today's christian woman

LOVE GOD. LIVE FEARLESSLY.

Abiding in Christ

How to live a fruitful life

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Introduction

Remain in Me

By Marian V. Liautaud

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

Nearly seven years ago, I started a business. I prayed diligently about the decision and sensed God's confirmation to move forward. Because of my inexperience in retail operations, I depended heavily on God for wisdom and direction. Between the first time I caught a vision for this venture and the day we opened our doors, I prayed every step of the way.

On opening day, customers lined up around the building. With pounding heart and sweaty palms, I became acutely aware of the fact that the success or failure of this business rested on me. For the next four years, I ran the store as if this were true.

Instead of praying for God's wisdom or listening to the counsel of trusted advisors, like my husband, Dan, who was also my business partner, I relied on my own understanding. I simply was too busy and preoccupied to spend time reading my Bible. And when I did make time, I found myself re-reading the same passage over and over and never grasping the words. Daily preoccupation over my work took the place of daily quiet time with God. The longer I skimmed in my spiritual life, the further I fell from the vine. And the further I fell from the vine, the more all my efforts proved fruitless.

Making decisions apart from God and Dan started to have a snowball effect that eventually led to the demise of our business—and nearly our marriage too.

Looking back on those four years, I learned a simple but painful lesson: apart from Christ, I could do nothing. Instead of remaining in Jesus, as he instructs us to do in John 15:5, I ran on ahead without him. I know now to stay connected to the Caller after you receive a calling. If I remain in Christ and he remains in me, there is nothing we can't do together.

In the articles that follow, other authors will share the ways they stay on the vine. Whether it's through the practice of spiritual disciplines or the simple act of nursing a baby, there are a multitude of ways to abide in the Lord. My hope is that you will find renewal as you discover both the peace and power that comes from remaining in Christ.

Grace,

Marian V. Liautaud
Contributing Editor, Today's Christian Woman
downloads,
Christianity Today International

Leader's Guide

How to use "Abide in Christ" for a group study

"Abiding in Christ" can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. **Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
2. **Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
3. **Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
4. **Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
5. **When working through the "Reflect" questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
6. **End the session in prayer.**

To Abide or to Abound?

Living with this holy tension.

By John Ortberg

I want to abound, to devote myself to God's work: "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, be steadfast and immovable; always abounding fully in the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

I want to discover the deepest passions that God hardwired into me. I want to develop whatever gifts I have to their fullest.

I want some fire in my belly. I want to experience such a level of motivation that sometimes when I think about the work of the Lord it keeps me awake at night.

I want to abound.

When Paul said: "I am being poured out like a drink offering," that's not a picture of casual, comfortable labor offered when my personal world makes it easy. Abounding is what Jesus asked us to do. Taking up a cross is not an easy thing. He is Lord of the cross.

But on the other side of my life is Jesus' statement in John 15:4: "Abide in me, and I will abide in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must abide. Neither can you bear fruit by yourself. You must abide."

Abide, Jesus says. This, too, is an important New Testament word: to remain, to dwell. In our day we would talk about this as having deep roots, or being centered.

I feel the power of this call as well, the call to be a man of deep prayer, to refuse to hydroplane over my emotional life but rather to experience joy and sorrow deeply. To live the way Jesus would live if he were in my place.

"Come to me, all you who labor, and are heavy laden," he says, "And I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28–30).

Gentle. That's how Jesus describes himself. The Lord of the cross is also the Lord of the easy yoke, the light burden.

A holy tension

Do you feel the tension between abounding and abiding? I live with it every day. It's unending. Will it ever go away?

Jesus lived with it throughout his ministry. In Mark 1 Jesus withdrew into the desert to abide with his Father, then plunged into the city to abound in his work, then withdrew while it was still dark to abide, only to be accosted by Peter who's upset that Jesus didn't leave a pager number ("everyone is searching for you"). Jesus doesn't say: "Don't bother me—I'm abiding." He goes off to abound some more.

Some people resolve this tension by just abiding, not seriously troubled by a lack of effectiveness. Garrison Keillor wrote about a patronizing do-gooder who lived by the "If I can just help one fainting soul for a moment my work was not in vain" philosophy—a strategy, he noted, that makes it rather difficult to fail.

It is possible for a church to go 20, 30 years or more without producing fruit. People are not challenged, volunteers not trained, resources not well-stewarded—and no one complains. People just get used to not abounding.

I don't want to live like that.
On the other hand, some people run around in frenzied activity. They live in a chronic state of exhaustion and burnout. They may pile up impressive accomplishments, but their spiritual life is dry. They use people; they live with preoccupied souls. There is no depth, no mystery.

I don't want to live like that, either. I expect to wrestle with this tension till I die.

What will make this work? If I'm going to both abide and abound, I need to practice certain principles.

1. Focus on what matters most. Each morning I make a W.A.M.M. (What Activities Matter Most?) list. I need crystal clarity on what's important and what's peripheral.

Peter Drucker writes that recognizing what counts as a true contribution is the great challenge for people in work like ours. If I don't do this, it's embarrassing to me how much time I can waste.

Sloth, Frederich Buechner said, isn't necessarily incompatible with heavy activity. It's failing to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. Like the kamikaze pilot who flew 17 missions.

2. I need to be fully present. Jean Pierre de Caussade described the "Sacrament of the Present Moment." It means being fully present to God's call right now.

It means devoting myself fully to the task—writing or counseling or leading or speaking—with my whole being. It means when I come home I must learn the difficult art of leaving work behind, being fully present with my family.

Our family is in the stage where Nancy and I spend a fair amount of time as chauffeurs (roughly 100 hours a week). I used to complain about this. Then a friend told me how this could be great family time—the kids can't get away! If I'm fully present, these are wonderful opportunities for conversation.

