For a long time, our understanding of SoulCare has been essentially secular. It really began with Freud, a hundred years ago, and we have come up with this thing called psychotherapy, which is really a secular version of SoulCare. It’s a way of dealing with people’s interior worlds without seeing people as fallen bearers of God’s image, without seeing people as in desperate need of the gospel of Jesus Christ, because only the provisions of the New Covenant can deal with the deepest battle going on in the soul. So, secular SoulCare denies solid biblical truth.

But as secular SoulCare became popular, it has become professionalized. It has become a source of economic advantage. It’s an industry. And it’s become depersonalized into a form of help that requires technical expertise more than personal involvement.

The danger I see is that we could take our new emphasis on spiritual SoulCare and see that go in exactly the same direction as our new millennium begins. A hundred years after secular SoulCare has been popularized into a profession, our world is waking up to the need for spiritual SoulCare, for a way of addressing what is deepest and darkest within us with the hope that we’re destined for something even deeper and brilliantly glorious and wonderful, with a longing in the human heart for meaning and for joy that comes from transcendence. And our world now is waking up to the idea of spirituality, and our churches are looking for the kind of conversations that allow people to deal with their core spiritual longings. Words like *spiritual direction* and *spiritual formation* are becoming very popular, and I am glad for that.

But we’re in danger, and the danger I believe we’re in is that we may move in the same direction our culture moved with secular SoulCare. We may make the same mistake a hundred years later that was made earlier when secular SoulCare became popular.
We’re in danger of taking the true and biblically significant idea of spiritual SoulCare and letting it become professionalized so that it belongs to a special caste of people and is taken out of organic spiritual community. We’re in danger of taking spiritual SoulCare and making the same mistake we made with secular SoulCare and not only professionalizing it, but also turning it to economic advantage so that the way we do it and how we do it and the reason we do it is more influenced by the love of money than the love of God.

And the third danger I see we’re in, the third danger that we face as spiritual SoulCare becomes a hot topic, is we can depersonalize this notion of SoulCare so that we direct people on their journey from a relational distance—directing them to good things like spiritual disciplines and sensitivity to the Spirit without the life of Christ pouring out of us into another and arousing their appetite.

You see, SoulCare is intensely soul-to-soul connecting, but we’re in danger of depersonalizing it into a technique done by an expert.

And if we go that route, then SoulCare will eventually, in my judgment, be seen as an early 21st-century fad rather than a deep and profound work of God’s Spirit. For that reason, as we talk about SoulCare I want to see three things happen. I want to see us continue to de-professionalize and guard against the professionalization of SoulCare. I want to see us realize that SoulCare is not for the professional; it’s for the godly person. There is certain training and there are certain experiences that are helpful, but I’m scared of seeing spiritual direction and SoulCare becoming professionally credentialed.

The second thing I want to see happen—I want to see it de-professionalized (number 1)—and I want to see us find a way to nudge economics to the side. They’re still granting money a legitimate secondary place. I want to see SoulCare as something that is available in truly spiritual community where the bottom line is the glory of God, not making a living.

The third thing I want to see happen in SoulCare: I want to see it re-personalized, not depersonalized but re-personalized, so that we realize that SoulCare is fundamentally, more than anything else, a union of two souls as together they seek to enjoy the gift of union with God. I want to see it become intensely personal—
not the objective professional distance where I back away and dispense technical expertise, but where you and I meet at the level of SoulCare. We must return SoulCare to the church. I don’t see any way to accomplish these three objectives until we see the church as the place where SoulCare happens most naturally, most supernaturally, and most organically.

Think about that with me for a bit. What would the word church mean to you if church were a community of people who journeyed together to God? Honestly and prayerfully, hopefully, relentlessly. What would the church mean to you if it described a handful of people who made you feel safe enough to be known without fear of judgment, to be explored into the secret recesses of your soul, into those embarrassing feelings and specific memories that are so painful? You know, those unspoken fears that nobody has ever heard you verbalize, those petty thoughts that are so weird, so embarrassing, so awful—what would it mean if church meant a handful of people who made you feel safe enough to be known and explored and discovered? Beneath all the mess there’s a miraculously good person, who, beneath all the ugliness, beneath all the junk, beneath all the mess, was possessed of an absolutely wonderful goodness that was divine, a literal divine goodness. The Bible says that we’re participants in the divine nature. What would it mean to be in a community of people called the church if that goodness was discovered and honored and valued, and somebody knew how badly you wanted to go toward God, and you wanted to love even though the evidence wasn’t terribly compelling?

