

SACRED PATHWAYS

Books by Gary Thomas

Authentic Faith

Cherish

Devotions for a Sacred Marriage

Devotions for Sacred Parenting

Every Body Matters

The Glorious Pursuit

Holy Available

A Lifelong Love

Loving Him Well

Preparing Your Heart for Marriage

Pure Pleasure

Sacred Marriage

Sacred Parenting

Sacred Pathways

The Sacred Search

Thirsting for God

When to Walk Away

SACRED PATHWAYS

NINE WAYS TO CONNECT WITH GOD

GARY THOMAS

 ZONDERVAN
BOOKS

ZONDERVAN BOOKS

Sacred Pathways

Copyright © 1996, 2010 by Gary L. Thomas

Copyright © 2020 by The Center for Evangelical Spirituality

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

Zondervan titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email SpecialMarkets@Zondervan.com.

ISBN 978-0-310-36119-0 (audio)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Thomas, Gary (Gary Lee), author.

Title: Sacred pathways : nine ways to connect with God / Gary Thomas.

Description: Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references. |

Summary: "This revised and updated edition of Sacred Pathways will encourage you to see strengths, weaknesses, and tendencies in your devotional approach to God. Gary Thomas, bestselling author of Sacred Marriage, shows you how to improve your quiet time and personal worship life so you can strengthen your walk with the Lord"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020022336 (print) | LCCN 2020022337 (ebook) | ISBN 9780310361176 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780310361183 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Spiritual life—Christianity. | God (Christianity)—Worship and love. | Temperament—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4501.3 .T47153 2020 (print) | LCC BV4501.3 (ebook) | DDC 248.4—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020022336>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020022337> ISBN 978-0-310-36117-6 (softcover)

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.Zondervan.com. The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

Any internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published in association with Yates & Yates, www.yates2.com.

Cover design: Curt Diepenhorst

Cover photography: Cyril Gosselin / GettyImages

Interior design: Emily Ghattas

Printed in the United States of America

20 21 22 23 24 /LSC/ 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Allison and Kelsey and Graham—
may you open
the windows of your hearts
to God's love.*

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	IX
------------------------	----

PART 1: THE JOURNEY OF THE SOUL

1. Loving God	3
2. Where Is Your Gethsemane?	22

PART 2: THE NINE SACRED PATHWAYS

3. Naturalists: Loving God Outdoors	33
4. Sensates: Loving God with the Senses	51
5. Traditionalists: Loving God through Ritual and Symbol	70
6. Ascetics: Loving God in Solitude and Simplicity	99
7. Activists: Loving God through Confrontation	120
8. Caregivers: Loving God by Loving Others	140
9. Enthusiasts: Loving God with Mystery and Celebration	160
10. Contemplatives: Loving God through Adoration	185
11. Intellectuals: Loving God with the Mind	206

PART 3: UNDERSTANDING YOUR SACRED PATHWAY

12. Tending the Garden of the Soul	231
------------------------------------	-----

<i>Companions on the Journey: The Sacred Pathways and the Enneagram</i>	243
---	-----

<i>Questions for Discussion and Reflection</i>	253
--	-----

<i>Notes</i>	267
--------------	-----

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank several people for reviewing this manuscript, especially Frederica Mathewes-Green, Dr. Brian Newman, Lisa Thomas, the Reverend Brian Thorstad, and Janet Thoma. Their comments have made a significant contribution to this book. I was well served by the Zondervan staff, especially John Sloan and Dirk Buursma.

I'd also like to thank the many people who have sat through seminars and offered their suggestions to add to this material.

PART 1

THE JOURNEY OF THE SOUL

CHAPTER 1

LOVING GOD

Valuable lessons about spirituality can come at the strangest times. An ear-popping flight from Washington, D.C., to Seattle, Washington, taught me a lesson I'll not soon forget. Just before I was about to embark on the trip, I came down with a severe head cold. My sinuses act up when I fly, even if I'm feeling well, so I knew I needed to get some help. Since I had just moved to Virginia, I hadn't bothered to find a doctor, so a coworker recommended an outpatient care clinic.

Nothing about the clinic's appearance looked professional or gave me peace of mind. I had serious reservations about the care I would receive, but I didn't have time to go anywhere else, so I did my best to explain my dilemma to the doctor, waited for his prescription, and left.

When I got home, my wife asked me, "What did the doctor say?"

"I don't know," I responded. "I was so sick I couldn't understand him."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Well, what did he prescribe?"

"I don't know. I can't read the writing."

"What kind of clinic was this?"

"I don't want to know," I said. "I have to leave town tomorrow."

The flight the next day was one of the most miserable flights of my life. It takes about five hours to fly from Washington, D.C., to Seattle, but I was certain that my then thirty-year-old body had

SACRED PATHWAYS

turned forty-five by the time I landed. My head felt like it weighed about fifty pounds.

I dutifully took the medication as it was prescribed and expected my ears to clear a bit by the next day, but they didn't. I wouldn't even be able to speak clearly if I didn't get some help, so after a day or two, I stopped in a Portland, Oregon, clinic, hoping to obtain more relief. The new doctor put me at ease. My head had cleared enough that I could understand what he was talking about. When he learned what had been prescribed for me in Virginia, his jaw dropped. "I don't know what that doctor was thinking, but I can't imagine prescribing this medicine for your ailment. Apparently this doctor knows just one or two medicines and is prescribing the same one for virtually everything."

This experience taught me the folly of using one medicine to treat every malady. It took some time, however, for the spiritual analogy to become clear. Over and over again we give Christians the same spiritual prescription: "You want to grow as a Christian? All you have to do is develop a quiet time and come to church every weekend."

Sometime in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the "quiet time" became a staple of most discipleship and church training programs. Usually consisting of thirty to sixty minutes, the quiet time was most commonly composed of a short period of personal worship, followed by some intercessory prayer (using a prayer notebook or intercessory prayer list), Bible study (according to a set method), and then a concluding prayer, followed by a commitment to share what we learned with at least one other person that day. This is something that's easily taught and, for some circles, easy to hold people accountable to: "How many times this past week have you had your quiet time?" Anything less than seven was a wrong answer.

With perhaps good intentions (who would oppose regular personal worship, prayer, and Bible study?), we reduced the devotional life to rote exercise. A. W. Tozer warned us about this: "The whole transaction of religious conversion has been made mechanical and

LOVING GOD

spiritless. We have almost forgotten that God is a person and, as such, can be cultivated as any person can.”¹ The casualties of “mechanized religion” are many. It’s one thing to witness spiritually empty people outside the church; it’s even sadder to see Christians *inside* the church who suffer this same spiritual emptiness.

Ultimately, it’s a matter of spiritual nutrition. Many Christians have found the traditional quiet time to be somewhat helpful in starting up a life of devotion but rather restrictive and inadequate to build an ongoing, life-giving relationship with God. Since the quiet time is all that was taught, many have simply let the quiet time lapse without finding a substitute, having never been taught any other way to “feed” themselves spiritually. They thus live on a starvation diet and then are surprised that they always seem so “hungry.”

Others have labored on but admit that the routine of their devotions has made them seem more like an obligation than a delight. This is because helpful, even delightful, routines can grow stale over time. There are certain foods I really like—but I don’t want to eat them *every day*. I have certain running routes and workouts that I earnestly look forward to, but I wouldn’t want to run the same route, at the same speed, the same length, every time I run.

Just getting out of our routines can often generate new enthusiasm. One of the most refreshing things that happened to my marriage some years ago was breaking my wrist. It was a serious break, requiring surgery, and it thrust Lisa and me out of our routine. We did most everything together, in part because I needed so much help. Since my exercise was limited to walking, we took near-daily walks. We shopped together. We answered email together (initially, I couldn’t type). For a while, Lisa even helped me get dressed. (OK, *you* try tying your shoe with one hand!) Being out of our routine, Lisa and I discovered a deeper and newer love. The romance was always there; it had just been buried under the accretions of always doing the same thing.

SACRED PATHWAYS

I've found that many people face the same dilemma in their walk with God. Their love for God has not dimmed; they've just fallen into a soul-numbing rut. Their devotions seem like nothing more than shadows of what they've been doing for years. They've been involved in the same ministry for so long they could practically do it in their sleep. It seems as if nobody in their small groups has had an original thought for three years. They finally wake up one morning and ask, "Is this really all there is to knowing God?"

Quiet Time Collides with Reality

Several years after I graduated from college, I realized my spiritual life had to adapt to a new schedule. I was leaving the house between 5:00 and 5:30 a.m. and getting back home around 5:30 p.m. That left an hour to have dinner with my family, an hour to spend some time with my children, half an hour to get the kids in bed, and about another hour to pay the bills, take out the garbage, catch up on my wife's day, and take phone calls. If we had an evening meeting, everything was crunched even tighter.

To have a sixty-minute quiet time, which had been a cherished staple of my spiritual diet, I would have had to get up at 4:00 a.m.! I was able to fit in some daily Bible reading before I left the house and a time of prayer during my morning commute, but I felt I was cheating. Vacations and weekends offered the opportunity to resume this discipline, but the workweek demanded something else.

This struggle to find a new "spiritual prescription" became a great blessing because I began to find new ways to nurture my soul. Perhaps the primary lesson I learned was that certain parts of me are never touched by a standardized quiet time. My discipline of quiet times was (and is) helpful; however, I came to realize it was not sufficient. Other parts of my spiritual being lay dormant.

LOVING GOD

I also began to realize other people shared my frustration. For some people, the formulaic quiet time seems too cerebral. Others simply grow bored sitting at a desk alone in a room just reading and thinking. And why should everybody be expected to love God the same way, anyway? We would think it absurd to insist that newly evangelized Christians in Moravia create an identical worship service to Presbyterians in Boston or Baptists in Georgia. Yet we prescribe the same type of spirituality for both the farmer in Iowa and the lawyer in Washington, D.C.

Beware of Narrowing Your Approach to God

Expecting all Christians to have a certain type of quiet time can wreak havoc in a church or small group. Excited about meaningful (to us) approaches to the Christian life, we sometimes assume that if others do not experience the same thing, something must be wrong with their faith. Please don't be intimidated by others' expectations. God wants to know the real you, not a caricature of what somebody else wants you to be. He created you with a certain personality and a certain spiritual temperament. God wants your worship, according to the way he made you. Your worship may differ somewhat from the worship of the person who brought you to Christ or the person who leads your Bible study or church.

I must admit, there is a limit to the individual approach to spirituality. It is neither wise nor scriptural to pursue God apart from the community of faith. Our individual expressions of faith must be joined to corporate worship with the body of Christ. Fortunately, over its nearly two thousand years of history, the church has provided us with rich and varied traditions of loving God.

Jesus accepted the worship of Peter's mother-in-law as she

SACRED PATHWAYS

served him, but he refused to force Mary, the sister of Martha, to also worship in that way. Mary was allowed to express her worship in the silence of adoration, not in the hustle and bustle of active service. Good spiritual directors understand that people have different spiritual temperaments, that what feeds one doesn't feed all. Giving the same spiritual prescription to every struggling Christian is no less irresponsible than a doctor prescribing penicillin to combat every illness.

As I read the classics of the Christian faith and shared my journey with others, I discovered various ways in which people find intimacy with God: by studying church history or theology, by singing or reading hymns, by dancing, by walking in the woods. Each practice awakened different people to a new sense of spiritual vitality, and something was touched in them that had never been touched before.

This discovery put me on the path of searching out various “spiritual temperaments” as a way to explain how we each love God differently. Our spiritual temperament should be distinguished from our personality temperament, about which so much has been written. Knowing our personal temperaments, whether we are sanguine or melancholy, for instance, will tell us how we relate to others or how we can choose a suitable spouse or vocation. But it doesn't necessarily tell us how we relate to God. The focus on spiritual temperaments is an attempt to help us understand how we best relate to God so we can develop new ways of drawing near to him. My search was most influenced by biblical figures, who lived out these temperaments on the pages of Scripture, and second by historical movements within the Christian church.

One God, Many Relationships

Scripture tells us that the same God is present from Genesis through Revelation—though people worshiped that one God in many ways: Abraham had a religious bent, building altars

LOVING GOD

everywhere he went. Moses and Elijah revealed an activist's streak in their various confrontations with forces of evil and in their conversations with God. David celebrated God with an enthusiastic style of worship, while his son Solomon expressed his love for God by offering generous sacrifices. Ezekiel and John described loud and colorful images of God, stunning in sensuous brilliance. Mordecai demonstrated his love for God by caring for others, beginning with the orphaned Esther. Mary of Bethany is the classic contemplative, sitting at Jesus' feet.

These and other biblical figures of the Old and New Testaments confirmed to me that within the Christian faith there are many different and acceptable ways of demonstrating our love for God. Our temperaments will cause us to be more comfortable in some of these expressions than others—and that is perfectly acceptable to God. In fact, by worshiping God according to the way he made us, we are affirming his work as Creator.

Historic Movements within the Church

The second area I researched as I sought to label these spiritual temperaments was the church's historical separation into groups that agree on many larger issues but often vehemently disagree on smaller ones. I looked into several controversies in Christian history and found that a different way of relating to God—a way hinted at through a spiritual temperament—was behind many of them. It would be simplistic to suggest that such differences were the sole or even primary cause of many church splits and denominations, but they did have some effect.

Let's take just the last five hundred years of church history. In the Middle Ages, the Western branch of the church, Roman Catholicism, was steeped in the mystery of sacramental rites; Roman Catholic worship focused on the altar. When Luther theologically broke with Rome, worship was altered considerably. Luther

SACRED PATHWAYS

stressed *sola scriptura* (the sufficiency of Scripture), so he elevated the pulpit to show the importance of preaching the Word. Thus in a Reformation church, your eye would be drawn to a majestic-looking pulpit, not to an ornate altar. This change created two different styles of worship—one emphasizing a ritual reenactment of the crucifixion, the other emphasizing intellectual discourse in knowing, understanding, and explaining the existence of God.

The Reformers differed among themselves, however. Lutherans tended to keep many of Rome's elements of worship unless those elements were overtly rejected by Scripture. Calvinists tended to get rid of every element unless it was prescribed in Scripture.

The different ways of loving God extended even to how that love was expressed in the world. Calvinists rejected the monastic expression of loving God—a strict separation from society—and opted instead to express love for God by transforming society. The line between church and state began to blur. Calvin wanted Christians to hold the important offices of the state and even went so far as to allow the execution of a heretic.

The Anabaptists, on the other hand, sought to express their love for God by stressing the inner reality of the gospel. They became separatists and pacifists, refusing to participate in the affairs of secular government. Instead, they attempted to create a model society that would witness to the unbelieving world by inviting them to come out of the secular society and join the community of faith. Their worship often consisted of sitting quietly before God, waiting for the Spirit to speak through his people. Neither the pulpit nor the altar starred. An Anabaptist church accommodated congregational sharing, believing that God's Holy Spirit spoke to his people, through his people.

Further to the east, the Orthodox Church maintained its centuries-old tradition of holding a very sensuous worship service, with worshipers touching various items (even occasionally kissing

LOVING GOD

them), listening to bells ring, smelling incense, watching the priests wear elaborate clothing, and worshiping in colorful surroundings. These were tactile-oriented, senses-come-alive services steeped in mystery and awe.

All five players—Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists, and Orthodox—were trying to love God, but with unique expressions of that love. Many differences had theological roots, but some were also related to worship preferences.

John Wesley, an eminent Anglican, was humbled on a trans-oceanic trip as he witnessed the faith of the Moravians, who bravely maintained their serenity in the face of death. In response, Wesley traded in a faith based on creeds and discipline for the inner faith displayed by the Moravians and began preaching the necessity of relating to God through an inward transformation. Thus, Methodism was born.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the Azusa Street Revival brought Pentecostal practices back into common church life. Today, virtually every congregation has been influenced by the charismatic renewal, whether they agree with Pentecostal theology or not. The singing of choruses and the clapping or raising of hands have spread to virtually every denomination.

At the same time inner experience was melding with Pentecostal elements, another wing of the church began stressing the social obligations of the gospel—and the social gospel movement was born, with one wing promoting Prohibition and the other wing endorsing socialism. In this expression of Christianity, what counted was loving your neighbor and creating a just society, not having vague inner experiences of spiritual delight.

Instead of learning from others, Christians have often chosen to segregate themselves by starting a new church whenever worship preferences diverge. This segregation has erected denominational walls and impoverished many Christians. Unless you happen to

SACRED PATHWAYS

be born into just the right tradition, you're brought up to feed on somebody else's diet. Unfortunately, some Christians tend to question the legitimacy of any experience that may not particularly interest them. Instead of saying, "That's not for me," they proclaim, "That shouldn't be for anybody."

This is not unlike an attitude expressed one time by my home-schooled daughter, who was struggling with a math problem that her mother had assigned her. Allison lamented, "This is too hard. It's not fair! In fact, I think it's unbiblical!"

Of course, there is nothing "unbiblical" about math, but this same approach is often adopted when we question experiences that other Christians have—particularly experiences that strike us as "weird." I'm talking about "theologically neutral" practices here. For instance, one woman may discover that the burning of incense in a church helps her to pray, while another woman thinks using incense is distracting or just plain weird. The two can agree to disagree without making a theological issue out of a doctrinally neutral worship preference.

God has given us different personalities and temperaments. It's only natural that these differences should be reflected in our worship.

Personality Temperaments

Carl Jung developed four profiles to describe human nature. (These profiles have been formulated by Isabel Briggs Myers in the popular Myers-Briggs test.) First, we approach reality either as an *extrovert*, who is most at home in the social world, or as an *introvert*, who prefers to dwell in the inner world. Second, we register input as either a *sensing* person, using the five senses, or an *intuitive* person, using the imagination. Third, we organize and arrange data either as a *thinking* person, who uses logic and the intellect, or as a *feeling* person, who arranges data according to how it affects

LOVING GOD

people and relates to human values. Finally, we arrange our outer reality as either a *judging* person, who is orderly, controlling, and managing, or a *perceptive* person, who is spontaneous and flexible. Combinations of these four profiles can create sixteen different personality types, and the Myers-Briggs test is designed to separate these types.²

While spiritual temperaments differ from personality temperaments, Myers-Briggs “types” can point us to different ways that we relate to the God who created us with a variety of dispositions and inclinations. Using biblical figures, historic church movements, and various personality temperaments, we can identify nine spiritual temperaments—what I call “sacred pathways.”

Sacred Pathways: An Overview

What is a “sacred pathway”? Put very simply, it describes the way we relate to God, how we draw near to him. Do we have just one pathway? Not necessarily. Most of us, however, will naturally have a certain predisposition for relating to God, which is our predominant spiritual temperament.

Here is a short overview of the nine spiritual temperaments. Part 2 of this book will take a detailed look at each temperament. As you read through the descriptions of these nine sacred pathways, you might check the ones that apply to you.

Naturalists: Loving God Outdoors

Naturalists would prefer to leave any building, however beautiful or austere, to pray to God beside a river. Leave the books behind, forget the demonstrations—just let them take a walk through the woods, mountains, or open meadows.

These Christians believe that nature clearly proclaims that

SACRED PATHWAYS

“God is!” They may learn more from watching an ant colony or looking at a peaceful lake than from reading a book or listening to a sermon, though they may find fulfillment from reading the parables of Jesus that are based on nature and selections from the psalms.

Naturalists are related to contemplatives, except that they are moved by creation in addition to the inner world. When they are outdoors, their heart soars to worship God. A modern-day example is the writer Annie Dillard. In her book *Holy the Firm*, Dillard wrote, “I know only enough of God to want to worship him, by any means ready to hand.”³ One of her primary means was spending time outdoors. Perhaps because Dillard fell in love with the Pacific Northwest, where I grew up, I have a particular affinity for her works. I’ve also lived in Virginia, where Dillard camped out in the Blue Ridge Mountains and recorded that now famous and moving scene of a moth flying into a candle’s flame.

From these ordinary events and scenes—moths, mountains, and the Puget Sound—Dillard uncovered the mystery of the holy, transcendent God. She wrote that she visited the Cascade Range “to study hard things, rock mountain and salt sea, and to temper my spirit on their edges.”

“Teach me thy ways, O Lord” is, like all prayers, a rash one, and one I cannot but recommend. These mountains—Mount Baker and the Sisters and Shuksan, the Canadian Coastal Range and the Olympics on the peninsula, are surely the edge of the known and comprehended world. They are high. That they bear their own unimaginable masses and weathers aloft, holding them up in the sky for anyone to see plain, makes them, as Chesterton said of the Eucharist, only the more mysterious by their very visibility and absence of secrecy. They are the western rim of the real, if not considerably beyond it.⁴

LOVING GOD

Like Dillard, naturalists learn to seek God by surrounding themselves with all that he has made. Notice how the physical beauty that surrounds Dillard continually mirrors the spiritual, unseen faith within her.

Sensates: Loving God with the Senses

Sensate Christians want to be lost in the awe, beauty, and splendor of God. They are drawn particularly to the liturgical, the majestic, the grand. When these Christians worship, they want to be filled with sights, sounds, and smells that overwhelm them. Incense, intricate architecture, classical music, and formal language send their hearts soaring.

Whereas some Christians might find such a sensuous onslaught distracting, these Christians delight in it. The five senses are God's most effective inroad to their hearts.

W. Phillip Keller, author of the popular book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, strikes me as someone with sensate tendencies. In his book *Taming Tension*, Keller writes about being a university student confined to a “rather cramped and drab home” one winter. He found escape in a picture of a “magnificent sunset scene. Again and again I absorbed myself in its loveliness. It was a tremendous uplift and inspiration amid what otherwise would have been unbearable surroundings.”⁵

In the same book, Keller talks about the role of music in his life. During his self-described “lonely years” in a foreign land, Keller took out his violin “to ease the heartache and inner pain. An hour of music making would set my heart to singing again.”⁶ He found that “even such a simple habit as humming or whistling can turn a doleful day into one filled with new hope and good cheer.”⁷

Once Keller fully understood the meaning of Handel's *Messiah*, he began playing it year-round. “At times when I am downcast or despondent over life's sufferings, the melodies and message of this

SACRED PATHWAYS

music, showing how Christ himself also felt such grief and sorrow, have lifted me in a way that no other human agency could possibly have done.”⁸

Sight and music, among other things, have played key roles in bringing Keller into new realms of worship and fellowship with God. Anything that touches the senses can be a powerful threshold of worship for sensate Christians.

Traditionalists: Loving God through Ritual and Symbol

Traditionalists are fed by what are often termed the historic dimensions of faith: rituals, symbols, sacraments, and sacrifice. These Christians tend to have a disciplined life of faith. Some may be seen by others as legalists, defining their faith largely by matters of conduct. Frequently they enjoy regular attendance at church services, tithing, keeping the Sabbath, and so on.

Traditionalists have a need for ritual and structure. The contemplatives’ unstructured “prayer of the quiet” would be confusing and fairly unfulfilling to them.

Rod Dreher, a *Dallas Morning News* columnist, may be a traditionalist. Dreher grew up attending informal Christian worship services. The emotional fervor of these services attracted him to the faith, but it wasn’t enough to hold him—and his commitment fell off during his days in boarding school. An encounter with some modern-day Christian writings eventually led Dreher back to the faith, but this time he found himself craving more established ritual and structure. Much to his surprise, he soon found that liturgies weren’t confining and dead, as he had supposed they were, but rather carried a depth and historicity that added a new aesthetic to his worship. “It was more beautiful than anything I had ever experienced,” he said.

Dreher was drawn by the ritual of the Orthodox Church, moved by the fact that he was praying prayers that had been prayed by many Christians in earlier centuries. The structure of the services

LOVING GOD

brought more discipline to his personal life. Experiencing the same ritual week after week has deepened his understanding of the faith and his commitment to it.

Now Dreher says, “I live more liturgically in my everyday life. It’s created a greater depth and texture to my Christian faith.”

Ascetics: Loving God in Solitude and Simplicity

Ascetics want nothing more than to be left alone in prayer. Take away the liturgy, the trappings of religion, the noise of the outside world. Let there be nothing to distract them—no pictures, no loud music—and leave them alone to pray in silence and simplicity.

Ascetics live a fundamentally internal existence. Even when they are part of a group of people, they might seem to be isolated from the others. Frequently introspective, sometimes to a fault, they are uncomfortable in any environment that keeps them from “listening to the quiet.”

Singer and writer Michael Card is a good example of the ascetic temperament. He lives in a Shaker-inspired home on one hundred acres in a rural part of Franklin, Tennessee. Card admires the Shaker emphasis on simplicity in architecture and lifestyle. His dream is to establish a small, silent retreat center on his land where pastors, artists, and songwriters can spend time with the Lord in prayer and fasting.

The lyrics of Card’s songs, like the reprise in “The Things We Leave Behind,” often advocate the simple life: “Every heart needs to be set free from possessions that hold it so tight . . . and we can’t imagine the freedom we find from the things we leave behind.”⁹

Activists: Loving God through Confrontation

Activists serve a God of justice, and their favorite Scripture is often the story of Jesus’ cleansing of the temple. They define *worship* as standing against evil and calling sinners to repentance. These

SACRED PATHWAYS

Christians often view the church as a place to recharge their batteries so they can go back into the world to wage war against injustice.

Activists may adopt either social or evangelistic causes, but they find their home in the rough-and-tumble world of confrontation. They are energized more by interaction with others, even in conflict, than by being alone or in small groups.

Francis Schaeffer is a good example of this temperament. Though he was known primarily as a “thinker,” Schaeffer’s thoughts usually led to activism. In his seminal work *How Should We Then Live?* Francis Schaeffer wrote that “as Christians we are not only to *know* the right world view . . . but consciously to *act* upon that world view so as to influence society in all its parts and facets across the whole spectrum of life, as much as we can to the extent of our individual and collective ability.”¹⁰ Schaeffer goes on to commend great Christian activists such as Elizabeth Fry, Lord Shaftesbury, William Wilberforce, and John Wesley.

Schaeffer believed that truth equals confrontation and that once an idea is unleashed, it has the power to change society. His book *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* cowritten with C. Everett Koop, was one of the first contemporary evangelical books to point out the evils of abortion and to encourage Christians to a posture of active opposition. Schaeffer lived his beliefs; he played a significant role in helping to found Care Net—one of the most strategic pro-life organizations still operating today.

Caregivers: Loving God by Loving Others

Caregivers serve God by serving others. They often claim to see Christ in the poor and needy, and their faith is built up by interacting with other people. Such Christians may view the devotional lives of contemplatives and enthusiasts as selfish. Whereas caring for others might wear many of us down, this activity recharges a caregiver’s batteries.

LOVING GOD

Perhaps the supreme example of this temperament was Mother Teresa of Calcutta (born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu), who at the age of twelve was so struck by the accounts of poverty in India that she decided to become a Roman Catholic missionary. In 1946, as a member of a community of Irish nuns working in the Motijheel slums of Calcutta, she heard God's call to change course: "I was to leave the convent and help the poor while living among them."¹¹

In 1950, she became an Indian citizen and founded her Missionaries of Charity as part of the Archdiocese of Calcutta. Many Americans do not realize that her work now extends to this country and throughout the world. Today some four thousand nuns, recognized by their white saris, small crucifixes, and spartan lifestyles, run approximately five hundred convents in eighty-seven countries. Nuns work in inner-city convents in New York, Washington, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and thirty other U.S. cities, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, and caring for the diseased.

When she dedicated a convent in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1995, Mother Teresa said, "God died for you and for me and for that leper and for that person dying of hunger and for that person on the street . . . It's not enough to say you love God. You also have to say you love your neighbor. Love, to be true, has to hurt. This requires people giving until it hurts. Otherwise it is not true love . . . Be the good news to your home people first. Find out about your next-door neighbor."¹²

Enthusiasts: Loving God with Mystery and Celebration

Excitement and mystery in worship is the spiritual lifeblood of enthusiasts. As sensates want to be surrounded by beauty and intellectuals love to grapple with concepts, enthusiasts are inspired by joyful celebration. These Christians are cheerleaders for God and

SACRED PATHWAYS

the Christian life. Let them clap their hands, shout “Amen!” and dance in their excitement—that’s all they ask.

If their hearts aren’t moved, if they don’t experience God’s power, something is missing. They don’t want simply to know concepts but to experience them, to feel them, and to be moved by them.

Younger readers probably won’t be familiar with a popular writer and speaker from the 1970s named Ann Kiemel Anderson, but older readers might. Anderson’s love of spending time with children, which shows her playful and childlike spirit, her delight in celebrative songs, and her belief in God’s power to work out everything according to his will are all hallmarks of a true enthusiast.

Contemplatives: Loving God through Adoration

Contemplatives refer to God as their lover, and images of a loving Father and Bridegroom best capture their view of God. Their favorite Bible passages may come from the Song of Songs, as they enter the “divine romance.” The focus is not necessarily on serving God, doing his will, accomplishing great things in his name, or even obeying him. Rather, these Christians seek to love God with the purest, deepest, and brightest love imaginable.

It’s difficult to give a well-known modern-day example of a contemplative since a true contemplative is not going to seek the spotlight. However, virtually every Christian is familiar with the biblical account of Mary of Bethany, who sat and worshiped at Jesus’ feet and was commended by Jesus for doing so. If you love this story and feel a kindred spirit with Mary, you may be a contemplative.

Intellectuals: Loving God with the Mind

Intellectuals need their minds to be stirred before their hearts come truly alive. They are likely to be studying (and, in some instances, arguing either for or against) topics such as Calvinism,

LOVING GOD

infant baptism, ordination of women, and predestination. These Christians live in the world of concepts.

Some intellectuals, influenced by a personality type that is shy or withdrawn, might avoid intellectual confrontation but still be “fed” primarily by intellectual activity. “Faith” is something to be understood as much as experienced. They may feel closest to God when they first understand something new about him.

There are many well-respected Christian intellectuals in our time, including Dr. J. I. Packer and Dr. R. C. Sproul. Though Dr. Packer has earned the respect of academic theologians worldwide, he continues to make the doctrines of academics accessible and useful to the people in the pew. His classic books, such as *Knowing God* and *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, are popular studies that make difficult theological discussions understandable to even the newest Christian.¹³

One of the ways to determine your dominant spiritual temperament is to list those Christians whom you most admire and seek to emulate. How would you describe each one? If you consistently find yourself picking leaders of a particular spiritual temperament, you may share that makeup.

WHERE IS YOUR GETHSEMANE?

Imagine Napoleon, Abraham Lincoln, Beethoven, Tim Keller, Matt Redman, and William Shakespeare all rolled into one. What would you have?

King David!

Think about it. He was a military general, a political ruler, a composer, a religious leader, a musician, and a poet. He was a true Renaissance man thousands of years before European culture invented one!

David exemplified what many moderns would consider contradictory qualities. Contemporary scholars would put military and religious leaders—Genghis Khan and Saint Francis of Assisi, for instance—on opposite ends of the scale, but David was able to fulfill both roles, and more.¹

Likewise, mature Christians often display many, if not all, of the spiritual temperaments. As I describe each one in detail in later chapters, you'll notice that I cite Jesus as an example of all of them. Regardless of our predominant spiritual temperament, all of us could learn a great deal from how others are nourished by God and how others meet and love God.

Once you've gone through this book, you'll be able to express your own spiritual temperament or temperaments. Knowing this, you can begin a program of feeding yourself spiritually. The goal

WHERE IS YOUR GETHSEMANE?

here is not self-actualization or spiritual self-absorption, but to feed our souls so we can know God in a new way, love him with every cell of our being, and *then express that love by reaching out to others*. That's why I want to introduce you to what may sound like a new concept: identifying your Gethsemane.

Your Gethsemane

Gethsemane holds a sacred place in faith history. It is the hallowed piece of ground on which Jesus prayed just before he was arrested. Churches don't normally talk much about Gethsemane apart from Passion Week, but the reason Gethsemane had such a monumental role in that famous week is precisely because it had such a huge and formative role in Jesus' life *prior* to Passion Week. Consider the report of John in John 18:

When he had finished praying, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side there was a garden, and he and his disciples went into it.

Now Judas, who betrayed him, knew the place, because *Jesus had often met there with his disciples*.

Luke backs this up: "Jesus went out *as usual* to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him" (Luke 22:39, italics added).

It wasn't an accident that Judas found Jesus in the garden; the betrayer naturally thought, "Where is Jesus most likely to be found?" He felt certain that Jesus would seek solace in the garden of Gethsemane, and he was right.

Jesus had used the garden on numerous occasions to meet with his Father, to gain spiritual strength, and to receive his marching orders. Long before Passion Week, Gethsemane was a sacred space

SACRED PATHWAYS

of refuge, refreshment, healing, intimacy, and fellowship—that’s why Jesus went there to prepare for what was about to take place.

One thing we know for certain: Judas’s betrayal didn’t catch Jesus by surprise. Jesus dismissed Judas, knowing exactly what the betrayer was about to do. Jesus was able to *choose* where he would spend that crucial time just before the crucifixion. When he needed to pour out his heart to his heavenly Father, to the point of sweating what looked like drops of blood, when he needed to have his will aligned with that same Father, Jesus chose a place with which he was deeply familiar: the garden of Gethsemane.

In fact, Jesus went there *every day* of Passion Week: “Each day Jesus was teaching at the temple, and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives” (Luke 21:37).

The experience of Gethsemane is unique to Jesus. None of us will ever have a moment like that. But in using this sacred space, Jesus leaves an example to follow. When you need to hear from God, when you need to be strengthened by God, when you need to receive your marching orders from God, where do you go?

For some of you, it may indeed be a garden, or perhaps a place in a local forest. Others of you may prefer a sanctuary. Still others may find prayer solace with a musical instrument in your hands. But do you have a place, or a moment, where you best meet with God in those times when you most need him?

Where is *your* Gethsemane?

My prayer is that by the time you finish this book, you’ll know.

Prayer and Ministry Go Hand in Hand

What I appreciate about using Gethsemane as a metaphor for meeting with God is that it portrays a vivid example of the balance between intimacy and mission, prayer and work. I can’t think of

WHERE IS YOUR GETHSEMANE?

Gethsemane without being moved by the intimate communion between Son and Father. On the other hand, this garden is also the scene of intense spiritual preparation for the most important work ever done.

In a healthy Christian life, prayer and ministry go hand in hand. As we build intimacy with God in prayer, he communicates his love for us, but he also gives us our marching orders. In this way, prayer feeds our sense of mission and renews the urgency behind that mission. Likewise, Christian work—whether it is evangelism, administration, teaching, discipleship, or something else—reminds us of our need for God’s strength and thus drives us further into prayer.

When we get too caught up in ministry and cut corners in our devotional time, the results can be disastrous. We begin to minister with the wrong motivations, risk losing our passion, and often are tempted to make it all about us instead of all about God.

Dr. Wayne Grudem experienced a glimpse of this while working on the final translation for the English Standard Version of the Bible. A dozen scholars from around the world met in Cambridge, England, to do the final polish of the translation. They worked nine-hour days discussing the remaining tricky passages, voting on final word choices, and completing the project. Informal discussions often stretched into the evening as the scholars contemplated the next day’s work. Wayne said he started getting up a little later each day, taking away time from prayer.

Many people might not see the danger in this. After all, Wayne was spending the entire day studying and discussing *the Bible*. What was the big deal if, for a rather short season, Wayne allowed his prayer life to drift a little?

According to Wayne, it became a very big deal. After God convicted him for not giving prayer its due, Wayne spoke of the spiritual sickness that followed from not tending to his heart: “pride, talking

SACRED PATHWAYS

about myself a lot, inwardly hoping people will praise me, lack of love for friends, irritability, relationship with friends just stall or put on hold, general inward feeling of unease, unsettledness, hard to concentrate on Scripture and prayer, self-reliance, no peace.”²

These are classic signs of a heart that is drifting from God. Wayne was devoted to a very pleasing work—translating the Bible—but even the act of translating the Bible can leave us spiritually empty if we ignore building intimacy with God through prayer.

The image of Gethsemane reminds me that I need to tend to my heart. When I give God the opportunity to speak into my heart, he motivates me to work—for the right reasons. Working diligently, I’m reminded of my need to receive my acceptance, favor, and strength from God. In this way, prayer and ministry together become a spiraling, upward staircase of devotion.

Small-Minded Devotions

I didn’t always live with this awareness that we all may have different “Gethsemanes.” Far from it! There was a time when I was as small-minded about prayer as you can get—I knew exactly when and how you were supposed to pray; I even knew the best books on prayer. In short, I was the perfect candidate to be humbled by a holy God who has a sense of humor and a history of helping his children overcome their arrogance and prejudice.

God’s work began when I fell in love with a young woman whom I knew had a dynamic relationship with God, but who didn’t pray according to my established discipline. Since the Scriptures clearly portray Jesus waking up early to pray, I was convinced that the “best” time to pray was early in the morning. Lisa isn’t a morning person, however. In college, she liked to wake up just early

WHERE IS YOUR GETHSEMANE?

enough to roll out of bed, run a comb through her hair, and get to her first class. When classes were over, she ate lunch, returned to the dorm, and then climbed onto the roof to lay in the sun with her Bible.

I was so convinced that she was cheating that, in the flirty way college students do, I kidded her, “Come on, Lisa. Who goes up on the roof at lunchtime, lies in the sun with their Bible beside them, and calls that a quiet time?”

Lisa didn’t have an answer for me until two weeks later. I can still hear the knock on my dorm room door. I opened it, Lisa marched in, grabbed my Bible, and opened it to Acts 10:9: “About noon the following day . . . , Peter went up on the roof to pray.”

At first it was funny, then convicting, and finally liberating. For years, I had been imprisoned by the thought that prayer, to be earnest, needed to be the first thing in the day, with an intercessory prayer list beside me, and it had to last a certain amount of time to be faithful and obedient. But God used Lisa as a wedge to expand my understanding of what it means to pray. I still, to this day, can’t bear to start any day without prayer, but I’m more accepting of those whose most fervent prayers occur later in the day or even at night.

God expanded my heart by giving us three delightful but very distinct children, each of whom relates to me in a very different way. Our oldest daughter is a classic introvert who wouldn’t dream of competing and likes to talk about relationships, and she can comfortably ride in the car with me and not say much of anything. Our son loves to attend, watch, or play sports with me; we’ve now written a published article together and can talk about intellectual concepts. My youngest daughter is the classic extrovert, often the life of the party. I do different things with each one of my kids, *and I like it that way*. Few things would hurt me more than if I heard that my extroverted daughter thought she had to do the same things

SACRED PATHWAYS

with me as my introverted daughter does, or vice versa. Each is its own unique relationship, and each one is a cause for joy.

What makes us think God is any different? In fact, for him, wouldn't it be even more so, since he created these personality types, while I simply received my children as he designed them?

There is great freedom in how we can meet with and enjoy God. This is by his design and according to his good pleasure.

Getting Out of a Rut

If you are in a spiritual malaise, it may be that you need a change in your spiritual diet. If you just can't seem to leave that one particular sin, you may find that the answer is simple: You don't know how to be nourished according to the way God made you so you're seeking spiritual "junk food," in the form of sin or addictions, somewhere else. Finding fulfillment in God is the most powerful antidote to any sin.

Some people who have read this book have found that they strongly identify with one particular type. Others have "charted" their faith: "I started out as an enthusiast, became a contemplative, and ended up a sensate." Within all of us, however, there has to be a common denominator, which is found in Mark 12:30.

According to Jesus, four elements are essential to every true expression of faith: loving God with all our *heart* (adoration), *soul* (will), *mind* (belief), and *strength* (body). The intellectual is not excused from failing to adore. Neither is the contemplative excused from harboring wrong beliefs about God. Complete Christians—which all of us are called to be—should exhibit adoration, belief, divine guidance, and service.

You may be tempted to read only the chapters that talk about your own particular spiritual temperament, but you may find that

WHERE IS YOUR GETHSEMANE?

your life hasn't expressed certain temperaments because you've never been exposed to them. That's what I discovered in my search. By reading all the chapters, you'll gain a much more comprehensive view of how Christians have learned to express their love for God. You may even find that your initial evaluation of yourself isn't as accurate as you thought.

By understanding our spiritual temperaments, we can develop the tools we need to grow spiritually. These tools will differ, of course—a ten-year-old girl who loves to paint and sing and draw pictures for Jesus will have a different way of relating to God than a construction worker who is trying to figure out how being a Christian affects the way he builds houses ten to twelve hours a day.

We need to be careful, however, when we talk about “tools.” Language is frequently imprecise, and no less so than when we're talking about spiritual matters. It would be easy to make a caricature out of what we're saying, reducing a dynamic relationship with the Holy God—in which he is the initiator and the sustainer—into a bunch of formulas and trick tests. But that's not what this study is all about.

The aim of this book is to help people understand the spiritual temperament that God gave them. Good spiritual counselors don't heal anyone; they try to bring the troubled soul into God's presence, clear away the confusion and subterfuge of sin and self, and let God's Spirit have his way. And that's what this book is attempting to do.

Married to God

After a number of people in a certain congregation had read one of my books, I was invited to speak at their church retreat. Prior to my arrival, I received quite a few letters in which various members

SACRED PATHWAYS

stated their high expectations. At the start of the first talk, I did my best to temper those expectations. “It would be very easy to manipulate a mountaintop experience over the course of this weekend,” I told them. “Working with the worship leader, setting the right schedule, having a carefully coordinated teaching progression, we could create a spiritual high if we wanted to.

“But after praying rather substantially about this weekend, I became convinced that I am not here to offer you a mind-blowing ‘date’ with God. I want us to talk about how to be married to him—about how, through the ups and downs and the routine of life, we can learn to spend time with God, enjoy him, and be conformed to his will. Anybody can ‘date’ God. The truly mature seek to be his faithful, lifelong companions.”

That’s my attitude in writing this book. How do we learn to love God, day in and day out, through the seasons of life? How do we keep this love fresh? How do we grow in our adoration and understanding of God?

We do it by spending time with him. And once we understand the myriad ways that Christians have cultivated this relationship, we’ll have more ideas than we need to prompt us to walk closer and more constantly by his side.

Let’s now turn our attention to these simple but powerful spiritual temperaments.

PART 2

THE NINE
SACRED
PATHWAYS

CHAPTER 3

NATURALISTS

Loving God Outdoors

ARE YOU A NATURALIST?

At the beginning of each chapter that discusses the nine spiritual temperaments, I will provide an exercise to help you determine if this temperament is a dominant one for you. Each time I will ask you to score a series of statements on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 being not true at all and 5 being very true. Record your results in the space provided.

Are you a naturalist?

- _____ 1. I feel closest to God when I'm surrounded by what he has made—the mountains, the forests, or the ocean.
- _____ 2. I feel cut off if I have to spend too much time indoors, just listening to speakers or singing songs. Nothing makes me feel closer to God than being outside.
- _____ 3. I would rather worship God by spending an hour beside a small brook than by participating in a group service.

SACRED PATHWAYS

- _____ 4. If I could escape to a garden to pray on a cold day, walk through a meadow on a warm day, and take a trip by myself to the mountains on another day, I would be very happy.
- _____ 5. Again, on a scale of 0 to 5, how much does the statement describing the heart's cry of the naturalist resonate with you in comparison with the others?
- **Naturalist: let me be outdoors.**
 - Sensate: let me experience.
 - Traditionalist: let me remember.
 - Ascetic: let me be alone.
 - Activist: let me conquer.
 - Caregiver: let me care.
 - Enthusiast: let me celebrate.
 - Contemplative: let me feel.
 - Intellectual: let me think.
- _____ 6. Seeing God's beauty in nature is more moving to me than understanding new concepts, participating in a formal religious service, or participating in social causes.

Total of all your answers: _____

The highest number of points possible is 30. The higher your score, the stronger the dominance of this spiritual temperament is in your life. But remember, most of us have more than one spiritual temperament. Any score of 15 or higher indicates a tendency toward this temperament.

Please take a moment to register this score in chapter 12 on page 233. Once you have reviewed all the spiritual temperaments and noted all your scores on that page, you will have a composite picture of your soul's path to God.

