

Christian Studies

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In Memoriam



Dr. William Stewart
1941–2003

ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ ἐν τῷ θεῷ . . . ὅταν ὁ Χριστὸς φανερωθῇ, ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν, τότε καὶ ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ.
Colossians 3:3–4

Dr. William (Bill) Wayne Stewart, son of Roy and Gladys Stewart, was born June 8, 1941, in Austin, Texas, where he died on December 4, 2003. Bill graduated from the University of Texas, Texas Tech University, and the University of Southern California.

Bill had a lifetime interest in education, serving as a director at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. He was especially interested in Christian education, serving on the Board of Brentwood Christian School and as an adjunct faculty member of Austin Graduate School of Theology.

Bill is survived by his wife Becky, his son Landon and daughter-in-law, Lana, two grandsons, Christian and Casey, and his sister, Jan Colley. Bill's first wife, Daphren, died in 1986.

From 1973 Bill was a member of Brentwood Oaks Church of Christ where he taught classes and for several years faithfully composed prayers for the order of worship. He was a man of deep personal faith who was sensitive to all those around him. He viewed all life as God's gift and sought to live in a manner showing gratitude for those who have gone before and concern for those who follow.

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True Religion and Undefined
Spirituality in Micah and James

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R. Mark Shipp

People have always been interested in spirituality. It is an irony that in American secular society, interest in things spiritual continues unabated. In recent cover articles in a local newspaper, “spirituality” is highlighted in a variety of ways:

The road to a fulfilling life could only be found if the listeners realized that all their interactions with others were about power.

The spiritual journey is an arduous and necessarily protracted meandering that takes a soul from a life governed by fear to that new serenity birthed only by trust in the mystery we call God.

The Society of Contemplative Spirituality is advertising seminars in inner tranquility.

What these statements have in common is that they define spirituality as internal life, a quality of inner peace and tranquility, or a mysterious connection with the divine life which enable us to transcend human weakness. Even many Christians in our society will define spirituality as something strange, numinous, and exotic, not really rooted in the here and now.

There have been other ways of approaching spirituality throughout the ages. A common way of understanding how humans can approach the divine in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and even down to the present, has been

by means of religious ritual. Those who adopt this approach assume that by performing the right acts of worship or sacrifice or by saying the right words, the realm of God or the gods can be brought close and we can have fellowship with and a participation in the divine.

A popular way of understanding spirituality in the past two centuries has been that of acts of kindness and benevolence towards our neighbors. The “social gospel” approach, popular at the beginning of the twentieth century, emphasized the healing and compassionate ministry of Jesus and the speeches of the Old Testament prophets against those who turned a blind eye to the unfortunate. Charles Sheldon, in his book *In His Steps*, said this:

What I feel puzzled about is, what is meant by following Jesus. What do you mean when you sing “I’ll go with Him, with Him, all the way?” Do you mean that you are suffering and denying yourselves and trying to save lost, suffering humanity just as I understand Jesus did? What do you mean by it? I see the ragged edge of things a good deal. I understand there are more than five hundred men in this city in my case. Most of them have families. My wife died four months ago. I’m glad she is out of trouble. My little girl is staying with a printer’s family until I find a job. Somehow I get puzzled when I see so many Christians living in luxury and singing “Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow Thee,” and remember how my wife died in a tenement in New York City, gasping for air and asking God to take the little girl too. Of course I don’t expect you people can prevent every one from dying of starvation, lack of proper nourishment and tenement air, but what does following Jesus mean?¹

Sheldon’s book has been in print for over 100 years, helped popularize the social gospel movement, and was the original “WWJD” (“What Would Jesus Do?,” Sheldon’s sub-title).

Walter Rauschenbusch was the primary theologian of the movement. A recent writer has said this about Rauschenbusch:

He believed that Christian principles must be translated into actions that promote compassion, justice, and social change. He took seriously the equality of love embodied in Jesus’ admonition that we love our neighbors as ourselves. . . . He began to believe that Christianity must address the physical as well

¹ Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps: “What Would Jesus Do?”* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1896), 9.

as the spiritual needs of humankind. He developed an understanding of discipleship that made the spirit of Christianity the core of social renewal.²

To Rauschenbusch, as well as other social gospel leaders, sin and spirituality are primarily defined as social sin and social righteousness and it was understood to be a necessary and logical development within Christianity.³

These are but three of the ways that spirituality has been defined over the centuries: religious ritual, social action, and inner illumination. The question of spirituality is a crucial one; how we define it has everything to do with our lives as Christians, for “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). Scripture orients us to what true spirituality is.

