

A Summons to the Outward Life in Christ as the Basis for Inward Spirituality

“For All the Saints”

An International Symposium on Evangelical Theology and Christian Spirituality

Beeson Divinity School
Samford University
Birmingham, Alabama
October 2-4, 2000

By Ralph C. Wood
Baylor University

Introduction

It's a delight to return to the Samford campus after two year's absence and in fond remembrance of the very happy year that Suzanne and I spent here in 1997-98. It's also a pleasure to receive this invitation from a friend of nearly three decades, Dean Timothy George. And it's a special privilege to respond to a scholar whose work I have admired for many years, Professor Alister McGrath of Oxford University, in his plenary address today on "Loving God with Heart and Mind: The Theological Foundations of Spirituality." Unlike other failed preachers, I have only two points to make. Both of them operate on the assumption that Christian spirituality is outward no less than inward: that the Christian life consists of outward habits and practices that form our inward character into the image of Christ. I want first, therefore, to question Professor McGrath's contention that spirituality consists in the heart-felt *application* of Christian truth to the inner life of faith. I will argue, by contrast, that Christian truth entails *outward practices* which are the very basis for inward spiritual life. I will maintain, in the second case, that our crying need is not so for much a renewed emphasis on *meditation*, as he claims, but rather on *theological preaching and liturgical worship*. In these outward and visible acts, I believe that we are spiritually formed as nowhere else.

I.

Professor McGrath asserts that we must accept the term "spirituality" because it has won nearly unanimous endorsement in our time. I fear, on the contrary, that the word has become unredeemably vague and monstrous. It is an abstract noun so devoid of theological content that it can be attached to almost any modifying phrase. Here, for example, are a few of the many spiritualities that I located on the Internet. I challenge anyone to specify what they might mean: the spirituality of unity, the spirituality of work, the spirituality of simplicity, the spirituality of intimacy, the spirituality of non-violence, the spirituality of the body, the spirituality of imperfection, the spirituality of indigenous cultures, the spirituality of food, the spirituality of letting go, the spirituality of the feminine, the spirituality of the good herb, the spirituality of aging, the spirituality of the religious educator, and finally the spirituality of wildness. This last

spirituality is described as follows: “religion that is lived, felt, and experienced – rather than simply believed – real and ecstatic and visceral [religion]. Wicca, neo-paganism, ecospirituality, shamanism, totemism, shapeshifting, therianthropy, nature magic, animal and plant lore, and earth-based spirituality of all kinds.” The one thing missing from this sorry litany is the spirituality of abortion. No wonder that the late president of Wake Forest University, James Ralph Scales, used to say that, whenever he heard the someone use the word “spirituality,” he grabbed first for his wife and then for his wallet – because somebody was about to be diddled.

Professor McGrath may well reply that we should courageously retrieve the faded word “spirituality” from its contemporary abuse, much as John Calvin adopted the old Latin word for “piety.” Yet it seems to me that piety does not entail the often self-serving subjectivism that seems to be inherent in spirituality. *Pietas* was a word redolent with rich and quite specific meanings. It connoted a sense of duty and responsibility and even patriotism, a deep devotion and loyalty to one’s family and homeland, as well as a kindness and tenderness towards others in need. In every case, *pietas* pointed the Romans to a reality beyond themselves – namely, to a huge sense of indebtedness to their country, to their parents, and of course to their gods. It is not surprising that the early Christians, and later Calvin and the other magisterial Reformers, seized upon this ancient word to describe the nature of the Christian life. They, too, believed that life in Christ takes us out of ourselves, out of our impossibly small subjectivity, and into the grand public realm of God’s own mercy and holiness – greater than which there is none – which is to say, of course, into the life of the church and its practices.

