

The Case for Biblical Spirituality

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[0 : 00] The topic of biblical spirituality, I think, is a really vital and important one and a very timely one for us in Western society at the moment because we are in an age of great spiritual hunger.

Even as people have become more secular, as atheism or non-aligned, non-religious sectors of the community have increased, spiritual hunger and talk of spirituality has increased.

In one survey in 2009, the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 47% of Australians described themselves as spiritual, while only 39% saw themselves as religious.

Spiritual but not religious seems to be the fastest growing designator for young people especially. In another survey in 2011, 29% of under-30s described themselves as spiritual but not religious, compared to only 10% of people 60 or over.

So people don't want religion, but they do want to be spiritual. What do they mean by that and what do they want from it? Well, from what I've observed and read, they want pretty much what everybody wants from spirituality.

[1 : 24] That is, they want a life lived in tune with a higher reality and they want to become the best version of themselves. Spirituality is about a life lived in tune with higher reality and becoming the best version of ourselves.

Now, of course, non-religious people have very different ideas about what that higher reality means. For some, it's just being more aware of our place in the natural world or an awareness of our relationship to other parts of the world through kind of scientific principles.

And they have different ideas about what it means to become a better person. It might just mean pursuing a dream or living well or cooking nice food or doing yoga.

Lots of yoga, apparently, these days. But then Christians have very different ideas about spirituality too, don't we? As Andrew was just mentioning in the introduction, Although we know that a spiritual life is about God and Jesus, at least in theory, we have different ideas about how to cultivate a life that expresses those realities, that is in tune with those realities.

So when we think of the word spirituality as Christians, lots of people come up with different ideas, different things pop into their minds. For some, it's being silent and waiting for God to speak.

[2 : 46] For some, it means the feeling that God is present when we gather to sing his praises. For others, of a more traditional bent, it means the symbols and rituals of Christian tradition, the sacraments, liturgy, meditation on things like icons or candles, for example.

And some people think that the core of their own spirituality is experiencing God in beauty, perhaps the beauty of the natural world or the beauty of a great cathedral or something, the sense of awe and wonder that comes from that.

Well, over the next three weeks, I'm going to be arguing that the true path to spirituality is with the Bible. If we want a life lived in tune with that higher reality, with God and his son Jesus, the Bible shows us the way.

If we want to become the best version of ourselves, then the Bible gives us the secret. I'm going to be arguing that the Bible doesn't just give us information about God, that it comes with spiritual power.

It's a spiritual reality that comes with the capacity of the Holy Spirit and the presence of the Holy Spirit to make us spiritual. That might seem surprising and unconvincing to you, or it might seem totally expected.

[4 : 20] But I hope if it's the former that I'll be able to persuade you. If it's the latter, you'll be hearing new things nonetheless. I'm going to be arguing that there is nothing in the world that is more spiritual than a life lived according to the Bible.

So why biblical spirituality? Well, I've got two basic points tonight. One, because we need it. And two, because it's how we meet Jesus.

So firstly, because we need it. The problem with most theories about how to be spiritual is that there's no way to check whether they're actually doing anything.

One of the problems, I should say. Yoga might make you feel good about your body, but how do you know that it has anything to do with being in touch with God or the universe? Meditation might help you quiet your mind and make you feel like you're part of something greater, but these feelings, of course, are very unreliable.

And that's become more and more clear, I think, as scientists have studied human psychology and neurology too. Some scientists claim that they can make you feel like there's a spiritual presence hanging around you simply by applying magnetic fields to part of your brain.

[5 : 38] We can feel like something spiritual is going on when we're on drugs or when we're in a large crowd. We're very susceptible and suggestible.

Our brains are unreliable. We confuse feeling good with feeling close to God. Or conversely, sometimes we can confuse feeling sick or depressed with being far away from God.

And I'd add, by the way, that this is true for Christians as well as for everybody else. There are emotional highs that come from singing in a large group that might have nothing to do with being close to God.

