



What is True Spirituality?

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When traveling to strange places where there is no navigator, we need a clear milestone or correct map. When traveling on the sea where there is no road, we need a good radar or compass. If the milestone and map or the radar or compass is not correct we are sure to get lost. Similarly, it is important that Christians have true spirituality as a milestone, map, radar and compass in the pilgrimage of their lives. It is more important today because we are living in an age of superficiality and non-biblical spirituality.

The Crisis of Spirituality

The crisis we face today in spirituality is that of what Paul warned of in 2 Timothy 3:5, namely, “having a form of godliness but denying its power.” It is easy to have a faith that looks good on the outside and goes through the motions of Christianity, but it is difficult to have a faith that has reality. It is like the King in the Hans Christian Anderson’s “Naked King”, who walks proudly in the streets thinking that he is well dressed though in reality he was naked. Would it be too much to call this kind of spirituality ‘ugly spirituality’? I would like to just briefly look at the 3 ugly spiritualities.

(1) The ugly spirituality is the “show-off” spirituality. This is a spirituality that shows off one's good deeds and faith. Faith that should be genuine before God becomes a way to show off to people, and good deeds that are meant to be done for ones neighbors become something that we boast of with pride. This is the exact reverse of the principle of the Kingdom of God and biblical spirituality. This is “the show-off spirituality where faith and ethic work the other way round. Categories of faith like giving, praying, fasting should be hidden but ethical actions like love, justice be broadcast.” (John Stott)

The Pharisees whom Jesus met belonged to this lot. They prayed, fasted, and gave offerings

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not secretly to God but to show off to people that they were righteous. (Matt, 6:1-21). And all the good deeds done to their neighbors were just a way to bribe God which made them non-practitioners of the law (Matt, 5:13-48). They made so many little laws and rules and emphasized practicing them to reach a higher level of spirituality. They were interested in 'how to increase spirituality'. The reason why Christians are spiritually powerless and socially ineffective is because faith and ethics are out of place.

(2) The next common form of ugly spirituality is negative eccentric and ascetic spirituality. Some people are so serious in their faith that they are very negative and even pessimistic. They understand spirituality as the destruction of humanness of man and sheltering oneself from the world's evil. There are many Christians who give up participation in spiritual warfare in the world and simply settle down in their Christian circle where they become isolated from the world.

This was exactly the case with the Colossian church. That is, they were pessimistic, ascetic, and they pursued "higher" spiritual life. (Col.2: 16-20). Their motto was "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" If one thinks the best spirituality is rendering his daily life worthless and pursuing the "spiritual" world, then that isn't Christianity. It is eccentric and ascetic spirituality. This kind of negative spirituality "looks as if it is very wise and spiritual in our secular lives, but in reality it has no value in fighting our sins." (Ranald Macaulay)

(3) The last ugly spirituality is anti-intellectual spirituality. East and West alike, Christians are becoming anti-intellectual. "Intellect hinders faith", and "Studies are the enemy of faith" they say in the churches. David Bradshaw points out that in American churches "there are many people who have a saved soul with the intellect of the Babylonians." Especially in the age where personal experiences and feelings are highly valued, Christian mind loses its ground.

Like the apostle Paul said, we are living in a world where people "we do not peddle the word of God for profit" (2Cor, 2:17). The word "peddle" in English means "to sell" but more correctly translated in Korean means "to mix". The problem of the church was a mixing the ideas of the world with Christianity and it raised an intellectual confusion. In the Corinthian church there people were mixing Judaism and secular thoughts with Christian doctrine but it couldn't be solved because of the anti-intellectual attitude of the people. We face the same problem today. This kind of spirituality separates believing and knowing, which we should unite, and it reduces Christianity to an anti-intellectual religion.

The Cause and Effect of Ugly Spirituality

There are many reasons for ugly, unbiblical spirituality, but I would like to look at three

main causes, and then think about its effects.

(1) The influence of eastern religion is the biggest cause for ugly spirituality in Korea. Our culture has relied on Buddhism and Confucianism for a long time. We are in its influence whether we want or not. It is our world view from which we judge things and by which we live. The pessimism of Buddhism and the epistemology of Confucianism act on the minds of the people even after they have become Christians.

