



A Little Guide to Christian Spirituality
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PROLOGUE

SLEEPING THROUGH A. W. TOZER'S LAST SERMON

The roots of this book go back many years, and I will start by acknowledging some of my earliest debts. It was Sunday night in downtown Toronto over forty years ago. The preacher with a narrow mustache moved to the pulpit. He first flexed his bony shoulders, as always, and then started in. Down below I was stretched out on a hard, creaky pew between my mom and dad, and slept right through the sermon. As it turned out, it was the last time the mystic A. W. Tozer ever preached. He went home that night and died soon after.

Later on I got to see his private upstairs study in his narrow little house, where he used to lay face down on the floor to pray and place his nose on a handkerchief to protect his lungs from rug dust. I treasure the memory of a man who once loaned me one of his big picture books of birds—cardinals in bold red, exquisite little bluebirds, Baltimore orioles flaunting their orange and black to the glory of God, and stunning yellow goldfinches—an extravagance of color, and a fascination the great man and a little boy happened to share. But ever since that night when I slept through Tozer's last sermon, I've felt a sympathetic kinship to Eutychus.



Winter was approaching Saskatchewan, with gauzelike skiffs of snow blowing across the one paved highway in and out of our little town Outlook. The Reverend Hobson, an Englishman with a charming

accent and a wife who could sing, had come to hold a week of special meetings at our church, probably feeling as if he had arrived at the end of the earth. He was an associate of Major Ian Thomas, promulgating the Keswick teaching on the so-called “deeper Christian life.” Only a scattering of people showed up to hear him speak. Yet through his influence that week I came into a freeing and empowering experience of consecration. And while that particular stream of spirituality left me with excruciating questions about the relationship between “the crucifixion of self” and the validity of my personal identity and will, it introduced me to the interior life of intimacy with God.

JP

Every April, when melting snow was filling up the farm dugouts, the birds were back singing after long months of absence, and farmers were lubricating their ramshackle machinery in preparation for seeding, church folk would pack up and head west to Prairie Bible Institute for Spring Conference. Thousands of people — shy, weather-beaten men, and their wives in homemade dresses — gathered in the Prairie Tabernacle in Three Hills, Alberta for a semiannual fix of soul nourishment. Groups of singers in matching outfits and every conceivable configuration — male, female, mixed, choirs, quintets, quartets, trios, duets, and soloists — lifted the spirits, while special speakers expounded the Word and challenged people to greater commitment to the Great Commission.

At Prairie it was always relatively easy to recruit young people to lifelong overseas missionary service. The fact was, it seems to me, that everyone was so poor already that there was not much they had to give up. To many ardent young folk, Burma or the Belgian Congo sounded more interesting than returning to a marginal farm outside of Moose Jaw or Elbow.

But the real draw at the Spring Conferences was always L. E. Maxwell. He was the founding principal of Prairie Bible Institute — an immigrant from Kansas with some connections to the early Pentecostal phenomena there at the turn of the century. He was so absolutely

full of energy and the joy of the Lord that sometimes it seemed as though his wired little body would be unable to contain it. He jumped and shouted and rejoiced around the platform, enthused beyond belief that he was “expendable” and Christ was everything. It was contagious. And you could feel your soul “transported” into some other dimension of insight and certitude as he expounded the Scriptures. I recall being so carried away as a teenager that I actually signed a personal pledge card for missions—agreeing to pay off a faith-stretching sum in monthly installments over the next year.

Later that night, as I lay on my upper bunk in the spartan men's dormitory, I was enveloped in such a sense of well-being that the room seemed radiant. Looking back, from a doctrinal perspective the messages were all stock fundamentalism, but there was some genuine life to it too.¹



Many years later my wife and I went off to Regent College in Vancouver to study theology and church history, and it felt like I had finally come home. J. I. Packer, James Houston, Ian Rennie, and the late Klaus Bockmuehl embodied a blend of evangelical spirituality and clear-mindedness that made them mentors and models for many of us. An English Anglican, a Scottish Brethren, a Canadian Presbyterian, and a Pietistic German Lutheran—they all widened our horizons. For good reasons Packer has been described as the last of the Puritans. Up close, his orthodoxy is combined with a gentleness, humility, grace, and wit that have always been profoundly winsome.

James Houston, a brilliant Scottish geographer, grew up in the biblically literate but separatist atmosphere of the Christian Brethren. Yet this man, from such an unlikely professional career and church tradition—indeed, God seems to delight in ironies!—pioneered the exploration and recovery for evangelicals of Christianity's historic spiritual resources in their widest, ecumenical scope. Meanwhile he has nurtured countless others with the insights he has harvested. His

discernment, gift for mentoring, and uncanny knack for being present when needed, are legendary.

