



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Being Spiritual – Being Human

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In January of 1992, I was invited to teach a Sunday School class at Shallowford Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia on the general subject of spirituality. The title chosen was, “Being Spiritual – Being Human,” and, for six weeks – not long enough to really do it justice – we explored the subject.

It was obvious that those who attended the class were hungry to know more about their own spirituality and to grow spiritually. Maybe this is a widespread hunger. If it is, maybe further exploration of the subject is indicated. Hence, this paper.

Typically of me, the first step is to clarify meanings. So I ask, “When you read the title, what meanings come to mind?”

The class came up with quite a variety, often seeking to distinguish between being spiritual and being human. It was almost as if the title should read, “Being Spiritual Versus Being Human.” Somehow it seems, if one is spiritual, one is not human, and, if one is human, one is not spiritual.

However, for me, being spiritual and being human are one and the same thing.

Yes, I know. It is easy to hold that spiritual and human are opposites. There seems to be lots of evidence to support the position – even in the Bible. A contrast between flesh and spirit is often drawn, as well as between spirit and the world. For instance, you might read Matthew 6:19-33, or Romans 8:1-17, or Galatians 5:16-26 to see this.

When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane praying, and came back and found his disciples sleeping, one of his comments was, “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Matthew 26:41b).

Romans 7:25b, “So then, with my mind I’m a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.”

Colossians 3:2, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”

The Letter of James 4:4, “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to become a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.”

1 John 2:16, “For all that is in the world – the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches – comes not from the Father but from the world.”

Historically, the contrast is emphasized. Being human is almost invariably over against being spiritual. Being human is the explanation for being against God. Or for doing heinous or selfish things. Or for being hard-hearted and cruel. Or for acting unkindly and thoughtlessly. Or for generally displaying unsavory and unlovely behavior.

Being human is seldom seen as the ideal way to be, while being spiritual, or Godly, is.

How often you have heard the explanation, “Well, after all, I’m only human.” Making mistakes, forgetting, procrastinating, or failing can be excused because, “After all, I’m only human.” Interestingly enough, that sentence is never used to describe us when we do positive and constructive things. We see “only human” as at least undesirable if not downright negative or condemning. The implication is that if I want to be better, or more spiritual, I need to rise above my humanness.

This seems to be a typical point of view. Being spiritual and being human cannot be the same. Only, I want to make a case for their being the same. When I am being fully human, I am being spiritual. How can I support that statement?

Actually, it doesn’t appear to be all that difficult, but it does require me to accept a different point of view from the one that sees spiritual and human as opposites, or even sees spirituality as something to be achieved over, or in spite of, humanness.

“Isn’t it desirable to achieve spirituality – to become spiritual?” you may ask. And, I suggest that the answer is, “No. It isn’t a matter of being desirable or not. In fact, it isn’t even possible. It is the wrong question to be asking.”

“How can you say that?” you respond. “People come together to worship, study, and pray both to sustain the spirituality attained, and to become more spiritual, don’t they? People deny and reject their humanness in their efforts to be more spiritual, don’t they? What do you mean by saying it is neither desirable nor possible? Or that it is the wrong question?”

To explain, I turn again to the Bible, to the story of our creation. You know the story well. I suggest that you read it in Genesis 1:1-2:25, being especially attentive to the words, familiar as they are, while I summarize them here.

God is consistently described as spirit being – living being – wind – or breath – the very essence of life. And human beings are consistently described as having been created in the image of God, into whom God breathed the breath of life – the very spirit of God. It seems to me that it follows that human beings are spiritual beings. That’s how God has created us – you and me. Therefore, I conclude that being spiritual and being human are one and the same thing. And neither is to be achieved, since both describe the reality that we are – I am – already created in the image of God.

I am created a human being. I am created a spirit being. And I suggest that those aren’t two separate kinds of being, but one and the same. Neither humanness nor spirituality is something to be achieved. They are “givens,” and what I am about is to manifest my humanness – my spirituality – in this life- in my “here and now.”

This really isn’t such a unique point of view. It may not be common or typical as it has to do with spiritual and human, but it isn’t all that unique in our view of things.

For instance, I am a physical being. Paraphrasing the title of this paper, I might say, “Being Physical – Being Human.” Becoming a physical being isn’t something I do, or achieve. It is something I already am. I have no capacity not to be. Developing myself physically is something I do, or don’t do. Even if I don’t develop myself physically, I remain a physical being. That is inescapable.