I have learned that certain forces keep me from experiencing "the sacrament": ingratitude, irritability, tension, a chronic sense that there's never enough time.

It's not just that we wrestle with these forces; it's that we glorify them. Busyness, fatigue, over-scheduling become signs of being important. Dorothy Bass noted that the fourth commandment is the only one that people, even people in ministry, commonly boast about breaking.

3. I need rhythm. One striking aspect of the Creation narrative is that God didn't get all his work done at once. Why not? It wouldn't have been hard for him.

God was establishing a pattern, a rhythm, for people made in his image.

God worked. And when he was done, God rested. He called it a day. He celebrated what he had done. He never burned out. He never said, "Thank me it's Friday."

I need to make sure I have a rhythm that includes solitude. I remember when I first decided to try it. I waited for a free day to come along. Guess how long I waited? You have to schedule solitude, write it in the calendar, and protect it fiercely. Sometimes mine are brief periods of solitude: an hour at a nearby forest preserve. Sometimes they're longer—a half-day or a day. But my days for solitude never volunteer. They have to be drafted.

4. I need a plan for my leisure. Some time ago I noticed a pattern: my days off would come up, and I had no idea what I wanted to do with them. I have friends who sometimes have whole vacations available but don't give any thought to what will be life-giving and joy-producing. No wonder we wrestle with fatigue!

So I ask myself these days, "What activities will I both genuinely enjoy and will also give me a chance to be with my family?" Recently my 11-year-old son and I took up snowboarding. One of us is much better at it than the other (the other one is bruised enough from it that he is writing this article standing up), but it's been great to find an activity that allows us to bond over something we both enjoy.

5. I need to focus on abounding where God has gifted and placed me. Parker Palmer writes about being offered the presidency of a large educational institution. Because it was a step up the ladder for a teacher and writer, he was ready to say yes. As a Quaker he first called some friends for a "clearness committee" to help him discern if it was God's call.

Their first questions were easy to answer. Then someone asked: "What would you enjoy most about being president?"

"Well, I wouldn't like to quit teaching,'' Palmer said. "I wouldn't like the politics involved ... I wouldn't like fund-raising."

"But what would you like?"

After a long pause, he said quietly, "I would like to have my picture in the paper with the word 'president' under it."

Parker, couldn't you find an easier way to get your picture in the paper?

To abide and abound I have to be very clear about the gifts and passions God has given me. And so often ego gets in the way.

It's one thing to embrace my gifts. It's another to embrace my limitations. But to take an unblinking look at my limitations is one of the greatest tests of character I know.

My guess is that all of us have at least one limitation that is especially painful to acknowledge. I know I do.

And every time I try to pursue a task as if I didn't have this limitation, I cease to abide and abound. Palmer notes that burnout isn't usually the result of trying to give too much. It's the result of trying to give what isn't really in me.

Performance review by God

At our church we've recently instituted a performance review process to help each other be as effective as possible. It can be a pretty sobering. But I remember that a performance review is coming one day that will make all my reviews on this side of life look pretty casual.

Here's what I'd love to hear God say when that day comes: "You abounded in my work. You took real risks, you dreamed honorable dreams, you rolled up your sleeves and sacrificed comfort and poured yourself out like a drink offering.

"And … you abided in my love. You sought to be transformed by my Spirit, to live in intimacy with me and authentic community with the people I love.

"You abounded and you abided."

Who doesn't want that?

John Ortberg is senior pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California. This article first appeared in Leadership Journal, *2000.*

Reflect

- *Am I more focused on abiding or abounding in my walk with God?*
- *What are some of my most successful experiences with abiding? Abounding?*
- *Which of the principles above will help me achieve a better balance?*

Spiritual Formation for Dummies

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun says people want more than knowledge about God—they want transformation. Where do they start?

Interview by Rob Moll

For those desiring a more intentional walk with God, practicing a spiritual discipline can be helpful. But choosing which discipline and sticking to it can be overwhelming. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun has compiled a* Spiritual Disciplines Handbook *(InterVarsity Press) with 62 disciplines, instructions on how to practice them, and a guide for choosing the correct discipline. Calhoun is pastor of spiritual formation at Christ Church in Oak Brook, Illinois, and a graduate of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

How did you get involved in spiritual formation and the spiritual disciplines?

When I was on staff at Park Street Church in Boston a long time ago, I had a crisis in ministry. The basic tool I was using was information. Boston loves information. People would come to see me or hear me teach, and they would say, "This is great information." Then they would come back two weeks, two months, or two years later with a different presenting issue—but underneath it was a sense of not knowing God's love or having things in their head but not in their heart.

I went to my senior pastor and said, "I don't really see transformation happening in a lasting way, and I either need to go someplace else or figure out how to do this right." That sent me on a journey. I ended up taking courses in spiritual direction. These practices lead people where they need to go as the Holy Spirit partners with them.

Spirituality, or walking closely with God, is often seen as more a matter of being than doing. But the spiritual disciplines are a practice. How does a daily or weekly practice relate to caring for the soul?

Disciplines are repetitive acts that I do to get something I want. I want to learn to speak Spanish. So I have to partner in the process. With the *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, I tried to get people to enter the disciplines through what they want. Sometimes it is just a longing, but sometimes it is out of desperation. I'm a mess, and I need this.

I have seen that there is more staying power through desire than through an *ought* or *should*. "You should get up every morning and have a quiet time" is a *should* I grew up with. It was a good thing in my life. I would be the last person to say it hasn't shaped me. But when you get to the point where you are doing something over and over again, and it is not leading you into the worship of God, I want to ask where God is showing up in your life.

As I see spiritual disciplines, they are to respond to our changing, ongoing relationship with God. You can enter the book depending on a season or cycle of your spiritual life. I'm not saying you don't have to persevere. Anything worth having takes perseverance, like marriage.

