

Transformation

Spiritual growth and maturity

THE SPIRITUAL WAY

Body, mind, spirit

Outside the main faiths in western society, spirituality has popularly come to be expressed in the phrase 'body, mind, spirit'. This is a very broad phrase that is able to encompass the diversity of personal spiritual thinking in our supposedly secular culture. Here is a random quote that sums up the ideas that seem to shape this way of thinking:

'It seems that the body, mind and spirit are connected. The health of any one of these elements seems to affect the health of the others ...

Body as ACTION ...

Mind as REFLECTION ...

Spirit as INSPIRATION ...

Spirituality is what deepens us into ourselves ...'

The most significant thing that comes across is recognition of the need for a holistic approach to human personhood. Everything is integrated: the physical, emotional, intellectual and the spiritual. As we shall see this is completely in agreement with a biblical understanding and a place where Christians can find common ground.

The major question is what spiritual philosophy and worldview lies behind the 'body, mind, spirit' approach. In a word it is eclectic; everything from a spiritual humanism to being on the edge of most of the world faiths. The majority of people who identify with this approach would tend to have a 'Hindu-Buddhist' worldview with perhaps strong animist influences – but we must be careful not to over generalize. Probably a popular way of describing it is to call it 'pick-and-mix'.

Mainstream Christians have generally been very hostile the 'body, mind, spirit' movement, but wrongly so. Here is popular spirituality out in the public square sharing its spiritual experiences. The majority of participants have already tried church and felt that it failed to meet their most basic spiritual needs. While in many cases the movement may be shallow, confused and even superficial, it is where ordinary people are. The important this is for us to listen and learn from them, and hope to bring an authentic Christian understanding to the questions they are working with.

Some time ago a local church decided to set up a stand at a local 'body, mind, spirit' fair, as they booked up the organizer said to them, "What took you so long, we have been waiting for you!"

Wholeness and personhood

As we have already indicated the biblical approach to personhood is holistic; each person being a single totally integrated whole. The popular notion that



we are comprised of distinct elements such as 'body', 'soul' and 'spirit' is a complete misunderstanding of the biblical text.

We don't *have* a body we *are* a body. When the biblical writers speak of our 'heart' or 'spirit' or 'soul', they are talking about the *whole* of us, not just a part. Each speaks of a characteristic of the whole, with huge overlap between them.

Personal growth

Within, and alongside, the 'body, mind, spirit' understanding is a huge interest in what is referred to as 'personal growth'. Individuals become profoundly aware that their human potential offers many more possibilities than they have ever achieved and they want to realize much more. Others struggle with deep personal obstacles in their lives from which they want to be free and move on.

We have already seen that 'growth' is a fundamental biblical spiritual principle, and that life-giving 'change' is what true spirituality brings. The question is what unique contribution does Christian understanding bring to the popular desire for personal growth?

One of the problems we face is that the English words used in the translation of biblical texts referring to spiritual change and growth - words such as 'holiness', 'godliness' and 'sanctification' - they are popularly associated with religion, their meanings are either mistaken or not understood, and they are dismissed as unhelpful or irrelevant. We have the important task of reclaiming these ideas and communicating them in a vibrant contemporary way.

Holiness and maturity

'Be holy for I the Lord your God am holy'
(Lev 19:2)

Pursue peace ... and holiness,
without which no one will see God'
(Heb 12:14)

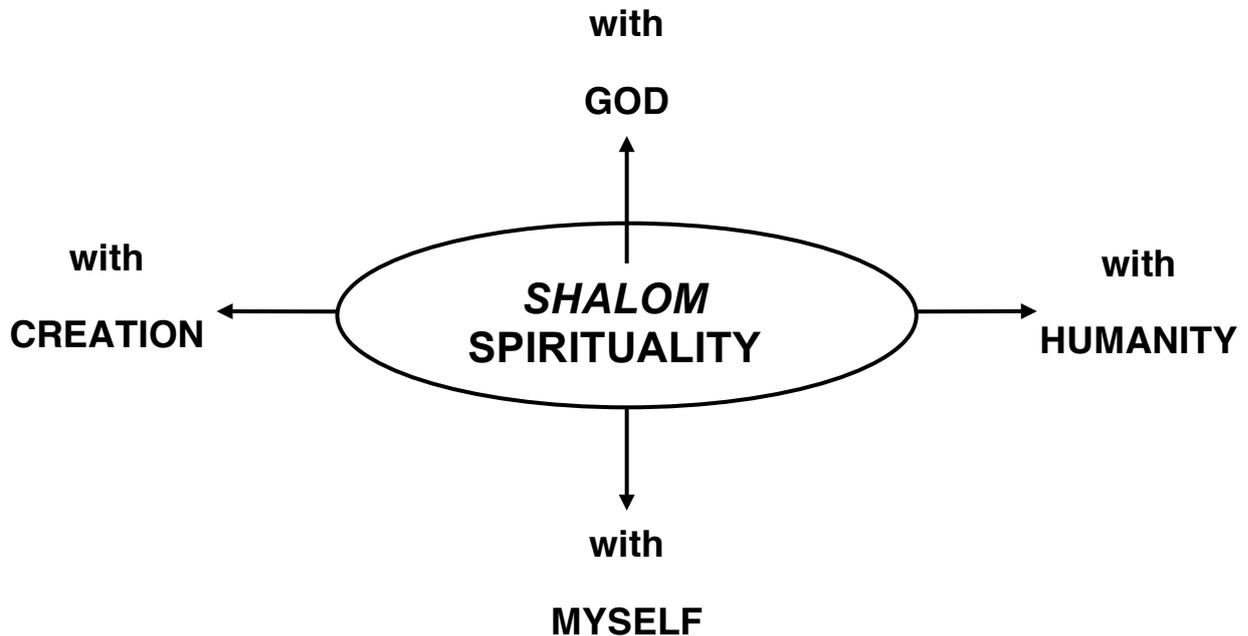
'Holiness' is one of the central biblical words to describe the nature of spirituality. It is the word used to translate the Hebrew word *qadosh*. Originally *qadosh* had nothing whatever to do with religion, it was an everyday word with a double meaning – 'belonging to' and 'different from'. I own a watch, there are tens of thousands of identical watches owned by other people, but this is my watch. It *belongs to me* so it is *different from* every other seemingly identical watch in the world. It is a holy watch! The best English word to translate *qadosh* is 'unique'.

