

Life in the Spirit

For many years I have been convinced that the health of our society has been in decline. We see it in the state of the economy, social and community dysfunction, family and relational breakdown and the prevalence of personal crises. I am also convinced that the heart of the problem is spiritual; a prevailing godlessness. The Church (apart from a few notable instances such as Manchester's Eden project) has had little impact on this overall trend. Whilst the Church continues to engage in social projects we are not on the whole transforming our culture or even arresting the decline. I long for the Church to take up its true calling to reach out to a world in desperate need of God's transforming love yet find that progress is at best slow. It seems that we are functioning mainly in human strength yet what we need is a new outpouring of God's Holy Spirit to revive our nation.

These feelings alongside prompts from others in the church has given rise to the Wednesday evening meetings and accompanying sermon series on Sunday mornings that I've called 'Life in the Spirit'. My first rather naïve approach to it was that we need to seek the power of the Spirit to revitalise the things that we are doing. I thought that if perhaps we pray more then those things might be anointed and we can achieve in God's supernatural power what we have been failing to do in our own human strength. We do need to pray more but for a different reason. In preparing for this series I've been taken down a rather different and much more challenging route.

The material I've been working with has remodelled my thinking and in doing so remodelled the content of the meetings. What has struck me time and again in my preparation is the need not for power but transformation. Before society can change the people of God must change. Whilst this change is brought about by the Holy Spirit, He requires an act of will from us to allow him to do so. God is a God of love and will not force us into anything. I have written before about the words of 2 Chron 7:13-14 but I include them again at the end of this article as I believe that they are crucial to the outworking of this transformation of the Church. In the realisation that we ourselves are in desperate need, each of us who call ourselves Christians must daily seek the change of heart that enables us to give everything over to God. We are seeking the Holy Spirit, not in the first instance for works of power but for the work of making us holy; in other words more like Jesus. And that is a much harder journey to take and one for which we need greater faith and greater support from one another along the way.

I believe that God has spoken particularly about our love for him and our priorities. Just as human relationships need to be worked on so does our relationship with God. Love is an act of will not merely a feeling. Love dictates our actions and not just our emotions. So as a first port of call we might ask ourselves the following. What do we most give ourselves to? What is it that most consumes our thoughts, time and energy? We are never far away from that which we genuinely love.

2 Chron 7:13-14

'When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.'

If my people who are called by my name – The responsibility for the spiritual climate of the land lies first and foremost with the Church. The people who truly believe in and aim to follow God.

Humble themselves – This is the first thing required of God's people. It is crucial that we have the humility to ask serious questions of our current practices. Jesus tells us that He is Lord but is this really evident in our churches? Being essentially good citizens, regular church goers or even working to the point of exhaustion for the Church organization does not necessarily mean that we are living authentic Christian lives. We also need the humility to acknowledge our absolute dependence on God. We have to ask how much time we give to our relationship with God before embarking upon church activities.

And pray – In humility we acknowledge that the solution lies with God. Involving God in the issues of the world takes place in prayer; in bringing our situation before him, asking for his mercy, help and empowerment. Prayer is not a formula for making things happen but the place of connection with our Father in Heaven.



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And seek my face – As we acknowledge all these things so will we be drawn back to our first priority, an intimate relationship with God. Do our Churches reflect a genuine love for God? Love in personal relationships is about both enjoying the presence of the one you love and living not simply for yourself but for the good of that other person. As Christians we have to ask ourselves how much time we spend alone in God's presence and whether or not we genuinely aim to deny our self interests for His sake. It is helpful to remember that it is easy (particularly for Church leaders) to develop a greater love for our personal ministry and Church culture and tradition than for God.

And turn from their wicked ways – We may have to face up to the fact that some of what we do in the name of God is in fact sinful. We can take on many good deeds, but are they the things that God is calling us to take on? If not then we must conclude that we are acting in disobedience to God. The Church also has to accept some responsibility for the gap that has grown between it and the surrounding culture. Is there a selfish desire to keep Church as we like it rather than respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit for change? Repentance is not just acknowledgement or even being sorry but changing our actions and behaviours. Repentance will lead us into doing things differently.

I will hear from heaven and heal their land – As Christians take the steps above God promises to hear and heal. The healing is not just for the Church but the very land on which we live and all those in it.

Steve