

# Spirituality and Ministry<sup>1</sup>

---

by J. Steven Harper

Recently I was visiting with one of our students who has been interviewing pastors in the area. His question to them was: “What is the greatest frustration you face in the day-to-day practice of ministry?” The answers were varied, but one struck me as particularly important for this article. That minister responded by saying, “My greatest frustration is loss of vision and motivation. It is too easy to let my work deteriorate into sterile professionalism and the mere practice of certain skills.”

This fellow is not alone in his frustration. In the past several years mainline denominations have begun to address the issue of “ministerial burnout.” While the causes of this are many, it is generally recognized that the problem is related to the quality of spiritual life. For many ministers the “springs of living water” have ceased to flow, and the result is dryness and lack of purpose in the practice of ministry. One of the largest denominations in America is developing a program of spiritual formation for its ministers. A full-time spiritual director has been appointed to move through the denomination to help ministers revitalize their spiritual lives.

Concerns for ministerial spirituality are also being felt in theological education. The Association of Theological Schools is emphasizing the need for spiritual formation among students. Dr. James I. McCord has called for a greater appreciation for “devotional theology” and a closer integration of the academic and spiritual dimensions of theological education.<sup>2</sup> At this point we have cause to rejoice because Asbury Theological Seminary was the first school to develop a Department of Prayer and Spiritual Life. For nearly twenty years Dr. Thomas Carruth has given dynamic leadership to this important area in seminary life. But we know there

---

*Since 1980, Dr. Steven Harper has been assistant professor of English Bible and Prayer and Spiritual Life at Asbury Theological Seminary.*

## *Spirituality and Ministry*

is still much more to be done.

In this article my concern rests mainly with the person who is already out of seminary. I am concerned about the enriching of those who are already caught up in the day-to-day struggles of ministry. Are there principles which can be applied to life which will result in a revitalization of spirituality among the clergy? I believe there are, and I would like to write about them under the categories of integration, inspiration, intercession, and interaction.

### **Integration**

It is my growing conviction that the greatest need for ministers is a sense of integration in what they are doing. Fragmentation is too often the order of the day. It goes under the names of “busyness” and “wearing too many hats.” It results in a crisis of identity which expresses itself in preoccupation, boredom, depression, a sense of unfulfillment, and even resentment.<sup>3</sup>

Often these feelings spring from a problem in the spiritual life. In evangelical circles we have too easily compartmentalized our devotional life. We speak of having a “quiet time” and we have many resources to help us. But by putting the major emphasis on the time we spend with God at the beginning and end of our day, we can be seduced into thinking that the rest of the day belongs to us. Having had our “quiet time” we move out to live in the “unquiet time.”

Obviously it is not that simplistic, but it is true that by limiting our understanding of devotion we can forget that all of our time belongs to God. Even in our spirituality we can make the unfortunate dichotomy between the secular and the sacred. “This time is set aside for God,” we say, “the rest of the time is for business.” When we begin to think and live this way, we are on the road to fragmentation. We lose the sense of being guided through the day, and instead we feel pushed through it. We lose a feeling of control and find a feeling of oppression. E. Stanley Jones is absolutely correct when he says, “If we lose a sense of being led, we become victims of our circumstances.”<sup>4</sup>

We begin to recover a sense of integration when we realize that our whole life is a devotional experience. As Wesleyan Christians we should be able to pick up on this. The Puritans had taught Wesley that “every moment is a God moment.” So even before Aldersgate he had learned that true devotion was a life lived before God, not just a time to be alone with God.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Albert Outler has recently given an excellent definition of Wesleyan devotion by calling it “life in the

Spirit, life from God, to God, and with God.”<sup>6</sup> To the extent that we begin to reorient our lives to this comprehensive understanding of devotion, we will be able to find a sense of integration in our spirituality.