Professor McGrath warns of the dangers inherent in an overly cerebral Christianity, and he traces this danger to the Enlightenment’s stress on objectifying reason. This strikes me as a skewed reading of the Enlightenment. Certainly the 17th century did mark a new turn to the outward and empirical world that can be known scientifically and rationalistically. But even this empiricist turn was not purely outward objective; it was also deeply inward and subjective. Even Descartes’ famous formula *cogito ergo sum* is characterized chiefly by its emphasis on the thinking subject: *I think*. Surely this newly individualized and reflexive self is the chief creation of the Enlightenment. It is no accident, therefore, that pietism arose alongside rationalism as its close kinsman, since it too is marked by this very same turn to the subject. I believe, therefore, that while the contemporary demand for spirituality speaks to a very deep human need, it is fundamentally a need created by Enlightenment self-reflexivity.

It seems to me that the biblical tradition knows little of this concern with the inner and subjective self. The Hebrew language has no word for our word “soul.” The word *nephesh*, so my Hebraist friends remind me, might better be translated “animated mud.” For the Jews, we are nothing other than inspired dirtballs! Together with the whole of the scriptural tradition, Jesus refuses our convenient distinction between the outward and the inward life. Our Lord condemns the Pharisees, of course, for being whitewashed tombs full of dead bones. He accuses them of cleansing the outside of the

cup and the plate while leaving the inside of the dishes dirty. But note ever so well that Christ doesn't call the Pharisees to greater spiritual inwardness by abandoning their so-called legalistic tithes on mint and dill and cumin. He commands them, instead, to practice greater faithfulness in the keeping of Torah, which these smaller observances are meant to prompt: "You have neglected the weightier matters of law," declares Jesus, "justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others" (Matt 23: 23).

So it is also with St. Paul. When he announces that "our outer nature is wasting away, while our inner nature is being renewed every day" (2 Cor 5:14), he is making no plea for us to forsake the outward life for the inward. Rather is he summoning us to make a full and perfect dedication of our bodies to God (Rom 12:1) in and through the Body of Christ called the church. There we are to bear what Paul calls "weight of glory." Again the metaphor is outward and substantial, not inward and subjective. We are to cultivate our new nature only in preparation for the new outward glory that we are destined to have through our new bodies in the New Jerusalem. In the teaching of both Jesus and Paul, therefore, the outward and inward life are deeply, indeed inseparably linked. They both make clear that our Christianity is meant to go all the way up and down—from the public to the private, from the communal to the personal, from the ecclesial to the spiritual.

This accounts, I believe, for Paul's strange but constant admonition that we must not be caught naked and unclothed at the Second Coming. He commands us to put on Christ here and now that we might join Him there and then. Notice how casually many of our highly spiritual folks enter the presence of the Lord. In their conviction that only what is inward and spiritual truly matters, they wear backward baseball caps, thigh-high skirts, polo shirts, and tennis shoes. Thus do they make an unconscious statement that worship is an utterly casual event. I read only recently of a Christian death-metal band (whatever *that* is) whose motto is this: "God can change you without changing how you look." Notice, by contrast, how our fellow believers in the black churches worship God. They do it in the beauty of their best attire. They want their clothes to reflect the beauty of God's holiness. They have no dress-down days either at church or at work. Their spirituality is first of all outward in order that it might also be inward. They approach God in the splendor of their dress, so that they might also be clothed in the whole armor of God and the garments of true righteousness. Like the well-dressed royalty whom God has made them and all of us to be, they intend to enjoy the marriage feast of the Lamb in *style*.

Consider these arresting examples of outward and public piety. Gerard Manley Hopkins, the great Jesuit poet of 19th century England, joined his friends at Oxford in practicing what they called "the discipline of the eyes." They believed that what we see shapes our souls. To behold ugliness and vulgarity and crudity is to risk the twisting and perversion of our very character. Yet many of us believe that, so long as we are attending to our inward spirituality, it doesn't make much difference what we look at or provoke others to look at. Karl Barth also believed that what he heard shaped his

soul. He began every day by listening to Mozart for an hour and then praying for another hour. Barth was not seeking to put himself into something as silly as “the mood for prayer.” He wanted, instead, to hear earthly echoes and musical parables of the heavenly Kingdom, so that when he prayed he might participate in the very life of God. In order that his prayers not become mere subjective meanderings among his own small-minded concerns, Barth always prayed aloud, even though he prayed alone. Thus did he commune with the God who is nearer than our own breath because He is also utterly objective and transcendent to us.

