

THE WAY OF THE SPIRIT

This class is in many ways a reply to the discussion that followed last Wednesday's class. Our topic is rather essential to everything *The New Church* is or wants to be about. But in the phone conference after the class last Wednesday, it became really clear that "the Way of the Spirit" is not yet clear to us. Now, I do not expect that such a huge concept as the Way of the Spirit will ever be completely clear to any of us in this realm. But if we are muddled in basic ways about the difference between "the way of the world" and the Way of the Spirit, that muddle will confuse and corrupt pretty nearly everything we talk about regarding the Christian Faith and Life. It was certainly doing that in the discussion last Wednesday.

Before jumping in, I would like to remind you that I know everyone who was participating in that discussion. And I have high regard, respect, appreciation, and love for every single person who was there. I beg you to remember that, as I take issue with some of the things that were being said. And yes, some very good things were being said. But two things were being said that muddy the waters and make a serious discussion about the Way of the Spirit nearly impossible. That is, they change the subject without appearing to do so. If we do not notice this, subsequent conversation and comment just leads us further and further astray.

THE FIRST CATEGORY OF REMARKS was a complaint that I was claiming that Christianity was superior to Judaism. If it were possible to isolate and define the purest and truest form of Judaism and the truest and purest form of Christianity, that might be a really interesting conversation. Theoretically, Christianity would win the contest, since it is the fulfillment and culmination of Judaism. But that is only the case if you accept that Jesus is the true Messiah. If you do not think Jesus is the true Messiah, then the conversation is not possible because you have no understanding or awareness of Christianity. So excuse me, but now I forget ... what was it that I was being accused of?

Oh, of course: Down on a mundane and much lower level, I was being accused of being politically incorrect. All religions are equal, and any right-thinking liberal can be expected to rise to the defense

of sound ecology, racial equality, equal rights for women, and mutual respect for all religions (except for Christianity, of course). Without real justification, I expect most of you to know that you cannot have a serious conversation with me on such levels. That is not where I'm coming from. It generates heat without light. And by the way, such conversations are always on the W-W level – the way of the world.

Lots of people spend most of their time on such levels, to be sure. And of course, everybody is always right, and the anger and resentments and animosity just keep mounting. Sometimes people are even angry when they agree with each other, because they each wanted to say it first, or say it their way.

We were a long way from such anger and heat last Wednesday. Some of the remarks in our discussion were just wondering and probing. They still sidetracked our conversation. But now I want us to understand, if possible, that we cannot mix such levels and still hope to communicate very much. If we are going to argue about institutional expressions of various world religions, we are automatically talking about W-W matters. On the W-W level, formal religious organizations are in competition with each other, whatever they claim or pretend. To win, to survive, to succeed – to have more followers, to steal converts from each other, to claim a superior truth better than the other contenders – that is all way of the world.

We were talking about Living The Life, and the subject was “the Spiritual Life” and “the Way of Following Jesus.” The issue was “the way of the flesh” (Paul’s phrase) – or the way of the natural propensities and purposes of humans – versus the Way of the Spirit. Some of you verge on claiming that there is no Way of the Spirit. Of course, some of that is a frustration we all share – the difficulty we have with finding and being obedient to the influence, the guidance, the comfort, and the presence of the Holy Spirit. And I have been telling people for years that this Way of the Spirit is the core essence and meaning of Christianity – and a core meaning and Way of Life that most of Christendom does not know or does not take to heart. It is unlikely that I will change this Message. If you truly understand it and turn away from it, that is your right and privilege. But if you try to convince me that no such Way of Life exists, what do you think are your chances of persuading me?

Jesus does not exist; Paul does not exist; and however imperfectly, I have walked this WAY for years – so *I* do not exist? Yes, I know; we do

exist, but we are delusional. Hey, that's always a possibility. But I can promise you, I like my delusions a lot better than yours!

