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SELF-ASSERTION FOR CHRISTIANS? PART A

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Translation aided by Lydia Kim

Tom and Lucy are sitting together with the Christian Psychology teacher Kathrin Halder musing on the theme of a possible self-assertion as Christians.

Tom: I definitely think that we Christians should oppose the constant calling for self-assertion. Doesn't the Scripture clearly tell us to love one's neighbor as well as one's enemy, to turn the other cheek (Matt 5:39), to go the second mile (Matt 5:44), to deny oneself and to lose one's life? Just listen to the Bible: "Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Matt 16:24-25); "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13); and "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers" (1 John 3:16).

Does Self-Denial Not Lead To Subordination And Ones Domination By Others?

Lucy: Well, on the one hand, I, of course, don't want to question the Bible, but I have run across some quite negative consequences in Christians taking that seriously. I know people who developed a servile lifestyle constantly doing what others want, restlessly helping, allowing people to walk over them.

The Secular Way of Self-assertion Cannot Be the Solution

Tom: Of course, that can't be it either. But I simply don't agree with the conclusions some Christian counselors draw. Generally, they lead people into the direction of secular thought. They promote the belief that a person needs to learn to put his goals in the center, to say no, to hold one's own ground against others, not to let others give oneself feelings of guilt when one is not willing to give in. Their approach teaches that a person needs to consider himself as capable and strong; he needs to become independent from other people; he has to present his own convictions, not influenced by others; he has to free himself from the pressure of others. Paul Tournier (1952) appears to teach this: "I have seen many neurotics who, at the end of a psychoanalytical treatment transferred from the camp of the weak to that of the strong and who were, in the clinical sense of the word, healed from their weaknesses" (p. 29).

Is the way of Interdependence a Possible Solution?

Lucy: How about going the direction that the well-known trainer in leadership strength Stephen Covey leads with his claim that we shouldn't live in a state of dependence or independence, but interdependence; that is one should pursue lifestyle of mutual dependence, a lifestyle of mutual consideration of our own goals and those of

others. We should not be focused on "you" or "I", but on "we." Covey (2000) says, "We can make it happen; we can work together; we can combine our talents and abilities and together we can achieve something bigger" (p. 50). Thus, neither the other person with his opinions and goals nor I alone with my goals are the standard; the question is not whether he or I win, but rather, together we try to find solutions that serve all those involved. Together we look for the so-called win-win solutions.

Kathrin: The concept that there should only be winners and that you look together for solutions is undoubtedly attractive and even sounds somewhat like God's objectives, for he loves all his children equally. However, I think, we still have to discuss it more

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foundationally, whether Tom is correct or whether win-win-arrangements are compatible with the biblical exhortations for self denial and selflessness.

1. The Important Capacity of Positive Self-Assertion

Every human being, every Christian, should appropriate the capacity for self-assertion; this is my fundamental opinion on this issue. The capacity to say “no,” to hold one’s ground against the will of other people, to not be manipulated by guilt feelings or in any other way, to carry through one’s personal goals, all this, when understood rightly, does not contradict, in my opinion, the teachings of Jesus.

The Incapacity to Rule Is a Result of the Fall

A total unwillingness or incapacity of people to rule does not derive from God’s original plan, but from the Fall. Ever since man withdrew himself from the loving rule of God, he fell under a hostile rule and since then, out of fear *he lets himself be ruled instead of ruling himself*. According to Adams (1982), “The world won dominion over people. The earth became hostile and brought forth thorns. . . . It is consequently natural that man—differently than God had commanded him—allows the surroundings and the circumstances to control him” (p. 109).

Ruling As the Image of God Instead of Reacting

Leaving a loving relationship with God, man ends up in slavery to a new lord, thus no longer lives out his freedom as the image of God, but instead he reacts reflexively to the demands of the outside world. He, for instance, says yes to somebody, engages in selfless behavior, but not out of love or real concern for the other person, but out of fear. He fears that others will stop loving him, if he doesn’t sacrifice himself, doesn’t do according to their will any more.

