Becoming What We Are to Be:
A Spirituality of Becoming

(1 of 3)

Dr. Justo L. González

Southern New Jersey United Methodist Conference
New Jersey
1991

Becoming What We Are to Be: A Spirituality of Becoming

(1 of 3)

In recent times, there has been a revival of interest in spirituality. Indeed, the word itself, "spirituality," which was seldom heard in Protestant circles two or three decades ago, has now become a major topic of discussion as seminaries plan their curriculum and as boards of the ministry seek to evaluate candidates and to provide them with guidance.

It is not only in theological and "professional" circles that the word has gained new currency. In the United Methodist Church, as in every other denomination, there are dozens of programs to promote spirituality. And, even if one goes to a bookstore in a mall, one will find a number of books on spirituality. True, much of this confuses Christian spirituality with the occult, with zen, and with astrology. But the interest in spirituality is nevertheless there.

I must confess that for a number of years when I heard the word "spirituality" used in United Methodist circles, I was not positively impressed. Out of my own field of study, I knew that the word has been used for quite some time in a positive sense in the Roman Catholic tradition. But when I had seen it used among Protestants it was as a means of escape. One was "spiritual" if one was not overly concerned with the things of this world. If there was controversy in the church, the solution some suggested was not to see what the controversy was all about and how it related to the Gospel but to become more spiritual. A "spiritual revival" was a fairly short-lived periodic affair in which a preacher was brought in to whoop things up. In the South,

some denominations developed the doctrine of "the spirituality of the church" as a means to avoid engagement on the pressing issues and the glaring injustices of the surrounding society.

In short, one reason for the current revival of spirituality may be a desire to flee, to escape to ethereal domains where we do not have to deal with the anxieties and ambiguities of present everyday life. That is a danger to which we must always remain alert.

But then, as the conversation about "spirituality" became more and more widespread, I began to detect a contrary, and much more positive, dimension. To increasing numbers in the church, the quest for spirituality is not an attempt to flee but is rather a quest for a power to engage the harsh realities of our world and to remain in faithful engagement wherever that may take us.

As people came out bruised and wounded from the battles of the sixties and seventies, realizing that there were still even greater battles ahead, the question began to be asked, where is the power that can sustain us for the long haul? Anger can be a tremendous force, and properly channeled can be quite productive. But anger by itself has a corrosive element that eventually eats away at those who are moved only by it. Guilt has a much shorter lifespan and soon becomes either dull or unbearable. Love has a much greater force and has led many to almost incredible acts of self-sacrifice. But human love by itself has difficulty enduring when it is unrequited, when the object of love does not seem to respond in ways that encourage greater love.

So, people are asking the question, where is the power that can sustain our anger, channel it in productive directions, and not let us be destroyed and paralyzed by its corrosive effect? Where is the power for action that remains once guilt has been forgotten or forgiven? Where is the power that can unleash our love, guide it into action, and sustain it even when there seems to be no positive result?

And the answer many have found is . . . spirituality. In this sense, spirituality is not an attempt to flee but the power to engage. It is in this sense that the Roman Catholic tradition has used the term for generations, when speaking, for instance, of a Franciscan spirituality, an Ignatian spirituality, or a Benedictine spirituality.

In this sense, spirituality usually involves two dimensions. It is first of all a particular vision of reality. It is an all-encompassing worldview, one which redefines the world, the neighbor, and oneself in ways that are quite different from what “the eyes of the flesh see.” Franciscan spirituality is a case in point. Living in a merchant family, and in a society where money was becoming increasingly important, one day Francis decided that he would marry "Lady Poverty. From his point of view, his father and his friends were all married to the pursuit of wealth. To them wealth was beautiful, and most to be desired. To him, there was no other lady as fair as Lady Poverty. And then that vision bloomed in other directions. His father disowned him, and he declared that now he could truly call God his Father. From that point, from taking his newfound

relationship with God quite seriously and realizing that the entire world was the creation of the same God, he moved on quite easily to calling the sun his brother and death his sister. Everything looked different. Actually, scholars who have studied the life and the spirituality of St. Francis have spoken of the “upside-downness” of his view of the world.

But then there is another dimension to spirituality. Spirituality is also a discipline that strengthens the newfound vision of reality and transforms one so as to fit in that new reality. When Francis marries Lady Poverty that is both a new vision of reality and a new order of life. It is by taking that step, and practicing the discipline required by it, that his vision was enhanced and his vocation was enlarged. Poverty is not only a vision; it is also a discipline.

In short, there are two dimensions to every spirituality: its vision and its practice. The two go together. One grows out of the other, and the other grows out of the one. The practice depends on the vision. But also, the vision is focused by the practice.

