

The *SBJT* Forum: Thinking about True Spirituality

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Mark Coppenger, Joel R. Beeke, and Pierre Constant have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: Could you briefly lay out the opportunities and dangers in the current interest in spirituality?

D. A. Carson: So many books on the subject of spirituality have been written during the last two or three decades that it is an impertinence to address the topic in a few paragraphs. In the hope that brevity may serve some useful functions, however, I'm inclined to say at least the following.

Before I answer the question directly, it is worth remembering that "spirituality" has an intellectual history that is worth thinking about. I summarized that history elsewhere (in an Appendix to *The Gaggling of God*), and I need not repeat here everything I said there. Nevertheless a handful of remarks from that survey will not go amiss. (1) Until a few decades ago, "spirituality" was not an expression much used in Protestantism. Nowadays, however, the expression is used not only by Catholics and Protestants alike, but also by almost everyone, including completely unchurched people who think of themselves as in many respects secular. "Spiritual" may hint at some sort of connection to eastern religions or to new age thought, but it might mean something like "aesthetic," and it might be tied to fairly

mystical quasi-materialist beliefs (e.g., some keep crystals close to them in the belief that they vibrate and improve the holder's "spirituality"). (2) In the Western world, the term was, as I've just said, until recently tied to Catholicism. But what did Catholics mean by it? One of their usages meant something like "devotional." While Protestants might write either academic or "devotional" commentaries, Catholics might write either academic or "spiritual" commentaries—and meant much the same thing. (3) Another traditional Catholic usage that stretches back many centuries has to do with forms of *superior* Christian experience. In other words, ordinary Christians might believe certain things and act in certain ways, but to be a really *spiritual* Christian meant to engage in certain ascetic practices, adopt certain spiritual discipline, and so forth. In other words, to be "spiritual" was something akin to being a more serious Christian, or a more advanced Christian, or a more holy or godly Christian. (4) Because "spirituality" today is often applied not only to Protestants and Catholics alike, but also to adherents of completely non-Christian religions—for instance, many writers probe what we ought to be learning from, say, Buddhist "spirituality"—the word is

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less and less tied to any identifiable belief structure, and more and more tied to technique. The assumption is that techniques of “spirituality” may be readily transferred from religion to religion, from belief structure to belief structure.

So now it is time to address the question directly. *First*, some of the opportunities bound up with current interest in this vague thing called “spirituality” may usefully be identified.

(1) Although the term “spirituality” as it is now used is astonishingly broad, it usually signals a reluctance on the part of those who espouse it to embrace philosophical materialism. In other words, being committed to “spirituality” usually means one is committed to a universe that has something in it beyond matter, energy, space, and time. The sheer reductionism of philosophical materialism is thus avoided, even if the nature or even the rationale of this “spirituality” is more than a little fuzzy. That means the beginning point in conversation with such “spiritual” people is never quite the same as with, say, a scientist committed to philosophical materialism.

(2) Epistemologically, those who espouse “spirituality” are more open to diverse channels of acquiring “knowledge” than are those who buy into logical positivism. To (over)simplify: While logical positivists think that the only things human beings can “know” are those that are tied by observation and reason to the material world, those interested in “spirituality” are open to intuitions, faith, extra-sensory perception, aesthetics, and sometimes a range of supernatural beings. I am far from saying that all of these epistemological claims are wise or defensible; I am merely saying that they avoid one common form of reductionism,

and so how people may come to “know” things about Jesus, and truly to “know” him, can happily proceed along broader lines than those acknowledged by reason alone or by the senses alone.

(3) In particular, those who espouse “spirituality” can be praised for their appreciation of the complexity of human existence, of a non-material component. One remembers Paul’s careful opening remarks when he addresses the Areopagus: “I see that in every way you are very religious.” He then adduces, as evidence, their “objects of worship” and even the altar “To an Unknown God.” Today, for most people in the Western world, being labeled “religious” would not be taken as any sort of compliment, ambiguous or otherwise. I suspect that if Paul were beginning his address today in New York or Chicago or L.A., he would say, “I see that in every way you are very spiritual.” Of course, that would not prevent Paul from chiding them for some of their understanding of what it means to be “spiritual,” or from providing a Christian understanding of what it means to be “spiritual”—just as he insists on a Christian understanding of true “religion.” Nevertheless, as the apostle detects some measure of common humanity in the desire to be “religious,” we ought to detect some measure of common humanity in the desire to be “spiritual.”

