

He That Is Spiritual

by Ward Fenley

When the term 'spiritual,' or 'spirituality,' arises in circles, whether sacred or secular, one's mind might gravitate toward the mystical, the unseen, or even godliness. These thoughts are not necessarily incorrect. But identifying the nature of such terms is difficult at best and could rightly be described as murky or even subjective. If we speak from the Christian perspective and describe a person as 'spiritual,' we are usually conveying the character of a person based upon his or her 'appearance' to us. By 'appearance' I am not referring to their outward look, as if to be clean-cut, tattoo-free, and properly dressed. Rather, by 'appearance' I mean that they come across to us as worshipful people; people who either talk about God, cite verses, perhaps practice what they would call 'the gifts of the Spirit,' among other 'godly' things. But if we are to examine what the Bible describes as 'spiritual,' we see something that is slightly different, and even more advanced or significant than the above. The term 'godly' is usually applied to those who spend much time in prayer, studying their Bible, going to 'church' and abstaining from those things called 'worldly.' So, for the present study we will dismiss the term 'godly' from our discussion of 'spirituality.' But, for the sake of clarifying the true meaning of spirituality within the Scriptural context, I will state the obvious. We know the use of spiritual gifts does not determine spirituality simply from the theology gleaned from this one rhetorical question of Paul:

"Do all speak with tongues?"

Paul, knowing that certain spiritual gifts were precisely that, gifts, would not hold a person accountable for not being 'given' a 'gift.' Paul clearly declares that God gave certain gifts and that not all spoke with tongues, interpreted, healed the sick, etc. But Paul does make a distinct reference to the contrast between a "spiritual" person and a "natural" person.

1 Corinthians 2:1-16 And I, brethren, when I came unto you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: 5 that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

6 We speak wisdom, however, among them that are fullgrown: yet a wisdom not of this world, nor of the rulers of this world, who are coming to nought: 7 but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, [even] the [wisdom] that hath been hidden, which God foreordained before the worlds unto our glory: 8 which none of the rulers of this world hath known: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory: 9 but as it is written, Things which eye saw not, and ear heard not, And [which] entered not into the heart of man, Whatsoever things God prepared for them that love him. 10 But unto us God revealed [them] through the Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. 11 For who among men knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of the man, which is in him? even so the things of God none knoweth, save the Spirit of God. 12 But we received, not the spirit of

the world, but the spirit which is from God; that we might know the things that were freely given to us of God. 13 Which things also we speak, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Spirit teacheth; combining spiritual things with spiritual [words]. 14 Now the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually judged. 15 But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, and he himself is judged of no man. 16 For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.

Paul says several things concerning the difference between the natural and the spiritual: First, a person who is natural cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God because they are foolish, neither can he know them because they are spiritually judged, or discerned. So it appears that a person is natural until he or she can perceive the things of the Spirit of God. Now, again, defining these 'things of the Spirit of God' can be a very difficult task. But Paul's context indicates that these spiritual things were not understood among those under the Old Testament. Therefore it might be safe to say that either faith is not the central issue, since David and Abraham and the other great men and women of faith (Hebrews 11) all had...faith; or, it could be that under the new era of the revealing of spiritual things, that those who are of faith do indeed understand spiritual things. One thing is certain: the Reformed position of being made spiritual before faith is not doctrinally correct, for then none of those under the Old Testament had true faith, since Paul describes these spiritual things he is about to utter as "wisdom that has been hidden, which God foreordained before the worlds unto our glory." He even quotes Isaiah as having been one of those who longed for the revealing of these spiritual things, implying that Isaiah had not seen them. But Paul then says that those spiritual things had been revealed to those in Corinth: "but as it is written, 'Things which eye saw not, and ear heard not, And [which] entered not into the heart of man, Whatsoever things God prepared for them that love him. 10 But unto us God revealed [them] through the Spirit.'" Regardless of what different phrases theologians may use to describe a "going to heaven" revelation, they cannot use these words from 1 Corinthians 2, for Paul says they apply to us, not to a physically deceased group of people. And they did not apply to Isaiah, at least when Isaiah made the prophecy. Therefore, this revelation commenced with those first-century believers.

Now we come to the important question: What were these spiritual things? First, Paul calls it a mystery. 'Mystery' is used a few times in the New Testament, but specifically Paul says that it once was a mystery but has now been revealed. Jesus spoke of a mystery that had been hidden but was now revealed:

Matthew 13:9-17 He that hath ears, let him hear. 10 And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? 11 And he answered and said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. 12 For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath. 13 Therefore speak I to them in parables; because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. 14 And unto them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall in no wise understand; And seeing ye shall see, and shall in no wise perceive:

15 For this people's heart is waxed gross, And their ears are dull of hearing, And their eyes they have closed; Lest haply they should perceive with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart, And should turn again, And I should heal them. 16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear. 17 For verily I say unto you, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see the things which ye see, and saw them not; and to hear the things which ye hear, and heard them not.

Paul, too, says that the 'mystery' or 'mysteries' were hidden but are now revealed. Jesus even quotes the same prophet that Paul quotes-Isaiah. Therefore, it is likely that Jesus and Paul have the same mystery in mind. So, what is it they were seeing? Contextually, Jesus is speaking about the kingdom of God. He is equating faith in Christ with seeing the kingdom of God. Now, Paul is clear in Romans that faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and resurrected Lord is that which is necessary for eternal life. Therefore, fundamentally important is the understanding that faith in Jesus Christ brings about this life. But the audience is significant. We must remember that we are dealing with a people who were expecting the kingdom, and many of them were expecting it to come through Christ. They even went so far as to make Him king by force:

John 6:15 Jesus therefore perceiving that they were about to come and take him by force, to make him king, withdrew again into the mountain himself alone.