There are many practical dimensions of integration which could be mentioned at this point, but none more important than the practice of solitude. The mystics have historically called it “centering down.” The phrase itself is descriptive of the process of finding a sense of unity and integration in life. In our day of fast-paced living, when our calendars become our taskmasters, it is a rare thing to find persons who know how to “be still.” In fact, it is not unusual to find people who either fear silence and being left alone, or who do not know what to do with silence when they have it. We are conditioned by the media to think of silence as “dead air time.” In the place of solitude we put noise, crowds, and words.<sup>7</sup>

The recovery of solitude will enhance our sense of integration in our spiritual lives. Solitude creates the space necessary for us to hear the inner Voice. It provides the opportunity for us to form our own ideas and set realistic priorities. It reminds us that life is to be lived from the heart. And it fosters the affections necessary to genuinely care for others and relate to them. Far from being “dead air time,” solitude is the necessary wellspring from which God-directed action flows. Maxie Dunnam puts it this way, “Solitude is thus preparation for more honest relationship and more deliberate participation with others and the world.”<sup>8</sup>

Integration is necessary for spirituality in anyone, but it is particularly important for the minister. How tragic if we who are supposed to “seek first the Kingdom” succumb to the temptation of our age to become hollow persons. Because we are self-employed we have an opportunity to carve out the time necessary for solitude. Because of the nature of our vocation we have the opportunity to live our days in the presence of God and in the name of Jesus Christ. We must not let these opportunities for integration pass through our fingers, otherwise we will be the blind leading the blind. Instead, we must “walk in the light as He is in the light” and minister to others from the resources of integration rather than the crumbs of fragmentation.

### **Inspiration**

It would be a mistake to equate integration in particular or

## *Spirituality and Ministry*

spirituality in general with abstractions. It is true that spirituality is, of necessity, related to the nonmaterial and supernatural dimensions of life. But this does not mean it lacks content. On the contrary, a mature spirituality will be developed by conscious instruction through the classic sources of inspiration. In evangelical circles we speak often of the need to “disciple” people. As ministers we see this as one of our primary tasks. But we must not forget that we too need to “be disciplined.” To be sure, this knowledge has been a major factor in the rise of continuing education programs for ministers, but there is also the sense in which we must “be disciplined” every day. It is my conviction that this should happen primarily through our encounters with Scripture and the devotional classics.

As Wesleyans we stand in the tradition of him who said, “I am a man of one book.” It would be hard to imagine anyone reading more books than John Wesley, or to read them in as many fields as he did. His reading lists are challenges to depth and variety in our reading today.<sup>9</sup> Yet, he never lost his perspective. The Bible always remained the central work and the touchstone by which he evaluated everything else that he read. He said himself that he allowed no other rule, whether of faith or practice, than the Holy Scriptures, and that he followed it in all things great and small. We continue to do well to remember that the Bible is the primary spiritual guide, even for us in the practice of ministry.

And yet, it is difficult for us to read the Bible devotionally. As ministers we too easily approach the Bible as a sermon starter rather than a personal developer. A fellow pastor has written of this problem and said, “I was not aware, at the time, of how my devotional life was affected by this frustration. In retrospect, I now see that when I turned to the Word to find personal help and inspiration, subconsciously my mind would begin to whirl . . . ‘Just how can this scripture become a sermon?’ It was not long until the joy of reading God’s Word seemed to abate and become a chore. I was merely reading the Bible as a professional sermon-maker.”<sup>10</sup>

I feel this temptation in myself. There is a sense in which I do not want to completely overcome it, for I know I am charged with a particular responsibility to proclaim the Word to those under my care. But at the same time, I know I must encounter the Bible purely as a believer, stripped of all my degrees and professionalism, and with no eye to “making something out of it.” Practically, I have had to use material which is not directly related to my ministry.<sup>11</sup> I also

find that I need to keep the time simple and brief. I agree with E. Stanley Jones that the devotional life is “food for the day” and I do not need to stuff myself on Scripture to be fed by it. But I do need a steady diet of it for my soul’s health. Then to the extent that I am growing through my study of Scripture, I can move out in service to others.

Related to the matter of inspiration is a newer discovery. I am growing in my appreciation for the devotional classics as means for my personal discipleship. Richard Foster is correct when he describes our problem in terms of superficiality.<sup>12</sup> Religiously and theologically we are the victims of modernity.<sup>13</sup> Our spirituality has also suffered because of a sense of rootlessness. As I travel across the country, I find that ministers (and laity also) are focusing their devotional reading in the most recent publications. Falling prey to the “cult of the contemporary” presents the danger of developing a pop spirituality.

