

**LEARNING TO BE FREE:
THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES
(7) STREAMS OF LIFE - The six major traditions of Christian Spirituality**

Psalm 46

Jeffrey S. Carlson

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SCRIPTURE

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. {2} Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; {3} though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. {4} There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. {5} God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. {6} The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. {7} The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. {8} Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. {9} He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. {10} "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." {11} The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge (Psalm 46 NRSV).

REVIEW OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

God wants us to "live as free people" (1 Peter 2:16 NRSV). In order to do this we need to live like the only truly free person who has ever lived, namely, Jesus of Nazareth. This means we need to become like Jesus in our faith, character and humanity.

God can help us become like Jesus and we cannot become like Jesus without God's help. But God also wants us to cooperate with him in this endeavor. Learning to become like Jesus is called discipleship or spiritual formation. The word "discipleship" emphasizes the need for a personal commitment to be a follower of Christ. The term "spiritual formation" emphasizes the necessity of relying upon the power of God to form the character of Christ within us. We need both a commitment to Christ and a willingness to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in order to be shaped into Christ-likeness.

Spiritual disciplines are time-honored practices that aid our spiritual formation. There is more to spiritual formation than the practice of spiritual disciplines but the disciplines are valuable allies in this quest.

Jesus gave priority to the disciplines of Scripture, prayer and Sabbath-keeping. If we also give them priority then they can help free us from the principle threats to the life of faith: distraction, fear and selfishness. Scripture gives us focus. Prayer gives us courage. Sabbath-

keeping connects us to the community of faith and the world.

There are other spiritual disciplines that can be laid upon these foundational disciplines and they include inner disciplines that are generally practiced alone such as meditation, fasting and spiritual reading; outer disciplines that are practiced in relation to others such as simplicity, kindness and service; and community disciplines that are practiced within the community of faith such as spiritual guidance, koinonia, and celebration. The goal of all spiritual disciplines is to help us to become like Christ and live as free people.

STREAMS OF LIFE

Over the years Christians have used several different approaches to spiritual formation. These are like the streams mentioned in Psalm 46:

There is a river whose *streams* make glad the city of God (46:4).

This is a reference to the river found in the Garden of Eden as described in the Book of Genesis (2:10-14). The river image is used in Psalm 46 and elsewhere in the Bible as a symbol of restoration (See Psalm 65:9; 87:7; Isa 33:21; 43:19-20; Ezek 47:1-12; Joel 3:18; Zech 14:8; Rev 22:1-5). The wholeness that humanity once had in the Garden of Eden, but subsequently lost, can be regained through faith in Jesus Christ. Experiencing the River of Life (see John 7:38) is yet another way to describe the restoration we call spiritual formation. And just as streams contribute to the strength of the river into which they flow, so too the different approaches to spiritual formation contribute to the strength of our experience of the River of Life, that is, our experience with becoming like Christ.

In order to introduce you to these different traditions I am going to borrow (heavily) from Richard Foster's book, *Streams of Living Water* (HarperCollins) in which he describes six major traditions of Christian spirituality. I do not expect you to remember all the names but I do think there is great value in becoming familiar with them. My aim is three-fold:

- 1) Free you from thinking there is only one approach to Christian spirituality;
- 2) Encourage you to broaden your practice of spiritual disciplines; and
- 3) Promote solidarity with all kinds of people who follow the same Lord.

I need to point out that these six traditions do not represent six different denominations. For example, the Presbyterian Church (USA) is a denomination but within the denomination you can find all six approaches. The six traditions also do not necessarily represent different movements in history. The Holiness Movement began in the 18th Century and includes such denominations as the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana) and the Church of the Nazarene. The Holiness Tradition includes the Holiness Movement but predates it and is found in many

churches not part of the Holiness Movement. Also, well known individuals from history do not necessarily fit into only one category. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, is part of the Holiness Tradition but is also part of the Evangelical Tradition.

