

## BEING HUMAN

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Humanness, being made in the image of God, is like a key which unlocks all the doors in the house of the Christian life. In this article we wish to step back from this organizing principle to view the design of the house as a whole. In other words, we intend to examine the framework within which the Christian life is to be understood.

**Why is it important to consider this framework?** Can we not just get on with considering biblical passages about the Christian life? Why bother with frameworks (biblical or otherwise) and alternative philosophies? These are good questions and deserve an answer.

**If the framework within which we consider spirituality is unbiblical, the conclusions we come to about the Christian life and how to grow as a Christian are bound to be wrong.** Even if we are influenced unwittingly by unbiblical ideas about the nature of reality as a whole, our understanding of spirituality will be distorted. Some things which are right in themselves will assume a place of importance out of all proportion to their value. Other things which the Bible clearly teaches as of central importance will be given little stress or might even be rejected as having no value at all. To the extent that we are affected by other ideas of the nature of reality, our spiritual experience will be impoverished. Without a knowledge of the "floor plan," we might neglect some rooms, while others, though unlocked and entered, might be misused, and still others disregarded altogether. In ignorance we might even spend much of our lives in imaginary rooms.

So **there is a clear need to consider the biblical framework and the alternative views of reality.** All teaching on Christian maturity must conform to the teaching of the Bible and its view of reality. The test has to be applied both with regard to content and emphasis. What is taught must not only be true, but properly emphasized.

**We will consider three views of reality:**

**the materialistic,  
the biblical and  
the platonic.**

As we do so we will consider what effects each has on one's view of the Christian life. It should become very clear that **it is essential to have the right plan of the house of reality.**

### **the materialistic view**

**We live in a largely materialistic culture, a culture which denies the reality of God's existence.** Because it denies the existence of God it allows no possibility of the supernatural working into this world. There can be no relationship with God in the present, though psychological techniques may be used to try to give reality a "religious dimension." Further, all life is regarded as the result of the chance process of evolution, producing the present array of diverse forms of life from original matter and energy.

Consequently, **humans are viewed as an advanced form of animal or as a very complex machine.** Each person is regarded as the result of genetic make-up or environmental conditioning or a combination of both. In this view, not only is the supernatural excluded from life, but so is any true human dignity. Our loves, aspirations to heroism, moral judgments, attempts at creativity and even individuality become suspect, having no ultimate value. Because of this view of reality, people seek meaning in the accumulation of material things, in the continual stimulation of the senses and emotions, and in techniques which are supposed to condition them to change.

**This materialism has brought about a terrible poverty of human experience in our culture.** The old are disregarded because they don't produce sufficiently to make themselves worthwhile units of society. As the spiritual ties which unite families are discarded, the family decays. People increasingly try to find meaning by satisfying their physical and sensual needs. But pleasure and material wealth do not produce happiness or meaning. The stimulation of the senses leads only to the need for greater and greater stimulation till the senses are jaded and unable to appreciate anything. In this vacuum of human experience people look desperately for something that will inject meaning into reality. They turn to experience, to the East, to the occult, to the multitude of new religions and new psychology's which spring up day by day.

**What does this have to do with the Christian? The materialistic view has rubbed off on the church.** Unhappily, the church often reflects society as a whole. Many Christian marriages are ending in divorce. Many Christian homes are little more than passing points for family members who lead totally separate lives. Many Christians become overburdened with the accumulation of wealth and possessions. Others, saddened by this state of affairs, turn to spiritual experiences to try to restore a spiritual dimension to their lives which, apart from attendance at church, differ so little from the lives of non-Christians. Christians sometimes live as practical atheists, professing belief in Christ but without any real conviction that God exists as a person. Without confidence that God exists, the prayer of believers can become sterile. How can I pray, believing that God will answer my prayers by working into this world, unless I'm sure deep down that God is and that he hears?

**The materialistic philosophy of our culture creeps in and impoverishes the Christian life in all sorts of ways.** Many have grown up in an environment where any supernatural statement of the Bible was explained away. Even if we do not doubt God's existence, we can become like the deist viewing God as the Creator who is removed from this world. Again prayer seems useless.

The Bible's authority is undermined by our culture in every area, whether natural science, social sciences or history. Unless we are convinced that the attacks on the Bible's authority in these areas are groundless, our spirituality will necessarily be affected.

**This impoverishment caused by materialism's influence leads to a confusion about what genuine spirituality is.** In the search for "life," Christians often turn in the same direction society turns and simply reflect its answers. This "turn" can take two basic directions — either to experience or to techniques.

Just as materially motivated people in our materially motivated society turn to "religious" experiences offered by drugs, Eastern religions and the occult, so Christians too become involved in a frantic search for spiritual experiences which will assure them that God is really there and that they have a relationship with him. Often the experiences sought are valid in themselves, but are given disproportionate importance in proving God's existence and verifying the individual's relationship with him.

Some time ago a girl was vigorously advocating speaking in tongues: "If you get tongues then you'll be really sure of God's love. Then you'll know you have the Holy Spirit's power." A sentence or two later she confessed, "Actually I am about to give up being a Christian. I'm not even sure that God exists or that what the Bible teaches is true." This is very sad. Tongues, which Paul describes as a genuine gift of the Spirit, had become the only nail on which to hang this girl's faith, and it could not bear the weight.

**Materialism also influences Christians to pursue mechanical techniques as the solution to spiritual weakness.** Consequently, much teaching on the Christian life is made up of rules that have to be adhered to.

It is said, for example, that the key to Christian family life is having the right authority structure. Or, it is said that the wife must follow certain rules to keep up her husband's interest-she must remain the "fascinating woman." A list of do's and don'ts show her how. Devotions at a set time each day or reading so many chapters of the Bible a day is said to be the key to a life of prayer. The key to growth is said to be personal evangelism.

