

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE *to be* SPIRITUALLY MATURE,
WHILE REMAINING EMOTIONALLY IMMATURE

UPDATED EDITION

Peter Scazzero

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ZONDERVAN

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality, Updated Edition

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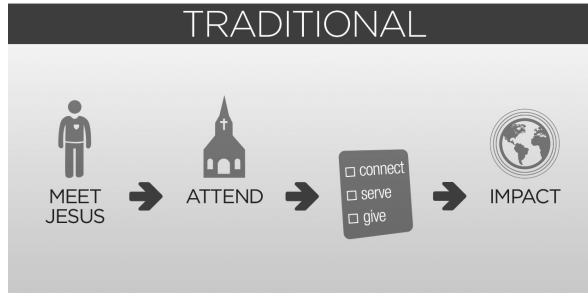
Introduction

When *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (EHS) was first published more than a decade ago, I hoped it would help people but I never imagined that the message it contained would resonate so deeply with readers across all denominational and theological lines and with churches around the world—from Africa to Asia, to Europe, to South and Central America, to the Mideast, to Australia and New Zealand, to North America. Nor could I have imagined that it would develop into *The Emotionally Healthy (EH) Spirituality Course*—with a workbook, a DVD, and an eight-week devotional book—or that churches would use it to implement EHS principles into their own DNA and discipleship culture.

When I am asked why I think the content of the book has spread so rapidly and found such a receptive audience, I often begin my response by describing how EHS was *lived* long before it was *written*. As a church, we have been practicing, refining, and absorbing the principles in this book for more than two decades. Fifteen hundred adults from seventy-three nations stream through our doors each week. This provides a very unique context for practicing this material in a community that represents the global church.

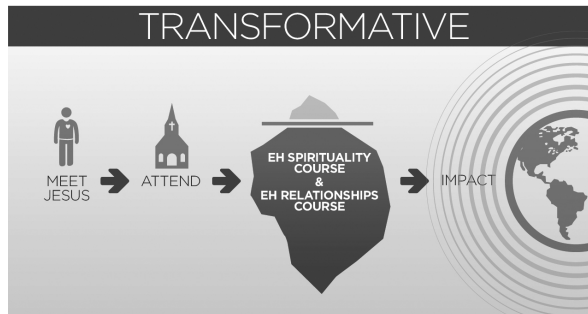
The other thing I point out is how EHS differs from more traditional approaches to discipleship. Many churches follow an approach to discipleship and ministry impact that looks something like this.

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality



While the traditional approach typically focuses on providing helpful classes, engaging small groups, and ample opportunities to serve, the level of change in people's lives tends to be minimal. So is the impact.

In contrast, Emotionally Healthy Spirituality books and resources are designed to help people experience beneath-the-surface transformation—spiritually and emotionally. Why? Because deeply changed people have a more powerful and more sustainable impact in the world. Changed people change the world.



As a result of EHS, the transformation we experienced as a church—members and leaders—has led us to frontiers of life in the Holy Spirit that we could not have imagined. One recent example is my own leadership transition. After serving as senior pastor at New Life Fellowship for twenty-six years, and after a four-and-a-half-year

Introduction

succession process,¹ I shifted my role from senior pastor to teaching pastor/pastor-at-large. This has been a wonderful expansion and deepening for New Life. Other examples include the global impact our church has around the world, the creative outreach EHS has unleashed in people's witness to Christ in the marketplace, and the change it has produced in the culture and community in churches as a whole.

Now it's your turn. I believe with all my heart that the principles and practices that have changed my life and lives in churches all around the world can change your life as well.

This book (along with the EH Spirituality Course) is your invitation to a deeper and wider relationship with Jesus Christ, requiring you to journey into the unknown, much like Abraham did when he left his comfortable home in Ur. The combination of emotional health and contemplative spirituality—the heart of the message found on these pages—will unleash a revolution into the deep places of your life. This revolution will, in turn, transform all your relationships.

So I invite you to read these pages prayerfully . . . thoughtfully . . . slowly. Pause when you need to in order to absorb the glimpses of God and yourself that the Holy Spirit provides along the way. Write down how God speaks to you. When I read an edifying book God uses to speak to me, I write inside the back cover a few sentences about each insight along with the page number. This way I can go back later and easily review what God said for additional insight and direction. You have my permission to write all over the margins of this book, or you may want to keep a journal as you read.

Pray the prayers at the end of each chapter—slowly. Don't hurry. Each chapter could easily have been expanded into its own book. There is a lot of material here to chew on.

Let me also encourage you to use the Checklist for the Emotionally Healthy (EH) Spirituality Course found on the last page of the book. This will guide you, step by step, to implement the truths contained

herein. Fill it out as you move through the Course and, when completed, go to emotionallyhealthy.org to receive your certificate of completion.

Most importantly, I encourage you to savor and cherish the Lord Jesus Christ as you meet him in these pages. The goal is to grow in your experience of Jesus, not merely add to your head knowledge about him.

John of the Cross, in the introduction of his book *The Living Flame of Love*, noted that everything he wrote about his life with God was “as far from the reality as is a painting from the living object represented.”² Nonetheless, he ventured to write what he did know. In a similar way, I invite you to receive what you read here as a painting that directs you to a richer, more authentic encounter with the living God in Christ. The real fruit of this book will be measured by the positive changes you begin to experience in your relationships—with Jesus, with others, and with yourself.

A lack of emotional health in the early years of my ministry almost cost me everything—my marriage, my family, my work, and my own well-being. I am thankful to God for his mercy. This mercy enabled me not only to survive but to enjoy a richness and joy in the Christian life that I had given up believing was possible. If you are hungry for God to transform you as well as those around you, I invite you to continue reading.