NATURALISTS

One Christmas Eve afternoon, I escaped to walk through a favorite part in the woods on the outskirts of Manassas, Virginia. The quiet, motionless world was a welcome change from the butting and clawing of the department stores and malls. The stillness created a sense of expectancy of the birth of Jesus, which was far removed from the hurry and worry of the artificial hoopla of the increasingly secularized Christmas holiday.

The woods opened into a clearing, and I pulled my coat tighter as the cold wind licked at my neck. The gusts blew around me, picking up momentum and then suddenly bursting forth into snow. I turned my back to the biting wind, pulled my hood up to cover my neck, and watched the wind carry the snow along the ground, causing it to travel some distance before it could rest. My heart nearly stopped as I was overcome by the sheer beauty. The snow lasted only a few minutes. My wife, just a few miles away at our home, didn't see any snow at all. Those few priceless moments did more to draw me into a remembrance of the Christ child than did weeks in shopping malls, post offices, and gaudily decorated rooms.

This experience helped me to begin looking at creation as God's cathedral. I continue to have the vast majority of my daily devotions indoors, but many are tied to the remembrance (and anticipation) of worshiping God outside—in his cathedral. These memories can be powerful, remaining with us long after their first light has faded away. Francis of Assisi composed his famous poem "The Canticle to Brother Sun"—perhaps *the* Christian classic on the beauty and glory of creation—when an eye infection had rendered him almost totally blind.¹

As I read the biographies of other Christians, I found that I am not alone in my desire to worship and learn of God outdoors. As a young man, the great eighteenth-century revivalist Jonathan Edwards wrote a monograph on the flying spiders of the North

SACRED PATHWAYS

American forests. A number of years later, in one of the most famous sermons ever preached on American soil, Edwards used the analogy of a spider hanging by a thin web to depict an unrepentant sinner's dilemma in the hands of an angry God. Edwards is just one of the many Christians who learned to use God's creation to understand God the Creator and his ways with men and women.

Where we worship can have a profound impact on the quality of our worship. The naturalist seeks to leave the formal architecture and the padded pews to enter an entirely new "cathedral," a place that God himself has built: the outdoors.

Any place that has some trees or a stream or, at minimum, open skies, can be God's cathedral. Naturalists have found that getting outside can flood parched hearts and soften the hardest soul. While it may be impractical for most congregations to regularly meet outside, individual worshipers or small groups can find great benefit in slipping away to a quiet spot to meet with God outdoors.

Naturalists in the Bible

It should be obvious, though modern conveniences hid the truth from me for a long time, that the Bible is meant to be read outdoors. Many of its illustrations and allusions are based on nature, and it is only in the context of nature that they regain their meaning and force. The phrase *river of life* seems quaint when the words are projected on a wall, but its power is nearly overwhelming when you stand by a swiftly flowing river. "Green pastures" can sound almost postcardish until you enter an unspoiled meadow, far away from the sound of a highway, radio, or ball game.

I'll give up the artificial glare of a backlit video screen for the sun's light peeking over a hill any day. I'd much rather hear

NATURALISTS

the howl of a strong wind racing over the earth than the clank of the heater kicking on in the middle of a sermon. When we lock ourselves inside, we leave part of God's creation, and therefore part of our understanding, outside. Artificial comfort comes to us at a cost.

Many of the Old Testament theophanies, or appearances of God, happened in the wilderness.² God met Hagar in the desert, Abraham on a mountain, Jacob at a river crossing, and Moses at a burning bush. It was far less common for God to visit someone in an urban center.

Jesus himself seems to have sought out the beauty of creation. Early in his ministry, he moved from Nazareth to live in Capernaum, which was by the lake (Matthew 4:13). When he called some of his disciples to follow him, he was walking by the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 4:18).

Jesus often taught in the countryside, and he may well have been pointing to the images as he taught. Who is to say that birds weren't flying overhead when he talked of God's care for them? Or that he wasn't pointing to real flowers when he talked of their beauty? Unfortunately, we have moved baptism from the river to the blue tub behind the pulpit. We hear the pastor read the Sermon on the Mount as he stands on top of carpeted stairs instead of sitting on a hillside covered with green grass. Worship has moved from Mount Sinai, with all its sights, sounds, and smells, to theatre seating designed to "protect" us from outside distractions.³ And we have endured months of building-fund appeals to achieve this "progress"!

When God created a paradise for the first man and woman, was it a resort house? A fancy motel? An elaborate palace? No. God chose to walk with Adam and Eve in a garden with plentiful trees and a beautiful river with four riverheads.

The Spiritual Lessons of the Outdoors

Naturalists often learn their best lessons in the outdoors. Three particularly come to mind: they visualize scriptural truths, see God more clearly, and learn to rest.

Visualizing Scriptural Truths

One day in January, I made my way through a meadow. Though much of the woods around me was barren, the tall grass had taken on a reddish tint. Examining a single blade of grass, I saw that each one by itself was an ugly grayish-brown color, but together they created a beautiful, rusty-looking hue. Immediately I thought of the connection between us as individual Christians and the nature of the church body, which reflects God's glory.

The trail took me up another small hill, and at the top I was greeted by a clear view of the Virginia countryside, with its rolling hills and wide meadows. I thought back to my days in Washington State, with the perpetually snow-topped mountains, the evergreens, the much larger rivers and waterfalls, and I wondered which was more beautiful. Would I take the meadows, the rolling hills, and the tiny creeks of Virginia or the evergreen forests of Washington State, with their fern-covered floors and imposing mountains that twist the highways with their impenetrable rock bases? I couldn't decide—and that's when I learned another valuable lesson by being outdoors: God's beauty isn't limited. As I stood in God's cathedral, I thought, *How different this is from Hollywood beauty*—the leading women requiring the same color of hair and roughly the same shape of body, the men seeking to craft a certain physique and master the same gnarling scowl.

I caught just a flashing glimpse of the difference between an infinite God and finite men and women. The glimpse was too sudden to hold on to, but strong enough to humble me under my limitations and encourage me with God's great possibilities.

NATURALISTS

The lessons we can learn outdoors are waiting for us every day—a whole new cast coming to town with each changing season. Jonathan Edwards was fond of creation analogies and titled an entry in his notebook “The Language and Lessons of Nature.” The fact that roses have thorns, he said, teaches us that “all temporal sweets are mixt with bitter.” Spiders sucking flies represent the devil and temptation; rivers running to the ocean are symbols of all things tending toward God.⁴

Francis of Assisi was famous for his care of worms, which reminded him of the description of the humiliated Savior in Psalm 22:6: “I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people.” Bernard of Clairvaux, a famous twelfth-century Cistercian monk, wrote, “You will find much more labouring amongst the woods than you ever will amongst books. Woods and stones will teach you what you can never hear from any master.”⁵

Anthony (born AD 251), an ascetic made famous by the writings of Athanasius, was once asked, “How . . . dost thou content thyself, father, who are denied the comfort of books?”

Anthony replied, “My book, philosopher, is the nature of created things, and as often as I have a mind to read the words of God, it is at my hand.”⁶

God will speak to us through creation if we will only listen. If you feel as though your time in front of books or listening to sermons has become stagnant, grab a coat, pick up a walking stick, and step outside into a school that never closes.

When you do so, you will also see God more clearly.

Seeing God More Clearly

In 1998, seventy-seven-year-old John Glenn returned to space. Almost immediately, he was overwhelmed with the presence of God. “To look up out at this kind of creation,” he stated in

SACRED PATHWAYS

a news conference from space, “and not believe in God is to me impossible.”⁷

Glenn is not alone. Space flight apparently is a rather effective evangelist. Bryan O’Connor, a retired astronaut, said an enhanced faith “is pretty common” for astronauts. “I can tell you I felt a sense of awe out there looking at the Earth that I never had before.”⁸

This shouldn’t surprise us. “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands,” declares the psalmist (Psalm 19:1). The apostle Paul writes, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities . . . have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Romans 1:20).

Christian confessions and individuals have attested to the scriptural truth that God is often revealed and encountered outdoors. Article 2 of the Reformed tradition’s Belgic Confession says that God is made known to us “by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to *see clearly the invisible things of God*” (italics added).

The famous preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon put it this way:

Oh, but surely, everything that comes from the hand of such a Master-artist as God has something in it of himself! . . . There are lovely spots on this fair globe which ought to make even a blasphemer devout. I have said, among the mountains, “He who sees no God here is mad.” There are things that God has made which overwhelm with a sense of his omnipotence: how can men see them, and doubt the existence of the Deity?⁹

John Milton, in his famous poem *Paradise Lost*, wrote, “In contemplation of created things / By steps we may ascend to God.”¹⁰ And one of the great hymns of the faith, “How Great Thou Art,” celebrates the way creation calls us to God:

NATURALISTS

When through the woods and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze;
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee,
How great thou art, how great thou art!

The existence, wonder, and worthiness of God are broadcast daily for all to see, if we will simply step outside and open our minds and hearts to the truth.

More than just the beauty of God is revealed outside, however. His awful and fearful terror is revealed as well. The Bible teaches us that God is a God of mercy and grace, but he is also a God of justice and judgment. It is not a surprise, then, that the same rain that nourishes the ground can disintegrate a coastline in a tropical storm. The same sun that feeds vegetation in the spring can burn fragile plants in the summer. The same wind that keeps us cool in the summer can send our houses flying during a spring tornado.

Let creation remind us of God's beauty, and let it also remind us of God's power and judgment.

Finally, let nature bring us closer to God's peace by learning to rest in him.

Learning to Rest

This aspect of creation is particularly close to my heart. On one occasion I was nearing burnout and was facing a six-week stretch of five out-of-town trips, two of them cross-country. Someone came into my office and asked me to make a decision on a relatively simple matter. I just stared at him. "I'll get back with you," I said.

Recognizing my precarious condition, I took a long lunch, walking through Big Chimneys Park in Falls Church, Virginia, then out through an established neighborhood with mature trees,

SACRED PATHWAYS

and finally circling Cherry Hill Park. It was a cold day, but the chill helped me to wake up. Leaves crunched under my feet, the trees cast their steadiness into my soul, and the distant sun smiled some perspective into my troubled mind.

I poured out my heart to God. There was something about being outside that helped renew my soul, and I was able to face the office for the rest of the day. As I walked around that park, I realized that we don't always need a change; sometimes we just need a rest, and there is no better place to rest our bodies and our souls than outside.

In Psalm 23, David credits God with restoring his soul, but clearly the pastoral setting plays a role.¹¹ The outdoors cannot replace fellowship with God, but it can be used by God in powerful ways. Susan Power Bratton, a Christian writer and naturalist, writes:

Experiencing the beauty and peace of God in nature is not a substitute for direct interaction with the regenerative powers of the Creator, but . . . the mending and binding so necessary to heal our stress-filled lives may flow through creation. For the spiritually oppressed or the socially injured, a pleasing or quiet natural environment can help provide spiritual release. Resting by a clear, free-running river or sitting on a sunny slope in a blooming desert grassland can bring peace and joy into very clouded souls.¹²

In the midst of a busy schedule of ministry, Jesus often sought lonely places to pray and be replenished. He taught his disciples to do the same (Mark 6:30–32). It may be just a coincidence in this instance, but it's interesting that Jesus and his disciples departed by boat to rest; being “coddled” by the water is a most refreshing experience. Jesus knew that God is our caregiver, but creation can be the warm blanket that God uses to enwrap our cold hearts.

How to Love God Outdoors

The sun cast crystal rays off the water on a late summer day in Birch Bay, just below the Canadian border and about one hundred miles north of Seattle, Washington. The water that day was calm and gently lapped at the sides of my kayak. A small baby couldn't have been more comfortable at her mother's breast than I was as I paddled in my kayak on that bay.

Steve, a college friend who was now a pastor, pulled his kayak close to mine. We stopped paddling and let ourselves be rocked by the small, graceful waves. Then we talked of how life had changed for us over the past dozen years. We talked about what God was doing in our lives—how we felt challenged and how we felt encouraged. We talked about mutual friends, laughed, thanked God, and just appreciated each other's company and the world that God had given us to enjoy.

As we paddled back toward the shore, I marveled at what I had missed growing up. My boyhood home was farther south of the bay, under the shadow of Mount Rainier. The Pacific Northwest's evergreen forests are one of the strongest memories of my childhood.

I was in the forests a lot, but most of the time I was running. My heart hadn't grown to the point where I could enter a forest and think of it as God's cathedral, a sacred place of prayer. In our modern age, where we're born in the antiseptic environment of a hospital, taken home to a nursery that consists of Sheetrock coated with paint, and driven through the countryside in a metal contraption called a car, our ability to appreciate and meet God in creation is stunted, to say the least.

We need to be spiritually reawakened to fully appreciate the outdoors. Elizabeth Barrett Browning understood this when she wrote these now famous words, "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees, takes off his shoes, the rest sit round it and pluck blackberries."¹³

SACRED PATHWAYS

How can we be reawakened to this? I have some ideas since I've traveled from being a Cub Scout who used to romp through the woods with nary a prayer on his lips to a more mature Christian who has seen those bushes afire with God. I've learned that we must first create a space of time, quiet, and isolation before we can truly see God. Three elements are necessary for this. We need to first believe, then learn to perceive, and finally receive.

Believe

To avoid a sentimental or idolatrous view of nature we need to first be fully converted to life in Christ. Martin Luther tells us, "Now if I believe in God's Son and bear in mind that he became man, all creatures will appear a hundred times more beautiful to me than before. Then I will properly appreciate the sun, the moon, the stars, trees, apples, pears, as I reflect that he is Lord over and the center of all things."¹⁴ If we *don't* appreciate the outdoors, then maybe we don't appreciate the Creator.

Luther tells us that it is only with the "eye of faith" that we can see miracles all through nature, miracles that he believed were even greater than the miracles of the sacraments. If we truly understood the growth of a grain of wheat, he says, we would die of wonder.¹⁵

So the first way to become awakened is to seek the Creator behind the creation. Luther called creation the "mask of God." A mask partially conceals, but it also tells us that something is behind the mask.

Perceive

The second step to becoming awakened to God is to resurrect deadened elements of perception. Saint Bonaventure, an early Franciscan friar, suggested a grid through which we may "school" ourselves to seek God outdoors.

NATURALISTS

- First, consider the *greatness* of creation—mountains, sky, and oceans—which clearly portrays the immensity of the power, wisdom, and goodness of the triune God.
- Next, look at the *multitude* of creation—a forest has more plant and animal life than you could examine in a lifetime and shows us how God is capable of doing many things at once. Those who wonder how God can hear so many prayers uttered simultaneously have been out of the forest too long.
- Finally, examine the *beauty* of creation—see the beauty of rocks and their shapes, the beauty of colors and shades, the beauty of individual elements (such as trees), and the beauty of overall composition (such as forests). God’s beauty cannot be revealed through one form but is so vast and infinite it can fill an entire world with wonder.¹⁶

The outdoors also speaks of God’s abundance. We’ve talked much about the forest, but stand barefoot in a desert or on a beach and try to guess how many grains of sand are under your feet or within your sight or on all the beaches and deserts of the world. We serve a God of plenty whose mercy and love are inexhaustible.

When our son, Graham, was two years old, we’d trek through the Manassas, Virginia, battlefield in silence. I’d occasionally point out a tree or a plant, and Graham would nod and move on. These were delightful walks for me since we were able to be together and still be reverent. When he became a preadolescent, it was virtually impossible for Graham and his friends to resist gathering pine cones and sticks to set up an “ambush” for the rest of the family as we walked by. He wasn’t in the woods to perceive; he was in there to play—and there’s a place for that.

For the true Christian naturalist, creation is nothing less than a sanctuary, a holy place that invites you to prayer. See how you can awaken your soul with creation. As you commute to work or

SACRED PATHWAYS

the grocery store, consider driving a few extra blocks or even miles if it means you can pass through a country road. Take an extra moment to look around you and appreciate what God has made. Decide that traveling will be more important to you than reaching the next place. Make it an event.

Receive

Psychologists tell us that a child's fear of animals is frequently the result of transferring his or her own aggressions onto the beast. When we enter the woods, we can do the same; we transfer our own anxieties onto the scenery. Walks that are truly helpful are walks in which I lay down my agenda at the first sign of grass and let God lead my mind wherever he chooses.

I was headed down a wooded trail once, trying to solve a job-related problem. My mind was preoccupied, but as I made my way farther down the trail, I sensed God correcting me. In a matter of yards, my mind was clear and my heart was listening to God, loving him, being with him.

The trail bent and began descending slightly. It was the beginning of spring, and a creek bed off Bull Run, which I had run across all winter, was now blocked by a freely flowing stream. I was stunned. That same small path of earth I had easily crossed for several months was now under water. I had seen it like this before, but the suddenness of the change overwhelmed me, and God's voice broke in to remind me that opportunities change. If I don't cross when I can, I may not be able to cross at a later date.

Thoughts, analogies, and ideas then flooded through my mind as I hiked around the creek bed to the small wooden footbridge that crossed it. There God planted new directions in my heart, and I lingered at that bridge, enjoying a rich time of worship. I reveled in the sight of the water running underneath me, the tree limbs catching leaves and small sticks, the sound of the water trickling, the smell

NATURALISTS

of the clean air. I didn't want to leave. Yet I had almost missed this blessing because my mind was so full when I entered the woods. God in his mercy broke in, and I left the woods deeply in love with a God who shares his heart and purposes with me.

We cannot receive unless we set aside time for God to speak—and then let him set the agenda for our discussion. I've found that my agenda is frequently different from God's. He must be the initiator in my spiritual walk. He knows what I need to hear. When I'm consumed with my temporal problems, I miss the blessing of being outdoors.

When you come to the woods, come to receive. Leave your worries at home.

The Temptations of Naturalists

As with all the spiritual temperaments, naturalists have to be wary of some dangers.¹⁷

Individualism

Jesus spent time alone outdoors, but he did so in preparation for going back into the world. Even Saint Francis stressed the need to leave his beloved countryside and enter the city to find people who needed to hear about God. We must make sure we are not using creation to escape the duties of Christian living.

Spiritual Delusion

Psychologists have found that some people traveling through biblical lands become so overwhelmed they believe themselves to be a biblical character or even Jesus himself. From the work of Henry David Thoreau to an astronaut such as John Glenn, ample testimony has been given that there is something about creation that

SACRED PATHWAYS

speaks powerfully into our souls. Sometimes God's voice whispers through nature; at other times, it practically screams.

We must remember, however, that such insights should be tested very carefully. Anything "received" on a walk with God should not be considered authoritative but seen as advice that must be tested. The Bible is the only sure guide, and we must guard against seeking an experience that Satan will only too gladly counterfeit in order to lead us astray.

Idolizing Nature

Some naturalists may slip into the heresy of pantheism, which is a worship of nature. Pantheism is a lie. It is not true that God is in all of nature, or that nature is God. It is true, however, that every time I am surrounded by creation, I see that God *is*. The Bible teaches us that the earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1). Pantheism twists this to say, "The earth is the Lord."¹⁸ Pantheism has been enjoying a resurgence due to various New Age philosophies, and Christians are rightly concerned about incorporating such teachings into their worship. However, I am not going to allow the lie of pantheism to rob me of worshiping God through an appreciation of what he has made.

The distinction between pantheism and true Christian worship can be seen through an analogy of a mother missing a child who has recently left for college. The mother walks into her daughter's room, taking time to appreciate all that her daughter has left behind. She breathes in her daughter's pleasant scent; her eyes linger on the posters, the bed, a few clothes left behind. Her daughter isn't in the room, but the room reminds her that her daughter *is*. No doubt she feels closer to her daughter here than she would in any other part of the house. A part of her daughter has been left behind—not materially but evidentially—in how her daughter has arranged the furniture, in how she has decorated the walls, in the things she has collected.

NATURALISTS

It is the same for a lover of God. God is not materially in nature, but his concern for detail, his overwhelming creativity, his orderliness, and much, much more are clearly present to the discerning eye. It can be intoxicating. Without the Holy Spirit, we might be led to cross the idolatrous line into pantheism. But with sound doctrine to instruct us and the Holy Spirit to guide us, we can appreciate nature's message that "God is" without falling into the heresy of pantheism.

An Invitation

Many years ago, I was putting on my shoes when my son came up to me and asked me where I was going. He knew it was too cold and wet for him to be outside, but he wanted to know where I was headed.

"The battlefield," I said.

"Why?" he asked.

I looked at him and touched his cheek. "I just pray a whole lot better out there."

As you can probably tell by this chapter, I have become a naturalist as my faith has deepened. I love to be in the middle of a deep forest or high up on a mountain or out on the water. My schedule doesn't permit me to be out as much as I would like, but I have learned that there are few better places for me in which to earnestly seek God.

Once, while walking through a meadow and watching the sun go down, I realized that, regardless of personal pain, regardless of vocational frustration or success, regardless of financial excess or lack, if I were able to be outdoors, I'd always be a rich man.

Sometimes, though, nothing happens when I'm outside. I may not receive any new insights, and God may not feel particularly

SACRED PATHWAYS

close. This has taught me that the demand for spiritual experience can be as gluttonous as the desire for food, money, or sex. Desire for spiritual highs has to be contained so that we can develop other parts of our being.

We'll be looking at eight other spiritual temperaments. Some of them have been great supplements to my journey as a naturalist; others I've learned about primarily through the experiences of other people. Christian experience is so vast that I'm thankful for the time God has given me on this earth (and promised me in heaven) to explore new and deeper ways to worship and love him more and more.

CHAPTER 4

SENSATES

Loving God with the Senses

ARE YOU A SENSATE?

Score the following statements on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 being not true at all and 5 being very true. Record your answer in the space before the paragraph.

Are you a sensate?

- _____ 1. I feel closest to God when I'm in a church that allows my senses to come alive—when I can see, smell, hear, and almost taste his majesty.
- _____ 2. I enjoy attending a “high church” service with incense and formal Communion or Eucharist.
- _____ 3. I'd have a difficult time worshipping in a church building that is plain and lacks a sense of awe or majesty. Beauty is very important to me, and I have a difficult time worshipping through second-rate Christian art or music.
- _____ 4. Again, on a scale of 0 to 5, how much does the statement describing the heart's cry of the sensate resonate with you in comparison with the others?

SACRED PATHWAYS

- Naturalist: let me be outdoors.
- **Sensate: let me experience.**
- Traditionalist: let me remember.
- Ascetic: let me be alone.
- Activist: let me conquer.
- Caregiver: let me care.
- Enthusiast: let me celebrate.
- Contemplative: let me feel.
- Intellectual: let me think.

_____ 5. I'm naturally drawn to museums and concerts more than I'm inclined to take a walk in the woods, work in a soup kitchen, or read a book by myself.

_____ 6. I would really enjoy using drawing exercises, icons, or classical music playing in the background to improve my prayer life.

Total of all your answers: _____

Again, the highest number of possible points is 30, but few, if any, will score that high, since none of us relate to God in one exclusive way. Any score of 15 or higher indicates a tendency toward this spiritual temperament.

Please take a moment to register this score in chapter 12 on page 233. Once you have reviewed all the spiritual temperaments and noted all your scores on that page, you will have a composite picture of your soul's path to God.

Henri Nouwen, a priest and prolific writer on the spiritual life, had just finished an exhausting lecture tour and was "dead tired, so much so that I could barely walk." He was anxious, lonely, restless, and, in his words, "very needy." As he visited the office of a friend,

SENSATES

he came across a reproduction of Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Stunned by the painting's power and beauty, Nouwen told his friend, "It's beautiful, more than beautiful . . . it makes me want to cry and laugh at the same time . . . I can't tell you what I feel as I look at it, but it touches me deeply."¹

Nouwen writes:

Rembrandt's embrace remained imprinted on my soul far more profoundly than any temporary expression of emotional support. It had brought me into touch with something within me that lies far beyond the ups and downs of a busy life, something that represents the ongoing yearning of the human spirit . . . The yearning for a lasting home, brought to consciousness by Rembrandt's painting, grew deeper and stronger, somehow making the painter himself into a faithful companion and guide. This seemingly insignificant encounter with one of Rembrandt's masterpieces set in motion a long spiritual adventure that brought me to a new understanding of my vocation and offered me new strength to live it.²

I've seen this same painting on many occasions, and I have to confess, I don't get it (though I've tried to). To me, it's *a painting*, not a spiritual experience. But just as I seem to melt in God's arms when I step outside, so some believers feel their hearts warm up to God in the presence of beautiful art, music, or some other sensual experience. In many ways, this painting became Nouwen's "Gethsemane." God used it to confirm his call to minister in a community for mentally disabled adults. The power of art to move us into a deeper understanding of God's truth and nature has been grossly neglected by some in the Christian community. Throughout the ages, the most magnificent art has been produced in the name of faith.

As I've lived and studied the Christian life, I've found that some Christians are moved more by sensuous worship experiences than

by anything else. By sensuous I'm referring to the five senses—taste, touch, smell, sound, and sight. When we reduce all Christian worship to mere intellectual assent, we force Christians to worship God in a stunted and muted existence. When we embrace the use of the senses—which God created, after all—we open up entirely new avenues of worship.

This may be a difficult message for Christians who grew up, as I did, equating silence and lack of sensory stimulation with reverence. When we look at Scripture, however, we find that God often appears in a very loud and colorful way.

The Loud and Colorful God of Scripture

Biblical accounts of the glory of God in heaven are elaborate affairs and rarely quiet, to say the least. Consider, for example, the experience recounted by Ezekiel. He *feels* a wind. He *sees* flashing lightning surrounded by brilliant light, fantastic creatures, and a magnificent and stunning throne of sapphire (Ezekiel 1:4, 5–14, 26–27). He *hears* the sound of wings like the roar of rushing waters, and a loud rumbling (1:24; 3:12–13). Ezekiel is then asked to *eat* a scroll that tastes sweet (3:1–3). After it is all over, Ezekiel is so overwhelmed—perhaps the sensuous onslaught is so great—he sits down, stunned, for seven days (3:15).

A similar appearance occurs in Ezekiel 10, where Ezekiel experiences burning coals, great radiance, a loud sound, clouds filling the temple, and fantastic sights and movements—wheels that sparkled like topaz, and cherubim with four faces.

When the glory of the Lord returns to the temple, we again read that God's voice is like "the roar of rushing waters" (43:2), and the land becomes radiant with his glory. The sight is so great that Ezekiel falls facedown.

SENSATES

When Jesus appears to John in the book of Revelation, the experience is also a very sensuous one. When Jesus proclaims his name, John describes it as “a loud voice like a trumpet.” Jesus’ head and hair were “white like wool . . . and his eyes were like blazing fire.” Jesus’ voice was “like the sound of rushing waters.” Jesus’ face “was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.” As anybody who tries to look into the sun knows, such brilliance forces you to turn away, and that’s what happened to John. “I fell at his feet as though dead” (Revelation 1:10, 14–17).

These pictures of God in his glory contrast greatly with the calm, quiet, “greeting card” Jesus often depicted today. And they bear absolutely no resemblance to a bruised and bleeding Jesus suffering on a cross. Those who think only silence is reverent may be a bit uncomfortable in heaven, and this is the lesson we learn from the sensate.

To be honest, the sensate is one of the more difficult temperaments for me. I much prefer the outdoors or quiet solitude to overwhelming stimulation. Yet there is something within me, within each of us, that is awed by the presence of beauty. I believe it’s a flashing glimpse of our desire for the transcendence of heaven. Looking at it this way, I can at least be open to the sensuous side of worship.

The Benefit of a Sense of Beauty

Von Ogden Vogt, a pastor in the early part of the previous century, described parallels between our contact with beauty and with God—parallels that can help us better appreciate the role of the sensate.³ First, beauty arouses *humility*. You go to the opera, for instance, and say, “I could never write an opera like that if I lived a thousand years.” I remember early in college wanting to be a fiction

SACRED PATHWAYS

writer and almost throwing down a book by Charles Dickens in frustration; the writing was so good it humiliated my own efforts. This humiliation is necessary. Once we've experienced such quality, we can never go back to the mediocre, just as once we have tasted God, we lose our taste for the world.

The second step, according to Vogt, moves us from humiliation to *dignity*. We recognize we may not be able to write such an opera, but there are other things we can do. Once we are truly humbled, God enlightens us as to what we can do, and this gives us a new sense of dignity.

The third stage produces *a different worldview*. "The unworthy sinks, the true and the good emerge and grow." Parents sometimes witness this transformation when their kids return from college. Our son, like many young people his age, left for college with a penchant for hip-hop and some rap music. Because he was an honors student in high school, he read good books that were assigned to him, but not so much on his own. After just his first year at Notre Dame, he came back and said his "dream gift" would be to receive Augustine's *Confessions* in the original Latin. The wholesome exposure he experienced at Notre Dame expanded his worldview, his literary taste, and his sense of enjoyment (though he *still* prefers some music that makes us scratch our heads).

The fourth and final stage results in a *recognition that we must return to the real world*. We can't stay in the theater or museum forever. Worship in church must give way to evangelism on the streets. But we're different persons because we have encountered beauty or God.

There are limits to the analogy, of course. Beauty doesn't result in improved morality, whereas interaction with God does, or at least, should. The search for beauty can be selfish, whereas God calls us to die to ourselves. But the four stages of beauty do mirror Isaiah's call (Isaiah 6:1–8) to repentance, cleansing, illumination,

SENSATES

and enlistment.⁴ Christianity without beauty becomes a disembodied religion of the mind. Truth—thought—is an essential component of real Christianity. But feeling is also important, for we are told to love God not only with all our mind but with our heart as well. Furthermore, truth as a concept is often not enough for people who live in the world of senses. Vogt writes, “Truth must be embodied to be realized. It must be incorporated to be understood. No religious movement has ever been forceful or popular without a rich corporeality. An image, a rite, a creed, a feeling, a feast, a vision, or a sacrament has always been used to embody its truth.”⁵

Vogt admits that we need the prophets who preach against idolatry and sensuous abuse; but he also maintains that people haven’t been able to understand truth without a symbol, sacrament, or rite in which they can express that truth. That’s where beauty comes in. Anything that is going to express the truth of heaven must be as beautiful as is humanly possible.

Awakening the Senses

I was glad to be sitting alone when I received Communion at Regent College’s chapel service for the first time; otherwise, I would surely have embarrassed myself. The bread was passed—a familiar experience. Next, the cup came around. I opened my mouth and took a quick gulp, and for the first time in my life, I tasted red wine.

I grew up Baptist, which meant we celebrated the Lord’s Supper with grape juice or even Kool-Aid (I’m not kidding!), depending on who drew Communion service that month. The wine caught me totally by surprise. I won’t try to describe the look on my face, but I’m glad nobody saw it. As I left the chapel service, I noticed that the taste of the wine was still with me. Its taste kept reminding me

SACRED PATHWAYS

of the truth of Communion for hours afterward. That was perhaps one of my first experiences of the benefits of vivid sensory experience in worship.

As I hinted earlier, I'm not a very sensuous person. Musically, my tastes are very unschooled and immature. I can relate to the theologian Carl F. H. Henry, who said he was looking forward to heaven because then he'd be able to sing the great hymns with more than one note. Incense, to be honest, is usually distasteful to me. Elaborate architecture is beautiful to visit as a tourist, but I sometimes find it a distraction (rather than an invitation) to true worship.

I need to remember, though, that God created our senses. Enjoyment through the senses was his idea, not Satan's. Let's look at some of the ways the senses have been used in Christian worship.

Sound

For those who believe that the quieter a building is, the more holy the environment, using sound to express love for God might seem paradoxical. Certainly, there is a great need for times of silence, but there is also a great tradition of sound being used to serve God—a tradition that began in the Bible. I've already mentioned the rather loud appearances of God to Ezekiel and John. There is much more. Psalm 96 begins with, "Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise his name." Psalms 147, 149, and 150 urge believers to worship God through making music with instruments.⁶

Scripture's admonition to use music in worship shouldn't surprise us. As our Creator, God knows that language and music together stimulate the brain more than just language on its own. In a very real sense, the congregation may be more "alive" during special music than during the sermon. And they may remember the verses long after they've forgotten the teaching.

SENSATES

Beautiful music has been a part of church life since its beginning. The great composer Handel recognized what he called the “transcendental keys.” Any key signature with five, six, seven, or eight sharps he associated with heaven. He used particular chords to bring forth various feelings—G minor, to evoke urgency or jealousy; E minor, to create a sorrowful, lamenting mood; G major, to create moods reminiscent of bright sunlight and green pastures; F minor, to provoke gloom and despondency.⁷

It’s interesting to note that Luther argued that Scripture was meant to be heard with the ears more than read with the eyes. Our hearts are most transformed and challenged, he thought, when we hear the Word of God. Science has proven the validity of Luther’s insight. When we hear Scripture read, our minds are more active than when we are just reading with our eyes.

Smell

What does church smell like? Many Protestants would consider this to be an absurd question. Other traditions, however, would immediately think of the use of incense.

Smell can cement memories. When I smell Johnson’s baby shampoo, I remember giving baths to my children. One particular brand of my wife’s perfumes evokes memories of our date nights.

Perhaps it is this property of smell that caused incense to play such a key role in Old Testament worship. The familiar smell can remind the worshiper of a time when worship may have been particularly rich. After the service, lingering scents remind the believer of the worship experience (the way our brains are wired, the sense of smell, and the capacity for memory are directly related). After a while, the smell can condition the believer to consciously enter into the presence of God.

God commanded Moses to collect offerings of spices to create sweet incense (Exodus 25:6). Aaron was told that he must burn

SACRED PATHWAYS

incense every morning (Exodus 30:7). Eli and Solomon both kept the practice of burning incense alive. Detailed instructions for cultivating sweet smells are given in Exodus 30.

God prophesies in Malachi that “in every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me” (Malachi 1:11). Incense was one of the offerings presented to the Christ child (Matthew 2:11). John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah, was burning incense when the angel appeared to him and told him that his wife would conceive and give birth (Luke 1:9–13). Incense continues to be offered to God in heaven, along with the prayers of the saints, according to the book of Revelation. Psalm 141:2 mentions that incense symbolizes prayers rising to God.

Negative examples of offering incense also occur in the Bible, but these are connected to idol worship (2 Kings 22:17; Jeremiah 1:16) or offered in the context of a lapsed faith (Isaiah 1:13). The *abuse* of incense is rejected, not its use.

There is little Eastern Orthodox corporate worship without incense. While some Lutheran and Episcopalian churches might employ incense, it’s not likely you’ll find it in a Presbyterian church, and certainly not in a Baptist one. The use of incense has not been without its critics, of course. Even putting aside some of the Reformers who were violently opposed to incense, some early Christians had their misgivings as well. Basil the Great, for instance, wrote,

Incense is now an abomination unto the Lord. For truly it is an execrable thing to think that God values the pleasures of the sense of smell and not to understand that the hallowing of the body, effected by the sobriety of the soul, is the incense unto the Lord. Corporeal incense that affects the nostrils and moves the senses is by a necessary consequence regarded as an abomination to a Being that is incorporeal.⁸

SENSATES

Basil is right in insisting that God couldn't care less about our burning incense as a sacrifice for our transgressions. No incense offering today will wipe out a single sin. However, incense is used not to court favor with God but to help the Christian pray. It is a means, not an end.

Physiologically our minds are sharpened and altered in the presence of incense.⁹ This is not to make the use of incense obligatory. Indeed, some Christians can be distracted by strong smells. But just because something isn't an effective worship aid for some doesn't mean other Christians can't enjoy it for themselves.

It's interesting that many Christians who reject incense wear perfume or cologne for very unspiritual reasons. Or they may use a car deodorizer or choose a particular shampoo because of the way they smell. If smell can be used to welcome our guests or provide a special treat for our spouse, why can't it be used as an aid to worship? The use of smell in the one context and the rejection of it in the other is an arbitrary and artificial distinction.

Touch

One Lenten season, I carried a nail in my pocket, reminding me to pray prayers of intercession and repentance throughout Lent. The sharp edge reminded me of Jesus' sufferings every time I touched it or bent over and felt it pressing into my leg. Touch communicates, especially to the sensate Christian.

Orthodox worship involves frequent kissing—a cross, an altar, a holy instrument. Touch with our lips is a way to recognize something as precious. It makes both a powerful internal and external statement. Once when I was in our attic, I pulled out of a box some clothes that our oldest daughter had worn as an infant. I was flooded with rich memories of that special time, and without thinking, I held one garment to my face and kissed it.

I don't apologize for being somewhat sentimental about my

SACRED PATHWAYS

children. How much less should I apologize for being moved by the reality of the cross! Where, indeed, would I be without the cross? Given this, what can be wrong with a spontaneous (or not so spontaneous) kiss?

One of my most memorable times of prayer occurred spontaneously. I was a young college student and wanted to offer everything I had to God. Without really thinking about it, I offered God myself by touching various parts of my body. First I touched my fingers and feet, praying that God would consecrate them for his service. “Whenever I reach out, I want to reach out in love. Wherever I travel, I want to do so under Christ’s name.” Next I touched my lips. “Whatever I speak, let it be the truth and something that will bring glory to your kingdom.” I touched my eyes. “Help me to protect my eyes, only letting them see what is helpful for the inner man within, so that my inner eye will not be blind to the sight of the real needs around me.” On and on I went, offering up the various parts of my body for God’s service.

Later, my wife pointed out that I had gone through motions similar to blood consecration in Leviticus 8:24, where Moses is described as placing blood on the lobes of the right ears, the thumbs of the right hands, and the big toes of the right feet of Aaron’s sons.

I didn’t plan this prayer beforehand; it just happened. Of all the prayers I’ve prayed, most of them have been forgotten, yet this prayer has remained with me through the years.

Sight

Henri Nouwen had taught at Yale Divinity School for several years before he was moved so profoundly by Rembrandt’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. There were probably very few theological points or arguments Nouwen hadn’t studied several times over. Certainly, he had read the story of the prodigal son innumerable times before. Yet once his soul was captivated by Rembrandt’s work, the truth of that parable pierced Nouwen’s heart with an entirely new passion.

SENSATES

I felt drawn by the intimacy between the two figures, the warm red of the man's cloak, the golden yellow of the boy's tunic, and the mysterious light engulfing them both. But, most of all, it was the hands, the old man's hands, as they touched the boy's shoulders that reached me in a place where I had never been reached before.¹⁰

Sight affects us perhaps more than any other sense. As much as a third of our cerebral cortex, which is the highest level of our brain, is devoted to visual processing. Researchers have even found that sight can be used to affect our will, which has a direct bearing on our commitment to live out our faith.

Journalist Michael Long writes, "In a profound and mysterious alchemy, sight sometimes combines with memory to energize the will. After his return from more than six years of captivity in Lebanon, American hostage Thomas Sutherland related that he had tried to commit suicide three times, but that each time, 'the vision of my wife and three daughters appeared before me,' and he could not follow through."¹¹

The use of sight in Christian worship and prayer is rooted in the incarnation, though sight was also an integral element of Old Testament worship. When God inaugurated Israel's form of worship, he especially gifted and called out two individuals, Bezalel and Oholiab, giving them "all kinds of skills" to create beautiful art forms out of gold, silver, bronze, and wood. They also developed skill in embroidering fine linen and making intricate and fashionable weavings (Exodus 35:31–33).

The sight of the finished temple must have taken the worshippers' breath away. To God, beauty mattered. The expense involved in the making of the temple was an acceptable sacrifice, and those who used their gifts to build it were held in high esteem and said to be filled with the Spirit of God.

It's true that Jesus told the woman at the well that worship

SACRED PATHWAYS

must be done in the Spirit and in truth (John 4:23), but he was confronting the misconception that worship should be limited to one particular place. On another occasion, Jesus himself accepted lavish worship—the offering of expensive, sweet-smelling perfume.

I've been in a number of churches that were just starting out, so I know from experience that you can truly worship God just about anywhere, including in a high school cafeteria with a flashing red digital sign overhead! However, the fact that we *can* worship in such surroundings doesn't mean we *should* if the opportunity presents itself to find more appropriate accommodations.

“The average church interior is uninteresting,” says Von Ogden Vogt. “Without necessarily being ugly in detail, there is no commanding excellence . . . Your building will have an effect whether you want it to or not, and this effect of ineffectiveness is one of the most unfortunate.”¹² He warns against creating a building that is either overly comfortable or cold and dreary.

Ironically, building committees are rarely chosen with regard to a person's architectural insight. Most of us lack the training to be able to appreciate the various elements in Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, or Renaissance architecture and apply them to today.

I am certainly no student of architecture, but like anyone, I am affected by the general “tone” of a room—whether it makes me peaceful or restless. Great architects of the faith were able to merge positive tones such as repose (symbolic of the sufficiency of religion), harmony and peace, austerity (calls for mortification of the flesh), warmth, and brilliance.¹³ It takes a great architect to pull off such a feat, let alone a building committee consisting of a lawyer, two homemakers, a banker, a schoolteacher, an engineer, and a pastor.

Some people may not be bothered by a room surrounded by signs announcing the upcoming prom, yearbook sale, and pep rally; and yet the sensate Christian would feel assaulted in such a place. It is

SENSATES

naive to ignore the fact that our surroundings affect all of us to a greater or lesser degree. Cathedrals were constructed as a call to worship so that our thoughts would be pulled heavenward when we entered them.

Besides worship rooms, other Christians have made use of sight through pictures or icons. The sight of an icon, symbolizing a saint's obedience, might help an Orthodox Christian finally say yes to a hard word from Scripture. At another time, the image presented by the icon may help lead the Christian into prayer. Praying to an icon is never an acceptable form of worship, but the true Christian may be helped to focus by being reminded of the reality that the icon represents.

It might make sense to encourage children to close their eyes so they can focus on prayer since children are easily distracted. But as we mature, we may find that looking at someone (or a picture of someone) while we pray for them increases our ability to pray. We may find that looking into the heavens as we worship, pray, or recite a psalm adds to the sincerity of our words rather than getting in the way. Clearly, since sight affects us so greatly, we would do well to incorporate it into our worship.

Sensates might also find that drawing can be a great aid to prayer. The following is an exercise suggested by a Christian group based in London:

- Draw a representation of what God means to you. Then depict yourself in relationship to God in whatever manner seems appropriate to you. Note: stick figures and simple symbolism will suffice; this needn't be a professional work of art!
- On another sheet of paper or by altering your first drawing, depict how you wish your relationship with God would be.
- Draw onto either sheet the things that seem to get in the way of that ideal relationship with God.
- Pray your pictures in silence in whatever way is helpful to you.¹⁴

SACRED PATHWAYS

Creative Christians can find their own ways to incorporate the element of sight into prayer.

Taste

Taste affects us so greatly that we use it to describe many things. A cultured person, we say, has “good taste.” A crude or vulgar person “lacks taste.” A cranky or vengeful person is “bitter.” Someone very kind is “sweet.” Getting a new job that calls us to relocate can be called “bittersweet.” Two researchers have said, “It seems that the perceptions that we call taste are so powerful, so extensive in their capacity to conjure up clusters of associated feelings, that we freely transfer the language of taste to all other parts of our experience.”¹⁵

If this is so, why can't we use taste to benefit our spiritual lives? I've already mentioned how real wine affected my experience at Communion. We must be careful that the sensory side of Communion doesn't deter us from the commitment Communion calls us to, but for a healthy soul, taste can reinforce the Communion experience, especially if we take our time and don't rush through the experience.

Taste can also be used in our prayers. Something sweet can remind us of God's goodness; something bitter can keep us praying for a seemingly unanswered prayer. A Jewish woman wrote about eating a “Hillel sandwich” during the Passover Seder. A Hillel sandwich combines very bitter horseradish with a paste of sweet nuts and fruits. She states, “The taste of that sandwich confirmed something that nothing else in my environment even acknowledged—the truth of the connection between sorrow and joy. I always sensed that truth in my heart, but on Passover I got to taste it.”