Because some churches have been influenced by the moral laxity of our culture and have not practiced biblical discipline, other churches stress discipline and authority so strongly as "the answer" that they give the elders a wider authority over the members' lives than the New Testament suggests. For example, attendance at particular services is made compulsory, people are forbidden to move or marry without the elder's consent, each household must have a particular structure and rules, and so on.

Other proposed techniques concern church health and growth.

"What our church needs is an administrative reorganization. Call in a firm of consultants. It will have to be the best. Christ cannot be given second best."

That may be and often is one way of trying to deal with the weakness of a particular church. But it certainly will not solve the problems of poverty.

"Our church must have an outreach program. If only we could get everyone involved in evangelism, then the church would grow. There's a new method which has been successful in Los Angeles. Let's try that."

"What we must have is small group Bible studies meeting in homes."

“We need to receive the baptism of the Spirit and speak in tongues, then the church's life can really start.”

“Let's have group therapy, then everyone will get to know each other.”

“What we need is a larger building in a better situation. Then people will be attracted.”

Some of these proposals may have a legitimate place in the life of a church or an individual Christian. Of course there should be evangelism, Bible study and spiritual gifts. But how do they come across? New legalisms are set up; a bondage to structures and rules destroys the Christian's freedom. Human relationships and relationship with God are reduced to mechanical patterns. This is the language and method of behavioristic psychology, not of the New Testament!

Techniques do not make a Christian “spiritual” or solve a church's problems for they do not touch the central issues of the Christian life. Only a firm conviction of the truth of Christianity and our commitment to trust and obey God himself, with our minds renewed by the teaching of his Word, will bring any real or lasting change.

The New Testament writers were wise not to set up little patterns or models of how to pray, how to read the Bible or how to evangelize. Each Christian is a unique individual free to work out a pattern of what is most helpful within the framework of the moral law. We are given principles, not techniques.

**In evangelism, for example, we are to state the truth plainly, not hesitating to deal with difficult questions (like judgment and the necessity of repentance) lest we scare someone off.** We are to witness because we honor individuals as significant and valuable creatures made in God's image who need to hear the truth. Our words must be accompanied, if not preceded, by a life which exhibits the truth of which we speak, a life characterized by love, forgiveness, forbearance, hospitality and compassion. This sort of principle cannot be replaced by techniques or methods however successful. **We should not be peddling the gospel with Madison Avenue methods; we should be simply living and proclaiming the truth.** The details of how this is done must be worked out in each local situation by each individual or church within the biblical framework. Humanness, freedom and the possibility of true growth are lost when technique becomes the answer.

### **the biblical view of reality**

In a sense we should not speak of the Bible's “view” of reality as if it were one alternative among several. For the Bible claims to be the truth about the nature of the world in which we live. Its claim to be the truth can be tested and proved, and is exclusive. All other views of reality must be false.

**Biblical teaching on the nature of reality begins with God himself.** He is the all-powerful Creator of the whole universe and has always existed. Everything else that exists has been made by him at some time in the past. He has always been the same. He did not gradually come into being as the universe grew, nor is he an idea in the minds of men. Rather, all things are dependent on him for their being.

**God not only created all things, but sustains all things in their existence.** He did not make the world and then leave it, like a watch, to carry on by itself. The laws of nature are in a sense simply descriptions of the way God upholds the universe. He acts into the universe all the time, not just occasionally like some deus ex machina who now and then throws a spear into this world.

**God is spirit, not restricted by space and so lives among us, knowing the thoughts and actions of every human being.** There is no escape from his presence. Because his knowledge is infinite, nothing surprises him. He is sovereign over the course of this world. He overrules history and some day will bring this age to a conclusion and inaugurate a new age of righteousness.

**God is also personal.** There are and always have been three persons in the Godhead. God is not some vague spiritual realm or "consciousness," nor is he coextensive with reality, or "all love" or just "being." Rather, the three persons of the Trinity have always existed even before the creation of this world. They loved each other, they communicated with each other. They were morally perfect. They thought and decided and acted on those decisions to create other purely spiritual beings, this material world and also man—a physical/spiritual being. God's own character makes this world a moral world. All things are defined by reference to his character of perfect goodness and justice.

We need to stress that it is not mere metaphor to say that the personal God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — loves, thinks, communicates, acts, is morally perfect, and creates. These are not metaphors drawn from our own experience by which we attempt to describe a God who is ultimately so transcendent that he cannot be described. They are first true of God himself and therefore are true of us also, as those who are made in his image. We can be described as moral beings, as loving beings, only because God is loving and moral. This is of absolute importance. We are not putting labels on what is really unnamable. Only because God has these personal characteristics do we, made in God's image, have them also. (Interestingly, modern thinkers, having rejected a personal God, are doubtful even about human personality, and so reduce people to machinery simply because they have no ultimate reference point which is personal.)

**We were made like God and intended to worship, love and enjoy him.** God did not make us to relate to him with one small part of our lives — the spiritual part. He made us to relate to him and express his likeness in all of life—body, mind, emotions, will.

Adam and Eve were made perfect but they chose (and so have we all) to disobey God and to pursue their own way. **The human problem since the Fall has been a moral one — rebellion.** Our problem is not that we are physical (or mental, emotional or volitional) rather than nonphysical. Nor is it that we are finite, that is, limited to existence in one place at one time, limited to a partial knowledge of reality, limited to knowing the present but not the future. No, there is nothing wrong with humanness as such. Our problem is sinfulness, lack of moral conformity to God's character in every area of life. This has brought sorrow into all our experience. The coming of Christ is God's solution for our sinfulness and its results- pain, confusion, distortion of all of life, and death.

