



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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"Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord." I Timothy 1:2.

One can hardly pick up a magazine or newspaper today without facing some celebrity or another talking about their "spirituality." Spirituality certainly has become hip, trendy. The problem is, of course, that most of the time we have no idea whatsoever what is meant by this term "spirituality." Many seem to echo the mantra, "I am spiritual but not religious." What does that mean? Spiritual but not religious. Can we truly be spiritual without the Holy Spirit?

Robert Wuthnow, a professor of religion at Princeton University tries to sort this all out in a book entitled After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950's. It's a lot to plow through, so I will try to reduce it down to the cliff notes and unpack his basic arguments.

Basically, Wuthnow argues that we have two primary types of spirituality today. The first he calls "habitation spirituality." Another term is "dwelling spirituality." This is the type of experience most of us raised in the 1950's or earlier identify with. The second type of spirituality is what he calls the "seeker spirituality." When the habitation spirituality no longer was meaningful for our society, then people launched into the seeker spirituality quest with gusto. What does all of this mean?

Habitation spirituality for much of history has insisted that God occupies a very definite place in the universe, to be spiritual is to be in the presence of God. For Christians this has meant that Jesus Christ is at the center of being spiritual. Through the 1950's the place where we met God was in some form of sacred space, usually the church building. Thus people who entered into sacred space wore formal dress, demonstrated reverence and awe, genuflected in front of holy symbols.

For many of us participating in a local congregation in the 1950's was virtually identical with being spiritual, centered in Word and Sacrament. In addition, we saw sacred space as also being in our homes, the home was to be a place of prayer and holy living. And the third rung in this ladder was America, the country was seen as sacred space, "In God We Trust," a city set upon a hill. Studies show that close to 80% of Americans in the

1950's were members of churches of synagogues, far higher than a century earlier. Habitation spirituality was predominant, sacred space was church, home, country.

But underneath the seemingly tranquil landscape of the 1950's, serious cracks were appearing. Much of spiritual participation and engagement was superficial. A mostly silent revolution was taking place beneath the surface. And so in the 1960's and 1970's a radical shift took place in our view of spirituality, as people became seekers. In other words, spirituality was now perceived as being "out there," something to be sought. Sacred space was now denigrated and people looked for spirituality just about everywhere. New Age, Eastern religions, transcendental meditation, even drug use was often cited as a vehicle to "become spiritual."

Change was so pervasive that by the end of the 1960's theologians were declaring that God was dead. By the end of the 1970's millions of people were claiming to have found spirituality far away from sacred space, outside of the church, even outside of religious life. Church attendance plummeted. People changed denominations willy-nilly, large numbers left the churches altogether. Freedom of conscience and freedom of choice blotted out habitation spirituality, and seemed to render much of sacred space irrelevant (church, home, nation).

Of course all of this was accompanied by seismic changes in the American family. During the 1950's, for instance, the average time between confirmation class and birth of the first child was seven years. By the end of the 1960's it was fifteen years. In 1957 the fertility rate was 3.8 children, by 1973 it was 1.9. College enrollment tripled, taking young people away from the sacred space of church and home and giving them permission to become seekers. Less than one third of confirmation students in the 1960's were still in the church twenty years later.

During this time of radical change, Wuthnow says, it is not surprising that large numbers of people became to believe that spirituality and organized religion were different. Many even suggested that religion interfered

with true spirituality. Studies showed that nine out of ten people believed they could be Christian without attending church, eight of ten said that people should find their spirituality independent of any church, and seven of ten thought that all religions were equally good at providing ultimate truth.

Dire predictions during the late 1960's were that spirituality would sharply decline. Wrong. During the 1970's and 1980's another dramatic shift took place. Now people began to look once again for sacred space, and many seemed to find it in evangelical churches. A reaction to the freedom and experimentation of the 1960's took place, and many gravitated toward churches of moral strictness and certitude. Fundamentalism flourished.

However, as author David Brooks asserts, the primary theology of much of America is what he calls "flexidoxy." the common trend of people who are creating their own orthodoxy. Because of the move from habitation to seeker spirituality, these adherents have brought into their own orthodoxy a mix and match mentality. One part mainline, one part evangelical, one part Pentecostal, one part new age, one part televangelism, one part signs and wonders, one part emerging church, all mixed up into a new broth.

Another part of the "seeker" mentality has been for many to search for higher and higher spiritual mountains. It reminds me of Charlie Brown in the Peanuts cartoon who was moping around one day. Lucy began lecturing him about life being a series of ups and downs, Charlie should just get used to it. But Charlie replies, I don't want ups and downs, I just want ups and ups and ups. So with many spirituality "junkies," running from emotional high to emotional high.

Wuthnow critiques both types of spirituality. Habitation spirituality he says is increasingly difficult to maintain because we are so transient, we often experience spiritual homelessness. On the other hand seekers often focus primarily on their own experience, which can be more dabbling than depth, and highly subjective.

One of the weaknesses of Wuthnow's book is that he ignores the rather incredible rise of the mega church today. Mega churches, which worship more than 2000, have grown from less than a dozen or so to more than 1200 today. These churches are reshaping the Christian church today. Such churches as Willow

Creek and Saddleback are changing the way churches do worship, music, education, discipleship, mission and spirituality.

Of course it could be argued that mega churches embrace both habitation and seeker spirituality. On the one hand, a sense of sacred space is very real, although with wide variations. For instance, most worship does not take place in gothic cathedral, but might be in a gymnasium or theater or auditorium or even outdoors. Yet what makes for sacred is not stained glass or pipe organs, but rather whether God is in the space.

On the other hand seeker spirituality is very prominent in these churches. Alpha can be conceived as a way for seekers to pursue a spiritual journey, for Lutheran Church of Hope this means at least 1000 people a year. Small groups often conceive themselves as seeking spiritual truth and experience. Even worship and preaching emphasizes much more the journey and the pilgrimage than it does finding permanent sacred space. The adventure of creating a satellite congregation is part of that mindset.

Wuthnow concludes his thesis with some kind of synthesis between the two spiritualities, although not the same as the mega-church might understand it. He promotes "spiritual practices," by which he means small groups, people praying together, reading the Bible together, finding spiritual guides. I wish he would have had more emphasis on the importance today of having dynamic and Spirit-filled churches in order to help people discover spirituality.

Habitation spirituality and seeker spirituality. Find a sacred space where you can experience God and the power of the Holy Spirit. And remember Jesus words, *"Seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you."* Dwell in God and God will never stop seeking you.