Do you see a greater interest in the spiritual disciplines today than in the last few decades?

I think the church has always had people who are interested in spiritual practices and disciplines. Our modern culture is highly technocratic, so that need to attend to the inward journey has become part of our culture. You read all these books that have *soul* in the title. They are everywhere. I think part of it is a response to the virtual reality of so much of life. We want to know how to engage our journey with God. It is not enough to say, "Go be spiritual." How do you go be spiritual?

Another word that I like for discipline is *rhythm*—spiritual rhythms that add to my life with God. Am I making space for him on a regular rhythmic basis so that I can partner with the Holy Spirit for my growth? I think that is why it is of interest to people now. They want to have something to offset a very secular, cold, externally focused life with some internal journey.

I have heard some criticism that spiritual disciplines are really just about character building. Spiritual disciplines can be about what* I'm *doing rather than what* God *is doing.

I think that is an artificial separation. A spiritual discipline that isn't a partnership between you and God isn't a spiritual discipline. It is like what Jesus said to those who had the ability to do miracles, "I don't know you." He was saying, "You're making the effort, but that hasn't produced a relationship that I recognize." There needs to be a bringing together of the two things. If I'm just interested in some personal spiritual renewal that isn't going to touch my world, I haven't understood the call of the kingdom on my life. This is not what the gospel is about. It is not some personal feeling of bliss.

One of the disciplines you write about is creating a rule for life. What does that mean?

The rule for life—and again, you might want to call it a rhythm—asks, "How do I want to live my life given the circumstances and season of my life right now?" Say I grew up having my quiet time, and now I'm a mom with little kids. To have quiet time with God, I have to get up before six in the morning, and I'm exhausted.

The rule says these are the givens of my life. This is what's true of my life. This is what is true of my limits. This is what is true of my time. Now how can I arrange my life to give space to God?

Frankly, we all have rules, like *Do your best* or *Never give up*. So what should be my spiritual rule for this time and season of my life? And how can that shape the life I have, so it is not at the whim of what is urgent or what is cool?

This article first appeared in Christianity Today *magazine, 2006.*

Reflect

- *What, if any, spiritual disciplines have you practiced that bring you into worship of God?*
- *If you had to create a rule for your life today, what would it be?*

Your Walk with God

Ten key questions for assessing our devotional life.

By Kevin A. Miller

For each statement, mark how true it is of you:	Not true of me				True of me
1. I thank God for something almost every day.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I give God credit for everything I am and possess.	1	2	3	4	5
3. It's part of my life to confess my sins to God.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I try to listen to God in prayer.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Every day, or almost, I read the Bible.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I don't let guilt or failure keep me from returning to devotions.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I apply the truth of the Bible to my life.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I long to and work to be pure in body, mind, and spirit.	1	2	3	4	5
9. My thoughts often turn to God during the day.	1	2	3	4	5
10. When someone asks me to pray for him or her, I do.	1	2	3	4	5

—Kevin A. Miller

Reflect

- *Individually, what are your areas of greatest strength? What needs more attention?*
- *As a group, how would we answer these questions?*
- *What might God be asking us to do so he can work more powerfully among us?*

Disorderly Disciplines

When I entered motherhood, my traditional spiritual life became impossible.

By Jenell Williams Paris

A lifelong evangelical, I once believed that daily quiet time dialed the only number God answers. In urban ministry as a young adult, I came to see the active life of service as another spiritual practice. My current church, a postmodern "emergent" congregation, encourages ancient Christian spiritual disciplines such as contemplative prayer and *lectio divina*. My faith has been enriched through these diverse practices, but they have never replaced my quiet times with God.

Becoming a mother, however, ruined my ability to be disciplined about spirituality. As I write this, my twins are two months old, and my initial sense of life with children is that everything is going to be rearranged, including the way I seek intimacy with God.

Spiritual disciplines that have been important to me are no longer possible, at least not in these early months of my babies' lives. I could only walk a labyrinth if its paths were wide enough for my double stroller. Anything approaching silence or solitude puts me to much-needed sleep. Pilgrimage? Only if I could bring along a pack-n-play, diaper bag, and washing machine. Even church gatherings have been crossed off the family calendar, because our boys were born prematurely and must avoid crowds for a while.

Many of the spiritual disciplines were developed by monastics who valued regularity and solitude; words like *order* and *rule* describe them. Family life, while no less holy than monastic life, makes consistent order impossible. The wild rhythm of parenting persuades me that monastic life cannot provide the only model for spiritual discipline. In fact, some seasons of life may be better suited to spiritual undiscipline. In contrast to the stability of monasticism, motherhood offers a catch-as-catch-can spirituality. I'm doing just that, and I'm catching more than I thought possible.

Spiritual Indulgence

Though breastfeeding will never be considered a standard spiritual practice, it's the most disciplined thing I've ever done. The boys have been taking their meals every three hours, around the clock, for nine weeks. That's about a

thousand feedings so far. In these early weeks of my boys' lives, I don't meet with friends for prayer, read devotional books, or enjoy quiet times. Breastfeeding is my daily office, giving structure to my spiritual life.

This spirituality is not ascetic. Many say that spirituality is about denying the flesh, but nursing moms like me indulge it. Along with my babies, I like the softness of blankets and bodies. I sniff my boys' scents and stroke their backs while they nurse. I encourage them to stuff themselves and become plump. I, too, eat as much as I please, packing in calories to maintain my milk supply. In an attempt to deny himself and seek God, the desert father Simon the Stylite lived on a small platform high in the sky for decades, reputedly subsisting on water and grass. In contrast to this asceticism, my boys and I revel in the comforts of life: milk, warmth, sleep, and touch. Feeding babies is a reminder to indulge the senses, to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:8).

