

Recovering the Disciplines:  
A Comparative Study on the Spiritual Disciplines as Expressed in the Lives, Teaching  
and Ministry of Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney and Richard Foster.

by

Thomas Grant Lengyel


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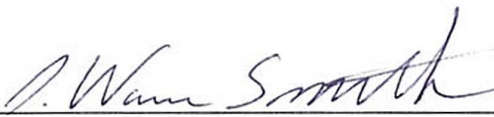
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Lauren Winner, Supervisor



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J. Warren Smith, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
in the Divinity School of Duke University

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This paper will examine the relationship between several prominent Evangelical leaders and the spiritual disciplines. By studying these figures, I hope to support two assertions. First, that the spiritual disciplines have always been an important part of the Evangelical tradition. Second, that the disciplines still have a role to play in the life and practice of the church today. In order to adequately defend these claims, I have chosen to focus on one Evangelical figure, from each of the last three centuries: Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney and Richard Foster. Edwards's leadership of the Great Awakenings established him as one of the principal Evangelical leaders of the eighteenth century. Finney was later responsible for some of the largest revivals in American history, and therefore stands as one of the most influential Evangelicals of the nineteenth century. With the publication of his classic book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Foster established himself as the foremost authority in the twentieth century on the modern expression of disciplines. By examining the private practice and public teaching of these three men, I hope to demonstrate that Evangelicals of every age not only adopted the disciplines, but also adapted them to their unique context. Consequently, I hope to inspire a new generation of Evangelicals to do the same.

Dedicated to my dear wife Maggie, who sat quietly, night after night, as I labored upstairs in the loft of our small one-bedroom apartment. Dedicated also to our new baby Sparrow, whose smile fills my heart with joy- born in between writing chapters three and four.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For a brief period, as a young man, I pursued mountaineering. I suppose I was trying to find peace in the midst of my daily life. In the film *Legends of the Fall*, when asked why beleaguered businessman Colonel Ludlow had escaped to the mountains, Native American One-Stab explains, “He wanted to lose the madness over the mountains.” This was a sentiment to which I could relate. I longed to be alone. I needed to be silent. The isolation of the wilderness beckoned to me. In response, I signed up to take a mountaineering course on Mt. Rainier. Topics of instruction included crevasse rescue, foul-weather survival, glacier climbing techniques and more. I was thrilled.

After months of planning, researching and saving, the day had finally arrived. I flew to Seattle, joined my team, and began to climb. Upon reaching our initial destination, we set up camp and headed to a nearby hillside. Our instructor announced that it was time to learn our first and most important climbing lesson. Needless to say, they had my full attention. What could they have planned? What did they have in store? To my disappointment they revealed, “Today we’re going to learn how to walk.” I know how to walk, I thought. Let’s try something more advanced! Unfortunately, the instructors had other plans. They explained, “If you want to be a proficient and efficient climber, you must learn how to walk in the footsteps of the person in front of you.” To reinforce their point, we proceeded to walk in a line up and down the hillside for the next four hours.

I discovered that the ideal climbing configuration for mountaineering is a line; one person leads and the others follow. The benefits of this formation are both safety and

efficiency. With each step forward, one climber tamps down the snow for the next, probing for hidden crevasses and clearing a trail through thick powder. The weight of virgin snow can exhaust even the most athletic climber. Naturally, the line-leader is often the strongest and most capable of the bunch. Their strength, wisdom and experience allow them to lead effectively, even under the harshest conditions. Everyone who follows uses the leader's footsteps as a platform to climb higher. Although it seemed trivial at the time, I later came to appreciate the wisdom of this concept, in more ways than one.

Church history is replete with deep thinkers; people who have practiced the divine life with devotion and passion. They have forged a path up the mountain of faith, trudging through deep snow and uncharted territory. They are the original trailblazers of our tradition. Their strength, wisdom and experience go before us as we journey upward. Their footsteps remain impressed upon the snow of time, waiting to lead forward those who dare to follow. The secret to effective spiritual formation is to walk in the footsteps of those who have gone before you. To forge your own path is inefficient and potentially deadly. The church is made up of believers who climb together, reaching the end of one trail and pushing further still. By studying their spiritual practices, Christians are given a path forward, a means to move further up the mountain. If we can follow in their footsteps, perhaps we have a chance of reaching the elusive peak.

As a child raised in an Evangelical Baptist church I was taught just two spiritual disciplines, study and prayer.<sup>1</sup> The Bible revealed God, and prayer connected me to that

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<sup>1</sup> During my research I stumbled across a quote by Billy Graham, the quintessential Evangelical of my childhood, which articulated my childhood spirituality perfectly. He writes, "In order to grow properly certain rules must be observed for good spiritual health. First, you should read your Bible daily ... Second, learn the secret of prayer..."

God. Although I practiced both often, and found them formative, I began to feel like a two-dimensional Christian worshipping a three-dimensional God. My soul was not satisfied. I longed to explore the complexity and creativity of God through other methods. In this pursuit, I was introduced to a book that changed my life forever: *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster. From the very first sentence, I was captivated. He articulated exactly what I had been feeling and offered practical proven methods to address my spiritual questions. He referenced ancient Christians and exotic literature introducing me to a period of the church of which I was totally ignorant. For the first time in my life, the boundaries of denomination and tradition dissolved and the wisdom of the historic church seeped through. I identified with the love and passion of the saints, and I longed to discover what they had found. From that point forward I was fundamentally changed. I became, and have since remained, convinced that the spiritual disciplines are the key to spiritual growth and development in the Christian life.

Unfortunately, my church tradition did not share this conviction, and after eleven years of professional ministry, I have only become more convinced that the spiritual disciplines have been misunderstood and undervalued by the modern Evangelical tradition. This is a tragedy. By ignoring the collective wisdom of faithful saints past, the Evangelical church risks producing a generation of spiritually shallow Christians who are ill equipped to climb the mountain of faith. The spiritual disciplines provide believers with the vocabulary to express their spiritual needs and desires. Without the disciplines, individuals are left mute, unable to communicate with the divine voice buried deep

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Prayer combined with Bible study makes for a complete and glorious life.” Billy Graham, *Peace With God: The Secret of Happiness* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1953), 152-154.

within. If the Evangelical church hopes to fulfill its calling to, “make disciples of all nations”<sup>2</sup> it must reengage with the historic disciplines, embracing the experiences of past Christians and building on what they’ve accomplished. If the church can recover a love for the disciplines, I am confident that the trail will once again be found and the journey upward will advance further still.

Unfortunately, my early religious experience fostered the perception that the spiritual disciplines were not Evangelical. Disciplines like fasting and simplicity seemed monastic and extreme. Meditation seemed Eastern, and confession seemed Catholic. Their unfamiliarity made me uncomfortable and skeptical. Richard Foster helped me overcome this Evangelical bias by introducing me to the timeless wisdom of the saints. Foster captures my sentiment perfectly when he writes, “These ‘saints’ as we sometimes call them, knew God in a way that I clearly did not... I began desiring this kind of life for myself. And desiring led to seeking and seeking led to finding. And what I found settled me, deepened me, thickened me.”<sup>3</sup> Not only did I discover that the disciplines had been practiced faithfully throughout Scripture, I developed a healthier appreciation for the contributions of other traditions. I came to realize that the fortitude of the disciplines consists in their adaptability not their exclusivity. No one tradition could lay claim to a single discipline. They transcend time and space, while simultaneously conforming to individual contexts and expressions. They are a gift from God to edify His people.

Given my developing interest, I researched the subject further and was surprised to discover that my early perceptions had been misinformed. To my surprise,

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<sup>2</sup> Mt 28:19 (New International Version)

<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1988), xiv.

Evangelicals had actually been practicing the disciplines since the formation of their tradition. Although they felt foreign to me, the disciplines had in fact been taught for hundreds of years.<sup>4</sup> Faithful Evangelicals had been fasting, praying and meditating together for generations. Only recently had the Evangelical tradition pivoted away from these historical practices.<sup>5</sup> I began to wonder what developments had occurred in recent history to suppress or discourage the teaching of the disciplines? I found myself frustrated by the lack of modern Evangelical knowledge and awareness of the subject. If the Evangelical church had always practiced the disciplines, why did it seem as if they were absent from modern Evangelical teaching?

Upon further reflection, I have come to the conclusion that there are three primary causes behind this shift in practice: the influence of American secularism, the infatuation with innovation,<sup>6</sup> and the development of inexpensive and accessible forms of modern technology. These three factors have combined to create a culture where the slow, methodical practices of spiritual disciplines seem unnecessary, archaic and boring. To overcome this perception, the Evangelical church needs to develop a more engaging model of religious practice, where the disciplines are restored as the primary vehicle for spiritual formation within the church.

Like the earlier spiritual revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which were in constant competition with competing religious narratives, the crusades of the

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<sup>4</sup> D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Glen G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 146-147.

<sup>5</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 144-147.

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker eds., *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 629.

twentieth century faced a divided populace. As the cultural diversity of America increased, so did its religious makeup. Consequently, the impact of alternative spiritualities and secular philosophies increased. Preachers were forced to act as missionaries, learning a new culture and language. With each emerging era of American history, the strategy for reaching its people had to change.

In order to attract new Christians during the twentieth century, the Evangelical tradition simplified their concept of spiritual formation, eventually discarding most of the spiritual disciplines altogether. They defended this change by emphasizing Luther's teaching on justification-by-faith, implying that if a spiritual practice is not necessary for salvation, it must be secondary to salvation.<sup>7</sup> Although the condemnation of a works-based-faith is appropriate and biblical, I do lament the impact that it has had on the perception of the spiritual disciplines. Equating spiritual effort with the heresy of justification-by-works is a misrepresentation of the disciplines' purpose and value. As Richard Foster explains, "By themselves the Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done. They are God's means of grace."<sup>8</sup> The disciplines do not have inherent power but are an instrument by which God's abundant grace can be communicated.

The massive crusades of the Billy Graham era symbolize this reductionist movement perfectly. The primary purpose of these events was to instigate a single moment of repentance, where the penitent person acknowledged their sins, confessed their guilt, and accepted God's forgiveness. If a "prayer of repentance" was expressed,

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<sup>7</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 146.

<sup>8</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 7.

faith was authenticated and salvation assured. The opening pages of *The Billy Graham Christian Worker's Handbook* provide an apt characterization of this perspective: “You prayed, committing your life to Christ. What does the Bible say happened? 1. You are saved.”<sup>9</sup> Salvation was offered immediately and discipleship was an afterthought. To be fair, the Billy Graham organization did eventually attempt to connect new converts to local churches; a single point of conversion, however, remained their first priority.

This shift towards simplified spirituality undoubtedly had a positive impact on the size and cultural influence of the Evangelical church, but the benefits were transient. By reducing the doctrine of salvation down to a single decision, the subsequent inference was that discipleship was unnecessary or inferior. In a sense, the prevailing attitude focused on securing the conversion first and sorting out everything else later. Unfortunately, the separation of salvation from discipleship had unintended consequences. People began to identify as Christians without feeling compelled to offer any demonstrable lifestyle change. Discipleship became a luxury, not a necessity for authentic faith. Unfortunately, this perspective is hardly biblical. In the life and teaching of Jesus, there seems to be no distinction between salvation and discipleship. They are one in the same. Jesus calls His disciples to “come follow me”<sup>10</sup> when they first encounter Him, not after years of casual association with His name. Discipleship is the expression of a genuine faith, not its replacement. To distinguish between the two is faulty and heretical.

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<sup>9</sup> Charles G. Ward, ed., *The Billy Graham Christian Worker's Handbook*, (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1984), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Mt 4:19

Although many Evangelical Christians abandoned the disciplines during this period, their behavior was not typical of the wider Protestant tradition. Mainline Protestant denominations remained interested in recovering their historical practices. As Karen B. Westerfield Tucker explains, “In the forty years after Vatican II, most major Anglican and Protestant groups authorized liturgical revisions that... reflected the content of early Christian liturgical documents and the work of an ecumenical range of liturgical scholars and worship committees.”<sup>11</sup> Despite its noble intentions, the liturgical revival remained relegated to mainline denominations. Evangelicals remained stubbornly independent. Unfortunately, this surge in interest coincided with a drop in church attendance. Mainline Protestant churches, for a variety of reasons, declined significantly during the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Evangelical churches took note of this trend and worked proactively to avoid a similar fate.

In an effort to counter this exodus, Evangelicals began to reshape their worship services. In many churches, the organ was removed and replaced with a set of drums, guitar or other contemporary instrument. Formal attire was retired and a come-as-you-are attitude adopted. Worship services began to resemble concerts, complete with expensive lighting configurations and complex sound systems. The general assertion was that entertainment was tantamount to effectiveness. In many ways, this effort worked. Despite mainline Protestant decline, the Evangelical church grew. The second half of the twentieth century marked the rise of countless Evangelical mega-churches, which developed ostentatious programs that attracted thousands of non-believers and believers

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<sup>11</sup> Wainwright and Tucker, 625.

<sup>12</sup> “General Social Survey 1972 – 2014,” The Association of Religion Data Archives, Accessed January 17, 2018, [http://www.thearda.com/QuickStats/qs\\_102\\_t.asp](http://www.thearda.com/QuickStats/qs_102_t.asp).

alike. Lyle Schaller, one of the most prominent parish consultants and Christian leadership authorities of this era, speculated that, “the number of megachurches has at least tripled, and more likely quadrupled, during the past quarter century.”<sup>13</sup> The success of these methods only served to reinforce the idea that innovation was the key to survival. To remain traditional was to die.

Although the church appeared to be entering a new era of effective evangelism, things were not as positive as they seemed. People who flocked to these budding megachurches were often transplants from other local Christian communities.<sup>14</sup> Smaller congregations couldn’t compete with the size, money and resources of these flashier churches, and were therefore deserted. The growth of one church often portended the decline of countless others. The Evangelical infatuation with innovation relegated the disciplines to the same category as the beloved organ, which could be appreciated for its historical contribution, yet could hardly be considered relevant for the modern age. The effort to destroy the distinction between secular and religious through superficial reforms led to a generation of Christians who had little sense of historical identity. The intentional surrender of ecclesial distinctions, in the name of evangelism, left some new Christians wondering why the church needed to exist at all. Music could be heard at concerts. Humanitarian aid could be supplied by non-profit organizations. Fellowship could be found through social groups and online social media outlets. In an attempt to reclaim its

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<sup>13</sup> Lyle E. Schaller, “Megachurch,” *Christianity Today* 34, no. 4, (Mar 5, 1990): 20.

<sup>14</sup> Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, “Not Who You Think They Are: The Real Story of People Who Attend America’s Megachurches,” Study Conducted by Leadership Network and Hartford Seminary, (June, 2009) 16-18.

relevance, the church made itself, in effect, irrelevant. By focusing on innovation, the church forgot how to make disciples.

Although appropriating secular trends might fill seats, recapturing and embracing ecclesial distinctiveness is the key to long-term success. Teaching people how to experience spiritual transformation through the unique redemptive work of Christ is the sole purpose of the church. No other organization or path can offer this experience. Worship, justice, and humanitarian aid are all byproducts of the divine life, not the source. When the church recovers what makes it unique, it will rediscover effective discipleship.

The church is not the only one to blame for this shift in religious practice. The rise of modern technology has led to an exponential increase in available distractions. There is little room for silence in the modern world. The accessibility of media, entertainment and noise has made it increasingly difficult for people to focus for extended periods of time. A comprehensive study recently found that “viewers start to abandon a [web] video if it takes more than 2 seconds to start up.”<sup>15</sup> In a pair of studies conducted by Forrester Research, analysts found that the time elapsed before people leave a webpage failing to load dropped by half from four seconds to two seconds in just three years.<sup>16</sup> Impatience is the enemy of spiritual formation. In a world marked by instant gratification, the disciplines struggle to find their place. The path of discipleship is long and arduous. To

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<sup>15</sup> S. Shunmuga Krishnan, “Video Stream Quality Impacts Viewer Behavior: Inferring Causality Using Quasi-Experimental Designs,” *Networking; Researchers from University of Massachusetts Report on Findings in Networking*, (February 20, 2014) 48.

<sup>16</sup> “2 Seconds,” *A Study Conducted by Forrester Consulting in Partnership with Akamai Technologies*, (September, 2009) Accessed January, 15, 2018, <https://www.akamai.com/us/en/about/news/press/2009-press/akamai-reveals-2-seconds-as-the-new-threshold-of-acceptability-for-ecommerce-web-page-response-times.jsp>.

promise anything else is misleading. The spiritual disciplines call the practitioner back to a life of slow formation, where old habits are cast aside and new habits are formed. Developing technological advancements and the increasing abundance of available entertainment present a formidable challenge to the disciplined life.

In light of these issues, I have become convinced that the Evangelical tradition would benefit greatly from a historical review of how the disciplines have been taught and practiced within its own tradition. In order to edify the church and contribute to this field, I hope to adequately defend the following two assertions. First, the Evangelical tradition does, in fact, have a proud history of practicing and teaching the disciplines. Second, the disciplines are still relevant to the spiritual formation of Christians today. As I mentioned above, the disciplines teeter between timeless and temporal. I hope to demonstrate that Evangelicals from every era have adapted the disciplines to fit their specific time and context. The disciplines remain relevant precisely because they are malleable. Only when believers engage with the disciplines and personalize them will they experience their full effect.

In an attempt to defend my assertions I have focused on one prominent Evangelical figure from each of the last three centuries: Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney and Richard Foster. Jonathan Edwards's played a vital role in inaugurating the Great Awakenings. Considered, by many, to be one of the first Evangelicals, he left an indelible impact on the landscape of North American Christianity. His pious practice of the disciplines made an impression on virtually everyone that he encountered. In many ways, Finney represents the quintessential American Evangelical of his period. He was responsible for some of the largest revivals of the nineteenth century. His fiery preaching

and commitment to *new measures* make him a compelling figure for study. Finally, with the 1978 publication of his classic work *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster established himself as the foremost modern authority on the disciplines. He introduced an entire generation of curious Christians to a world that, for many, had remained largely unexplored. Foster has since travelled the world, teaching and practicing the disciplines. His effort to inspire a renewed interest in spiritual formation makes him the perfect person with whom to complete this journey through the Evangelical tradition.

After reviewing the history of these three important Evangelical figures, I will conclude with a reflection on how the Evangelical church can adopt and adapt the disciplines to an emerging twenty-first century context. With each generation, new work must be done to communicate the importance and relevance of these classical spiritual practices. Not only is it possible, it is essential. Regaining a sense of history and appreciation for the wider Christian tradition is vital to understanding the disciplines. If the church is serious about producing disciples, it must first get serious about practicing the disciplines.