That brings us to the *second* part of the question: What are the dangers in the current interest in spirituality?

(1) For many people, “spirituality” is a word with only positive connotations—a bit the way “apple pie” or “motherhood” functioned in the Eisenhower years. The upshot is that encouraging people to be discerning in spiritual matters sounds hyper-critical, for it presupposes that not

everything that passes for spirituality is good. Yet diminished discernment is rarely a good thing, and so we have to make the attempt to avoid the clichés surrounding “spirituality” and try to encourage rigorous biblical fidelity.

(2) The result of the current naïveté about spirituality is that many people have begun to appeal to their own mystical experiences over against claims of truth. An explanatory aside: Historically, people have tended to base their religious claims on reason, mysticism, or revelation. This is not to say that there may not be some overlap of these categories, of course, but this analytical breakdown is helpful. The current appeal to spirituality is very largely an appeal to highly diverse forms of mysticism—forms that brook very little space for revelation in any biblical sense, and not even much for reason. Another way of saying this is that personal experience trumps everything; indeed, it becomes an end in itself, which of course feeds that which, from the biblical perspective, lies at the heart of human rebellion, namely, self-interest.

(3) To put this another way: the current shape of spirituality largely sidesteps very substantial matters dealing with history and truth. Did Jesus rise from the dead, or did he not? If he did, what does his resurrection mean? What does it say about his own personal claims and his own understanding of the human beings? Is he truly the unique Son of God, the “Word made flesh”? From a biblical perspective, can one be “spiritual” while still rejecting the Son of God? And such matters as these are nestled within huge questions of worldview: human beings are important because we have been created in the image of God; we are guilty because we have chosen to go our own

way; salvation consists first and foremost in being reconciled to the God from whom we have alienated ourselves, and whose judgment we must face; the only escape is what this God has provided. Within that sort of framework, then, Paul insists that the “natural” person, the person without the Spirit, “does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness” (1 Cor 2:14). Only the person who has received the Spirit, the Spirit whom Jesus himself bequeathed and who is the down payment of the ultimate inheritance, is truly “spiritual.” Thus being “spiritual” is tied irrefragably to the gospel itself—in the context, to “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:14). Even when Paul refines this fundamental polarity in the next chapter, and painfully writes that some who are “spiritual” in this fundamental sense are acting immaturely, he assumes they are Christians: their immaturity does not manifest itself in the repudiation of the Christian faith, but in one-upmanship and bickering (1 Cor 3). Certainly Christians are responsible to “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25). Yet the fundamental polarity of the new covenant must not be ducked: those who have the Spirit (a state bound up with saving faith in Christ and his cross-work) are spiritual, and those who do not have the Spirit are not. Whatever else is said about not quenching the Spirit, about spiritual growth and knowledge of God, about conformity to Christ—all of which are regularly tied up with “spirituality” in current discussion—must begin with this fundamental polarity, or shunt to one side the Bible and the gospel it announces.

Again, one should be suspicious of generalizations of this sort: “By all means read the evangelical literature if you want to understand the cross, but if you want to

grow in spirituality, read the Catholics.” The bifurcation is deeply troubling. Of course, some Catholics have understood the cross profoundly: we still sing, for instance, some of Bernard de Clairvaux’s cross-centered hymns (at least we did until they were largely displaced by choruses telling God that we are worshiping him). But I have not read literature that is more “spiritual” than the best of the Puritan classics, for instance—literature that is, on the whole, deeply imbued with a profound grasp of the gospel. Is it really biblically-defined spirituality which is found in traditions that are *less* clear on the nature of the gospel?

(4) Within the broadly Christian heritage, a very large amount of current discussion turns on technique, asceticism, monastic practice, and the like. Not for a moment would I want to deny that there are degrees of knowledge of God (as there are degrees of knowing any person), and that some Christians are more mature than others. One needs only to read Philippians 3, for instance, to remember how Paul yearned for continued growth and conformity to Christ. Moreover, disciplined practices may prove to be a helpful part of such growth for some believers. For instance, Christians who commit themselves to daily reading of substantial parts of the Bible, along with the journaling that keeps records of personal reflections as one reads the text, may find themselves growing substantially. But is it the reading and journaling, *considered as techniques*, that are achieving these ends? Or is it the truth of the Word? After all, on the night he was betrayed, Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them by your truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). There are myriads of passages that stress the importance of meditating on, believing in, obeying,

learning, memorizing (“hiding in one’s heart”), God’s truth; there are none that mandate journaling. I hasten to insist that I am not unalterably opposed to journaling. But I am deeply suspicious of any appeal to technique in spirituality that is not mandated by Scripture, the more so if it has the effect of masking what the Scripture is actually talking about.

