

STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

When I first went off to seminary, I was warned by some of my friends against the dangers to my faith that I would face there. I was told about agnostic professors, intellectual smugness, and anti-biblical ideas. Similar warnings came when I started my career as a pastor. I was told to avoid the pitfalls of hypocrisy, clericalism, institutional irrelevancy, fundamentalists who curtail freedom, and liberals who dominate denominational committees.

All of these warnings were partly true, but they did me little good. Warnings are like dried fruit: They have a short shelf life but a long after-taste. The nourishment soon evaporates, but the bitter flavor stays on. In fact, warnings create a generalized loss of appetite because of their own bad taste. They make us suspicious of every future banquet because of our perceived potential danger of contamination. Our generation has been over-warned by disillusioned advisors who have decided that each new generation needs a few choice warnings to keep us on guard and off balance.

Good Advice

On the other hand, the best advice I received during that time was free of warnings—a positive exhortation which turned out to be relevant not

only for my career, but also for my life. It was given to a small group of us, each on his way to various theological schools, by a wise friend and pastor, Dr. Richard Halverson. At that time he was a pastor on the staff of Hollywood Presbyterian Church.

Dr. Halverson's counsel was basic and without loopholes: "Stay close to Jesus Christ in your daily walk, stay close to your brothers and sisters in Christ, trust the Holy Spirit to be your guide and companion, and jump right into the experience of being a student." I've thought a great deal since then about that advice, and I know now that what he was describing was spirituality in its most fundamental form. For Dr. Halverson, spirituality was not some exotic giftedness, but simply this: a day-to-day walk with Jesus Christ as Savior, Lord and friend; a day-to-day fellowship with God's people; the assurance of His Spirit that this is all we need to be spiritual; and then a discipleship attitude that enthusiastically tackles the daily challenge.

Spiritual Infections

If all this is true, and so apparently simple, then why is it that we pastors and Christian workers who labor every day in Christian service have so much trouble keeping spiritually healthy? Several reasons come to mind.

First of all, spirituality as found in the Bible is fundamentally the description of a relationship between ourselves and the Lord Jesus Christ. The New Testament phrases "in Christ," "in the Spirit," and "Christ in you" illustrate this point. Relationships take

quality time, and most lack of spirituality is not an "infection" of faith by diseased, false doctrine. Rather, it is a malnutrition that saps a life starving for time with our living Lord in prayer, worship, and Bible study. If this is true, then a restoration of spiritual health will happen in direct proportion to our change in time priorities. A move on our part to focus our daily lives toward Jesus Christ will have immediate impact in favor of spiritual health.

Nevertheless, we can fall prey, to spiritually destructive infections more serious than malnutrition. In some instances, our very techniques and strategies for spirituality, may, be essentially unhealthy. We are sometimes drawn from a simple reliance upon Jesus Christ, and away from simple relationships with Christian brothers and sisters, by our careful and conscious attempts to become spiritual. In place of a robust relationship with Jesus Christ and His people through the Holy Spirit, we implement our own "spiritual" programs — causing spirituals self-righteousness and impudent demands upon God.

The cure for such sickness is as simple as the process of the sickness is complicated. It is the rediscovery of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the rediscovery of the ordinary Christians we are privileged to meet and know because of that gospel. A theologian friend of mine once told me that after he had studied several of the exotic spiritual movements of European and American Christianity — with their

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mighty claims of "spiritual" success stories and their disdain for what they called the nominal Christian—he found himself praying, "Lord make me a nominal Christian." My friend wanted more than ever to be an ordinary believer who simply trusts in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Looking for the Zap

Another hindrance to spirituality occurs when we find ourselves waiting for something spiritually "profound" to happen in the private moment of withdrawal, when we should instead be jumping into the way of discipleship and working hard at the tasks of daily life. Spirituality needs the private moment of personal prayer and meditation, but it also needs the road of service and ministry, the banquet with the other brothers and sisters, and the hard interpersonal places where testing takes place. "Spirituality" describes a rhythmic, balanced life of work and rest, time alone and time with people, quiet time and adventurous discipleship.

Another crisis of spirituality that affects many of us is the mistaken notion that certain experts must teach us the deeper secrets of spirituality. These spiritual giants, however, and the communities created around them,

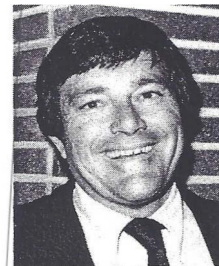
often turn us into religious groupies, victims of spiritual indigestion from too much advice and too many different theories of religious procedure. The basic error here is the thought that spirituality is something religious in the first place. Actually, spirituality is not merely religion highly refined and polished; it is thoroughly amateur and nonprofessional to the core.

In C. S. Lewis's book *The Magician's Nephew* (one of the *Chronicles of Narnia*), a young boy named Diggory experiences the most spiritual moment of his life. It comes not while he's speculating about magic rings and magic bells, but in that one awful moment when he blurts out to Aslan, the great Golden Lion, the deep worries of his heart. He dares to look squarely into Aslan's face and asks, "Oh Aslan, would you, could you help my mother?" The spiritual summit of that story is reached at just this point, when Diggory saw the great tear in Aslan's eye: for then he knew that his prayer—as stumbling and inadequate as it seemed to him—had been received and answered. He knew that Aslan loved his mother just as Diggory did, and even more. In the same way, we may find that our most spiritual moments come at the most unlikely times.

What, Me Spiritual?

Finally, I have an odd observation to make about my own experience with spiritual people: The ones who are most spiritual are least aware of it. Any one of us may be more spiritual than we

realize we are. Some of us who feel inadequate precisely at this point—because our hearts yearn for more time with Jesus Christ and more fellowship with His people, and more time for worship and study of the Holy Scripture—have these feelings because we are healthy, not because we are sick. Appetite, after all, is not a sign of illness, but of health. My advice, therefore, is not more strategies to make us spiritual. We already are! Rather, we should jump right into our lives as students, pastors, and Christian people. He's already given us all the advice we need. ♦



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