

Christ and Spirituality

The Foundation and the Structure of our Life

Rev. Dr Thorwald Lorenzen

Relevance

If it is true - and it is true - that many of our church members and church leaders are not whole heartedly committed to the process of *reconciliation with the Aboriginal people* of this country, are unwilling to apologise and make suitable reparations, then we do not only have a moral problem, but we have a *theological* and a *spiritual* problem in our midst.

If it is true - and it is true - that a sizeable number of our church members and church leaders are not willing to recognise *God's call of women to ministry* and refuse to *ordain women* who are called to the ministry, then we do not only have a moral and a human rights problem, but we have a *theological* and a *spiritual* problem in our midst.

If it is true - and it is true - that a sizeable number of our church members and church leaders are not willing to recognise that we are only *a part* of the *one* "body of Christ", and refuse to *join the visible structures of the unity of the church*, like the *National Council of Churches in Australia* and the *World Council of Churches*, then we do not only have an ecclesiastical problem, but we have a *theological* and a *spiritual* challenge in our midst.

What is "theological" and "spiritual" about a problem?

To have a theological and a spiritual problem means that our understanding of God and the ways of communication between God and us are distorted. Can the rich man in Luke's parable communicate with God, by-passing Lazarus who sits at the door of his life? Can we come to the altar without first being reconciled with the representatives of God's creation? Is it possible to love God and show little interest in one's neighbour? Are we the ones' who pick and choose the neighbour whose wounds we are willing to bind, or are our neighbours chosen for us?

We are inter-woven with "world" and "church"

We all know - deep down - that the world is not as it ought to be; and we all know - deep down - that the church is not what it ought to be.

At the same time, we all know that the world and the church are God's creation, and that we are ontologically woven into the world and into the church.

God looked upon his creation and said that it is beautiful. God has never given up on his creation. Indeed, God has given us the privilege of becoming partners in God's liberating and sustaining activity.

And God created the church in order to do something good for the world. The church's identity is interpreted as being the "body of Christ". What is the "body"? It is the way of relating to the world around us. With the body we eat and see and love and touch and work and create. The church is Christ's way of relating to the world. We are called the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world". Just as the salt brings out the flavour in the vegetables, and just as the spot light brings out the splendour in the architecture, so the church does not condemn the world and it is not suspicious of the world and it is not afraid of the world, but it helps to make the world what it is, God's beautiful creation.

We - you and I - are all part of the world, ontologically woven into the world which provides us with people to love, with air to breathe, with food to eat and with water to drink. At the same time, we are all part of the church, ontologically woven into the community of faith which points us to the One who gives us food for our souls and orientation for our conscience. If, therefore, we perceive a problem with the world and with the church, then the problem is also ours. As citizens of the world

and as members of the community of faith we are part of the problem and we can be part of the answer.

The way ahead

Can we get a handle on the problem, and can we envision the foundation and the direction of the answer? Can we be what we are, the “body of Christ”, the “salt of the earth”, the “light of the world”? Can we read the signs of the times? Can we unmask the enemy within and without? Can we locate mountains from which there might be a new view of the land? Can we find wells that provide living water for the journey ahead?

I want to suggest two points for our discussion; points which may hopefully lead us into a promising and empowering time together.

I want to suggest, first of all, that we must retrieve what the apostle spelled into his words to the church in Corinth: “... no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:11). Or what the fourth evangelist meant when he dethroned the gods of his world and named Jesus Christ “the true vine”, “the good shepherd”, “the way, the truth and the life”. Or what the visionary on the isle of Patmos meant when he heard the cosmic chorale confessing “the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!” (Rev 5:12).

Are we clear in our thinking and in our acting that the ground of our faith is not morality or ethics, is not our experiences or our stories, is not the Bible or the church - but is Jesus Christ. Do we realise that our talk of values, our engagement for justice, the discipline of a moral life - all call for a ground and a foundation in order to be sustained?

As a second point I want to suggest that we must develop a spirituality which is coherent with the ground and content of our faith. It is well known that the apostle Paul distinguishes between those Christians who are mature in the faith (1 Cor 2:6; cf. 1 Cor.3:1) and those who are “babes in Christ”, “men of the flesh” (1 Cor 3:1; cf 1 Cor 2:14). We know that the Anabaptists distinguished between the sweet Jesus of comfortable Christianity and the bitter Christ of Christian discipleship. We know Bonhoeffer’s and Barth’s distinction between cheap and costly grace. But what does it mean today to make room for the Spirit to inspire, empower and guide us?