As he didn’t say yes to the wishes of others and no to himself out of real freedom (since his action was not done out of real love), aggressions will eventually rise, aggression against a God that demands this or against his fellow humans that put him under so much pressure. Moreover, if he rejects that pressure from others, that also does not lead him to freedom, since he will become self-centered and feel guilty.

Thinking that he doesn’t have the right to say no, he will act out of fear (the yes or then no does not come out of the whole heart) and he will not be able to enjoy either choice. That is, if that person was invited to the movies and says yes in spite of not being in the mood for it, he will be in the movies with discontentment, but if he says no, he will stay home with feelings of guilt and be unable to enjoy the evening.

God Called Man to Rulership

God did not call us to live in such fear; He hasn’t created us with a weak will that bows down to every pressure of the surrounding world and that denies himself constantly in saying yes to everything. God created us in His image with a strong will, able to assert ourselves. We should not live a life of domination that is reactive, or, due to our weak will, driven by the desires and expectations of others, or by the internalized ideas of those who reared us. Rather, we should proactively take charge of our own life, strong willed (in God) and able to discern our reactions and actions.

The Inner Freedom to Say Yes or No

Thus, we are called to develop a strong will, being able to discern (even in unfavorable surroundings) what we really want, being able to act out of inner freedom to say yes or no from the bottom of one’s heart.

God wants our yes to be yes and our no to be no (Matt 5:34f, Jas 5:12b). He

wants a yes to be an actual yes that out of a free decision we for example, may go with someone to the movie theater (and that joy is involved in the going). He wants our no to be an actual no, so that with an inner clarity, we will not conform to the desires of another (and that we can do so with joy and not guilt).

Only with a strong will and a capacity for deciding, only with a self that can observe desires and strive for what it wants, can we say no, but also yes. And only with a strong will and a capacity for deciding, only with a self that can observe desires can we, with a free yes, truly deny ourselves. As Van der Voet (1995) has observed, “People, who let themselves be ordered around without willpower, are not denying themselves. . . . Whoever does not have a will, cannot deny himself” (pp.144-145).

The point I want to make is this: God did not call man to a heteronomous life but rather to a life of ruling, to a life in which one is not motivated by anxiety or by inner weakness, but in which one, through a well-developed will, has the capacity of self-assertion at one’s disposal, and who, out of an inner freedom, can fully say yes or no.

No Idealizing of Strengths or Weaknesses

Regarding self-assertion, one can fall off the horse on either side. As we have seen, our current society idealizes mainly strengths, and raises them from time to time unconditionally to self-assertion and even to usurpation. As Tournier (1952) reminds us: “We are living in a deceptive philosophy that butters up the strong and despises the weak and that conducts itself as if she believed that the salvation is found in the victory of the strong over the weak . . . and who tries to encourage the strong in his dangerous and strong reactions” (p. 182).

But a Christian counter reaction, which is based on a false understanding of Jesus’

CORRECTION: “A Prayer for Love: A Ragamuffin’s Meditations on Ephesians 3:14-2,” which was included in *Soul & Spirit* (4.1), was mistakenly attributed to Eric Johnson, who had forwarded the article to *Soul & Spirit*. The author of “A Prayer for Love” is Scott Holman.

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requirements of self-denial and humility, does not lead further. We also should not build up weaknesses into the highest value nor consider ourselves in our own understanding as powerless tiny “worms,” who cannot do or know anything, who cannot actively operate—mere children for whom God must tie the shoelaces. We should not swallow all suffering as if it were sent by God, or endure variables brainlessly, and we should absolutely not live heteronomously in a docile manner toward people, or sacrifice ourselves to the point of exhaustion because of the demands of others.

Neither strengths nor weaknesses should be idealized; however, both belong, if rightly understood, to our existence, in which we are neither called to sheer weakness nor to sheer strength (to strength in the usual sense).

