# Developing an Adventist concept of spirituality

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*Spirituality* has been described as "a broad concept referring to the ways in which people seek, make, celebrate and apply meaning to their lives."[1] In a society with growing uncertainties and ample choices, people will need more time to reflect on the deep values that make life worth living, and it will be "increasingly difficult to determine precisely what spirituality means."[2]

The waters become muddied, though, when individuals use the term for almost any experience. For instance, Jerry Hall, the former long-term companion of Mick Jagger, supposedly said that natural childbirth was a spiritual experience, as she was watching her goddaughter being born. As is her love of poetry. As is her ability to forgive the press for what they say about her and Jagger.[3]

Spirituality means, then, different things to various people with the word often used in a vague and ambiguous way.[4] For some it's an undefined word with no clear meaning or with wide and loose significance,[5] a word that is "hardly more than a hint, a 'hint followed by guesses.' And the guesses proliferate exponentially."[6]

It has been argued that instability exists in what spirituality means.[7] Spirituality has become a "proliferation term" with a "clutter" definition.[8] One researcher, David Tacey, admits that a definition is difficult, "but we can talk around the subject and provide some hints and descriptions."[9]

## Interviews

While involved in research including 41 face-to-face interviews and 10 focus groups (totaling 78 people) among Adventists in Australia and New Zealand, I asked them to define *spirituality*. The question was direct: "How would you define a spiritual person?" The respondents' answers give us insight into their understanding and may help develop an Adventist concept of spirituality.

Most among those who responded had difficulty finding a ready answer. In focus groups, the concept tended to be bounced around the group, but even there, follow-up questions proved helpful in gaining a fuller response. The additional questions asked were if respondents knew someone they sensed was a spiritual person, and what was it about that person that made them view this person as "spiritual." These questions helped clarify their thoughts, and allowed them to express more freely why they thought certain individuals were spiritual.

