

Spirituality for Men

Tony Horsfall

The early years of my work as a church leader were spent in a small mining town in West Yorkshire. In those days, as part of our evangelism, we often did 'door-to-door' work, calling on people in their homes to share with them about Jesus and the church.

It soon became apparent that men in the area did not think Christianity was for them. Usually if a man answered the door, he would listen politely to our introduction, and then say 'Wait a minute, I'll get the wife.' It was as if 'religion', and anything to do with God or church, was women's business, something that men were not interested in or confident to talk about.

This kind of response is of course reflected in the make-up of the church, not just in tough mining areas, but in most parts of the world. Generally there is an imbalance in church attendance, with more women than men. To some extent this reflects demographic trends, but usually in a more exaggerated way. Women seem to engage more easily with spiritual things and to be more interested in what the church has to offer.

Even when there are men in church they are often passive and lifeless when it comes to spirituality. They seem content to turn up and go through the motions, but often lack passion where the things of God are concerned. They can get worked up about football, animated about cars, and enthuse about DIY, yet be tongue-tied and lethargic when it comes to prayer, or Bible study, or Christian witness.

Many ladies lament the fact that their Christian husbands give no spiritual lead in either their marriage or home life. It is an accepted fact that most Christian service is actually done by ladies. They are the ones who pray, who give sacrificially, who visit their neighbours, and who talk about

their faith. Indeed, in the history of the expansion of the church, it has often been single ladies who have bravely taken the gospel to the ends of the earth, whilst the men stayed safely at home. Oswald Sanders, a great missionary statesman commented in response to this that ‘some of God’s best men are women’. Too many men have prayed ‘Here I am Lord, but send my sister’.

So how do we account for this lack of spiritual interest, and how can we encourage a greater responsiveness to God amongst men both inside and outside the church? Is it possible to reverse the trend towards the feminisation of the church?

One encouragement for us is the fact that the Bible is full of examples of men who were real men and yet enjoyed a deep intimacy with God. They did not seem to think they were denying their masculinity when they felt the need to pray, shed tears over their sin, or got carried away in worship. People like David, Abraham and Moses were warriors and leaders who could hold their own in the toughest of company, and yet who never lost sight of their ‘softer’ side. They could be tender, compassionate and sensitive. These friends of God were far from perfect, but seemed natural in the way they related to God with the whole of their lives. They were passionate about doing his will, and had a rich inner life that sustained them in the tough business of living in a real world.

Nor should we forget that Jesus himself was a real man, fully God and yet fully human. He displayed all the strengths of manhood in his life - earning a living by using his hands, ruggedly enduring forty days in the desert without food, living under the pressure of ceaseless demands from needy people, courageously facing cruel and mischievous opposition from his enemies, and at the same time leading and developing a team of twelve very diverse individuals. Those who wish to be like him need not fear they will be emasculated in the process.

One of the issues seems to be that men are more given to activity rather than reflection. They prefer ‘doing’ to ‘being’. They want to accomplish things, to make a mark, to achieve success. Often they

find their worth and value in what they do, their position in life, or the possessions they own. To some extent these are God given drives and are not to be denied, but out of balance they explain why many men remain spiritually immature. They simply do not have time to give to the nurture of their souls since they are pursuing career goals and fulfilling their ambitions to get to the top. Work comes first for many, even before family, let alone God. To spend time cultivating one's relationship with God therefore feels like wasting time. It offers no tangible outcomes and cannot be considered a priority.

Bob is a medical doctor who is something of an exception to this rule. He has chosen to work only three days a week in the practice where he works. It means a drop in income and a change in lifestyle, but fortunately he can still manage adequately. For Bob, quality time with his wife and family, and the opportunity to be more involved in Christian service, is a higher priority than climbing the ladder of success and seeking material gain.

The spiritual life can only grow as we give time to it – time to be still, to stop and listen to God, to allow his work to go deeper in our lives. Sometimes this demands a re-ordering of our priorities and this can be costly. In the Bible we read 'Be still and know that I am God' (Psalm 46:10). This requires us to slow down and make time and space in our lives both for God and those closest to us. This is a challenge for men both inside and outside the church.

Men are also more likely to approach life as 'thinkers' rather than 'feelers'. That is, they look at things rationally and logically, and try to avoid getting too emotional about situations. They live from their heads rather than from their hearts. Consequently, when they do have a relationship with God it tends to be more factually based rather than experiential. They are more comfortable with doctrine and abstract truth rather than things which affect the emotions.

Again, this is not necessarily wrong, but a full-orbed encounter with God is likely to touch the emotions. When the Holy Spirit touches our lives it is an experiential event, releasing our emotions and touching the deepest part of our selves. As it says in *The Message*, ‘we can’t round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit.’

(Romans 5:5) This can bring men into unfamiliar territory and they fear losing control, so they hold back. Inevitably this stunts their spiritual growth and robs them of the inner assurance that the Spirit wants to give, as well as the passion for service that he longs to impart. Spiritual growth requires a movement from the head to the heart, and a letting go of our natural inhibitions. This presents another challenge for cerebral men.

Dr David Benner is a clinical psychologist in America. He has shared how this challenge came to him in his mid thirties when he became aware of his own spiritual impoverishment. For most of his life his knowing of God was primarily knowing *about* him, and his faith was more intellectual assent than emotional reliance or trust. He became spiritually restless and filled with longing to know God personally and experientially. For Benner this happened over a period of time, and by reading not only the Bible, but many of the Christian classics that deal with the inner life. Slowly he began to meet with God not just in his head but in his heart.