Jesus Christ - the one word that we are to hear, trust and obey

The Christian faith and the Christian church began when God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead; when God shared his life with the dead Jesus; when God took the dead Jesus into his life, and thereby and therefore made the confession possible that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God (Rom 8:31-39). By raising Jesus from the dead, God bound his very being to the world and its future. Thereby not only God but the world has been changed. With Jesus, part of us has reached its ultimate destiny. God affirmed Jesus’ humanity, his vision, his struggle, his temptation, his doubt, his obedience. God has graced our world and its future with the unconditional promise that God would be with us to the end of the age. Do we hear that? Do we believe that? Is that the ground for our hope and faith and love?

For the early Christians, the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead resulted in glorious certainty which filled their lives with creativity, vision and meaning. They knew that nothing could separate them from the love of God, and this knowledge resulted in the confessions which ever since have been at the core of the church’s faith:

“... the Word” - that great mediator between God and God’s creation - “became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth”

and how does the confession continue?

“... we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (John 1:14).

Or look into the Pauline tradition:

“... in him” - in Christ - *“the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ...”*

and how does the text continue?

“... and you have come to fullness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. 2:11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; 2:12 and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. 2:13 And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 2:14 having cancelled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. 2:15 He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him” (Col 2:9-15).

This reality of God in Christ sharing his life with his creation without becoming dissolved into the creation, has been classically formulated at the council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. The christological confession of Chalcedon is authoritative for all Christian churches to the present day:

... we ... confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. (He) ... is perfect both in deity and also in human-ness; (he) ... is truly God and truly human. He is of the same reality as God as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we ourselves as far as our human-ness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. ... we apprehend this one and only Christ - Son, Lord, only begotten - in two natures; without confusing the two natures , without transmuting one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories, without contrasting them according to area or function. The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union. Instead, the “properties” of each nature are conserved and both natures concur in one “person” and in one hypostasis. They are not divided or cut into two prosopa, but are together the one and only and only-begotten Logos of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here the community of faith confesses to whom they belong and what the ground and content of their faith is.

Two things have emerged. Firstly, it is emphasised that God, by raising Jesus from the dead, has laid the foundation for our faith, hope and love: “... no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:11)!

The second is this. God’s act in raising Jesus from the dead swaps over to include us, our world, our future. The apostle summarises:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you. (Romans 8:11)

Or in different words, the apostle speaks of

... always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

What does this actually mean, that Christ, his cross and resurrection, is present in the existence of the apostle?

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed ...

For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

So death is at work in us, but life in you.

(2 Cor 4:8-12)

That is the first point which I want to make. Before we speak about values and morality and ethics and church and Bible and experience, we must be clear about our commitment to Jesus Christ in whom God committed himself unconditionally to this our world, God's creation.

Spirituality **The call for a contemporary spirituality**

If we agree that the world is not what it ought to be; and if we agree that the church is not what it ought to be; and if we realise that we are part both of the world and of the church, then is it not the very mission of our lives to become agents of change both in the world and in the church? Our spirituality must be a spirituality of changing things. It must help us to resist the constant temptation of following our religious instincts and the pressure of the crowd of using our faith to affirm and cement the status quo.

Such change can not and therefore must not be arbitrary. It has focus and it has direction. It is made possible by God's activity in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God has fleshed out the promise for our world and the purpose for our lives. In Christian spirituality - and there are other spiritualities! - it must therefore be clear that Jesus Christ is the ground and the content of our faith; that he is the one word that we are to hear, trust and obey; that for us there is no other foundation on which to build our lives and our future. In that sense the early interpretation of the Nicea-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 AD - the filioque addition - is theologically and scripturally correct: the "Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son". This does not deny that the Spirit has her own centre of identity. But it does mean, just as it is the case with the Father and the Son, that the identity of the Spirit must not be seen apart from but in relation to the Father and the Son. The early church wanted to confess what is most clearly expressed in the Johannine farewell discourses (John 14-16) that the Spirit who dwells in the believer (14:17), does not speak on his own authority (16:13), but that he glorifies and bears witness to Jesus (16:14, 15:26) and will bring to their remembrance all that Jesus had said to them (14:26).

