

# THE DANGERS OF SPIRITUALITY

Psalm 8  
Romans 5: 1–5

Faith Community  
June 10, 2001

## Introduction

America has experienced a rebirth of spirituality. Recently people have shown a great deal more interest in spiritual concerns. They are talking openly about spirituality. People are exploring their spiritual side, searching for what has meaning in our often-chaotic world.

We now have television shows like *Touched by an Angel* that deal directly with spiritual beings. There have recently been shows about pastors and congregations. Even prime time hits – law shows – talk about God and the characters express their religious beliefs, as I mentioned in *Musings*, in the last *Loaves and Fishes*.

A particular hunger for spiritual matters exists among our teens. In our community, *Young Life* is an enormously popular program. It is a Christian youth organization that isn't affiliated with any denomination and meets in kids' homes. Their meetings draw scores of teens.

In addition to that, a group of about 20 high school students meets for bible study every Tuesday, led by some of Faith Communities youth. There are no adults involved, the group is entirely student led. There is a hunger for spiritual life in our country.

## I

Why this burst of spirituality now? I'm pretty sure it is because spirituality has been shut out of public life for such a long time. American society for some years now has interpreted separation of church and state to mean that nothing should be said in public about spiritual or religious concerns. TV avoided anything that appeared to be spiritual. The Gallop Polls showed regularly that about 40% of American's went to church or synagogue on an average week, but on TV you never saw anyone ever attend, or even talk about church. That has changed recently.

Schools were not allowed to lead children in the Lord's Prayer - and they shouldn't be - but the schools took that to mean not to speak about anything spiritual. They went so far in keeping out anything religious that the federal government finally had to pass a law requiring schools to allow church's to use their buildings for worship and other programs. An important part of life was ignored, or more accurately, cut out of public life.

But the spiritual need was still there in people. It was alive and well, if below the surface of our culture. It was building, and now, it is as if the dam has burst, the reality of the spiritual life is demanding to be recognized.

Now the question is - Is this new interest in the spiritual life a good thing? So much of what we see in the media – especially movies – is a bland generalized, don't-offend-anyone spiritualism. They don't want to step on any toes so they create a spiritualism that is a little bit Christian, a little Hindu, a little Moslem, a little Buddhist, and a good bit New Age.

A few years ago Robin Williams starred in a movie about death and the afterlife that featured psychedelic flowers like a weird drug trip, an underworld kingdom, and all that with a little reincarnation thrown in. It was such a hodge-podge of theologies that it was meaningless.

Touched by an Angel tends to be so sweet, so happy-ever-after, that it seems to represent spiritualism as all sweetness and light.

## II

The point is that Christian spirituality is more difficult than what we're seeing in the current vague, generalized American spirituality. The Holy Spirit often takes us where we don't want to go. Sensing God's Spirit in our lives is not always sweetness and roses.

Being touched by the Spirit is as often uncomfortable as it is comforting. Remember Moses being called by God? When God spoke out of that burning bush, it wasn't something Moses wanted to get involved with. In fact, he started making excuses as soon as God told him what needed to be done. "I'm not really the person you want." "You know, I don't speak well." "Someone else could do this job a lot better than I could."

And maybe Moses was right. Probably, someone else could have done it better. Someone who was a dynamic speaker. Someone who was charismatic, a born leader, a persuasive orator.

But God chose Moses – to do a difficult job. First he had to deal with the Pharaoh. It took 10 plagues before Pharaoh would finally let the Israelites go. Then when they were out in the wilderness, on their way to the Promised Land, the Israelite people began to complain.

They complained about the barren land, and they complained about not having any food. When Moses took their concern to God, and God provided food, they complained that it was always the same - no variety. (I am sometimes tempted to think this was really the real beginning of the church!).

Moses couldn't win. First he had to deal with the Pharaoh, and then the people of Israel. So, did Moses live happily ever after? Did he make it to the Promised Land, and enjoy the land flowing with milk and honey? No. Moses died shortly after he had reached a mountaintop where he could see the Promised Land. He died before he ever got there himself.

The calling of the Holy Spirit isn't always sweetness and light. Just ask Moses, or look at the apostle Paul. He was on his way to persecute Christians when he was blinded by a brilliant light. When he recovered he went out starting Christian Churches all around the Mediterranean. Then he wrote back to them to offer advice, to explain Christian theology, to hear their complaints and to chastise them for not being faithful.

Some of these Christians broke Paul's heart. As a result of his work he was thrown in jail several times. In the end he was killed for his ministry. The call of the Holy Spirit is not always a warm fuzzy feeling. Just ask Paul.

And look at Jesus: his humble birth, the challenges of his life, his arrest, trial and death, and then his resurrection.

Spirituality isn't always a soft glow and a comfortable life. Sometimes it takes us where we would rather not go. Sometimes when we are involved with the Spirit it brings danger, suffering and fear.

### III

That is not to say that all calls to the spiritual life involve pain and hardship – not at all. It's just that we never know what God may want us to do.

What the Spirit wishes for us may not be what we had in mind. It reminds me of a comment I heard just last week. Someone said, "Do you know how to make God laugh?" No, how? "Just tell him what you have planned."

Well, what we have planned and what God wants for us isn't always that far off, but with true spirituality we don't exactly know what is in store for us. Real spiritual commitment can be frightening because we put ourselves in God's hands and say, "I'm here to serve you, where do you want me?"

Our response to profound spirituality isn't, "Here's what I'm going to do for God," instead it is, "Not my will, but your will be done." Let's face it: that can be scary.

Sometimes the Spirit comes to offer comfort, support, and strength. Especially when we face times of trial or pain. I think Moses only made it through his ordeal because he knew God was with him all the way. He had the support and strength of God beside him.

Paul thrived in his work with Christians because he was always aware of God's Spirit with him. Christ endured it all because he had the power and presence of God with him.

### Conclusion

What we are talking about here is that you and I can't tame the Spirit of God. In Christian spirituality we don't know what the Holy Spirit will call us to do. We don't demand the presence of the Spirit when we need it, but it also surprises us when we least expect it. God's Spirit isn't on a leash.

When we are deeply spiritual we never know where the Spirit will take us...how it will help us...what it will ask of us.

A member of our church told me about an experience she had just before surgery. She was very anxious about the surgery; had been worrying for several weeks.

The morning of her surgery, when they came to get her and put her in a wheelchair, she said she suddenly felt the presence of God. "I knew that God was there with me. I could feel as he put his arms around me, and held me.

I can't tell you the comfort I felt in that moment. I knew right then that I was going to be OK. From that time on I had no fear."

The Spirit of God is with us in our times of trauma. When we need courage God's spirit stands with us to give us strength. This same Spirit challenges us and moves us.

With Christian spirituality we open our lives to the mystery, the excitement, the comfort, and the surprises of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.