Christ is the second person of the Trinity, the Son. He lived forever with the Father and the Spirit and then at a point in time, in history, was born in Bethlehem. As both man and God, he lived a perfect life. Unlike every other human being there was no moral blemish in his life. He lived in obedience to the Father, and his calling in his life was to reflect God's character. He expressed God's love to us, and had a perfect relationship with the Father. Though as a man he was finite-just as we are-he found this no problem. He was contented to be in only one place at one time, to speak to only one person at a time.

Yet when we examine Christ's life we see him neither using nor advocating any spiritual techniques. His spirituality was expressed in his whole life, not in one little part. When he prayed, he spoke to the Father in ordinary human language. There were no barriers between him and the Father because he was not tainted with sin. The only barrier came when he offered himself on the cross as the substitute in our place, bearing our guilt and punishment. On the cross he experienced physical death and separation from the Father because he was at that point, in one sense, a great sinner and consequently had to bear God's wrath. Hence his cry that he was forsaken by the Father. The sins for which he was punished were not his own but ours. Consequently, as God's righteous Son, he was raised from the grave to live forevermore with a body as both God and man.

We have peace with God and the barriers to a relationship with him are removed if we put our trust in Jesus Christ alone. If not, we remain condemned before God. Because of Christ's work, believers are called God's children. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and have a love relationship with God. This peace with God is the basis on which the whole Christian life is built.

**In light of all this, what is our calling as those restored to a relationship with God?** Is it to make God present — to “practice the presence of God?” No. Is it to seek spiritual experiences to assure us of his love and power in our lives? No. Is it to pray, to go to church, to study the Bible, to evangelize? No, though it involves these things. Our calling is the same as Adam's was. It is to serve him with our whole life, to love him, to enjoy him, to reflect his character. Every area of our life is to express spirituality, not some special parts of it. Every area of our life in every day is to express the relationship we have with him. Because we have a relationship with him through Christ, we can speak to him simply at any time. We do not have to use any special techniques to make him present or to feel his presence, or to ensure our prayer is real. We can simply talk to him as our loving Father.

Already we enjoy the first fruits of the inheritance Christ has won for us. But we look forward to the day when we shall see him face to face. When we die, though our bodies decay in the grave, we go to be with Christ and we await the day when he will return in power to reign over this earth. If we have died when he comes, our bodies will be raised; if we are alive at his coming, then we will be physically changed and perfected. This transformation at Christ's return is the consummation of our salvation. We will still be finite humans, but we will be without sin and our bodies will no longer be subject to sickness, decay or death. Along with us, the whole creation will be transformed and we shall live in a new earth and heavens, enjoying forever our relationship with God.

### **the platonic view**

This third view of the nature of reality has had as detrimental an effect on the church as the materialistic view. In some ways it is more dangerous because it can be presented in a way which has a superficial resemblance to the biblical view and for this reason we treat it last. Because of this resemblance **the Platonic view has influenced the whole history of the church, from the first centuries until today.** Therefore, we will trace its ideas and development in some detail. It is important to grasp some of the basic ideas of Platonism, as every Christian meets it disguised in one form or another.

In the Platonic view, reality is made up of two parts—the material realm and the spiritual realm.

The material realm is the realm of the physical world. It is imperfect, transitory and shadowy. The spiritual realm is the realm of the “ideas,” that is, the forms which stand behind the appearances of the material world. The forms or ideas are more real than the things which exist in this material world. The spiritual realm is the realm of permanence, of the perfect, of the real. This spiritual realm is not itself personal, though it may be called divine. The gods may be included in it as spiritual beings.

To understand how this view of reality affects one's understanding of spirituality, let us picture man as another circle, superimposed on the other two as in Figure 2.

### **the idea that the spiritual is superior to the physical**

(According to Platonism) on the one hand, humans are physical and supplied with senses. With our senses we relate to the physical world, evaluating sense perceptions with reason. On the other hand, we each have a spirit. We relate to the spiritual realm through our spirits, not through the senses nor primarily through reason.

Accordingly, **in Platonic thought the spiritual realm is considered superior to the material. The spirit is housed in a body of clay from which it longs to be released. Death gives that final release. In this life, however, the aim is to dwell in the realm of the spirit as far as possible and de-emphasize and devalue the material realm.** So the philosopher and the artist are those who are in closest contact with the spiritual realm because they are caught up in the contemplation of the ideas, the divine, the beautiful and the celestial.

The material world is not regarded as of no importance. However, it has value only insofar as it acts as a kind of sparkplug to set off the mystical contemplation of the more real spiritual realm. For example, I see the beauty of a flower but I don't "stay" with its beauty. Its beauty is imperfect and I use it only to contemplate the true beauty of the world of the real which stands behind this world. This world has no value, except as a catalyst. Plato says,

He who sees this true beauty is transported with the recollection of true beauty when he sees beauty here on earth: then, careless of the world below....

We see the beauty of this earth and man —  
a kind of ecstasy overtakes us and the soul is renewed.

**Plato has established a spiritual hierarchy.** Ordinary people who pursue earthly tasks in the material world are low in the hierarchy because they are not in such close contact with the spiritual realm as the philosopher and inspired artist. Those who have been in contact with the spiritual realm become "careless" of this world. Notice how easy it would be to read the biblical statements against worldliness, or earthly passions or the desires of the flesh in a Platonic way. This would be a mistake.

