

## Spirituality – what's that?

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### Popular estimates of spirituality

Any attempt at understanding biblical spirituality must begin with engaging with what is popularly thought to be spirituality in the Western world. Here is a list of some popular statements, which you might hear, that have undeniable associations with spirituality.

*“All paths lead to God. It really doesn't matter what you believe because you can become anything your want. You control your own destiny.”*

*“We're born basically good. It's important people understand this. Guilt over sin is an illusion left over from oppressive religion and limits people.”*

*“Feeling fulfilled in this life is all that matters. What happens after you die is irrelevant.”*

*“There is no hell. It's an idea left over from religion that tried to control people. Heaven, if it exists, is a place where all are unconditionally accepted.”*

*“Jesus was a good man, a fine teacher. But he is one of many spiritual leaders.”*

*“Everyone has his or her own truth. There is no objective truth. Truth is what any community or culture says is true.”*

*“Quiet your mind and let your inner feelings and instincts be your guide. Only when you are in touch with yourself will you know what to do.”*

*“Love yourself first. Pursue self-fulfilment above all else. Any decision that causes pain must be avoided.”*

*“Adhering to creeds and doctrines stifles spiritual growth. They divide rather than unite. So the real spiritual person doesn't have a creed.”*

*“Expressing yourself and being creative is inherently spiritual. Stifling creativity is repressive and an attempt to control.”*

Take any **three** of the above and talk about whether they are like what you have heard in “lite” conversation or the media. What perspectives on spirituality, as developing a relationship with something outside you, might they reveal? Why are they very appealing to certain individuals and/or popular culture?

Can you think of any other popular ideas that are ultimately expressions of spirituality?

### Popular spirituality in Paul's day

In Acts 17:16-34 there is a record of Paul speaking in Athens, Greece. The New International Version (NIV) of the Bible says Paul was debating with Epicurean

and Stoic “philosophers” (verse 18). But they weren’t academics, so it is more helpful to think of them as representatives of contemporary spiritualities.

If this is the case, then Paul’s speech is, amongst other things, a reflection on features of Christian spirituality. After you have read this section, discuss together what Paul says about the fundamentals of a relationship with God.

Are there any surprises if you think about these words as expressing some of the fundamentals of Christian spirituality? Why is spirituality a product of an understanding of God? Why doesn’t Paul talk about his spiritual experiences?

### Mysticism and popular spirituality

Mystical experience of the divine through a religious discipline has always been a part of human experience. Every religion has its mystics. Even Islam has mystics, who are known as Sufis. So any map of Christian spirituality has to include the ‘region’ of mysticism.

Mysticism has a long history in the Christian tradition. It can be traced as far back as the mid third century and is linked strongly to the development of monasticism. In essence, mysticism grows from the belief that not only does God speak in the Bible, but he can also ‘speak’ to the soul. So the focus in Christian mysticism is on God with (in) the believer, understanding his communications and experiencing his presence. Here’s a sample from a mystical classic

*I try to keep myself always in God’s holy presence by simple attentiveness and a loving gaze upon him. This I may call the actual presence of God, or to speak more accurately, an habitual, silent and hidden communion of the soul with Him.*

Brother Lawrence, *The practise of the presence of God*, tr. Donald Attwater, Templegate, Springfield, 1974, p. 61.

In order to be attuned to God speaking to the soul, a believer can prepare and facilitate the experience through a variety of spiritual exercises like prayer, fasting, meditation etc.

There is a second stage in mysticism that is very subtle and sometimes unnoticed. Some people, who have gone a long way down the mystical path, testify that the presence of God in the soul becomes so real, that his “voice” is heard. This “voice” begins to be their means of guidance and, unintentionally perhaps, they powerfully declare what they claim to hear.

Is mysticism the only (or best) path to authentic Christian spirituality? If anyone was spiritual it was Jesus. As a group discuss what significance Jesus gave to spiritual exercises like giving, prayer and fasting (Matt 6).

Can you think of anything else that Jesus taught that could be linked to developing the "soul"?

Get a concordance and look up some of the occasions that Jesus talks about the "soul" (eg, Matt. 11:28, 29). Are there any practices or disciplines that Jesus advocates help the Christian walk with God?

Could Jesus be described as a mystic or even mystical at times?