Certain Bible passages lend themselves to taste. Matthew 7:16 tells us we can know a person by his or her fruit. Think about this the next time you bite into a particularly delicious (or rotten) apple

SENSATES

or orange. Jesus describes himself as the bread of life. He calls us the salt of the earth. As we study these passages and are reminded of them in everyday life, we can incorporate spiritual awakening into the otherwise routine act of eating.

God created taste; it was his idea. If we're creative, we can find ways to love him through it.

The Temptations of Sensates

Despite the many benefits we can experience through using our senses to worship God, there are also many dangers. Sensate Christians must be especially aware of three of them.

Worshiping without Conviction

Senses can deceive, especially when our emotions are sent soaring through music. In college, we had a number of concerts with well-known Christian artists. Some artists used the music to convey a clear message; other performers focused solely on the music. In some cases, this would be fine—entertainment has its place—but in the midst of this event an altar call was given. People were highly emotional after a particular song, and many went forward. A few days later, one of the women who had made a “decision” told my wife, “The music just got me in the mood. I didn't really mean it.” Her faith died before the amplifiers had cooled off.

The same thing can happen to us when we worship. It amazes me how casually I can sing songs of deep, almost heroic commitment. It's as if I think, “As long as I'm singing, the words I say don't really matter. God knows it's just a song.” While my mind wanders, I promise to bow before the Lord, to proclaim his name to the ends of the earth, and to go so far as to die to express my faith. Yet these words may be sung with scarcely more emotion than I feel when I'm

SACRED PATHWAYS

ordering a hamburger. How often do we Christians take the Lord's name in vain during our worship?

It matters to God if we lie, even if we're singing, and even if everybody around us is singing the same thing. Music can make us feign a commitment that just isn't there, causing us to become callous, insincere believers.

Idolizing Beauty

Just as naturalists can fall into idolatry if they let eros slip into an appreciation for creation, so the sensate Christian can slip into idolatry if eros enters the appreciation of an elaborate cathedral or a beautifully painted icon.

When God's servants, mere angels, appeared to people in the Bible, even mature prophets were tempted to worship them. Things of great beauty can steal our heart from the only One worthy of true, unadulterated worship. Somebody might leave a very beautiful liturgical service satisfied by the sensuous experience without having entered the true presence of God.

Worshipping Worship

Sadly, we can mistakenly slip from using our senses to worship God to using our senses to worship worship. Many of the great Christian classics warn that sensuous worship is immature, or at least inferior to the dark night of the soul favored by contemplatives. I don't fully subscribe to this view, but I do believe that the senses can be very misleading, especially if we confuse sensory stimulation with a true commitment of the will.

On the other hand, using sensory stimulation as an aid to worship doesn't necessarily mean the Christian is dependent on it or would be lost without it. I can get by on one meal a day, but I'd prefer not to. And we can't deny that some Christians really do find sensuous aids to be a help in their faith.

An Invitation to Beautiful Worship

Von Ogden Vogt issued a call to churches a century ago that provides an appropriate closing for this chapter on sensate Christians:

Quietly and naturally we can improve our ordinary public worship in many ways, by simpler, nobler, and more beautiful church buildings; by altogether more pertinent and disposed religious music; by high points of stimulus in the placing of a painting, a window . . . ; by a more unified and climactic order of service; by patient attention at many little points in the administration of the sacraments; by better prepared prayers; and by more instruction for securing spiritual effort and reverent expectancy on the part of the people.¹⁶

Remember, sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell are God's gifts more than they are Satan's temptations. Using our bodies to glorify God is a much better response than denying the role of the body in worship and then turning around and using the body in areas that lead to sin. Gnosticism, emphasizing a special knowledge and thus making the mind the only arena that really matters, was rejected as a heresy centuries ago.

When I die, I hope that I will have been able to love God with everything I am, that I will have worked to turn my mind over to his wisdom and truth, my hands to his service, my sight to his beauty, and my entire being to enjoying his presence. Christianity is based on *truth*; this reality will never change. But it is often *beauty* that fills our souls.

CHAPTER 5

TRADITIONALISTS

Loving God through Ritual and Symbol

ARE YOU A TRADITIONALIST?

Score the series of statements below on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 being not true at all and 5 being very true. Record your answer in the space provided.

Are you a traditionalist?

- _____ 1. I feel closest to God when I'm participating in a familiar form of worship that has memories dating back to my childhood. Rituals and traditions move me more than anything else.
- _____ 2. I begin to feel closest to God when I lay something on the altar, sacrificing it for him.
- _____ 3. The words *tradition* and *history* are very appealing to me.
- _____ 4. Participating in a formal liturgy or "prayer book" service, developing symbols that I can place in my car, home, or office, and developing a Christian calendar for our family to follow are activities I would enjoy.

TRADITIONALISTS

- _____ 5. Again, on a scale of 0 to 5, how much does the statement describing the heart's cry of the traditionalist resonate with you in comparison with the others?
- Naturalist: let me be outdoors.
 - Sensate: let me experience.
 - **Traditionalist: let me remember.**
 - Ascetic: let me be alone.
 - Activist: let me conquer.
 - Caregiver: let me care.
 - Enthusiast: let me celebrate.
 - Contemplative: let me feel.
 - Intellectual: let me think.
- _____ 6. I would really enjoy developing a personal rule (or ritual) of prayer.

Total of all your answers: _____

Any score of 15 or higher indicates a preference for this spiritual temperament. Please take a moment to register this score in chapter 12 on page 233 so you will have a composite picture of your soul's path to God.

That didn't take long, I said to myself as I stood up from the old wooden pew and made my way to the side door of the church, up near the altar. "These Episcopalians sure know how to hold a short service."

The priest turned and saw me walk up the aisle. A distinctly puzzled look covered his face. I glanced sideways and realized to my horror that people were sitting down, not leaving. The service wasn't over at all; it was just beginning.

SACRED PATHWAYS

With a face redder than the wine that was served for Communion, I slunk down into the closest available pew. “Passing the peace,” I learned, wasn’t a benediction; it was like the Baptist “Take a moment and please shake everybody’s hand.”

The experience was all the more embarrassing because I was not a new Christian at the time it occurred. I had attended thousands of church services. I was raised in a Baptist church, however, and during college and seminary I attended what was basically an interdenominational church. This was my first liturgical service, and I felt as ill at ease as when my college missions group attended a Sikh wedding to get a cross-cultural experience.

If you weren’t raised in a liturgical setting, it takes a while to get used to it, but the benefits can be tremendous, even for someone raised a Baptist. Sometimes just stepping out of our tradition will help us understand familiar parts of the faith in a new way. Listen to this comment from the Presbyterian poet and writer Kathleen Norris:

I think I’m typical of a lot of people in my generation. I simply stopped going to church after high school. I really can’t explain what it was that ten years later drew me back. Ironically, I think it was the Benedictines that kept me at it. I’m married. I’m not a Catholic. But when I started attending their liturgy, they would sing or recite psalms, have a Bible reading and some prayers four times a day. Being able to say and hear poems out loud was a whole new approach for me, even though it’s about 1,700 years old. It really nourished me and made me a better Presbyterian.¹

Kathleen now describes herself as a “Presbyterian Benedictine.” I think she speaks for many Christians who want to remain in their tradition but have found elements of worship in other Christian traditions that greatly increase their faith.

TRADITIONALISTS

Some people react to the word *religion* like a child reacts to the word *bedtime*. They rightly fear a form of faith that has no substance, so they stress, “Christianity is a relationship, not a religion.”

However, in the context of a true faith, religious practices and rituals can be a powerful force for good—a friend, not an enemy, of a rich and growing relationship with God.

The Biblical Account of Religious Practices

For all our suspicion of religious practices, we must remember that God invented (and at times commanded) much of them. They marked the lives of the Old Testament patriarchs. Furthermore, even the New Testament champions of salvation by grace through faith were eager practitioners of certain religious practices—not to earn salvation, certainly, but to nourish their faith.

Religious practices are the way men and women embody spiritual truths. Thus the Bible contains a rich tradition of “sanctified religious practices.”

Abram expressed his faith by building altars. When God appeared to him at Shechem and told him that the Canaanites’ land would one day be his, Abram built an altar to the Lord. When he moved from there and pitched his tent between Bethel and Ai, Abram built another altar to the Lord. He followed the same practice when he moved to Hebron. By doing this, Abram sought to bring form to his faith (Genesis 12:7–8; 13:18).

When God began to formalize Israel’s religion, he rejected idol worship and commanded that Moses make “an altar of earth” for offerings (Exodus 20:23–24). God was reorienting religious practices, not rejecting them. In fact, Aaron and his sons were given

SACRED PATHWAYS

elaborate religious rituals to follow, which would “distinguish between the holy and the common” so that reverence for God wouldn’t be lost (Leviticus 10:8–11).

Modern Christians may scoff at such symbolism. “That stuff was for the unenlightened and the superstitious,” we may say. “Surely God doesn’t really care about such symbolism.” But he does care—at the very least, he did care very much—for when Nadab and Abihu, two of Aaron’s sons, “offered unauthorized fire before the LORD,” God took their lives (Leviticus 10:1–2). After this, God gave more specific instructions to Moses about how priests were to come into his presence.

God understands that our reaction to symbols often reveals our hearts’ reaction to him. If we’re flippant toward symbols, we’re often flippant toward what the symbols represent. Wanting to guard against this, God instructed Moses to follow the exact pattern God gave him for constructing the tabernacle (Exodus 25:40; Hebrews 8:5). Moses was told not to depart from this.

Ezra was also a traditionalist. He studied the law and taught its decrees, proclaimed fasts, offered sacrifices, mourned over sin, made confessions, and publicly read the law (Ezra 7:15; 8:21, 35; 10:7, 11; Nehemiah 8:3).

Many New Testament figures observed religious rituals as well, teaching us that religion still has a place in our worship, even though the substance of Christianity is based on faith. Jesus’ custom was to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). (If Jesus saw the need for regular, formal worship, how much more should we!) Peter and John both observed regular, set times of prayer (Acts 3:1). Paul, the champion of receiving salvation by grace through faith, nevertheless observed the religious custom in Philippi of praying by the riverside on the Sabbath (Acts 16:13). He also willingly underwent the ritual of purification (Acts 21:26).

These New Testament figures made it clear that no one will

TRADITIONALISTS

be saved through religion alone, but they also showed, by their example, that Christians can be nourished by certain religious practices.

Elements of the Traditionalist Expression of Faith

I'll always remember my first walk into the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. The churches of my childhood were usually long buildings with a cross in the front. If you removed the cross and put down a hardwood floor, you'd have a gymnasium.

This cathedral was altogether different. "It's a castle!" my daughter, Allison, shouted the first time we drove by.

The doors were heavy and solid. The stones in the floor and steps gave me a secure feeling, like I was walking on a foundation no less sturdy than the earth itself. When I first stepped into the main sanctuary, I felt small, much smaller even than when I gazed into the sky. There are side chapels, some with candles flickering, and halls containing the crypts of Christians who died long ago. My eyes rested on the Canterbury pulpit, so majestic that it almost made me laugh when I thought of the music stands I had preached behind.

I found out that prayer services were held at noon. Later, I'd try to catch one or two, or spend an afternoon praying in one of the side chapels. Praying became difficult, however. The National Cathedral is a tourist attraction as much as a sanctuary, and you soon find that any type of prolonged solitude is impossible.

My wife was somewhat surprised by my interest in this religious building. Earlier in my life, my Christianity was lived out on the streets, witnessing to nonbelievers and taking a stand for justice. It was a new thing to see me tucked away in a cathedral, seeking to pray to God surrounded by religious trappings.

SACRED PATHWAYS

The same elements that some have discarded as lifeless—because in their childhood these elements were foreign to a real expression of faith—began to nourish my soul in new ways and create a strength and depth in my spiritual life that had been missing. These experiences have given me a new appreciation for the traditionalist temperament.

There are three main elements of the traditionalist pathway:

- ritual (or liturgical pattern)
- symbol (or significant image)
- sacrifice

Evelyn Underhill, a popular Christian writer in the previous century, calls these three elements “sensible signs of supra-sensible action.”² They are ways we use the physical world to express non-physical (spiritual) truths.

Ritual

The power of rites is quite simply the power of reinforced behavior. Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox Christians may disagree about which rituals are most appropriate, but all Christians can benefit from them.

Gertrud Mueller Nelson, a contemporary writer and artist, writes the following:

God proceeded to create a world of order with space, matter, time, life, and humans in his own image. Through ritual and ceremonies we people in turn make order out of chaos. In endless space, we create a fixed point to orient ourselves: a sacred space. To timelessness we impose rhythmic repetitions: the recurrent feast . . .

What is too vast and shapeless, we deal with in smaller,

TRADITIONALISTS

manageable pieces. We do this for practicality but we also do this for high purpose: to relate safely to the mysterious, to communicate with the transcendent.³

Nelson goes on to mention a practice we have all seen on the shore of a lake or ocean. We watch how children, frightened by the vast and powerful surf, “tame” it by scooping a small hole in the sand near where the waves break and letting the water fill the hole. In essence, children respond to the vast sea by creating a “mini-sea,” which they can control and manage. “They had created a hole,” Nelson writes, “to catch something of the transcendent. In the same way we cannot head straight into the awe of the Almighty. Like the child before the ocean, we turn our backs on what is too much and slowly create the form that will contain something of the uncontainable . . . The power of the Almighty needs, sometimes, to be guarded against but it also needs to be beckoned, called forth, and wooed.”⁴

Rituals, like sacraments, provide a way for us to enter into God’s glory and still be protected from a force that is too great for human experience. Let’s review some of these rituals.

Celebrations and Observances

My young daughter wouldn’t let go of my hand. Sensing her insecurity I bent down to talk to her.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I’m so fancy,” she said, touching her dress, embarrassed.

I looked around. We were surrounded by people wearing leather coats, colored T-shirts, shiny jackets with professional sports logos on them, blue jeans—the standard crowd in a jail waiting room. Allison and I had just come from a Good Friday children’s service, and we were waiting to visit an inmate.

“That’s all right,” I told her. “It’s Good Friday. They’ll just figure you’ve been to church.”

SACRED PATHWAYS

After an unusually long wait, my friend's name was called, and we made our way into the cell blocks. I had prepared Allison for what she would see—the man we were visiting would be in a glass-enclosed room, and we'd have to talk through a phone. Finally we found him and began talking.

"It took a long time," I said.

"I was in the gym," he answered.

"Are they going to be doing anything inside for Easter?" I asked after some time.

"Is it Easter this weekend?" he asked. "I thought that was last weekend. *Jesus of Nazareth* was on television, so I thought it must have been Easter."

I have to confess that my heart sank a bit. I'm not particularly pious when it comes to these things, but the thought of another believer playing basketball on Good Friday without knowing that Easter was around the corner saddened me.

This person has a hard time submitting his life to Jesus. The desire is there, but pressures arise and he sometimes falters. A good four-day celebration at Easter time could do wonders.

At certain points in church history, the season surrounding Easter was a *forty-day celebration*. Forty days is too much for our busy culture, so we've shortened it to four—Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. But even this is becoming too much for the modern Christian, so we watch *The Ten Commandments* on Saturday night and show up, fresh and pretty, on Sunday morning.

It doesn't have to be this way. Religious observances have their place. They can be lifeless rituals or life-altering encounters, depending on how we approach them. If we're willing to step back from the world for a few days, we may find that God can fill our celebrations with a power we never knew existed.

Walter Wangerin did the church a great service when he wrote

TRADITIONALISTS

Reliving the Passion. Wangerin's little book provides a short meditation, based on the gospel of Mark, that takes the reader from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. Tricia Rhodes has written a similar book titled *Contemplating the Cross*, and Nancy Guthrie has edited a marvelous collection of Easter readings titled *Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross*. There are now so many of these devotional books that a traditionalist could probably read through a different Lenten devotional for an entire decade without having to repeat any. While some Christians argue that we should ignore these observances, traditionalists will say, with good reason, that we ought to out-celebrate everyone.

A mother who goes out of her way to make the Christmas, Lenten, and Easter seasons special is doing her family an exemplary Christian service. A father who explains what certain Sundays and celebrations mean is doing a tremendous pastoral work for his children.

It is all the more important to do this in a culture that is increasingly post-Christian. My wife and I were awakened to this need when we took a new Christian to his first Christmas Eve service. As we pulled up to the church, he asked, "I understand why we celebrate Christmas, but isn't Christ's death and resurrection just as important? Why don't we celebrate those?"

"We do," I said. "On Good Friday and Easter."

"Oh, is that what that's all about?" he said. This young man had grown up in the United States, yet he didn't know the meaning of Easter.

Scripture and Ritual Practices

Meditating on Scripture is an important source of nourishment for any Christian but especially for the traditionalist. And this repetitive practice was first recommended back in Old Testament times: "Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day

SACRED PATHWAYS

and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it” (Joshua 1:8).

Certain scriptural rituals can add new meaning to an old practice. Consider trying the following:

Read Scripture aloud. I did this in a hotel room the first time. I was on the road and tired. When I tried to silently read the Bible, the words seemed to meld into one another, and I was getting nowhere. I knew I needed to be replenished, however, so I got up, paced around the room, and began reading the Scriptures aloud. At that point the words came alive. Hearing them spoken seemed to ram them into my soul.

Use the psalms. The early church father Chrysostom urged every Christian to read Psalm 62 in the morning and Psalm 140 in the evening. According to Caesarius of Arles, all Christians knew Psalms 50, 90, and 103.⁵

Think of the potential power in doing this faithfully. Imagine being a twelve-year-old girl whose mother introduces you to the practice of praying through Psalm 62 in the morning and 140 in the evening. You carry this out faithfully, and Psalm 62 sustains you through the turbulent years of adolescence. Then you read it on your wedding day. Now you’re part of a couple, and the words in verse 1—“Truly my soul finds rest in God”—remind you to base your satisfaction on God first and foremost. You keep reading Psalm 62 first thing every day, which is why you read it on the day your first child is born. No doubt you take comfort in verses 11 and 12, reminding you that God is strong and loving. Those verses sustain you through the “tired” years of child rearing. Then, on the day your last child leaves home and it’s back to just you and your husband, you’re moved by verse 9, reminding you that humans “are only a breath.” How true! Life has gone by so quickly. You keep reading that psalm, now perhaps as a grandmother, and so you pick up that familiar passage on the morning you bury your husband,

TRADITIONALISTS

and verse 2—“Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken”—speaks to you like never before. It’s back to you and God, just like when you were a twelve-year-old girl who started reading Psalms 62 and 140 for the first time. These psalms have literally been the bookends of your entire adult life.

Some of you are thinking, *I’m quite sure that reading the same two psalms every day would be incredibly boring*, while others of you wish your life had been marked by such a ritual (it’s never too late to start one!). If you’re one of the latter, you may have some latent traditionalist inside you, just waiting to get out. Rituals can tie our years together with the common thread of faith.

Begin your day with the Bible. In my early teens I started the practice of reading a chapter of the Bible first thing in the morning and last thing in the evening—my first and last conscious activity would be God’s Word. I’ve heard of another Christian who places his Bible on his shoes at night. Before he can get dressed the next morning, he’ll need to read the Scriptures.

The Christian Calendar

Christianity is based on God breaking into the physical world, most noticeably in the incarnation, or the birth of Christ. This is why celebrating the Christian calendar can be such a help to Christian worship.

When we ritualize historic events, not just Christmas and Easter but Pentecost and Advent and Lent and Ascension Day as well, we affirm that our spiritual worship is historically based. It also helps us keep balanced. Advent reminds us that there is a time to wait; Lent, a time to repent and mourn; Easter, a time to celebrate; Pentecost, a time to be empowered and emboldened to go out and minister. We all have our blinders, emphasizing some elements of the faith over others, and the Christian calendar can remind us of those we might otherwise forget or diminish.

SACRED PATHWAYS

I like to add more contemporary reminders to my calendar as well, perhaps a reminder of Pascal's ecstatic experience on November 23, 1664, or Bonhoeffer's imprisonment and eventual martyrdom on April 9, 1945—any events that may have particular meaning because a historic figure has influenced my faith. Pastor Robert Morgan has made this easy to do by means of his devotional book titled *On This Day: 365 Amazing and Inspiring Stories about Saints, Martyrs, and Heroes*.

A Rule of Prayer

To bring structure to prayer, many Christians have found it helpful to establish a “rule” or “habit” of prayer, which helps them to pray every day.

To develop your own rule, you might survey some Episcopalian or Eastern Orthodox prayer books. Theological differences may lead you to delete or at least amend certain hymns or prayers, but with a little work on your own, you can develop a helpful tool.

The following is a sample rule compiled by Marc Dunaway. I've taken the liberty of making some omissions and a few additions. The full outline with additional suggested prayers is available in *Building a Habit of Prayer* (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar, 1989).

Invocation

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

(Short time of silence)

*O God, be merciful to me, a sinner. O God, be merciful to me, a sinner. O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.**

* I've found repetitive prayers to be helpful, not because it makes it more likely that God hears my prayers, but because it helps me understand more fully what I am praying.

TRADITIONALISTS

Prayer of Cleansing

Psalm 51

Lord, cleanse me of my sins and have mercy on me.

Prayer to the Holy Spirit

Glory to you, O Lord. Glory to you.

O Heavenly King, O Comforter, the Spirit of truth, Treasury of good things and Giver of life, come and abide in us. Cleanse us from every stain and save our souls, O Good One.

The Trisagion Prayers

*Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us.
Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us.
Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us.*

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

O Most Holy Trinity, have mercy on us. O Lord, cleanse us from our sins. O Master, pardon our iniquities. O Holy One, visit and heal our infirmities for your name's sake.

Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one, for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

SACRED PATHWAYS

Call to Worship

Come, let us worship and fall down before God our King.

Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ, our King and our God.

Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ himself, our King and our God.

Song (optional)

“Come, Let Us Worship and Bow Down” (or something similar)

Read or Sing a Psalm

Read Scripture

Follow through on Your Own Schedule

Choose a Hymn or Song for the Day

Intercessions

Bring your own spontaneous personal requests before God or follow your own intercessory list. You may want to include time for God to lay some requests (or words of instruction) on your heart.

Closing Prayer

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

O Lord, thank you for hearing my prayers. Give me the strength to serve you this day. Have mercy on me and save me, for you are good and love humankind. Amen.

TRADITIONALISTS

Some people may find that this type of structure hinders their prayers; others, particularly those who struggle with wandering thoughts or who are new to praying, may find that this form helps their prayers improve in both their discipline and sincerity.

The evangelical movement has suffered somewhat from making prayers too informal. New Christians often need more guidance than the popular “just talk to God and tell him what’s on your heart” to learn how to pray properly. Praying according to a rule can school a Christian to pray appropriately—with adoration, thanksgiving, and confession melded together with intercession.

An alternative rule of prayer I’ve found to be helpful is to pray through the Lord’s Prayer, pausing with each line to personalize it. In this way, I use the Lord’s Prayer as the structure for my own spontaneous prayers, and it seems to be a good mix.

Scheduled Prayer

Throughout Christian history, believers have often held that prayer is far too important to be left to chance. On the contrary, early Christians saw disciplined times set aside for prayer as the only way to be faithful in prayer. Clement of Alexandria, a Christian writer in the late second century, tells us that many Christians fixed hours to be assigned for prayer, such as the third, the sixth, and the ninth. Canticles of praise and Scripture readings were usually undertaken before meals and sleep.⁶ *The Didache*, an early Christian document, states that first-century Christians were expected to pray three times each day, usually using the Lord’s Prayer. Tertullian, a Christian leader in the early third century, urged prayer during the third, sixth, and ninth hours—in addition to regular prayers offered at the beginning of the day and during the night. Tertullian also stressed, however, that hours were guides more than rules. Christians need to pray at least three times daily, he said, and set times can help accomplish this aim.⁷

SACRED PATHWAYS

When I first began spending daily time in prayer, I often grew frustrated at how I could forget about God's presence by lunchtime, even after praying for an hour in the morning. Shorter but more frequent times of prayer may actually help us to live with an increasing awareness of God's presence in our lives. How difficult would it be to set aside five minutes in the morning, five minutes at noon, and five minutes before or after dinner to meet God in prayer?

Rituals provide structure for our faith. Once we learn to use them, traditionalists can also incorporate the use of symbols, which provide meaning.

Symbol

How many times have you heard a moving sermon, been almost bowled over by a powerful verse, or been given a great new insight, only to lose its effect because you forgot about it so soon after it was given? Symbols can help us overcome one of the great difficulties of the Christian life—namely, the problem of a poor memory.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Christian who was executed for his participation in a plot against Hitler, was fascinated by how his fellow prisoners could come so close to death in an air raid and then forget about it as soon as the danger was past. As Allied bombs were rocking the prison cells, nonbelieving men would cry out to God for salvation; but as soon as the bombers had passed and the dust had settled, the prisoners went back to playing cards and passing time, forgetting about their supplications to God. Bonhoeffer writes:

Something that repeatedly puzzles me as well as other people is how quickly we forget about our impressions of a night's bombing. Even a few minutes after the all clear, almost everything that we had just been thinking about seems to vanish into thin air. With Luther a flash of lightning was enough to change the course of his life for years to come. Where is this "memory"

TRADITIONALISTS

today? Is not the loss of this “moral memory” . . . responsible for the ruin of all obligations, of love, marriage, friendship, and loyalty? Nothing sticks fast, nothing holds firm; everything is here today and gone tomorrow. But the good things of life—truth, justice, and beauty—all great accomplishments need time, constancy, and “memory,” or they degenerate. The man who feels neither responsibility towards the past nor desire to shape the future is one who “forgets.” . . . Every word, even if it impresses him for the moment, goes in at one ear and out at the other. What is to be done about him? It is a great problem of Christian ministry.⁸

Symbols help us preserve this “moral memory,” which is so essential to right living.

God endorsed the use of symbols when he spoke to Moses:

“Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by chasing after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes. Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God.’”

NUMBERS 15:38–40

I can hear the cries of resistance: “But we’re saved by faith! We don’t need those Old Testament symbols!” Symbols have nothing to do with saving us, but they have everything to do with realizing the effects of that salvation on our everyday lives. Just because we’re saved doesn’t mean we don’t need help to live holy lives.

A Christian who has a hard time living by his faith while

SACRED PATHWAYS

driving, for instance, could hang a symbol—a cross or a fish—on the rearview mirror to challenge him when his temper begins to flare. (That’s certainly preferable to putting a Christian bumper sticker on the back of the car for all to see, and then driving like a son of perdition!) A pastor friend of mine uses a pond near his home as a symbol. As soon as he drives by that pond, he is reminded that he is going home and needs to prepare himself to focus on his wife and children, leaving the cares, worries, and concerns of the church on the north side of the pond. He can pick them back up the next morning as he passes the pond on his way to work.

A symbol can be found to meet virtually every need in every situation. Men or women who have failed sexually can begin wearing a cross as a reminder of their pledge to now remain pure. Others may choose to wear a ring during certain periods of intensive prayer; every time they see the ring, they will be reminded of their prayer.

One of the symbols Bonhoeffer found helpful in prison was making the sign of the cross during prayer. To one who is familiar with his writings, this is highly significant. At that point in his life, Bonhoeffer was seeking a “religionless” Christianity, but his experiment failed. He found, as have many Christians, that symbols can be potent ushers into God’s presence and reality.

Architects use Christian symbols. Byzantine churches, for example, often resemble the shape of a cross. Other churches were constructed in circular form, symbolizing, as the twelfth-century bishop Durandus wrote, that “the church has been extended throughout the circle of the world.” Still other churches use elements of the building for symbolic purposes. The nave of a church, where the congregation sits, takes its name from the Latin word *navis*, or ship, symbolizing the ship of the church tossed on the waves of the world, similar also to the picture of Noah’s ark. The chancel, where the choir sits, is symbolic of the church triumphant.⁹

Some Christian traditions have made symbols out of baptism

TRADITIONALISTS

cloths, called the “alb,” which are kept as a memorial of the baptism and used as a covering for the body after death. This is unusually beautiful symbolism—to be buried in clothes proclaiming the hope of baptism.

Evangelicals, of course, use bread and wine (or juice) as symbols of Christ’s body and blood. The Christian church historically has also made great use of symbols for the members of the Trinity. Christ is frequently symbolized by the chi-rho symbol, which looks like the letter *P* over the letter *X*. These are the first two Greek letters in *Christ*. *IHS* is also used, the first three Greek letters in the word *Jesus*. The symbol of a fish, adopted by early Christians as a secret sign, is often shown containing five letters (*i-ch-th-u-s*, meaning “fish”)—the first letters of the Greek words for Jesus (*i*), Christ (*ch*), God (*th*), Son (*u*), and Savior (*s*). Jesus’ deity and lordship were symbolized by a picture of a shepherd—the Good Shepherd. His passion and suffering were captured in a picture of the Lamb.¹⁰

God the Father was generally not symbolized in early Christianity. He was only to be revealed through the incarnate Christ, so there were never any earthly pictures to copy. However, up until perhaps the twelfth century, God the Father was sometimes represented by a hand. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, an arm was added, signifying the arm of the Lord. Later, God the Father was pictured as an aged man, and still later, in the West, as the pope with multiple crowns (the earthly pope had just one crown).¹¹

I am not advocating that we return to these symbols. Personally, I agree with early Christian theologians who rejected depictions of God the Father. Something as nebulous as a hand may legitimately serve art, but pictures of an aged man don’t do justice to God the Father. It is one thing to depict Jesus, who was incarnate; it is dangerous to depict the Father, whom we have not seen.

The Holy Spirit, of course, is frequently symbolized as a dove (reminiscent of the Bible’s metaphor of the Holy Spirit’s settling on

SACRED PATHWAYS

Jesus) or with fire (reminiscent of the day of Pentecost when “tongues of fire” rested on the heads of the disciples; Acts 2:3). The Trinity historically has been symbolized by a triangle or three entwined circles.¹²

Christian art made use of many different symbols that modern traditionalist temperaments may find helpful in their homes, offices, and cars. Some of these symbols include an anchor (hope, the last hope of sailors), an arrow (martyrdom, pain, suffering), a banner (triumph over persecution and death), a circle (eternity), a crown (sovereignty), a lamp (wisdom and piety), a palm (martyrdom), and the square (earthly existence).¹³

The cross has frequently been one of the major symbols of Christianity, but even this symbol has many variations. Anyone who has looked at an Eastern Orthodox catalog knows an Orthodox cross looks different from one worn by a Protestant. And the Protestant’s cross certainly looks much different from a Roman Catholic crucifix. The symbol of the cross has changed through the centuries. In the early Middle Ages, Jesus was usually depicted on the cross, signifying the suffering Savior. In earlier antiquity, however, the cross was usually depicted without the figure of the crucified, signifying the *empty* cross as a symbol of Christian victory.

Early Christian artists used colors for symbolism, as do some liturgical churches today. Though this symbolism varied somewhat, in general, white was used on Easter and Christmas and as a color of joy. Red spoke of the exaltation of the cross, feasts of the martyrs, and the Lord’s passion. Green symbolized common Sundays and ordinary weekdays, as well as serving as the symbol of life (plants and vegetables). Purple was used for Lent, Holy Week, and Advent and spoke of the union of love and pain. Black was used only on Good Friday.¹⁴

A more sophisticated form of symbolism involves the use of gargoyles, which are used to exalt the pure, noble, beautiful, and good by contrasting them with the ugly, coarse, and vulgar. Some people, however, have polluted these symbols with superstition.

TRADITIONALISTS

Superstition is to religion what lust is to love—an empty substitute that misses the power of the original.

Symbols also become dangerous if they become the center (rather than a reminder) of our faith. This happened in Old Testament history. On one such occasion, God commanded Moses to build a bronze snake so that Israel could be healed from a plague of snakebites. Later in history, Israel began worshiping the snake, treating it as a god rather than a symbol (Numbers 21:4–8; 2 Kings 18:4). Something good can be perverted, but the perversion is in the *use* of the symbol, not the symbol itself.

Gertrud Mueller Nelson writes beautifully of how rituals and symbols bring a necessary sense of “poetry” into our worship:

What we have lost touch with lies in the poetic aspect of the church which has . . . nourished us through rite and symbol, through rhythmic repetition . . . Rites and symbols use the ordinary and earthy elements of our existence and, by encircling them, ratify, sanctify, complete. The ordinary becomes the container for the divine and safely holds what was uncontainable. The transcendent is disclosed in what is wonderfully familiar: bread, wine, fire, ash, earth, water, oil, tears, seeds, songs, feasting and fasting, pains and joys . . . It draws its action more from what is most human in us than from theology. In its creative function, the church speaks directly to the heart, a heart which hears symbols, not rational vocabulary.¹⁵

Sacrifice

The third element of traditionalists’ faith—besides ritual and the use of symbols—is *sacrifice*. Sacrifice is at the heart of Christianity. Those who want to identify with their Lord, who gave the supreme sacrifice, must understand this. Sacrifice keeps our idealized and often romantic expressions of divine adoration

SACRED PATHWAYS

rooted in reality. Worship must not be reduced to mere emotional expression, for Christianity calls us to a commitment of the will.

The notion of sacrifice is also at the heart of why so many traditionalists celebrate Lent. Sadly, we are a culture that celebrates Mardi Gras but rarely gets around to Lent! “Liberated” Christians may well ask, “Why observe Lent?” God doesn’t need us to give up anything; certainly, he doesn’t “need” my chocolate or roast beef, but sometimes I need to learn to deny myself something in order to truly appreciate what really matters.

One year, I decided to give up ice cream for Lent. Since I was raised as a Baptist, I had never even considered observing this season, but our family decided to give it a try. During this period, I was traveling and had stopped at a grocery store to get something to eat. Unfortunately, it was an out-of-the-way grocery store, and the produce looked like it had been trucked in from Brazil—three weeks ago. There was no real bread to speak of, and nothing that looked appetizing enough to take back to my hotel room.

Finally I gave in to the “dark side.” *I’ll just get a small carton of ice cream*, I thought. But as soon as my hand hit that cold container, I remembered my commitment—and put the ice cream back. Suddenly, I was vividly reminded of the Lenten season. What Jesus had done on our behalf broke into my consciousness, and my Lenten “mourning and celebrating” was deepened.

All in all, I’d say it was a fabulously good trade, forgoing ice cream to live with a deeper sense of the Lenten season. That’s what fasting is all about, isn’t it? It doesn’t earn us any extra merit or favors with God, but God can use it to chasten our demanding hearts.

Of course, we can’t really give anything to God—*everything* is his, including the strength by which we sacrifice—but the notion of performing a sacrifice reminds us that we are God’s servants and that God is not our servant.

There are three types of sacrifice in the Old Testament: the sin

TRADITIONALISTS

offering, the guilt offering, and the burnt offering. (All sacrifices are offerings, but not all offerings are sacrifices.)¹⁶ Some offerings allowed the giver to use the item offered (a singer might sacrifice her voice to the Lord), while others were totally consumed (an alcoholic might decide to never taste alcohol again). Our sacrifices may include giving up something permanently or dedicating something to the Lord's use. The giving of our money should be seen as a sacrifice—something we give to God that can't be used by us for another purpose.

Sacrifice is at the heart of a holy life. At times, we will be called to give up something we cherish that has illicitly nourished us in the past—an inappropriate relationship, a job that provides financial security, overeating, gambling, smoking, or some other activity.

The prophetic denunciations of sacrifice that scare many Christians away from talking about this as a way to love God are directed at the *degradation* of the ritual, not the idea of it.¹⁷ God endorses the concept of sacrifice throughout the Old Testament, and Jesus participated in the sacrificial system in the New Testament, ultimately becoming a sacrifice himself (Romans 3:25; 8:3). Of course, Jesus' sacrifice made animal sacrifice obsolete, but the principle remains operative: Paul exhorted the Romans to offer themselves as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1). Admittedly, in context, Paul is urging us to offer our spiritual gifts to serve the body of Christ. Merely "giving up" something could actually trivialize Paul's admonition rather than fulfill it. The point, however, is to understand the nature of sacrifice in the Christian life and how sacrifice is part of what a healthy Christian does.

Traditionalists remind us that we have turned our faith inside out. Faith today is often seen as a tool to get something special *from* God. Historically, a man or woman of faith is one who was willing to give something precious *to* God. When the traditionalist incorporates the idea of sacrifice into his or her daily life, a key component of Christianity is modeled and preserved.

Living as a Traditionalist

How, then, can you love God as a traditionalist? By incorporating the three elements of this temperament into your daily life: make plentiful use of symbols, develop meaningful rituals, and find areas of sacrifice.

I encourage you to begin by adopting one of the categories—symbols, for instance—and then slowly bring their use into your life. You may want to read further about ancient Christian symbols to give you more background. As symbols are incorporated into your worship, consider adding another category. Perhaps you could add one ritual a year—a certain way to begin your Christmas morning, a special Sunday prayer, a new form of Bible reading, and so on.

The glory of life in Christ is that we are starting a life that will go on for eternity. We certainly don't need to rush. Meaning is more important than accomplishment. Symbolism must be the servant, not the master, of substance. Go slowly, and gradually bring the religious element into your life.

The Temptations of Traditionalists

There are many benefits gained from incorporating traditionalist elements into our faith expressions, but there are dangers as well. Traditionalist Christians must be especially aware of four of them.

Serving God without Knowing God

It is possible to serve God religiously for quite some time without actually knowing him. Samuel is a good example of this danger. First Samuel 3:1 tells us that “the boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli,” yet in verse 7, we're told, “Samuel did not yet

TRADITIONALISTS

know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.” Samuel was intimately involved in the religious observances of Israel, but he didn’t know the God of Israel personally.

The world is full of religions and full of religious people who don’t know God. Religion can serve faith, but it doesn’t substitute for faith, and it can never replace faith. Meaningful expressions of the heart, mind, and will become lifeless if they are not mixed with a deep and abiding faith.

Neglecting Social Obligations

Like several other spiritual temperaments, traditionalists can get so caught up in their faith that they forget the social obligations of faith. It is not enough for us to cultivate holiness; we must reach out and minister to others.

Remember God’s warning to the Israelites:

“I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.
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

Substituting religion for the social obligations of the faith must have been a constant temptation for Israel, for Jeremiah also warns that religion alone is not enough.

SACRED PATHWAYS

“Do not trust in deceptive words and say, ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!’ If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place.”

JEREMIAH 7:4–7

Jesus also warned against empty displays of religion. Religion without substance, says Jesus, is hypocrisy; it makes us “white-washed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean” (Matthew 23:27).

Judging Others

Traditionalists must remember that God, not religion, is sacred. It took a vivid noontime vision for Peter to relinquish the religious food prohibitions that blocked him from reaching out to the Gentiles (Acts 10). Paul’s life calling to minister to the Gentiles made him particularly careful not to elevate religious rituals to the measurement of true faith. He makes it clear in Colossians 2:16–17 that religious observances are not to be used for judging others: “Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” (See also what he tells his readers in Romans 14.) Paul warns Timothy against those who, in the name of religion, forbid Christians to participate in activities that God created for their enjoyment and pleasure (1 Timothy 4:1–5).

Traditionalists should freely engage in those rituals and

TRADITIONALISTS

observances that build up their faith. But just because something is beneficial to them doesn't mean it is obligatory to others. Near the place where I grew up, a conservative Baptist pastor "shocked" some of his parishioners because he enjoyed gardening on Sunday afternoon. This pastor spent his entire week studying Scripture, and he found that gardening was not work as much as it was relaxation as he prepared for the evening service, even though his actions didn't square with some parishioners' view of the Sabbath.

Rituals can powerfully enhance an individual's faith, but they can also destroy corporate faith if used to criticize, measure, or divide.

Deifying Rites

The new pastor gave his benediction to bring the service to a close, pouring his heart into it, but when he opened his eyes, he saw his church members joining hands and the pianist walking up to her piano. One of the deacons gestured to the new pastor to step down, and as the pastor did so, the congregation began singing, "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds." The church had sung the song after every Communion as long as anyone could remember. With or without the new pastor's cooperation, the song was going to stay.

In this instance, such a circumstance can serve as a humorous anecdote for seminary classes rather than representing any real harm; in other circumstances, such attitudes can be lethal. People tend to virtually deify something just because it's the way it's always been done, even if they no longer understand why it is done.

No symbol or ritual has absolute value in itself. A symbol represents a hidden reality. It is there to evoke the mysterious. When the original meaning is lost, the symbol is of no more value than an expired coupon.

Discovering Traditionalism

During college, I cut my teeth on “spontaneous” Christianity, almost to a fault. The more “holy” you were, I thought, the more willing you would be to “move with the Spirit.” People who wrote out prayers (and at one point, I thought, even sermons) beforehand were coming dangerously close to “quenching the Spirit.”

Thus when I first encountered liturgy, set prayers, and various religious practices, I was surprised at how deeply my soul responded. I’m tempted to describe it as “coming home,” except I was never there in the first place!

Still, I felt I had touched my roots. And, indeed, I had.

The Christian faith is a faith based in history and community. Ritual, symbols, sacraments, and sacrifice have marked the entire history of the church. Virtually every symbol, ritual, or rite has probably gotten in the way at one time or another or veered off course, however slightly, or fallen into rote repetition, losing its power.

But the real problem, I found, was not with the symbol, ritual, or rite but with the human heart. Many of the religious obligations I had felt “delivered” from in my own youth, I later discovered as potential avenues of spiritual growth. Instead of feeling delivered, I felt cheated, as if I had been taught to live the Christian life without being given something helpful to assist me. I now feel carried by their power, nurtured by their truth, and strengthened by their practice.

Maybe you will too.

CHAPTER 6

ASCETICS

Loving God in Solitude and Simplicity

ARE YOU AN ASCETIC?

Score the following statements on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 being not true at all and 5 being very true. Record your answer in the space provided.

Are you an ascetic?

- _____ 1. I feel closest to God when I am alone and there is nothing to distract me from focusing on his presence.
- _____ 2. I would describe my faith as more “internal” than “external.”
- _____ 3. The words *silence*, *solitude*, and *discipline* are very appealing to me.
- _____ 4. Taking an overnight retreat by myself at a monastery where I could spend large amounts of time alone in a small room, praying, studying God’s Word, and fasting for one or more days are all activities I would enjoy.
- _____ 5. Again, on a scale of 0 to 5, how much does the statement describing the heart’s cry of the ascetic resonate with you in comparison with the others?

SACRED PATHWAYS

- Naturalist: let me be outdoors.
- Sensate: let me experience.
- Traditionalist: let me remember.
- **Ascetic: let me be alone.**
- Activist: let me conquer.
- Caregiver: let me care.
- Enthusiast: let me celebrate.
- Contemplative: let me feel.
- Intellectual: let me think.

_____ 6. I believe I would particularly benefit from acts such as a night watch, taking a short vow of silence, or simplifying my life.

Total of all your answers: _____

Any score of 15 or higher indicates a preference for this spiritual temperament. Please take a moment to register this score in chapter 12 on page 233 so you will have a composite picture of your soul's path to God.

Dressed in an animal skin, John the Baptist pranced around the amphitheater, screaming out his defiance of the Pharisees. His hair was knotted, and his muscles were taut with tension. He picked up a fistful of dirt and cast it into the air, and the dirt showered him as he screamed, the veins on his neck bulging like fire hoses bursting with pressure. He was berating Herod and demanding that he repent.

John's voice had two volumes—loud and louder. His heavy, labored breathing had an asthmatic quality to it as he paced back and forth like a caged animal, spittle flying out of his mouth as he spewed his denunciations.

ASCETICS

Was this an accurate portrayal of John the Baptist? I doubt it. For starters, he couldn't have preached more than thirty minutes at that pace and volume, much less for hours a day, day after day. Furthermore, just because John the Baptist had taken what appeared to be a vow of the Nazirite, abstaining from alcohol, avoiding dead bodies, not cutting his hair, and so forth, it doesn't mean he had chosen to live on the precipice of insanity.

