

Balancing Bible Study and Spiritual Disciplines

Pastor Edward D. Seely, Ph.D.

An aspect of educational ministry where balance is especially important involves the balance between Bible study and what are referred to in the literature as spiritual disciplines or spiritual practices. Using Richard Foster's terminology (in his book, *Celebration of Discipline*) these disciplines historically have included such activities as meditation, prayer, fasting, simplicity, and others). Every good church-based education program, including youth ministry, has always included teaching about such practices, which throughout the Bible and church history have been recognized as helpful and necessary for maturity in Christ.

In recent years, however, a movement in the field of church education, called spiritual formation (SF), has arisen. It has become vogue to refer to educational programs in the church and educational ministry divisions in seminaries with the term spiritual formation. This movement does not have a specific driving force, such as a leader or an organization, but it is more of an amorphous bandwagon-type movement that in many ways is resulting in the replacement of traditional educational programs in the church.

In the SF approach the spiritual disciplines, which are often reinterpreted, replace programs that have historically been seen by God's people as essential for facilitating wisdom and maturity in Christ. These traditional programs are diminished or eliminated entirely, such as exegetical Bible study, systematic theology, and church history, among others, to the detriment of youth and adult development in sanctification, and in the case of ignorance of church history, hiding the mistakes of the past, including inadequate spirituality.

Further, within the spiritual formation movement, there exists a wide range of what is called spirituality. The range extends from those who hold to a Biblical orientation to those who broaden their understanding to include various non-Christian concepts. Much of the SF literature frequently quotes Buddhist, Hindu, New Age, Muslim and other religious persons and texts along with Biblical texts, but the penchant for these additional sources of "spirituality" is for thought from Eastern religions.

Hence, we see much emphasis in the SF writings on looking inward, within the heart. For example, a prominent feature of the non-Christian religions typically cited in the SF literature regarding meditation is the instruction to look inward for insight and enlightenment. The orientation is very much internal. Further the SF writings that quote sayings from other religious sources do not comment on the context of these other religious teachings; the result is to mislead and mitigate the Bible's teaching regarding spiritual development. The average church member is left with the impression that all religions are on the same page concerning the subject at hand.

In Contrast to the Bible the SF Movement Includes Spirituality from non-Christian Religions without Discernment.

Conversely and contradictorily some of these other religions teach that to find spiritual peace the adherent should empty him or herself and clear the mind. This is one of the procedures in Hinduism, including one of its now popular practices, yoga, when yoga is performed as it is intended in Hinduism. The object is to remove all thoughts and connect with the cosmos in a monistic oneness with the universe.

In direct opposition to the preceding and other similar Eastern religious practices, contrast the teaching of God's Word, where we read that the whole creation (including the cosmos) has been corrupted by the powerful effects of Adam and Eve's sin, such that "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." (Romans 8:22-23)

Indeed, "the creation" has been subjected to "frustration" and is in "bondage to decay," (Romans 8:20, 21) which is widely observed in physics, chemistry, and other sciences, e.g., as described in the Second Law of Thermodynamics, sometimes called the law of entropy. This law states that "Any system which is free of external influences becomes more disordered with time. This disorder can be expressed in terms of the quantity called entropy."¹ Entropy means "the degree of disorder or uncertainty in a system, the degradation of the matter and energy in the universe to an ultimate state of inert uniformity, a process of degradation or running down or a trend to disorder."² Clearly, the cosmos is not something with which to try to become one. It offers no help or hope. Neither does it offer peace. Most of all it does not offer eternal salvation to a perfect new life of unending joy in relationship with the triune God, Father; only-begotten Son, Christ Jesus; and Holy Spirit together with all his redeemed people throughout history "from every nation, tribe, people, and language." (Revelation 7:9)

It is also dangerous, spiritually and otherwise, to try to empty one's mind. Recall Jesus' statement in Matthew 12:43-45

⁴³ When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it.

⁴⁴ Then it says, "I will return to the house I left." When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order.

⁴⁵ Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.

Thus the Biblical orientation is in the opposite direction from Hinduism and other false religions. A very significant difference exists between what the Bible teaches about these

¹ <http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/hbase/thermo/seclaw2.html#c2> (Accessed 09/16/2014)

² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/entropy> (Accessed 09/16/2014)

subjects, e.g., meditation, and what the other religions teach. By contrast, the Bible teaches that we obtain insight, understanding, wisdom, and such related knowledge from God, his revelation, and his guidance, directly and through the body of Christ, the true church, i.e., those who teach and walk in accord with God's Word. Consider, e.g., Psalm 1:1-2, "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and *on his law* he meditates day and night." (NIV; ital. mine) Notice also the direct implication and application to youth ministry in the first verse regarding the guidance that will be most helpful to young people and others who are vulnerable to the influence of peers.

