

Chapter One



The Spiritual Life of a “Good” Christian

As the pace of lifestyles quickens, the demand for tips on how to fit prayer into a busy life grows. A cottage industry of new books, Websites, and spiritual aids offers quick and easy devotions.

—Susan Hogan-Albach, *quoted in Religion Watch*,
June 2001, p. 3

Each week, all over America—and much of the rest of the world—people are looking for spiritual nourishment. They go to big churches and little churches. They attend on Saturday, or maybe Sunday. Many read books, some listen to the radio, others watch religious programming on television. A few do all of the above, and others do none.

Who is right? Who is wrong?

For many years, I was sure I was wrong. I did not do any of the things that people say you are supposed to do. I heard it from the pulpit, I heard it from speakers, I heard it from friends, and I even heard it from my father: there are set things one must do to be a “good” Christian.

The two biggies are to read your Bible through (cover-to-cover in a year), and to spend an hour a day, preferably in the morning, in “quiet time” or “devotions”—even better yet, in written prayer. I know people who do this. I have one friend who is celebrating her fortieth year of reading the Bible through each year and is inviting people to join her in an online discussion as she reads through it. Wow! That surely sounds spiritual.

For the last ten or fifteen years of his life, my father embraced the idea of writing out your prayers. He hardly ever missed a day. After he died, we found notebook after notebook of his prayers. In more recent years, he used a computer. He traveled all over the country with a small laptop used exclusively for his prayers. What a great heritage I have, right? No wonder—right?—that I am writing a book on strengthening your relationship with God. Wrong.

Yes, my friend who reads through the Bible every year and my father with his diligent written prayers are both wonderful examples of godly people. They inspire me. Over and over I've made a commitment that I am going to follow their lead ("This is the year I am really going to make it from Genesis all the way to Revelation"). I bought the Bibles that divided the Scriptures into 365 daily reading segments. I bought special notebooks to help me in my written prayers. I promised God I was not going to leave the house each day until I completed the prescribed program.

I had great intentions, but I failed. Not only had I not done these things, I was consumed with guilt over my lack of discipline. I felt like a second-class citizen of the Christian world. Yet I was also sure that I had an active and vital spiritual life. I pray to God—in my head, not on paper—and my prayers get answered. I feel God's definite guidance and direction for my life, but I do not read the Bible every day.

Edy felt much the same way. She told me that the church she attends is one where they "seem to do everything right." To fit into their "Bible time" she has bought many Bibles, just hoping "this one" would make it easier for her to understand—but, Edy reported, she still couldn't get it. She tried so hard to remember Scriptures but would find the next day that she had forgotten them. She even tried sitting in her room, blocking out the world and reading. But her mind kept drifting to the things she needed tomorrow, or the laundry, or something else. Her response was to avoid talking about the Bible because she didn't feel she had a right to discuss something she knew so little about. Although Edy's Bible reading was not successful for her, she still felt sure that God was

always there with her and for her. Edy told me: “I have always prayed to God and He has kept me under His wing through my very difficult life and many times of despair. I could always feel God in my heart and I just knew I had a special relationship with Him—but I did not seem to fit in.”

Is it possible that there is no one right way to develop one’s spiritual life?

As I speak to various groups around the country on this topic, including virtually every denomination, I find many people have tried the prescribed plans and failed. Not only do they not feel closer to God; they actually feel farther away. After hearing testimony after testimony of how a specific devotional system has been effective for others, those of us for whom these systems do not seem to work feel that the failure is not the system, but a personal deficiency on our part. This is not to say that these tried and true systems are wrong; they are just not right for everyone. What I hope to do in this book is help each person understand his or her own spiritual personality, and to develop the tools and techniques that *do* work for each of us.

If you are not already aware of your basic personality or my teaching on the general subject, you will find that Chapter Three gives you a good overview of the concepts and how they relate to your spiritual personality. Additionally, you will find a complete Personality Profile in the Appendix. If you have never taken this profile, please take some time to look at your own strengths and weaknesses before you read Chapter Three. When you take the Personality Profile, I encourage you to use the word definitions provided; they will help you select the correct words as they are intended in this usage.

One day, my friend, speaker and author Betty Southard, and I discussed the differences in personalities and how they affect one’s spiritual growth and approach to God. We found that we both had the same basic experiences with the methods of spiritual growth that are touted as imperative today. Yet we each had a vital relationship with God. Until our conversation, we had felt ashamed, afraid to mention this to others.

