The Nature of Pentecostal Spirituality

One of the scribes ... asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Mark 12:28-31 (NRSV)

What is spirituality? On the surface this would seem to be a fairly easy question to answer. But any survey of offerings in your local Christian bookstore on the subject will demonstrate quickly just how difficult this term is to define. To be sure, there are definitions which deserve our further reflection. But these are rare. Most of what passes for advice or reflection on spirituality is little more than froth. It may incorporate an element of truth, but much of it is aimed at the popular market and it is often little more than the latest pop-psychology or self-help scheme with little or no relation to Scripture.

We can be judgmental of this state of affairs, of course, but our day differs little from those which have come and gone for centuries before us. Some folks in the New Testament viewed their prayers on street corners and their self-congratulatory giving of alms as symbolic of their spirituality. Jesus called it hypocrisy and suggested that genuine spirituality was as secret as it was genuine (Matthew 6:1-6). The Corinthians believed that public outbursts of tongues, or if you would prefer, uninterpreted eruptions of vocal ecstasy were demonstrative of their spirituality. They were the truly spiritual ones, the pneumatikoi. Paul, however, responded with his lesson on charismata, those many and varied manifestations of God's grace which point back to the Giver, build up the other, and reach out to the world undergirded by a healthy understanding of self, as being the real marks of spirituality.

There are many other examples we could cite from Scripture which would provide similar conclusions. The meaning of Christian spirituality, is at times elusive. In a sense, when we look for it we are in the greatest danger of losing the very object of our quest (Luke 9:23-24). True spirituality involves the giving over of our very selves to the One we worship and adore (Romans 12:1-2).

Recently as I lectured on the rise of asceticism and the monastic movement, I was struck once again by the aspects of these movements which consciously aspired to genuine spirituality. The earliest monastic men and women were hermits who lived in small, sparse, isolated caves or cells in the deserts of Syria and Egypt. Some of my students criticized them for running away, for embracing an individualistic form of religious expression, for failing to confront the world and the
problems which an increasing alliance between church and state and the development of civil religion brought to bear upon genuine Christian testimony. Others criticized them for seeking an artificial form of perfectionism, of trying to work out their own salvation by engaging in acts of self-denial, or of producing a new form of sectarianism. But others viewed them as giving themselves up as gifts to their Lord and to the church, those spiritual few who were called to pray and to meditate and to work and to pray again in a methodical rhythm which remembered both God and neighbor.

To be sure, even asceticism and monasticism have their weak points and their failures. There are those who are running away who do not understand even in a community what it means to be part of the larger whole, who fail to connect spirituality with reality, who are more intent on their acts than they are on the desired results of their actions. But there are the many who, in this vocation, this calling, have not only demonstrated genuine Christian spirituality but by their lives and prayers have contributed to or called us to our own expressions of greater spirituality.

Pentecostal spirituality is no different, in a sense, from other forms of Christian spirituality. The symbols, rites, and rituals may differ a bit but beyond that, sometimes even in the midst of all that, the object is the same. My good friend Russell P. Spittler is undoubtedly correct when he notes that Spirituality is “the gestalt of piety,” and that it is “not native to the Pentecostal tradition” (“Spirituality, Pentecostal and Charismatic” in Burgess and McGee, eds., Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements (Regency/Zondervan, 1988), 804].

Emerging from the Wesleyan-Holiness movement with its emphasis upon sanctification, the Pentecostal Movement inherited some Wesleyan-Holiness “baggage.” Some of it was good, such as an emphasis upon a life of holiness. Some of it was not good. Sometimes those things in which one generation chose not to engage, the next generation chafed at. What one culture found to be a helpful consensus in their quest for genuine spirituality became signs of legalism and stagnation to the spiritual development of another culture. It is difficult today to explain to our children why chewing gum, playing ball, or drinking soda pop were such taboos among those who preceded us in the Pentecostal tradition. But they were important at the time, not only as signs against the encroachment of the modern world, but as genuine marks of spirituality, and because of that we should be slow to criticize.

Does this make pentecostal spirituality a relative matter, with each generation or each culture free to do that which is good in its own eyes? I think not, for we have, after all, adopted Scripture as our norm, and that stands above all things except the Living Word Himself. Some things do not change. Some things do. There are undoubtedly things which we do and hold that future Pentecostals will reject or