

## And What does it mean to be Spiritual?

What do we mean when say, “*I think he is a very spiritual man*”? Or, “*She is not very spiritual*”? Is “*being spiritual*” equated with being a Christian? Or, can we be more or less “*spiritual*”? Is being “*spiritual*” something to which we all should aspire?

In seeking to answer those questions I wish to approach the subject in three ways. First, I want to examine the meaning of the term “*spiritual*”. Next, I will assess its significance within the biblical context. Finally, consider its relevance for the Christian life.

### 1. What does the term “*spiritual*” mean?

This is one of those words that has slipped into Christian usage, about which, however, most of us know very little - least of all in its NT sense. If asked to give an explanation of our use of the term it is probable that we would not know how.

The adjective “*spiritual*” in the Greek is πνευματικός (pneumatikos) which is only a NT term and is not found in the OT LXX. The word belongs to a class of adjectives in the Greek ending in ἰκός (ikos) which are formed from the nouns to which they correspond bearing the meaning of, “*belonging to; concerned with*”. We understand, therefore, that πνευματικός (pneumatikos) “*spiritual*” is an adjective derived from the noun πνεῦμα (pneuma) “*spirit*”. Thus the word “*spiritual*” means *belonging or concerning the “spirit”*.

In our definition of this term we arrive at this conclusion; “*spiritual*” has something to do with the Holy Spirit. “*Spiritual*” is not a term referring to our spirits in contrast to our physical bodies. It is a direct reference to the “*Spirit*”, namely the “*Holy Spirit*”. However we interpret or use this term it must be within the context of the Person and operation of the Holy Spirit Himself. To be “*spiritual*”, therefore, has something to do with our relationship to the Holy Spirit.

### 2. “*Spiritual*” in the biblical context

The adjective is used in various ways when referring to people. We read in 1 Corinthians 3:1 that Paul had difficulty describing the Church as “*Spiritual*”; he states, “*Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly-- mere infants in Christ*”. The interesting feature here is that in chapter 1:7 he congratulated them on not lacking any “*spiritual gift*”. Indeed, a cursory glance at chapters 12 and 14 shows that in their worship they were queuing up to express their gifts and Paul had to call for “*order*” and control. How could Paul, then, address them as not being “*spiritual*” and whilst it would appear they were experiencing the gifts of the Spirit in great measure? I suggest that this is an indication that the ability to practice the gifts of the Spirit is not sufficient to prove that someone is “*spiritual*”.

Paul again refers to the “*spiritual*” person in 1 Cor 14:37, “*If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should.....*”. It seems as if in this verse Paul is equating being “*spiritual*” with the ability to exercise the gifts of the Spirit, and in this case being a “*Prophet*”. However, there seems to be an element of doubt about the level of their spirituality in the use of the phrase, “*if anyone thinks...*”. The meaning here is, “*if anyone is of the opinion that he or she is spiritual; considers himself to be spiritual*”. This, of course, would reflect back on his complaint that he could not speak to them as “*spiritual*” (3:1) due to their immaturity.

Another reference to the use of “*spiritual*” in relation to people comes in Galatians 6:1, “*Brothers if anyone is caught in any transgression; you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness*”.

There are many other references to “*spiritual*” some of which refer to holy lifestyle (Romans 8); worship (Eph 5:19, Col 3:16), and gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 14:1).

If we conclude that being “*spiritual*” has some direct connection with the Holy Spirit then we are introduced to a very important issue. In the first place, every Christian must be “*spiritual*” because they are “*born of the Spirit*” (John 3:3) and have the indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19) and if we do not have the Spirit “*we do not belong to Him*” (Romans 8:9).

However, it would appear from 1 Cor 3:1 that our level of spirituality can increase and decrease; that being spiritual is a matter of degree. The Corinthians had the gifts of the Spirit but unfortunately their lives were far from being “*spiritual*” in terms of sanctification. They thought themselves to be “*spiritual*” but were in danger of becoming radically “*un-spiritual*” through their behaviour.