In his Phaedrus, Plato writes of the ways we gain contact with the spiritual realm. He outlines the four ways of "divine madness." By madness Plato means that the experience comes from the spiritual realm rather than from or through the mind. The human spirit has direct contact with the spiritual realm. The mind may evaluate the experiences, but the final authority is the divine power or madness which possesses the spirit. The four ways are:

### **prophecy**

There is also a madness which is a divine gift and the source of the chiefest blessings granted to men. For prophecy is a madness, and the prophetesses at Delphi ... when out of their senses have conferred great benefits on Hellas; but when in their senses few or none.... Madness is superior to a sane mind ... for the one is only human but the other of divine origin.

### **healing madness**

This seems to be a kind of emotional catharsis caused by contact with the spiritual realm.



Where troubles arise ... there madness has entered ... and by inspired utterances found a way of deliverance for those who are in need ... and he who has part in this gift and is truly possessed and duly out of his mind is made whole and exempt from evil, future as well as present, and has a release from the calamity which was afflicting him.

### **artistic inspiration**

Plato makes it clear that there is no entry into the temple of the arts by artistic effort and human creativity.

The sane man disappears and is nowhere when he enters into rivalry with the madman.

### **divine love**

The madness of love is the greatest of heaven's blessings. The man of ideas [the one who contemplates heavenly beauty and who knows most of divine love] forgets earthly interests and is rapt in the divine ... the vulgar rebuke him and deem him mad... they do not see that he is inspired.

**In all four of these ways of relating to the spiritual realm there is an emphasis on the uselessness of ordinary human experience.** In the presence of the spirit the human is devalued, the mind has no place, creativity is useless, the earthly is forgotten. The spiritual realm is even called the “demonic” by Plato. Socrates, in the Phaedrus, hears the voice of the “demonic” within him telling him what he must not do. This inner voice is always to be held as a higher authority than his reason. Because it is from the realm of spirit it must be obeyed.

### **platonic influence on christianity**

**Plato's thought had a profound effect on the early church's view of spirituality.** In the second century A.D., Justin Martyr had been influenced by Plato before he became a Christian. After his conversion he carried much of Plato's thinking over into his teaching. He called Plato a Christian before Christ. Where the Old Testament was the pedagogue to lead the Jews to Christ, so, for Justin (and later for some of the Greek fathers), Platonic philosophy was the pedagogue to lead the Greeks to Christ. In the next century, Clement and others in Alexandria placed an even greater emphasis on Plato's ideas. The New Testament in particular was read in a Platonic framework. In the third century, Christians began to equate the physical and the sinful completely. Consequently, to obey Paul's command to “put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature” (Col. 3: 5 NIV), many found it necessary to sit on pillars in the desert or have themselves sealed up in caves!

Plotinus, a third-century Roman philosopher who was not a Christian, is called the father of Neo-Platonism. He elaborated some of Plato's ideas and developed them much further. He **stressed the transcendence of the divine, the importance of meditation and the union of the human spirit with the divine in the life of contemplation.**

He wrote that the way to divine knowledge is to separate yourself from your body and very earnestly to put aside the system of sense with its desires and impulses and every such futility.

**There could be no language about God:**

The one is truth beyond all statement....  
The All- Transcending has no name.  
We can state what it is not,  
while we are silent as to what it is.  
Those who are divinely possessed  
and inspired have at least knowledge  
that they hold some greater thing within them,  
though they cannot tell what it is.

**This divine encounter was above reason, the mind and feeling.**

At the moment of truth there is no power whatever to make any affirmation ...  
how is this [the divine encounter] to be accomplished? ...  
let all else go.

Plotinus' teaching that religious language is only symbolic was taken up by Dionysius the Areopagite within the Christian church. Dionysius stressed the transcendence (otherness) and oneness of God rather than God's personalness. For Dionysius language about God was meaningless. Verbal prayer was for him only a poor substitute for “real” prayer.

In this connection he is famous for teaching what is called the via negativa — the “negative way”:

**Spiritual growth, according to Dionysius, does not come through understanding who God is and what his blessings are. Rather, we must remove all positive statements about God until we are left with silence — the bare communion of the soul with God.**

Lossky, presenting Dionysius' position, says,

The perfect way, the only way which is fitting in regard to God, who is of his very nature unknowable, is the second (the negative way), which leads us finally to total ignorance. All knowledge has as its object that which is. Now God is beyond all that exists. In order to approach him it is necessary to deny all that is inferior to him, that is to say, all that which is. If in seeing

God one can know what one sees, then one has not seen God in himself but something intelligible, something which is inferior to Him. It is by unknowing that one may know him who is above every possible object of knowledge. Proceeding by negatives one ascends from the inferior degrees of being to the highest, by progressively setting aside all that can be known, in order to draw near to the Unknown in the darkness of absolute ignorance.

This emphasis on God being beyond all knowledge is a fundamental characteristic of the mystical tradition of the church. This way of ignorance can only be pursued by removing sense and reason, by abandoning not only what is impure but even what is pure. (Later we will discuss the similar emphasis in some evangelicalism of this century on self-emptying, on brokenness, on the uselessness of the mind and doctrine, and on the removing even of what seems good in the self.)

### **consequences of platonic thinking**

**The purpose of these spiritual exercises** [in Platonic-oriented thinking] **is union with God.** The object is to become so united with God in the inner being that one passes beyond subjectivity (“I perceive God”) and beyond objectivity (“God perceives me”). The individual attempts to reach a point where the Creator/creature distinction is no longer true or, at least, is no longer perceived.

**This kind of union with God is never the purpose of spiritual life in the Bible.** There will always be the Creator/ creature distinction, even in heaven. When glorified and perfectly restored to God's likeness, we will still perceive God and ourselves as different beings (Rev. 15:3-4; 21:1-6; 19:6-8). Consider Paul's statement:

Then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

1 Cor. 13:12

This is of fundamental importance as we consider what spirituality is. Confusion at this point leads to Watchman Nee's suggestion [see side bar] that our spirit and God's spirit become so one that to us they are indistinguishable and undifferentiable. (In fact it is unhelpful for us to ask whether promptings to righteousness arise from ourselves or from the Holy Spirit implanting his desires within us. But it is unhelpful because his work is secret, not because there is a confusion or merging of his personality and ours.)