Klaus Bockmuehl modeled the solemn privilege and responsibility of a Christian scholar. On a ferry back and forth between the British Columbia mainland and Vancouver Island one weekend, I recall devouring a little book he had recommended to his class. A. G. Sertillanges's *The Intellectual Life* highlighted the legitimacy, for those called to it, of an academic vocation in the service of Christ. It freed me up to be myself.

And Ian Rennie, a great Canadian church historian and raconteur, somehow managed to draw us, our varied wounds, disillusionments, and horror stories notwithstanding, into his own charitable embrace of the church—warts and all.



Closer to the present, I am ever so grateful to Bethel Seminary for sustaining an institutional environment where spirituality is valued and theological research is encouraged. I am especially grateful for a faculty travel grant from the Bethel Alumni Association and for a sabbatical reprieve from teaching duties that enabled me to get a good start on this project. I will always treasure my sabbatical pilgrimages to Iona Abbey in Scotland, various historic sites of spiritual significance in Italy and Turkey, and renewal centers closer to home. I want to thank in particular the *Suore dell' Addolorata* for the extended hospitality at their B and B in Rome, for their inspirational daily chapel singing (in Italian, of course), and for their cheerful ministry to the homeless and unemployed there.

It is such a blessing when a marriage grows into a spiritual friendship. My biggest debt of gratitude, as always, is to amazing Kate—my soul mate through the years.

I am also indebted to those who provided constructive feedback to earlier presentations of this material. My benefactors include the eight members of our graduate seminar on the theology of spirituality and prayer, offered at Bethel Seminary San Diego in 2005. They

also include friends at the Chinese Bible Church of San Diego who attended an eight-week series of lectures on this topic there; members of Glory Christian Church and Chinese Evangelical Church of San Diego in southern California retreat settings; another special group at Hillside Baptist Church in Penang; and later on, the faculty and student body of the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary, a class of graduate students at the Biblical Seminary of the Philippines in Manila, a group of Chinese pastors in Kota Kinabalu, and the tribal students at the Malaysia Evangelical College in Miri, Borneo.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge those resilient believers who, amid persistent discrimination and opposition, live for Christ and so graciously engaged this material in Bandar Seri Begawan, the capital of the southeast Asian kingdom of Brunei.

I have taken to heart the encouragement and constructive suggestions of all these friends. This little book is better for their input, while the remaining flaws are entirely my responsibility. On this side of eternity, as the apostle Paul acknowledged, at best we know in part (1 Corinthians 13:12).

INTRODUCTION

TWO SAINTS UNDER ONE HOOD

I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding.

1 Corinthians 14:15

It's a damp, lonely business being a graduate student in Scotland. Yet for me it was also a marvelous life highlight. The gray, brooding climate is good thinking weather, and the isolation helps keep distractions at bay. And walking everywhere keeps the mind clear. The most exquisite place in the whole country is St. Andrews, a medieval town built of stone on the coast of the North Sea. Never mind that it is also the home of golf. The ancient town walls are still visible, along with the ruins of a castle once besieged by the French navy and the remains of a once-great oversized cathedral. You can casually park your bicycle over places marked in the cobblestones where ardent young Reformers burned at the stake in the tough early years of the Scottish Reformation. History cozies up close.

St. Mary's College, the divinity school of the University of St. Andrews, has been in operation since 1453. Periodically the robed faculty hosted little gatherings for the graduate students at St. Mary's,

and we would be invited into a normally off-limits hall for sherry, cheese, and chitchat. With uncharacteristic extravagance, the tall-ceiling room would be very briefly *heated* for the occasion. We were always eager for some social contact, not to mention an opportunity to dry off, warm up, and enjoy free food.

Standing near the refreshment platter one evening, my attention was drawn to a series of dark oil paintings in large, ostentatious frames along the walls: portraits of former principals of St. Mary's, going back through the centuries. My eyes came to rest on the one of Samuel Rutherford, a seventeenth-century divine and one of Scotland's greatest-ever theologians, political theorists, and devotional writers. He embodied the very best of the Puritan heart and mind.

Through the centuries the Catholic Church has produced numerous orders: voluntary organizations of committed members, usually monks, with distinctive strengths and particular visions for ministry. The Franciscans, founded by Francis of Assisi, were known for their simple faith and personal piety. The Dominicans, an order of preachers and theologians, claimed Thomas Aquinas, *the* theological genius of the Middle Ages, as their most celebrated member. And most members of these orders wore robes, with cowls or hoods to cover their heads in inclement weather.

This brings us back to Rutherford, who managed to combine scholastic learning and mystical piety in a remarkably integrated way. He was, in the words of one writer—and this is what I am setting up—“St. Thomas and St. Francis under one hood.” What a wonderful image! Rutherford believed that “the arduous work of academic theology was necessary in order to provide a conceptual framework within which ecstatic spirituality could flourish without spinning into subjectivism.”¹ Don't be thrown by the term “ecstatic”—it simply refers to personal religious experience that touches one's heart, feelings, and emotions. And this is exactly what this little book aims to do—to get St. Thomas and St. Francis (so to speak) back together again under one hood.

