

"WEEDS, WHEAT AND WATCHING FOR SNAKES:
DISCERNING THE TIMES"

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During my freshman year my parents moved to Colorado, so I lived there during the summer after my freshman year at Carson-Newman College. I worked for a surveyor in our new church and spent the summer gloriously tramping across Colorado, both the mountains and the fields on the plains east of the mountains.

A great deal of that summer I was in fields, up to my waist in weeds and wheat, worrying about stepping on poisonous snakes. I stepped very guardedly, always certain that a strike would come. The snake never came--at least not in the wheat fields!

During the final week of my summer labors, I walked along in a newly-mowed open field when suddenly a dreadful sound split the air. There in front of me was a huge rattlesnake, coiled, rattling and ready to strike. I looked for him to come in the fields, but it never occurred to me that it might happen in the open!

I hadn't been paying attention! Now I fixed my gaze firmly on the serpent. I waited--the only thing I could remember to do was freeze--and slowly backed away. The snake, sure that I was no longer a threat, slithered away.

Let's let this be a parable for our task together. The snake is a wonderful image in dream work for the unconscious life and therefore for everything that is promising and threatening within us. It is also a great symbol for our battle against sin. As we help young people, how do we teach them most effectively to avoid sin and find God's presence and direction in their lives? And how do we do that without "taking over" or causing them to be so narrowly focused on one particular way or issue that they miss other things that God wants to do in them?

These are big questions indeed! I would like to begin by providing some context to help us comprehend why guidance has become a lost art in the church. Then I will offer some suggestions about how we might begin the task of "reclaiming" the function of guidance for the church in this time.

The Four Pastoral Functions and the Secular World

Ministers, including campus ministers, spend a large part of their time guiding individuals. In addition to the "ministry by activity" which is inevitably required of you in order to receive funding, I have been impressed as I have been around campus ministers with how much time and effort are put into the work of directing young lives in the right directions. You spend a lot of time praying with students, talking life over, considering their options, and holding their hands as they "walk on the edge."

This work of guidance is, in my opinion, far more important than the "big" stuff--more than rallies, revivals and creative worship services. These latter events are well-intentioned, but they sit on a false foundation: the assumption that the most important things that God does are in some sort of official gathering and that to some extent we determine what God does. Nothing could be further from truth, but it plays well in the institutional Peorias of the world.

But you know better. It's the relationships that really produce the long-term results. This is not new, of course. What you are doing is one of the four continuing classic functions of Christian ministry. These four basic functions have been studied by Clebsch and Jaeckle in their book *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective*. These four functions of healing, guiding, sustaining and reconciling have made considerable impact, not only upon pastoral care and counseling, but also indirectly on modern medicine, psychiatry, psychology and sociology.

Healing, for example, was once the province of the church, but in the modern world, it has been separated from the work of Christian faith and secularized into professional medicine. While many Christians work there, many are not. Thus the ministry of healing has been confused for the modern church. The modern obsession of the charismatic movement with "faith-healing" might also be seen as a visceral revolt against this development, however inadequate one may judge its theological foundations.

What Is Guidance?

Guiding, which is our focus of interest, is defined as:

Assisting perplexed persons to make confident choices between alternative courses of thought and action, when such choices are viewed as affecting the present and future state of the soul [Clebsch and Jaeckle, 9].

Many years ago Seward Hiltner distinguished two major forms of guidance in pastoral care. The more ancient type was *inductive guidance*, in which the individual is persuaded by a group to adopt a set of values and standards by which to make a decision. In this understanding, guidance functions by indoctrinating the individual into certain standards and behaviors and seeks to direct the person in *how to avoid sin*.

We still practice this form of guidance. A simple example of this in our present life is a program like "True Love Waits" or any of a thousand other denominational emphases. At bottom, it is an attempt at guidance.