Sometimes the technique that is being urged is so heavily horizontal that it barely acknowledges God. One recent influential book, for instance, urges us to move through distinct phases of spiritual exploration, regardless of the particular object of our faith (i.e., what we believe is unimportant; the categories of spiritual growth are sociologically determined): (1) discovery, i.e., we find God on the particular path we have chosen; (2) belonging, i.e., we attach ourselves to a particular group; (3) working, i.e., we commit ourselves to this religious cause; (4) questioning, i.e., at some point we may begin to wonder what we are doing here; (5) the wall, i.e., we hit an impasse; (6) living with uncertainty, i.e., we work through the impasse and choose deeper confidence on the God we believe in, while we hold other things more loosely; (7) living in love, i.e., we learn better how to live for God and others. Regardless of the accuracy or inaccuracy of this sociological profile, it is utterly detached from *any* particular belief system, including the gospel. We are a long way from 1 Corinthians and Galatians, from the Farewell Discourse, from Ephesians, from Matthew’s form of the Great Commission.

What we must see is that only what is valuable is counterfeited. One does not bother to counterfeit pennies; one counterfeits \$20 bills or \$100 bills. A great deal of biblically-mandated spirituality is

counterfeited by those who will not come under the biblical frame of reference, precisely because *biblical* spirituality is glorious, so it seems worth counterfeiting. Sadly, Christians are easily taken in by such counterfeits, unless they relentlessly return to Scripture to test all things.

(5) It may seem a tad harsh to say it, but in my experience, many (though certainly not all) of those who buy into contemporary approaches to spirituality have no hesitation about saying things like “I really am quite a spiritual person.” This is not surprising. Once spirituality is tied to technique, personal mysticism, and self-discipline, it can easily become a basis for pride. This is a long way removed from the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5).

Perhaps it is the fruit of the Spirit that gives us an important clue to what we should be pursuing. We often encourage people to memorize the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit, but observe carefully the references to the Spirit in the context: “So I say, *walk by the Spirit*, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to *the Spirit*, and *the Spirit* what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led *by the Spirit*, you are not under the law. . . . But *the fruit of the Spirit* is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we *live by the Spirit*, let us *keep in step with the Spirit*. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other” (Gal 5:16ff.). This is where our future lies: walking by the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, keeping in

step with the Spirit, growing in the fruit of the Spirit. Here is spirituality alive with Christ-centered awareness, a passionate desire to bring glory to God and good to his people, a love and a joy and a peace, and all the rest, that are cruciform.

SBJT: Is there a connection between ethics and spirituality?

Mark Coppenger: A connection, yes, but not airtight. Sometimes, the lost can out-think and outperform Christians, even believers who have a regular “quiet time.” Southern Baptist resolutions on abortion provide a case in point. For years, godly pastors were acting under the influence of abortion enablers and crusaders at our seminaries and denominational offices. Thus, in the early 1970s, the Convention favored abortion when there was “clear evidence of severe fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother.” Not until the conservative resurgence of the 1980s did Southern Baptists officially oppose abortion “except to save the life of the mother.” It finally occurred to them that a death sentence for “severe fetal deformity” was eugenic murder and that deferring to “the emotional health of the mother” gave a blank check to those who found pregnancy inconvenient.

Meanwhile, Jewish atheist Nat Hentoff, without benefit of “spirituality,” was concluding that the “severely deformed” were precious. In “The Awful Privacy of Baby Doe,” he railed against the parents who wanted their Downs baby to die of starvation and dehydration (“The Awful Privacy of Baby Doe,” *Atlantic* [January, 1985], 50), and later, he castigated the Democrats for marginalizing Pennsylvania governor Robert Casey for his pro-life stance (“Life

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of the Party," *The New Republic* [June 19, 2000]). Even in his lost condition, Hentoff got things right.

So how can those who are dead in sin be ethically perceptive? Romans 1:26-27 teaches that certain behaviors are unnatural; God's ethical commands are not arbitrary. And, as C. S. Lewis demonstrated in *The Abolition of Man*, non-believers can be morally perceptive. Clearly, some behaviors (such as adultery, drunkenness, lying) are destructive, and others (such as industry, sobriety, fidelity) are salubrious. Furthermore, as Rom 2:14-15 teaches, even pagans have God's law written on their hearts, pricking or easing their consciences appropriately.

