

A SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY:
THE PERSONAL JOURNEY AND THE COMMUNITY

Anita Lee
SPIR I801 Spiritual Formation
Professor Jesse Sudirgo
September 18, 2019

The spiritual search for meaning and fulfillment is an integral part of the human experience. Though typically not considered a priority in modern western culture, the spiritual journey is a required course, inevitably awakening the individual to his or her larger life purpose. This awakening could be sparked by a dark night of the soul, a tragedy, a miracle, or simply growing dissatisfaction with one's life and the gnawing feeling that there is something more. For some, a life-altering event leads directly to salvation and faith. For others, an unlikely event cracks open the door for God to reveal Himself over a long period of time. In both cases, it is often unclear how to move forward once the spiritual journey has begun. Given that every human being is wired with different personalities, ethnic background, temperament, learning styles, psychology and emotional baggage, how does one find the path of spiritual growth that is most beneficial to his or her walk? The purpose of this essay is to present a spiritual theology that prioritizes the personal journey and connection with Christ followed by integration into community. By examining the work of Bradley P. Holt and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we will see that the community component of spiritual growth is most advantageous after an individual has anchored his or her relationship with Christ and had the opportunity to explore the breadth of Christian history and heritage. This movement from the individual journey to community, from personal to corporate, is often not the way that Christians are taught to grow spiritually. New Christians are typically expected to join a church immediately, which can result in the church becoming the "middleman" or "facilitator" of their faith. This is the danger to plugging into and integrating into communities too early. Doing so can lead ignorance whereby the Christian comes to believe that there is only one way to live an authentic Christian life. As we will see in *Thirsty for God* by Bradley P. Holt, there is a plethora of ways to express one's faith and live out

an authentic Christ-centered life. Combined with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, we can grasp the value of community in shaping a believer's life, while keeping its limitations in mind. Spiritual communities, such as churches, small groups or monasteries, are an excellent place to deepen one's personal experience with and knowledge of Christ, but not the only way. Finally, we will explore how this spiritual theology can be practiced in the shaping of a sermon.

Prioritizing The Personal Journey in Spiritual Growth

Looking at Holt's sweeping history of Christian spirituality in *Thirsty for God*, we can see the diverse variety of spiritualities that have shaped Christianity. Through the ages, believers have found countless ways to connect with God, and this variety creates balance. While not explicitly a book about spiritual theology, *Thirsty for God* is helpful in understanding the full complexity of Christian spiritual beliefs and how they play out in one's lived reality.¹ This book reveals the findings in systematic theology over Christianity's history and the practical implications at the personal and societal level, which according to Simon Chan, is exactly the substance of spiritual theology.² Throughout Christianity's two thousand year history, hundreds of key historical figures have ventured for a deeper understanding of God, which consequently affected their understanding of the purpose and goal of Christian Life.

An understanding of church history is typically not included the standard North American church's definition of "spiritual growth." This disregard for church history has grave implications for the spiritual walk. Instead of honouring the value of our forefathers' insights and the reasons why they developed such customs, the customs became rules and differing rules

¹ Holt, *Thirsty for God*, 5.

² Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 18.

created fragmented faith communities. Without an understanding of the rich tradition behind our Christian practices, believers lose depth, maturity and empathy. As a result, how successful one is as a believer can easily default to the same markers of modern society: an increase in affluence, recognition or power. When little attention is given to the diverse spiritual traditions within Christianity, one is limited in how he or she can authentically practice and grow spiritually.

Holt's book demonstrates that a general knowledge of church history is immensely valuable to the Christian walk. As Holt himself writes, the underlying purpose message of his book "is that there are many authentic ways to be Christian, to practice Christian spirituality."³ His stance is one of appreciation to every kind, including Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical and Ecumenical Protestant tradition. Simon Chan highlights that, "another value of emphasizing different spiritualities is that each spirituality helps to highlight and preserve aspects of the totality of Christian life and belief that would be lost to a single superimposing spirituality."⁴ Is one way of being Christian more right than another? Holt would argue no, for throughout history Christians have found countless ways and often opposing ways to live out their faith. Changes in the church were often the result of personal revelations, such as Martin Luther's revelations about the rights of the believer that contributed to the reformation. One is able to discover the richness and variety within church history and Christian community, when one takes time to journey with God before committing to an entrenched spiritual community.