For what we experience as a weakness, on the one hand, belongs to God’s creation-design (as dependent human beings), on the other hand is a result of the fundamental anxiety due to the fallenness of our existence.

God wants to free us from our fundamental anxiety. He does not want our relationship to him to be based on anxiety with the result that we follow his directions only out of fear of punishment. He does not want us to flee to weak reactions or let ourselves be controlled by other people out of fear of others.

Nevertheless, we can hardly consider it our goal to overcome our creation conformed dependency and need. Exactly the awareness of our dependency on God, the knowledge that we cannot live and love without him, that we cannot be strong without him, that we should not base all our strong reactions on our own possibilities, these can and should cause us to repeatedly turn ourselves to God. Tournier (1952) expresses it well: “As we become aware, over and over again, that we are poorer souls than we thought, that often the things that we believed to be credited to our active side, rather belong to the passive, that behind our strong reactions still lies a weakness hidden, then we will make the most fruitful discovery. Then will we finally turn ourselves rather to God, who is the only one who can truly give an answer to the deep need of people” (p. 173).

Neither weaknesses nor strengths should be idealized. Weakness in and of itself has no value, and surely self-denial does not mean being controlled by others out of fear. On the other hand, it is not about the strength itself, where a human being sees himself

as the source of strengths and denies the dependency and neediness that was given to him since the beginning. Rather, when I speak about the capacity for self-assertion, I am referring to a strength that accepts our personal humanness and considers others.

2. God’s Goal as the Standard of Our Actions

Does Saying Yes to Self-assertion Contradict Jesus’ Teaching?

Tom: Well on the one hand, this sounds attractive, but on the other, I still have problems with this idea. It does not appear that different from the usual secular teachings to stand one’s ground, to live according to one’s own will, to refuse the desires of others when this contradicts personal goals. It is a mystery to me how we can bring this view in accord with the Bible’s call to love one’s neighbor and with Jesus’ call to self-denial.

The Important Formulation of the Question Regarding the Goal of Self-assertion

Kathrin: That we can do what we want and that we can refuse our neighbor anytime it suits us is not something I have said. It was merely important for me to express that we *should have the capacity for self-assertion* and that we should not do things out of fear. A second and totally different question is this: *In what direction should we use this capacity*, exactly whose goals should we consider?

Tom: So we should have a strong will, the capacity to say yes or no without fear. Then, however, it boils down to whose values and goals by which we should order our decisions, whose will we should make the standard. And I should not use my strength and means of self-assertion to pursue my own goals, but the goals of others, having their needs in my mind according to the commandment to love my neighbor. Is this what you are saying?

Compromise between My Goals and the Goals of Others

Lucy: Perhaps I am not “spiritual” enough, but I can’t agree. It cannot really be our goal, be it out of inner freedom instead of being driven by fear, always to do what others want, to always fulfill only their desires; can it? If I would take that serious, then I would starve, because I would give away all the food, and never keep anything for myself. Let me suggest again: shouldn’t we go the middle way of Stephen Covey and look for win-win solutions in which both people benefit. One

time we will go to the movie theater because you want it and the other time we will not go, because I don’t want it, and yet another time, we will find a third option that gives joy to both of us.

Tom: That sounds useful, yet I doubt that an unconditional “fairness,” a compromise concept, a tailoring to a fifty-fifty, can be brought in line with the teaching of Jesus regarding devotion to our neighbor. Do we not far too easily fight for the fact that at least we keep our fifty percent rather than considering our neighbor and his needs?

Kathrin: In discussing the direction of the goal, we have considered three possibilities: personal goals, the goals of others, and both personal goals and the goals of others. Perhaps there is, besides these three possibilities, yet another alternative.