**The emphasis on the total otherness of God leads to a devaluation of all language and of knowledge perceived by the mind.** Language is considered to be essentially idolatrous.

*There is only one name by which  
the divine nature can be expressed:*

*the wonder which seizes the soul  
when it thinks of God.*

Gregory of Nyssa

We have shown elsewhere that language is not idolatrous because there is a correlation between God and man.

**The confusion here arises from forgetting the distinction between true knowledge and exhaustive knowledge, true language and exhaustive language.** In saying we can know or say certain things about God, we do not claim that we have said everything about God which can be said, or that we know all that can be known. This is true not only of our knowledge of God but even of our knowledge of other people or of the material world. Though incomplete, our knowledge of God is accurate because he has made himself known to us in the Bible and there described himself for us.

**Mystics, forgetting this distinction between true and exhaustive knowledge and stressing that God is utterly different from man, devalued language both as a means of talking about God in theology and as prayer.** Notice that neo-orthodox theology is very similar to the mystical tradition at this point. God is considered to be completely other, and so is said to be unapproachable by man. Language about God is thought to be merely an expression of our “encounter” with God, rather than a true description of him. The Bible itself, it is said, “contains” God's Word and becomes the Word of God only when God is “encountered” in it. Christians must always engage Scripture with the mind and never devalue the mental effort of study with the assertion that Scripture comes alive only when God's spirit “touches” our spirit as we read.

**This devaluation of language and mental knowledge makes the Christian life ascetic.** The mind as well as everything external is rejected. Sin is said to be “exteriorization,” that is, to experience oneself *as a self* is to be in a state of sin. So, there is to be a continuous exodus from oneself. The goal of the spiritual life is to attain to a state of impassibility wherein one is affected by nothing in the external world, or even by any internal passions — a state of quietness beyond suffering or pleasure.

Here, too, there is total confusion about the biblical teaching on what is sinful. **It is not the self as such which is a problem, but the sin which affects every part of the self. The sin, not the self, is to be mortified.** Evangelicals often become confused about asceticism and the self.

In the mystical tradition, not surprisingly, prayer using words becomes a means to achieve a state of passionlessness. This verbal prayer is said to be only the frontier of prayer. When the state of passionlessness is reached, then begins the wordless, contemplative prayer in which the heart lays itself open before God in total silence. A state of ecstasy is the result, but even this is only the beginning. “The expert,” so it is claimed, moves into a state of constant experience of the divine reality.

In order to achieve these states, techniques for prayer are proposed. An example is the **Prayer of the Heart** — the continual repetition of “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner.” Nicephorus wrote of this prayer:

In every man inner talking is in the breast. For, when our lips are silent, it is in the breast that we talk and discourse with ourselves, pray and sing psalms, and do other things. Thus, having banished every thought from this inner talking (for you can do this if you want to), give it the following short prayer: "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me!" - and force it, instead of all other thought, to have this one constant cry within. If you continue to do this constantly, with your whole attention, then in time this will open for you the way to the heart which I have described.

But what about Jesus' warning against prayers of vain repetition (Mt. 6:7)? The Prayer of the Heart is really no different from the mantra of Eastern thought. Some Christians use this prayer today, but we should see that the framework in which the use of this prayer and other techniques like it arose, has nothing to do with biblical Christianity. These techniques may certainly produce intense experiences (as does the use of a mantra), but they are quite unrelated to genuine Christian prayer.

**Emphasis on this sort of meditation and the mysticism of union with God became, unhappily, a broad stream in the history of the Christian church.** The medieval work *The Cloud of Unknowing* betrays in its title the influence of the negative way and of Dionysius. This stream is still with us and its tributaries continue to flow through the evangelical church in unexpected places.

The danger of an uncritical acceptance of this tradition is indicated by some comments of William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James examines at great length the mystical tradition not only in the Christian church but also in other religions. He comes to the conclusion that all the mystics from whatever source, stand in one tradition. Commenting on the devaluation of language, he points out that if there is nothing to be said, then contrary to the protestations of some of the theologians, doctrine is essentially unimportant.

James also comments that it is odd that evangelicals have abandoned the methodical search for mystical experience and considers that evangelical Protestantism appears flat compared with the mystical tradition.

*The naked gospel scheme seems  
to offer an almshouse for a palace.*

William James

**The “naked gospel scheme” is not an almshouse, however, for the basis of our rejoicing comes not from the pursuit of ecstasy or the experience of the loss of personality in God, but from the knowledge that we who deserve eternal punishment and exclusion from God's presence have been bought back by Christ's death into fellowship with our Creator.**

## **platonic thinking today**

**Carl Gustav Jung, among the most influential of modern thinkers, stands in the Platonic tradition.** His world view is very similar to Plato's. While acknowledging the existence of a spiritual realm, he certainly does not think of the Spirit as the personal God of the Bible. For Jung, Christian doctrine is just one culturally conditioned, verbal expression of the nature of the spiritual realm. Naturally, then, the way of experiencing and describing this reality varies from culture to culture. The Hindu describes this "spirit" in characteristic Hindu terminology; the Muslim in Islamic terms; the Christian in Christian terms. The spiritual reality behind the words is the same.

**We should remember, therefore, the use of Christian words is no guarantee that the thinking or the view of reality being offered is biblical.** Jung wrote of "God the Father," "Christ" and the "Holy Spirit," but he used these as labels for spiritual experience. The reality behind the words is a vast spiritual realm, but certainly not the personal, triune God of the Bible. [see our review of Deepak Chopra]

The views of Plato and Jung are being equated by some today with the biblical world view. A striking example is Morton Kelsey.