There are feelings of mystery and awe associated with being in a great cathedral or participating in communion that might or might not be true expressions of our spiritual state. I remember a time in my life where I suddenly realised that I was having a great quiet time in the mornings but it always happened if I had my quiet time about 30 minutes after I had a really good cup of coffee.

In other words, I was confusing the euphoria of that coffee with being in tune with God. Coffee is good. But it's not spiritual.

[6 : 57] The point is we can't trust our own feelings. But it's even worse than that. These things that I've just mentioned, of course, are neutral or innocent. But our hearts aren't just unreliable.

They're also sick and influenced by our sinful desire. So as the prophet Jeremiah says in that classic verse, the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick.

Who can understand it? Paul, of course, in Romans chapter 1, verses 18 following, describes our natural state as one of suppressing the truth by our wickedness and God handing us over to our own foolishness as a result of our idolatry.

If that natural blindness, that natural confusion of heart and spirit wasn't enough, the Bible also makes it clear that we have the devil to worry about.

We're in a spiritual war, and the devil, or the father of lies, as Jesus calls him in John's Gospel, is continually trying to lead us into error. Let's look at what Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, describing why the gospel often doesn't make any progress in people's lives.

[8 : 16] He says, So not only are we weak psychologically, easily misled, suggestible, confused, we also have our sin, polluting our thought processes, and we have the devil blinding us too.

And I want to add, I think, that this isn't a problem that goes away the moment we become Christians. In 1 Timothy chapter 4, verse 1, Paul says, In other words, this is a concern for everybody, Christians and non-Christians.

We have terrible problems within ourselves and from spiritual quarters. What's the answer? Well, according to the New Testament, God has done two great things for us.

He's given us a true message to listen to or to proclaim and he's performed and performs a miracle to accompany that message.

So have a look at 2 Corinthians 4, just following on from that stuff about the God of this age, that's Satan blinding the minds of unbelievers. He then goes on to talk about his own ministry.

[9 : 53] He says, So notice what Paul does.

He preaches a message of Jesus Christ as Lord. And at the same time, he looks for a great miracle. What's that miracle?

Verse 6, For God who said, Let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

Notice, of course, that Paul is making a clear reference here to the first act of creation. He's saying that what is required and what God does for us is a new act of creation.

We are in a state of darkness. Satan has blinded us so we can't see the truth. God says, Let there be light in our hearts and people can respond to the gospel.

[11 : 13] A great miracle of new creation, in other words. Which is what he says in 2 Corinthians 5, of course, that if anybody is in Christ, there is a new creation.

The new creation that God is going to bring about at the end of time begins in Christ and begins in our hearts as we hear the gospel message.

Now, elsewhere, the same reality is described as a work of the Spirit. So Paul in 1 Corinthians 2 is making the same point in using different words.

This is what we speak, he says to the Corinthians, not in words taught us by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.

The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, but considers them foolishness. And cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.

[12 : 17] So here again, we have a message and the work of God directly in the hearer together, don't we? Notice how the Word and Spirit go together.

The Word comes from the Holy Spirit. He talks about in verse 13, we're explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.

In other words, his own message comes from the Holy Spirit, but the words must also be accompanied by the Spirit as they reach the listener. Why? Because, verse 14, the person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, but considers them foolishness.

Of course, in this context, he's talking about the message of the cross, foolishness to Jews and Gentiles. So the only hope for effective ministry, according to Paul, is the Holy Spirit using the Word, using the Word about Christ, making the Word living and active, as the writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 4, verse 12.

The Holy Spirit using the Word as a sword, as Paul would say in Ephesians 6, 17. Let me just have a little aside here and point out that this means that God does speak today.

[13 : 56] It's one of the questions I said we'd be talking about in this series. Does God speak today? Yes, God does speak today. When we hear the Word and understand it and accept it, when it's not foolishness to us, when we see it's truth, that is God speaking to us through His Word by His Holy Spirit directly.