God’s Will and Not the Will of People as the Orientation for Action

I think that it is not about a struggle whether personal goals or the goals of others should be in the foreground. Primarily it is not about formulating compromises and fundamentally, it is not about a human will that sets the direction. Instead, *the will of God*, His definition of the goals for our lives and the lives of others, should guide us.

[Thus ends the first half of this article. The second half will appear in the next issue of *Soul & Spirit* (5.2). The entire article is being reprinted with the generous permission of Kathrin Halder.]

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PRIDE, SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT, AND COUNSELING

Kevin Goodrich O.P.

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on a general introduction to Walter Hilton and more specifically to his theology of spiritual development. Specific attention is given to his writings on pride and the general significance of his work for spiritual directors and Christian counselors today.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries Christians have sought solace, comfort, and understanding concerning their personal and communal problems through the writings of Holy Scripture, the teachings of the Church, and the godly examples of men and women surrendered to the Lord Jesus Christ. Increasingly, since the Enlightenment, even faithful Christians have moved away from pastoral and biblical models of counseling and spiritual direction to secular ones rooted in psychology and the medical model.

In the last few decades, there has been a ground swell of interest among Christians in re-connecting with the pastoral and biblical wisdom for the human condition found in the Scriptures and the writings of godly counselors over the Church's history. One of the most promising of these movements is the Christian Psychology movement that seeks to promote a genuine Christian anthropology, psychology, and counseling method for the benefits of believers facing all kinds of struggles.

Similarly, there has been a resurgence of interest in the sacramental tradition in the art and practice of spiritual direction. Many of the contemporary schools of spiritual direction have been compromised by secular influences, but their remains considerable interest in sacramental circles in rediscovering the wisdom of authentic Christian directors such as John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Julian of Norwich.

Both of these streams—the evangelical and the sacramental—would benefit immensely from an exploration of the writings of Walter Hilton. Hilton, a fourteenth century spiritual director, provides counsel that is both biblical and rooted in the Church's rich teachings on the Christian life. Of particular interest to the Christian counselor and the spiritual director is Hilton's theology of pride. Whether counseling couples or guiding directees who are experiencing dissatisfaction with their prayer life, pride is a substantive issue that must be addressed.

BIOGRAPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Before exploring Hilton's theology of pride in particular, it is necessary to acquire some familiarity with his life, writings, and wider context in fourteenth century England. Like many writers from Church history, the facts regarding Hilton's life remain sparse and several details of his life remain unknown. However, over the years scholars have been able to construct a basic history of Hilton. The evidence points to Hilton being born in Lancashire, England, sometime around the year 1343. The literature remains silent about his childhood, but it can be assumed that he came from a family of some means, whether noble or not is uncertain, because of his later career at Cambridge.

Hilton studied secular law at Cambridge where he came under the patronage of the influential Bishop of Ely, Thomas Arundel. At this point, the exact progression of Hilton's life becomes uncertain. There is evidence to suggest that Hilton practiced secular law for a time. However, at some point Hilton reached a crisis regarding his vocation in the world and before God. It is clear he felt drawn toward a religious vocation and it is believed he lived for a time as a hermit.

However, this sort of isolated existence did not suit Hilton who eventually embraced the mixed life of the Augustinian Canons entering the Thurgorton community in 1386. Canons were orders of men that embrace elements of monastic life (taking vows of celibacy for example), but who also had pastoral duties in cathedrals, parishes, and other institutions. This is an important historical feature of Hilton's life, as he would later be a proponent of the mixed life—a life of both active and contemplative pursuits. It also appears that Hilton may have practiced canon law, either prior to his ordination as a priest, or more likely afterwards.

The practicalities of dealing with controversies and specific situations—a regular feature of life for a canon lawyer in the fourteenth century—shine through Hilton's writings as a spiritual director. It was during his time at Thurgorton that Hilton's ministry

of spiritual direction and counsel developed. It was also during this time that he wrote his most influential work: *The Scale of Perfection*. Hilton died ten years after entering the Augustinian Order on March 24, 1396, the eve of the Annunciation of our Lady. Hilton's fame as a spiritual director blossomed in the fifteenth century as his writings, particularly the *Scale*, were used as a standard manual of the Christian life for ordinary people, as well as for spiritual directors and confessors.