In any case, to get into a dogfight over which structural religion in the outer world is superior – or even to claim that they are all the same or equal – will obviously sidetrack any serious discussion about the Way of the Spirit. Living The Life and being politically correct do not equate. On the other hand, I do understand that talking about the difference between the way of the world and the Way of the Spirit does lead us into vocabulary that can be confusing at first glance. It can easily sound like comparing religions, instead of contrasting the Physical Survival Realm with the Spiritual Awakening Realm. So I am not calling you stupid, just careless. And I want to remind us all that Satan can use either mode.

The New Church may never get clear or viable; I don't know yet. But if it does, it will be a "new church" precisely because it will represent and carry a Message about the reality and possibility of us humans being in a personal relationship and dialogue with the Holy Spirit of the Risen Jesus. I am totally convinced that this is the real and deepest Message of the New Testament – the true purpose and invitation of Jesus' life among us, and the culmination of His death and resurrection followed by Pentecost (the formation of the church because the presence of the Holy Spirit was with them). Clearly this is not where most of "Christendom" has focused – at least not yet.

It is never easy, never a "turkey shoot." Many Pentecostal groups put huge emphasis on the Holy Spirit, at least in language, and they are sincere without question. Yet they have gone right back to "the Law" without noticing. If you don't "speak in tongues," you are not real yet. And you can get judged and condemned as fast in many Pentecostal churches as you can in many Catholic, Lutheran, or Presbyterian churches.

Of course, all along the way, some have seen it – the centrality of the Holy Spirit – at least at times. But it constantly fades in and out of focus for most. If *The New Church* has a mission, this is its primary mission. If this "Life with the Spirit" is not possible, as some keep arguing or implying, then *The New Church* is not viable – in fact, it is a falsehood, a big lie. And to be sure, there is another possibility: Those who think and claim that Life with the Spirit is not possible may

be mistaken. They don't get it yet. They are blocking their own relationship with the Spirit in ways they do not realize. As many of the saints have told us, there are many levels of rebellion, resentment, anger, and fear that do block us from an open relationship with the Spirit.

I have been told over and over by people who believe in marriage – who are deeply in love, who would not dream of ending their relationship – that they do still recognize that there are numerous ways in which they have never fully trusted, opened themselves fully to, or given themselves fully to their own partner in their marriage relationship. Hello! And they do realize that this is cutting the intimacy and making it harder for the relationship to grow and develop. If it is this difficult to give yourself fully to someone as fierce and awesome as a man or a woman who loves you, what do you suppose it's like for us to try to be open and trusting in a relationship with the Holy Spirit, who has power, authority, wisdom, and might beyond anything we can conceive of or imagine? You think the subject of relationship with the Holy Spirit of the Risen Jesus is all cut-and-dried? Maybe you also imagine that you are at the very top level of all the dimensions there are to whom God has created and designed you to be.

This following comment may not be very important to some of you, but it is important to me. The only place I know about where people can authentically connect across (or beyond) the definitions and boundaries of religious theologies and structures is in this area of spiritual experience and relationship. The W-W level of religion can never do this. The W-S level can. This is true for the divisions within Christendom, and it is also true for the divisions *beyond* Christendom – that is, between Christendom and other religions. I suspect that this will become increasingly important to the religions of the world as we move into the future. But it will also necessitate an awareness of experience with the Spirit that supersedes the structures of any given religious organization – awareness on the part of all the parties engaged in such conversations. If we cannot or will not relate to the Spirit of God in ways that are beyond our normal religious frameworks, I do not believe we have a chance to hear or relate to each other, except in shallow pretense that quickly evaporates under pressure.

It is always possible for someone to misunderstand such comments, especially in a conversation as subtle and complex as one about the difference between the way of the world and the Way of the Spirit.

Nevertheless, human logic cannot transcend some of the divisions between the great faith systems of our world. But the Spirit can. Herein lies a great hope. I do not believe that the “mystery,” as Paul calls it, of the purpose of God that he sees unfolding – a purpose to bring unity and harmony to all of us, and indeed to all of Creation – can be seen or believed on W-W levels. But I believe that it is very real and can be seen – and is in fact happening – on W-S levels.

