



## *Spirituality and Religion*

More than once while doing survey work with our TCW team a few weeks ago I heard unchurched people excuse themselves from further follow-up by our congregation by claiming: “We’re just not very religious people, but we are spiritual.”

“Spirituality” has become a trendy term and concept in recent years. Movie stars claim to be spiritual. The Christian Science web-site is “spirituality.com.” Christian colleges are appointing chairs of the “spiritual theology” department. There is even a book on Lutheran Spirituality: *The Spirituality of the Cross*.

But what does it mean to be spiritual? A scathing commentary on modern spirituality appeared in the Wichita, KS Eagle, several years ago. It was written as a lampoon of “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” entitled, “Who Wants to Be a Spiritual Person.” The contestant describes himself this way. “I’m a businessman who’s never quite found a religion that suits me. Besides, Sunday is my golfing day. I’m looking for a ready made, easy-to-follow spirituality that doesn’t make too many taxing demands and fits with my lifestyle.”

Christian writer Eugene Peterson complains that most Christians who are trying to become “spiritual” people are little better. They think of it mostly as mystical experience that has little to do with the mundane things of everyday life. It’s almost elitist. It has little to do with repenting of sins, receiving forgiveness, believing the gospel, and serving my neighbor. It has much to do with getting more out of life. It’s all about me. “With Christ, you are better, stronger, more likeable, you enjoy some ecstasy.”

If that is spirituality, it would seem that religion deserves a second look. James says of religion: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27). His description of the kind of religious practice our heavenly Father is looking for holds our feet to the fire with two of the great concerns of the commandments: a life of unselfish love for our neighbor, and an unselfish life of personal purity before God. Looking after widows and orphans is a practical example of the former, and keeping oneself from being polluted by the world is a general exhortation to the latter.

And don’t we tend to emphasize one to the exclusion of the other? Some who bear the name Christian today immerse themselves in lives of good works. They are activists. They raise funds for some food pantry or shelter, volunteer their time at some



inner city youth center, build homes for the poor, and maybe even travel to some third world country to try to improve the living conditions of the poor natives. They take the concern for widows, and orphans, and anyone else who is down and out very seriously. But it doesn't seem to matter much to them if they or others have personal lives that are the moral equivalent of a cesspool. They see no problem with selfishly satisfying every craving. They don't understand being polluted by the world.

While the moral pollution of the world is constantly encroaching on our own hearts and minds, perhaps a conservative church like our own has more trouble in the other direction. We still believe and preach what God has to say about sexual morals. We talk about materialism and greed, even if it has a greater hold on us than we might like to admit. But our sin falls more on the side of overlooking the plight of the less fortunate. As long as we are staying out of trouble personally, we feel like we are doing an adequate job of keeping up with the commandments. Since our church rejects the social gospel, we may be inclined to excuse ourselves personally from concern for our neighbor in his need. We forget that Jesus does not summarize the commandments by saying "Be good." He summarizes them by saying, "Love." Go find someone to whom you can show your love. God has put us here to help the widows, and the orphans, and anyone else who needs what we can give.

Didn't Jesus live both sides for us? Morally, no one's life was ever more spotless. He was tempted in every way just as we are, yet was without sin. He loved the widow of Nain and all the needy people who came to him for healing or help. He looked after an entire world of spiritual beggars when he gave his life to remove our debt of sin.

That was not merely a great example of pure and faultless religion. That is the redemption that sets us free from our less than pure and fault-filled religion. That is the reason that God accepts you and me as pure and faultless. Jesus gives us his own pure and faultless life as a substitute for impure and fault-filled lives.

Whether we call it "religion" or "spirituality" or "sanctification" or merely "Christian life," may we be moved to live our lives for him who lived this way for us.

In Christ, Pastor Vieths