This does not mean, however, that it is merely a toss-up. The fruit of spiritual vitality is overwhelmingly bountiful, and the fallout from spiritual deadness is staggering. In the former connection, George Muller is a famous example. Repeatedly, he began the morning in both poverty and prayer, only to find provision, before sundown, for orphans in his care (*The Autobiography of George Muller* [Springdale, PA: Whitaker House, 1984], 146-53). And devotion can have broad cultural implications as well: "In the long view of history, the [American] Civil War can be seen as the last chapter in the Christian story of the Second Great Awakening. In the North, one of the reforms inspired by the revival was abolition, the drive to abolish slavery" (Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992], 314). Then, at the far opposite end of the spiritual/ethical spectrum, an atheistic Mao Tse-Tung "was responsible for well over 70 million deaths in peacetime, more than any other twentieth-century leader" (Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *The Unknown*

Story of Mao [New York: Knopf, 2005], 3). Godlessness kills.

How does spiritual deadness result in evil? The Bible clearly teaches that a corrupt heart issues in corrupt behavior (Mark 7:21-22). Televangelist Jim Bakker agrees, tracing his adultery to jealousy (*I Was Wrong* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996], 13-24). He went on to write a confessional book, *I Was Wrong*, but most sinners prefer excuse to repentance. In this vein, E. Michael Jones, the Catholic editor of *Culture Wars* magazine, argues that misbehaving cultural elites, such as Paul Tillich and Pablo Picasso, were masters at changing the subject—and the rules (E. Michael Jones, *Degenerate Moderns: Modernity as Rationalized Sexual Misbehavior* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993], 17, 127-51). Straying into sexual immorality, they crafted ideologies to justify themselves. Anthropologist Margaret Mead was another offender. Saturated with her own sexual sin, she wrote the poorly researched *Coming of Age in Samoa* to prove that "open marriage" was the way of innocents in the South Seas (Jones, *Degenerate Moderns*, 19-41). So, in her own mind, she was a noble primitive instead of a furtive, decadent academic.

The term *spirituality* has been emptied of virtually all meaning, hence, the confusion when New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft attributed his team's first Super Bowl victory to their "spirituality" (See a positive reflection on his statement in Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, "Why G-d Sided With the Patriots: The devout Kurt Warner represented righteousness over unity—and lost," online: http://www.beliefnet.com/story/99story_9930.html.) One had to wonder whether it was the spirituality of the Crusaders who sacked Constantinople, Buddhist spirituality

which suppresses the desire for personal stardom, the Hindu spirituality of Kali the annihilator, or Quaker spirituality encouraging quiet reflection on the lessons of the game in progress.

One should stipulate Christian spirituality, but even that is not enough. A roll call of self-identified Christian mystics will show a conflicting variety of causes and prescriptions from the likes of Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Meister Eckhart, Ignatius of Loyola, John of the Cross, George Fox, and William Law (Georgia Harkness, *Mysticism: Its Meaning and Message* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1973])—not to mention the “charismatic chaos” chronicled by John MacArthur (*Charismatic Chaos* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992]).

So it requires *sound* Christian spirituality. There have to be biblical checks on devotional perceptions, for some seem to think that it is enough to be gloriously saved and Spirit-filled to do right: “Just love Jesus with all your heart and then do what comes naturally.” But Paul’s epistles show that the fellowship of ever-less-than-perfect saints needs a lot of written and spoken coaching to avoid wasted motion or even shipwreck, whether the topic is lawsuits, hairstyles, or slave behavior. And then there is the danger of quietism or “pietistic individualism,” whereby the spiritually-edified saint cultivates his serenity to the neglect of messy and troubling social and political engagement (“Pietistic individualism” was the concern of Reinhold Niebuhr, who had feared that Billy Graham’s 1957 crusade in New York City would pull believers from the public square, where he had lost liberal friends by advocating U.S. participation in World War II. See Andrew S. Finstuen, “The Prophet and the Evangelist: The Public

‘Conversation’ of Reinhold Niebuhr and Billy Graham,” *Books & Culture* [July/August 2006]: 9).

Nevertheless, sound, Christian spirituality can be wonderfully *antiseptic* (neutralizing sinful thought) and *nutritional* (feeding the soul starved for insight)—and the impact on public policy as well as personal morality has been proven to be considerable.