Holiness is the character of God (cf Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8). Spirituality calls us to pursue holiness; God's nature becomes our nature. In totally belonging to God and being separate from anything that does not harmonize with the divine character. One of the many qualities of this unique character is beauty and splendour:

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name,
worship the Lord in beauty of holiness.
(Ps 29:2)



Pursue peace ... and holiness,
without which no one will see God'
(Heb 12:14)



WITH GOD - fellowship

Lover and beloved

Like a young man taking a virgin as his bride,
He who formed you will marry you.
As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
So your God will delight in you.
(Isa 62:5)

Christian spirituality has the deep resonance of a lovers longing for their beloved ¹. Our desire for God awakens a deep emotional response within us that is often seen to be akin to the relationship between a lover and their beloved. In biblical thought it is God who is the initiator. Yahweh is the husband of Israel; he chose her, wooed her in the wilderness and longs for her to love him (Hos 2:16; Isa 54:6; Jer 2:2; 3:20; Ezk 16:8).

The picture of God's passionate marital love for his people is continued in the New Testament. He is as jealous as a man betrothed to a virgin (2Cor 11:2).

¹ The idea of the relationship between the devotee and the divine being like that of the longing of the lover is a very widely used image in the history of spirituality. It was used frequent among the medieval devotional writers, but also in other faiths; in some of the traditions of Vishnu in Hinduism and among the mystic poets of Islam, such as Rumi.

Christ loves the church, dies for her, and cleanses her to present her in all her beauty for him to marry (Eph 5:25-27). “*Maranatha!*” the Aramaic exclamation, ‘Our Lord, Come!’ (1Cor 16:22) has all the feeling of a lovers cry.

Throughout scripture the ‘lover and beloved’ experience continues to be packed with tension. Here there is a strong sense of ‘the already’ but ‘not yet’. But through it all there is the incredible sense of God's love already embracing and fulfilling (cf Rev 19:7).

At the heart of spirituality there is devotion. The total commitment of love and self-giving which is simply a response and following the example of how God in Jesus has already acted towards us. Devotion is shown in the Hebrew concept of ‘*chesed*’: steadfast, loyal, faithful, covenant love (see Hos 6:6).

While Jesus was eating, a woman came with an alabaster jar full of very expensive perfume made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on Jesus' head ... Jesus said, “She has done a fine and beautiful thing for me ...”
(Mk 14:3-6)

If true devotion is in the heart, it must also revealed be in action (cf Lk 21:1-4; Mt 25:40).

Mystery of godliness

Everyone must agree,
deep is the mystery of godliness;
He² who was revealed in the flesh:
He who was vindicated by the Spirit:
He who was seen by angels:
He who has been preached among the nations:
He who has been believed in all over the world:
He who was taken up into glory.
(1Tim 3:16)

What sort of people ought you to be
in holiness and godliness.
(2Pt 3:11)

Godliness (Gk: *eusebeia*) is a great and almost untranslatable Greek word. It describes reverence towards both God and other people. It describes that attitude of mind, which respects people, and honours God and respects oneself. Eusebius defined it as, ‘reverence towards the one and only God, and the kind of life he would wish us to live’. William Barclay says. “Clearly this *eusebeia* is a tremendous thing. It never forgets the reverence due to God; it never forgets the rights due to people; it never forgets the respect due to self. It lives forever conscious of duty human and divine. It describes the

² Jesus is the incarnation of the mystery of godliness.



character of the person who never fails God, others or themselves.” This is spirituality summed up in one word! The mystery of godliness demonstrates what Jesus said was the greatest commandment:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your mind.
This is the greatest and first commandment.
And a second is like it:
‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’
On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets”.
(Mt 22:39)

The mystery is the revelation of the true character of godliness in Jesus who incarnates and examples it, enables it and now empowers it in us through the Holy Spirit.