Though his spiritual practice was unusual and mine is mundane, both Simon the Stylite and I observe self-denial, a virtue that is just one side of a coin. Motherhood requires a daily denial of good things I once considered essential: adequate sleep, uninterrupted reading time, and leisurely meals, to name just a few. Desert fathers spoke of crushing sin through rigorous self-denial. But for women raised to be caretakers, self-denial can be all too easy and even harmful. Social and family expectations often result in women negating the self before they've even formed a self. Over time, such warped self-denial leads to jealousy, anger, and manipulation as women assert their squished selves in any which way.

Though babies require me to practice self-denial, I also insist on self-care. Asking for help every day—and at this point, I can't make it through even eight hours solo—is at least as difficult as self-denial. I'm beginning to see it as a spiritual practice. Like many evangelical girls, I was raised for domestic labor, raised to be a cheerful giver and never a taker. In the colicky evening hours, however, when two babies are crying at the same time and I'm beginning to cry myself, I just can't do it all. Asking for help, both when I'm at my wit's end and when I just want a break, preserves my health and strengthens my community. It draws my husband into the inner circle of baby care, a sanctum from which dads too often are excluded. It brings friends and family members into my babies' lives in meaningful ways. And it allows me to snatch some sleep—and occasionally even a walk or a shower. Self-care is the inverse of asceticism, but it may be a feminine counterpoint to pride-crushing self-denial. When done for the right reasons, both self-denial and self-care are sanctifying.

Women's Work

The spiritual value of women's work has been given little credence in Western Christianity. As in ancient Greece, men are still often seen as more capable of sustained philosophical and theological reflection, while women are tied to earth in the messy physical work of childbearing and raising. In *Breathing Space*, Lutheran pastor Heidi Neumark describes her friend's first interview with a church committee. Members of the committee were concerned that the woman's mothering would get in the way of her pastoring. The candidate's reproductive

giftedness was cast in competitive terms against her spiritual giftedness, and the church wanted only the spiritual goods.

If this spirit-body dualism were true, then mothers of babies and young children would have to put their spiritual growth on hold until they were able to seek God in quiet study, silent prayer, and uninterrupted conversation. For their part, male theologians and pastors would also have to maintain a false separation of family life from spiritual life. Augustine, for instance, left us to speculate about how his experience of fatherhood fit with his theology of women. Though the tradition of elevating the esoteric over the experiential continues, parenting offers both women and men an opportunity to integrate living their faith with thinking and speaking of it.

I've been influenced by the dualist tradition enough to fear it's true. But when I look down at my suckling sons, there's no doubt in my mind that this is holy work. In contrast to her friend's experience, Neumark was interviewed by an inner-city Puerto Rican church committee. They also asked questions about mothering and pastoring, but with a tone of anticipation instead of anxiety: "'Pastor, when are you and Gregorio going to start a family?' Instead of seeing pregnancy and childbirth as inconveniences and obstacles to job performance, they considered motherhood a natural and joyful part of life that they hoped I would share." Church folk got what they asked for: concurrent opportunities to receive Neumark's leadership and to support her through pregnancies and early motherhood.

Mothering teaches me that spirituality is not only about folding hands and closing eyes. As my daily life has become more physical and immediate, so has my experience of God. My favorite undiscipline, nursing, offers me reason to sit in a glider rocker for eight hours a day, one or another babe at breast. This sitting—a meditation of sorts—encourages generosity and patience that I hope will bless my sons and others I encounter. Changing a hundred diapers each week cultivates endurance; crankiness can nurture quick forgiveness; exhaustion calls for humility and community. And, best of all, babies themselves provide unlimited chances to live in gratitude and joy. Practicing conventional disciplines, when we're able, prepares us to simply practice the presence of God—to borrow a phrase from Brother Lawrence—in seasons of life filled with disorder.

The Benedictine rule describes its purpose as "seeking the grace of God with the help of many brothers." As a married woman with children, my spirituality looks little like that of a monk, but I seek the same grace. I do it with the help of two wee brothers, Oliver and Wesley. And though the life of my spirit as I've known it is impoverished, I feel rich. I'll see a spiritual director, read the Psalms, and enjoy solitude again as soon as I get the chance. For now, I'm practicing the spiritual undisciplines.

Jenell Williams Paris's reflections were written two months after her twins were born in 2005. Paris is the author of Urban Disciples *(Judson, 2000) and* Birth Control for Christians *(Baker, 2003). This article first appeared in* Christianity Today, *2007.*

Reflect

- *What season of life are you in right now? In what ways could you use your circumstances to become more aware of God's presence in your life?*
- *What spiritual undisciplines are you currently practicing? How are you benefitting from them?*

A Life Formed in the Spirit

How Richard Foster practices what he preaches.

Interview by Mark Galli

Thirty-one years ago, not many evangelicals thought much of the "spiritual disciplines," and when they did, they thought of them negatively—as one more form of works righteousness. That began to change substantially 30 years ago, with the publication of **Celebration of Discipline** by Richard Foster. This book, arguably more than any other, introduced evangelicals not only to the disciplines, but also to the wealth of spiritual formation writing from the medieval and ancient church. Senior managing editor of Christianity Today magazine, Mark Galli, sat down with Foster in his home in Colorado to talk about the genesis of his lifelong work in spiritual formation, and how the disciplines have shaped him personally.

What were the key influences in your early Christian faith?
One was a youth pastor at that church; he was very serious and didn't go in much for the fun and games. He took us through a two-year study of the Book of Romans; I mean a real study. In terms of anchoring me theologically, that was great.