Once when two friends of C. S. Lewis came to collect him for a day’s trip outside Oxford, they noticed that Lewis was walking up and down in his garden while they sat impatiently in the car. Lewis finally joined them, and his friends wanted to know why on earth he was pacing back and forth in the side yard: “What were you doing while we sat here waiting for you?” “Oh,” replied Lewis, “I wouldn’t dare leave home without first saying my prayers.” Prayer, for C. S. Lewis, was an outward, even visible, habit that shaped his inward and spiritual life. So it was for the southern Catholic master of fiction, Flannery O’Connor. As far as she could tell, O’Connor confessed, her prayers never penetrated even the ceiling, much less the skies. She never felt that in praying she was mystically passing through the heavenly portals. Yet this sense of what is often dull and ordinary in prayer never deterred her one whit, she said, from her daily practice of praying from the Missal. It was meant to form her character, not to make her feel spiritual. Hence this hard but true saying from one of the Desert Fathers, Abba Agathon, as summarized by Bishop Kallistos Ware: “Prayer is the hardest of all tasks. If we do not find it difficult, perhaps it is because we have not really started to pray.”

Prayer is difficult, I submit, not only because it is inward and spiritual but also because it is outward and habitual. Calvin called prayer the central practice of the Christian life because it is our daily wrestling with God, our chronic struggle to understand God’s will for the world and our place within it. We learn God’s absence no less than His presence in prayer. “Verily,” says Jeremiah, “thou art the God that hidest thyself.” The Cross is the place of God’s supreme darkness and mystery, exactly because it is also the place of God’s supreme light and self-disclosure. It is largely in prayer, I believe, that we discover this awful otherness and hiddenness of God, no less than the very nearness and dearness of God. We err, I believe, when we pray on the assumption that we know the Gospel in advance, and that we need only to apply it to our personal lives. Because God’s Word is a living Word, it is a Word which comforts only as it also terrifies. God’s Word can never be comfortably assumed. It awaits our astonished discovery every day; indeed, our trembling re-conversion every day.

II.

In the second place, I want to contest Professor McGrath’s claim that good theology is not enough. If he refers to the theology practiced in the academy, then he should have said that bad theology is not enough! I believe that good theology always

issues in good preaching and good worship. Professor McGrath laments what he calls “theological correctness.” He declares that the current vogue for spirituality has been prompted by our all too “cerebral approaches to Christianity.” I suppose that there are a few dispensationalist fundamentalists somewhere who get out their Schofield Bibles every morning and trace the successive ages of divine dispensation. Perhaps there are also a few TULIP-growing Calvinists who ponder the Synod of Dort every night before bed. But I must confess that I know hardly any brain-dominated Christians. In my experience, it is precisely the brain-lame believers who are a scandal to our Faith. Professor McGrath warns that knowledge can be a temptation to arrogance and a distraction from God. But surely he doesn’t mean theological knowledge of any substantial kind. I maintain, on the contrary, that Christian doctrine is not only a reflective distillation of Christian experience but also a powerful spur to Christian experience. My point is nicely made here in the Beeson Divinity School Chapel, where the Apostle’s Creed is inscribed on one of its walls – albeit at the back rather than the front where it belongs! We know and experience God in and through such central theological claims as God’s own self-revelation has prompted us to make about Him. Far from being a distraction, I believe that theological knowledge is an enhancer of our experience of God.

