

## *Spirituality: What Is It? Part I*



**John R. Lillis, Ph.D.**

*Experience:* Dean and Executive Officer  
at Bethel Seminary in San Diego, CA.

In July 1989 at the Council of Europe meeting, Mikhail Gorbachev, premier of the then- Soviet Union, stated that Europeans need to build a new world worthy of their spiritual potential. And the material foundation of life is changing drastically as are its spiritual parameters. This is a course in spiritual formation, a course designed for those that are going into Christian ministry. Yet we live in a world in which the term “spiritual” is being spoken of a great deal. There is much that is being said today in a decidedly nonbiblical way concerning the whole matter of spirituality. What do we mean by spiritual formation? What do we mean by spiritual, by spirituality?

As we begin this course, we need to come to an understanding of that. Before we come to a biblical understanding, it’s my belief that we need to both examine and understand the way that the world is using the concept of “spiritual” today. For as I’ve indicated, it’s being used to a degree that it was never used before as we’re coming out of the scientific age and the emphasis on the materialistic and materialism aspects of our society. We also need to realize that there’s not a little disagreement among Christians concerning what we mean by spirituality and spiritual formation. So in this session and the next, we’re going to be examining just what we mean by spiritual formation with particular emphasis on spiritual and spirituality. In the remaining part of this session, we’re going to focus on what I call “secular spirituality.” And then in the next session, we’ll talk about the biblical concept of spiritual.

Let’s examine secular spirituality by looking at some examples of the secular usage of this term. And I’m indebted for much of this discussion to an article in *Christianity Today* in September 24, 1990, by Steve Turner in which the article entitled “Lean, Green, and Meaningless” analyzed this growing use of secular spirituality. He quotes a European environmentalist in that article who says, “I am not religious in a conventional way. But there is a strong

spiritual dimension to my life.” Now this particular individual had rejected Christianity as a teenager. Through the interview they expressed a profound liking for other human beings and species. They expressed awe for the environment. As they described that liking and that awe, the profound liking for other human beings and species coupled with the awe for the environment gave that individual spiritual satisfaction in their words. When we talk about spiritual formation, is that what we’re talking about? Is that the characteristic that is to be developed?

Let’s go on. We hear a lot about spiritual and spirituality and the spiritual nature of the quest in the contemporary “green politics” as well as the new physics. *Spirituality* becomes a key word. Capra, in his work *The Turning Point*, describes his environmental vision as an “ecological and feminist perspective which is spiritual in its ultimate nature and will lead to profound changes in our social and political structures.” A perspective which is spiritual, now is this something that can be developed? Is this what we’re talking about? Is Capra talking about the same things that we’re talking about when we talk about spiritual formation from a Christian perspective, from a perspective of ministry? Britain’s Green Party, in one of its publications, said that “we need to recognize the spiritual dimensions of our lives and give equal value to spiritual needs as to physical needs.” Well, initially this sounds good. Again, has the world come around to our way of thinking? Are they concerned with the things that we’re concerned about when they talk about the spiritual dimension of human life and the spiritual needs that people have? Are they talking about the same things? Naisbitt, in the book *Megatrends 2000*, predicts a religious revival at the end of the century, which will enable us to be “reaffirming the spiritual in what has become a more balanced quest to better our lives and those of our neighbors.” Again, is he talking about the same thing? Is he talking about the biblical perspective of spirituality?

There is much being said today in what we call the “new physics” about the spiritual dimensions and the spiritual dynamics involved in science, physics. My own background is in physics. I was a theoretical physicist, in fact, studying in graduate school, when I became a Christian. And I know that in the 60s and 70s, there was a great deal of talk about looking to Eastern world and life views and Eastern mysticism as being more consistent with reality. As we were discovering it and looking more at the spiritual aspects of those descriptions and those worldviews, basically coming about because of the dualistic nature of the new physics in which

we look at matter and we say that sometimes matter behaves as a particle and other times it behaves as a wave. We look at light and say sometimes it behaves as a wave and other times as a particle. The physicists recognize that the Eastern world and life view, the Eastern religions themselves are dualistic. And therefore there was the tie-in there, spirituality and the spiritual aspects of physics. There are a couple of books that have been written in the last two decades, *The Eye of Shiva* and *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, which compare the findings of the new physics with the Eastern mysticism and the spiritual aspects of those religions. Again, are we talking about the same thing?

