

Dwell: Life with God for the World

Available October 2014
\$16, 229 pages, paperback
978-0-8308-3669-7

“To hear Barry tell it, living with God for the world is the key to all human flourishing. . . . In this nexus lies the hope of real, abundant, rich, beautiful human existence.”

—From the foreword by Michael Frost, author of *Incarnate*

Recovering Christian Spirituality

My central claim is that the great need of the church today is to recover a spirituality deeply informed by the logic of the incarnation, of life with God for the world. That claim is connected to two related claims about the situation in which the church finds itself. The first is simply this: people are thirsty. Deep spiritual thirst—for identity, meaning, security and wholeness—is an inescapable part of the human condition. This deep thirst seems particularly apparent in contemporary Western culture’s current fascination with “spirituality.” If you visit your local bookstore (if you can still find one with bricks and mortar), you’ll find shelves full to overflowing with books on metaphysics, self-help and a whole host of spiritualities—Eastern and Western, old and new. From the sublime to the bizarre, from the ancient to the novel, you’ll find more spirituality than you’ll know what to do with.

Much has been made of late of the so-called “rise of the nones.” A recent study by the Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project identified “nones” as those people with no particular religious affiliation. The Pew research showed that their numbers have been steadily rising in recent years—so much so that Protestant Christians no longer represent the cultural majority in the United States. An increasing number of people in North America now identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” Many are searching, without the moorings of church and tradition, for something to satiate their deep spiritual thirst.

The second claim that informs this book is that the popular version of Christian piety characterizing much of American Christianity is ill-suited to satisfy the deep thirst so many people are feeling today. Christian spirituality is not doing particularly well in the spiritual marketplace. In the minds of many, it has been tried and found wanting. But could this be true because Christians in North America have presented a fundamentally flawed vision of what Christian spirituality actually is? Could it be that we have reduced Christian spirituality to a narrow set of beliefs and a seemingly restrictive set of moral rules? Moreover, could it be that even our beliefs and morality have been displaced (at least in the minds of many) by other considerations such as zealous nationalism, partisan politics and an adversarial pursuit of cultural power?

Some are beginning to take notice of how these other considerations contribute to Christianity’s increasing failure to provide a compelling alternative to the popular cultural conceptions of “the good life.” They are beginning to recognize the disastrous effects of this compromised version of Christianity not only on attempts to reach those outside the Christian faith, but even on efforts to pass the Christian faith along to the next generation.

The statistics concerning the number of evangelical young people who walk away from their faith after they graduate from high school and leave home are alarming, to say the least.



BOOK EXCERPT



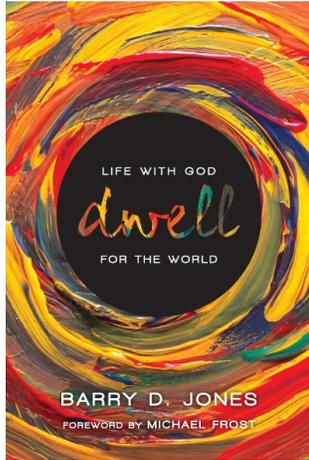
Barry D. Jones serves as associate professor of pastoral ministries and spiritual formation at Dallas Theological Seminary. With an acute desire to train future leaders who are deeply rooted in their faith and vitally engaged in the world, Barry has served in a variety of ministry capacities including time as a youth pastor, a camp and retreat speaker, and currently as a teaching pastor at Irving Bible Church. He received his masters of theology at Dallas Theological Seminary and his PhD in theology at Wheaton College, and lives with his wife and children.

These trends have potentially dire consequences for the future of the church in North America. In his book *The Next Christians*, Gabe Lyons attempts to help the church to name what ails it and to chart a course toward a better future. He writes:

“I believe this moment is unlike any other time in history. Its uniqueness demands an original response. If we fail to offer a different way forward, we risk losing entire generations to apathy and cynicism. Our friends will continue to drift away, meeting their need for spiritual transcendence through other forms of worship and commitments of faith that may be less true but more authentic and appealing.”

One crucial aspect of the task of offering an “original response” to the present crisis is the recovery of a robust vision of Christian spirituality, a spirituality deeply informed by the logic of the incarnation. To be clear, I am not advocating such a view because I take it to be a more “marketable” approach to Christian spirituality or a more effective “strategy” to reach lost people in the kind of world in which we live. I’m advocating it because I believe it captures the essence of the biblical vision of what it means to be fully human. But if that is the case, it is critical for us to recover if we hope to correct the errors of the past and offer a more compelling way forward.

— Taken from the introduction, *“The Incarnation and Christian Spirituality”*



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What does it mean to dwell with God?

Where did you get the idea for *Dwell*?

Barry Jones: I have spent the last several years teaching graduate courses in Christian spirituality and preaching regularly at a “missional” church. I have benefitted greatly from the growing body of literature on both spiritual formation and missional ecclesiology, but the two conversations have been happening almost entirely without reference to one another. *Dwell* attempts to bring together Christian spirituality and mission, making the case that the two belong inseparably together.

What is at the heart of this book?

Barry: The central claim of the book is that the great need of the church today is a recovery of a spirituality deeply informed by the logic of the incarnation, a life *with God for the world*. Popular notions of Christian spirituality today tend to focus on getting us out of the world or getting the world out of us. On the one hand, many are looking to spirituality as a means of disengaging from the chaos of life in order to experience the transcendent and to discover one’s true self. On the other hand, much of the popular piety in the church seems to be about avoiding the corrupting effects of the world on our beliefs, values and behaviors.

Describe what authentic faith looks like.

Barry: Authentic Christian spirituality ought to be about becoming more like Jesus. This certainly involves our intimacy with God and growth in personal holiness, but there’s far more to it. Jesus was the Incarnate One who dwelt among us to accomplish the mission of God. If we are to become like him, we must learn what it means to live out a missional spirituality in the places we dwell.

What do you hope readers take away from *Dwell*?

Barry:

1. Spirituality and mission belong together, like breathing in and breathing out.
2. The goal of Christian spirituality is conformity to the likeness of Christ, which doesn’t merely mean conformity to his holy character but imitation of his embodied life in the world for the sake of the world.
3. Cultivating a missional spirituality involves (1) a *vision* we live toward, (2) a set of *practices* that shape and sustain us, and (3) the *context* in which our life with God for the world gets lived out.
4. Practical instruction in spiritual disciplines that shape and sustain a missional life.