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"Walk in the Spirit": Preaching for Spiritual Growth (Gal. 5:13-6:2)

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ALAN G. PADGETT

In a recent interview in the hot online magazine salon.com, the anthropologist Barbara King (who has just written a book on the evolution of religion) was asked if she was “religious.” Her answer was, “I consider myself a spiritual person because of the way I feel when I’m around animals in particular, especially apes.” How many times have you heard something like this phrase: “I’m a spiritual person—I’m just not religious”? The term “spiritual” is a positive term in our culture these days; but “religion” is seen as constraining, organized, traditional, and a bit of a drag. Theologians will recall the critique of religion in the work of Barth or Bonhoeffer, but we are not talking about something that sophisticated—or that Christian. Rather, “religion” is a term in popular culture filled with all kinds of vaguely negative associations regarding organized religious services. Yet we are fooling ourselves if we think such ideas are “out there” and not in here, not in our own churches. How should evangelical leaders and biblical preachers respond to this kind of misunderstanding?

One option is simply to ignore it. Leave the term “spiritual” to the New Age gurus and pop-religion webmasters. We could continue to preach, teach, and wor-


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ship just as we always have, with the vocabulary we always used from the past. This could be a serious mistake, however. Part of our vocation as Christians in ministry is to bring into this age and culture the biblical and evangelical truths of the past. This will sometimes mean simply opposing the present age and its assumptions; there are plenty of good examples of this strategy, for example in the areas of sexuality and consumerism. In other cases we take up modern ideas and fill them with new meaning. Both of these approaches can be found in Scripture; both can be Spirit-led and faithful to the gospel. The word “spiritual” is too important, too central, too biblical and Christian in its roots simply to abandon or ignore. That means we will have to reclaim it for our time. A crucial need for our day is sound teaching about spirituality and the Holy Spirit. We need a biblical and evangelical spirituality that is re-centered on the Holy Spirit and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Looking at this text from the latter part of Galatians (Gal 5:13–6:2) can provide us with an example of how this might work.

What congregations are hungry for today is a rethinking of spirituality in biblical and trinitarian terms. A good place to start for Lutherans is Paul’s letter to the Galatians and his teachings about walking in the Spirit in the last two chapters. The reason to focus on this text is a simple one: Galatians has long been a central text for evangelicals, all the way back to Luther. By focusing on this text, we can overcome some of the misunderstandings of Christian spirituality that exist even in Lutheran circles. From a Lutheran point of view, there is a danger in thinking that by means of the practice of Christian spirituality we are somehow saving ourselves. The long tradition of worry about works-righteousness casts its shadow on the understanding of Christian spirituality, even today.

When we rightly understand what a Christian spirituality is all about, Paul’s letter to the Galatians becomes a clear case of genuine spirituality. The book contains important teachings about life in and with the Holy Spirit, and that is where a New Testament spirituality must begin. Paul famously claims in Gal 2:19 that “I have been crucified with Christ” and that “it is Christ who lives in me” (v. 20). It is plain from the later chapters that this is only possible in the Spirit. Our flesh has been crucified with Christ (5:24); it is the Spirit that makes us alive, and therefore we should walk in the Spirit (5:25). Yet what or who is the Spirit? The Holy Spirit is not a philosophical concept or spiritual energy, not a part of natural religion or the pantheism of the New Age and its gurus. An evangelical spirituality must be absolutely clear about this. The personhood of the Spirit is essential for a biblical, trinitarian faith—but “spirit” has become everything and nothing in our time. The word “spirit” must be connected intimately with God the Holy Spirit in our congregations and in our own mind. For this reason I call the Spirit “she” or “he”—but never “it”! When we understand that the Spirit is a person, God the Holy Spirit, then we can rightly understand what Paul wrote: “Live by the Spirit” (5:16).

In 5:16–26 Paul sets out a dualism of flesh and Spirit. The “flesh” here is best understood as the sinful part of our human personhood, the area of our lives still
infected with original sin. Because of the work of Christ and our faith in Christ, we are no longer slaves to sin (4:31–5:1). We do not have to follow in the ways of the “flesh,” which lead to death. Our flesh has been crucified with Christ. By faith we can be led by the Spirit. When we are led by the Spirit, then we are not under the law (5:18). The term “law” means many things in Paul; here the idea is that of a legalism that leads to spiritual death. What Paul here calls “law” we can associate with what many people reject when they reject “religion”: legalism, empty rituals, hypocrisy.

