

AVOIDING THE MIRE OF INAUTHENTIC SPIRITUALITY

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I have been asked to help you chart a course for the twenty-first century which will avoid the mire of inauthentic spirituality. This is a good time to be checking the charts. Like Columbus, we Southern Baptists have sailed off the maps of the known world into new territory. We live in a boundary situation where we can still see the old familiar homeland off our stern, but just ahead lies a strange, unknown land where your vocation will be plied in the future. (The changes among Southern Baptists are only the nearest and most obvious sign of a broader historical change leading some to speak of ours as a post-modern world.)

Just what is authentic spirituality? First, it is personal encounter. Ours is heart religion whose essence is intimate communion with God. Second, spirituality is public. It starts where the Holy Spirit touches our inner spirits, but it also flows outward as far as our actions have influence. As Charles Wesley is reported to have said: "If a man is a Christian his horse will know it." It is the most personal of matters with the most far reaching of social consequences. Third, this inward and outward expression of our friendship with God is always incarnate, never abstract. It clothes itself in the particulars of time and place. One size does not fit all.

Taking these realities into account, a path charted to avoid inauthentic spirituality must take its bearings from at least three points of reference. Arranged from the more general to the more specific, these three are tradition, vocation, and personality.

TRADITION AND SPIRITUALITY

First, look at tradition and spirituality. Tradition provides the symbolic language for one's spirituality. As one observant spiritual guide noted: "Generally speaking, Baptist do not have visions of the Blessed Virgin...." (Holmes 1982, 17).

As this quote implies, a central avenue of spirituality is our denominational identity. With a tip of the hat to the fact that Baptistness takes many forms, a pertinent question for charting a future spirituality is: How Baptist will it be? Taking our cue from sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman, let us look at our Baptist denominational identity from three angles: the theological, the cultural, and the organizational.

Theological Identity and Spirituality

Dr. Ammerman says most denominations began with an emphasis on theology. New denominations start when certain principles of belief and practice are given priority. In our case, these correlate with the Baptist part of the title, "Southern Baptist Convention."

For us Baptists, the theological taproot of our denominational identity is freedom. Our motto might be Gal. 5:1,"

For freedom Christ has set us free...." In Glen Hinson's attractive phrase: Baptists came from the womb crying for freedom.

At the center of this Baptist love for freedom is soul freedom, the right and responsibility of every person to relate directly to God without mediator or go-between. Baptists began with a direct human to divine encounter, face to face, up close and personal. Any obstacle to that free relationship was resisted. Soul freedom suggests a spirituality which is personal and unmediated.

This emphasis on soul freedom gave rise to a cluster of other recognized Baptist distinctives. Any attempt to chart a course for Baptist spirituality should take them into account. Walter Shurden summarized these in a recent book under the headings soul freedom, Bible freedom, church freedom, and religious freedom (1993).

Let me use Shurden's second heading, Bible freedom, as an illustration. In line with the central tenet of soul freedom, Bible freedom suggests a personal spirituality free to be shaped by scripture. It is spirituality free to be shaped by scripture. It is spirituality free *from* narrow credalism and mass majority interpretation; it is spirituality *for* a direct and personal encounter with scripture.

Such freedom led, I am told, to early Swedish Baptist being derisively called *lazare* or "readers" because they insisted on their own reading of the scriptures. A "reader's" spirituality requires

freedom from two areas: the intellect and the imagination. Authentic Baptist spirituality assures intellectual freedom to apply the best available biblical scholarship to the life of prayer. Devotional approaches which ignore the questions raised by contemporary biblical criticism and theological inquiry are inadequate for charting your future. Avoid spiritual guides who pride themselves on the ignorance of current scholarship.

Spirituality reflecting Bible freedom means freedom for the imagination as well as the intellect. We are called to pray the scriptures as well as to study them. By praying the Bible we approach it as a doorway to realities beyond the written word. This means steering a course between the scholastic rationalism of either the liberal left or the fundamentalist right.