C. S. Lewis was once asked what kind of devotional reading he most favored. His interlocutor perhaps assumed that he would answer by referring to Oswald Chambers’ *My Utmost for His Highest*. Instead, Lewis replied that his spiritual life was prompted by such theological treatises as Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation*. Lewis was not preening. He was making the salient point that thinking and believing are profoundly linked, that faith which does not seek understanding is no faith at all, that spirituality which does not lead to a profounder knowledge of God is bogus and bankrupt. For Lewis, all thought that is sufficiently rigorous and thorough cannot but redound to the glory of God. After all, Jesus Christ is the Logos (true Thought) become flesh.

In the opening pages of *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis tells of an atheist whom the devil’s minion named Screwtape had noticed to be reading in the British Museum. The satanic Screwtape immediately sought to interrupt this man’s concentration. Screwtape tempted the atheist to think about his forthcoming lunch, to take a break, above all to go read a newspaper. Yet why would a devil want thus to distract an atheist? Any sustained argument, says Screwtape, even if it’s atheistic, concentrates the mind on universal issues and is thus dangerous to the Kingdom of Evil. Such serious thinking, Screwtape confesses, withdraws human attention from the realm where the demonic thrives – namely, from “the stream of immediate sensate experiences.”

These words were written in 1942. Surely Lewis, were he living, would describe our entire culture as nothing other than “a stream of immediate sensate experiences.” Its effect has been deadly for the life of the church no less than for our common social and academic life. I have students who confess that they can no longer take even a two-hour exam, much less a three, because their nerves cannot stand it. The reason is not far to find. The average television image lasts less than two seconds. Our minds and souls

are sensorily pummeled by the nihilistic images of modern advertising. We are thus rendered virtually incapable of sustained thought. Indeed, we find it almost impossible to imagine the regimen of reading and study that John Wesley set for his followers – a regimen which began, by the way, at four o’clock in the morning. Alistair Cooke, the former host of Masterpiece Theatre, has said that reading is such a rapidly disappearing art that its fate in the late 21st century will be akin to the fate of hand-quilting the late 20th – namely, that it will become a merely curious pastime. W. H. Auden rightly called ours the Age of Anxiety. Our stomachs churn, our ears roar, our fingers thrum, and our colons are knotted with silent terror and secret unbelief. Most of us are so dependent upon medications that either rev us up or calm us down that one of my witty friends has formulated this aphorism: “Reality is for those who cannot stand drugs.” T. S. Eliot described our sense-saturated culture even more chillingly in his *Four Quartets*. There he says that we are “distracted from distraction by distraction.” Can it be that our current mania for spirituality is yet another distraction from our distraction?

I believe that we can answer in the negative only if our spirituality is rooted and grounded in theological preaching, even as it is also sustained by liturgical and sacramental worship. For St. Paul, the Gospel is not something to *be* preached so much as it is *preaching itself*. Faith comes by hearing, he declares on Romans 10:17: *fides ex auditu*. We are saved by the response which proclamation enables. Authentic preaching is thus necessarily and inherently theological. It is meant to feed us with such rich spiritual food that our souls will be nourished and our minds concentrated upon ultimate things. Far from being theologically stuffed and satiated, I find that my students and fellow church members are theologically starved and emaciated. Let two examples suffice. My upbringing in an East Texas church pastored by graduates of our Baptist seminaries was biblically rich and evangelistically strong, and I am ever so thankful for it. But I confess that it was theologically barren. I could have been spared enormous spiritual shallowness and immaturity by learning even such basic doctrines as justification by grace alone and sanctification through faith alone. If only my ministers had proclaimed the Good News that in *justification* God in Christ turns himself toward us once and for all despite our sin, and thus converts us into Christians through baptism; while in *sanctification* God in Christ repeatedly turns us toward himself, and thus keeps us Christians through preaching and the Lord’s Supper!

