

## SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN THE NONCONFORMIST TRADITION

At a recent consultation for Baptist, Methodist and URC ecumenical officers, one of the seminars examined the question: 'How do we engage with people who reckon to be *spiritual* but not *religious*? There was a recognition that although many people had given up on the institutional Church they were still looking for a spiritual dimension to life.

This search is spilling over to those who have stayed with the Church. Christians too are seeking a deeper reality and authenticity in their walk with God.

So, can Spiritual Direction help those of us in the Nonconformist Tradition?

### **Many Nonconformists have problems with the term "Spiritual Director"**

- partly through unfamiliarity, and partly because of its sacerdotal overtones. A number of the central tenets that nonconformist Christians hold dear, make some suspicious of the whole idea of Spiritual Direction.

#### *i) Christ the one and only Mediator*

Baptists are hot on "the Priesthood of all Believers". We have no priests because we are all priests. Nonconformist Christians are quick to pounce on the idea that we need any other mediator between God and the individual except Jesus Christ. The word "priest" and the title "Spiritual Director" conjure up images of another mediator, which is anathema.

#### *ii) A high view of the Bible*

Strengthening the sense of spiritual independence is our high view of the Bible. Nonconformists are not necessarily fundamentalists or literalists, but Baptists in particular think of themselves as "people of the Book".

The Bible is the primary means of spiritual guidance and nurture, and although there are different understandings of how it happens, it is the primary means by which God speaks to the individual heart.

#### *iii) The Holy Spirit as Spiritual Director*

The Holy Spirit is the one who sanctifies and guides us into all truth (John 16: 13), so, says the nonconformist, I don't need a Spiritual Director, because the Holy Spirit is my Spiritual Director.

### **So does Spiritual Direction have any place in the Nonconformist Tradition?**

Many would argue that Spiritual Direction has always been part of nonconformist Christianity, although rarely in the one-to-one way it is classically practised in other denominations, and without the same claim to authority it sometimes makes in those places.

Beginning with Staupitz's influence on LUTHER,

- through ZWINGLI, who recommended confession to God alone, but advised that if necessary the Christian should consult a wise counsellor:- "*auricular confession is nothing but a consultation in which we receive from him who God appointed . . . advice as to how we can secure peace of mind*" (quoted Leech, p.85);

- to CALVIN who was deeply concerned with the question of guidance of conscience, and who wrote many letters which would fall into the category of Spiritual Direction, although always stressing his own subservience in all things to God;

- through RICHARD BAXTER'S "The Reformed Pastor";

- to JOHN BUNYAN, who is known to have used John Gifford, pastor of a congregational church in Bedford, as a Spiritual director, and on to:

- GEORGE FOX, referred to by William Penn as a 'discerner of men's spirits' . . .

. . . all the way through, Spiritual Direction by any other name has been accepted and practised by many of the great names in the Protestant movement.

The distinctive feature of Fox's Quaker guidance was its mutuality, a feature that is

also seen in the local Methodist Societies set up by JOHN WESLEY. Wesley's own gift for Spiritual Direction and his assumption that he had the authority to carry out such a ministry is amply illustrated in his letters.

As we move into the 19th Century, we recognise that perhaps the clearest way nonconformists have sought Spiritual Direction is through preaching. Indeed, the same people who would have cried Popery to the idea of Spiritual Director, seemed never to have thought twice about conceding that same authority to preachers such as ALEXANDER WHYTE and C H SPURGEON.

### **So what place does Spiritual Direction have in the Nonconformist Tradition today?**

Nonconformist Christians continue to seek Spiritual Direction in the ways they always have: through honest, relevant, applied Biblical preaching; through personal, prayerful, applied Biblical reading; through the use of hymns and songs which reflect on people's experience of God in the different circumstances of life.

In recent years there has also been a recovery in the role of the Pastor as, effectively, Spiritual Director.

Alongside other roles a modern Pastor may or may not be called to fulfil, the role of spiritual guide or director (being there to help people grow in their prayer life and their walk with God), is being rediscovered.

Among nonconformists such a ministry is not confined to ordained pastors but is being recognised afresh as the ministry of the church. Within the life of the church, friendships are sometimes made within which mutual guidance and direction are offered, on the early Quaker model. Similarly, the model of offering Spiritual Direction to people of no particular Christian commitment, recognising that they too are on a spiritual journey, offers new light on the church's task of evangelism.

Corporate Spiritual Direction is also alive in nonconformist churches. The modern church homegroup could be seen as the child of the Methodist class group. Functioning at their best, homegroups can be places where people can

honestly share their questions, their lives and their journeys, and where direction is effectively offered one to another.

For Baptists and others in congregationally governed churches, the role of the Church Meeting as the place where we seek to discern the mind of Christ is a model for corporate Spiritual Direction, which at times needs to be redeemed, but which is a model which can be adapted to a variety of situations.

### **Spiritual Direction :**

- is a practice that recognises our mutuality, that although Christ calls us personally He calls into community.

- is a practice that recognises our sinfulness. Left to our own devices we can deceive ourselves even as we are wanting to hear from God and grow in Him, because "the heart is deceitful above all things" (**Jeremiah 17: 9**)

- is a practice that recognises the shadow-side of each one of us, of life, and even of God.

- is a practice that recognises that in a secular society, so many of us don't even know where to begin in recognising the presence and activity of God in our lives.

- is above all about giving permission to one another to ask questions and to be honest about our struggles, recognising that struggle is part of growth.

We do that, secure in Christ Jesus, in dependence on the Holy Spirit, in submission to the authority of Scripture, and believing that honesty and accountability serve the Truth, and that it is the Truth as we encounter it in Christ that sets us free.

### **Recommended Reading**

Kenneth Leech	"Soul Friend"	Harper and Row
Gordon Jeff	"Spiritual direction for every Christian"	SPCK
Timothy Jones	"Mentor and Friend"	Lion
Richard Foster	"Celebration of Discipline"	Hodder
J. Neville Ward	"The use of Praying"	Epworth
James Gordon	"Evangelical Spirituality"	SPCK

*Published by the Baptist Union Retreat Group*