In any case, and back to it: last Wednesday we found ourselves talking about Pharisees, Jesus, Torah, Paul, the Jews who did not believe in Jesus, etc. Can any of you fathom the possibility that on this level, talking about any world religion in general cannot further the conversation? To talk about Living The Life requires us to get personal and specific. Nobody can Live The Life in general. Generalities and vague notions about mass movements cannot add very much to our understanding of Living The Life. There is not just one “Jewish type” or one “Christian type” and all the other “followers” think and experience everything in the same way.

There were Jews who opposed Jesus. That is historical fact. It doesn't matter whether we like it or not; that is part of the story. It is also part of the story that Jesus was bringing a New WAY – and some loved and claimed it, and others opposed and fought it. It was hard to be neutral around Jesus. It still is. But we will not get any clarity about the New WAY versus “the old way” if we cannot talk about such things without getting drawn into the W-W level of religious institutional wars.

We must notice: Some Jews appreciated Jesus and became His followers. Some opposed Him and became His enemies, even His second-hand executioners. In short, the issues break down into individual responses. That always happens in real life. There is no “Judaism” that thinks one way or decides one way. There are too many Jews. So what is the benefit or purpose of pretending that my real agenda is to claim that Christianity is superior to Judaism? Do any of you imagine that I think Catholicism represents the Way of the Spirit better than Judaism? I could ask the same question about nearly every branch of Christianity: Lutherans, Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists, and on and on. Do you think I imagine that such institutions are following the Way of the Spirit? They are too interested in survival, and in what they imagine to be success in this world. Do you even imagine that I think most of the UCC is following the Way of the Spirit?

By the way, I do not think Catholicism, as a religious structure, is even close to representing the Way of the Spirit. But I think Teresa of Avila was a champion of the Way of the Spirit. And she was a Catholic, at least by earthly category. It is, of course, silliness to imagine that we can pick and choose all of the people who really were or are walking by the Spirit. *“Only God looks on the heart.”* It still reminds us of a very necessary perspective: It is people (individuals), not organizations, who walk by the Spirit – who Live The Life.

So in the context of our conversation last week, what sort of put-down do you imagine that I was aiming at Judaism more than at Christianity? If we want to live the Life of the Spirit, we do have to have some notion, some comprehension, of what we are talking about. You cannot get there from the “here” of either Judaism or Christianity. Jesus is too NEW! The world has not comprehended His real Message or purpose very often, or in many places – to this very day. Okay, enough of that.

THE SECOND CATEGORY OF REMARKS suggested that sincere people – people we like or admire, people we think are trying really hard – are automatically living the Life of the Spirit. It came pretty quickly to Paul as an illustration. And some were insisting that Paul was living the Life of the Spirit even before he met the Spirit on the Damascus Road. But more than that, it was being implied that any moral, upright, responsible person is automatically on the Spiritual Path. Language is so difficult sometimes! Nevertheless, this kind of thinking is a huge aberration of nearly everything we are told or taught in the New Testament. *“By works shall no one be saved.”* We must not allow such basic confusion to go unchallenged. Especially not in our own inside understandings. It directly contradicts the heart and core meaning of the Gospel.

So I am unwilling to let it stand that our conversation is about being politically correct; or about Judaism versus Christianity; or about good guys versus bad guys; or about moral, well-meaning people versus blighters and sinners.

We need to go on a little review of some things I think we all know, but they are things we also sometimes forget or at least get fuzzy about. I propose to talk a bit about the perspective of Jesus. Then look at what Paul thought, especially about his own condition and pilgrimage. And then a word about my own experience.