## CHAPTER 2: EDWARDS

Jonathan Edwards was never quite comfortable in his context. As a child born during the waning years of the Puritan-dominated colonial era, Edwards found great comfort in the established hierarchal social structures of his forefathers. Although he straddled two eras, namely the end of colonial rule in North America and the American Revolution, Edwards remained staunchly traditional. His conventional upbringing and cultural setting had a major impact on how he practiced the disciplines. He favored disciplines that demanded strict methodical devotion. His study of Scripture was logical and orderly, and his commitment to fasting was unyielding. Although the colonial world would soon find itself racing towards revolution and reformation, Edwards was pleased to defend the customs of his ancestors. Conventional authority was to be respected and God was to be feared. He understood and related to the world through a broad system of interconnected personal relationships and familial ties. His father, Timothy Edwards, and grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, were both prominent New England pastors and major influences in the life and work of Edwards. They guided him through his early years of ministry and helped shape his understanding of power, faith and family.

Above all else, Edwards was a relentless student. His life was characterized by an uncompromising work ethic and a persistent call to discipline. Known for rising early, Edwards would often begin his day “at four or five in the morning in order to spend thirteen hours in his study.”<sup>1</sup> This devotion was instrumental to his success and indicative

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<sup>1</sup> George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 133.

of his personality. He was an ambitious and focused man, whose faith benefited greatly from a determined spirit. His devotion, while at times bordering on neurotic, was indicative of his Puritan tradition, which valued hard work and ardent spirituality.<sup>2</sup> Most of all however, his devotion originated from a great passion to experience God's transforming love. He believed that God deserved his total attention and anything less would call into question his very salvation.

He held his congregation to the same standard, teaching that a life transformed by faith must be marked by a total commitment to the pursuit of Jesus. He longed for the day when his congregation felt as passionately about their faith as he did about his own. The Great Awakenings of the eighteenth century offered a small taste of the piety he yearned to inspire. Shortly after the Awakenings began, in 1734, Edward's town of Northampton responded with such zeal that it "seemed to be made over in his image, which was no small feat in light of his perfectionist standards and spiritual intensity."<sup>3</sup> The sincerity of his congregation and the apparent authenticity of their experience convinced Edwards that the Holy Spirit was working amongst his people. Although Edwards grew more nuanced in his support of the Awakenings, in later years, he remained a stalwart advocate of the movement until the day he died.

Despite his lifelong support of the Awakenings, Edwards did eventually come to recognize that a single moment of revival was in itself not sufficient to maintain the fires of faith. He acknowledged that charismatic expressions of faith had the potential to

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<sup>2</sup> Marsden, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.158.

corrupt weak-minded individuals who were susceptible to powerful social pressure.<sup>4</sup> In an effort to avoid overestimating a person's level of interior transformation, Edwards later recorded twelve general rules that could be used to authenticate a person's religious affections. Although all are profitable, his twelfth and final sign stands as the definitive measure: *Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice*. Of this, Edwards wrote, "I mean, they have that influence and power upon him who is the subject of them, that they cause that a practice, which is universally conformed to, and directed by Christian rules, should be the practice and business of his life."<sup>5</sup> Having witnessed many of the proponents of his first Awakening regress to their former sinful habits after experiencing powerful religious affections, Edwards rightly concluded that a person who had truly encountered the living God would inevitably turn to a life of disciplined spiritual practice.

It is remarkable that Jonathan Edwards came to acknowledge this fact. Despite serving as the preeminent defender of a movement, famous for its palpable spiritual spectacles, Edwards understood that long-term devotion to spiritual disciplines was the only thing that could cultivate lasting spiritual transformation. Although the Awakenings were the spark that started the fire, the disciplines were the oxygen that kept it ablaze. Edwards considered both components necessary in the battle to maintain spiritual intensity.

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<sup>4</sup> Marsden, 285.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Hickman, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998), Kindle Location 30534.

## ON PRAYER

### 2.1 In Private

During his childhood, prayer came naturally to Edwards. His propensity for the practice grew out of a sincere love for Jesus. What might have felt like a chore to other children proved to be a source of life for the young disciple. In a fond recollection of his childhood, Edwards reminisced, “I used to pray five times a day in secret, and to spend much time in religious conversation with other boys; and used to meet with them to pray together. I experienced I know not what kind of delight in religion.”<sup>6</sup> His powerful childhood connection was fostered in a Puritan culture that saw the salvation of its children as its primary social concern.<sup>7</sup> It was only natural that his minister father and pious mother would urge Edwards to incorporate secret prayer into his daily religious habits. This practice would continue into adulthood.

As Edwards worked hard to develop an ordered life of prayer, he quickly discovered the shortcomings of his fallen nature. Subject to emotional swings, Edwards often found himself mired in depression. He was perpetually critical of his own efforts, convinced that his emotional and psychological setbacks could be resolved by a firmer commitment to discipline. In an attempt to corral his wayward spirit, Edwards instituted a habit that would impact his religious practice for the rest of his life. In the fall of 1722, Edwards began to record his famed *Resolutions*, a compendium of personal faith

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<sup>6</sup> Hickman, 1145-1147.

<sup>7</sup> Marsden, 20.

commitments that characterized his personal religious life. In all, Edwards documented seventy resolutions, which covered a wide variety of disciplines and daily behaviors.

As a sign that prayer was never far from Edwards's mind, he declared in his twenty-ninth resolution, "Resolved, Never to count that a prayer, nor to let that pass as a prayer, nor that as a petition of a prayer, which is so made, that I cannot hope that God will answer it; nor that as a confession which I cannot hope God will accept."<sup>8</sup> Edwards believed that prayer was an essential component in God's plan to redeem the world. He would go on to address the subject many more times throughout his life in both sermons and writings.

Although prayer came naturally as a child, it grew more challenging with age. Journal entries composed during his early twenties are rife with frustrated accounts of spiritual struggle. Never quite satisfied with his level of personal commitment, Edwards often lamented his inability to maintain his own self-imposed standard of devotion. In an entry logged February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1723, Edwards recounted, "I have been negligent this month past, in these three things: I have not been watchful enough over my appetites, in eating and drinking; in rising too late in the morning; and in not applying myself with sufficient application to the duty of secret prayer."<sup>9</sup> Prayer was a common gauge by which his spiritual devotion could be measured.

The frequency of Edwards's prayer represented only one standard of measurement. Edwards was also concerned with the content of his prayers. For it was not simply enough to pray often; he must also pray with sincerity. Idle chatter in prayer was

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<sup>8</sup> Hickman, 1588-1589.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 1865-1867.

indicative of a careless spirit. Careful consideration must be given to the petitions presented before almighty God. In an entry recorded Saturday morning, June 29 of 1723, Edwards wrote, “It is best to be careful in prayer, not to put up those petitions, of which I do not feel a sincere desire: thereby my prayer is rendered less sincere, less acceptable to God, and less useful to myself.”<sup>10</sup> For Edwards, the attitudes with which one practiced the disciplines were as vital as the disciplines themselves.<sup>11</sup> As the number of resolutions grew, so did the discipline necessary to satisfy them. Undeterred by the expectation, Edwards pressed on, adding responsibilities daily to his personal, professional and spiritual life.

At first glance, it may appear as if prayer simply represented one more self-imposed spiritual requirement in a long list of religious resolutions. It is quite possible, however, that this practice was the very thing that sustained him in his times of greatest need. As his influence grew, during the Awakenings of Northampton, Edwards experienced both unprecedented revival and unsolicited criticism.<sup>12</sup> He was forced to navigate uncharted and treacherous waters. For Edwards, it was as if the very reputation of God Himself was at stake when speaking of the success of the Awakenings.<sup>13</sup> A misstep by Edwards or his congregation at a time when the Kingdom of God was so obviously breaking into the world could spell disaster for the movement as a whole.

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<sup>10</sup> Hickman, 1983-1984.

<sup>11</sup> *Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, Volume 13, The "Miscellanies": (Entry Nos. 43. Sabbath, Para. 224. (Jonathan Edwards Center, Yale University, 2008) This is a digital collection of Edwards's original writings collected and preserved by the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University. All subsequent references to this edition will appear as WJE.

<sup>12</sup> Marsden, 161.

<sup>13</sup> *WJE*, Vol. 4: Para. 272-276.

During this period, a young woman, recently converted, wrote to Edwards asking for advice regarding how to cultivate a vibrant faith. In response, Edwards offered seventeen suggestions. Of those suggestions, four of them involved prayer.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly revealing, given that Edwards wrote this letter the same year that he preached his famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, a sermon which marked the epicenter of his entire career. Clearly, Edwards considered prayer to be an essential practice even in the midst of burgeoning responsibilities.

As the years passed and the Awakenings ebbed Edwards's love for prayer persisted. His later protégé, Samuel Hopkins, captured it best when he recalled, "He began the day with private prayers followed by family prayers, by candlelight in winter...Throughout the day, his goal was to remain constantly with a sense of living in the presence of God, as difficult as that might be. Often he added secret days of fasting and additional prayers."<sup>15</sup> It is plain to see that Edwards did, in fact, exhibit a pattern of perpetual prayer from childhood to death, reinforcing the idea that prayer was an essential component of a healthy spiritual life. For Edwards, prayer was not simply a platitude to be preached from the pulpit, but the lifeblood that coursed through the church, animating the work of Jesus and giving life to a dying world.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Hickman, 3186-3187.

<sup>15</sup> Marsden, 133.

<sup>16</sup> *WJE*, Vol. 5: Para. 351.

## 2.2 In Public

Prayer was also a consistent theme in the teaching and writing of Edwards. It served as the invisible vehicle by which God's work was delivered. It might seem strange that a strict Calvinist such as Edwards would be an ardent advocate of the practice; however, his support of the habit remained consistent throughout his life. His critics often wondered why he thought prayer necessary in a universe where God had already determined the outcome of events. Yet, despite his absolute conviction of God's sovereignty and omnipotence, Edwards remained totally convinced of the necessity of prayer.

For Edwards, the efficacy of prayers lay not in God's potential to be convinced, but rather in God's willingness to acknowledge and work in response to said prayers. In fact, Edwards actually believed firmly that God could not be persuaded to change His plans. This did not, however, suggest that prayer was therefore unnecessary or powerless, but only that it was powerful in a different way. In order to reconcile the disparity between God's sovereignty and His biblical command to pray, Edwards deduced that God ordered His will to work in response to prayer, not as one being convinced by the requests themselves, but as one who desired to use prayer as the catalyst that would initiate His predetermined will.<sup>17</sup> God, in His goodness chose to use prayers as the forewarning of what was to come. The stirrings of prayer in the hearts of believers were the indication that God was preparing to initiate His purposes. If the believer was to

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Beck, *The Voice of Faith: Jonathan Edwards's Theology of Prayer* (Ontario: Joshua Press, 2010), 56-58.

ignore these stirrings, the will of God would still prevail, only it would be missed or misunderstood by the believer called to be a witness. According to Edwards, God's will could never be impeded.

What, therefore, is the purpose of prayer, if not to change the will of God? In a sermon entitled *The Most High: A Prayer-Hearing God*, Edwards lists two primary purposes of prayer. The first was to remind people of their dependence upon God's sovereign providence. Without prayer, humankind might be tempted to forget the vital role that God played in the interconnected relationship between creation and creator. Prayer reinforced the natural order of God and his people, establishing clear distinctions between superior and subordinate. The second purpose of prayer was to prepare the hearts of God's people to receive the mercy soon to come. Although God's purpose can never be thwarted, a prayerless spirit might ensure that one misses the grace being imparted. As Edwards preached, "Our prayer to God may excite in us a suitable sense and consideration of our dependence on God for the mercy we ask, and a suitable exercise of faith in God's sufficiency, that so we may be prepared to glorify his name when the mercy is received."<sup>18</sup> In other words, God initiates prayer to remind people of their dependence upon Him and to prepare His people to recognize His blessings when they come.

In another sermon, *Hypocrites Deficient in the Duty of Prayer*, Edwards remonstrated people who claimed to be Christians yet neglected the duty of secret prayer. In this sermon Edwards explains that "Prayer is as natural an expression of faith as breathing is of life," going on to claim, "A prayerless life is so far from being an holy

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<sup>18</sup> Hickman, 59653.

life, that it is a profane life.”<sup>19</sup> Edwards taught that prayer was indispensable to the life of faith, even going so far as to propose that one who does not pray might not in fact be saved at all.

Edwards considered prayer not only essential to the life of the believer, but also to the future of the church. In his well-known work, *An Humble Attempt*, Edwards described prayer as being the precursor to a worldwide revival that would inaugurate the final age of redemption. He declared, “This disposition to prayer, and union in it, will gradually spread more and more, and increase to greater degrees; with which at length will gradually be introduced a revival of religion, and a disposition to greater engagedness in the worship and service of God, amongst his professing people.”<sup>20</sup> An increased interest in prayer within the church was a sign that God’s Spirit was being unleashed.

Prayer is a theme that surfaces regularly in both his sermons and public writings. Edwards saw this discipline as a vital connecting point between God and His people. When practiced properly, God’s will would be implemented judiciously and recognized by a people who had been properly prepared to receive it.

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<sup>19</sup> Hickman, 26387.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 69715-69717.

## ON FASTING

### 2.3 In Private

Fasting was a common practice among eighteenth-century New England Puritans. It was customary to observe regular fast-days, as both a spiritual discipline and a response to perceived divine judgment.<sup>21</sup> Congregations and communities would gather and petition God for help, embracing fasting as a means to exercise control over the appetites of the flesh. These passions, when left unchecked, could hinder a faithful believer from being effectively heard in prayer. Fasting was the ultimate ascetic discipline, holding obvious appeal for a community that prided itself on its unmitigated pursuit of God. Edwards, a conventional man by nature, was quick to adopt and personalize this practical sign of faith.

Although fasting could involve total abstention from food, Edwards's generally practiced moderation, limiting his portion size and meal frequency. Edwards regulated his eating habits at an early age. In his twentieth resolution, Edwards declared, "20. Resolved, to maintain the strictest temperance in eating and drinking." Later, Edwards wrote, "40. Resolved, to inquire every night before I go to bed, whether I have acted in the best way I possibly could, with respect to eating and drinking."<sup>22</sup> For Edwards, discipline was a way of life. Apathy in any form carried with it the potential to unravel a carefully ordered life. Food was simply one more opportunity for excess and gluttony to corrupt his will. Edwards always entertained the fear that unchecked excess would "dull

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<sup>21</sup> Ted Rivera, *Jonathan Edwards on Worship: Public and Private Devotion to God* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2003), Kindle Location 1273.

<sup>22</sup> Hickman, 1606-1607.

his mind or rouse his passions.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, fasting helped Edwards temper his appetites and refocus his mind on divine things.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, it was only natural that Edwards worked hard to practice total self-control in eating, as in every other area of his life.

In this way, Edwards reflected the private devotion expected of every practicing Puritan of his age. Ted Rivera quotes author William Spohn when he notes, “The first generation Puritans rejected monasticism while transferring its religious intensity to “the affirmation of ordinary life.”... The ordinances of public worship consisted of reading and preaching the Scripture, the sacraments, and prayer, fasting, community discipline, collections for the poor, and special days of prayer and thanksgiving.”<sup>25</sup> With monastic discipline, Edwards sought to reign in any impulse that might devolve into spiritual chaos.

Despite his clear commitment to the discipline, we have very few personal references in Edwards’s writing concerning his own practice of fasting. This is likely due to his habit of keeping spiritual practices private.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps one of the best ways to gauge the value that Edwards ascribed to fasting is to observe how he referenced it in his biography *The Life of David Brainerd*. Reflecting on the personal nature of this work, Marsden explains, “It might also be seen as in part a spiritual autobiography. Although the substance of the volume is edited diaries, it is often difficult to distinguish between

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<sup>23</sup> Marsden, 51.

<sup>24</sup> Col 3:2

<sup>25</sup> Rivera, 193-194.

<sup>26</sup> Marsden, 133.

author and editor.”<sup>27</sup> To Edwards, Brainerd was a model of Christian piety and saintly submission.

After Brainerd’s death, Edwards sought to pen his biography using a collection of private notes and Brainerd’s own diary. It is logical to think that Edwards might have emphasized those disciplines he considered most important when memorializing the life of his dear friend. If there is merit to this assertion, the frequency with which the discipline occurs in his biography should provide insight into its value in the eyes of Edwards. Between the account of his life and his related journal entries, fasting is mentioned thirty-one times. Prayer is by far the most commonly mentioned discipline, referenced nearly four-hundred times. Meditation is mentioned sixty-nine times.<sup>28</sup> These three disciplines make up the bulk of the spiritual practices discussed in the biography. Although this is not a perfect method of assessment, it does demonstrate that fasting was common, expected and celebrated as an important spiritual practice for the pious eighteenth-century New England Christian.

In 1757, shortly before his untimely death, Edwards continued to promote the practice. In a letter written to his colleague John Erskine Edwards recalls, “I concluded with our pious governor that, as soon as the season would admit of the Trustees meeting, we would keep a day of fasting and prayer, to implore the divine blessing on the College, and humbly to adore him that his providence has so remarkably appeared for it.”<sup>29</sup> Edwards’s conversation with a public official on the subject, and the expectation that his advice would be heeded, is indicative of the general acceptance of this practice. This

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<sup>27</sup> Marsden, 331.

<sup>28</sup> *WJE*, Vol. 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* Vol. 16: Para. 703.

excerpt demonstrates that even in his waning years, Edwards still endorsed the practice. Fasting was undeniably a staple discipline in the spiritual life of Edwards, even in his final days.

Although it is important to recognize the obvious impacts of fasting in the life of Edwards, it is also important to acknowledge that some scholars consider Edwards's habit to be unhealthy and potentially symptomatic of an undiagnosed medical condition. Unfortunately, we will never know with certainty if this was the case. Given the possibility, however, it seems prudent to at least dedicate some space within this section to discuss how this discipline in particular has the potential to become a destructive force in the life of the practitioner.

Throughout his life, numerous people commented on Edwards's gaunt appearance. One contemporary described Edwards as, "very much emaciated, and impaired in his health, and it is doubtful to me whether he will attain the age of forty."<sup>30</sup> He was perpetually thin, and regularly suffered from prolonged illness. Ultimately, his lack of nutrition might have even contributed to his untimely death at the hands of a smallpox inoculation.