And then, of course, an example that has really risen in the late 80s and the 90s has to do with the New Age and the wide diversity of New Age applications and usages. There was an article in *USA Today* in June 1991 speaking of an individual who was a New Age prophet. The article begins by referring to one of the sessions with this individual. And it quotes,

“My happiness and function are one. My happiness and function are one. My happiness and function are one,” a man’s voice is repeating slowly, soothingly. A silence settles over the assembled gathering for 15 minutes of meditation. This individual is a 38-year-old former singer, bookseller, and office worker from Houston, now the psycho-spiritual guru of the moment. And she has just given a lecture. The rented hall is packed, as they always are these days, with people who have paid seven dollars to hear her. Spiritual psychotherapy is what she’s preaching. But she is not a woman of the cloth. “I feel,” she says, “that I facilitate a non-denominational spiritual fellowship.” She’s a teacher, she says, discoursing on the book *A Course in Miracles*, the centerpiece of the hot, self-help program. Or should it be called a religion, consuming the curious and the converted, the famous and not-so-famous?

A spiritual psychotherapist, is she dealing with that aspect that we are dealing with when we talk about spiritual formation? Is she developing within her followers that which the church of Jesus Christ is to be developing in His disciples? As we look at these examples from a variety of backgrounds, it seems that in secular discourse we can begin by saying that spiritual at least refers to anything that cannot either be tested in a laboratory or bolted to the floor. Rock musicians playing whimsical music are often considered spiritual. Anyone who is involved in the occult

is spiritual. And, of course, as we've just pointed out, anyone involved in a New Age application is automatically spiritual.

Well, these are but a few examples to illustrate the growing interest and concern in our own society for that which is spiritual. We need to realize, as we engage in our ministries in a variety of settings, that the people that we minister to, those who have come into the faith, those who have become Christians, are coming out of this environment. And they bring with them these ideas and these concepts, these definitions and meanings of spiritual. And so when we talk about spirituality, spiritual formation, spiritual growth, spiritual maturity, they already have preconceived notions and biases as to what that means that needs to be dealt with.

Well, let's dig a little bit deeper and see if we can ascertain some sense of meaning here. What do we mean or what does the secular world mean when it uses the word *spiritual* in the senses that we have been referring to? I think, first of all, we recognize that they are saying there is more to life than the material. There is more to life than the physical. Reality includes far more than we can describe through empirical means alone. And they're saying we need to give attention to the unquantifiable aspects of reality as well. Well, at first, we tend to get excited about that. Maybe the world is coming around. Maybe they're coming around to where we are and becoming concerned with the things that we think they ought to be concerned with. We need to be careful, however, about getting excited at this point. I think it's easy to be deceived; for this kind of talk, this kind of usage of a term that is very important in Christian theology can often be more dangerous than blatant humanism, because it does have a ring of truth to it and it does have some aspects of truth to it.

Let me read you a definition of spirituality or spiritual that was provided by Porritt who was the director of the Friends of the Earth. And again this is coming from Turner's article in *Christianity Today*. "Porritt describes or defines spirituality as that aspect of human nature that allows people to transcend the limitations of their material world and to seek meaning in that which cannot be defined materialistically or scientifically." Now this is very characteristic. I chose this definition because it is characteristic of the usage of spirituality that we see in secular circles and secular literature, and there are some things that we should note about that definition. Porritt says that it is "that aspect of human nature." Notice that it is seen as a common aspect of human nature. It's

a part of what it means to be human, and it's not seen as some outside invading force. To be human is to have spirituality. To be human is to automatically have this aspect of our being which can be self-developed. Notice also that spirituality, like sexuality, is something woven into the very fabric of our being. We can foster it or neglect it at our own discretion. As I've said, it's part of what it means to be human. It's part of what it means to be a person, to be an individual naturally.

This brings us to a key item. That is the human problem in light of this definition, in light of this concept of spirituality, the human problem is not spiritual death but spiritual sloth. Now that's a critical point to see here, and it's a thread that is common that runs through all of the secular usage whether we're talking about New Age, green politics, the new physics, whatever. In the world's view of spirituality, spiritual formation, spiritual development, the basic problem is not spiritual death but spiritual sloth. All that we need to do is to arouse the latent force within us. And, of course, we've seen that manifest in films in recent history: *Star Wars* and that whole sequence, "the force be with you," and all of the spirituality that is developed there.

