

MONK OR MERCHANT? THE DIRECTION OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

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How are we to direct our spiritual growth? Should we concentrate on the personal state of our heart? Should we be more concerned with our daily lives? Paul tells us to discipline our body, to “keep it under,” to strive for perfection.¹ How is this done? Should we enter the world, or flee from it? Should a Christian young man aspire to be a monk, or a merchant? These questions bring us into the study of personal spiritual discipline and discipleship. Since the time of the apostles the church has faced these questions and has recommended a way of life to the faithful. During the Middle Ages the Roman Catholic church supported aestheticism and the monastic movement; during the Reformation Luther and Calvin sent their followers back into the world with the assurance of God’s calling and their sense of vocation. Today this issue has become muddled and confused in evangelical churches. We need a fresh appreciation of our Reformation heritage, which is based on the teachings of Scripture.

Today’s Common Concept

Most Christian bookstores display a section on Christian growth and devotion, sometimes called “spirituality.” Examining these books, you would find them written by many popular, well-known authors. Many of these books have sold in the hundreds of thousands, even in the millions. One of these classics is *The Imitation of Christ*, written nearly six hundred years ago by Thomas à Kempis, a monk who lived for sixty-six years in the same monastery; it is said on the back cover of a recent edition that this book “ranks next to the Bible in the influence it has exerted upon Christian spirituality.”² About a hundred years ago Charles M. Sheldon wrote *In His Steps*, with its question, “What would Jesus do?”; it has sold nearly ten million copies.³

Since all these books are sold together, you might think that they all generally agree and that any of them would be a good guide. However, closer examination will show that these books diverge. Some lead to the more medieval ideal of isolation from the world and attachment to God and the church, while others advocate active engagement in the world as Christian witnesses. With the new evangelical movement now embracing the Roman Catholic church, many Protestant writers, whom we would expect to follow the path of the Reformers, and now advocating the traditional spirituality of their Catholic opponents.

A current example of this tendency is the modern writer Richard J. Foster. Himself a Quaker, Foster is the executive director of the Milton Center and professor of theology and writer in residence at Friends University. He is the author or editor of numerous books dealing with spirituality, personal discipline, and discipleship.⁴ His books are very popular among evangelicals. Perhaps his most seminal work is his *Celebration of Discipline*, published in 1978.⁵ This book has been republished often and still is a big seller; it provides an excellent example of modern trends in Protestant thinking. Foster divides Christian growth into three

areas: inward disciplines (meditation, prayer, fasting, study), outward disciplines (simplicity, solitude, submission, service), and corporate disciplines (confession, worship, guidance, celebration). While many of these areas can be developed in our Christian lives, yet they do not cover all that we are to do. They do not emphasize obedience to God's law, or doing one's duty and working hard at one's vocation; these were major emphases of the Reformation.

Especially enlightening are the people that Foster looks up to. His book contains many quotations from other writers. In the Forward we are told that he relies heavily on other Quaker writers—George Fox, John Woolman, Hannah Whitall Smith, Thomas Kelly, and others. Foster has provided detailed footnotes showing whom he quotes, and I have checked these to see how often he quotes these different writers. These Quaker writers are cited fourteen times in the book.⁶ So certainly his debt to his own tradition is evident. However, Foster betrays a far greater debt to another tradition, not mentioned in the Forward. This is the tradition of the Roman Catholic church. Whereas he cites his fellow Quakers 14 times, he cites Roman Catholic writers at least 47 times. The person he cites most of all is Thomas Merton. Merton, who died about thirty years ago, was a Trappist monk at Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey in Trappist, Kentucky; Foster cites Merton 17 times in his book, more than all the Quakers put together.⁷

Richard J. Foster does quote other Protestant writers also. He frequently cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer, E. M. Bounds, existentialist Søren Kierkegaard, John Wesley, and Harvard divinity professor Harvey Cox, author of *The Secular City*.⁸ While Bounds and Wesley would be considered evangelical Protestants, none of these writers would present a Reformed or Calvinistic perspective on Christian discipline. It is notable in this regard, that there are no quotations from Martin Luther or John Calvin, who wrote extensively on these subjects. Likewise, there is no mention of the Catholic-Protestant conflict over personal holiness, nor of the careful formulations worked out in the Protestant creeds. Reading Foster, one would think that the Reformation never occurred.