Unfortunately, knowing the right path does not imply that one will follow it. Decency is as much a matter of the will as the intellect. Ethicists, such as Alasdair MacIntyre and William Bennett (See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* [South Bend: Notre Dame, 1981]; and William J. Bennett, *The Book of Virtues* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993]), have picked up on this in recent years. Focusing on more than the morality of war, abortion, lying, etc., they now also speak of self-discipline, compassion, courage, perseverance, and loyalty—what it takes to follow through on one’s convictions, the morality of the *actor* as well as the morality of the *act*. This attention to virtue tracks with the Spirit fruit named in Gal 5:22 and the cultivation of spiritual disciplines, reflected in 1 Tim 4:7-8.

No, we cannot be saved by ethics. Yes, our moral calculations and deeds are tainted by sin, hobbled by finitude. But essential truth is attainable and choices can be praiseworthy, particularly when the resources of regeneration and sanctification are in play.

SBJT: Could you discuss the Puritan practice of biblical meditation? How can we learn from them today?

Joel R. Beeke: The word *meditate* or *muse* means to “think upon” or “reflect.” “While I was musing the fire burned,” David said

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(Ps 39:3). It also means “to murmur, to mutter, to make sound with the mouth.... It implies what we express by one talking to himself” (William Wilson, *OT Word Studies* [McLean, Va.: MacDonald Publishing, n.d.], 271). Thinking, reflecting, or musing presupposes a subject on which to meditate. Formal meditation implies weighty subjects. For example, philosophers meditate on concepts such as matter and the universe, while theologians reflect on God, the eternal decrees, and the will of man.

The Bible often speaks of meditation. Genesis 24:63 says, “Isaac went out to meditate in the field in the evening.” Despite Joshua’s demanding task of supervising the conquest of Canaan, the Lord commanded Joshua to meditate on the book of the law day and night so that he might do all that was written in it (Josh 1:8). Moses, Mary, Paul, and Timothy all meditated.

The term *meditation*, however, occurs more often in the Psalms than in all other books of the Bible put together. Psalm 1 calls that man blessed who delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night. In Ps 63:6, David speaks of remembering the Lord on his bed and meditating on Him in the night watches. Psalm 119:148 says, “My eyes are awake before the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promise” (Cf. Ps 4:4; 77:10-12; 104:34; 119:16, 48, 59, 78, 97-99).

More than any other group in church history, the Puritans wrote about meditation from a strictly biblical point of view. They never tired of saying that biblical meditation involves thinking upon the Triune God and His Word. By anchoring meditation in the living Word, Jesus Christ, and God’s written Word, the Bible, the Puritans distanced themselves

from the kind of bogus spirituality or mysticism that stresses contemplation at the expense of action, and flights of the imagination at the expense of biblical content.

For the Puritans, meditation exercises both the mind and the heart; he who meditates approaches a subject with his intellect as well as his affections. Thomas Watson defined meditation as “a holy exercise of the mind whereby we bring the truths of God to remembrance, and do seriously ponder upon them and apply them to ourselves” (Thomas Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm* [Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000], 23. For similar definitions by other Puritans, see Richard Greenham, “Grave Counsels and Godly Observations,” in *The Works of the Reverend and Faithfull Servant of Jesus Christ M. Richard Greenham* [ed. Henry Holland; London: Felix Kingston for Robert Dexter, 1599], 37; Thomas Hooker, *The Application of Redemption: The Ninth and Tenth Books* [London: Peter Cole, 1657], 210; Thomas White, *A Method and Instructions for the Art of Divine Meditation with Instances of the Several Kindes of Solemn Meditation* [London: for Tho. Parkhurst, 1672], 13).

Edmund Calamy wrote, “A true meditation is when a man doth so meditate of Christ as to get his *heart* inflamed with the love of Christ; so meditate of the Truths of God, as to be transformed into them; and so meditate of sin as to get his heart to hate sin.” He went on to say that in order to do good, meditation must enter three doors: the door of understanding, the door of the heart and affections, and the door of practical living. “Thou must so meditate of God as to walk as God walks; and so to meditate of Christ as to prize him, and live in obedience to him” (Edmund Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*).

Dozens of Puritan ministers preached and wrote on how to meditate. Meditation was a daily duty, they said, that enhanced every other duty of the Christian life. As oil lubricates an engine, so meditation facilitates the diligent use of means of grace (reading of Scripture, hearing sermons, prayer, and all other ordinances of Christ) (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. 154), deepens the marks of grace (repentance, faith, humility), and strengthens one's relationships to others (love to God, to fellow Christians, to one's neighbors at large).

