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An Overview of Protestant Spirituality

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AN OVERVIEW OF PROTESTANT SPIRITUALITY

By Eldon Sheffer*

History of Spirituality

Christian spirituality has deep roots into the spiritual traditions of many centuries back to the time of Christ. However, the focus of this article will be to briefly examine some of the main streams of tradition since the time of the Reformation (sixteenth century). To give a sense of the more recent history of spirituality, the following traditions will be surveyed: Lutheran spirituality, Reformed spirituality, Anabaptist spirituality, Anglican spirituality, Puritan spirituality, the spirituality of Pietism, and Methodist spirituality.

Lutheran Spirituality

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a central figure in the early stages of the Protestant Reformation. Although others made significant contributions to this renewal movement, Luther, through his quest for piety, certainly played an important role.

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Liturgical piety has been a vital element in Lutheran spirituality. Frank Senn points out:

The chief Liturgy of Word and Sacrament especially has been a way in which Lutherans have appropriated God's grace by faith and responded with the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in prayer, liturgical chant, and hymnody. In their worship Lutherans have been nourished by the means of grace in order to put their faith to work in the everyday world. The liturgy has been formative of a genuine lay spirituality, which is also a major contribution of Luther to Protestant spirituality in general...¹

From the emphasis on the liturgy of the Word and Sacraments come other elements which are important in Lutheran spirituality. The "priesthood of all believers" gave laity a greater stake in things of a spiritual nature. There is no difference between the clergy and the laity except one of office. The "Catechism" served as a foundation for spiritual life. Instruction in and regular attention to the Ten Commandments, the Apostle's Creed, and the Lord's Prayer is expected of Lutheran young people in preparation for confirmation.

Hymnody and devotional literature have also played an important part in Lutheran spirituality.

Reformed Spirituality

Reformed spirituality finds its roots in the experience and thinking of Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and John Calvin (1509-1564). Zwingli emphasized two elements which relate to spirituality. He insisted on the centrality of Scripture which brought about a spirituality that was largely inward. Also, he placed an emphasis on knowledge which drifted into a rationalistic approach to spirituality.

Calvin, on the other hand, placed much emphasis on the mystical union of the believer with Christ. Justification and sanctification enable growth into the likeness of Christ. The Church is also important since that is the main context for development and growth in spirituality. One of Calvin's favorite statements illustrates this belief: "We cannot have God as our Father if we do not have the Church as our mother."² Within the church, the believer grows through the preaching of the Word and the eucharist. Through the Word Christ is made real in an audible way and through the eucharist he is made real in a visible way. Through the Word and the eucharist the believer is empowered and enabled to render

obedient service to God in the world.

Anabaptist Spirituality

The spirituality of the Anabaptists developed in the context of the Radical Reformation (dating from the 1520s) with several different branches and leading characters involved. They had a real zeal for God and focused on love, faith, and bearing the cross. In The Study of Spirituality, Sebastian Franck is quoted concerning the essence of their spirituality:

They [Anabaptists] showed themselves humble, patient under suffering; they brake the bread with one another as an evidence of unity and love. They helped each other faithfully, called each other brothers, etc...They were persecuted with great tyranny, being imprisoned, branded, tortured and executed by fire, water and the sword.³

Anabaptists became known for their separation from the world and holiness of life. Their spirituality "was expressed less in acts of worship and devotion than in the whole of life...[They] lived moderately, avoiding ostentation,..."⁴ Membership was by public profession of faith and baptism. Anabaptists gathered in independent gatherings apart from any traditional churches.

They often gathered in secret because of possible persecution but were always ready to bear the cross in life.