WORKS

Several works have been attributed to Hilton on the basis of similarities of style, content, and theology, but without conclusive evidence. These include *Conclusiones de Imaginibus (Conclusions Concerning Images)* and *Epistola de Lectione, Intentione, Oratione, Meditatione, etc. (On Reading, Intention, Prayer, Meditation, etc.)*, the second of which would certainly establish Hilton as a spiritual writer and adviser. Other fourteenth century works sometimes attributed to Hilton are *The Prickling of Love* and *A Letter to Someone Wanting to Renounce the World*.

Of particular significance to Hilton's theology of pride are three works that are definitively attributed to Hilton by the scholarly community: *On the Image of Sin, Eight Chapters on Perfection*, and lastly, *The Scale of Perfection*, his masterpiece. It is the *Scale*, sometimes alternatively titled *The Ladder of Perfection* or *The Reforming of Man's Soul* that will form the primary text for this paper's exploration of Hilton's theology. The *Scale* is the first work in English written on ascetical theology. Hilton was literate in both English and Latin, but it is telling that he chose to write in the Middle English of his time, which made the book far more accessible. This was a daring move at a time when sacred works written in the vernacular were still considered suspect.

The *Scale* is directed toward a woman anchoress seeking to pursue a life of holiness dedicated to God and is divided into two books. The first book provides general instruction on living the contemplative life

according to Hilton's interpretation of the Church's rich tradition on this topic. The second book, written several years later, appears to be a more mature work reflecting the efforts of the anchoress, what efforts worked, and what did not. Some question whether the anchoress was in fact an actual person or a fictional character of convention for pedagogical purposes. Regardless, Hilton's writing was widely consulted and used to guide not only those in religious vows, but ordinary men and women living in the world.

BIBLICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Hilton's understanding of the human condition is rooted in the basic Christian theology of creation, fall, and redemption. He writes, "A man is the image of God according to the soul and not the body" (Clark & Dorward, 1991, p. 193). In other words, it was clear to Hilton that the nature of the *imago dei* was of a spiritual nature and not a physical one, for God the Father does not have a physical body that in any way resembles human beings. Hilton would agree with Jesus' declaration to the Samaritan woman that "God is Spirit." In language that echoes Pauline theology, Hilton states in reference to the image of God in human beings "through the sin of the first man, Adam, it was deformed and changed into another likeness."

In terms of "reforming" this deformed image, Hilton argues that the justice of God requires amends before any forgiveness can be given. Hilton's writings here find some congruence with later Reformation theologies regarding penal substitution. The act of redemption is completely God's action, and there is nothing the individual believer can do to merit God's grace. However, the individual believer is not merely a passive recipient of God's grace—Hilton stresses the need for personal acceptance of God's redemption. In fact, this initial stage of redemption or "being saved" falls into Hilton's first division of the spiritual life: "reforming in faith." This might be described as the ordinary faithfulness of those who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. Unlike other medieval writers, Hilton grants this stage fairly freely. The second division or stage, "reforming in feeling," describes a much higher state in which persons have grown in considerable sanctification and spiritual maturity.

These two stages "are equivalent to the purgative and illuminative ways of

the classical scheme" (Thornton, 1986, p. 179). Hilton's work sometimes entitled *The Ladder of Perfection* reflects Hilton's view that the Christian life is one of continuous development on a single path. There may be many stages or rungs to the ladder, but in Hilton's view, they are the same ladder. This unity of the spiritual life does not lend itself to interpreting Hilton's categories directly into the categories of salvation and sanctification. It must also be stated that in the first and earlier book of the *Scale*, Hilton shows a partiality toward the contemplative life as the true realm for those wishing to be reformed in feeling. However, in his second book, Hilton shows a greater generosity to Christians in all states of life for achieving reformation of feeling.