Kelsey seems to have come from the rationalistic background of modern liberal theology which he rightly considers bankrupt because of its failure to deal adequately with the supernatural element in the Bible. When confronted by phenomena like dreams, tongues, prophecy and healing, he saw the need to find a framework which accommodated such experiences. He then explicitly adopted the world view of Plato and Jung and equated their view with the biblical world view.

**According to Kelsey, the main human problem is not moral, but is the need to be in contact with the spiritual realm.** His central emphasis is not the atonement of Christ, but spiritual experiences which, he says, are the means by which one is restored to contact with the spiritual. Consequently, he stresses tongues, healing, emotional catharsis, spiritual filling, meditation, prophecy and dreams. The Spirit brings wholeness primarily in these ways. The extraordinary becomes the Spirit's usual way.

Kelsey acknowledges that when one makes excursions into this spiritual realm of the unconscious one is opening oneself up to evil as well as good and so one needs a spiritual confessor to guide one through these dangerous waters. This realm (which he refers to as the Holy Spirit or self) is a place of subconscious forces or spiritual powers beyond our normal rational experience. A journey into it is intended to restore a lost dimension to our experience parched by materialism and thus revitalize our lives. This thinking is very similar to the gnostic theosophies which plagued the early church and is right in line with the resurgence of interest in religious experience and the occult which exists in our culture. What is particularly dangerous about Kelsey's thinking is that it is presented in biblical language.

Nevertheless, **this is not biblical Christianity**. The acknowledgment of a spiritual realm and the use of God's names to describe it do not mean that a biblical view is present. The Holy Spirit is not "a spiritual realm," nor is he the unconscious part of our psyche, nor the spiritual ground of all human life. He is not a part of any of these things. The Holy Spirit is a personal being. And we come into a relationship with him not through extraordinary spiritual experiences, nor through meditation, nor inward silence, but through believing that Christ died for our sins. Therefore, spirituality is to be expressed not by the sort of "divine encounter" which Kelsey, Jung or Plato suggest, but simply by loving the personal God who made us and redeemed us, and by obeying his commandments.

We stress this because Kelsey's book **Encounter with God** already seems to have confused many true Christians to the point of believing that biblical Christianity is what Kelsey describes. For instance, one prominent charismatic leader is quoted on the cover:

Kelsey's book ... points people to a discoverable reality ... it could have, in the field of theology, the kind of effect that Copernicus had in the field of astronomy-it sets forth a whole new scheme of reality. It provides the most thoroughly worked-out and documented theology for the charismatic which has been done anywhere. Beyond this it offers a whole new perspective from which to teach the Christian faith.... I'd love to see it used as a textbook.

Larry Christenson

In the foreword of the book another charismatic leader writes:

*It gives encounter an undergirding of theology.*

John L. Sherrill

Though *Encounter with God* was considered to be one of the most important books of 1974 by evangelical leaders in England (in a survey conducted by Crusade Magazine), we feel that the theology undergirding the encounter has very little similarity with biblical theology.

**It is naive to think that Christ is honored wherever the Holy Spirit is mentioned or "experiences with the Spirit" are encouraged. The New Testament commands us to test spiritual claims by biblical doctrine (1 Jn. 4:1-3; Gal. 1: 6-9).**

### **platonists unawares**

Morton Kelsey is an example of one who has deliberately adopted elements of the Platonic world view. **More frequently, someone within the mainstream of orthodox Christianity is influenced by Platonism without realizing the source, and genuinely confuses it with biblical teaching.** For example, extraordinary spiritual experiences may be considered ultimate (rather than subordinate) in the Christian life, or the mind may be devalued.

**Watchman Nee provides several clear examples of this kind of Platonic influence.** According to Nee, the person is composed of three parts: the inner man (the spirit), the outer man (the soul) and the outermost man (the body). Because they belong to the outer man, neither the emotions nor the mental thoughts have the same nature as God. Only the spirit relates to God. Nee seems to say that the spirit of the Christian and God's Spirit are fused. The self, or soul, must be broken for the spirit to be released.

Nee's stress on dependence on God, and on the humility we ought to have as sinners is of great value. But it seems to us that he goes beyond this valuable emphasis when he speaks of the breaking of the soul to release the spirit. He seems to be rejecting not merely the sinful nature but the self, for is not the self constituted by the emotions, the mind, the will — Nee's "outer man"? Consequently he devalues the human.

He says that natural compassion and tenderness are still sinful because they are only human. These too must be broken to allow the Spirit to do his work. This breaking of the self he regards as a particular experience which one must seek to have.

Nee says, further, that **to read the Scriptures with the mind is not enough, even though we may think we have been helped.**

Nee's teaching in these areas may flow from a misunderstanding of Galatians 2:20: It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. This, he seems to have taken to mean that the self must no longer play any part in the spiritual life, the "I" must be replaced by Christ. This is why he sees all the efforts of the self in attempting to practice righteousness as sinful. This also explains his view of the necessity of enlightenment, as over against mental effort, in reading the Scriptures.

**What does Paul mean in Galatians 2:20?** He cannot be taken to mean that the self is or must be replaced, for he goes on to add in the same verse: The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Paul's "I" continues to live — it has not disappeared and should not disappear. Further, the context indicates that **Paul is dealing with the question of justification through faith alone.** In verse 19 he says, I died to the law: **Paul is no longer trying to justify himself or build himself up.** Rather, he is "living to God." His life is now centered on God and thankfulness to him. Verse 20 simply reiterates the same point. **He is no longer trying to establish his own righteousness before God or with no help from God.** Instead, he sees Christ as the source of his whole life. **Christ's work is now central to his existence.**

Paul recognizes that without Christ he would be "dead" — alienated from God. Only through his faith in Christ is he alive to God, and therefore truly alive. Christ has brought light to his mind; where before he was ignorant of the truth, now through Christ he has wisdom. Where before the need to justify himself brought rebellion against the law and bondage to sin, now because of Christ he is free to obey the law and to practice righteousness.

