Discipleship and Spiritual Direction

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March 18, 2005

Introduction

Becoming a disciple is a common theme and a commandment in the New Testament. Each of us as believers in Christ has the opportunity, and responsibility, to walk closely with Jesus. But nowhere are we commanded to have, or be, a spiritual director. The function of a spiritual director has been described since the first century when John and Paul were encouraging their disciples about how to walk closer with Jesus Christ. The title spiritual director has been in the church since about 400. While the title and command are not in the Bible, the function of the spiritual director is discussed in the New Testament. We want to discern the relationship between discipleship and spiritual direction.

1. Historical role of a spiritual director

 a. function

The function of spiritual direction began early with Jesus helping the disciples to trust God and Paul helping Timothy grow in Christ. We also have the example of John with Polycarp, who in turn taught Irenaeus. Irenaeus is the first to apply John's (I John 1:3) and Peter's (I Peter 1:4) point that the purpose of God incarnate is that we might share in the divine life (*Heresies* IV. 52). But the office of spiritual direction did not arise until the monasteries began:

> The office of a spiritual director emerged within monasticism in the early church among
> the monks who needed the direction of a wise and mature person. Theologically, the idea
> is grounded in the New Testament concept that the church is the body of Christ and that
> Christians are "members" of each other, and that in this context growth occurs.
> http://www.intown.org/DSD/DSDPurpose.htm

Spiritual direction is essentially a relationship of giving care and suggestion, not direction as in demanding obedience, to a person seeking to know God's will or to seek God's presence or direction in their life. It is a three way relationship: the seeker, the director, God. The director functions like a coach or a wise friend. In the Irish church the phrase is *anam cara*, a spiritual friend. In a recent review by evangelicals, Armstrong and Gertz say,

> Spiritual direction is a voluntary relationship between a person who seeks to grow in the Christian life and a director. The latter is not, notice, a counselor or therapist. Rather, he or she is a mature Christian who helps the directee both to discern what the Holy Spirit is doing and saying and to act on that discernment, drawing nearer to God in Christ. *Chris Armstrong and Steven Gertz, Christianity Today, posted 05/02/2003.*

This function is part of the overall process of spiritual formation, which itself is often seen as the spiritual side of discipleship, following Christ.

There are theological implications of this function in this process. The functions of the Holy Spirit in our lives and the salvation we have in Christ are equally important for spiritual growth, spiritual direction, and discipleship. Earlier I wrote,

> The problems of spiritual formation are: common grace applied by the Spirit; the drawing of the Holy Spirit; the process of coming to faith; the initial salvific work of the Spirit; the assurance of the believer; the nature of the new creation in the believer; the relation of justification, adoption, and sanctification to spiritual formation and personal transformation; the means of sanctification; and the work of the Spirit versus the person in all of these. (Clinton, 2002)

A Catholic diocese reached a similar conclusion:

> Today's Christian searches and seeks out those to help discern the presence of God working in his or her life. Through this ministry, spiritual directors accompany others in

their quest to recognize God more fully in their life events. It is a ministry of deep

listening which the director and the seeker are attentive to the movement of the Holy

Spirit in interior and exterior events and circumstances of life. Spiritual direction is not

giving advice or problem solving, nor is friendly "chats." The Spiritual Director, while

nurturing, also challenges the seeker to a deepening life of Christian discipleship.

http://www.austindiocese.org/staff-and-organizations/spiritual-direction-institute1.htm

In the last sentence they identify spiritual direction as part of discipleship, and I would agree.

b. qualifications

For the office of spiritual director in a church, denomination, or retreat center there are no

specific qualifications in scripture or in any denominational literature. In the more informal

sense of a discipler or mentor with a Christian who desires to know God more deeply, there are

many specific direction in scripture. There are examples which point in two directions: first, the

disciple wants to grow deeper; second, the discipler is further ahead on the spiritual path and is

willing and available to meet with the disciple and minister to them. Paul and Peter have many

specific suggestions or commands, such as: walk in the Spirit, grow in character.

c. formalization

In more formal spiritual direction situations (in monasteries or through the Jesuits, for

example), specific instructions can be given. The need for the disciple to appropriate his/her

own roots or the need to make connections with some coherent tradition can be addressed by the

application of some of the following values concerning disciples being guided in their prayer and

the life of the Spirit:

- It is generally helpful to belong to some worshipping community.

- It is even more helpful if the directee shares the community's stories and

  wisdom concerning the spiritual journey.

- When the going gets tough and the directee is confused or unable to recognize her own authentic experience, she needs the wisdom of others often expressed through her own or some other tradition.

