



Spiritual Friendship & Spiritual Direction

Spiritual Friendship

Spiritual friendship (also called spiritual companionship) is a relationship where the individuals see themselves as companions on a spiritual journey, and commit themselves to taking the time to ask each other specific and relevant questions and then listen to the details of each other's lives in a way that encourages the spiritual growth of the other person.

Sharing the deep parts of ourselves

Many of us long in our hearts to have a friend where we can share the deepest parts of ourselves. Those of us who know the Lord also desire a friend or two in whom we can share our relationship with God and all that God is doing in our lives. One of the greatest benefits of spiritual companionship is a place where I have the freedom to be "me." This relationship provides a place to interact with one another as a triad - the two of you and God. It is in this kind of relationship that lasting change can take place.

Importance of friendship

In his book *Healing Grace*, David Seamands points out the importance of friendship:

We talk a lot about being honest with ourselves and with God. And we sincerely - sometimes desperately - try to do this in our times of Bible reading and prayer. But the kind of honesty and self-knowledge which will bring about lasting changes in our lives almost always requires another person. It is when we disclose our true, private selves to someone else that we fully come to know ourselves for real. Down deep we may dimly perceive the truth about our real selves, yet we go on denying or covering it with our superselves - even in prayer. However, once we have actually put the truth into words and shared with another, it becomes increasingly difficult to continue deceiving ourselves.

[David A. Seamands, *Healing Grace* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1988), 180.]

In the twelfth century, Aelred of Rievaulx (1109-1166) wrote *Spiritual Friendship*. In this book he writes:

What happiness, what security, what joy to have someone to whom you dare to speak on term of equality as to another self; one to whom you can unblushingly make known what progress you have made in the spiritual life; one to whom you can entrust all the secrets of your heart and before whom you can place all your plans.

A formal intentionality

While most of us have people in our lives that we consider close friends or with whom we can discuss spiritual subjects, having a "spiritual friendship" involves an intentionality that moves the informal friendship to a different level where there is a formality of meeting either at certain times, at certain places, or according to a certain schedule. This will allow friends to challenge each other spiritually in appropriate ways.

Practice

Idea #1: One idea you might try is to commit to meeting at a neutral location where the two of you will spend several hours in solitude, silence, and prayer. Then at the end of this time, meet together to debrief and discuss how you sensed God working in your life.

Idea #2: Another idea is to meet for lunch once or twice a month where a certain amount of time (e.g. ½ hour to 1 hour) is committed to discussing how each of you is sensing God work in your life.

Spiritual Direction

Spiritual direction is similar to spiritual friendship, but involves meeting with a professionally trained spiritual director that attempts to emulate the Jesus-disciple relationship in a way that therapy, mentoring, and pastoral counseling do not. People seeking spiritual direction are looking for ways to see how God is working in their lives, wanting accountability in their prayer practices, and attempting to discern the Spirit in their lives.

A **Spiritual Director** is someone who is experienced in life and faith and able to help others notice the movements of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

The core question: *Where do you sense God in that?*

The center of spiritual direction is looking for or noticing how and where God is working in the details of one's life. Spiritual direction emphasizes the place and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. One must believe that the Holy Spirit is alive and active in the world, constantly moving in the believer's life. A simple question such as this has the ability to pull you out of your narcissistic world and into a realization that God has created me and is intricately involved in all the details of my life. One will hopefully begin to notice God at work in places he or she hadn't considered and in ways he or she hadn't even imagined. The question then, which might at first seem rather simplistic or even annoying, is exactly the type of question that someone who is following hard after Jesus will want to live their life by. Insight and joy can result when the thread of God's Spirit working in one's life can be seen over a period of months and years.

Spiritual Direction is not . . .

One book on spiritual direction points out that

Spiritual direction is not psychotherapy nor is it an inexpensive substitute, although the disciplines are compatible and frequently share raw material. Spiritual direction is not pastoral counseling, not is it to be confused with the mutuality of deep friendships . . . in this covenanted relationship the director has agreed to put himself aside so that his total attention can be focused on the person sitting in the other chair. What a gift to bring to another, the gift of disinterested, loving attention!

[Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Boston: Cowley, 1992), 52.]

Spiritual Direction is . . .

- Formalized in its structure - involves meeting at a set time and place.
- Received from a spiritual director who has formal training
- Usually an hour long session
- Something you usually pay for (\$35-\$75 an hour)

Pastors as Spiritual Directors

Some believe (Eugene Peterson for example) that spiritual direction is the neglected role of pastors. There is an increasing trend for pastors to see their primary role as that of "spiritual director" to those in their congregation. And while most pastors cannot have individual appointments with everyone in their congregation, they should be available to offer spiritual direction in both personal and corporate ways. More pastors are receiving formal training in spiritual direction because of this refreshing perspective.