

What is Christian Spirituality? Answer: Faith in Christ

Colleagues,

Today's ThTh posting #390 comes from Timothy Hoyer, Pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran congregation (ELCA) in Lakewood, New York. Peace & Joy!

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Faith in Christ is Christian Spirituality

People are trying to get closer to God. That desire to get closer to God, to feel closer to God, along with what one does to feel closer, is called "spirituality," or worship. That desire to experience God and to know what God wants was expressed by a man named Philip. He asked his spiritual mentor the question of all people who want to be close to God. "Philip said to Jesus, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?'" (John 14.8-10). Another spiritual advisor wrote and said, "Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also" (1 John 2.23); and, "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in them, and they in God" (1 John 4.15-16). The witnesses who knew

Jesus testify that the way to experience God, to be close to God, to know God's will for you, was to have faith in Jesus as the "expiation for our sins" (1 John 4.10).

To give people spiritual closeness to God, so close that God is called "Father," Jesus gave his followers five spiritual practices. The first is the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin through Christ is preached to all; second is baptism, where one is made a child of the Father; the third is The Lord's Supper, where one tastes and eats the presence of Christ and his forgiveness, so that we abide in him and he in us; fourth, the speaking of forgiveness through Christ, one person to another; and fifth, "through the mutual conversation and consolation of Christians" (Book of Concord [BoC], Tappert Edition, Smalcald Articles, Article 4. The Gospel). This fifth way is also described, "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and whoever loves is born of God and knows God" (1 John 4.7), and, "Bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6.2). Christ's spiritual practices are all done out loud, verbally, so people can hear Christ's promise and believe in him.

Those are the spiritual techniques or practices that Christians have to know and experience God as their Father, who forgives them for Christ's sake because he died for all people. That is why the Reformers wrote, "The chief worship of God is the preaching of the Gospel" (BoC, 221.42).

Three Places That Talk About "Another" Spirituality

There is another spirituality that is often sought after and urged upon Christians. This other spirituality consists of different techniques and practices that are claimed to bring the spiritual seeker closer to God and to know the mind of God. This other spirituality is based on a person's actions, practices, and techniques as the way to feel closer to God,

that is, more approved of by God, more loved by God, as if the closeness Jesus offers is insufficient. This other spirituality does not include the verbal proclamation of Jesus' promise to forgive. But when the Promise is not spoken, there can be no faith, no closeness to God's mercy for sinners.

- 1. The Newsweek Magazine Spirituality was the cover story of Newsweek's September 5, 2005 edition. In a poll by Newsweek and Beliefnet seventy-four percent of the people responding said they were spiritual (Newsweek, September 5, 2005, p. 48). The article "In Search of the Spiritual" states that this search "was a passion for an immediate, transcendent experience of God" (ibid, p.49). "There is a streak in the United States of relying on what Pacific Lutheran University's Professor Patricia Killen calls 'individual visceral experience' to validate religious ideas" (ibid, p.52). Echoing that is Tony Campolo, who asks, "You can have solid theology and be orthodox to the core, but have you experienced God in your own life?" (ibid. p. 50) In other words, God is real if you can feel God in you, if you feel joy, if you feel the love, or if you feel empowered and speak in tongues.*

The spiritual techniques mentioned are centering prayer, yoga, meditation, reading a holy book (Bible, Koran), and prayer groups. Those are techniques that focus on what the person does to get close to God. The more and better one practices, the closer one becomes to God. In contrast, the Lutheran Reformers wrote, "Faith is that worship which receives God's offered blessings; the righteousness of the law is that worship which offers God our own merits. It is by faith that God wants to be worshiped, namely, that we receive from him what he promises and offers" (BoC, 114:50). Faith in God's mercy for sinners is received because it is a gift, it is not

something that is obtained by practice.