Another form of inductive guidance was *the use of a mentor or spiritual director*. Attaching oneself to a spiritual guide is rooted in virtually all ancient religions. The pupil generally spent what amounted to an apprenticeship with his master, being taught, guided, corrected and encouraged until such time that peer status was achieved. This form of guidance tended to become highly

authoritarian and subject to abuses by the mentors, but it nevertheless provides a genuine historical antecedent for the modern clinical concept of supervision.

Clebsch and Jaeckle point out that guidance was predominant during certain historical periods, such as the beginnings of the imperial church after Constantine. Christianity became "culturally accepted." Now pastors, once preparing members for the possibility of martyrdom, had to help confused parishioners comprehend what it meant to "be a Christian" in a society where church and state were one.

The same need appeared in the nineteenth century, as the church in the United States was shaped by voluntarism and privatism. Churches everywhere experienced fragmentation at the hands of rising nation states with their bourgeois morality. Perplexed individuals hungered for help in knowing how to live a decisive life as a Christian. In the great revivals of that century we see a form of guidance emerging which assisted individuals in redirecting their lives away from the chaotic sins of their time. The "spiritual guides" in these two examples were the monk during the imperial era and the evangelist in the nineteenth century.

The other type of guidance, according to Hiltner, is *eductive*, in which the counselor seeks "to draw out the individual's own experiences and values the criteria and resources for such decisions." This approach has obviously dominated modern

psychology and pastoral counseling through the influence of Carl Rogers, but it is not entirely foreign to the earlier tradition. Origen of Alexandria, for example, as early as the third century recognized the importance of being listened to for well-being.

Guidance, therefore, is a function of soul-care that has been accorded great importance in the tradition, but has been largely dominated in the twentieth century by the social sciences. With the ascendancy of psychology and its attendant themes of adjustment, insight and self-actualization, psychologists, psychotherapists and social workers became interpreters of the guidance function for the American public, more effective than pastoral counselors (unless the latter emulate the former), because they could provide "guidance" in decision-making and living without having to deal with complicated (and often intractable) theological issues, which came to be seen increasingly as irrelevant by many.

The Recovery of the Soul

Clebsch and Jaeckle, writing in 1964, looked out upon the ecclesiastical landscape of their time and pronounced that reconciliation was the crying need of their time. Perhaps they felt that institutional medicine and psychiatry had adequately provided for the first two functions, and the third, sustaining, was the ministry that they judged the church to have carried out most consistently over the centuries.

In the light of the tumult of the 1960s, they were probably right. The need to reconcile brokenness and sin, mediate forgiveness and bring races, marriages, and economic groups together, is probably still with us. Perhaps that is what movements like Promise Keepers have touched most deeply.

It may be, however, that we are also being called to consider again our role as guides in what is increasingly a normless postmodern society. Young people today appear not to have the clear signals about moral values from their culture that many of us had. The anxiety about this situation has caused many to take up political swords to solve what is finally a spiritual problem.

Spiritual direction is regaining popularity again. Like most subprofessions (read here vocations like "Professional Evangelist," "Pastoral Counselor," and my favorite sub-specialty, "Minister of Recreation"), spiritual directors emphasize an aspect of ministry that all ministers ought to be doing to some degree. The care of souls was reduced during the past several decades, even in the church, to psychotherapy. Now, once again, questions are being raised about that concession.

Not long ago, I reviewed a thoughtful and quirky book for *The Christian Ministry* by Jeffrey Boyd called *Affirming the Soul*. In it Boyd, a psychiatrist and priest, records conversations he undertook with mental health professionals about the language of the soul and our need to revive it. Almost without exception, they

cited the limitations of psychology to move past the attainment of self-understanding and the increase of self-acceptance to spiritual growth, which many felt was a logical next step in the process of growth.

This is a call to the ministers of the Christian gospel to reclaim their vocations again and take up the work of guidance. In doing so, however, we immediately encounter the issue of *discernment*. That is, how do we recognize what God is doing in the lives of those under our care? And how can we help them without getting in the way?