Fear of the Lord

To sum up everything:
Fear God and keep his commandments;
this is human responsibility in its completeness.
(Ec 12:13)

Let us cleanse ourselves
from all that can defile flesh and spirit
perfecting holiness in the fear of God.
(2Cor 7:1)

The ‘fear of the Lord’ (Heb: *yirah*) is a biblical phrase that is synonymous with spirituality. It is trying to communicate a fundamental expression of our response and relationship with God in emotional and spiritual terms. It uses the word ‘fear’ but in no negative sense; it is a holy/unique fear, which comes from our experience of the living God. It is:

- Awe and wonder, mystery and knowledge, joy and reverence;
- Given by God (Jer 32:41) and enables people to respond to him (e.g. Gen 22:12);
- The fountain of life (Pr 14:27; 19:23), it is clean (Ps 19:9);
- The beginning of wisdom (Ps 111:10; Pr 1:7), brings God’s favour (Ps 147:11);
- It is one of the qualities of the Messiah (Isa 11:2);
- It is fulfilled in Jesus in his desire only to do the Father’s will (e.g. Jn 5:19-20).

The fear of the Lord is the desire of the lover to do only what their beloved wants, and the abhorrence of doing anything that would offend them³. There

³ Imagine someone getting ready for their first date with somebody they really adore; their feelings of panic, that they might mess things up by dressing unattractively or say something inappropriate or stupid! Those natural emotions can only properly described as ‘fear’. However, they are not afraid of the person they love and want to be with, but they are afraid



is not the slightest contradiction between the fear of the Lord and the freedom from fear the new covenant brings (Rm 8:15; 2Tm 1:7; Heb 2:15). In fact to be a disciple of Jesus is nothing less than to walk in the fear of the Lord (Acts 19:31) and binds Christians together (Eph 5:21).

WITH MYSELF - discipleship

Gentle yoke

“Come to me,
all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me:
for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.
For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”
(Mt 11:28-30)

It is said that a yoke is the only thing that you can add to a burden to make it lighter. In many cultures the yoke is seen as a symbol of spiritual discipline and learning. The Rabbis spoke of a Jewish proselyte as, ‘putting on the yoke of the Torah’ as they embraced and learned to live in the covenant. Hindu sages speak of ‘yoga’ (a word that comes from the same linguistic root as ‘yoke’) as a series of disciplines that will teach the participant what is needed to find spiritual fulfilment. In the light of this it is interesting to reflect on the idea of ‘the yoga of Jesus’!

Notice how Jesus takes an established symbol of spiritual discipline (which in so many religious contexts can be seen as harsh and demanding), and uses it as a picture of discipleship. A disciple is a ‘one who is learning’ which is at the heart of spirituality. Notice the words; rest, gentle, humble, easy. A yoke can appear restricting, inhibiting and chaffing; here it is symbol of rest and freedom!⁴ If you picture it as a double yoke (like those used for ploughing) you can imagine the other side being shared with Jesus - learning both from him and with him as you walk together.

Following to perfection

‘And we, with unveiled faces
reflecting like mirrors the glory of the Lord,
are being transformed into the same image
from glory to glory,
this is the work of the Lord who is Spirit.’
(2 Cor 3:18)

of spoiling something they want to be perfect. These are exactly the emotions connected with the idea of the ‘fear of the Lord’.

⁴ It has been imaginatively suggested that there could have been a sign above the door to the carpenter’s workshop in Nazareth that read, ‘Our yokes are easy’!



Jesus, like his Father, is the sanctified one; 'the holy one of God' (Mk 1:24; Lk 4:34). He is 'the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being' (Heb 1:3). He is the one who had the Spirit without measure (Jn 3:34), and of whom the Father said he was 'well pleased' and to whom all people should listen (Matt 3:17; 17:5). He personally identified himself with 'good' (Jn 10:11,14) and 'goodness' with God (Mk 10:18). He was called 'Good Master' (Lk 18:18), and he went about doing good (Jn 10:32; Acts 10:38). The whole purpose of the incarnation was that those to whom he came could share his uniqueness.

Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect ...follow me.'
(Matt 19:21)

Sanctification has discipleship at its core and perfection as its goal. It begins with Jesus' call 'Follow me!' to participate in his perfect humanity and to take up our cross and follow *him* [Mark 8:34-36]. Within the church Christians have often taken one of two polarized positions:

- **Mystics:** emphasise relationship with Jesus rather than his commands;
- **Activists:** emphasise commands rather than relationship with Jesus.

True disciples are 'mystic activists'. The Anabaptist leader Hans Denk said, 'No one can truly know Christ unless they follow him in life, and no one may follow him unless they have first known him':

'... whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, "I abide in him" ought to walk just as he walked' (1Jn 2:5-6).