The kind of spirituality reported on by Newsweek teaches people that as long as one has a feeling of being close to God (obtained by one's spiritual technique), then God is for you, then you are important to God, and so your life has meaning and purpose. The article never mentions Jesus' dying and rising to forgive people as the means by which God reconciles (becomes close to) people. The article's message is that closeness to God is determined by what each person does instead of closeness to God being given to believers in Christ, as the Reformers wrote, "This obedience toward God, this desire to receive the offered promise, is no less an act of worship than is love. God wants us to believe him and to accept blessings from him; this he declares to be true worship" (BoC, 139:228).

- 2. Renewing the Passion: a guide to spiritual revival. A Resource of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), c.2005 Evangelism is the impetus in the ELCA for spiritual renewal. "We want renewal because there is a thirst in our community of churches for a closer relationship with God" (Renewing the Passion, p. 3). People in the ELCA "seek to understand God's will and keep it" (ibid, p.10). "We desire a deeper relationship with God" (ibid, p.13).*

Renewing the Passion prescribes that in order to get a deeper relationship with God "We prepare by returning to the rituals, the places, and the forms that re-energize us and open us to God" (ibid). Suggested are: Lectio Divina, Prayer with sound and silence, Healing Prayer, and Interior Prayer (ibid, p. 17). Prayer and silence is to use "music, chanting, the beat of the drum as a tool to enter more deeply into God's presence in a time of

silence” (ibid). Worship is a time for an assembly “to embrace the will of God as revealed in their learning and experience” (ibid, p.31).

It can be said (though wrongly) that closeness to God, this spiritual renewal, is something Christians pursue after they have faith in Christ. So, after a Christian has faith in Jesus, they are free to use spiritual techniques in order to feel closer to God. However, spirituality and its techniques do not make good use of Christ’s forgiving us. Spirituality and its techniques in *Renewing the Passion* ignore the promises of Christ, never mentioning them. By emphasizing technique, such as silent meditation, instead of describing different ways verbally to proclaim forgiveness, *Renewing the Passion* treats Christ’s promises as ineffective and insufficient, as if Christ’s promises are not enough to give people closeness to God, that is, faith in God as their Father who forgives them because of Christ. Thus, the teaching of faith in Christ is eroded. “Nowhere do they teach that sins are forgiven freely for Christ’s sake and that by this faith we obtain the remission of sins. Thus they obscure the glory of Christ, and abolish true worship (that is, the exercise of faith struggling against despair)” (BoC, 328:44).

The world makes people feel distant and apart from God. The fact that God is hidden from our five senses and from our mind makes people feel far from God. Luther writes that everyone has a general knowledge of God-that God is. But people do not have a particular knowledge of God-how God relates to them with mercy and forgiveness through Christ. Normal, everyday living makes people feel unloved, for they feel compelled to do the right behavior in order to get God’s love. (That compelling is called

the law.) There is a constant pressure to perform, to get one's work done, errands done, chores done, bills paid, phone calls returned; there is daily conflict with other people, things breaking-cars, copiers, computers-waiting in long lines, standing on a crowded bus or subway, kids yelling and the TV volume too high. People do not feel close to God at such times. They feel rushed, pressured, strained, and without an inner peace or feeling loved and special. They feel far from God.

To overcome that world people need one who is born of God. For the one who "is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5.4-5)

People also do spirituality practices to try and discover what God wants, to better know the will or mind of God. That is only a general knowledge of God. Jesus has made people a promise. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14.9). Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in Jesus. To know Jesus is to know God in the closest, most loving and forgiving way there is. That is the particular knowledge of God.

The witnesses of Christ tell of how close Christ makes himself to us. They say that Christ is actually in us. "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us" (1 John 4.13-16a).

3. *The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC)* LSTC for the first time has hired someone to be its Director of Spiritual Formation and Dean of Chapel. The Seminary's concern was that "pastors who had graduated from seminary in earlier decades began to burn out because a variety of spiritual practices were missing from their professional repertoire (*EPISTLE, Magazine of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Fall 2005, p. 2*). The Director of Spiritual Formation is responsible to teach seminary students "how to deepen their spiritual lives as a basis for ministry" (*ibid*). The Director is to "offer specific practices and disciplines to aid in such a growth of faith" (*ibid*).

