

“Partnership with the Spirit: A Theology of Spirituality”

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I’ve been thinking a lot lately about “partnership with God” as a paradigm for spiritual formation and spirituality. As we’ve seen already, there’s a lot of confusion out there regarding spirituality, especially when it comes to defining it and thinking well about it. So I’d like to lay out some of my thoughts about spirituality as “partnership with God” or even “partnership with the Spirit” as a way of thinking about spirituality. To do so, I’ll need to help you understand where most of the gurus are coming from these days and demonstrate how we’re off-center just a little bit. Mostly I view partnership, not as a way of doing “spirituality,” but just about living life with God—through Christ, in the power of the Spirit—in the humdrum and everyday activities.

Who Takes the Lead?

If we survey those who are writing most prominently about spirituality in our time we find two distinctly different opinions, leading to very different approaches to the practice of spirituality. One the one side are those who suggest that Christian spirituality is mostly the work of the Spirit, with some corresponding activity on our part. Among the most prominent are Eugene Peterson¹ and Dallas Willard,² both of whom express their belief that the Spirit drives the process of transformation, to whom then the believer responds by providing outward, visible signs of that renovation. Included here are those who define spirituality as *religious experience*. Thomas Tobin, in *The Spirituality of Paul* describes Paul’s spirituality in terms of his experience of the Spirit,³ which the Spirit of God initiated in the vision of the risen Christ. Michael Gorman’s view of Paul’s spirituality also involves this kind of experience, but in relation to the cross of Christ.⁴

On the other side are those who suggest that the work of spiritual formation involves *initiative* on our part, and that the initiative we take provides the ideal conditions for the Spirit to work transformation in our lives. In other words, “Draw near to God and he will draw near to you” (James xx). Richard Foster’s classic, *Celebration of Discipline*, takes the approach that spiritual disciplines are the gateway to transformation. Practicing spiritual disciplines places the believer in unique positions to receive fresh “grace” from the Spirit.⁵ Mulholland’s view of spirituality, while notably striking balance between these two extremes, defines spiritual disciplines only in terms of things *offered to God on a regular basis*, which God may or may not choose to use for spiritual

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Wisdom of Each Other* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 32: “The Christian life is mostly what is being done to you, not what you are doing.”

² Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 22-23. For Willard, Christian spiritual formation is a “Spirit-driven process.” Human action, no matter how well-intentioned always takes us back to the legalistic, outward righteousness of the Pharisee.

³ Thomas H. Tobin, *The Spirituality of Paul* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1987), 61. “Paul’s religious sensibilities were formed by the interaction between the religious traditions of which Paul was a part and his own experience. In a very fundamental sense, this is what one means by a spirituality, a person’s basic convictions, attitudes, and sensibilities about God and the relationship of God to the world.”

⁴ Michael Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 2-3: “As a starting point for the understanding of spirituality ... we may describe it as the experience of God’s love and grace in daily life.”

⁵ Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 7: “then is it not logical to conclude that we must wait for God to come and transform us? Strangely enough, the answer is no. . . . God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving his grace. The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us.”

development.⁶ Perhaps we find in this kind of approach a reaction to spirituality that is defined *only* by experience, and places proper emphasis instead upon our own human responsibility for spiritual formation.⁷

Among those who are writing most prominently, there seem to be two divergent views about who initiates or takes the lead in our spirituality. Some say that God takes the lead, and there's ultimately nothing that we can do to effect spiritual transformation but respond to Him. He will work transformation in us when He's ready. All we need do is be ready for Him. Still others are saying that it's up to us to take the lead—to practice the disciplines and see if God will use them in his own time and for his own purpose.⁸

In the end, I find this dichotomy less helpful both as a way of understanding what Scripture says about our interaction with the Trinity and as a practical way of fleshing out what the Spirit is doing. Ultimately both viewpoints are nearly in agreement in suggesting *partnership with the Spirit* as a starting point in defining spirituality. Each is slightly nuanced, but in the same direction, defining spirituality in terms of God and the believer working together, sometimes at God's initiative, sometimes at the believer's, but always with the Spirit bringing about transformation.

The Biblical Witness: Partnership

The language of partnership is exactly what we find in the Biblical text regarding transformation. A full catalogue of Scripture's teaching on partnership with God is not possible here, but a few texts will paint us a substantially broad picture. With deference to the problem of human responsibility and divine sovereignty, Scripture consistently demonstrates that God and his people must work together to bring about personal spiritual transformation.

