

Exchanged Life Spirituality

Grasping Our True Identity in Christ

Excerpt taken from "Conformed to His Image" Chapter 8 pages 101-104 by Kenneth Boa

Overview

Exchanged life spirituality concentrates on the reality of a new identity through the in-Christ relationship that can dramatically transform us as we progressively grasp it in our experience. It stresses that the spiritual life is not a matter of trying to do things for Jesus but of claiming and resting in what he has already done for us. This chapter sets the stage for this issue of identity by considering our God-created needs for love and acceptance, significance and identity, and competence and fulfillment.

Chapter Objectives

- A clearer sense of the principles involved in exchanged life spirituality
- An appreciation for God's character and this loving plan that flows out of his character.
- An understanding of our God-created needs for love and acceptance, significance and identity, and competence and fulfillment.

Note: This paper extracts only the first bullet point, i.e. "the principles involved in exchanged life spirituality."

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the growth of an experiential approach to the spiritual life that is based on the believers' new identity in Christ. Identification with Christ in his crucifixion and resurrection (Romans 6; Galatians 2:20) means that our old life has been exchanged for the life of Christ. This approach to spirituality moves from a works to a grace orientation and from legalism to liberty because it centers on our acknowledgement that Christ's life is our life.

When I was in seminary, I took a memorable course taught by Howard Hendricks on the spiritual life. In the first half of the course, he constructed a series of contrasts and emphasized that the spiritual life **is not**:

- a crisis but a continual process
- based on knowledge but on obedience
- external but internal
- automatic but cultivated
- the product of energy but of divine enablement
- a dream but a discipline
- a list of rules but a life relationship
- to be endured but enjoyed
- theoretical but intensely practical

In the second half of the course, Hendricks defined and developed the spiritual life as “the life of Christ reproduced in the believer by the power of the Holy Spirit in obedient response to the Word of God.” The personal and experiential apprehension of “the life of Christ reproduced in the believer by the power of the Holy Spirit” is central to what writers like Hudson Taylor, F.B. Meyer, and Charles Solomon have called the exchanged life. Others have called it the abiding life (Andrew Murray), the victorious life (Charles Trumbella and Bill Gillham), the highest life (Oswald Chambers), life on the highest plane (Ruth Paxson), the normal Christian life (Watchman Nee), the fullness of Christ (Stuart Briscoe), the saving life of Christ (Ian Thomas), the overflowing life (F.R. Havergal), the Christian’s secret to a happy life (Hannah Whitall Smith), the larger life (A.B. Simpson), and victory over the darkness (Neil Anderson).

Exchanged life spirituality concentrates on the reality of a new identity through the in-Christ relationship that can dramatically transform us as we progressively grasp it in our experience. This approach to the spiritual life commonly stresses a number of principles:

1. The substitution of Christ’s life for the self-life. Those who are in Christ have “laid aside the old self with its evil practices” (Colossians 3:9; Ephesians 4:22) and “have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him” (Colossians 3:10). This new self “has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Ephesians 4:24)
2. Our identification with Christ in his crucifixion, burial, resurrection, and ascension (Romans 6:2-11; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 2:5-6; Philippians 1:21; Colossians 3:1-4). The list of affirmations in chapter 2 illustrates the multifaceted nature of our new identity in Christ. Exchanged life spirituality stresses the in-Christ relationship and the importance of experiencing and expressing his life in us.
3. Our freedom from the law of sin and of death through the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:2) The key to our freedom from the power of sin is our co-crucifixion with Christ and the indwelling power of the Spirit. We are no longer under law but under grace (Romans 6:14)
4. We must know these truths, acknowledge them by faith to be true regardless of feelings to the contrary, and present ourselves to God as people who are alive from the dead (Romans 8:6-13). Although we may not feel this way, Scripture declares that in Christ, we have already become saints, children of light, and citizens of heaven (1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 5:8; Philippians 3:20).
5. The basis of our salvation is also the basis of our sanctification (Galatians 3:2-3; 5:5; Colossians 2:6). Just as we were justified by grace through faith, so we are sanctified by grace through faith. Good works are not attained by dependence on our own fleshly efforts, achievements, or merits; instead, they flow from the power of the Spirit of Christ who indwells us (Galatians 5:16-25).
6. Brokenness, or realizing the bankruptcy of our own resources and efforts, and unconditional surrender are part of the process of appropriating Christ as life (Romans 7:14-25; 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10; Galatians 5:24).
7. Only Christ himself can live the Christian life, and he does this in us and through us (John 15:1-8; cf. 2 Corinthians 2:14). As branches of the true vine, we do not create

- life, but we receive it through our connections with the vine. The new life that flows in and through us is displayed in the fruit we bear, and this fruit not only nourishes others but also contains the seeds of its own reproduction. This life is sustained by receiving and abiding as branches in Christ the vine.
8. It requires “a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him” for us to move from a cognitive to a personal and experiential knowledge of these spiritual truths (Ephesians 1:17-19; Colossians 4:9). The eyes or our hearts must be enlightened in order for us to grasp the nature of our new calling, inheritance, and power (Ephesians 1:18-19).
 9. The spiritual life is an inside-out rather than an outside-in process (Ephesians 3:16-19). The Father strengthens us “with power through His Spirit in the inner man” (Ephesians 3:16). In this way, sanctification is a divine-human dynamic in which our outworking (“work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12)) is an expression of God’s in-working (“for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13)).
 10. The exchanged life is not a matter of trying to do things for Jesus but of claiming and resting in what he has all ready done for us (Galatians 2:20). The new nature we possess in Him is now our deepest identity, and the practice of sin is incompatible with the new creations we have become as children of God (2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 John 2:1-2; 3:1-10). While we are in this body, we will experience the pull of the old beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions, but we must see ourselves as new people, adopted into God’s family, who need not yield to the lures of the flesh (Romans 8:12-17).

Caution: The insights and benefits of exchanged life spirituality are sometimes obscured by erroneous theology. Proponents of this approach have been known to slip into the errors of perfectionism (we no longer sin, or repentance for sin is unnecessary) and passivity (the Christian life is all of Jesus and none of me, so I should let go and let God). Some exchanged life teachers have also slipped into a form of experiential Gnosticism, teaching that when people come to apprehend the Cross and their identity in Christ, everything is suddenly different and permanent victory is theirs. Some people may experience a dramatic realization of their union with Christ and get off the treadmill of performance-based acceptance, but others may come to understand these identity truths in more gradual ways. The spiritual life should not be reduced to a sudden experience or series of experiences, as meaningful as these may be. Spirituality also involves a process of transformation in which we are progressively conformed to the image of Christ in our character and conduct.