

## *The Spirituality of the Gospels*



THE  
SPIRITUALITY  
OF THE  
GOSPELS

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*To Fiona  
and to my mother  
and  
in memory of  
my father*



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## PREFACE

The immediate origin of this book was an invitation to deliver four lectures at the Vacation Term for Biblical Studies at St Anne's College, Oxford, at the end of July 1991. Having studied and taught the gospels for about ten years, the invitation to deliver four lectures suggested immediately that I devote one lecture to each gospel. I thought it would be worthwhile to try to convey to the best of my ability what I had come to understand each of the canonical gospels to be *really* about. A naïve intention, of course—especially when the study of any single text or passage or theme in the gospels is virtually inexhaustible, and more and more monographs are being written from ever-increasing points of view on smaller and smaller pieces of text!

Nevertheless, there is something to be said for taking stock every now and then, and for standing back and getting the wider view of the whole. In particular, because the gospels are written from faith for faith, it seems legitimate to try to grasp what they are saying about life under God or life lived in response to the sense of the presence of God—specifically, the presence of God revealed in Jesus Christ through the Spirit. So I entitled the lectures, *The Spirituality of the Gospels*. I am much indebted to the Committee of the V.T.B.S. for extending the invitation and for the marvellous care and hospitality the members showed to me during the conference itself.

But my debts for this my first book go much further. Amongst my New Testament teachers in three universities, I would mention particularly Edwin Judge, Robert Banks, David Catchpole and Graham Stanton. Then must come the students I have taught at Bishop Otter College and the Theological College in Chichester, at Salisbury and Wells Theological College in Salisbury, and now at the Department of Theology in the University of Durham. At

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Salisbury, I was encouraged and enabled to make connections between academic biblical study and the life of a worshipping community of ordinands and their families. That is where spirituality and the concept of spiritual formation became important to me. Here I would acknowledge especially the friendship and stimulus of Trevor Dennis, Ruth Siddals, Alan Gregory and Nicholas Bradbury, and the support of the then Principal, Reginald Askew. Since coming to Durham, I have been very privileged to work in such a graceful environment and such a lively theology department. To Ann Loades and to the university authorities, thanks are due for the sabbatical term which made possible the writing of these lectures. Jimmy Dunn and Sandy Wedderburn have been extremely supportive colleagues in New Testament Studies and in the intricacies of computing. Walter Moberly has encouraged me most to take seriously the fact that the gospels are a central part of what Christians call 'Holy Scripture' and have their true place in enlivening and sustaining communities of faith. These lectures owe a lot to his critical eye and to conversations with him. Special thanks are due also to Leslie Houlden and Gordon Mursell, for their friendship, their own writing in the area of biblical spirituality and for giving these lectures a critical reading.

To George Hepburn and Jan McGregor, who allowed the Barton family to mind their house and dog over the Easter vacation of 1991, when the lectures were given their penultimate form, many thanks. Nor could I fail to mention with deep gratitude my parents-in-law Stanley and Gladys Giltrap, and also Richard and Clare Firth, Sue Bowder and all the members of St John's Church, Neville's Cross, whose practical and spiritual support during an extended period of serious illness in the family allowed life to go on almost as normal. Above all, however, I would like to thank my wife, Fiona, our four children, Anna, Thomas, Joseph and Miriam, and my father and mother, George and Nancy Barton. Unfortunately, my father died before seeing this book. It is to Fiona and my mother and the memory of my father that the book is dedicated.

*Stephen C. Barton*  
Durham  
Lent 1992

## INTRODUCTION

What is Christian spirituality? For some, especially in the Catholic tradition and those influenced by it, spirituality is about prayer, meditation, confession, making retreats, and ascetical practices such as fasting; and it is where a spiritual director properly trained in the disciplines of the soul plays an important role. For others, perhaps from a more Protestant tradition, spirituality is basically about the joyful experience of justification and conversion along with their consequences for ethics and daily discipleship, and intimations of the cloister or the idea of priestly direction in the life of the soul have little appeal. Each of these models—sketched all too superficially, of course—has its strength and profundity, as well as its shortcomings. The ‘Catholic’ model is strong in its tradition of withdrawal and in its long practice of the spiritual disciplines, but weak perhaps in its ability to translate its vitality beyond the sphere of the cloister and the full-time ‘religious’. The ‘Protestant’ model is strong in its ability to engage lay people in their life in the everyday world, but weak perhaps in its disparagement of tradition, ‘religion’ and the mystical, and in its tendency towards activism and individualism.

