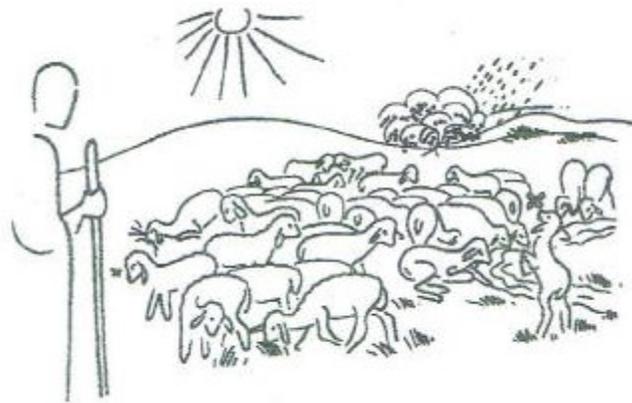


"Take Care of My Sheep"



A Biblical Foundation for Spiritual Direction

A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
Spiritual Directors' Training Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries

Introduction

Spiritual Direction? What's the Biblical foundation of it? Where in the Bible do we find reference to Spiritual Direction? These are questions I have been asked by people for whom the concept of Spiritual Direction is something new. Many of these people come from strongly evangelical Christian traditions for whom the centrality of Scripture is vitally important. They are interested in Spiritual Direction but want to know that it is firmly rooted in Scripture. Much has been written about Spiritual Direction in the history and tradition of the church. However, for the evangelical 'Scripture has primacy over other writings; primacy over church tradition; primacy over individual religious experience; primacy over individual conscience; primacy over individual revelations, dreams and visions; primacy over culture'¹ and so, in order to answer their questions I began to seek out a Biblical Mandate for the ministry of Spiritual Direction.

Recognising that Jesus is our ultimate example for all forms of ministry, I began my search in the gospels which tell his story. There it is easy to find clear instruction given by Jesus concerning evangelism, making disciples, baptism, teaching, preaching, deliverance, healing, prayer and pastoral care as seen in passages such as *Matthew 28:18-20*, *Mark 16:15-18*, *Matthew 6:5 ff*, *John 21:15-19* ; but where do we find Spiritual Direction?

Jesus described himself as the 'Good Shepherd'² and then used the same image in the instructions he gave Peter after the resurrection – "Feed my lambs, take care of (tend) my sheep, feed my sheep."³ Through Peter, Jesus passed on to the church, the ministry of the shepherd. Later both Paul and Peter used the same imagery in their instructions to leaders in the early church:

¹ Foster, Richard J: *Streams of Living Water* p. 222; Harper Collins, New York, 1998

² John 10:11

³ John 21:15-17

“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God” Acts 20:28;

“Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care” 1 Peter 5:2

While the ‘shepherd image’ is more commonly applied to the role of pastor, the ministry of Spiritual Direction is inherent within it. A very helpful paper written by Brian Hamilton presents Spiritual Direction as a model for pastoral ministry.⁴ This ‘shepherd image’ is, I believe, a good starting point for the biblical foundation I have been seeking. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus did not so much teach about what we now call Spiritual Direction, he demonstrated it in his life with his disciples and with people he met: He accompanied them, listened to them and pointed them to deeper relationship with God the Father. This is the foundational purpose of Spiritual Direction – helping people deepen their relationship with God.

The Spiritual Director as Shepherd

Shepherds were, and are, those who tend, feed, and guard flocks of sheep. To ‘tend’ is to do or provide the things that a person, animal, or plant needs for health, comfort, and welfare.⁵ Spiritual Directors provide a ‘tending’ ministry to those seeking greater intimacy with God by helping them “to pay attention to God’s personal communication, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship;”⁶ four essential elements of spiritual health and growth.

⁴ Hamilton, Brian: *Spiritual Direction as the Model for Pastoral Ministry*; www.sgm.org.nz

⁵ Encarta Dictionary, Microsoft Online

⁶ Barry William A & Connolly William J: *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* p.8; HarperSanFrancisco 1986

In John chapter 10 we have two images of Jesus. First he describes himself (verse 9) as ‘the gate for the sheep’; the gate through which shepherds lead their sheep into and out of the sheep pen. Two verses later he describes himself as ‘the good shepherd’. Here we see Jesus as our example of a good shepherd and also the gate, whereby ‘spiritual director shepherds’, are able to lead others in safety. As ‘the gate’ Jesus is the point of reference for people seeking Christian Spiritual Direction. Frank Doyle points out that, *“Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, for instance, by climbing over the fence or breaking through it, is dangerous and should be avoided. He is "a thief and a brigand" who comes to steal and do harm to the sheep. The genuine shepherd, however, enters by the Gate (Jesus).”*⁷ The genuine Christian Spiritual Director will model their ministry on Jesus’ ministry.

