

ISF Lecture Series 2002 Exact Center of Spirituality Q & A

By Larry Crabb

Speaker 1:

Self-examination and looking at our flesh. Because we are flesh and we are looking in our flesh. We are flesh. What do you think for a standard of accountability, like my individual personalities to be very critical. So I have to be careful not to be too critical of myself and I know that I misjudge my perceptions for God's perceptions because it can all be mixed up together. So I'm just wondering as we're judging our flesh, what's the best way to make sure my flesh isn't judging flesh?

Crabb:

Next question.

[audience laughs]

Crabb:

Let me respond as best I can to a very important question. Let me just take a little tiny point of issue with one of the ways you put it when you said that we're going to be discerning our flesh through our flesh, and that's not all we are. I certainly continue to have a proclivity toward wanting to make life work without God. I see my as the essence of my sin nature, as the way John Piper defines it, which I deeply appreciate his theology on this.

He defines the flesh as the treasonous pursuit of final satisfaction apart from God. And I think that's good. And there's something within me. There's an energy, there's a proclivity, there's an appetite for finding myself or finding my longing satisfied without without God being at the

center, without God being the source, without God being everything. And therefore, as a Christian, sometimes I don't want to know God. I want to use God to make him cooperate with my agenda, which is what I call the old way of the written code, Roman seven polls that were delivered from the old way, the written code, which I think he's talking about the the determination to make life work by doing what's right. So we get everything we want. And that to me is the flesh. So if I'm going to discern the flesh, I would say a couple of things. One is that we really do have the spirit of God within us to guide the process. So we're not we're not at our we're not just looking at the flesh through the flesh. There's more to us than that if we're believers. I think one of the things I hear you saying, and perhaps I'm missing you, I don't want to miss you, but one of the things I hear you saying is that it's very easy when you introduce the notion of self-examination to get caught up in and self-wallowing in self-preoccupation and to be self-deceived about what's wrong and to become so aware of all that's wrong that you just live in internal desolation and despair and self-hatred and you never get out of the slimy pit kind of a thing.

And that's one of the reasons why I think community is so essential. Dr. Coe mentioned Jim Houston, who also was a person and I've come to deeply appreciate and he makes the point that because of the nature of our deceitful hearts, self-examination is a risky process when you do it alone and therefore the one of the functions of spiritual friendship, one of the functions of having spiritual friends, of being the community, having spiritual direction, of being in a small group, of having a pastor, of having a disciple or of having somebody that you can interact with is for the person to to to maybe discern that as you're exploring your internal realities in terms of the negatives there, that maybe you're exploring them with the intent to to solve them all as opposed

to exploring them for the only legitimate purpose, which is to be broken by the reality of your helplessness apart from God, which then creates a dependence.

The only reason for self-examination is not to figure it all out. I think it's a terrible mistake if we assume that the whole idea of of of psychological interpretation and self self exploration is to understand it all insightfully and to get enough interpretations that we can figure it all out. That isn't the point of it at all. I think that's a therapeutic mistake in my understanding of it. The reason for self-examination is to recognize how desperately we need God not to understand all that's going on so we can sort of through.

So self-examination is for the purpose of promoting brokenness over our inability to have anything of value apart from him. That brokenness then leads in my understanding of the cycle to a repentance of saying God, my self-preoccupation, which I thought was self-examination, is nothing more than a proud examining of myself to get on top of things. Why am I so angry? I'll figure it out because my dad did this and this happened. Let me understand it better. And now that I've got it all figured out, I won't be angry anymore.

Pagans can do that and we need to do things that pagans can't do otherwise, which are testimony. So brokenness leads to repentance of God. You really are the source of life. You're the springs of living water. And I'm tired of digging broken systems by looking at my life for endlessly and out of repentance comes an abandonment to God. God, I. I am a self-confessed mess and I'm not going to spend the rest of my life figuring it out.