Spirituality is profoundly popular today. Mainstream bookstore shelves are spilling over with volumes ranging from classic devotionals to the totally bizarre. It is easy to be confused by this cacophony of voices. Quite a few Christians are asking: So what exactly *is* spirituality? And what constitutes a distinctly *Christian* spirituality? As Christians, we need to get a handle on what it's all about. And these are exactly the questions we aim to address in this book.

Beyond these questions, however, another even larger one looms, and it is this: Does the Christian faith *really* have the resources to satisfy this gnawing contemporary hunger? I am convinced that it does. But I am equally convinced that the popular North American *version* of Christianity we have bought into cannot sustain itself over the long haul. This is why I also believe the Holy Spirit is prodding the people of God today to reclaim the rich spiritual resources of our faith and to recover the things that have inspired and sustained believers through the centuries.

Our primary resource in this quest will be the Bible. But the full experience to which the Scriptures point—that is, distinctively Christian spirituality—has been known (to greater or lesser degrees) for almost two thousand years now. The “cloud of witnesses” has left a large legacy of spiritual insight, and this literature continues to accumulate. We are blessed to be so well resourced. But the sheer quantity and diversity of this material can bewilder sincere seekers. We need help to access it with discernment.

This book is not a devotional piece. Rather, it is a little *theology* on an immense subject. Naturally I am not putting it forward as *the* definitive way everyone should view spirituality. I offer it instead as *a* way of seeing, yet one that resonates with Scripture and incorporates important recurring themes in Christian literature, designed for Christians who are prepared to *think* about spirituality as a foundation for practicing it wisely and well.

It is not meant to replace any of the classics, or a single one of the many helpful contemporary treatments of Christian spirituality. Rather, it is offered as a companion to the rest; a navigational guide

to orient travelers by providing a basic map of the terrain, some help with local dialects, and a few travel tips along the way. For example, each chapter concludes with brief profiles of “some helpful guides” to deeper understanding and experience.

The mystery of a life lived before God in the power of the Spirit cannot be reduced to a “one size fits all” formula. The Spirit is like the wind, that “blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going” (John 3:8). No, the best we can do is to identify some pervading themes and recurring emphases. The encouraging thing is that there are some elements that all pilgrims are able instinctively to recognize and affirm as parts of their own experience. The Spirit has his own signature style. He leads us along paths that are similar. Despite the feelings of loneliness that sometimes flood over us, it is comforting to realize that we are not really alone.

There *is* such a thing as a distinctive Christian spirituality, and this book lays out a model for understanding it. It is one that highlights three essential dynamics—three impulses that mix and move together as a single living thing.

Each of the dynamics I describe came to me more or less the hard way—on my own. Only afterward did I become aware that I was not as original as I had thought. Instead, I felt like a person who struggles to blaze a trail upward through the woods to a hilltop, only to discover upon emerging at the peak that other hikers are already there. Other contemporary writers have already structured their thinking around similar triads.² When you think about it, this is probably a good sign. Total originality is overrated in such a venerable field as this. After all, we are attempting to describe, in our different ways and from our diverse perspectives, the same reality—the timeless dynamics of the Christian life we share together.

Christian spirituality should be cultivated in dialogue with godly voices from the past *and* present. There is no excuse for ignoring the past, for the kind of attitude C. S. Lewis labeled chronological snobbery. Unfortunately, we tend to sample the literature of spirituality

eclectically, and for the most part uncritically. We must do better than to take random biopsies from our spiritual heritage. Such dabbling can lead to imbalances and deficiencies in our understanding and experience.

Our three-dimensional understanding of spirituality helps make sense out of what might otherwise appear a chaotic deluge of devotional information and advice. It *clarifies the goals* toward which the Spirit is moving, and toward which we, then, ought to be intentionally aiming our lives. And it also *provides criteria for evaluating* the strengths and limitations of the various spiritual resources available to us.

In our concluding section, we will note that the three dynamics are interconnected—woven together—and that each is essential to human life as God intended. Not just one or two of them, then, but all three need to be consciously cultivated. The book ends with an invitation to live the Christian life with disciplined intent.

It is tempting to write about Christian spirituality in a partisan way. Certainly there is a place for highlighting the strengths of our respective church traditions and denominations. Even so, the spiritual experience of the people of God is enriched, stimulated, and typically guided back on track by listening to the diverse voices of the larger harmony. It is “together with all the Lord’s people” that we are able “to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3:18).

