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## Christian History Corner: Got Your 'Spiritual Director' Yet?

*"The roots of a resurgent practice, plus 14 books for further study"*  
Chris Armstrong and Steven Gertz | posted 4/01/2003 12:00AM

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Spiritual direction was limited to the monasteries for the next four hundred years, until the emergence of the Dominican order of itinerant friars in 1216. Dominicans emphasized teaching and preaching Christian doctrine, and these activities soon expanded into a regular program of caring for and counseling souls—particularly in spiritual discernment and perfection. Since many of those who received the ministry of the Dominicans were laymen in the emerging medieval cities, the practice of spiritual direction spread rapidly beyond monastery walls.

Spiritual direction as practiced today—especially in the Roman Catholic Church—owes its greatest debt to the founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556). Loyola encouraged the practice of individual and group retreats. Participants worked through his famous "spiritual exercises" in a program spanning four "weeks" (these have subsequently been stretched or compressed to fit various timeframes).

The first week draws participants into a frank consideration of their own sin and its consequences, the second focuses on Christ's life on earth, the third on his Passion, and the fourth on his Resurrection. Loyola also drew up rules to accompany the weeks—for example, the second week comes with guidelines for identifying and rejecting the workings of Satan in their lives. All of this Loyola intended should be directed by a mentor who is "prudent, discreet, reserved, and gentle."

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Since Loyola's time, Catholics have continued the practice, shaped further by such writings as the seventeenth-century's St. Francis de Sales's Introduction to the Devout Life.

Protestants, on the other hand, have emphasized the direct, unmediated nature of the individual's relationship with God in Christ, and they have thus tended to be suspicious of the function of spiritual directors. This, however, seems to be changing today, at least among Protestants unsatisfied with what Crabb calls the "standard 'evangelical' means of spiritual growth": moral vigilance, church attendance, and busyness in a variety of programs, conferences, methods, and ministries.

### How can I find out more about spiritual direction?

How can you turn a short-term missions trip into lasting change?

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### Featured Items

Such prominent Protestant writers on spirituality as Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, and James Houston have written on the subject in recent years. One excellent place to start is Eugene Peterson's valuable guide to books on Christian spirituality: Take and Read: An Annotated List (Eerdmans, 1996).

In his chapter on spiritual direction, Peterson offers a broad definition of spiritual direction that includes all forms of spiritual friendship—"the prayerful attention that we give to another person as a spiritual being and the accompanying prayerful conversation" that develops out of this attention. Then he says, "By watching/reading the masters at work, we come to appreciate how important it is to learn and practice this art."

Here are 14 books in which Peterson finds "the masters at work:"

1. Frederick von Hugel, Letters to a Niece (1928).
2. Aelred of Rievaulx, Spiritual Friendship (twelfth century, available in a 1974 translation by Mary Eugenia Laker, S. S. N. D.)
3. Francis de Sales (1567-1622, Catholic), Introduction to the Devout Life and Letters of Spiritual Direction (1988 translation by Peronne Marie Thibert)
4. Samuel Rutherford (a seventeenth-century Scottish pastor), Letters (available in an 1891 edition)
5. Kenneth Leech, Soul Friend

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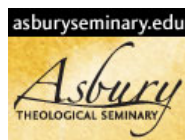
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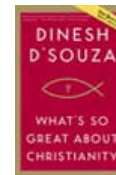


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