That John the Baptist was so portrayed in this Passion Play doesn't surprise me, though. Our culture has a difficult time understanding the ascetic temperament. We may admire these people, but we often suspect they may be victims of religious fanaticism, which we see as a cousin to mental illness.

The ascetic temperament gravitates toward solitude, austerity, simplicity, and deep commitment. It's the "monastic" temperament, so to speak, representing believers who aren't afraid of discipline, severity, and solitude—indeed, believers who find that these elements awaken their souls to God's presence.

It's ironic that in a culture where loneliness and feelings of isolation are almost pandemic, solitude is so foreign to us. One reason is that we have lost the art of austerity, which gives meaning and substance to our solitude. The word *austere* has a number of connotations. It can mean morally strict, somber or grave, or unadorned or simple. All of these meanings are relevant here, and they point out why the ascetic is such an enigmatic figure.

Most of our solitude is forced, not chosen, creating loneliness rather than spiritual intimacy with the Father. Our culture is anything but morally strict. We gravitate toward the trite and trivial rather than the somber and grave, and we pride ourselves on adornment and complexity rather than simplicity, often because many of us are trying desperately to hide our true selves. Ascetics, perhaps more than any of the other spiritual temperaments, must truly go against their culture to practice loving God.

The Bible and Ascetics

Growing up, I was always fascinated by the Nazirite. *That's what it means to be holy*, I thought—*give up everything you have and look really weird*.

Of course, I was wrong. Being a Nazirite had to do not so much with a person's nature as with vows taken for a set period of time during which the adherents agreed to abstain from alcohol, refrain from cutting their hair (I liked that part, but my dad never bought it!), and stay away from contact with a dead body. During the period of this vow, Nazirites were in essence pictures of holiness—literally “set apart” for a special purpose. Because the Nazirites' vows were only for a set period of time, they could leave their solitude to later fulfill the social obligations of their faith (Numbers 6).

John the Baptist immediately comes to mind when we think of the solitary and the ascetic, but Jesus also had these tendencies. Before he launched himself into his public ministry, Jesus spent forty days in solitude and fasting (Matthew 4:1–2). He taught that prayer should be done in secret (Matthew 6:5–6). He assumed that his disciples would eventually fast (Matthew 6:16–17). And he returned to solitude at difficult moments in his ministry—after hearing about John the Baptist's death and when the crowds pursued him, for instance (Matthew 14:13, 22–23).

Mark tells us that Jesus frequently sought solitude. “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed” (Mark 1:35). Mark's word, here translated “solitary place,” could also mean “deserted,” connoting the barrenness of the surroundings. Even a lush place seems austere in the dark, however. It's not surprising, then, that before his greatest test, Jesus found comfort in the dark, in the garden of Gethsemane, kneeling quietly and privately in prayer (Matthew 26:36).

ASCETICS

It is in these dark, intense, and lonely times that ascetics' souls awaken. I think that anyone who has been stretched in ministry knows that an intense battle was fought at Gethsemane as well as at Calvary. To be sure, only Calvary provided payment for our sins and thus was absolutely necessary, but Gethsemane was a spiritual battleground where Jesus made the final decision to be obedient. In a wrenching, courageous act of self-denial, Jesus proved the mettle of his faith.

When I was involved in street preaching on college campuses, the soul-wrenching and gut-busting struggles came during the moments in prayer before I actually spoke. Once I had wrestled with my fears and my doubts, the act of obedience became almost anticlimactic. Even later in life, as I've struggled with God's will, the act of obedience always seemed less difficult than the prior decision to be obedient. "Don't you know where God is leading on this?" I was asked once.

"Yes, I do," I said. "And that's the problem. I'm waiting for my willingness to catch up with God's."

That's why I identify so much with Jesus, alone and in agony, as he prayed in Gethsemane. It is the ultimate picture of Christianity, the picture of us struggling spiritually as God aligns our will with his. It's the picture that fuels the ascetic spiritual temperament.

The Old Testament gives us several profiles of ascetics, not just in the Nazirite, but in a call for the devout to mourn. The book of Psalms provides treasured passages for enthusiasts who love to celebrate, but the books of Lamentations, Daniel, and Joel provide many rich passages for ascetics who know they are called to mourn.

Daniel writes of fervent prayer in which he pleads with God, fasts, and sits in sackcloth and ashes (Daniel 9:3). Joel urges the spiritual leaders to wear sackcloth, to mourn, wail, fast, and spend the night watching in prayer, crying out to God. God himself urges

Israel to return to him with fasting, weeping, and mourning (Joel 1:13–14; 2:12).

Certainly, then, there is a time and place for the role of austerity and solitude in every Christian's worship. For those with this particular spiritual temperament, however, these two qualities may be the most cherished forms of worship.

The Three Worlds of Ascetics

To give a more precise definition of this temperament, we can break it down into three worlds: solitude, austerity, and strictness.

Solitude

Over the years, solitude has become one of my best friends. There is a quietness and depth to solitude that nourishes me while other spiritual activities—preaching, for instance—deplete me. Even in a crowd or at a party, sometimes I'll try to “sneak in” a few moments of solitude. Some might argue that in doing this I'm taking myself too seriously, and they may be right. All I know is that it's in those solitary moments that colors regain their brightness, truth regains its clarity, and reality loses its fog. Without some time alone, I feel like I've lost my anchor.

M. Basil Pennington, a twentieth-century monk, wrote, “If one note is to characterize the true monk, it is this: He is the one who has gone apart, to be in some way alone.”¹ Modern-day “monks” recognize that even if they are married or work in a crowded office or busy church ministry, spending some time apart is essential for a deepening walk with God.

For a young mother or father, or for a child living at home, getting completely away may not be possible; the important thing, however, is, as Pennington terms it, “the sense of apartness.”² A

ASCETICS

family can create a prayer room; perhaps your local church will allow you to have keys to the sanctuary. Just the act of getting away can serve as a call or prelude to worship.

Solitude is essential in that ascetics live fundamentally internal existences. Jerome, a fourth-century ascetic, wrote that “to me the town is a prison, and solitude is paradise.”³ While I’m sympathetic to Jerome’s confession, I’ve also learned that there is a temptation in this. Solitude is a tool when we use it to recharge; if we neglect “the town,” however, we won’t be able to reach those who most need our message.

Informed ascetics will rightly respond that an individual’s prayers are rivers running into the ocean of the church. Evelyn Underhill, a popular British writer and speaker on the spiritual life in the early part of the previous century, wrote, “Each Christian life of prayer . . . however deeply hidden or apparently solitary in form, will affect the life of the whole Body. By the very fact of its entrance into the sphere of worship, its action is added to that total sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in which the life of the church invisible consists.”⁴

Historically, the emphasis on solitary living that marked early asceticism gradually gave way to learning to live in detachment within society. Solitude evolved into duos consisting of a master and disciple, then small groups, and then larger communities. Philip Rousseau, an expert on early Christianity, wrote, “Dying to others, one of the basic requirements of a solitary ascetic, became more an inner disposition, quite compatible with proximity to other men.”⁵ Jerome particularly stressed “inner asceticism.” According to him, virginity, leaving the city, and poverty were beginning points, not the end, of asceticism.⁶ A later ascetic took this inner detachment a step further, saying, “Let her find in the busy city the desert of the monks.”⁷

This is the lifeline for modern ascetics. We don’t have to find a desert to express our faith; inner detachment allows us to find a

SACRED PATHWAYS

lonely desert in the midst of the busiest city. For years I thrived on arriving hours before anyone else came to the office because the quiet and solitude were essential for my faith. The early morning was my favorite part of the day. When another “early bird” was hired, it took some time for me to adjust. Friends and families will need to learn that ascetics need a certain amount of time alone, perhaps every day.

Austerity

A friend of our family, a young woman with two small children, exhibits many ascetic traits. Her closest moments with God occur when the kids have gone to bed, all the lights are turned out, and everything is quiet. If the kids won't be quiet, she's been known to go into the bathroom, turn on the faucet to block other noise, and pray to God there.

Susanna Wesley, mother of John and Charles Wesley, raised a large family but, like the mother just mentioned, craved an austere and solitary place from which she could meet her God. Her solution? She frequently pulled her apron over her head and prayed. Her kids learned not to bother her during that time. While sensate Christians are drawn to God through their senses, ascetic Christians are often distracted by their senses so they will try to shut them out. Monks often chose environments with low levels of sensory input so that they wouldn't be distracted in their prayer and fasting.⁸ While Francis of Assisi reveled in the beauty of the countryside, many of the desert fathers sought out barren wastelands. It is here where the ascetic may part company with the naturalist.

Strictness

A decade ago, with some dismay, I found that what is often said about ten-year high school reunions is true: Women do tend to look prettier, men do tend to gain weight and lose hair, and people are

ASCETICS

still trying to make impressions. I wasn't expecting, however, one of the little rumors that had been floating around.

"Did you hear about Gary?" one rumor went. "He sold everything he owned, joined a religious group, and became a religious fanatic."

"Is that true?" one person asked me.

I laughed. "It only feels like it. The truth is, I went to seminary, moved into a house that cost \$200 a month to rent, and worked for a campus ministry that paid me about what you would expect a campus ministry to pay you."

My wife was rather alarmed when she heard what had been said, but I was amused. Ninety-nine percent of communication is in the interpretation. A man who begins giving a portion of his income to the church and its work, carves out time two or three times a week to attend church services, tells people on the street about his God, and reads books about God on a regular basis may appear to the world to be a "religious fanatic." If, however, the same man were to begin making payments on a diamond ring, spend his weekends going on dates, tell all his coworkers about the lovely woman who has come into his life, and read love letters over and over, the world would simply say he's "in love."

If I were to write an entire book on asceticism, I would be tempted to title it *The Divine Romance*. We normally don't think of asceticism and strictness as allies of romance, but they are. Ascetics are "strict" only because they want to reserve a major portion of their lives for their passionate pursuit of God.

It is this strict side of the ascetic's life that is perhaps the least understood, not only by our culture, but also by other Christians. Especially among evangelicals, who champion salvation by grace through faith, a strict faith can seem perilously close to legalism—and in some cases, it can be. For healthy ascetics, however, strictness is a cherished method of expressing love for God.

SACRED PATHWAYS

In a book on the life of Francis of Assisi, G. K. Chesterton answers those who ask “what cruel kind of God can have demanded sacrifice and self-denial” by putting the question in another context. What selfish sort of woman, he asks, would demand flowers or be so avaricious as to demand a gold ring to wear on her finger? “It was because the thing was not demanded that it was done,” Chesterton writes, and in doing so he reminds us of the romantic side to asceticism.⁹

Chesterton says that the popular view of the ascetic, that of the gloomy, depressed person, is in error.

The whole point about Francis of Assisi is that he certainly was ascetical and he certainly was not gloomy . . . He devoured fasting as a man devours food. He plunged after poverty as men have dug madly for gold. And it is precisely the positive and passionate quality of this part of his personality that is a challenge to the modern mind in the whole problem of the pursuit of pleasure.¹⁰

True Christian asceticism doesn't seek suffering or self-denial as an end, but as a means, as a way to love “something else that God might be loved more.”¹¹ Thus the ascetic life has historically been intimately tied to the contemplative life. I am drawing a distinction between the two as I discuss spiritual temperaments. In our modern world, I think they've split apart, but historically, one went hand in hand with the other. Ascetics lived strict lives of self-denial so that they would be free to contemplate God. Without self-denial, sins of the flesh arose and made it impossible for the Christian to focus on communion with God.

The strictness of the ascetics gave their teaching an added authority. The ascetics stressed deeds before words. Hard work in developing the inner life was far more important than obtaining a degree, writing a book, or being a skilled speaker.

ASCETICS

Somewhat surprisingly, this strictness with self was marked by gentleness toward others. You see this in the historical accounts of the great ascetics. Martin of Tours, a late fourth-century ascetic, was said to be a person who neither judged nor condemned. Augustine wrote in *The City of God*, “What shall I say of these judgments which men pronounce on men . . . ? Melancholy and lamentable judgments they are.”¹² And Ambrose, another well-known figure in the ascetic movement, was known to weep when he had to judge another Christian, “leaving a sound example to the priests who followed him, that they should rather intercede with God than bring charges against men.”¹³

The legalism of the Pharisees caused them to set impossibly high standards that other people were obligated to follow, while the Pharisees basked in other luxuries. True ascetics are strict with themselves but treat others with supernatural gentleness.

Acts of Ascetics

Ascetics live in the three worlds of solitude, austerity, and strictness through various acts of devotion. The following discussion is by no means exhaustive but should prove helpful to get the ascetic temperament started on a productive and growing relationship with God.

Watching in the Night

It was a clear night; I held my baby daughter in my arms, rocking her gently from side to side, looking out at the still neighborhood. In the deep of the night, after even the late-night David Letterman crowd has gone to sleep, there is a stillness, an expectancy, a sense of waiting for the dawn to break open and overtake the darkness. Long after my daughter had drifted off to sleep, I wanted to stay awake.

SACRED PATHWAYS

Ascetics revel in this practice of quiet worship in the night. Many of us don't experience this except when a sick child forces us to be up late (or early), but some Christians have found the middle of the night to be one of their best times of prayer and worship.

Rather than staying up late, however, ascetics may get up earlier than normal, perhaps one day a week. If we do this on a weekend, we can go back to bed to catch up on lost sleep. "Missing sleep is not the important thing, though for some this can be a significant ascetical dimension of the practice," writes M. Basil Pennington.¹⁴ Just as a teenager might shape her day in anticipation of a date or a sporting event, so a Christian can reschedule a day in anticipation of time alone with God.

More important than losing sleep, Pennington continues, is being vigilant when others commonly are not. While others slumber, the ascetic lifts his or her soul to God. While all creation awaits the sun, the ascetic welcomes the Son.

Pennington tells us that this spirit of watching can be carried into the shower and the act of dressing and can remain with us throughout the day. Perhaps families can have agreements that once a week, or maybe once a month, radio, television, and unnecessary chatter before breakfast will not be allowed. Instead, there will be a holy stillness, an expectancy that invites the presence of God.

According to Pennington, it is hard to understand the value of such watching without actually doing it. "The value and effect of watching can only be known by experience," he writes.¹⁵ Ascetics should certainly consider incorporating night watches into their regimen of worship.

I especially encourage people who struggle with insomnia to transform nights of frustration into great opportunities for prayer and worship. Many cases of insomnia can be directly related to stress, which intimate prayer and watching with the heavenly Father can ease.

Being Still

A friend of mine called to tell me he was going to be in town and to ask if I would like to meet for dinner. I'm always up for a dinner with him—he's a great conversationalist—so I readily agreed, and we went to a restaurant in the heart of the China district in Washington, D.C. We caught up on what each of us was doing, and my friend began telling me about a retreat he had attended in which participants weren't allowed to speak for the first twenty-four hours.

Of all the types of retreats I could imagine for my friend, this wasn't one of them. "You've got to be kidding," I said. "What was it like?"

"At first I hated it," he admitted. "I thought I was going to go crazy. I was sure this was going to be the longest weekend of my life. But you know, the next night they said we could talk for an hour or two, and by then, I didn't want to. I so much enjoyed being quiet that talking seemed burdensome. I really enjoyed it!"

Some monastic communities have become famous for their vows of silence, in which they agree to never speak again—or at least not for long periods of time. While this is not practical for many laypeople, we can appreciate some of the benefits of stillness by adopting it for shorter periods. Our needless chatter often dissipates our energy and scatters our thoughts from a focus on God. Trying to be silent for just a few hours will reveal how distracted we have become. At first, like my friend, we may hate being quiet. If we give it time, however, most of us will not only grow comfortable with silence but fond of it as well.

Fasting

Benedictine monasteries were often considered "moderate" because their virtually perpetual fast (except during the Easter season, when fasting would not be appropriate, given the joyful celebration of Christ's resurrection) allowed one light meal a day.

SACRED PATHWAYS

Like stillness, fasting reveals to us how much time and thought is taken up by transitory matters. Fasting can involve much more than food. We can fast from television, radio, movies, or certain types of food, desserts, meats, and the like.

The ascetic is willing to give up the “delights and consolations of this world”¹⁶ so that he or she can enjoy the delights and consolations found in God. Renting a video to pass the weekend or turning on the radio to survive a commute can become habit-forming. To make sure these things aren’t controlling us, we may need to give them up for a short period of time. The question I like to ask myself is, “Am I depending on this for spiritual nourishment?” If the answer is yes, I need to step back or I risk fostering a dependency.

Obeying

I had a close friend in college who actually drove at the (old) speed limit of fifty-five miles per hour all the way from Bellingham to south of Seattle, a two- to three-hour drive (at that speed). When we were jogging together once through the middle of town, I suddenly noticed that I was alone. When I looked back, he was waiting for the traffic light to turn. There wasn’t a car in sight, but if the sign communicated “Wait,” my friend was going to wait.

I’ve since lost track of my friend, so I have no idea if he has experienced the thrill of hurtling down a freeway at seventy miles per hour. Certainly, strict obedience can become legalistic, but on the other hand, I wonder if some of us haven’t gone too far the other way.

Obedience—putting ourselves under the authority of another—is an important part of monastic living because it assaults human pride and invites us to live in humility. While laypeople are not likely to enter into the strict obedience of a master/disciple relationship lived out in monastic times, we can still learn the

ASCETICS

blessing of obedience by obeying government authorities and employers. Children can learn by obeying their parents.

I've talked with several managers about the casualness with which people today are willing to cross the accepted lines of authority. One manager told me that a worker who was “temping” from an outside agency but hoping to secure full-time, permanent employment, blew his chances when he told the manager that he didn't like the way a decision was handled and expected the manager to justify his decision.

“I almost laughed,” the manager said, “and managed to stifle the words I wanted to say—Who do you think cares about *your* opinion here? You're a temp!”

That may sound harsh to some, but there's a truth underneath it all. It can be hard for all of us to “submit” and just accept someone else's leadership.

A pastor friend of mine went through a heartbreaking experience when he and the elders of his church were forced to lay off two staff members due to the effects of a recession. What hurt almost as much as letting the two staffers go was the constant second-guessing on the part of a few church members: “Did you think about cutting back on office supplies instead?” “What about everybody else taking a week off without pay?” Some treated the decision as if it had been made in five minutes' time with no forethought or prayer. They hadn't been privy to a single part of the discussion but still assumed there was something the church leadership had obviously overlooked. Leaders, bosses, and pastors are frequently second-guessed by people who have far less experience, far less information, and far less perspective than the one who is being questioned.

I know this may sound radical, but we live in a very arrogant society bolstered in part by the wrong notion that everyone's opinion is just as valid as anyone else's. This wrong notion is the child of

relativism. We live in an age of polls and are encouraged to develop and publicize uninformed opinions. But there are some matters where my opinion is worth no more than a wild guess. It would be arrogant for me to seriously question someone who has a much better basis on which to form his or her opinion.

Without being legalistic, we need to realize that rebellion at any level can become habit-forming. If someone undermines the old boss, they are far more likely to do the same with the new boss. Respect for others is a matter of character and a call to humility. It can take great humility to work under and submit to an imperfect human being, but that's what Scripture calls us to do. And if we're extremely cavalier about obeying legitimate earthly authorities, chances are we'll also be extremely lax about accepting God's authority. That's why we can learn so much by rediscovering the monastic emphasis on obedience.

An important point to remember is that ascetics practice obedience because this act is a way to honor God, not just because leaders are worthy to be obeyed. When government, parents, or employers direct us to an action that goes against the will of God, however, the first call of obedience is always to the will of God.

Working

It's startling to realize that Jesus was a common laborer for 90 percent of his life. Only a very small amount of his time was spent in a visible public ministry. Unless we want to accuse Jesus of being a poor steward of his time, we must reevaluate our distinction between secular and sacred work. Working hard is acceptable to God; done in the right spirit, it can be part of our worship to God. Benedict urged his monks to look at the tools of the monastery as if they were the vessels of the altar. "The monk in his labor is celebrating a liturgy, the liturgy of the creation."¹⁷

When we recognize that the strength and ability to work are

ASCETICS

God's gifts to us to help us provide for our needs and the needs of our families, the use of that energy and skill becomes an affirmation of the God who created and sustains us. The plumber fixing a pipe under the sink, the construction worker driving a backhoe, and the pilot guiding a plane can all be worshipping God through their work. For ascetics, the harder the work, the better.

Taking Retreats

Limited retreats can be a mainstay of the ascetic's faith. Although modern ascetics may not live in complete solitude, they will still need to schedule time to be away for several hours, a day, or a week at a time. Being apart from society, ascetics can then focus on drawing nearer to God.

Before my wife and I had kids, I planned a few overnight retreats. You can often find monasteries within a few hours' drive. After the kids were born, extended time away became less possible. Besides, my work requires me to travel a great deal, so the last thing I want to do is consume another weekend by being away from home.

Instead, I've discovered the value of afternoon retreats. When I lived in Virginia, I would occasionally slip away to the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., or spend a few hours hiking the Manassas, Virginia, battlefield. I don't get to do this as often as I would like to now, or even as much as I think I need to, but our lives take us through many different seasons, and we must learn to adapt our spirituality and even our spiritual temperaments to meet the different demands of our changing life situations.

Living Simply

Ascetics will work to create simple living environments. On occasion, they even create rooms that are especially reserved for prayer. Simplicity in dress and lifestyle may also be an important

factor. Ascetics will avoid packed schedules and devotional rooms full of figurines.

If you're an ascetic, you may want to create a prayer room with bare, white walls and simple furniture. You'll likely prefer the quiet, so you'll need to find a place where noise won't be a problem. A silent digital clock—or no clock at all—might be preferable to a clock with a moving hand that clicks each time the second hand moves. (If you don't understand the importance of this seemingly small detail—a quiet clock, for instance—you're not an ascetic; if you're smiling and saying, “Yes, of course,” you may be!)

It's difficult for some Christians to understand, but the mere act of walking into such a barren and quiet room can call ascetics to worship, just as an ornate cathedral and the smell of incense can call sensate Christians to worship.

Enduring Hardship

Serious training presupposes hardship. In a desire to draw near to God and take on God's character, ascetics embrace hardship rather than fight it.

An early Christian writer working under the pseudonym of Athanasius told of a (possibly fictional) account of a woman named Syncletica, whose story challenged many early Christians to endure hardship. This woman underwent severe physical pain, yet modeled great maturity to all those around her. Syncletica taught that we have an infantile and unpracticed soul. When sickness comes, the hardship we must endure can actually serve to strengthen us. “For just as the fetuses inside their mother, perfected from diminished food and life, and because of this are brought to a greater security; likewise the righteous withdraw from the ways of the world for the higher journey.”¹⁸

Early ascetics adopted practices like sleeping on the ground and exposing themselves to adverse weather conditions. Just like an Olympian runner might seek out the higher altitude of Denver,

ASCETICS

Colorado, so the ascetic might seek out harsher environments for his or her spiritual training.

In my own life, I have found that the demand to be warm when it is cold, and cool when it is hot, reveals an infantile spiritual weakness. We want to be pampered. Years ago, when I worked in the fields as a boy harvesting rhubarb in the Pacific Northwest, I remember a Latin American field hand reproving the American suburban kids he supervised: “In the morning you complain because the leaves are wet and make you cold; in the afternoon you complain because you’re thirsty and it’s too hot. How will you ever get any work done?”

When sickness, heat, cold, hunger, or tiredness come—and they will—we can either adopt a demanding spirit and stunt our spiritual growth, or we can embrace them, learn from them, and mature in our faith. Our attitude will make all the difference.

The Temptations of Ascetics

There are many benefits gained from incorporating ascetic elements into our faith expressions, but there are dangers as well. Ascetic Christians must be especially aware of three of them.

Overemphasizing Personal Piety

In the book of Zechariah, the people asked God if they should weep and fast as they had done for so many years. The Lord spoke through Zechariah, “Ask all the people of the land and the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned . . . , was it really for me that you fasted?’” (Zechariah 7:5). Instead of outward displays of piety, God calls Israel to “administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor” (verses 9–10).

SACRED PATHWAYS

The desire to seek solitude presents some problems, since a full expression of Christianity requires an outward focus. Remember the limited role of the Nazirite—the vow was often taken with a definite end in sight. Jesus spent lengthy periods of prayer in solitude, but these were followed by public times of ministry. Jesus urged his disciples to follow this same pattern—ministry followed by withdrawal and rest (Mark 6:30–32). John the Baptist adopted the role of an ascetic, but this was also in preparation for a public ministry.

Our need for spiritual refreshment, then, must be balanced with our obligation to reach out to others.

Seeking Pain for Its Own Sake

Masochism is a sickness, not a spiritual path. Many of us are used to being pampered; we refuse even small discomfort and demand immediate relief. Others, through a distorted view of themselves or a diseased psyche, seek pain for its own sake. This is not the lesson of the ancient ascetics, nor is it a proper expression for modern ones.

Healthy ascetics make it clear that asceticism is a means to an end. Whenever it becomes an end in itself, it is a gross distortion of a time-tested and treasured Christian practice.

Seeking to Gain God's Favor

The “heroic” measures of faith practiced by the ascetic can become an attempt to gain God's favor. It is futile to try to win God's approval or forgiveness by developing an extraordinary holiness. We are so steeped in sin—attitudinal sins, such as pride, as well as physical lusts of the flesh—that “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6).

We walk, live, and worship by faith in the completed work of Jesus Christ. Ascetics need to remember that fasting, sleeping on

ASCETICS

the ground, or adopting a simple lifestyle doesn't make God love us more. His love is absolute, and his forgiveness is based on a prior work completed by Jesus Christ, not on the spiritual experiences that we participate in today.

An Invitation

Ascetics have an important lesson for the church and society. Seeking God entails some sort of separation from the world, even if that separation is expressed solely by inner detachment. The care-free life lifted up by celebrity magazines often results in a poverty of spirit (just as forced poverty often results in a bitter spirit).

Ascetics testify to a higher life, a life of the spirit. This life is a high and holy invitation for those willing to take the road less traveled. A walk in the woods, intellectual challenge, enthusiastic celebration, active work for justice—all these have moved my spirit to some degree. But I've found that if the ascetic element of faith is completely lacking in my life, a spiritual bloatedness seeps in. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German martyr and theologian, wrote that if we do not have some element of the ascetic in us, we will find it hard to follow Jesus.¹⁹

Ascetic practices keep us on the right track. They help us to move farther down the trail, regardless of what our main temperament may be.

CHAPTER 7

ACTIVISTS

Loving God through Confrontation

ARE YOU AN ACTIVIST?

Score the following statements on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 being not true at all and 5 being very true. Record your answer in the space provided.

Are you an activist?

- _____ 1. I feel closest to God when I am cooperating with him in standing up for his justice: writing letters to government officials and newspaper editors, picketing at a place of injustice, urging people to vote, or becoming informed about current issues.
- _____ 2. I get very frustrated if I see apathetic Christians who don't become active. I want to drop everything else I'm doing and help the church overcome its apathy.
- _____ 3. The terms *courageous confrontation* and *social activism* are very appealing to me.
- _____ 4. Activities such as confronting a social evil, attending a meeting of the local school board to challenge the new curriculum, and volunteering on a political campaign are important to me.

ACTIVISTS

- _____ 5. Again, on a scale of 0 to 5, how much does the statement describing the heart's cry of the activist resonate with you in comparison with the others?
- Naturalist: let me be outdoors.
 - Sensate: let me experience.
 - Traditionalist: let me remember.
 - Ascetic: let me be alone.
 - **Activist: let me conquer.**
 - Caregiver: let me care.
 - Enthusiast: let me celebrate.
 - Contemplative: let me feel.
 - Intellectual: let me think.
- _____ 6. I would rather stand in the rain for an hour to confront an evil than sit in a room by myself for an hour and pray, take a walk through the woods, or spend an hour reading a book.

Total of all your answers: _____

Any score of 15 or higher indicates a preference for this spiritual temperament. Please take a moment to register this score in chapter 12 on page 233 so you will have a composite picture of your soul's path to God.

Rob and I had spent the better part of the last hour in intense prayer. I don't know when I had felt closer to him. We had played on the Puyallup city champion Little League baseball team. In high school, we graduated to the grueling cross-country runs—Rob having the advantage, I remember, of never needing to duck under low-lying branches. The respect, and even fear, for the impending pain before such races binds boys together like war binds men.

SACRED PATHWAYS

But now, in college, we were facing a new challenge. I don't know that either of us had ever been more nervous. Both Rob and I looked out over Red Square, shifting our weight from side to side; then, instinctively, we both knelt down to retie our shoes. Looking at each other, we laughed. Retying shoes is a natural habit for runners, but it was a classic case of symbolic nervous confusion for what we were about to do.

Rob laughed it off. "We don't want our shoes to fall off while we're preaching," he said.

The square started to fill with college students, and we walked up to the fountain like two lightweights facing a boxing ring housing Muhammad Ali. We had done this before, but open-air preaching is never easy, especially to your collegiate peers.

Open-air preaching was my first introduction to the confrontational world of the activist. Emulated by many, yet scorned by an equal number, the activist is actually in good company, biblically speaking. Persons of this temperament can join such luminaries as Elijah and Moses, who showed evidence of profound and courageous activism. From them and others we can learn both the blessings and pitfalls of loving God by standing up for righteousness in hostile places.

Biblical Lessons of Activists

Activists burst onto the history of faith in Scripture in both glory and infamy. It seems that few groups of believers can be so right at some times and so wrong at other times. When I think of Moses, Elijah, Habakkuk, and Peter, I think of men who have challenged me with their courage and leadership yet encouraged me through their weaknesses. Let's look at a few of these individuals to get a feel for the activist mentality.

ACTIVISTS

Moses

Moses began his career as an activist (albeit a misguided one!) when he killed an Egyptian in defense of a fellow Israelite (Exodus 2:11–12). His strategy was all wrong, but he would need all this courage, and then some, in the years ahead. I've met few activists who don't cringe, as Moses must have, when they look back at their early days of faith. It can take some time for the enthusiasm generated by the activist mentality to be tempered and seasoned by maturity and foresight.

Shortly thereafter, Moses the activist rescued some young women who were being pushed by unruly shepherds (Exodus 2:17). Whenever we see the young Moses, he is embroiled in confrontation. In this case, the conflict led him to his future wife.

Then there is Moses's classic confrontation with Pharaoh. Moses didn't have the benefit of being told beforehand that there would be ten plagues. All he knew was that God told him to tell Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" and that when he obeyed, the situation actually grew *worse*. Pharaoh put a greater burden on the Israelites, and overnight Moses became the most hated man in Israel (Exodus 5:1, 20–21).

God sent Moses back again—and again, apart from a few snake tricks, nothing happened. It was at this point that the ten plagues *started* (Exodus 7:8–18). I think most of us would quit around the third or fourth plague. I can just hear myself: "God, give me a break! I've done what you told me to do—five times now. Pharaoh hasn't set Israel free, so forget it; I'm done. Send somebody else."

When God first gave Moses his commission, Moses did display a little reluctance: "Who am I that I should . . . bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" God's response was an implicit rebuke against such self-sufficiency. He said simply, "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:11–12). In other words, it doesn't matter who you are, Moses; what matters is who is sending you.

SACRED PATHWAYS

After great perseverance, Moses finally saw Israel gain freedom. It wasn't long, however, before he adopted the "I'm the only one who can do it" complex and began wearing himself out on good causes (Exodus 18:14). Fortunately, Moses also had a teachable heart. By listening to his father-in-law, he avoided the nervous exhaustion so common among activists. Still, his attitude reveals the danger of the activist mindset—"me and God against the world." At one point, Moses asked in desperation, "What am I to do with these people?" (Exodus 17:4). Exasperation and fatigue are particular temptations for activist Christians.

Elijah and Elisha

Elijah's confrontations with the rulers of Israel rival Moses's confrontations with Pharaoh. Elijah displayed great courage in his confrontation with Ahab and the prophets of Baal, but his demeanor also reveals pride. Elijah thought he was the only true prophet left, and the only one who demonstrated true zeal (1 Kings 18:22; 19:10). However, God assured Elijah that seven thousand others were still true to the faith (1 Kings 19:18).

Elijah reveals classic activist symptoms (the negative kind) in his feelings of isolation and exhaustion (1 Kings 19:4). Activism is one temperament that can spiritually feed many Christians but can also exhaust them.

Elisha, Elijah's replacement, was also an activist, and he showed great maturity in his confrontation with Hazeal, who would eventually become king of Israel. Elisha saw the harm that Hazeal would do and wept over it, but he didn't become consumed with it (2 Kings 8:11–13). Most Christians have to learn that whenever God calls us to an activist posture, we must leave the results to him or we will be consumed and driven by immediate results rather than by the Holy Spirit. I've seen a number of activists who just can't accept defeat. When their political or

ACTIVISTS

social campaigns fail, their faith is rocked. Elisha would be a good role model for such people to emulate, in part to keep them from responding like Habakkuk did.

Habakkuk

Habakkuk is a good biblical warning to activists, one that I've taken to heart many times. I've heard too many prayers offered by activists in which God is accused more than he is petitioned, as if the activist is more concerned about justice than is God himself. Habakkuk cried out,

How long, LORD, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save? . . .
Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.

HABAKKUK 1:2, 4

God's response to this accusation is instructive. He says that he is working behind the scenes. Justice is coming even though Habakkuk couldn't see it. Activists need to learn the message of the book of Habakkuk: live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4). Life situations and circumstances can tempt us to question God's sovereignty and goodness, but we see with a finite eye. God is not blind to injustice, nor is he indifferent.

The activist must be careful that intercession doesn't become accusation. Because there is so much apathy in our world and even in the church, it is easy for an activist to feel isolated and alone. We see the injustice; we see wickedness passed off as good. Our hearts

burn within us, yet when we look around, the church seems to be sleeping. This can create an isolation that, if not kept in perspective, can eventually be broadened to attribute “apathy” to God. Not only will the church not respond, the activist thinks, but even God is silent! When we think our concern for righteousness exceeds God’s, we have slipped into the delusion of being self-appointed messiahs. “[The proud person] is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness” (Habakkuk 2:4).

Confrontation and Activists

A number of years ago, I heard of a local Christian activist who was circulating all the “ungodly” details of a popular PG movie. He had counted and listed all the offensive words, the number of times the Lord’s name was taken in vain, and all the obscene gestures. As one of the leaders in a national network, I received his packet of information.

That guy should really get a life, I thought. Of all the things to attack.

I had lunch with him after that, and he hammered on the issue again. I tried to display no emotion as he told me, “I went to several pastors and asked them if they had seen that movie. Each one responded, ‘Sure, I took my kids.’”

This activist then asked if they walked out, to which the pastors replied, “No, of course not.”

“OK, could I have one minute during your worship service this week?” the man asked them.

“What for?” the pastors asked him.

“I want to read this list of words here out loud. It shouldn’t take more than a minute,” he replied, and each pastor immediately said, “There’s absolutely no way I’d let you do that!”

ACTIVISTS

The man's face grew grave as he looked me in the eyes and said, "I told them, 'How *dare* you take your kids to hear filth that you wouldn't want the members of your congregation to hear.'"

The activist went on to talk about Romans 12:9, which calls us to hate what is evil and cling to what is good.

"Do we really *hate* evil," he asked, "or are we content to just put up with it?"

I hadn't taken my children to see that movie, but I left that lunch convicted nevertheless. I sensed a growing coldness in my heart. Most of the time, I may resist evil, but do I really hate it?

The sad truth is, not always.

The lunch with that activist was anything but "pleasant." In fact, it was rather exhausting. But this man was responsible for ridding a large section of northern Virginia from certain types of pornography, and he's had a major role in energizing the church to reach out to prisoners and to take a more active role in opposing abortion, and I needed to hear what he had to say.

He told me that he and his wife don't get invited to dinner very often, and as I talked with him, I could see why. If he sees or hears about something that is wrong, he's going to address it, confront it, and force people to take a second look at it.

I wouldn't do everything the way this man does—I can't imagine going from church to church, talking to pastors about taking their kids to see a particular movie—but the same God who created bunnies and mosquitoes created contemplatives and activists. This man is fed by righteous confrontation. You can see it in his eyes. He's not going to run from a fight.

No, I wouldn't want everybody in the church to behave the way he does, but I certainly wouldn't want everyone in the church to behave the way I do either.

Activists, you see, are actually spiritually nourished through the battle, which is not such a bad thing. Jesus himself said, "My

SACRED PATHWAYS

food . . . is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work” (John 4:34). And like it or not, much of Jesus’ work involved intense confrontation with the religious authorities of his day.

Of course, the *way* we do God’s work will determine whether or not we are being fed. Many years ago, Francis Schaeffer wrote this in *The Mark of the Christian*:

There is only one kind of person who can fight the Lord’s battles in anywhere near a proper way, and that is the man who by nature is unbelligerent. A belligerent man tends to do it because he is belligerent; at least it looks that way. The world must observe that, when we must differ with each other as true Christians, we do it not because we love the smell of blood, the smell of the arena, the smell of the bullfight, but because we must for God’s sake.¹

Thus the example of Moses, the “reluctant activist,” is particularly appropriate. When activists live to see justice and righteousness worked out so that it is visibly evident in the church and in society, and they do this as a way of loving God, the confrontation will actually bring fulfillment, not exhaustion; thanksgiving, not anger; and often a deeper sense of intimacy with God rather than a deeper sense of self-righteousness.

I found this to be especially true in my open-air preaching days. Temptations abound on a college campus. Tight accountability groups can help, but nothing was more effective to banning the lure of temptation than knowing I’d be preaching the next morning.

It was like training for a big race. Having something to look forward to gave me a reason to forgo other activities. The fear involved in confrontation creates a certain dependence on God that isn’t normally there. You don’t just love him; you need him—desperately.

ACTIVISTS

Your primary fear is that he'll leave, and you'll be left to face the challenge on your own.

Facing this fear and stepping out in faith, finding God to be faithful as he steps in to carry you, can do wonders for your intimacy with God. You appreciate him more. I've found that facing a trial with God builds fellowship with him no less than does facing a trial with a fellow human being.

In defense of their work, activists frequently cite Jesus' cleansing of the temple. Jesus did more than heal, activists say; he also confronted. He was *holy*, which is something very different from *nice*. In *The Mark of the Christian*, Francis Schaeffer wrote, "So often people think that Christianity is only something soft, only a kind of goopy love that loves evil equally with good. This is not the biblical position. The holiness of God is to be exhibited simultaneously with love."²

It is this fear of confrontation that keeps many from becoming activists—the fear that as soon as you take a stand, you'll be shot at. I'll always remember the first time in college that a leader of a proabortion group wrote a particularly biting letter to the editor that included an attack on me. It wasn't easy. In junior high I was voted "most polite," and it took some time to realize that being perceived as a "nice guy" and being a faithful Christian don't always go hand in hand.

On another occasion during my days as a campus pastor, I met with the leader of a campus gay-rights group. This leader used to attend a Christian group. I asked him what the goals of his group were. He looked into my eyes and said with startling dispassion, "To undo everything you guys are trying to do."

I realized then that my desire to be liked and accepted had to be crucified. I never want to be patently offensive or stupidly obnoxious, but the fact is, some people have chosen to hate God and his kingdom. If I am going to identify myself with God and

SACRED PATHWAYS

his kingdom, I will be hated as well. We can't expect to faithfully serve God and be liked by his enemies.

My activism has resulted more from obedience than temperament; I don't consider myself an activist at heart, and I scored very low on this temperament in the test at the end of this chapter. I've been challenged to be proactive, however, by passages such as this one in Proverbs:

Rescue those being led away to death;
hold back those staggering toward slaughter.
If you say, "But we knew nothing about this,"
does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?
Does not he who guards your life know it?
Will he not repay everyone according to what they
have done?

PROVERBS 24:11–12

Other passages of Scripture that speak to the heart of the activist include Psalms 7, 68, and 140, as well as Ezekiel 33:1–20.

I have witnessed an irony in this temperament, however. While activism and even confrontation feed many Christians, they can also leave us depleted. Elijah is a classic case study. If activists notice a tendency toward isolation and accusation, they would do well to consider whether they have lost their balance and then make sure they find other ways to supplement their spiritual nourishment.

After Jesus' disciples confronted the powers of Satan, Jesus insisted they get some rest. Without rest, activists may adopt the self-defeating motivations of hatred and anger instead of love and compassion. Activists need to find the right balance—indeed, the balance modeled by Jesus, who regularly interspersed times of spiritual refreshment with intense ministry.

I've also found it helpful to try to turn my activism into spiritual

ACTIVISTS

intimacy. How? Thomas Merton provides a clue when he suggests that activists can actually enjoy a “masked” contemplation if we’re active for the right reasons. Some Christians have tried to drive a wedge between an activist and a contemplative calling. Certainly both temperaments display their differences, but Merton found that at least a certain synthesis could be reached.

There are many Christians who serve God with great purity of soul and perfect self-sacrifice in the active life. Their vocation does not allow them to find the solitude and silence and leisure in which to empty minds entirely of created things and to lose themselves in God alone. They are too busy serving him in his children on earth. At the same time, their minds and temperaments do not fit them for a purely contemplative life: they would know no peace without exterior activity . . .

Nevertheless they know how to find God by devoting themselves to him in self-sacrificing labors in which they are able to remain in his presence all day long . . . Although they are active laborers they are also *hidden contemplatives* because of their great purity of heart maintained in them by obedience, fraternal charity, self-sacrifice and perfect abandonment to God’s will in all that they do and suffer. They are much closer to God than they realize. They enjoy a kind of “masked” contemplation.³

Merton stresses, however, that there is a great difference between “hidden contemplatives” and those whose Christian life is mere piety and routine. The difference is that true Christian activists “live for God and for his love alone.”⁴ When our activism is oriented around the love of God, it is as acceptable to God as the contemplative’s prayer. If it is oriented around confrontation for its own sake, we may be feeding a sinfully divisive spirit rather than serving the unifying Holy Spirit.

Forms of Activism

Activism can take many forms. As a writer, I'm pleased to see that there is a strong tradition of Christian pamphleteering and publishing that confronts failures and lapses both inside and outside the church. The late Dr. Klaus Bockmuehl wrote a small but seminal piece in this regard titled *Books: God's Tools in the History of Salvation*.⁵ When Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he quipped, "So this is the woman who started the [civil] war." In the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens pled the case of the London orphaned while Tolstoy passionately portrayed the downtrodden. In the twentieth century, Richard Wright, in his novel *Black Boy*, opened many eyes to the difficulties of growing up as a minority in rural Mississippi, while C. S. Lewis wrote his popular Narnia series as "a sort of pre-baptism of the child's imagination."⁶ These and many other writers have changed the destinies of millions through the written word.

Another form of activism is working for social reform. John Wesley wrote that there is "no holiness but social holiness . . . [and] to turn [Christianity] into a solitary religion is to destroy it."⁷ Charles Finney refused to baptize Christians who supported slavery, while William Wilberforce fought slavery in his own country, England. The Christian church has often led the way in societal reform, today fighting the evils of abortion, racism, AIDS, poverty, sexual slavery, and child pornography, among others.

In the years during which I worked for a pro-life organization, one of the most difficult challenges I faced was helping other Christians adopt this sense of social responsibility. Too often we think that as long as we attend church regularly, give a tenth of our income, and keep from willingly living in sin, we've done our Christian duty. Yet the Bible is filled with calls for God's people to reach out to the less fortunate (Matthew 25:35–36; James 1:27; and others).

ACTIVISTS

There is a tension in this, however. Good Christian minds disagree on many issues—government use of welfare to help the poor, and capital punishment, to give just two examples. While we may find Christian brothers and sisters advocating an opposing position, as Christians and as citizens we have a responsibility to be fully informed, prayerfully decisive, and fully involved.