Both of us were steeped in the teaching of personality types, and on the basis of our knowledge we developed the hypothesis that our personalities shaped our spiritual lives. Our ideas were just a theory; we needed to find out if our assumptions would prove to be true. So for more than a year, every time either of us spoke we surveyed the audiences. We posted a survey on my Website and began to gather information. The responses of more than five hundred people told us we were more right than we originally allowed ourselves to believe. Much of this book is founded on that research. You will learn from many of the survey responses as you read on.

From our questions, one respondent, Amy, told us that she had a close relationship with God from the time she was just a little girl. Having been taught “God loves you; God loves you; God loves you,” Amy felt comfortable talking to Him even as a young girl. She believed God was with her on the playground, joining her on the swing.

However, Amy shared, when she was thirty-one she realized that although she never questioned God, she had never really invited Jesus into her heart as her Lord and Savior. She took that step and for a year was on her own in her quest to deepen her relationship with God. Then she joined a Bible study group, where she was exposed to the Word in a whole new way. It was a small group of well-meaning women who loved God and were committed to teaching Amy how to be His disciple. Of that time, she says, “I was in love with God and wanted so much to please Him. I lapped up their teaching like a hungry kitten at a bowl of milk.”

That was a wonderful time of spiritual nourishment in Amy’s life. Yet three years later she found things had changed—and not for the better. In her journal she poured out her heart to God. She told Him how she missed the times of “sitting at your feet and laying my head on your lap.” She remembered how she used cry to Him because she hurt. She felt as though He put His warm, strong hands on her head and stroked her hair while allowing her to cry. He never told her to stop her tears; He was never too busy. It was

in these times that Amy felt closest to God, feeling He cared for her and deeply loved her.

As Amy looked back over her journal pages, she saw she had written to God: “Do you remember even further back, when I was the skinniest kid in town—a tomboy with pigtails and scabbed knees? Remember how I’d stop right in the middle of the playground and ask you a question? Sometimes I’d wait for an answer, and sometimes not. But I always knew you were there. I never even considered you might not be. I just knew you were always delighted in who I was.”

Amy shared with us that back then it was easy to connect with God. She didn’t picture Him in a “throne room,” as she was later taught. She never imagined she would have to get herself ready to talk to Him, never knew there was a proper way to approach Him. In her journal, she wrote: “You were just my ‘Daddy,’ my ‘Abba.’ I could curl up on your lap whenever I wanted to. I didn’t realize then that I should never start my day without talking to you first. I hadn’t heard that I should never cry to you because that would be ‘murmuring and complaining.’ You see, I never understood that there were certain rules involved in speaking to you.”

Because Amy felt such a love for God, she wanted to learn all she could. She listened intently to those who taught the supposed rules. She learned the procedures, and learned them well. She even began to pass on her newfound knowledge to others, instructing them that “This is what you need to do—try this; begin this way.”

Our survey made Amy go back to her journal to review her growth process. She shared another passage with us:

But do you know what Father? I miss you! I want to put my head on your lap again and feel your hug. Yes, I know you’re seated on a beautiful throne, but couldn’t I just burst into that throne room when I want to share something exciting? All those rules have filled my head with so much knowledge and made me proud. Now I can impress people with how well I know the rulebook. But I don’t want

that, I want you Father. I want you! I just want to be your daughter again. I love you Abba!

Does that make you cry? Or if you are not the emotional type, does it at least make you feel sad? It does me. It grieves me. If this fills you with sorrow, then this book is for you! Throughout these pages you will find many ways to strengthen your relationship with God—ways that work for you.

As you were reading Amy's journal entry, if you said "Yes, yes; she needs to know those rules" then this book is for you. You need to hear the stories of others who love the Lord as much as you do but express it in ways different from yours and different from each other. I encourage you to expand your horizons, to allow these differences to bring unity to the church, not division.

There are some who might think what I am suggesting is heretical. Chances are they will not even get this far into these pages. But I hope that on whichever side of the fence you sit, you will open your heart and embrace my goal: to help my readers strengthen their relationship with God, to have a real and vital relationship with our God, who is alive and authentic.

So, this book is about your relationship with God. It is also about understanding and accepting others—especially your loved ones.