Furthermore, Jesus is the gate through which we enter into relationship with God and also the shepherd who leads us into that relationship. The key aspect in both biblical shepherding and Spiritual Direction is relationship. Shepherds in Jesus’ day knew their sheep individually by name. They did not drive their sheep, nor did they use dogs to control them. Rather, they went ahead leading the sheep by safe paths. The wonderful opening words of Psalm 23, “The Lord is **my** shepherd” clearly indicate this personal relationship between the sheep and the shepherd. In relationship with ‘the Lord **my** Shepherd’ the Spiritual Director is enabled to be a shepherd to those who come for ‘direction’; to accompany them on their journey even as the shepherd accompanies his sheep through good times and bad. Harold Kushner writes:

⁷ Doyle, Frank S.J.: *Sunday Scripture Reflections* ; www.sacredspace.ie/livingspace/SundayArchive/A-Easter4.htm

*“Our world may not be a perfect world, but it is God’s world, and that makes all the difference. Yes, the world may be dangerous, but God is there to take care of us, to help us, even as a shepherd cares for his sheep in a world of dangerous predators and threats of accident. The world may be a frightening place, but it becomes less frightening when we know that God is here with us.”*⁸

Spiritual Direction “is primarily a relationship of accompaniment”⁹ and, as a shepherd, the Spiritual Director walks alongside those who are seeking a deeper experience of God helping them grow in their experience and understanding of the God who is ‘here with us’.

Defining Spiritual Direction in a Biblical context

The question of a biblical foundation for Spiritual Direction brings us back to the basic question, “What is Spiritual Direction?” In Barry & Connolly’s definition (as quoted earlier) four key words stand out for me: attending, responding, growing and living. Let’s look at each of these in relation to Spiritual Direction being a shepherding ministry.

Attending

To attend is ‘to listen or pay close attention to somebody or something.’¹⁰ The role of a shepherd involves paying close attention to what is happening to the sheep: young sheep are taught to recognise the shepherd’s voice; straying sheep are drawn back into the flock; wounded sheep are healed; hungry sheep are fed. In relation to spiritual direction, we recognise God as the chief Shepherd; the primary Spiritual Director at work in people’s lives who also works through human spiritual directors in all these aspects of shepherding. As Jeannette Bakke puts it, “Spiritual Direction helps us hear, recognise, and pay attention

⁸ Kushner, Harold S: *The Lord is My Shepherd*, pp 7-8; Anchor Books, New York, 2003

⁹ Benner, David G: *Sacred Companions p. 91*; IVP Books, Downers Grove Illinois, 2002

¹⁰ Encarta Dictionary, Microsoft Online

to the voice of our faithful love who is God.”¹¹ “The sheep follow him (the shepherd) because they **know his voice.**” (John 10:4) Spiritual directors assist others to recognise the voice of God (the shepherd) even as Eli helped Samuel to recognise that it was God calling him in the night (1 Samuel chapter 3) and there is nothing more important that we can do than encourage attunement to God’s Spirit.¹² Spiritual Direction brings to the Church a gift of awakening; awakening God’s people to recognise the multitude of ways in which He¹³ seeks to communicate with them. Communication is the very basis of relationship and helping another attend to God’s personal communication is one of the greatest gifts we can offer.

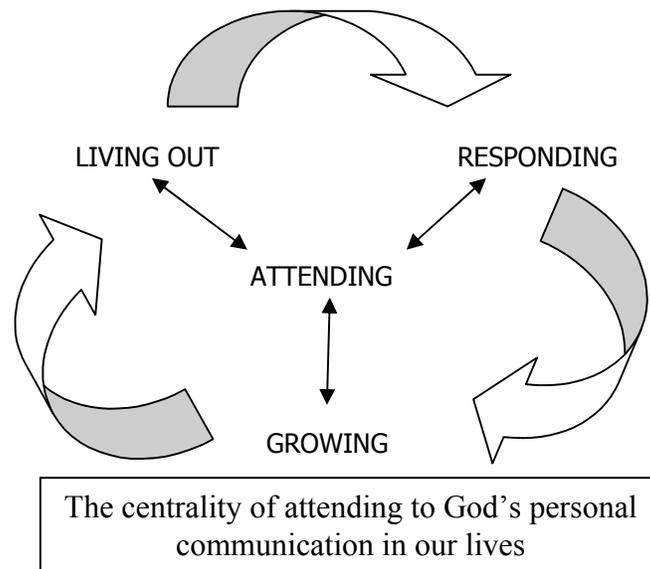
“Pay attention and listen,” says the writer of Proverbs.¹⁴ Attending to God is central to our spiritual journey. Without it our spirituality is nothing more than hollow religion but, as we learn to attend more closely and recognise more of God’s involvement in our everyday lives, we find a new richness and depth of relationship. Our response to God’s communication flows out of our attention to it as does growth in intimacy with Him and the living out of this relationship, not in isolation but in community.