Anglican Spirituality

The focus for Anglican spirituality has centered on The Book of Common Prayer. This was originally prepared by Archbishop Cranmer in 1549 for the purpose of communal piety. The discipline of public or common worship is critical to their spirituality leading to a corporate unity. A statement made by archbishop Robert Runcie in 1988 lists the main elements of Anglican unity and spirituality:

Anglican unity has most characteristically been expressed in worship, which includes four essential elements: scripture proclaimed, creed confessed, sacraments celebrated, and order maintained through an authorized episcopal ministry.⁵

Public worship and prayer and devotion precedes and prepares the way for private prayer and devotion. The family, then, is the place of worship apart from the Church. With the facility of the Book of Common Prayer, the weekly readings and devotion of the family can maintain a link with the devotions of the whole Church. Thus everyone had opportunity to participate in corporate worship. This was a foundational

concept of Anglican spirituality.

Puritan Spirituality

Lewis Bayly, Bishop of Bangor wrote The Practise of Pietie in 1610 and is quoted as describing the essence of piety as follows:

to joyne together, in watching,
fasting, praying, reading the
Scriptures, keeping his Sabbath,
hearing Sermons, receiving the
holy Communion, relieving the
Poore, exercising in all humilitie
the workes of Pietie to God, and
walking conscionably in the duties
of our calling towards men.⁶

Puritans viewed the spiritual life as a pilgrimage. They were pilgrims who "looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10). Self-examination and prayer were important to live a heavenly life while passing through this life on the way to heaven. The reading of (praying and poring over) scripture was central. Fasting, keeping the sabbath, good stewardship, "heart" religion, and seeking to transform both individuals and society were all elements of Puritan spirituality.

Pietism

Pietism was a renewal movement in the later seventeenth and the eighteenth

centuries growing out of the church life of both Lutheran and Reformed. Philipp Jacob Spener was one of the leaders in this movement. In reaction to the spirit of rationalism that had developed, emphasis was placed more upon a personal Christianity including the new birth/regeneration/conversion experience. Spener made six proposals regarding faith and spirituality:

1. A more extensive use of the word of God...in teaching and preaching than what was prescribed in the pericopes for each Sunday and a more sustained encounter with Scripture by use of the conventicle.
2. More exercise of the Spiritual priesthood...If the conventicles could develop properly and lay persons assume their rightful priesthood, then renewal had a chance and pastoral care could truly be pastoral.
3. It is not enough to have knowledge of Christianity, for Christianity consists of practice.
4. Great care must be exercised in the conduct of religious controversies...the practice of Christianity is part of the apologetic in any defense of the gospel or reproof of error.

5. Seminaries are to be places of spiritual formation, not just places of intellectual exercises. "...Study without piety is worthless."

6. Seminaries are to provide practical experiences in ministry.⁷

The implementation of these propositions within groups of committed people was intended to spread renewal throughout the church.

Methodist Spirituality.

Methodist spirituality begins with John Wesley in the eighteenth century. He saw the Christian life as inward spiritual growth as well as active discipleship in the world.

Methodist spirituality had a purpose which transcended the personal formation of its practitioners. It was the appropriation and application of those disciplines which equip and empower the believer to be a faithful disciple in the world. The goal of their spiritual pilgrimage was the mind that was in Christ. But their immediate task was to be the ambassadors of God to a sinful and resistant world--of which they were also a part.⁸

The key to Methodist spirituality was the class meeting. These were small groups of people that provided opportunity for teaching and spiritual accountability. Other elements of spirituality that were stressed in Methodism include the quest for Christian perfection (not without its struggles/back-slidings), the rich tradition of hymnody, and holiness (the second blessings by the Holy Spirit--a cleansing from sin).

This brief overview from an historical perspective reveals the fact that the Protestant spirituality of our day has a rich heritage. Men and women of God have for centuries realized the importance of cultivating a deep relationship with God. Although various expressions of spirituality gave rise to different forms or emphases, it is important for us to realize today that underneath traditions are common threads that bind us together in our understanding of Christian spirituality.

ENDNOTES

¹Frank Senn, ed., Protestant Spiritual Traditions (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1986), 26.

²Ibid., 63.

³C. Jones, et al., The Study of Spirituality (New York: Oxford University

Press, 1986), 351.

⁴Ibid, 352-53.

⁵Robin Maas and Gabriel O'Donnell, eds., Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 269.

⁶Senn, 165.

⁷Senn, 206-207.

⁸Ibid, 230.