Activism can also call us not only to work for social reform but also to actively confront error and evil. Franky Schaeffer, echoing the teachings of his father, the late Francis Schaeffer, wrote that sometimes “truth equals confrontation.”⁸ He warns that we must therefore be willing to challenge and answer the enemies of the truth. This is by nature a confrontational work: “Those who wish to join in the ecumenism of orthodoxy cannot be a silent majority. We must be an aggressive, feisty, dig-in-your-heels, kick-and-scream bunch; we must work twice as hard because there are fewer of us.”⁹

Writers, preachers, politicians, academics, artists, and homemakers can all be activists, faithful in their own sphere to stand up for the truth. Schaeffer argues that Christians should be open to new ideas but actively mold events in the arena of education, ideology, the electoral process, the national agenda, protest, the media, waywardness in the church, and strengthening the family—beginning with our own.¹⁰ In so doing, Christian activism can move beyond protest to provide a positive alternative. Instead of just writing letters to Congress, Christians can run for Congress. Instead of merely protesting immorality in entertainment, Christians can become part of the entertainment industry.

On a more individual basis, I’ve witnessed that activists, by temperament, have an acute need for “spiritual risk-taking.” While the rest of us prefer to play it safe, activists often exhibit an almost insatiable need to see God break through in mighty ways. These are the men and women who found nonprofit organizations on a hundred dollars and a prayer, who eagerly begin national campaigns

SACRED PATHWAYS

against systemic evil, and who achieve what others said could never be done.

Activists will never be satisfied playing it safe. They need to experience the exhilaration of seeing a miraculous God come through in miraculous ways. In this sense, the activist bears some resemblance to the enthusiast.

Prayer and Activists

If ever there was a group I would want to see plugged into prayer, it would be the activists. Fortunately, many of the activists I know regularly participate in various forms of prayer.

Walking Prayer

Many activists may find that “walking prayer” is particularly helpful. The evangelist may intercede for a city block by walking around it as he prays silently; the intercessor may walk around a government building while she prays for justice. Some Christians will spread a map in front of them and pray for unreached people groups.

Processions

Jesus marches, in which large numbers of Christians gathered to march in celebration of Jesus, made a surprising comeback in the early 1990s. I say *comeback* because an ancestral practice can be found going back as far as the Baroque period (roughly 1550–1750). The marches of the 1990s were somewhat different, as they focused more on praise and celebration, whereas the earlier community marches tended to seek some spiritual favor and were frequently solemn affairs. They became so common that A. L. Mayer has called the Baroque period the Age of Processions.¹¹

ACTIVISTS

Intercession

Karl Barth urged Christians to pray with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Intercession can definitely be considered a form of Christian activism—and not just for political ends. I remember rising early once a week in college to attend missions prayer meetings. We didn't bring a newspaper with us, but we did carry materials prepared from various missions groups. Such meetings still take place in many churches.

Prayer should be an important part of the life of the activist. Work as prayer is important and valid, but coming away to pray is also important. Activists, by nature drawn to confront and face evil and injustice on a regular basis, need prayer to stay focused and unpolluted. Hatred for sin can become hatred for people if activists become tired and spiritually depleted. Before long, prayer-deficient activists begin to take apathy personally and can begin alienating most Christians around them. If you're an activist, do yourself and the church a favor: cultivate an active prayer life.

The Temptations of Activists

There are many benefits gained from incorporating activist elements into our faith expressions, but there are dangers as well. Activist Christians must be especially aware of five of them.

Becoming Judgmental

Activists might think that the holier they become, the more they will hate sin. This is true. Where activists often go wrong, however, is making the leap to assume that the holier they become, the less they should be able to tolerate sinners. This is clearly not true.

As a student of the Christian classics, I've found most spiritual writers agree that as we mature in our faith, we become more

eager to see sin leave our lives, yet more compassionate toward other sinners. Our love, as well as our holy hatred of sin, should grow. A self-righteous, critical attitude is not a reflection of the compassion of Jesus.

Ambition and Sex

I'm going out on a limb on this one, but from personal observation and from reading biographies, there seems to be a direct spiritual relationship between the level of a person's ambition and sexual temptation, especially in men. The stories of Christian men who have accomplished a great deal but fallen into sexual immorality are numerous.

At its root, ambition is often a fight against powerlessness and for control. The ambitious person is also inherently selfish. This search for control, unimpeded by thoughts of concern for another's welfare, certainly provides a fertile seedbed for sexual lust, which may find a particularly comfortable home in an ambitious soul.

I was speaking to a group of Christian activists a while back, and I sobered them with the words, "The very qualities that help you succeed as an activist may tempt you to fail as a Christian."

Ambitious men and women must allow others to hold them accountable. Ambition coupled with secrecy is a fertile ground for sexual sin. Throw in fatigue, and you're almost certain to embarrass yourself and the ministry God has given you. The activist may face more temptation in this regard than many of the other temperaments would.

Elitism and Resentment

Because the activist is fed by confrontation, he or she may not understand why others fear it so much. Even the thought of a picket or face-to-face evangelism is debilitating to some while very exciting

ACTIVISTS

to others—with the result that activists can be tempted to form an elitist attitude.

A good warning is found in 1 Samuel 30. During one of David's battles, many of the soldiers grew tired during their pursuit of a group of marauders, so David left them to watch the supplies while he and the others went off to complete the task. Among the men who continued the chase and returned victorious, an elitist attitude arose: "Because they did not go out with us, we will not share with them the plunder we recovered," they said (1 Samuel 30:22).

David stepped in. "No, my brothers, you must not do that with what the LORD has given us. He has protected us and delivered into our hands the raiding party that came against us" (verse 23). Notice what David is saying. Paraphrased, it's this: "You're forgetting something, men. God, not our own strength, gave us this victory, so everyone is going to share."

David "made this a statute and ordinance" (verse 25): the one who fights and the one who guards the supplies will receive the same reward. This mirrors the apostle Paul's numerous statements about respecting different spiritual gifts and callings.

Preoccupation with Activity and Statistics

When a young child is frustrated with a toy that is stuck in something or a knot that won't come undone, she may respond by just trying harder, often making the situation worse. Sincerity and effort are two strong legs, but two legs are not enough to stabilize a stool. Christian activists need sincerity, effort, *and* thoughtful prayer.

A minister who had misgivings about the Prohibition movement remarked that "the churches in the long run would get further if their activities were marked by less commotion and more insight."¹² It is hard to disagree with this. Jesus is the perfect model

SACRED PATHWAYS

of a man who worked hard during the day and prayed hard during the morning and night; Peter is the model of a man who acted quickly (cutting off a soldier's ear, for instance) and had much to repent for.

Lack of Emphasis on Personal Sanctity

Jesus taught that we are to remove the plank from our own eye before we reach for the speck in our neighbor's eye (Matthew 7:5). Societal reform begins with the individual who is seeking to reform society. Social action can never be a substitute for personal sanctity. In fact, social action without personal sanctity can do as much harm as good. It greatly discredits the cause if we are found to be a hypocrite.

A High Calling

Although I don't consider myself an activist at heart, I have a great deal of respect for the role of activists in the church and the world. A strong ego is often necessary because the activist is frequently ostracized from the rest of the community. Most Christians I know would absolutely wilt if a newspaper article publicly belittled them. The activist just seems to smile, get a kick out of the photo, and move on.

There is a temptation to become prideful, and at that point it needs to be dealt with, but I'm often reminded that our God is in the business of using imperfect people—and even of transforming character flaws into useful tools and strengths.

The church has frequently had an uneasy relationship with activists and prophets. We fondly remember those who have died but often loathe those who are still living. This should lead the activist to love God all the more, because God may frequently be

ACTIVISTS

his or her only friend! Being an activist is a high calling, but it needs to be done with the right motivation. Calling activism a “sacred pathway” should help. We’re active because that’s the best way for us to express our love for God. Armed with this attitude, a successful ministry (rather than a personal monument) will soon follow.

CHAPTER 8

CAREGIVERS

Loving God by Loving Others

ARE YOU A CAREGIVER?

Score the following statements on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 being not true at all and 5 being very true. Record your answer in the space provided.

Are you a caregiver?

- _____ 1. I feel closest to God when I see him in the needy, the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned. I feel God's presence most strongly when I am sitting quietly by the bed of someone who is lonely or ill or when I am taking a meal to someone in need. You can count on me to offer a ride or to volunteer for helping activities.
- _____ 2. I grow weary of Christians who spend their time singing songs while a sick neighbor goes without a hot meal or a family in need doesn't get help fixing their car.
- _____ 3. The words *service* and *compassion* are very appealing to me.
- _____ 4. I sense God's power when I am counseling a friend

CAREGIVERS

who has lost a job, preparing meals for or fixing the car of a family in need, or spending a week at an orphanage in Mexico.

- _____ 5. Again, on a scale of 0 to 5, how much does the statement describing the heart's cry of the caregiver resonate with you in comparison with the others?
- Naturalist: let me be outdoors.
 - Sensate: let me experience.
 - Traditionalist: let me remember.
 - Ascetic: let me be alone.
 - Activist: let me conquer.
 - **Caregiver: let me care.**
 - Enthusiast: let me celebrate.
 - Contemplative: let me feel.
 - Intellectual: let me think.
- _____ 6. I would rather nurse someone to health or help someone repair their house than teach an adult Sunday school class, go on a prayer and fasting retreat, or take a lonely walk in the woods.

Total of all your answers: _____

Any score of 15 or higher indicates a preference for this spiritual temperament. Please take a moment to register this score in chapter 12 on page 233 so you will have a composite picture of your soul's path to God.

“Gary, I need some help.”

I winced. I knew what was coming, but I didn't want to hear it. Gordy moved his wheelchair a little closer and whispered, “I had a little accident.”

SACRED PATHWAYS

“Sure, no problem, Gord,” I answered. “Let’s go take care of it.”

Gordy and I attended the same university, and he was in the advanced stages of muscular dystrophy. He was just two years away from dying of pneumonia, which frequently takes the lives of those suffering from MD. As Gordy’s condition worsened, his need for extra help increased. I had seen another Christian taking care of him just a week before during a bout of diarrhea and remembered thinking to myself, “I could never do that!” I was about to find out differently.

In spite of my unfamiliarity with the situation, we were actually able to enjoy ourselves through the whole experience. Since I had been duly “initiated,” I also became someone Gordy could, and did, frequently call on when his paid person wasn’t available.

I remember the silliest things. Once I took his shirt off and was folding it when I heard this very patient but very urgent, “Gary!” I turned and caught Gordy before he fell all the way back. Gordy laughed, and I laughed, and when I pulled his shirt over his head the next time, I remembered to prop him up with my knees.

I remember his feet the most. Gordy had been unable to walk for ten years by the time I met him, and he wore slippers instead of shoes. As a marathoner, I’ve seen my share of battered feet: black toenails, calluses, toenails that have fallen off—all those things you would expect from slapping your feet against pavement for 26.2 miles—but never had I seen a foot that had atrophied. Gordy was silent. He knew I would see everything, but he said nothing.

As I was putting his socks on him one day, I realized that Gordy was the holy one in all our efforts. He was serving me and, in some very practical ways, sacrificing the privacy of his body to do so. I was so disabled inside, afraid to let people see my faults and struggles, which were disabilities that, in some respect, could be hidden. Gordy’s outward disability became, in a real sense, my inward cure. His willingness to let another see his weakness revealed an inspiring inner strength.

CAREGIVERS

One Saturday morning, I awoke early and made my way to the men's bathroom. As is not uncommon in a college dorm, someone had had too much to drink the night before and hadn't been able to make it to the toilet. The one handicapped stall was covered with vomit—the mess was on the floor, the toilet seat, everywhere.

Normally, I would have shaken my head in disgust and moved on, but an inner prompting wouldn't let me do it. Gordy wouldn't be able to just move on. The cleaning person wouldn't be in until Monday, and this was the only bathroom Gordy could use. I had helped Gordy many times before when he had seen me, but this was a time when he needed me but wouldn't know it and wouldn't see it.

I shuffled back to the sink, ran water over several sheets of paper towels, and went to work. A dorm mate trudged in, saw me on my hands and knees, and exclaimed, "Dude! Cleaning up somebody else's chunks? What's the matter with you? Have you lost your mind?"

Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes later, the cleanup had been accomplished. Gordy never knew. His weekend went on as usual, the sound of his chair whizzing down the hallway continued unabated, but I was changed. Gordy's life had touched me again. Something moved inside me, and I realized, not in an idealized way, but with full understanding, why ancient monks often considered people with disabilities to be especially holy. The lessons they can teach us are profound.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta looked behind the eyes of the poor, the sick, and the needy and said she saw the image of God. She learned to love God by loving others. Such a statement may put the "codependency police" on red alert, but, psychological maladies aside, many people have found that one of the most profound ways we can love God is to love others. For caregivers, giving care isn't a chore but a form of worship. I've heard that Mother Teresa asked all

prospective oblates, “Does your work give you joy?” If the answer was no, they didn’t make it in.

Martyrs need not apply.

Biblical Examples of Caregivers

Caregivers can look to two people in particular as they seek to understand their calling and temperament: Mordecai and Jesus.

Mordecai

The portrait painted of Mordecai in the book of Esther is that of a man who deeply and profoundly cares about others and freely pours out his energy to help them. The first picture we have of Mordecai is in Esther 2:7, where we learn that he raised Esther after she was orphaned: “Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.”

Mordecai’s effort on Esther’s behalf was tremendous. Even after she was taken into the king’s palace, he remained intimately involved and concerned over her welfare. “Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her” (Esther 2:11).

A less concerned man might simply have washed his hands of her. After all, he had done his duty by taking her in, but now she was gone, so couldn’t he just forget about her and go about the rest of his business? A lesser man, maybe, but not Mordecai.

The second picture we have of Mordecai occurs later in Esther 2. Here Mordecai is looking after the king. He overhears two of the king’s servants plot to harm the king. Mordecai reports what he has heard and saves the king from harm. In just two chapters, Mordecai has provided for an orphan and protected a king.

Mordecai was not a people pleaser, however, and this removes

CAREGIVERS

our suspicions of codependency. We learn in chapter 3 that he incurred the wrath of Haman because he refused to bow down in Haman's presence. Mordecai served others when it was clearly an expression of serving God. When serving God and serving others came in conflict, Mordecai pleased God.

Not only did Mordecai care for an orphan and for the king; he also cared for an entire race—the Jewish people. When Haman retaliated against Mordecai by obtaining permission to wipe out the Jews, Mordecai “tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly” (Esther 4:1).

By undergoing such humiliation and discomfort, Mordecai was able to communicate the urgency of Israel's danger to Esther, who dispatched a servant to find out what was going on. When Esther balked at the only route of escape, Mordecai stood firm. “Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape . . . And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:13–14).

It has always amazed me how true caregivers—shepherds—can become lions if need be to carry out their mission. Though a caregiver, Mordecai was obviously not a weak man. He could be forceful, even with those he loved deeply, when circumstances required that he be firm.

It's worth noting that if Mordecai had refused to care for the orphaned Esther, all Israel might have been lost, for Mordecai would have had no way to reach the king. His earlier act of care provided the opportunity for a later act of care, one carried out on a far broader scale.

Through Mordecai's insistence, God's providence provided a way for Israel to defend itself. Again Mordecai was the primary caregiver here, carefully writing out instructions to his fellow Israelites, which were sent to all the surrounding provinces so that the Israelites would know how to defend themselves (Esther 8:8–13).

SACRED PATHWAYS

Once Israel was victorious, Mordecai's caregiving continued. He established a yearly festival to celebrate God's protection and intervention. He could easily have established a monument to his own faithfulness, but instead he decreed that the Israelites celebrate by sending presents to one another and by giving gifts to the poor. Rather than thinking of himself, Mordecai invented new ways to care for those in need (Esther 9:20–22).

At all points, Mordecai was looking after others—first an orphan, then a king, then a nation, then the poor. His epitaph, the last verse in Esther, is fitting: “Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews” (Esther 10:3).

Who could hope for a nobler remembrance?

Jesus

Because he was the only truly whole man who ever lived, Jesus displayed all the spiritual temperaments described in this book. We as fragmented, broken people lack the depth and breadth revealed in the life of Jesus—a life that shines in the area of being a consummate caregiver. Jesus cared for the sick, the demon-possessed, and the lost; he urged his followers to give to the poor and had great compassion on the multitudes (Matthew 4:23–24; 6:2; 9:35–36).

While many people assume that “religion” and caring for others go hand in hand, it is only because of Jesus that this is so. He is the one among religious leaders known for associating love for God with love for others—particularly the downtrodden. Islam was founded in warfare and has a confrontational edge to its message (though, admittedly, one of the “five obligations” is to give one-fortieth—2.5 percent—of your income to the poor); the morality of Buddhism is based on refraining from evil, not on alleviating

CAREGIVERS

the suffering of others (since suffering, in Buddhist thought, is an illusion anyway); and Hindus are concerned with avoiding negative karma and thereby escaping from the wheel of life, death, and rebirth.

Entwining love for God with love for others and adopting a “positive” morality (“Do to others what you would have them do to you” [Matthew 7:12]) rather than a negative one (“Don’t do to others what you don’t want them to do to you”) was a radical message in Jesus’ day—an expansion of Old Testament, Jewish-based calls for social mercy. The spread of Jesus’ message is the main reason that people today assume religion and caring should be intricately interwoven.

One picture in particular reveals the caregiving heart of Jesus. When he heard that John the Baptist had been beheaded, Jesus knew that his earthly ministry had taken a serious turn toward Calvary. A torturous death was now in his near future. And before that ordeal, he had to make sure that a group of unruly disciples were trained to carry on his message once he was gone. If ever a man deserved solitude, it was Jesus. If ever there was a time to set legitimate limits—to pray and to process all that was happening—this was it.

The needy and insatiable crowds followed, however. Imagine an ice cream vendor walking into a group of hungry kids clawing and grabbing at his clothes. That’s what it must have felt like for Jesus to look out and see that the crowds still wanted more. Yet when Jesus saw them, “he had compassion on them and healed their sick” (Matthew 14:14).

Amazingly, Jesus’ ministry continued for several hours. Jesus, still tired, still deep in thought about the seriousness of the day’s events, continued to give, to heal, and to teach. The crowds were there long enough to grow hungry—providing a great excuse, the disciples thought, to get rid of the people. Remember, Jesus wasn’t

SACRED PATHWAYS

the only one who was tired; his disciples must have been tired too. There was likely more than a little self-interest in their voices when they said, “Come on, Jesus, the people are hungry. Isn’t it time to send them away?” (Matthew 14:15, paraphrased).

Hypocritical compassion. The disciples wanted peace, rest, and quiet for themselves but pretended to care about the crowds. Jesus, full of the caregiver’s heart, looked at them and said, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat” (verse 16).

I can see the furrowed brows. I can imagine the disciples’ calculations: “If we have to feed this mob of people, we’re talking days of gathering and preparation, days before we can rest! Days before we can eat in peace! Surely he can’t mean that!” So they pull out the trump card.

“We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish” (verse 17). Enough for the disciples, maybe, but certainly not for thousands of people.

Jesus was undoubtedly hungry himself. Clothed in human flesh, he was subject to aches and pains, hunger pangs, and physical exhaustion. Producing great miracles must have been very tiring, certainly much more taxing than merely snapping his fingers and watching everything move. Still, Jesus exerted himself once more, performed yet another miracle—this one on the edge of exhaustion—and fed the people, again sacrificing his own need for rest and refreshment before sending them away.

That Jesus needed time alone is emphasized by his movements once the crowd was fed. Matthew tells us, “Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray” (verses 22–23).

Jesus placed his own needs underneath the needs of others. He had a more important mission to accomplish than anyone who has ever lived, yet he still found time to care for the basic needs of a sick,

CAREGIVERS

hungry, and unruly crowd. This example challenges me today as well. It is so easy to ignore the needs of others around us because we have “more important things” to do, but Jesus defined these very needs as a central part of our mission. I don’t need to quote the entire parable of the good Samaritan for us to be reminded that tending to “spiritual concerns” is not an excuse for refusing to get our hands dirty.

Biblical Exhortations to Care for Others

The biblical challenges to love God by caring for others are legion. The story of the good Samaritan is probably one of the most popular parables in the entire New Testament (Luke 10:30–35). Its meaning is clear: Nobody is so important or so wise that they can excuse themselves from practical helps. Jesus emphasized compassion in so many of his teachings that it’s no surprise his followers also urge us to love God this way.

John tells us that “we know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other” (1 John 3:14). In fact, lack of love for others calls into question whether we love God at all: “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?” (1 John 3:17).

Paul joins John in urging Christians to look after others: “In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others” (Philippians 2:3–4). The writer of Hebrews equates loving others with loving God: “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them” (Hebrews 6:10). Later, this same writer reminds believers that in giving care to strangers, we may actually be entertaining angels (Hebrews 13:2).

SACRED PATHWAYS

James says that “pure and faultless” religion is “to look after orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27). Peter urges us to be hospitable and to use whatever gift God has given us to minister to one another (1 Peter 4:9–10).

The breadth of this teaching and the fact that it is repeated by so many writers of the New Testament leave us without any doubt as to the importance of loving God by loving those he has made. Though some people excel in this avenue of loving God, it should be a part of every Christian’s life.

One verse in particular has greatly challenged me. The afternoon that its truth gripped me is one I won’t soon forget. The city of Sodom is often alluded to in Christian circles as *the* wicked city, but what really was Sodom’s gravest sin? Listen to Ezekiel: “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy” (Ezekiel 16:49).

I definitely have plenty of pride in my life. On a worldwide scale, I am certainly “overfed.” I also have to own up to an attitude of “unconcern.” These three things being true, the only thing keeping me from the sin of Sodom, the biblical picture of wickedness at its basest form, is whether or not I am “helping the poor and needy.”

We like to define holiness by avoiding transgression, but in God’s book, the sin of omission (not doing what we should do) ranks right up there with the sin of commission (doing something we shouldn’t do).

Patterns of Caregiving

I have great admiration for those who have taken on the task of caring for others in need. I remember a campus ministry intern who lived in an apartment building that I managed when I was

CAREGIVERS

going to seminary. Two deeply troubled men moved in next door to him.

If it wasn't drugs, it was alcohol. Several nights a week, the intern would find one of his neighbors mumbling unintelligible words or passed out in the hallway. He'd pick him up, pack him into his car, and take him to the detoxification center. (If you've never transported an intoxicated person before, you may not be able to appreciate the risk of using your own car for this purpose.)

When the intern received a call to a ministry out of state, he told the good news to his neighbors. "Hey," they said, "who's gonna take us to detox when we mess up?"

More recently, I heard the testimony of a remarkable couple who have taken a severely brain-damaged infant into their home. Gail Kelley and her husband told the story of Manuel (short for Emmanuel), a severely disabled foster son who came into this world as the result of an incestuous relationship and who was further damaged in utero by a poorly prescribed drug. One night, Gail was up late with Manuel as he suffered repeated seizures. Each seizure activity was destroying more brain cells, and Gail's tears wet Manuel's black hair as she realized Manuel didn't have very many brain cells left to lose.

A three-minute seizure at 3:30 a.m. began a horrifying ordeal. A two-and-a-half-minute seizure hit at 3:34. A frightfully long seizure, lasting a full five minutes, occurred at 3:44. A few minutes later, at 3:56, another three-minute seizure took hold.

Each time, exaggerated spastic movements took control over Manuel's arms. At first his legs were stiff and rigid, and then they also began to shake and quiver. Manuel's head flinched and jerked out of control. His left eye alternately closed and bounced in all directions, while his right eye rhythmically vibrated. At times, Manuel would choke, or saliva would drip from the left corner of his mouth. Then, as the seizure came to an end, Manuel's tongue

SACRED PATHWAYS

would gently quiver, drawing slightly backward, and the seizure would be like two giant arms that gently laid him to rest.

Two more seizures took hold, one at 4:00 a.m. and another at 4:20. Exhausted, frightened, and depleted, Gail began crying uncontrollably. She was afraid that Manuel would soon die in her arms, so she pleaded with God, “I haven’t had enough time with him. Please, God, don’t take him from me now.”

Gail “heard” what she believed to be God’s response. “Whatever you do for the least of my brothers, you do for me. God is with you. Emmanuel.”

“But how can we accomplish such a task?” Gail asked, the reality of what was ahead now becoming clear. “Can’t you see? I don’t know what I’m doing!”

“I will give you enough grace to meet each day’s needs.”

Gail felt weak, but she then sensed the Spirit of God slowly enveloping the entire room. Her eyes were still closed when she became aware of the presence of God in a way she had never known before. She was afraid to open her eyes. The presence of God seemed so intense that she wondered if Jesus would be visible in that very room. Was she ready for this?

With what felt like electricity pouring through her body, Gail slowly lifted her head and opened her eyes. “I fully expected to have the child Jesus in my arms instead of Manuel,” she said. God’s presence was so overpowering that she began looking around the room, trying to find the real presence of Jesus that was manifesting itself to her.

“My eyes stopped as I made the full circle,” she said. “I gazed at Manuel, and I knew.”

Gail relaxed and uttered a brief word of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. Within minutes, Manuel’s seizures were over, and Gail and Manuel were both fast asleep.

Gail and her husband are caring for a child that many people would say has no right to live. Manuel will never walk or talk.

CAREGIVERS

Though Gail displayed pictures to show that the three-and-a-half-year-old boy seems to recognize those around him, some doctors have disputed whether he can even know what's going on. But God knows, and Gail and her husband know, and Manuel is a conduit funneling a deeper sense of the presence of God into Gail's life.

We needn't limit our definition of caregiving to nursing sick people, however. The caregiver temperament incorporates many different avenues of loving God through serving others. Some might interpret giving care as quietly sitting by an elderly person's bed, others as working on a volunteer rescue unit or repairing a house. Activities to consider include:

- “adopting” a prisoner
- helping a friend through a personal crisis
- lending money
- helping someone battling substance abuse
- volunteering on a rescue squad
- helping an illiterate person learn to read
- donating time at a battered women's shelter
- counseling at a pregnancy care center
- working in a soup kitchen
- fixing someone's car
- repairing a house
- making recordings for the blind
- researching a cure for a disease
- helping someone reconfigure his or her computer system
- watching the children of some tired parents
- providing budgeting counseling for someone struggling to manage money

In his book *Conspiracy of Kindness*, Steve Sjogren suggests mixing service with evangelism.¹ Imagine the surprise of

SACRED PATHWAYS

neighbors when they see you providing cool drinks in rush-hour traffic; providing hot chocolate, coffee, and cookies on a university campus; giving away free popsicles or cups of Gatorade to joggers, cyclists, or families at the local park; raking leaves and mowing lawns in senior citizen communities; providing free kindling and firewood to the needy; and shoveling snow from sidewalks and driveways.

With the Spirit's inspiration impelling us, there is no limit to the number of opportunities available to those who seek to care for others. Whether we do this as a prelude to evangelism or as a service that demonstrates the love of Jesus to others, it is a powerful picture of the gospel in action.

Caregivers as Prophets

Caring for others is a prophetic activity. Self-centered creatures that we are, being concerned about others is an unnatural response and provides evidence of a supernatural touch by God. In a tangible way, then, the caregiver is a witness to God's existence by demonstrating his love through the giving of care.

According to the Bible, our natural human response is selfishness. The biblical evidence is plentiful: Lot taking the best piece of property (Genesis 13:5–12); Jacob plotting to get Esau's birthright (Genesis 25:29–34); James and John wanting to sit at Jesus' right hand and the other disciples responding in resentment (Mark 10:35–41); the priest and the Levite passing by the injured man as they traveled to Jericho (Luke 10:30–35).

We could add our own. I remember attending a meeting in high school of what was called "Key Club," which is a public service organization, and one of my friends commented, "Key Club is for people who have absolutely nothing to do with their time." *Why*

CAREGIVERS

should an active high school student care what happens in a nursing home? he was wondering.

Acts of selfishness can continue into marriage and career, as we just get too busy to care. I was greatly humbled one time when I was asked to speak at Swarthmore College for their “Why Jesus?” week of evangelism. When I got there, several students were meeting for prayer at 5:00 p.m. “Do you do this once a week?” I asked, quite impressed by their piety.

“No,” they said. “Every day.”

They don’t have a campus pastor who watches over them. The school is considered too small by the national ministries. Instead, student leaders ask local pastors and Christian workers to come and speak at their weekly meetings.

One young woman shared during prayer requests about an investigative Bible study she had led the night before. Two other students shared about a two-hour follow-up session and a book table they’d be sitting at on campus the next day.

As I began mentally adding up the hours that these leaderless students were dedicating to God’s work, I felt humbled and ashamed. In college, physically you are at your prime. You can play football all day without battling stiffness for a week afterward. You can go on lengthy hikes or to late-night movies without finding a babysitter. You can do all sorts of things, yet these students were dedicated to reaching the lost.

One young man was engaged to be married in the summer: “It’s 116 days away,” we were told.

“God,” one collegian prayed, “help him to find 116 ways to serve you instead of just waiting for the wedding.”

“Amen,” the engaged man prayed.

These collegians were evidence of a supernatural touch that had lifted them out of their natural and sinful selfishness.

Yet rather than confront our selfishness, some Christian

SACRED PATHWAYS

ministries may even try to exploit it. Instead of calling us to sacrifice out of love for Jesus Christ, one national relief agency ran an ad urging Christians to help them stop hunger because “It’ll make you feel good.” The message “You’ll feel good about it” was repeated several times throughout the ad. As Robert Wuthnow, a professor of sociology at Princeton University, has observed, it is hard to imagine Jesus saying, “Take up your cross and follow me; it’ll make you feel good.”²

Christians who demonstrate compassion because they are passionately in love with God will thus speak prophetically to a selfish culture—and, sometimes, a selfish church. Selfishness distorts true sacrifice, and sacrifice is at the heart of true care. Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, “Real love is always painful and hurts: then it is real and pure.”³ We have to pass through the pain of sacrifice before we experience the joy of obedience.

“Prophetic” caring, then, necessitates that we are caring out of love for God, that is, caring for others because we know God loves us so much. Wuthnow reports that academic studies suggest the religious beliefs most conducive to care and compassion are a “personal God one can feel close to and a belief system that affirms one’s personal worth.” He goes on to note that “to the extent that one can measure such things in empirical studies, the perception that one is receiving love from God does in fact seem to be associated with a greater willingness to care for others.”⁴

Thus caregiving becomes a *sacred* pathway.

The Temptations of Caregivers

There are many benefits gained from incorporating caregiver elements into our faith expressions, but there are dangers as well. Caregiver Christians must be especially aware of four of them.

CAREGIVERS

Judging

When we are spiritually fed by showing care to others, we need to remember the lesson of Martha. We may think contemplatives are “so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good” and prayer meetings are a waste of time if we’re not making sure the Smiths, with a sick mother, are getting regular hot meals, but Jesus told Martha in very direct terms that there is a place for sitting at his feet in adoration (Luke 10:41–42).

Caregiving is not a license to judge others who serve God in different ways. It is true that all Christians are called to care for others, but there are different ways this obligation can be fulfilled. It is not for us to judge the validity of someone else’s worship.

Serving Ourselves through Serving Others

Some people with low self-worth may feel the need to serve others to validate their existence. Caregiving as a *temperament* means we express our love to God by reaching out to others; it’s the picture of a heart overflowing with love and spilling out onto those around us. Caregiving as a *disease* is actually an act of taking; it’s an act of deception expressed in loving others so that they will love or need us in return.

One therapist said, “I really hate it when women get involved in volunteer organizations to take care of the great unwashed because they aren’t taking care of business in their own lives. We do terrible things to people who already have enough problems without wanting them to also meet our needs.”⁵

A Los Angeles priest gained national attention as “the minister of dollar handshakes.” His idea of helping the poor was to cruise the poor section of the city every Sunday afternoon and pass out dollar bills to the homeless. One social worker wryly observed that this stroll “does nothing for the people but does a lot for Father Chase.”⁶

Holding Narrow Definitions

Activists and caregivers may have more in common than you think. Many caregivers may, in fact, be led to become activists. Someone who cares for the poor in the inner city may eventually be led to get involved in reforming government structures that get in the way.

It may be tempting, however, for a caregiver to judge the motives of an activist; but both can work together—one to help solve the underlying problem, the other to give comfort until the problem is addressed. Beware of narrowly defining care and thus missing the distinction between long-term, problem-solving care and short-term, problem-relieving care. Both have their place in kingdom work.

Neglecting Those Closest to Us

In our zeal to love God by loving others, we must remember that God makes home the priority. Paul writes to Timothy, “Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8). If we are truly loving God and not just serving to satisfy our own needs, we will be content to care for those at home first. A young homemaker with small children can revolutionize her outlook if she sees that caring for her children is a major part of her worship. A young father must learn that changing the world begins with changing diapers in his own house.

The Call of Caregivers

It is one thing to say we believe; it’s another to show compassion to others, to inconvenience ourselves because we believe. While such care is incumbent on every believer, some Christians will have a

CAREGIVERS

particular gift and calling for this type of service. These acts of mercy are a practical way for them to show their love for God but also to grow in their love for God. Caregivers may hear God more clearly when they change an adult's diaper than when they sit quietly in prayer.

This is a high and holy calling. It won't be as visible as preaching to the crowds, but it is, I believe, particularly precious to our Father in heaven.

CHAPTER 9

ENTHUSIASTS

Loving God with Mystery and Celebration

ARE YOU AN ENTHUSIAST?

Score the following statements on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 being not true at all and 5 being very true. Record your answer in the space provided.

Are you an enthusiast?

- _____ 1. I feel closest to God when my heart is sent soaring and I feel like I want to burst, worship God all day long, and shout out his name. Celebrating God and his love is my favorite form of worship.
- _____ 2. I feel most energized when I take a spiritual risk on behalf of God or see God move in a supernatural way. Tradition and ritual put me to sleep; I serve a supernatural God and am excited to see him move in unexpected ways.
- _____ 3. The words *celebration* and *joy* are very appealing to me.
- _____ 4. I would enjoy attending a workshop on learning to worship through dance or a worship session with contemporary music. I expect that God is going to move in some unexpected ways.

ENTHUSIASTS

- _____ 5. Again, on a scale of 0 to 5, how much does the statement describing the heart's cry of the enthusiast resonate with you in comparison with the others?
- Naturalist: let me be outdoors.
 - Sensate: let me experience.
 - Traditionalist: let me remember.
 - Ascetic: let me be alone.
 - Activist: let me conquer.
 - Caregiver: let me care.
 - **Enthusiast: let me celebrate.**
 - Contemplative: let me feel.
 - Intellectual: let me think.
- _____ 6. I spend more money on music and worship downloads than on books.

Total of all your answers: _____

Any score of 15 or higher indicates a preference for this spiritual temperament. Please take a moment to register this score in chapter 12 on page 233 so you will have a composite picture of your soul's path to God.

There are worse places to die, I thought, looking up at the sun lighting the top of Crystal Mountain in Washington State. Some friends had offered to take me on what would be my first and last downhill skiing trip. I was old enough at the time to know that a body flying down a mountain past trees and boulders with two thin pieces of wood—neither of which has brakes—as your only contact with the ground, presented some dangers; possible loss of life was the one that loomed foremost in my mind.

SACRED PATHWAYS

After I piddled around for a while, doing my best to ignore the five-year-olds who swept past me on what looked like rulers, my friends decided that the best way for me to learn was to go to the top of the mountain. “If he can just get himself to the top,” they figured, “he’ll have to come down.”

I looked up Crystal Mountain and tried to decide which I preferred: slow and enduring humiliation in front of friends who would probably never forget my refusal, or a fairly quick death and dismemberment. I chose the latter.

The edge of the mountain looked like a snowy precipice leading to a frozen hell. I swallowed my fear and crammed a normally five-minute run into the next hour and a half. I told my friends that I wanted to make sure I didn’t run into anybody. They were more worried about my back than what was in front of me, however. “Just stay out of the middle of the run,” one warned.

“They’re going a bit faster there, aren’t they?” I said.

“Yeah, they’re moving.”

I could see that skiing had the potential to be an amazingly fun sport, but at that time I lacked the willingness to “let go” and send myself down the mountain. You can’t ski very well if you need to check your speed every five yards. To get down the mountain before dinner, you’ve got to tuck the poles under your arms, point your skis downhill, and go for it—or so I’m told.

Downhill skiers remind me of enthusiast Christians. I was almost tempted to title this chapter “Loving God with Gusto.” Enthusiasts enjoy a celebratory form of worship, as well as many of the more supernatural forms of faith. People with this spiritual temperament like to let go and experience God on the precipice of excitement and awe.

This makes the enthusiast one of the more controversial of the spiritual temperaments. An honest look at Scripture, however,

ENTHUSIASTS

clearly reveals people of faith whose experiences involved generous portions of mystery, celebration, and supernatural events.

I understand the fear that many people have. Supernatural experiences can all too easily degenerate into chaos. My response is not to deny this—it is all too true—but to suggest that this is precisely why the church must teach about legitimate and biblically ordained experiences of the supernatural. If the Christian church doesn't sanctify and oversee those practices taught and used by Jesus and the apostles, then we are tempting people to experience these types of things outside the church, where heresy is virtually certain. The best protection against New Age meditation, for instance, is biblically rooted Christian meditation. Some Christians may deny the heart's hunger for the transcendent, but they cannot quell this desire. We can either teach people the way that God ordains for us to come into his presence, or leave them to stumble into it on their own. If these are the two choices, then there is no question where I will end up—adopting the practices, but also the restraints, of the early apostles.

To begin to define the enthusiast temperament, I want to put two words into your mind—*mystery* and *celebration*. These two words help us to understand what feeds this type of Christian. We'll look at each element individually.

The Mystery of Faith

“Gary, how can I know God's will?”

“There are four ways we can discern God's will,” I began, but internally I was thinking, *Now where did that come from?* Thankfully, four points came to mind by the time I was done. I have spoken with dozens of teachers and counselors who have experienced the same thing.

SACRED PATHWAYS

“God,” I prayed on another occasion, “this doesn’t really square with what I think is the best way to discern your direction, but if you really do want me to begin this internship, I need to get these bills cleared up. Specifically, I need three hundred dollars by the end of the week.”

The next day, I received a phone call from a close friend. “Gary,” he said, “Jill and I have been praying. We think God wants us to give you a gift.” The gift was a check for three hundred dollars.

Probably all of us, on either the receiving or giving end, have experienced something similar to these two situations. On one occasion we may be using a gift God has given us and say something that sounds profound and then think, “Where in the world did that come from?” Or a prayer is miraculously answered in a way that makes coincidence seem impossible.

There is no getting around the fact that Christianity has its “mysterious” side. We worship and serve a supernatural God who manifests himself to us in supernatural ways. In this sense, every Christian will bear some marks of being an enthusiast. But enthusiasts *by temperament* are particularly fed by such experiences. Enthusiasts long to preserve the mystery of faith. They understand that there are certain things about God and Christianity that we simply can’t fully understand. When this understanding is rooted in anti-intellectualism, it becomes dangerous. When it is rooted in humility, in the understanding that God is spirit and we are flesh, that God is in control and we are not, it is a healthy response to a fantastic relationship between two unequals.

While traditionalists are comforted by the fact that the offering is passed every Sunday at precisely 10:34 a.m., the enthusiast is likely praying that God will show up in such a new, unique, and unexpected way that nobody will even *think* about the offering. Ritual may at times feel stagnating to an enthusiast; they want to

ENTHUSIASTS

see fresh evidence of God moving, speaking, directing, and interacting with the worshipers.

Accepting the mystery of faith has both its strengths and its dangers, for while there is much mystery and supernatural activity in Scripture, there are also strong warnings against improper manifestations of what is popularly called “spirituality.” Before we get into the blessings of mystery, then, let’s look at some of the warnings.

The Warnings

Many spiritual manifestations are expressly forbidden for the Christian. These include the list found in Deuteronomy 18:10–12: making children pass through fire, witchcraft, soothsaying, interpreting omens, sorcery, conjuring spells, acting as a medium or spiritist, and contacting the dead. Scripture is clear: “Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD.” The pagan nations relied on these things, but the people belonging to Yahweh were to rely on revelation from the prophet (verse 15), ultimately Jesus Christ (Acts 3:20–23).

A second warning can be inferred from knowing God as Creator. God gave us sound minds and solid, biblical revelation. These are in no sense inferior to “hearing God’s voice.” To suggest otherwise is to drive a wedge between God the Creator and God the Redeemer. We’ve probably all met Christians who had to “ask God” whether they should go out to eat or what street they should take to drive home:

“Want to go out for a burger?” we ask.

“Just a second,” he says, and turns around, bowing his head. After a few moments of silence, he responds, “Nope, can’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“God told me not to.”

SACRED PATHWAYS

Even more likely, we've met Christians (perhaps ourselves!) who have set up a "fleece"—à la Gideon—before taking a job or making a move. God's response to Gideon's fleece is clearly presented in Scripture as his making a concession rather than giving us a rule to practice (Judges 6:36–40). Still, for good or for bad, there seems to be something within us that needs more than mere reason to guide us.

How do we balance mystery and reason? King Saul's failure is a good lesson. Saul got himself in great trouble when he disobeyed clear revelation and offered a sacrifice on his own because he "felt compelled" to do so (1 Samuel 13:12). God, who gave us our minds, doesn't despise us for using them, but he does get angry when we neglect them. God certainly doesn't expect us to accept without question any compulsion that comes our way, especially if we have written revelation to the contrary.

The Blessings

Apart from the warnings of Scripture, there are many ways "mystery" has become a part of faith. Let's take a look at three in particular: the use of dreams, expectancy, and prayer.

Dreams

One of the ways that God has moved and continues to move in mystery is through dreams. In fact, most Christians can point to one or two very significant dreams in their own lives.

One night a number of years ago, near the end of a vacation on the West Coast, I awoke from a particularly vivid dream. I dreamed that my boss at that time had resigned, and I saw his successor, a thin man with light hair. When I awoke, I prayed fervently and thought about it off and on until I told my wife about it.

After I got back to work, I learned that on the same night of

ENTHUSIASTS

my dream, my boss had been asked to take on a different role in the organization and that a new president would be hired. He found this unacceptable and after much negotiation eventually resigned. His successor was appointed several weeks later—a thin man with light hair.

Why did I have this dream? It served at least two purposes. First, it allowed me to intercede for a man I cared about in a moment of great distress for him. Second, it prepared me for major changes that were about to come into my life. I had more time to prepare for the ramifications, even though I had no “worldly” way of knowing what was happening.

I have talked with many other Christians who have heard from God in their sleep. A dream may have provided clear direction, a new insight into an ongoing struggle, or an encouragement or a rebuke, and I have talked with many whose faith has been strengthened by such experiences.

That God speaks through dreams is well established in Scripture. God spoke to Jacob, Joseph, Solomon, and Daniel through dreams (Genesis 28:10–15; 37:1–11; 1 Kings 3:5–10; Daniel 7:1). Joel prophesied that when the Spirit of God would be poured out on believers, “your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions” (Joel 2:28).

The New Testament also contains accounts of God speaking to people through dreams, including Joseph and the Magi from the east (Matthew 1:20; 2:12). There are also several visions (which differ from dreams in that the person receiving them is awake) in the New Testament. Saul (Paul), Ananias, Cornelius, and Peter all received visions (Acts 9:3–8, 10–16; 10:3–6, 9–18; 16:9).

The idea of God speaking through a dream is consistent with the nature of God. He is always pursuing us, speaking to us even while we sleep, giving evidence of his infinite and unlimited nature as opposed to our finite and limited existence. God has much to say to us, but we are often too busy to listen. Our minds tend to get overly

SACRED PATHWAYS

occupied during the day, or sometimes we are too busy praying to God with our own agendas and have lost our listening ears. Dreams are one way in which God can “break in” and get something across to us that we might not be open to hearing during the day.

All of this must be put in context. I would never accept a dream that clashes with the revelation of Scripture. I would not make a major decision based solely on a dream. But I have found that God can bring insight into a situation or issue me a warning when I’m open to receiving something in a dream.