‘I felt as if I was being reborn,’ he writes. ‘It was a spiritual birthing, comparable in spiritual impact to my conversion of two decades earlier.... I am still far from the depth of encounter with God for which I long. But I am closer than I was.’ (1)

Tied in with this is the fear of vulnerability that men have. We want to appear strong, to be competent and capable. We are afraid of weakness and detest asking for help, as if this shows up our inadequacy. We have all kinds of defence mechanisms to avoid the pain that comes with vulnerability, and carefully construct ‘walls’ around ourselves to keep others from getting too close. So, when during the World Cup in Italy in 1990, Gazza (Paul Gascoigne, the England soccer star)

burst into tears on the pitch it became an iconic moment, and the whole nation felt sorry for him. He had ‘lost it’ in a very public way, and behaved in a way that was inconsistent with our image of him as a hard-drinking, fast-living macho footballer. Most of us want to avoid such embarrassment. We prefer to cover our insecurity and mask our loneliness with a thousand disguises. Yet how can we know intimacy with God (or other people) if we remain aloof, detached, untouchable?

The spiritual journey begins with admitting our need for forgiveness, a humbling thing in itself, but continues as we grow into an ever-increasing awareness of our dependency upon God. It is this that creates intimacy with God, for the being ‘naked and unashamed’ (Genesis 2:25) is the basis for real fellowship. Since God loves us unconditionally we can dare to be vulnerable before him – to express our fears, reveal our inadequacy, and face our failures honestly and openly. Such vulnerability can be frightening, yet wonderfully liberating for it gives us the freedom to become our true selves. It brings healing and wholeness to wounded souls.

One man who had to face public humiliation was British politician Jonathan Aitken. He was convicted of perjury and sent to prison, losing everything in the process. At the same time, in his brokenness he began to search for God. Having been brought up to attend chapel at his public school, he knew the basics of Christianity, but it was only by attending an Alpha course that he finally discovered how to have a personal relationship with God. Until this point he had been a proud and self-centred man; it took a painful ‘fall from grace’ to open his eyes to his own spiritual need.

How then can men be encouraged to develop their spirituality? Men need help to become more reflective, to open up in their emotions, and to become more vulnerable. For this to happen they need to be in the right context.

Churches can put on programmes which are designed with men in mind. I don't know why it is, but somehow men can respond better when they are together. Admittedly, men in groups sometimes become competitive (the 'how big is yours' mentality quickly surfaces), and this can be a downside, but once a group has gelled it can become a safe place to talk with honesty and openness about the issues that they have in common – pressures at work, ethical dilemmas, sexual temptation and problems of lust, role expectations as husband and/or father, and so on. One group I know have successfully read various books together that tackle relevant issues and have enjoyed discussing their responses. Other groups combine outings and social activities – anything from visiting breweries to clay pigeon shooting - with their study programme. This helps 'bonding' to take place, another key aspect of male psychology. Each group will be different, and the important thing is to make the programme relevant and interesting for those particular men.

I am very fortunate to belong to a small group of men who meet about every two months for a day together. We meet because we are first and foremost 'lovers of God' and want to deepen our walk with him. What we do is loosely based on the Renovare concept introduced by Richard Foster. (2) We meet mid-morning for coffee and catch up with each other's news, then share around the theme for the day. After this we have at least an hour by ourselves before joining together for a simple lunch. In the afternoon we will share deeply our fears and concerns, our joys and our hopes, and pray very meaningfully for each other. Over the months this group has been a life-line for me personally, and I think for the others too.

Another way that men can develop spiritually is by finding a spiritual director or mentor, who can guide them individually. Over the years several godly people have had this key role in my own life, and I am privileged now to fulfil that same role towards other younger men. To have a confidant and friend who believes in us and wants to see us do well is indeed a great privilege. The mentoring relationship provides a safe place where we can open up and talk through all kinds of issues without the fear of judgment or condemnation. We can explore what we think God may be saying to us, and

begin to get in touch with some of our deeper hurts and fears. It may not be easy to find a mentor, but for anyone who desires to grow spiritually it is worth praying that God will guide you to suitable person, and persevering in the search.

Perhaps the bottom line in all this is that we need to help Christian men to be sure of their place in God. We too often assume that because people have become Christians they are well grounded in their faith, but this is often not the case. We need to take people on to understand what really happens at conversion. We must explain how fully God has dealt with the past through the death of Jesus on the cross and the reality of complete forgiveness for sin and failure; how Christ's righteousness has been transferred to us so that we can stand before him with confidence and boldness; that the Holy Spirit now lives within us and gives us power to do what is right; what it means that we have a new nature and that our identity is now in Jesus Christ. Relevant, inspiring, down-to-earth Bible teaching still has its place, too, as we seek to become the kind of men that God longs for us to be.

These are the truths that transform men (and women) into oaks of righteousness, or 'trees of goodness' as *The Message* puts it (Isaiah 61:3), and help them to stand tall and strong in the storms of life. The church is crying out for a new generation of godly men who will rise up in the power of the Spirit and do great exploits for God, who will stand like Daniel with an uncompromising faith in the midst of opposition and persecution. Men need not be weak and ineffectual or lacking in spiritual passion. They can be led into the exciting adventure of faith that is the Christian life and which brings the best out of any man.

(1) Sacred Companions, David Benner, IVP, 2002

(2) See Streams of Living Water, Richard Foster, Harper Collins 1998 and visit

www.renovare.org

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