¹¹ Bakke, Jeannette A: *Holy Invitations p 47*; Baker Books, Grand Rapids Michigan, 2000

¹² Benner, David G: *Sacred Companions p. 137*; IVP Books, Downers Grove Illinois, 2002

¹³ While acknowledging that God is beyond gender I have chosen to use the traditional male personal pronoun for God throughout this paper rather than repeated use of the word ‘God’.

¹⁴ Proverbs 22:17 NIV



Sheep learn to recognise the shepherd's voice and discern his presence in their world and Spiritual Direction helps us to recognise God's presence in our world. We ask questions such as: "Where is God for me in this situation?"; "How am I experiencing God in this relationship?" "Who is God for me and who am I for him?"¹⁵ "Where and when do I feel closest to God?" We also pray for discernment, not to understand what we should be learning from an experience but rather for the ability to see God's presence in it and in our life right now.¹⁶ As we do this we move from intellectual knowing about God (head knowledge) to knowing God in relationship (heart knowledge). This movement brings growth as we respond to what the Spirit reveals.

Responding

A good shepherd enables the sheep not only to recognise his voice but also to respond to it; to come when he calls; to follow when he leads and to relax when hurt or

¹⁵ Barry William A & Connolly William J: *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* p.5; HarperSanFrancisco 1986

¹⁶ Benner, David G: *Sacred Companions* p. 136; IVP Books, Downers Grove Illinois, 2002

afraid or stressed because of the security his presence brings. Spiritual Direction provides a safe place in which to examine and explore our responses to life's situations and to God's presence in them. Philip Yancey tells of a woman who wrote to him about a particularly difficult life experience. At the end of her letter she wrote, *“As I think of it, I've never expressed this to anyone before, for fear of disturbing someone's faith. Don't think you must say something to make me feel better but thanks for listening. Most people have no idea how much that helps.”*¹⁷

Sharing with someone we trust to listen unconditionally is truly liberating especially when we find ourselves in a place of spiritual change; when the ways in which we have related to God in the past no longer seem adequate and we are unsure how to respond. A woman who was going through a period of spiritual re-awakening shared with me how much it helped to be able to talk to someone who didn't think she was crazy. The things she was experiencing often felt quite bizarre to her and she knew that most of her friends would think she'd 'lost the plot' if she told them but through exploring her story in Spiritual Direction she came to see and understand God at work in her life in a new way.

The discipline of regular Spiritual Direction helps us slow down and take note of what is God is doing. In Jeremiah 31:21 we read, “Set up road signs; put up guideposts. Take note of the highway, the road that you take.” Times of stillness are vital to this and keeping a journal is encouraged as a place to express thoughts and feelings, whether with words or pictures, helping bring clarity to what we sense God is communicating and our response to Him. Through the prophet Isaiah God challenged the people of His day saying, “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you

¹⁷ Yancey, Philip: *Disappointment with God*; Strand Publishing under license from Zondervan publishing house, 1998

would have none of it.”¹⁸ The danger of avoiding times of stillness is that we become self-sufficient which can lead to burn out and, if we fail to be still with God, there may well come a time when He *makes us lie down*¹⁹ in order to engage our attention. However, the assurance is that *when He makes us lie down*, it is in a place of ‘refuge from a noisy, intrusive world, an alternative to the way we spend so many of our hours.’²⁰ The message of the world is that our value and meaning come from what we do and so we fill our lives with busy activity but God says “Be still and know that I am God.”²¹ Knowing and responding to God requires taking time to be with Him. How we respond is the key to growing in intimacy with God.

Growing

In the early days of a relationship, verbal conversation plays a major role as two people get to know each other. As the relationship deepens, however, there comes a time when words are not always necessary; just being together is enough. The sheep are content just to be where their shepherd is. We become like the writer of Psalm 131 who said, “I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.” Like a weaned child we are content to nestle into the arms of God not seeking knowledge or answers or guidance; simply enjoying Him for who He is and becoming one with Him as Jesus prayed, “Father, just as you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.”²² This is true intimacy with God; relational, deep and mystical. As a shepherd guides his sheep to the places most suited to their needs, Spiritual Direction will

¹⁸ Isaiah 30:15

¹⁹ Psalm 23:2

²⁰ Kushner, Harold S: *The Lord is My Shepherd*, p.40; Anchor Books, New York, 2003

²¹ Psalm 46:10

²² John 17:21

help us discover the places and ways where we find deep connection with God; ways that are different for different people and which change for us as we grow.