In Christian tradition, there have been three fundamental visions that have molded Christian faith and practice. In the field of theology, these three visions yield three different types of theology. In the field of spirituality, likewise.

The first of these is a vision which sees everything in terms of law. Its typical verbal forms are "should,” “ought,” and “must.” The driving force of this spirituality is obedience to fixed laws.

The outline is quite simple, although it could be filled with countless examples and nuances. The basic vision is that God made the world as God intended it to be, that somehow, we have fallen from that primal perfection, and that the Christian life consists in obeying commandments that somehow bring us back to that original perfection. Naturally, since none of us can really do that, Jesus was obedient in our place and through his death on the cross fulfilled the obedience of which we necessarily fall short. This vision leads to a practice of spirituality in which "should" and "ought" also play a central role.

There are many examples of this sort of spirituality in our Western tradition, for it has been the most typical form both in traditional Roman Catholicism and in the form of Protestantism that has been most influential among us.

From the Middle Ages come the following words of Thomas à Kempis:

> The life of a good religious person ought to be adorned with all virtues, so that inwardly they may be the same as they seem outwardly to others.
>
> Truly, there ought to be much more within than one sees without, for God sees us. And to God's reverence we are most highly bound, no matter who we are, and to walk in purity like angels in God's sight.
>
> Daily we ought to renew our purposes, and to stir ourselves up to greater fervor, as though this were the first day of our conversion, and to say: "Help me, my God, in my good resolve, and in your holy service. Grant that I may begin this day perfectly, for what I have done so far is as nothing."
>
> We shall profit spiritually according to our resolve, and in order to profit greatly much diligence is necessary.[1]

And, now from the Puritan tradition, the words of William Law:

> We cannot offer to God the service of Angels; we cannot obey Him as man in a state of perfection could; but fallen men can do their best, and this is

> the perfection that is required of us; it is only the perfection of our best endeavours, a careful practice to be as perfect as we can.
>
> But if we stop short of this, for aught we know, we stop short of the mercy of God, and leave ourselves nothing to plead from the terms of the Gospel. For God has made there no promises of mercy to the slothful and negligent. His mercy is only offered to our frail and imperfect, but best endeavors, to practice all manner of righteousness. As the law to Angels is angelical righteousness, as the law to perfect beings is strict perfection, so the law to our imperfect natures is, the best obedience that our frail nature is able to perform.[2]

John Wesley was deeply influenced by William Law, whom he later faulted for not having given him enough of a sense of the unmerited grace of God. As Wesley saw it, Law's advice was very good, as long as it was directed to people who already knew the grace of God and who were now striving after perfection.[3] His disagreement with William Law, therefore, was not on the nature of Christian spirituality, but on the need for such spirituality to be based on the experience of grace. This is very clear in a passage from one of his letters in which, while being critical of Law, still he agreed on the nature of Christian spirituality. To Miss Furly he wrote on May 18, 1757, that she might lose the sense of the love of God:

> 1. By committing sin. Or, 2. By omitting duty. Or, 3. By giving way to pride, anger, or any other inward sin. Or, 4. By not watching unto prayer; by yielding to indolence, or spiritual sloth.[4]

This is the first type of Christian spirituality; one whose goal and purpose is to obey the commandments of God. It may or may not involve salvation by works. That is not the point I am trying to make. I am simply underscoring a type of Christian spirituality whose main category is obedience to the commandment of God, or, in other terms, being as close as possible to what God intends us to be.

I said earlier that every spirituality involves both a vision and a practice. In this first type of spirituality, the vision is that of a static universe, governed by immutable laws, some would say laws of nature and moral laws. The practice of this spirituality consists in striving to obey those laws, suppressing everything in ourselves that does not lead to obedience, and strengthening our moral fiber by means of a series of exercises that often include renunciation and even self-mortification.

A second type of Christian spirituality is based on the vision of a permanent and changeless reality beyond this changing and passing world. For this vision, the basic verbal form is "is." What matters is what really *is*, beyond all shadow of doubt, and certainly beyond all shadow of passing things.

The basic outline of this perspective can also be expressed quite simply, although it, too, could be nuanced and illustrated by multiple and varying examples. According to this vision there is, beyond this world of passing things and shadowy matter, another world of changeless reality. It is to that world that we really belong, if we would but acknowledge and constantly remember it. In this world, things are then ordered hierarchically, according to the degree to which they approach spiritual reality, and the task of the believer is to ascend through the contemplation of the inner reality of things to the contemplation of the ultimate reality, God.

