

The Sense and Sense-ibility of Spirituality: A Biblical Theology Refracted Through C. S. Lewis and Paul F. Ford

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Something enormous happened to me during my twelve years at Fuller. No, I am not talking about how the monastic Brother Peter Ford became the married professor Paul Ford—at least not directly. And I am not telling the full story of how I finally decided to write my dissertation on C. S. Lewis as a spiritual mentor. What really happened was that I discovered that I actually could live on every word that came from the mouth of God—every word: verbs, nouns, and even adjectives (to be explained below).

This is not to say that my practice of the monastic way of prayer, the four-stage contemplative reading of scripture called *lectio divina* (also to be explained), had left me starving. But I hadn't ever had to depend on God as much as I did during the time of my transition from monastic life; until you have to depend on God alone, you don't really believe that God can be so trustworthy. And I didn't know how much nourishment was available in God's word and, really, nowhere else.

This realization began to dawn during the very wet winter of 1978 when I was working with Dr. Robert Meyers in the design

and teaching of the course, *New Testament Spirituality*. You have to picture me getting up at four in the morning to put the final touches on my lectures to be given four hours later, fighting fear of short-term failure (what shall I say about this in class?) and anxiety over long-term aimlessness (what shall I do with my life?) with the very words and ideas of the New Testament that I was trying to bring to life for my students.

During this difficult but precious time, *lectio* was incredibly nutritious. Every biblical text I picked up to study on behalf of my students or pray on my own behalf became grist for *lectio*. I would read just a few words and the text would stop me (stage one of *lectio*, called *lectio* or “reading” by the ancients). I would ruminate on the text (often throughout the day), chewing it over and over again (stage two, called *meditatio*); I was amazed at how filling and energizing the Word is. Almost effortlessly I would move on to adore or thank or beseech or ask God for forgiveness (stage three: *oratio*). Then, in my hunger I would be tempted to go on to gobble up more of the text but I usually remembered to leave time for God to console me if he so desired or just to waste time in his presence (stage four: *contemplatio*).¹

Throughout this season of my life I was learning what Christians down the centuries already knew: The Bible is not a text you read; it reads you. The Bible is not something you read to have read (“Did you see that article in *Time*?”—“Yeah, I read that.”) but something you read in order to continue to read. I learned that Christians are ruminating animals, so to speak, who needed to chew the cud of the Word in order to receive its nourishment. During these months all sorts of texts took on

¹ For more on the process of *lectio* for individuals or groups, please see *Bible Reading for Spiritual Growth* by Norvene Vest (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

deeper meaning for me and, I hope, my students.

One particular text, Romans 12:1–2, the “epicenter of New Testament spirituality from a Pauline perspective” as we nicknamed it in our course, became the key to unlock spirituality for me. I already knew from Louis Bouyer, the great historian of Christian spirituality, that the schema of the old and new humanity is the matrix of Pauline spirituality.² I likewise knew that C. S. Lewis would describe the same distinction as between “nice people or new men.”³ What I learned from Romans 12:1–2 was that the basic components of this new humanity are our true selves, our bodies and minds, offered up totally in prayer to please God and transformed by God to resonate in perfect harmony with God’s pleasure in discernment.

These two verses provided me with the sustaining insight that prayer and discernment are the being and doing dimensions, the vertical and horizontal, of the spiritual life. Sandra Marie Schneiders and H. H. Farmer are just two theologians who have commented on this diadic structure of the Christian life. Schneiders says:

What do people mean when they talk about seeking “spiritual direction”? If we listen attentively to these seekers we hear two recurring themes: prayer and discernment . . . that is, for organization

² Louis Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality* (New York: Seabury, 1977) vol. I: *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, p. 63.

³ *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 175; this is the title for Book Four, Chapter Ten; Chapter Eleven is titled “The New Men.”

and structure in the *being* and *action* dimensions of the spiritual life.⁴

Farmer writes of it thus: “The new life of co-operation with God is manifested in prayer, and in a daily activity increasingly informed and guided by the divine Spirit.”⁵ And the biblical scholar Oscar Cullmann has called discernment the “key to New Testament morality.”⁶ Discernment is that essential gift of the Holy Spirit which enables the Christian to discover and do in the present moment that activity which pleases God.⁷

I have discovered that these insights can even be sung about, as in the hymn by John Keble, a hymn I often use in my morning prayer as the “grace before the meal” of the day:

New every morning is the love
our wakening and uprising prove;
through sleep and darkness safely brought,
restored to life and power and thought.

⁴ “The ‘Return’ to Spiritual Direction,” *Spiritual Life*, 18 (Winter, 1972), pp. 272, 274, emphasis added.

⁵ *The World and God: A Study of Prayer, Providence and Miracle in Christian Experience*, 2nd. ed., (London: Nisbet, 1936), p. 261.