What would it mean to be in a group of people who knew and were able to explore you, and discovered you, and then could touch you—to be touched by people who simply gave you what was most alive in them with no pressure that it prove helpful? But, rather, people who gave something that ignited a flame within you, so that it became a bonfire that changed the way you lived, and changed the way you thought, and changed the way you related?

What would the word church mean to you if it were that? What would the word church mean to you if it made you think not of sitting in a large crowd, hearing a choir sing and a pastor preach, but suppose the word church made you think instantly of a companion for your journey and a guide for your search? If the word church meant sacred companionship, then the word would be as attractive to us as the word oasis to a desert
traveler. Sacred companionship—not professionalized, not fundamentally economically advantaged, not depersonalized—sacred companionship, SoulCare.

It comes, I believe, in two varieties. Sacred companions are either spiritual friends or spiritual directors. Now, think about what a healthy community looks like—a spiritual community where there’s a companion for every journey (a spiritual friend) and a guide for every search (a spiritual director). Both forms of relating provide meaningful and rich SoulCare. Both are expressions of SoulCare: spiritual friends, more often in small groups, sometimes over lunch or on golf courses; spiritual directors, somewhat more formal perhaps, and perhaps in a structured arrangement, often one-on-one conversations in offices or church buildings or maybe during a spiritual retreat, and sometimes in small groups led by a seasoned spiritual director. Spiritual friends and spiritual directors—if you want to be a provider of SoulCare, then you’re going to be providing either spiritual friendship or spiritual direction. You’re going to become a sacred companion for people.

I want to argue strongly as we think about these two kinds of SoulCare—spiritual friendship and spiritual direction—I want to argue strongly that both are organic elements in true spiritual community. They represent the kind of relational opportunities that develop when Christians take the New Covenant seriously. That’s one of the reasons why I again urge you to read Dwight Edwards’ book *Revolution Within* and to ponder the truth of the New Covenant and to realize that when the foundation of what the gospel really is begins to grip you, then out of that reality—out of that truth, out of being gripped in your soul by the fact that there is a new purity and a new identity and a new disposition and a new power—out of that will come a different way of relating that can be described either as spiritual friendship or spiritual direction. It’s something that happens when the Spirit is working in the hearts of people. It’s something that happens when people are pursuing, with all of their energy and all of their giftedness and all of their opportunities for training, the chance to follow the Spirit together with others in the work of spiritual formation.

Spiritual friendship and spiritual direction at one level happen. They are not something that is necessarily planned and structured and organized; there’s an organic element to what we’re talking about. True spiritual community organically
breathes relationships where spiritual friendship and spiritual direction take place—just as surely as good soil planted with living seeds and properly watered and exposed to sunlight eventually yields a garden of flowers.

But our culture thinks otherwise. Just as Freud began a way of thinking that taught that only highly trained certified professionals can do the real work of secular SoulCare, so our current awakening to spiritual hunger is encouraging a way of thinking that says (now listen carefully and you may disagree with this; ponder with me) that says that only highly trained, certified, professional spiritual directors can properly enter the battle for someone’s soul and guide them on their journey to God.

I mean this very sincerely when I say to you that the person who has probably, no, not probably, the person who has certainly had the most spiritually directing influence in my life is my wife of thirty-five years. She’s not trained in spiritual direction. She’s not trained as a counselor. She’s not a professional psychologist. But living in that kind of proximity, which marriage obviously requires and we can say it affords, is an opportunity when, if the two souls are both longing to meet God, spiritual direction can take place right there; and it has for me.

But we’re coming to a position in our culture that says, “No, we appreciate the value of a good spouse and a good friend, but to get spiritual direction is somehow similar to seeing a highly trained surgeon who can do with your body what only a highly trained surgeon can do, and a spiritual director is like that, and because of his or her training, he or she can do with the soul what only great training affords the opportunity to do.” But that re-professionalizes and makes it a technical enterprise again. That’s the model we’re buying into in our culture. In that model, spiritual friends become second-rate helpers, become little more than practical nurses who can give back rubs and encouraging support while they wait for the doctor to provide what is truly needed by way of professional treatment.

