

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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4-5 June 2011

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

The Spirituality of Oprah Winfrey

Oprah Winfrey is leaving her regular TV program and founding a new TV network, which will expand even further her influence on American culture in the early 21st century. She just finished 25 years of syndicated “pastoral work” (a total of 4,561 shows) serving her own “congregation” of true believers throughout America. Joanne Kaufman aptly summarizes this last program: “Oprah’s final show made it difficult to avoid ecclesiastical comparisons. ‘Amazing Grace,’ she told her rapturous audience, ‘is the song of my life.’ ‘This was what I was called to do,’ she said at another point. She also referenced the hand of God and the presence of God, offering prayers of gratitude ‘for the privilege of doing the show,’ talking about her ‘yellow-brick road of blessings,’ and signing off for the last time with hands raised in benediction and a fervent ‘God be the Glory.’” How influential has Oprah Winfrey been these 25 years? What is its nature and how pervasive is it? What exactly does Oprah Winfrey believe? In my view, Oprah Winfrey is one of the most powerful and prominent individuals in America today. Several key thoughts:

- First of all, a brief summary of her life, with special emphasis on the spiritual markers of her life. Oprah was born on 29 January 1954, a child of a brief affair between Vernon Winfrey, who was on Army leave, and Oprah’s mother, Vernita. In the early years of her life, Oprah lived on a farm in Mississippi with her mother Vernita and her grandmother, Hattie Mae Lee. Living there in Mississippi, Oprah was deeply influenced by the church and by her grandmother, who taught her about God and faith. At about age 6, Oprah began living with her dad, Vernon, in Nashville, where they attended the Progressive Missionary Baptist Church. In an important article in *Christianity Today*, LaTonya Taylor writes that “Even as a little girl, she was attentive on Sunday mornings. . . In fact, the next day on the playground at Wharton Elementary School, Oprah would often repeat the Sunday sermon, using notes she had taken at church. She called it the ‘Monday morning devotion.’ She had learned the Golden Rule, written it over and over, and carried it in her school bag. She wanted to be a missionary. . .” After spending a year with her father, she went back to her mother in Milwaukee. She returned to her dad at age 14, but only after she had been sexually abused by male relatives and “was a promiscuous teenager who was too much for her mother to handle.” Her father brought structure back into her life and she returned to the Progressive Missionary Baptist Church, where she spoke, and then also began speaking in other Nashville churches. At age 19, she got into the broadcasting industry and by 1984 had her own local talk show in Chicago (WLS-TV). Spiritual themes were a part of her show, even then. Throughout her career, she has mixed two seemingly contradictory strands—spiritual guide and show business diva!! And she has done so brilliantly!

- Second, can we summarize adequately her theological beliefs? She has never written any such summary but Taylor believes that three key ideas permeate her personal belief system, her personal theology. **(1)** In a discussion she had with New Age author and thinker, Gary Zukav, Winfrey said, “I am creation’s daughter. I am more than my physical self. I am more than the job I do. I am more than the external definitions that I have given myself. . . . Those are all extensions of who I define myself to be, but ultimately I am Spirit come from the greatest Spirit. I am Spirit.” **(2)** She argues quite passionately for a generic spirituality that sees all religions as equally valid paths to God. Taylor writes: “The show also presents an a la carte blend of religious concepts, from karmic destiny (Zen Buddhism) to reincarnation (Hinduism).” Indeed, in 2008, Winfrey, in an exchange with several Christian audience members, revealed the following:

Winfrey: One of the mistakes that human beings make is believing that there is only one way to live and that we don’t accept that there are diverse ways of being in the world, that there are millions of ways to please God and many ways, many paths to what you call God.

Audience member 1: And I guess the danger that could be in . . . I mean it sounds great at the outset but if you really look at both sides. . . .

Winfrey: There couldn’t possibly be just one way? . . .

Audience member 2: You say there isn’t only one way. There is one way and only one way and that is through Jesus.

Winfrey: There couldn’t possibly be only one way with millions of people in the world!