Ultimately we believe there is *one* holy, catholic, and apostolic church—*one* people of God who live and move in his transforming and empowering presence. Beneath our surface idiosyncrasies are the strong, subterranean continuities of our shared life with God. I write as one rooted in the evangelical tradition, but the dynamics of Christian spirituality are known to all those who are embraced by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and open to the Holy Spirit. I invite you to join me now on a journey of discovery. As we set off, let’s keep trying to squeeze St. Francis and St. Thomas beneath a single hood. We love God best with heart *and* mind.³

GETTING STARTED

*The spiritual did not come first, but the natural,
and after that the spiritual.*

1 Corinthians 15:46

Years ago our family enjoyed attending a summer Bible conference north of Toronto. It was in the exquisite Muskoka district, nestled between a clear lake and granite ridges covered in pines. The smells of that camp still come to me—bacon grilling in the kitchen, tree gum oozing from rough bark, used oil splashed on gravel roads to keep the dust down, the tuckshop where pop bottles hung in rows in a dark tub of cold water, the canvas walls of a hot tent, gas fumes from an Evinrude outboard motor, and the staring fish we triumphantly carried up from the lake for cleaning.

But I also remember that the motorboats sat idle on Sundays, so we could take meditative walks in the forest and listen to mesmerizing Bible expositors baptize our imaginations in the world of Scripture. A plaque beneath the camp flagpole bore the names of heroic missionary martyrs. And I remember how the loudspeakers, mounted on spindly poles around the grounds, would at 6:00 a.m. sharp begin to crackle with upbeat trumpet music relayed from a record player in the conference office down the hill. On the heels of reveille, a voice would give a cheery wake-up call, inviting one and all to morning prayers. Then, remarkably it seems now, out from the cabins and

lodges hidden in the trees, those old saints, already dressed and ready for the day, would begin heading for the chapel. There was a quality of holiness to it all.

The ones who impressed me most were the broken-down missionaries who'd lost their health in prison camps or through repeated bouts of malaria in jungle locations. They took prayer very seriously, fasting too, and spent a lot of their time in the heavenlies. They were spiritual warriors—the real McCoy. Their petitions were global, their personal needs few. And when they turned to us young people and spoke a kindly word or godly admonition, we felt their discerning eyes pierce right through our souls. They spoke of entire consecration in a way that made you feel they really knew what they were talking about. And their ear was always tilted in an attentive way for the still, small voice that guided them. The veil between time and eternity seemed very thin indeed. It seemed a sacred place.

Over time, for financial reasons and the changing demands of Christian guests, the conference's emphasis shifted to more recreation and less spiritual renewal. The buildings were upgraded, and the prices rose. Eventually it was all sold off, and today it is an exclusive sports camp, where rich parents send their kids for summers of parasailing and other elite recreational activities.

As much as I long for those good old days, I am aware that we can never step in the same river twice. We cannot restore some cherished memory. Time moves on. New wine cannot be put in old wineskins. The basic dynamics of authentic Christian spirituality will always be the same, but their forms and expression will be continually new and different. The Spirit is infinitely creative, and we must be open to the fresh and unexpected (though strangely familiar) ways he will graciously meet the next generation.

THE SPIRITUAL YEARNING OF OUR TIMES

There is a great deal of interest in spirituality today. Just about everyone, it seems, is weighing in on the topic, not just the Dalai Lama and the leaders of the other world religions. Hollywood stars,

whole food stores, and sports heroes are all into it as well. What's going on?

The explanation lies in a serious shortcoming of modernity—the dominant cultural backdrop to the early twenty-first century. Modernity's defect is that it is hopelessly materialistic. Day after day, from morning to night, our society operates on the assumption that the material world—the world of *stuff*—is all there is. Our world is thought to operate like a self-sustaining machine, according to fixed laws that can be explained by science and manipulated by technology. The notion of an unseen, supernatural dimension beyond this is considered, well, silly. The transcendent, if it exists at all, is of no real concern. Nor is the question of possible life after death. What you see is what you get—period. So enjoy. Indulge. Be happy.

Modernity depicts an absolutely empty universe, stark and friendless beyond the fragile bubble of our planet's atmosphere. It has been skilled at describing what *is*, but is at a loss to propose what *ought* to be. It can offer no point beyond the material horizon by which we aim our lives in straight, purposeful lines. It provides no help beyond what we can create for ourselves.

The older religious worldview depicted a three-story universe, with heaven above and hell beneath. It envisioned a vast expanse of time, from purposeful origins in an intelligent Designer's mind, through responsible existence in the present, to life stretching beyond death to eternity. But modernity has lopped it all away, and collapsed this vast space-time panorama down to the narrow here and now—to movies, cell phones, and protected sex, and seventy to eighty years at the outside.