Lest I be misunderstood, let me hasten to say that I find nothing inherently wrong with keeping up-to-date and reading quality material recently published. Additionally, we can be thankful that there is a resurgence of interest in spirituality and many good books are being written to guide us in our devotional development. But what I’m calling for is a discovery of the devotional classics as means of nourishment. We stand on the shoulders of nearly two thousand years of Christian spirituality. We are not the first ones to walk the road of spiritual life and face the problems related to the journey. By reading the classics we are inspired to a greater sense of community. We can gain insight into our specific needs. We can avoid making some of the mistakes which our predecessors have made. We can lose our superficiality and take on a new sense of “roots” in our Christian experience. The classics have a stabilizing and enriching effect upon our spirituality.<sup>14</sup> Again, as Wesleyans, this should be attractive to us because of our appreciation for tradition as one of the formative influences in the Christian faith.

The matter of inspiration is of utmost importance for the minister. We, no less than those to whom we minister, must be growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. The problem of “burnout” is related to the feeling of having no more to give. It is folly to think we can be in a giving, serving vocation for a lifetime without receiving all along the way. When inspiration ceases in ministry we either “give out” or we retreat into yesterday’s experience and material. Either

## *Spirituality and Ministry*

way our life and work loses its cutting edge.<sup>15</sup>

### **Intercession**

What has been said so far is not unique to the clergy. Any person's quest for true spirituality must include the aspects of integration and inspiration. However, when it comes to intercession, there is a special dimension for those in ordained ministry. While everyone is called to practice intercession for others, the ordained minister does exercise a particular "priestly function."

In most forms of ministry one is responsible for a group of people. A significant act of ministerial devotion is interceding for these people. Traditionally, we have understood this in the context of prayer where the minister takes to heart the needs of his congregation and lifts those needs to God. Dr. Tom Carruth has reminded us well that the willingness to be an intercessor requires that we first offer ourselves to God.<sup>16</sup> In other words, prayer begins as an act of self-surrender. In the spiritual life this is a critical barrier to overcome. While no one denies that we must be concerned about our spiritual formation, there is also the need to transcend self. There is the need to take the focus of integration and the input of inspiration and turn them outward in acts of love toward others. The priest is one who not only seeks his own salvation, but also one who prays and works for the salvation of those around him.

In terms of spirituality this means that intercession will go beyond the traditional linkage of it with prayer. It will also include actions which "flesh out" the concerns which are born in the prayer room. Kenneth Leech has broadened the idea of intercession by describing it as "our cooperation with God in the work of reconciliation."<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Kinghorn has described the true disciple as a "co-creator with God."<sup>18</sup>

There are at least two implications of this for spiritual life. First, true intercession frees us from trying to force our desires for others on God. Rather, true intercession is our attempt to discover God's desires for others. In intercession, especially intercessory prayer, we are seeking to know the means by which God would reconcile others to Himself. To be sure, we are free and invited to share our desires about others with Him. But deeper than that is our concern to know His heart.

The second implication is that intercession is not "passing the buck" to God about another. We are called to enter in to the

redemptive process as instruments in God's hands. This is why our intercession can never be divorced from ideas like "action," "service," and "involvement." Again, Dr. Carruth has reminded us

. . . our bodies are very important in intercessory prayer because they are channels through which God communicates himself. . . . The body communicates through a smile, a handshake, a look of compassion, a voice, a kind embrace, or in service.<sup>19</sup>

One of the needs of the human being is the desire to feel wanted, even significant. By expanding intercession into the area of "mission" and "action" we come to see that God needs and wants us to join him in the process of reconciliation. On a day-to-day basis in the practice of ministry we truly discover this dimension as we concretely touch lives in His name. This not only gives expression to our spiritual lives, but at the same time creates a sense of joy as we see God at work through us.

A word of caution is in order at this point. Many ministers fall into the trap of feeling indispensable in the work of reconciliation. Consequently, they become workaholics at the expense of their families and their own health. They live with the words of Paul on their lips: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" and they take the "all things" quite literally. What they forget is that while God can enable us to do anything, he does not ask us to do everything. True spirituality includes the ability to recognize our limitations, as well as the ability to see our potential. Unfortunately, some ministers have never learned this, and they burn themselves out in a feverish and unrealistic attempt "to be all things to all men" and effectively handle anything that comes up.