John Piper in one famous sermon tells this story. He says, let me tell you about a most wonderful experience I had early Monday morning, March the 19th, 2007, a little after 6 o'clock.

God actually spoke to me. There's no doubt it was God. I heard the words in my head just as clearly as when a memory of a conversation passes across your consciousness.

God said, come and see what I have done. There settled over me a wonderful reverence. A palpable peace came down. There was a holy moment and a holy corner of the world in northern Minnesota.

God Almighty had come down and was giving me the stillness and the openness and the willingness to hear His very voice. As I marveled at His power to dry up the sea and the river, He spoke again.

[15 : 12] I will keep watch over the nations. Let not the rebellious exalt themselves. What effect did this have on me? He says, it filled me with a fresh sense of God's reality.

It assured me more deeply that God acts in history and in our time. It strengthened my faith. But then He says, but it's an experience available to all of us.

If you would like to hear the very same words I heard on the couch in northern Minnesota, read Psalm 66 verses 5 and 7. That's where I heard them. How precious is the Bible.

It's the very word of God. In it, God speaks in the 21st century. This is the very voice of God. By this voice He speaks with absolute truth and personal force.

By this voice He reveals His all-surpassing beauty. By this voice He reveals the deepest secrets of our hearts. No voice anywhere, anytime, can reach as deep or lift as high or carry as far as the voice of God that we hear in the Bible.

[16 : 16] I wonder if when you realized that this was going to be a story about him reading the Bible whether you were a little bit disappointed. I was. I thought, John Piper, he is God directly.

I assumed that he was going to go on to say that the Bible is just as good or better but I was a bit disappointed when I heard that he hadn't actually heard an audible voice outside the Bible.

How unspiritual of me to think like that. I was more excited about the idea that God would give somebody in our time, John Piper or possibly me, a direct word than that he would go on speaking in the miraculous voice of his written word about his son.

Because that's the key, isn't it? The Bible is about Jesus. The message that Paul is talking about in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 and 1 Corinthians 2 is a word about Jesus.

the glory of God in the face of Christ. The message of the cross which is foolishness to those who do not have the Holy Spirit. It's all about Jesus.

[17 : 36] Now, that raises one question I guess and that is does this voice of the Spirit, this speaking of the Spirit apply to all the Bible or just the bits which are about Jesus?

There's lots of ways people try to separate Jesus from the Bible. So sometimes that just means we pay special attention to the red letters in the Gospels or sometimes it means that we like the Gospels but not Paul or sometimes it means that we like the New Testament rather than the Old Testament or sometimes more sophisticated theologians will say that the Bible isn't really the Word of God it's a witness to the Word of God.

Jesus is the incarnate Word and the Bible points to Him in some lesser sense. Well that last point is kind of right in a sense isn't it that Jesus is the incarnate Word.

He is the greatest revelation of God. Hebrews 1 in the past God spoke to us in various ways throughout our ancestors but in these last days He's spoken to us by His Son.

Jesus is God's Son His living Word He's God's greatest revelation and yet we cannot separate Jesus from the Bible.

[19 : 11] I often think when people say that Scripture is a witness to the Word or a testimony to Jesus rather than the Word itself I think well what did Jesus think about that?