³ Holt, 3.

⁴ Chan, 22.

While it is possible to discover the array of Christian spiritualities from within a community, membership within a community often requires agreement and can limit exploration. A charismatic church will naturally abide by its unique method of worship, without explaining the values in other styles of worship. Encouraging a period of personal exploration before committing to a community can be hugely beneficial to a believer. Learning about the diverse array of Christian spiritualities is a practice of allowing God to meet an individual's needs and not assuming that a church has all the answers. No longer is a Christian confined to the specific methods of practicing their faith as taught by his or her current church. She is welcome to uncover spiritual practices that will deepen her spiritual growth. The sheer breadth of spiritual practices is astounding. *Thirsty For God* suggests 46 distinct spiritual practices for the reader to engage in, all taken from a long tradition of believers who relied on these practices for their spiritual growth. At the end of each of Holt's chapters, he offers suggestions for spiritual practices for the reader to try that came out of a particular era. For example, at the end of the chapter on the European Era, where he discusses Christian spirituality from the seventh to the fifteen centuries, he gives instructions on how one can practice the Jesus Prayer, how to use icons for prayer, how to study as the monks and nuns the Middle Ages did, how to practice of simplicity as exemplified by St. Francis and how to pray with rosary beads. Depending on one's tradition, these may be obvious Christian spiritual practices, totally foreign or even considered blasphemous. By prioritizing the personal quest with God, over fixing oneself in a Christian community, one is more likely to get to uncover these variety of helpful spiritual practices.

It is clear that there is more than one way to connect with God and grow in one's spiritual journey. Often these practices were born out of opposition to an existing theology such as how

the Protestant reformation was a counterbalance to Catholicism. This kind of re-interpretation of Christian theology is not new. In fact, it has been going on since the time Jesus left. For example, the European Era, “western Europe focused more on sin as the enemy of humankind and the cross of Jesus as it’s solution, as compared with the Eastern focus on death as the event and the Resurrection of Christ as the victory of God.”⁵ Are the monks wrong and the mystics right? How is one to come to a solid path of spiritual growth amidst the seemingly endless variations of Christian spirituality? These are the questions that are best answered within the container of one’s personal relationship with God. Thus, it is advantageous for a Christian to develop a personal and comprehensive understanding of what a Christian life could look like for him or her. This requires taking time to develop and deepen one’s personal relationship with God, without the interference of others’ opinions as often happens in community. In doing so, the Christian is able to discover spiritual disciplines and practices that will serve her personal journey, through and even beyond her community. For example, meditation and stillness may be valuable to someone with a quiet temperament and this can be discovered in the monastic traditions, but may not be taught by a church that values loud worship and social gatherings. Holt explains, “On the foundation of Christian teachings about creation, redemption and sanctification, we can each build a life of variegated practices that are distinctive to our own life history.”⁶ By taking the time to understand the stunning variety and the depth of Christian spiritualities, one is drawn closer to God. For many, this period of personal discovery naturally leads to the desire for community.

⁵ Holt, 102.

⁶ Holt, 261.

The Role of Community In Spiritual Growth

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* is an excellent commentary on the importance of Christian community and how it can help believers grow in their spiritual journey. Bonhoeffer considers it a great privilege for Christians to be in the presence of one another, especially after being alone.⁷ Certainly humans are wired for relationship and seek the comfort and companionship of others on the long walk of life. A believer may even find that seeking God alone for an extensive period of time inevitably makes them more fervent for spiritual community.⁸ Even Jesus surrounded himself with the twelve disciples for support and for completing his mission. Bonhoeffer considers the physical presence of other Christians a source of "incomparable joy and strength to the believer" as Christians are containers for God's presence and grace. Indeed, connecting with other believers is a privilege that our forefathers fought for and not all believers have equal access. Bonhoeffer brilliantly describes various ways that Christians can be in community, beyond simply attending traditional church:

"The Christian in exile is comforted by a brief visit of a Christian brother, a prayer together and ... by a letter written by the hand of a Christian... Others are given the gift of common worship on Sundays. Still others have the privilege of living a Christian life in the fellowship of their families. Seminarians before their ordination receive the gift of common life with their brethren for a definite period. Among earnest Christians in the

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 18.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, 18.

