

A Spirituality for the 21st Century

At its March meeting the Mission Council proposed that we would do well to seek a fitting spirituality for the Twenty-first Century. Before answering this call for an appropriate spirituality, it might be useful to clarify what “spirituality” in itself means for us, and what it can mean for the United Reformed Church in particular.

Most would agree that spirituality relates to our experience of a greater or deeper reality than ourselves, and how that experience shapes our lives. We, as Christians, would call this greater reality “God”, though spirituality as such is not necessarily limited either to Christianity or to formal religion in general. Spirituality is a natural but not necessarily inevitable characteristic of an individual person or a group. In the same way one might say so-and-so has no personality, a person might be said to lack spirituality. Groups can also lack spirituality. Their collective life can become flat, bureaucratic, orientated toward mere survival. Or they can possess a spirituality that is rich and deep in its experience of God and capable of driving a church’s overall corporate and institutional health. Spirituality is an essential human characteristic that can wither or flourish. It can be neglected or nurtured. Surely the urgency of the Mission Council’s proposal emerges from its concern for our spiritual health at a time when the practicalities of our survival can be so distracting.

The Mission Council proposal recognizes that spirituality exists in a variety of forms, not all of which may be appropriate for the URC as it moves into its immediate future. Spirituality can be Anglo-Catholic or Revivalist, for example, or Victorian or 1970s secular. Sometimes the spirituality of our community has been influenced by particular people, like George MacLeod or William Temple or John Henry Newman, or focused on Christian rock bands or Scottish metrical psalms. Our spirituality can form around movements like the Jesuits or the Benedictines or the Fair Trade movement or Taizé. And then, of course, there is the allure of Celtic spirituality and spiritualities borrowed from Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and other non-Western traditions. Clearly, our spirituality, as a core aspect of our individual or communal identity, is as contextual as any other aspect of our identity. The URC will have no problem in drawing the practice of its spirituality from ecumenical sources, but at the same time we need to be aware that our spirituality can be anachronistic, unfocused, eccentric, dysfunctional. The Mission Council’s proposal to seek an *appropriate* spirituality is crucial for a healthy church.

Spirituality is central to Reformed identity. Those who caricature spirituality as a monastic otherworldliness that has little to do with our Reformed tradition may be surprised to learn that the Mission Council proposal emerges from the heart of what it means to be a Reformed church. Our common life as Reformed churches finds its very foundation in the life of the Spirit. We don’t see it because we have ceased to name it so. The conduct of our governance, the place of Scripture in our personal and corporate life and even our relationships with the world around us are all shaped by our understanding of the Holy Spirit, by our “spirituality” as a Reformed community of churches. Searching for an appropriate spirituality for today is as much a matter of re-discovering who we have been as it is of who we shall be. We need to start on home ground. What follows is a brief exploration of what spirituality has meant as a fundamental aspect of what it means to be a Reformed church.

Our Experience of God

Howard Rice, in *Reformed Spirituality* (Westminster John Knox 1991) defines spirituality as “the pattern by which we shape our lives” in a process that is “in response to our experience of God” (p. 45). The experience of God is the defining factor here. Our lives are shaped not so much by an act of will but by “the inspiration of the Holy Ghost”, in the words of the Scots Confession (1560), grasped and shaped by something beyond us or deep within us. In the

words of our *Nature, Faith and Order* statement, “The life of faith to which we are called is the Spirit’s gift”.

Calvin said at the beginning of *The Institution of the Christian Religion* that our knowledge of God, which is the foundation of all theology, is inseparable from knowledge of ourselves as God’s creatures, and our knowledge of ourselves is inseparable from our knowledge of God. And of course by extension our knowledge of ourselves is inseparable from our engagement with neighbour. Our tradition invites us to turn our attention away from ourselves in order to know who we really are. Calvin’s phrase “we are not our own”, heard throughout the third book of the *Institutes*, echoes down the years in the many confessional documents of the Reformed Churches. In Brian Wren’s hymn, *We are not our own*, for instance, the words form a litany of commitment to a life centred not in ourselves but in others. Here is a spirituality of life together and a spirituality of praise and thanksgiving.