At any rate spirituality which ignores these Baptist Bible freedoms risks running afoul of rigid, lifeless creeds and the "super apostles" who always rise to enforce them, to use a Pauline term (2 Cor. 11:5). Authentic Baptist spirituality resists such tyranny in order to be free for the word, intellectually and imaginatively.

If time allowed we could address other traditional Baptist doctrines in our search for the authentic spirituality. Local autonomy and congregational polity, for instance, imply community discernment and rejection of spiritual elitism, ruling pastors, or top down spiritual direction by bureaucratic fiat; religious freedom's corollary, separation of church and state,

asserts that Christian piety in order to be genuine must be free from both government support and interference. The state always promotes inauthentic piety. These are a few of the Baptist tradition's theological foundations by which those seeking to avoid a counterfeit spirituality can take their bearings, but tradition is formed from more than theological materials.

Cultural Identity and Spirituality

Culture and organization also influence denominational identity, that central source of tradition's power to shape spirituality. Culture consists of the overtones and suggestions associated with a tradition. It is what a denominational identification *connotes* rather than *denotes*. The cultural baggage in the title "Southern Baptist Convention" is carried mostly in the word "Southern."

We are close to the cultural part of a denominational identity when we can joke about it. If you get the joke, you are "in" on the cultural identity; if you don't, you aren't. As an experiment for this presentation I asked a friend of mine who knows Southern Baptists well but is not one himself if he could recall any Baptist jokes. Here is one he told me.

Did you hear the one about the non-Baptist who died, went to heaven and was offered a choice of rooms to spend eternity in? In the first room was an endless Catholic high mass and in the third was Pentecostal praise service. St. Peter didn't allow a look in the

middle room, making the newly deceased walk by silently and on tiptoe. When asked to pick a home, the puzzled rookie wanted to know more about the mysterious second room. "Oh that," said St. Peter, "That's where we isolate the Baptists. They wouldn't be happy if they knew anybody else was up here."

How does our Southern Baptist culture influence our spirituality past, present and future? In what ways is it changing? What does it mean that churches, left and right, are taking Southern off their welcome signs (not to mention Baptist)? Professor Bill Leonard speaks of a generic evangelical piety at Samford University which he calls "Charismatic Lite." He says it is characterized by "Lord, we just wanna" prayers and a highly individualized piety. You know what I am talking about here better than I do, but consider: How will future generations take their bearing if former Baptist landmarks disappear along with the Southern culture which is eroding in the winds of change?

This threat to authentic Baptist spirituality calls for charting a course apart from cultural captivity. This is a particularly hard task for a denomination and culture joined like Siamese twins. It remains to be seen whether the authentic elements of our Southern Baptist spirituality can survive separated from a rural, white, male-dominated, Deep South culture.

What is called for is a discerning spirituality not conformed to this world but transformed by the renewal found in Christ (Rom.

12:2). Authentic Baptist spirituality would do well to seek the freedom of conscience revealed in Lillian Hellman's reply to Sen. Joseph McCarthy when he threatened to blacklist her if she didn't cooperate in his witch hunt. She said: "I cannot and I will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions" (Hellman 1976). Not a bad coordinate to chart a spirituality by in these difficult days.

Organizational Identity

Organization is the third and final source of denominational identity mentioned by Dr. Ammerman. "Convention" is the word in the Southern Baptist Convention title which denote organization identity. Developing institutions come to embody religious tradition and may gradually come to be viewed as synonymous with tradition itself, especially if theological origins are ignored and cultures are in major transition. The tension created between the Foreign Mission Board and the Woman's Missionary Union when the former tried secretly to trademark a program long identified with the latter is an example of the power of a program to be identified as the mission which it was originally designed to embody.

Changes in the organizational identity of Southern Baptists is self-evident. For the most of this century, the SBC has organized according to the business model of corporate America. This model was based on mass production programmed by a large and centralized bureaucracy. Success depended upon "making and

distributing identical items across...vast territories." Dr. Ammerman's prototypes of this are the black Model-T Ford and the SBC Sunday School quarterly (Ammerman 1993, 896).