If the word *church* is to regain its rich and full biblical meaning, then I believe we as Christians need to recognize where our understanding of SoulCare, where our approach to providing SoulCare comes out of culture and tradition more than out of biblical theology. Let me show you what I mean. Suppose
someone in a Christian church is experiencing a struggle they can’t seem to handle. This person’s name is Legion. Next Sunday when you go to church and you sit among fifty or five thousand people, look around and realize you aren’t the only one. Almost everyone sitting there is in the middle of something for which SoulCare would be wonderfully important.

So here’s a person sitting in church who’s experiencing something in their life, a journeying reality, and they’re not sure how to handle it. Where do they go for help? Well, it all depends on how they think about the nature of their struggle.

If the problem is a physical one, then the direction is clear: See a physician. Get medical help and ask the church to pray, of course, but see a doctor. I support that; that’s what I do.

If the problem is practical—a single mother who needs help carpooling or a widow who can’t meet her monthly payments—again the source of help might be the church or friends who can help with the carpooling or, out of the deacons’ fund, give some money.

But suppose the problem is more personal. Suppose the problem is emotional. Something about how the person is feeling about himself or something about how the person is handling tough times—how they’re going through widowhood, financial crisis, marital strife. Suppose the problem is something about relationships gone bad, relationships that aren’t going well. Well, I would suggest in our culture, the first fork in the road that most of us come to when we experience a problem is to say, “If the problem’s not physical—then, here’s the fork—is the problem psychological or is the problem spiritual?”

I remember once asking a seminary student who was taking a course entitled “Psychotherapy and Spiritual Direction,” and I asked the student what the difference was. And I’ll never forget, when I said to the student, “I see you’re taking a course on spiritual direction and psychotherapy. What’s the difference in the two?” The student—a very bright graduate student, a woman—looked at me as though I had asked the dumbest question on the face of the earth. I mean, it was like, “What’s one plus one? I thought by now you’d know the answer to that.” She was more gracious in her response, but what she said to me was very simply, “Well, psychotherapy is for treating psychological pathology and spiritual direction is for guiding people toward
God who have a hunger to know Him.”

So, if your problem is psychological, then find an expert in psychological counseling who can deal with your psychological pathology. If your problem has more to do with your hunger for God, and you aren’t sure how to find your way home, then see a spiritual director or get a sacred companion to guide you on a journey home, but realize that the two are very different things, and there are two different kinds of helping professionals.

Soul pathology and soul hunger—reflect on that for just a moment. Up until the mid-1990s in Western spiritual culture, especially in evangelical Christian culture up until recently, a spiritual problem was commonly defined as having to do with doctrinal ignorance, theological uncertainty, undisciplined living, or moral failure. If any of these were what you were struggling with, see a pastor, get spiritual help. But everything else—anxiety and depression, eating disorders, sexual addictions, aftermaths of childhood abuse—they were all psychological disorders. Spiritual disorders, up until recently, were viewed as just theological problems and moral issues, and everything else—anxiety, depression—were psychological problems.

Up until recently, the church and its resources handled spiritual problems. That’s their domain; that’s what they’re there for. But if a person had a psychological problem, they were referred to a psychotherapist or to other psychologically trained professionals. But things are changing.

As the 21st century approached, a shift has occurred. Spiritual problems are now seen to encompass more of human distress, including now deep, unsatisfied desires to experience oneself as alive, as vital, as longing to have something meaningful to offer.

A spiritual problem is now caught up in whether a woman feels alive as a woman and enjoys her femininity, and a man feels alive as a man and enjoys his masculinity. Now we’re starting to see these things as spiritual issues, matters of the soul. Do I feel fully alive? Am I a meaningful person? Is there a reason to go on? Do I wake up in the morning with a sense of excitement, having something to offer? Now we’re calling those spiritual problems—a hunger for peace, a hunger for joy.

As our spiritual nature has received more recognition as an
essential part of what it means to be human, we’ve accepted a new kind of helper in our Christian culture that we now call a spiritual director—someone who can lead empty people to fullness in God. Psychological problems still are assumed to exist as a distinct kind of struggle that spiritual directors are not qualified to touch.

