



## **PUBLICATIONS--Manna: Food for the Journey of Spirituality**

### **Articles**

#### **Surrender: The Essence of Authentic Spirituality**

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Spirituality is a subject that is much in vogue today. In Sunday afternoon conversations around the tables at the local coffee bar, we may hear someone describe themselves as being very "spiritual" without explaining exactly what that means. Or we may hear someone say they are "spiritual" but not "religious." Again, we are never quite sure what their words imply. Many baby-boomers, still shaking their aging fists at the establishment, describe themselves as "spiritual" persons who are suspicious of "organized religion."

Nevertheless, though "spirituality" is a popular topic of discussion, there is much confusion about the nature of spirituality in contemporary society. The new age movement, pop psychology, and the influx of eastern religions into western society have led many down false paths that lead away from the realm of true spirituality. To be sure, in our overly-individualistic culture, many persons have developed their own personal, idiosyncratic approach to God. They have found the spiritual path that "feels right" to them and "works" for their particular lifestyle. Sadly, however, many have merely chosen a "path to God" that is nothing more than a compilation of spiritual practices based on personal tastes and preferences. This type of "spirituality" is very attractive because it allows self, not God, to remain in charge of one's life.

Like pop spirituality, popular Christianity--with its emphasis on health, wealth, and other externals--has lead many away from the realm of authentic Christian spirituality. For many Christians, spirituality is reduced to mere externals. The spiritual life is measured in terms of duties done, rules obeyed, and effort expended to gain the approval of God and others. I refer, of course, to the many forms of legalism that plague today's Christianity. All too often we are told that if we pray harder, read the Bible more, strive for greater obedience, and increase our giving, we will find the path to God. While each of these things may be commendable (when motivated by love), many fail to realize that we serve a God who longs not for the effort of our duty, but for our love freely given (to paraphrase George MacDonald). Sadly, rather than encouraging a mature relationship with God based on reciprocal love, much modern Christianity has reduced spirituality to rules, not relationship, with the implication that spirituality is measured by performance.

Authentic spirituality is neither about self (as in New Age thinking) nor about performance (as in much modern Christianity). True spirituality can accurately be encapsulated in a word quite familiar to those who participate in support groups based on the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics

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*Surrender: The Essence of Authentic Spirituality Continued...*

Anonymous. I am referring, of course, to surrender, a process that is described in the Twelve Steps as “turning our wills and our lives over to the care of God.” Twelve-Steppers often describe surrender with pithy, spiritually potent slogans like “letting go and letting God” or “turning it over to God.” The “Big Book” of A.A. accurately captures the essence of surrender with the prayer, “Relieve me of the bondage of self that I may better do thy will.”

Surrender is not only a recurring theme in the Twelve Steps; surrender is a theme that runs like a vital thread throughout the New Testament. Jesus said, “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it” (Luke 9:24). According to the Lord Jesus Christ, surrender means losing our lives in service of God. Furthermore, the great prophet John the Baptist expressed surrender quite simply and to the point. He said, “He (Jesus) must become greater; I must become less” (John 3:30). The apostle Paul also captured the essential idea of surrender. He said, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live” (Gal. 2:20).

This teaching runs throughout the New Testament because it is the essence of the spiritual life. Self must die so that something better can take its place. In Christian terms, the sinful nature with its selfish desires dies and we become “new creations” in Christ. In Twelve-Step terms, we turn our wills and our lives over to the care of God.

To be sure, surrender is a vital aspect of eastern religions such as Buddhism and Taoism. We see the general idea in the Zen saying, “On the withered branch the blossom grows.” Yet this aspect of eastern thinking is often obscured when presented in the more palatable forms designed for western tastes. Thus while surrender is important in eastern thought, it appears to play little part in the contemporary “new age” spirituality that derives from it.

In reality, the many brands of new age "spirituality" on the market today are more about self than about God. Many moderns are nothing more than spiritual window shoppers moving from one form of "spirituality" to another, depending on what's in vogue at the moment. They choose the spiritual practices that fit their lifestyles and ignore those that don't—a kind of cafeteria plan for contemporary spirituality: pick what you like and pass by the rest. This kind of "spirituality" is very appealing to many today because it allows self to remain in charge; that is, I decide what's right for my personal tastes and lifestyle. Nevertheless, spirituality that is about self and its desires is no spirituality at all! True spirituality, the kind that involves surrender to God, is not a hobby to be engaged while talking with other "seekers" at the corner Starbucks. Authentic spirituality is about dying to self—not discovering self or exploring our spiritual personality profiles. Quite frankly, real spirituality will likely never be popular with today's “me generation.”

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### *Surrender: The Essence of Authentic Spirituality Continued...*

Contrary to the self-focused “spirituality” of contemporary society, surrender is the process of moving from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness. As George MacDonald wrote, God gives his children selves, with their wishes and choices, that they may have the true offering to lay upon the true altar; for on that altar nothing else will burn than selves.” That is what surrender is all about: the sacrifice of self-will to Divine will. That is the essence of authentic spirituality.

In his typically articulate fashion, C. S. Lewis described the process of surrender as follows:

*There must be a real giving up of the self. . . .As long as your own personality is what you are bothering about, you are not going to Him at all. The very first step is to try to forget about the self altogether. Your real, new self. . . will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for Him. . . . The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day . . . Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in. \**

The fourth-century Christian thinker Augustine captured the whole matter quite succinctly. He said that we must choose between two alternatives: "love of self till God is forgotten or love of God till self is forgotten." That's what it all boils down to. That is surrender—and that is what authentic spirituality is all about.

(For an in-depth study of “surrender,” see chapter 6 of my book, *Ashes into Gold: The Journey of Spirituality*, available at [www.mannabooks.org](http://www.mannabooks.org).)

\*C.S. Lewis, *A Year with C.S. Lewis: Daily Readings from His Classic Works*, Edited by Patricia S. Klein (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 219.