Spirituality is not an add-on to a Reformed faith. Reformed faith is *essentially* an exercise in spirituality, an engagement between God and the human person. Apart from human experience, God becomes a cipher. Salvation comes by faith, not faith as an assent to creedal propositions but faith as a trust deep enough to carry us through an often traumatic process of transformation to a godly, Christ-centred life. Our spirituality is as much about how we are to live as how we are to pray. An important dimension of prayer is to bring a godly shape to life. Matthew Henry in the Seventeenth Century described prayer much as John A. T. Robinson would in the last century, as a transformative process: “Prayer is to move and oblige ourselves, not to move and oblige God.”

Reading the Word

In his preface to his commentary on the Psalms, Calvin calls the Psalms “an anatomy of the soul”—a mirror image of all the grief and hope known to human experience. Those who wrote these psalms, in “laying open all their innermost thoughts and affections”, call us to read in a way that becomes a process of self-discovery, allowing the text to probe the heart with questions about how we live and prompt us to new commitments. As with our knowledge of God, our knowledge of Scripture is useless, abstract and merely academic if it does not lead, through the animation of the Holy Spirit, to self-knowledge, personal transformation and faithful action. Such a Spirit-led engagement with Scripture forms the foundation of the URC’s affirmation that “the highest authority for what we believe is God’s Word in the Bible, alive for [God’s] people through the help of the Spirit”.

Reading Scripture can be a bruising experience and intimidating. Few of us welcome change. But if it is a journey we are willing to take, it can become our guide to a new life lived in company with Christ and his teachings. The life of Christ is the life God intends for us all, as in David Fox’s hymn *God with humanity made one*: “In you all humankind can see/ the people God would have us be.” The Word takes on flesh in us. Such experiential engagement with our sacred texts becomes the core of Reformed spirituality. It has profound personal and public implications.

Changing the world

When Calvin laments the fallen disgrace of humanity in a world that, perceived correctly, is the “theatre of God’s glory”, he simply means that all humanity, indeed all human institutions and the very creation, are in need of redemption. The overarching message is one of promise. The gospel is good news. But again, it is good news that includes us, and our response to the Spirit’s movement among us to work in partnership with God. Here is what *A Brief Statement of Faith* from the Presbyterian Church (USA) has to say about transforming fallen structures: “The Spirit gives us courage...to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices

of people long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom and peace.” The URC makes the God-centeredness of such a spirituality of social/political explicit:

We believe that Christ gives his Church a government distinct from the government of the state. In things that affect obedience to God the Church is not subordinate to the state, but must serve the Lord Jesus Christ, its only King and head. Civil authorities are called to serve God’s will for justice and peace for all humanity, and to respect the right of conscience.

The Spirit-led Christian community engages the world with the same vigorous sense of what is right that we find in the Spirit’s engagement of the individual conscience. The foundation of our action in the world is our experience of God’s totally gratuitous grace, which prompts in us what Brian Wren calls an “answering love”. In Wren’s hymn, *When Christ was lifted from the earth*, such love creates a new world of welcome and acceptance:

Thus freely loved, though fully known,
may I in Christ be free
to welcome and accept his own
as Christ accepted me.

The Church as God’s House

Calvin called his theology a “practical theology” because it was concerned with what godly people did more than with intellectual speculation about deity in itself. And because the Reformed concept of salvation is so fundamentally grounded in the covenant life of the people of God, the Church remains the essential place in which and from which God’s people do what they do. The Church is a location for practising real relationships among real people, an embodiment of life together, and our ecclesiastical authority is therefore corporate, a priesthood of all believers rather than a priesthood of every believer. Decisions are made by the councils of the church rather than individuals, and this is true at all levels of church life. This is our corporate spirituality at work. The Church, Fred Kaan reminds us in a hymn, “is like a table....here people are a one-ness/ and love together bound”.