'No pupil is greater than their teacher ...
a pupil should be satisfied to become like their teacher.'
(Matt 10:24)

Sanctification is to become like Jesus and discipleship is the path. In Jesus, sanctification is revolutionary. He is constantly asking for qualities in the lives of his followers that run completely counter to the grain of popular thinking.⁵ Love is the hallmark of holiness.⁶ The sanctified life is possible only because of the work of the Holy Spirit.⁷

⁵ He calls for meekness, humility, compassion, purity, a forgiving spirit and love for your enemies and much more. There is behaviour to be renounced; hypocrisy, retaliation, a critical spirit etc (cf Mt 5:5-8,44; 6:5-6; 7:1-5; 18:21; 23:2-12; Lk 6:29-30 etc). They are not only to be 'merciful' (Lk 6:36) but they are also to be 'perfect' (Mt 5:48). This is not natural human behaviour, something radical must happen. Jesus teaches that we are contaminated by our inner attitudes (Mk 7:15). We are to be like a tree that gives only good fruit (Lk 6:43-45). Jesus makes purity is an important sign of the sanctified life. Being pure is being clean (Jn 15:2). However, he removes it from religion and ritual and fills it with moral content (Mt 23:26).

⁶ Disciples are to love God and their neighbours as themselves (Mk 12:29-31). Jesus unique command is that they love others as he has loved them (Jn 13:34; 15:12). They show obedience by loving as he asks (Jn 14:15). This act of loving reveals them to be not just

Teachable learner

We have already noted that discipleship is the pathway to sanctification. Only someone who is willing to learn can be a disciple; for 'disciple' means 'one who learns'. Teachableness, and a sense of always being beginners in spiritual things, is of the essence. Thomas Merton said, 'We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners all our life.' So much teaching on holiness comes across in an austere manner leaving most people feeling helpless, hopeless and too weak to manage. The reality is that God comes to us in our weakness and begins to lead us to holiness from there:

'Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.' (Matt 11:28-30)

This is the spirit of sanctification: gentleness. A yoke is the only thing you can add to a burden to make it lighter. A 'yoke' is an ancient oriental symbol for teaching and learning. The way to holiness is learning from the gentle teacher. The task of learning is deeply serious, demanding total commitment, but the discipline of discipleship is tender and nurturing.

People who are learning make mistakes. Babies beginning to walk fall over. Saints discovering holiness stumble. But it is not the mistakes, but the progress that is vital. We will fail, but there is always forgiveness, support and encouragement. But we will learn. Let us be honest, not idealistic, about sanctification; one step at a time in the power of the Spirit leads us to his likeness.

Childlikeness

The disciple must change and become like a child and begin to learn as a child does:

'Unless become like children,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'
(Matt 18:3)

A child looks at the world with wonder, questions, awe and yet confidence. A child touches the world with curiosity, excitement, sense of discovery and joy. A child has emotional and intellectual gentleness and vulnerability coupled with a remarkable honesty and even shrewdness

disciples but friends (Jn 15:14). He shows the depth of love involved by laying down his life for them (Jn 15:13) and this is what love will lead them to be prepared to do also (cf Lk 9:23).

⁷ He is the source of life and rebirth (Jn 3:3,5). The Spirit is the teacher (Jn 14:26), guide (Jn 16:13) and witness (Jn 15:26). He is the one who vitalizes and empowers (Jn 7:37-39; Lk 24:49). The writers of the New Testament letters develop this powerfully (e.g. 1Pt 1:2; Rom 15:16; 1Th 4:7-8; 2Th 2:13).



‘Wise as serpents and harmless as doves’
(Matt 10:16)

Sanctification comes only by way of sensitivity and simplicity. Childlikeness must be a constant characteristic of our holiness; even in maturity :

‘... be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults.’
(1Cor 14:20)

Garments of salvation

I put on righteousness and it clothed me;
my justice was like a robe and a turban.
(Job 29:14)

Around his waist he will wear the belt of justice,
and faithfulness will be a girdle around his body.
(Isa 11:5)

He put on righteousness like a breastplate,
and a helmet of salvation on his head;
and he put on garments of justice for clothing,
and wrapped himself in zeal like a cloak.
(Isa 59:17)

He has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has wrapped me in a robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom is decked with garlands,
and as a bride adorns herself with jewels.
(Isa 61:10)

Clothing is both a covering for our nakedness⁸ and an expression of our character. Clothes both protect *what* we are and project *who* we are. Your clothes announce you⁹. What you wear says so much about you as a person. Style is an essential key to identity; it has been well said that ‘fashion is a substitute for style’. For these reasons it is easy to understand why the language of dress becomes the language of spirituality.

God is clothed in majesty, strength and honour (Ps 93:1; 104:1). Priests wear holy garments (Ex 28:2-4), and are seen to be clothed in righteousness and salvation (Ps 132:9; 2Chr 6:41).

Throughout scripture clothing metaphors communicate spiritual truth: -

- God clothed man and woman to cover their shame and nakedness (Gen 3:21);

⁸ In the 1970's there was the saucy button-badge that proclaimed, “Remember I am naked underneath my clothes” – it made the point very clearly!