The study which follows works with neither of these models and, instead, tries to go behind them to a biblical understanding—maybe in a way which will speak to those who identify with one or the other, or with a different model altogether. In simplest terms, spirituality as I use it in this book has to do with *the sense of the divine presence and living in the light of that presence*. There are two basic aspects therefore: knowing and being known by God, on the one hand, and responding with the whole of life, on the other.<sup>1</sup> To put it another way, spirituality has to do with life under God: and for Christians, it has to do

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specifically with life under the God who is revealed in Jesus and who graces believers with the Spirit. Clearly, this is a much broader definition of Christian spirituality than those described above. It is not, however, without its points of contact with both the 'Catholic' and the 'Protestant' approaches. Its advantage for this study of the gospels is that it does more justice to the originating moment' which they re-present, as we shall see.

The four gospels are classic expressions of Christian spirituality. That is the central theme of this book. They are shaped through and through by a sense of the presence of God in Christ, and they are deeply serious attempts to re-envision the whole of life in response. Thus, for *Matthew*, Jesus is 'God with us' (Matt. 1.23), and life as the Israel of God and as the children of Abraham can never be the same again. The sense of fulfilment, of history at a turning-point, is overwhelming. In Jesus, the Son of God, heaven and earth have touched for salvation and judgment, and God's new people are brought into being to live as 'the light of the world' (Matt. 5.14). The message of *Mark*, similarly, is 'gospel', the 'good news' of Jesus Christ and of the coming of the reign of God (cf. Mark 1.1, 15). Above all, and most paradoxically, the sense of the divine presence is manifest in the messiah's cry of forsakenness on the cross (Mark 15.33–39). In consequence, the way of faith is the way of the cross which no true disciple may avoid. In *Luke-Acts*, too, there is a strong sense of 'the way' (cf. Luke 9.51ff.; Acts 9.2). Here, it is the joyous pilgrim way opened up by Jesus and his apostles in the power of God's Spirit. To go that way demands faith, repentance and perseverance. But the sense of God's presence is all-pervasive—in 'signs and wonders' and other revelations of divine power from beginning to end—so the ultimate outcome is not in doubt. Then there is the *Fourth Gospel*. And do we not have here pre-eminently a work vibrant with the testimony of witness after witness to the glory of God made known in Jesus the Son (cf. John 1.14)? And is not this extended meditation on God-in-Christ at the same time also an invitation to have 'eternal life' by believing in the Son and being 'born again' (cf. John 3)?

This is to anticipate what is to come in the succeeding chapters. But by doing so, I want to show that to inquire into the spirituality of the gospels is an appropriate thing to do. Indeed, perhaps it is the *most* appropriate thing to do especially if, as I

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would claim and as is recognized widely, the gospels are 'faith documents' from start to finish—written expressions of profound encounters with the divine, intended to mediate those experiences to others as the basis for faith, repentance and new life. The opening sentences of 1 John are apt evocations of what we find in the gospels and how we should come to them: 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life . . . that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you . . .'

 (1.1–3).

Obviously, it is possible to read the gospels (or any of the biblical texts) for a variety of purposes. For instance, the gospels can be read as historical sources, where the aim is to see what light these ancient documents cast on Palestine under Roman occupation, the life of Jesus of Nazareth, the origins of Christianity, the beliefs and practices of the early church, and so on. This is a perfectly legitimate way of reading and has a distinguished pedigree. To some extent, the reading which I am going to give of the gospels is a reading which takes for granted an historical commitment of this kind. For I too am concerned to engage in an interpretation of the meaning of the gospel texts in their historical context, to describe with as much historical sensitivity as I can how the four evangelists envisaged life under God in the light of the coming of Christ. Furthermore, within the historical paradigm, the findings of redaction criticism—the investigation of the meaning of the gospel texts in their final form as compositions of the respective evangelists—are crucial for the present study.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, historical investigation does not take us far enough. In particular, it tends to pay insufficient heed to the fact that the gospels are documents of the canon of Christian scripture held as sacred within the communities of Christian faith which scripture sustains and nourishes. Typically, historical method works by creating a critical distance between reader and text, whereas the expectation and hope of the believer is for inspiration and illumination in the life of faith, gained through a sympathetic proximity between reader and text. Awareness of this problem has led to attempts to take more seriously both the literary dimension of the gospels as texts to be read,<sup>3</sup> and also