My husband and I both love God, but our spiritual personalities differ considerably. We attend a megachurch. The preaching is wonderful (hence the "mega" church status), but I'd prefer to go to a smaller church, one where someone notices if I am there or not, someone who misses me and gushes with enthusiasm upon my return. When I mentioned this to my husband, he was surprised. The anonymous quality about the church—that I dislike—is one of the main things he likes. He can slip in unnoticed, be taught God's Word, and leave without ever having to talk to anyone.

Jan and her husband were in a similar situation. For them church became a point of contention. She says that "we approached our spiritual life so differently, we kept annoying each other." In hopes of making their church attendance harmonious, Jan kept promising

herself that she would just stand there beside her husband and quietly worship God. It never worked. During the worship time, Jan is quite animated—sometimes joining others at the front to dance and sing. When she returns to her seat (at the back of the church) her husband gives her “one of those looks.” He and their children silently commiserate with each other about how happy they are that they are not out of control—or making fools of themselves. When there is an altar call, Jan is out of her seat and down at the front. Jan’s husband never responds because he “doesn’t want to be pawed by the people who pray for you.”

Jan reports: “I used to get irritated with my family because I thought they were missing out on all the blessings. My husband’s approach has always been practical, private, and sedate in comparison to mine. I have always emoted, been vocal, and very exuberant.”

These differences manifest themselves in church attendance and expression of worship. But they also affect those on the other side of the pew, those in ministry. Teresa is an example. Her husband is a pastor, and they work together in ministry. Yet the understanding she gained from the teaching in this book gave her fresh insights that maybe she “is not so bad.”

She shared her story with me. “I have been a pastor’s wife for nearly thirty years. In the early years, my husband pastored small churches, and he and I were the only ‘staff’ that existed. We worked together on many projects, from leading youth groups to summer trips.”

She is an organizer, and coordinating an event—though challenging—can be a joy to her. As an organizer, Teresa likes to plan ahead and have her ducks in a row. She and her husband would become frustrated with each other because he thought her deadlines were unreasonable—wanting things done days before they needed to be. Likewise, Teresa felt as though she were giving freely of her time and energy, but he would wait until the last minute and then expect her to do a good job with something. It became clear that their marriage relationship would be better if they didn’t try to lead church ministries together, and so they didn’t—for many years.

Only after the couple learned of and understood “the personalities” that I’ve written and taught about for years did they grasp how their skills can complement each other. Today, Teresa says, “I’m happy to say we are very much partners in ministry and lead many ministries together in the life of our church.”

Fortunately, Teresa and her husband learned about their differences and how they have an impact on spiritual life and overall ministry. Unfortunately, another respondent, Renee, did not have the same results. She was on a ministry team with a pastor who did not acknowledge and accept that one’s spiritual life can take on many sizes and shapes. She was almost forty when she moved to a new city and church. She and the pastor had been friends for a year, even before she moved. So when she moved to be near that church, it was logical for her to take on leadership roles almost immediately. However, after only a few months Renee received a note with some “suggestions” of things she should do as part of her leadership/mentoring development. Her first thought was, *No problem, I can do this.*

Renee grew up with a Pentecostal/Charismatic background, played on church praise teams for years, and considers herself to be outgoing, friendly, and helpful—though she prefers to be relatively quiet with some forms of expression (hand clapping and raising hands occasionally) in her worship style. But, when she reviewed the list of “suggested” changes, she quickly saw some of the items were way outside of her spiritual personality. *I’ll give it a try*, she again thought. After all, she was in a new church, experiencing new things, and the list did have some validity. So she went about attempting to incorporate each item into her worship.

The list included “Just go with the flow; loosen up; suspend all judgments and your perfectionist tendency and just enjoy worship—abandon yourself, to be a fool for Him because of His great love for you and your love for Him; laugh more and just enjoy life; when we ask all to lift hands—lift your hands; be transparent—don’t be afraid of rejection; be more interactive with the group and quick to reach

out to new people; be willing to get out of your comfort zone at all levels, at all dimensions.”

Renee did try to grow beyond her natural tendencies. But no matter how hard she tried, she just could not work up that much consistent enthusiasm (or phony joy). As she told me the story, she said, “I was just about as loose as I was going to get.” Before long, she began to resent being told how to worship. The struggle began. As part of the church’s leadership program, she had to attend the services—the entire service, no slipping in after the worship—but she soon found herself wanting to completely avoid the worship service. She went, but she didn’t enjoy it. It was as if she were saying, “I may be standing up on the outside, but I’m sitting down on the inside.”

