

Beginning Steps in Spiritual Direction



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Let me offer a radical proposal for how SoulCare could actually develop in the local church. Suppose we recognized that deep wounding to the human personality can create substantial internal problems, and of course that's true. But rather than thinking of psychological dynamics that need professional care, suppose we thought of flesh dynamics. And the difference is this: In psychological dynamics, an innocent self is coping as best it can, and needs and deserves support. But we have to ask a question: Does a biblical view of people ever allow for the idea of an innocent self being wounded? Or are we not depraved selves from the moment of conception, determined to make life work without God and, therefore, having our fist clenched in His face? And when we're wounded and bad things happen, our flesh pops up, and we say, "I'll find a way to make my life work." That's not an innocent self coping as best they can in the way that deserves our support.

"Psychological dynamics" presumes innocence. "Flesh dynamics" presumes that there's no such thing as an innocent self. There is, rather, a soul determined to handle life without God. If we thought like that, then SoulCare would begin to become a much bigger word. No longer would it have the idea of just somebody who prays together and reads the Bible together and says nice things to each other, but now would deal with all the internal wounding that we now think only psychotherapy can address.

Suppose also that we realized that depth discernment into the soul required an awareness of the Spirit's movement and the wisdom to encourage that process. Suppose we believed that people needed relationships where they felt safe enough to look into their own interior worlds, and relationships with people who had enough wisdom to enter their interior worlds, hear their story, and see what is really going on. Suppose, not only, we believed that depth wounding was the province of SoulCare, but depth discernment was something that SoulCare could provide. We could see the

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holy tension between flesh dynamics and Spirit dynamics.

Suppose we had available to us a person with the wisdom to move into our interior worlds and to surface the holy tension between flesh and Spirit and who understood the spiritual cycle through brokenness and repentance and abandonment and confidence and release.

If we understood all of these concepts and put them together, then my radical proposal is this: We could return SoulCare in its full-orbed reality and richness, to spiritual community, where spiritual friends provided a safe place to journey honestly, where every Christian had a companion for the spiritual journey. And we could see not only spiritual friends in spiritual community, but we could also see spiritual directors properly defined as men and women who provide wisdom to enter the darkest places in the human heart and to discover, to discern, and to encourage the release of the divine life within.

Not only a companion for every journey, but a guide for every search. I know it's a dream, but it's a biblical dream. And if that were to happen, then maybe we could redefine therapy and counseling and spiritual direction and spiritual support and bring all these good words under the rubric of one concept—true spiritual community, with spiritual friends who provided grace-filled, passionate relationships, and spiritual directors who were not professionalized, who were not living for economic advantage, and who were not de-personalized in their approach, but who could offer wisdom to those who were especially struggling in their journey to God.

If that were to happen, if my dream were to come true, then I believe the word *church* could become the most meaningful and exciting word in our vocabularies. How do we get started with that? How do we move toward the actual reality of SoulCare happening in our churches and our communities? How do you begin moving with all the material we've discussed in all these courses into providing actual SoulCare?

The first step in every journey is to know where you are and where you want to go. Where are we in our Christian churches? At the risk of overstatement, I believe it's fair to say that we are a collection of individuals who too often struggle alone. We're unknown. We're unexplored. We're undiscovered, and we're untouched. We've never turned our chairs toward one another.

We've never meaningfully said, "I invite you to enter my soul in a relationship of SoulCare." We've never turned to another and said, "I would love to provide companionship for you and your journey." We've never turned our chairs. That's where we are, generally, in our churches. There are happy exceptions, but that's a general pattern. That's where we are.