Consider the infinitely greater alternative God offers to us who are caught up in the law of entropy. One of the passages my wife and I have found most comforting, especially during the years she struggled with an increasingly disabling disease before she died, is the following passage from 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. Just before these verses Paul has described what God has done for us who believe in and follow Christ Jesus. Then he says

¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

This is the spirituality that brings life in its fullest, now and forever. That life includes Biblical hope, not the hope of the world, a wishful thinking (like, "I hope our team wins the World Cup this year."), but a well-grounded hope that in the Bible is a realized expectation and joy. Such is not found in an empty head (actually unattainable anyway) and in a universe in decline.

Mixing the teaching from other religions with teaching from the Bible in SF literature is confusing to many people. Many if not most are unable to discern what is right and what is wrong (a word not appreciated or used in related postmodern thought today) about other religions, because they don't know the Bible and historic Christian theology well enough and can't use it as a standard for understanding what is true and what is false. Biblical illiteracy is rampant. It especially confuses people when these non-Christian religions are only spoken of affirmatively in the SF literature. It is good to include instruction in church education programs about other religions, but that should be done in a course where the Bible is contrasted with the teaching of those religions. To be sure, most other religions have some good in them, due to God's common grace. Such good, however, is used in the demonic attempt to draw people away from God, diminish his glory, and undermine the accomplishment of his purposes. Any good in other religions is also present in the Bible and in historic church tradition.

Moreover, when taught from a Biblical perspective, the context and focus of these doctrines are rightly stated (e.g., the contrasting approaches to meditation as indicated above) which produce results pleasing to God. (Psalm 1, cf. Proverbs 1) In our time people have such limited knowledge of the Bible and theology, and are willing to give such limited time to studying those and other important subjects, it is most urgent that we focus on the Bible and Christian theology whenever we have the opportunity.

It is also commonplace for proponents of the spiritual formation movement to criticize the historic and traditional approach to church education as being “too cognitive and ineffective. It doesn’t produce the needed change in people.” If you listen carefully, they offer no empirical evidence or logic to substantiate that claim. They downplay, and in some cases disavow, the cognitive, especially exegetical Bible study and systematic theology, thus depriving or at least hindering believers from developing a realistic Biblical worldview that they can use to make sense out of life, filter out wheat from chaff, and help others to do so in a strong witness for Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-16) They either ignore or are unaware of the historic wisdom that spiritual growth comes from involvement with the Word and the Spirit together. Through Bible study and prayer, individually and with the church, one grows in what the Bible and historic Christian theology refer to as sanctification, growth in Christlikeness in word and in deed.

In Contrast to the Bible the SF Movement Orients to the Heart over the Mind.

Those in the spiritual formation movement are oriented to the heart over the mind. This orientation comes with their emphasis on looking inward for insight and enlightenment.

One often hears the mistaken and misleading advice, “Follow your heart!” When I hear someone say that I reply, “You mean that organ Jeremiah said is deceitful and beyond cure? You want me to follow a heart like that?! Since the human heart is that way, why look there for insight and enlightenment?!” In fact when we examine God’s Word, the Bible, (a primarily cognitive activity) we see Jeremiah look into the heart and hear him lament, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (17:9; cf. Psalm 51:1-5) Led by the Holy Spirit who inspired him to write, the original Hebrew word Jeremiah used that is translated “beyond cure” is **אָנָשׁ** *’ānash*, which means a disease, illness, or wound that is usually *fatal*.³

While the regenerated heart (the new heart, part of the new nature which the Holy Spirit has provided in the new birth, John 3:3) is essential, the mind is as well, which is necessary to provide the self-control that is a fruit of the Spirit. (Galatians 5:23) Consider also that God created us to use our minds in our relationship with him (Isaiah 1:18) in order to understand and do his will. (Matthew 22:37)

Here again, we need balance in our perspective. Because God created us as holistic beings, having hearts and minds, soul and body, there is a place for our hearts in decision-making. However, taking the whole of God’s Word into account, which is an

³ *The Complete Biblical Library Hebrew-English Dictionary – Aleph-Beth.*
Copyright © 2005, 2014 by Edward D. Seely

axiom of the discipline of Biblical interpretation, we see that primarily we are to discern God's will cognitively, but there is a place in that context for the heart: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) In this chapter God presents his case against his people Israel in the form of what Biblical scholars call the lawsuit *Gattung*, or category, a literary style that is very cognitive, as trials typically are. Then in verse six we see revealed that God's will involves not only cognition but also action and with heartfelt loving mercy and humility.