That is all very indicative of where the world is right now, of the contemporary common worldview concerning spirituality, and that which is spiritual. It is something to be developed within us. And there are a variety of means to develop that force. Some techniques would push deep-breathing, or perhaps you can arouse it through chanting, or maybe even receiving a bolt of psychic energy from a crystal. One popular theory in recent years is that the spiritual nature of man is located totally in the right side of our brain, so one becomes spiritual and one is spiritually formed and spiritually developed by developing the skills and the tools of the right side of the brain.

Well, as we look at this, as we have considered some examples of secular usage of spirituality and as we've looked at at least a typical example or definition of spirituality from this perspective, we need to make some observations regarding this secular usage. We need to realize, first of all, that we might need to revise our vocabulary as we deal with those who are outside of the community of faith as we share the gospel of Jesus Christ with those who have not accepted the truth of that gospel, or as we disciple those who are new members of the kingdom. As we use terminology like spiritual formation and spirituality, even the word *spiritual*, spiritual maturity, we need to realize that that might conjure up

one thing for us but something decidedly different for our hearers. As we talk about the indwelling Spirit, our minds might go back to the beginning and the images of the tongues of fire descending at Pentecost to the early church. Our hearers might be thinking, when we say “the indwelling Spirit,” they might be thinking of the funny feeling one gets for the price of an hour’s soak in an isolation tank.

In our city recently, there was a newspaper article about a new center in which for \$20 one could go and rent an hour’s worth of time in an isolation tank, a tank full of saltwater very dense so that you could float and have your eyes and ears either plugged off or have some type of visual and auditory input. And the whole experience was described as a spiritual experience, a chance and an opportunity to develop the inner being and to develop spiritually. We need to realize that the people coming into our churches, into our ministries, are going to be thinking in that way. We also need to realize, and we’ll see this in a more detailed sense in a little bit, that the Bible uses the term “spiritual” in a very specific, limited, and restricted sense especially when referring to that which is to be developed in an individual, when referring to that which we would describe with the phrase “spiritual formation.” It seems, as we’re going to see, it never refers to an innate aspect of human nature that can be self-developed by anyone in a variety of ways as the secular usage would have us to believe. In Christianity, there seems to be a very specific, limited sense of the word. Christianity does not view itself as one means of spirituality. That’s important. It’s important to realize that. It’s important to see that because even in some of the Christian literature, it’s sometimes implied. It’s sometimes implied that that which we’re dealing with is an innate, natural aspect of humanity that can be self-developed.

A second factor that we need to realize is that spirituality, from a biblical sense, is not a case of fanning that little spiritual spark in the human soul to flame, as those that engage in the secular practices of spirituality New Age for example, would have us to believe. Rather, as we’re going to see in Scripture, spirituality involves an invasion, an invasion from without, an invasion into a dark and doomed soul with the light from above. Christian spirituality does not originate in the right side of the brain either. Rather it involves the transference of God’s personality into the human life. Christian spirituality, the biblical concept, is not discerned through subjective interpretation or funny feelings or other types of experiences. Rather we discern Christian spirituality through objective observation of things like love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As Steve Turner said in his *Christianity Today* article, and I quote, “The evidence that Saint Paul has passed from spiritual death to spiritual life was not that he heard a voice, saw a light, and temporarily lost his sight, but that love replaced hatred, that patience replaced his testiness, and that meekness replaced his pride.” As we talk about spiritual formation, we need to keep all of this in mind. We need to be aware of what we do mean and what we do not mean. The biblical concept of spiritual does not refer to a natural aspect of innate human nature that can be self-developed by anyone. And Christianity, the way of Jesus Christ, is just one of those ways. That is not the biblical concept, as we’re going to see. As we shall see, we are dealing with something, which from the very beginning, refers to a divine intervention into the human experience. We’re dealing with that which we call grace.

To understand what the Bible has to say about this, we now want to turn to both the Old and the New Testament and, in the remainder of this session and then the next session consider what the Bible has to say about spiritual. Consider the biblical definition of *spiritual*. Now realize that we are developing a biblical response to the secular concept. The secular concept that spirituality, the spirit, spiritual all involve something that is innately human and that anyone can develop. And it can be developed through a variety of means, with Christianity being just one aspect. So we will not be developing a full, biblical theology of the concept of spirit, by any means. But we want to answer that which we’ve seen in secular spirituality, that we might focus our own attention in the proper direction, and that we might be able to deal with those aspects of secular spirituality as we’re exposed to them in our ministry situations. Again, we’re not going to deal with the totality of the concept found throughout the Scripture dealing with the Holy Spirit as well. Rather, we want to focus on the anthropological usage of the terminology and, in particular, try to determine a biblical sense of that which is to be developed when we talk about spiritual development, spiritual maturity, spiritual formation. From a Christian context, from a Christian perspective, what is that which is being developed? What is that which is being formed when we talk about spiritual formation?