Typical of this approach are the following words from St. Bonaventure:

> The world of things itself is a ladder to climb toward God. Some created things are a trace of God while others are an image; some things are corporeal, others spiritual; still others, temporal or eternal; some things are within us; others, outside of ourselves. Since the First Principle, after which we strive, is purely spiritual, eternal, and beyond us, we must first follow the path which is corporeal, temporal, and outside of our self. This will put us on the path to God. We also must enter into our own mind which is the image of God, eternal, spiritual, and within us. This will permit us to enter the truth of God. We must then move beyond to the eternal, totally spiritual, and that which is above us, by raising our eyes to the First Principle. This will cause us to rejoice in the knowledge of God and reverence His majesty.[5]

In its classical form, this type of piety seldom entices us. We no longer believe in a world in which all beings are ordered according to a strict hierarchy, from the material to the spiritual. But there are other forms in which this piety is still very much alive. According to most of these other forms, there are two spheres of reality, the material and the spiritual, the historical and the eternal, the earthly and the heavenly. One is more important than the other. Indeed, the sole purpose of the lower order of being is to lead to the higher order. Only the spiritual, eternal and heavenly really "is." The rest, the material, historical, and earthly, is passing away, and its sole function is to point us to the truth that "is." The same is true of ourselves. In truth, we "are" spiritual beings. If at present we are also material, that is passing away, and our goal is to look at the material as an instrument leading us to the spiritual (or, in the more gnostic versions of this form of spirituality, the material obscures the spiritual, and our goal is to set it aside).

Obviously, it is this form of spirituality that most often becomes an avenue of escape, as I was saying at the beginning. This is what was meant by those in the South who spoke of the "spirituality" of the church: The church must be concerned only with things of a higher order,

and therefore these political and racial struggles going on around us are at best only a matter of secondary concern. This is also what is often meant by many who say that the reason the church does not grow is that it is involved in material things, and that the solution is to become more spiritual.

The vision of this spirituality, if not that hierarchical ordering of all beings as in St. Bonaventure, is at least that of a two-storied universe, with earth below and heaven above--earth material, historical, passing away, and heaven spiritual, eternal, changeless.

The first form of spirituality that I have attempted to describe is a spirituality of doing. This second form is a spirituality of being. There is, however, one common denominator between these two types of spirituality: They both are essentially static in nature. The spirituality of doing begins with fixed laws that we are to obey and then depicts us as mature, fully developed agents, capable of obeying those laws; that is why it so often verges on Pelagianism. Both the laws and our own nature are given. What we must now do is obey what has been commanded. The spirituality of being begins from the presupposition that change itself is a denial of being and thus focuses its attention on that which supposedly does not change: the divine being and our spiritual nature.

There is, however, a third vision, one that in turns leads to its own understanding of the Christian faith and of Christian spirituality. This is a vision that places history at the center of the

stage. If the first form of spirituality was based on law and the second on being, this third type takes history as its starting place and its goal. The fundamental vision here is that of the entirety of history as a cosmic drama, being guided by God, much as a shepherd leads a flock or a parent leads a child, so that history, like a flock or like a child, may reach its intended future. We are in the midst of history, at some point between creation and consummation. That is where every human being who has ever existed has always been: in the midst of history. And yet, because we take history seriously, our particular moment is both continuous with every other moment of history and different from it. Spirituality is always spirituality, always part of a tradition, always opening paths to the future, and always unique to its time and place. Within this perspective, however, history is not just a sequence of recorded and somewhat disjointed events. History, I repeat, is the cosmic drama of the entire creation as it is brought to God's intended goal.

From this perspective, the basis of Christian spirituality is that we have a hint as to what that goal is. We have that hint first of all in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the focal point of history, not only because we count years more or less from the time of his birth, but even more so because he is also the goal to which all of history is moving. And we have that hint also in the vision of the prophets, which is also the fundamental vision of the Christian faith, of a Reign of God, reign of peace, justice, love, and abundance.

There are many examples of this kind of spirituality, especially in the early church. Indeed, it is my conviction that this is essentially the spirituality of the New Testament.

If the first type of spirituality was one of doing, and the second was one of being, this third is a spirituality of becoming. The central metaphor is not that of fixed laws that we are to obey, nor of a static spiritual reality to which we belong, but that of a process whereby we are being led to become that which we are to be. As Paul says:

> We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we await for the adoption as children, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what one sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Rom. 8.22-25)

And, in I John we read:

> See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; but it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we do know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And those who thus hope in him purify themselves as he is pure. (I Jn. 3. 1-3)

As this text from John clearly shows, there is a practice of spirituality that stems from this basic vision: “Those who thus hope in him purify themselves as he is pure.” There certainly is a moral dimension to this spirituality. But this moral dimension is not based on law, as in our first type. One obeys, not simply because it is commanded, nor even in order to gain admittance into heaven, as is often the case in that first type, but because by so doing, one is authentic to what one is to be. And, as in the second type, there is here an element of hiddenness, of things not

seen. But the difference between what is seen and what is not seen is not the difference between a "here" and a "there," but rather the difference between a "now" and a "then."