At the time Renee received the list, she had a limited knowledge of the personalities. Four years later, she has studied up on the subject. She wonders how the list might have been different if written with her spiritual personality type in mind. The intent of the pastor was to be helpful and cause her to stretch, but the outcome was completely the opposite. There was a period of time when she “shut down” during public, corporate worship. She said, “I can’t help but think, ‘If only the pastor had taken into consideration my spiritual personality and had written the list accordingly.’ I have tried to learn from this experience, and I keep the list tucked away in my Bible as a reminder of what not to do to others.”

Today Renee is once again able to enter into worship the way God created her—no more mask or attempts to be something she’s not. She sums it up by saying, “I’m finding freedom, joy, and pleasure in His presence—like I’ve never known before.”

Renee’s story beautifully expresses the heart and soul of this book. There are many ways to show our love for God, to serve Him and to grow in Him. Our personality influences which way is the best for us. Once we understand this, we can maximize the tools and techniques that work for us and give freedom to others—who may differ from us. As I teach this material, I find the frequent conception that there is

only one way, and everyone needs to do just that one thing—though as a result some people (including me) feel we must be lesser Christians because that doesn't work for us. I hope this book gives you a sense of relief and freedom while encouraging you to continue to develop your own spiritual life.

Renee's experience is especially interesting in that it is so opposite from most of the stories I hear. Usually those of us who are more expressive are being told to tone down. In her case, she was told to loosen up. It goes both ways. Whichever way we think is right is typically—without this understanding—what we think others should do as well.

How could we have such divergent spiritual needs? Could it be that God made us different for a reason?

Van has moved a lot during her lifetime. In each city, she has attended church. But she has never found one that was perfect for her. She told me:

I used to get frustrated with the people, the pastor, the choir director, the director of women's ministries, the custodian, the yards keeper, the kitchen committee. . . . I just couldn't understand why they did things the way they did. If I happened to be in a meeting with the custodian, I focused on the flaws in the décor—not in how hard he was working, overtime, to keep up with the needs of the growing congregation. When it came to meeting with the choir director, I had my own ideas of elaborate dramas. I tended to get carried away with intricate props and costuming. It wasn't easy for me to just be the speaker at the women's banquet. I wanted a say in the centerpieces and the special music. One time I was asked to lead a workshop on teaching Sunday school. I emphasized well-presented bulletin boards, music, drama, and crafts.

Perhaps you know someone like Van in your church. She means well, but she irritates everyone—when she thinks they are irritating her! Because Van's heart was right, just trying to be helpful, she began to see that her efforts were not always appreciated. Through

the principles in this book, Van began to change, to grow, and to mature.

She continues:

Then I began to understand the differences in personality extended to our spiritual life as well. It was a harsh reality when I realized not everyone’s style is to go forth with passion, color, emotion, and wild enthusiasm. I began to look around and see others were working in the church and doing a fine job—even though it wasn’t my way. Others were organized, where I was not. Others were listening where I was loud. Others were caring, while I was frazzled. Stepping back, I took a look at myself. I made a personality check. There were many things I was doing well. I realized, though, that I needed to pray to God about bringing balance into my personality. Today, I operate differently than I did a decade ago. I do not rush in to fix the lilies at the foot of the cross on Easter Sunday. I do not step into others’ Sunday school classes to rearrange the furniture. When the pastor speaks of the reality of life and its unavoidable hard places, I pray for those who are suffering. And, now, when someone does something that irritates me, I pray that I may not be an irritant in someone else’s life that day.

As you can see, there are differences, not just in our personality but in our spiritual personality as well. In this book, we explore these differences. First, you will gain an understanding of your personality; then you’ll learn how your personality has an impact on your spiritual life and your relationship with God. Second, you’ll discover how you can maximize your personality to strengthen your relationship with God. Then we look at the personality of Jesus and how we can each bring balance into our personality—as Van did—by becoming more Christlike. Additionally, we do a short study on spiritual gifts and how combining our personality and our spiritual gifts equips us for the work of the church.

But now let’s take a fun look at these differences as found in the fictional Sonshine Church. It might sound just like your church—maybe even too much so.