Yet I never learned, from either the pulpit or the Sunday School room, the importance of even such an indispensable doctrine as the Trinity. No one proclaimed to me the Good News that we Christians are necessarily Trinitarian in our faith. Only because we believe that God has a rich and complete life unto himself – only as the three Persons of the Holy Trinity give themselves utterly to each other – only thus is God free to act in our behalf, delivering us from our present misery, as He enables us to participate in His own triune life of total self-surrendering love. To illustrate what a fearful price we pay for the neglect of this doctrine, Fisher Humphreys of the Beeson faculty tells a sad but funny story about one of his students who decided to observe Trinity Sunday by preaching a sermon on the Trinity. Afterwards, a deacon accosted him and pressed him with this question: “Preacher, why are you messing around with

all that *Catholic* stuff?!" No one had ever bothered to school this sincere man in St. Paul's own claims. "Thanks be to God," Paul declares in Romans 6:17, "you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the *heart* to the standard of *teaching* to which you were committed" (emphasis added). Obedient faith springs from our hearts because it has been prompted by and presses on to theological doctrines and truths.

Even so, good preaching and teaching will not sustain Christian life if they do not issue in good worship. Especially for those who stand in the non-creedal traditions, the heart of worship lies not only in our preaching and praying but also in the music. Our hymns are our sung creeds: they often set forth what we believe and practice more sharply and freshly than either our prayers or our sermons. Yet in many evangelical churches, our richly theological hymns are being rapidly replaced with praise songs. Their trite lyrics and sappy tunes ignore God's transcendent mystery as well as our own awestruck humility before Him. They convert God into a swell Buddy and the Gospel into feel-good emotion. The lyrics of praise music are almost always I- and me-centered. The amplified instruments – piano, drums, guitars and the like – that usually accompany such music give it the unmistakably erotic throb of sensate entertainment. Even when praise songs are focussed upon God, they rarely mention the agony of the Cross, the surprise of the Resurrection, the terror of God's wrath, the unutterable peace of his salvation, the fear and trembling of discipleship. I believe that praise songs are indeed useful for children and immature Christians. They can help teach them the rudiments of the Faith. But mature believers require stronger stuff.

I am not calling for high falutin' anthems and cantatas, nor for a return to hymns with archaic words and unsingable tunes. Rather am I calling for a recovery of the theologically and imaginatively rich music that characterizes the greatest of both our ancient and modern hymns. Consider, for example, four works that very few of my students know: "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" and "Come Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy." Then consider a praise song that they *all* know: "Majesty." The three hymns and the gospel song, both in their lyrics and their melodies, make us shudder with awe, tremble with thanksgiving, stand astonished at Calvary, mark the wonder of Christ's intimacy with us, and ponder the cost of our glad surrender to the God who has yielded himself up for our sake. The praise song by contrast, offers nothing but banal rhymes and sub-grammatical accolades. The effect is to make us feel, I fear, what a Peter De Vries character honestly confesses: "Deep down, I'm rather shallow." Once such praise music comes to replace real hymns and gospel songs, the Christian gospel may well be lost.

Having offended perhaps everyone in the room, allow me to offer a final gesture of peace. I would reminding us all, but especially the young people present, that Isaac Watts began his greatest hymn (and I believe it to be the greatest hymn in the English tongue) with these words: "When I survey the wondrous cross,/Where the *young* Prince of glory died." Watts knew that our Lord did not die as an old man but as a man on the very threshold of adult life, and therefore that the Gospel is surely meant for *all* men and women, the young no less than the old. Hence my hope that some young student

might also protest against those squeamish fuddy-duddies who have excised the most vivid stanza from Watts' great hymn. This eradicated stanza links the inward and the outward world of faith, and thus it plumbs tremendous spiritual depths.

His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o'er his body on the tree:
Then I am dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.

Christ's body was drenched with gore, but this oozing blood became his great gown of glory. For here was no noble martyr's death. Here the King of Cosmos bore our sin away. Only such Love can demand our bodies and our souls, our very life, our all.