In a like manner, I am an emotional being. I have feelings. I feel afraid or not. I feel secure or not. I feel angry or not. I feel helpless or not. I feel good, bad, up, down. I love. I hate. I am an emotional being. I have no capacity not to be. I do have capacity to work out how I manifest, or express, being emotional. I work out positive, appropriate ways – or I don’t. Even if I don’t, I remain an emotional being. That is inescapable.

Similarly, I am a mental being. I think. I observe. I survey and assess. I sort out and analyze. I reflect. I process. I come to conclusions. I decide on courses of reaction and action. I am a thinking being. It is how I am created. I cannot escape being a mental being.

So, my physical being, my emotional being, and my mental being are all involved in my being human. I am physical. I am emotional. I am mental. I am also spiritual. I am fully human. In my humanness, I express all these. I manifest my humanness. I become whatever kind of human being I become.

It follows, then, that I manifest being spiritual by being fully and really human. In me is the breath of life put there by God. In me, human being that I am, the spirit of God dwells. I suggest, therefore, that, if I want to express being truly spiritual, I do so by striving to be fully human as God has made me, as I have the capacity to be, and as God intends for me to be. Herein is the fullness of life.

I can distort my humanness in all sorts of ways. I have that freedom. I can make that decision. I can choose to be the worst kind of human being imagination can conceive.

I can also choose to be the kind of human being who manifests the unconditional love of God in the way I live my life. In so doing, I will be expressing my spirituality/humanness. If I make this choice, I set as my goal in life to grow continually as a human being, thereby expressing what it means to be in the very image of God. Thus, I grow continually as a spiritual being, as I express what it means to be in the image of God.

Let us say, then, that I choose to be the kind of human being who manifests the unconditional love of God in the way I live my life. How do I do that? What are my resources? How do I grow as a human/spirit being? It doesn’t “just happen”, does it?

No, it doesn’t just happen. If I am to grow, I must have food. Nourishment and nurture are essential.

I illustrate. My body is my body. No matter what, it is my body. The kind of body it is depends upon the food I eat, how much rest I get, and what I do in the way of exercising that either builds up and sustains – or doesn't. Without appropriate nurture, it remains my body, but without suitable growth and development.

So it is with my human/spirit being. If I am to grow spiritually, I undertake to be as wholly, completely human as I can be. I set about to keep moving toward my full potential as a human being. I set about to grow steadily in my understanding of the nature and expression of the being of God in my life. As I grow toward my full stature as a human being, I am growing spiritually also, for they are one and the same.

To do that, I have two main resources. One is to study the Bible, especially the part about Jesus, and the other is to observe and study human beings – including myself. Then, I put into practice what I learn, both about the nature of God and about expressing the nature of God in my own life.

Is it too high a goal to aim toward expressing the very nature of God in my life?

I think not. Rather, it is a statement of my ultimate potential as a human being. It is a consistent opportunity and challenge as I set about to do with my life whatever I choose to do with it. If, indeed, I seek to know and express the very nature of God in my life as a human being, I am doing what I am able to do to grow spiritually – to be in good health spiritually. I am being spiritual and being human.

What kind of human being do I want/choose to be? It is solely my choice.

Jesus both taught and practiced his full humanness. This is the kind of human being he was. He saw to it that he was nurtured in every way and gave full expression to his humanness. When I study his life and teachings, I am tapping the richest resource available to me to guide my development as a fully human being.

Presumably, Jesus grew up a typical Jewish child. He was a Jewish adult. However it came about, he seemed to have developed a strong sense of mission for his life. Human being that he was, it was not clear to him just how he was to go about living that mission. To find out, he went into the wilderness – he went off alone – to come to grips with the issue. He knew that he needed to think, pray, search, and, finally, decide how to give full stature to his humanness in the image of God.

On many other occasions, Jesus acted on his need for the nurturing that prayer and meditation gave him. He went off alone to pray. Having thus fed and renewed himself, he was able to continue to express his potential as the human being in the image of God that he was.

I, too, need the nurturing that prayer and meditation give if I am to reach toward my potential as a human being in the image of God.

Jesus taught many things having to do with everyday life – with the situations people encounter, the decisions we have to make, and the actions with which we respond.

There was Nicodemus, who was so insecure that he came to Jesus in the dead of night lest he incur negative reactions from his peers. Jesus intrigued him. Could the things he had heard from Jesus' lips be true? "Born again?" What could born again mean? Was Jesus teaching a basic understanding and outlook on life? Was he suggesting that I, too, need to strive to be clear about who I am, about my goals in life, and about the principles by which I live?