I.) JESUS

It is well known that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. John was the leader of the most dramatic grassroots revival movement in Judaism, in the early first century A.D. It appears that when John was arrested and later beheaded, Jesus inherited the movement that John had started, and then took it to new dimensions. Most of Jesus' top followers had been followers of John the Baptist first. Jesus was deeply moved at the news of John's death. John was a great prophet, and he truly "prepared the way" for Jesus. Jesus does see John as playing the role of Elijah to His own role as the true Messiah.

That is just a quick introduction to Jesus' famous comment regarding John the Baptist. It is found in Matthew 11:11 and again in Luke 7:28. I quote from the Luke passage, and take only the one summation statement: *"I tell you, among those born of women, none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."*

That is an incredible remark, and very revealing of Jesus' perspective on some of the very things we were talking about last Wednesday. Was John the Baptist sincere, prayerful, upright, faithful? He was the very epitome of all such things. He did not seek earthly wealth or success, but devoted his entire life to serving God. He was beyond bribes or threats or worldly pressure. And he paid for his faithfulness with his life. Jesus regarded him with utmost respect and appreciation. Yet according to Jesus, John did not live in the Way of the Spirit. Think about it. Ponder it. Get used to it. The dividing line between the way of the world and the Way of the Spirit is not some simplex or obvious little moralism. It is a profound dividing line between two very different dimensions of life. You could not get more faithful or committed or devoted to God than John was. But John was still a "law man," not a "grace man." It wasn't his fault; who had revealed a different WAY to him? And please, we are not talking about John going to hell. We are not talking about God or Jesus having no regard or appreciation for John. Had anyone breathed such a comment to Jesus, Jesus would have said, "What?! Are you crazy? It has nothing to do with our regard or love for John."

Nevertheless, we are struggling to talk about a New WAY. Is there a New WAY, or is there not? A New Covenant not like the Old Covenant (Jeremiah). A New WAY – a New Covenant in my blood. Life under very

different management. Even a whole new way of seeing – perceiving – and it involves different goals, different purposes, different approaches, different values. If we cheapen, minimize, or obscure the New WAY of Jesus Christ our Lord, how will we ever truly convert, truly be transformed, truly follow Jesus into more than a slightly revised, U.S.-certified stamp of approval? (Or a New Age mishmash?)

“Of those born of women, none is greater than John.” Of course, this matches Jesus’ perspective: *“You must be born anew – born of the Spirit.”* It isn’t just the difference between “we really mean it” and “we really, *really* mean it.” It is a whole new reality. If we really want to know what Jesus is offering and inviting us into, we will not allow ourselves to be sidetracked by any lesser arguments or considerations. We do really want to know. So pay attention. Listen to Jesus: *“The one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he* [that is, greater than John the Baptist].” Great or small, least or most, I *do* want to be in the Kingdom of God. That means in the Kingdom where God reigns supreme, instead of the kingdom where humans are still running the show. John lives in a kingdom where the rules of Jewish Law, Jewish promises, Jewish expectations, and Jewish understanding still run the show. John doesn’t know any other Kingdom exists. What about you?

II.) PAUL

It was pretty strongly expressed, at least by most of you, that Paul was already in the Way of the Spirit even before his conversion. I understand the sentiment, of course. I like and admire Paul too, and know he was conscientious and trying hard to serve God from the time he was a young boy. But what would Paul say if he was present in our discussion? And what is Paul’s perspective about other conscientious Jews of his time?

We are not entirely confined to guesswork. We can allow Paul to chime in on our conversation.

“If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gain I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I count everything sheer loss, far outweighed by the gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake

I did in fact forfeit everything. I count it so much rubbish, for the sake of gaining Christ and finding myself in union with him, with no righteousness of my own based on the law, nothing but the righteousness which comes from faith in Christ, given by God in response to faith.” (Philippians 3:4-9, and then the passage gets even better, should you wish to track it.) Faith = trust, not merely belief (as in “right views” or opinions about something).

Paul names all the assumed and accepted credentials of his Jewish identity. But he is casting off this way of the world – this way of the flesh – as of no value. Knowing Jesus is a very different Life for him. So we can say that Paul was fine before, in his former life, but clearly Paul disagrees with us.