The Puritans wrote of two kinds of meditation: occasional and deliberate. Occasional meditation takes what one observes with the senses to "raise up his thoughts to Heavenly meditation," Calamy wrote. The believer makes use of what he sees with his eyes, or hears with his ears, "as a ladder to climb to Heaven." That's what David did with the moon and stars in Psalm 8, what Solomon did with the ants in Proverbs 6, and what Christ did with well water in John 4 (Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*).

The most important kind of meditation is daily, deliberate meditation, engaged in at set times. Calamy said deliberate meditation takes place "when a man *sets apart* . . . some time, and goes into a private Closet, or a private Walk, and there doth solemnly and *deliberately meditate of the things of Heaven*." Such deliberation dwells upon God, Christ, and truth like "the Bee that dwells and abides upon the flower, to suck out all the sweetness." It "is a reflecting act of the soul, whereby the soul is carried back to it self, and considers all the things that it knows" about the subject, including its "causes, fruites, [and] properties" (Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*). Thomas White said deliberate meditation draws from

four sources: Scripture, practical truths of Christianity, providential occasions (experiences), and sermons.

Why is it our duty to meditate? The Puritans stressed the need for meditation for several reasons. First, our God commands us to meditate on his Word (Deut 6:7; Ps 19:14; Isa 1:3; Eph 1:18; 1 Tim 4:13; Heb 3:1). Second, one cannot be a solid Christian without meditating. Thomas Watson wrote, "A Christian without meditation is like a soldier without arms, or a workman without tools. Without meditation the truths of God will not stay with us; the heart is hard, and the memory slippery, and without meditation all is lost" (*The Sermons of Thomas Watson*). Third, without meditation, the preached Word will fail to profit us. Reading without meditation is like swallowing "raw and undigested food," wrote Henry Scudder (Henry Scudder, *The Christian's Daily Walk*). Fourth, without meditation, our prayers will be less effective. Manton wrote, "Meditation is a middle sort of duty between the word and prayer, and hath respect to both. The word feedeth meditation, and meditation feedeth prayer" (*The Works of Thomas Manton*). Fifth, Christians who fail to meditate are unable to defend the truth well. They have no backbone and little self-knowledge. As Manton wrote, "A man that is a stranger to meditation is a stranger to himself" (*The Works of Thomas Manton*).

In terms of general guidelines for practicing meditation, once again the Puritans are helpful. First, the Puritans said that meditation should be frequent—at least once a day. William Bates wrote, "If the bird leaves her nest for a long space, the eggs chill and are not fit for production; but where there is a constant incubation, then they bring forth: so when we leave

religious duties for a long space, our affections chill, and grow cold; and are not fit to produce holiness, and comfort to our souls" (*The Works of William Bates*).

Second, set a time for meditation and stick to that time, the Puritans advised. That will put brackets around duty and defend you "against many temptations to omission," wrote Richard Baxter (Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*).

Third, meditate "ordinarily till thou doest find some sensible benefit conveyed to thy soul." Bates said that meditating is like trying to build a fire from wet wood. Those who persevere will produce a flame. When we begin to meditate, we may first garner only a bit of smoke, then perhaps a few sparks, "but at last there is a flame of holy affections that goes up towards God." Persevere "till the flame doth so ascend," Bates said (*The Works of William Bates*).

In order to prepare oneself to meditate, Puritan writers suggest the following: Clear your heart from things of this world. Have your heart cleansed from the guilt and pollution of sin, and stirred up with fervent love for spiritual things. Approach the task of meditation with utmost seriousness. Find a place for meditation that is quiet and free from interruption. Maintain a body posture that is reverent, whether it be sitting, standing, walking, or lying prostrate before the Almighty.

In regard to the actual process of meditation, the Puritans wisely emphasized the need to ask first the Holy Spirit for assistance. Next, we should read the Scriptures, by selecting a verse or doctrine upon which to meditate. Be sure to pick out relatively easy subjects to meditate on at the beginning, and subjects that are most applicable to your present circumstances. Then, memorize the selected

verse(s), or some aspect of the subject, to stimulate meditation.