Human existence is here revealed as being suspended between a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit in us—the gift of faith in Jesus Christ—and the fleshly character of our human nature that still tempts us into sin. Paul lists a number of evil results from the “works of the flesh.” Against this list of vices he sets a series of character traits for Christian spirituality: the fruit (singular) of the Spirit. How does the fruit of the Spirit grow? The metaphor itself suggests a natural growth, not a human effort. It comes about organically through a daily relationship with Christ and the Holy Spirit. Our job is not to strive with all our might to be better than other people or to earn God’s love. Rather, our job is simply to dwell in the Holy Spirit, to let Her work in us to make us like Christ.

Martin Luther put things this way in the introduction to his Galatians commentary: he distinguished between two kinds of righteousness. First there is that alien righteousness that is based on the work of Christ. This we receive by faith alone, apart from any good works. This alien righteousness is the bedrock of salvation now and in the future. It can neither increase nor decrease. Yet there is also another kind of righteousness: proper righteousness. This is the daily gift of Christ to the believer in faith, by which they live in love and serve the neighbor. Proper righteousness is the growing presence of Christ in the life of the believer by the power of the Holy Spirit. I suggest that the fruit of the Spirit, a Christlike character that serves others in love (5:13), is one of the things that Luther meant by “proper righteousness.” This, too, is a gift: a result of faith and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It should never be confused with works-righteousness. Rather, the fruit of the Spirit grows in us naturally as we walk in faith.

Another thing to notice about life in the Spirit is the importance of community. The works of the flesh destroy community, both in Galatia and today: hatred, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, and the like. The plain fact is that Christ has called us into community, and so life in the Spirit of Christ is a spiritual

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life in community. New Age spirituality is eclectic, private, and individualistic. Biblical spirituality grounded in the gospel and the Holy Spirit is communal, traditional, and practical. The fruit of the Spirit is exactly those virtues that tend to build up community: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control. Paul is writing against a group of leaders in the Galatian churches who thought they were “spiritual” but whose conduct showed them to be far from Christ.

Paul turns to the importance of life in community in this passage as a whole. We are called to serve one another in love to begin with (5:13), and at the chapter’s end he warns us away from provoking one another or envying each other (5:26, cf. 5:15). The whole of this biblical spirituality in Gal 5 has community as its unspoken assumption. Life in community with other believers is the meat and potatoes of evangelical spirituality. Spirituality without community, without the church, is one of the greatest deceptions of false spiritualism. This kind of individualistic “spirituality” is a lie and cannot be of the Spirit. Sure, in a community there is bound to be sin. Paul calls on those “who have received the Spirit” to correct the sin they see in others—but with meekness and humility, “in a spirit of gentleness” (6:1). The goal here is to “bear one another’s burdens.” This concrete, practical spirituality of loving service is what “fulfill[s] the law of Christ” (6:2). Paul is not against the law per se, but wants Christians to follow the law without the law as a taskmaster: to follow the Holy Spirit and so to fulfill the law through faith (5:14, 18). If I am right to see an analogy between “law” in this text and “religion” as it is rejected by so many today, then perhaps we can teach this: by a daily relationship with Christ through the Holy Spirit, we fulfill the goals of true religion without being “religious” in the negative sense. A genuine, biblical spirituality that is free in the gospel is thus revealed as a religion without religion. This may well be good news to many in our churches today.

What have we learned from this text about preaching for spiritual growth? Of course such preaching needs to be biblical. The point is that care is taken to attend to the work of the Holy Spirit in the individual, the community, and the larger world. Two things are important here: first, the Spirit is a person, the second person of the Triune God, not an impersonal energy, force, or philosophical divinity. Second, the Spirit works everywhere with Christ. Christ and the Spirit work together in an evangelical spirituality. Finally, Christian spirituality should be practical and communal, with a focus on the life of faith working itself out in love. The practice of Christian spirituality is also communal and ecclesial: Sunday worship, prayer, Bible study and devotion, holy songs, Holy Communion, and the like. With a sustained biblical vision, local churches can be places where a genuine evangelical and trinitarian spirituality is reclaimed for our time.

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