



Authentic Church:
True Spirituality in a
Culture of Counterfeits
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What is the nature of true spirituality?

Perhaps no other subject causes greater confusion and, sadly, division among Christians today. What does it mean to be a truly spiritual Christian? New trends frequently sweep through the Christian world, which can give the impression that those who do not embrace their teaching and practices are second-class disciples. None of us wants to miss out on all that God is doing, so our ears prick up when we hear of some movement, teaching or personality claiming to offer a new work of God's Spirit. But how can we discern what is really from God?

We will be focusing on Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, because it directly addresses our subject. It seems that the Corinthians prided themselves on being very "spiritual" (a word that appears twelve times in the letter, more than in the rest of the New Testament put together). Other words that are often repeated also seem to be qualities they admired and believed they possessed: "wisdom," "knowledge" and "power."

The Corinthians really thought they had arrived in these areas and that they had left Paul behind. In contrast to them, he was unspiritual, ignorant, weak and foolish. The apostle writes a strongly corrective letter, not simply to defend his reputation but also to restore them to true Christian faith.

It is striking how very Corinthian the twenty-first-century church is. The buzzwords that had such currency in Corinth still appear frequently in book blurbs and conference brochures today. We value exactly the same qualities and yet we often have very inadequate understandings of them. Paul's appeal to the Corinthians is God's appeal to us. We also need to repent of inadequate and worldly understandings of what it means to live by the Spirit, and instead embrace true spirituality.

As we study 1 Corinthians, we will hear God's word to us today, bringing both encouragement and challenge, whether our temptation is towards a super-spirituality which claims more from God than we should expect, or a sub-spirituality which is so nervous of excess that it contents itself with far less than God wants to give us. In our desire to be spiritual, we too are in danger of substituting the vibrant heart of our faith with a pale echo of the world. In correcting the Corinthians, Paul challenges us too and calls us back to true spirituality.

—Adapted from the introduction

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