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the canonical context of the gospels, including their contribution to the message of the canon as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

In general, the method of interpretation one applies to the gospels has to be appropriate to the purpose for which one is reading them. Historical aims require the application of historical methods, literary readings require the application of literary criticism, sociological study requires the application of models from the social sciences, and so on. The aim of this study is to describe and evaluate the spirituality of the gospels in their canonical context. Such a task is necessarily multifaceted. It therefore requires the use of a variety of methods and approaches—part historical, part literary, part sociological, part theological. Furthermore, while I am concerned in what follows to describe as accurately as possible how the four evangelists envisage life lived in response to the revelation of God-in-Christ, I am concerned also to evaluate it. For the Christian theologian, the tasks of description and evaluation go together. Otherwise it is not possible to appropriate the message of the gospels in a life-giving way for the church in each succeeding generation. Placing ourselves ‘under’ scripture is not the same as enslaving ourselves to it.

There is, in my view, good reason for an attempt to give an account of the spirituality of the gospels. First, the burgeoning literature on spirituality in general and on Christian spirituality in particular is testimony to the fact that spirituality is on the agenda, both at the popular and the scholarly levels.<sup>5</sup> The roots of this interest are complex. Factors of obvious relevance include: the continued questioning of the cult of enterprise and materialism in the West; the collapse of Marxist ideology in the East and the accompanying resurgence of Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christianity; dialogue and conflict between adherents of the world religions in multi-cultural societies; concerns about the environment, leading to the quest for more ecologically aware ways of being human; trends in popular culture, such as new religious movements, the ‘new age’ movement, and the like; and in the churches, the reawakening of interest in traditional spiritualities, the impact of the charismatic movement, the cry of the oppressed for a spirituality of liberation, and the quest for a feminist spirituality promoted by the women’s movement. A study of the spirituality of the gospels is timely, therefore, in view

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of this very widespread resurgence of interest in spirituality generally.

Second, surprisingly little has been written so far on the spirituality of the gospels, either taking each gospel as a unified whole or taking the gospels together in their contribution to the canon of scripture.<sup>6</sup> In historical-critical study of the gospels, the tendency is to break the text down into its constituent parts; and enormous energy is devoted to tracing the history of the formation of the tradition from its origins at the (hypothetical) oral stage to its final form as written text. This is valuable work, for it helps us to discern what the text means against the backdrop of the developments through which it may have passed. Unfortunately, however, there is a tendency for the meaning of the text as a whole in its final form to be lost sight of, and for the agenda of the historian to displace the theological and ethical concerns of the text itself or the concerns of the community of believers who hold the text as sacred scripture. On the other hand, within the churches, the common approach to the gospels in the quest for inspiration and guidance is to look for the 'purple passages' which speak with an apparent immediacy and vitality, the result of which is, once again, to fragment the gospel texts in a way which so easily loses sight of the larger whole. This tendency is exacerbated by common liturgical practice, where choices for the lectionary appear often to run counter to the natural shape of the biblical texts themselves.

A third reason for writing a book on the spirituality of the gospels is more personal. For four years I taught biblical studies at a theological college. My students were ordinands for ministry in the Church of England. Their goal was spiritual and ministerial formation within the Christian, and specifically, Anglican traditions. As a result, as one trained in the academic study of the Bible, I found myself being encouraged constantly to ask the question, how does this or that way of reading the text convey a sense of God, illumine the way ahead, inspire for the journey of faith, address the mission of the church in the world? If the Bible is a kind of 'love letter from God', as Christians believe, how best may we open it and be captivated by this text and its 'author'? In being encouraged to ask these questions on behalf of others, I came to ask them for myself. The 'quest of the historical Jesus' still excited me, questions about authorship and

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dating and place of writing remained important, debates over whether or not Jesus (or Moses or Paul) *in fact* did or said this or that, continued to engage my attention. At the same time, however, I came to ask more urgently and more personally, how may I so read the text that it becomes for me—for us—what has always been claimed for it: that it is *Christian scripture*, a fount and wellspring of truth for people of faith who long to know God and to do God's will in the world? To put it another way, how may my/our reading of the text become a coherent and integral part of the worship of God in all of life? It is questions such as these which have led me to ask after the spirituality of the gospels, in the belief that the gospels are works of spirituality themselves and may appropriately be read as foundations of and for Christian spirituality today.