What does it mean today to make room for Christ and for the Spirit in our lives and in our churches. What kind of spirituality is worthy of the name of Christ? That spirituality is important can hardly be doubted. Don't we all yearn for oases in the deserts of our lives? Don't we all need moments of truth and inspiration in the every-day-ness of our world? No wonder that spirituality workshops and encounter groups spring up all over the place promising to bring some life and some warmth and some touch and some acceptance into the otherwise cold humdrum of life.

Within the Christian view of reality, the Holy Spirit ascertains that we do not freeze Christ into the past, that we do not freeze Christ into a doctrine, that we do not freeze Christ into church structures, hierarchies and bureaucracies, that we do not freeze Christ into the Bible, and that we do not dissolve Christ into our experience. Spirituality gives structure to the foundation and content of our faith, Jesus Christ.

Perhaps we need to take stock with reference to our spirituality. Perhaps we need to ask whether contemporary spirituality will have to discover new wells to drink from. Perhaps we shall have to depart from our traditional spirituality. Is there any way to get hold of the grammar of traditional spirituality so that we may question it in light of the foundation of our faith, and then develop a more adequate spirituality?

Marks of traditional spirituality

Traditional Spirituality - if there is such a thing - has been marked by a tendency to compartmentalise of life into sacred and profane, into holy and secular. We felt that we had to withdraw from the profane and secular life, and enter a holy and sacred realm where we would receive the energising fuel and then return to the struggle of life. God was not out there in the market place of life, we thought; God had to be sought elsewhere, away from life. We felt that the inward journey led towards God, while the outward journey led away from God. We felt that on Sundays we need to fill up the tank of our spirituality in order to keep us going from Monday to Friday.

Please check whether your own experience and knowledge, your own spiritual journey, would confirm that the following characteristics shape the grammar of our traditional spirituality.

“Docetic” and “gnostic” tendencies. I am using the names “docetic” and “gnostic”, because for the theologian these names immediately raise flags of caution and danger. The church had to struggle with the dangers of docetism and gnosticism from the beginning. Both have been rejected as heresies. Docetism denies that in Jesus Christ, God has really shared his being with the world. They say that God only “appeared” to have shared his life with Jesus. To this the “gnostics” add that human beings possess an inner light or knowledge that cannot be touched by the evil world or that needs to be protected from the evil influence of the world. In both cases the “world” has a negative connotation; it is “fallen”; God is not to be found in the world. Consequently, we have to withdraw from the world in order to feed our spirituality.

Individualistic and privatised tendencies. Conversion and sanctification play an important role in the Christian life. But they have become mixed up with the individualism of our culture and with the tendency to regard religious convictions merely as private matters. Bible reading and prayer is mainly practiced for personal edification. Participating in the sacraments is understood as strengthening our individual spirituality. The possibility that reading the Bible, prayer, being baptised, or participating in the Eucharist, can be subversive acts, that they can lead the believer into the peace movement, and that they could fuel protest against racism and torture within us, has hardly ever been entertained as part of our spirituality. That “knowing God” also implies doing justice, as the prophetic tradition (Jer 22:13-17), as Jesus himself, and the early church (Matt 25:31-48) emphasise, has often been linked with “social ethics” rather than with “spirituality”.

Self-centred rather than community-centred. Although we have heard about the 20th century saints, the Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer and The Roman Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero, we often fail to recognise that their spirituality, like the spirituality of Jesus, led them to a violent death. Bonhoeffer was murdered in a concentration camp and Romero was gunned down by a death squad. Both lost their lives because the political powers of their day and their situation felt that they were meddling in community affairs.

Have we perhaps fallen prey to the ancient Greek idea, which is also an ever present human religious temptation, of seeing the body as the prison of the soul, of playing off “heaven” against “earth”, of glorifying “spirit” and devaluing “matter”? Indeed, is not our refusal to recognise the ministry of women on equal terms to that of men, a result that a male dominated church too easily and too willingly took on board the ancient but non-Christian idea of equating maleness with “heaven” and with “spirit”, while femaleness is likened to “earth” and to “matter”? And has this compartmentalising of life not so deeply influenced us that can’t hear any more that the Lord claims the earth for himself (Psalm 24)? Have we not failed to affirm the goodness of creation, and have we forgotten the fact that God in Christ has reconciled the world with himself (2 Cor 5:17-21)? Is God not a God who “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:45)? Why in our anthropology and eschatology have we rejected the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and affirmed the resurrection of the body, if not to show the value of the body?