A second was Bonhoeffer and his writings, especially **The Cost of Discipleship**. His writing was the only place I could find serious engagement with discipleship. And that probably saved me from abandoning the faith. If all this stuff I read in the Gospels were really true, then that should change everything, but when I looked at the churches in my youthful idealism, I didn't see it. But I saw it in *The Cost of Discipleship*. And then, of course, his story was compelling because of his own martyrdom. So I clung to that. I still have the old book, taped together.

How did you start to become interested in spiritual formation in a more focused way?
My first church out of seminary was a Friends church in San Fernando Valley in Southern California, with between 55 and 80 people on Sunday mornings. Dallas Willard and his wife attended there—she was the organist, and he led singing. Dallas also taught classes at the church, material that eventually became **The Divine Conspiracy**.

In that little church, when I taught, people might come, but when Dallas taught, they brought their tape recorders. And I did too! I cancelled all adult Sunday school classes when he taught.

We not only had teaching, but we would also visit in homes. This church was a little ragtag group of people that had no middle-class props. There were many people from prison, from the drug culture. And they were hungry for God. I remember this one guy, Bob Harrington, would study probably 15 hours a week just to go to the class, because Dallas gave a lot of homework!

I gave that congregation everything I learned in seminary in the first three months. Here were these very needy people, and I knew that I didn't have enough substance to really help them. So I went to our elders, the ruling body, and said, "I need to learn the spiritual life. I need to get to know God." And they heartily agreed. So we arranged for me to take a weeklong retreat four times a year.

That was probably the place where I really encountered Scripture in large pieces. I remember the first retreat reading the Book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was the prophet whom I identified with most. There's suffering again in that. So that was formative.

And—I don't know exactly why—I instinctively went to the old writers. I just felt like Augustine's **Confessions** and Teresa's **Interior Castle**—this was real meat. The first line of *Celebration* is, "Superficiality is the curse of our age." And I guess I felt that. It was all around me.

How did this start to shape your ministry?

Early on we were moving into a building program. And we did the various studies and so on and so forth, so I really could justify it. But I was also learning about prayer at that

time. I remember Dallas asking, "Have we really prayed about it?" I realized we really hadn't.

I remember calling a meeting, a worship gathering on a Sunday night, to pray over this building project. We had all the approvals, and we were about ready to launch the fund drive. In a Quaker context, there's an open meeting for worship. So singing would happen, silence would happen, Scripture would be read, different things like that.

During the meeting, nobody ever said we ought to do it or not do it—that was not the spirit at all. The service lasted a couple of hours. I went into that meeting feeling that we probably should do the building, and I came out of it sure we shouldn't. During worship, my heart was revealed to me—that a big building and a big church would have been for me signs that I was a successful pastor. If anybody had actually said that to me beforehand, I would have denied it. But that night, learning to die to that was important. I'm not against buildings, but for me, it was crucial to give that up.

How did the practice of the disciplines work itself out as you raised a family?

That is so important, because this is where I think we have a lot of work to do. The work of formation is to be found in the midst of all of life and should never be sequestered to the cloister. The two major places where spiritual formation should work, and where the disciplines are vital elements, are the home—children, family—and work. Those are the two places where most of our lives are spent.

I often counsel mothers, for example, who have their little ones they are nursing that they shouldn't try to do retreats. When they are nursing their children, that's the time of prayer. What better metaphor for the transference of the life of God to us than a mother with a baby? Or when you're playing with your kids—that's the laughter of God. You discover God in that and not outside of it.

I used to take our kids, sit them on my lap. We'd talk about the day a little bit. "Now let's be still for a moment and think about that. Let's thank God for the day, just for a few moments." And then they're up and going.

Both of our kids played soccer as they were growing up, and our front yard was the local soccer field for the kids. To find that God is with us in all of that was important.

As you look back on a life of spiritual formation, what part of you has been most shaped by the disciplines?
You start out in ministry with a lot of idealism and hope. Jeremiah's word to his servant Baruch—"Do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not"—you just hear the wisdom and the bitter experience in that.

The freedom from the need to be important, the freedom to be part of a team of people and to look for the good of the advancement of the kingdom of God—to whatever extent that's been true for me, it has come through spiritual practices like the discipline of solitude. This helps you learn that you are not the center of things, that God is in charge, and that your task is to work in cooperation.

Evangelicals, among others, have been reading your book for 30 years. What is the discipline that you think we need to be exploring more at this point?

Solitude. It is the most foundational of the disciplines of abstinence, the *via negativa*. The evangelical passion for engagement with the world is good. But as Thomas à Kempis says, the only person who's safe to travel is the person who's free to stay at home. And Pascal said that we would solve the world's problems if we just learned to sit in our room alone. Solitude is essential for right engagement.

I so appreciated in Bonhoeffer's **Life Together** the chapter, "The Day Alone," and the next chapter, "The Day Together." You can't be with people in a right way without being alone. And of course, you can't be alone unless you've learned to be with people. Solitude teaches us to live in the presence of God so that we can be with people in a way that helps them and does not manipulate them.

Another thing we learn in solitude is to love the ways of God; we learn the cosmic patience of God. There's the passage in Isaiah in which God says, "Your ways are not my ways," and then goes on to describe how God's ways are like the rain that comes down and waters the earth. Rain comes down and just disappears, and then up comes the life. It's that type of patience.

In solitude, I learn to unhook myself from the compulsion to climb and push and shove. When I was pastoring that little church, I'd go off for some solitude and worry about what was happening to people and how they're doing and

whether they would get along without me. And of course, the great fear is that they'll get along quite well without you! But you learn that's okay. And that God's in charge of that. You learn that he's got the whole world in his hands.