According to Buddhism, all the things we see in this world are illusions and so everything is vain. To escape from this empty life and reach the state of "Nirvana", which is salvation, is very difficult. That is why Buddhism and the Zen-cult concentrate on meditation away from everyday life to be saved from this vain world.

For example, the late Buddhist priest Sungchul, who was greatly respected, didn't speak for 10 years, and didn't lie down for 8 years, and lived in the mountains all his life. When he left his wife and daughter to turn Buddhism, he said, "I couldn't change 100 Won (10 pence) for 10 Won (1 pence)."

The spirituality of the Buddhism is very eccentric, pessimistic, and ascetic, like the Gnostics in the early church. Jerram Barrs carefully commented at L'Abri Conference Seoul 1992, "This may be the reason why Korean Christians are very much interested in outward spiritual hard training, to show that they are more spiritual than the Buddhists." I totally agree with his opinion.

According to Confucianism, the completion of man is realizing his "self-consciousness," that is, his moral self, and this is the ultimate value of knowledge. The best way to reach this "moral self" is to stop using one's mind, because they believe the human mind is so affected by desire and emotion that it hinders us from knowing the ultimate truth. So the cognitive subject is not the mind but the heart.

"The heart" here is not "the minds" of *nous* or the *kardia* of Christianity, but the sense, or the intuition. Mencius called it "affiliation(情)" which means the "pure emotion" of man. It is the feeling of discomfort compassion caused by one's sympathy for another, which flows naturally from the human nature. The late professor of the Korea University, Kim Yongok, called it the "Creative Feeling." This may be a reason why Korean Churches are so emotional and experiential rather than intellectual and rational.

(2) The dualism of the west is another cause of ugly spirituality. The dualism has its roots in Plato's ideas, and in Korea it gained its popularity through mainly western education and the followers of Watchman Nee of China. The quote from Alfred North Whitehead; "The history of western philosophy is only the footnotes of Plato" is enough to understand the influence of

dualism in the history of philosophy and the history of the church. Dualism divides this world into two; the material and the mental. In the material realm there is the body, senses, and reason of man. These are only temporary things and imperfect “shadows.” Soul or the spirit belongs to the mental realm, and it is thought as perfect and eternal “idea”.

This kind of dualism brought a very unhealthy mysticism and asceticism. They treated reason, language, and the body of man as unspiritual and valued only silence and meditation and more “spiritual” practices. They said the everyday language of man is not fit for communication with a divine being. In this way man’s basic humanness is destroyed, and the everyday life of man is secularized. They say the spirit is locked up in the body, the ultimate freedom is death. To set the spirit free from the body, they mistreat their body which can even sometimes lead to death. In that way they can make the spirit more clean and pure. And that is their salvation. They claim that such things as being united to a divine being, ascetic practices, being above worldly things, and suicide are the highest spiritual experiences. These are the typical results of dualism.

(3) Modern philosophy and theology is partly the cause of ugly spirituality in that it causes anti-intellectual spirituality. The evident examples can be seen in people such as Schleiermacher: “Religion is the realm of emotion and will, not reason.” Karl Marx said “Religion is the self-consciousness of man and one's emotion and the sign of the oppressed.” Kierkegaard said “It was the leap of faith that made Abraham able to give Issac.” They all claim that faith and reason are mutually exclusive. Sometimes intellect is regarded as the obstacle of faith, or the “enemy” of spiritual experience. This view insists that the essence of Christian faith is “anti-intellectual.”

Some theologians and pastors even say that Paul’s evangelism was anti-intellectual. The verse they quote is Colossians 2:8; “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” But what Paul means here is not that all philosophy and the pursuit of academic studies are vain, but that human reason independent of God's word is. Paul is criticizing those who don't follow the biblical thinking based on the Bible; certainly he is not criticizing thinking itself.

Some say Paul's evangelism in Athens was a failure because he reasoned with them, but the bible tells us that Paul tried reasoning, persuading and arguing in Philippi, Athens and a few other places as well, and there he led many people, like Lydia to Jesus (Acts 16-17). Without transformed intellect, true spirituality and effective evangelism were impossible to attain for Paul and other apostles.

What is Biblical ‘True Spirituality’?