For some time now, skeptical Western philosophy and relentless materialism have ignored God and squeezed the remaining glimmers of the transcendent out of human experience. Modernity is still seductive, but it is failing to satisfy the soul-hunger of a growing number of people. For our contemporaries the term "spirit" represents what is transcendent, what defies reduction to physical reality. The contemporary quest for "spirituality" is a cry of the human spirit for

satisfaction of the deeper needs of creatures with eternity set into their hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

SPIRITUALITY AND ORGANIZED RELIGION

“I consider myself a spiritual person. I’m just not into religion.” This is a familiar mantra today. Attitudes toward organized religion have been increasingly negative. People, especially young people, are declaring themselves with their feet. Attendance at church services in America has been in a downward slide for a while now, with no sign of turnaround. Religion is viewed as institutional and diminishing. Spirituality, on the other hand, is thought to transcend dogma, dwell in the region of the heart, and be ultimately empowering. So religion (meaning organized religion) is out and spirituality is in.

Some of this “bad press” for organized religion may be a result of the world’s chronic hostility to Jesus Christ and his followers. As the apostle John explained, there is a spirit of falsehood circulating in the world order that predisposes people to react with disdain toward the truth (1 John 4:5–6). Jesus Christ himself endured unfair slander, and warned his disciples that they should expect the same (Matthew 10:24–25).

But the real question is whether this explanation *fully* accounts for the growing disdain for organized religion, which, in the overwhelming number of cases, means Christian churches. Is it possible that organized religion, if we can borrow the pejorative term for just a moment, has been at least partly responsible for making itself so odious? Let’s be honest—is organized religion very effective in facilitating transforming encounter with God? We look back rather wistfully to the first century, when the response of outsiders who visited church was, “God is really among you!” (1 Corinthians 14:25).

Transcendence is atrophying in the contemporary church. Marketing Jesus is intensely demanding. We have time for little else. Our souls are becoming hollowed out. A while back we somehow made the fatal mistake of diving into the world without maintaining any transcendental air hose.¹ And this is where we are. Nothing short of

spiritual renewal of the church will draw those who hunger for God back into the locus of organized Christianity in the West.

WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

Spirituality is “that most slippery of words to pin down.”² But we won’t get very far here unless we take a moment to think ourselves clear on what we mean by it. One of our three daughters is a nineteen-year-old literature major who is well connected to pop culture and contemporary values. I get pretty accurate reads on the current thought-world by asking her what she thinks. So I questioned her the other day: “What does spirituality mean to you?” She paused for a moment and then responded carefully: “It’s about encountering the transcendent and being changed by it.”

I think Sarah hit it, as the British say, “spot on.” Spirituality in the generic sense involves an *encounter* with the transcendent (or the numinous, the Real, or whatever is *ultimately* important), and then the positive, beneficial *effects* of that encounter on a person. It’s about establishing a transforming connection to something *more*—a connection that will shape who we become and how we will live.

Christians affirm a distinctive version of this definition. Through the correcting lens of biblical revelation, the “transcendent reality” of generic spirituality comes into focus as the living, personal triune God. This is, as we shall see, a gargantuan clarification. And the *effects* will include growing in Christlikeness and participating in the larger purposes of God.

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY IS HOLISTIC

Two competing conceptions of spirituality circulate among Christians these days—a narrow one and a holistic one. The narrow version is concerned with experiencing the presence, voice, and consolations of God in a direct, right-here-right-now way. It pursues direct encounter with God’s presence—experiences that have been aptly called “esoteric moments” and “points of wonder.”³

Authentic Christianity has always celebrated the possibility of *experiencing* God in this direct and interactive sense. At the same time it has insisted that there is more to being a Christian than this. And this brings us to the holistic definition of spirituality. Such spirituality is about living *all of life* before God. In its full sense spirituality is synonymous with *the Christian life* lived with God. It involves more than experiences, although it has an important place for those. It also encompasses things like repentance, moral renewal, soul-crafting, community building, witness, service, and faithfulness to one's calling.

Evelyn Underhill offers this holistic description: "A spiritual life is simply a life in which all that we do comes from the center, where we are anchored in God: a life soaked through and through by a sense of His reality and claim, and self-given to the great movement of His Will."⁴ We should aim for this more holistic understanding of Christian spirituality. But it should be with awareness that enthusiasts for *experiencing* God have put their finger on the weak spot in the dominant brand of religion being offered by institutional Christianity.

SPIRITUALITY AS *Spirit*-UALITY

Everything about Christian spirituality—indeed, everything Christianity has ever had to offer—is grounded in what Jesus Christ has done for us. The eternal Son revealed the face of God. He showed us what God is like. As a human being, he also modeled what we are to become. He gave us a glimpse of our own restored humanity. Not only that—by his life, death and resurrection, and ongoing ministry on our behalf, he makes our own renewal possible. The saving merits and energizing life of Christ now come to us through the Holy Spirit, who is present with us in the world. Presently the Spirit is our point of contact with—indeed, our lifeline to—the triune God.

