

The Independence Myth

Only our soul friends can show us the ecology of evil within us.



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Spiritual director, soul friend, and spiritual friendship—these new buzz words in Protestant circles make us suspect someone has imported another fad from our society's "culture of novelty." Do they signal one more encroachment on evangelical faith and practice?

Some who are aware of these phrases' origins fear that "spiritual direction" is the Trojan horse of Catholicism. After all, they ask, who are the great exem-

plars of spiritual direction? Julian of Norwich, Walter Hilton, Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, Francis de Sales, Abbé Huvelin, and Adrian Van Kaam—Catholics all! Protestant anxiety is further aggravated by the recognition that a number of recent books on spiritual direction are doctrinally eclectic, quoting from biblical, Neoplatonic, and even non-Christian traditions.

And while we might be encouraged by reforms in the Catholic church begun in the late sixties through Vatican II, we cannot afford for our ministry and pastoral care to be indifferent to theologi-

cal truth. Clarity of doctrinal vision is too important for evangelicals. Unfortunately, contemporary Protestantism has had no pastoral reform akin to Vatican II. Could a new understanding of such terms as *spiritual direction* provide pointers to what is needed in our congregational life? Could it be that in our search for "revival," making our pastoral care more holistic would save us from what seems like a constant need to pump air into leaky tires?

Leaks in our corporate life

Unfortunately, there are too many such

"leaks" in evangelical life and ministry.

One such leak is our mistaken notion that if only we preach and teach enough, the congregation will "know the truth." We live in the "Information Society" and are constantly *informed*, but do not show much sign of being spiritually transformed. Could it be that pulpit instruction and the printed page and television are really no substitute for the relational inspiration and quality of life we can give each other in "soul friendships"? Sometimes, however, the best expositors and communicators are hopeless in spiritual conversation and guidance on a personal basis, and can only offer "talk" and guidance at long range. But as long as we assume that "talk" automatically leads to living the gospel, there will be spiritual leakage.

Why is prayer so neglected?

It reflects our general fear of intimacy, which in turn is responsible for our lack of deep friendships, and indeed for the whole undernourishment of the relational life.

Another major leak has to do with our confused identity as Christians. Like people of the world, we draw our identities from what we *do*. But it is fatal to Christian ministry to find one's identity in being the pastor or elder or deacon, instead of in being "in Christ Jesus." If our spiritual significance lies only in our activities, no wonder we are such "busy" people, and also such manipulators of others, harnessing them for our own empire building. Our understanding of training for leadership is not likely to be training in humility, or in living a "life hid in God."

There is also a moral leakage among us. Many church members never grow in the faith, expecting their conversion experience to carry them through life. But despite the statistics of the "born-again" movement in North America, we are a nation of the morally stillborn,

or, at best, the morally retarded. The millions who say they are "born again" show little behavioral difference in regard to adultery, fornication, marital breakup, lying, tax evasion, and all the other sins rampant in our society. Leakage again!

These leakages indicate that the discipline and ordering of our emotional lives, of our attitudes and motives, are as vital as—if not more so—all our activities, programs, and organizations. Personal accountability to a circle of friends, a life inspired and enriched by spiritual friendships, emphasis on the relational rather than on the merely functional nature of Christian witness and service, the reinstatement of the home altar for family prayers and worship—these are directions we must take. And as we take them, we would do well to remember the classical practice of spiritual direction, for given the proper sphere, it can legitimately and authentically plug some of the troubling leakages in our life together.

The inner ecology of evil

Motives, attitudes, and doctrinal assumptions will all play their part in the final character and judgments we may make of any ministry. So we declare at once that if spiritual direction means giving and receiving directives on how

to build up merit for our salvation, the Reformers were right to sweep it all away, abolishing the malpractices of confession as well.

We reject the doctrine that the efforts of nature are rewarded by the addition of grace. Luther and Calvin were right in their emphasis on the seriousness and effects of original sin.

But Roman and Anglican spiritual directors have something vital to contribute to evangelicalism, precisely at one of our weakest points. Capitalizing on their natural abilities, many evangelical leaders are blind to the depth and subtleties of original sin. This is where practiced spiritual directors have often a depth of experience and realism, because they listen to confessions every day.

This is the message of Calvin at the beginning of his *Institutes*: "Our wis-

dom . . . consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." It is not the psychoanalyst who knows us most intimately, but God's Word that mirrors the inward conditions of our being, as it is before God. So Calvin continues: "the miserable ruin into which the revolt of the first man has plunged us, compels us to turn our eyes upwards. . . ." For, he adds, "there exists in man something like a world of misery, and ever since we were stripped of the divine attire our naked shame discloses an immense series of disgraceful properties."