Edwards's appearance alone would not serve as sufficient grounds to say with certainty that he suffered from an undiagnosed eating disorder. Many ascetics have been known to eat sparingly, caring little for their lean figures. Occasionally however, Edwards seemed to reveal signs that something more sinister might have been present in

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<sup>30</sup> Timothy Cutler to Bishop Edmund Gibson, May 28, 1739, in Douglas C. Stenerson, son, "An Anglican Critique of the Early Phase of the Great Awakening in New England: A Letter by Timothy Cutler," *William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Jul., 1973), pp. 475-488.

his obsession with this spiritual discipline. In a particularly revealing passage, Edwards writes:

I find that when eating, I cannot be convinced in the time of it, that if I should eat more, I should exceed the bounds of strict temperance, though I have had the experience of two years of the like; and yet, as soon as I have done, in three minutes I am convinced of it. But yet, when I eat again, and remember it, still, while eating, I am fully convinced that I have not eaten what is but for nature, nor can I be convinced that my appetite and feeling is as it was before. It seems to me that I shall be somewhat faint if I leave off then; but when I have finished, I am convinced again, and so it is from time to time.<sup>31</sup>

Evidently, at times, Edwards wrestled with unusual eating tendencies. Many people today can empathize with Edwards. Our modern world bombards its citizens with messages that encourage unhealthy body images and unnaturally thin figures. In these cases, it can be tempting to allow the spiritual discipline of fasting to become an excuse to avoid eating. It is important to remember, in these times, that the spiritual disciplines were meant to bring life to the practitioner, not burden them with yet another insecurity. When the spiritual disciplines begin to affect our health, both physically and emotionally, they become a tool of the devil and not a tool of faith. Although we cannot be sure where Edwards fell on the spectrum between problematic and productive with this discipline, we can take a moment to remember that all good things created to draw us close to God can become forces for evil when used improperly.

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<sup>31</sup> *WJE* Vol. 40: Entry February 15, 1724.

## 2.4 In Public

For Edwards, fasting was an external sign of an inward commitment. It was not to be taken lightly or used as a tool to bolster one's public reputation. After years of publicly promoting and privately practicing the discipline, it became clear to Edwards that many of his parishioners showed little interest in following suit. As usual, his commitment to the discipline far exceeded that of his congregation and Edwards was left to reconcile his zeal with his congregation's indifference. In an effort to remind them of their Christian obligation, Edwards usually responded to such apathy with pointed observations and sharply worded sermons.

In a fast-day sermon, *Fast Days in Dead Times*, Edwards addresses his perceived hypocrisy among the community by noting, "There is a great show of humiliation on fast days, but no reformation."<sup>32</sup> Empty performances of religious practice incited a double measure of judgment according to Edwards. Not only would the fasting party be denied the mercy they supposedly sought, but also, as a result of their hypocrisy, they would also heap judgment upon themselves because of their lack of sincerity. The correlation between a contrite and broken spirit, and fasting, was incontestable. The two must work in tandem. Observance of religious rituals in and of itself provided no guarantee that God would be pleased. Edwards preached, even "A degenerate people may keep up fast days and other religious observances..."<sup>33</sup> Edwards understood that the disciplines were to be the expression of a right spirit, not an empty routine, practiced for social affirmation.

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<sup>32</sup> *WJE*, Vol. 19: Para. 61.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* Vol. 19: Para. 58.

For the general public, fasting was commonly practiced in response to a perceived need in the community. Both physical and spiritual needs warranted fasting. Often times, God’s ostensible judgment was enough to elicit a call to fast. For example, early in his ministry, an earthquake struck the region of Northampton. Edwards interpreted this event as a divine warning. The unusual lack of destruction or death from the earthquake was an indication that God’s judgment was still pending. This fear prompted the local government to call “for a province-wide day of humiliation and fasting.”<sup>34</sup> These responses were common, and often reflected the influence of the Puritan tradition on the culture in general. Edwards believed that if action was taken quickly, God’s judgment might be delayed or even deferred, as in the case of Jonah and the city of Nineveh.<sup>35</sup>

Later in his career, Edwards encountered another unfortunate incident. At the height of the first Awakening, in 1735, Joseph Hawley II, a prominent Northampton citizen and Edwards’s uncle, slit his throat and died. His leadership as town clerk for nearly two decades ensured that his loss would be especially devastating given the flourishing movement at hand.<sup>36</sup> In order to curtail the inevitable negative reverberations of this dreadful incident, Edwards mandated a community-wide fast-day to teach on why God allowed this to happen. For Edwards and his parishioners, fasting was a natural response to a world filled with so much uncertainty, a demonstration of humility in the presence of a potentially angry God.

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<sup>34</sup> *WJE*, Vol. 14: Para. 213.

<sup>35</sup> Jnh 3:10

<sup>36</sup> James R. Trumbull, *History of Northampton, Massachusetts, from its Settlement in 1654*, Vol. 2 (London: Forgotten Books, 2017), 79-81.

For Edwards, a well-timed, sincere fast might be the single act that prevented God from unleashing his righteous judgment. If practiced insincerely or with a halfhearted effort, there is no telling when God's wrath might be released. In a strange episode, nearly two years later, the gallery of the Northampton meetinghouse collapsed during a crowded worship service. Heavy beams of wood crashed down on parishioners below, crushing numerous people, including children. Miraculously, no one was hurt. He observed, "God had sent an awful rebuke to the congregation "by so dangerous and surprising an accident," so that they would "praise his name for so wonderful, and as it were miraculous, a preservation."<sup>37</sup> Despite the evident divine intervention, Edwards's congregation remained unmoved. The first Awakening was in decline, and their concern for spiritual matters was fading. Revealingly, no fast-day followed this dangerous calamity. For Edwards, fasting was an essential and even potentially life-saving discipline to be practiced regularly by authentic disciples of Jesus.

## ON SELF-EXAMINATION

### 2.5 In Private

In modern churches, the discipline of self-examination is virtually a lost art. The unparalleled media saturation of the twentieth-century would have been extremely troubling for Edwards and his contemporaries. For Puritans, the practice of self-examination was bound up inextricably with salvation. Christians were expected to

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<sup>37</sup> Marsden, 185.

examine their hearts carefully and extirpate any vestiges of sin. Only after years of painstaking introspection could believers be assured that their motives were in fact true, and their salvation secure.

Modern Evangelicalism has all but removed this discipline from corporate practice. Noted for their altar calls, the Christian crusades, made popular during the twentieth century, are prime examples of this development. Once words of repentance were spoken, salvation was assured, and the status of “elect” was gladly bestowed. For many travelling preachers of this era, self-examination and careful reflection were an afterthought, considered unnecessary for securing salvation.

This model would have been completely foreign to Edwards and his contemporaries. For the eighteenth-century Puritan, years of careful self-examination were necessary to confirm one’s salvation. Public proclamation alone was insufficient. As J.I. Packer explains, “Professions of faith, they said, must be tested before they may be trusted, even by those who make them”<sup>38</sup> Edwards reflected this sentiment perfectly in his own life.

For many years, Edwards wrestled with doubt concerning his own salvation. Throughout his teenage years, and even into his early twenties, Edwards agonized over his eternal state. Much of his anxiety can be attributed to the Puritan practice of documenting the steps of conversion. Edwards’s own father had established a list of steps that should be considered if one’s conversion was to be deemed genuine.<sup>39</sup> By

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<sup>38</sup> J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 182.

<sup>39</sup> Marsden, 27.

constructing a rigid system of evaluation, Puritan pastors unintentionally undermined unique experiences of faith that might have fallen outside of the predetermined norm.

Even Edwards himself, the son of a prominent pastor, struggled to fulfill these inflexible stages of conversion. In a diary entry recorded on the morning of August 12<sup>th</sup> of 1723, Edwards writes, “The chief thing, that now makes me in any measure to question my good estate, is my not having experienced conversion in *those particular steps*, wherein the people of New England, and anciently the Dissenters of Old England, used to experience it.”<sup>40</sup> Eventually, Edwards accepted that the matter was beyond his control. The agony of self-doubt was too much to bear. He commended it to the Lord’s grace and resolved to remain vigilant in watching for any signs that his sinful nature might actually be deceiving him. Ultimately, he committed himself to the lifelong discipline of self-examination.

Although it might appear as if the practice of self-examination produced only doubt in the minds of otherwise well-meaning Christians, it was actually intended to serve a larger purpose. Puritans believed that humankind was, by nature, helplessly mired in sin. The presence of sin, as they understood it, corrupted the entire being, compromising more than just ordinary ethical or moral choices. The Puritan doctrine on the human condition described a nature that in itself could not be trusted. Like the seed that sprouts quickly only to wither under the scorching sun,<sup>41</sup> some supposed conversions might, in time, reveal themselves to be “the devil’s counterfeits.”<sup>42</sup> Like Judas, who actually lived with Jesus only later to betray Him, the eighteenth-century

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<sup>40</sup> *WJE*, Vol. 10: Para. 269. (emphasis the editor’s)

<sup>41</sup> Mt 13:1-23

<sup>42</sup> Marsden, 189.

pious Puritan lived in constant fear that they too might abandon Jesus in their final hour. Only by intense self-examination could the inquiring soul determine with confidence whether or not God had included them in the selection of the elect.

Edwards's expected his family to share his concern for careful self-examination. Never missing an opportunity to show consideration for their eternal salvation, Edwards regularly reminded his children that death could strike at any time. In typical Puritan fashion, Edwards wrote to his twelve year-old daughter Sarah, reminding her that because she had a, “‘very weak and infirm body,’ she may ‘not... be long-lived.’ and in the meantime she would probably have to live without many comforts other than ‘the presence of Christ and communion with him.’”<sup>43</sup> At a time when disease and death from childbirth were common, one's eternal destiny was of principal concern.

By searching one's heart carefully, expelling all hidden sin, and submitting oneself to the rule of Christ, one could find the confirmation for which one longed. In many ways, self-examination was the foundation for all other disciplines. It provided insight into the human condition, which reinforced one's need for God. A quiet and reflective spirit, informed by dutiful self-examination, proved to be fertile ground for spiritual Awakening.

## 2.6 In Public

Given its prominence in the spiritual life of Edwards, it is no surprise that self-examination would also be emphasized in his teaching. Due to the practical nature of the

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<sup>43</sup> Marsden, 214.

discipline, however, most references to the exercise are found among Edwards's sermons, which are peppered with references to the practice.<sup>44</sup> Edwards regularly called for sincere reflection in the life of a faithful believer. He understood that self-examination was the cornerstone of a confident faith, assuring the believer of their eternal destiny. His Puritan upbringing ensured that self-examination would forever be imprinted on the mind and heart of Edwards.

In the text of an early sermon, preached while Edwards served briefly in New York between the end of 1722 and early 1723, Edwards delivered a message that discussed the mortal danger of unrecognized sin. In response to this problem, he specifies with unusual detail the proper way to practice self-examination. In this sermon, entitled *Conviction, and the Uses of Order*, Edwards uses the wickedness of the Jews, as described in the book of Jeremiah, as an example of those who sin without remorse. They remain unconvinced of their sin, and so remain under God's divine judgment. The only solution to this problem, Edwards postulates, is a rigorous practice of self-examination.

Edwards even goes so far as to establish a specific systematic method for remembering one's sins. He suggests, "Begin with your childhood, and go through your whole life. Follow your own track. View the path that you have gone in through all its mazes, through all its windings and turnings. Bring to mind as many of your sins as you can, and let there be distinct conviction of them. Be as particular as you can."<sup>45</sup> He goes to great lengths to impress upon his congregation the need to uncover every last sin in

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<sup>44</sup> For relevant examples, see sermons, "*Duty of Self-Examination*" "*Self-Examination and the Lord's Supper*" and "*Christian Cautions: The Necessity of Self-Examination.*" See the collection WJE.

<sup>45</sup> WJE, Vol. 19: Para. 267.

order to confess them before God. For Edwards, the forgiveness of God was dependent upon one's ability to acknowledge and confess their sins. Therefore, any sin left unconfessed was a sin left potentially un-forgiven.

Numerous other sermons affirm the central role that self-examination played in the process of sanctification. In his sermon *Christian Cautions; or the Necessity of Self-Examination*, Edwards lists various ways that self-examination can be used to illuminate bastions of sin. He addresses topics such as secret sins, attitudes towards one's neighbors, charity, family relationships and more.<sup>46</sup> This list is reflective of the Puritan belief that sin was a corrosive force that pervaded every component of life. No area was safe from its destructive power. Like a little yeast in a lump of dough, even one undetected sin could become a source of evil in the life of a sincere believer.

While Puritans are known for their serious consideration of sin, modern Christians often misunderstand their purpose behind this practice. As Rivera explains, "Self-examination's purpose for the earnest seeker is not then aimed at looking for the means of salvation, but for evidence of salvation, and in particular, seeking to determine that one's conversion was genuine against all who would be found imposters."<sup>47</sup> It is hard to fault a people whose lives are marked by such uncertainty for wanting to find security in their salvation. Puritans believed with total certainty that eternity waited for them, and therefore their destiny in the life to come was of primary concern.

Although modern Evangelical Christians might find it easy to be critical of a Puritan culture that fostered such insecurity, it would be wise to consider the source of

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<sup>46</sup> Hickman, 63335.

<sup>47</sup> Rivera, 2169-2171.

that criticism. Perhaps a modern Evangelical's lack of concern for this type of spiritual security actually reveals a lack of consideration of the alternative. For Edwards, the reality of hell and eternal separation from God influenced practically everything he did. For many modern Evangelicals, hell has become a taboo topic, to be avoided at all costs.<sup>48</sup> At best, it lingers in the minds of believers as a vague, abstract consequence of sin with little material substance. Edwards and his contemporaries, however, had few reservations about describing in detail the "Eternity of Hell's Torments."<sup>49</sup> They believed that a healthy fear of God's judgment has its place in Christian doctrine, and Edwards demonstrated this full well.

Despite the vital role that Edwards thought self-examination should play in the spiritual development of a Christian, he also understood that it could lead to unintended sin. Pride was a constant threat. The intense focus that this discipline required had the potential to lead to a haughty spirit, which regarded others with contempt. Edwards also perceived that misuse of this discipline could produce a result that ran contrary to the very purpose of the discipline itself. Self-examination, meant to reveal one's own secret sins, could actually become a tool used to magnify the sins of others. This preoccupation with the sins of others defeated the very purpose of the discipline, which was intended to root out personal sin and eradicate it from the life of the believer. Edwards writes, "Let everyone look to himself, and consider whether he is not guilty... We can observe the

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<sup>48</sup> Mark Galli, "Q&A: Francis Chan on Rob Bell and Hell." *Christianity Today*, July 5, 2011, accessed November 5, 2017. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/julyweb-only/francis-chan-hell.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Hickman, 8877-8878.

error in others, but can we observe nothing in ourselves?”<sup>50</sup> Therefore self-examination, though generally beneficial, was not without its flaws.

Irrespective of the potential for misuse or abuse, self-examination was a principal discipline for Edwards and his contemporaries. Cultivation of this practice took years and it was applied consistently, impacting every facet of the Puritan’s spiritual life. Regardless of intentions, the consequence of this practice was often a heavy dose of fear mixed with a measure of humility. Both had their place in the doctrine of Edwards.

## 2.7 Conclusion

By now, I hope it has been made abundantly clear that Edwards practiced the disciplines faithfully within his particular context. From the moment that he was born, to the moment he died, Edwards thought and acted like a Puritan. This upbringing directly affected his perception and application of the spiritual disciplines, influencing which disciplines he valued and which he avoided. Little time was spent attempting to learn from other traditions. In many ways, this singular focus proved to be both a negative and a positive force in the life of Edwards. By committing himself entirely to one narrow expression of spirituality, Edwards was able to perfect eighteenth-century Puritan spiritual practice. Negatively however, it limited his ability to learn and incorporate alternative spiritual practices from other traditions. Regardless, Edwards remains a fascinating eighteenth-century figure, steeped in tradition and singularly focused.

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<sup>50</sup> Rivera, 2696-2697.

His preference for conventionalism was a product of his privileged status in society. He was educated, intelligent and connected. This privilege was often lost on Edwards, who saw his social class as virtually a divine mandate.<sup>51</sup> This, however, did not mean that Edwards was arrogant. On the contrary, he constantly examined his heart, in search of any indication of lingering pride.<sup>52</sup> For Edwards, privilege was indicative of a higher calling. His blessing had been bestowed for a purpose. Edwards had a mission to fulfill, and his privilege was the means by which that calling could be accomplished. No measure of effort was too demanding, and nothing would stop him from devoting himself completely to realizing that vision.

Although in this study I only chose three disciplines for closer examination, Edwards practiced numerous other disciplines that warrant further future research. He was an avid student of Scripture. He read the Bible daily, carefully searching the Scriptures for important lessons and indications of God's plans for the future. He saw the discipline of Bible study as central to the life of the believer and especially pastors, commanding ministers to, "be very conversant with the Holy Scriptures; making it very much their business, with the utmost diligence and strictness, to search those holy writings"<sup>53</sup> As a typical Protestant, Edwards placed Bible study at the center of his spiritual practice.

Edwards also valued music as a valid and necessary act of spiritual devotion. For a conventional man, Edwards was unusually progressive in regards to music. A fan of the nascent composer Dr. Isaac Watts, Edwards incorporated hymns, accompanied by music,

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<sup>51</sup> Marsden, 152.

<sup>52</sup> *WJE*, Vol. 16: Para. 753.

<sup>53</sup> Hickman, 110775.

into worship long before it was universally acceptable to do so. In a Thanksgiving Day sermon, Edwards writes, “Parents ought to be careful that their children are instructed in singing, that they may be capable of performing that part of divine worship.”<sup>54</sup> His consistent support of music in worship and the life of the believer adds merit to the supposition that he saw it as a vital spiritual discipline, raising the question of whether or not it should be considered for inclusion in the broader conversation on spiritual disciplines and Edwards.

Edwards also showed great concern for the Lord’s Supper. A point of contention for most of his life, Edwards often clashed with his family and friends over the necessary qualifications for someone to partake of this sacrament. This was common for his time however, as the topic of communion conduct and regulation had been contentious for decades.<sup>55</sup> Although the discipline was often loaded with controversy, it remained one of the most important and sacred components of Edwards’s worship model. Rivera writes, “it appears evident that the Lord’s Supper was perhaps the most solemn time in Edwardsean church life, with the possible exception of the funeral service.”<sup>56</sup> Edwards’s practice of the Lord’s Supper was tied closely with his practice of self-examination. Investigating how these two disciplines complimented and supported each other in the life of Edwards, could provide fascinating insight into how the disciplines overlap and reinforce one another.

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<sup>54</sup> *WJE*, Vol. 2: Para. 917.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* Vol. 12: Para. 507-619.

<sup>56</sup> Rivera, 1105-1106.

Edwards undoubtedly lived a rich and vibrant life of faith. His practice of the disciplines left the modern church with much to learn about the importance of spiritual formation. Despite his Herculean efforts to maintain a life of discipline however, it was really his shortcomings that made him so endearing. He was focused to the point of obsession and his habits impacted every relationship he formed; yet he pressed on, undeterred by naysayers. In the end, it wasn't fame or fortune that motivated Jonathan Edwards, but rather a simple desire to live his life in the presence of Jesus. He fell in love with Jesus as a child, and like a child he remained infatuated for life. It was with this attitude, that he practiced the disciplines.