The roots of the popular word "spirituality" are actually Christian. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul wrote a great deal about the Spirit (*pneuma*) and spiritual persons (*pneumatikoi*). He had something specifically in mind when he did. To Paul's way of thinking,

spiritual persons are those who keep in step with the Spirit. The Spirit's role is crucial, for he is the one who mediates the presence, character, and power of the ascended Christ to us. He brings Christ close. So spirituality is about being attentive to the Spirit's voice, open to his transforming impulses, and empowered by his indwelling presence.

The vital connection between the Holy Spirit and Christian spirituality has led New Testament scholar Gordon Fee to offer an intriguing suggestion. As a reminder to ourselves, Christians should consider spelling spirituality with a capital "S" and a hyphen—that is, as *Spirit-uality*.⁵ Now we can expand our definition of spirituality a bit further. It is about living all of life before God in the transforming and empowering presence of his Spirit.

THOMAS CAHILL'S CHALLENGE

Not so long ago Thomas Cahill wrote a book entitled *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, a captivating tale of how the Christian faith fared during the first millennium. After its dynamic apostolic launch, Christianity eventually fell under the spell and control of the powerful and administratively gifted Romans. The outcome was the near extinction of the faith and the onset of the Dark Ages. In God's providence, however, Christianity survived and eventually flourished again. Its recovery was not due to the Romans, though, but to the contribution of some obscure but saintly, Spirit-filled Celtic missionaries from Europe's most remote offshore island. History has a way of cycling around again. Cahill concludes his book with this prophetic application to our own time: "The twenty-first century," he says, "will be spiritual or it will not be."⁶

Cahill's remark stimulated my desire to rediscover, if I could, the essential dynamics of Christian spirituality as set forth in Scripture and grasped at the higher points in Christian history. My search started on the little island of Iona, just off the west coast of Scotland, where the Celtic missionaries Cahill talked about had long ago established a significant center for evangelism in pagan territory.

Iona Abbey still stands, and I was determined one night to make it there for a vespers service. It was raining, cold and sideways. The air was full of sharp odors from the sea. The abbey was about a mile from my lodgings in the pitch-black night, and I had forgotten my flashlight. So I groped and stumbled my way past the ruins of a nunnery, along a winding, narrow road, through a little gate, and finally on to the property of the abbey itself. The path before me cut diagonally across the premises and past a cemetery, where converted pagan kings and warlords have lain beneath their tilting Celtic crosses for one and a half millennia.

The path itself was more like a gently molded trench, worn progressively deeper by the feet of centuries. Around the back of the building was a glimmer of light. Following it, I finally pushed into a small stone candlelit room. Over the next few minutes other people found the door and quietly shuffled in. Without words they scraped their heavy wooden chairs across the stone floor as they took seats around the long table and began to shed their rain gear. The room filled with the scent of soaked wool and hot wax.

We celebrated a simple Communion service together. The liturgy was full of poetry by early Celtic Christians, words that celebrated nature and grace and the light of dawn. As I walked back home, this time cupping a borrowed candle in my hand, I thought of the words of the prophet Isaiah: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned” (Isaiah 9:2; cf. Matthew 4:16). And the darkness has never been able to overwhelm it.

That winter I also visited historic sites of spiritual significance in Italy and Turkey (ancient Asia Minor), and participated in some active centers of spiritual practice closer to home. During these travels and afterward, I pored over Scripture and got into the literature of Christian spirituality. The amount and breadth of this latter material proved daunting. The *Classics of Western Spirituality* series, to cite just one example, has already grown to over one hundred volumes, and more are anticipated. Unfinished books soon piled up all around my

study, and I began to lose control. The problem was compounded by the fact that many of these writers were advising me not to speed-read, but to slow down and meditate! I realized that the best I could do was survey this vast corpus. Despite the cursory nature of my approach, certain strong and persistent themes began to emerge. In this book I hope to share some of my preliminary observations about them and their implications for the church today.

THE ORIGINAL DESIGN

It will help us appreciate the dynamics of Christian spirituality if first we recall what it means, according to the Christian faith, to be human, and then remember the Scripture's analysis of what is wrong with us now. As we shall see, each dynamic of Christian spirituality addresses an aspect of our pathological human condition, and thereby renews a dimension of God's original design for us.

Among all God's creatures, great and small, we are uniquely like him (Genesis 1:26–27). This makes human life sacred and gives us each great dignity and worth. It's like an old rabbi once put it: Whenever a person walks down the street, we should imagine a cloud of angels out in front shouting, "Make way, make way! Make way for the image of God."⁷

The image of God in us has more than one dimension. To begin, God is triune—experiencing within himself an eternal communion of the persons of the Godhead. So the image of God is first of all a *social* likeness. It indicates an ability to reflect in *our* relations something of the interactive, loving mutuality within the Trinity.