I'm just going to present myself as I am with with whatever awareness you give. Don't make self-understanding the goal of your life. Rather be open to understanding whatever the spirit wants you to see so that you can more deeply abandon yourself to him. Brokenness, repentance, abandonment, which then leads to a confidence, a confidence that God, no matter what the mess, no matter what I see in my history and my background and my sexual abuse and my and my divorce and my whatever is the story of your life.

No matter what I see in all that God, I have confidence that your life is deeper and present and indestructible and undisturbed by all of that mess and with that confidence based on the brokenness, repentance, abandonment and then confidence, I believe the release comes. So I would never want to encourage self-examination is a self preoccupying process. So I hope that's of some little response to your important question.

Speaker 2:

I take it's around the folks on the white line or whatever.

Crabb:

Oh, OK.

Speaker 2:

I just got here, but if you have a question over there [inaudible 00:06:20]

Crabb:

Great. Good. I see Don back here at the microphone.

Don: [inaudible 00:06:26] and I want gut honesty here. Do you believe as..

Crabb:

Did you cut his mic somehow?

Don:

Do you believe that evangelical Christianity as it now exists, is able to sustain the boundless freedom, the spiritual formation, in fact the Holy Spirit lives in. Is evangelical Christianity able to abandon its doctrines within the bounds of orthodoxy, become heretics without. Abandon our doctrines of sin and become passionate folks of evangelical.

Crabb:

Let me see if I can give a give a response to to that question. Um, Donna and I have been enjoying a bit of a correspondence and he's been a great encouragement to me and sending me a variety of books that I deeply appreciated on the topic of spiritual direction, the spiritual formation. And he's added to my library and very wonderful ways. And I read everything you said actually. It's been very helpful. I think a very important book that all of us should read that has to do with your question, I think is a book by Alister McGrath called The Future of Evangelicalism, is that's the right name? Somebody in the book. The Future of Evangelicalism, I think is the name of it. Alister McGrath. And McGrath makes a point that I alluded to it at a meeting earlier this week, that that unless evangelicals become serious about the topic of spirituality and build an understanding of spirituality within the framework of evangelical conviction, which I'm not willing to abandon, that, that I believe that Allister McGrath says that today's evangelicals will become tomorrow's non evangelicals and that he when he goes on to say something, which I deeply believe and this is a gut response on my part, he goes on to say that he believes evangelicalism is the slumbering giant of spirituality.

And I don't believe we need to abandon evangelicalism. And I'm not sure you're saying that, but I don't think we need to abandon evangelicalism. We need rather to enter more deeply into the

implications of many of the doctrinal truths that we hold as essential and evangelicalism. But I do think that there have been certain accretions within our evangelical thought that have very little or nothing to do with our essential doctrines and those accretions we do well to abandon. And I think those are those accretions are coming out of flesh dynamics and that they're not articulated as doctrine, but they have more to do with with church leadership.

I control with Christian life by effort. I think that many of us really are Galatians heretics who use the word heresy a moment ago. I think many of us do fall into the heresy of beginning by faith and continuing in the power of the flesh and thinking that somehow we can make that happen. And what I would do with your question, I think, is to say that that we need to, as evangelicals, to become profoundly unafraid of the spirit of God. And if that requires some doctrinal adjustment for that to happen, then so be it. But that doesn't require any doctrinal adjustment within within me in my heritage. It may with some, but it requires some real shifts in my own flesh dynamics to become unafraid of with the spirit of God really can do, because I've only recognized recently that. And this I think is true for a lot of us. But it was true for me. I'm terrified of loss of control.

And and I think a lot of psychopathology has to do with the demand for control. And there is a healthy decision making process, but it's not a control process. Let me give you a quick little story. When I was speaking in England at a conference some years ago named Selwyn Hughes, a name some of you might know, he's a leading figure in England, a wonderful brother, a Pentecostal brother. And he said to me, after I did a whole week of seminar, morning, noon and night all week for an organization that he sponsors even after dinner afterwards.