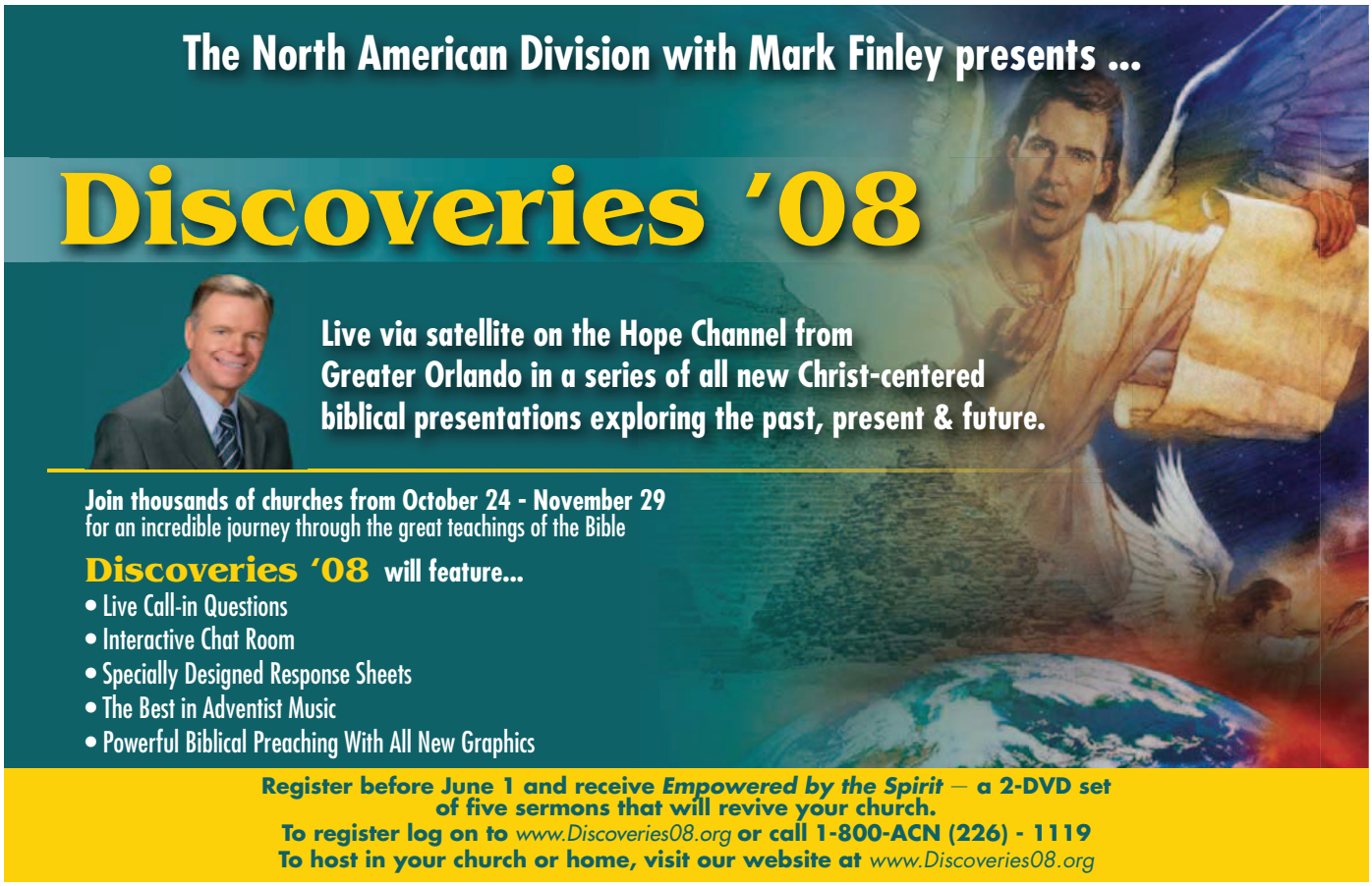
Responses weren't limited to concepts of spirituality within Adventism or Christianity. Four of those interviewed, and several in focus groups, spoke of spirituality or of a spiritual person within other religious bodies citing "Eastern religions," Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam as examples. Within Christianity, Mother Teresa and a pastor gained mention (the pastor, though, was mentioned only once as an illustration of one who did *not* demonstrate spirituality).

Surprisingly only eight individuals specifically linked spirituality to the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22–24). This seemed an obvious connection for people with biblical knowledge, although several referred to elements mentioned in Galatians, within the life of a spiritual person, but without making any direct link. In one focus group, when an individual responded that a spiritual person has the "fruit of the Spirit," another retorted, "What a cop-out!" Perhaps others felt the same way.

While respondents gave a variety of answers, their responses concerning demonstrations of spirituality may be gathered under three broad categories: demonstrations of spirituality through a connection with God, within the personal life, and through relationships with others.

## Spirituality through a connection with God

This concept was also expressed in terms of a connection or a relationship with Jesus. Because of the nature of this relationship, these demonstrations were subjective. They ranged from a spiritual person being one who believes




in God and has complete trust and dependence in Him, to having the sense that Jesus walks with them or that they walk close to God.

This relationship becomes personal and can be described in terms of a love relationship involving the heart, mind, and soul—one that is open, that places God first and central, and leads to obedience in response. This relationship has an impact on the life, with spiritual people knowing that God has changed their lives. They want to live the life Christ would live, and this leads to the "image of Christ" being reproduced in them or a reflection of God in their lives.

Respondents expected that there will be some excitement about this relationship and, when trouble arises, thoughts will turn immediately to God. A practical and measurable response will be found in a devotional life that includes prayer and Bible reading, which they understood as spending time with God every day.

## Spirituality within the personal life

As noted, an active devotional life was expected as a personal result of a spiritual connection with God. Other anticipated spiritual attributes may include humility, sincerity, tolerance, gentleness, compassion, integrity, and caring for others.