The SBC has charted spirituality by the same norm. We have attempted spiritual formation mainly by mass produced programs developed at corporate headquarters and distributed widely and exclusively by local dealerships. Without doubt such programming has proven influential and successful in many ways, but as we chart a future course certain questions arise.

Among them are: Is this model of corporate uniformity adequate for a diverse constituency in a fragmented culture? Who is best equipped to chart a new course for spiritual formation at the local level--on your campus--corporate headquarters or your local ministry choosing and implementing programs best suited for your context? How free are you to choose the best resources from all Baptist suppliers? Future authentic spirituality calls for an increase, not restraint, of cooperative, voluntary organization.

How shall we judge the success of organized spiritual formation in the future? Compare the progress multimillion member mega-denominations have made in altering society for Christ to the effect of the Quakers, the spirituality tradition of Elton Trueblood and Richard Foster. Quaker impact in social, educational and spiritual arena had been enormous, yet they have never number more than about 200,000 worldwide (Trueblood

966, 18). The number of members enrolled in a discipleship program may not be the best or first mark of effective spiritual formation. A spirituality which is a mile wide but only an inch deep is likely to be mired in inauthenticity.

To chart a course for a future spirituality, I suggest you turn to the Baptist part of our denominational identity. Let the theological distinctives of soul freedom, volunteerism, community and local autonomy guide your approach to the culture and the organizations in which your spirituality is going to be nurtured.

VOCATION AND SPIRITUALITY

So much for tradition. A second and nearer point of reference to take a bearing from in charting authentic spirituality is vocation. Yours is reflected in your denominational title: you are ministers, campus ministers.

While acknowledging that Christian spirituality is a vocation and affirming the Baptist belief in the priesthood of the believer, the fact remains that you have a peculiar calling which shapes your spirituality. All Christians are supplied from the same ground water, but we drink from our own wells, and the minister's bucket is oddly shaped.

Our particular vocation has its advantages and disadvantages for authentic spirituality. On the plus side, ministers by virtue of our calling are given time with the channels through which God's grace flows. We are expected to pray, to study

scripture and devotional materials, to reflect upon the life of the Spirit and the human predicament in all its complexity. We are motivated by our calling to make our personal spiritual experience an instrument of God's peace in the world. We are encouraged to be living providers of God's refreshment among God's people. Like Scully and Fox on "The X-Files," we seek the truth out there to make it known down here.

The dark side of this reality often comes from the overfamiliarity with sacred things which so often develops as we seek to move between heaven and earth. As interpreters of God's revelation to the world minister are hermeneuts. Hermeneut is a word based on the mythological figure of Hermes whose task it was to serve a messenger between humans and the gods (Holmes 1982, 34-37). Too often the symbolic power of the sacred is lost to us because we become too accustomed to handling the ordinary things which convey the extraordinary. To see the eternal in the temporary--the Christ within our routine--takes attention and intention. The weary messenger is all too prone to miss the message amid the hectic details of delivering it to others.

In his book, *Pastoral Spirituality: A Focus for Ministry* (1978), Ben Campbell Johnson tells the story of a minister who owned a donkey. One day as he was riding the donkey through his village he was asked what he was up to. "I am looking for my donkey," he replied. Familiarity sometimes breeds apathy.

To avoid the same fate in charting your spirituality, remember, the opposite of devotion is not doubt but indifference. As long ago as the fourth century the church identified this spiritual malaise as the special burden of the minister. They called it *acedia* from the Greek *akedia*, not caring. It signifies weariness, listlessness, boredom. Fourth century spiritual guide Evagrius Ponticus (346-399), noting the similarity of *akedia* to the lethargy experienced by desert monks at mid-day, likened it to the noonday demon of Psalm 91:6 (Ware 1983, 3). The bone-tired minister under siege by the "destruction that wastes at noonday" (NRSV) is dry inside, shriveled, empty of life's passion. Such a minister can no longer tell the difference between words and the Word, activity and the Act.