The joining of spiritual formation with worship in this new position is odd. The joining equates spiritual practices with hearing the Gospel, as if both do the same thing. However, "the chief worship of God is the preaching of the Gospel" (*BoC, 221.42*). Since "faith comes through what is heard, and what is heard is the preaching of Christ" (*Romans 10.17*), and since the spiritual practices mentioned in *Newsweek* and *Renewing the Passion* do not preach Christ, then such spiritual practices by themselves cannot give faith or grow faith or make someone closer to God or better know God's will. Without being able to give faith, spiritual practices alone cannot assist in preventing the burnout of pastors. The Reformers warn against this lack of preaching faith: "Therefore the patriarchs, too, were justified not by the law but by the promise and faith. It is strange that our opponents make so little of faith when they see it praised everywhere as the foremost kind of worship, as in *Ps. 50:15: 'Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.'* This is how God wants to be known and worshiped, that we accept his

blessings and receive them because of his mercy rather than because of our own merits” (BoC, 115:59).

The way for people to learn about Jesus, and the spiritual practice that pastors need, is to hear that Jesus forgives them by his death and rising. They hear that forgiveness when they listen to the stories of Jesus that his witnesses wrote down (the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). People are given Jesus in his Supper, so that by the bread and wine consumed, Jesus is within the person. That is how a person is close to God. When one person forgives another in the name of Christ, that person believes that God’s will and mind is to forgive, to have mercy, to declare that person righteous, and to give that person eternal life. That is how one knows the will of God. Those are the spiritual practices pastors need in their “professional repertoire.” Christian spirituality is to give Christ and his forgiveness or to receive Christ and his forgiveness. Christ is the one who reconciles us to God. Christ is the one who gives people peace with God. Faith in Christ is to be one with God.

To practice spiritual techniques as a way to open one’s mind to God is not enough to get close to God, for to think on God without dwelling on Christ is to think on those things that compel us—on the law, and thus on accusation, on judgment, and on death. If Christian spirituality is to be taught, the teachers are to teach that Christians get to think on Christ’s suffering and death for people, on his forgiving all people, on his finding the lost. To know Christ is to know God and to be close to God.

Being close to God is not determined by how well we participate in spiritual techniques, or how often we use a spiritual

technique, or by the resulting feelings caused by spiritual techniques. Such things replace Christ as the means to be close to God. We can be no closer to God than when we are in Christ and Christ is in us. If we say we are closer to God by another means than faith in Christ, Christ's glory is dimmed. God is closest to us through our faith in Christ dying for us and by our faith that we are forgiven for Christ's sake.

The world does not know God's mercy for sinners through wisdom or techniques or practices. "God decided through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. God is the source of our life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption"(1 Cor 1.27-30). God chose the Word of Forgiveness, the feeding people the body and blood of Christ, the pouring of water on people along with his spoken promise of forgiveness in Christ, as how God is close to us with mercy and love. Is there any other means of grace, any other spiritual technique by which we can feel "particularly" closer to God? If there is, then we deny that to be with Christ is to be closest to God.

Faith in Christ is our only hope that in times of sickness or pain God is close to us; that in times of despair and exhaustion, God is close to us; that in times of death and mourning, God is closest to us. For only faith in Christ makes us close to God, particularly God's mercy and forgiveness.

Thus, whenever spirituality is taught, whether by spiritual or faith mentors, by bishops' assistants or pastors, those teachers cannot say, "Doing this technique helps make you feel

closer to God." That does not use Christ to his glory, for it does not use Christ's benefits of forgiveness, mercy, reconciliation, or peace. Christian spirituality is to tell people Christ died and rose for them and that for his sake God abides in them with mercy and love. To listen to the Promise is a spiritual technique. To hear the Bible read in a way that Christ's forgiveness is told is a spiritual technique. To eat the Lord's Supper with others weekly is a spiritual practice. To forgive another in Christ's name and to share Christ's peace and to sing a hymn praising Christ are spiritual practices. Spiritual techniques are worthless unless those techniques give the good news of Christ to the person. Faith-closeness to God comes only through hearing of Christ.

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