- Helping the directee deal with disaffection with her own religious background is also the work of the spiritual guide. In time it may lay a foundation for the directee's embracing of her own tradition, or it may lay the foundation for accepting the wisdom from another tradition.

http://www.sentex.net/~jveltri/earlystg.htm

In a formal situation the director is usually a person who has been certified by a church or ministry agency and has been part of a spiritual director process as a disciple/apprentice.

d. Scripture

The terminology of directing or giving direction occurs in the Old Testament and the New Testament. We shall confine this discussion to the New Testament. Four words are used to express this verb in fifty-seven locations. The questions are: 1) do any of these passages speak of spiritual direction (in the sense above of direction or advice about how to grow closer to Christ), 2) do any of them give clear examples of spiritual direction, 3) do any of them command Christians to give or submit to spiritual direction.

The word which occurs with the most frequency is *diatasso* and *suntasso*. *Diatasso* occurs in 14 verses. It is used of Christian and non-Christian audiences and refers to external direction. It is used most by Paul and talks about what he orders in the churches. This use of apostolic function to order the churches and the activities of the churches represent Paul's strongest teaching. However, none of the passages refer to spiritual direction. *Suntasso* occurs three times in Matthew 21, 26 & 27 as mentions of what Jesus had appointed his disciples to do.

These words do support obedience in response to direction, but none of them appear to speak to spiritual or heart issues.

Paraggello occurs 35 times almost always being translated "command." It is used to command action, giving money, obedience to the law. It is used by God, Jesus, the Spirit, Paul, non-Christians. It does not occur in the General Epistles. As diatasso, it appears to support authority and obedience, but is not used in a spiritual growth context.

Metago is used twice of turning or directing the body.

Kateuthuno occurs three times and all three passages appear to have a spiritual application. Luke 1:79 "to guide our feet in the way of peace." This is the end of Zechariah's prophecy and refers to God's mercy directing our feet in the way of peace. I Thes 3:11 "The Lord direct our way to you," is part of Paul's prayer that God will direct him to see the Thessalonians soon. II Thes. 3:5 asks for "the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ." Of all the verses this is the clearest at discussing spiritual direction. Paul asks God to direct their hearts. All three uses of this word have God as the subject and the people as the object. The indirect object are: peace, mutual presence, the love of God and steadfastness of Christ. These appear to be very similar with the way spiritual direction has developed over the centuries. There is less focus on command, these are requests. These is less focus on externals and more on affective development.

In answer to the earlier questions, spiritual direction is mentioned, using the word direction and it is presented as a request and example. However, no one is directed to be or to receive spiritual direction. It always appears as a desire on the part of the requester.

2. Relating Discipleship and Spiritual Direction

The objective is for the disciple to be established in understanding and practice of an evangelical spirituality. The key terms are defined here:

Discipleship – following Christ in inner life and outer behavior.

Discipler – one who helps others follow Christ and become like him.

Direction – seeking Christ to be formed in me.

Spiritual Director – one who helps others discern the work of Christ and follow him.

It is easy to see the overlap in terminology, since all these focus on the inner work of the Spirit in the believer and the inner response the believer makes.

The activities of a discipler are covered in *How to Become a Discipler* (Clinton, 2003). The general elements of discipleship help a person to reflect on spiritual things and one's walk with God, as well as on the activities of obedience. A special set of activities are called spiritual exercises. "Spiritual exercises are things we can do with God's help, with or without the assistance of a spiritual director, personally or corporately, to help develop our personal spiritual life." (Clinton, 2002) The following list represents some of the activities.

a. Outward activities (outward disciplines)

the Bible (study, memorization, meditation)

fellowship\groups

worship\celebration

ministry\service\work

simplicity\poverty

submission\confession

b. Inward activities

meditation/solitude

practicing the presence

prayer & fasting

The value of these activities is to build spiritual habits of godliness, as well as any immediate effect they have.

Therefore the unique value of a spiritual director is exactly similar to a mature discipler – the value of a wise friend who is actively involved in my life, who helps me grow in Christ.
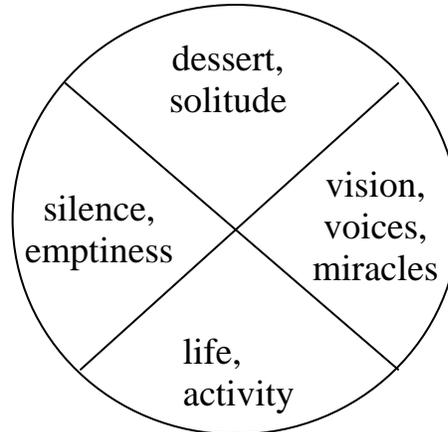
3. A Mature Philosophy of Spiritual Growth

We were created to be individuals who act with integrity as whole persons and who live and act in concert with God and other persons, that is, in community. We were to be in loving fellowship for all eternity. We are created to be brothers and sisters with Christ. Thus, the activities and the aspects of life and growth need to be looked at from both personal and communal perspectives, and from the future as well as the present.

