

Spirituality in Missionary Sandles

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In a sense we do not seek spirituality. We seek God - and we long for others to seek God. When spirituality becomes an end in itself, it becomes Pharisaical. We focus on our own righteousness. It also becomes technique. We count the number of hours we spend in prayer, add those spent in the study of Scripture, and multiply the whole by our level of sincerity and faith. As Jacques Ellul points out, we in the west are obsessed with technique and measureable goals.

But talk of spirituality we must, if for no other reason than that it is one of the most neglected areas in the western church. What I have to say springs less from the western church tradition and more from the nonwestern churches, and less from personal realities and more from personal aspirations. It is confined to the question of spirituality in missionary life.

On first thought we tend to equate missionaries and spirituality. After all, missionaries have given their lives to God and spend their full time in spiritual ministries. What more can we ask of them? On second thought we realize that we cannot equate spirituality with religious vocation. Spirituality has more to say about who we are in ourselves and in community, and how we live - and less about the nature of the work we do.

Missionaries certainly are aware of this, we say to ourselves. They must spend much time in prayer and meditation for that is part of their work. But missionaries are us. They share our theological and cultural assumptions, and they are harried as we by daily problems to solve, tasks to do and people to relate to. Most try to find what spirituality they can in the over-crowded schedules of the day.

Some missionaries do take the time for prolonged prayer and meditation, but they often think of spirituality as something private and otherworldly. Piety becomes a form of personal retreat from community life, a place where individuals clean up after being defiled through contacts with others - as if left to ourselves we would be pure. It also becomes divorced from the mundane things of life: from handling accounts, preparing for classes, fixing cars, preparing meals and raising children - in other words from what occupies most of our time.

Where does one find spirituality - or, rather, where does one find God - in the middle of a busy missionary life? Let me suggest a few places we can meet Him.

Worship through Work

We must learn to worship through work. Unfortunately our western world view makes a sharp dichotomy between worship and work, supernatural and natural, spiritual and mundane. We 'retreat' from work to renew our spirituality and 'recharge our batteries.'

This dichotomy was not present in the middle ages when workmen offered their creations to God as offerings of praise. The stonecarvers working on the cathedrals of Europe did not sign their names on their masterpieces. These were created not simply as a means to earn a living (they were that, too), or to bring praise to their creators, but to point to God.

We need to offer all our deeds to God as worship. It is easier to see this when we preach, teach, write and sing. We must learn to do so when we shop for school supplies, visit the stranger who intrudes on our time, build the hospital wards, repair the school walls, take our children on outings and rearrange the furniture in our homes. Then these take on meaning and we can do them with joy. They take their proper place in our

lives for they are no longer divorced from the deepest longings of our hearts.

Prayer in the Pauses

Our schedules are filled with the agendas we and others have for our lives. The morning mail takes up half our day, and work and interruptions fill the rest. At night we have neither the time, energy or will to spend long times in prayer.

If we examine our days, however, we find little chunks of unused time: driving to work, waiting in line, and lying awake at night. To overcome the boredom of these moments we turn on the radio, curse the delay and count sheep. Yet, these can be some of the most fruitful moments of the day when they are spent in prayer and contemplation.

Prayer is not just talking to God. It is first listening to God and discussing the affairs of the day with him in order to get ourselves straightened out. It is opening our minds to let him speak to us, even when we know what he is going to say and we don't want to hear it. It is arguing with him when we think we know better than he what should take place, and letting him have the last word. It is berating ourselves for our sins and foolishness, and letting him pick up the pieces and put us together again. It is sorrowing over the effects of sin on life as we see it - over hatred, oppression, injustice, poverty, twisted lives and broken homes. It is to contemplate his redemptive work in all that goes on around us - in the flowering of a tree to brighten our day, the hand of kindness reaching out to us, the music that overwhelms us, and the silent moment we sense his nearness to us closer than a brother. It is living in the consciousness of his presence.

To discover these moments, however, we must resist the temptation to fill each moment so that there is no time for contemplation.

Peace Amidst Pressures

To live in the modern world is to live with pressure, but that runs counter to our notions of spirituality. The Hindu answer is to flee from the stresses of the world to some mountain cave. But if spirituality is possible only in retreat, most of us have little chance of attaining it.

Christ provided us with another alternative. He showed us a life of peace amidst the pressures of everyday life - a peace based on a clear understanding of the priorities of life, and of the Father's will for him.

Our stress, in part, arises from the many demands made on our lives. We have responsibilities at home, at church, at work, in the neighborhood, in the nation, in the world, to the poor, to the stranger and to those seeking after God. Twenty-four hours a day is not enough to meet these demands, but that is all God has given us. He must have thought that that was enough to do what he wants us to do.

Why, then, do the tasks of the day often seem so onerous? The fact is most of the loads we carry are those placed on us by others, or by ourselves. Everyone has a great plan for our lives, and we have great plans for their lives. All of these seem so important. How do we know which of them are from God? Christ said, "my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Those that burden us down must not be God. This does not mean that God's work demands no effort, but with his task he gives us joy and strength to do it. We may chose to carry the burdens others place upon us, but they no longer carry the weight of a divine mandate.

Sensitivity to God's Serendipities

Our days are usually so tightly scheduled that God has to wait in line to see us, and our plans so inflexible we cannot follow his lead. If we seek God, our schedules and plans must be subordinate to his. We must listen when God speaks in the middle of a crowded hour, and be willing on a moment's notice to drop our plans when he opens an unseen door. These unplanned moments are often more fruitful than all our programmed activities.

Christlikeness in Community

In the west we generally define spirituality in individual terms. In the Bible it is a quality of relationship with God, with humans and with nature. It is **shalome**. It is to see God's hand in nature, and his image in the stranger and enemy. It is to live like Christ in the communities in which we find ourselves.

As missionaries we need the spirituality of retreat. We also need a spirituality of the road, even though it is often confusing and muddied, for the road is where people are and where mission is to be found.