There was the woman at the well in Sychar, Mary and Martha, the scribes and Pharisees, the troubled people who came to Jesus for some kind of help, the disciples themselves. In his encounters with all these, he expresses what it means to be fully human after the likeness of God himself.

There is the Sermon on the Mount, all the many parables, the things Jesus said to his disciples. They teach me. They speak to the kinds of situations in which I find myself. They point up what it means to be human in the fullest sense of the word.

And there are all the things Jesus did, the clear beliefs, values, attitudes, and priorities that governed his life. What do they disclose to me about my priorities, attitudes, values, beliefs and actions? What outlook on life do they suggest?

If I aspire to the full spiritual/humanness of Jesus, I study his actions and words to learn what he believed, and what his values, attitudes and priorities were. I get in touch with my own beliefs, values, attitudes, and priorities. I compare them with those of Jesus. I validate them for me – or I don't.

If I find my beliefs, values, attitudes, and priorities are different from those of Jesus, I have a decision to make. I must decide to accept his or mine. Given that my goal is to manifest the very nature of God in my life, and that I believe Jesus has attained such a goal, it follows that I would see his beliefs, values, attitudes, and priorities as the ones appropriate for me. I would choose them and express them in my life. It would seem reasonable for me to be compassionate and merciful, to feed the hungry, visit the sick and imprisoned, turn the other cheek, forgive, love my enemies, and to be whatever else I learned that Jesus was.

Some of what Jesus lived and taught is, to say the least, challenging to incorporate – maybe even difficult to understand in the light of typically expressed beliefs and values. How can I turn the other cheek when I have been struck? How can I love my enemies when they are clearly out to destroy me? How can I forgive those who spitefully use me? How can I be loving and forgive those who spitefully use me? How can I be loving and merciful and compassionate when people are using and abusing me? How could I forgive those who do deliberately destructive things to me? How could I possibly stand before those who have the power to destroy my body, and not use my power to

keep them from doing so?

How can I allow myself to understand that the highest goal in life is to, like Jesus, remain true to my decision to express unconditional love in all that I do and say? Where do I find the strength to do this?

The second resource to enable me to move toward being wholly and completely human – and so spiritual – is to learn from people, including myself.

Here we are, human beings, encountering life each day however we do. And we cover the whole range of human behavior, and of reasons for doing so. They're all there to be observed, studied, and emulated, or not. Through them, I learn about the ways human beings are being human.

I can go with the contrast so often made between being human and being spiritual. I can see all the unsavory and unlovely behavior of people. I can see, over and over, all the ways not to be if I am truly a human/spiritual being. Like being carping or critical. Or gossipy. Or forgetting. Or failing at a task. Or being cold-hearted and cruel.

Examples are abundant of people doing decidedly unspiritual things, and having decidedly unspiritual beliefs and attitudes. Observing – studying – them, I learn how not to be if, as a human being, I express being spiritual.

I can go with the belief that human beings are, indeed, spiritual beings. I can see, over and over, all the ways to be if I am truly a human/spiritual being. I can see people being merciful and compassionate. And feeding the hungry. And visiting those who are sick and in prison. And helping people to have clothes and shelter. I can see people loving enemies, turning the other cheek, standing for what they believe even when their very life is threatened. I can see people being spiritual as they go about being quite human.

Isn't that interesting? I've come full circle. Read Matthew 25:34-41. Hear Jesus say, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." I know how to live the life of a person created in the image of God.

And I remind myself over and over that I am never alone. I cite just three of the many passages of scripture that reassure me that I am not alone as I give expression to being a spiritual/human being.

Jesus said to his disciples in a final discussion with them, "I you love me, you will keep my commandments, and I will ask the father, and he will give you another advocate, to be with you forever. This is the spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you." (John 14:15-17)

And then on the day of Pentecost, we are told, "All of them were filled with the

Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” (Acts 2:4)

Paul wrote to the Romans, “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” (Romans 8:15-17)

I am never alone. I am never without support. God, the Holy Spirit, is always with me.

I sum it all up. Human being that I am, I am a child of God. The spirit of God is in me. Since I have established who I am, it follows that, in my living, I express who I am. I commit to my growth as a human being.

And that means that I also grow as a spirit being.

I like that.

(The quotes from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version)