Where do we want to go? Well, if you are like me, and you've thought this material through enough to perhaps come to a recognition of your own desires as a human being, then maybe you know what you would like to become. Maybe, with me, you would like to become involved in a community of broken but hopeful people, traveling together into the presence of God and there being changed and empowered by supernatural resources to go back into our worlds, not just staying in the monastic retreat where all we do is pray, where all we do is encounter God, but where we encounter God meaningfully together and then are empowered to go back into our worlds to love our spouses unselfishly, to keep our families together as best we can, to spend time with our kids, to feed the hungry, to provide opportunities for the poor, to hate sin, and to somehow manage to love the sinner, to proclaim what we believe humbly, and to wait longingly for heaven.

That's who we want to be. The community of the broken but hopeful who together travel to God and are changed to live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven and then to reenter our world, not to be of the world, but to be in the world as lights—that's where I'd like to be. That's not where I am.

The first step in every journey is to know where you are—individuals with unturned chairs—and to know where you want to be—a community who turn our chairs, discover our brokenness, and, in our brokenness, discover the reality of God, and it changes our lives.

Well, let me begin the planning for this journey by thinking through how we can find the wisdom we'll need to move from an interior world that has more in common with Adolf Hitler than Jesus Christ to an interior world that actually resembles the interior world of Jesus—that's what I want. I want to do it with you; I can't do it without you. You need my SoulCare. I need your SoulCare. We need to come together and recognize that when we come together, we're a mess. Because, in the core of my being—find out what I'm like inside, and you will realize that it's no overstatement to say that I'm actually more like Hitler than I am

like Jesus—but in the core of my being there are resources to be otherwise.

Can you touch those in me? Can you help me believe that they are there? Can you help me believe that in the core of my being Jesus Christ lives by His Spirit, and I can become like Him?

To put all this more simply, how do we provide spiritual direction for men and women on the journey through crisis and complacency and demanded comfort into the confidence and centeredness and unending consolation of God's presence? How do we move toward spiritual direction? How do we become sacred companions who provide spiritual direction?

I want to talk about spiritual direction first. Then I want to talk about spiritual friendship.

First, spiritual direction—a lot of overlap here of course. If we're going to begin the ministry of spiritual direction, dealing with depth woundedness, dealing with depth hunger and depth struggle, if we're going to become spiritual directors for the soul, then let's start by thinking vision. We've talked about that a lot. Let's think about vision.

What would a spiritual community with spiritual direction look like? Three verses occur to me as a way of developing vision. The first is in Proverbs 20:27, where the inspired writer says this: "The lamp of the Lord searches the spirit of a man; it searches out his inmost being" (NIV). That's the interior world. There's something that God provides that is a flashlight that goes into the very deep recesses of my soul. There is something in us that God has placed there for the exact purpose of revealing what's happening at the center of my being. In other words, I really can know myself to a significant degree. Call it the conscience. Maybe call it what Paul called it in Romans, where he talked about the requirements of the law being written on every heart. What he's saying is that we can know at any given moment when we're heading and how we're heading in the wrong direction—in raising your kids or deciding what job to take or handling your spouse or working through other kinds of internal conflict. We can become aware of our sin. If we're going to provide spiritual direction, we need to have confidence that we're going to be able to discern the real problem, and the lamp of the Lord is available for the real problem to be revealed. That's the first thought.

Developing Vision for Spiritual Direction:
The lamp of the LORD searches the spirit of
a man; ...
— Proverbs 20:27

Developing Vision for Spiritual Direction:

... you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.
— Psalms 73:23-24

Developing Vision for Spiritual Direction:

As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him.
— 1 John 2:27

The second thought in getting a vision for spiritual direction: When we enter into the deepest struggles in life—when we feel cheated, when life seems unbearable, when the pain is overwhelming, when we feel like things have gone badly and it's not fair and we're miserable and we don't know what to do; when a marriage falls apart or a child breaks a parent's heart or cancer strikes or a job is lost—then we can say, because the Bible tells us we can, "Yet (don't you love the word *yet*?) in spite of . . . yet, with all this going on . . . yet I am always with You, God. You dwell in the center of my being. Your home is in me. I'm in You, yet I am always with You, God, in the middle of whatever calamity I'm facing."