⁹ The title of Lauri Lewin's autobiography, *Naked is the Best Disguise*, about her life as a stripper, makes a powerful statement about the significance of clothing in revealing who we really are. We may try to hid behind our clothes only to reveal much of who we really are. Here is a wonderful paradox!

- Clothing symbolised acceptance for both the prodigal son (Lk 15:22) and the wedding guests (Mt 22:11-12);
- The kingdom of God demands entirely new garments, not the patching holes in the old with bits of new (Mt 9:16);
- To be 'clothed and in his right mind' was a profound statement about the healed state of the demoniac (Mk 5:15);
- We are to beware of wolves in sheep's clothing (Mt 7:15);
- To prepare for action is to 'gird up your minds' (1Pt 1:13).

Believers have 'put of' and 'laid aside' their garments from the past (Col 3:8-9; Eph 4:22,25) and anything that would inhibit them (Heb 12:1), and they have 'put on' Jesus Christ (Rm 13:14; Gal 3:27). They are clothed in a new self-renewed in God's image (Col 3:10; Eph 4:24). They are clothed in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, righteousness, holiness and truth (Col 3:12; 1Pt 5:5; Eph 4:24).

The clothing is not only for beauty; it is also for protection ¹⁰. They are to put on the armour of light (Rm13:12), and the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of salvation (1Th 5:8). There is the famous injunction to, "Put on the whole armour of God"; belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, sandals of peace, shield of faith, helmet of salvation and sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:11-17).

Although the spiritual person is clothed now, there is still a longing for the final eschatological clothing to come (2Cor 5:2,4). While we are waiting we are to keep our garments (Rev 16:15) From the heavenly perspective the garments of the faithful are white; symbolising their purity (e.g. Rev 7:9; 19:14).

At the transfiguration 'a change come over Jesus, and his clothes became shining white; whiter than anyone in the world could wash them' (Mk 9:2-3). This is a profound statement and an important focus about clothing as a picture of spirituality. Transfiguration is what spirituality is all about.

WITH HUMANITY - relationship

Community of Unity

"... making every effort to maintain
the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."
(Eph 4:3)

"... until all of us come to the unity of the faith
and the knowledge of the Son of God,
to maturity,
to the measure of the full stature of Christ."
(Eph 4:13)

¹⁰ This is why the poor, who had had their cloak 'taken as a pledge' during the day, were to have it returned to them for the night so as to keep them warm (cf Ex 22:26-27 Dt 24:17).



Spirituality can often appear to be a very solitary experience, and aspects of it will always be so. However, Christian spirituality is also to do with community and being a spiritual body, the body of Christ ¹¹:

“Indeed the body does not consist of one member but of many...
If one member suffers, all suffer together with it;
if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.
Now you are the body of Christ
and individually members of it.”
(1Cor 12:14, 26-27)

Our spiritual growth and development, even our communing with God, has an essential corporate dimension to it. There is this flow of life from God to each member, mutually enriching, empowering and maturing.

Holy community

‘In him the whole structure is joined together
and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;
in whom you are also built together spiritually
into a dwelling place for God.’
(Eph 2:21-22)

An essential truth about sanctification is that it is God’s intention that it should take place within the energised and supportive structure of the committed community of faith. It should never be a solitary experience of striving, and sometimes failing, alone. The circle of the church is the environment where holiness is shared and nurtured, and then expressed to the world.

The church is the community where the uniqueness of the mature and sanctified humanity is already ‘realised’, in its head and foundation – Jesus. From its source in him it flows through its members who are ‘not yet’ fully realizing it, but are beginning to. Sanctification takes place through being part of the church and growing up together into him.

Local church communities must actively create a setting where their members can share together their struggles and victories in an atmosphere of encouragement, nurture and prayer. It must be a place where forgiveness, nourishment and new beginnings can be found. It should be the primary place at which ‘re-reflexing’ can be worked at; where brothers and sisters lovingly help us to identify persistent old responses and put pure ones in their place. We are to become a community that is excited by holiness and experiments with the habits of godliness.

¹¹ This is a huge, important and complex subject to which many scriptures refer. Here we are simply making the point about the dimension of community being vital to a Christian concept of spirituality. See Rm 12:5; 1Cor 10:17;12:12; Eph 1:23; 2:16; 5:23; Col 1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15 plus the passages referred to above.



WITH CREATION - companionship

Sacred harmony

There is a strong and sustained biblical tradition that one of the hallmarks of a truly righteous person is that they live in harmony with creation and the animal world. This is an essential quality of true spirituality and a hallmark of the new creation (cf Hos 2:18; Isa 11:6-9; 65:25). Among the examples are:

- The story of the 'Noah family' and the flood (Gen 6-9) we have a righteous family living in this 'floating box' (the literal meaning of the word 'ark') in harmony with representatives of the natural and wild animal world.
- The story of Daniel and the lion pit, a person whose righteousness and godliness not only created an offence with the corrupt political figures but was his protection in the company of the lions (Dan 6:1-23).