In Psalm 37 we read, "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart." (37:4 NRSV) The Hebrew word, עָנַגְ *'ānōgh*, translated "delight" means that in the sense of taking "exquisite pleasure in"⁴ the LORD, clearly involving the heart, but the heart that belongs and is subjected to God. Nevertheless, we must also keep in mind that God's Word refers to the sanctification (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:2) that all believers must pursue, maturity in Christ, indeed attaining to the whole "measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:13 NASB) Paul explains in Romans 7 that we still struggle with sin which has so corrupted our being that residual effects from the old nature still hang on in our regenerated nature, and these unspiritual and corrupt parts of our old nature must be put off in the sanctification process. Rather than looking inward, let us look outward and upward to God and his Word and Spirit for our help and our hope. Psalm 37:4 means that when we've done our due diligence and cognitively concluded that more than one option would be just, loving mercy, and in humility in relationship with God, thus within God's will for us, then it pleases him to allow our heart to choose which of the alternatives before us would bring us the most pleasure and joy.

When done according to the Bible the spiritual disciplines are not all about feelings; considerable thought, meditation, and contemplation are a significant part of these practices. However, much of what is advocated and done in the SF movement is out of balance and skewed too far into a preoccupation with the affective dimension of our mentality: feeling, emotion, and passion.

In Contrast to Sources Promoted by the SF Movement the Light We Seek that Overcomes Darkness Comes from Knowing God's Word, His Only-Begotten Son Christ Jesus and His Inspired Written Word.

By eliminating Bible study, including in its form of systematic theology, proponents of the SF movement fail to provide help for church people to understand the teachings of the Bible by subject (e.g., God, mankind, Christ, the application of salvation, the church, the future) which have been grouped together and logically related throughout history to provide God's answer to the great questions of life and eternity. Such answers profoundly enable God's people to engage and overcome even the most enormous of challenges they encounter in this phase of life here on earth.

⁴ *The Complete Biblical Library Hebrew-English Dictionary – Nun-Ayin.*
Copyright © 2005, 2014 by Edward D. Seely

One reason for that failure in the SF movement is that many of them do not hold to the view of the Bible as the uniquely revealed word of God; they consider it as essentially a human document written by people who became progressively mature. Thus, they figure, since it is essentially a human work, other religious writings can and should be included in people's spiritual formation as well.

Notice the difference between this orientation that the Bible is a human document and that of the Apostle Paul in the text above from Ephesians and his words to Timothy: "All Scripture [referring here to the Old Testament] is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17) See also what the Apostle Peter wrote:

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:16-21)

Unless we fully utilize the limited amount of time we have with our people, who are precious to God, to whom we are accountable (James 3:1), how can we equip each person to accomplish this Biblical mandate: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15)?

As I mentioned earlier in this brief essay, there is a good body of literature which provides guidance in helping the church to grow Christ-like through the historic spiritual disciplines and practices rooted in the Bible. However, they exist as wheat sown among the thorns, and it is necessary that church education administrators, e.g., directors and ministers of education, youth ministers, ministers of pastoral care, pastors, and others carefully discern which materials are helpful in this aspect of Christian education and which contain material that is counterproductive.

One such valuable resource is *Journey into Joy* by Arthur H. DeKruyter. Another is *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* by Richard J. Foster. Here it is also helpful to turn to the Ministry Resource Center (www.calvin.edu/library/mrc), which contains those resources that are consistent with the Bible and historic Christian theology, that facilitate both cognitive and affective spiritual maturity in Christ Jesus.

In summary, the spiritual formation movement contains the following (three) major flaws:

1. Drawing on and pointing neophytes (and others) toward the spirituality in other religions instead of teaching Biblical spirituality as exclusive and normative.
2. A self-oriented, inward, focus instead of looking to God and his revelation in the Bible. (E.g., Psalm 1)
3. Downplaying, and in some cases disavowing, the cognitive dimension of human nature, especially exegetical Bible study and systematic theology, thus depriving or at least hindering believers from developing a holistic and realistic Biblical worldview that they can use to make sense out of life, filter out wheat from chaff, and help others to do so in the calling God has given us. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

For Reflection

1. Have you had any experience with the SF movement? (For example, has anyone urged you to make the changes that are taking place as described in this essay?)
2. Explain in your own words what the two categories mean (Bible study and spiritual disciplines). Then briefly describe what a healthy balance between the two would look like in an effective educational ministry.
3. How would you explain your approach (as articulated in your response to question #2) to a senior pastor, church board, or others who want you to do spiritual formation in your church? Include in your explanation your rationale for what you will do and not do.