That God speaks through dreams is as strongly established in the history of the church as it is in Scripture. Augustine’s mother had a dream in which her unruly son was converted to the faith, and this dream gave her the inspiration she needed to keep praying until Augustine turned to faith in Christ. Such church luminaries as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and many others accepted, to varying degrees, the idea of God speaking through select dreams.¹

John Wesley wrote in his journal, “What I have to say touching visions or dreams, is this: I know several persons in whom this great change was wrought in a dream, or during a strong representation to the eye of their mind, of Christ either on the cross or in glory. This is the fact; let any judge of it as they please.”² Twenty years later, Wesley acknowledged the fear many have of dreams, and he conceded that Satan can mimic legitimate dreams. Still, he believed that dreams have a place:

The danger was, to regard extraordinary circumstances too much, such as outcries, convulsions, visions, trances; as if these were essential to the inward work . . . Perhaps the danger is, to regard them too little; to condemn them altogether; to imagine they

ENTHUSIASTS

had nothing of God in them, and were a hindrance to his work. Whereas the truth is, . . . to strengthen and encourage them that believed, and to make his work more apparent, [God] favored several of them with divine dreams, others with trances and visions.³

As soon as we seek dreams for their own sake, we have slipped from true Christianity to circus spirituality. On the other hand, it makes little sense to completely deny the usefulness of something just because it can be abused.

Let's look at some helps and safeguards related to our dreams.

The Importance of Listening

Many of us pay no attention to our dreams because we have ruled out the possibility that God could speak through them. And in truth, the vast majority of our dreams are not messages from God—we'll talk more about this in a moment. Even so, the biblical and historical use of dreams is so prevalent that Christians should at least consider the possibility that God could speak to us in this way. If we're not listening, we may miss an important warning or word of instruction.

The Importance of Journaling

Most dreams will be lost within minutes if they are not written down. Journaling shows that we're serious about receiving God's direction, and it provides an opportunity for us to reflect and judge what we've heard. It will also help us explain our dream to someone else and see if we are deceiving ourselves about its meaning.

The Importance of Meaning

The dreams in which God was clearly speaking in my life have been unmistakable in their "interpretation." If God is speaking, I don't have to figure the dreams out. I wake up with the understanding.

SACRED PATHWAYS

This is an important point, and it has biblical precedent. In the Bible, members outside of the community of faith, such as Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar, required a member of the community of faith to interpret their dreams (Joseph and Daniel, respectively; Genesis 41:15; Daniel 2:17–19). But people belonging to God, such as Joseph and Paul, seemed to have the interpretation clear in their minds as soon as they awoke (Genesis 37:5; Acts 16:9–10).

Thus, we should draw a distinction between schools of thought that “interpret” dreams through psychoanalysis and symbol and a biblical understanding of receiving both the dream and the meaning upon waking. If the interpretation isn’t clear upon waking, hold any insight loosely and wait for additional confirmation.

The Importance of Community

Any attempt to grow in this area of Christian spirituality apart from the body of Christ is undeniably dangerous. Without the firm foundation of biblical truth for our absolute standard, the wisdom of Christian tradition and history for our general guidance, and the contemporary oversight of fellow believers for accountability, we can easily be led astray. If you’re not connected to a local church, your first step toward spiritual growth should be to find one.

The Importance of Perspective

When you begin accepting the possibility that God speaks through a dream, you may find yourself remembering far more of your dreams than you did before. In fact, just the process of reviewing your dreams upon waking will begin making you more aware of them after just a few days. However, because we dream every night, the practice of listening through our dreams can become dangerous. Here’s why.

Tertullian believed that dreams come from three sources: the natural workings of our soul, demons, or God.⁴ The natural

ENTHUSIASTS

workings of our soul probably count for 98 percent or more of our dreams, and the latter two categories make up the remaining 2 percent. If we adopt Tertullian's view of the three sources of dreams, we find that two out of the three can lead us astray. If the dream is the natural working out of our soul's fears, nightmares, and anxieties, we certainly don't want our lives to be guided by these fears and anxieties. Even our soul's hopes can lead us astray if our personal dreams conflict with God's will for us.

And because, at least according to Tertullian, Satan can use our dreams to masquerade as an angel of light, we must be especially careful about what we accept. I read one account of a woman whose dream was examined by a Christian counselor, and the alleged message of the dream was that she should move forward in seeking a divorce. It is precisely this type of occurrence that makes me so nervous about "interpreting" dreams. Not only are the sources of dreams suspect, but our interpretations are suspect as well. Scripture is clear that legitimate grounds for divorce are very narrowly defined, and certainly a dream should never be used to counteract the clear teaching of Scripture.

God clearly uses dreams in Scripture, and I've found in my own life and from the experiences of others that God can continue, on a limited basis, to use them today. But we must avoid reducing our faith to waking up every morning and thinking, *Now what was God telling me last night?* This is a clear abuse of a practice that God infrequently uses to guide his people. If we want to hear from God, the first place to go is Scripture.

Dreams can also point us to another aspect of living out our "mysterious" faith, the importance of expectancy.

Expectancy

As a young collegian, I met with a number of students every Friday afternoon on the top floor of a dorm for prayer. We called

SACRED PATHWAYS

these meetings “the Upper Room.” They were powerful times of preparation for our Friday night campus meetings.

One of the things that charged these lengthy prayer times was expectancy. We expected that God wanted to do something, and he often met that expectancy and then some. The theme of our prayers often coincided with the theme of the Friday night meetings, even when those planning the meetings had no idea what we were praying about across campus. This happened so frequently that my future wife (then girlfriend) typically asked me as we walked into the meeting room, “So what are we going to hear about tonight?”

Enthusiasts “need” this expectancy in their faith. A planned program in which God is not invited to move—even if he should be inclined to do so—would seem unbearably stifling. The challenge is that the church as an institution needs some boundaries. If everybody who felt God moving through them blurted out a pronouncement or word of instruction, the church service would soon resemble a carnival. Paul dealt with this at some length in his correspondence with the Corinthians. That’s why I usually encourage enthusiasts to incorporate expectancy into their personal life—the Monday through Saturday side of their walk with God.

To cultivate the mystery of expectancy, enthusiasts would do well to wake up and ask God to bring someone in their path to whom they can minister. This sense of watching, whether it presents an evangelistic opportunity or a chance to encourage a downhearted believer, energizes enthusiasts’ faith because they see God moving in visible ways.

The needs out in the real world are great and known to God. By cooperating with him, we can move in supernatural ways. The reality of this came home to me in a new way as I walked through the mall one day, helping a friend pick out a tiny bear to place in the coffin of his stillborn son. We were ripped up inside, trying to carry on a normal conversation with various store clerks,

ENTHUSIASTS

while emotionally we were bruised and battered, tears welling up in our eyes.

It hit me that virtually every time I step inside a mall, the odds are that somebody feels just like my friend and I did that day. Maybe they just found out they have cancer or that a loved one has cancer; maybe they're going through a divorce or their parents are going through a divorce. A spouse may have just been laid off or fired, while another may suspect the other is having an affair. Any number of deeply felt crises are going on in people's lives, but in our busyness and our lack of expectancy, we miss opportunities to minister to people in supernatural ways.

Spiritual risk-taking is another way to foster this expectancy. Beginning a conversation with a stranger in hopes of sharing the gospel or stepping out in faith in an unknown situation can charge an enthusiast's faith. We don't want to slip into the sin of presumption here, as if God is obligated to provide such excitement on a daily or even monthly basis. On the other hand, complacency and being lukewarm are no less sins than presumption.

Be willing to stretch yourself. Don't run from situations in which the natural obstacles appear insurmountable. Create room in your life for God to move. If finances are tight and you need to make a major purchase, give God the chance to provide first. If finances are plentiful, be open to clues about how you can meet another's need.

Prayer

Is there anything more mysterious than prayer? Prayer moves us to call on a Being we cannot see and ask him to alter that which we can see. Enthusiasts need to create pockets of prayer in their lives, learning to trust God to come through in unexpected ways.

However, there is an element of mystery against which many enthusiasts sometimes rebel—the mystery of unanswered prayer, or, perhaps more appropriately stated, prayers that are answered

SACRED PATHWAYS

with a no. Because God sometimes answers our prayers with a yes, it can become intoxicating, especially to the enthusiast, and this intoxication can become so addicting that we begin to demand that God answer every prayer with a yes. When a prayer isn't answered in the way we want it to be answered, we may mistakenly assume there must be hidden sin, lack of faith, or some other minute item that propels us into hours of fruitless introspection.

It's been said before, but it is worth repeating here: To demand that God answer all our prayers with a yes is to ask for his omnipotence (power) without having the benefit of his omniscience (knowledge). Looking back, I'm thankful God said no to some of my prayers. The mystery of faith calls us to love and serve a God whom we can't always understand. The enthusiast loves this truth when the result is satisfying, when God answers in ways that make our knees weak. It is much less exciting, however, when the mystery leads us to believe that God is silent, indifferent, or even cruel. Mystery is mystery. It has its exhilarating elements as well as its frustrating elements. We can't expect one without the other.

The necessity of maturity will lead virtually every enthusiast through this canyon of unanswered prayer, where expectancy runs dry and the only mystery seems to be where God is hiding. Understand that this is a necessary avenue on the destination to holiness and that it usually has an end—in God's timing, however.

Acts of Celebration

In addition to mystery, the enthusiast is fed through celebration. Since celebration is more raucous and joyous in the presence of others, enthusiasts tend to be more relational. The ascetic likes to get alone; enthusiasts usually want to gather around as many people as possible.

ENTHUSIASTS

I'll always remember the morning I finished my first full-length published book. I had been writing for a good nine years, preparing for that day. At one point, I had received more than 150 consecutive rejections of various articles and proposals. After numerous false starts and completed books that never made it out of my drawer, I was making the final touches to a manuscript that was under contract.

It was early in the morning, and nobody else was in the office. I marveled at what God had given me: the strength to persevere, insights that went beyond my natural ability, open doors with a publisher. Once the package was bundled up and ready to go, I spent time celebrating before God in a way that I hadn't done for years. I remembered the morning, several years before, when I had woken up and felt God urging me, "Write, write, write," and I complained, "What for? Nobody's reading it!"

But now God had broken through. I was familiar with the call to sacrifice hours of leisure, to persevere past doubt, to die to my desire to sleep in—but now came the fun part.

Now it was time to party.

Those who know me know that the call to celebrate can be more difficult for me to obey than the call to sacrifice. I'm not a natural celebrator. I probably emphasize the call of the gospel on our lives more than its benefits. That's just my nature. But I'm trying to learn from the enthusiast. I'm trying to understand how to participate in the joyful recognition that we serve an absolutely wonderful God and have so much about which to celebrate.

Celebration can take many different forms and could be a book in itself, so we'll address just a few examples of how celebration can be incorporated and fostered in our faith and worship: enthusiastic worship, being involved in creative endeavors, and getting together.

Enthusiastic Worship

Celebration has a wide background in Scripture. There were three major festivals prescribed in the Old Testament—Passover, Weeks (Pentecost), and Tabernacles—and several other religious celebrations. These could be elaborate affairs. The Festival of Tabernacles, for example, involved a seven-day celebration in which the Israelites are commanded to rejoice (Deuteronomy 16:13–15).

Programmed celebration also gave way to individual, spontaneous celebration. David, the man after God’s own heart, danced enthusiastically before the ark of the covenant. When his wife despised him for it, he replied that the Lord had chosen him, and in response he would celebrate and “become even more undignified than this” (2 Samuel 6:22).

David also appointed singers and musicians, that they might worship and “make a joyful sound” (1 Chronicles 15:16). A musical, celebratory style of worship was one of the hallmarks of David’s era: “David and all the Israelites were celebrating with all their might before God, with songs and with harps, lyres, timbrels, cymbals and trumpets” (1 Chronicles 13:8). Many years later, Israel was still using the instruments commissioned by David (2 Chronicles 29:26).

Jesus also encouraged celebratory styles of worship. Not only did he and his disciples participate in hymn singing (Matthew 26:30), but when religious leaders complained about the people’s loud celebration of his entrance into Jerusalem, Jesus said, “I tell you . . . if [the people] keep quiet, the stones will cry out” (Luke 19:40).

This celebratory style is carried over into apostolic, New Testament worship as well. Acts 2 refers to speaking in tongues and foretells of receiving dreams, witnessing signs, and experiencing wonders. Paul and Silas sing hymns while in prison (Acts 16:25), and Paul exhorts the Ephesians to use psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit in their worship (Ephesians 5:19).

ENTHUSIASTS

According to the book of Revelation, worship in heaven involves crying out “in a loud voice” and the roar of a great multitude shouting “Hallelujah!” (Revelation 7:10; 19:1–6).

All of this tells me that my reluctance to celebrate enthusiastically is more a personal foible than a sign of maturity. It’s something I need to overcome instead of something to be proud of. When Jesus says, “If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out,” I’m convicted. We have even more reason to celebrate the risen Christ today than when Jesus entered Jerusalem before the crucifixion.

There are some warnings given to celebrants, however. While the apostles participated in supernatural activities, they still found it necessary to include formal and structured religious observances in their worship (such as prayer times, Acts 3:1). Paul stressed that order was extremely important (1 Corinthians 14:40), and Revelation 19:20 tells us that miracles and signs can deceive as well as inspire. Furthermore, Simon is chastised for seeking a supernatural gift rather than the Giver (Acts 8:18–23).

It’s also important to point out that celebratory worship must still include reverence. In the midst of a celebration of the ark of the covenant’s return to Israel, those carrying the ark must surely have had light hearts even while carrying a heavy load. Festive music—with timbrels, harps, cymbals, and trumpets—filled the air. David and the Israelites celebrated “with all their might.” In the middle of this joyous celebration, the ark rocked slightly, and Uzzah, forgetting what he was carrying, reached out to touch the ark, and immediately he died (1 Chronicles 13:8–10).

In the midst of a celebration, it’s easy to forget how fearful and awesome God is. Without reverence, however, celebration degenerates into shallow triviality. It’s interesting to note that in a later psalm, recorded in 1 Chronicles 16—after Uzzah’s death—David includes both celebration and reverence: “Sing to [the LORD], sing praise to him . . . Tremble before him, all the earth!” (1 Chronicles

16:9, 30). David had learned his lesson: celebration must never lose touch with what Jacob called the “Fear of Isaac” (Genesis 31:42), the profound recognition of the majesty of God shown by Isaac.

The act of celebration reminds us that we have much to be thankful for. God is worthy of great praise, and who else will sing that praise if not those who believe? There was a fifth-century group of Greek monks who were known as the “non-sleepers” because they often spent an entire day and night in uninterrupted praise of God. Most of us may not have the strength to do this, but let us remember that God is worthy of even more than this. Even our best (though acceptable to him) will always be far less than God deserves. But even more than an obligation, celebration is a privilege. Celebrative worship leads to joy, which is a foundational virtue leading to spiritual strength (Nehemiah 8:10).

Creating

One of the more difficult things I’ve done was to officiate at a funeral service for a young man who died of complications resulting from AIDS. He never married and didn’t father any children. Because he had built a list of legal offenses and arrests long enough to fill a computer screen, he ultimately died in prison. The last few years of his life were a torturous affair. He just couldn’t learn to live without heroin (which is how the HIV virus was introduced into his body).

This young man had great promise—but he died with most of that promise unfulfilled. Christians rightly believe that life is a gift given to us by God, that it is something we shouldn’t waste. We celebrate God by using the life he has given us to create other things. Whether it’s building a business, writing a poem, painting a picture, or planting a garden, creating something can be a profoundly holy experience. Far more than hobbies, these activities can be powerful expressions of worship. One of the most powerful

ENTHUSIASTS

antidotes to addiction is participating in different activities that lift addicts out of themselves and into positive, constructive acts of creation.

Healthy Christians create. It is the nature of our God to create. He is introduced in Genesis 1 as the Creator of everything. One of the last images given to us in the book of Revelation is that of God creating the new heaven and the new earth. The Bible is literally framed around the act of God creating.

With the Spirit of God living in us, we also have a need to create. I won't create the same things that my wife or children create, but all of us should find some participation in the act of creation. It's what we were made to do.

When looking at creating as an act of worship, it is preferable to choose something you're relatively good at, or at least inclined toward; frustration is an effective block to adoration. Without lapsing into perfectionism, do your best to make something shine for the glory of God. God gave you your mind, your hands, your strength, and your skill; make something to give that mind, strength, and skill back to God.

Think carefully about how you can cooperate with God to bring forth something new—how that landscape can be restored, how a new program of education can restore lives and hope to young people, how a sculpture can reflect on the beauty of a heavenly theme, how even a cosmetic surgeon can create a new life for a child with a severe deformity.

Getting Together

When Chicago-area pastor Bill Hybels used the “sacred pathways” concept to speak to a large gathering of pastors, he recounted the story of talking to an earnest pastor who came to Bill with an air of defeat. The pastor explained how he had decided to go away for the weekend on a prayer and study retreat. He found a location

SACRED PATHWAYS

with minimal distractions and got ready for what he hoped would be a mountaintop experience. As the minutes dragged by, this pastor realized he wasn't going to make it through the night, much less an entire weekend. He gave up, returned home, and went to Bill in an attitude of confession: "How can I be a pastor who teaches others how to pray when I can't spend even one weekend alone by myself?"

Knowing this pastor to be a very relational sort, Bill replied, "Have you ever thought of bringing some buddies along with you on these retreats?"

The pastor looked at him in astonishment and asked, "Is that legal?"

Here's the freedom behind the "sacred pathways" approach: Does God really care whether you pray better in a group or alone—or simply that you're praying? Is he concerned whether you'd rather worship while taking a walk through the woods, strolling through a museum, or holed up in an antiseptic room all by yourself—or simply that you're worshiping? Is he upset if someone finds Bible study in a Beth Moore group setting more profitable than being alone with his or her commentaries and Bible dictionaries—or is he more concerned that the Word is a daily part of every believer's life?

Some have viewed enthusiasts as those who walk the "relational pathway." While I have high regard for solitude and believe that everyone can benefit from this practice, as an introvert, that's an easy thing for me to say. Enthusiasts, in general, will want to spend more time with others than without. They may pray and worship better in a group. If this is true of you, my advice is, lean into it. Ask friends to meet you once, twice, or even three times a week to pray with you, if you know that by doing so you will become engaged more often in prayer.

The Temptations of Enthusiasts

While the enthusiast temperament points to many exciting strengths, there are also several inherent weaknesses that enthusiasts need to be warned about.

Seeking Experiences for Experiences' Sake

Seeking miraculous experiences simply for the sake of experiencing the miraculous makes us spiritual drug addicts who want to “get high.” This book is about learning to love God, not learning to join a spiritual circus.

Enthusiasts need to be especially careful to remain true to seeking and loving God rather than always searching for new experiences. When we seek “spiritual experiences” for their own sake, they can actually become, and be used for, evil.

Being Independent

Enthusiasts, perhaps more than any other temperament, need to be rooted in a strong church that can hold individual believers accountable. Supernatural experience apart from the oversight of the church is a sure prescription for disaster. Morton Kelsey, who wrote numerous books on spirituality, observes, “The idea that each person’s religious opinion is of the same value is nonsense, for there is a body of knowledge which is tested by time that can be transmitted by the church to believers.”⁵

Scripture may be our final authority, but it is foolish to ignore the wisdom learned from believers in the past and applied by believers in the present. The apostle Paul, who experienced spiritual reality that most of us can only dream about, made sure he sought the counsel and support of the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–21; Galatians 2:1–10).

Equating “Good Feelings” with “Good Worship”

Pure worship is an act of our will in which we offer our allegiance, praise, and thanksgiving to God. Just because we feel good during a time of worship doesn't mean we have offered up our will in an appropriate manner. Conversely, just because we feel down or “flat” doesn't mean we aren't effectively worshiping God.

Feelings come and go. Enthusiasts shouldn't apologize for enjoying them, but they should avoid becoming dependent on them.

The Message of Enthusiasts

Sometimes life can squeeze joy out of us faster than it can be replenished. I was talking with a friend once who had undergone some financial difficulties. After a long struggle, he began making progress. Just when he began to have new hope, however, the company he worked for received a review from a consultant, terminated his position, and offered him another position with considerably lower pay.

It is difficult—and can even seem inappropriate—to remain positive and enthusiastic in the face of such changes. Because of this, the enthusiast temperament is often seen as obnoxious, naive, or immature. “Just wait until their eyes are opened,” some cynics might say. “They won't be quite so upbeat then.”

Early in my writing career, I remember talking to a published author about a book idea. He gave me all the doom and gloom about publishing and basically told me I was wasting my time. A pastor overheard our conversation. I didn't know him, but I'll always remember his words: “Don't give up. If God is calling you to do this, it'll happen.”

For me, that pastor was the voice of the enthusiast. In a cynical

ENTHUSIASTS

and depressed world, enthusiasts point toward faith, mystery, and expectancy. When the situation seems impossible, enthusiasts say, “Now God’s *really* going to move.” God doesn’t always move the way we hope he will or the way we want him to, but despair and cynicism cloud real faith as much as Pollyanna optimism clouds real life.

Sometimes God does move in strange and powerful ways. People are miraculously healed; lives are dramatically turned around; hearts are at once challenged, convicted, and encouraged through a supernatural event.

A friend of mine was weeping at the altar at the conference she had attended, knowing that God was calling her to release her fears for her children and hand them over to him. As she knelt there praying, an anxious pastor, who had absolutely no earthly way of knowing what was going on, walked up and said, “I’m really nervous about saying this, but I believe God wants you to hear this Scripture.”

The pastor turned to the passage where Hannah gives up Samuel. My friend was overwhelmed, knowing that God had read her heart and was giving her direction.

I know, for every powerful story like this one there are at least a dozen instances where people really miss the mark and say something stupid. But none of this denies the fact that Scripture and church history are full of accounts where God moves mysteriously and powerfully, sometimes confronting entire nations, at other times reaching just one individual. And my friend was profoundly encouraged by that timely passage.

Personally, I don’t score very high as an enthusiast. I prefer meditative walks in the woods to loud celebrations. I’d rather grapple with the truth of a scriptural passage than listen to a dream. But I have to admit, I don’t celebrate God one-tenth as much as he deserves to be celebrated. And I have a sinful tendency to lapse into

SACRED PATHWAYS

a practical “atheism,” believing in God, but not expecting him to move in supernatural ways.

I believe enthusiasts have a precious gift and a special calling, and I hope they will never stop celebrating and never stop believing, even in the darkest night.

CONTEMPLATIVES

Loving God through Adoration

ARE YOU A CONTEMPLATIVE?

Score the following statements on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 being not true at all and 5 being very true. Record your answer in the space provided.

Are you a contemplative?

- _____ 1. I feel closest to God when my emotions are awakened, when God quietly touches my heart, tells me that he loves me, and makes me feel like I'm his closest friend. I would rather be alone with God contemplating his love than participating in a formal liturgy or being distracted by a walk outside.
- _____ 2. The most difficult times in my faith are when I can't feel God's presence within me.
- _____ 3. The words *lover*, *intimacy*, and *heart* are very appealing to me.
- _____ 4. I really enjoy having thirty minutes of uninterrupted time each day to sit in quiet prayer and "hold hands" with God, writing love letters to him and enjoying his presence.

SACRED PATHWAYS

- _____ 5. Again, on a scale of 0 to 5, how much does the statement describing the heart's cry of the contemplative resonate with you in comparison with the others?
- Naturalist: let me be outdoors.
 - Sensate: let me experience.
 - Traditionalist: let me remember.
 - Ascetic: let me be alone.
 - Activist: let me conquer.
 - Caregiver: let me care.
 - Enthusiast: let me celebrate.
 - **Contemplative: let me feel.**
 - Intellectual: let me think.
- _____ 6. When I think of God, I think of love, friendship, and adoration more than anything else.

Total of all your answers: _____

Any score of 15 or higher indicates a preference for this spiritual temperament. Please take a moment to register this score in chapter 12 on page 233 so you will have a composite picture of your soul's path to God.

Larry Crabb, a bestselling author and Christian counselor, has probably attended thousands of social lunches and dinners in his lifetime, but one will always stand out in his mind. While speaking at a spiritual journey conference at Biola University (in California), Larry shared a meal with Dr. James Houston, a professor from Regent College (Vancouver, British Columbia). In Larry's words, "When I was with him, . . . I experienced something coming out of him that touched a part of my soul that isn't often touched . . .

CONTEMPLATIVES

I went to my bedroom and I literally wept. I fell on my knees and I said, ‘Lord, I’ll pay any price to know who you are.’”

When I read about this encounter in a Regent College publication, I smiled knowingly. I had a similar experience sitting in Dr. Houston’s classes when I attended Regent College. There is something about men and women who have devoted themselves to knowing God that touches our souls in a profound way.

By build, by speech, and by character, Dr. Houston has all the marks of an English gentleman. When Regent was being shaped out of two old fraternity houses, Dr. Houston stripped old wallpaper while wearing shirtsleeves and a tie. When you look at him, there is nothing “mystical” or effeminate about him in any way, yet I remember being fascinated as this man spoke candidly and openly about “holding hands with God.”

Holding hands with God?

“As two lovers do nothing but gaze into each other’s eyes, so we gaze lovingly at our heavenly Father and have our heart’s delight satisfied.”

I listened to these words before Dr. Houston had introduced me to Teresa of Avila. My prayer life at that time consisted of an ever-lengthening intercession list. I had divided it into different days to give me plenty of time to “wrestle” in prayer. But the type of prayer Dr. Houston was talking about had nothing at all to do with wrestling. He was talking about holding hands and building, in his words, a “transforming friendship.” This was one of my first introductions to the way of the contemplative.

The contemplative seeks to perform the first work of adoring God. God is known and described as the heavenly spouse in whom all the contemplative’s delight is met. Activists and caregivers are marked by obedience and service; intellectuals are marked by understanding, while enthusiasts are marked by delight. Contemplatives seek to gaze lovingly into God’s face and be caught up in the rapture of a lover’s experience. They are marked by adoration.

The Biblical Portrayal of Contemplatives

One of the best descriptions of the role of contemplatives is found in Moses's blessing directed to the tribe of Benjamin:

“Let the beloved of the LORD rest secure in him,
for he shields him all day long,
and the one the LORD loves rests between his shoulders.”

DEUTERONOMY 33:12

“Resting between God's shoulders” is the favorite pastime of contemplatives. They want to enjoy God and learn to love him in ever deeper ways. Contemplatives remind us that God does not seek obedient but dispassionate servants but rather those who experience a passionate love that is so strong it burns all other bonds. Even the Old Testament describes a love relationship between God and his chosen people:

The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery.

DEUTERONOMY 7:7–8

Listen particularly to key passages in David's Psalm 63.

You, God, are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you,
my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land
where there is no water . . .

CONTEMPLATIVES

Because your love is better than life,
 my lips will glorify you . . .
I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
 with singing lips my mouth will praise you.
On my bed I remember you;
 I think of you through the watches of the night . . .
I cling to you;
 your right hand upholds me.

PSALM 63:1, 3, 5-6, 8

With these passionate and earnest words, David fulfills the charge given to the community of faith in Deuteronomy 6:5: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” Cold and calculated lip service is not enough for our God. “The Lord says: ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me’” (Isaiah 29:13).

God’s love for his people is so intense that when Israel strays from God, the act is often analogized as the betrayal of adultery. In Jeremiah, God recalls with fondness the love relationship he had with Israel: “I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness” (Jeremiah 2:2). God feels our rejection so strongly that his pain at our straying is no less than that of a husband who finds out his wife has been unfaithful. We may think, *God doesn’t need me!* In reality, of course, he doesn’t need to need us, but he chooses to need us in the sense that he feels deeply our rejection or passionate return.

There was a time in my life when I thought Christianity was about being obedient, and the ultimate issue was whether I would end up in heaven or hell. As I matured, I found that Christianity was about intimacy with the Father, and obedience flows from passionate love. I started relating to heaven and hell less as places and

SACRED PATHWAYS

more as descriptions of communion or separation from God. (I'm speaking figuratively, of course. Both heaven and hell have a literal separate existence apart from this sense of relationship.)

Unfortunately, throughout the history of faith, some well-meaning men and women have failed to grasp the depth and calling of this love relationship with God, preferring instead to turn faith into ethical lists of dos and don'ts. This rote obedience apart from adoration is not the faith that Jesus represented. When a woman extravagantly pours expensive perfume on Jesus' head, some of the disciples vehemently object, but Jesus defends her act as an acceptable offering of love, acceptable even above giving to the poor. The act is so full of adoration and love and so acceptable in Jesus' sight that Jesus promises, "Wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her" (Matthew 26:13).

It is not unusual for contemplatives to be misunderstood and judged by others. Martha, busy in her service to Jesus, found herself rebuked, not for performing her service, but for judging Mary, a contemplative (Luke 10:38–42). Jesus was not about to distract Mary from her calling to gaze lovingly at the face of her Lord.

The activist may have a hard time accepting the contemplative as a legitimate pathway to worship. The traditionalist may think the contemplative is shallow. The intellectual may find the contemplative's worship to be nothing less than a mystery. The enthusiast may find the contemplative's worship to be boring. But to God, the contemplative's worship is cherished, valued, and rewarded.

God's Beloved

To enter the devotion of contemplatives, Christians must begin by emptying their lives of those things that choke out our desire

CONTEMPLATIVES

for God. These may not necessarily be sinful things; too much busyness, on its own, will effectively kill earnest contemplation. In *Thirsting for God*, I write at length about “cultivating the quiet” and the Christian discipline of submission;¹ so here let us be reminded by another writer, Thomas Merton:

The fact remains that contemplation will not be given to those who willfully remain at a distance from God, who confine their interior life to a few routine exercises of piety and a few external acts of worship and service performed as a matter of duty . . .

God does not manifest himself to these souls because they do not seek him with any real desire.²

While I explained earlier that my discipline of an hour-long, daily quiet time had to be altered somewhat, I’ve found that some sort of quiet time is still essential, if for no other reason than to set my desire on serving and pleasing God the rest of the day. Morning is the crucial time for me to do this because it colors the rest of my day with what Merton calls “real desire.”

Thomas Aquinas explains that contemplation will be denied to a man in proportion to how much he belongs to the world. We can’t make ourselves love God, but we can prepare the way and, according to Aquinas, desire is the most important thing in the contemplative life.³

In the study of Christian spirituality, real contemplation is actually an experience with a beginning and an end that Christians pass through. Contemplation is not generally considered a life state that one exists in, so I’m adapting the word somewhat when I use it as a label for a spiritual temperament.

Here is how one writer explains Augustine’s description of this experience:

SACRED PATHWAYS

The act of contemplation is [characterized by Augustine] as “the perception of Something Unchangeable,” accompanied by a wondrous inward joy. Its effect on the soul is to make it feel contempt for exterior things, and be ravished by things interior. But after the brief moment of realization, the soul, weighed down by the burden of its infirmity, sinks back to its ordinary level and its normal experience: and this return, as it were, from the other world is an occasion of sorrow, and of longing for a renewal of the experience. Here is emphasized what is the testimony of all the mystics as to the transient nature of the act of contemplation.⁴

I was tempted to name this temperament “Beloved” because Christian contemplation has less to do with mystical experience than it has to do with adoration. Jesus was emphatic that the spiritual life is based on love, not laws. The greatest commandment, he said, is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). Jesus told his disciples, “I no longer call you servants . . . Instead, I have called you friends” (John 15:15).

Servant is a “doing” word; *friend* is a “being” word. What do servants do? They cook, clean, and so forth. A friend, however, is something you are, not something you do. A servant is Martha; a friend is Mary.

For our purposes, I will describe contemplation as a form of “hand-holding prayer” in which the Christian rests in God’s presence. Thomas Merton writes that “there are so many Christians who have practically no idea of the immense love of God for them, and of the power of that Love to do them good, to bring them happiness.”⁵ But contemplatives live for this love. They want nothing more than some privacy and quiet to gaze at the face of their heavenly lover and give all of themselves to God.

It is impossible to understand the contemplative apart from

CONTEMPLATIVES

this motivation of love. Many people think of mystics as loners or even, in an ascetic setting, as masochists. But really, contemplatives simply want to bathe in the ocean of love God has for his children, while the rest of us seem sadly content to experience that love drop by drop.

Without hesitancy, with no sense of obligation, contemplatives appreciate Jesus with unadulterated adoration. Time is one of the best gifts we can give God, and contemplatives want to give God plenty.

It's important to mention another distinction that is crucial to the worship of contemplatives. Contemplatives seek the perception of God's being or presence, but this is something different from a divine vision of God's essence. It may be that both Paul and Moses were blessed with such experiences, but these are truly unusual, thoroughly miraculous occurrences and undoubtedly very rare. When I talk about seeking God's face, then, I am not generally talking about actually seeing God's face as much as I am talking about being aware of his presence.

Acts of Contemplatives

There are many forms of prayer and activity that contemplatives can make use of in addition to general contemplative prayer. Let's look at a few of them.

The Jesus Prayer

Historically, contemplatives from the Orthodox branch of the church have made great use of the Jesus Prayer. You'll find various forms throughout the ages and in different countries, but perhaps the most popular version goes like this: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Sometimes an even shorter

SACRED PATHWAYS

form might be used. Cassian, a famous fifth-century monk, used the prayer, “Come to my aid, God; Lord, make haste to help me.”⁶

The purpose of the Jesus Prayer is to practice the presence of God. The usefulness of this prayer has been proven through the ages. It has also occasionally been abused to become an end in itself. One monk, for instance, started out by saying it 10,000 times a day, eventually working up to more than 100,000 times a day. This is just evidence that a good practice can be pushed into absurdity. If we’re so caught up with how many times we’re saying something, we’re no longer focusing on why we’re saying it. (I’d like to know who was counting!)

The main focus of the Jesus Prayer is to help us remember God. Recognizing that our minds naturally drift, the Jesus Prayer keeps reminding us of all that is fundamentally true: Jesus is Lord, he is God’s Son, we are sinners, and we need his mercy. When we really know who we are and who he is, life is lived differently.

When I’m anxious (before a major talk or sermon, for instance), frightened, uptight, spiritually dry, or facing temptation, and I don’t know what to pray, I’ve found the Jesus Prayer calls me to a humble reliance on God. I have found it does, indeed, help me “practice God’s presence.” It has all the elements of a proper prayer, recognizing Jesus as Lord, asking humbly for his assistance and mercy, and admitting sin. The purest form of prayer addresses the Father in Jesus’ name. But the Jesus Prayer is a reminder that Jesus is Lord, that I’m a sinner, and that I need his mercy.

Secret Acts of Devotion

It was a cold December night. The next day was Christmas Eve. Since I was a young college student who still lived at home during breaks and vacations, I had to sneak out of my parents’ house, grabbing a bag before I slipped quietly outside. A youth outside in the dead of night usually means trouble, or at least toilet paper on

CONTEMPLATIVES

the trees. I had done my share of that, but this time my intention was different. I wanted to give a present to Jesus.

Earlier that day, I had picked out a ham from a local grocery store and scrawled “Merry Christmas” on the bag. Now I was leaving it on the front porch of a financially strapped family who had lost their father to an affair just a few months earlier. Until now, many years after the fact, I’ve never told anybody about this act. I was practicing my first secret act of devotion. (Now I guess I’ve lost one!)

I like to encourage all Christians, but especially those who are predominantly contemplatives, to engage in “secret acts of devotion.” A secret act of devotion is something you do—giving an anonymous gift, helping someone out “behind the scenes,” sending a card—without letting anyone, even the person who benefits, know you had anything to do with it.

The importance of secrecy is that it ensures you are doing it for the love of God, and the love of God only. Any intimate relationship has its secrets; a husband and wife share things with each other that they will never share with anyone else. In our relationship—and romance—with God, part of the intimacy is to share secrets with him. On God’s end, these secrets may be something he has shared with us or done for us that we are not to share with anyone else. (Jesus once healed a man and told him not to tell anyone about it—Mark 8:26; see also verse 30.) On our end, it could be a service we perform that no one will ever know about. Some secret acts of devotion might include the following:

- giving an anonymous gift of cash to someone in need
- crafting a poem or letter written to God, then burned
- singing a particular song only in the presence of God
- going on a “secret” walk or night vigil in the presence of God

SACRED PATHWAYS

- establishing a secret devotional place where you frequently go to meet God
- engaging in intensive intercessory prayer and fasting
- making a vow to give up something permanently or for a period of time to signify how your most important needs are met in God
- adopting a symbol of your love for God, which you carry in your pocket or wear as a necklace or ring
- working “behind the scenes” to help an unemployed person get a job
- sending an anonymous note of encouragement to a pastor or friend
- planting a tree or sowing wildflower seeds in a field to celebrate God the Creator

With practice, you’ll think of many other secret acts of devotion on your own.

Dancing Prayer

By *dancing*, I don’t mean bodily movements, although some contemplatives may find such activity meaningful. Rather, I mean that just as the woman traditionally allows the man to lead in ballroom dancing, so we allow God to lead in our prayers.

Vigorous intercession, wrestling in prayer, and laying our requests before God all have a place. But allowing God to speak and place requests before us also has a place. Dancing prayer is prayer in which we allow God to lead. It is presumptuous to assume we even know what most needs to be prayed about; how necessary it is, then, to let God take the lead.

This is where we in the West can grow the most in prayer. Western prayer is so human motivated and human centered—we decide when to pray, how to pray, and what to pray about. And

CONTEMPLATIVES

when we've said our piece, we get up off our knees and go our own way.

Dancing prayer is an act of humility: "Lord, I don't know how to pray or what to pray about. I'm placing myself before you. What should we discuss?" God may lead us to repentance, celebration, intercession, introspection, or any number of things. The important element in dancing prayer is to be still enough so that God can lead, like a good dancer, as we pray.

To nurture my relationship with God, I must learn to hear his voice and adopt his concerns, and seek to know his perspective. There are times when I absolutely must pour out my heart to him, but I never want my prayer life to lapse into a monologue.

Sit with this image—*dancing with God*—and let the Holy Spirit lead you as you pray.

Centering Prayer

Centering prayer has been practiced throughout the ages as a practical help for Christians whose minds stray when they want to just sit in and soak up God's presence. It has been a mainstay of Eastern Orthodox spirituality but has also been widely practiced among Roman Catholics as well as many Protestants. In centering prayer, you choose a word (*Jesus* or *Father*, for example, or perhaps *hope* or *love*) as a focus for contemplative prayer; as your mind strays, you repeat the word to bring your thoughts back to God.

It is hard to describe this to the Western mind. We think, "Well, what do I do next?" But centering prayer is a contemplative act in which you don't do *anything*; you're simply resting in the presence of God. Focusing on God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or on the beauty of the Trinity, helps you to have a centering anchor for your contemplation, so your thoughts don't race around looking for more stimulation. As thoughts drift, you simply repeat the word in your heart, centering once again, to bring you back to focus.

SACRED PATHWAYS

I have been attacked by a few who believe this is a dangerous practice bordering on New Age spirituality or the Transcendental Meditation movement. Christians practiced centering prayer long before TM perverted any form of it. If Christians avoided everything that false religions tried to co-opt, we couldn't fast (many other false religions fast) or pray or preach, and we certainly couldn't celebrate Christmas.

I believe that denigrating centering prayer as “mantra meditation” betrays a gross misunderstanding and mischaracterization of a cherished practice in Eastern Christian traditions. Having said this, my advice would be, if this type of prayer makes you nervous, don't do it! I personally don't practice centering prayer myself, but this is due to my own weaknesses and limitations. It's certainly not a point of pride or a condemnation of what has proven helpful for so many believers through the ages.

Some Christian traditions view the anxious and wordy prayers of us Western believers as distracting rather than effective. John Climacus (late sixth to early seventh century), who wrote an early classic on the Christian life, put it this way:

Let there be no studied elegance in the words of your prayer . . . do not launch out into long discourses that fritter away your mind in efforts for eloquence. One word alone spoken by the publican touched God's mercy; a single word full of faith saved the good thief. Many words in prayer often fill the mind with images and distract it, while often one single word draws it into recollection.⁷

The purpose of centering prayer is not to cultivate feelings or create a “spiritual experience”; it is simply to rest in and enjoy the blessed presence of God. For those who question this, we need merely look to the human example. The deepest kind of love is often that which allows you to rest in another's presence without saying or doing

CONTEMPLATIVES

anything, just enjoying being together. If a husband can feel this way with his wife, or a sister with her sibling, or a mother with her infant, why can't Christians enjoy this with their God?

Prayer of the Heart

The challenge of contemplatives is to move beyond the purely intellectual exercise that makes up 90 to 100 percent of our prayers. When we Westerners think of *prayer*, most of us think of us talking to God. Other Christians have found, however, that there is a prayer of the heart that, while not replacing a prayer of the mind, is an essential ingredient of a full life of prayer.

God created us with more than intellectual or cerebral faculties, yet we do little to develop the emotional element of our being. One writer describes it this way:

Never would we come to true peace and fulfillment if only our cerebral faculties were involved in conversing with God. And yet it is a fact that, in comparison with the overwhelming rational and cognitive training, we receive very little education in our emotional growth. Often the affective dimension of adults is either infantile or of a crudity which is neighbor to a barbarian attitude.⁸

Prayer of the heart does not call us to abandon our mind. But it does call us to use the mind to focus on our heart. What are we feeling as we enter God's presence? Is our adoration centered on God, or on something else? Are we content to enjoy the presence of God, or are we too restless to quiet the mind for just a few minutes?

That our faith must not be ruled by our feelings does not mean that feelings are irrelevant or even unimportant. God created our emotions for a purpose. It is true that we cannot entirely trust them, but it is also true that we shut off part of our true selves if we entirely ignore them.

SACRED PATHWAYS

Prayer of the heart, then, like centering prayer, is more “being” prayer than “doing” prayer. Its aim is not to get an answer from God, make a request known to God, receive an insight from God, or even express our commitment to God. Rather, the prayer of the heart focuses on emotional attachment to, or adoration of, God. It develops and matures the affective faculty of our souls that is so frequently crippled in our society. Its aim is to love God, to have our hearts enlarged so that God owns more and more of us. Centering prayer focuses on being with and intensely aware of God.

Stations of the Cross

Calling to mind the stations of the cross has historically been a popular method of contemplation. Christians simply pray through the various events surrounding Jesus’ crucifixion, perhaps beginning with Gethsemane and moving on from there:

the sentence of death given to Jesus
Jesus receiving his cross
Jesus falling
Simon helping Jesus carry the cross
Jesus falling a second time
women mourning for Jesus
Jesus falling again
Jesus being stripped of his clothing
Jesus being nailed to the cross
Jesus calling out to John and Mary
Jesus dying on the cross
Jesus being taken down from the cross
Jesus being laid in the tomb

As you experience the stations of the cross, at each point you pause and picture the truth of the Scripture in your mind. What

CONTEMPLATIVES

was going on? What can you learn from Jesus' sacrifice and obedience? There are no set prayers for each station, so let the Holy Spirit lead you in your prayers.

Praying through the stations will give your contemplative prayers concrete structure while also allowing spontaneous insight and petitions.

Meditative Prayer

Ignatius of Loyola in *The Spiritual Exercises* helped to make mental prayer more popular. In his book he provides several different examples of mental or contemplative prayer, and those who are particularly interested in this type of prayer would do well to buy a copy of this classic.

Ignatius talks about prayerful reflection of a biblical text or of a particular theme, or prayerful use of an object (something you can see, taste, touch, hear, or smell), reflecting on its practical lessons. Each time of prayer should begin with humble submission of the will to God and end by returning to God in a genuine personal encounter.

Many of these types of prayers may seem new—and somewhat uncomfortable—to some. The difficulty of writing about them is something like being assigned the topic “How to Fall in Love.” Relationships, including our relationship with God, are dynamic. The exercises I have mentioned have proven helpful in the lives of other Christians, but the exciting truth is that all Christians can build their own stories in the journey of loving God.

The Temptations of Contemplatives

There are many benefits gained from incorporating contemplative elements into our faith expressions, but there are dangers as well. Contemplative Christians must be especially aware of four of them.