There are the words of Job:

'For you shall be at league with the stones of the field
and the wild animals will be at peace with you'
(Job 5:23)

There are also the words of Guthlac the hermit of the fens:

"Have you never learned in holy writ
that he who hath led his life after God's will,
the wild beasts and the wild birds will become more intimate with him"

We are told that Jesus was '*with* the wild beasts' (Mk1:13). This word 'With ...' is probably the single most exciting biblical ecological word. We are called to 'companionship' (rather than 'stewardship') within creation. In Jesus we see both authority and harmony in nature; we are told that the winds and the waves obey him (Mk 4:41) and he rides into Jerusalem on an ungentled donkey (Mk 11:7).

Gentle strength

Following his resurrection Jesus calls us to proclaim the gospel to the whole of creation (Mk 16:15). The church is the community called to hasten the liberation of humanity and nature into full new creation freedom in Jesus' name. We must learn to live as priests in harmony with creation.

We have been told that we are given 'dominion' within creation (Gen 1:26,28), but it must be expressed as 'meekness' – the word is to be understood as 'strength under perfect control' (cf Zech 9:9, Mt 21:5). Jesus himself told us that it is 'The meek shall inherit the earth' (Mt 5:5).

As truly spiritual people we must learn to act as prophets in solidarity within creation. As we have seen the symbol of the 'ark': God's people living in harmony with wild creatures amid chaos (Gen 7:14-15). Also the symbol of



the 'whale' (large fish), especially in the Jonah story we see the call for God's people to identify with living creatures and so to recover their role in God's purposes (Jonah 1:15-2:10).

It is our feet that connect us most directly to creation and the earth; notice how often 'feet' are linked to the concept of *shalom* (cf Ps 85:13; Isa 52:7; Nah 1:15; Eph 6:16; Lk 1:79). A maxim to live by is:

'Everything is sacred,
live gently in this sacred world with wisdom'

WORKING HOLINESS

Being perfect

'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'¹²
(Matt 5:48)

These words of Jesus are exciting yet disturbing; the call to perfection and sinlessness. They are his interpretation of, 'Be holy for I the Lord your God am holy' (Lev 19:2). A parallel statement, 'Be merciful just as your heavenly Father is merciful' (Lk 6:36), gives the example of how perfection is to express itself.

The first letter of John contains some strongly worded directives about sinlessness:

- 3:6 'No one who abides in him sins, no one who sins has either seen or known him'
- 3:9 'No one born of God commits sin, for God's nature abides in them, and they cannot sin because they are born of God'
- 5:18 'We know that everyone born of God does not sin, but he who was born of God keeps them, and the evil one does not touch them'

Paul's letter to the Romans seems to suggest that sinless perfection is possible:

- 6:2 'How can we who died to sin still live in it?'
- 6:6-7 'We know our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For the person who has died is freed from sin'
- 6:11 '... so you must consider yourselves dead to sin'
- 6:14 'For sin will have no dominion over you'
- 6:22 '... but now you have been set free from sin'

¹² The word 'perfect' (Gk: *teleios*) strictly means 'complete', and in this context cannot mean anything less than the perfection of God himself; the goal of the purpose of God.



So the call to sinlessness and perfection seems clear. But how we interpret these scriptures in the light of Christian experience? Do we believe we can achieve 'sinless perfection' in this life?

Sinlessness

'May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely;
and may your spirit, soul and body be kept sound and blameless
at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.
The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.'
(1Th 5:23-24)

Scripture like this should inspire us towards discipleship and spirituality. Whatever particular interpretation we put on individual verses, the possibility of sinlessness must not be lost. Sadly, the subject raises little excitement. Most Christians react with a sense of guilt and frustration. It is a topic that easily divides Christians:

- Most refuse any possibility due to their own personal experience and the belief that such an idea underestimates the true nature and extent of sin;
- Some take a rigid position in favour of sinlessness that can appear both elitist and dogmatic or patently misguided.

Neither position helps towards a clearer understanding of the text, nor do they encourage the subject of sanctification to be taken on seriously and practically within the church.

What do those scripture passages mean?

- Jesus' use of the word 'perfect' (Matt 5:48) is best understood as 'mature';¹³ a life which displays a consistent wholehearted relationship in devotion with God, rather than a flawless moral character.
- John's statements (1Jn 3:6, 9; 5:18) all use the verbs in the present tense, which suggests that he is challenging persistent sin ('mortal' 5:16), not occasional failures ('non-mortal' 5:17), for which there is forgiveness (1:9); to declare that we are without sin is deception (1:8).
- Paul's teaching (Rom 6:2, 6-7, 11, 14, 22) says we share in Jesus' triumph over sin; to persistently sin denies this conquest; the fact he challenges them to 'let no sin therefore reign' (v12), shows the threat from sin is ever present.