In chapters 9-11 of his letter to the Romans, Paul talks about this very subject – Jewish versus Christian life and perspective. You should read the entire discussion, of course, but for the moment, one telling comment: *“For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.”* (Romans 9:3) Paul wishes he himself could be cut off from the New Life in Christ instead of his own people. It is a comment of love: “I wish I could be sick in your place.” But in case you’re missing it, it is clear that Paul sees his fellow Jews as cut off from the Christian Way – from Life in Christ Jesus, to use his language.

He continues: *“Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them [his fellow Jews] is that they may be saved. [Clearly Paul thinks they need a further step, or awakening.] I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. [They are like he was before his conversion.] For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”* (Romans 10:1-4)

Clearly we cannot use Paul in support of the comments being made in last Wednesday’s discussion. This does not end any argument in any absolute way. That is, we may still want to claim that Paul was wrong. But I am not wrong about Paul. Paul does not equate zeal or conscientious religious practices with living the New Life in Christ. In fact, he is quite clear here that the claims of keeping the Law and living under the Old Covenant will not suffice – it is not the same as the Spiritual Life, which is on a whole different spectrum from the way of the world.

“As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God.” (Romans 11:28) That is fairly blatant. Paul is still certain that in the end, his fellow Jews will be shown mercy – just as the Gentiles are now being shown mercy as the Gospel is being spread among them. But most of the Jews Paul knows do not know it yet; they do not know their own estrangement from God, and they do not want to see or admit it yet – and therefore they will not accept any healing or reconciliation.

“In former generations this mystery was not made known to mankind; but now by inspiration it has been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets, that through the gospel the Gentiles are joint heirs with the Jews, part of the same body, sharers together in the promise made in Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 3:5-6) (And by the way, it must have been painful for a Pharisee to come to this realization.)

It goes on, of course. And I have included more references below, in case any of you want to make doubly sure that I have not skipped too lightly over Paul’s perspective. The difference between the old life and the New Life is more dramatic for Paul than we were saying or admitting – or wanting it to be.

Romans 7:17-25

(sin dwells in me; captive to the law of sin and death)

II Corinthians 5:17

(“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation”)

(A complementary teaching to Jesus’ “born anew” – born of the Spirit.)

I Corinthians 3:1

II Corinthians 12:9

Galatians 2:20

Galatians 3:27

Ephesians 3:19

“For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh” (Philippians 3:3) The “flesh,” as we have mentioned, is often Paul’s language for the way of the world. Actually, Paul is having fun here. Circumcision is a rather “fleshy” ritual. Of course, he sees it has having spiritual meaning far beyond the flesh. And he is also playing off of Jewish teaching about idolatry: Idols are made with human hands and therefore cannot be true gods. But circumcision is also made by human

hands. Circumcision, of course, is the mark of being God's Chosen People and true members of the Covenant Community. But Paul sees true circumcision as something only God can accomplish.

What are we looking for if we try to minimize the difference between these two very different WAYS of Life? Do we want a conversion that makes no difference? Do we want a New Life that is just like the old one? A New Life that makes no changes in us? Paul was great before his conversion, not just afterward. I agree with that – from a W-W point of view. That is, he was admirable, honorable, valuable, and impressive. But is that what we want for ourselves – a worldly stamp of approval? Some days that might sound pretty good, but is that all we want for ourselves? A conversion that makes no difference – a conversion that leaves us just as much in control as we were before?

I would be happy to give my life to Jesus – as long as I can be assured that it won't make any very big difference in how I live my life. But I don't want it if it might change my schedule, or my priorities, or my friends – and especially not, God forbid, if it would change any of my attitudes or opinions!

III.) ME

My father was a “law man” – a Protestant, Christian “Pharisee” of great personal rigor and honor. There are very few humans I have admired or respected as much as I have admired and respected my father. Nevertheless, grace – and the dialogue of guidance from the Holy Spirit – was not the flavor or reality of my father's life. He prayed sincerely, and from my perspective he loved God and God loved him, but it was not a warm, personal relationships by any stretch of the imagination. It was way too long on rules and obligations, and way too short on joy, approval, affection, or affirmation.