And he's an older gentleman. And he mentored me wonderfully. He said, Larry, tell me tell me what you do with an observation that made about your teaching. And I said, what's the observation? And in fear and trembling. And he said, I noticed in the course of the week there were probably six or seven times that I counted. When, as you were speaking, it was clear to me sitting in the audience that the spirit of God was quietly moving powerfully. And every time I discerned that, you told a funny story. And I felt wonderfully caught and as we discussed it, it became very clear that I want to be in charge and to actually yield to the spirit of God and let him be in charge and to tag along after him is not something I have naturally found a comfortable process. So if that's what needs to be abandoned, then that needs to be abandoned. Frankly, I those of you who've read some of my stuff might might have pegged me perhaps accurately as somebody who tends to look on the dark side of things.

Somebody's been shattered dreams. And I got a letter. And just two weeks ago when the person said, do you have a mood disorder? The medication is, I think, helping, but I don't think I'm a Pollyanna type. But I do find myself more hopeful than discouraged. And I don't and I don't think I'm wearing blinders, rose colored glasses. And looking at the evangelical church, I, I think have been around the block enough to know the politics and the frustrations and the difficulties and the pride, the territorialism and the turf and the internal emptiness and the struggle of pastors have been passing for 20 years.

Anything happening and all sorts of things that I think I have some familiarity with. But I don't feel personally any inclination to abandon the evangelical local church for another tradition. I

feel quite a desire to be open to what the Eastern Orthodox people have to say and some of the Catholic writings. And I'm very open to being enlightened and fed by many other traditions. But I feel quite hopeful that within the evangelical tradition that we're on the verge of, of responding to the hunger for spirituality, which I think is being produced within our hearts, by the spirit, we're on the verge of responding to that maybe with some beginnings of power. And it's going to require that it's going to require a new level of openness, not a shift of doctrine, but an understanding of the implications of our doctrine, really allow for the deeper work of the spirit than perhaps we understood. So I'm not sure if I've gotten better.

Your question time, but that's the best I can do with it. In a moment, other things that you'd like to think about a comment on. We had to have a rolling mic now, I think somewhere. Other questions or comments that you'd like to make. You're always hungry. You don't want to talk to you want to eat. There we go. Yes, sir. Just for the sake of the mother type referred to by power. There's a passage in Isaiah, Chapter 50 that says, who among you trust the Lord, who is who is willing to walk in the darkness? And I'm not going to quote here quite proper, but who is willing to walk in the darkness without lighting your own fires and the passages rebuking us for when we get in the dark, lighting our own torches, turning on our own flashlights and walking in the light of our own making. And the passage continues by saying that be aware of this, that you light your own fires will eventually lie down in misery. When I speak of power, I'm thinking about my attitude toward mystery.

I'm thinking about the fact that there are so many elements of my life, particularly relationally with God and with others and with myself. There are so many elements of my relation life that I

cannot reduced to a system and I cannot shine the flashlight of my intellect and my will on them where I figure it all out and make sense of it. And I believe that over the course of my career, I just I just love charts. And I remember showing one of my sons, one of my recent charts a little while ago, and I was all excited about it because this captured everything that needed to be known until the Lord comes back, you know, and and as I showed him his chart, his comment, he began to laugh and he wasn't interested.

And I said, you know, come on, this is really good stuff. I'm your father. And and he said, well, I'm just kind of anxious to hear what the next one will be that'll change all this. And and that took me back a bit in a good way, because I think that whatever the reality of the spirit of God is within me is going to come out in my interactions with my wife, with my children, with congregations, with spiritual directives, with counseling.

I think it's going to come out when I embrace mystery and don't require a system. So my stance toward mystery, I think, is crucial in the release of spiritual power. So spiritual power is something which my mind is something I cannot contrive on my own. And there's something about it that feels rather unnatural when it comes out. But it feels not unnatural. It feels more supernatural. And I when it comes out, it feels clean and feels alive.