His life was saturated with Scripture He knew what to do because He read Scripture In other words Scripture was part of His life part of His mission part of His coming into the world Look what He says in Matthew 26-24 as He's going through the ordeal of dying for our sins He says the Son of Man will go just as it is written about Him and later on do you think I cannot call on my Father and He will at once put at my disposal more than 12 legions of angels but how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen that way In other words Jesus is continually taking His cue from Scripture If we ask what's the content of the brain of Jesus it's very largely the Bible by the sounds of it The Bible the Old Testament is part of the incarnation

Why Luther talks about Jesus coming into the world wrapped in the swaddling clothes of the Scriptures We can't know Jesus apart from the Bible And all Scripture according to Him turns out to be about Him So what happens after He comes back from the dead on the road to Emmaus Well He meets up with those two disciples walking along and Luke 24 verse 25 He says He said to them How foolish you are and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter His glory and beginning with Moses and all the prophets He explained to them what was said in the Scriptures concerning Himself And then later on they say after they recognize Him and He disappears from them they asked each other Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us

And then later on again appearing to His disciples Then He opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures He told them This is what is written The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem You are witnesses of these things In other words Jesus comes back from the dead and His first response is to do some Old Testament Bible studies with His disciples His ministry His victory over sin and death is so tied up with the witness of Scripture so clearly testified and so manifest in Scripture Scripture is so important to understanding what He's done that that's what He wants to talk about People think sometimes that Jesus is like a pearl that you can prise out of an oyster and chuck away the oyster which is the Bible or bits of the Bible you don't like and grab the pearl which is Jesus but it's more like

Jesus is the heart or brain in the body isn't it there's the Holy Spirit flowing into him from Scripture He looks to the Old Testament and it flows into him to govern his actions the Holy Spirit through the pages the scrolls of the prophets comes to him so just as the Holy Spirit overshadows Mary to bring about the virgin conception so the Holy Spirit brings the life of Jesus to fruition too through the Scriptures but of course just like a brain or a heart there's blood or the Holy Spirit flowing out as well as Jesus ascends or goes up to sit at the right hand of the Father He sends the Holy Spirit anew what does He say to His disciples in

[23 : 43] John 15 John 15 26 when the advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father He will testify about me and you also must testify for you have been with me from the beginning in other words Jesus appoints His disciples and equips them with the Spirit that He sends to be His witnesses in other words He's arranging for Scripture to witness to His coming just as Scripture has already witnessed in a more vague way through the Old Testament Jesus as Luther says again comes wrapped with the Bible wrapped before and after the Bible that is part of His coming into the world and the Bible that testifies now through the word of the apostles to His coming into His mission and His victory

Jesus' life and mission is part of one great spiritual project the Holy Spirit from the very beginning has had in mind God has had in mind through His Spirit if you want to put it that way the revelation and installation of God's Son Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour with a people who are His very own so going back to 1 Peter 1 10 there concerning this salvation Peter writes the prophets who spoke of the grace that was to come to you searched intently and with the greatest care trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when He predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow it was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the

Holy Spirit sent from heaven so notice that in the Old Testament the writings of the prophets were inspired by the Spirit of Christ the Old Testament work of the Holy Spirit was already the work of the Spirit of Christ part of Christ's mission and appearing in the world and of course the ministry of the Holy Spirit now comes again he says verse 12 it was revealed to them the prophets that they were not serving themselves but you when they spoke of the things that have now been told to you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit from heaven so the Holy Spirit is back in the Old Testament helping the prophets and now the Holy Spirit has been sent from heaven to assist the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus and the result of that is that we who live in the wake of Jesus' life, death and resurrection are the ones for whom scripture is really for that's what he says when he says the Old Testament prophets were serving not themselves but you we as Paul would say in 1 Corinthians 10 live in the fulfillment of the ages everything in the Old Testament was leading up to Christ and now Christ has ascended and sent his spirit to make clear what was in shadow and what was coming and what was made what was fulfilled in his actual life and death and resurrection and we are the ones who get to live in that age the spiritual age where the spirit testifies most clearly to Christ and comes directly from

Christ through the apostles to us the point I'm trying to make I guess here is that word the word about Christ and the spirit always go together so as Andrew said in his introduction some people have the idea that we had the age of Jesus he came and lived on earth for a while then went back up to heaven and now we have the age of the spirit the Holy Spirit is now revealed on his own as the he has his time on the stage the third person of the Godhead but that's not how it works is it the Holy Spirit is not here to reveal himself or to act on his own behalf he is as J.I.