Each of these traditions also has its share of extremists or “whackos.” Saint Finnhua, an Irish contemplative, voluntarily spent seven years suspended by iron shackles under his armpits. Simeon the Stylite, spent thirty-nine years on top of a sixty-foot pillar in order to get away from people asking for advice on prayer. A prominent 6th Century abbess named Ite placed beetles on her body for the sole purpose of having them eat away at her flesh. Now we find these excesses appalling, and rightly so, but are they all that different from the modern obsession with a youthful body – people whose lives revolve around the quest for “buns of steel?” My point is, let’s not judge any of these traditions in spirituality based on a few extremists.

1. CONTEMPLATIVE

The first stream is the Contemplative Tradition. A contemplative wants to contemplate or meditate on the love of God. The focus is on learning how to live a prayer-filled life. A biblical representative would be Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus who desired to listen to and be with Jesus more than anything else (see Lk 10:38-42).

Examples from history would include: Benedict of Nursia, whom I mentioned earlier in this series; Clare of Assisi, one of Francis of Assisi’s first students; John of the Cross (*Dark Night of the Soul*); and more recently, Henri Nouwen, who has written more than forty books on spiritual life including *The Wounded Healer (The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*. Doubleday) which has had quite an impact on me – You don’t have to be perfect in order for God to use you!

The Contemplative approach appeals to people who enjoy spending time alone. It promotes prayer that develops friendship with God. The danger in this approach is that it can make you too other-worldly – separating your faith life from your ordinary life.

2. HOLINESS

The second stream is the Holiness Tradition. This has nothing to do with being a “holy roller” or having a “holier than thou” attitude. Holiness is about functioning according to God’s standards rather than the standards of the world. The focus of the Holiness Tradition is on learning to live a virtuous life. A biblical representative would be James the brother of Jesus (half-brother) and author of the letter that bears his name. James rejected Jesus at first but later embraced him and went on to be a leader in the Jerusalem church and gained the nickname “James the Righteous” for the way he lived out his faith.

Examples from history would include: Tertullian; Thomas a Kempis, who is credited with a book called, *The Imitation of Christ*, second only to the Bible as the most published religious

book on the planet; Teresa of Avila; John Wesley; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor executed during WWII for his resistance to Hitler.

The Holiness approach appeals to people who want to do something about the erosion of moral fiber in society. It promotes a transformation of character that demonstrates the goodness of God. The danger in this approach is a tendency toward legalism – too many rules and a subtle belief that if you keep the rules God owes you a favor.

3. PENTECOSTAL

The third stream is the Pentecostal Tradition. Pentecost was originally an Old Testament festival that celebrated God's gracious provision during the spring harvest. But on the Pentecost immediately following Jesus' resurrection, the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus in a powerful way. Ever since then, Christians have associated Pentecost with the Holy Spirit. The Pentecostal Tradition can also be called the Charismatic Tradition. Charismatic is a reference to the gifts for the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4). The focus of the Pentecostal or Charismatic Tradition is on learning to live a Spirit-empowered life. A biblical representative would be the Apostle Paul who was the one who wrote:

Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 5:18b-20 NRSV).

Examples from history would include: Gregory the Great, the first pope to come out of monastic life (By the way, John Calvin admired Gregory and said in his *Institutes* that Gregory was the last good pope!); Francis of Assisi, whose life story is rich in healings and miracles; William Seymour, who initiated the Pentecostal Movement at the beginning of the 20th Century; and John Wimber, who practiced power evangelism and founded the Vineyard Church that has produced music that has found its way into many other churches including First Presbyterian of Battle Creek.

The Pentecostal approach appeals to people who seek an immediate present of God and the power to do God's work. It promotes the biblical teaching that all Christians are gifted for ministry. It also resists our attempts to put God in a box. The danger in this approach is a tendency to dismiss the intellectual aside of faith and to arrive at conclusions based on feelings rather than objective truth.

4. SOCIAL COMPASSION

The fourth stream is the Social Compassion or Social Justice Tradition. People who follow this approach believe that whatever breaks the heart of God should break their hearts also. The focus of the Social Compassion Tradition is on learning how to live a compassionate life. A biblical representative would be the prophet Amos. Amos lived during the 8th century

before the birth Christ. It was a time of great prosperity. But it was also a time of social injustice, gross immorality, and religious apostasy. Although a major theme of the Book of Amos is judgment even in the midst of judgment we find words of mercy and hope.