This article first appeared in Christianity Today, *2008.*

Reflect

- *Foster says solitude is one of the most important spiritual disciplines. Why do you agree or disagree with him?*
- *Which of the spiritual disciplines helps you feel closest to God?*

Excusing Our Time with God

Evaluating the four factors that determine all we do.

By Richard P. Hansen and David Wall

Why do people avoid devotions? Social psychologists say there are four major factors undergirding any behavior. People weigh these factors when embracing or resisting an activity.

I use this excuse:	Often	Sometimes	Never
Will it work for me? For years Susan had kept her daily appointment with God. Then her 10-year-old son was hit by a car. After hanging on for two weeks, he died. Susan now says, "What's the use of praying? I prayed harder in those two weeks than in my whole life, but Timmy still died!" Susan no longer has confidence that prayer makes a difference. Susan needs guidance to see if what she expects prayer to accomplish is realistic and biblical. She has taken one aspect of prayer—petition—and isolated it from others, such as submission, intimacy, and comfort (as in Jesus' prayer in the Garden).	❑	❑	❑

Can I do it? Frank was enthusiastic about his faith, but when his pastor urged him to read the Bible each day, he thought, *I've never liked to read. I don't even read the paper*. Frank's struggle is with having confidence that he could successfully accomplish a task. Like the smoker who knows giving up cigarettes will improve his health but doesn't think he has the willpower to quit, Frank believes reading the Bible would help him grow spiritually, but that his nonliterary mindset leaves him powerless to read it regularly. Several approaches can help Frank. One is to link him with people of similar abilities and backgrounds who regularly read Scripture. A second is to provide him with small experiences of success, to build his skills and morale. A third is verbal encouragement.	❑	❑	❑
What's it worth to me? Joanie thinks to herself, *I've enjoyed my life so far. How could spending time every day praying and reading the Bible make my life better?* Joanie is questioning the value of personal devotions. She expects that devotions will make her a better Christian, and she feels confident she could do them if she wanted to. But, she asks, "Why become a better Christian?" Of the four behavioral factors, this is the one most often overlooked. We assume that Christians will value the outcome of the spiritual disciplines, but outcomes are not valued unless they are defined, and that is not always easy to do.	❑	❑	❑
What will it cost me? "What will I give up if I study this weekend?" asks Jeff. If it means missing a day at the beach with his girlfriend, the cost will be high. Jeff knows he can study effectively, believes studying will result in good grades, and realizes that good grades are important to his future—but he'd still rather go to the beach. For personal devotions, cost is often expressed as "I don't have enough time." Sleep, recreation, family, and work schedules all compete for the heart and the mind. The best way to help people count the cost is to strengthen the first three factors (expectations, skills, and values), which would make people more willing to pay the cost. Another approach is to lower the cost. For example, the novice, rather than being urged to practice a sweet hour of prayer each day, might be encouraged to spend five minutes a day in prayer and Bible reading.	❑	❑	❑

This article is from **BuildingChurchLeaders.com**, *2003.*

Reflect

- *Which of these four factors most often undermines your devotional life?*
- *In what ways is a rich devotional life worth the effort in our own life? How do you encourage others to build time with God into their lives?*
- *What can you do to help people overcome these barriers to having a vital devotional life?*

Take Time to Be What?

A classic hymn shows why holiness is scarce these days.

By Gordon MacDonald

In the early 1880s, William D. Longstaff wrote a poem that later became a hymn called "Take Time to Be Holy." In my branch of church tradition, we often sang this hymn. As a kid I considered it uninspiring (sorry, Mr. Longstaff), and I groaned whenever the song leader announced it. Today, decades later, I have taken a fresh look at the song and reconsidered my earlier appraisal. There's substance here.

Take time to be holy,
Speak oft with thy Lord,
Abide in him always,
And feed on his word.
Make friends of God's children;
Help those who are weak,
Forgetting in nothing his blessing to seek.

There are three more verses to Longstaff's hymn, and the second verse is also worth quoting:

Take time to be holy,
The world rushes on;
Spend much time in secret
With Jesus alone;
By looking to Jesus
Like him thou shalt be;
Thy friends in thy conduct his likeness shall see.

Each line of that second verse prompts an objection from somewhere within and helps me to understand why holy people tend to be scarce.

"Take time ..." But I don't have time.

"The world rushes on ..." And I am busy rushing with it.

"Spend much time in secret ..." Secret? I like to brag about anything I do with and for Jesus.

"With Jesus alone ..." Huh? And turn off my iPod and text messaging?

"Like [Jesus] thou shalt be …" I'd rather imitate Bill or Rick or Andy.

"Thy friends in thy conduct his likeness shall see …" Don't expect me to be that kind of example.

Despite its Victorian English, Longstaff's hymn does a pretty good job of describing the essentials of what it takes to become holy.

Becoming a holy person is intentional; you have to work at it. When God says to Israel, "Consecrate yourselves," he is putting the ball in our court. In other words, pursue whatever it takes to be a holy man, a holy woman, a holy nation.

Holy, a volatile word

I've not seen myself as a holy man, although I have longed to be one. Sometimes I've reasoned that I don't have the temperament or the concentrative ability for that level of spiritual nobility. And there have been times when, despite my general intention to be holy, I have felt that I failed God so miserably that I was tempted, like someone else in the past, to settle for being a servant, not a son, in his household.

I am using the word as it was used in "be holy, because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16), where the apostle challenges a fresh Christian generation to a unique lifestyle that will set it in contrast with the pagan culture. Those who received the challenge would know instantly that they were being called to something extraordinary.

Holy starts out as descriptive of the character of God. And Christians are urged to order their lives in accordance with what they know about the nature of God. Holy can also be equated with Christlikeness and the fruits of the Holy Spirit listed in the Galatians letter. This speaks to the quality of life to which Christians are to aspire.