	Present	Future
Personal		
Communal		

With these in mind one can plot the shape of spiritual development.

The types of activities, the nature of the experience, the stimuli involved, the expected progress and outcomes will all vary in two dimensions: personal and communal.
The stimuli include the incredible variety of experience which set the stage for spiritual growth. These have varied much across the centuries and proponents of many major systems of stimulating spiritual growth tend to favor the stimuli which have worked best for their founders or their community.

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         dessert,
         solitude

  silence,              vision,
  emptiness             voices,
                        miracles

           life,
           activity
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All these traditions of spiritual growth see people grow in Christ. Anything in life, reflected about spiritually (which is the modern sense of sacramentals), can be a source of growth. All of life is "pregnant" with meaning because it is created for us by God, and has sacramental meaning.

External stimuli are: the Bible, fellowship groups, ministry opportunities. Internal stimuli are: meditation techniques, prayer strategies, visualization and other executive functions. Thesis statements are directive or instructive statements which help a person understand or make sense of spiritual truths. These thesis statements function as stimuli to growth and often come from a spiritual director, counselor or Christian friend. Statements of paradox are also helpful to pull us away from the ordinary, the day to day. Statements such as "to live you must die," "to be born again you must die to self," "if you drink this water you shall never thirst again," cause a person to focus intellectually on spiritual truths and the spiritual realm.

Progress in spirituality is fostered by a correct use of relationships in time (chronos) and knowledge and sensitivity to critical times (kairos) and opportunities for spiritual growth, and is hindered by improper use of time and relationships. This is an elaboration of Paul's command to "walk in the Spirit" or to "pray at all times." External and internal stimuli help set a focus and

build habits. The ideas of growth, death, time and relationships are main variables in developing

a biblical sense of personal and community progress.

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Appendix A

Wendy Minton Edwards wrote a book review of *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* by Thomas

Merton. She concludes: *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* is exactly what its title says. It's a

direct, brief, and precise explanation of two of the most noted spiritual disciplines throughout

history, by one of the most noted spiritual writers of all times, Thomas Merton. The first part is

addressed to those who feel the need for a Spiritual Director. Merton provides a brief historical

overview of Spiritual Direction and explains the role of the Spiritual Director. He helps the

reader to see that the Holy Spirit is the true director of the spiritual life and the called out human

Spiritual Director functions simply to "verify and to encourage what is truly spiritual in the

soul."

The second part of the book focuses on meditation. Merton introduces meditation by saying that

in "study we seek the truth in books or in some other source outside our own minds. In

meditation we strive to absorb what we have already taken in." He says that in meditation we

"search for truth which springs from love." "Words lose their power and concepts escape our

grasp," as meditation moves into contemplative prayer. Merton believes that the overall goal of

meditation and also contemplation is to be in touch and in union with the Spirit that prays within

us (Rom. 8:26). The ultimate end is communion with God.

Merton concludes this great work by making the point that the goal of meditation, Spiritual

Direction, indeed the spiritual life in general, is simply abandonment of ourselves and our

agendas in order to fully embrace the will and action of God."

http://www.bscnc.org/spirituallife/reviewsbooksfilmmusichelli/spiritualdirection.htm

Appendix B

Eugene Peterson gave us a valuable guide to books on Christian spirituality: *Take and Read: An Annotated List* (Eerdmans, 1996). In his chapter on spiritual direction, Peterson offers a broad definition of spiritual direction that includes all forms of spiritual friendship—"the prayerful attention that we give to another person as a spiritual being and the accompanying prayerful conversation" that develops out of this attention. Then he says, "By watching/reading the masters at work, we come to appreciate how important it is to learn and practice this art."

1. Frederick von Hugel, *Letters to a Niece* (1928).
2. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship.*
3. Francis de Sales (1567-1622, Catholic), *Introduction to the Devout Life* and *Letters of Spiritual Direction.*
4. Samuel Rutherford (a seventeenth-century Scottish pastor), *Letters.*
5. Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend.*
6. Martin Thornton, *Spiritual Direction* (1984).
7. Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction* (1960).
8. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (a French Jesuit), *The Divine Milieu* (1960).
9. Gerald May ("a psychiatrist who "knows the difference between psychology and spirituality and disperses some of the fog that confuses them"), *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit* (1982).
10. Jerome Heufelder and Mary Coelho, editors, *Writing on Spiritual Direction by Great Christian Masters* (1982).
11. Francis W. Vanderwall, S. J., *Spiritual Direction: An Invitation to Abundant Life* (1981).
12. Douglas V. Steere (a Quaker), *Together in Solitude.*
13. Ralph Harper, *On Presence* (1991)
14. Martin Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel.*

Quotes:

Larry Crabb describes, in his book *Connecting*, a deeper side of what spiritual direction is by saying, "spiritual direction, [is] the art of discerning the deepest recesses of the soul with a sensitivity to what the Spirit is doing accompanied by offering one's presence to another. Spiritual directors need to think about biblical categories for understanding themselves and others. They must immerse themselves in spiritual theology (where truth dynamically impacts life). They will often grow through involvement with their own spiritual director. They will read widely in spiritual classics and good literature and will ponder lessons from life and the arts. And they will learn to recognize and disrupt the evil passions and plans of the flesh while clinging to a vision of what could be released in another's life."