Next, use your memory to focus on all that Scripture has to say about your subject. Use "the book of conscience, the book of Scripture, and the book of the creature" (*The Works of George Swinnock*) as you consider various aspects of your subject: its names, causes, qualities, fruits, and effects. Like Mary, ponder these things in your heart. Think of illustrations, similitudes, and opposites in your mind to enlighten your understanding and enflame your affections. Here's an example from Calamy. If you would meditate on the subject of sin, "Begin with the description of sin; proceed to the distribution of sin; consider the original and cause of sin, the cursed fruits and effects of sin, the adjuncts and properties of sin in general and of personal sin in particular, the opposite of sin—grace, the metaphors of sin, the titles given to sin, [and] all that the Scripture saith concerning sin" (Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*).

Next, stir up affections, such as love, desire, hope, courage, gratitude, zeal, and joy (Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*), to glorify God (Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*). Apply your meditations to yourself to arouse yourself to duty and comfort, and to restrain yourself from sin (*The Works of William Bates*). Examine yourself for your own growth in grace. Reflect on the past and ask, "What have I done?" Look to the future, asking, "What am I resolved to do, by God's grace?" (Ussher, *A Method for Meditation*). Do not ask such questions legalistically but out of holy excitement and opportunity to grow in Spirit-worked grace.

Next, turn your applications into resolutions. "Let your resolutions be firm and strong, not [mere] wishes, but resolved

purposes or Determinations,” wrote Thomas White (Thomas White, *A Method and Instructions for the Art of Divine Meditation*). Conclude with prayer, thanksgiving, and Psalm singing.

The Puritans commonly meditated on the following subjects: In theology proper, the nature and attributes of God, and the works and providences of God. In anthropology, the sinfulness of sin and personal sin, and the corruption and deceitfulness of the heart. In Christology, the passion, death, and love of Christ. In soteriology, the promises of God and examination for experiential evidences of grace. In ecclesiology, the ordinances of God, such as, the Lord’s Supper. In eschatology, death and judgment, and heaven and hell.

How does meditation benefit us? Here are a few of the benefits the Puritans suggest: Meditation helps us focus on the Triune God, to love and to enjoy Him in all His persons (1 John 4:8)—intellectually, spiritually, aesthetically. It helps increase knowledge of sacred truth (Prov 4:2). It is the “nurse of wisdom,” for it promotes the fear of God, which is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:8). It enlarges our faith by helping us to trust the God of promises in all our spiritual troubles and the God of providence in all our outward troubles (Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation*). It augments one’s affections. Watson called meditation “the bellows of the affections” (*The Sermons of Thomas Watson*).

Meditation fosters repentance and reformation of life (Ps 119:59; Ezek 36:31). It is a great friend to memory and helps transfuse Scripture through the texture of the soul. It serves as a great aid to prayer (Ps 5:1) and helps us to hear and read the Word with real benefit (*The Whole Works of the Rev. W. Bates*).

Meditation stresses the heinousness

of sin. It helps prevent vain and sinful thoughts (Jer 4:14) and weans us from this present evil age. It provides inner resources on which to draw (Ps 77:10-12), including direction for daily life (Prov 6:21-22). It helps us persevere in faith (*The Works of the Rev. William Bridge*). It is a mighty weapon to ward off Satan and temptation (Ps 119:11, 15).

Meditation helps us benefit others with our spiritual fellowship and counsel (Ps 66:16). It promotes gratitude for all the blessings showered upon us by God through His Son. It glorifies God (Ps 49:3) (*The Whole Works of the Rev. Oliver Heywood*).

If they could offer a concluding word, The Puritans would say to us, “If you continue to neglect meditation, it will dampen or destroy your love for God. It will make it unpleasant to think about God. It will leave you open to sin so that you view sin as a pleasure. It will leave you vulnerable and fragile before trials and temptations of every kind. In short, it will lead to a falling away from God” (Edmond Smith, *A Tree by a Stream: Unlock the Secrets of Active Meditation* [Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1995], 36).

Thomas Watson exhorted, “If you have formerly neglected it, bewail your neglect, and now begin to make conscience of it: lock up yourselves with God (at least once a day) by holy meditation. Ascend this hill, and when you are gotten to the top of it, you shall see a fair prospect, Christ and heaven before you. Let me put you in mind of that saying of Bernard, ‘O saint, knowest thou not that thy husband Christ is bashful, and will not be familiar in company, retire thyself by meditation into the closet, or the field, and there thou shalt have Christ’s embraces’” (*The Sermons of Thomas Watson*).

SBJT: Why do we need Jesus as our exemplar in spirituality? Can you offer some examples of how Jesus' spirituality can serve as a model for us?