The psalmist goes on to say in Psalm 73:23-24, "You hold me by my right hand" as I navigate through this storm. "You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory" (NIV). With that verse in our minds—with those two verses in our minds—we can say with confidence that it's possible to discern what is happening in us that's causing all the trouble, but we can also discover from God how we can respond to this particular struggle. Aren't you having a relational problem right now with somebody? Almost everybody is. There's somebody that's hurt your feelings. You're not sure how to handle this, how to talk with this person. I've got that going on in four or five areas of my life I could talk about. And according to this verse, no matter where I am, God and I are together. I am in His presence, and He will guide me and make known to me how I am to handle this. So I can discover from God how I can respond in good ways to whatever might be happening in my life.

Add a third thought. Not only can we discover what's wrong, not only can we discover the path back home, but John tells us in 1 John 2:26-27 that when we're being led in wrong directions, the Spirit Himself is in us and will Himself guide us from within from a source of internal wisdom that is drawn from Scripture and that resonates in our hearts. So, therefore, John says in his first epistle, we don't need anyone to teach us.

So God is actually going to speak to me from the center of my being, and I don't need you to teach me, but maybe I need you to help me discern what He is saying in the core of my being. Maybe that's spiritual direction. When God looked down on His foolish Old Testament children, He said in Deuteronomy 5:29, "I really wish" (I'm paraphrasing), "I really wish, I long that their hearts were inclined to fear Me and to keep My commands." But they

weren't. So God arranged to give each of us, as His children, a new heart. He promised that in Ezekiel 36:26-27, where He said, "I'm going to give you a new heart, and I'm going to put a new spirit within you, and I will see to it that when you have this new heart, when you have this new spirit, you will be able to discern what is best. You will be moved to follow My decrees. You will want to follow My decrees and the recognition of what it means to walk My way. And the desire to go My way is something that will come from within." This means something radical that a lot of Christians are uncomfortable with. It means this: Now, because of the new heart and the new spirit—that's what's in us under the terms of the New Covenant—now you can trust the deepest desires of your heart, because you will be delighting in God in the core of your being. That's why when I talk to men with sexual addictions, and they are tempted to view pornography, my response is that the answer is not merely to resist the wrong direction, it's certainly that, but it's to indulge the deepest desire of your heart, which has nothing to do with watching pornography.

Now, if you followed all that, that means we have a three-legged stool, a three-legged stool we can sit on. It will balance, and we can be comfortable. A three-legged stool will give us the basis for talking about spiritual direction. That is what our topic is now. We're thinking about how we can develop a spiritual community where SoulCare takes place that is not parceled out into psychotherapy and counseling and lay counseling and your own spiritual support groups and spiritual disciplines and spiritual direction—it's not parceled out in all these ways. But we realize that way in the core of our beings, we don't have soul pathology versus soul hunger. We just have a deep problem in our relationship with God. Our souls are deformed, but the power of God can reform them, spiritually form them. And we need companions in the journey in spiritual community. That's what I've been saying

And now we're talking about how spiritual direction can be a part of that. The three-legged stool on which we can build our model of spiritual direction goes like this: Leg number 1 (to repeat what I've said): We can know what's happening beneath the surface of our lives. At least we can know enough to develop wisdom for living well. You don't need to live in unending confusion. You don't need to ask yourself for the rest of your life: What's wrong? Why am I failing my spouse so badly? Why am I so involved in continual sexual addiction? Why is my anxiety overwhelming me? We can know what's wrong. The Bible tells us that. That's leg number 1, as we think about spiritual direction. It's possible to

A Model for Spiritual Direction



It's possible to enter
flesh dynamics and
know what's wrong.

A Model for Spiritual Direction



A Model for Spiritual Direction



... for the teaching of the law by the priest will not be lost, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets.

— Jeremiah 18:18

enter flesh dynamics and to know what's wrong.