Or perhaps the Church “ought to be” like a table. Authority “ought to be” corporate, collegial and Spirit-led. Leadership “ought to be” more shared in the practice of our local churches. But is it? Seeking an appropriate spirituality for the Twenty-first Century that can re-invigorate our churches may simply mean giving greater recognition to the spiritual foundations of our present operation.

Making our meetings more spiritual is not only a matter of giving more time to devotions, but also giving more time to listening carefully and respectfully to one another. Opening our common life to the movement of the Spirit is more than encouraging members to prepare for worship through scripture reading and prayer. It ought to also ensure that roles of responsibility are rotated, that newer members are sought out and nurtured for leadership. Nor is it enough to ensure that the Lord’s Supper is celebrated in proper Reformed tradition without also ensuring that there is a conscious and programmatic connection between this sacrament and feeding the hungry in the world around our churches. The Church needs to be as self-critical in its own spiritual journey as individuals are in theirs, ever open to being transformed by the Holy Spirit.

A church that takes itself seriously as the household of God needs to cultivate a healthy sense of its own fallibility. In *The Basis of Union* the URC affirms its “right and readiness, if the need arises, to change the Basis of Union and to make new statements of faith in new obedience to the Living Christ.” Such a readiness to embrace new forms of integrity is an important dimension of a church’s vocation. A church that lives in the tension between its

own tradition and God's future is called to be more than an unshakeable rock of salvation. It is also called to be an instrument of the Spirit, a healing means of grace and broken witness to new possibility in a broken world. This is how Jill Jenkins expresses it in *Living God, your joyful Spirit*: "As your bread may we be broken,/ scattered in community;/ we who know your greatest blessings/ called to share Christ's ministry."

A Life Engaged

If the Spirit breaks up what has grown too stiff, it also reconciles, integrates and binds up what is broken. In our tradition a godly person is not otherworldly, nor is temptation seen in terms of sensuality, but in terms of desires that are idolatrous because, fetish-like, they strive to make ultimate what is only partial. Spiritual health is by contrast centred and integrated, bringing flesh, mind and spirit together in the whole, socially responsible godly person. It's about grace, blessing and affirmation. Reformed spirituality is a transformation of this world we live in according to the spirit of the Lord's Prayer: thy will be done on earth.

Such an understanding is hardly an invitation to a quiet, placid life. Calvin, in the third book of his *Institutes*, cautions us: "For whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of his fellowship ought to prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome, and unquiet life." The Christian life is often a call to engage in struggle on behalf of those in need of a neighbour. Fred Kaan picks this up in one of his hymns: "For ourselves no longer living,/ let us live for Christ alone;/ of ourselves more strongly giving,/ go as far as he has gone."

Kaan's hymn goes on to say, "Let us rise and join the forces/ that combine to do God's will." The Spirit's call to fight fear and exploitation is a call to join a movement that is bigger than tradition, bigger than a denomination and bigger even than the Church. And the call from within the Reformed faith to be ever ready for continuing reform suggests that the model of engagement and transformation called for in individual Christians is the model for the spirituality of the URC as a whole, insofar as we can capture the vision of such a movement. The classic statement of this attitude comes from Pastor John Robinson's words to his congregation on the eve of their departure for the New World in 1620, popularised in the hymn, "We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind":

I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of his Holy Word. For my part, I cannot sufficiently bewail the condition of those reformed churches which... will go, at present, no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw; whatever part of his will our God had revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left by that great man of God, who yet saw not all things. This is a misery much to be lamented...

This framework for a Reformed spirituality is one we all recognize and often practise without naming it as such. While the notion of "spirituality" is often criticised as a thin form of faith for those who find rigorous engagement uncomfortable, it is clear that the spirituality of the URC is a life of fundamental engagement with God, with neighbour, and with the structures and powers of the world around us. Nor is it parochial, a shrinking retreat into a Reformed backwater increasingly imperilled by the vitality of a secular world. Rigorously self-critical, ecumenically flexible, rooted in the fundamental experience of what it means to be human, Reformed spirituality lays a good foundation for exploring what an appropriate spirituality might be for the URC in the years to come.

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