The Reformed Concept

While emphasizing the necessity of personal growth in holiness, the Reformers deepened the understanding of what it means to serve God.

“Through the Middle Ages monasticism fostered an other-worldliness that disparaged the immediate interests of the present. The Reformation, indeed, paid attention to these interests. Self-preservation necessitated attention to matters of politics and government. The rediscovery of the New Testament, in which no support is given to the monastic ideal, altered the prevailing views on marriage and business. Industry and thrift were sanctified, and common occupations came within divine vocation. However, in emphasizing that God was interested in the proper use of worldly goods, the Reformers were not less but possibly more other-worldly. Their morality was much stricter than that of Romanism; and human life all the more stood under the final judgment before God's great throne.”⁹

When God brought about the Protestant Reformation, he produced along with it a revolution in our understanding of spiritual discipline.

Spiritual discipline before the Reformation

The world into which the Reformers came had a well-established teaching and system for those who wished to excel as disciples of Christ. This was the monastic system and mentality. A truly spiritual Christian would forsake the world and live in poverty, chastity (meaning celibacy), and under strict obedience. Monasteries and convents dotted the cities and countryside. Those Christians who chose to remain in the world and pursue a so-called secular life were following an acceptable but second-rate path. They would never reach the heavenly recognition and reward granted to those who had turned aside from the world. The world and its temptations would lure them away from the spiritual excellencies found in the seclusion of the cloister. The door of the monastery was the entrance to the fast track of spiritual acceptance and approval by God. A good illustration of the monastic ideal is that given by Thomas à Kempis in his famous *The Imitation of Christ*. For example, he recommends solitude over interaction with others as the pathway to spirituality:

“As often as I have been amongst men, said one, I have returned less a man. . . . It is easier to keep retired at home than to be enough upon one’s guard abroad. He, therefore, who aims at inward and spiritual things, must, with Jesus, turn aside from the crowd. . . . The cell continually dwelt in, groweth sweet. . . . For who withdraweth himself from acquaintances and friends, to him will God, with His holy Angels, draw near. . . . It is praiseworthy for a religious [person] but seldom to go abroad, to shun being seen, and to have no wish to see men.”¹⁰

The Reformers’ solution

The Reformation brought people back from the traditions of the church to the Bible. They soon discovered that the path of piety in the Bible was not that recommended by the Roman Catholic church. The Bible sends us into the world as salt and light; it glorifies our common vocations by shining the light of God’s calling upon them. The ancient patriarchs were men of the world, with families and property, engaged in the events of the times. The prophets were actively involved in their country and culture. John the Baptist instructed people not to give up their occupations, but to carry them out in a godly manner.¹¹ Jesus himself worked as a carpenter, then as a teacher among the people.

The Apostle Paul considered that, for Christians, all our life is a calling from God. “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus”; God has “saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.”¹² This “called” life means that our ordinary occupation is assigned to us by God as the way we are to spend our time and energy serving others and glorifying him. This might be as a member of a family and household, or as a worker in what we call an occupation or profession. We each have our

calling. Thus, when we are saved, we are told to “let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called.”¹³ Paul in that command was referring to one’s daily work. By so doing, to paraphrase his words, we will be “walking worthy of the vocation with which we are called.”¹⁴

The Reformers saw these truths, and they set their followers free to serve and glorify God in their callings.

Martin Luther

As a young man Luther desperately sought God’s forgiveness and favor; he gave himself over entirely to the disciplines of the Augustinian monastery. However, he realized that even his most strict obedience fell far short of God’s demands—he still was condemned. But then, by studying the Bible, he grew to understand the truth of the gospel; he realized that monasticism was not in itself of any spiritual merit. Faith in what Christ had done, not acts of one’s own righteousness, was the instrument to receive God’s favor. One could be more spiritual and pray more effectually than a monk in the eyes of God even while simply doing his daily work and living in his own family. When Luther broke with Rome and then married Katherine von Bora, he led hundreds of men and women out of the cloister and back into the society of the world, to live as Christians in useful vocations.¹⁵

John Calvin

As Luther, so Calvin as a young man converted from Roman Catholicism to the Protestant faith. As the leading systematic theologian of the Reformation, Calvin clearly spelled out the way of spiritual growth and discipleship. It was not the works of sacrifice ordered by the Roman church, but rather simple obedience to the commands of Scripture in one’s ordinary life.