Church today there is a growing desire to meet together with other Christians in the rest periods of their work for common life under the Word.”⁹

This suggests that standard North American meetings on Sundays are only one form of spiritual community. Any format in which believers are brought together is a relationship created by God and an opportunity to contribute positively to each others’ lives.

It is impossible to go through life without being in interpersonal relationships, but this is different from committing to an entrenched Christian community. Churches are not perfect, especially when they are built by people who have not yet reached spiritual maturity, but merely building an organization, as one would build a business. Bonhoeffer has a high spiritual standard for what he considers spiritual community. It is not merely gathering for prayer and singing. According to Bonhoeffer, the goal of all Christian community is to “meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation.”¹⁰ Being in community allows believers the opportunity to embody what they believe, so that when they are outside of the community, they are better able to embody Christ. Communities gives us opportunities to reaffirm what Christ has done for us. Bonhoeffer believes that “Christian community is like the Christian's sanctification.”¹¹ He implores believers not to look for the defects of community, complaining about what our community lacks, but instead giving thanks to God for "giving us brethren who live by His call, by His forgiveness, and His promise.”¹² Clearly there are benefits to being in spiritual community and a sound theological basis for engaging in community, but it should be viewed in light of the necessity of personal spiritual growth.

⁹ Bonhoeffer, 21.

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, 23.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, 3.

¹² Bonhoeffer, 28.

Bonhoeffer himself warns that community engagement must be tempered with solitude, as “one who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair.”¹³ These times being alone with God and the Word give believers a solid ground on which to stand and form meaningful, selfless relationships in community. Bonhoeffer argues that Christians come together only through Jesus Christ: the community another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us.¹⁴ In order for a Christian community to thrive, each individual must have a basic grasp of what “living through Jesus Christ” means to him or her. Furthermore, he expects the Christian community to edify one other by the Word, saying “God has put this Word into the mouth of men in order that it may be communicated to other men.”¹⁵ This presupposes that each individual is confident in his or her own knowledge and understanding of the Word. In order for an individual to both benefit from and contribute meaningfully to a spiritual community, he or she must first be committed to personal spiritual growth. Combined, the personal journey and interpersonal relationships create a balanced path forward in spiritual growth, one where the iron of our souls is sharpened by God and spiritual community.

Let us use the analogy of a musician’s relationship to her craft, to her musical community and to the outside world to illustrate this spiritual theology. A person is a musician because she plays and practices her instrument. Whether or not she is part of an orchestra, she is still a musician. As she builds her competency on her instrument, she is able to play in timing with other musicians as a part of a larger group. Entrenched within a musical community, such as an

¹³ Bonhoeffer, 78.

¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, 26.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, 22.

orchestra, she is integrated into a group that will naturally give her momentum to progress in her musicianship. She becomes confident in her own abilities as a musician through her personal practice and the group practice. However it is impossible to excel in the group practice, if she has not put in time in her personal practice. Similarly, in the Christian walk, it is the personal practices that enable one to thrive in community. In music and in spiritual growth, personal progress is separate and distinct from the group's progress. The community cannot enable one to grow anymore than she is already committed to grow. The musician must be able to practice on her own, in order to grow at the rate that the orchestra requires of her. The more committed she is to her personal practice, the more she can even thrive in the community.