And and I become aware of a deep joy of being a vessel when spiritual power is released. And that's what comes out of that little cycle of my mind of brokenness, repentance, abandonment, confidence, and then release of the life of Christ within me, which is part of my favorite text for this is Galatians, where where Paul says that, you know, I preach and teach, presenting

everybody mature, completely lost in Christ. And then he says, I do all these things. And this to me is an incredible challenge for me. I do all these things in the energy of Christ. That's the power. I do all these things in the energy of Christ, which then he says would so powerfully works in me. Am I aware of that at all? An old mentor of mine is now with the Lord Buckhach, a professor at Columbia Bible College. For years, he was once preaching and in the middle of his sermon he stopped and he said the power of Christ is no longer working through me.

And he sat down and I thought that would save us a lot of time Sunday morning. And and I was so challenged by do I even recognize when he is working to know when he's not, that's about 10, 12 years ago or Rachel would be 15 probably. [audience laughs] And and when I heard that, I thought I would love to be able to discern that the spirit of God is working right now and to be excited about those holy moments. And that's what I longed to see more of, at least in my heart, in my life.

Speaker 2:

Dr. Crabb, uh, quick question with your involvement with charts, and I just wondered how many times that you may have been to France and visited the Cathedral of Church.

Crabb:

Now the questions are doing this. I have been to France, actually, and I don't have the privilege of visiting the Cathedral of Chartes, but I'll...

Speaker 2:

Real question. Um..what's What really ripping me, need is what does it mean to listen to the spirit of God or God speaks to me. Or there's so much terminology that we use, just like we all know what it means. And I was in a church a number of years ago that had been mildly visited

by the church on the afternoon. When someone joined the church, they would baptize you and would lay hands on them for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And I asked the leaders, I said, what does this mean? And no one could ever tell me. And I believe that and I am here, but what does it mean? How do we know it? How do we not use it [inaudible 00:19:16] ?

Crabb:

Just let me just share with you a little bit of my journey in that category without any thought at all that this is definitive, just as far from that. But I'll just give you my little journey on it. I see a great danger as we as the spirituality movement, if you will, takes hold in evangelical circles and as we talk more about spiritual formation and spiritual direction. And there's times I feel a little bit cynical and say, why are we just talking about sanctification and discipleship, what all this new language is all about?

And I sometimes get a little bit jaded about that. But I but I think it's good language and I'm very open and grateful for the new language. It's I think it's it's changing paradigms for us. So I think the language is helping us do that. So I'm not opposed to the new language at all. And I use it freely myself. But I think there's some dangers. And I think one of the dangers is that we are going to we are in danger of divorcing the spirit from the word. And I think we're in danger of spending all of our time just kind of shutting our eyes and getting some internal prompting and saying that's a spirit and going for it. And that can be very childish, maybe well intended, and maybe sometimes the spirits gracious enough to work through it, even even that. But in my own journey, I would say that the spirits that they're listening to, the spirit, must be rooted in a lot of time in the word.

Let me just sound like a good old time fundamentalist. If there's not just a lot of time in the word, if we're not eating the word, I'm learning to appreciate Lexia Divine in kind of a new for me, it's not new. It's rather old, but kind of a sacred spiritual reading of the word is. It's a bit of a new thing for me the last four or five years. And and it's making it's making sense to me now to actually eat the word and to have the word feed my soul.

I indicated that yesterday I was feeling just kind of dry and wasn't looking forward to speaking to you all today. And I do a variety of things. Sometimes when I feel like that, I just figure I'm not going to try hard to make it all happen. I want to watch it air on television and I think that's OK. I actually went for a jog and I think that's fine. And there's is a place for that.

I was talking to go to a seminary professor Dallas some years ago. And what's the most important thing you do in the course of your week, your spiritual life? And he says workout in the gym. And it was like, shouldn't you say it better than that? It seems kind of, you know, kind of mundane. I mean, there's a place for that. But I also spent time in the word and I and I think I'm understanding more of what it means for the spirit to actually feed my soul in the word.

That's a reality for me now. And it wasn't some years ago. And now I can I can read the passage of Abraham and Sarah, as I did just the other day. And I can think about the fact that Abraham's job was to be obedient and one hundred year old guy, actually, and his wife had a child. It's impossible. But and I read that and it worked itself into my heart. And on the basis of that and I also read the story of Jepta in judges where he said in his letter to the Ammonites, I think he said, whatever God has given me, I will possess it.