Paul

Probably the best (and most misunderstood) place to start is Philippians. Paul encourages them to "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (2:12), but in conjunction with God, "for it is God who works in you" (2:13). Their "accomplishing" or "production" of salvation is only a faithful response to God's "working in" their hearts his will and purpose. The same partnership is articulated earlier in the letter, as Paul prays for God to increase their knowledge and understanding of the faith, expressing itself in love (1:9), but for the express purpose of "discerning what is best" and becoming pure and blameless (1:10).¹⁰ Partnership with God is in view in Paul's

⁶ M. Robert Mulholland, *Shaped By the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1985), 112-113: "Are you willing to offer something to God as a discipline and to keep offering it day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year—to continue offering it for God to use in whatever way he wants in your life and *have God do absolutely nothing with it?* If you are ... then you are engaging in a spiritual discipline that will cut to the heart of all of those dynamics of our culture that tend to misshape our formation."

⁷ It was this over-emphasis upon spiritual *experience* to authenticate both conversion and ministry that caused early Restorationists like Barton W. Stone to return to a more biblical model (faith, repentance, confession, and baptism). For a more detailed accounting, see James B. North, *Union in Truth: An Interpretive History of the Restoration Movement* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1994), 33-45; James DeForest Murch, *Christians Only: A History of the Restoration Movement* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1962), 83-96. The demand among modern evangelicals for religious experience as a necessary component of salvation in Christ was one of the main foci of Scot McKnight's addresses for The Parchman Lectures at Baylor in 2011.

⁸ Scot McKnight articulated this as his view of the spiritual disciplines in "Spirituality in a Post-Modern Age," the plenary session address of the *Stone-Campbell Journal* Conference (April 9, 2010).

⁹ These are the possible ranges of meaning for *κατεργάζομαι* (*katergazomai*). See W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker, "*κατεργάζομαι*," *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University Press, 1979), 421.

¹⁰ Ralph Martin, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 66-67, suggests that the purpose of acquiring "knowledge and depth of insight" is greater unity and cohesion in a church plagued with disharmony and fault-finding.

letter. It is no less on display in Galatians, where Paul's prayer is that Christ "be formed" within them (4:19), but simultaneously encourages them to "keep in step with the Spirit" (5:16, 22-25), avoid carnal living (5:17, 19-21), and continue to do good (6:10). Again, partnership best describes Paul's view of spirituality.¹¹

The Old Covenant

Partnership is not simply Paul's, new covenant way of appropriating the Spirit. His understanding of partnership can be seen in the Psalms. Those who refuse to walk in the way of the wicked and delight themselves with the knowledge of God (Ps. 1:1-3) find themselves blessed by God and afforded his protection and care (Ps. 1:3, 6). Those who have "clean hands and a pure heart" and sanctify their speech and worship (Ps. 24:3-4), receive blessing and vindication from God (Ps. 24:5) and the privilege of standing (not kneeling or groveling) in His presence (Ps. 24:3). The renewal of the covenant in Deuteronomy 29 is based on this kind of partnering with God—the extension of the grace of the covenant by God (29:12-13) and the faithful response of His people to abide by the terms of the covenant (29:9, 18-28).

Jesus

Jesus seems to speak about his relationship with the Spirit in terms of partnership. Acknowledging that the Spirit was upon him (Lk. 4:18), he expressed it in tangible ways, including "preaching good news to the poor" (Lk. 4:18), resisting temptation (Matt. 4:1-10; Lk. 4:1-13), and casting out demons ("by the Spirit of God," Matt. 12:28). Although the Spirit is yet to come in John's Gospel, Jesus' relationship with "the Father" in the Gospel of John is arguably lived in the Spirit of God. Indeed, the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit in the Gospel of John (and in Jesus' life) was so intimate that articulating differences between them can seem trite. Jesus sees himself as sent from the Father (or the Father's "apostle"), carrying out His will, serving as His extension among His people.

This partnership comes most clearly into view as Jesus passes on to his apostles the ability to retain and forgive sins—a privilege that to fore God alone had reserved and for which Jesus was charged with blasphemy (Mark 2:5-7). In a re-contextualization of Deuteronomy 19:15-17, Jesus declares that, should anyone be found guilty of sin before two or three witnesses, the apostles (and subsequent church leaders) are to mete out discipline. "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18). The rare future-perfect passive vocabulary actually suggests that whatever these church leaders decide on earth *will have already been decided* in heaven. Similar statements are made to Peter individually (Matt. 16:19) and to the Twelve in the wake of Jesus' resurrection (John 20:21-23). Rather than thinking of this as either the Father's predestined agenda fleshed out by church leaders, or the apostles' privilege within the early church as God's agents of change on planet earth, I suggest that viewing this teaching within the context of the apostles' partnership with the Spirit of God—whose ministry it is to convict of guilt and sin, and to move people to repentance (John 16:8-11)—helps us understand the responsibility and privilege Jesus is passing on to them and to us in that moment.

