

Spiritual alone?

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We've been hearing for a while now about the "spiritual but not religious." There are all kinds of reasons why people might rather be spiritual than religious.

One is that the church has turned people off with its own mistakes. Some of these mistakes have been not just embarrassing but shameful, unconscionable: child sex-abuse scandals, the burning of copies of the Qur'an, the condoning of slavery, white churches' slow response to the civil rights movement. Given this record, it is understandable that people would reject the church. After all, we do need to be discriminating about the groups with which we affiliate, especially when they call forth from us our trust and loyalty.

Like every other institution, of course, the church is a human institution. In the church we are stuck with one another, just as in a family. And just as our family members know all too well our strengths and our shortcomings, church members also get an up-close view of human weakness.

So it may be that when some people decide they are spiritual but not religious, what they need is a break from all the people in the church. I worry that after this break, they won't return to a faith community of any sort. I worry about this not because I am concerned about the fate of the church or want to defend it, but because I suspect that this SBNR identity is just a step on the way toward a "neither spiritual nor religious" identity.

What does it mean to be spiritual? We use the term in different ways. Sometimes we describe people as deeply spiritual because they seem to be in touch with a higher power. Sometimes it refers to extroverted, charismatic, ecstatic behavior in worship. Sometimes we assign the term to introverted, meditative people.

The term spiritual seems to have held multiple meanings for early Christians as well. In this week's epistle reading, the Corinthians' assembly has presented an opportunity for some members to display the spiritual gifts of which they are evidently proud, in particular the gift of speaking in tongues. Paul writes to clear things up about what it means to be spiritual.

First of all, the Spirit is a gift of God to the church. It is what God gave at Pentecost when the church came into existence. It is a gift for the people of God--not as individuals, but as a community. Paul says the gift of the Spirit, however it manifests itself in the various abilities of church members, works for the good of the community.

Paul wants the Corinthians to understand what the Spirit of which he speaks, the Spirit by which the church was formed, has as its goal: wholeness of community. On this definition of being spiritual, it would be misguided for people to show off their individual spiritual endowments, building rivalry rather than unity. On this definition, it would also be misguided for people to think that they can be spiritual when they are absent from a community of faith. On this definition, "spiritual but not religious" is just one small step away from "neither spiritual nor religious."

Darn. Double darn. Haven't we all, at one time or another, considered being spiritual but not religious? Haven't we all wished that it were truly an option? There are many reasons people feel this way, and each deserves its own attention. But no matter a person's motivation, some basic information about the Spirit and spiritual things applies.

Though the Spirit may blow where it will, its work consists of binding people together heart to heart and hand to hand. Its work takes place where people are together, where people are committed to sticking it out and sticking around. Churches are full of such people. I suspect that they remain in the church because, though the sorrow and pain they feel may be great, the trust they have in the Spirit is greater.

By the Spirit's power, great things can happen. Consciences can be pricked and then driven. Hearts can be moved and then motivated. Someone else's problem can

becomes everyone's prayer, and the message of a lone prophet can become a movement for all people. This is when we know the Spirit is at work.

Paul wants us to understand clearly that while it is possible to be religious but not spiritual, the opposite is not possible. That's not how the gift of the Spirit operates. Once the Spirit is given, it demands giving and receiving, listening and talking, praying and caring, trusting, showing up, and sticking around.