And that sentence just flew out at me the other day. And I thought, if God has given me something, I don't possess it, I'm going to share it. This is fun. I had that come about spirit through the word. So never separate the spirit in the word. If the word is central, if we're spending time in the word, then I think that as we're sitting in fellowship, as you and I are chatting, then I think it's fair for us to explore our own interior world, to become aware of flesh dynamics, to develop the kind of discretion, the kind of discernment that helps us see that.

Yeah, right now I want to say this because I want to appear intelligent and to go, oh, that's just so ugly. Is there anything that's alive within me that I just want to say for his glory? And then when you start getting a hold of, you know, this is really alive in me, I want to say this, then I think you can say, you know, this this might be the spirit of God prompting me to say this to my client, to my spiritual directly, to my friend, to my wife.

So that kind of thing is what I mean by listening to the spirit. I also think it's OK to structure this a little bit. We in our small group, we do a little thing about listening to the spirit on behalf of another. We borrow the phrase from somebody else and not a new phrase does. And now we many times in our small group will somebody starts a struggle. We'll go off into various separate corners of the. Of the house, and we'll spend maybe 15 minutes, half an hour, and the way we do it is we just in our mind's eye, we lift the person and sometimes I'll just raise my hand, lift the person into the presence of the Trinity and eavesdrop. That's how I see it. Eavesdropping the Trinity. I think it's a good thing. I think we're invited to do that. The Old Testament prophets, if they didn't spend time in the Council of God, then they hadn't heard from God. Remember

Hannah and I and Jeremiah, he said, you'll be out of here in captivity in two years. No problem.

And and Jeremiah said, you didn't hear that from God. You're a dead man. So it's possible to hear things from God, apparently.

So we spent time eavesdropping on God. And that phrase eavesdropping makes sense to me. I know that when I'm doing a seminar somewhere and I want to I want to know how it's really going. During the break, I'll go to the men's room and hide in the stall for the half hour and just kind of eavesdrop on the conversations. And sometimes people will come up and say, boy, I really appreciate yourself Dr. Crabb. And if I leave the men's room, what's he talking about? I've got a clue. The guy talks too fast or whatever, but eavesdropping on the Trinity is always a very gratifying experience. And then we just as we as we listen, we just bow our heads or our hearts and just visualize. The Lord says he's singing over this guy with the lights. The Lord has redeemed this person. The Lord has redeemed him to the praise of God's glory. The Lord has put something in this person. This person is a masterpiece. He's poetry. God is building a poem out of this man's life, this woman's life, so that the poetry can reflect his glory. Can I think about all that? Can I ponder these biblical truths and see how the Trinity might be viewing this person? And then if anything begins to come to me that seems consistent with the word and all of God's redemptive plans. And we gather and share that with the person. And that's what we call listening to the spirit on behalf of another. So that's the best I can do. And just thinking about it that way.

A couple more questions.

Speaker 3:

In your book inside out, what are some of the [inaudible 00:25:30] there is a sense of not really knowing where you are going. Is that a place of your father or is that a place of your own?

Crabb:

Oh. Inside Out has been out and about 11, 12 years. And the most feedback I've gotten from that book has been the sentence, where's the hope? And that's why when the 10th anniversary edition, I wrote an extra chapter. So there's a new edition out as of a year or two ago. And the last chapter now in the new version of the book is There's Something Good Beneath the Mess. And I would very much stand by the thesis that impassioned me to write the book, which is that brokenness, a condition for hearing the spirit and growing, is entering into what I call both a hopelessness and helplessness, the hopelessness of realizing that there are desires that are ineradicably, embedded in my image bearing soul, that nothing in this world will ever satisfy not even the best wife in the world. And I think I married her, not the best kids in the world. I think I have them. Not the best military in the world. And I love what God's allowed me to do. But if folks if this is as good as it gets, I'm not very pleased. And one of the dumbest sentences, sometimes evangelicals say it was even if heaven weren't coming up, I still look like a Christian. Well, I sure wouldn't. [audience laughs] Give my money to the church, I'd buy a BMW. [audience laughs] I mean, what's the point? But if heaven's coming up, then it changes everything. And then I say there is a hopelessness that if this is all there is, you might as well get all you can out of it because tomorrow you're dead. And I think that's biblical. But if there's a heaven, then purify yourself because you have the hope. So the hopelessness to me is crucial with longings that cannot be satisfied in this world. A helplessness to me is the issue of the flesh is always with me and I can continually mortify it and then crucify it but I never get to sinless eradication ism. It's my own theological view. And so I'm I'm stuck with the fact that apart from the power of God, I'm never going to be all that I was called to be. And until I get to heaven, I will never be all I long to be. So I'm helpless and with both hopelessness and helplessness filling my soul, which I think Inside