Losing Balance

In our healthy desire to find our joy and love in God, we sometimes limit how God can reveal his love. God wants us to delight in him, yes—but he also wants us to delight in the people and the world he has made. Contemplatives sometimes make the mistake of creating a secular/sacred dichotomy in which their love for God precludes enjoying the company of others or something God has made.

Healthy contemplatives will understand that rich human relationships are a way to enjoy God's love, just as is solitary and intimate prayer. Good music, the beauty of the outdoors, art, and recreation all contain mini celebrations of God as Creator so we can love God while appreciating the wonder of his creation.

Don't exclude the enjoyment of things other than God in your zeal to love God more passionately. God can reveal himself to us just as much in a conversation with a fellow believer as he can when we are on our knees in prayer.

Absorbing the Ego

Some forms of contemplation wander from the folds of orthodox Christianity, and contemplatives must watch out for these. In particular, we should beware of any meditation that calls our ego to somehow be absorbed into God rather than encouraging us to relate to God. God is always God, and we are always human—and “never the twain shall meet.” We can relate to God, but we cannot be absorbed into God. Such foolishness is not Christian thinking.

Be wary of practices that speak of simply “emptying” yourself and creating a vacuum. A Christian wants to be filled with the Holy Spirit, not emptied out. Jesus spoke of a man being delivered of a demon, yet being worse off because, remaining empty, he was soon inhabited by a legion of demons (Matthew 12:43–45).

CONTEMPLATIVES

Forgetting Virtue

Historically the contemplative role has grown out of asceticism for this reason: great mystics have held that there is no progress in faith without a lessening of vice. We cannot gaze at the glorious face of God while lusting in our heart for the world's sinful pleasures. Contemplatives must grow beyond an adolescent infatuation so that they incorporate self-discipline and self-control into their lives. Just as marriage must pull two people beyond a crush to engage in a commitment built on self-sacrifice, so contemplatives must move beyond mere meditation (the failure of some Eastern and faddish religions) to an alignment of our will with God's will and into conformity with Jesus Christ.

Getting Addicted to Spiritual Experience

The ancients viewed contemplation as a foretaste of heavenly joys. It was rarely described as something that can be expected to continue indefinitely on earth. Spiritual feelings can be so intense—Augustine once described them as a “holy inebriation”—that we don't want to let them go. Contemplatives will have to accept that just as earthly bodies have their limits, so earthly souls and emotions have their limits too. We should be thankful for the spiritual joys we receive but also tolerant of their transient nature. We must also beware of “spiritual gluttony” in which we begin to seek the feelings instead of God.⁹

The Message of Contemplatives

As I grew up, it seemed to me that the “giants” of the Christian faith were the men and women who had accomplished great things for God—the great leaders, authors, preachers, and servants. Their degrees, accomplishments, and résumés were long and elaborate

SACRED PATHWAYS

affairs. Perhaps they had started entire movements or led people by the tens of thousands to experience salvation. You could “judge” a person’s sanctity by how long it took to introduce them before they spoke.

Contemplatives point us in an entirely new direction. All our work may seem absolutely essential to us, but I wonder if that isn’t just because we have an inflated view of our own importance. Or perhaps our work is more of an attempt to validate our own existence than an expression of our true love for God.

Contemplatives remind us of a startling fact: There is one thing that each individual Christian can do that nobody else can—give our personal love and affection to God. God can raise up plenty of evangelists, teachers, writers, and witnesses, but only I can give my personal love and affection to God. My spouse, pastor, or coworker can’t do this for me. Only I can give God this love, a love that he wants very much.

Imagine that you had six children. Five of them loved you dearly, sent you cards and letters on a regular basis, and made sure you were frequently reminded of their devotion. The other child left several years ago, telling you, “I hate you and never want to see you again. As far as I’m concerned, I don’t have any parents.” Would the love of the five ever completely erase the pain you’d feel over the alienation of that one rebellious child? Certainly not. Amazingly, it’s the same with God. Just because he has my wife’s devotion and Rick Warren’s or Beth Moore’s devotion doesn’t mean he doesn’t desire mine. And I’m the only person who can give him *my* love and adoration.

Contemplatives and mystics will perhaps always be looked at askance because their service to God is so very private, but this private love is cherished by God. M. Basil Pennington described it this way:

I have run into a situation in marriage counseling a number of times. The couple is unhappy. The wife is dissatisfied and the husband cannot see why. He goes into a long recital of all he is

CONTEMPLATIVES

doing for her. He is holding down two or three jobs, building a new house, buying her everything. But to all this the wife quietly replies: If only he would stop for a few minutes and give me himself! I sometimes think that God, as he sees us rushing about in all our doing of good, says to himself: If only they would stop for a few minutes and give me themselves!¹⁰

It's up to each of us to love God with this kind of fervor.

INTELLECTUALS

Loving God with the Mind

ARE YOU AN INTELLECTUAL?

Score the following statements on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 being not true at all and 5 being very true. Record your answer in the space provided.

Are you an intellectual?

- _____ 1. I feel closest to God when I learn something new about him that I didn't understand before. My mind needs to be stimulated. It's very important to me that I know exactly what I believe.
- _____ 2. I get frustrated when the church focuses too much on feelings and spiritual experience. Of far more importance is the need to understand the Christian faith and to have proper doctrine.
- _____ 3. The words *concepts* and *truth* are very appealing to me.
- _____ 4. I feel close to God when I participate in a time of uninterrupted study—reading God's Word or good Christian books and then perhaps having an opportunity to teach or participate in a discussion with a small group.

INTELLECTUALS

- _____ 5. Again, on a scale of 0 to 5, how much does the statement describing the heart's cry of the intellectual resonate with you in comparison with the others?
- Naturalist: let me be outdoors.
 - Sensate: let me experience.
 - Traditionalist: let me remember.
 - Ascetic: let me be alone.
 - Activist: let me conquer.
 - Caregiver: let me care.
 - Enthusiast: let me celebrate.
 - Contemplative: let me feel.
 - **Intellectual: let me think.**
- _____ 6. I spend more money on books than music.

Total of all your answers: _____

Any score of 15 or higher indicates a preference for this spiritual temperament. Please take a moment to register this score in chapter 12 on page 233 so you will have a composite picture of your soul's path to God.

“No, no, no,” the pastor said, shaking his head. “I’m sure it was located in the northwest corner.”

“I’m sorry,” the other pastor said, the one who was driving the car, “but I’ve always held to the southeastern view.”

The first pastor looked at his atlas one more time. “No, couldn’t be,” he said, pointing to a location near the southeast corner. “It has to be here,” and his finger moved up the map.

It was hard not to smile as our car pointed north. It was a hot summer day, and we were headed to a denominational convention where we would make a joint presentation. As other cars passed,

SACRED PATHWAYS

I could imagine the discussions—the latest baseball scores, or the most recent business mergers, or maybe some Hollywood gossip. I felt reasonably certain, however, that not one carload in a million could possibly guess what was being discussed by the men in our car: a heart-stopping debate on the location of the Sheep Gate in ancient Jerusalem! And to think, in my theological ignorance, I had always thought the true debate was between Calvinists and Arminians, or premillennials, postmillennials, and amillennials. Who knew people actually debated the location of the Sheep Gate? (Between you and me, I didn't even know there *was* a Sheep Gate.)

These somewhat silly discussions partly explain why so much disdain is often cast on intellectual pursuit in some sectors of the church. We've probably all heard someone say, with great condescension in his or her voice, "So and so's faith is all in his head." While a head full of information divorced from a heart filled with passion *is* a great danger, the truth is, Jesus himself exalted the role of the intellect when he urged us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, *mind*, and strength (Mark 12:30).

It is difficult for some enthusiasts and contemplatives to understand how powerfully some of us can be drawn to the Lord through a stimulated mind. When intellectuals' minds are awakened, when they understand something new about God or his ways with his children, then their adoration is unleashed.

Don't be misled by the title *intellectual*. It has nothing to do with IQ. Rather, it describes those believers whose hearts are most warmed toward God when they understand new concepts and gain new insights and increased comprehension. "Conceptual" Christians might be an even better title, to be honest. If you don't engage their minds, their worship will never take off.

Pastor and commentator John MacArthur is a classic example of this temperament. He wrote:

INTELLECTUALS

For me personally, the most important element in worship music is the lyrical content. The appropriate musical accompaniment should be suitable and memorable, but it is the words that carry the truth. When the words are teeming with rich theological life and biblical accuracy, they inform the mind and that launches a legitimate experience of glorifying God.¹

Just as the contemplative can spend hours basking in the presence of God, so an intellectual can spend long seasons contemplating a challenging verse or concept. One time, I was deep in the book of Job and was suddenly caught short as I read verses 6–8 of Job 35:

“If you sin, how does that affect him?
If your sins are many, what does that do to him?
If you are righteous, what do you give to him,
or what does he receive from your hand?
Your wickedness only affects humans like yourself,
and your righteousness only other people.”

I knew that something precious was behind those words. At first, I wasn't sure what the passage was getting at, but I knew something was there, and the verses provided many pleasant reflections and meditations in the days ahead, just as a newly learned song can feed the worship of an enthusiast.

I've found that for me to be growing in Christ, I need to have my mind stimulated with Scriptures such as the above. I need to be challenged and to experience “the power to love hard questions,” as my friend John Rankin likes to say. If I'm not learning new things about God, my relationship with him feels stagnant.

SACRED PATHWAYS

Many of the books in the New Testament (the letters of John, Galatians, and Jude, for example) make especially strong contentions for right thinking as well as right living. Intellectuals remind us of the high calling of loving God with our mind. Our culture doesn't always think of the mind when it thinks of love and devotion. Drugstores don't sell chocolate brains on Valentine's Day—it's always the heart that is exalted when love is talked about—but biblically speaking, chocolate brains would be perfectly acceptable. The Bible is emphatic that our mind is one of the key elements in the love we show for God.

Intellectual pursuit and service have played a key role in the advancement of God's work. One writer has pointed out that the main reason the early church was so successful in its witness to the pagan world was that it not only outlived and outdied the world, it also outthought it.² Though the great Christian thinkers shared fundamental disagreements with each other, luminaries such as Augustine, Calvin, Erasmus, Aquinas, Pascal, and others have helped Christianity not only keep up with scholarship but advance it. It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of scholasticism on the history of Christianity. Building on Augustine's foundational work from the fourth century, it was largely the theology of scholasticism that crowned the High Middle Ages and led the church out of the Dark Ages. The powerful thought that fueled the Reformation would soon follow.

Thomas Aquinas, the great theologian of the High Middle Ages (many Reformed theologians like to believe that Aquinas's thought was in line with the Reformational thinking that would follow), put this aspect of history in perspective when he argued that prayer in every case must include, among other things, *an ascent of the mind to God*.³

Any form of Christianity, then, that rejects or even diminishes the importance of the mind is not a biblical Christianity.

The Biblical View of Intellectuals

Have you ever seen a pulpit with the carved-wood image of an eagle on it? The ornate pulpit is symbolically proclaiming the truth that the word of God destroys the work of Satan. Eagles are the natural predators of the serpent. Throughout the ages, and indeed throughout Scripture itself, the proclamation of God's word is given high priority as an essential component in waging war against the powers of darkness.

When Moses blessed the tribe of Levi, he blessed a tribe that “teaches your precepts to Jacob and your law to Israel” (Deuteronomy 33:10). The Levites were released from other duties so they could function in the one duty of studying and teaching—loving God with the mind.

Biblical individuals also fulfilled this role. The Bible is clear that “Solomon showed his love for the LORD” (1 Kings 3:3). One of the ways he loved God was by using his intellect to the glory of God. It's particularly interesting to note that Solomon didn't limit his mind to religious words of wisdom; he also explored the natural world, for God is the natural Creator of all:

[Solomon] spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.

I KINGS 4:33–34

A professor of biology can love God with his mind every bit as much as a professor of systematic theology. Since God created everything, any study that explores, examines, and explains the

SACRED PATHWAYS

natural world can shed some light on the nature of our God and help us to know him better.

Words of wisdom can be an active part of worship, or, as in the case of Psalm 49, a call to worship:

Hear this, all you peoples;
listen, all who live in this world,
both low and high,
rich and poor alike:
My mouth will speak words of wisdom;
the meditation of my heart will give you understanding.
I will turn my ear to a proverb;
with the harp I will expound my riddle.

PSALM 49:1–4

The sermon is a crucial part of the general church service. It does not follow or precede worship—it *is* worship.

Much of the book of Proverbs stresses how important a trained mind is as we seek to truly love God:

Let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance—
for understanding proverbs and parables,
the sayings and riddles of the wise.
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

PROVERBS 1:5–7

In the book of Proverbs, we are told to “cry aloud for understanding” and to “search for it as for hidden treasure” (2:3–4). We are told, “The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding” (4:7). Right

INTELLECTUALS

thinking—conforming our thoughts to the thoughts of God—supports and encourages right living.

We need to pause and remember how radical this is. Our culture tells us to seek fame and fortune, affluence and power. The Bible tells us that our first search, our primary calling, is to get wisdom and understanding.

Jesus himself revealed intellectual tendencies. At twelve years old, he was found discussing the law in the temple (Luke 2:46). Teaching was a large part of his ministry. Though he was forceful in his denunciation of intellectual contrivances that kept people from God, Jesus understood that the mind, as well as the heart, had to be transformed. He urged his followers to love God with all their mind (Mark 12:30).

Are we doing that? Are we earnestly seeking to chase out all our wrong notions of God and offer up to him a mind that has been fully redeemed?

Intellectual Training

The first time I visited Regent College, I drove past it without realizing it. At the time, Regent was housed in a couple of converted fraternity houses, right by the University of British Columbia campus. The bookstore was stationed in a portable trailer. What I knew of Regent I knew from the professors who taught there—professors such as Dr. Bruce Waltke and Dr. J. I. Packer. I had no idea they could teach in a place like this.

Regent has undergone massive physical transformation, but the lack of physical facilities in the early days didn't really bother us in the mid-1980s. It was the teaching and relationships that kept us coming back. I remember when my classmates and I graduated and went our separate ways. One friend with whom I often ate and

SACRED PATHWAYS

studied left a note for me on my books as he departed from “campus” for the last time. We both knew the likelihood of our meeting again was very small. He was heading off to teach at a United Methodist school in Canada; I was returning to life in the United States. Another friend was going back to Hong Kong, hoping to prepare Christians there for the country’s return to Chinese control. Another friend—who had been sobered but strengthened by having his paper virtually torn to shreds during a seminar—was preparing to become a pastor in the Vancouver area.

As I walked around the school for the last time, I was in awe of what had been accomplished over the past two or three years in so many lives. Men and women were leaving as very different people. Our minds had been provoked and our hearts challenged, and now we were ready to begin our own feeble efforts aimed at accomplishing the same thing with others. This process continues today.

More recently, I attended the convocation services for Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, where I have the joy of serving as an adjunct faculty member. The testimonies of graduating students moved me and my wife to tears—literally. Seminary may have a reputation for being a “cemetery,” but this hasn’t been true of any of the schools I’ve been blessed to be associated with. In countries around the world, the Christian church is advancing itself with education aimed at training the Christian mind. It’s a thrilling reality and a deep source of strength for the professing church.

While everyone can gain from such an experience, intellectuals will especially derive great benefit from formal theological training. A good school will equip you to further educate yourself once you’ve graduated, but there is no substitute for establishing a solid foundation.

This is getting easier and easier to do. If the two or three years

INTELLECTUALS

required for a master's degree just aren't feasible, consider taking one year off from work and getting a one-year degree. You might also consider taking summer classes—many seminaries and Bible colleges offer one-week courses that gain credit toward a one-year degree. These one-week courses can provide enough material to study for an entire year if you take the time to draw up a list of related books that you'd like to read in the months following the course.

Think how much stronger you'd be as a Christian if you picked one topic a year for in-depth study. In just a few years, you could be quite conversant on a number of important truths. It's clear that the church would be a vastly stronger institution if we applied ourselves with a little more fervor to developing the mind that God has given us.

If time and expense stand in the way of your attending a school, you can always consider extension classes through the internet. You can start small study classes at your church, using video lectures of prominent professors. It's always helpful to study in a group dynamic; I've found discussion to be an invaluable method of honing my own thoughts and beliefs.

If others around you lack interest, however, you can turn your work commute into a rich time of study by listening to sermons or lectures in your car. One of the best things about the the internet is how many good, absolutely free audio resources are now out there. If you enjoy a particular pastor or preacher and are willing to look hard enough, you're likely to find a listing of free or inexpensive downloads for future study.

In all the years I've commuted to work, I don't remember a single traffic or weather report that has changed the course of my life or redirected me into God's purpose. However, by spending a year listening to the men and women to whom God has given great insight, I can become a better person.

The Disciplines

Intellectuals can aim to broaden their faith by gaining an understanding of the basic disciplines of theological training. These disciplines include church history, biblical studies, systematic theology, ethics, and apologetics. A full seminary education would also include a few other disciplines, but these five comprise a good start toward building an informed Christian mind.

Numerous books discuss each of these disciplines, though you may not find many in a local Christian bookstore. A pastor who has gone to seminary should be able to meet with you and within a few minutes make several suggestions. As you begin reading, you'll come across footnotes and endnotes that will direct you to similar volumes. To get started, you might consider the following.

Church History

Church history contains numerous compelling and true stories of great faith, commitment, and devotion. Even more, it connects the head to the heart. It's one thing to read the passionate words of men or women dedicated to evangelism; it's another to read that they went to a foreign country as missionaries with their belongings in a casket because they didn't expect to live more than eighteen months in the new climate.

When the writer of Ecclesiastes wrote that there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9), he was foreseeing the growth and development of the church. Over its two-thousand-year history, the church has faced the same heresies under many different names. The church has also overcome many of the same struggles and dealt with the same issues of reaction and balance. A man or woman who has a broad understanding of church history would be a valuable addition to any church's leadership.

INTELLECTUALS

Kenneth Scott Latourette's two volumes titled *History of Christianity* have been standard fare in seminaries and Bible colleges for a number of years, though they may be a bit lengthy for those who have only a passing interest. A more accessible alternative is Bruce Shelley's *Church History in Plain Language*.

Clyde Manschreck has compiled original documents in his two-volume series titled *A History of Christianity: Readings in the History of the Church*. The series titled *The Pelican History of the Church* also contains some helpful works, and these are small paperbacks that can easily be carried wherever you're headed.

Apart from these introductions, you can find many books dealing with a particular segment of church history. North American readers might be interested in Mark Noll's *Turning Point* or *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*.

Church history is an essential foundation on which to build the theological mind. Trying to understand theology without church history is like trying to understand world events by reading headlines and ignoring the articles. You'll have an idea of what everything is all about but little idea of how it all fits together.

Biblical Studies

I wish there were some way I could make the page begin dancing for you right now to signal the importance of this particular section. In the absence of being online, however, let me state that I believe 90 percent of the difficulty in the Christian life is caused because we don't understand the Scriptures well enough. Ninety percent. Biblical studies, I believe, are that crucial.

Broadly speaking, we can divide biblical studies into three components: reading through Scripture, meticulous study of portions of Scripture (often referred to as "exegesis"), and reading books that help us understand what Scripture says. It's a good practice for every Christian to have some type of program for

SACRED PATHWAYS

regularly reading through the Bible, whether it's once a year or once every three years. You don't always have to start at Genesis and conclude with Revelation. I've tried a number of different approaches. You can read one Old Testament book—Genesis, for example—and then one New Testament book—Matthew. Then go back and read Exodus, and follow that up with Mark, and so on. Since there are approximately twice as many Old Testament books as New Testament books, I've found a helpful schedule that begins with Genesis, Psalms, and Matthew and then follows each book in its order—Exodus, Proverbs, Mark, and so on. This splits up the Gospels and some of the more difficult Old Testament accounts.

I can't tell you how many times God has providentially placed something before me that I really needed to hear at just the time I read it. A regular reading program gives God a great tool to speak truth into our hearts. I haven't met a single Christian who reads Scripture daily who isn't enthusiastic about its effects.

If you think you may be an intellectual in your spiritual temperament, this is the place to start. Begin reading Scripture *daily*. Even if you're not an intellectual, daily Scripture reading should be a part of every Christian's life.

We'll also benefit from moving beyond straight reading to giving careful study to particular passages. An excellent book to prepare us for this work is *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart. Another helpful book in this regard is *Knowing Scripture* by R. C. Sproul.

As you begin studying individual books, you may want to consult a few good commentaries and then add other books on the cultural history of the time period about which you're studying, including Bible dictionaries and atlases. Your aim is to increase your understanding of what individual passages actually mean and teach.

INTELLECTUALS

There are sixty-six books in the Bible. If we start devoting six months a year or so to turning a book of the Bible inside out, meticulously studying every passage, reading the commentaries that relate to it, and doing our best to really understand it, we can thoroughly study the entire Bible in our lifetime.

Systematic Theology

Systematic theology is the study of Christian doctrines—salvation, the last things, and the like. There are two excellent books to begin with—J. I. Packer’s *Concise Theology* and R. C. Sproul’s *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*. Both of these volumes provide introductory or refresher samplers of Christian doctrine.

As you move out from these two volumes, you’re going to find particular theological bents within each systematic theology. There are the classics—Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica* and Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, among many others—and your pastor can also help you find a good one-volume or multivolume work that will explain the beliefs of your own tradition.

Systematic theology will touch on some or all of the following topics: God, revelation, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, humankind, salvation, the church, and eschatology (last things). In addition to general collections of systematic theologies, you can read volumes that focus on just one of these topics (for example, the church or the nature of God).

Ethics

Christianity is about what we believe, but it’s also about how we behave. The study of Christian ethics seeks to provide a framework from which Christians can make prayerful decisions. Ethics seeks to answer the question from the Old Testament (made famous by Francis Schaeffer): How shall we then live?

SACRED PATHWAYS

A man who carries out a significant prison ministry told me he has yet to meet a rapist or murderer who isn't convinced he is on his way to heaven. "I believe Jesus is God. Of course I'm going to heaven," they'll tell him, and yet they show little remorse for their previous actions. The study of ethics reminds us of the need for Christian transformation. Salvation is about more than missing hell; it's about being transformed—*changed*—here on earth.

To develop this aspect of your intellect, you may consider reading John Jefferson Davis's *Evangelical Ethics*, John Murray's *Principles of Conduct*, David Wells's *Above All Earthly Powers*, or the classic *The Abolition of Man* by C. S. Lewis. In addition to these introductory volumes, you may also want to consider books that focus on a particular issue, such as poverty, sexual ethics, and the like.

As time moves on, Christians should be actively and increasingly engaged in social issues, not only for our own benefit but for the benefit of society as a whole. Technology is opening up entirely new avenues of ethical discussion: When does life begin? How do we know when natural life ends? Can a nuclear war ever be considered a "just war"? How do we live responsibly in a world where so many are in need?

These are questions many Christians face on a daily basis. We need those with a keen intellectual bent to present the issues, suggest some guidelines, and help us understand Scripture and God's will on the matter.

Apologetics

When I used to commute to work, I liked to spend my commuting time listening to cassette tapes (which demonstrates that I haven't commuted to work in almost two decades). I figured my commute extended my day by about two hours. Rather than merely passing time, I was able to redeem it. One tape in

INTELLECTUALS

particular got me excited like few others have. It was the tape of a “Mars Hill Forum” featuring a Christian pastor, John Rankin, debating Patricia Ireland, head of the National Organization for Women.

Reverend Rankin did a superlative job, winning over a hostile crowd at Smith College. His ability to enter a secular arena and explain the truth and excellence of Christian beliefs left me in stunned awe. I have a great deal of respect for those who can present the Christian faith in an effective manner.

Sometimes God can call us out of our comfort zones, and we need to be ready. Not long after I listened to Reverend Rankin’s tape, a group of students at Swarthmore College asked me to give an evangelistic talk on Jesus’ view of women. I’ve never seen myself as a particularly effective apologist, and I tried to talk the leaders into inviting John Rankin, but one of the students had heard me speak somewhere and was adamant that I come. I prayed about it further and finally accepted.

When you’re used to speaking to Christians, it’s a challenge to face a crowd that is looking for every weak point it can find. These are the types of discussions usually known as “apologetics.” Apologetics concerns how we explain and defend the faith in the midst of unbelief. It also involves defending true Christian doctrine in the face of heresy, especially as propagated in Christian or non-Christian cults. We can call these two branches “external” and “internal” apologetics. The former defends the faith against those who believe Christianity is untrue; the latter defends it from those who claim to be Christian but who hold to teachings that are contrary to true Christian doctrine.

A recent book that may well become a classic apologetic is Tim Keller’s *Reason for God*, ably carrying on the tradition C. S. Lewis established with *Mere Christianity*. Peter Kreeft’s and Ronald Tacelli’s *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* has been described as

a “virtual one-volume, self-study course on essential apologetics,” and in *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?* James Sire uses college-tested material to help university students address the nature of belief and other questions.

For a history of apologetics, you might check out *Classical Reading in Christian Apologetics, AD 100–1800*, edited by Russ Bush. Introductory works to consider include William Lane Craig’s *Apologetics: An Introduction* and Norman Geisler’s *Christian Apologetics*.

For a positive example of a contemporary apologist, I’d encourage you to listen to some of the Mars Hill forums featuring John Rankin. DVDs are available through the Theological Education Institute (www.teinetwork.com). John was trained at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and Harvard Divinity School, so his presentations are not only spiritually sensitive but also well researched and reasoned.

Creeds

The late Dr. Klaus Bockmuehl, who was a professor of theology and ethics at Regent College, often remarked that we need to be reminded of some doctrines every twenty minutes. Creeds help us do that and thus can be powerful tools for spiritual growth. Creeds also reveal the lie in the popular but misguided statement, “As long as we do the right thing, it doesn’t matter what we believe.” How do we know what the right thing is if we don’t know what we believe? Once we dispense with creeds, dogmas, or certain beliefs, we lose our ability to determine if what we are doing is right, and we can be pulled into the diabolical practice of serving Satan while we think we’re serving God.⁴

As much as we may wince when we talk about the importance of creeds—“that heady stuff,” as some might say—intellectuals remind us that they play a crucial role in the advancement of the

INTELLECTUALS

church. Dorothy Sayers, a popular British writer during the Second World War, penned words that remain as relevant today as when they were first written:

It is worse than useless for Christians to talk about the importance of Christian morality, unless they are prepared to take their stand on the fundamentals of Christian theology. It is a lie to say that dogma does not matter; it matters enormously. It is fatal to let people suppose that Christianity is only a mode of feeling; it is vitally necessary to insist that it is first and foremost a rational explanation of the universe. It is hopeless to offer Christianity as a vaguely idealistic aspiration of a simple and consoling kind; it is, on the contrary, a hard, tough, exacting, and complex doctrine, steeped in a drastic and uncompromising realism. And it is fatal to imagine that everybody knows quite well what Christianity is and needs only a little encouragement to practice it. The brutal fact is that . . . not one person in a hundred has the faintest notion what the church teaches about God or man or society or the person of Jesus Christ.⁵

What we believe about God will affect how we serve him, in the same way that what we believe about a person will affect how we treat that person. I remember sitting next to a rather humble-looking man during a lunch break at a conference. We were having a pleasant chat, but in the back of my mind something was bothering me. He looked familiar, but I couldn't place him. His name tag had just his first name on it. All of a sudden it hit me, and I realized I was talking to a former United States senator. "Would you happen to be . . .?" I asked, mentioning his full name.

"As a matter of fact, yes," the senator said, "but don't tell anybody."

Immediately, those close enough to hear what was going on

changed their demeanor. This man in casual clothes suddenly received a new measure of respect. People were more careful with their words. It was interesting to watch people begin to act differently during that lunch as they discovered who he was. Ideally, we may not always act this way, but even the apostle Paul had respect for certain positions. In one instance, he responds rather glibly to a fellow, only to apologize when he is told that this man happens to be the high priest (Acts 23:1–5).

In a similar way, what we know about God will affect how we treat him. If we view our Creator as just a “good buddy” or as a harsh taskmaster and vindictive judge, our lives will be shaped accordingly. Doctrine affects our actions as surely as eyeglasses affect our sight. Thus creeds are essential to help us love God as God deserves to be loved.

Today’s intellectuals serve God by explaining what the Christian faith is and what the Christian faith means. Both parts are essential. Jesus is God (this is a crucial statement of faith), but what does this truth mean for my life?

Creeds are collections of these statements of belief. They may or may not be exhaustive. The Nicene Creed is a foundational creed of Christianity, but this creed doesn’t, for instance, cover every point of belief that Christians need to understand.

There are “ecumenical” creeds, which were designed for and are accepted by the entire visible church, and “domestic” creeds written for particular segments of the church—Presbyterianism or Roman Catholicism, for instance. Intellectuals may want to become familiar with the major creeds, even if they are not a part of his or her tradition. The Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Augsburg Confession, and the Westminster Confession together comprise a good start. For further study, consult Philip Schaff’s three-volume work titled *Creeds of Christendom* or J. N. D. Kelly’s *Early Christian Creeds*.

Developing as an Intellectual

If you score high as an intellectual on the spiritual temperament test, or even if you just want to begin building your mind as a way to love God, choose a discipline that carries the most interest for you. Are you drawn to the challenges of apologetics, or are you the type of person who will be most inspired by the stories of Christian history? Do you need to brush up on your general knowledge of the Bible, or do you need to begin applying your faith in the area of ethics?

This is a lifetime calling. We have as much time as God gives us on this earth to begin handing our minds over, bit by bit, to the truth of God. By the time I die, I want my actions, thoughts, and beliefs to all conform to the image of Christ. This won't happen by accident. Thankfully, we have a great teacher, the Holy Spirit, and a reliable and authoritative group of teachings, the Bible, to help us accomplish this aim.

The Temptations of Intellectuals

There are many benefits gained from incorporating intellectual elements into our faith expressions, but there are dangers as well. Intellectual Christians must be especially aware of three of them.

Loving Controversy

Timothy may have been an intellectual who loved controversy. Paul's two letters to Timothy contain several strong exhortations to avoid those who "devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies" that "promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith" (1 Timothy 1:4). Such

SACRED PATHWAYS

persons “are conceited and understand nothing. They have an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth” (1 Timothy 6:4–5).

These are as much Paul’s warnings to those who are following Timothy as they are exhortations to Timothy himself. But in 2 Timothy, the warnings seem to get personal:

Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth.

2 TIMOTHY 2:23–25

Perhaps Paul realized that Timothy was enjoying correcting other people a little too much. There comes a point when we stop teaching and start arguing. It’s a fine line, but we must make sure we don’t cross it. Discussions devoid of love—that is, arguments aimed at defeating rather than truly caring for the welfare of the other person—are not godly. Paul writes, “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, . . . but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2).

Paul was similarly direct with another young leader, Titus: “Avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless” (Titus 3:9). Paul saw this divisiveness as a very, very serious sin: “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. You may be sure that

INTELLECTUALS

such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned” (verses 10–11).

The mark of a Christian is love and grace, not prideful displays of knowledge.

Knowing Rather Than Doing

Intellectuals have to remember that knowing what is right is not a substitute for doing what is right; on the contrary, knowing what is right gives us a greater obligation to bring our lives into conformity with our understanding. James warns that teachers are subject to a stricter judgment (James 3:1).

According to the book of Proverbs, the truly wise person is someone who actively applies the ways of righteousness they have studied. Right thinking is essential to a healthy Christian existence, and right action is equally essential.

Being Proud

“Gary,” my wife whispered, “you better rescue the pastor.”

We had brought a young man to church who was engaging the pastor in a vigorous discussion, pointing out the “heresy” in the pastor’s sermon. This young man has a good mind, but it is as critical as it is sharp, and unfortunately his discernment has yet to catch up to his intellect.

Pride is a common failing among those with a superior mind. It is demonstrated by the common desire to correct virtually everyone. Some people seem incapable of refraining from passing judgment on others’ intellectual failings. You get the feeling that their sense of self-worth comes from being able to demonstrate their intellectual superiority.

If God has gifted you with an unusually good mind, remember that he has entrusted it to you so you might serve the church, not exalt yourself. Someone with a beautiful voice can still be obnoxious

if he sings at inappropriate times, and someone with a superior mind can still be offensive if she doesn't learn the time and place to engage others in proper discourse.

A High Calling

The Christian church has produced some of history's most brilliant thinkers. We don't have to aspire to the heights reached by John Calvin or Blaise Pascal to make an impact, however. Intellectually inclined believers can play a crucial role in the kingdom of God by witnessing to his truth in communities all across the world through adult Sunday school classes, blogging, and conversations with friends and neighbors.

As one who definitely has an intellectual bent, I crave the stimulation of a mind that's being captured by God's truth. I'm fed by verses that send me into a "deep thinking" mode and delighted when someone helps me understand something I didn't understand before.

What it comes down to is that I've never learned something about God that didn't draw me closer to him. I'm confident this can be the testimony of every Christian who earnestly seeks God's face by expanding his or her understanding.

PART 3

UNDERSTANDING
YOUR SACRED
PATHWAY

TENDING THE GARDEN OF THE SOUL

Suppose two women are each planting a vegetable garden. On the same day, they prepare the earth and plant their seeds. One then neglects her garden and waits for her vegetables to grow. The other woman works in her garden regularly. She puts cages around the young tomato plants, drives in stakes beside those vegetable plants that are going to grow tall, and puts netting around plants that are particularly attractive to rabbits and other animals.

Several months later, the two women go out for the harvest. One finds tomatoes rotting on the ground, beans whose vines had spread among the other plants, weeds that have choked out most of the carrot plants—all of which have been raided by birds and squirrels. She pulls up a handful of food and figures that planting a garden wasn't worth it—the food isn't as good, the harvest is small, and, well, grocery stores are so much more convenient.

Her neighbor, however, harvests a basketful of good vegetables every other day, which all taste much better than grocery store vegetables. She figures that, when everything is added up, she probably saved a good 15 to 20 percent on her grocery bill during the summer months. Both women planted, but only one tended.

I've known Christians who have committed their lives to following Jesus at about the same time, but the influence this commitment had on their lives soon became markedly different.

SACRED PATHWAYS

One lived a life of self-absorption. Christianity made sense, but it became almost a convenience—no need to take it too seriously or to reorder one's life around it. The other person took a different approach. She found ways to make Bible study a regular part of her life. She kept her prayer life fresh and varied. New character traits came to the forefront, and before she knew it, people were asking her for advice and counseling.

Both planted a spiritual garden, but only one tended.

Some of us live with the mistaken impression that our faith needs only to be planted, not tended. Becoming a mature Christian, some think, is like becoming six feet tall—it either happens or it doesn't. This is not the view of those who have written the classics of our faith or the view of many experienced pastors or teachers. Nor is it the view of the writers of Scripture (see, for example, Philippians 2:12–13; 1 Timothy 4:15–16; James 1:4; 2 Peter 1:5–11).

A classical spiritual movement in the Middle Ages encouraged Christians to think of their soul as a garden. I hope this book can build on that imagery, helping us tend the garden of our souls by understanding our spiritual temperaments. The first question we should ask ourselves, then, is “How am I doing in this regard? Have I truly tended my garden, or did I just plant it?”

It may help you to take a step back and evaluate your current devotional life, beginning with the quiet time. What are you doing now, and how well is it working? Does the prospect of another quiet time excite you? Make you feel guilty? Do your quiet times build on each other, or are they beginning to feel like more of a burden than a blessing?

Some Christians may find that a traditional quiet time—twenty to thirty minutes of Bible study, followed by twenty to thirty minutes of prayer and worship—is the best way for them to relate to God 90 percent of the time. These Christians may

TENDING THE GARDEN OF THE SOUL

simply be looking for some supplementary activities for the remaining 10 percent of the time. Other Christians may feel they need a complete spiritual overhaul. Understanding their spiritual temperament will greatly affect the content of their devotional time.

Understanding Your Sacred Pathway

Now that you've learned about each of the nine spiritual temperaments, you're ready to determine your spiritual personality. Remember that you will probably have more than one dominant temperament.

What's more, spiritual temperaments can evolve over time. Just as a married couple will express their love for each other differently in their fifties than they did in their twenties, so our love relationship with God undergoes changes as we mature and walk through life. The evaluations from chapters 3–11 describe where you are right now and what activities you will find most helpful as you seek to grow spiritually today. You can then move on to incorporate and learn from other temperaments.

You have already filled in your score for each of the temperaments:

- _____ Naturalist
- _____ Sensate
- _____ Traditionalist
- _____ Ascetic
- _____ Activist
- _____ Caregiver
- _____ Enthusiast
- _____ Contemplative
- _____ Intellectual

SACRED PATHWAYS

The higher your score in each category, the more it corresponds to who you are. List each temperament in the order of its importance in your life:

Discovering our strong tendencies and predominant spiritual temperament gives us the information we need to construct a comprehensive plan for spiritual growth.

The Interplay of Our Spiritual Temperaments

When I took the test, I scored strongest in the naturalist category, followed by the intellectual. The ascetic temperament was a strong third. Therefore, I can reasonably assume that for me to be spiritually healthy, I need to spend a good deal of time outdoors (naturalist). Second, I need to engage in activities that challenge my mind (intellectual). Finally, I can be reasonably sure I have a strong need for discipline and solitude (ascetic).

TENDING THE GARDEN OF THE SOUL

If I were reading this book for the first time, I would go back and reread the three chapters corresponding to my three strongest temperaments. I could then begin writing a “spiritual prescription” based on some of the suggestions in those chapters. At least once a week, I’ll want to spend some time going on a prayer walk through the woods. On a regular basis, I’ll need to make sure I’m continuing to study. Perhaps I’ll need to download more teachings or order more books. Also, I should begin respecting my need for discipline and solitude.

I’m not suggesting we feed our souls only what they want—and thus risk shrinking them. There is a time and a place for stretching into new experiences, but few of us want to experiment with a new, exotic meal every night. Once we’ve discovered what draws us into God’s presence, we can explore new areas of nourishment, knowing there’s always something tried-and-true to fall back on.

This gives us a long-term view of Christian spirituality. For example, I sometimes struggle with the demands of a very visible, people-oriented job. I frequently speak at banquets and conferences. If anything is going to make me feel run-down after a while, it’s being confined to a cramped hotel room and talking before large groups—particularly the “small talk” before and after, at which I never feel particularly adept.

Yet my job requires me to do this. It’s what God has called me to do now, so I need to make allowances for spiritual nourishment within this context. To keep my sanity, I have to schedule time to get outside when I’m on the road (not a problem at retreats but more difficult at conferences), and I almost always reject the idea of sleeping in someone’s house. I need—not just want—time alone, without any demands of propriety or politeness. Otherwise I’ll grow frustrated with my responsibilities and unable to fulfill my calling.

On a recent men’s retreat, I traveled to the location with three other men, talking all the way. I spoke that evening and twice on Saturday morning, but on Saturday afternoon, I slipped away by

SACRED PATHWAYS

myself to catch a ten-mile run on a local battlefield. Some men had initially talked to me about joining me for the run, which I was open to, but when I said I planned to run about ten miles, they playfully responded, “We’ll pray for you. Have fun.” In the aftermath, I was grateful I could be alone that afternoon—being in the woods, praying on my own, sweating in the sun, talking with God. It was the perfect time of refreshment for me, giving me the needed boost for the rest of the weekend. Some Christians get recharged by getting together and talking about what has happened or just kicking back and enjoying each other’s company. I prefer to be alone, to think and pray and wind down slowly.

I used to struggle with this need, wondering if I was being selfish. However, now I know that if I serve God in a blazing two weeks, or a blazing ten years, and then become burned-out for long periods of time, I will not have been a good steward of my life. I want to faithfully serve God for fifty or sixty or seventy years, which means I need to consider how I can be spiritually replenished.

On his deathbed a great Christian evangelist said, “God gave me a message and a horse to carry that message. I have beaten the horse to death, and now I can no longer carry the message.” The horse was his body, but it could also have been his soul.

I’ve met too many godly men and women who were burned-out before they entered their most productive years. Sometimes burnout led them to quit the ministry and never look back. Others have sought escape through illicit activity and brought scandal on the church of Christ. If God grants it, I want to be serving him just as zealously in my sixties, seventies, and eighties as I am now. Twenty years from now, I don’t want to have gained vital and precious experience but have lost my motivation and joy.

If we tend our garden, we’ll have plenty of food with which to feed others. If we give our garden just cursory attention, we may have enough to feed just ourselves. If we completely neglect

TENDING THE GARDEN OF THE SOUL

our garden, we're going to be so hungry we'll become "consumer" Christians, feeding off of others.

Discovering our spiritual temperament is a means by which we can achieve the desired ends—knowing God and obeying his call on our life. The Puritans called the Sabbath the "market day of the soul," a special day to care for our inner world and spend extra time relating to our God. The problem is that some of us try to take a shortcut and fulfill God's call without receiving God's nourishment. Disaster lies down that road. Another temptation is to judge one spiritual temperament as better than another.

Tolerance for Temperaments

During my first year of college, I started getting very excited about studying the Bible—not just reading it but really studying it. I began with the book of Romans and spent hours poring over the first few verses. The letter begins with Paul writing, "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle." This catapulted me into several days of studying the words *servant* and *apostle*. I hadn't studied Greek yet, but I searched through commentaries, concordances, and word studies.

The leader of my small group found out what I was doing and raised some questions. "The best type of Bible study," he said, "is inductive, not deductive. You need to discover for yourself what the Bible means, not have people tell you what it means through commentaries." In his mind, I was breaking a cardinal rule. The "holy" method of Bible study was to sit before an open Bible and interpret it in light of your own experience.

During this time, I was as shortsighted as my leader. I thought a fellow Bible study member was "cheating" because he took walks down by the bay or through the woods and counted them as "quiet

times.” *That’s not a quiet time*, I thought. *You need an intercessory prayer list and a Bible study notebook to have a real quiet time.*

Both my leader and I needed to be more tolerant. Every true spiritual path has Jesus Christ at its center, but in Christ there are many ways for us to express our faith. Maybe my Bible study leader didn’t like to use commentaries or word studies, but was his method any holier than mine? Was my friend’s method of walking by the bay any less holy than my method of praying through a list of family members, fellow Christians, foreign countries, and friends who didn’t know the Lord?

I’m hesitant to use the word *tolerance* because it has been so abused today. Tolerance is not the chief virtue that our culture has made it out to be, nor is it justification for accepting what the Bible considers abhorrent behavior. However, it is an important virtue, especially when it comes to the issue of tolerating different spiritual temperaments.

Different personality types often have a difficult time working and living together. Some mixes are recipes for disaster. But even though we’re talking about spiritual temperaments and not personality types, the overall principle is the same. It’s difficult for us to understand—and even more difficult to appreciate—people who approach something (in this case, Someone) differently than we do.

We must be careful not to invalidate another’s expression of faith simply because it differs from our own. Pastors especially must be sensitive to the spiritual temperaments of their people. In the seventeenth century, Richard Baxter wrote the all-time classic on pastoral work—and *The Reformed Pastor* is still read in many seminaries today as a model of effective pastoral ministry. Baxter stresses the importance of giving individual attention to each church member. The application today, I think, is to respect the ways in which different people nourish their souls.

As a writer, speaker, and discipler, I’ve had to try to understand

TENDING THE GARDEN OF THE SOUL

what makes people tick. I must confess that certain spiritual temperaments make me bristle. If I were in a church full of one or two particular temperaments, I think I'd go crazy. But that doesn't mean I believe these spiritual temperaments are any less valid than the ones that predominate in my life.

Parents, your children may love God in a way that is totally different from the way you have learned to love God. Husbands and wives, your spouse may love God in a way you just don't understand. Pastor, your church members may have an altogether different expression of devotion from the one you're familiar with. Can we still respect these "different" Christians? Can we, in Christian humility, encourage others to nurture their souls in ways that are most effective for them, as long as they remain true to orthodoxy and the historic Christian faith? I hope we would all answer yes.