⁶ *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, Floyd V. Filson, tr. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950), p. 228. Cullmann’s assertion serves as the foundation for Gerard Therrien’s masterful study, *La discernement dans les écrits pauliniens* (Etudes Bibliques, Paris: Librairie Lecoffre/J. Gabalda et Cie, 1973).

⁷ For insight into the meaning of the will of God as the joy or pleasure of God, see Andre Louf, *Teach Us to Pray: Learning a Little about God* (London: Darton, Longmans, Todd, 1974; Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1975), pp. 27-33.

New mercies, each returning day,
around us hover while we pray;
new perils past, new sins forgiven,
new thoughts of God, new hopes of heaven.

If on our daily course our mind
be set to hallow all we find,
new treasures still, of countless price,
God will provide for sacrifice.

Old friends, old scenes will lovelier be,
as more of heaven in each we see;
some softening gleam of love and prayer
shall dawn on every cross and care.

The trivial round, the common task,
will furnish all we ought to ask:
room to deny ourselves; a road
to bring us daily nearer God.

Only, O Lord, in thy dear love,
fit us for perfect rest above;
and help us, this and every day,
to live more nearly as we pray.⁸

In the spirit of Romans 12:1, the quest to “hallow all we find” does provide plenty to offer as a living sacrifice; the “trivial” and “common” give more “room to deny ourselves” than we usually wish but also, thankfully, a road to bring us daily nearer God.” Romans 12:2 draws our attention to the

⁸ As found in *Hymnbook 1982*, (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1985), Number 10.

seven new things Keble says God is always trying to get us to see and to act upon: love, mercies, perils past, sins forgiven, thoughts of God, hopes of heaven, and treasures; this verse also directs our contemplative gazing and active doing to the old, common, and trivial things: friends, scenes, crosses, and cares. Finally, the interplay between being and doing is revealed in the two prayers of the last stanza: “fit us for perfect rest” and “help us to live more nearly as we pray.”

Because of this transformation my perception of C. S. Lewis was also changed: Lewis the apologist gave way to Lewis the spiritual director. I changed the direction of my dissertation and studied Lewis for what he said and experienced about prayer and discernment as the foundation of the new self God was building in him and wants to build in each of us.

To his fictional friend Malcolm and to me, reading Lewis’s side of their fictional correspondence, Lewis disclosed a method for the prayer of adoration, a method which also becomes a way to understand the meaning of spirituality:

. . . mental images play an important part in my prayers. I doubt if any act of will or thought or emotion occurs in me without them. But they seem to help me most when they are most fugitive and fragmentary—rising and bursting like bubbles in champagne or wheeling like rooks in a windy sky: contradicting one another (in logic) as the crowded metaphors of a swift poet may do. Fix on any one, and it goes dead. You must do as Blake would do with a joy; kiss it as it flies. And then, in their total effect, they do mediate to me something very important. It is always something qualitative—more like an adjective than a noun. That, for me, gives it the impact of reality. For I think we respect nouns (and what we think they stand for) too much. All my deepest,

and certainly all my earliest, experiences seem to be of sheer quality. The terrible and the lovely are older and solidier than terrible and lovely things. . . .

The wave of images, thrown off like a spray from the prayer, all momentary, all correcting, refining, “interanimating” one another, and giving a kind of spiritual body to the unimaginable, occurs more, I find, in acts of worship than in petitionary prayer. (*Letters to Malcolm*, p. 86)

Perhaps, I thought, Lewis would caution us that we respect the noun “spirituality” too much. My study of the history of the noun in Greek, Latin, English, French, and German bore out that the adjective “spiritual” is far older than the noun “spirituality.” Following Lewis, let us look at the adjective “spiritual,” well aware that in all talk about supersensibles we must use sensibles, that is, metaphors.

At first blush there seems no better example of a supersensible than the adjective “spiritual.” Almost by denotation “spiritual” is not-sensible; it connotes the not-bodily and denotes the not-fleshly (we have to be careful to avoid reading the ancient dualism of body-soul into the Pauline distinction between flesh and spirit). And yet to speak about this supersensible, we must use metaphors derived from the five senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. To help us experience what is the reality behind the adjective “spiritual,” biblical images, especially from the New Testament, can be grouped around each of the senses of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling. They can be further delineated into the being and acting dimensions, the prayer and discernment dimensions, of spiritual reality.

The following collection provides just a sketch of Christian spirituality in hopes of provoking you to pursue a more detailed picture on your own. As Lewis says, these images “help [us] most” even “when they are most fugitive and fragmentary . . . : contradicting one another (in logic) as the crowded metaphors of a swift poet may do.” But since the Poet of the Bible is God the Holy Spirit, the contradictions are only apparent; they spur us to look deeper for their hidden unity. For each, we will have to “kiss [them] as [they] fl[y],” especially because of limitations on the length of this article. But, “in their total effect, they [will] mediate to [us] something very important”—the sense and sense-ibility of spirituality.