Although the words of Jesus, John and Paul recognise believers contending with a sinful world and the possibility of occasional failure, we must not let their words lose their power. In Jesus the 'age to come' has already broken in ahead of time. We live in this age and sin's effects still affect the new person that we are in Christ. We do still sin from time to time, but we are 'overcomers'

¹³ See G Friedrich *'Theological Dictionary of the New testament'* Eerdmans 1972 Vol 8

- Article *teleios* by Gerhard Delling p 76-77



open to the possibilities of grace and the limitless potential for sanctification. An eschatological understanding of truth sees no fixed limits on the extent to which the new age can impact the present; but it does not judge or discourage those who fall short.

Sanctification is about a person's individual spiritual development; with all its uniqueness and struggle. Yet that is part of the whole dynamic of Christian hope. We must have a broad vision; avoiding the unreal and rigidity. We need a response that channels the dynamic of grace and the Spirit towards the fullness of our humanity in Christ into whom we grow (Eph 4:13, 15-16).¹⁴

Re-reflexing

‘I have been crucified with Christ;
and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.
And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God
who loved me and gave himself for me.’
(Gal 2:19-20)

These words illustrate the radical way sanctification is rooted in Jesus' act of atonement. Our identification with his death will influence our expectations about sinlessness.

Our 'old self' was a rebel against God, a slave to sin, but through baptism we have identified with the death and resurrection of Jesus. The 'old self' is dead, the power of sin is broken and we walk in 'newness of life' enjoying sanctification (Rom 6:1-23). Is this the end of the story?

The crucial issue is that we enjoy this new life within our 'mortal bodies' (Rom 6:12) or 'flesh' (Gal 2:19). The flesh and its appetites are not in themselves evil; they were created good by God. However, its desires are doorways through which sin used to operate (Eph 2:3), and will still try to influence (Rom 6:12), but the Spirit is challenging and reorienting (Gal 5:16). We are a 'new creation' (2Cor 5:17). Its reality has to be outworked by the Spirit. The overall momentum of turning our desires god-ward is not easy. A very practical way of describing this sanctification process is to call it 're-reflexing'¹⁵; learning by the power of the Spirit to react spontaneously in a Christlike manner.

The struggle between the 'new self' and the old impulses leads many Christians to believe consistent holiness is unattainable. They see themselves caught in a 'sin-warp'[cf. Rom 7:15-19]. This leads to fundamental pessimism. The only hope is to struggle and wait for the return of Jesus. This seems to deny what the New Testament expects about sanctification. In contrast, those who argue for 'sinless perfection' can be in danger of minimizing the nature of sin.

¹⁴ The material in the last two paragraphs have been influenced and inspired by TN Finger '*Christian Theology* : an eschatological approach Vol 2 Herald Press 1989 p 210-212

¹⁵ This is a phrase coined by Alan Kreider



Holiness is harmony with the character of God; only he can pronounce someone perfect. Sanctification is the goal, not a stage, but the spirit of the Bible is reaching towards perfection, expecting increasing success, awaiting God's verdict, but not feeling hopelessly trapped. The biblical evidence is clear; sanctification is God's work in which we actively cooperate:

- '... let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and Spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of the Lord' (2Cor 7:1)
- '... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Phil 2:12)

Right attitude

'But thanks be to God,
who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
... be steadfast, immovable,
always excelling in the work of the Lord ...'
(1Cor 15:57-58)

Critical to our growth and development in sanctification is our expectation and response. There is a great deal of negative attitude about practical godliness among many Christians; it is seen as idealistic and that it is inevitable that they will sin; there is thought to be little scope for substantial change. Where there is focus on holiness it so often simply provokes guilt and promotes legalism. All this must be fundamentally challenged.

We have seen that holiness is sourced in God. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus have broken the power of sin, and the outpouring of the Spirit energises us with the life of the age to come ahead of time. We have also heard the call and the command of God to be actively involved in embracing perfection and sinlessness:

- 'Be perfect' (Matt 5:48)
- 'Pursue holiness' (Heb 12:14)
- 'Strengthen your hearts in holiness' (1Th 3:13)
- 'Consider yourselves dead to sin' (Rm 6:11)
- 'Do not let sin reign' (Rm 6:12)
- 'Lead a life worthy' (Eph 4:1)
- 'Put off the old nature' (Eph 4:22)
- 'Be holy' (1Pet 1:15)
- 'Live worthy of the gospel' (Phil 1:27)
- 'Work out your own salvation' (Phil 2:12)

All of this should inspire us to strive with great enthusiasm for an increasing encounter with holiness in an attitude that is saturated with grace, liberated by joy and focused in hope; but in no way twisted through introspection. Victory over sin is a present reality in Jesus; to be encountered, experimented with and proven to be true on a moment-by-moment, daily and lifelong basis! And if we do sin there is forgiveness.

True repentance is not an act, but an attitude. Not an event but a lifestyle; a radical change of mind, a renewed way of thinking. Not simply some point in the past when we turned from our sin to Jesus, but a constant joyful turning from sin and learning to think and act like God does.

Why didn't Jesus sin? Simply to reply, 'Because he was God!' is not sufficient. Jesus did not sin because he did not *want* to sin! The fact he was divine enabled him to have the power to be sinless; but the desire to sin was not there. He is our example. True repentance brings us to a place where we simply do not want to sin, our heart is after God. This is the right attitude. This is the 'fear of the Lord'. The Spirit is there to empower us, and there is forgiveness if we fail.