Leg number 2: God Himself (we're told this in the Psalms), God Himself will let us know how we can move through any situation to enjoy His presence and to be changed. God Himself will illumine the path home. A spiritual director doesn't give you illumination. A spiritual director develops eyes to see the illumined path that God has made known, and then he encourages following on that path. So the second leg: God Himself will make known the path home.

The third leg of the stool: God is now in us creating desires that can be trusted, so that when I want to know the path home, the issue is not "Will someone tell me what to do?" The issue is to trust my heart: "You know, what I really want to do right now is to go to my wife and tell her I'm sorry. That's really what I want to do. It isn't that it's the right thing to do, and my therapist told me I should do this, and the Bible verse convicted me that I should. All that may be there, but it's what I want to do. It's the way home. I can trust my heart, because in the core of my being, my desires are holy." We don't need someone to tell us what to do. Spiritual direction is not direction in the sense of "do this." Spiritual direction is directing you to your deepest desires, because your deepest desires are from God.

We only need someone who can put us in touch with our new hearts, someone who understands Spirit dynamics and can help us to see them and feel them and experience our desire to release them. That person is what I call a spiritual director. In New Covenant terms, a spiritual director is the replacement for the wise man of the Old Testament. Think about that with me for a moment.

In the Old Testament, there were three categories of spiritual leaders. Jeremiah talks about this. In Jeremiah 18:18, there are three categories of spiritual leaders. There were priests who taught the law, priests who led public worship. There were prophets who spoke to the culture about their failures. There were prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel who came and said, "Israel, you are wrong at a national level. You are going in bad directions. I call upon you to repent."

There were priests who taught and led in public worship. There were prophets who spoke to the culture about failures and about their responsibilities. But there was a third kind of spiritual leader

in the Old Testament days called a wise man. And wise men were people who offered counsel on how to live well.

The wise men in Israel's latter days in the Old Testament were exposed as people who weren't wise at all. The wise men had lost their wisdom, because they didn't listen carefully to the Word of the Lord. That's in Jeremiah 8:9. The Old Covenant wise person was to listen to God, not the culture. The Old Testament wise person was to spend time in the presence of God, not just to get a lot of training. The Old Testament wise person was someone who knew God so well that wisdom came from God's heart and mind into their heart and mind, and they could go to other people and impart that kind of wisdom. And when they didn't spend time in the presence of God, they had no wisdom to offer.

In New Covenant days, which are now, we need wise people. We need wise people who will listen to God. And because they listen to God long enough and hard enough—in His Word primarily, but also in terms of their own journey through their hearts toward the presence of God—they have come to understand that a wise man in our culture is someone who understands where God is taking us, how God is moving us to become a people who bring Him glory, and how He is leading us home.

And wise people, secondly, are people who understand the resources that God has made available for us to get home. The new heart, the new purity, the new identity, the new disposition, the new power are all available. And a wise man or a wise woman is one who understands that and then enters our lives with this wisdom and can see the holy tension between all of the flesh dynamics and the deep wounding—in our childhood abuse and our parents' neglect and all the sad stories that people tell—and we can see how the flesh has been energized by all of this. We can see what is deeply alive in the person, and the wise man, the wise woman, sees that and exposes it to the individual so that the holy tension is felt, which then releases the cycle of spiritual growth.

That's what Paul did. Paul was a wise man. He said many things along this line. He said to people, "You walk in newness of life. You obey God as people who have been brought from death to life. You obey God as new creations in Christ Jesus. You obey God as people whose bodies are now temples of the Holy Spirit." What Paul was saying is this: Discover who you really are in Christ and reveal yourself.

An old saint once said, “The key to spiritual growth can be put really simply: Love God, and do whatever you want.” Because if you love God, what you want to do is exactly what God wants you to do.

“Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.” That is delighting in Him.