Let’s begin by looking at the Old Testament, and we’ll focus on the word, *ruach*, the Hebrew word which is often translated “spirit” in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, the primary intent of this word *ruach* with respect to the human spirit, deals with the life principle. Now we’re going to be looking at some Bible

passages. So if you don't have your Bible with you right now as you're listening to the tape, this would be a good time to turn the tape off and make sure that you do have your Bible with you as we look at these texts together.

First of all, let's turn to Genesis 7:22. We'll go up to verse 21 just to get the immediate context. This is, of course, talking about the flood. It says, "And all flesh that moved on the earth died among the fowl and cattle and beasts and every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth and all mankind. All in whose nostrils was the breath of life of all that was in the dry land died." The New American Standard here in Genesis 7 translates that "all in whose nostrils was the spirit of the breath of life." But literally it's the breath of life, the *ruach* of life. This illustrates a primary intent of the word in the Old Testament with respect to the human spirit, and that is the life principle. The entry of *ruach* gives life. Its removal means death. We see that illustrated again in Psalm 104. In Psalm 104:29, the psalmist says, "You hide Your face and they are troubled. You gather their breath and they expire and return to their dust. You gather their *ruach*." ("You gather their spirit," as is translated in some English translations). Here again, the idea of that as it refers to life, an innate characteristic of life is life principle. And then in Ezekiel 37:5-6, we read, "Thus saith the Lord Jehovah to these bones, 'Behold I will make *ruach* enter into you and you shall live. And I will put sinews on you and will bring flesh on you and spread skin over you and put *ruach* in you and you shall live and you shall know that I am Jehovah.'" Again the entry of the *ruach* gives life. Its removal means death.

Now from just these three passages, and they are, of course, representative passages, we see some things that we need to know. First of all this *ruach*, spirit, the breath, finds its source in God. This is not something to be developed secondly. It just is a fact of existence. In addition, *ruach* can also refer to that part of an individual which is the seat of the emotions, the intellect, and the will. These passages didn't illustrate that. They are Old Testament passages. We'll come back to that in more detail as we look at the New Testament passages that illustrate a similar usage. And here they are referring to an immaterial aspect of our being but not necessarily a supernatural part of our being. So when we see the word *spirit* used in the Old Testament to refer to some intrinsic, innate aspect of humanity, of something that is a part of the inherent human nature, it is used to refer primarily to the life principle or, in other parts, to the seat of the emotions, the intellect, and will. But there are no supernatural overtones here.

And we see it used to describe something that is an innate part of human existence, not something which is to be developed, not something which can be formed, if you would, through some type of self-help or exercise or some type of discipline.

Now there are also occurrences in the New Testament of the word *pneuma*, which are similar to these Old Testament uses as well, in which we see the New Testament writers picking up on the Old Testament usage; for example the concept of life spirit, that which gives life to the body. In Matthew 27 we see just such an example. Matthew 27:50—in the crucifixion as Jesus is dying—says, “And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up His Spirit.” He died. Primarily what Matthew is saying here is that Jesus died. This is a Hebraic term of expression that is expressing that truth, that fact. Now I think we do need to ask ourselves why the culture in both the Old and the New Testament expressed it that way. And again I think it goes back to the fact that life finds its ultimate source in God. But here we see the word *pneuma*, the word *spirit*, used in a way consistent with the way *ruach* is used in the Old Testament to refer to giving up life, the life principle. Similar usage is in Luke 8:55, “And her spirit returned, and she rose immediately; and He gave orders for something to be given her to eat.” This, of course, is the healing of Jairus’s daughter. She had died. And when Jesus healed her, Luke expresses the fact that she had come back to life by saying her spirit returned and she arose immediately. So here the word *pneuma* is used with this particular nuance to describe, again, life principle in a manner consistent with the Old Testament usage.