God is also holy and perfect. He is wondrous in his moral character, glorious in his essence and powers. We have the capacity to reflect this holiness and glory, for he has equipped us with qualities and powers that mirror his own, including those of conscience, virtue, intellectual reflection, creativity, and free will. And so we realize that the image of God in us is *substantive* as well. God has crowned us "with glory and honor," and intends for us to be holy and whole as he is.

And finally, God is a God who *acts*—who does things (like creating, sustaining, and redeeming). God’s image in us therefore has a *functional* side as well. It involves a capacity for creative work, sovereignty over the rest of creation, and participation in God’s own kingdom-building project in history.

SOMETHING WRONG WITH US

Now the bad news—something very serious happened early on in history to mess up our original design. The image of God in us has been seriously defaced, though not entirely erased. We are no longer what we once were. We are shadows of our true selves. We long to become fully human again. But in the meantime, we suffer because the different aspects of the image of God in us have all been distorted. Our root problem is that our souls have become, in Martin Luther’s famous phrase, curved inward. We have become self-absorbed and sealed off from what is outside of us.

Here in summary form is the Christian pathology report on the human condition. We were designed for relationship, but every day we experience the opposite reality of *alienation*—of degrees of separation from God and others and even nature itself. Our varied experiences of distance and disconnect create what philosophers describe as the alienated self. This explains why themes of reconciliation, belonging, and community figure so prominently in the gospel.

As indicated earlier, we were also designed to image God’s holiness and wholeness. Instead we now live with the realization that we are *damaged* persons. Sometimes Christians assume that the only significant consequence of sin is guilt. Not true. Sin is also enormously destructive, leaving human beings themselves weakened, bound, wounded, and filled with self-loathing. Salvation, as the imagery of the Bible makes clear, is also about *healing*, the progressive rediscovery of our authentic selves, and restoration to wholeness.

Finally, part of the anguish of human existence is our frequent inability to find deep meaning and a profound sense of purpose for living. The question “Why?” haunts us even more intensely as we age,

begin to tire, and see our end approaching. It accounts for our longings for significance and our restless gadflying about. There is a simplistic kind of advice going around that we should content ourselves with *being*, and not worry about *doing*. Such advice is always well meant. Nonetheless, it is misleading. We were designed to be doers too, and to derive fulfillment from our efforts. The call to contribute to something that *matters*, to something bigger than our individual selves, is not a duty imposed, but in fact an incredible gift. It is part of what makes our lives meaningful. But now we are ready to consider the dynamics of Christian spirituality—and to see how they each meet a fundamental human need.

THE RELATIONAL DYNAMIC

The first dynamic of Christian spirituality is a *relational* one. There is a God, and there are other people like us; and as humans we share this world with a myriad of other creatures. The fact is that we are not alone. If we try to live in denial of this, we will only slide downward into dysfunction. As Jewish philosopher and mystic Martin Buber declared, “All real living is meeting.”⁸ Human existence is *essentially* relational.

The impulses of this dynamic move both vertically and horizontally. From the first chapters of the Bible, where Enoch walked faithfully with God (Genesis 5:24), to Jesus’ departing assurance that he would be with us always (Matthew 28:20), the Bible attaches great importance to relationship with God. Christians justified by faith in Jesus Christ have an official relationship with God that is established solidly and safely beyond fluctuations in feeling. But this relationship is also meant to be experiential and living—a matter of keeping company with God. It can even develop, incredibly enough, into something akin to *friendship* with God (John 15:15).

Left alone in our sinful state, we tend toward narcissism. We become, in Paul’s indicting phrase, lovers of ourselves (2 Timothy 3:2). But once we open ourselves up to God, things begin to change. The life of God, which is characterized by self-giving love, turns out

to be infectious. God draws us out of ourselves and “into the grand objective realm of the *not merely me*.”⁹ God’s love, Paul recalled, “has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” (Romans 5:5).

This new experience creates a *general* disposition of openness, so that our souls now have a capacity to connect with, plus an inclination to embrace rather than to exclude, other human beings. Love for God and love for neighbor are two expressions of the same divine impulse.

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL DYNAMIC

Though we exist in relationships, and are profoundly affected by them, we will never *become* the other, nor will we ever be *absorbed into* the other. Our identity will always survive. That’s the first thing. The second is that what we are is not what we *ought* to be, nor what we once were. This leads us necessarily to the transformational dynamic of Christian spirituality.