(3) Elliot Miller, a specialist in the New Age, writes that for Winfrey, “Jesus is like an ascended master, a God-realized teacher, someone who completely expressed God in her life.” Jesus is not a personal Savior from sin or the Godman, but merely a good teacher who shows us how to achieve what He has achieved—some form of enlightenment. Of course, with that view of Jesus, the cross, the nature of God as Trinity and even anything resembling the Last Judgment is irrelevant. Any distinctives that go with genuine, biblical Christianity are gone!

It is most instructive that she told Piers Morgan, in a recent interview on CNN, that she definitely sees herself as a spiritual leader. “. . . I’m very clear about what my role is and purpose is. This isn’t about me. I am the messenger to deliver the message of redemption, of forgiveness, of gratitude, of evolving people to the best of themselves. So I am on my personal journey. My personal journey is to fulfill the highest expression of myself here as a human being here on earth.” Hence, she is interested in fostering spirituality but not religion. She wants people to turn inward for relevant and spiritual wholeness, not to structures, theological systems or the church. In so many ways, we are talking about one of the most powerful spiritual leaders of our time—more influential and more powerful than almost any pastor or religious leader one can imagine.

- So, thirdly, this all begs the question of why so many flock to her form of church-free spirituality. Why do 22 million, mostly female, viewers watch, listen and drink in her New Age worldview? Taylor suggests several reasons:

1. America is spiritually hungry. Our secular, Postmodern culture offers nothing absolute or certain. There must be a spiritual world that we can have or know. We must be able to feel it, touch it, and experience it! When Oprah began engaging in open spiritual discussions on her program, her popularity surged.
2. Americans long for practical spirituality. “Part of Oprah’s appeal is that she motivates people to make practical, lasting changes in their lives. Whether she is speaking about diet and exercise, promoting a new book, or hosting the straight-talking Dr. Phil, her gospel is an empowering one: you can change.”
3. Americans want hope! People feel powerless and hopeless in the world. Oprah gives them a brand of spirituality that produces encouragement, comfort and hope: “I can be better and I can expect a better tomorrow.”
4. Americans embrace pluralism and Oprah offers a pluralistic spirituality where one does not need to make concrete theological choices. There is not only one way to God—there are millions!

Oprah Winfrey is a high priestess of a Postmodern spirituality that is like a sponge—it soaks up almost any belief system and puts a stamp of her approval upon it. In that sense, she is one of the most dangerous women in America as well, leading 22 million people down a path filled with spiritual half-truths and lies.

- Finally, in my book on Worldviews, I offer 4 bridges to the New Age, all of which are appropriate in dealing with the New Age cult fostered by Oprah Winfrey.

Bridge #1. Perhaps most important is the matter of building relationships with the New Age Movement (NAM) advocates. Members of the NAM are seeking something that thrills and awes but they have also experienced the fact that nothing really satisfies. Mystical experiences, rituals and other fantastic elements of the New Age ultimately do not bring the satisfaction and fulfillment that all seek. Therefore, the authenticity and genuineness of the Christian life can speak volumes to the NAM advocate. If they see the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and the Beatitudes of Jesus (Matthew 5:1-16) lived out, God’s Spirit can use this supernatural life to attract them to genuine faith in Christ.

Bridge #2. Because the NAM stresses so heavily the sovereignty of self, it is imperative to press the point that self acting out its own desires and wants naturally results in the abandonment of all ethical standards and absolutes. If self is in the driver’s seat in all areas and is satisfied, then who sets the boundaries for life? Who or what determines right and wrong? The result is moral and ethical anarchy and no one who is intellectually honest can accept that. This remains one of the most vulnerable aspects of NAM thinking.