More than anything else, seeing a spiritual director myself and participating in the Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme has broadened my understanding of prayer. Richard Foster describes it as, "Finding the heart's true home" and "a love relationship with God"²³ while Sue Monk Kidd writes of "growing from praying as a child – the stage of 'saying' prayer – to praying as an adult – the stage of 'being' prayer."²⁴ It is prayer beyond words; our whole relationship with God becomes prayer. We learn what it means to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17) as we grow in our awareness of God's constant presence with us in every aspect of our lives. Even when we go through the 'valley of the shadow' (Psalm 23:4) we are not afraid because we have learned that the presence of shadows confirms that a light is shining. God has not abandoned us.

This type of growth does not come through intellectual head knowledge; it comes from being with the shepherd, watching, listening, observing, learning by following his example. The apostle Paul wrote, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice."²⁵ His desire was for believers to become more and more Christ-like by following his example even as he followed the example of Christ.²⁶ It could be said that Paul was a Spiritual Director by letter as the main focus of his epistles is growth in relationship with Christ. Spiritual Direction, like Paul's letters, challenges us to become all that God desires us to be. The emphasis is on who we are rather than what we

²³ Foster, Richard: *Prayer, Finding the heart's true home*; Hodder & Stroughton, London 2000

²⁴ Monk Kidd, Sue: *God's Joyful Surprise p.208*; HarperSanFrancisco, 1987

²⁵ Philippians 4:9

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:1

do. “We are his people, the sheep of his pasture”²⁷ He created us for relationship; created us to worship and it is out of worship that we are called to use the gifts and talents He has blessed us with for His glory and the good of others.

Living

Shepherds take care of sheep not because they are woolly and cute but because they have a purpose; to produce more sheep, to provide wool, to provide meat. Being with the shepherd and growing in intimacy with him is incomplete unless there is an outworking of that relationship. No shepherd will keep the sheep contained within the sheepfold. His job is to lead the sheep in and out so that they can find pasture and fulfil their purpose in life. Jesus’ prayer for unity among his people and union with them has a specific purpose: “that they may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you; may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you sent me.”²⁸ Intimacy with God enables us to be Christ to those around us so that others may come to believe because of what they see in us. In ‘The God of Intimacy and Action’, Tony Campolo and Mary Albert Darling write: “*The ultimate goal for the ancient mystics was union between the mystic and God. Mary and I contend that the goal is a unity with God that involves a connectedness with those around us – especially the poor and oppressed. Ultimately this means eliminating the barriers between ourselves and God and the barriers between us and the rest of creation The God we want to love mystically waits to be encountered in our neighbour*”²⁹ Spiritual Direction challenges us to be accountable for the revelation of God in our lives. We ask the “so what?” questions: “What difference has your experience of God made in your life?”

²⁷ Psalm 100:3

²⁸ John 17:21

²⁹ Campolo, Tony & Darling, Mary Albert: *The God of Intimacy and Action*; Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2007

“How has it affected your relationship with others?” “What is God calling you to be and do as a result?” The focus is not on the doing but on the being; work flowing out of worship; intimacy leading to action not action to prove intimacy.

John 17 is Jesus’ heart cry for intimacy between God and His people which brings unity among them. Called to be in the world but not of the world we are to stand out from the crowd like lights on a hill;³⁰ living our lives from a relationship of intimacy with God; bringing the presence of God into every interaction with others. This is the gift we bring to the world; Christ in us the hope of glory.³¹ Christ in us and us in Christ; a relationship of love evidenced in our interactions with others. “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love (intimacy) and good deeds (action).”³²

In Conclusion

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”³³ Herein lies a Biblical Mandate for Spiritual Direction and the image of a shepherd taking care of sheep³⁴ provides us with a model. In his ministry on earth Jesus, the Good Shepherd, demonstrated the accompanying, listening, challenging, encouraging role of a Spiritual Director and gave us the Holy Spirit to be our guide. Within the Church it is now well recognised that no one person can be or do everything. Spiritual Direction provides a support ministry which, alongside other ministries, helps people grow up into Christ by focusing on relationship with and experience of God in everyday life.

*“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up.”
1 Thessalonians 5:11*

³⁰ Matthew 5:14

³¹ Colossians 1:27

³² Hebrews 10:24

³³ John 21:16

³⁴ See John chapter 10, Psalm 23

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Kathleen Gavin
Raglan
bkgavin@xtra.co.nz