How To Shape A Sermon

Now let us explore what a church sermon would look like with this spiritual theology as its foundation. Upon understanding that the individual's spiritual progress is foundational to a strong community life, a sermon would always include a few minutes for personal reflection and developing an awareness of one's ongoing journey with God. The pastor would begin this time of self-inquiry by reminding the congregation of how one's personal relationship with God is the crux of the spiritual journey. He or she could read a passage from scripture where Jesus is noted leaving the crowds to be refueled by God alone, such as Luke 6:12, "It was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God."

The pastor would then ask the congregation to reflect on questions such as: Where, when or how did I experience God move in my life this week? What is the Holy Spirit speaking to me about? What do I sense God nudging me towards? What do I need to confess? Who do I need to

forgive? The congregation would be given a few minutes to jot down their answers to these questions or similar ones into their phone or on paper. In order for this to be effective, the pastor would need to develop a culture of prioritizing personal growth. He could do this by encouraging members to bring the same journal every Sunday and reflect over multiple weeks or to continue these personal reflections throughout the week, so that they arrive on Sunday already aware of the week's spiritual challenges or progress.

At this point, the pastor would speak on a theme that helps the congregation to relate to one another as holy brethren, not as merely passerbys. This is about teaching the church how to be in community together, not merely assuming that they know how to be brothers and sisters in Christ. Humans have habits of relating that are taught in our schools, families and workplaces. Unless explicitly taught, we default to our existing social patterns, which may be spiritually immature ways of relating. A concept such as Bonhoeffer's "Ministry of Listening," in which he explains how love begins with listening, would be appropriate here.¹⁶ After thoroughly explaining the concept, its biblical foundation and practical implications, the pastor would give the church an opportunity to practice the ministry of listening. The church would be asked to find form a small group of two or three with the people sitting around them and share what was recorded in their personal reflections, in response to the questions posed earlier. The instructions would be merely to listen as Christ listens to our own prayers, neither in condemnation or superiority, but with love. This is a rare opportunity for members to consciously practice the skills of Christ-like community in a safe environment, without fear of judgement. After giving enough time for everyone in the group to share, the pastor would ask for two or three people to

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, 97.

share how this exercise affected them. The sermon would close with an invitation to enjoy the rest of the day's fellowship with an attentive ear for listening. This is an example of how this spiritual theology of individual practice leading into spiritual community can shape a sermon.

The intention behind structuring a sermon in this way is that it demonstrates to the church and makes them active participants in the practice of both personal growth and true community engagement. In the modern church, being a part of the community is often considered identical to volunteering, bringing snacks or showing up to prayer meetings. However, these can also be very passive ways that bring us into human connection, but not joint spiritual growth. The practices and shifts that Bonhoeffer outlines must be intentionally brought to the forefront, so that people learn to engage with a Christ-like disposition and heart.

Conclusion

In the past, involvement and membership in church was seen as the hallmark of a committed Christian. If one did not belong to a church, his or her faith was questionable and unreliable. Yet this view of Christian maturity makes optics the primary concern. How one appears in relation to the Christian norm in a particular setting is used the yardstick for the depth of one's faith. This has created great schisms in the Christian faith as leaders have fought over which yardstick is more biblical, accurate or theologically sound. It is time to move beyond the yardstick of community involvement and consider that since the earliest days of the church, humans have discovered countless different ways to live out the Christian faith. While Christians are all connected by faith in Christ, each individual is different and the variety in personality types, skills and experiences means that progress on the spiritual journey will look

different for each person. By giving believers space to embark on a personal journey with God and then consciously engaging in community, we are able to fulfill our potential for spiritual maturity. Prioritizing this personal journey allows space for God to reveal what he needs to the individual, that may not be met by a singular church or Christian community. Over a lifetime, a believer will oscillate between these two realms, at times focusing on his relationship with God and on other times, focusing on contributing to and growing through community. This framework gives space for a believer to also move between communities, as he or she will be able to see the benefits and disadvantages of different spiritual styles, ultimately creating Christian communities that are more well-rounded, balanced and spiritually mature.

Bibliography

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978.

Chan, Simon. *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1998.

Holt, Bradley P. *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality*. Third edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017.