True intercession demands a certain amount of selectivity — a sense of priority. Charlie Shedd has been a great help to me in this regard. Having been appointed to a suburban church in one of the fastest growing cities in America, he soon found himself overwhelmed with job demands. For a while he attempted to do it all, only to learn that he could not, and that his effectiveness was reduced when he tried to. One day it dawned upon him that even Jesus didn't "do it all." He didn't heal everyone in Palestine. He didn't move at the same pace day-after-day. He did not permit an audience to everyone.

Shedd began to be selective, attempting prayerfully to discern

## *Spirituality and Ministry*

God's will for his ministry. He had to let some things go. New opportunities arose to which he had to say no. But in cutting back, he actually went forward with a renewed sense of divine guidance. Consequently, he wrote, "Our creator does not expect us to do every good work that needs doing. . . . Some things are outside the sphere of our divine assignment, and we take a mighty step forward when we sense this truth."<sup>20</sup>

Intercession is a major feature of ministerial spirituality, both because of the nature of our calling and the immensity of the task. Intercession is the opportunity to live out the implications of our devotion and at the same time experience further renewal. In its dimensions of prayer and service it does demand discernment and selectivity; otherwise the needs we discover will drive us to despair rather than to action.

### **Interaction**

It is this dimension of spirituality which saves us from privatized devotion. While each of the preceding elements can and should have corporate expression, it is this final dimension which makes spirituality intentionally related to the larger community of faith. To my way of thinking it is a dimension greatly needed in and among ordained ministers.

There are two reasons for this. The first is that interaction demands that we reflect upon our life and work. And reflection is often missing in the practice of ministry. Like the pastor we met at the beginning of the acticle, we find ourselves "practicing skills" without much reflection upon the meaning and significance of them for ourselves and others. Interaction begins when we reflect in these areas of our ministry.

This is not easy. For one thing, true interaction means that we must face ourselves honestly and come to grips with our weaknesses as well as our strengths. Often interaction is an uncomfortable experience, and many prefer to by-pass the process. Until recently denominations have not really dealt with the limitations of their clergy. They have just passed them along to a new appointment where the self-destructive process starts over again. But the facts are coming in: bad ministers make bad churches. Boards of ministry are having to develop evaluative means to help ministers deal with their problems. Seminaries are expanding supervised ministry and intern programs to facilitate this kind of reflection even before ordination.



We are coming to see that no spirituality is complete unless it contains the dimension of self-reflection, evaluation, and critique.

On the personal level this can be enhanced through journal keeping.<sup>21</sup> Through this medium we are enabled to record the events of our lives and reflect upon them. We can “walk around ourselves” and see the positive and negative dimensions of our personal and professional growth. We can take our discoveries and our hopes, our affirmations and our confessions and formulate them into prayers.<sup>22</sup> The written word becomes a fixed means of returning to the events of our lives and to more objectively measure growth in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. Many people do not sense growth because they only sense it when dramatic events take place. Journaling helps us to see that we are constantly changing, most often in little ways. By recording and reflecting we are enabled to see the importance of “little things” for spiritual growth.

The second reason why interaction is so important for ministers is too many of us have adopted a “Lone Ranger” approach to our life and work. We are continually asking others to open themselves to us so that we may minister to them, but we do not open ourselves to others in return so they can minister to us. Not only are we failing to practice what we preach, but more importantly we are suffering under the false illusion that ministers must be self-contained units who portray the image of having it all together. This is not true and neither is it healthy. Interaction calls us to relate to others and allow them to minister to us. Self-reflection is expanded into group reflection.

We need more of this on the level of professional relationships. It is true that every pastor needs a pastor. Ministers need to be ministered to by their peers who can more perfectly empathize with the feelings which the vocation of ministry generates. Interaction with a peer group also gives us the chance to focus on topics of mutual interest that will result in personal and professional spiritual growth. Interaction also saves us from “the Elijah complex”<sup>23</sup> and gives us a greater sense of community and support. Every minister should have at least one other minister (and preferably a group) to whom he is responsible and with whom he may share common interests and concerns. This is one of the best forms of continuing education I know.

But it does not stop here. Interaction also needs to exist with laity. One of the worst pieces of advice I ever received was the counsel that

## *Spirituality and Ministry*

ministers should not form close friendships within their congregation. I'm glad I saw it to be such and never followed it. To do so would have been to violate a basic tenet of humanity — the need to make friends. But even more, I would have denied myself of one of the richest sources of support and guidance I have ever experienced in the ministry. The mere fact that lay men and women are not in it “full time” gives a different perspective on the Christian faith. This perspective is often enriching for those of us who get so close to our work that we can't see the forest for the trees.