It is in this same passage that the Jews were accused of following Jesus because they had their bellies filled. Jesus strongly rebukes them and explains that unless they eat His flesh and blood they will have no life and will continually hunger and thirst. There are many prophecies in the Old Testament that speak of a time when God's people would never hunger or thirst. Therefore, contextually, the problem is that people were following Jesus for carnal fulfillment rather than forgiveness of sins, or, everlasting life. Now, there seems to be somewhat of a difference between a first-century carnal Jew and a first century carnal Christian. Even Paul addressed the church of Corinth as 'carnal' and not 'spiritual.' He wrote to them as babes. He begins that in 1 Corinthians 3. "I write unto you as carnal...as unto babes." But those who were simply following Jesus in John 6 "because they had their bellies filled" were not true believers. It says, "many of them walked with Him no more," after He said they had to drink his blood and eat His flesh to never hunger. They wanted a 'real' king, one who would rescue them from literal hunger and the literal Roman Empire. But they never trusted in Christ for forgiveness. Conversely, the church of Corinth seems to be in a different place. They seem to be trusting in Christ but are struggling with the revelation of spiritual things. Is it possible that Paul is wanting to point out the fact that Christ is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and that spiritual people are the ones who understand Him as fulfilling Old Testament prophecies and yet those who do not yet see these things conclusively are born again but carnal-babes? Paul says, "I do not speak unto you as spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as babes in Christ." They are in Christ, but they are babes. They are believers but they are carnal. Unfortunately a neo-evangelical fleshliness has caused many Christians to believe that the carnality of the Corinthian church was necessarily an outward immorality. Though there was an incident of this (1 Corinthians 5) it appears that the context is speaking of Christians wanting to make claim to certain individuals in regard to their Christian heritage--who was of Apollos, Paul, etc. Paul says that is

nothing in regard to true spirituality and the sovereignty of God in salvation.

If we make our way back to chapter 2, we see that Paul is addressing people who need to grow in their spiritual understanding. They need to grow out of foolishness (making claim to individuals for heritage etc.) and into spirituality (understanding Christ to be their all). It is plain in Isaiah that a time would come when God would give the waiting eye, ear, and heart, these Messianic blessings. Paul says "but unto us they have been revealed." But there were some who were still not seeing it. They were foolish, foolish to the extent that Paul would call them natural. Is it possible that these natural persons were saved but simply carnal in their understanding? The context appears to affirm this. However, Romans says that the 'carnal' mind is death and that the 'spiritual' mind is life and peace. In Romans the context is faith versus works. But the context in Corinthians appears to be different. I find it hard to believe Paul would identify a carnally dead man as a babe in Christ. This seems incongruous with the born-again experience. So, it is possible that the 'carnal' and 'spiritual' of Romans 8 is different from the 'carnal' and 'spiritual' of 1 Corinthians 2 and 3. If it is not, then we must conclude that Paul is saying those in 1 Corinthians 2 lack the blessing of regeneration. I am not prepared to make a judgment concerning this issue. However, I believe that it is essential that we understand that Paul desires for us to have the mystery revealed. And when one examines the life of Christ and the message of Christ to His people, the kingdom of God proves itself preeminent. One could not see the kingdom of God, enter the kingdom of God, or understand the kingdom of God unless he or she was born again (John 3). Now, is that to say that one immediately understands the kingdom of God upon being born again? Probably not. The understanding of the various mysteries of how Christ fulfills the kingdom of God is a long process. But, what is essential is that we understand that Christ fulfills the kingdom of God. Understanding the intricacies of how He fulfills it is very detailed. But we must believe that He fulfills it. That is, we must believe that Christ, through His death and resurrection, fulfills the kingdom of God. We must not ascribe physicality, carnality, or outward 'godliness' to the kingdom of God. We must understand the kingdom of God to be entirely bound up in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He has performed our way into the kingdom. God has answered the prayer Jesus taught the Apostles, "Thy kingdom come." Well, in Christ the kingdom has come and therefore we are called to give thanks for that kingdom and express that kingdom through our love for God and each other.

"He that is spiritual" understands that the mystery has been revealed and that we can say that "our eyes have seen and our ears have heard and our heart has perceived the things which God has prepared for those who love Him": Those 'things' are Christ. He is the fulfillment of those things, and we must not take away from that heavenly fulfillment by ascribing physicality to Him or His blessings. The nature of forgiveness and heaven is spiritual. Christ is our forgiveness and our heaven and we do not know Him after the flesh but after the Spirit.

In light of what we have seen, it is apparent that an outward performance of moral standards or 'gifts of the Spirit' are not the demonstration of a spiritual person. In fact, one who truly immerses him or herself into the aforementioned truths will begin to manifest spirituality by a distinctly merciful spirit. For it is mercy and restoration that are the main evidences of the person who understands that the kingdom is fulfilled in Christ:

Galatians 6:1 Brethren, even if a man be overtaken in any trespass, ye who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

The spiritual person restores the fallen, the broken, and reminds the believer of their place in the kingdom of God. Paul also says:

1 Corinthians 2:15 But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, and he himself is judged of no man.

The word 'judgeth' should be translated 'discerns.' That is, the one who is spiritual allows no judgment by another person in regard to salvation or eternal life. The spiritual person already discerns who Christ is and what He has done for them and no one can accuse otherwise.

We conclude, therefore, that the truly spiritual person is one who has the combination of mercy and faith in Christ as the fulfillment of the kingdom of God demonstrated in his or her life. They practice this spirituality in contrast to the moralist who judges others and believes that moral performance determines one's status in the kingdom of God.