It has occurred to me more than once in the writing of this book that I am not the best person to be doing it. I say this not from false modesty, but from an awareness that spirituality and the study of spirituality are inevitably self-involving,<sup>7</sup> and therefore, that the best spirituality is likely to be written by one who has progressed in the life of the spirit and life in the Spirit. Saint Paul put it this way: 'The unspiritual person does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one' (1 Cor. 2.14–15). For one reason or another—to do, no doubt, with factors of cultural background, education, upbringing, religious subculture, habits of mind, emotion and will, and so on—the reading of the gospels I give will be myopic at some points and blind at others. All I can do here is to acknowledge this fact and to try to incorporate an awareness of it into what I write.

### Notes

1. This is not an idiosyncratic definition by any means. For example, Gordon S. Wakefield, in his excellent essay on 'Spirituality' in *idem*, ed., *A Dictionary of Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 1983), pp. 361–3, defines it thus: 'This is a word which has come into vogue to describe those attitudes, beliefs, practices which animate people's lives and help them to reach out towards super-sensible realities.' And, speaking specifically of Christian spirituality, he says: 'Mutual



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indwelling with God in Christ is at once the means and the end; but this is a being caught up into the paschal mystery, not absorption into the infinite, and it cannot deliver us from the sometimes unbearable tensions, dangers and sufferings of "the world of action". Cf. also C. Garner's essay, 'What on Earth is Spirituality?', in J. Robson and D. Lonsdale, eds., *Can Spirituality Be Taught?* (London: ACATE and BCC, no date), pp. 1-8.

2. For a good recent account, see G.N. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). Part I is entitled, 'The Four Gospels', and the headings for each respective gospel are suggestive for spirituality—for Mark the heading is 'The Way of Jesus', for Matthew it is 'The Way of Righteousness', for Luke it is 'God's Way Triumphs', and for John it is 'I am the Way'.
3. See further, R.A. Culpepper, 'Story and History in the Gospels', *Review & Expositor*, 81 (1984), pp. 467-78; also R. Morgan with J. Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), chs.6-8; and, as one attempt, P. Grant, *Reading the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1989).
4. The major contributor here is Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (London: SCM Press, 1984).
5. See, for example, these three recent, substantial dictionaries/encyclopedias: G.S. Wakefield, ed., *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 1983); C. Jones, G. Wainwright, E. Yarnold, eds., *The Study of Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1986); and E. Cousins, ed., *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest* (New York: Crossroad, 1985ff.; and London: SCM Press, 1989ff.), which includes three volumes on Christian spirituality. A useful survey article is G.S. Wakefield, 'Recent Books on Spirituality and their Trends', *Epworth Review*, 14/3 (1987), pp. 92-7.
6. To take a few examples, Gordon Mursell's excellent book *Out of the Deep: Prayer as Protest* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989) devotes its first four chapters to the biblical literature, but the texts chosen are primarily from the Old Testament, and Jesus and the gospels come in for attention only in relation to Gethsemane and Golgotha, in a brief section on pp. 22-5. Similarly, Rowan Williams' recently republished, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990<sup>2</sup>) covers the New Testament suggestively, but only briefly, on pp. 4-14. C.P.M. Jones has a chapter on the New Testament in *The Study of Spirituality* (see note 5), pp. 58-89, but his discussion of the Synoptic Gospels is really about Jesus rather than about the spirituality of the gospels themselves, and his discussion of the Fourth Gospel is more a summary of scholarly findings about its message than an analysis of its spirituality. Closer to what I have done is Michael T. Winstanley's *Come and See: An*

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*Exploration into Christian Discipleship* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), but whereas he works synthetically, drawing upon material from all four gospels to address a particular theme, I take the four gospels one by one and only then try to draw together some common threads. Very suggestive for spirituality is J.L. Houlden's short study, *Backward into Light: The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus according to Matthew and Mark* (London: SCM Press, 1987), from which I have learnt much and try here to take further in relation to all four gospels.

7. Cf. Anthony de Mello, *The Song of the Bird* (Gujarat: Anand Press, 1982), pp. 12–13, on True Spirituality: 'The Master was asked, "What is Spirituality?" He said, "Spirituality is that which succeeds in bringing one to Inner Transformation."' "