Pierre Constant: Let me first define spirituality. There are some people (e.g., André Comte-Sponville in the forthcoming translation of his French book about the spirit of atheism) who believe in the existence of spirituality without making any reference to God. Actually, such forms of spirituality often borrow the values of a fundamentally Judeo-Christian ethical system. However, spirituality as we understand it here is the living out of our relationship with God through Christ. Christian spirituality, therefore, is responding to God's revelation in Christ. It is concerned with prayer, rightly interpreting Scripture, discerning the will of God and obeying it, loving and encouraging one another, and forgiving our brother or sister in Christ, to name but a few elements.

So, when it comes to spirituality, all of us need good models. We often learn more through the example of godly people than by lectures. Not that listening or reading about spirituality is of no avail, but to witness spirituality modeled by mature saints speaks volumes when it comes to living out the reality of our relationship with God.

The entire New Testament, especially the Gospels, points us to Jesus as our model of spirituality. We are here concerned not so much with spiritual disciplines, but rather with the broader contours of what it means to relate rightly to God.

The first that comes to mind is prayer. The Gospels, mostly Luke, depict Jesus praying in various contexts, such as when he is baptized, or spending all night in prayer before choosing the Twelve. Mark shows Jesus praying early in the morning,

away from the noise and distractions of unceasing daily business. Luke specifies Jesus was praying when the appearance of his face changed. Jesus prayed at Gethsemane, and even on the cross.

On another occasion, after feeding the five thousand, Jesus sends his disciples away from the crowd, dismisses the crowd whose messianic expectations suddenly grew after being physically nourished, and ascends on a mountain in order to pray. On a different occasion, Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray as he finished praying.

When all is said and done about prayer, the main reason we pray is because Jesus himself prayed. His prayer, "Yet not my will, but yours be done," was not only essential in fulfilling the Father's plan of salvation and the ushering in of the New Covenant, but it also serves as the model for any prayer we are to present before the heavenly throne. While Jesus' perfect obedience to the Father in his death and resurrection is the source of our salvation and the basis of our acceptance before God (Heb 5:7), his reliance on the Father serves as the model for our own reliance upon Him.

It is also worth noting that in all their references to prayer, the Gospel writers do not focus on the time of the day, or on those bodily postures most conducive for prayer, but rather they simply show Jesus as the man of prayer.

Many others examples of Jesus' spirituality could be cited. Three must suffice. First, briefly look at corporate worship in the life of Jesus. The Gospels do not give us many details here, but a few things are worth considering. It is again Luke (4:16) who specifies that it was Jesus' custom to go to the synagogue. Moreover, a significant number of miracles occur in various

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synagogues throughout Galilee, as people gathered on the Sabbath day. Granted, the Evangelists' main point is not "Go to church because Jesus attended the synagogue services;" nevertheless, as we find specific exhortations in the epistles and in the life of the Early Church in the Acts of the Apostles as disciples meet together for worship and mutual encouragement, we see in the life of our Savior this pattern of regularly meeting with the people of God.

Second, an important part of our relationship with God concerns our relationship with His children. John writes that we cannot say we love God if we do not love our brother or sister in Christ (1 John 4:20). Loving one another is made possible, thanks to Christ's love for us, but it is also to be lived out in imitation of Christ's spirit of servanthood and humility. Jesus taught his disciples that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, providing his disciples a living example about true greatness in the kingdom of God. Actually, we are to love one another just as He loved us; and we are to forgive one another as God forgave our own sins in Christ. Not only did Jesus teach about these attitudes as found in Matthew 18, but also Paul reminds the Philippians about the necessity of imitating Jesus' attitude in relating to one another (Phil 2:4-5): Christ's humbling himself, by both becoming a man and by being obedient unto the death of the cross, vividly portrays an essential ingredient in the outworking of our own fellowship with God and His children.

A final example deals with Jesus' reaction to suffering. True spirituality is made manifest when one is faced with opposition, hardship, and persecution, outside the safe boundaries of quiet meditation

and private prayer. How can Jesus serve as an exemplar here? If all those who live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted (2 Tim 3:12), then all are called to follow the example of Jesus. To God's elect undergoing persecution, Peter writes that Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example so that we should follow in his steps (1 Pet 2:21).

Further examination of Jesus' life certainly provides many more examples of spirituality: his dependence upon the Father, his love towards his disciples, his compassion shown towards all those who came to him, his readiness to forgive sins, his individual care even when heavily solicited by crowds, his submission to the Father, and his times of fasting, resting, silence. All these were part of Jesus' living out his relationship with the Father and serve as models in our own walk with God.