PRIDE IN HILTON'S WORK

Spiritual writers in the Middle Ages were fond of classifying sins and determining the relative merit of certain acts or the relative demerit of certain sins. Pride figured prominently into the writings of most spiritual writers at the time, but Hilton was less concerned with categories as he viewed sin as the pandemic problem of humanity. For Hilton, "pride is the root sin, first because it puts self before God" and "secondly, pride denies the need for grace." In the *Scale*, Hilton devotes chapter 37 to the topic of sin. He uses the metaphor of an arrow to describe the dangers of pride: This is a sharp arrow, and a dangerous one: it flies swiftly, it strikes softly, yet it wounds mortally (Thornton, 1986, p. 187). Echoing Ephesians chapter six, Hilton describes the devoted lover of Jesus as possessing a shield against such arrows.

Against the arrow of pride, Hilton describes two types of humility that serve to protect the believer. The first is the humility of reason, or what moderns might describe as the reason of introspection. The second is the humility given as a gift of the Spirit, or as Hilton describes it as a "special gift of Love."

The first kind is rooted in a deep personal awareness of sin: "And it seems to him likewise that because of his own sins he is worse than the greatest sinner that lives, and that everyone does better than himself; and so by such considerations he casts himself down in his thought beneath all men" (Clark & Dorward, 1991, p. 272).

This awareness of one's own personal sinfulness—and by contrast of God's absolute holiness—turns the believer away from any occasion of pride. This type of

piety is often misunderstood by twenty-first century Christians as a self-denying and self-depraving sort of spirituality. However, for Hilton it was merely the recognition that an awareness of one's sin would serve as a safeguard against the dangers of pride.

The second and higher type of humility was given by the gift of contemplation from God:

"And then the soul stops looking and leaning toward itself and turns entirely to the beholding of him; and when it does so, then the soul thinks nothing of all the joy and honor of the world, for the joy of worldly honor is so little and so worthless in comparison with the joy and love that it feels in the spiritual sight of Jesus and the knowledge of truth, that he would want none of it, even if he could have it without any sin" (Clark & Dorward, 1991, p. 273).

Here the believer is no longer concerned with his or her own sin—or the sins of others, but is rather caught up in the beauty and majesty of Christ. In this utter love of the other, the self is forgotten. It could be argued that such an infatuation with Jesus could lead to the neglect of the love of neighbor. However, since Hilton was an advocate of the mixed life, this interpretation cannot be given serious merit. The absolute focus on Jesus that leads to perfect humility would necessarily lead to perfect charity toward one's neighbor.

CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE

Hilton, as a spiritual writer, has much to offer spiritual directors and Christian counselors in their work of helping people to be "reformed" in the image of God. It is rare for modern Christian counselors to give much attention to the place of pride and humility in their care. Hilton's two types of humility find great usefulness in counseling individuals who are struggling at maintaining healthy relationships. Often in conflicted marriages, one focuses on the sins of one's partner to the complete neglect of one's own sinfulness. Suggesting to the enraged husband that he also has a part to play in his crumbling marriage will take greater tact than merely saying, "You're a sinner too." Hilton's remedy for the kind of pride that says, "I am doing everything right in the relationship, if she would just change!" is his method of introspection. In addition, when teaching couples, or parents, about healthy

relationship development, Hilton's second kind of humility, the humility of perfect love, could play a significant role. If couples or parents would fixate their concern and love toward the spouse or child in question, their relationship would likely be enhanced.