As Paul looks at himself, he sees that his whole life as a believer is built upon the foundation of Christ's work. Faith in Christ is the central ingredient of his relationship with God, of his



relationships with others and of his own inward security. Because of this continual state of dependence on Christ, Paul can make the startling statement: It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. Paul is no longer living autonomously. He knows that his life flows from Christ, his Creator and Redeemer. But Paul is not making a statement of nonexistence of the self, nor of self-rejection.

Much of what Watchman Nee has written is very helpful, particularly his emphasis on faith and the need to be yielded in all things to God, but his teaching on the self is unbalanced, unhelpful and contrary to the New Testament's teaching.

### **physical for eternity**

**The biblical view of several areas, particularly the body, the world, spiritual gifts and prayer, is worth noticing in relation to Platonic thought.** The Bible's view of the body is quite different from the Platonic view. God called his physical creation very good. Our physical nature is part of our structure as human beings. Because our bodies are made by God they are to be enjoyed. Consider the celebration of sexuality in the Song of Solomon. We are called to honor God in our bodies (1 Cor. 6:20) and to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God (Rom. 12:1-2). Paul here uses the term body to refer positively to the whole "self" in somewhat the same way that he uses the term flesh to refer negatively to the whole of our "sinful nature."

**The great value God gives to the body is best shown by the physical resurrection. We will be physical for eternity.** The passage which may seem most Platonic, at a superficial glance, is in fact the very opposite of Platonic thinking (2Cor. 5:1-5).

Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

In this passage Paul speaks of his longing to be released from this life and from this body which is subject to mortality. We long, however, not to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. **Paul longs not for a less physical experience but for a better physical experience--one unmarred by sickness and decay.**

**In fact, Paul adds that the Holy Spirit is given to us as a guarantee of this physical resurrection.** Far from being unspiritual or having nothing to do with true spirituality, the body is of such supreme value to God that we are given the Spirit to assure us that we always will be physical. He puts the same great emphasis on our future physical life in Romans 8:23 where he

equates our adoption with the redemption of our bodies. **Thus asceticism for its own sake has no place in Christianity.**

### **separation of sacred and secular**

**Platonism, as we have seen, teaches that as we become absorbed in the spiritual realm “we become careless of the world below.” Is this what the New Testament means when it urges us not to love the things of this world?**

The “world” in the New Testament is the sphere of life in which God's lordship is rejected, where the things of this life become ends in themselves or even are worshiped. The world in this sense is most certainly to be rejected, but this does not mean that we are to hate life, culture, nature, sex and other material things.

*Everything created by God is good,  
and nothing is to be rejected if it is  
received with thanksgiving.*

1 Timothy 4:4

**Paul even asserts that the teaching that the material world is not to be enjoyed is a doctrine of demons** (v. 1). We have been created to enjoy God's world in all its richness. Human culture is also to be enjoyed. Spirituality involves the whole of human life; nothing is nonspiritual. But wherever Platonism has affected Christian teaching there has been a separation of the sacred and secular. Thus, prayer, worship, evangelism and “the ministry” are thought to be sacred. All other activities are secular. The sacred is said to be more spiritual.

Even where a necessary involvement in everyday tasks is acknowledged to be a Christian duty, the work, it is said, has to be done only physically. The spirit within has to be involved in silent communion with God, practicing his presence. This is similar to the command of the BhagavadGita to act as if we were not acting, love as if we were not loving. The necessity of involvement in the world of people and things is accepted, but the action must be done with the spirit withdrawn into the secret place of union with God, where the “real” business of life is said to be carried on.

**This mentality subtly affects Christian thinking in numerous ways.** For example, someone might say, “If only I could be involved in something really spiritual like witnessing rather than peeling these potatoes.” The New Testament stands absolutely against this division of life into more and less spiritual sections. Consider Ephesians 5:18. We are commanded to be filled with the Spirit continuously. How is this to be expressed? In singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs; in giving thanks in all things; and also in thinking of others' needs as we submit to one another in the ordinary everyday relationships of husband and wife, parent and child,

employer and employee. We are to obey God's Word in all these areas, living before him in dependence on his Spirit. This is what it means to be filled with the Spirit.

Paul says elsewhere that we are to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Col. 3:17). **All we do is to be done under the lordship of Christ--even washing floors. Everything we do as human beings is spiritually important. There is no sacred and secular.** This does not mean merely that we see practical value in "secular" tasks like peeling potatoes and washing the floor. It means far more: God himself delights in them because he has created the realm of the physical. Therefore, we are to value every part of our lives just as he does. In fact, spirituality is to be expressed primarily in the ordinary everyday affairs and relationships of our lives. God will reward his servants both for their work in everyday tasks (even if in slavery-Col. 3:22-24), and for their work in proclaiming the gospel (1 Thess. 2:19). Anything done well on the foundation of Christ will be approved by God on the day of the believer's judgment.

### **gifts: no natural/supernatural division**

**Associated with this scorn of mundane activities is the devaluation of natural, as over against supernatural matters.** Platonic thinking separates that which is merely human from that which is spiritual, the mental from the divine. The same kind of division is made by Christians in the area of gifts: the natural and the supernatural, the ordinary and the charismatic. But, is this a biblical division?

