

August 1996, The First NewesLetter: Foundations

The Quarterly Newes

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Spirituality Shoppe: An Evangelical Center for the Study of Christian Spirituality

Well, here it is, the first of our quarterly newsletters. The first paper to be published continuously in England (1621) was named the *Weekly Newes*. This newspaper was quite small in page size compared to the newspapers of today. In memory of this paper, we have called our newsletter *The Quarterly Newes*. We hope, in the issues of this newsletter, to provide friends of Spirituality Shoppe with regular “news” of the activities of Spirituality Shoppe along with a few reflections on matters related to Christian Spirituality.

Our biggest news this quarter is that we have finally relocated. We found a nice little hollow up in the piñons and sage of Colorado’s Western slope, and have settled in quite comfortably. Our property came complete with a little “hermit hut,” or guest cabin, which is available for friends who want to visit or take a retreat. Outside of the redwood forests of California, this land may be the quietest place I have ever been.

Writing and Research -

My research and writing has been guided by the needs of the circumstances of the past few months. Relocation tasks demanded more attention than expected, although I have gotten a chance to begin research in many new fields of which I had hitherto been ignorant: compost toilets, hauling and reclaiming water, straw bale housing, etc.. My preparation for the class at Mesa State on “Philosophy of Religious Experience” required a bit of research this summer. For the latter part of the summer, I found myself immersed in questions like, “What makes an experience *religious*?”, “Is there only one fundamental type of religious experience common to all religions or are there many distinct types?”, “How can we tell if a religious experience is valid or not?”, “Are we justified, based on religious experience, in believing in a God?”, “in the Christian God?” Questions like these have stimulated philosophical discussion for centuries, and they are especially “hot issues” today. I hope, in the years to come, to offer some contribution to these questions. In the meantime, for you scholars, look at the works of Alvin Plantinga and William Alston. These brothers have raised the credibility of the Christian faith through their philosophical reflections.

In the past few weeks I have cleared my desk enough to begin work on my dissertation in earnest. The first step of the writing is the creation of a formal proposal which is submitted to fellow students, to a dissertation committee, to the faculty of the Spirituality Program at GTU, and finally to the doctoral council of University of California, Berkeley for approval. Many revisions are required to gain the “ok” of all concerned. As it looks now, in technical language, I hope to advance the study of Christian discernment by 1) illuminating the process of Christian discernment as a “coming to know” (God’s will, testing prophetic utterances, etc.) through associating the elements of this process with the knowledge of human mental and affective experience acquired in the field of cognitive psychology, and 2) clarifying the validity

of the process of Christian discernment through an analysis of its logical structure, especially as related to the logic and metaphysics of American philosopher C. S. Peirce. In less technical language, I hope to learn and to share with others how we distinguish what is of God from what is not.

My first book, *A Field Guide to Praying the Scriptures*, is being edited by some friends from my home church in California who are professional editors. From there I plan to send the manuscript on to Intervarsity Press for review. I have delayed all other major writing projects until the dissertation is further along.

Teaching and Seminars -

I have not taught one seminar this past three months. My energies and schedule have been taken up with moving. Furthermore, I have sensed the need here in Montrose to go slowly. It is a time to cultivate relationships informally, to “earn the right to be heard.” I have been meeting with a couple of gatherings of pastors in the Montrose community. These have been especially pleasant times of relationship-building. I am very excited about the spirit of comradeship here among the church leaders of the Montrose area. I have met individually with a few of these pastors. As a result of these meetings, I have been asked to be licensed with the Episcopal church of Colorado to do spiritual direction, and I am scheduled to preach in the Presbyterian church on September 1. So much for going slow! Pray for us as we make decisions concerning our church affiliation and ministry in the local area.

I will be visiting in the Bay area three times this fall. I will be teaching seminars on Prayer and Counseling with Maranatha Institute on October 18 and 21, and I will be ministering at VCFSF and elsewhere on the third weekend of November and the first weekend of December. Dates are not finalized as of this newsletter. If you are interested, you can write for more information next month, when dates and topics will be more solid.

Internet Work -

I have done little Internet work these past three months. Lack of time and money has kept me behind. As soon as we are able to acquire the use of a scanner and graphics software and can develop more skills in using the net, we will be able to set up pages which have pictures as well as words, and we can begin putting rare and hard to find devotional classics up for access. My association with Mesa State College may provide just the environment to pursue this side of the ministry.