## CHAPTER 3: FINNEY

Although both men experienced outstanding success as revivalists, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney could hardly have been more different. Edwards was a meticulous academic who crafted his sermons like a lawyer preparing for court. Finney, on the other hand, rarely used notes while preaching, instead depending upon his natural style and charisma to captivate his audience.<sup>1</sup> Edwards was formally educated at Yale, while Finney eschewed theological education altogether. Even while teaching courses at the Oberlin Collegiate Institute later in life Finney did not follow the traditional lecture model but rather a Socratic method centered on lively discussion and debate.<sup>2</sup> Edwards held that God alone was responsible for initiating revivals, while Finney believed that they could be induced with persuasive preaching and persistent prayer. As noted in the previous chapter, Edwards was a product of an earlier era. In many ways, Finney was a product of the next. Despite their differences however, both men managed to find a relevant voice for their generations.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the winds of destiny seemed to blow westward. Men and women across the northeast packed their bags and travelled west, lured by inexpensive land and fertile valleys. Western New York, replete with rushing rivers and abundant lakes, provided ample space and resources for burgeoning towns founded on trade and industry. Sylvester and Rebecca Finney were not immune to the temptation of potential opportunity, eventually leaving their home in Warren,

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<sup>1</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion: Lecture 12 How to Preach the Gospel* (New York: New York Evangelist, 1835), Remarks Section 2.B.

<sup>2</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology Vol. 3*, Preface Para. 4.

Connecticut to travel west, to the Oneida County region of New York. It was here that their seventh child, Charles Grandison Finney, would spend most of his childhood. Although records are scant regarding his early education, few contemporaries doubted his natural aptitude.<sup>3</sup>

Before his conversion in the autumn of 1821, Finney worked as a schoolteacher and eventually a lawyer. After his conversion, however, Finney embraced ministry as his true vocation. His encounter with God left a permanent impression on his life. While walking to work one morning, Finney felt God calling him to repent. In response, Finney retreated to the woods. Waves of grace washed over him and a peace settled in which made it seem, “as if all nature listened.”<sup>4</sup> After an unknown amount of time, Finney returned to his law office to find a client waiting for his services. Overwhelmed with spiritual fervor, Finney asserted his now famous declaration, “Deacon Barney, I have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead His cause, and I cannot plead yours.”<sup>5</sup> Shortly thereafter, Finney abandoned his law practice, and pursued ministry under the tutelage of his local pastor Rev. George Gale.

Unlike Edwards who embodied the prototypical New England Puritan, educated and stiff, Finney had been raised on the frontier. He was perceived by many to be wild and unkempt. His adoption of methods like the *anxious seat* elicited confession by confrontation. His brash style of preaching appealed to hardened frontier families who

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<sup>3</sup> Keith J. Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Finney, *The Original Memoirs* (New York: James H. Fairchild, 1876), 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 20.

often lived isolated lives with little or no time for education.<sup>6</sup> This would later have to change, as Finney was forced to adapt to the refined style and expectations of larger cosmopolitan cities such as Boston and New York. Although he proved capable of adapting, he never fully outgrew his roots. Eventually Finney returned to the West, settling in Northern Ohio and using the newly founded Oberlin Collegiate Institute as his base of operation. After numerous revivals and tens of thousands of converts, Finney secured his place as one of the most influential evangelists of his generation.

Despite his unmatched evangelistic success, Finney constantly struggled to overcome his lack of theological education. At times, problems might have been avoided had he been formally trained. His theology was sometimes tenuous and occasionally bordered on heretical. His habit of emphasizing certain components of faith, while ignoring others, proved problematic. His shortcomings often served as points of conflict between he and his colleagues. The culmination of these troubles can best be displayed in his turn towards Christian perfectionism, or the belief that one can achieve perfection through one's own efforts. Although this ideology was widely panned by his colleagues, Finney held tightly to it, in one form or another, until his death.

This unfortunate misunderstanding and misapplication of the Christian disciplines was ultimately a detriment to his overall ministry and mission. By not properly understanding the role of spiritual disciplines, in the life of the believer, Finney risked treating them as idols. In Christian practice, the disciplines must always remain subservient to the grace of Jesus Christ. Although Finney grappled with many of these issues throughout his life his ultimate intentions remained true. He was a man of great

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<sup>6</sup> Hardman, *Revivalist and Reformer*, 82.

faith, passionate about preaching and innovative in his approach. Ultimately, his teaching and practice of the spiritual disciplines, however imperfect, stand as an excellent example of how he adapted and applied the disciplines to serve his particular context. Hopefully a careful examination of his methods here will enlighten the modern Christian's understanding of how to adapt the disciplines to their own environment. The three disciplines that will be explicated are *confession, divine discernment, and self-denial*. Each of these three were especially relevant to the cultural milieu of Finney, and therefore provide insight into the interplay between culture and spiritual expression- a concept that will be elaborated on in the conclusion of this paper.

## ON CONFESSION

### 3.1 In Private

Although confession was an indispensable discipline in the public ministry of Charles Finney, very little has been recorded regarding his personal practice of the discipline. Based on his historical-social context and his public teaching on the matter however, it can be safely assumed that he practiced it regularly. While personal accounts on the matter are sparse, a close look at his religious conversion will offer evidence that he considered confession a vital spiritual discipline in his own personal life.

Raised on the frontier, Finney rarely enjoyed consistent access to educated pastors. As a child, he occasionally heard sermons delivered by itinerant ministers. His

life in the wilderness afforded him virtually no “religious privileges”<sup>7</sup> such as prayer groups or compelling worship services. He did attend school with some regularity throughout his adolescence, always striving to balance work and leisure time. He was an athletic boy who apparently excelled in virtually every sport in which he participated.<sup>8</sup> Life on the frontier helped to cultivate a strong sense of independence and self-assurance, qualities that would later define his character.

At the age of 26, Finney settled near his parents’ home in Adams, New York. He intended to study and eventually practice law. The fortunate presence of a local minister, Rev. George W. Gale, presented Finney with the opportunity, to learn from an educated preacher. Undeniably curious, Finney began to attend prayer meetings with Gale, exchanging ideas and arguments. Although Finney would never fully admit the impact that Gale had on his young spiritual life, this was likely due more to stubborn self-confidence than reality.<sup>9</sup> Gale helped shepherd Finney during his earliest and most defiant years. After several years of religious evaluation Finney began to experience a new and challenging conviction, eventually concluding, “At this period, my mind... was so much impressed by the Holy Spirit that I could not long leave this question unsettled, nor could I long hesitate between the two courses of life presented to me.”<sup>10</sup> Finney had come to a crossroads of faith and his future would depend upon which direction he chose.

Never one to take matters of spiritual concern lightly, Finney resolved to settle the issue of his faith immediately. To elaborate on his conversion story mentioned earlier,

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<sup>7</sup> Finney, *The Original Memoirs*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> William C. Cochran, *Memorial Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Finney Memorial Chapel, Oberlin, June 21, 1908*, Par. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Hardman, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Finney, *The Original Memoirs*, 9.

Finney searched the Scriptures, turning to God for answers concerning his questionable spiritual state. Shortly thereafter, while on his way to work, Finney found himself confronted with a spiritual question that seemed to literally stop him in his tracks. In light of God's mercy, Finney felt God calling him to consider, "Will you accept it now today?" While standing in the middle of the street, Finney replied, "Yes I will accept it today, or I will die in the attempt."<sup>11</sup> Fearing that someone might discover his newfound humility, Finney escaped to the nearby woods to pray and discern God's will. It was in this moment that Finney embraced the spiritual discipline of confession. He searched his soul for every conscious sin and expressed sorrow for them before God. What would later become a regular public exhortation was on display in the personal life of Finney that day.

It is important to note that Finney's first response in the face of divine conviction was to fall to his knees and confess his sins. A proud man of unusual aptitude, such as Finney, might be tempted to rely on his own abilities to secure his fate. However, in this moment of contrition, it became obvious to Finney that his only hope for salvation was the unfailing mercy of Jesus Christ. Finney explained, "I saw that His work was a finished work; and that instead of having, or needing, any righteousness of my own to recommend me to God, I had to submit myself to the righteousness of God through Christ."<sup>12</sup> This truth literally brought him to his knees. In that moment, Finney came to realize that the key to a right relationship with Christ was uninhibited, earnest confession.

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<sup>11</sup> Finney, *The Original Memoirs*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 11.

Only after authentic confession could Finney begin to rebuild his life according to the divine order laid before him.

His practice of confession did not stop there. Later, after returning from the forest, Finney once again felt the weight of conviction. Realizing that he had not yet submitted fully to the calling set before him, Finney relented. In a flash, the Holy Spirit descended upon him and bathed him in His presence. Unraveled and laid bare, Finney recalled, “I literally bellowed out the unutterable gushings of my heart. These waves came over me, and over me, and over me, one after the other, until I recollect I cried out, “I shall die if these waves continue to pass over me.”<sup>13</sup> Finney, convinced of his guilt and helpless to save himself, confessed. He exposed his wrongdoings before God, and trusted in his mercy. Shortly afterward, he quit his law profession and committed his future to the Lord’s service. Confession was the first step, among many, in a long journey of discipleship. Without confession, nothing could rightly follow.

Although Finney’s conversion story highlights only one example of the practice of confession, his public teaching on the matter is replete with references to the subject. In many ways, Finney was a pioneer on the matter. His efforts to reinvent and encourage regular confession set him apart as a bold and innovative preacher, unafraid to confront the deep-rooted sin that afflicted the church. His practice informed his teaching, and his teaching would go on to change the American religious landscape forever.

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<sup>13</sup> Finney, *The Original Memoirs*, 16.

### 3.2 In Public

Charles Finney embraced confrontation as a key weapon in the fight against sin. In an effort to instigate confession, Charles Finney adopted “new measures,” designed to force his congregants to reflect on their true position before God. Unwilling to allow his listeners to hide behind veils of pride or civility, Finney called his parishioners forward, demanding that they account for their sins. The most famous symbol of this approach was the *anxious seat*, a bench reserved, at the front of the sanctuary, for those who felt inclined to repent in response to personal conviction. The anxious seat represented the confrontational nature of this era of revivalism, further demonstrating that public confession played a vital role in the ministry and teaching of Charles Finney.

Finney was not the first to use public confession as a tool to instigate revival. Itinerant Methodist preachers had been using similar methods for several decades. It was common for Methodist preachers to employ a call-to-the-altar in which congregants were expected to come forward and kneel in repentance. In an account that dates back to 1799, a well-known itinerant revivalist, Rev. W. P. Chandler, invited the members of his congregation to come to the altar and confess their sins.<sup>14</sup> Although the exact style of confrontation might have varied, confrontation was nonetheless employed. Richard Carwardine writes, “Far more important, however, than the precise pattern of adoption is that by the second decade of the century the call to the altar had become a standard

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<sup>14</sup> Samuel Wesley Williams, *Pictures of Early Methodism in Ohio* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1909), 76.

feature of Methodist revivals.”<sup>15</sup> Finney’s willingness to adopt methods from other traditions, unlike many of his Presbyterian counterparts, was one of the reasons he enjoyed such unrivalled success.

Although some modern Evangelicals might find the anxious seat distasteful, as did many of his contemporaries, it was not used without purpose. Finney understood that pride played a pivotal role in preventing authentic confession. In his own conversion, it was pride that drove him deep into the forest, afraid that someone might discover him in his frail state.<sup>16</sup> The anxious seat was meant to challenge this instinct. In *Lecture 14* of his collection *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, Finney reflects on the role that pride plays in preventing proper confession. “When a person is seriously troubled in mind, everybody knows there is a powerful tendency to conceal it. When a person is borne down with a sense of his condition, if you can get him willing to have it known, if you can get him to break away from the chains of pride, you have gained an important point towards his conversion.”<sup>17</sup> This passage was written in defense of the anxious seat, which forced his parishioners to confront their pride and humble themselves before their God and peers. Once pride was removed, true confession could take place.

The anxious seat was only meant to represent the initial act of contrition, however. In essence, it was designed to prime the spiritual pump. Confession before God was the first step in a long journey of wider reconciliation. In a lecture entitled *Confession of Faults*, Finney acknowledges four other potential parties, apart from God,

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1978), 13.

<sup>16</sup> Finney, *The Original Memoirs*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Charles G. Finney, *The Works of Charles Finney, Vol. 1* (Amazon Digital Services, 2010), *Lecture 14 Measures to Promote Revivals*, Section 2.7.A.

who might be worthy recipients of confession based on a passage taken from James 5:16.<sup>18</sup> Finney taught that Christians should first confess to those whom they have injured. Secondly, in the case of public sin, Christians should confess publically. Thirdly, Christians should confess confidentially to praying friends. Finally, Christians should confess to people of great faith who might lift them up in prayer before God.<sup>19</sup> In all four instances Finney acknowledged a public component of confession. Sin unexposed retains the power to corrupt and destroy. For Finney, confession should always involve public repentance, reparation and reconciliation.

Finney's emphasis on public confession should not imply that he was only interested in instigating spectacles designed for public consumption. Internal conviction was the engine that drove the vehicle of public confession forward. Without a contrite heart, public confession was meaningless. In a publication from 1857, Finney explains, "Again, true confession implies that we cease from all known sin, of either omission, or commission...It also recognizes our guilt, and not only for all want of outward conformity to God's law, but for all inward sin, for all sins of the heart."<sup>20</sup> Conviction, which begins in the heart, is relieved through the act of confession. A personal acknowledgement of guilt and a desire to repent from wickedness is central to Finney's understanding of the discipline of confession.

Although Finney is often cited for his use of the anxious seat, his teaching on confession goes much further. The anxious seat was simply the spiritual sledgehammer

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<sup>18</sup> "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." Jas 5:16

<sup>19</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Lecture XXI Confession of Faults*.

<sup>20</sup> Charles G. Finney, "On Confessing and Being Cleansed from Sin," *The Oberlin Evangelist*, December 23, 1857

Finney used to break the shackles of pride. Once removed, the sinner was free to explore more nuanced methods of confession. More notable was Finney's emphasis on the need for a repentant heart and public reparation. Finney realized that the Protestant teaching on the priesthood of all believers had the potential to perpetuate the misunderstanding that one's privileged place before God through Christ nullified the need for public confession. Although surely God alone is judge, the Bible teaches that the consequences of one's sinful actions demand dual confession, in which the offending person seeks reconciliation before both God and their peers.<sup>21</sup> Finney understood this. Confession remains a relevant spiritual discipline because, when practiced correctly, two relationships have the potential to be healed: first with God and subsequently with His creation.

## ON DIVINE DISCERNMENT

### 3.3 In Private

Unbeknownst to him, only six years into his notable career, Finney would face one of the most consequential decisions of his life. After completing a period of fruitful ministry in New York City, Finney felt compelled to broaden his sphere of influence. His success in the city had helped to secure his reputation across New England as a force to be reckoned with, and therefore, potential ministry opportunities abounded. Among the available prospects was a relatively unappealing offer from a city in spiritual disarray, Rochester, New York. Conflict between a local elder and pastor remained at the center of

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<sup>21</sup> Mt 5:23-24

the spiritual disorder and it looked unlikely to be resolved any time soon. This combined with the religious diversity of the area made for an unappealing setting for religious revival. A young man finding his stride in ministry could hardly be expected to entertain such a dismal proposal.

This particularly decisive moment in Finney's life stands as one of the best examples of his effort to practice divine discernment. The subsequent success of his ministry in the years to follow further confirms that he had chosen wisely. This success was not a stroke of luck. When read carefully, Finney's account of the event reveals a number of important practices which, when practiced properly, helped nurture his ability to discern the will of God. Each step that he took can be supported by the wisdom of Scripture. In order to fully capture this, it will be helpful to review this story in light of what the Bible teaches regarding divine discernment.

First, upon considering a move to Rochester, he spent considerable time in thought on the matter. Eventually, unable to decide, Finney set out to Utica to work in the meantime. This indicates Finney's patience in discernment. The author of Micah wrote, "But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me."<sup>22</sup> Instead of allowing impatience to dictate his decision, Finney waited patiently on the Lord to reveal His will. He did not allow his confusion on the matter to delay his work for the kingdom; rather he continued to work until God's will was made clear.

Upon arriving in Utica, Finney called forth a group of trusted advisors to beseech their advice. Finney actively embodied the sentiment captured in Proverbs 15:22: "Plans

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<sup>22</sup> Mic 7:7

fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.”<sup>23</sup> His likelihood of properly discerning the will of God was higher when a council of sincere Christians was called forward to give account of their sense on the matter. Jesus promised His disciples that He would be present when groups gather in His name.<sup>24</sup> Finney gathered people with mature faiths to help him discern God’s will.

When gathered together, his council did not simply discuss rational arguments for and against the intended venture. As Finney recounted, the group shared “several seasons of prayer.”<sup>25</sup> Prayer was central to the evening, used as tool to quiet minds and discern the will of God. Further, when faced with a monumental decision, Finney prayed. The author of Jeremiah, recording the voice of God, wrote “Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.”<sup>26</sup> Prayer is fundamental to the discipline of divine discernment. Without a quiet spirit and an inquiring mind, the will of God can become muddled and lost in the life of the believer.

Eventually the council decided that although the spiritual needs of Rochester were great, the potential for disaster was equally likely. After much deliberation, the council agreed that Rochester would be a misstep for the nascent preacher. The risks were simply too great. Upon receiving their advice, Finney acquiesced and retired for the night, resolving to head east, towards New York, the next morning.

Before falling asleep, Finney was struck by an unusual impression. As he lay in his bed, he opened himself to the possibility that although much time had already been

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<sup>23</sup> Prv 15:22

<sup>24</sup> Mt 18:20

<sup>25</sup> Finney, *The Original Memoirs*, 235.

<sup>26</sup> Jer 29:12

spent on determining his current intended course, God might still desire something different. It was only in the stillness of night that Finney found the true voice of God. Like Elijah, who heard the voice of God not in the wind, earthquake or fire, but in a gentle whisper,<sup>27</sup> Finney heard God in the silence. He was willing to be still until God's desired course of action was made clear.

As Keith J. Hardman writes, "An almost mystical feeling came over him, as it occasionally did in his life when he claimed to feel the direct presence of God guiding his actions. It seemed that all the reasons he advanced against Rochester, in another light were the very reasons he should go there."<sup>28</sup> Shamed by his lack of faith, Finney reconsidered his decision. The impression left by the Holy Spirit was undeniable. After further discernment, Finney resolved to change his course. The next morning, in defiance of previously proffered advice, "he and his family boarded the first packet boat headed west"<sup>29</sup> for Rochester. History would later reveal this to be one of the most pivotal decisions of his life. His work in Rochester would spark a revival unlike anything America had yet seen. Finney's choice to defy his advisors and follow his sense of the Holy Spirit would shape his future and secure his reputation as one of America's preeminent revivalists.