Micah and Spirituality

The people of Judah in the eighth century B.C. had their own definition of spirituality, having to do with their understanding of the importance of ritual and worship. Micah, and earlier in the eighth century, Amos, had much to say about the fervor with which the people of Judah performed their acts of public worship. The problem was that they saw no connection between their acts of worship and their behavior. Micah describes the spiritual leaders of Judah in this way:

Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong. Its heads give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for hire, its prophets divine for money; yet they lean upon the LORD and say, “Is not the LORD in the midst of us? No evil shall come upon us.” (Mic 3:9–11)

In chapter 6, Micah describes the care with which the Judeans conduct their worship in words and rituals reminiscent of the book of Leviticus. The

² www.deepmedia.org/rauschenbusch/rauschenbusch.html.

³ “The Social Gospel is a permanent addition to our spiritual outlook and . . . its arrival constitutes a stage in the development of the Christian religion” (Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1945], 2).

people offer the calves of the whole burnt offering, or holocaust offering, the oil of the grain or thanksgiving offering, and the ram of the guilt offering.⁴ Micah resorts to a little hyperbole: even if the Judeans offered thousands of rams and ten thousands of, not measures of oil, but rivers of oil, the Lord would not be pleased with their worship.

Micah 6:7 reflects the point of the book: the sacrifice the Lord requires is that of justice, loyalty, and humble living before God. Justice, the Hebrew word *mishpat*, is literally proper judgment. It has to do with being fair and impartial in legal judgments, and by extension, interpersonal relationships. Kindness is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which literally means loyalty, keeping covenants and promises. It is a word used in almost every passage in the Old Testament which talks about covenants. The last phrase means literally “showing a humble walk with your God.” “Walk” is the way Deuteronomy refers to behavior and way of life characterized by keeping God’s commandments. Deuteronomy 5:33 says, “You shall walk in all the way which the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you.”⁵

All of this has a great deal to do with spirituality. If spirituality may be defined in terms of what God requires in order to be close to his people, then there are two distinct requirements: acts of compassionate kindness and fidelity, directed to others, and a faithful and obedient walk of life, directed towards God.

⁴ Note, however, that James L. Mays (*Micah* [Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976], 139–140) suggests that only the ‘*olah*, or whole burnt offering, is intended here.

⁵ Note Hans W. Wolff’s discussion of these words and their interconnectedness in *Micah: A Commentary* (Continental Commentary; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), 180–181.

What do compassion to others and a humble walk with God have to do with New Testament spirituality? James 1:27 is one of the earliest commentaries on Micah 6:8. It reads,

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

James defines pure and undefiled religion in much the same way as Micah did. Pure religion, in other words pure spirituality, is comprised of two elements: acts of compassionate kindness and a faithful and obedient walk with God.

What Does the Lord Still Require?

We live in a society which defines spirituality in many different ways. Some define spirituality as inspiring worship, as the Judeans of Micah's day did. Some define it as inner illumination and faith, as James makes allusion to those of his day who had an inadequate understanding of that faith. Some define it as social action and acts of compassion, like Walter Rauschenbusch and Charles Sheldon.

But scripture does not limit itself to these categories for our understanding of what the spiritual life is. It is to love God and love our neighbor. It is the life of faith and worship, but faith exhibited in acts of loyalty and compassion.

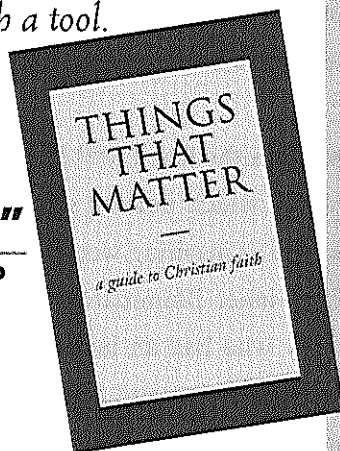
We live in a confusing and complex world where we are asked to believe that spirituality is an inner feeling, an outward action, or exciting worship. While authentic spirituality may include elements of all of these, the heart of true and undefiled religion is still to do justice, love loyalty and compassion, and live a life of faithful obedience.

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