Legal and Financial Matters -

The good news in this department is that we are finally officially tax-exempt. After much waiting, we received the letter from the IRS on month ago confirming our status. Financially speaking things have been good as well. Our land was inexpensive, with the consequence that we anticipate a low cost of living here, and salaries can be kept low. There are a few ministry expenditures we look forward to as funds are made available. We have discovered that the pastors here are inadequately served by way of library resources, and so we sense the need for funds for *The Church Fathers*, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, *Weavings*, *Spirituality Today* and other basic reference tools. The hermit hut needs a few improvements to

make the place more welcome to guests. I am postponing travel to society meetings this year (The Evangelical Theological Society, The Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, The Society for Evangelical and Orthodox Dialogue) for both scheduling and financial reasons. It appears that both the pace of giving and my current priorities are converging to make Spirituality Shoppe a pleasant part-time occupation.

Personal Reflections

The site on which we hope to build our home someday is about fifty yards from the mobile where we are located at present. Both the mobile and our future site are situated on a large rock face, which serves as a kind of large “bench” halfway between the top and bottom of Tappan Creek hollow. For years Cheri and I have dreamed of building our own home using materials on the land. As we began to plan for our house, we learned that a primary consideration in building a home is the foundation. Would the county building inspectors allow us to use local rock in the foundation? Could we build on the rock face? How high and thick would this foundation need to be to properly support the building we hoped to build? Questions like these have filled our minds, and thus we have begun to reflect on “our foundation.”

The official leaflet of Spirituality Shoppe gives the following as a statement of purpose: “To research, interpret, and cultivate the Christian’s relationship with God through Jesus Christ, both in individual and corporate dimensions, through the exploration of semi-monastic lifestyle, academic pursuit, ecumenical experience, and relevant expression.” It explains that, “in keeping with the purpose of the Center, we desire the atmosphere and life of Spirituality Shoppe itself to be a primary source of its study. We believe that our best fruit of service to the Church will come from the well-watered tree of semi-monastic living, ecumenical experience, and academic pursuit. For this reason, the sense of daily rhythm, interdenominational sharing, prayerful reflection, and careful research are critical elements of the Center.” It goes on to say that “from this foundation the following contributions can be made to the Church.” This is the foundation of Spirituality Shoppe: a lifestyle of praying regularly with our God, sharing with brothers and sisters of various denominational associations, diligent study, and physical labor.

This mixture of body and mind, private and social life, prayer and work, is the mortar and brick which, when blended properly, can support a truly authentic ministry of research, writing, and communication to God’s people. It provides Spirituality Shoppe with the elements needed to provide proper strength and flexibility to its ministry. It enables us to stand under a variety of “adverse conditions.” Just as our rock face needs its own particular foundation, made with elements common to most foundations, and just as Spirituality Shoppe is secured to its own particular foundation, blended from elements common to the lives of many of our fathers and mothers in the faith, so also each individual, each family must its own particular spiritual foundation. The elements will be discovered as we hear and act on the words of Jesus (Matthew 7:24-27). Yet the elements will be blended and mixed to match the “site” of each of our lives. The proper blend and mix for each of us is discovered through our living relationship with God through the Holy Spirit and through our own community of faith.

Take heed to your own foundation! It is hard work laying a good foundation. As we considered laying the foundation of our house by hand, we estimated hundreds of hours of

lifting rock and concrete. How much more work to find and establish that rhythm of study, prayer, ministry, work, or other elements which blend into an authentic Christian life for each of us.

It is hard to establish our own rhythm of prayer study, work, and ministry. Demands and opportunities are always calling. In Spirituality Shoppe, we have felt it especially important to give the establishment of our lifestyle-foundation primary attention in this first season of our new life. Without the proper foundation we are like buildings on sand, destined to collapse under pressure. Let me encourage you to examine your own lives. Question the foundation of your daily existence. Is it sufficient to hold you up when the times get tough? Is it made of elements drawn from the Gospel of Christ? Are the elements blended not simply “to meet code” and look decent before other believers, but to support your unique expression of the faith? Take some time tonight and ponder your foundations. Perhaps you might have fun drawing a picture of what “the house of your life” might look like now. What may God want it to look like? Be encouraged. The Father-architect is eager to act as consultant just to co-build with you the house of your dreams.

We hope all is well with you and we look forward to keeping in touch.

By His Grace,

Evan B. Howard