**In the New Testament's teaching on gifts there is no such division made between the human and the divine.** Gifts as varied as teaching, prophecy, service, encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, leadership, showing mercy, speaking with wisdom, speaking with knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, distinguishing between spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues, apostles, helping others and administration are all called charismatic in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 and 28-31, Romans 12:5-8 and 1 Peter 4:10-11. In each of these four passages in the Greek text the term charisma (literally "grace gift") is used. (Though charisma is not used in Eph. 4:7-11, we might also add evangelism and pastoring to the list. Marriage and singleness are also referred to as charismata in 1 Cor. 7.)

It is plain that the various lists include both "ordinary" and "extraordinary" gifts, but no division of natural/supernatural or human/divine is indicated. It is wrong to label particular gifts extraordinary and say these are the really spiritual ones. That a gift like tongues or healing or working miracles is more obviously given directly by the Spirit, does not put it on a higher plane. Nor does it demonstrate that the person who exercises such a gift is more open to the Spirit or knows a fullness of the Spirit not enjoyed by others who have more ordinary gifts.

Singling out the extraordinary gifts is not necessarily expressing greater openness to the Spirit: it may in fact define the work of the Spirit too narrowly. The Spirit works into the whole of our lives, in our ordinary human experience as well as in extraordinary ways. The Spirit was involved in the creation of each of us; he has been the sovereign Lord over each of our lives; he has given us new

life as believers; he gives us new gifts after we become Christians, either “ordinary” or “extraordinary.”

Jeremiah, for example, was prepared from the womb for his calling as a prophet of God. His whole life contributed to make him God's prophet. This was true also of Paul. When Paul became a Christian, God added gifts to those he had already given him at birth which had been developed by his training. All these worked together to make Paul, the apostle, God's gift to the church. The same is true of each one of us.

On the other hand, the “extraordinary” gifts should not be devalued. That would be as mistaken as the disproportionate value sometimes given to them. We should all desire good gifts and believe that God will give them to us, ordinary and extraordinary, when his church needs them. For example, if we are faced with someone who has been into the occult or the demonic, we should pray for the gift of discernment or that Satan will be restrained in order that the person may be able to believe, or if necessary we should exorcise in the name of Christ. God forbid that any of us should be antisupernaturalists. Let us not become practical atheists.

At the same time, we should see that **the Spirit works into our whole lives, not just into a narrow, “spiritual” area. To use one's mind in teaching does not mean that the result is unspiritual or that no charismatic gift is being exercised. We should not set the human and the divine in opposition. The Spirit works in dramatic and obvious gifts, and equally in less obvious and less dramatic gifts.**

## **prayer**

As we have seen, in the Platonic tradition within the church, nonverbal ecstatic prayer was considered the highest way. Meditation and other techniques were practiced to bring the soul into a state of realizing God's presence. Prayer was viewed as a way of experiencing the Spirit's presence within. But **what is prayer? Is the meditation that the Bible speaks of, the meditation of the Prayer of the Heart that we considered earlier? Is it a method for practicing God's presence?**

Occasionally the psalmist is said to meditate on God's wonderful works or God's character. He recalls the way God has delivered his people in the past and this gives him confidence to pray in the present (Ps. 77:12; 143:5). But the word meditation is principally reserved for the consideration of God's law. Joshua is commanded to meditate on the book of the law day and night (Josh. 1:8); and it is a frequent refrain of the psalmist that the righteous man so loves God's law that he meditates on it continually (Ps. 1:2; 119:15, 23, 48, 78, 148 and others). The nearest parallel in the New Testament to this idea of meditation is in Colossians 3:16: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

Notice, then, **how different from the meditation of the mystical tradition is the meditation encouraged by Scripture.** It is obviously the opposite of the “negative way” for it

**is a meditation rich in content.** It is not the emptying of the mind, but the filling of the mind. The believer meditates on God's Word, seeking to know both what God has commanded in Scripture and how this is to be applied.

**Biblical meditation is not intended to make God present.** God is present with the believer and therefore the purpose of prayer in the Scripture is to communicate to God in ordinary language one's praise, thanksgiving, confession, troubles and requests. Because God is personal and uses language himself, ordinary human language is a perfectly good medium for communicating with God. God is not the absolute other. Language is not valueless to describe God, nor to speak to him. Sometimes, of course, we may feel so troubled about a particular issue which faces us or so confused about how to pray in some situation that we cannot find words to express ourselves. Then the Spirit, who knows the deepest needs and desires of our hearts, prays for us (Rom. 8:26-27).

Further, **the reason for praying is not to experience God or to feel God's presence, nor is prayer meaningful only when there is such a feeling.** The Apostle Paul says simply,

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

Phil. 4:6

So, prayer need not be complicated, beautifully expressed or extraordinary in any way. Nothing could be more simple than the model prayer which Jesus taught his disciples (Mt. 6:9-13; Lk. 11:2-4). Even for the second person of the Trinity, ordinary language was adequate to communicate his deepest needs and greatest longings to his Father.

**This is not to say that prayer is or should be without emotion.** As we pray we ought to be overwhelmed with thanksgiving for God's love in giving his Son for us; we ought to grow in our appreciation of God's character. As with our Lord, deep emotion may indeed accompany our prayers and be the result of them.

*And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Phil. 4:7

The presence of God with us and his love for us are the factors which encourage us to pray - they are never the end toward which we pray.

**conclusion**

Concerning the things we have just examined, **the biblical teaching at each point stands opposed to Platonism, however diluted.** There is simply no warrant in Scripture to devalue the human or the natural. **Materialism is equally to be avoided.**

**God desires that men and women be fulfilled in every aspect of their humanness as they grow day by day into the likeness of himself, enjoying fellowship with the living God.**

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