationship with God; he can be accepted by God even as a sinner because atonement for sin is complete. He is justified by grace simply by trusting the work and promises of Christ, justified, in other words, by faith. But he is thus justified *NOT* to try to get away from his humanity, but to have his humanity re-integrated, to be as it was at the beginning when man was made.

That humanity, we saw, included all the ordinary things. Adam was not more spiritual when praying and less spiritual when gardening or having a nice time with Eve. All his experience was designed by God. All of it was also *God's* delight. All of it was spiritual. And that ideal of spirituality we must now recover. We glorify God when we are most "ordinary" - when we know how to conduct our relationships with others, when we have

happy families, when we are radiant and creative, when we find ways around practical problems, when we delight in our physical being and revel in the delights of nature around us, when we enjoy beauty and create beauty. It is *not* the removal of our humanity. It is not even a grudging acceptance of our humanity - as if it is better to be a pastor or an evangelist than an artist or gardener, spending our lives in “spiritual” activities rather than in “secular” ones. Such an attitude must be seen to be anathema. It must be rooted out of our thinking, and also out of our churches.

The resurrection of the body is an outstanding finale to this renewed vision of the humanness of spiritual experience. For what do we find involved here, if not that the whole of our experience, even the physical experience of the body, is of such value that God is going to restore our bodies at the last trumpet when, in the twinkling of an eye, we shall all be changed. Our humanity will then have been perfectly restored, physical and spiritual together.

In the meantime, we must work for the restoration of the whole of our experience - to the degree, that is, that this is possible within our fallen condition. We must value the human, the individual, the physical, the concrete reality in which God has placed us. To try to reject it is a futile exercise anyway - for it is always there, even at the point when we have died physically and are raised (once more) with bodies! But we must not just tolerate it. We must see that it is *this* which is important. To be spiritual is to be human.

If our model of spirituality leads us away from this, there is something wrong with it, very seriously wrong with it. Jesus was able to attend a marriage feast and even make wine for the pleasure of the guests. Was he being unspiritual doing this? Or does the miraculous side, the water into wine, remove the simple humanity of the event as if that side of things were unimportant - whether the wedding itself, the joy of the couple and their anticipated union, the pleasure of the guests in this important step within the community and especially within the two families concerned, the bustle of the servants, the responsibilities of the caterers, *et cetera, et cetera*.

Or, to take another example which we shall look at in greater detail elsewhere, the mind. Do we find the mind disparaged within the New Testament? Not at all. Paul evidently applied himself intellectually. As he says, he set out to “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we *take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ*.” (2 Corinthians 10:4, 5, NIV)

He also exhorted believers to be changed in their lives by “the renewing of their minds.” (Romans 12:2, NIV) Elsewhere he went in the Mediterranean world, amongst non-believers as much as believers, he taught and discussed and argued. Why? Because the mind of man is important. It is part of his humanity, continuing into the present despite the fall.

Of course marriage and sexuality can be, and are, distorted. And so too, the mind. This is the tragedy of man: that the good gifts given by God are turned to evil ends. But this does not mean that they are irrelevant and unnecessary for spiritual experience. The Christian is called to reject and to mortify the evil use of his self - whether mind, appetite, possessions or anything else. It is sin which is to be removed - *NOT* the self. Rather, the self is to be liberated from sin, the human released from its bondage - so that the image can be seen in something “approaching” its former glory the self renewed in the likeness (image) of its creator. (See 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Colossians 3:10.)

¹ Gerald Cragg, *The Church and the Age of Reason* (New York: Penguin, 1961), p. 162