Spiritual people will be easygoing and cheerful, but firm when they need to be; they have their life "together." Their life will be an "open book." While you may recognize them as spiritual persons when you meet them or pick them out in a crowd by the way they speak, they will tend to go about quietly living saintly lives.

With the spiritual life of central importance to spiritual people, they will talk naturally about spiritual matters without making another person feel out of place. In fact, they will talk openly about their prayer life, devotional reading, and devotional life.

A sense of peace surrounds spiritual people including a consistency in their lives. They do not put on a "Saturday [Sabbath] face" that's different from the weekday face. They have a value system but are nonjudgmental and supportive of others. They stand up for what they believe, have high principles, but look honestly at their own battles and victories, and realize that Jesus has become the answer to their problems.

At the same time, they're able to recognize and accept failure in their own lives and in those of others. They have a deep appreciation of spiritual things—something you can see in them because it impacts everything they do. You feel good when you're with them because they make you feel inspired, a little closer to God.

## Spirituality in relationships with others

There are practical consequences to spirituality, said the respondents, because the love relationship with God becomes a priority and shows itself in practical ways in relationships with others. They saw spiritual people wanting to reach out to others as Jesus did.

Spiritual people won't be self-focused, but will have an active faith. They'll be seen doing more than praying. They'll be in tune with people around them and accept people as they are without being judgmental. They'll have a social consciousness and a passion for people and for helping others. They will

be a "blessing" to those with whom they come in contact, and active in their church. Spiritual people are practical in their faith and in what they do.

## More than hints and descriptions?

This composite picture painted by respondents idealizes spiritual people, making them nice to know (as one woman commented about a friend she knew as a spiritual person). She also noted a difference in everyone, with some more practical in demonstrating their spirituality—an important recognition that allows for differences within the experience and outworking of spirituality.

Having attempted to illustrate Adventist spirituality in this way leaves us with precisely that, an illustration, not a definition. Lacking definition, perhaps we have only briefly discussed the subject, dealing with it on a surface level. Perhaps one respondent was correct when she said of spirituality, "It's indescribable. It's something you can't define, but it's there."

This reflects several realities: spirituality remains for some Adventists a slippery concept without a set definition, which makes it difficult to construct an understood, concrete boundary. Unlike some of its theology, no distinctive Adventist understanding of spirituality exists.

Added to this, we have evidence that not much is distinctive between denominations in concepts of spirituality, or in the terminology used.[10] Finally, spirituality, as a relatively recent term within Protestant Christianity (in the past 50 years),[11] would be expected to rate lower than theology or lifestyle, which have far stronger traditions within the Adventist Church.

However, these responses may be able to help us begin to develop an Adventist understanding of spirituality. Of course, any concept of spirituality or spiritual formation must be biblically based, not founded on mere comments. What was fascinating about this research was that, although it was opinion-based, it generally points toward an underlying biblical theology that supports the "hints and descriptions" respondents gave.

## Developing an Adventist spirituality

I wish I could now unveil a model of Adventist spirituality with appropriate fanfare. That isn't going to happen. However, this biblical base stands as important for developing a Christian and Adventist understanding of spirituality. This takes it to a level more meaningful than that of Jerry Hall's understanding of self-actualization schemes that can pass for spirituality. The Bible remains essential for a Christian understanding of spirituality for it "reveals the God who is the subject, the object and the means of true spirituality."[12]

Eugene Peterson says the Bible is a great gift to "offer the world in all matters of spirituality."

> Tested against the reality of actual lives, [the Bible] turns out not to be another of many "guesses" about spirituality, but spirituality itself. Instead of reading *about* spirituality, getting careful definitions or elaborate descriptions of it, we come upon spirituality in action. Reading the Bible, we are immersed in the intricate tangle of human life as it is entered, addressed, confronted, saved, healed and blessed by the living God—God's Spirit breathed into human lives. Spirituality.[13]

Biblical spirituality remains grounded in something solid and outside ourselves. Having accepted the validity and authority the Bible brings, we can come to two immediate results. First, we can no longer claim every warm feeling as a spiritual experience in the biblical or Christian sense. Second, we discover within its pages spiritual disciplines that enhance Christian spirituality.