I grew up in that atmosphere, so of course I became a “law man” myself, though I was never nearly as good at it as my father was.

Most of you know that I had a “spiritual encounter” – an “awakening” – the summer of my sixth-grade year. It changed my life (forever) and sent me into the ministry. I was with a “spirit being” of power and comfort, but the identity of this being was not part of my theophany.

In the language and understanding of “the church,” I was converted. It certainly had a dramatic effect on my life and on how I lived it. I became far more conscientious, prayerful, and sincere about religion, and I wanted very much to please and serve God – more than anything else in life.

But whatever an “outsider” looking on might have said about me, I can assure you that I was not in the Life of the Spirit. (Peace, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, etc., were not my realities or my experience.) I worked very hard to be better and to do better – harder and harder, and better and better. But I never measured up to my own ideas of what I should be like. Need I add that I never felt like I was good enough to please God or gain God’s approval? And without being conscious of it, I was getting more and more judgmental of those around me. I often worked to “help others” when I could think of any way to do that. Often I was “generous” in ways that left me very close to ruining my own plans for becoming a Minister. But the core of it was “duty” – obligation. I was trying to prove to God and to myself that I was a good and worthy person. Jesus – I read about, studied, learned more and more about all the time. But Jesus didn’t mean very much to me as friend or Savior. God was what and who I cared about. And God, however great, was a hard taskmaster. Like my father (no surprise), you could never please him. His “love” meant that he was always driving you to do better and be better.

A “second conversion” came when I was twenty-three. The first had changed everything. The second conversion also changed everything for me. I was two-thirds of the way through seminary. I worked every weekend at the First Congregational Church of Amherst, New Hampshire. Though I was just a seminary student, I was functioning much more like an Associate Pastor. As an aside, Frank Weiskel, the Senior Pastor, was a wonderful man, and a true spiritual Mentor to me.

In any case, I was in a clinical pastoral training program at Boston City Hospital that summer. The Head Chaplain over the whole program was a Lutheran, and he was an excellent leader. There was just one minor detail: We met in the hospital chapel for a communion service at the beginning of the program and another near the end. Lutherans serve wine for communion. I was raised Quaker, and we use no communion elements at all; communion is silent prayer. Nothing alcoholic had ever passed my lips at this point in my life. So I refused the communion at the beginning of the summer and thought nothing of it. By the end

of the summer, we knew each other far better and had been through a lot more together. But I somewhat automatically refused the wine at the communion service once again.

Later that evening, the Spirit went into a conversation with me. “Why did you refuse my communion?” A silly and not very important question, I thought. The Spirit didn’t seem to think so. I dutifully explained that I did not drink, never had, never intended to. But to my surprise, the dialogue turned into a serious confrontation. Something along the line of: “Your rules are more important to you than my communion?” And I was suddenly seeing the communion as far more about His love – and the faith community, and participating in the body, and caring about “the people” – than I had ever imagined before.

It was not a pleasant “conversation.” I was not getting the message (changing my mind, or showing much contrition). So it ended rather abruptly with the Spirit saying something about: “If you don’t need the rest of us and can do this all on your own, so be it.” And the light of the Spirit blinked out.

I don’t know how else to put it. That is what it felt like and seemed like to me. I was utterly appalled at how empty and meaningless everything suddenly became. I could barely breathe. Until that moment, I had absolutely no awareness of how much the Spirit sustains and upholds us every moment of every day.

Nothing changed on the outside. I was able to get up in the morning, go through the motions and routines of the day. I don’t think an outsider could have seen much difference in me, unless they knew me really well. Even then, they would have just thought I was being a little somber, or coming down with a cold or something. But I wasn’t saying anything to anybody – I couldn’t think of anything to say – and talking seemed a completely futile waste of effort, as was everything else.