Although virtually every external source of wisdom and internal sense of intuition indicated that Rochester would be a mistake, Finney trusted in God's providence, as communicated through the Holy Spirit. Finney's change of course does not necessarily indicate disdain for spiritual counsel. Although he ultimately decided to

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<sup>27</sup> 1 Kgs 19:12

<sup>28</sup> Hardman, 194.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

head west to Rochester, his appreciation for counsel remains proven, given that it literally took an act of the Holy Spirit to convince him to disagree with his advisors. His willingness to consult respected peers before drawing a final conclusion, demonstrated his wisdom and humility. His ability to practice the discipline of divine discernment was crucial in determining his direction. In a revealing passage from his lecture entitled *The Spirit of Prayer*, from *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, Finney writes regarding discernment, “How does he [Jesus] make intercession for the saints?... By giving to Christians a spiritual discernment respecting the movements and developments of Providence... Thus they are often led to expect a revival, and to pray for it in faith, when nobody else can see the least signs of it.”<sup>30</sup> Finney showed great courage that night. When God spoke, he chose to listen. Reason and logic were set aside and the discipline of divine discernment prevailed. His willingness to be flexible and follow the leading of God’s Spirit forever changed the course of his life. Cultivating a deep sense of the Holy Spirit is vital to realizing the abundant life that Christ promised His disciples.<sup>31</sup> Finney was successful, in many ways, because of his ability to be sensitive to the leading of the Spirit. In both word and deed Finney practiced divine discernment.

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<sup>30</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion, Lecture 6, Section 4.5.1.*

<sup>31</sup> Jn 10:10.

### 3.4 In Public

By chance or providence, Charles Finney was raised in western New York, a region labeled the “burned-over district,” by proponents and critics alike, as it was known for its religious revivals and spiritual eccentricities.<sup>32</sup> This eclectic environment significantly influenced Finney’s teaching on divine discernment. Even the most peculiar person could find a home in this eclectic area. Although undoubtedly accommodating to the religious fringe, the burned-over district presented an unusual challenge to the average Presbyterian pastor, however unorthodox he might be. Finney was faced with the task of advocating for Christian spirituality in an environment that embraced alternative transcendent expressions as spiritual. He had to present Christian spirituality as distinct and superior in light of rival movements vying for recognition. Always in contention with competing movements, Finney had to carefully craft his message to ensure that there could be no confusion between Christian spirituality and the ever-present alternative.

Surrounded by pseudo-spiritual movements, Finney’s teaching on divine discernment ultimately rested on one immutable fact: to be truly spiritual, one must be endowed with the Holy Spirit, a fact which was lost on many of his contemporaries. In recent years, modern Christians have experienced a similar problem of etymological ambiguity. The term *spirituality* has regained popularity in current secular culture, giving rise to secular ‘spiritual’ fads endorsed by pop-culture figures such as Oprah.<sup>33</sup> Spirituality has come to describe a devotion to virtually anything immaterial. In light of

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<sup>32</sup> Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District*.

<sup>33</sup> June Mears Driedger, “Spirituality according to Oprah.” *Vision* 1, no. 1 (2000): 41-47.

his comparable dilemma, Finney understood the importance of articulating an orthodox definition of the term, which communicated that spirituality must inherently be established in the Spirit.

To possess the Holy Spirit alone is not enough, however. One must discern and obey His will. Therefore, Finney laid out three ways that the Spirit could be discerned in his fourth lecture, “*Prevailing Prayer*,” taken from his series of lectures entitled *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*. First, one may discern the will of God, by studying the promises and predictions recorded in Scripture.<sup>34</sup> If God is faithful, His promises will remain steadfast. Consequently, examining those promises will provide insight into the nature of God Himself. For example, although the Noahic flood reveals God’s judgment, the subsequent Noahic covenant reveals His love and mercy. The Abrahamic covenant reveals God’s faithfulness. The Mosaic covenant reveals His justice. Each promise and prediction found in Scripture serves to illuminate God’s true character, and understanding God’s character is essential to the discipline of divine discernment.

According to Finney, the next potential tool of discernment is divine providence. In His infinite wisdom and power, God decides when and where to reveal His will to recipients He deems worthy. Finney explains, “When He makes it clear that such and such events are about to take place, it is as much a revelation as if He had written it in His Word... God often makes it clear to those who have spiritual discernment that it is His will to grant such and such blessings.”<sup>35</sup> Clearly, Finney believed that divine revelation was both substantial and authoritative. Finney concludes that in the same way that God

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<sup>34</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion, Lecture 4 Prevailing Prayer*.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Section 2.2.B.

reveals His will to faithful believers in Scripture, God continues to reveal His will to faithful believers today.

Finally, Finney contended that God reveals His will through the intercession of the Holy Spirit. When Christians are unable to find the words to pray, or discern the will of God, the Spirit intercedes on their behalf, praying for things according to the will of the Father. When Christians are in tune with Christ, His intercession reveals God's divine will. Finney declares, "It is just as plain here as if it were now revealed by a voice from heaven, that the Spirit of God helps the people of God to pray according to the will of God, when they themselves know not what they ought to pray for."<sup>36</sup> Prayer in the Spirit is Finney's third and final suggestion for effective divine discernment. As is the case with virtually all other disciplines, one practice aids another. In this case, prayer is a principal instrument in the process of divine discernment.

Over the course of his life, Finney came to recognize the importance of divine discernment. He also recognized that America's diverse and pluralistic context would make it increasingly difficult for well-meaning people to distinguish between Christian spirituality and secular spirituality. In the end, Finney concluded that divine discernment is only possible when a healthy relationship with the Holy Spirit has been formed. Once it has been formed, careful discernment becomes possible through the study of Scripture, sensitivity to personal revelation and prayer empowered by the Spirit. When these practices are employed, Christians will find themselves able to discern the will of the Father, acting in the power of the Holy Spirit by the grace of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>36</sup> Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion, Lecture 4 Prevailing Prayer. Lecture 4: Prevailing Prayer, Section 2.2.C.*

## ON SELF-DENIAL

### 3.5 In Private

In 1826, the American Temperance Society was founded. Upon its creation, the A.T.S. became the first nationally organized temperance organization in American history.<sup>37</sup> Indicative of the early nineteenth-century American obsession with temperance, the A.T.S. established 5,000 new chapters nationally within eight years of its formation.<sup>38</sup> Temperance swept across the nation boosted by clergy and lay people who embraced teetotalism as their cause. The spiritual disciplines of abstinence and self-denial experienced a revival of their own. Charles Finney was just a budding evangelist when the American temperance movement began to gain steam. Given its rapid growth in popularity, there can be little doubt that this important period in American history impacted Finney's perspective on the discipline of self-denial.

Typical for his time period, Finney embraced self-control as an indispensable virtue. Finney's commitment to self-denial as a spiritual discipline influenced his life and ministry by limiting his consumption of food, alcohol, tobacco, entertainment and more. He was a model of temperance, pleading with his fellow Christians to abandon their carnal desires and embrace the will of God. His success was a product of a life lived in submission to God. Out of his passion for Christ, Finney abstained from routines that he perceived might distract him from his love for Jesus. His loss was the church's gain. His

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<sup>37</sup> John L. Merrill, "The Bible and the American Temperance Movement: Text, Context and Pretext," *Harvard Theological Review* 81, no. 2 (1988): 147.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

example of self-denial helped to inspire countless Christians to follow suit, abandoning their own needs and embracing the will of the divine.

Finney's first encounter with the discipline of Christian self-denial came early in his faith. In a sermon delivered in 1850, Finney remembered an event that left a permanent impression on his mind. He had been using tobacco for a time, even after his conversion, when a brother in Christ approached him. The man questioned Finney, asking him to consider whether or not his use of tobacco was right. In a moment of impulsivity, Finney reached into his pocket, removed his tobacco tin, and surrendered it to his accuser. He resolved then to never use tobacco again. Finney reflects on this event in a sermon, "I have always tried to do this; if aught gets between my soul and God, I have been in the habit of saying, 'O Lord, tell me what is the matter! What am I doing? What stands in the way?'... Let that be the rule. Let no man do or say anything of what Jesus might say, 'I am sorry to see you doing or omitting to do so and so- engaged in such and such a business.'"<sup>39</sup> Finney's conviction as a youth, that nothing should stand between he and Christ became a lifelong principle. His commitment was indicative of a faith that would give him strength in more trying times. Christ alone was his goal, and no earthly habit would prevent him from reaching Him.

At the height of the American temperance movement, destructive vices and innocent delights were difficult to distinguish between. This conflict provided ample fodder for religious debate. In the same sermon, Finney offers an interesting perspective on a related issue, which provides insight into his reasoning on this matter. Reflecting on ethical business practices in the eyes of God, Finney explains, "Now, do you for one

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<sup>39</sup> Finney, *Sermon 23: Quenching the Spirit*, Section 2 Para. 20.

moment suppose that a slaveholder, for instance, could do this, and go away supposing that God would have him continue his atrocious traffic?... No man has any right to engage in any business on which he cannot ask the blessing of God.”<sup>40</sup> In this sermon, Finney suggests that the standard by which a Christian’s business practices should be judged is whether or not it would be worthy of God’s blessing. I contend that Finney would have agreed that earthly habits should be held to the same standard. Therefore, if a Christian is involved in a practice for which God cannot rightly bless, due to its questionable nature, it should be avoided. His perspective on ethical business practices may provide a useful framework for understanding how Finney chose to distinguish between permissible practices and profane habits.

Later accounts indicate that Finney’s practice of self-denial was not simply a product of youthful fanaticism. As G. Frederick Wright, one of Finney’s professors at Oberlin, writes in his 1891 biography, “on coming to Oberlin, Finney... went to the extreme of opposing tea and coffee with somewhat the same vehemence that he opposed alcohol and tobacco.”<sup>41</sup> In line with the popular temperance sentiment of his time, Finney had embraced total abstinence from anything that could be considered a stimulant. In the case of Oberlin students, Finney expected them to adhere to the same standard he apparently still held himself. This likely would not have created too much of a disturbance, since Oberlin was already known for its commitment to strict faith practices.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Finney, *Sermon 23: Quenching the Spirit*, Section 2 Para. 23.

<sup>41</sup> G. Frederick Wright, *A Biography of Charles Grandison Finney*, (Jawbone Digital, 2014). Ch. 6 Para. 39.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* Ch. 5 Para. 20.

Finney's personal commitment to abstinence extended beyond food and drink. Any pleasure that represented a distraction from Christ was subject to scrutiny. In a memorial address delivered at Oberlin College in 1908, William C. Cochran recounts a story that might elicit laughter from a modern reader. Cochran describes Finney's love for books, explaining that his Oberlin library was stacked with the best available volumes on virtually every popular subject. Although academic tomes surrounded him, Finney was a fan of fiction novels. He was often moved to laughter or tears when reading Dickens or Thackeray. Despite his love for these books, Finney eventually refused to read for pleasure. In a rather unfortunate expression of Christian self-denial, Finney's love for books became the very thing that prevented him from enjoying them. As Cochran explains, "No resulting good could be accomplished and all stirring of the emotions which could not be followed up by appropriate action was as bad and weakening in its effects on the mind as alcoholic stimulants were on the will and body."<sup>43</sup> Although few modern Christians would agree with his sentiment, most would admire his commitment. Even his beloved books would not prevent him from pursuing Jesus.

These accounts also demonstrate that during his later years at Oberlin, his practice of self-denial remained steadfast. Despite his exceptional commitment to the discipline, Finney's austerity did not alienate him from his peers. Throughout his life, he managed to present a well-balanced example, embracing temperance while exuding grace. Since his practice of self-denial was the result of a deep and profound faith, he inspired people to follow his lead. He was undeniably authentic and tirelessly devoted to his faith. While the

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<sup>43</sup> William C. Cochran, *Memorial Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Finney Memorial Chapel, Oberlin, June 21, 1908* (J.B. Lippincott Company, 1908), Para. 24

exact objects of his focus might no longer be in vogue, the attitudes with which he practiced self-denial are timeless.

### 3.6 In Public

The unfolding temperance movement of the nineteenth century helped to ensure that self-denial would remain a popular topic for decades to come. It provided a unifying cause to rally behind for those who wished to evangelize the rugged frontier while also helping to define the difference between permissible pleasures and sinful seductions. Despite its infamy during the temperance movement alcohol was only one item on a long list of vices Finney saw fit to curtail. When practiced properly, the Christian discipline of self-denial was expected to encompass virtually every component of daily life, including the moderation of food, alcohol, leisure time, habits and more; a monumental task to be sure. Undeterred by the challenge, Finney embraced the duty of teaching this discipline. During other time periods in history, present day included, teaching on self-denial would likely have received less support. Bolstered by a diverse group of socially conscious leaders however, including “humanitarian reformers, abolitionists, utopian dreamers, vegetarians, protectors of the blind and the insane, who believed that human beings were physically and morally perfectible”<sup>44</sup> the general population was prepared for his teaching on the practice.

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<sup>44</sup> R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 93-94.

When speaking on the spiritual importance of self-denial, Finney often labeled it a “necessity.”<sup>45</sup> His conviction on the matter stemmed from his understanding of its origin. According to Finney, the practice of self-denial was first modeled by none other than God Himself. In a revealing passage on self-denial, Finney explains, “Jesus Christ exercised self-denial to save sinners. So has God the Father exercised self-denial in giving His Son to die for us, and in sparing us, and in bearing with our perverseness. The Holy Ghost exercises self-denial, in condescending to strive with such unholy beings to bring them to God.”<sup>46</sup> For Finney, self-denial was not a practice conceived by man, but rather a discipline demonstrated by the Divine. God was the first to deny Himself, setting the example for all faithful believers to follow. Finney argues that all Christians, as imitators of Christ, have an obligation to “deny themselves and take up their cross”<sup>47</sup> and follow Him. Anyone who earnestly claims to follow Christ must accept this challenge.

Although tangible frivolities like alcohol or tobacco were easy targets for the escalating temperance movement, Finney recognized that Christian self-denial was fundamentally more demanding than its worldly counterpart. To effectively practice this discipline, Finney believed that Christian self-denial must transcend the profane habits and mundane objects of this world. To focus on a pinch of tobacco or glass of ardent spirits would be to miss the point of the discipline entirely. The sinful human condition runs deeper than self-control or ambition can overcome. The purpose of Christian self-

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<sup>45</sup> See Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, “Lecture 9, Means to Be Used with Sinners,” Sections 1.8 and 2.7; and “Lecture 20 Instructions to Converts-Continued,” Section 1.8.

<sup>46</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion, Lecture 20 Instructions to Converts- Continued*, Section 1.2.2.

<sup>47</sup> Mt 16:24

denial is not to emaciate or humiliate the believer, but rather to refocus them. Finney's version of Christian self-denial sought to reorder, not reject personal pleasures, subjugating them to the will of God. When practiced properly, a Christian's temporal fleshly appetites should become subservient to the eternal transcendent desires of God. Finney explains, "...Now I do not mean by self-denial, the breaking off from some outward customs and habits in which you have been accustomed to indulge... Self-denial is not a total denial of our appetites and passions, but our appetites and passions are not to be our law."<sup>48</sup> A Christian's first priority must be the will of God. Self-denial empowers the believer to reorder their lives and place Christ at the center. During a time when it may seem as if every earthly pleasure was on trial, Finney sought to promote a balance between internal and external application.

It would be a mistake to think however, that Finney intended for this charge to be interpreted solely metaphysically. He certainly advocated for serious, practical self-denial. In his sermon, *Conditions on Being Saved*, Finney writes, "You must forsake all that you have, or you cannot be Christ's disciple. There must be absolute and total self-denial."<sup>49</sup> Evidently Finney believed that to deny oneself meant literally to abstain from frivolous habits that detracted from a love of Christ. In a revealing passage on alcohol, taken from a sermon entitled *Total Abstinence a Christian Duty*, Finney weighs the pros and cons of alcohol consumption. After contending that the potential evils outweighed the perceived good, Finney determines, "the law of benevolence plainly demands

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<sup>48</sup> Charles G Finney, *Sermon: Regeneration Preached on Wednesday Evening, November 21, 1849*, Section 3 Para. 7.

<sup>49</sup> Charles G. Finney, "Sermon: Conditions of Being Saved," *The Oberlin Evangelist*, 1848). Section 2.7.

abstinence, because, upon the whole, the use is an evil rather than a good.”<sup>50</sup> Finney concluded that alcohol, though not inherently evil, had little to offer the well-meaning Christian. In an earlier sermon, Finney addressed the subject of gluttony, calling it, “one of the commonest forms of sin.”<sup>51</sup> These are only two examples among many in which Finney’s teaching on self-denial demanded both spiritual and physical commitment.

Through study and practice, Finney came to accept that self-denial must be indicative of more than a well-disciplined will; it was a sign of spiritual regeneration. True self-denial was proof that Christ had in fact begun the process of transformation in the life of the believer. Without this evidence, the authenticity of one’s faith could be questioned. Finney even went so far as to claim, “total, unqualified self-denial is the condition of being saved.”<sup>52</sup> On numerous occasions, Finney included calls to self-denial when preaching to potential converts. In his *Lecture 20, Instruction to Converts*, Finney writes, “Young converts should be taught that the duty of self-denial is one of the leading features of the Gospel.”<sup>53</sup> Through Christ, Finney believed, converted Christians should be moved to sacrifice their own needs on behalf of their neighbor’s. In faith, they are truly a new creation, capable of new selfless behavior.<sup>54</sup> Their willingness to forgo their own needs is a sign of spiritual conversion.

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<sup>50</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Lecture: Total Abstinence a Christian Duty- Delivered on Thursday Evening, June 27, 1850*. Section 2.6 Para. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Finney, *Sermon 23: Quenching the Spirit*, Section 2 Para. 20.

<sup>52</sup> Charles G. Finney, “Sermon: Conditions of Being Saved,” *The Oberlin Evangelist*, 1848, Section 1.8 Para. 1.

<sup>53</sup> Charles G. Finney, “Lecture 20: Instructions to Converts- Continued,” *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, Section 1.G.2.

<sup>54</sup> 2 Cor 5:17

Self-denial is a common theme in Finney's lectures, sermons and publications. He was determined to remind people that carnal appetites and base desires should not control their lives. This is not to say that pleasure was forbidden, but that it should remain subservient to a higher cause. For Finney, the discipline of self-denial was essential to the Christian identity. To let Christ rule in one's life meant to abandon oneself completely and to adopt the nature of Christ Himself. Finney's teaching on the matter was perfectly complemented by the era in which he lived and it stands as a perfect example of how Finney adapted his teaching to fit the context in which he taught.

### 3.7 Conclusion

Charles Finney was a passionate man, supremely confident and unusually gifted. His impact on nineteenth-century American Christianity is hard to overstate. The *new measures* that he employed shook the church establishment to its very core. His willingness to abandon convention for the sake of conversions reformed an entire generation's perspective on how to evangelize the lost. Although not classically trained in theology, Finney managed to surpass his colleagues in virtually every measurable category. Perhaps his unusual path to the pastorate was the very reason for his success. Finney's outsider status allowed him to shuck tradition, embrace new ideas, and push the boundaries of acceptable practice.