There is a loneliness to this predicament. How can you worship, pray, or take time for reflection when you are constantly leading these activities? In charting an authentic spirituality, I suggest you begin by owning your unique vocation within the life of faith. Attend to our vocational peculiarity. Reclaim your rightful vocation as *mystagogue*, a term from the Greek combining *one initiated into mysteries* with *leader*.

Owning the first part of the term, *one initiated into mysteries*, means we begin at the beginning, our own personal encounter with the divine. We protect and nourish this intimate relationship as the first duty of our ministerial vocation. We heed

B.G. Collins's admonition: "The best preparation . . . for the whole work of the ministry, is the preparation of the [ministers themselves]" (Collins 1935).

The *leader* part of the our mystagogue identity suggests "a person who interprets religious mysteries and initiates others into them." In charting a future spirituality, be intentional in resisting all other definitions of your calling. You are not primarily an administrator of programs or a talent agent for entertainers or a permanent camp director or an adviser to the lovelorn. Be a messenger for the mysteries.

We are called to be resident holy persons with all the attendant humanity and set apartness that entails. Inch by inch, step by step, reclaim your rightful place as spiritual guide into the mysteries of faith. Retool for the future by becoming reeducated in the art of spiritual guidance, Baptist style.

PERSONALITY AND SPIRITUALITY

Receiving what Christian spirituality offers means merging the tradition and the vocation of the minister into one with the personality of the minister. My third and final point of reference for taking a bearing on future spirituality is personality. Know thyself; ministers who do not have little hope of knowing God's way with themselves. Augustine's fourth century prayer serves here: "you were right before me, but I had moved away from myself. I could not find myself; how much less, then, could I find

You?" (cited by Brown 1969, 168).

Two questions call for answers in this finding. First, what kind of personality do I have; and second, where does that type fit in the history of Christian spirituality? The answers inform choices regarding prayer, Bible study, worship, and a host of other spiritual disciplines.

There are timeless helps for sifting the inner life of the spirit. The Gospels are unparalleled in their ability to read us, revealing us to ourselves. Other devotional classics such as Augustine's *Confessions* or John Woolmann's *Journal* are also excellent resources. A text such as Magill and McGreal's *Christian Spirituality: The Essential Guide to the Most Influential Writers of the Christian Tradition* (1988) can give an overview of these.

Unlike the generations before us, we have another set of tools to put in the service of Christian spirituality--the insights of modern psychology. We have learned the values and limitations of psychology helps in the areas of education, communication, and vocational choice. Those charting a future spirituality can apply the same helps to spiritual formation. A merger of insights from the classics of devotion and current psychological findings is called for.

One psychological instrument often integrated with spiritual formation is the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (Myers 1980). We know and use words drawn from this instrument: terms

such as Introvert and Extrovert, Sensing and Intuitive, Thinking and Feeling. The Myers-Briggs is simple to take and interpret, and its application to spirituality is fairly direct. For example, the spiritual channels for personalities which favor Sensing profit most from types of prayer which use concrete images or ritual; those who favor Intuition may prefer more contemplative forms of prayer. Feeling preferring personalities make best use of experiences designed to activate a sense of beauty, awe, or personal relationship; Thinking folks are best enabled to enter into spiritual communion by an intellectual grasp of truth.

One of the most helpful typologies connecting these modern insights to the classics of Christian devotion is the "circle of sensibility" developed by Urban T. Holmes (1980, 3-5). In what follows, I will apply Holmes's spirituality types to individual personality, but they also work on church traditions or historical eras.

Holmes's typology charts four types of spirituality as quadrants on a circle. First, the circle is divided horizontally on a continuum established between two opposite ways of seeking God. At one pole is the Apophatic way which roughly corresponds to the Intuitive scale on the Myers-Briggs. For spirituality this pole characterized the *via negativa*, and emptying kind of search for God emphasizing the non-concrete, unknowable, mysterious ways of viewing God. At the other horizontal pole is the Kataphatic way

which roughly corresponds to the Sensing scale on the Myers-Briggs. For spirituality this side describes ways which approach God through revealed, concrete, knowable aspects of the divine such as God the Father, Lamb, or Friend. Perhaps the Quaker tradition would be found nearer the Apophatic pole and the more liturgical traditions at the Kataphatic.