Throughout his life Calvin continued to edit and expand his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the compendium of his theology. The section of the *Institutes* dealing with our life of discipleship was special to him (Book 3, ch. 6-10). He wrote it in a style more simple and direct than the rest of the work. And then in 1550 he had it published separately with the title *The Golden Booklet on the True Christian Life*. This *Golden Booklet* has been in continuous publication in many languages ever since. John T. McNeill, the editor of the modern standard English edition of Calvin’s *Institutes*, summarized Calvin’s attitude:

“While this world is not our home, it is to be taken seriously as our place of pilgrimage and probation, and Calvin will have no morose rejection either of its duties or of its boons. In five chapters, he gives a brief directory for the Christian life that is balanced, penetrating, and practical.”¹⁶

Unlike the writings of Thomas à Kempis, this work promotes faithfulness in one’s own vocation at the highest path of spiritual discipleship. In fact, Calvin debunked the monastic ideal of à Kempis:

“It was a beautiful thing to forsake all their possessions and be without earthly care. But God prefers devoted care in ruling a household, where the devout householder, clear and free of all greed, ambition, and other lusts of the flesh, keeps before him the purpose of serving God in a definite calling. It is a beautiful thing to philosophize in retirement, far from intercourse with men. But it is not the part of Christian meekness, as if in hatred of the human race, to flee to the desert and the wilderness and at the same time to forsake those duties which the Lord has especially commanded.”¹⁷

Calvin warned against rash vows, those not commanded by Scripture and often beyond one’s power to fulfill.¹⁸ He also insisted that we never should take a vow that would contradict our vocation given by God.¹⁹ Instead Calvin commended loyalty to our callings or vocations:

“Therefore, lest through our stupidity and rashness everything be turned topsy-turvy, he has appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life. And that no one may thoughtlessly transgress his limits, he has named these various kinds of living ‘callings.’ Therefore each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about throughout life. . . . The magistrate will discharge his functions more willingly; the head of the household will confine himself to his duty; each man will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness, and anxieties in his way of life, when he has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God. From this will arise also a singular consolation: that no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God’s sight.”²⁰

Spirituality in the Westminster Standards

The Westminster divines stood solidly in the Reformation tradition. They insisted that the only good works acceptable to God were those commanded in Scripture. They denied the spiritual worth of following a monastic life or other such deeds recommended by the medieval church: “Good works are only such as God hath commanded in His holy Word, and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are devised by men, out of blind zeal, or upon any pretence of good intention.”²¹ In their statements defining and describing sanctification, the Standards emphasize the law of God; the Holy Spirit enables the believer more and more to die unto sin and live unto righteousness.²² And the only standard of righteousness is the moral law, summarized in the ten commandments.²³ The vows and disciplines of the monastery or the convent have no place in a Christian’s sanctification.

Reformed Christians believed that every Christian is called by God to glorify him in life. The sovereign Lord has prepared a way of life for each Christian, and calls the Christian to follow it. This is normally a life of activity in the world. This life is the “vocation” that Calvin spoke of. *Vocation* is derived from the Latin word *vocare*, “to call,” and is equivalent to our English word *calling*. Thus the Confession can refer to our effectual calling to salvation as our “effectual vocation.”²⁴ Likewise, our occupation in life is referred to as a “calling”; it is not merely a job, but rather a summons from God to activity for his glory.

A Christian's calling results in having a measure of influence and authority, to help others and to influence them to honor God and oppose idolatry.²⁵ Diligent pursuit of one's vocation is an aid in avoiding temptations and sins.²⁶ The eighth commandment in particular, "You shall not steal," requires as a duty "a lawful calling, and diligence in it." Likewise, it forbids the sins of "idleness" and "unlawful callings."²⁷

As the greatest doctrinal statement in the Protestant tradition, the Westminster standards clearly declared that God calls his people to serve him in the world. From this Calvinist doctrine came significant Christian involvement in free enterprise, representative government, and social action, which has so much developed and improved the world. God is glorified when we work well.

Our Spiritual Discipline

We need a new appreciation of our Reformation heritage. This heritage is biblical. God tells us to enter the world, serve him there, and be a witness to a society in need. So the next time you enter your Christian bookstore, see if they stock à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*. If they do, ask them to stock also Calvin's *Golden Booklet of the Christian Life*!