For example, Finney's use of the *anxious seat* exemplified his willingness to challenge social norms by innovating tradition, adapting the discipline of confession to

his cultural context. Caught between the Catholic expression of confession (publicly declared before a priest) and the Protestant tradition (privately confessed before God) Finney became convinced that neither represented the discipline adequately. Although he certainly agreed with the Protestant doctrine of *the priesthood of all believers*, Finney found that private confession often proved insufficient. A lack of public accountability inhibited the internal conviction that confession was designed to elicit. Finney eventually determined that public confession was a powerful and necessary weapon in the arsenal of the evangelist. Calling the contrite forward to acknowledge their sins publicly by way of the anxious seat was an excellent example of how Finney adapted a classic spiritual discipline to his particular context.

While much has been written on Finney's revivals, relatively little is known about his personal faith practice. Even in his memoirs, Finney explicitly states, "I am not about to write an autobiography."<sup>55</sup> He was more interested in reporting on revivals than recording accounts of his spiritual routines. In light of this, it can be challenging to find descriptions of how he personally practiced the disciplines. This is not to imply however, that his faith was shallow or his practices lacking, only that one must be creative when searching for supporting sources on the subject. Constrained by both time and space, this analysis was only able to explore several fascinating components of his rich faith practice. While studying Finney, it became clear that there are a variety of other spiritual disciplines that have yet to be investigated in depth and deserve further attention. Solitude, simplicity and celebration are just three of many.

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<sup>55</sup> Finney, *The Original Memoirs*, 3.

Ultimately, Finney understood that the disciplines transcended both time and tradition. Prayer was not a practice recently invented by the Presbyterians, just as fasting was not a fad created by the Congregationalists. These disciplines had rich histories that superseded his immediate context. Even Christ Himself practiced and modeled them for others to follow. Therefore, despite his aversion to practically all things conventional, Finney found his penchant for rebellion quieted. He embraced the practice of the spiritual disciplines, and in turn, he discovered that they had become the true source of his power, stoking his faith and feeding his fire.

## CHAPTER 4: FOSTER

For America, the twentieth century brought dramatic cultural upheaval. A flood of new immigrants, two world wars, and the Great Depression marked the early decades of this tumultuous period. Never before had the cultural identity of America been so challenged and yet consequently so affirmed. Conventional family structures and values were questioned and human rights, in virtually every form, were promoted. With each passing decade it would seem as if a new American identity had been forged. It was out of this context that American Evangelical Richard Foster would emerge.

Born in 1942, Foster spent the majority of his childhood in Southern California. As a teenager, he befriended a group of Quaker youth who became instrumental in his faith formation. This group had “a reality about them that was substantial, a deep joy”<sup>1</sup> Through these friendships, and the encouragement of a local congregation, Foster became a Christian. Shortly after his conversion, Foster was confronted with the untimely illness and death of his parents. Despite their tragic demise, Foster held tightly to his faith. Through the financial support of his new church family, Foster would eventually go on to complete his college education at George Fox College and his seminary education at Fuller Theological Seminary.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Galli, "A Life Formed in the Spirit: Richard Foster's Disciplined Attention to Spiritual Formation Began Early On." *Christianity Today* 52, no. 9 (September 2008): 40-45.

<sup>2</sup> *Renovaré Biography Page*, <https://renovare.org/people/richard-foster/bio>, (accessed January 2, 2018).

Graduating from seminary in 1970, Foster accepted his first pastorate at Woodlake Avenue Friends Church in the San Fernando Valley of Southern California.<sup>3</sup> It was here that he would meet Dallas Willard, a professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California. Willard would soon prove to be Foster's most influential mentor. Although he stumbled through his first few months at Woodlake, Foster eventually found his footing. He began to explore the writings of figures such as Augustine and Teresa of Avila- where he found the substance for which he longed. Within these ancient volumes he discovered a fount of life. He began to teach on these works, encouraging his small ecclesial community to adopt a new rule of life. It was out of these experiences that Foster would find the inspiration to pen his first and most significant work, *Celebration of Discipline*. Since its release, it has been widely regarded as one of the most influential Christian books of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Its enduring success would ultimately establish Foster as the preeminent authority on the modern application of spiritual disciplines.

Foster was convinced that modern Evangelical Christianity had grown shallow and superficial. The world had become a frenetic place, filled with noise and chaos. This made it virtually impossible to find God amidst the madness. In the very first sentence of his book *Celebration of Discipline* Foster wrote, "Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep

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<sup>3</sup> *Renovaré Biography Page*, <https://renovare.org/people/richard-foster/bio>, (accessed January 2, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> "Book of the Century." *Christianity Today* 44, no. 5 (April 2000): 92.

people.”<sup>5</sup> Foster perceived that American Christianity had become lazy and apathetic. The remedy, he believed, was to scour the writings of past Christians and apply their hard-earned wisdom to one’s life. Faithful believers had practiced the spiritual disciplines for thousands of years, and it was Foster’s contention that contemporary Christians could learn a great deal from their experience.

As a result of this conviction, two distinct tendencies have emerged in the writings of Foster. The first is Foster’s willingness to embrace the practices of other Christian traditions outside his own. Unlike Edwards and Finney, Foster has sought to appreciate and promote the disciplines of his historical counterparts and has generally remained unhindered by denominational quibbles or patriarchal pressures. He has wholeheartedly embraced the idea that no one tradition can entirely capture the fullness of the Christian spiritual life.

Secondly, Foster has placed great emphasis on those disciplines that run counter to the prevailing consumerism and superficiality of the twentieth century. When practiced correctly, the disciplines should curb and ultimately reverse the destructive habits of this world. Therefore, many of the disciplines that Foster has promoted relate to ascetic practices such as fasting, solitude and simplicity. These disciplines are especially relevant to a culture that Foster describes as being, “trapped in a maze of competing attachments.”<sup>6</sup> It is helpful then, when studying Foster, to remember the context in which he writes. The twentieth century was a period defined by extraordinary “noise, hurry and

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<sup>5</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1988), 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 80.

crowds.”<sup>7</sup> In order for Christians to find God, Foster argues, they must be willing to “move beyond the superficialities of our culture...” and “be willing to go down into the recreating silences, into the inner world of contemplation.”<sup>8</sup> When they do this, Foster asserts, a deep spiritual life will take root and transform them, one day at a time.

## ON SIMPLICITY

### 4.1 In Private

Foster’s practice of simplicity has been strongly impacted by his Quaker roots. Historically known for their plain speech and ordinary clothing, the Quakers of old embraced a simpler lifestyle. Although modern Quakers are usually less conspicuous, the same internal commitment generally abounds. Richard Foster is no exception. Despite his undeniable success as an author, public speaker, and preacher, Foster has continued to live simply, as demonstrated by his sincere modesty and intentional efforts to avoid gratuitous publicity. Likewise, Foster’s organization Renovaré, formed to promote the practice of the disciplines “has freely given ideas away,”<sup>9</sup> always looking to promote practice before profit. Although he has certainly worked to cultivate this discipline, his propensity towards it likely began in childhood.

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<sup>7</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Nathan Foster, “Why Renovaré Will Live On,” April 1, 2015, <https://renovare.org/articles/why-renovar%C3%A9-will-live-on> (accessed January 3, 2018).

As a child, Foster was relatively poor.<sup>10</sup> The unfortunate passing of both his parents when he was young ensured that his means would be limited. Despite his financial challenges, he remained positive. Reflecting on that period, his son Nathan Foster explains, “When he talks about his upbringing, and the poverty, I don’t ever get a sense of grief in that.”<sup>11</sup> Despite his meager resources, Foster remained grateful. The financial support of his local Quaker community, throughout college and seminary, represented just one example of God’s providence during this difficult stage. His humble upbringing was likely a key factor in shaping his penchant for simplicity.

This predilection towards simplicity has carried into his adulthood. Foster spent many years riding the bus to work while his wife used the family car. Despite being able to afford a second car, Foster enjoyed this time, using it to read and mull over the tasks he hoped to accomplish that day. When it came time to purchase a new car, his son Nathan fondly recalls him purchasing the exact same car as his previous one. When asked why he didn’t want to upgrade to a different model, with more features, his father plainly replied, “Well then I’d have to learn it!”<sup>12</sup> Foster’s proclivity for simplicity has influenced nearly every aspect of his daily life, including his use of language, thought patterns and more. For Foster, the discipline of simplicity should encompass more than a simple reduction of one’s physical possessions.

When his son Nathan was seven, his father took him to buy new shoes. Faced with a plethora of options, Nathan’s father mused, “...how nice it would be if you just

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<sup>10</sup> Nathan Foster, Phone Interview by Thomas G. Lengyel, December 8, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

had two choices.”<sup>13</sup> His point? Even the freedom of choice had the potential to distract the inattentive mind from its central focus. Never one to miss an opportunity to teach, Foster explained that many children around the world only have two options to choose from. As Nathan recalls, “He wasn’t offering a lesson on gratitude, but rather on the freedom of limited choice- in other words, I wouldn’t miss what I didn’t know about.”<sup>14</sup> The freedom of simplicity lies in its power to free a person from unnecessary concern.

This shouldn’t imply that Foster always advocates for the cheapest option, though. Often times, the cheaper option leads to more concern. If one were to save money by purchasing a cheaper couch, yet had to repair and replace it three times more often than the more expensive couch, simplicity would demand that you purchase the more expensive couch. True simplicity frees the practitioner from the legalistic trap of assuming that frugality is the epitome of simplicity. Nathan explained, “When he purchases things, he purchases them with the idea to not replace them.”<sup>15</sup> In a humorous example of this mentality, Nathan recalled a story in which his father purchased a computer with the assumption that it would never have to be replaced.<sup>16</sup> The inevitable need to upgrade his computer had not occurred to Foster. Although simplicity often means less, it doesn’t always mean less expensive.

Despite its obvious outward expression, Foster’s practice of simplicity flows from a deep internal conviction. Having published his first best-selling book in 1978, Foster has had ample time and opportunity to promote himself. Yet regardless of his success,

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<sup>13</sup> Nathan Foster, Phone Interview.

<sup>14</sup> Nathan Foster, *Wisdom Chaser: Finding My Father at 14,000 Feet* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press), 137.

<sup>15</sup> Nathan Foster, Phone Interview.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Foster has repeatedly used his reputation to endorse other authors and speakers first. Instead of capitalizing on his name to promote an endless succession of personal books, Foster has published only when he felt he had something of value to offer. Upon further examination, his son was surprised to discover “story after story of times that Dad sought to advance others rather than himself. He seemed to take great delight in helping to launch other people's careers while paying very little attention to his own.”<sup>17</sup> Foster has been careful to build a legacy of simplicity, where his own ambitions are not a primary cause for concern.

Simplicity is typical of Foster’s wider teaching on the disciplines, representing several important themes that occur repeatedly throughout his writings. First, it challenges the prevailing materialism of the twentieth century. Second, it begins with an internal transformation that results in an external behavior. Lastly, it has been practiced across virtually every Christian tradition. Simplicity is a fundamental discipline that has far reaching implications for the practicing believer and Foster has embodied its practice beautifully.

#### 4.2 In Public

The discipline of simplicity stands in utter opposition to many of the ideals celebrated by modern western culture. When politicians are praised for their duplicitous language and manipulative rhetoric, simplicity demands straight talk and simple words.

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<sup>17</sup> Nathan Foster, *Wisdom Chaser*, 71.

When wealth is hoarded, while people live in poverty, simplicity demands generosity and compassion. When possessions are acquired for status instead of function, simplicity demands humility and purposefulness. Simplicity, in essence, “is putting our love and energies into God rather than into material goods and the pursuit of social status.”<sup>18</sup> When two words will do, why use three? When one car will do, why buy two? Simplicity is a practical discipline designed to impact a believer’s entire life.

Though characterized by outward implications, simplicity finds its origins within. Without a foundation of inner simplicity, the resulting lifestyle is impossible. Both components are to be held in tension. Foster explains, “Simplicity begins in inward focus and unity.”<sup>19</sup> In order to acquire this focus, Foster advocates for a divine center. To seek first the Kingdom of God is the root of simplicity. To hold Christ at the center of all things should produce a simplicity of purpose that permeates every subsequent decision. Without a divine center, around which to orient everything else, the over-abundance of unnecessary options leaves the unwitting person lost in the perceived luxury of choice. Simplicity halts the endless obsession of acquisition.

As practitioners of simplicity are conformed to the will of Christ, their priorities are reordered and unnecessary concerns are abandoned. The desire to appear impressive or devout diminishes as holiness becomes the sole motivation. Foster writes, “Everything hinges upon maintaining the ‘first’ things as first. Nothing must come before the kingdom

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<sup>18</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Year with God: Living Out the Spiritual Disciplines* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 325.

<sup>19</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 80.

of God, including the desire for a simple lifestyle.”<sup>20</sup> Prioritizing and pruning are central to the practice of simplicity.

This is where asceticism and simplicity differ for Foster. “Asceticism renounces possessions. Simplicity sets possessions in proper perspective.”<sup>21</sup> By ascribing apposite worth to belongings, Foster asserts that the believer is actually able to enjoy their goods more, because they are freed from the burden of unholy and unhealthy attachment. The purpose of simplicity is not to withdraw from God’s creation but rather to enjoy it in its proper place. The discipline of simplicity encourages the practitioner to find a balance between abstention and indulgence. God’s gifts are for the pleasure of his children, to be enjoyed without possessiveness or envy.

Although the practice of simplicity originates internally, Foster does not overlook or undervalue the corresponding behavioral expectations. To practice internal simplicity without external transformation is to continue living in duplicity. “An inward focus on God will lead to simplicity in our outward lifestyle— in the way we speak, spend money, dress, and share what we have.”<sup>22</sup> The Christian life should be marked by a unique detachment from the things of this world. This freedom from status, wealth and the need to protect physical possessions allows the believer to demonstrate a total commitment to the cause of the Kingdom of God.

For Foster, this radical lifestyle is ultimately rooted in faith. Simplicity should impact the allocation of resources, both physical and mental, because those things ultimately belong to God. To use them sparingly is to trust that God will provide more

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<sup>20</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 84.

<sup>22</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Year with God*, 325.

when the needs arise. Trust in God's provision is a key component of simplicity. In his book *Spiritual Classics*, a collection of writings from various saints on the disciplines, Foster excerpts a letter by Clare of Assisi to represent the subject of simplicity. In this passage, Clare lauds the choice to live in poverty, encouraging her friend to trust in God's faithfulness. Reflecting on this passage, Foster writes, "in response to the issue of money we learn to live in simplicity."<sup>23</sup> This important discipline is the antidote to the poisonous fear that wealth and possessions are the only things that stand between utter ruin and us. Simplicity reminds the believer that God is trustworthy to provide for every need, without exception.

In case there be any remaining confusion, regarding the practical nature of this discipline, Foster finishes his chapter on simplicity in *Celebration of Discipline* with a list of ten practical ways that one can live more simply. Among the suggestions listed, Foster includes, "buy things for their usefulness rather than their status;"<sup>24</sup> "reject anything that is producing an addiction in you,"<sup>25</sup> and "learn to enjoy things without owning them."<sup>26</sup> These proposals are indicative of his wider teaching on simplicity, which honors independence from the world and encourages dependence upon God. Simplicity is a gateway to freedom in a world replete with opportunities for people to enslave themselves. By teaching on the subject, Foster hopes to break the shackles of modern materialism and introduce a simpler way of life.

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<sup>23</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2000), 137.

<sup>24</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 90.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

## ON SOLITUDE

### 4.3 In Private

The clamor of modern life virtually ensures that solitude will remain the most elusive of all the spiritual disciplines. Advances in technology and communication have made it possible to be available literally every minute of the day. Moreover, nearly every form of popular entertainment is now available on inexpensive portable devices. Without intentionality one might find oneself saturated in sound from morning until night. Despite this challenge, solitude remains essential to the life of a thoughtful Christian. In light of its necessity, Foster contends that it must be made a priority. As he writes, “We must work to create this space, to ‘purposefully’ withdraw even when- especially when it seems that we have no time to do so.”<sup>27</sup> Regardless of his numerous professional responsibilities, Foster has worked hard to practice solitude in his personal life, if only for a moment.

As a prominent author and speaker, Foster is regularly called to teach at churches, colleges and other organizations. During these occasions, it is common to be inundated with attention from admirers, inquirers and advisors. Undeterred by the commotion, Foster has made it a habit to intentionally schedule times of solitude. Recalling a speaking engagement at Westmont College, Foster writes, “Whenever possible on business trips I schedule a twenty-four-hour private retreat for my own renewal and

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<sup>27</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Year with God*, 184.

spiritual growth.”<sup>28</sup> In another passage, Foster declares, “This year, for example, I am engaging in a splendid new experiment. In order to give practical expression to my experience of solitude, I have scheduled into my calendar four private retreats, following the seasons of the year- winter, spring, summer, fall.”<sup>29</sup> Foster has demonstrated his own commitment to make solitude a priority. He has chosen to not allow his schedule to prevent him from finding time to be alone.

Professional responsibilities present only one obstacle to practicing this discipline. Personal obligations have the potential to cause equal harm. Daily duties represent an oft-overlooked subversive force that prevents the believer from finding solitude. Foster has managed to counter this disruption by creating moments of retreat in the midst of daily life. In describing his father, Nathan Foster explains, “[My mother] has trouble driving. So he just brings his book and he just gets a coffee and sits and waits for her while she shops... He just is finding a moment of solitude, but also study.”<sup>30</sup> Foster utilizes the ostensibly inconsequential moments throughout his day to find solitude. No circumstances are considered too mundane or trivial. Although his practice of this discipline might appear modest, it ultimately originates from a deep inner commitment to avoid being polluted by the excessive noise of modern culture.

At times however, it is difficult for him to distinguish between his practice and his natural preference. Foster is by nature “an introvert, actually kind of an extreme

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<sup>28</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Sanctuary of the Soul: Journey into Meditative Prayer* (Downer’s Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 135.

<sup>29</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 101.

<sup>30</sup> Nathan Foster, Phone Interview.

introvert.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, solitude likely comes easier to Foster than the average person. Time alone feels natural and flows freely. Social situations with large groups prove more demanding than solo retreats. Before speaking engagements, Foster is often nowhere to be found, off wandering alone. “Part of it is he’s saving his energy, because he knows that he’ll expend it talking with people.”<sup>32</sup> His desire to be alone is an expression of both his spiritual devotion and his personal nature.

While attending a retreat during a work trip in England, Foster had the opportunity to visit a famous cave where St. Cuthbert was converted. Hoping to find time alone, Foster prepared supplies to last the night. When his companions decided to turn back, Foster felt relieved, thinking to himself, this is “...a decision I welcome, for right now I crave solitude.”<sup>33</sup> As is the case with every practitioner, certain disciplines resonate more naturally than others. For Foster, solitude is second nature.