Packer says he's a floodlight his ministry is always to shine on Jesus just as it was in the Old Testament he was the spirit of Christ then and now he's still the spirit of Christ he's at work in our lives through the Bible through the witness of the apostles to point to Jesus we can't have the spirit separated from the word about Jesus he's here to talk about Jesus conversely of course we can't have the word about Jesus the Bible without the Holy Spirit that too of course is possible isn't it what would it look like we can imagine we'll talk more about next week maybe it would be a dry reading a dead reading of the Bible that produces no fruit that remains as foolishness to us maybe it's simply an intellectual exercise a classic example of course of the of a dead reading of scripture is what we see when

[29 : 47] Jesus talks to the Pharisees in John chapter 5 verses 37 following where he talks about how they study the scripture because they think they have eternal life by it but these are the very scriptures that testify to me he says in other words that's word without spirit spirit is always about Jesus the Bible is about Jesus if we want to know what it's about if we want to receive it and receive it fruitfully we need the Holy Spirit so where does that leave us here are some summary ideas under the heading true spirituality true spirituality focuses on well what does it focus on Jesus yeah Sunday school answer but it's true as ever as revealed by the spirit in the

Bible all those three together true spirituality doesn't go beyond Jesus why not well because Jesus was always the fulfillment of the Old Testament everything was always headed towards him we live in the fulfillment of the ages the culmination of the ages according to 1 Corinthians 10 11 or again as we saw in 1 Peter 1 12 it was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you so Jesus is the apex he's where everything was headed and he's what everything is about true spirituality doesn't go beyond Jesus true spirituality doesn't ignore the Old Testament as we've seen Jesus' first instinct after he comes back from the dead is to do Bible studies on the Old Testament with his disciples on the road to

Emmaus true spirituality doesn't neglect the New Testament because as we've seen in John 15 that's the product of the people Jesus selected and empowered by his spirit the New Testament the testimony of the apostles is his chosen method to make himself known in the world and to spread his influence true spirituality reads the Bible Christologically it's always looking for how this part of the Bible reveals Jesus directly or indirectly and true spirituality reads the Bible prayerfully why prayerfully because it's only as the Holy Spirit works dynamically haunts the text of scripture that it comes alive for us that we are preserved from our sins and errors and the devil's lies and we are brought to fruit and life and light so conclusion walnuts fish oil and

Jesus if any of you were here on 1030 on Sunday you'll have heard my illustration of how in the middle ages the way people used to think you found medicine and drugs was by looking for objects or fruit or plants that look like the body part you're trying to treat so blood root for blood mushrooms for your ears walnuts for your brain and nowadays of course we know that's crazy it's not what things look like that makes the difference it's what it's got in it what are the active ingredients of that drug that plant and if you're like me you take fish oil for example then you're taking something with fatty acids that's made of the same stuff that your brain is made of that's why we take it rightly or wrongly well what's the bible the bible is like fish oil isn't it it's the same spiritual reality that brought

Jesus into the world it's the same spiritual reality that informed his life it's part of the same spiritual mission that brought about his conception with Mary it's part of the same product of the same spiritual reality that he has sent to his apostles and sends to us so we can receive it the bible is made of spirit it's spiritual and it's also I guess a bit like a living drug like T cells or stem cells injected into us it's not a dead compound or an inert compound it's something that comes with the power to change us and give us new life so the question I guess for us to finish with is do we have a medieval view of spirituality which looks for appearances all the time looks for things that look spiritual or do we let Jesus and his

[35 : 34] Holy Spirit and his word dictate what true spirituality is for us next week we'll be talking more about how that works itself out in practice what spirituality means when it's lived out individually and corporately how that helps guard us but that's the great question the great question for tonight is are we people of spiritual appearances or spiritual reality and I'll stop there