When authentic spiritual guidance reveals the reality of human sin, and the relevance of Christ's lordship and redemption to our emotions and our minds, then it will help expose the intrinsically self-deceiving character of sin in our lives. In the apostle Paul's words: "I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me" (Rom. 7:21). If sin is self-deceiving, then I need a soul friend to give me insights into the ways I am deceived, or insensitive, or hardened by sin within me. I cannot do it alone. Self-examination can only take me so far. I need others to help expose and help me understand where sin would deceive and confuse me.

The exaltation of reason in our culture is another reason for the relational value of spiritual friendships. The emotional education of our inner lives does not have much priority in today's church. Having a "heart for God" does not get high rating in our seminaries, or even in our pulpits. Intellectualism reinforces the pride and autonomy of the human spirit, so that those most in rational control of themselves are most likely to scorn the relevance of soul friendship.

If we were asked to describe the sort of person we should be most afraid of, we might well think of someone with great intellect but no "heart," whose feelings were dead. Science fiction makes much of such characters in its frightening dystopias. Why then do we assume that building up our faith by mere logical inference can ever substitute for the experience of covenant bonds of love in Christ, and of fellowship with other believers? Yet there is a creeping scholasticism today in our seminaries and Bible colleges that reflects more concern for "accreditation" and an acceptable theological blandness.

Behind an overrationalized faith, more talked than lived, there can lurk

pride and concupiscence. Pride is so readily reinforced by reason. Both so readily keep us autonomous, and closed in on the self. They deny the divine purpose in Creation to have us bear the image and likeness of God. Addictive behavior ensues, and the freedom promised by Christ is not realized.

But often our soul friends can show us the ecology of evil within us, how a particular childhood wound, or fixation of emotion, or emotional frame of mind, have brought the addictions that now enthrall us, coloring and distorting all we do and are. It may be that only the courage and wisdom of true soul friends can expose the ambitions and compulsions that lie behind our addictions to ministry, to pleasing everybody, or to "being in the limelight."

If friendless, then prayerless

Prayer is an area of secret guilt to many Christians, who carry the burden of not knowing who can help them enter into its vital reality and blessings. The odds, however, will be that if you are friendless, you will also be prayerless. *Friendless* does not mean not having many Christian acquaintances, but it means lacking a soul friend to whom prayer means everything. Prayer is the breath, the life, the friendship with God that is in some way, at least, nourished by fellowship and spiritual friendship.

Why is prayer, the most intimate expression of the Christian's life, probably the most neglected? I believe this reflects our general fear of intimacy, our fear of self-exposure, which in turn is responsible for our lack of deep friendships and, indeed, for undernourishment of our whole relational life, as we live to "perform" rather than to "be."

But it is sobering to think that prayerlessness is really godlessness. And spiritual friendship and prayerfulness go closely together, hand in hand. For the primary objective of spiritual guidance and direction is to foster the life of prayer in the context of prayerful relationships. In our struggles to live as people who pray, we greatly need companions who have traveled further with, to borrow George Herbert's words, such a "heart in pilgrimage."

The Trinity and human community

We need, however, to expand the whole matrix of our Christian life and ground it all upon the mystery of the Holy Trinity. In a day when the theologically

unorthodox are teaching a renewed "Arianism," and when conservative believers tend to concentrate on one Person of the Trinity—some charismatically on the Holy Spirit, others evangelistically on Christ—we all need to see the divine Trinity as the archetypal reality our expression of community, communion, and spiritual life together must mirror.

Living in an emotional vacuum, or ignoring the encouragement and guidance others can give and share, is incompatible with our belief in the Trinity. The truth that each person of the Trinity is "for-the-Other," each having "identity-in-the-Other," yet one God, should come to us as new inspiration to be "members of one another" in the body of Christ.

Spiritual friendship means the friendship of those who are the prayerful companions of God. With such friends we enjoy what the Puritan Robert Bolton called "a comfortable walking with God" at a time when *comfort* meant not "lethargic" or "complacent" but "gaining strength." The strength comes directly from being together.

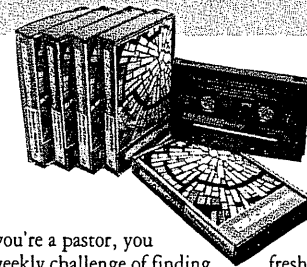
Our natural response, however, is to ask, "But where are they?" Are such friends only one in a thousand? Are we not being tantalized by an impossible ideal?

We are, if we assume the next enterprise is to organize an "Operation Spiritual Direction," to mount an effort to create a new professional class of spiritual counselors in our churches. But sober reflection forces us to confess that there are no "experts" in prayer. There can be no professional friendship, no "paid friends," spiritual or otherwise. To professionalize spiritual direction, then, would only hasten its death. There are certain areas of life that require spontaneity, love, self-sacrifice, wisdom, and godliness that no training can give, no money can buy.

These qualities only appear when the Spirit of God blows softly over dry bones as the prophet saw in his vision. And therein lies our hope. For as God breathes life into our fellowship and we open our lives to prayerful direction and friendship from a brother or sister, vitality will return and the witness and work of the church will be strengthened.

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