The practice of this third type of spirituality can be described along two lines: anticipation and witness.

First of all, anticipation. When we stop to think about it, we realize that we live most of life by anticipation. Moral principles do guide us. But we apply those moral principles concretely on the basis of whatever our goals are at a particular time. When I come to the end of my driveway, I certainly yield to others who are already on the road; I obey the general law that they have the right of way. But the very reason why I am at the end of the driveway is that I intend to go somewhere. And whether I turn right or left will also depend on where I intend to go. Thus, although rules do provide me with guidance, it is not on the basis of rules that I decide to leave my house, nor is it on the basis of rules that I decide whether to turn right or left. I decide to leave my house because I intend to get somewhere. I decide to turn left because I anticipate getting somewhere in that general direction. And, what is true in small matters such as whether to turn left or right, is also true in larger matters such as what college to attend, whom to marry, what job to accept, etc. Anticipation is a fundamental dimension of everyday life, and it is even more so when it comes to the spiritual life, at least as this third type of spirituality sees it.

Anticipation, however, is not something we must do on our own. Indeed, according to the New Testament, that is one of the functions of the Spirit. In II Corinthians 1:22 and 5:5, Paul twice refers to the Holy Spirit as " our guarantee." And in Ephesians 1:13 - 14 Paul, or whoever wrote that epistle, says, "In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, . . . were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it." In all three cases, the word which the RSV translates as "guarantee" (*arrabōn*) really means "down payment," "first installment," earnest money. What the texts are saying is not simply that the Holy Spirit guarantees the promises but also, and even more, that the Holy Spirit is the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise. In other words, that when it comes to anticipating the reign of God, we do not have to do it on our own. It is not a matter of our own powers of imagination. It is rather that, because of the presence of the Holy Spirit, the promised future is already available to us, if not in full, at least in earnest money.

This is important, because ultimately what we mean by "spirituality" is life according to the Spirit. And, if the Spirit is the down payment of the coming order, spirituality is precisely living as those who have whose future in God is so certain (as the RSV would say, so guaranteed) that the present can be guided by it.

It is at this point that the dimension of witness comes in. In one of the most famous passages of the New Testament, the disciples are gathered with the risen Lord and ask him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel." Jesus' response we all know by heart, at least in part:

"It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

We are often told that Jesus rebukes the disciples because they were still thinking in terms of the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. That may or may not be the case. What the text actually says is that they are not to be concerned over when certain events will happen. It is not for them to know the times or seasons. But, they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, and they will be witnesses. They will not know when God's reign will come; but by the power of the Holy Spirit, they will be witnesses of the King and his kingdom.

Witnessing and anticipating go hand in hand, because what we witness to is not just the King. A king without a kingdom is not much to brag about. What we witness to is a coming order in which, as the hymn says, "Jesus shall reign where 'er the sun doth his successive journeys run." But what this means must be left for our next session.

Questions for Discussion

The questions that follow are intended to help the group reflect. There is no need to "cover" all of them. Discuss those that the group finds most relevant. Make certain that all are given the opportunity to express their views and experience.

1) Begin by going around the group, asking each person to introduce themselves very briefly, and to say which of the three types of spirituality has been the most common in their experience, and which is the most interesting to them.

The legal type?
The type that looks for eternal, fixed truth?
The third type of spirituality at work (a spirituality based on the past actions of God, and oriented towards the promised actions of God)?

As a group:

2) Reflect on the way future expectations determine how we look at the present, and what decisions we take. Then ask: What are the most vibrant goals and expectations of people in the church today? Do these lead to fuller discipleship? Do they contradict it?

3) What can we as ordained ministers do to help others gain a vision of the future that is Gospel-based?

4) If you were to ask people in your community what is the goal and dream of the UMC, what do you think they would say? How does this relate to the task of witnessing?

5) What would the members of your church say are your goals and dreams?

Notes

1. Thomas à Kempis, *Imitatio Christi*, 9.

2. William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), p. 30.

3. See John Wesley's letter to William Law, May 30, 1738.

4. John Wesley, *Works* (reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, n.d.), 12:197.

5. St. Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, 1.2, translated by L. S. Cunningham, *The Mind's Journey to God* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1979), p. 32.