One assumes from the statement in Ephesians 5:18 “*be filled with the Spirit*” that one can be filled with the Spirit to a lesser or greater degree, otherwise Paul’s exhortation would be meaningless. From the accounts of the apostles in Acts it seems as if there were special occasions when they were “*filled with the Spirit*” as they faced certain situations (Acts 4:8, 13:9). Given that being “*spiritual*” refers to ones degree of association with the Holy Spirit, being “*spiritual*”, therefore, can signify being “*filled with the Spirit*”.

Furthermore, expressing the gifts of the Spirit is a sign of being “*spiritual*”. Within 1 Cor 14:1 “*...earnestly desire the spiritual gifts...*” Paul does not use the normal Greek word for “*gifts*” but πνευματικά (pneumatika), “*spirituals*”; meaning, “*things that are spiritual, things of the Spirit*”. The translators are correct in rendering it as “*spiritual gifts*” as this is clearly what Paul is speaking about. We have already noticed in chapter 14:37 that Paul describes a person who uses the gifts as being “*spiritual*”.

Within our Bibles it is important to realise that chapter numbers and verse numbers were not in the original Greek text. Sometimes chapter numbers are placed wrongly. This is the case with Galatians 6:1 which should be joined to the passage that runs from 5:16. In 5:16 and 25 Paul urges his readers to “*walk by the Spirit*”, and in 5:18, be “*led by the Spirit*”. He then enumerates the “*fruit of the Spirit*” 5:22.

When he comes to use the phrase, “*you who are spiritual*” in 6:1, it makes sense to think of “*spiritual*” as a person who is walking and being led “*by the Spirit*” and showing the “*fruit of the Spirit*”. Being “*spiritual*” therefore, relates closely to our sanctification and holiness of life. There are various levels and degrees within sanctification. Some Christians are more advanced and more mature than others.

### **3. “*Spiritual*” and the Christian life**

I suggest that being “*spiritual*” from a biblical perspective simply refers to our relationship with the Holy Spirit. As every Christian has to be regenerated and have the indwelling Spirit, it follows that every Christian by definition must be “*spiritual*”. But, it would appear that being “*spiritual*” is closely related to our development and growth as Christians. We can be more “*spiritual*” or less “*spiritual*” as we either mature in our association with the Holy Spirit, or backslide into sinful practices. As we grow in sanctification and display the fruit of the Spirit more keenly; are found walking by the Spirit and being led by the Spirit, and experiencing something of the gifts of the Spirit, so we become more “*spiritual*”.

“*But*”, you ask, “*How does one become less spiritual*”? This is achieved by our sins against the Holy Spirit. You will notice that I did not say, “*the sin against the Holy Spirit*”. I am not referring to the “*unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit*”. I am speaking of three types of sins that are

forgivable but, in my opinion, are nevertheless very serious and will detrimentally affect our “*spirituality*”.

These sins against the Holy Spirit comprise, “*grieving the Spirit*” (Eph 4:30); “*quenching the Spirit*” (1 Thess 5:19), and “*resisting the Spirit*” (Acts 7:51). All three areas encompass every known sin (other than the unforgivable sin against the Spirit). As a consequence of our disobedience, transgression and sin, we fly in the face of the Holy Spirit and dishonour Him by grieving, quenching and resisting Him. Now, all these sins are forgivable, but their practice reduces our level of “*spirituality*”. Such behaviour, I believe, prompted Paul to say in 1 Cor 3:1, “*Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly-- mere infants in Christ*”. In the light of chapter 1:7 where he states that they do not lack any of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, being “*spiritual*” cannot be confined to the demonstration of these gifts. Gifts without sanctification does not equal spiritual maturity.

Let us all aspire to be mature in being “*spiritual*” and not be content with immaturity. Use all the means at our disposal to honour, obey and please the Holy Spirit so that there is a deeper quality to the level of our own “*spirituality*”. I suggest that a Spirit led lifestyle is closer a biblical definition of what it is to be “*spiritual*”.

In Romans 8:5-6 Paul expands on the meaning of “*spiritual*”. He says, “*For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace*”.

To be “*spiritual*” is to “*set the mind on the things of the Spirit*”. We might call this being, “*spiritually minded*”. Being “*spiritual*” begins with the mind; the inner thoughts; the disposition, and the particular perspective we have on life. From the mind it flows into the body and from the body into practice, behaviour and conduct.

What are “*the things of the Spirit*” (Rom 8:5)? They constitute “*...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*”.

Richard Lee