Sadly, the word *holy* gets kicked around a bit these days. While some take it very seriously, others mistakenly connect the idea with pomposity, a contrived way of living that seems more designed to impress people (some people anyway) than God.

In my childhood, there was a version of faith that seemed unreal to me. It sported a special vocabulary, a way of praying, a list of prohibited behaviors, and a withdrawal from the larger world. It was a faith-style that, for me, seemed fraught with judgmentalism and arrogance even as it projected a gloss of humility. Whatever it was, I didn't want to be that kind of a "holy" person.

I raise the subject because I wonder if the idea of being holy is losing ground today, especially among those in a position to influence the church. Are we inadvertently losing interest in being holy (in the best sense of the word) and spending our energies on problem-solving, success, personal fulfillment, and avoiding anything that smacks of suffering?

As I read the blurbs on books about authors, as I listen to the introductions and read the brochures about speakers at various conferences, and as I tune in on the illustrative

stories chosen to describe modern Christians, I hear little about anyone being holy. I just hear how successful they are.

For all I know, many of these luminaries are indeed holy and embody William Longstaff's four-verse poem. Perhaps they do take the time to be with God, and they do remind their personal friends of Jesus. But if this is true, I'd like to hear a bit more about it. It would encourage the rest of us.

Unfortunately, Christian leaders are usually accredited to us as great speakers, brilliant and creative thinkers, scintillating artists and entertainers, and powerful organizational developers. But holy people? Maybe that's an endangered species.

When was the last time you were invited to meet someone because he or she was a holy person with a word from God?

Ever met a holy person?

I did a dangerous thing as I worked through this essay. I asked myself who, in my own Christian tradition, have I known and observed that seems a genuinely holy person? The names—each well-known—that came to my mind first were John Stott, Billy Graham, Ruth Graham, and Joni Eareckson Tada.

I added George Verwer, Jill Briscoe, Robertson McQuilken, James Houston, and Dallas Willard. They, in my estimation, are holy people. My list grew to include many others, most of whom you would not know.

Many that I could have named have done something great for the kingdom. But as I built my list, I tried to go for what I call the Life underneath the life, the being beneath performance. I was looking for those who have consistently "walked with God" (remember Enoch?) throughout life's small and large routines.

C.S. Lewis writes: "Nothing could be more foreign to the tone of Scripture than the language of those who describe a saint as a 'moral genius' or a 'spiritual genius' thus insinuating that his virtue or spirituality is 'creative' or 'original.' If I have read the New Testament aright, it leaves no room for 'creativeness' even in a modified or metaphorical sense. Our whole destiny seems to lie in the opposite direction, in being as little as possible ourselves, in acquiring a fragrance that is not our own but borrowed, in becoming clean mirrors filled with the image of a face that is not ours."

You know a holy person because when you are in their presence, there's something about them that makes you feel elevated toward God.

Often when I enter the kitchen where my wife, Gail, is preparing a meal, I feel my saliva glands spring into action involuntarily. It's the mark of a great cook that she can make this happen.

A similar thing happens when you come into the presence of a holy person. The glands of the heart spring into motion, and you experience a fresh attraction to the God this person knows.

The opposite may also happen. The presence of a holy person can cause a sudden burst of conviction. I'm thinking of a time when a celebrity known for her flagrantly immoral lifestyle came through a reception line to meet one of the people I listed above.

With a suddenness that probably surprised her as much as anyone, she burst into wrenching tears as she extended her hand. You had to believe that godless heart simply could not remain composed in the presence of someone who projected an authentic holiness.

Holy and human

An early 20th-century Salvation Army officer, Samuel Logan Brengle, embodies for me everything I could imagine a holy person to be. Brengle served God as an evangelist and revival speaker for approximately 40 years.

Clarence Hall's biography of Brengle records these words (in the context of the Salvation Army) from an anonymous source describing Brengle: "There are men to whose name rank and title add weight, prestige; whose position in the minds of their fellows is elevated by it. But not so with Brengle. Rank does not give increase to that name; neither would lack of rank diminish it. In the minds of people the world over, the name Brengle means holiness, sweetness, love, benediction, blessing, power; Commissioner Brengle means no more. Though the rank he has recently added is just recognition of his value to the Salvation Army, it is a superfluity in the evaluation of the man himself."

The writer here is pointing to the Life underneath the professional life, to the characteristics that point beyond the man toward the God to whom he had dedicated his life. As a truly holy man, Brengle did not set himself above others, nor did he attempt to flaunt some kind of cheap piety.

Hall writes: "Looking him over at close range, men saw in Brengle these three: humanity, humility, and—humor … to them the most surprising of these was humor. Others (found) that this man's saintliness sparkled and bubbled with good nature, that his humor was gentle, whimsical, graceful. His smile was the kind that opened suddenly, like a bursting skyrocket; it would start in his eyes, twinkle there, then wreathe and wrinkle over his face, shake his body, and seem to run vitalizingly to his very toes."

People sought his presence. Again, Hall (quoting a Salvation Army associate): "I have seen the leading commissioners, engulfed with a thousand duties, set aside their papers, dismiss their stenographers, lock the door, and wait upon the American preacher. They wanted him near, they felt their need of this holy man, and all their actions seemed to say: 'It is holy ground, Brengle is here.'"

I have read the Brengle biography at least a dozen times. Few books in my library inspire me as much as this one does when I feel that my personal arrangements with God are slipping (or, to use Longstaff's words, when I am not spending time in secret with Jesus).

What I see is a man who knew lots about life in the streets but saw it from the perspective of knowing lots about life in the Lord's presence. After reading of Brengle, I'm pointed in a better direction: seeking deeper communion with the Father.