On Being a Good Guide for Others

Discernment is about more than simply avoiding sin and obeying God's commands: it is also about being attentive to the movement of the Spirit in our lives. How can we help the young people who are in our care to really move to a level of depth in their lives?

The first work of discernment is to determine whether someone is lost or simply messed up. That is, we must evaluate and decide what it is that young people need. Some who come to us claiming a call from God into the ministry have really heard that call. Some people simply cannot handle their sex drives and wind up twenty years later as the pastor of a huge church. Someone failed to discern the real issue! Sometimes, both things are true.

Certainly sexuality and spirituality are interconnected, but the connections are not always apparent.

Our task is to be one who walks alongside the seeker, pointing out the markers, distinguishing the signs and assisting them to be present to God in their lives. One of the fundamental ways we can do that is simply by distinguishing between the types of issues they are presenting to us. Gerald May set forth a typology some years ago which I have found helpful in making some initial assessments of problems presented to me:

PSYCHOTHERAPY

Presenting issues -- confusion, inability to cope, relate-unconscious conflicts.

Goals -- reduce conflicts, integration, function, ego-control-relate to reality.

Helper's Role -- Healing, cure, intrapsychic peace, or even biological stability.

COUNSELING

Presenting issues -- Need to make choices, crisis, deal with situations, relationships, very much aware of choices

Goals-Recognize needs, values, focus on feelings-self-awareness increased-realistic decisions

Helper's Role-collaboration to strengthen the ego, encourage self-direction and assertion.

SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Presenting issues -- yearning for coherence and

communion. Meaning, search for God,
disillusionment
Goals -- conversion, letting go of ego (voluntary),
deeper identity
Helper's Role -- dialogue about the mystery of God,
clarifying where God is present.

The first point, then, is to distinguish *true spiritual searching* from *developmental* and *pathological* issues. Where the latter are present, therapy may be the prelude to spiritual change. But where we determine the presence of genuine spiritual issues, let us then take up the great heritage of mentors and guides.

Where Do I Begin?

If most of us in places of ministry recognize the need to be a faithful guide, we struggle with "where to begin" if we want to be more intentional about the task of guidance. I would like to suggest a beginning place that may not sound correct at first. In fact, it may sound completely wrong, a reflection of this narcissistic age in which we live--we must begin with ourselves!

This requires a shift in thinking, for we have been taught, with some truthfulness, that the self is not meant to be the center of life. But we cannot get to the authentic life of self-giving without dealing with the self--that is the paradox! We might begin by thinking of self-care as a way of caring for others. Nurturing a

proper spiritual life in oneself is a door into better care for others.

The first assumption we might naturally make, of course, is that there are "activities" into which we might launch with frenetic energy. In Baptist life, this usually is measured by the "quiet time." I listened with amusement one day to a program on Christian radio in which the preacher was berating Christians for their failures to spend time with God. He used angry emotions and sharp words to describe the pitiful state of devotional life among us. But his only prescription seemed to be, "This is right. We ought to do it. Most of us don't do it or don't do it well, and that ought not be!"

Instead we ought to ask the question, "What is it that causes me to so resist being quiet, being still, resting, listening, paying attention?" The answers will lead us into some of the most revealing areas of our lives. Sometimes our answers may have to do with physiological problems or emotional issues. We may re-contact some deep emotional hurts. Our capacity for intimacy in relationships and our willingness to be in prayer are not unrelated!

When we begin to honestly face ourselves, our brokenness, our needs, prayer can begin to assume a new face. For most of us this will not be an easy journey. We will face the terror of the loss of control or be led into some broken places in our lives, ministers as well as others. The level of personal pain that ministers carry today is like our whole culture: immense.

Five Desires for Wholeness

We can follow our desires if we follow the right ones.

Today I list five. They are certainly not all that could be listed. I make no attempt at an exhaustive list. They are, however, five that I have found most meaningful in my own spiritual search. They have been a means of clarification and self-truthfulness.

