

Editorial: “Spirituality”—*Caveat Emptor*

Stephen J. Wellum

Stephen J. Wellum is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Wellum received his Ph.D. degree in theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and has also taught theology at the Associated Canadian Theological Schools and Northwest Baptist Theological College and Seminary in Canada. He has contributed to several publications and a collection of essays on theology and worldview issues.

Most astute observers of our contemporary culture will acknowledge that “spirituality” is in. One cannot watch the TV, read the newspaper, listen to the radio, or peruse the blogosphere without being confronted with the topic of “spirituality.” However what passes today for “spirituality” needs to be stamped with the old Latin phrase, *caveat emptor*—“Let the buyer beware.” No doubt, it must be acknowledged that some of the reasons for the rise of spirituality in our day are beneficial. For example, in contrast to a crass philosophical materialism of a previous era and a constant preoccupation with the horizontal, the focus of many on spiritual matters is welcome. However, most of today’s discussion regarding “spirituality” is so eclectic and syncretistic that it is imperative that Christians do not confuse contemporary discussions and forms of it with true biblical spirituality. As the old adage goes, “Ideas have consequences,” and the ideas surrounding current thought on spirituality, if not grounded in a Christian worldview centered in the gospel, will, in the end, lead to spiritual disaster.

In fact, many people in recent days have made this precise point and probably none better than theologian and cultural critic, David Wells. In his very helpful analysis of the contemporary landscape, especially in his books, *Losing our Virtue* (Eerdmans, 1998) and *Above All Earthly Pow’rs* (Eerdmans, 2005), Wells has argued that, due to a whole host of factors such as modernization, secularization, and even immigration patterns, western

society has seen a rise in “spirituality,” but spirituality which too often has been uncoupled from the centrality of God in his blazing holiness, Christ and his glorious cross, and the entire truth of God’s Word. In this “new spirituality” the focus, unfortunately, is not upon the glory of the triune God, but too often upon the human self; not upon the glory of Christ and the cross, but that which is private, internal, and psychologically driven. In the end, Wells argues, much of today’s spirituality is syncretistic, pluralistic, and downright pagan. This is one of the reasons why an incredible number of Americans see themselves as “spiritual” but without any reference to God and especially the God of the Bible. Or, why many view spirituality through a pluralistic lens so that forty-four percent of Americans think that the Bible, the Koran, and the Book of Mormon are simply different expressions of the same spiritual truths (*Above All Earthly Pow’rs*, 126). Regrettably, even discussion of spirituality in the evangelical world has seen a shift away from how the Scriptures and our forefathers have viewed it. As Christians, if we are not careful, we may end up adopting more of a cultural understanding of spirituality than a biblical one.

This is not a new problem. Interestingly, Francis Schaeffer many years ago wrote his very helpful book, *True Spirituality*, to address this very same issue. In many ways, Schaeffer’s work was prophetic in its day. Back in the 1950-60s, he saw a growing interest in what we now know as “spirituality” but he was

very concerned to distinguish a *true* and *biblical* spirituality from its contemporary expression. He acknowledged that this new situation was, no doubt, an opportunity for Christians to present the gospel in all of its depth and breadth, but he was also concerned that Christians evaluate this growing trend towards spirituality through the lens of Scripture. In many ways, *caveat emptor* was his cry: Be careful not to buy into a form of spirituality that may be nothing more than a distortion of the gospel.

One of the reasons why this edition of *SBJT* is devoted to the theme of biblical spirituality is for this very reason: to help Christians think through some of the issues surrounding the current discussion through the lens and grid of Scripture. If we are going to be transformed by the renewing of our minds and not be conformed to this world (Rom 12:1-2); if we are going to speak clearly and powerfully to our generation, we need to think afresh about what Scripture says about the topic of spirituality, as well as learn from those in the faith who have gone before us. With that in mind, our various contributors, both in the articles and Forum selections, will explore a wide-range of material to help us achieve this goal.

Robert Plummer begins our discussion by biblically evaluating the current focus on the very popular and widely practiced spiritual discipline of “silence and solitude.” After helpfully examining the biblical basis for this practice, Plummer provides some wise reflections on its role in the Christian life. Graeme Goldsworthy then turns our attention to some very important reflections on a biblical theology of prayer, that which is at the heart of true, biblical spirituality. Goldsworthy, after grounding his dis-

cussion of prayer in the doctrine of God, then turns our attention to how we should think of prayer across redemptive-history centered in Jesus Christ. Peter Adam, in contrast to much of contemporary discussions of spirituality, draws our attention to the foundation of biblical spirituality, namely, God’s Word. True spirituality, Adam contends, is Word-centered, and his reflections on this subject are especially pertinent for today, given the neglect of this topic in current discussion. Shawn Wright and Michael Haykin respectively provide some very important historical reflections on the subject of spirituality. It is important to recognize that we are not the first Christians to reflect on this subject; we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. Wright’s focus is on the sixteenth century theological giant, Theodore Beza, while Haykin reflects on the piety of Baptists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. What both of these articles achieve is the reminder that we neglect the resources of our forefathers in the faith to our peril. Finally, Phil Johnson reminds us that the New Age movement, which has spawned much of the contemporary discussion of spirituality, is still alive and well today, something that the church must not ignore.

It is my prayer that all of our contributors will make us ever vigilant, not only to understand the truth of the gospel, but also to live it out faithfully in our daily lives. May we ever learn afresh “to think God’s thoughts after him,” for the glory of our great God and Savior and for the good of the church.