Common threads of holiness

When one reads the Scriptures and the church fathers on this theme of being holy, and when one reads appropriate biographies of the great spiritual champions, and when one observes the lives of less-than-prestigious people who seem to have gone deeper with Jesus than most, you see these commonalities:

1. They don't second guess their decision to intentionally follow Jesus. They possess a powerful (not necessarily spectacular) sense of personal conversion, and they readily invite others to share the same experience.

2. They conscientiously prioritize life so that they spend ample time in personal worship, reflection in Scripture, and prayer (listening to God and absorbing whatever God wishes for them to know and experience).

3. They make a steady effort to discipline their lives toward virtues that reflect Jesus. They cultivate a healthy hatred of sin and all that corrupts life.

4. They cultivate healthy relationships—both giving and taking—and add value to each human encounter. I might add that they usually understand that their connection with God is often in the context of "community" and not merely as solo-saints.

5. They engage the larger world with a humbled mind to serve and seek justice and mercy for those weaker than they.

I see these qualities in Commissioner Brengle, and I have no doubt that this man would have been a spiritual influence in any branch of the Christian movement. Not because of his giftedness as a preacher and evangelist, but because of this underlying holy life that compelled people to feel nearer to God when he was around.

Clarence Hall writes of a night when Brengle was introduced to a crowd as "the great Colonel Brengle." He was apparently disturbed by this excessive introduction and wrote in his journal: "If I appear great in their eyes, the Lord is most graciously helping me to see how absolutely nothing I am without Him, and helping to keep little in my own eyes. He does use me. But I am also conscious that He uses me, and that it is not of me that the work is done. The axe cannot boast of trees it has cut down. It could do nothing but for the woodsman. He made it, he sharpened it, he used it, and the moment he throws it aside, it becomes only old iron. Oh, that I may never lose sight of this."

This perspective made Brengle tender, not hard.

"There is nothing about holiness to make people hard and unsympathetic and difficult to approach," Brengle wrote. "It is an experience that makes a man pre-eminently human; it liberates his sympathies, it fills him with love to all mankind, with compassion for sinners, with kindness

and pity for them that are ignorant and out of the way. And while it makes him stern with himself, it makes him gentle with others."

The soil of suffering

One of the elements of Brengle's life that many of us would like to avoid is the fact that the man knew suffering. During his assignment to the Boston Corps, he was accosted by a thug who threw a paving brick at him from a distance of just ten feet. The brick hit Brengle in the head with full force, and he almost died. He was forced to spend 18 months in rehabilitation. From then on, he suffered periodically from excruciating headaches and bouts of depression.

During his recovery, Brengle wrote what was probably his best book, *Helps to Holiness,* and would often quip, "Well, if there had been no little brick, there would have been no little book."

Hall writes that Brengle "never allowed himself to give in (to physical weakness) until completely overcome, but would laugh away all minor complaints as mere trifles, maintaining a happy buoyant spirit until some malady positively forced him to bed. His spirit drilled his body into an habitually erect and optimistic carriage, which could be forced to drop but could not be induced to droop."

Brengle said: "God does not make pets of His people, and especially of those whom He woos and wins into close fellowship with Himself, and fits and crowns for great and high service. His greatest servants have often been the

greatest sufferers." I don't think the Commissioner would have had a lot of use for a prosperity gospel or for a faith that is devoid of struggle.

The Life beneath life

It may be time for all of us to rethink the meaning of being holy. To ask ourselves again: what is the Life beneath that life of technique, skill, and charisma to which we have recently given so much attention?

Peter is credited with the question, "What kind of people ought you to be?" He asked this while sensing that civilization as he knew it was unraveling.

With today's realities (climate change, terrorism, globalism, human-engineering, awesome human suffering), his question is just as relevant now. And the answer—if it's a good answer—is probably the latest description of what it means to be holy.

It's worth a vigorous discussion for every church leadership team, every covenant group. You don't arrive at a final definition of being holy. But you pursue it, talk about it over and over, pray for it, experiment with it, and each time you get a fresh rendition of what God wills the people called by his name to be.

We sometimes fear that in the pursuit of being holy, we will fall into the trap of putting on an act, or being caught when we fall short. A reasonable concern. So let's be aware of it. Let's have friends close enough to call us to account when need be.

I go back to William Longstaff's hymn, which I once found so boring. Perhaps the music could be spiffed up, but leave the words as they are and sing them often. They open the doors to a recitation we all need to hear: how to pursue the way of being holy.

I bet Samuel Logan Brengle loved that song.

Gordon MacDonald is editor at large of Leadership *and chair of World Relief and lives in Belmont, New Hampshire. This article first appeared in* Leadership Journal, *2007.*

Reflect

- *Gordon MacDonald writes, "You know a holy person because when you are in their presence, there's something about them that makes you feel elevated toward God." Who in your life makes you feel elevated toward God? How does this person cultivate their relationship with God?*
- *In what ways have your life struggles set you apart for God's service?*

Additional Resources

Books to help you further.

Spiritual Disciplines Handbook by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun (InterVarsity Press). A compilation of 62 disciplines, instructions on how to practice them, and a guide for choosing the correct discipline. is available from ChristianBook.com and other book retailers.

Becoming a Healthy Disciple by Stephen Macchia. This book outlines ten traits that will help you grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ in today's world (Baker Books, 2004).

Discovering Soul Care by Mindy Caliguire. A simple guide to maintaining or recovering the health of your soul (InterVarsity Press, 2007).

Eat this Book by Eugene Peterson. The second part of Peterson's momentous five-volume work on spiritual theology, this book challenges Christians approach Scripture in a new way (Eerdman's, 2006; ISBN 978-0802829481).

Embracing Soul Care by Stephen W. Smith. This book is about slowing down, stepping outside the chaos of our lives, and entrusting God with the care of our souls (Kregel Publications 2006).

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