•**Seeing**.....In his book *Ways of Imperfection*, Simon Tugwell, the British Dominican theologian who was a member of the International Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue, defines spirituality as “people’s ways of viewing things, the ways in which they try to make sense of the practicalities of christian living and to illuminate christian hopes and christian muddles.” What and how do they view; what and how do they see?

With eyes of faith, they see the will and pleasure of God in the great design of history come-to-a-focus in Jesus. They abandon their worldly point of view and see only Jesus. Especially when they behold the least appealing person, the least one, the little one, they see God. Even when they stumble and fall, even when they choose the dark, they have only to come to their senses, raise their eyes, and see the welcoming sight of their Father and his household ready to party at their return. In turn, each becomes a welcoming sight to one another. Spirituality is a way of seeing, a way of seeing like God (doing) and a way of seeing God (being).

Hearing.....In the world of physiology seeing is the most developed sense; in the world of faith, where we do not walk by sight, hearing is the most developed. What and how do the spiritual hear? What sounds do they make and what sounds do they register?

Christians don't make the sounds of noisy gongs or clanging cymbals or of trumpet blast at street corners; they don't chatter or gossip. They do say "Abba, Abba" a lot and they do say "Jesus is Lord" and they are wont to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs full of thankfulness. There is also enough silence in their lives for them to hear God's still, small voice in the least one, the one left naked and half dead at the side of the road. And their ears are ever tuned for what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Spirituality is a way of hearing, a way of hearing like God, a way of hearing God.

Touching.....Physiologists and philosophers tell us that touch is the most complex of the senses:

For all practical purposes, distinctions can be made among (1) tactile or cutaneous sensitivity that selectively perceives pressure, pain, warmth, and cold; (2) deep organic sensitivity, viz, kinesthesia or proprioception for muscular sensation, and deep touch for the viscera and internal organs; and (3) vestibular function . . . for the positioning and movement of the body in equilibrium, a function that works in harmony with kinesthesia and deep touch.⁹

Because we are members of one another, body parts of the Bride of Christ, our sense of touch moves us to comfort one another with the comfort with which we have been comforted.

⁹ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XIII, p. 91b.

We clothe our naked members and give food and drink to our hungry and thirsty members and, touched and moved to our own depths by human misery of every kind, we reach out with healing to those whom the world regards as untouchable. Spirituality is a way of touching, a way of touching like God, a way of touching God.

•**Tasting**.....Tasting is almost another word for discernment, according to New Testament scholar Pierre Sandevour. "To taste . . . is above all to appreciate the flavor of our experience on all levels . . . The Bible applies it to the discerning of moral values and to the savoring knowledge of God and of Christ, the delights of our life here below and in heaven."¹⁰

So what do Christians "taste" like, so to speak? How do they use the ability to savor? They taste "salty," that is, they add flavor to all those human activities which tend to go flat and insipid; you know they are present by their zest for life—lukewarm is something they are not. Their conversation is well-seasoned with graciousness and wisdom. Because their Lord drank death to the dregs, they can live life to the full. But, paradoxically, they also have a hungry look because they are "accepting no substitutes," nothing artificial. Their Bridegroom is absent and so they hunger and thirst for his righteousness and both taste and see that he alone is good, that his word is sweet; they long to dine with him in the kingdom. Spirituality is a way of tasting, a way of tasting like God, a way of tasting God.

Smelling.....The way Christians smell pleases God and attracts or repels their fellow human beings. All the while the incense of

¹⁰ "Taste," *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Xavier Leon-Dufour, ed. (New York: Crossroads, 1973), p. 590.

their living sacrifice reaches heaven, God rejoices because God recognizes the sweet smell of Jesus who gave in his own death the pattern of our dying. Those destined for life detect this same fragrance in their Christian brothers and sisters while those who refuse to be saved hold their noses. All those washed in the Lamb's blood follow the Anointed One to the mountain of spices and to the enclosed garden from which there wafts already the marriage perfumes and the banquet aromas. Spirituality, then, is even a way of smelling, a way of smelling like God, a way of smelling God.

These images—fugitive, fragmentary, rising, bursting, wheeling, contradicting, correcting, refining—should suggest the sense and sensibility of spirituality as the total consecration to and transformation of the self by God the Holy Spirit which is the exhortation of Paul in Romans 12:1–2. Without the graces I received in 1978, the year of severe mercy, I would not be the man and teacher I am today. I treasure the insights I have just attempted to offer to you. This attempt invites me to take them seriously again for myself.

A Bibliography

In addition to my C. S. Lewis favorites, *The Great Divorce*, *Mere Christianity*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, I would recommend a prayerful reading of the following titles by other authors:

Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness by David Steindl-Rast (New York: Paulist, 1984)

Holiness by Donald Nicoll (New York: Paulist, 1989)

Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer by Ann and Barry Ulanov (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982)

Poverty of Spirit by Johannes B. Metz (New York: Paulist, 1984)

Teach Us to Pray: Learning a Little about God by Andre Louf (new edition available from Cowley Publications)

Introduction to Spirituality by Louis Bouyer (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1961)