Look at the church today. What are the New Testament counterparts of Old Testament wise men? For this new model I’m wanting to create, I suggest that in our churches we need wise men, wise women. We need spiritual directors after the pattern of Old Testament wise people. Look at the church, and you’ll see that we have pastors who perform oftentimes the functions of prophets. We have teachers and worship leaders who serve as priests before God, proclaiming truth and leading us into His presence in a corporate body. But my question is: Where in the church are the wise counselors? Where in the church are the wise spiritual directors—people who understand the human soul, who enter it, and who see the battle and know the available resources and stir up the holy tension that sets the spiritual cycle in motion? Where are the wise people?

As our culture becomes more accepting of the idea of spiritual direction, more and more schools are developing in spiritual direction, many of them wonderful and good. But may I suggest that rather than establishing more formal schools where men and women can be professionalized and economically advantaged and taught to be a special class of elitist experts, perhaps another way to think about developing wise men, wise women, is in our spiritual community; so that people who are struggling with life and want great wisdom will know to go to, not a psychotherapist, not a highly trained spiritual director, but a wise man, a wise woman, a spiritual director who can enter the battle and see the flesh and the Spirit, and highlight the holy tension, and guide people through the process of brokenness and repentance, abandonment, confidence, and release. As wise people begin to develop that, we’re going to have a true community.

But how do we get there? Training programs, well, they have their place. But may I make just a simple suggestion to you? If this is drawing your heart, if you see the need, and you feel God is calling you to be one of these wise men or women—not proudly, you feel inadequate, you’re not sure if you have it—but you like thinking in this direction, you feel called of God, let me suggest a simple

little pattern to follow.

Meet with a couple of other people who share your heart. Get two or three or four people together who feel the same way, who long to provide spiritual direction, who long to be equipped by God to be a wise man or wise woman. If you are struggling and hurting, this doesn't disqualify you; it qualifies you. If you're suffering, if you're failing, well, of course—get together with other people who are honest about their journey but long to provide spiritual direction. Pray long and hard about a sense of unique calling to this vital work.

First, get together.

Secondly, pray. Are you called?

Third, you might take this course on SoulCare together. You might get together and take this entire four-course curriculum on SoulCare and ponder the ideas and debate and dialogue and think.

Fourthly, read. Read together. Become a book club. Read books like Thomas Dubay's *Seeking Spiritual Direction*. Read books like Henri Nouwen's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Read books like Theresa of Lisieux's *A Story of a Soul*. Maybe John Gorsuch's book *Invitation to the Spiritual Journey*. These are the kind of books you need to think about. Read books on the topics. Think about these things.

And in your group of three or four people, become a community where you seek to know, explore, discover, and touch each other. Pursue whatever training is available, not to be certified, but to become more aware and discerning. And as you meet, commit yourself with authority and sufficiency of Scripture, journey together honestly through the spiritual cycle, study New Covenant theology. Read Dwight Edwards' book *Revolution Within*. Reflect on what New Covenant community could look like. Read a book by Jim Kallam called *Releasing the Community to Become a Church*. [Editor's note: Dr. Crabb is referring to Jim Kallam's book currently entitled *Risking Church: Creating a Place Where Your Heart Feels At Home*]. Reflect on the nature of the journey. Read my book *Shattered Dreams*—how God matures people through suffering.

In the middle of all this, remember a key principle: You offer meaningful spiritual direction to people who are drawn to your

life, not to people who recognize your credentials. Do you want to be a spiritual director? Let me ask it differently. Would you like to provide spiritual direction? Would you like to be the kind of person who people come to and say, “I’m away from home. I don’t know how to get back. Can we talk?” And you would say, “I’d love to.” Why? Because you’re qualified through training? Maybe, or maybe not. But you walk the path. You’re a wise man, you’re a wise woman, through study, through dialogue, through thinking, through reading, and now you want to walk with somebody else on the journey home.

Spiritual direction. Maybe it’s your calling.