I tried to make it through the days, and to the best of my recollection this lasted four or five days. All I know for sure is that the bleakness kept increasing, and it became clear to me that I could not go on – I could not survive in this way for very long. So, to put it into words to the best of my ability, I went to my knees and said something like: “I didn’t know I was making You so angry. And I don’t know if You will ever want anything more to do with me ever again. But I cannot endure this. Please, I will do anything – I will smoke, I will drink, I will do anything you say. But please, don’t leave me alone any longer.” (It seemed to be my little

rules of perfection that had annoyed him, so that was why I was making silly promises.)

I had barely finished this prayer when “the lights of the entire universe” switched back on. Not only could I *feel* The Presence again, but I was completely overwhelmed with JOY, and LOVE, and a love for LIFE, and an awareness of The Presence. It seemed to me then that I had never really loved anything or anyone ever before. Being so consumed with duty, with doing things right, and with trying to be right had hidden many things from my eyes. Now I was suddenly flooded with “love.” Everyone I looked at was far more important and precious than I had ever realized before. Even Mariana seemed far more precious and beautiful than ever before – and that is saying a lot! Anyway, with tears streaming down my face, I realized that I was not alone, and that this “withdrawal” had only been an effort to wake me up. Concepts of grace and forgiveness and acceptance and mercy all seemed to leap into new dimensions and new perspective. I also finally realized that Jesus was the True Revealer of such things. And that Jesus was the One who loved me and wanted me to know it. There was also a comment along the way that I remember. It in no way cut the light or the joy, but Jesus was also saying something like: “You are about to go into My Ministry for real. And if you do not know the Gospel, you cannot do very much for Me or My Church.”

As an aside, that also began my career as a smoker and drinker. On my end, it had been a solemn promise – the price I would pay for not being left alone anymore. That also made it doubly hard for me to stop those practices later, because I had begun them as a promise to God. If you asked me today, I would say that this piece was a misunderstanding on my part. And as it turned out, a very costly one. On the other hand, there may have been no other way for me to get to the next level from where I was. In any case, I smoked and drank for twenty years – learned to love it. And in the end, to hate it. Until Jesus, in His mercy, freed me from that syndrome also. I would still say this: I would rather die a drunk than go back to being a “law man.”

This part of my story is clear to me; whether it is to you or not, I cannot know. I prayed and read the Bible with considerable conscientiousness all through the years, from my sixth-grade days until the present time. In many ways, looking back, I know that the Spirit was with me, and trying to help me, and even trying to guide me – even through all the drinking years. But I also know that my life before that

second conversion was an “Old Covenant” life. It was the way of the world in consciousness, goals, values, purposes. The Way of the Spirit is very different indeed. I drank a lot in the Way of the Spirit – and knew much grace and mercy during that time. Even preached some pretty good sermons, taught some pretty good classes, and did a lot of counseling and pastoring too. It was getting dimmer, without question, toward the end of those days. A third conversion, though very hard at the time, was a huge and welcome relief when it finally came.

The point still stands. Switching from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant is not some minor change of address – not just a little adjustment of perspective. It is an entirely different WAY. Even that is not the end of the whole story. But it is essential and imperative that we have some glimmer of what we are talking about when we contrast the way of the world with the Way of the Spirit.

Clearly Jesus knew that there was a very different content between the two Ways (John’s Way and His Way).

And Paul knew that he had no understanding or experience of the New Life he found with Jesus, before his encounter on the Damascus Road.

And I know that being a “law man” and trying to earn my way into the good graces of God are not the same as the overflowing abundance of love and mercy that comes in the presence of the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord.

Now, if you want to talk about being politically correct or compare the concepts of one religion with those of another, we can do that. But it has very little to do with the true Life of the Spirit. And if you want to talk about people we admire who have good morals and are responsible and conscientious, we can do that too. But it has nothing to do with Living The Life of the Spirit.