We can describe biblical spirituality as an experience and relationship as the human spirit to *the* Spirit—or, better expressed, "a magnificent choreography of the Holy Spirit in the human spirit. . . ."[14] Spiritual disciplines help build and strengthen this relationship. They assist in taking the relationship to a more consistent level than the occasional experiential encounters with God, and in creating a "room where Christ can invite us to feast with Him at the table of abundance."[15] For the Christian, biblical revelation and spiritual disciplines are something solid to work with in giving focus, direction, and methodology for developing a strong, personal God-related spirituality.

And because this concept concentrates on a personal relationship with God, it means there is no set formula for what will be the most meaningful for an individual—one size does not fit all. What proves to be a meaningful approach to God for one, may not work as well for another. While it's true that all Christians should be involved in spiritual disciplines such as prayer and Bible reading, not all will have the same impact.

## A model?

So, what could an Adventist model of spirituality look like? From the research there is a strong emphasis on what could be called "practical spirituality," or defined as spirituality demonstrated in action, in doing—a part of our heritage. We have tended to promote and applaud action. This will naturally be reflected in our approach to spirituality.

The following seven points are tentative starters that are disciplined based, and attempt to place Adventist teaching into the context of spirituality. I have intentionally avoided the use of terminology often associated with spirituality in an attempt to bring the topic into a plain-speak format.

*Relationships.* Biblical spirituality is bound up in our relationship with God. Christianity itself is about relationships. With God as the majestic Creator-Lord of the universe, we know Him also as the Father (a relational term). His Son (another relational term) lived, died, and rose from the grave so we might have hope and life. He gave believers the right to be called children of God (John 1:12). Siblings to the Savior, we're family. Love strengthens the family of God. Love spreads out from the family of God because, yes, Cain, we are our brothers' (and sisters') keeper. Therefore, both good deeds and the good news need to be shared. With building relationships classed as a discipline, the same kind of work needed to develop relationships within families and within

friendship groups is needed in developing a relationship with God.

*Worship.* God alone is worthy of worship. Revelation 14:7 describes His worthiness and our worship choices. Worship should be a spiritual discipline in both its private and corporate experience involving a variety of elements including praise and adoration, prayer, music, and the Word. It can be structured or unstructured. In worship, privately or publicly, God is the audience. We worship falsely when we become the center of worship—avoiding this takes great discipline.

*Communication.* God communicates through His Word and His Spirit. The spiritual disciplines of reading and listening, of journaling and meditation, of shouting (inwardly, if you prefer) and silence are all part of this communicative experience with God. Solitude can be helpful, but praying with a crowd can be just as effective. While some find it easy to "practice the presence of God" in everyday life, most have to set specific times.

*Time.* Adventists should be at an advantage here because of the Sabbath 24-hour time emphasis when we attempt "to become attuned to *holiness in time.*"[16] Taking the time, and not only on the Sabbath, may be the most difficult discipline of all because of the fast pace of life. Social researcher Hugh Mackay has discovered that families are reassessing family life. "In all this re-evaluation, *time* is of the essence! . . . Spouses speak of the need to take 'time out' to work on the repair and maintenance of their relationships."[17] We, as part of God's family, need time to maintain this relationship.

*Money.* Tithing, as the most obvious spiritual discipline involving money, in its true sense, recognizes a trust relationship with God. But it is so much more. Our giving and our spending and our resisting the temptations of materialism should fit into the context of the disciplined life. Ideally, we should make money a spiritual tool, perhaps as Rabbi Shawn Zevit sees it: "To obtain something is to create an exchange that leaves all parties feeling whole and holy in their comings and goings with each other. Money used as a spiritual tool in this way has the potential to leave everyone resting in a place of peace, of *shalom.*"[18]

*Witness.* Whether it's walking across the room to befriend a stranger, or witnessing on a street corner, or preaching an evangelistic sermon, rightly done, sharing about God is a spiritual experience. If it comes out of a relationship with Him, what we share comes out of our practical and spiritual experience.