Furthermore, it is in interaction with laity that we often experience the deepest forms of *koinonia*. It is unrealistic for ministers to think, “It I share my problems and struggles with my people, they won't respect me or look to me for guidance.” To be sure, there are limits of propriety, but those limits can be broader than many ministers have been willing to admit or experience. It is far worse to portray an *image* of “victory” and “being above the common cares of men.” I am happy to write that some of my deepest concerns have been shared with persons in my churches. They have wrestled with me to find answers. They have exhorted me in times of depression and doubt. They have corrected me when my perspective was hazy. They have shown me much of what Paul meant when he described the church as “the *body* of Christ.”

Interaction is that essential process in spirituality which moves us from the private to the corporate, from the individual to the communal. In that movement we find insight, encouragement, reproof, and fresh motivation. Things happen when we are in the presence of others which can and will never happen if we limit our spiritual pilgrimage to a solitary walk.

These then are some of the disciplines which seem to me to be particularly appropriate for ordained ministers. While we can certainly avail ourselves of devotional disciplines common to all Christians, there are dimensions of our life and work which call for special attention. Above all, we must not allow the lure of professionalism to mask our need for personal spiritual growth. For even as we exhort our fellow Christians to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, we hear the call of the Master saying, “Physician, heal thyself.”

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>I am particularly grateful for the opportunity to write this article in honor of Dr. Tom Carruth. Dr. Tom has enriched my life in numerous ways, and his influence extends far and wide. One of his great concerns, which this article addresses, is the spiritual life of the minister.

<sup>2</sup>James I. McCord, "The Seminary Enterprise: An Appraisal," *Theological Education*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 53-58.

<sup>3</sup>Henri Nouwen, *Making All Things New* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 28-32.

<sup>4</sup>E. Stanley Jones, *Abundant Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Festival, 1976), p. 248.

<sup>5</sup>Those interested in a more comprehensive analysis of Wesley's devotional life may refer to my Ph.D. dissertation, "The Devotional Life of John Wesley: 1703-1738." (Durham: Duke University, 1981).

<sup>6</sup>Frank Whaling, ed., *John and Charles Wesley* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. xiii.

<sup>7</sup>Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), chapter 7.

<sup>8</sup>Maxie Dunnam, *The Workbook of Living Prayer* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1974), p. 32.

<sup>9</sup>V.H.H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley* (London: Edward Arnold, 1961), pp. 305-319.

<sup>10</sup>C.D. Acheson, "Professional Bible Reading Is Hazardous to Your Health," *Preacher's Magazine*, January 1981, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup>I recommend the use of "Discovery" or "Encounter with God" which are two series produced by Scripture Union, 1716 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103.

<sup>12</sup>Foster, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup>One of the best books that examines the problem of modernity in theology is Thomas Oden's *Agenda for Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).

<sup>14</sup>Two good ways to become familiar with the devotional classics are, (1) Thomas Kepler's *Anthology of Devotional Literature* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979) and (2) *The Upper Room Devotional Classics* (Nashville: Upper Room, n.d.).

<sup>15</sup>cf. D.G. Kehl, "Burnout: The Risk of Reaching Too High," *Christianity Today*, November 20, 1981, pp. 26-28.

<sup>16</sup>Thomas Carruth, *Prayer: A Christian Ministry* (Nashville: Tidings, 1971), p. 28.

<sup>17</sup>Kenneth Leech, *True Prayer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 25.

<sup>18</sup>Kenneth Kinghorn, *Dynamic Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), pp. 141-157.

<sup>19</sup>Carruth, p. 29.

<sup>20</sup>Charlie Shedd, *Time for All Things* (Nashville: Abingdon Festival, 1980), p. 56.

<sup>21</sup>One of the most helpful books on keeping a journal is Morton Kelsey's *Journey Inward* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980).

<sup>22</sup>Henri Nouwen's *A Cry for Mercy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981) is a good example of this kind of written prayer.

<sup>23</sup>The "Elijah complex" is a term for the feeling that we are all alone in the work God has called us to do.