Eugene Peterson has a helpful definition in his book *Working the Angles*, "Spiritual Direction is an act of giving attention to what God is doing in the person who happens to be before me at any given moment...Spiritual Direction is the aspect of ministry that explores and develops this absorbing and devout attentiveness to 'the specific detail of everyday incidents,' 'the everyday occurrences of contemporary life."

Robert Webber, in his book *Ancient-Future Faith*, has a good explanation of what a spiritual director does. "A mature Christian assumes responsibility toward one or more believers and guides them through regular counsel into a disciplined growth in Christ." The ultimate task of a spiritual director is to help younger Christians find the will of God. In the process, the director may help the person develop disciplined habits of prayer and spiritual reading, may listen to the confessions of sins, and may encourage and counsel the growing Christian in many areas of life." Whether the function of helping people answer and obey Jesus' call to "Follow Me!" is called discipleship, mentoring, spiritual direction, life coaching, spiritual formation, or whatever the

new name will be soon, the truth remains the same, seekers and followers of Christ need it!

 http://www.intown.org/DSD/DSDPurpose.htm

Training in spiritual formation at AMBS has several possibilities for ministry. Some students

also engage in these studies for their own spiritual growth, faith enhancement, or to deal with

important issues that they face. While the MA in Christian Formation is not intended for the

training of sole

or lead pastors of congregations, it would be beneficial for those already involved in pastoral

ministry. It is a good program for associate or assistant pastors with primary responsibilities in

the area of discipleship or spiritual formation. This training is also useful for those involved in

teaching, spiritual guidance, and youth ministries in the church.

http://www.ambs.edu/pdf/chr%20spirituality%20factsheet.pdf

HHN: The first question people usually raise about spiritual direction is, "What is it?"

JSG: Spiritual direction can mean different things to different people, but in my understanding it

is *the art of Christian listening carried out in the context of a one-to-one trusting relationship*. It

is when one Christian is trained to be a competent guide who then "companions" another person,

listening to that person's life story with an ear for the movement of the Holy, of the Divine.

HHN: For many people spiritual direction is a new concept, and some people are

uncomfortable with the word "director" because of what it might imply. Is it a problem for

you?

JSG: I would say that "director" really is a misnomer, because God is the Director and I am

simply one who companions. There is a tradition of using the word "director", and I don't see

that being changed, but truly God is the Director, and the spiritual director simply assists the

seeker in uncovering and discovering the *direction of God* in that person's life. This enables the

directee to see, claim, receive, own, and reverence God's voice, God's nudging, and God's acting, in such a way that it elicits a natural and genuine response.

Spiritual direction -- or mentoring, or companioning, or spiritual friendship -- has been part of the Christian tradition for centuries. It's part of the discipline model. People sought out Jesus because they saw that he was wiser, and they respected his walk with God. John Knox sought out Calvin in Geneva and walked with him. In monastic communities a novice might have the abbot as his/her spiritual director. These kinds of prayer relationships have existed down through the ages. Excerpts from An Interview with Jeffrey S. Gaines, M. Div. Former SDI Executive Director Published in Hungryhearts News, Summer '96 by the Office of Discipleship and Spirituality, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

My earnest seeking for a spiritual identity was more about the powerful intervention of a college para-church group intersecting my life at just the right time. This discipleship group's influence resulted in my first "re-invention." After substantial grounding in an evangelical church, I had the necessary categories for evaluating the theological content of my personal creed. This created the context for the next major shift to my present affiliation with the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and ministry in the Chaplaincy. by Chaplain (LTC) Gary K. Sexton http://www.usachcs.army.mil/TACarchive/acsumfal00/Sexton.htm

In the Masters of Arts in Christian Counseling and Discipleship (MACCD) Program, our passion is to equip Christ-like disciple-makers for relational ministry to the Body of Christ (church, para-church, and professional) by emphasizing godly character, biblical content, ministry competence, and Christian community. The MACCD is structured to assist graduates to encourage the Christian community to address the needs of people in the great tradition of soul care and spiritual direction. http://www.bible.edu/cbs/macounseling.html