We studied that the pessimism, anti-intellectualism and showing-off are not the characteristics of the biblical spirituality. Then what is true spirituality according to the Bible and the historic Christianity?

(1) True spirituality is restoring God's image in all the areas of our life. The "image (*ikon*)" here, is the word used in Bible to explain the characteristics of the way man was created and it also explains the essence of spiritual experience. The image of God is God's knowledge, righteousness, holiness, love, creativity etc. (Eph. 4:22-24, Col. 3:9-10, 2Cor. 3:18). Spirituality is the spiritual experience of those who come to believe the Lord Jesus Christ as their savior and earn righteousness as God's children and it is related to the doctrine of sanctification.

Spirituality is not a program, or something that happens in the same way to everybody, but it is the experience in which each person has the image of God restored in them by the power of the Holy Spirit in Christ. The spiritual experience here is not only the salvation of the soul but also the change of a whole person. Calvin acknowledged this and said, "The only purpose of man is restoring the image of God, which is damaged and lost because of Adam's sin." (J. Calvin, Inst., 3:3:9)

The restoring of the God's image encompasses all dimensions of human experience: the spiritual, psychological, social and the ecological relationships (Lk. 10:27; Rom. 3:25; Eph. 4:24-6:22). The Restoration is the recovering of the Lordship of Christ and recovery of our humanness in all the areas of our life. Francis A. Schaeffer puts it this way: "True spirituality should be emphasized in all the areas of our life, from art and literature to law and government. All of human life is under the Lordship of Jesus Christ."

(2) True spirituality is the trusting the Lord Jesus Christ moment by moment. Some people live as though Jesus is only important at conversion and then they proceed to live independently of him afterwards. It is like never confessing your love and trust after the marriage. But good marriage is the loving and trusting your wife and husband with freshness day by day and moment by moment. The trusting and loving the Lord is the same way like good marriage as the branch remains in the vine to bear fruit (Jn. 15:4). "Faith" is not just an article of the ceremony necessary for one to be saved, but should be the main power in the whole process of our salvation. (cf. Rom. 6:1-12)

Our spiritual weakness is also due to focusing on the programs and techniques without the existential faith in all the moments of our life. When someone treads on your feet on the bus, or when you are sexually tempted, or when someone criticizes you and you get depressed, how do you overcome such crisis? Do you overcome by the good name of a gentleman or courage or by faith? You should overcome by the same faith you had when you were first

converted.

Abraham remembered the promise of God and trusted him fully when he was commanded to sacrifice Issac, the only son he had. It was not “the leap of faith” as Kierkegaard argued. When first coming to Jesus for forgiveness, when facing trials everyday, when we meet God in His kingdom, what we should always have is faith. This is not irrational “leap of faith” at all but personal and intellectual trust on Him.

(3) True spirituality is fighting our sins with our best effort based on the power of the Holy Spirit. Faith without deeds is dead. The Bible teaches us that we should have the “passivity” of trusting the Lord fully, and also the “activity” in our choice and freedom. It is putting our sinful nature to death as well as trusting the grace of God to restore His image in us. (Rom. 8:13; Phil. 3:13-14).

We need the power of the Holy Spirit in our battle, and we need our best efforts also. Admitting that Christ’s Lordship is 100% and taking one's own responsibility is 100%. This kind of spirituality was what Francis A. Schaeffer once called “Passive Activity.”

True spirituality is not blaming our weakness and being still. Rather, it is participating in the power of the kingdom of God with the help of the victory Jesus had over the power of darkness. It is not running away from the world and hiding in our safe caves, but fighting the evil powers of this world. We are not called to stay safe in this world, but to defeat and rule the evil power as a member God's Army.