As we have already noted, simply being in relationship begins our transformation. True friendship with God, James Houston points out, is always *transforming* friendship.¹⁰ It never leaves us unchanged. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, the apostle Paul explains this dynamic by drawing an analogy to Moses on Sinai: “We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory.” It is a case of reflected glory.¹¹

A great amount of the evil in the world, perhaps the bulk of it, originates within the human spirit—and this toxic wellspring must be repaired. The biblical diagnosis of the human condition is that people need radical renewal from the inside out. This explains why classic Christian spirituality took the challenge of the self so seriously, practiced self-examination, intentionally cultivated virtue, and embraced spiritual disciplines. The goal is the transformation of the heart—the inner command-center of one’s entire being. And change is never easy.

But there is another side to this whole story. Sin (whether it is the kind we commit, or the kind committed against us) is never good for us. Its effects are always harmful, disabling, and disfiguring, leaving us as injured victims of a crime. In the end, the Bible warns, sin will always turn bitter and eventually lead to death.

The gospel includes the good news that God is not only our Savior but our *Healer* (Exodus 15:26). He doesn't want us to live permanently with the wounds that sin inflicts. By his grace we are destined to become *whole* as well as holy. *Healer* is one of the great titles for God in the Old Testament. He is the one who heals his people. Time and time again, the prophets promised the people of God that if they would return to him with their whole hearts, he would *heal* their land (2 Chronicles 7:14).

THE VOCATIONAL DYNAMIC

From the inner workings of the heart, Jesus explained, flows every decision a person makes, every word they say, every action they perform (Luke 6:43–45). Who we are becoming on the inside naturally and inevitably finds expression in our outward behavior. The Christian life is about connecting and becoming. It is also, finally, about *doing*. The third dynamic of true Christian spirituality is the vocational. This word is derived from the Latin *vocare*, which means “to call.” My intent in using it here is to underscore the fact that we have a calling upon our lives to participate in the purposes of God. Authentic Christian spirituality follows the pattern of the incarnation—it becomes flesh. Vocation is following the heart of God into the world.

The conversion biography of the apostle Paul is just one of many biblical stories that illustrate and confirm this threefold pattern of Christian spirituality. On the road to Damascus, Saul encountered Christ in a memorable experience that left him temporarily blind. Immediately he started to undergo a major transformation of his whole life and character, including a total reorientation of his worldview. And following on from this he was eventually commissioned

into service as an apostle to the Gentiles. He never got over the privilege of it all.

Paul's story, and the stories of others like him, might lead us to conclude that these are sequential steps in Christian spirituality. But they are *more* than this. They are all continuing, *ongoing realities* of the Christian life. I hope it will become even clearer as we continue that these three dynamics—the relational, transformational, and vocational—are always vitally connected, overlapping, and interdependent. It is not possible to choose one and neglect the others.

Bringing these three themes together as we conclude, we can say that authentic Christian spirituality (or the Christian life, which is the same thing) is a Spirit-enabled relationship with the triune God that results in openness to others, healing progress toward Christlikeness, and willing participation in God's purposes in the world.

The longings of the human spirit are most fully satisfied in Jesus Christ, as we encounter him through his Spirit in the world today. From a Christ-centered perspective, we can say that the first dynamic is about Christ *with* us. The second concerns Christ *in* us, and the third is about Christ working *through* us. By his Spirit, then, Christ is inviting people to come to him, submit to his transforming influence, and then follow him into the world. The pattern is always the same. True spirituality involves continuous cycles of encounter, change, and action.

BACK TO THE IRISH SAINTS

Thomas Cahill warned that if civilization is to be saved, it will not be by modern clones of the administratively astute and technologically advantaged Romans. It will be by *saints*. I thought about this on another stormy evening on Iona, as I walked alone to a stony bay on the west side of the island. There, some suppose, the intrepid Columba and a few other wild Irish friends first blew ashore in their fragile coracles many centuries ago. I gazed on the scene for some time—until I was soaked through and chilled to the bone. I pocketed a little white stone to remember those strange saints, and then turned back

toward my lodgings some distance away. As I did, I marveled at their courage. What kind of persons were they? What resources were they accessing? What made them tick?

Some words of Patrick, that great Celtic giant, spoke into my mind as I walked on: “I bind unto myself today the power of God to hold and lead . . . Christ be with me, Christ within me . . . I bind unto myself the name, the strong name of the Trinity.” The answer to my question lies buried in this ancient, mystical, militant imagery. Hopefully we have caught a glimpse of the timeless spiritual dynamics operating behind the saint’s evocative words. In the chapters that follow, we will explore these themes more fully.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The modern way of life has left the human spirit unsatisfied. Though organized religion has been found wanting, real *Spirit*-uality remains God’s gracious provision for the soul-hunger of every age. We have introduced a framework for understanding such spirituality—one that highlights its three essential dynamics. The first, the *relational*, deals with being in healthy relationship to God and others. The second, the *transformational*, examines the sanctifying and healing changes God’s Spirit works in our souls. And the third, the *vocational*, considers the new life and mission to which we are called. These three are interconnected, and each is essential to life as God intended it to be.