Purity

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.'
(Matt 5:8)

We have seen that to be holy is to be pure. As people, the source of what we are, and the motive for what we do, is to be 'clean', 'transparent' and unmixed. We are to have perfect inward sanctity. We are pure. We have been washed clean (Eph 5:26), we have 'a pure heart and good conscience' (1Tim 1:5).

Purity carries a strong sense of innocence; found both in true childlikeness and true maturity. Illustrated so beautifully in the words of Jesus, 'Wise as serpents, innocent as doves' (Matt 10:16); this is prudent purity. All this is inseparably linked with a sense of beauty, which Paul presents in his cascade of qualities that make up the sanctified mind:

'... whatever is true ... honorable ... just ... pure ... pleasing ... commendable ... excellent ... and praiseworthy, think about these things'.
(Phil 4:8)

True purity proclaims freedom. The human religious mindset sees purity as something that can be found, experienced and maintained only by restricting, enclosing, protecting and inhibiting. In new covenant sanctification, the opposite is true; 'To the pure all things are pure' (Titus 1:15). Source is everything; Jesus made it clear that it is what comes out of a person that is critical (Mark 7:15). The pure person walks free within the world; not only keeping themselves unstained by the world (Jas 1:27), but also actually contaminating (sanctifying) that which has been corrupted by evil with cleanliness and holiness (Mark 1:40-44)!

Being 'pure in heart' refers to the centre and source of selfhood. Purity will therefore mark our self-expression. Without question, two of the most fundamental and intimately connected aspects of human self-expression are sex and violence. This being so, it is a helpful practical litmus test of our spirituality as to whether our sexuality and responses to aggression are marked by the unmixed, clean, transparent innocence and freedom of purity.



Temptation

‘Our struggle is not against flesh and blood,
but against the rulers, against the powers,
against the world forces of this darkness,
against the spiritual forces of wickedness
in the heavenly places.’
(Eph 6:12)

Sanctification intensifies our struggle with the forces of darkness. Every attempt is being made to overcome us. It is very important that we understand the nature of spiritual struggle. The word for ‘temptation’ (Gk: *peirasmos*) can be used in two senses, ‘to entice’ and ‘to test’.

On one hand we face real hostility, we recognise that there are destructive negative forces out to conquer us (1Pt 4:12-19). We stand in the teeth of tribulation (cf. Jn 16:33). Our adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour (1Pt 5:8). Temptation is not from God, but it is when ‘a person is enticed by their own desire and lured away by their own lust’ (Jas 1:14). Every effort is being made to entwine us in evil. Jesus is our example in dealing with temptation; he was tempted in every way like us; yet without sin (Heb 4:15). Hence the power of Jesus’ words when he declares that the ‘ruler of this world’ comes and finds nothing in him (Jn 14:30) Whatever the temptation, God has promised always to provide us with a way of escape (1Cor 10:13), if we are prepared to see and accept it. He has promised to deliver us from evil (Matt 6:13).

However, temptation is used by God to reveal our faithfulness and character (cf. Ex 20:20; Dt 8:2). We must learn to look at temptation positively; it is part of God's quality control programme. It is a vital aid to the maturing of spirituality. Every challenge is an opportunity to be overcomers (1Jn 5:4). When we find ourselves being tempted we need to reflect on the experience and understand why that particular incident was able to affect us in the way that it did. This will tell us much about ourselves: areas of weakness in our character, things that need strengthening and protecting. We don't actively seek temptation (Matt 6:13), but it will come! When it does we must learn from it and use it as a sanctifying force.

Transfiguration

‘... the righteous will shine like the sun
in the kingdom of their Father.’
(Matt 13:43)

The whole of sanctification is about transfiguration. Jesus is our example, our model and our goal, which we will certainly attain as we work towards it together in the grace of God and the power of the Spirit.

‘... to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,
and to clothe yourselves in the new self,
created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness’
(Eph 4:23-24)



‘Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transfigured by the renewing of your minds,
so you may discern what is the will of God –
what is good and acceptable and perfect.’
(Rm 12:2)

‘All of us ... seeing the glory of the Lord ...
are being transfigured into the same image from one degree of glory to
another.’
(2Cor 13:18)

‘... what we will be has not yet been revealed.
What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him,
for we will see him as he is.
And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.’
(1Jn 3:2)

Questions

1. How would you advise a Christian who was struggling with persistent sin in their lives? What theological teaching and pastoral advice would you give?
2. How can we learn to use temptation and spiritual struggle creatively? What should be our attitude to sanctification?
3. The language and expectation of holiness, spiritual maturity and perfection often stimulate disturbance and even hostility in certain parts of the Christian community. Why do you think this is? How can the difficulties be met? What do you think is needed to get Christians universally excited about sanctification as a practical part of their spiritual journey in an applied way with very practical results?

Reading and Resources

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