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24 NRSV).

Examples from history would include: John the Almsgiver, the 7th Century leader of the Church of Alexandria, Egypt who worked tirelessly for the poor and the oppressed; Sojourner Truth of Battle Creek, the former slave who became an abolitionist and promoter of human rights; David Livingston, medical missionary to Africa; William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army; and Martin Luther King, Jr., prominent leader in the civil rights movement and youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

The Social Compassion approach appeals to people troubled by suffering and injustice. It promotes a call to right relationships and right living. The danger in this approach is the possibility of making justice an end in itself while ignoring spiritual realities. There can also be a tendency to replace biblical theology with political ideology.

5. EVANGELICAL

The fifth stream is the Evangelical Tradition. Evangelicals are committed to the spread of the Gospel. Our word Gospel means “good news” and is an accurate translation of the Greek New Testament term- *euaggelion* (yoo-ang-ghel'-ee-on), from which we get such English words as evangelism and evangelical. The focus of the Evangelical Tradition is on learning how to live the Gospel life. A biblical example would be the Apostle Peter who boldly proclaimed to thousands of visitors to Jerusalem the meaning of the events surrounding the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and called them to make a response.

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:37-38 NRSV).

Examples from history include: Augustine, the great teacher; Thomas Aquinas, the scholar; Martin Luther and John Calvin, Protestant reformers; Charles Spurgeon, popular 19th Century preacher; C. S. Lewis, atheist professor turned Christian apologist; and Billy Graham, world-wide evangelist.

The Evangelical approach appeals to people who want the Good News lived and proclaimed and who believe faith and reason are not incompatible. It promotes Christ's mandate to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19) and encourages a clear call to commitment. The danger

is a tendency toward being judgmental and even sectarian.

6. INCARNATIONAL

The sixth stream is the Incarnational Stream. Incarnational means “in the flesh” and refers primarily to God taking on human form in Jesus (John 1:14). People who pursue the incarnational approach try to make visible the invisible realm of the Spirit. The focus of the Incarnational approach is learning how to live the sacramental life. Sacraments like baptism and communion are sometimes called “the enacted Word” or “the Word made visible” because they involve objects that can be seen and felt in order to represent the teachings of the Bible. A biblical example of someone who represents this approach would be Bezalel, who was the artist in charge of decorating the place of worship known as the tabernacle (see Exodus 31:1-6 and related). Each artifact in the tabernacle (and later the temple) had symbolic meaning.

Examples of this tradition from history would include: Geoffrey Chaucer, English author and poet; Michelangelo, the artist; Isaac Newton, the scientist; Susanna Wesley, mother of John and Charles; Johann Sebastian Bach, the composer; and Dag Hammarskjöld (pronounced “DOG HAMMER hold”), the Swedish diplomat who said, “In our age, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.”

The Incarnational approach appeals to people who want to see God in everyday life. It promotes a positive view of work and looks for reminders that God is with us whether that reminder be communion bread, a stained glass window or a delicate rose. It is a corrective to Gnosticism that teaches that only “spiritual things” are good whereas material things, including the human body, are evil. In contrast, the Incarnational Tradition recognizes that God made a good world, and everything in it belongs to him. But one of the chief dangers of the Incarnational approach is that it may lead to idolatry if people fail to distinguish between a specific object and the spiritual reality it represents.

CONCLUSION

These then are six approaches to Christian spirituality: Contemplative – learning to live a prayer-filled life, Holiness – learning to live a virtuous life, Pentecostal – learning to live a Spirit-empowered life, Social Justice - learning to live a compassionate life, Evangelical – learning to live the Gospel life, and Incarnational – learning to live the sacramental life. These different approaches are diverse streams that can deepen our experience of the River of Life.

I find it comforting to know we are not the first generation of Christians who have tried to live like Christ in a time and place other than 1st Century, rural, Palestine. I think we have much to gain from the efforts of others down through the ages. Their stories are a source of joy and inspiration. Yes, they made their share of mistakes. But there is so much we can learn from these men and women who stumbled and fumbled their way toward a Christ-like life. By God’s grace and humble faith we can do the same.