A second continuum divides the circle vertically between two poles depicting the goal of one's search for God. The top pole is the Speculative which corresponds roughly to the Thinking scale of the Myers-Briggs. This represents an emphasis on transformation or "illumination" of the mind. The lower pole is the Affective, roughly corresponding to the Feeling scale on the Myers-Briggs. It represents emphasis on transformation of the emotions or heart. This continuum, then, marks the head and heart tensions within spirituality.

By taking bearings from each of the two continuum described above, persons can place their spirituality in one of the four quadrants of the circle of experience. For example, those who tend toward the Affective (Feeling) and Kataphatic (Sensing) ends of the spectrums will probably have a spirituality which tends toward abundant expressions of emotion coupled with clear signs of God's presence and activity. John Westerhoff calls this the "charismatic" type (1994, 55). Speculative (Thinking) and Apophatic (Intuitive) tendencies indicate a spirituality more

dominated by the intellect and the not yet seen. Not what feels good but what is true though perhaps not yet made visible is the main concern of this spirituality. Eldon Olson calls it the spirituality of "social action" (cited in Sager 1990, 51). To the "charismatic" type the ways of "social action" spirituality may seem to impersonal (hard-hearted); to the "social action" sort, the "charismatic" way often seems too warm and fuzzy (soft-headed).

Knowing our personality and its relation to the spirituality typology can teach us much about appropriate future formation in many areas including worship, prayer, and Bible study. For example, which Gospel image of Jesus would serve your personality best: Luke's feelingful portrayal whose emblem is the burning heart of the disciples on the road to Emmaus recognizing Jesus at table fellowship; or Matthew's thoughtful bylaws for right action delivered by Jesus, the New Moses, in the Sermon on the Mount? A rapidly expanding literature is available to help you pursue such connections between spirituality and personality.

As you chart a course for the twenty-first century which will avoid the mire of inauthentic spirituality, take your bearings from your unique personality, from your vocational particularity, and from your tradition's best theological insights. In and through all of these, keep an eye on the past, for there the pioneer and perfecter of our faith blazed a path to our future destination. The Christ who was and is and is to be holds our future. Because of this

reality, when on our pilgrimage we find ourselves locked up on Doubting Castle ruled by the giant Despair, as was Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*, we too will find Hope beside us in our dark dungeon. And, shifting the image, remember an observation attributed to Augustine: "Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are Anger and Courage: Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain the way they are." Hope and her daughters make good companions on our journey toward a future spirituality.

NOTES

1. Dr. Ammerman spoke of these three dimensions and their connection to the SBC at lectures delivered in the spring of 1995 at Mississippi College.

2. See the discussion by Gary Furr in "'The Road of Ashes:' Prospect for Disillusioned Baptists," in *Ties That Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision* (127, 1994).

3. See my article, "Spiritual Discernment, the Community, and Baptists" in Furr and Freeman, *Ties That Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision*. Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 1994.

4. From an address delivered at the annual meeting of the Southeast Region of the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, 10 March 1995.

5. A show of hands at the ASBCM meeting revealed about 75% of those present had used material by one or the other of these

spiritual writers.

6. Examples include Oswald and Kroeger's *Personality Type and Religious Leadership* (1988). Also see Michael and Norrisey's *Prayer and Temperament: Different Prayer Forms for Different Personality Types* (1984). Allan H. Sager applies Holmes's spirituality types in *Gospel-Centered Spirituality: An Introduction to Our Spiritual Journey* (1994). And pastoral counselor Corrine Ware in her D.Min project at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary developed an instrument from Holmes's categories to be used in the spiritual direction aspects of her counseling. Her work has been published by the Alban Institute under the title, *Discover Your Spiritual Type: A Guide to Individual and Congregational Growth* (1994).

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