In retirement, Foster has had even more time to commit to this discipline. He enjoys sitting on his deck in the woods and drinking coffee early in the morning enjoying a short moment of solitude before his day begins.<sup>34</sup> He also hikes regularly in the canyon near his home. Even these daytrips present opportunities to grow deeper spiritually. He often chooses a Bible verse, meditating on it as he walks, at times contemplating the same verse for months. He finds pleasure in his canyon excursions. His son recalls, “It isn’t just [that] he’s going out into the desert to fast and pray. He’s going to enjoy

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<sup>31</sup> Nathan Foster, Phone Interview.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Sanctuary of the Soul*, 96.

<sup>34</sup> Nathan Foster, Phone Interview.

creation, enjoy solitude.”<sup>35</sup> Foster has found practical ways to practice solitude and his retirement has only created more opportunities to express this discipline.

More than either of our two previous figures, Richard Foster has had to contend with the evolution of modern technology and communication, which makes his example even more impressive. Society has become more connected digitally, yet more detached. Oversaturation of media and entertainment has made it virtually impossible to find silence. Yet in the midst of the noise, Foster has persevered. He has remained relevant in word and deed for decades, reminding Christians that a life of solitude is not only necessary but also possible.

#### 4.4 In Public

When describing the importance of this discipline Foster refers to the “recreating stillness of solitude.”<sup>36</sup> This phrase captures perfectly the purpose behind this discipline. To practice solitude effectively is to be recreated in the image of Christ. This recreation happens when the distractions and noise of the world are stilled, and the soft voice of God breaks through. Without solitude, the mind is left to wander aimlessly, bullied about by competing interruptions. Solitude centers the mind and frees it to focus on one purpose alone—the work of Christ.

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<sup>35</sup> Nathan Foster, Phone Interview.

<sup>36</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 97-98.

Before practicing solitude, one must first learn to be quiet. Silence is central to solitude. Unfortunately, the modern surfeit of available entertainment options makes silence seem unnatural and uncomfortable. Foster writes, “The fear of being left alone petrifies people.”<sup>37</sup> In order to avoid this feeling, the average person saturates their day with din, hoping to sate their overwhelming fear of loneliness. Foster fights against this tendency by teaching that silence is not only natural but also necessary to the human experience. Later he explains, “But loneliness or clatter are not our only alternatives. We can cultivate an inner solitude that sets us free from loneliness and fear.”<sup>38</sup> In stubborn opposition to his milieu, Foster fights fervently to reclaim solitude as an essential Christian discipline.

The silence of solitude should not imply laziness or inactivity. Solitude should always beget active listening. Sensitivity to the movement of the Spirit is central to solitude. By disrupting the daily habits that distract the believer, space is created for God to speak. To overlook God’s divine revelation would be to miss the point of solitude altogether. Upon reflecting on his father’s intentional pursuit of solitude, Nathan Foster recalls his father’s frequent trips to a nearby canyon: “Sometimes he’ll go everyday, sometimes a couple times of week. At least once a week, year-round, he goes there... He takes one verse and sits on the top of the canyon, and reads it a few times and then goes for a walk.”<sup>39</sup> The practice of solitude is less a call to disengage with the world and more a call to reengage with God, reorienting priorities and re-centering one’s life. When

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<sup>37</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 96.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Nathan Foster, Phone Interview.

properly engaged, the practicing believer might be surprised to discover that solitude has, in fact, become the most demanding discipline of the lot.

Despite its demanding nature, Foster rejects the implication that the discipline of solitude should be reserved for the lonely ascetic. This discipline has practical social implications for the common believer. For example, Foster highlights people's tendency to use words and actions to influence their circumstances. He labels words as being one of "our most powerful weapons of manipulation."<sup>40</sup> Instead of speaking plainly, Foster laments that words are used to convince and conspire. This forces the believer to live in a constant state of damage control, in which their words are used to justify their actions. Solitude seeks to simplify this cycle by removing the need to rationalize. When you are alone, there is no one left to convince. Foster explains, "by means of solitude God frees us from our bondage to people and our own inner compulsions."<sup>41</sup> Vanity and control are often enemies of solitude. In a world, increasingly impacted by social media, the desire to manage one's public image will only grow stronger. Solitude halts that impulse and reminds the practitioner that God's opinion is the only one that matters. Solitude saves the believer from the temptation to manage and manipulate their public persona, freeing them to be more authentic with God and other people.

Although generally practiced alone, Foster teaches that true solitude should eventually transcend location and population. In its purest form, solitude is first and foremost a state of mind. Isolation does not ensure solitude. Inner turmoil can be a source of great outward distraction. Once mastered, solitude should produce a peace that

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<sup>40</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 101.

<sup>41</sup> Foster, *Prayer*, 63.

transcends the noise that life inevitably brings. Foster writes, “Whether alone or among people, we always carry with us a portable sanctuary of the heart.”<sup>42</sup> To practice solitude is to enter the inner sanctuary of the heart and encounter the living God. Solitude is usually formed in the silence of isolation, but often practiced in the noise of crowds.

For Foster, the foundation of solitude is trust in God’s goodness, providence and control. Without trust, one cannot step into the recreating silence that must take place when practicing solitude. To be still is to be vulnerable. To be vulnerable voluntarily is to trust. In an unpublished interview between Richard Foster and his son, Foster explains, “It’s a kind of balance to know that God is in charge of things. I’m not, and it’s ok... the solitude and the silence, opens us to seeing that it’s been there, right along. But we’re open to seeing it because we’ve learned to still that noisiness of life, and God is pleased then, to show us the deeper realities of the kingdom of God.”<sup>43</sup> By trusting in God’s goodness, the believer relinquishes control of his life and empowers God to be his justifier and judge. The shackles of self-preservation are released and the freedom to be loved is unleashed.

Foster concludes his discussion of solitude in *Celebration of Discipline* by offering concrete ways to practice it. He is careful to acknowledge that solitude is rooted in practical action. He challenges his readers to consider the small moments throughout the day when they might find time to be still. He urges Christians to find quiet places where they can seek retreat from their daily routines. He also encourages believers to speak plainly, examining their speech for hints of manipulation or maneuvering. Finally,

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<sup>42</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 96.

<sup>43</sup> Richard J. Foster, Unpublished Interview by Nathan Foster, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PN8Gfv22pSI> (accessed January 4, 2017).

he suggests that Christians plan quarterly retreats where silence and solitude can be prioritized.<sup>44</sup> As is the case with virtually all of the disciplines, Foster finishes his chapter by reminding his readers that education without application is of little value. Therefore, solitude must be practiced regularly and resolutely if it is to be beneficial to the believer.

## ON STUDY

### 4.5 In Private

The doctrine of “sola scriptura,” or Scripture alone, has remained an invaluable and defining contribution of the Protestant reformation. This principle has had an immeasurable impact on how subsequent Christians have read and interacted with their Bibles. By faith in God’s divine inspiration and Scripture’s reliability, millions of Christians have since been empowered to venture out on their own, not relying on ecclesial authorities but on the inspiration of the Spirit to interpret God’s word. Foster continues this tradition by personally practicing and teaching the discipline of study. Going one step further, however, Foster adds current events and creation to the list of items worthy of study.

His practice of study began at an early age. His son Nathan explains, “He has a big love for Scripture. As a teenager he would memorize lots of passages.”<sup>45</sup> His desire to discover God in the stories of Scripture was evident by the effort he applied. This did not

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<sup>44</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 105.

<sup>45</sup> Nathan Foster, Phone Interview.

mean that it came naturally. Nathan later clarifies, “I don’t think the memorization of Scripture has come easy to him... The Scripture that he has memorized has probably taken longer than it would other people.”<sup>46</sup> Despite the challenge, Foster persevered. In doing so, he demonstrated one of the key components of study, determination. Without a steadfast resolve, study is often the first discipline to be discarded. As he grew older, Foster’s affinity for study did not go unnoticed.

Foster attended George Fox University, where he earned his bachelor’s degree. Afterward, he went on to complete his doctorate in pastoral theology at Fuller Seminary. When evaluating Foster’s personal practice of study, it’s important to remember that his educational path is in itself a testament to his practice of the discipline. School rarely came naturally for Foster. “He was one of the students in college who had to work really hard to earn a “B” or a “C”. He didn’t necessarily have a really good educational upbringing.”<sup>47</sup> Although it was a challenge, Foster remained convinced of the value of education, and so persisted. He embraced academics in order to enhance his spiritual life and inform his pastoral responsibilities.

Despite his academic success, Foster has never considered himself an academic elite. His study habits have always flowed out of a deep love for learning. Uninterested in appearing impressive, Foster has consistently shown a willingness to learn from others, regardless of their age, experience or education. This humility has left a lasting impression on his children. Reflecting on his father’s unpretentious pursuit of knowledge, Nathan Foster observes, “One of the defining characteristics about him is he’s

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<sup>46</sup> Nathan Foster, Phone Interview.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

teachable... He's willing to learn from my kids."<sup>48</sup> He goes on to recall, "The first time he ever heard me speak. He sat up in the front row with a pad of paper. He wasn't taking notes to critique. He was taking notes to learn."<sup>49</sup> Fundamental to the discipline of study is a love for learning, and fundamental to learning is humility. Foster embodies these qualities.

Although Foster has primarily supported his family by writing and researching, he has been cautious to not let his practice of study become profit-driven. He reads to grow, personally and spiritually. If he has nothing to say, he doesn't write, much to the disappointment of his publishers. Foster refuses to let himself become the brand. Although he might not consider himself an academic elite, he is certainly an academic, perhaps in the truest sense of the word. His son Nathan recounts an instance when his dad began to do research for a book on spiritual direction. After nearly a year of work reading forty to fifty books, Foster declared the project defunct, concluding that he didn't have anything more to say on spiritual direction. With a chuckle, his son sarcastically concluded, "So you won't find no book by him on spiritual direction!"<sup>50</sup> Though some might consider this a failure, Foster felt no regret. To have spent a year studying spiritual direction was in itself a great accomplishment. For Foster, the discipline of study is a tool to enhance his understanding of God, not to enrich his bank account or advance his reputation.

Foster's practice of study permeates his life. It is woven tightly into the fabric of his spiritual identity. By being present and willing to learn, Foster has cultivated a habit

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<sup>48</sup> Nathan Foster, Phone Interview.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

of study, not for the attention or acclaim but for the wisdom. While hiking in Colorado with his son, Foster asked him to give him a “trail name,” a tradition started by Appalachian trail trekkers long before. Amused at the request, Nathan agreed. Towards the end of their trip, he finally settled on what I conclude is the perfect moniker to describe Foster’s personal practice of study: Wisdom Chaser.<sup>51</sup>

#### 4.6 In Public

Foster identifies study as the primary vehicle by which the Christian mind is conformed to the will of God. By regularly refocusing the mind on “things above”<sup>52</sup> (things that reveal the character of God i.e. Scripture, creation and current events) the believer is drawn back to her center and reoriented towards spiritual things. Study establishes a framework by which the other disciplines can be practiced. Foster writes, “Many Christians remain in bondage to fears and anxieties simply because they do not avail themselves of the discipline of study.”<sup>53</sup> Study helps to clear the fog of theological confusion and define more clearly the nature of God and our relationship to Him. Without study, one might become lost in the realm of misunderstanding and even heresy. By carefully examining Scripture, creation and one’s current context, believers are given the ability to distinguish between the sacred and profane.

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<sup>51</sup> Nathan Foster, *Wisdom Chaser*, 168.

<sup>52</sup> Col 3:2

<sup>53</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 52.

Foster draws a distinction between meditation and study, although both disciplines include the reading of scripture. Study is oriented towards the mind, while meditation is oriented towards the heart. He explains, “Meditation is devotional; study is analytical. Meditation will relish a word; study will explicate it. Although meditation and study often overlap, they constitute two distinct experiences.”<sup>54</sup> In study, the believer is challenged to examine her subject critically, using reliable resources and logic to uncover God’s truth. While a combination of the two is necessary for life transformation, for Foster, study holds one advantage over meditation in that it lowers the potential for unintended theological error.

Determinedly practical, Foster is not satisfied with simply declaring the discipline of study important; he insists on offering concrete principles of practice. When referring to the study of books, including but not limited to the Bible, he proposes that, “three intrinsic and three extrinsic rules govern our study.”<sup>55</sup> He goes on to define those six criteria as understanding, interpreting and evaluating the book, referencing personal experience, reading other books and participating in live discussion. By applying these six principles, the believer should be able to establish an effective method of study when reading books of significance.

Despite its implied importance, Foster does not identify Scripture as the sole source of inspiration. He writes, “in study there are two ‘books’ to be studied: verbal and nonverbal... The world of nature and, most important, the careful observation of events

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<sup>54</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 64.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 67.

and actions are the primary nonverbal fields of study.”<sup>56</sup> Foster divides the two equally, recognizing that observation of the physical world can also communicate divine truth. This perspective is rooted in the belief that God’s created order reflects His character, and therefore should offer insight into the character of its creator. In his book *Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines*, Foster includes excerpts from four prominent historical Christian authors who exemplify this practice. Reflecting on a passage by George MacDonald, Foster writes, “If they had simply studied what they had seen... they would have known that God is the one who gives in abundance...”<sup>57</sup> Study should not be relegated to the classroom, but rather expanded to include the entirety of the human experience. As demonstrated earlier in the description of his private practice, Foster believes that all things can and should serve as sources of inspiration, offering insight into the divine nature of God.

Foster warns his readers against isolation when practicing study. These two “books” are best interpreted in community. Foster explains, “Reading the Bible with heart and mind comes to its fullness as we read the Bible with others, seeing it through their passion and perspectives.”<sup>58</sup> The risk of studying in isolation is arrogance and stubbornness. The community of God tempers interpretational extremes and introduces alternative angles. As impressionable beings, humans naturally conform to what occupies their time. Consequently, it becomes even more important to invest one’s time in positive relationships and practices. Foster teaches, “That is why it matters who and what we

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<sup>56</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 64.

<sup>57</sup> Foster, *Spiritual Classics*, 84.

<sup>58</sup> Richard J. Foster and Kathryn A. Helmers, *Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation* (New York: HarperOne, 2010) 103.

surround ourselves with... if we are spending time with things or people not of God, we will find ourselves changing in ways we may not intend.”<sup>59</sup> The practice of study helps to refine our understanding of God and His creation through the filter of His divinely appointed community.

In true Evangelical form, Foster has recognized the study of Scripture as a vital practice. He has encouraged his students to read their Bibles and study its context. But, in a less than typical Evangelical move, Foster has also incorporated the study of creation and context in his teaching on the discipline. He has reminded Christians that God can be found beyond the Bible, in the daily workings of His will. A careful examination of both expressions will lead to a more robust understanding of God and His creation.

#### 4.7 Conclusion

As was mentioned above, Foster was raised during the twentieth century, a period marked by unprecedented advances in technology, entertainment and consumption. Faced with the unique challenges of his day, Foster was forced to determine how the historic disciplines could fit into a modern context. Unsurprisingly, the disciplines on which he has focused the most often relate to the excesses of his era. Foster’s book, *Freedom of Simplicity: Finding Harmony in a Complex World*, stands as a perfect example of this predisposition. Among only three books Foster has written on individual disciplines, *Freedom of Simplicity* provides practical advice for how to simplify one’s life in a

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<sup>59</sup> Foster, *Year with God*, 56.

twentieth-century context. Foster recognizes that “the lust for affluence in contemporary society is psychotic.”<sup>60</sup> In response, he resolved to apply the discipline of simplicity to the modern church, helping to push back against the materialistic nature of twentieth-century American culture. Like those who went before him, Foster has adopted and adapted the disciplines responsibly.

One of the challenges I discovered in studying a contemporary living figure like Foster is the lack of retrospective reflection that you find with other historical figures. Not a single biography or autobiography has been penned, and virtually no publications of any kind exist describing his personal practice of the disciplines. Intentionally private, Foster almost never writes about his own experiences, relying instead on the stories of others to illustrate his points. In modesty, he seems to believe that no one is interested in learning from his personal experience with the disciplines. Ironically, most of the historical figures that he references are compelling due to the very fact that their writings reveal intimate details about their religious experience. Obviously there is ample room for continued research and reflection on the life of Richard Foster. As someone who has practiced the disciplines for over half-a-century, Foster surely has practical insights and earned wisdom that would benefit the interested reader.

Although Foster spends the majority of his time in the United States, his work has had a global impact. Further research can and should be undertaken to determine how the work and writings of Foster have shaped the global practice of the spiritual disciplines. Translated into dozens of languages and read by millions, *Celebration of Discipline* has

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<sup>60</sup> Richard. J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 80.

reached far beyond the borders of America.<sup>61</sup> It would be interesting to examine how his teachings have influenced the meditation of Chinese Christians, or the worship of Brazilian Christians. Foster has completed numerous international trips throughout his career during which his teaching was featured. Furthermore, Renovaré, the nonprofit organization that he founded, has been committed to teaching the disciplines both nationally and internationally for decades. Clearly Foster has impacted Christians around the world. The question remains, how?

In this study, it has become clear that each of my three subjects of research have taken the disciplines and adapted them to their particular context. If this is the case, I'm left to wonder how the disciplines might be adapted in a drastically different context? What would simplicity look like for an Ethiopian Christian living in poverty? In his book *Life With God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation*, Foster recalls a trip to Korea, where he was struck by the intensity of the prayer lives of Korean Christians. "I believe God has chosen the Korean peoples to teach us about prayer as a constantly flowing life."<sup>62</sup> The interplay of cultures in the adaptation and expression of the disciplines is a subject of research that has the potential to offer fascinating insight into how to teach spiritual formation on an international stage.

Richard Foster's impact in this field has been enormous. He reintroduced an entire generation of Christians to the spiritual disciplines. He revitalized practices that were perceived by many to be strange or outdated. As with any important work,

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<sup>61</sup> Gary Moon, *Celebration of Discipline Resource Guide* (Franklin Springs: LifeSprings Resources, 2005), 7.

<sup>62</sup> Foster, *Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation*, 103.

*Celebration of Discipline* has remained relevant decades after publication, still offering timeless wisdom in an age of relative truth and secularism.

It is my contention that one of the primary reasons for Foster's enduring relevance is his commitment to the study and teaching of historical Christian literature. His willingness to revisit and recover the invaluable spiritual writings of past saints has helped to ensure that his teaching is always fixed in a broad spectrum of traditions and experience. His books have served to widen the scope of reading for millions of eager Christians. As one journalist observes, "Today you are almost as likely to hear an Evangelical talk about Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* as Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*."<sup>63</sup> Unlike Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney, Foster's most lasting contribution to the field of spiritual disciplines might be his elevation of other people. If true, it only serves to reinforce the authenticity of his message, for it demonstrates both his wisdom and humility, two primary byproducts of a life lived in the pursuit of discipline.