Perhaps we need to start again at the beginning if in our spirituality we want to bring to expression that God in Christ has said “yes” to the world and graced the world with a promise.

Search for of a contemporary Spirituality

What should be the grammar which would underlie and shape a contemporary spirituality? What structure and what content should such a spirituality have? Where do we find the wells to drink from? What are the dangers that we should be aware of? Here are a few preliminary considerations, realising, of course, that within certain parameters, spirituality will be different for each one of us:

We must retrieve a theology that rejects the compartmentalising of life into holy and profane, into sacred and secular. We must retrieve what the early Christians meant when in light of the resurrection of the crucified Christ, they confessed that the Word had become flesh (John 1:14);

when they rejected the immortality of the soul and affirmed the resurrection of the body; when they confessed that God has shared his life with the dead Jesus; when they insisted that the cross is not a prelude to the resurrection, but that it is the very content and meaning of the resurrection; when they formulated that Jesus Christ is “vere deus” and “vere homo”, truly God and fully human.

In Mark 7 the Markan church confesses that in Jesus Christ the gulf between sacred and profane is overcome: “... there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him” (Mark 7:15). When Paul heard that in Corinth they were celebrating the Lord’s Supper without waiting for the nannies and the servants and the slaves and the wharf labourers, he exclaims that, with all their religiosity, it was not the Lord’s Supper they were celebrating (1 Cor 11:20-22). The “Lord”, he had to teach them, is the Crucified One - “... the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread ...” - and he was crucified because he spent his life with and for the “late comers”; how then could they celebrate the “Lord’s” supper forgetting about the late comers? For the believer in Christ and for the community of faith it is not possible to divide life into holy and profane. That must be the theological basis for our spirituality.

Theology, therefore needs to be constructive and critical. If the church is not what it ought to be, then it is the function of theology not to provide the social cohesive for the status quo, but to be the thorn in the flesh of the church. Theology must refuse simply to become an instrument of the church’s leadership or the church’s majority. Theology refuses to simply reflect what people believe, rather, it is so overwhelmed by the joy of the gospel, that it fearlessly examines the faith and practice of the church in light of the gospel and fearlessly enters into a critical dialogue with church and world. A theology which is not critical has become a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. The church needs and should ask for a theology that is a thorn in the flesh.

“Inward Journey - Outward Journey”. The question must be asked, if God is God, if God is the all-encompassing reality, if God is creator, redeemer and fulfiller of the world, and if God is different from God’s creation, how can we remain open for God in the midst of the ambiguity and brokenness of life. We know about the ambiguity and brokenness of life; we know that even the most pious and most righteous people have skeletons in their cupboards; we know of our unbending self-will, and we know that we don’t even shy away from using the word “God” for our own schemes and interests. We therefore need occasions of reflection and meditation where we create space and time to review our life in light of the story of Jesus. Just as a “marriage enrichment weekend” is not a withdrawal into another world, but a creative interruption of life, to ask who we are and who we want to be, so our bible study, our prayer life, our communal worship are not withdrawals into another reality, from the profane to the divine, but they are necessary and creative interruptions in our life, intensive reminders who we are, to whom we belong and where we are going.

Strive towards a holistic anthropology. The above has already set the stage for our self-understanding. We have been given a body with which we kneel in prayer; with which we touch in love; with which we change instinct into culture; with which we participate in the ecological process. We need to understand ourselves in an interlocking network of relationships: to ourselves, to others, to nature, to history and to God.

In this relationship our faith in Christ adds a specific thrust. Not only that we intentionally live in these relationships, but that we feel responsible for it, and, this is the specific thrust, that we have a pull towards the below. That we live with the promise in our hearts that the torturer will ultimately not triumph over his victim. We cannot by-pass Lazarus in our worship of God.

Our relation to our partner is not the same but is related to our communion with God. Salvation includes a person’s communion with God, but at the same time and with the same importance it includes a meal on the table, a home to sleep in, a family to love, a school and a clinic to go to, clean water to drink and a passport!

A holistic anthropology implies that we acknowledge and retrieve the communal nature of the human person. In our individualistic and highly competitive culture we may be forced to forget that we have been created as communal beings. God created the human being as male and female (Gen 1:27). When unbending selfishness centred human interest on the self, our perception of

reality became individualised. When the “other” was no longer seen as a medium of grace, but as a competitor and potential enemy, when our communal nature was denied and distorted, our identity and our relationship to God also suffered. Through faith and baptism, so the confession of the apostle Paul (e.g. Gal 3:24-28), the communal nature of the human person has been re-established, so that “in Christ” we recognise that we need each other for the journey ahead.