For spiritual directors, helping directees to grasp the extent of their own sinfulness is an ongoing challenge. Many people in spiritual direction are not engaged in gross sins. Their violations of God's ways are often more subtle, and the result is that people generally feel that they are "okay." They may rationalize "we are all sinners," leading to a certain complacency about God's grace. This complacency could be described as a carefully guided form of pride. Thus, Hilton's perfect humility is a good spiritual barometer for spiritual directors and Christian counselors alike, not only in evaluating where their directees/counselees are, but where they, as directors/counselors, are in giving care. They need to ask themselves whether they are more concerned for the welfare of their directee/counselee, or are they, because of pride, more concerned that this person be impressed with them.

Beyond Hilton's specific work on pride, his writings could provide help in drafting a theology of human spiritual development for Christian counselors and spiritual directors. Since there is a scarcity of anthropologies for human spiritual development rooted in Biblical theology and the rich spiritual theology of the Church, it is important to note that Hilton provides a foundation for this sort of spiritual developmental scheme.

In addition, Hilton assumes in his counseling and spiritual direction work, a whole tradition of spiritual practices centered in the Christian community. For example, Hilton assumed a framework for his directees that included spiritual directors/confessors, regular sacramental confession, and regular (daily) prayers and the ongoing liturgical life of the Church. These practices need to become common place in local congregations for them to be a significant aide to counselors and those they counsel. Thus, I advocate that non-liturgical Christians look at the traditional practices of the Church and find ways to adapt them to their own settings.

Lastly, it is unfortunate that the work of Christian counseling and spiritual direction

have been separated in the modern Christian Church. Both disciplines seek to guide men and women facing specific problems with God's guidance. The work of the Christian counselor and spiritual director must be brought back together into one person, or at least into one local Christian community. Thus, Hilton may be helpful in facilitating a dialogue between classical spiritual directors and Christian counselors.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, Hilton's works were probably the most well known in fifteenth century England. Today, other works contemporary to the *Scale of Perfection*—such as the *Cloud of Unknowing*—are more known in today's Christian circles. This is a loss for the contemporary Church as Hilton's orderly description of the spiritual life remains relevant as men and women seek to climb the ladder of perfection to Christ.

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Do I Believe OR Do I Believe That I Have To Believe?

By Hanne Baar
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No one is able to will oneself faith; faith is received from God. Faith, initiated by God, grows throughout one's life as a believer. This faith and what it contains leads us step by step into a greater understanding of God's eternal kingdom; a world where our searching and anxious spirit is able to find a home and dwelling place.

This is something different to someone who believes that you only can receive faith by convincing yourself to believe. If this happens often enough, what will appear is not faith anymore. To believe in this way (but perhaps not being able to do so) is stressful—just like everything which grows in us by this way is the opposite of faith.

So as not to incur such a stress, it is recommended to proceed on what I have in faith and not on what is missing. Since I cannot create faith anyway (or I will find myself in the "neurotic stress gutter of thinking" as mentioned before), I would only have the choice to hold onto what God gives me with a certainness of faith and to live with it or loose it again.

In fact, concerning our faith, it is all about this choice. And it is constantly like this, because God gives to us constantly. He puts sentences into our thoughts, so that we are able to believe, sentences that flow to me, from the preached or read word of God; sentences that I know are true. These sentences are important to me, they are soothing to me, they fit into what I already have received from God, they fit like a building stone into the place I am living—those are sentences that I remember.

This means that I am making full use of them so that I can believe them. I save them from being deleted from my memory. It is therefore good to collect what God is showing us, until it is formed into a final construction, where our spirit is able to dwell in peace—whatever may come!

A Broken Pieces *Meditation*

Valerie Murphy

Have you ever been in a place with God where the disillusionment of this life just seems too much? Through my life, I have had a view of what it means to be an infant, a child, a daughter, a wife, a lover and a mother. As I have aged, I have also come face to face with my views of health, of death, and of what it means to be truly human. I have found that the breaking down of my vision of what my life “should look like” has been a journey.