First, *we must desire to be healed and not simply fixed.*

The temptation in things spiritual is to seek the right "outer" change--a book to read, a technique to begin, some "one great thing" to add to our lives that will guarantee spiritual advance. If the literature on prayer through the centuries has anything to say to us, however, it is that we sometimes grow most in the barren, dark, forsaken times and places. The great shifts in our lives sometimes take place exactly in those times when it seems that nothing is going on or when things seem to be going wrong, not right.

The desire to be healed is less concerned with outward appearance than truthfulness and growth. We begin to see our pains and sorrows not as problems to be fixed, but as opportunities for the grace of God to work. Psalm 139:12 says, "You see in the dark, because daylight and dark are all the same to you" (CEV). To God, the distinctions we make between what is growthful and what hinders is not meaningful. God sometimes chooses the

despised ways, the rejected parts of our lives and the disregarded path.

If we really want to be healed, we will be willing to go wherever healing can be found. If we only want to be "fixed," we will stop short of the sometimes radical surgery that must be done in our hearts and lives.

Second, *we must desire to be guided in our own lives if we would be good guides of others.* This means seeking out trustworthy guides, spiritual directors or mentors. Most of us recognize this need quite well. Reading can also be a form of guidance. A book is a conversation with the heart and mind and imagination of another person. But this need is best filled in the context of a relationship.

Spiritual direction has made a big comeback in the 1990s! But we must practice some discernment in finding the right person with whom to entrust our hearts for such a journey. Finding a guide will require asking questions, seeking and sometimes struggling as we make the decision to do so.

This process may be a formal one, in which we meet with a spiritual director whose ministry is overtly focused in this way, or it may be informal, in which we simply covenant to meet with someone whose Christian life has impressed us as genuine. In any case, such a relationship requires our capacity to be honest with one another and, ironically, to "let one another be." A good guide

knows when to leave the pilgrim alone and when to nudge. It is therefore an art and not a science. One thing, however, needs to be said--spiritual authority is never justification for emotional and spiritual abuse! The desire to be guided is not the same as a willingness to be dominated and controlled. Good guidance preserves and nurtures the gentle root of freedom.

When we have known the life-enhancing experience of a good guide in our own lives, we will have a base of experience from which to direct others. Such experiences often give us an insight into others as we see what we ourselves wrestled with "from the outside."

Third, *we must desire to be in community*. I have heard many of you talk about this need--peers are not easy to find, the context may be isolated, and so on. In my own life, I found myself discouraged by the raw politics, ambition (including my own) and anger that have seethed through Southern Baptist life in recent years. I reached a point of great discouragement, even considering whether I could live the kind of spiritual life which (in my better moments) I longed to find. I wrote to Eugene Peterson, whose writings I respect very much. I still have that letter.

I told him of my discouragement and said that I wasn't sure that I could live an authentic spiritual life in the Baptist context anymore. He wrote back a wise and true answer, one which I have referred to again and again since then. He said, "I have found that

it is possible in any and every place to live a life that is pleasing to God."

Having said that, it must also be said that not everything is helpful. Some things religious will be destructive. Institutional religion is replete with bad motives, self-advancement, and evil (intentional and unintentional). Nevertheless, we need to find genuine Christian community in which our own souls can be nurtured, where we might truly worship God. Too much of our church connection is functional. We need, at least sometimes, to be in a community where we experience spiritual growth.

One of the tasks of guidance is that we might nurture those in our care toward deeper and truer community with others. If we have not known such community, how can we help them find it?

Fourth, *we must have a desire to define ourselves*. It is insidious how entrenched our desire to control one another can be. It is even more tragic how willingly we often acquiesce to such desires because of a lack of self-identity. One true pathway to spiritual vitality is what is sometimes called "individuation." To put that in a simpler way, it simply means to seek to define who we are in proper balance and interaction with the claims of others on us. Above all it means finding the genuine call of God in our lives.