This further lends credence to the view that Paul's prayer is for God to instill in the Philippians this knowledge and discernment so that they may put it to practical use in the faith community.

¹¹ It may be best here to think, as Fee suggests, in terms of s/Spirituality, since Paul has in mind, not just a generic inner vitality, but specifically an outlook wrought by The Spirit of God. See Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 24-26; *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), x-xi.

Peter

Peter comes close to this partnership in his first letter. Though believers have been “chosen ... through the sanctifying work of the Spirit” (1 Pet. 1:2) and is building them into a holy temple and nation (2:4-10), they are called to be active in their faith (1:13), to pray (4:7), to use their gifts to serve one another (4:10), and to live in harmony with one another (3:8-9). This harmony comes by loving one another deeply from the core of their being (1:22, 4:8), by offering hospitality to one another (4:9), and by being sympathetic, compassionate, and humble (3:8-9). By doing these things, they are “purified from malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander” (2:1). As they do this, the Spirit sanctifies them, or makes them holy (1:12).

These are some of the texts that come to the surface as I’ve been thinking about spirituality as *partnership with the Spirit*. I know you’ve read this a couple of times already, but I keep coming back to this quote from John Tyson. Notice how he says that spirituality is a “cooperative effort” between us and God.

The development of Christian Spirituality is a cooperative effort, it involves God’s work (the gift of grace) and our work (the faithful response); taken together and intermingled these two works produce transformation, wholeness, and life with God.... we will have to recognize (in accordance with the NT analogies) that the life of grace is cultivated, nurtured, and grown over the span of a lifetime.¹²

The Practical Side

So how does it work? What evidence do I see that, either in my life or in yours, that partnership with God is an appropriate way to think about our relationship with Him? What possibilities does this bring?

Looking back on my own life and relationship with God, I can see where there were times when He took the lead, and I responded. Most clear in my mind was my call to ministry. I don’t know how to explain that time, except to say that God stepped into my life and called me to do something I wasn’t thinking about doing. Ministry wasn’t on my mind; medical school was. The voice (man, that *nagging* voice!) just kept saying, “Go into ministry.” I tested that call (through some ways we’ll talk about later in this course) and found it to be the genuine call of God. I responded, forsaking med school and enrolling at Cincinnati Bible College. There are times (and you’ve had them) when you’re minding your own business, enjoying life, only to find God climbing up in your business ready to confront you about some sin in your life, or to call you to some ministry or to some act of kindness. In these situations, God takes the lead and we respond.

But I know of other times that I took the lead and God came near. Some of my practice of the spiritual disciplines works like this. I’ve been reciting *The Shema* (Deut. 6:4-6) faithfully for a little over a year now. Every Sunday morning I recite it orally and write it out by hand in Hebrew, Greek, and English. It’s not something that God led me to do. It’s just something that I *wanted* to do, to broaden my understanding of Israel’s formative creed, to sharpen my skill in biblical languages, and to guide my thinking about how to keep the main thing the main thing and keep the non-essential issues in the periphery. I took the initiative on this, and over time, God has met me here, teaching me many things about how to love Him with my whole being and helping me keep my focus on Him in everyday life. And what is prayer if not taking the initiative in petitioning the Father? Sometimes we’re prompted to prayer by Him, and other times we pray beseeching Him (sometimes

¹² John R. Tyson, *Invitation to Christian Spirituality* (Oxford: University Press, 1999), 46.

begging Him) to come near. And He always does. Read through the Psalms sometime and note the number of times David begs God, “Come to me quickly” (references go here, but that would defeat the point of asking you to go look, eh?)

Conclusion

Partnership with God seems, in my view, to be the most biblical, comprehensive way to think about spiritual formation. I can’t expect that my activity will make me spiritual. Here we are very akin to a works-righteousness kind of spirituality, and all of the Old Covenant (and Jesus, and Paul) confirms that this kind brings death. But neither can I sit back and wait for God to do it all for me. It takes, again, a “cooperative effort” between me and God.

Cooperation, give-and-take, respecting the other’s wishes ... this is how any good relationship works.