How do we, as Christians, respond to disillusionment and grief? Ecclesiastes certainly reveals the disillusionment of Solomon as he concluded that this world is simply vanity. Job had no shortage of earthly experiences, as he faced disaster, death, and disease—as well as his wife’s deep dissatisfaction with God as they suffered such profound losses. Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, felt deep despair for himself and the nation of Israel with their enslavement. In addition, there is Moses’, Caleb’s, and Joshua’s 40 years in the desert; Naomi’s years of desolation; Joseph’s years in the dungeon; and David’s seemingly endless years of fleeing from Saul.

How do we, using the examples of those that have gone before us, walk this journey maintaining integrity and uprightness through God’s grace? We find, as we take up our crosses and follow Him and as we walk with those for whom we care we on their journeys, that each stage of grief is to be acknowledged in honesty before one’s self, before the Lord, and often, in counsel with one another. Job’s outcry, David’s Psalms, Jeremiah’s Lamentations and Christ’s own expressions are examples of this honest outpouring of pain while still seeking after God’s heart in the matter.

When we are overcome by anger and unmet expectations in this life and when our hurts and needs are too much for us, we can encourage one another toward courageous and open expression of our stories. When our guilt, fears, inadequacies, self-interest and sadness are overwhelming who we are, we can take it to the One who is the “I am.” We can follow David as he cried out in his disillusionment and grief in this life and invited God to be his Light through the darkness.

If we (or those for whom we care) attempt to rely on our own capacity (our humanness, failings, and fallenness), there is limitation. As we express the depth of need, the fullness of grief, and the reality of brokenness, we tend to want to hurl at ourselves, at others, and even at God. At that time we need to know that God’s capacity is unlimited. I tell those I care for, “God can take it. His shoulders are

big enough.” Clearly, those shoulders are big enough to carry a cross. They held strong as He held the sins of the world nailed to that cross. They are big enough to hurl that loss, that grief, that hurt and that death into the depth of the reality of His love. As we are in the midst of experiences like those found in Ecclesiastes, Job, Lamentations, and Psalms, the love Song of Songs is still playing for us. It was playing and will always be playing. As Paul reminds us, “But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).

In my shattered place, I had thought that God might take all the broken pieces that lie at my feet and form them into a beautiful and more meaningful stained glass window, a window where I might view my world through His eyes. Instead, He showed me that He wants to take away all the broken pieces of our lives. He desires to place His vision for us in our hearts. He desires to implant His pure love deeply within each one of us so that we can shine this love out into the world and so through the hurt and darkness to magnify the glory of the One that has gone before us.

Devastating disillusionment occurs in our lives. The clear and honest expression of pain to self, God and others is key in understanding God’s plan. The purpose of this expression is not to simply fix our broken dreams but rather to replace them with God’s perfect perspective. To His Name be the Glory!

Valerie Murphy is a Board Certified Professional Christian Counselor, Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor, Spiritual Director and a Stephen Ministry Trainer/Leader. She is a presenter and member of the Society for Christian Psychology. She serves as president of Foundation Counseling and Training dedicated to Christian counseling from a biblical worldview.

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OTHER VOICES

TERRY COOPER ON SELF-EXALTATION AND SELF-CONTEMPT

"I need the grace of God when I am feeling both self-exaltation and self-contempt. Both experiences are very real. Yet neither experience occurs in isolation from the other. If I search around enough, I'll find insecurity beneath my grandiosity and arrogant expectations beneath my self-contempt" (p. 166). Cooper, T. D. (2003). *Sin, Pride & Self-Acceptance*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP.

PETER ON HUMILITY

"All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" 1 Peter 5:5, NIV.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS ON FAITH

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" Hebrews 11:1, NAU.

PAUL ON FAITH

"So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" Romans 10:17, ESV.

PAUL ON YES AND NO

"Do I plan in a purely human way so that I say 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no' simultaneously?" 2 Corinthians 1:17, CSV.

HABAKKUK ON SUFFERING

"Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls -- Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer's feet, And He will make me walk on my high hills." Habakkuk 3:17-19, NKJV.