A danger related to intolerance is segregation. As I've taught this material in various settings, I've become sensitized to the depth of feeling with which Christians view their favored ways of worshipping God. At one church, a woman came up to me and said, "What am I supposed to do when I realize I'm in the completely wrong church for my temperament?"

I believe we would seriously impoverish God's church if we created "The First Church of the Activist," "The Second Church of the Traditionalist," or "The Outdoor Chapel of the Naturalist." We need to learn from each other rather than segregate ourselves within our own confining experiences. As our own children grew older, I became grateful that through other members of the congregation, they witnessed a variety of expressions of personal devotion. How sad if I had limited them to my own small experience of worship by allowing them to hang around only with people who are just like us.

I also think people expect entirely too much of their church. A pastor who reviewed this book in its early stages wrote in the margin, "I think you've told me why pastors hear so much criticism of

SACRED PATHWAYS

worship services and so little praise: a particular variety of service will only please one-ninth of Christians!”

My pastor friend is right: Each church is full of conflicting temperaments. It is unreasonable to expect everyone’s spiritual needs to be fully met by an hour-long service every seven days. It is my hope that this book will make it easier for people to supplement the corporate worship service with their own regular devotional times. Then during church they can focus on the corporate call of the Christian faith and how they can reach out to others.

It is idolatry to demand that one teacher give you everything you need to grow in your faith. A pastor is frequently given the charge to teach one hundred or more other individuals, all of whom are in different stages of life, vocation, and faith. It is also questionable to assume that a full life of worship can be developed in just sixty minutes a week of corporate time. If all your worship needs can be met in one hour a week, your need for worship is far too small!

A healthier approach is to develop a life of faith, prayer, and worship that feeds into the life of the church. Rather than criticize the church service, learn how to add to it. Maybe your perspective isn’t represented, but perhaps those in charge of leading the worship service can learn from your temperament. They may not want to incorporate your suggestion into every worship service, but perhaps they’ll consider it every few weeks or so.

I hope this book will teach us that there is more than one spiritual prescription for growth. God is bigger—much, much bigger—than we can possibly know in our own limited experience.

How Does Your Garden Look?

We were made to love God. Think about that for a minute: *We were made to love God.* Like the two gardeners mentioned at the

TENDING THE GARDEN OF THE SOUL

beginning of this chapter, each of us stands before an open plot of land. God will scour heaven and earth to provide us with what we need to plant and maintain a beautiful garden of love, intimacy, and fellowship with him. Not a second of our existence passes without God thinking about how to turn our hearts toward him. Not one single second.

The almost unbelievable joy is that you can enjoy a relationship with God that he will have with no one else. *And God eagerly, passionately, yearns for that relationship to begin.* God is just as eager to love and know you as he was to know Moses, David, and Mary. You are no less precious to him than were these heroes of the faith. But each one of these saints spent time cultivating and growing their relationship with God. Each one made knowing God the chief passion of their hearts.

Will you respond to this same invitation today?

COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY: THE SACRED PATHWAYS AND THE ENNEAGRAM

When I'm writing a book, I usually feel like an architect who is designing a house. What should the front door (opening) look like? Where's the roof (topic)? How far apart should the walls be (thinking about the audience)? How many rooms (chapters)?

Writing *Sacred Pathways* was different in every way. I felt more like an archaeologist than an architect, dusting off the bones of something that was already there. I don't want to sound too mystical, but the writing process felt more like *discovery* than *design*. In my initial proposal to the publisher, I thought I'd simply be discussing ways to enjoy creative quiet times. Then, out of seemingly nowhere, these nine temperaments started appearing. When I talked to my editor about it, she urged me to run with them. "This is good, fresh, and creative," she said, and out popped the nine sacred pathways.

Since the publication of the first edition of *Sacred Pathways* in 1996, I have often been asked by interviewers and enthusiastic readers where the pathways came from. I use the archaeologist analogy

with some trepidation, not wanting to give the wrong impression. I'm not claiming biblical divine inspiration, but I also can't in good conscience claim full authorship. I truly believe a gift of God's Spirit helped me get these down.

The natural sources I used were primarily scriptural characters and occasional passages from Christian classics that are focused on spiritual direction. Later, I saw how many of the pathways seemed to correlate with denominational differences or even the different strains of Christian traditions. While it was interesting to look at the pathways in light of the Myers-Briggs test, that test really wasn't a factor in coming up with the nine descriptions.

The Age of the Enneagram

It's a happy coincidence that there are nine sacred pathways and nine points on the Enneagram. I didn't consult the Enneagram when writing *Sacred Pathways*, in large part because in the early 1990s, not too many people were even talking about the Enneagram. I had vaguely heard of it but wasn't at all familiar with it.

Now, having studied the Enneagram a bit, I don't believe you can draw a direct correlation between the numbers on the Enneagram and the sacred pathways. A few seem like natural fits—caregivers are often number 2s, for example; 5s seem to resemble ascetics or intellectuals; 6s could fit in well with the traditionalists; 7s may lean toward the enthusiast pathway; and many 8s could feel some pull toward the activist pathway—but I think you'd distort both the Enneagram and the pathways by trying to force a one-to-one comparison.

What I've come to believe is that the Enneagram and the pathways have different but complementary purposes. According to Enneagram specialists Ian Morgan Cron and Suzanne Stabile, "The

COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

purpose of the Enneagram is to develop self-knowledge and learn how to recognize and dis-identify with the parts of our personalities that limit us so we can be reunited with our truest and best selves.”¹ The sacred pathways are all about finding out how you best relate to, or connect with, God. Understanding yourself better *can* help you relate to God better, just as connecting with God can help you understand yourself much better. These are complementary aims, but they are not identical aims.

Dr. Shane Wood, professor of New Testament studies at Ozark Christian College, is well-versed in the Enneagram and is also familiar with the pathways. The two of us have enjoyed some enlightening discussions about how they best cooperate. Dr. Wood finds their connection in Matthew 22:37–39, where Jesus is questioned about the greatest commandment in the law. “Jesus’ response is startling,” Dr. Wood says. “He starts with the great Shema from Deuteronomy 6—‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ So far, no surprises. But then comes the strange line in verse 39: ‘And the second is like [the first]’—to which I ask: *What in the world could be like the first, that is, loving God with all my heart?* Jesus continues, ‘Love your neighbor *as yourself.*’

“It’s in those last two lines that I see a link between the sacred pathways and the Enneagram, for if we don’t know how to love ourselves, or in other words, ‘to understand self’—the Enneagram—then we won’t know how to love our neighbors, *and* we won’t know how to love God, which is the first greatest commandment *and* the goal of the sacred pathways.”

One of Dr. Wood’s favorite metaphors for the use of the Enneagram is that we are all “incarcerated” by our early wounds and need to be able to understand our prison walls so we can “explore what will delight us and set us free in relationship to God.” In this view, you could call the Enneagram the key that unlocks

SACRED PATHWAYS

the door through which you meet with God in the most satisfying, intimate way.

In *Sacred Pathways*, I mention the greatest commandment as it is quoted in Mark 12:30–31, which addresses four dimensions through which we dedicate ourselves to God: heart, soul, mind, and strength. Dr. Wood points out that the Enneagram is composed of three triads: the heart triad (2, 3, 4), the head triad (5, 6, 7), and the body triad (8, 9, 1). He says, “What the Enneagram lacks, though, is something that focuses on the soul. A GPS needs to know where you’re starting from and where you’re going. The Enneagram is the *starting point*, the layers of defense mechanisms, and Scripture reveals to us our *destination*—connection with the triune God. Yet oftentimes a GPS will offer multiple routes to the same location, and that’s where I see the importance of the sacred pathways.”

Spiritual Surgeons

When facing a seriously ill patient, doctors often prescribe different medications at the same time to address different issues. For instance, one prescription addresses pain, while the other relaxes the muscles. The wise spiritual surgeon will also have a variety of resources with which to care for the soul in all its neediness. Sometimes you need to address spiritual “pain”; other times you may need to lead the soul toward relaxation.

The Enneagram addresses the pain. Enneagram scholar Richard Rohr writes, “With the Enneagram, the question is: Why in our encounter with life do we human beings so often keep running up against ourselves instead of making a breakthrough to God, to the Totally Other?”² Based on this insight, we could say that *the Enneagram removes the roadblocks that may keep us from pursuing or*

COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

even being aware of any particular pathway. The Enneagram is the medicine dealing with the pain so that spiritual surgery can begin.

Once we are freed from our pain and bondage, we can be released for the joy and freedom of relating to God along the lines of our sacred pathway(s).

If you're familiar with the Enneagram, you know that in addition to assigning you one of nine numbers (with each number having a "wing"), there are three "triads" in which the numbers are grouped. Spiritual mentors often recommend certain spiritual practices (recognized through the ages) that may help bring healing to each triad. I didn't write the pathways thinking about "healing" as much as about "delight" and "connection," but of course delighting in God and connecting with God are healing experiences.

Rohr recommends that the "gut triad" of the Enneagram (numbers 8, 9, 1) find spiritual healing in what I would call either the ascetic or contemplative sacred pathways. I doubt Rohr is familiar with the pathways, so I'm applying his general advice that the gut triad pursue the kinds of activities that mark what I call ascetics and contemplatives in the sacred pathways framework. Having said that, I also think a lot of 8s would likely feel right at home in the activist pathway.

The heart triad (2, 3, 4) may feel most comfortable in the caregiver or enthusiast pathways but they may *need* the ascetic and contemplative pathways to get over their tendency to depend on others.

The head triad (5, 6, 7) may gravitate toward the intellectual pathway. Yet when Rohr writes that "concrete forms of meditation (e.g., looking at pictures), in which they can pick something up, also appeal to these people," he's describing the sensate pathway.³ Reading these accounts makes me think the head triad may find a comfortable fit in the traditionalist pathway as well. What they may *need*, however (as oppose to *want*), would be the activist

SACRED PATHWAYS

pathway—to get out of their heads and focus on the needs of others.

The healing arts, both medically and spiritually, are called “arts” for a reason. They are based in science *and* creative application. This is no less true for spiritual surgery. All we can do is provide the tools (the Enneagram and the sacred pathways), but it’s up to the spiritual surgeon to creatively apply the truth.

The same chisel and rasp wielded by Michelangelo was available to any sixteenth-century sculptor with vastly different results, but, of course, Michelangelo created works unlike any other. Why? He mastered *both* the science and the art.

Wake Up, Sleeper

Augustine famously wrote, “Thus with the baggage of this present world was I held down pleasantly, as in sleep.”²⁴ Throughout the ages, many classical writers and thinkers agreed with Augustine, often likening our existence to people who sleepwalk through life, dead to what brings true life and true joy—even true happiness. We are desperate but blind, so we expend a lot of energy looking for love in all the wrong places.

To describe this phenomenon, Dr. Wood quotes Ephesians 5:14:

“Wake up, sleeper,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”

The Enneagram is all about “waking us up.” In this sense, if you’re a 2 on the Enneagram, you might try to practice a noncorresponding sacred pathway, because you might be a 2 for all the

COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

wrong reasons. Dr. Wood suggests, “The Enneagram begins with the idea that we’re all sleepwalking, moving on automatic in our soul space, trying to cope with the pain of being separated from God. For the enneatype 2s, then, the *caregiving* is not their pathway home but the way they are uniquely broken, uniquely incarcerated. What a 2 needs is to find unique ways to move toward the pathway of ascetics, because they are in a constant state of comparing themselves to others for their identity—whereas the solitude of the ascetic pathway challenges them to find their identity *not* in comparison to others but from God alone in solitude. Similarly, the 8s do seem to parallel the activist pathway, but the unique point of the Enneagram is that the 8s do this as a defense mechanism, believing that more and more confrontation will help them return home, when in reality it simply incarcerates them further. What 8s may need, then, is to move toward the caregiver pathway, indicated by the line connecting the 8s to the 2s on the Enneagram. In other words, the parallels between the enneatypes and the pathways may have less to do with what the type looks like in comparison to the pathways and more to do with which pathways will counter the false beliefs found in each enneatype.”

Dr. Wood describes the goal of the Enneagram as “to heal yourself so that you are able to heal others.” I believe the goal of the pathways is to be filled with God so that you can bring others to him and represent him well. Again, two complementary aims.

The pathways and the Enneagram both point toward healthier communities. Dr. Wood states, “If you don’t know how to connect with the image of God in you, then you will overlook the image of God in others.” That leads to judgment, prejudice, hatred, and malice instead of compassion, encouragement, kindness, love, and unity.

Both the Enneagram and the pathways help me appreciate God’s divine design and skill in creating people who are different

SACRED PATHWAYS

from me in fundamental ways, not to *judge* them but to *appreciate* them and to worship God accordingly. Flowers are beautiful; mountains are majestic; scorpions are perplexing; and the ocean feels transcendent—and yet all of them are beautiful in their own way. The Enneagram and the sacred pathways, employed rightly, will create increased personal freedom *and* increased respect for others, which are two desperate needs in today's church. There is no creator like God who has fashioned so many different sides, shades, and colors of beauty in the physical world and in people.

This leads to an important observation made by numerous Enneagram scholars who stress something about the Enneagram that I believe is equally true of the pathways: we are not to evaluate or compare our numbers. No number (or pathway) is “better” than another. We are all fallen, and we can all be gifts to God's church. Every pathway has blessings, and every pathway has its own temptations. The church is richer when worship is experienced through all nine pathways rather than fighting over whether the intellectual is a more “biblical” pathway than, say, the sensate. The church is a greater representation of God than any one individual, however devout.

Another connection between the Enneagram and the pathways is that most Enneagram authors will say everyone has a little bit of every number in them. In the same way, most Christians enjoy experiencing many of the pathways. I use the word *blend* more fluidly than I think Enneagram writers do (though, in fairness, they talk about wings), and I certainly speak of the fluidity of the pathways (growing up as an enthusiast, moving to a traditionalist or naturalist, ending up as a contemplative) in a way that no Enneagram writer I know of would ever talk about the “fluidity” of the Enneagram. With the Enneagram, you're pretty much wed to your number for life; the pathways can be far more seasonal.

Another big difference between the two is that while Enneagram

numbers often originate (at least in part) from “original wounds” or “childhood wounds” (two different ways of trying to describe the same general concept), the pathways aren’t at all about woundedness; they are entirely about what brings us the most delight, intimacy, and connection with God. Rather than the pathways originating from hurt, they are drawn out by delight—not what was done to us, but what we like to do.

Opening Windows to God

A common refrain I keep hearing from Enneagram enthusiasts is, “You can only take people as far as you have gone.” This is to answer the question, “Why go through the work of addressing my hurts, understanding my weaknesses, and unlocking my gifts?”—because it is, indeed, a lot of work to go through all this. If you want to use the Enneagram as a tool toward transformation, you have a lot of work ahead of you. Merely becoming familiar with them so you can create a “parlor game” to amuse friends and entertain people during a dinner party may do more harm than good.

But this line—“You can only take people as far as you have gone”—may be where the pathways and the Enneagram diverge. Spiritual formation isn’t about pulling people up to our level; it’s about opening the window to God and letting him pull the people up to his level. I can’t be all nine pathways (though I believe Jesus displayed all of them), but I can point people to their pathway and wait for God to provide insight and delight via an avenue I have never experienced myself. I don’t have to be a contemplative to know how rich that pathway is for so many.

And for me, that’s the joy of pointing people away from self and toward God. In his presence we find our highest delight and joy. That’s why I love teaching on the sacred pathways. Helping people

SACRED PATHWAYS

connect with the God they were created to love is one of the highest and greatest honors on this good but fallen planet.

I'll never forget being invited to a church outside Johannesburg, South Africa. The leadership there had read, studied, and appreciated *Sacred Pathways* and had built a chapel designed to accommodate all nine pathways to various degrees. The church was large enough that they met in an auditorium on Sunday morning, but the chapel was designed for private worship throughout the week.

Being there was one of my first experiences in trying to communicate truth in a truly cross-cultural context in which I spoke a different language. Flying out of Johannesburg, I really wasn't sure how well the time had gone. But as I sat on the plane for the long journey back to the United States, I could hear God's gentle voice: "Teaching others how to love me and relate to me is one of the best gifts you could give to me." Whether or not I was successful, God knew my heart and my aim, and that pleased him.

In the same way, I pray that many will pick up this book and embrace the joy of all joys—relating to God according to the way God designed you to relate to him, and then teaching others to do the same. There is no greater end in life than this.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

Compiled by Gary Thomas and
Lynette Marie Galisewski

Chapter 1: Loving God

1. Were you taught about a “quiet time” (daily devotional time alone with God, studying the Bible, and praying) early on in your faith experience? If so, how was it described? Has it proven helpful?
2. Have your devotional times evolved as you’ve gotten older? Have they become an increasingly important part of your life, or are they slowly fading away?
3. How has your church background affected the way you spend time alone with God? What have been the positives and negatives of this influence?
4. Before reading further, what would you guess are your primary pathways? Have you ever thought of them in this light before?

Chapter 2: Where Is Your Gethsemane?

1. Were you able to identify your own “Gethsemane,” a place or an activity that has been consistently rich and helpful in building intimacy with God on a daily basis? Describe it.
2. Are you more prone to prioritize service over prayer, or prayer over service? How has your choice affected your spiritual walk? Do you think you need to make a change? If so, what might it involve?
3. Describe a time when you felt as though you were in a devotional rut. What helped you get out of it?
4. How does Gary’s idea of being “married” to God instead of “dating” him provide guidance for building a long-term life of devotion?

Chapter 3: Naturalists

1. Which aspects of the naturalist’s path to connecting with God seem most helpful or intriguing to you? Which aspects seem least interesting?
2. Do you consider the outdoors primarily a place of spiritual wonder, a place of recreation, or a place you’d rather escape to from the indoors? Discuss some of your favorite times outside.
3. Read Psalms 8 and 23. How does being out in nature trigger David’s awareness of and appreciation for God?
4. Talk about some of the lessons you’ve learned from spending time outdoors. Was being outside simply a place where you could hear God’s voice, or did God use something natural (the shape of a tree, an ant colony’s

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

movement, the color of a rainbow) to inspire or instruct or challenge you? What might help you become more open to this in the future?

5. Are there any temptations naturalists may face other than the ones Gary mentioned? If so, what might they be?
6. How would you counsel someone who isn't particularly inclined toward being a naturalist to explore using the outdoors for his or her personal devotions?

Chapter 4: Sensates

1. Which aspects of the sensate's path to connecting with God seem most helpful or intriguing to you? Which aspects seem least interesting?
2. Have you ever had a "Henri Nouwen" moment when God used a stunning painting, photograph, or song to open up your heart to him in a new way? If so, describe it.
3. As you read Ezekiel 1:4–28; 3:1–3, consider each of these senses:
 - sight
 - sound
 - touch
 - smell
 - taste

How does Ezekiel's vision of God in heaven incorporate each sense? As you read this, are your senses stimulated to draw you into God's presence more fully? If so, describe.

4. Do you find that beauty (in any form) transports you into God's presence, or does it distract you from your focus on him? Why?

SACRED PATHWAYS

5. How can churches do a better job of incorporating all five senses into their worship services?
6. Design a “sensual” experience (using all five senses) to interface with God. What were your reactions to that experience? Did it add or detract from your sense of God’s presence?

Chapter 5: Traditionalists

1. Which aspects of the traditionalist’s path to connecting with God seem most helpful or intriguing to you? Which aspects seem least interesting?
2. How can developing the three elements of the traditionalist pathway enhance your awareness and worship of God?
 - ritual (or liturgical pattern)
 - symbol (or significant image)
 - sacrifice
3. Why do you think religion is usually thought of as a danger rather than as a pathway to intimate worship of God? What are the marks of a religion that is divorced from true faith?
4. Read Exodus 12:21–27. God was doing something momentous in the life of the Hebrew nation, freeing them from slavery in Egypt. He wanted them to memorialize this event as a true “God thing” in their history so that they would never forget his miraculous rescue.
 - What does he call them to do as a *ritual*? (See Exodus 12:1–14 as well.)
 - What *symbol(s)* does he initiate as triggers for remembrance?
 - What *sacrifice* was involved?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

5. Read Luke 22:7–20. Jesus' last meal before going to the cross was the Passover celebration at which he instituted a new memorial for his followers. What do the bread and wine symbolize? What are the parallels between the Passover shedding of a lamb's blood and Jesus' shedding of his own blood (see Isaiah 53 as well)? How can Communion take on new meaning as you embrace the elements Jesus gave us in remembrance of him?
6. How could keeping a scheduled prayer time or adopting a rule of prayer help someone who has never learned how to pray? Are there any dangers in these two approaches to prayer? What are the potential benefits?
7. On pages 94–97, Gary discusses various temptations of the traditionalist. Do any of them resonate with you? If so, describe.
8. Create a traditionalist experience this week, such as attending a liturgical church service, praying according to a schedule or with a rule of prayer, or developing a few symbols that will be meaningful for you. Describe what you did and how it was helpful (or unhelpful).

Chapter 6: Ascetics

1. Which aspects of the ascetic's path to connecting with God seem most helpful or intriguing to you? Which aspects seem least interesting?
2. How might developing each of these three disciplines enhance your connection with God?
 - solitude
 - austerity
 - strictness

SACRED PATHWAYS

3. Read Matthew 4:1–11. Before Jesus launched his public ministry, he sought his Father in solitude, austerity, and strictness in the Judean wilderness. With what does Satan tempt him? How does Jesus respond? Satan promised Jesus things he would eventually get in God's perfect timing and way but tempted him to take the shortcut around the pain (especially the cross) to get to that point. As you think about some of the ways that Satan has tempted you, what can this incident in Jesus' life teach you about enduring the difficulty involved in your own fulfillment of God's purpose for your life?
4. Where was Amos when God called him (see Amos 1:1)? Ezekiel (see Ezekiel 1:1)? John the Baptist (see Luke 1:80)? How can the practices of the ascetics prepare us for ministry?
5. Which temptations of the ascetics are you most likely to fall prey to?
 - overemphasizing personal piety
 - seeking pain for its own sake
 - seeking to gain God's favor by your efforts
6. What do you think Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant when he wrote that if we do not have some element of the ascetic in us, we will find it difficult to follow Christ? Do you believe this statement to be true? Why or why not?
7. Create an ascetic experience this week by adopting one of the following: a night watch, a period of silence, a fast, a work for the Lord, a personal retreat, a hardship that you intentionally endure. Describe your experience.

Chapter 7: Activists

1. Which aspects of the activist's path to connecting with God seem most helpful or intriguing to you? Which aspects seem least interesting?
2. Read Isaiah 58:6–12. God is calling his people out of the complacency of merely seeking personal holiness (through fasting and religious obligations) and urging them to become deeply concerned about social injustices as well. In this passage, what issues most concern God? What actions does God call Israel to? What are the promised personal benefits that follow our obedience to God's agenda?
3. Gary constantly warns against becoming arrogant, jaded, or harsh in our efforts to bring about change in society for Jesus' sake. How would embracing the truth of Micah 6:8 help guard against this?
4. Can you think of a contemporary activist who inspires you? What is it about him or her that makes this person's faith contagious? Think about someone who turns you off. Is there something that makes his or her expression of faith unhealthy or problematic, or do you just not feel kindly toward activists? Has this chapter changed your view of activists in any way? If so, how?
5. For many of us, it's easier to fly under the radar of confrontation and enjoy the peace of our personal walk with God. In Luke 19:45–48, what got Jesus fired up enough to make an active issue of injustice and unrighteousness? What inspires you to become more active?

SACRED PATHWAYS

6. Discuss the difference between being an activist in *temperament* and an activist as *an occasional obligation*.
7. How can the church help activists to express their faith as a part of devotion, while avoiding the temptations Gary warns about on pages 135–38?
8. Given your area of concern, what one thing can you do this week to act on your conviction? Pray about it and ask God for the right wisdom, motivation, and attitude to honor him in your activism. Record your thoughts or discoveries here.

Chapter 8: Caregivers

1. Which aspects of the caregiver's path to connecting with God seem most helpful or intriguing to you? Which aspects seem least interesting?
2. Jesus, the consummate caregiver, was unique among religious leaders in his call to care for the poor and needy. In his first sermon as he launches his public ministry, Jesus quotes a messianic prophecy from Isaiah. Read Luke 4:16–21. How closely does Jesus' ministry focus reflect the church's emphasis today? How could adopting Jesus' mindset help us build closer lives of intimacy with our heavenly Father?
3. Is there any difference between loving others as an act of obedience, and loving others as an act of worship toward God?
4. Read Matthew 25:31–46. These verses call us to see Jesus in the people around us, and to treat them with the care and concern we would feel if Jesus were in that needy place. How would your interactions with the needs

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

around you change if you truly embraced this mindset/
heart-set?

5. Have you ever met a true caregiver—someone who seems dedicated to loving God by loving others? What impressed you about this person?
6. How can you enlarge the view that restricts worship to singing, broadening it to include *acts* you might do, such as giving care? Why do you think worship is often primarily known as simply singing songs?
7. Do you relate to any of the temptations of the caregiver on pages 156–58? If so, describe and explore how caregivers can guard themselves against these failings.
8. Design a caregiving opportunity this week that is all about worship—loving God by loving others. Describe the situation and your sense of God’s presence as you perform this act.

Chapter 9: Enthusiasts

1. Which aspects of the enthusiast’s path to connecting with God seem most helpful or intriguing to you? Which aspects seem least interesting?
2. Gary talks about “the mystery of faith.” What does he mean by this phrase, and how does this concept/experience feed the enthusiast’s walk with God?
3. Read Genesis 24:1–27. Abraham’s servant involved God in a mysterious way as he sought to find the right woman to marry Abraham’s son Isaac. Have you had similar “mysterious” or “coincidental” experiences that can only be attributed to God’s orchestration of your life? If so, describe.

SACRED PATHWAYS

4. Has God ever spoken to you through a dream? How did you eventually determine that it was actually God communicating to you? What are the dangers of opening yourself up to this type of experience?
5. We all know people (or perhaps *are* people!) who act as if they have the inside scoop on everything that God is up to, not only in their own lives, but in everyone else's as well. What suggestions woven throughout the chapter can keep the enthusiast in balance in his or her walk with God?
6. Have you ever lived in a state of expectancy, making yourself available and waiting for God to use you in surprising or even mysterious ways? What was it like? How would you counsel someone who makes himself or herself available but nothing much ever seems to happen?
7. Read 2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12–23. What keeps you from celebrating God as David did? Why do you think Michal despised David for his actions? What lessons can you learn from this?
8. Have you ever sensed God's presence as you were in the act of creating something? What were you doing? How can you use hobbies or interests as regular acts of worship?
9. Create an opportunity this week to unleash the elements of mystery, celebration, creation, or deep worship. Write your experiences and discoveries here.

Chapter 10: Contemplatives

1. Which aspects of the contemplative's path to connecting with God seem most helpful or intriguing to you? Which aspects seem least interesting?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

2. Sensing God's deep love for you isn't something you can demand or force. It is a gift from God, a breeze of awareness that blows on your soul. How can you hoist the sails of your heart to capture the breeze and let it propel you into his very presence?
3. Read Song of Songs 5:10–16—an almost embarrassing account of all the things this woman adores about her beloved. Falling in love with God is quickened by taking time to focus on all the things we love and appreciate about God. What does your “love list” for God look like? Write it out on a sheet of paper.
4. How might these “acts of contemplatives” help you grow in this path of adoring God more intentionally?
 - the Jesus prayer
 - secret acts of devotion
 - dancing prayer
 - centering prayer
 - prayer of the heart
 - stations of the cross
 - meditative prayer
5. What are the dangers of having a spiritual pathway that feeds off of feelings and spiritual experience? How can contemplatives guard against these dangers?
6. What can someone who doesn't enjoy being alone learn from the contemplatives? What can activists learn from them? Enthusiasts? Caregivers? What can contemplatives learn from the other temperaments?
7. Create some “alone time” with God this week to be still in his presence. Choose one of the acts of the contemplatives, and record your experience.

Chapter 11: Intellectuals

1. Which aspects of the intellectual's path to connecting with God seem most helpful or intriguing to you? Which aspects seem least interesting?
2. Has learning something new about someone ever completely changed the way you looked at them and thought about them? How might this same principle apply in the way you think about and worship God?
3. Solomon, considered one of the wisest men to have ever lived, wrote the book of Proverbs to instruct his sons in the ways of God. Read Proverbs 2:1–15. What does Solomon tell his sons to seek and acquire? What will wisdom and knowledge do for the person who truly seeks them? How are understanding, wisdom, and knowledge connected with loving and knowing God?
4. Seeking knowledge for the sake of accumulating more facts or winning an argument can be an exercise in pride and result in arrogance. How does God want to use intellectual growth and theological understanding to draw you closer to him? How can it help you become more like Christ?
5. Gary zeroes in on five classic disciplines of theological training. How could study in these areas help you grow in your walk with God?
 - church history (stories of faith)
 - biblical studies
 - systematic theology
 - ethics
 - apologetics
6. How might Christians who don't consider themselves particularly smart or academically inclined still operate as intellectuals, when it comes to their spiritual pathway?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

7. Read Psalms 64:9; 111:1–2; Ecclesiastes 12:9–11. How do these verses direct us to use our minds to worship God? What special role can intellectuals play in service to Christ’s church?
8. Design an intellectual time of worship and write down what you learned from your experience—how your understanding of new concepts helped you worship God and enjoy his presence, expanded your heart, or led to new respect or affection toward your heavenly Father.

Chapter 12: Tending the Garden of the Soul

1. Read the analogy of the two vegetable gardens on page 231. Which best describes the care that you give to your soul? How might understanding the sacred pathways help you to change (or maintain) that?
2. What are your top four pathways? Were you surprised by the results? List a couple of things you can do with each pathway to grow in your devotion in that area.

Pathway

How to Grow It

3. Do any of the other pathways intrigue you enough to want to explore and develop them? If so, which one(s)? What will help you to grow in that area?

SACRED PATHWAYS

4. Respond to this statement: The more mature someone is and the longer they have actively and passionately walked with God, the more spiritual temperaments they will display. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
5. Has studying the diverse pathways to building intimacy with God helped you become more understanding and thus more tolerant of pathways other than your own? If so, describe.
6. Read John 15:1–8. The garden analogy reveals that when we connect with God in meaningful ways, because of his power and presence in our lives we will have productive, fruit-bearing ministry opportunities. How do these verses describe this interplay between God’s flow into your life and your influence on others?
7. Reread the final section of this chapter (“How Does Your Garden Look?”). Do you believe that God passionately yearns for a love relationship with you? Is such a relationship the chief passion of your heart? Talk to God about your past relationship with him and your desire for your future relationship.

NOTES

Chapter 1: Loving God

1. A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1982), 12–13.
2. For more on this, see Morton Kelsey, *Transcend* (Rockport, MA: Element, 1981), 122.
3. Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper, 1977), 55.
4. Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, 19–20.
5. W. Phillip Keller, *Taming Tension* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 120.
6. Keller, *Taming Tension*, 132.
7. Keller, *Taming Tension*, 133.
8. Keller, *Taming Tension*, 134.
9. Michael Card, “The Things We Leave Behind,” Sparrow Records (1994), from the album *Poeima*.
10. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (1976; repr., Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 256.
11. Quoted in “Mother Teresa of Calcutta,” *Charlotte Observer* (June 14, 1995).
12. “Mother Teresa of Calcutta.”
13. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973); *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1984).

Chapter 2: Where Is Your Gethsemane?

1. See Susan Power Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 1993), 78.
2. Quoted in Anugrah Kumar, “Guard Your Heart Above All Else,

SACRED PATHWAYS

Respected Theologian Wayne Grudem Warns,” *Christian Post*, September 2, 2013, www.christianpost.com/news/guard-your-heart-above-all-else-respected-theologian-wayne-grudem-warns.html.

Chapter 3: Naturalists

1. See Wayne Simsic, *Natural Prayer* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991), 70.
2. See Susan Power Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 1993), 35.
3. See Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife*, 244. I want to acknowledge Bratton for her quote (which I have adapted for this book): “Baptism is moved from the river to the marble font, the calling of disciples is shifted from the seaside to formal ordination services, and prayer is moved from the isolated place to the packed church pew.”
4. Quoted in Conrad Cherry, *Nature and Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 27.
5. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, trans. Bruno Scott James (Athens, OH: Cistercian, 1998), 156.
6. Quoted in Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife*, 165.
7. Quoted in Seth Borenstein, “Astronauts’ Faith Isn’t Lost in Space,” *Orlando Sentinel*, November 7, 1998, www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-1998-11-07-9811060642-story.html.
8. Quoted in Borenstein, “Astronauts’ Faith Isn’t Lost in Space.”
9. C. H. Spurgeon, “God Rejoicing in the New Creation” (sermon no. 2211; July 5, 1891), www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons37.xxx.html.
10. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 153.
11. See Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife*, 90–91.
12. Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife*, 93.
13. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Aurora Leigh” (book seven), in

NOTES

Masterpieces of Religious Verse, ed. James Dalton Morrison (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 16.

14. Quoted in H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 131.
15. Santmire, *Travail of Nature*, 130.
16. See Santmire, *Travail of Nature*, 99.
17. I acknowledge Susan Power Bratton for many of the insights contained in this section.
18. My thanks to the Reverend Brian Thorstad for his comments here.

Chapter 4: Sensates

1. Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 4.
2. Nouwen, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, 5.
3. Von Ogden Vogt, *Art and Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1921), 145–51.
4. Vogt, *Art and Religion*, 148–151.
5. Vogt, *Art and Religion*, 56.
6. See Harold Best, *Music through the Eyes of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 185.
7. See Philip Whitfield and Mike Stoddart, *Hearing, Taste and Smell: Pathways of Perception* (New York: Torstar, 1985), 63.
8. Quoted in Whitfield and Stoddart, *Hearing, Taste and Smell*, 153.
9. Whitfield and Stoddart, *Hearing, Taste and Smell*, 156.
10. Nouwen, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, 4.
11. Michael Long, “The Sense of Sight,” *National Geographic* (November 1992), 8.
12. Vogt, *Art and Religion*, 206.
13. Vogt, *Art and Religion*, 205–6.
14. See Henry Morgan, ed., *Approaches to Prayer* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1991), 92.
15. Quoted in Whitfield and Stoddart, *Hearing, Taste and Smell*, 85.
16. Vogt, *Art and Religion*, 77–78.

SACRED PATHWAYS

Chapter 5: Traditionalists

1. “CT Talks to Kathleen Norris,” *Christianity Today*, November 22, 1993, 36.
2. Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Harper & Row, 1936), 20.
3. Gertrud Mueller Nelson, *To Dance with God: Family Ritual and Community Celebration* (New York: Paulist, 1986), 25.
4. Nelson, *To Dance with God*, 25–26.
5. Cited in Joseph Jungmann, *Christian Prayer through the Centuries* (New York: Paulist, 1978), 30.
6. See Jungmann, *Christian Prayer through the Centuries*, 8.
7. Jungmann, *Christian Prayer through the Centuries*, 9.
8. Eberhard Bethge, ed., *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 203.
9. See Sidney Heath, *The Romance of Symbolism* (London: Francis Griffiths, 1909), 57–61.
10. Heath, *Romance of Symbolism*, 116.
11. Heath, *Romance of Symbolism*, 117–20.
12. Heath, *Romance of Symbolism*, 157–58.
13. Heath, *Romance of Symbolism*, 194–99.
14. Heath, *Romance of Symbolism*, 214–15.
15. Nelson, *To Dance with God*, 7.
16. See W. A. Van Gemeren, “Offerings and Sacrifices in Bible Times,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 788.
17. See Underhill, *Worship*, 53.

Chapter 6: Ascetics

1. M. Basil Pennington, *A Place Apart: Monastic Prayer and Practice for Everyone* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 26.
2. Pennington, *A Place Apart*, 26.
3. Quoted in Roger D. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 20.
4. Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Harper, 1936), 164.
5. Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church: In the Age*

NOTES

- of *Jerome and Cassian* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), 48.
6. Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church*, 117.
 7. Quoted in Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church*, 100.
 8. See Susan Power Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 1993), 181.
 9. Gilbert K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (New York: Doran, 1924), 118.
 10. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, 119.
 11. Felix D. Duffey, *Psychiatry and Asceticism* (London: Herder, 1950), 62.
 12. Saint Augustine, *The City of God* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 681.
 13. Quoted in Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church*, 153.
 14. Pennington, *A Place Apart*, 41.
 15. Pennington, *A Place Apart*, 43.
 16. Pennington, *A Place Apart*, 65.
 17. Pennington, *A Place Apart*, 111.
 18. Quoted in “The Life and Activity of the Holy and Blessed Teacher Syncretica,” in *Ascetic Behavior in Greco–Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, ed. Vincent Wimbush (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 91.
 19. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, rev. ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 169.

Chapter 7: Activists

1. Francis A Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970), 26–27.
2. Schaeffer, *Mark of the Christian*, 28.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 63–64, italics original.
4. Merton, *Inner Experience*, 64.
5. Klaus Bockmuehl, *Books: God’s Tools in the History of Salvation* (Moscow, IN: Community Christian Ministries, 1992).
6. Quoted in George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 318.

SACRED PATHWAYS

7. Quoted in Garth Lean, *Strangely Warmed* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1979), 62.
8. Franky Schaeffer, *A Time for Anger: The Myth of Neutrality* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982), 154.
9. Franky Schaeffer, *Bad News for Modern Man* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1984), 96.
10. Schaeffer, *Bad News for Modern Man*, 106–7.
11. Cited in Joseph Jungmann, *Christian Prayer through the Centuries* (New York: Paulist, 1978), 148.
12. Quoted in Paul Carter, *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1954), 82.

Chapter 8: Caregivers

1. Steve Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1993).
2. Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 87.
3. Quoted in Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion*, 105.
4. Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion*, 128–29.
5. Quoted in Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion*, 104.
6. Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion*, 106.

Chapter 9: Enthusiasts

1. Cited in Morton Kelsey, *Transcend* (Rockport, MA: Element, 1981), 54–57.
2. John Wesley, May 20, 1739.
3. John Wesley, November 25, 1759.
4. Cited in Kelsey, *Transcend*, 55.
5. Kelsey, *Transcend*, 34.

Chapter 10: Contemplatives

1. Gary Thomas, *Thirsting for God: Spiritual Refreshment for the Sacred Journey* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2011).
2. Thomas Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1981), 12, 17.

NOTES

3. Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* 21–22.
4. Dom Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism: The Teaching of Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life* (London: Constable, 1922), 26.
5. Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* 7.
6. Joseph Jungmann, *Christian Prayer through the Centuries* (New York: Paulist, 1978), 44.
7. Quoted in Dr. Gabriele Winkler, *Prayer Attitude in the Eastern Church* (Minneapolis: Life and Life, 1978), 13.
8. Winkler, *Prayer Attitude in the Eastern Church*, 18–19.
9. See Thomas, *Thirsting for God*, 183–97.
10. M. Basil Pennington, *Daily We Touch Him* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 51–52.

Chapter 11: Intellectuals

1. John MacArthur, “Why I Still Preach the Bible after Forty Years of Ministry,” in *Preaching the Cross*, ed. Mark Dever et al. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 154.
2. See Morton Kelsey, *Transcend* (Rockport, MA: Element, 1981), 37.
3. Quoted in Joseph Jungmann, *Christian Prayer through the Centuries* (New York: Paulist, 1978), 114.
4. See Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949).
5. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* 28.

Companions on the Journey: The Sacred Pathways and the Enneagram

1. Ian Morgan Cron and Suzanne Stabile, *The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey to Self-Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 24.
2. Richard Rohr, *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 21.
3. Rohr, *The Enneagram*, 39.
4. William G. T. Shedd, ed., *Confessions of Augustine* (New York: Wiley, 1860), 187, VIII.11.

GARY THOMAS

For information about Gary's speaking schedule or to access his blog (with posts on both marriage and spiritual formation), visit his website (www.garythomas.com).

You can follow him on:

Twitter: [@garyLthomas](https://twitter.com/garyLthomas)

Facebook: www.facebook.com/authorgarythomas

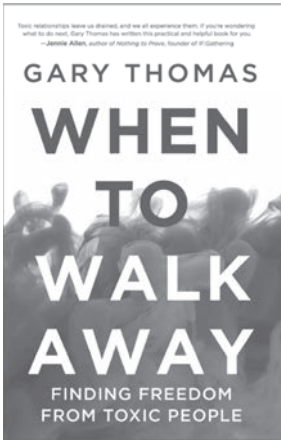
Instagram: [@garythomasbooks](https://www.instagram.com/garythomasbooks)

To inquire about inviting Gary to your church, please email his assistant: alli@garythomas.com.

When to Walk Away

Finding Freedom from Toxic People

Gary Thomas



Your life's calling is too important to let toxic people take it away. *When to Walk Away* draws from biblical and modern stories to equip you to handle toxic people in your life and live true to your God-given purpose.

As Christians, we often feel the guilt and responsibility of meeting the needs of unhealthy people in our lives. Whether a sibling, parent, spouse, coworker, or friend, toxic people frequently seek to frustrate our life's calling. While you're seeking first God's kingdom, they're seeking first to distract your focus and delay your work.

Instead of attempting the impossible task of mollifying toxic people, it's time we dedicate our energy to the only worthwhile effort: completing the work God has given us by investing in reliable people. It's only when we learn to say no to bad patterns that we can say yes to the good work God has planned for us.

Drawing from years of service as a pastor, Gary Thomas (bestselling author of *Sacred Marriage*) looks at biblical examples from the lives of Jesus, Paul, and Nehemiah to give you insightful, biblical takeaways that you can apply right away. You'll discover how to:

- learn the difference between difficult people and toxic people
- find refuge in God when you feel under attack
- discern when to walk away from a toxic situation
- keep a tender heart, even in unhealthy relationships
- grow your inner strength and invest in reliable people

We can't let others steal our joy or our mission. It's time to strengthen our defense, learn to set healthy boundaries, and focus on our God-given purpose. It's time to know when to walk away.

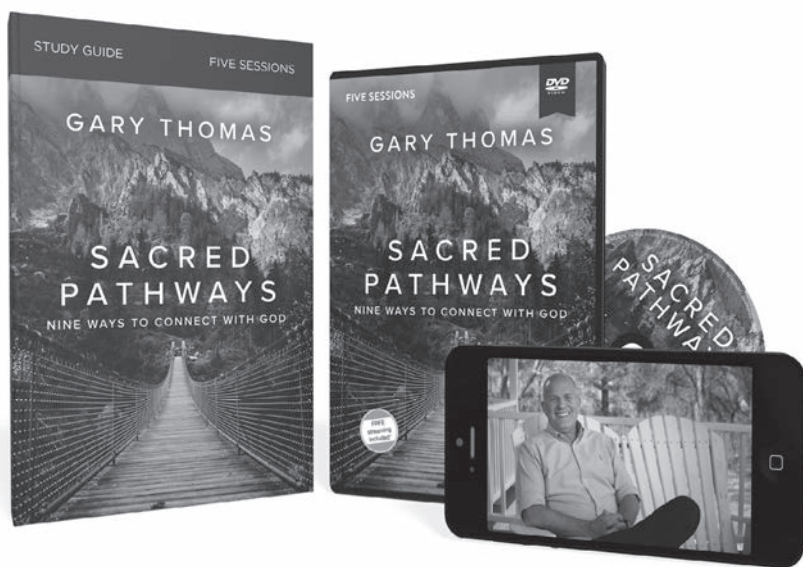
 **ZONDERVAN**
BOOKS

AVAILABLE IN STORES AND ONLINE!

New Video Study for Your Church or Small Group

If you've enjoyed this book, now you can go deeper with the companion video Bible study!

In this five-session study, Gary Thomas helps you apply the principles in *Sacred Pathways* to your life. The study guide includes video notes, group discussion questions, and personal study and reflection materials for in-between sessions.



Study Guide
9780310122098

DVD with Streaming
9780310122111

Coming soon to your favorite bookstore,
or streaming video on StudyGateway.com.