Out was written to promote, then it seems to me that that becomes the soil in which, in your despair, you say, is there more?

And it's only out of that, that we seek God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. And that's what I think we become. That's when we shift Hosea's 7 talks about God says I long to redeem them, but I can't because they wail in their beds, you don't cry from their hearts. And people that wail on their beds, in my judgment. What are you saying? And Hosea's 7 there is wailing on beds is just grumpy about the pain we're crying out from your hearts is dependently seeking the reality of God in your own soul and hopelessness and helplessness helps you get there. So I would rather think it's going to be a bit of a bit of a chronic condition to some degree. And and it visits us in seasons in order to let us seek him more deeply. I think it's similar to to the dark night of the soul type theology with John of the Cross. We have time, maybe just one more. And then I don't want to take time away from Dr. Coe.

And I've seen no..a number of hands up up this other gentleman. The backspin raising his hand a number of times. How about if I take your questions, sir?

Speaker 4: I don't know if you have read Bruce Jimras, [inaudible 00:29:14] the soul

Crabb: Satisfy the soul.

Speaker 4: Satisfy the soul

Crabb: Yes, I have.

Speaker 4: He has a very similar story. His path that you had in connecting . Um, is it was your contention? [inaudible 00:29:18] from I am hearing even from your responses. We all need to do is bring us about an understanding of building our own soul first, so that can then accept and reflect the holy spirit upon those who are being counseled.

Crabb:

Um, if you couldn't hear the question, let me repeat it. Referring to Bruce Demaris excellent book, Satisfy Your Soul. And am I in congruence with Dr. Demaris thesis that we need to build our own soul in spiritual formation that that's what spiritual formation really is perhaps, building our own souls so that we can reflect the glory of God to others? Is that a fair way of putting it? I guess I want to say yes and no to that. I want to say aloud yes to the notion of spiritual formation. And the next talk after lunch will be my understanding of what that looks like and it's in its maturing form. So maybe I'll answer your question better then, perhaps. But I think it's crucial that we do attend to the health of our own souls. I think that's crucial. The danger, of course, is that we really can become incredibly inward focused and perhaps one of the major ways to grow our own souls, if you will, or to see our souls growing by the power of the spirit, is to develop a very outward focus. And I think the discipline sometimes can help us with that. And I think that that one of the evidences of our souls growing into maturity is that we become much less sensitive to things like criticism are less less controlled by it. Actually, I think we become more sensitive, but less controlled by it. And my only my only caution in medicine, rather than just saying aloud yes to the question, my only caution is that I don't want to see us thinking that the job that we're now encouraging people to do is to spend the next three years building your own soul and then start loving your spouse and taking care of your kids and and serving God. And once you're grown, then it's time to do it. And that's not how it works, in my judgment at all, that it's a very much of a synchronous process. So that'll be the only hesitation I would have about your about your good comment.

I don't want to take time away from Dr. Coe. He wanted to share some things about, I think is a very, very important program that I'm really excited about. And then after he shares, I guess we're going to some meeting. [audience claps]

Coe:

I wanted to give you his website email. Just again, if you're interested in pursuing that. The website is New Way Ministries dot org, just one word there, new way ministries.org and his email. Again, New Way Ministries, One word, new way ministries at earthlink.net.