Bridge #3. A third area for focus is the realm of the spirit world. For the person centered in the NAM, the world is filled with the supernatural, the spiritual and the angelic world. As Sire argues, “The New Age has reopened a door closed since Christianity drove out the demons from the woods, desacralized the natural world and generally took a dim view of excessive interest in the affairs of Satan’s kingdom of fallen angels. Now they are back, knocking on university dorm-room doors, sneaking around psychology laboratories and chilling the spines of Ouija players.” As NAM advocates like Oprah open themselves to this

spirit world, there will be consequences, including demon possession, power and occult activities. As Christians, we know that God is far more powerful than the spirit world, for He is its Creator. We know the clear teaching of Deuteronomy 18:9-14 that prohibits any form of dabbling in the occult world, so central to the NAM. Jesus cast out numerous demons and offered freedom to millions. We must be ready to declare the truth about the occult world but also be ready to offer the freedom that Jesus Christ brings from such enslavement, because at bottom, the NAM is a worldview deeply influenced by the occult.

Bridge #4. The NAM movement defines truth in a self-centered manner. Sire maintains that in the NAM “there is no critique of anyone’s ideas or anyone’s experience. Every system is equally valid; it must only pass the test of experience; and experience is private.” The end result is that in the NAM we can only know what we experience. But that rarely satisfies anyone. History has shown us that just experiencing all the facets of life, even those fantastic ones of the NAM, does not produce fulfillment or bring purpose to life. Jesus said that He had come that we might have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10). As Christians, our task is to both live and declare with our words that abundant life. If we have established a genuine relationship of trust and confidence with a member of the NAM, God can use our lives to point them to life’s meaning and purpose, not in the mysticism of the NAM, but in Jesus Christ.

See LaTonya Taylor in Christianitytoday.com (1 April 2011); Elizabeth Tenety in the *Washington Post* (24 May 2011); Alessandra Stanley in the *New York Times* (26 May 2011); Joanne Kaufman in the *Wall Street Journal* (27 May 2011); and James P. Eckman, *The Truth about Worldviews*, pp. 79-88.

PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

The Presbyterian Church and Gay Ordination: The Importance of Sound Doctrine

On 10 May 2011, the Presbyterian Church (USA) joined other mainline churches in opening the door to gay ordination. The constitutional change, which has received the necessary votes in the denomination, removes language that had required clergy to live in “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness.” This decision and change reverses actions taken in 1997, 2001 and 2008. Gone from the Presbyterian constitution are all references to marriage, chastity and a refusal to repent of sin. The new language in the constitution speaks instead of “submission to the Lordship of Christ and being guided by Scripture and confessions.” But in changing their constitution in this manner, Presbyterians demonstrate that they believe they can “submit to the Lordship of Christ without submitting to the clear teachings of Scripture.” Albert Mohler writes that “[this] is a fundamental error that leaves this denomination now in the implausible position of claiming to affirm the Lordship of Christ while subverting the authority of Scripture. The removal of the constitutional language about marriage and chastity, coupled with the removal of the language about repentance from what Scripture identifies as sin, effectively means that candidates and presbyteries may defy Scripture while claiming to follow Christ.” Indeed, Dr. Donald Fortson III, professor of Church History and Practical Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, writes that “One of the primary things handed down in the Christian church over the centuries is a consistent set

of lifestyle ethics including specific directives about sexual behavior. The church of every generation from the time of the apostles has condemned sexual sin as unbecoming a disciple of Christ. At no point have any orthodox Christian teachers ever suggested that one's sexual practices may deviate from biblical standards. Concerning homosexuality, there has been absolute unanimity in church history: sexual intimacy between persons of the same gender has never been recognized as legitimate behavior for a Christian. One finds no examples of orthodox teachers who suggested that homosexual activity could be acceptable in God's sight under any circumstances. Revisionist biblical interpretations that purport to support homosexual practice are typically rooted in novel hermeneutical principles applied to Scripture, which produce bizarre interpretations of the Bible held nowhere, never, by no one." There is really little else that needs to be said about the matter. The PC(USA) has left the fold of genuine biblical Christianity. As J. Gresham Machen concluded in 1923, when a denomination does so, it no longer deserves to be called "Christian."

See Albertmohler.com (11 May 2011); Fortson's article in Christianitytoday.com, (12 May 2011); and J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*.