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<sup>63</sup> Mark Galli, "A life formed in the Spirit: Richard Foster's disciplined attention to spiritual formation began early on." *Christianity Today* 52, no. 9 (accessed January 7, 2018): 40-45.

## CHAPTER 5: LOOKING FORWARD

A review of the past is only beneficial in so much as it helps to inform our future. Practicing the spiritual disciplines can be intimidating. They demand total devotion, sacrifice, and endurance. They require focus, determination and drive. Unfortunately, modern society rarely celebrates such values. Profit, productivity and power are the gods of today. Quick returns are demanded and short attention spans are the norm. Qualities endorsed by modern culture often run counter to those developed by the disciplines. Recovering an appreciation for the disciplines is essential to revitalizing the spiritual life of the church. They force willing practitioners to slow down, develop perspective and reorient their lives. All three figures featured earlier appreciated the value of the disciplines. They embraced their setting, and adapted the disciplines to their particular needs. In light of this, I feel a responsibility to conclude my research by offering a new prescription for how the disciplines can relate to twenty-first century Christians. I believe that any discussion on the disciplines should include a section on contextual application. Without context, the disciplines languish in abstraction and become useless.

Although it might seem logical to evaluate the strengths of a culture when determining the disciplines that are best suited for that context, I contend that a culture's weaknesses provide better fodder for spiritual growth. Social shortcomings often become the fertile soil in which the spiritual disciplines are cultivated. Instead of railing against the shortfalls and sins of modernity, the church should look for ways strategically to address such problems. The answer to modern spiritual stagnation is not paralysis but

application. If the church can reengage with the disciplines, in a fresh and relevant way, there is hope that the church can be reinvigorated.

Therefore, I have identified four potential areas of contemporary culture that warrant the application and adaptation of disciplines: the overworked American, the rise of social networks, the pervasiveness of noise and distraction, and the development of superficial social consciousness exacerbated by a modern increase in accessibility to information. To counter these developments I will suggest the application of the following disciplines: Sabbath, Christian fellowship, solitude and service.

The modern American work schedule has placed a significant burden on the family lives and stress levels of countless Americans, making the institution of a Sabbath an increasingly important matter. As responsibilities expand and compensation stalls, work hours inevitably increase. Intrinsic to the very fabric of American identity is the belief that if one works hard enough, one will earn the opportunity to advance. This mentality implies that immobility, even if by choice, is tantamount to failure. People work excessive hours trying to achieve the “American dream,” while sacrificing their own mental well-being. Despite ranking highest in the “income and wealth” category in a 2013 study by the *OECD Better Life Index*, the United States ranked twenty-eighth among advanced nations in the category of “work-life balance.”<sup>1</sup> The desire to advance drives people to exhaustion as they try to keep up with the rigorous pace of modern production. Young people accept unpaid internships that assign them the same amount of work as full-time employees. Entry-level employees are expected to “pay their dues,” for

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<sup>1</sup> “Work-Life Balance” *OECD Better Life Index*, accessed January 20, 2018, <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/work-life-balance>.

countless years, before receiving favorable shifts or timeslots. The expectations placed on modern professionals have become virtually unmanageable.

Practicing the Sabbath can help to curb the effects of this taxing trend. By reinstating a weekly Sabbath, where work is set aside and rest is embraced, modern Christians can break the cycle of exhaustion and reestablish healthy life rhythms. People often work tirelessly because of the assumption that their hard work is the only thing that stands between them and poverty. Trust in God's provision is usually relegated to isolated moments of unusual need when personal abilities and resources are insufficient to solve the problem at hand. Implementing a Sabbath frees the believer from the misplaced expectation that he is responsible for his future, placing God squarely in command. Dallas Willard, a prolific author and professor, wrote several books on the disciplines during the twentieth century. Willard's writing on the disciplines rival Foster's in both substance and importance. In discussing the role of the Sabbath, Willard explains, "When we come to the place where we can joyously 'do no work' it will be because God is so exalted in our minds and bodies that we can trust him with our life and our world and can take our hands off of them."<sup>2</sup> Rest is a natural byproduct of trust. If there is no trust, there can be no security. Without security there can be no rest. To practice the Sabbath faithfully is to trust God completely.

Practicing the Sabbath also has material benefits. As fleshly creatures, humans are left to contend with the fleeting desires of their bodies. These desires often stand in opposition to the spiritual nature. To be freed from the desires of the flesh is the goal of any devout Christian. Willard goes on to write, "If we are not rested... the body moves to

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<sup>2</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 175.

the center of our focus and makes its presence more strongly felt, and the tendencies of its parts call out more strongly for gratification.”<sup>3</sup> To fully experience the power of the Sabbath, one must experience rest. As the body grows tired, focus and determination often wane and room is made for sin to flourish. The body unrested will become a stumbling block for itself, demanding unnecessary attention and indulgence. Self-interest will become one’s sole motivation, and the needs of others will become secondary. Finding time to properly rest is essential to participating in the divine life.

If these things are true, how then might one institute the discipline of Sabbath in the midst of such demanding social expectations? In cases of extreme overscheduling, I have found it fruitful to start small. Find one hour during the week that can be established as a Sabbath. Commit that time to resting in God. During this initial stage, it will be tempting to feel like you could be doing something more productive with your time. Cultural habits of efficiency will creep in, undermining the importance of intentional rest. Keep in mind however, that rest helps one to be more productive. God has given His church the Sabbath not to undermine a strong work ethic, but to enhance it. A well-rested mind, focused on God, makes for a happier, healthier person. To be sure, a proper biblical Sabbath should encompass a full day; however, to declare a single hour off-limits from the daily demands of life is a victory in itself.

Once mastered, the length of Sabbath can be extended. For many people, committing even half a day per week can be a challenge. To set aside a full morning devoted to God, will prove a fruitful endeavor indeed. Although the precise details of how this time should be spent vary, one thing remains certain; God should be the focus.

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<sup>3</sup> Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 175.

The Sabbath was not meant to be a time of aimless repose, but rather intentional abstention. For example, during the Puritan era the Sabbath was often filled with numerous religious responsibilities, yet all pointed back to God. As George Marsden notes, “The Sabbath included the usual two lengthy church services, morning and afternoon, supplemented by explications of Puritan works, such as William Ames’ *Cases of Conscience*. For the students it was a day of rest mainly in the sense that they must abstain from the sports and diversions permitted on other days.”<sup>4</sup> Although the schedule of the modern Sabbath might look quite different, the mentality should remain the same. Despite the furious pace of modern life, space must be reserved for God.

The second area of contemporary culture that merits consideration, is the rise of social networks and their impact on the formation of authentic relationships. Although online communities often expand one’s social circle, they rarely result in more substantive, material relationships. Social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter create the perception that meaningful connections are being formed while often leaving the user feeling empty. As one study shows, “real life social interaction was negatively associated with excessive use of Twitter and this relationship was mediated by loneliness.”<sup>5</sup> The growing distance between individuals is not the result of a change in emotional needs, but rather in social convention and unhealthy developments in understanding of relationships. People still long to connect. Unfortunately, as social

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<sup>4</sup> Marsden, 102.

<sup>5</sup> Yamikani Ndasauka, “Excessive use of Twitter among college students in the UK: Validation of the Microblog Excessive Use Scale and relationship to social interaction and loneliness.” *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 55, Part B (February 2016): 963-971).

networks continue to infiltrate our lives, it will only become harder to build lasting relationships.

The discipline of fellowship calls people out of isolation and into transformative relationships with other Christians. United by a love for Jesus, differences are set aside and growth is nurtured. In his classic work *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains, “The serious Christian, set down for the first time in Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God’s grace speedily shatters such dreams.”<sup>6</sup> Unlike online relationships, fostered by private messages and public posts, personal relationships can’t be edited. Genuine Christian community forces people to face the harsh realities of their sinful natures, forcing them to come to terms with their imperfections. The rough edges of our personalities are rubbed smooth by the friction of authentic interaction. Christian fellowship is the antidote to the modern epidemic of isolation and loneliness.

The benefits of fellowship exist by design. Through honest unedited interactions, God affirms and adjusts our perspectives. This happens during the natural exchange of ideas. Participation in a Christian community helps to shape one’s beliefs and temper their theological extremes. Proverbs states, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”<sup>7</sup> By submitting our theological ideas to the scrutiny of the church, we allow the Spirit of God to refine and improve our understanding of God. Apart from this influence, one risks misunderstanding God’s character, purpose, and Scriptures.

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<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 26.

<sup>7</sup> Prv 27:17

Practicing fellowship also allows believers to access and utilize the diverse set of gifts given to different individuals within the church. God’s power is amplified when Christians come together in community. Describing the church, Paul explains, “As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.”<sup>8</sup> The participation of one individual impacts the spiritual health of everyone else. Each person in the church has been endowed with unique spiritual gifts to edify the body and advance God’s purpose. Only when believers join together will the fullness of God’s blessing be realized. Commenting on the role of fellowship, Dallas Willard explains, “The diverse gifts or graces of the Spirit— all of which are needed in some measure by each person from time to time— are distributed among the separate members of the body of Christ, the church. The unity of the body rightly functioning is thus guaranteed by the people reciprocating in needs and ministries.”<sup>9</sup> The body of Christ is made up of many parts, and fellowship allows them to all work together in harmony.

If fellowship is the antidote to our loneliness, how might one go about implementing this important discipline? The obvious answer is to get involved in a local church. Participate in worship regularly, and attend special events. Building community takes time. There is no quick solution to authentic fellowship. Time is fellowship’s advocate. Gathering together regularly in the name of Christ will inevitably result in meaningful relationships. Include Bible study and prayer in your times together. Allow the truth of God to permeate your friendships and inspire profitable conversations. Ask

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<sup>8</sup> Eph 4:16 (New Living Translation).

<sup>9</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 187.

penetrating questions, and show interest in other people. Learn to be selfless, elevating others above yourself. Pour yourself out, so that God might fill you up.

Although Christian community is best practiced in person, this is not always possible. In these cases, online communities might offer the only available source of fellowship. I concede that this might appear to contradict the previously proffered advice, however, an important point of distinction should be made. Like any tool, the internet can be used for good or ill. When utilized properly, online communities can provide a quality source of encouragement and accountability. The key to community is authenticity. Though it might be more difficult to foster this quality online, therefore making in-person interactions preferable, I don't believe it is impossible. Find a positive Christian community or church online and invest yourself. Participate in discussions, read blogs, and interact with friends around the world. The internet has made it possible to connect with people from every corner of the globe. Connect with missionaries and support their work. Reach out to Christian authors and interact with their writings. Do not allow locational limitations prevent you from experiencing authentic Christian community. In an age of unprecedented connectivity, millions of people feel more isolated than ever. True Christian fellowship is the only solution to this unfortunate development.

The third area of focus that demands the attention of the disciplines is society's growing addiction to modern technology. Solitude is a thing of the past. Children are given electronics, replete with opportunities for stimulation, as soon as they are old enough to hold them. Regrettably, the unceasing noise of modern culture will inevitably create minds that know no peace. To prevent this from happening, solitude, and in particular silence, must be celebrated. It must be taught and practiced, so that young

Christians will learn that there is an alternative to the racket. Silence is essential for a healthy soul. As with most important habits, leading by example is often the best practice.

In my current church, I know of a family who has established a “technology basket” by their front door. When a family member arrives home, they are expected to place their phones and other electronic devices in the basket. Children and parents alike have made a commitment to limit their use of distracting gadgets while at home together. Although at first defiant, the children have ultimately accepted this practice, because their parents have modeled it in their own lives. Their example played a vital part in communicating the importance of this discipline.

Turning off the television for a period of time each night, is also a great practical way to introduce solitude into the home. It has become increasingly common for families to eat dinner in front of their television, making conversation nearly impossible. Recovering the traditional family dinner, shared around a dining room table where discussion can take place, should be a modern goal. Determine a time, when the television will be turned off, and spend the rest of the night together. Do not be afraid of potential silence. John Main writes, “To be silent with another person is a deep expression of trust and confidence and it is only when we are unconfident that we feel compelled to talk. To be silent with another person is truly to *be* with that other person.”<sup>10</sup> By turning off unnecessary noise, and making room to be still, we enter into the silence that recreates us.

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted Foster, *Spiritual Classics*, 156. See John Main, *Moments of Christ: The Path of Meditation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

One of the reasons why solitude is so unnerving is because it forces the practitioner to stand exposed before their peers. Foster explains, “The tongue is our most powerful weapon of manipulation. A frantic stream of words flows from us because we are in a constant process of adjusting our public image... Silence is one of the deepest disciplines of the spirit simply because it puts the stopper on all self-justification.”<sup>11</sup> In order to develop a habit of silence, as a component of solitude, try using the fewest possible words to express an idea. Make it a habit to avoid flowery, unnecessary language. Avoid expressing opinions about yourself, or other people. Be simple in speech, focusing on facts and necessary details. Consider setting a time when it is reasonable to do so where you stop talking all together. Spend an evening responding to family members by writing out your responses. Although it might seem extreme, it won’t be long before you realize how much of your daily conversations are unnecessary and frivolous when you take the time to write them out by hand. This process will slow your conversations, and make your choice of words more deliberate.

Finally, take time during your week to be alone with God. These moments can range from seconds to hours. Learn to listen to the world around you. If possible, escape to nature and observe the sights and sounds of God’s creation. While in college, I would leave my dorm room late at night to amble around my campus alone. On these silent walks I would listen to the Santa Ana winds blowing over the mountains to the East, down through the tall Eucalyptus trees above. To this day, nothing communicates God’s presence more strongly to me than the sound of wind rushing through the trees at night. The stillness of those walks has nourished my soul for many years since. Finding time to

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<sup>11</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 101.

be quiet with God is not easy. Countless distractions abound. Yet somehow we must prevail in our pursuit. For solitude is a foundational discipline that creates space for other disciplines to occur. If we can find time to practice solitude, there is hope that the others will follow naturally.

My fourth and final area of modern culture that can benefit from an application of the disciplines, is the recent increase in awareness for social causes. Although this might appear to be a cultural strength, I view it as a weakness. The rise in social awareness is due, in part, to the free-flow of information, made possible by technology. The internet has created a forum where countless causes can be promoted easily and inexpensively. This growth in available information has given rise to socially conscious young people, who are often informed about yet rarely involved in contributing substantively to a solution. The sardonic term “slacktivism,” (a combination of slacker and activism) has recently been created to describe young people who promote causes without personally contributing to them. Though troubling in itself, growth in social concern has the potential to become a powerful tool when combined with the discipline of service.

Serving the needs of our world is fundamental to the Christian message. The church must be known for its sacrificial love and service. Jesus declared, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”<sup>12</sup> Active service is the tangible expression of a living faith. Teaching people to serve is, by extension, teaching them to practice their faith. Like most of the disciplines, service is often learned best by actually doing. Therefore, the church should be intentionally creating and promoting opportunities for people to serve. Many churches

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<sup>12</sup> Mt 25:40

offer a weekly meal for the poor and homeless. Some churches offer monthly medical check-ups or mail service. Where there is need, the church should be looking for ways to serve.

But, the causes should always be chosen with purpose. Churches should carefully discern the most urgent needs of their community and then proceed to offer relief. In my current context, several churches have come together to offer free laundry service to families who use the local Laundromat. Although it might seem trivial, this service helps to provide a basic service for some of the poorest in our neighborhood. We must never forget the difference that a few dollars can make in the lives of the destitute.

The desire of younger generations to participate in positive social causes should be celebrated, not mocked or discouraged. Their knowledge should be connected to organizations and churches that give them outlets to express their concern. They should be reminded that awareness is only the first step in supporting a cause. Once they have become mindful of the need and have been given opportunities to serve, they need to see examples of other people serving. By observing other Christians serving, younger generations will be inspired to do the same. An invitation to serve together is a great way to motivate someone to get involved. Only after Christians learn to practice the discipline of service faithfully will the world discover that believers are sincere in their desire to love their neighbors as themselves.

Whenever discussing the discipline of service, domestic and international needs must be considered. Although technology has led to the rise of the aforementioned slacktivism, it has also created effective channels by which aid can be delivered. Modern technology has made it possible to serve people on a global scale. Unfortunately, this

opportunity has led some churches to underserve their local communities. A healthy expression of service always balances local needs with their global counterparts. International mission trips are exotic and exciting, and can easily become the sole focus of a Christian's service. I advocate for a revolving mission schedule, in which domestic and international trips are rotated on a yearly basis. This helps to remind the church that service should be practiced, both locally and abroad.

The disciplines have always been a great passion of mine. Their importance for the spiritual development of the church is unparalleled. For centuries, great followers of Christ have used them to grow deeper in faith. If we can once again embrace an attitude of humility and open-mindedness towards the disciplines, the ocean of wisdom that would become available would take a lifetime to cross. Christians of every tradition have contributed something to this important field, and in order to fully benefit from this body of work, an appreciation for all traditions must be developed. The disciplines are a medium through which God has chosen to speak, and without them we would be lost. Hopefully this research will encourage Evangelical Christians to revisit this important topic, inspiring them to adopt the disciplines of their ancestors and adapt them to the spiritual needs of future generations.

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## BIOGRAPHY

Thomas Grant Lengyel was born and raised in San Diego, California. He became a Christian at a young age, attending College Avenue Baptist Church. During his freshman year in high school, a friend suggested he consider a future career in ministry. Although spoken in passing, that conversation would set in motion events that would define the next twenty years of his life. Thomas embraced the idea and turned his focus towards ministry. His love for God and the church made it a natural fit. Graduating from Grossmont High School, Thomas went on to major in Religious Studies at Westmont College. His experience at Westmont only affirmed his calling.

A week after graduation, in 2003, Thomas began serving as the Youth and Children's Director at Pacific Beach Presbyterian Church. After several years, he founded a young adult ministry, built around a Sunday night service. This young adult ministry, *Roots*, gave Thomas his first opportunity to preach weekly in front of adults. This small community of faithful Christians journeyed together for years. After three years of ministry, Thomas began his M.Div. degree at Bethel Seminary. He worked full-time while attending seminary, eventually becoming the Student Senate President during his final year. After seven years of ministry at Pacific Beach Presbyterian Church, Thomas graduated from Bethel and was accepted into the D.Min. program at Duke Divinity School.

Looking for a change of scenery, he and his wife drove across the country and settled in North Carolina. After completing his coursework at Duke, while working at a small rural church in Durham, Thomas was called to serve as the Associate Pastor at

Summer Street Church on the island of Nantucket, MA. Less than two years later, Thomas stepped into the role of Senior Pastor, where he currently serves. He is married, with a brand new daughter, born on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Her name is Sparrow Isabel Lengyel. Together, he and his family look forward to many more years of fruitful ministry ahead.