If the priesthood of believers has any meaning at all it means an essential humility toward the great diversity of God's creation and the genius of God's individual and creative work in human

lives. I must respect that intricacy in directing others. If I am paying attention to God in another's life, I will see things that are not always "like" my life. I will sometimes be led to wonder and to respectful silence.

I visited the aquarium here in New Orleans with my daughter, Katie a few days ago. There we saw a tank full of jellyfish. The descriptive note on the tank said they were 97% water, with no brains, no internal organs or nervous system. They were beautiful, though, pure life energy. I respected their beauty, but they are not very high up on the continuum of definition!

Human beings have been given enormous capacities for reflection and definition. The responsibility for that is ours. I heard chaplain Eric Hayward of Birmingham once say, "Jesus continually defined himself and let others bump up against that." I really liked that!

It is important that good guides have an ever-clearer sense of themselves, for others, even with the best intentions, will be forever trying to co-opt them into agendas that may not be God's agenda. Those whom we guide will sometimes want us to bless when we must withhold blessing for the sake of greater blessing!

The responsibility for this definition, of course, is our own. We do not expect another to do it all for us, though they may help. My life may not look exactly like a cookie-cutter image of Christian living with which I may have grown up. It begins, fundamentally,

with self-acceptance and its implication: that we are accepted and loved by God. But there is more. It also means an essential openness to the "other." That is, I do not simply accept myself and by that mean that there is nothing more to learn, no more to achieve. Self-acceptance is more like a foundation, a base camp from which we ascend to the summit.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, *we must desire to know God*. This is the essence of prayer. My journey of prayer can be described very simply. At first prayer for me was very much like the experience of children first learning to talk. Those of you who are parents will remember what that was like! They learn a few words and say them over and over, sometimes with meaning and sometimes just as delighted chatter! It can become incessant!

That was my first understanding of prayer. We know it as petition and intercession. It is talking to God and God listens. God *does* listen, of course, as we discover in God's responses to these worried chatterings of ours! So my first understanding was basic: I talk and God listens.

A revolution occurred some years ago when I was searching for a more meaningful prayer life. I discovered another entire vein of understanding in the Christian heritage, one that says, "Prayer is talking all right, but it is more. It is also listening, paying attention, hearing God." I read about ancient forms like *lectio divina*, a way of coming to the Bible not so much to analyze it as to listen to God

speak. And a very simple revolution in my life occurred. I began to think of prayer as God speaking and me listening, too. Prayer is communion between us, not simply my dispatches from the front!

Of course, there is a danger that prayer can become like a dead marriage. Two people can believe, after many years, that they know everything that there is to know about each other. They lose the wonder of another person and are reduced to knowing grunts and taking for granted.

I have been married almost twenty-three years to the same woman. We have been through so much together, but I have to say that I love her more than ever. And she is a greater mystery to me than she was when we were dating.

That mystery, that wonder, is an imperfect picture of the truth of God. If we would help others find the mystery we must ourselves know just how great it is. We cannot always be walking single-mindedly in the weeds, worrying about the occasional snake. We cannot ignore that, of course, but *there is so much more!* The mountains are all around us, the sky is spectacular and there is more to see and hear and smell and touch and taste than we ever knew.

Others are hungry to go where we want to go. They, too, want to know how to walk in the wheat and find their way to the great and wonderful things of God. We can, of course, remain aloof and indifferent, great souls who will always be inaccessible to them (although greatly admired). On the other hand, we might just

decide that this way is great and the path broad enough that another can walk with us without the journey being lost. We can take others with us and share what we have learned and also learn from them.

As we allow these holy desires their place, they will lead us through the fields of the world to an ever deepened sense of God in us. As we find our own way, we become qualified in the graduate school of Christian experience to humbly help in God's great work of guiding another person toward the kingdom.

Notes

Much of the analysis on guidance is adapted from my dissertation, "Ecclesiological Models in Contemporary Pastoral Counseling," Baylor University, 1986, 5-16.

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