Luke 23:46 also uses the word in a similar manner. “And Jesus crying out with a loud voice said, ‘Father, into Thy hands I commit My Spirit.’ And having said this, He breathed His last.” Again the primary intent of the passage is to express the fact that Jesus has died. In addition to these Old Testament types of usages in the New Testament, we also see the word *pneuma* used to refer to that part of the human personality dealing with the insight, the feeling, and the will; the seat of the emotions and the intellect and the will, if you would. For example in Mark 2:8, “And immediately Jesus, aware in [His *pneuma*] His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, ‘Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts?’” Now again, here *spirit* is used to refer to the inner part of His personality, that dealing with His mind, His insight, His mental thought processes as He is thinking about what they are saying and aware within. Regardless here, and I don’t want to discuss it at this point, it’s not really germane

to this discussion as to how He was aware in His spirit. But the usage of *pneuma* here is to refer to His intellect. He's aware within His intellect what they were reasoning and asked them about it.

In Luke 1, in the *Magnificat*, we have an example of this (verses 46 and 47), "And Mary said, 'My soul exalts the Lord [and in verse 47] and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.'" In verse 46, we have *psuche*, in verse 47 *pneuma*. Howard Marshall, in his commentary on Luke, points out the frequent use of these two words in parallel of *pneuma* and *psuche*. And again referring to the inner part of her being, not necessarily a supernatural aspect at all but that part of her personality dealing with the insight, feeling, and will as she was reflecting within and exalting and praising God from within. Also we see this in other portions of Scripture. And what this illustrates for us with respect to *pneuma* is a principle that we need to be aware of in our exegesis and that is that this word has a semantic domain. Part of the problem in our exegesis with words like *spirit* and other words that have a lot of theological import for us is that we take a given theological meaning and we want to impose that meaning every time we see the word used. We need to realize that this word and other words have semantic domains. That is, they have a host of meanings and they can be used in different ways and different contexts. For example, if I were to tell you that yesterday I had a ball, well there are several things that that could mean. I might have had a round, spherical object in my possession or I might have had a good time or I might have gone to a banquet of some type. The word *ball* has a large domain of meanings that we need to be aware of. And so it is with *spirit*, and so we need to be careful about imposing one set meaning to every passage that we see, every example or usage of the word.

The point we want to make here, however, as we are looking at this Old Testament type of usage, is that when we do see *spirit* referring to something which is innate, which is active within all of humanity, that we're referring to, first of all, biblically, life principle. The Bible does use the word *spirit*—both the Old Testament *ruach* as well as the New Testament *pneuma*—to refer to the life principle, that which gives life, that which we all have. It's a fact of existence, not something which we can develop. And that secondly, the word is used to describe the common characteristic of humanity that includes that aspect of our being which is the seat of the emotions, the intellect, and the will. An immaterial part of our being, yes, but not necessarily a supernatural part of our being and not a part which is to be developed in the sense that we would talk about in spiritual formation or spiritual development.

As we bring this session to a close, let's review the concepts that we've discussed during these past few moments together. We've been examining, initially, the concept of secular spirituality. We need to realize that we live in a world today which views itself as a spiritual world. We live in a culture which sees itself as spiritual. We live in communities and with people that are outside of the faith community that say a great deal about spiritual, spirituality, spiritual development, and spiritual maturity. Yet we need to understand that as they talk about that aspect of human nature which is innate, that they are talking about something that is not consistent with the biblical idea. For the person in the world, for the person who holds the secular view of spirituality, the basic human problem is spiritual sloth, not spiritual death, that all one has to do to become more spiritual, to be spiritually formed and spiritually developed is to fan the flame to spark that is within, to develop the internal and intrinsic abilities and potentials that one has. And of course that can be done through a variety of self-help programs and self-help means and techniques and methods.

We need to realize, as we've already said, that when the Bible talks about that which is intrinsic, that which is innate to human nature and labels it with the word *spirit*—whether it's the Old Testament *ruach* or the New Testament *pneuma*—that when the Bible talks about that which we all have in the human experience, whether we are Christians or not Christians, that it is talking first of all about the life principle. And secondly it does use the word *spirit* to refer to the seat of the intellect, the emotion, or the will and that indeed those meanings are used in the Bible in both the Old and the New Testament to describe innate characteristics, innate aspects of all humanity, that which we all have. However, they're described as simple facts of existence. They're not something you can do anything about. You have them. It is not that which is to be developed, that which is to be formed, that which is to be a part of a process that we might call spiritual formation.

So the question arises then: What do we mean by spiritual formation? What is it that we are talking about forming? What is it that is a part of our being? If it is indeed a part of our being, is that what the Bible is talking about? Is that what we mean when we talk about spiritual formation? In our next session, we'll focus then on those concepts: That which the New Testament, in particular, describes as spiritual, in terms of that which is to

---

be spiritually formed when we talk about spiritual formation that which we're referring to.