“The dew of your youth” in Psalm 110:3 means that the youth of the kingdom of God are like jewels. They are like jewels because they are called to the glorious spiritual war of our God. One of the frontlines of the spiritual warfare our young-adults face today is the war of ideas, thoughts and *zeitgeist* (the spirit of the age). (2Cor. 10:4-5)

(4) True spirituality is the experiencing true humanism or being human as a human. Christianity is the truth which makes man truly human because Christianity is not an ideology but the personal truth. When we speak something, it demonstrates that “God is not silent” and the God who is there made us communicable being. It is the glorious that only human beings can experience verbal and non-verbal communications. True spirituality is taking off the old person and putting on a new humanity in Jesus Christ and restoring the true humanness that was destroyed by sin. (Jn. 8:32; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:10)

Jerram Barrs said, “ ‘Self-denial’ on Mt.16:24 do not mean the ‘self-destruction’ or ‘selfreplacement’ of human being but it means the denial of the sinful nature and the denial of self-worship.” Hans Rookmaaker was right when he said “Jesus came to make us true human beings, not Jesus maniacs.” In the age where true humanness is hard to find, and in the age where in spite of the numerical increase of Christians there aren't many “humans.” We need to

demonstrate how free and human Christians are.

To teach and restore the church in Colossae in its state of pessimistic and ascetic spirituality, Paul advises them to be free from 3 things (Col. 2:5-3:17). 1) Be free from the world. Freedom from the world does not mean living in our cozy caves away from the world, but living "in" the world "not according to the patterns of the world." 2) Be free from the law. Jesus came to fulfill the law and free us from its regulations, so it would not be right if we still lived under its yoke and were its slaves. 3) Be free from the flesh. Freedom from the flesh means freedom from the lust of the body and sin, not our daily human experiences.

So true spirituality frees us and it restores our human nature as it was first created, in the image of God. It restores our body and soul. The separation of the body and soul in dualism is the result of sin, not salvation. True spirituality is fighting against worldliness with faith and giving our body to God as a living sacrifice. In this way, Christianity is the true humanism.

(5) True spirituality is integrating the mind and experience. Christianity is at once intellectual and experiential. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he says boldly that he is not ashamed of the Gospel (Rom 1:16). Where did he get such confidence? His answer is in the following verses: "...because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew then for the Gentile." (Rom 1:16-17). Traditionally Jews demanded miraculous signs, and Greeks looked for wisdom (1Cor. 1:22). Paul confessed that he is not ashamed of the Gospel intellectually or experientially because he wanted everybody to join him in his confession.

The difference between the Gospel and "non-gospel" lies here. The Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone. It is not ashamed intellectually or experientially. So "reaching unity in the faith and in the knowledge" (Eph. 4:13-14) is what mature faith should be. Paul never says anywhere in his letters that Christianity is anti-intellectual. Actually anti-intelligence is related to unfaith. If Christianity is anti-intellectual it is a superstition.

We should remember what Paul said to the Corinthians: "We demolish arguments and every thoughts that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." (2Cor. 10:4-5) True spirituality does not divorce the mind from the experience; it unites them in abundance for us to enjoy. In that sense, we could proclaim that "Christianity has an essential relation with the reason" as Francis A. Schaeffer said.

(6) True spirituality is enjoying everything God created except for sin (2Cor. 6:12-18, 10:31). Whatever we do in Christ, whether it is eating, studying, dating, washing dishes, praying, it all is spiritual and done for the Glory of God. Paul said clearly: "Everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible, but not everything is constructive." (2Cor. 10:23)

What was the true spirituality taught to the Corinthian church? (1Cor. 10:24-31) It was that

everything is permissible. Everything except sin is spiritual. This is the major proposition. In his letter to Timothy, Paul said “everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanks giving.” (1Tim. 4:4)

What was the spirituality of our Lord when he had risen? (Lk. 24, Jn 21). He walked, talked, made fire with woods, he ate, he his friends, and he talked about the secrets of the kingdom of God. We tend to think the last act, talking about the kingdom of God, is the only spiritual thing among all. It is true that that is the most important thing, but that is not all there is to spirituality. The whole life of Jesus was holy and spiritual and for the Glory God as well as his teaching.

Summary

We should be aware of three ugly spiritualities; 1) the “show-off” spirituality, 2) the negative eccentric and ascetic spirituality and 3) the anti-intellectual spirituality. We should turning ugly spiritualities upside down as soon as possible. Then we should be highly experienced Christians in believing six true spiritualities; 1) the restoring God's image in all the areas of our life, 2) the trusting the Lord Jesus Christ moment by moment, 3) the fighting our sins with our best effort based on the power of the Holy Spirit, 4) the experiencing true humanism or being human as a human, 5) the integrating the mind and experience, 6) the enjoying everything God created except for sin.