Here the importance of the church as the community of faith comes in. It is an important part of our Baptist tradition that we emphasise the soteriological importance of the church as the social manifestation of faith. Will we be able and willing to shape alternative communities where people feel warmly accepted and at the same are empowered to take their place in the market of places of life?

Faith as restlessness and as anticipation of the victory of the crucified Christ. Faith is anchored in the Christ event. By raising the crucified Jesus from the dead God foreshadowed the reality by which this world will be measured. Since the world is not as it ought to be and since the church is not what it ought to be, therefore the believer who is focussed on Christ becomes an agent of change. Not arbitrary change, not change for the sake of change. But a change arising out of a radical commitment to Christ and willing to prepare the way of the Lord. On the road we are sustained by the Spirit who deeply speaks the promise into our lives that ultimately the oppressor will not triumph over the oppressed and that it is therefore worthwhile to follow Jesus.

Spirituality and justice. Spirituality has to do with knowing God and knowing God has to do with implementing justice (e.g. Jeremiah 22; Isaiah 58; Romans 12:1f.). In the Book of Jeremiah we read:

22:3 Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place. 22:4 For if you will indeed obey this word, then through the gates of this house shall enter kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their servants, and their people. 22:15 Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. 22:16 He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. *Is not this to know me? says the LORD.* 22:17 But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence. (Jeremiah 22)

The struggle for justice is not the result or the consequence of faith. It is part of our faith and therefore belongs into our spirituality. Let us not forget that Christ does not only meet us in the Word and in the Sacrament, but also in the stranger, the orphan, the single mother and the prisoner in our midst (Matthew 25:31-46).

The preacher as priest and prophet. Since many of us are ministers, we may want and we may need to remind ourselves that, to use an analogy from the field of sport, it is not only our function to counsel, inspire and massage the players; it is also our task to interpret the game, and to lead the players into the field to play - with the risk of course that they will get bruised, make of mess of things and lose!

At this point our Baptist ecclesiology is not very helpful. We are too close and too dependent on the people who call us and pay us. How many ministers have left the ministry because they felt quenched and limited in their ministry by the expectation of the people to preach a gospel of cheap and comfortable grace?

Perhaps a way out of this dilemma is to re-emphasise the importance of ordination. Ordination not to create a spiritual elite, but as setting women and men apart to interpret the word and administer the sacraments as the word of Christ and the sacraments of Christ. By ordaining a person, the church confesses that Christ stands over against the church in grace and judgment; and the preacher whose conscience is bound to Christ is expected to speak the words of grace and judgment. The preacher must claim this freedom and as such not only be a balm for the body but also a thorn in the flesh of the church.

Worship as becoming aware of the “dangerous memory” of Jesus. I sometimes have the uncomfortable feeling that our only interest in planning a worship service is to entertain people and make them feel good; to withdraw from life for a moment of solitude and not to be interrupted by the pain and injustice and frustration around us. And, indeed, there is a need for such withdrawal. But it cannot be the sole aim of a Christian worship service. Not our feelings or wishes but whether we worship God for God’s own sake and whether we meet Jesus in grace and judgment is the important point.

Conclusion

My aim has been *twofold*. I wanted to say, *firstly*, that all our doing and thinking, our talking of values and our engagement for justice, needs to have a ground, a basis, a foundation, something that was there before, and something that outlasts the ambiguity and uncertainty of the moment, something that is stronger than our fears and inability to understand, something that transcends our experience and commitments. For Christians that something is someone, *Jesus Christ*, whom God raised from the dead to give meaning and structure to our living and our dieing. I wanted to explain what the apostle Paul meant when he said: “... no other *foundation* can any one lay than that which is laid, which is *Jesus Christ*” (1 Cor 3:11).

My *second* point was that we need a spirituality which sustains, energises and empowers us on the journey. How does Christ, whom God raised from the dead, flow over into our life and open windows, break chains, and lead us to wells to drink from? In dialogue with traditional spirituality I made a few suggestions as to how a contemporary spirituality may historically and experientially manifest the Christ who is the focus of our lives.

Thorwald Lorenzen