By confessing our sins and seeking to obey God's law, we develop spiritually. God has given us the means of grace, the Word of God, prayer, and the sacraments. By these means we gain spiritual strength. Then we are empowered to serve God in our families, our churches, our work, and our society. This is true spiritual discipline. As we grow in holiness, daily dying to sin and living unto righteousness, we glorify him and we witness to the world.

¹ 1 Cor. 9:27; Php. 3:12-15.

² Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1973).

³ Charles M. Sheldon, *In His Steps* (1897; Springdale, Pa.: Whitaker House, 1979).

⁴ His books published in recent years include *Spiritual Classics*, *Streams of Living Water*, *Celebration of Discipline*, *Freedom of Simplicity*, *Money, Sex & Power*, *Prayers from the Heart*, *The Challenge of the Disciplined Life*, *Prayer*, *Devotional Classics*, *Seeking the Kingdom*, and *Celebrating the Disciplines*.

⁵ *Celebration of Discipline, The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

⁶ Kelly is cited the most (6 times), Woolman 5 times, and Fox 3 times; Hannah Whitall Smith is not cited at all in the footnotes.

⁷ Citations of writers known to me as being Roman Catholic include Merton (17 times), Morton T. Kelsey (5), St. John of the Cross (5), Thomas à Kempis (4), Catherine de Hueck Doherty (3), François Fénelon (3), St. Alphonsus Liguori (3), St. Francis de Sales (2), Brother Ugolino di Monte Santa Maria (2), St. Francis of Assisi (1), Bernard of Clairvaux (1), Brother Lawrence (a seventeenth century Carmelite friar; 1). Many other writers are cited, whose religious affiliation I do not know.

⁸ Bonhoeffer (13 times), Bounds (9), Keikegard (4), Wesley (4), Cox (4); all other writers not mentioned were cited fewer than 4 times.

⁹ Gordon H. Clark, *Historiography Secular and Religious* (1971; 2nd ed., Jefferson, Md.: The Trinity Foundation, 1994), p. 106.

¹⁰ à Kempis, 1:20:1-6, pp. 31-32.

¹¹ Lk. 3:12-14.

¹² Php. 3:14; 2 Tim. 1:9.

¹³ 1 Cor. 7:20.

¹⁴ Eph. 4:1.

¹⁵ Much has been written about Luther and his break with monasticism. For an excellent article, see Endel Kallas, "The Spirituality of Luther: A Reappraisal of His Contribution," *Spirituality Today* 34:4 (Winter 1982), 292-302; this article can be read online at <http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/823441kallas.html>.

¹⁶ John T. McNeill, "Introduction," *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*; ed. by John T. McNeill, transl. by Ford Lewis Battles; p. lx.

¹⁷ *Institutes* 4:13:16, p. 2/1271; Calvin devoted long sections of his work to criticizing monasticism and related vows of the Roman church, e.g., 4:12:19-28, pp. 2/1245-1254, and 4:13:7-21, pp. 2/1260-1276.

¹⁸ *Institutes* 4:13:2-3, pp. 2/1255-1257.

¹⁹ *Institutes* 4:13:3, p. 2/1257.

²⁰ *Institutes* 3:10:6, pp. 1/724-725; footnote 8 on p. 724 contains a lengthy list of writings on Calvin's conception of vocation.

²¹ *WCF* 16:1. The divines cited several Scriptures to justify this statement; that we should obey only commands from God's Word (Mic. 6:8; Rom. 12:2; Heb. 13:21), and that good works are not those devised by men or blind zeal (Mt. 15:9; Isa. 29:13; 1 Pet. 1:18; Rom. 10:2).

²² E.g., *WCF* 13:1; *WLC* 75; *WSC* 35.

²³ *WLC* 91-98; *WSC* 39-41.

²⁴ As it does in *WCF* 3:8.

²⁵ The general truth is in *WLC* 99, point 8. Removing idolatry is referred to in *WLC* 108.

²⁶ The divines noted that the seventh commandment requires chastity, along with, among other things, "marriage by those that have not the gift of continency," and "diligent labor in our callings" (*WLC* 138).

²⁷ *WLC* 141-142. To support the necessity of a lawful calling, the divines cited 1 Cor. 7:20 and Gen. 2:15; 3:19.