*Present-future living.* We live in the present, but we can already taste the future with Christ because we're part of the family of God. Our hope for the future will impact how we live now. Our relationship with Him brings with it the desire to live a balanced, wholesome lifestyle for this type of lifestyle will lead to a balanced and wholesome spirituality—you can't divorce the physical and emotional from the spiritual.

As noted already, I've placed a strong emphasis on spiritual disciplines in my suggested approach to Adventist spirituality for within the disciplines we find something solid that can be used to develop a strong experiential relationship with God. There's nothing new here, it has been this way since the beginnings of Christianity[19] and grows naturally out of Old Testament teaching. It can be argued that without the disciplines there is no sustainable Christian spirituality, for while they do nothing of themselves, they "get us to the place where something can be done. . . . in the place where the change can occur."[20]

We will always have difficulty defining spirituality because, as an experiential term, it can be used to describe feelings of euphoria. Biblical spirituality brings the focus where it should be—away from us and on God. The spiritual disciplines give structure for developing a strong relationship with Him.

In the end, I've suggested that Adventist spirituality should fit within a biblical and holistic approach to Christianity—and that's all. There's something very Adventist about that concept. Then again, "the spiritual life is not one slice of existence but leaven for the whole loaf. . . . Spirituality is naturally holistic."[21] M

1 Philip Hughes et al., *Believe It or Not: Australian Spirituality and the Churches in the 90s* (Kew, Australia: Christian Research Association, 1997), 7.

2 Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 14.

3 Michael Raiter, *Stirrings of the Soul: Evangelicals and the New Spirituality* (Kingsford, Australia: Matthias Media, 2003), 74.

4 Paul Kurtz, "Spirituality, Neospirituality, and the Paranormal," in *Modern Spiritualities: An Inquiry,* eds. Laurence Brown et al., (Amhurst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1997), 223.

5 C. P. M. Jones, preface to *The Study of Spirituality,* eds. Cheslyn Jones et al. (London: SPCK Publishing, 1986), xxii.

6 Eugene Petersen, foreword to *New Testament Spirituality: True Discipleship and Spiritual Maturity,* by Michael Green and Paul R. Stevens (Surrey, United Kingdom: Eagle, Inter Publishing Service [IPS], 1994), vii.

7 Barry Brummett, "Rhetorical Epistemology and Rhetorical Spirituality," in *The Academy and the Possibility of Belief: Essays on Intellectual and Spiritual Life,* eds. Mary Louise Buley-Meissner et al. (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2000), 122.

8 Johann Roten, "The Marian Counterpoint of Postmodern Spirituality," in *Divine Representations: Postmodernism and Spirituality,* ed. Ann W. Astell (n.c., NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 104.

9 David Tacey, *Re-enchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* (Sydney, Australia: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), 17.

10 Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 13, 14.

11 It must be admitted, though, that *spirituality* now covers terms such as *piety* and *devotion,* which have fallen out of favor.

12 Michael Green and Paul R. Stevens, *New Testament Spirituality: True Discipleship and Spiritual Maturity* (Surrey, United Kingdom: Eagle, Inter Publishing Service [IPS], 1994), x.

13 Eugene Peterson, vii, viii.

14 Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 6.

15 Henri J. M. Nouwen, foreword to *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life,* by Marjorie Thompson, x.

16 Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 10.

17 Hugh Mackay, *Turning Point: Australians Choosing Their Future* (Sydney, Australia: Macmillan, 1999), 18.

18 Shawn Israel Zevit, *Offerings of the Heart: Money and Values in Faith Communities* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2005), xxv.

19 For instance, Jesus and the New Testament writers encouraged us to engage in such spiritual activities as prayer, worship, witness, coming apart, reading the Word, walking in the light, and loving God.

20 Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 6, 7.

21 Thompson, 15.

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