I’ve read probably forty or fifty books on spiritual direction in the last couple of years, and without exception (I think that’s true), without exception, every book that I’ve read that I can recall has some lines somewhere where it says, “Let’s recognize that as spiritual directors, we’re not psychotherapists. There are psychological problems that we, as spiritual directors, cannot handle.” So we still have a clear distinction between soul pathology and soul hunger.

What do we mean by pathology? Don’t be frightened by a fancy word. What do we mean by psychological problems? There’s still a wall between psychological pathology and spiritual hunger. What do we mean by pathology?

Well, as near as I can tell, it means something like this: You’re a victim of psychological pathology just as a cancer patient is a victim of physical pathology. You’re a victim of psychological pathology if the following is true: Some significant emotional wounding has been suffered, like a father’s neglect or a scout leader’s sexual advance, and a complex of internal defenses has developed to ward off the unbearable pain. And when those defenses are sufficiently maladaptive to prevent the afflicted person from experiencing a sense of personal wholeness and being able to relate well, then we say that psychological pathology is present—a complex of internal unconscious defenses against an unbearable pain that results in a variety of symptoms of what we call psychological disorder.

And when that pathology is visible in distinct symptoms like anorexia, or in poor relational styles like borderline personality disorders, then we think of a psychological problem or a psychological disorder. So, in our culture, the way we are thinking is very much this way: We have psychological problems involving internal pathology, and we have spiritual problems involving internal hunger.

We send people with the first kinds of problems to the psychotherapist, and we send people with problems of the
second nature to spiritual direction or back to church. As spiritual direction is gaining recognition as a valid discipline, we’re moving to professionalize this activity with extensive training programs. We’re moving to offering economic advantage to spiritual directors by accepting them as healthcare providers, and we’re depersonalizing spiritual direction into something that a certified expert does to, or on behalf of, a seeker, much as a dentist pulls a diseased tooth.

Psychological problems and spiritual problems exist on a continuum from mild through moderate to severe, and in our culture we’ve recognized this fact by offering three levels of psychological care and three levels of spiritual care. Now, this can be fairly easily sketched, and I want you to get this, because I’m going to propose a whole different way of thinking about what SoulCare could look like in the Christian community. What I’m going to put now before you is a picture that I think describes our culture, but I want to see this change.

This is how it looks now. We have psychological pathology that comes either in the form of severe pathology, moderate, or mild pathology. There’s a whole different category over here called spiritual hunger. And that can be experienced at a severe level, at a moderate level, or at a mild level.

The person who experiences severe psychological pathology requires, in our culture, psychotherapy—somebody who probes deeply into unconscious kinds of conflicts. The person who is suffering from more moderate psychological pathology might not need to go to the highly trained psychotherapist, but can go to a counselor who somehow seems less than a psychotherapist, somebody who offers insight and perspective. But if your psychological pathology is mild, then perhaps a lay counselor will be able to be helpful—providing support and advice from briefly trained people.

On the other side, if you have a spiritual hunger and the problem is severe, and you’re just dying to experience God and you’re in a terribly deep, dark night of the soul, then perhaps you need to see a spiritual director, somebody who has the discernment to go into the deepest part of your soul. If your experience in spiritual hunger is more moderate, then maybe on your own you can practice some of the spiritual disciplines without the help of a spiritual director. You can learn to fast and spend time in silence and listening to God, and that will help your spiritual hunger.
If your hunger is of a more mild variety, then perhaps simply spiritual support, like a good small group, a good prayer group that you can pray together, perhaps that will do it.

Let me introduce a proposal. Suppose we recognized that there’s no real distinction between what we call psychological pathology and spiritual hunger (and I’ll make sense of that later). Suppose we recognized that what we call psychological pathology really has to do with flesh dynamics, and that psychological pathology—what we’ve called psychological pathology—does exist but that we misunderstood it, and it really has more to do with a spiritual activity of the flesh-driven soul. And suppose we realized that there is a very real spiritual hunger in the image-bearing heart, and we were to take these two categories of pathology and hunger and bring them together and say, “It’s a human being who’s left home and we’ve got to find some way to walk with that person back home.” Who’s going to do that? The spiritual director as our culture now defines it? The psychotherapist as we’ve known him or her for years? Her whole new category of sacred companion, SoulCare, is a different way of approaching the difficulty of working with people who are troubled. It has more to do with bringing the soul home than with anything else. We’ll look at that more carefully in our next presentation.