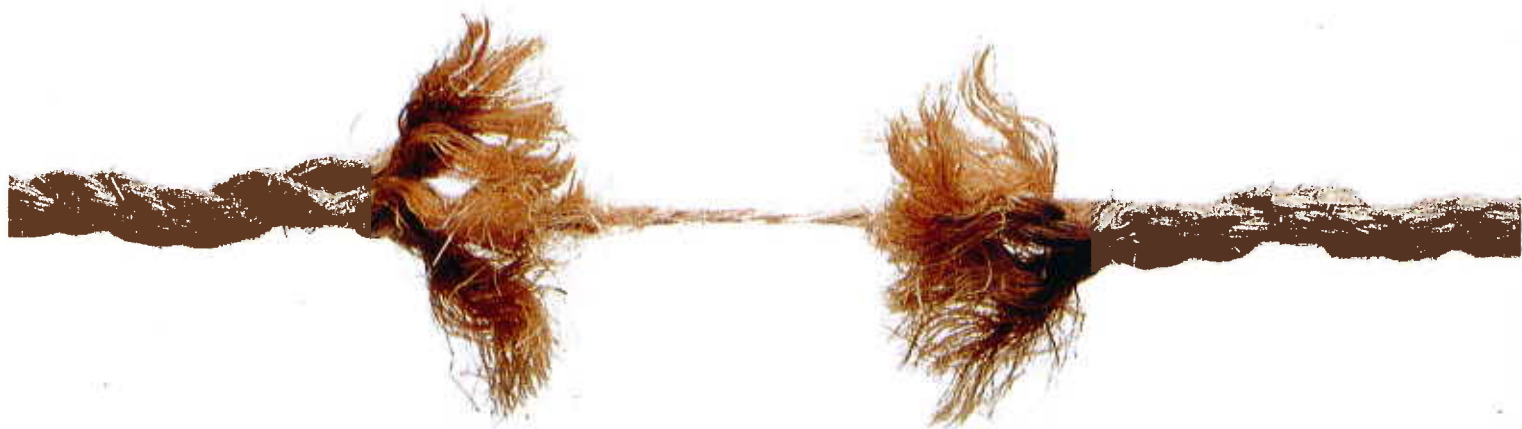


THE GREAT DIVIDE



For the Jewish people, as for Jesus, the whole of life was spiritual. So how have we managed to separate spiritual from secular, asks Steve Chalke

THE TEACHER LISTENED AS HIS APPRENTICES ARGUED AMONG THEMSELVES.

"Which part of the Sabbath meal is most sacred?" they eventually asked him. "Is it the prayers or the reading of the holy scriptures?"

Their teacher smiled.

"The whole occasion, and every element within it, is equally sacred," he told them.

"From the reading of Torah to the prayers that are said; from the eating of the meal itself to the drinking of wine; from the laughing together to the embracing of family and friends. It is all sacred. The enjoyment of God, the delight in one another and the celebration of creation."

The Hebrew scriptures contain no word for 'spiritual' and,

perhaps even more astonishingly, Jesus never used the phrase "spiritual life". The reason, however, is simple. The Hebrew language knows no distinction between the physical, material world, and some kind of separate sacred experience. For the Jewish people, as for Jesus, the *whole of life* was spiritual.

Eugene Peterson, the writer of *The Message*, put it this way. "Spirituality is not immaterial as opposed to material; not interior as opposed to exterior; not invisible as opposed to visible. Quite the contrary; spirituality has much to do with the material, the external, and the visible. What it properly conveys is living as opposed to dead."

Consider the laws and statutes of the book of Leviticus. It is filled with a wide range of practices and instructions: from healthy eating to family affairs, from medical advice to farming

directives, from religious protocol to international relations. Leviticus 19, for instance, is a comprehensive vision of holiness that embraces every aspect of individual and corporate life, from guidance on the breeding of cattle to respect for parents, instructions about the harvesting of crops to principles about hiring workers, caring for refugees and the use of accurate weights in trading.

If we could travel back in a time capsule and ask the Hebrews how they found time for their 'spiritual life' with all of this creation-tending legislation to contend with, we would only confuse them. All of these things were part of what it meant to be spiritual rather than additional to it. The segmented nature of our modern lives did not exist. Spirituality infused every area of life.

The Hebrew scriptures were not written with the intention of providing a devotional manual for inspiration in those 'special' moments. Instead, their goal is to record and remember God's ongoing involvement in every detail of the daily life of his people.

Indeed, on the occasions when the people of Israel got themselves over-focused on the more narrowly *religious* dimensions of life, God was quick to criticise them for their preoccupation with empty words, songs and religious festivals.

"I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies.

"Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them.

"Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.

"But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5:21-24).

The problem, of course, was not that fasting, praying or worship were inherently wrong. It was simply that the issues of injustice and oppression were being ignored. The blessings the people sought for their nation would only be forthcoming if they put their house in order and focused their attention on the more 'mundane' issues of life – serving their neighbours and becoming advocates of the poor and oppressed. This was not because God, out of spite, would ever turn his back on the people that he loved. Rather, it was a clear recognition of the fact that sin – the rejection of God's way – always becomes its own punishment.

Our problem is that, far from offering us a 'whole life' experience, our 21st-century Western culture has compartmentalised spirituality. Our spiritual 'side' is regarded as something 'a little aside' from the rest of our life. Spirituality has been relegated to the fringes.

But those who subscribe to this 'otherworldly' notion of the Christian faith, concerned only with the inner life, as well as those who focus exclusively on activism and public service, both make the same mistake and end up abandoning biblically rooted

Christian spirituality. That which we claim to be aware of in our souls must become visible before it is credible. Likewise, our actions need to spring from the depths of our spirit if they are to be of substance and significance.

A spirituality that is solely focused on the inner life becomes dead and lifeless. It falls foul of the criticism which Freud and others have made of religion – that it is no more than a crutch for the weak. But, likewise, mission, activism and public service which are detached from an inner spirituality will ultimately prove to be bankrupt of transformational power and energy. In either case, faith becomes impotent and sterile. Genuine Christian spirituality is lost and a light that should shine in the darkness and bring hope to the world is extinguished.

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All talk about the inner versus the outer life is an attempt to drive a wedge between two things which are, in essence, unified. Its danger is that it ends up producing a perilous and destructive dualism that rejects the teaching of both the Old and New Testaments.

The Bible consistently contradicts the imagined divide between the sacred and the secular, calling instead for faith and action to function in harmony with one another. The Hebrew word for 'faith' also implies 'faithfulness' or 'obedient activity'. In fact, the connection between right beliefs and right actions is made explicit by Jesus himself in his famous parable of the sheep and the goats when he concludes: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these...you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

Authentic Christian spirituality always requires us to be with God for other people, and with other people for God.

As the wise teacher explained to his young apprentices, "Love God. Love your neighbour as you love yourself. Nothing else matters."



STEVE CHALKE is the founding director of Oasis Global, Faithworks, Stop The Traffik and CEO of Oasis Community Learning. This is the last in the present 'Apprentice' series of articles. The conversation about 'engaging in life' continues at next year's Faithworks conference held at Oasis Academy Enfield. For tickets and further information for Steve's autumn 'Apprentice' tour with Diane Louise Jordan and Cathy Burton go to www.oasisuk.org/apprentice