CHAPTER 1

The Problem of Emotionally Unhealthy Spirituality

Something Is Desperately Wrong

Christian spirituality, without an integration of emotional health, can be deadly—to yourself, your relationship with God, and the people around you. I know. Having lived half my adult life this way, I have more personal illustrations than I care to recount.

The following is one I wish I could forget.

Faith and the Pool

I met John and Susan while speaking at another church. They were excited and enthusiastic about visiting New Life Fellowship Church in Queens where I was pastor. On a hot, humid July Sunday, they made the long, arduous drive from Connecticut, with all the predictable traffic, to sit through our three services. Between the second and third service John pulled me aside to let me know they hoped to get some time to talk with Geri and me.

I was exhausted. But my greater concern was what their pastor, a

friend of mine, would think. What would they say to him if I simply sent them home? What might they say about me?

So I lied.

“Sure, I would love to have you for a late-afternoon lunch. I’m sure Geri would too!”

Geri, in her desire to be a “good pastor’s wife,” agreed to the lunch when I called, even though she too would have preferred to say no. John, Susan, and I arrived home about three o’clock in the afternoon. Within a few minutes, the four of us sat down to eat.

Then John began to talk . . . and talk . . . and talk. Susan said nothing.

Geri and I would occasionally glance at each other. We felt we had to give him time. But how much?

John continued to talk . . . and talk . . . and talk.

I couldn’t interrupt him. He was sharing with such intensity about God, his life, his new opportunities at work. *Oh God, I want to be loving and kind, but how much is enough?* I wondered to myself as I pretended to listen. I was angry. Then I felt guilty about my anger. I wanted John and Susan to think of Geri and me as hospitable and gracious. Why didn’t he give his wife a chance to say something? Or us?

Finally, Susan took a bathroom break. John excused himself to make a quick phone call. Geri spoke up once we were alone.

“Pete, I can’t believe you did this!” she mumbled in an annoyed voice. “I haven’t seen you. The kids haven’t seen you.”

I put my head down and slumped my shoulders, hoping my humility before her would evoke mercy.

It didn’t.

Susan returned from the bathroom and John continued talking. I hated sitting at that kitchen table.

“I hope I’m not talking too much,” John said unsuspectingly.

“No, of course not.” I continued to lie on our behalf. I assured him, “It’s great having you here.”

Geri was silent next to me. I did not want to look over.

After another hour, Geri blurted out during a rare pause, “I haven’t heard from Faith in a while.” Faith was our three-year-old daughter.

John continued talking as if Geri hadn’t said a word. Geri and I exchanged glances again and continued pretending to listen, occasionally stretching our necks to look outside the room.

Oh, I’m sure everything is all right, I convinced myself.

Geri, however, began to look very upset. Her face revealed tension, worry, and impatience. I could tell her mind was racing through options of where Faith might be.

The house was way too quiet. John continued talking.

Finally, Geri excused herself with what I could tell was an annoyed tone: “I have to go and check on our daughter.”

She darted down to the basement. No Faith. The bedrooms. No Faith. The living and dining rooms. No Faith.

Frantically, she ran back into the kitchen. “Pete! Oh my God, I can’t find her. She’s not here!”

Horror gripped us both as our eyes locked for a nanosecond. We were both pondering the unthinkable: the pool!

Despite the fact that we lived in a two-family, semi-attached house with little space, we did have a small three-foot-high pool in our backyard for relief from the hot New York City summers. We ran to the backyard . . . and saw our worst fears realized.

There stood Faith in the middle of the pool with her back to us—our three-year-old daughter, naked, barely standing on tiptoes with water up to her chin, almost in her mouth.

At that moment I felt ourselves age five years.

“Faith. Don’t move!” Geri yelled as we ran to pull her out of the pool. Somehow Faith had let herself up and down the ladder into the water without slipping. And she had kept herself standing on her tiptoes in the pool for who knows how long!

If she had faltered, Geri and I would have been burying our daughter. Geri and I were badly shaken—for days. I shudder even today as I write these words.

The sad truth about this incident is that nothing changed inside us. That would take five more years, a lot more pain, and a few more close calls.

How could I, along with Geri, have been so negligent? I look back in embarrassment at how untruthful and immature I acted with John and Susan, with God, with myself! John wasn't the problem; I was. Externally, I had appeared kind, gracious, and patient, when inwardly I was nothing like that. I so wanted to present a polished image as a good Christian that I cut myself off from what was going on within myself. Unconsciously I had been thinking: *I hope I am a good-enough Christian. Will this couple like us? Will they think we are okay? Will John give a good report of his visit to my pastor friend?*

Pretending was safer than honesty and vulnerability.

The reality was that my discipleship and spirituality had not touched a number of deep internal wounds and sin patterns—especially those ugly ones that emerged behind the closed doors of our home during trials, disagreements, conflicts, and setbacks.

I was stuck at an immature level of spiritual and emotional development. And my then-present way of living the Christian life was not transforming the deep places in my life.

And because of that, Faith almost died. Something was dreadfully wrong with my spirituality—but what?

Growing Up Emotionally Undeveloped

Very, very few people emerge out of their families of origin emotionally whole or mature. In my early years of ministry, I believed the power of Christ could break any curse, so I barely gave any thought

to how the home I'd left long ago might still be shaping me. After all, didn't Paul teach in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that when you become a Christian, old things pass away and all things become new? But crisis taught me I had to go back and understand what those old things were in order for them to begin passing away.

My Italian-American family, like all families, was cracked and broken. My parents were children of immigrants and sacrificed themselves for their four children to enjoy the American dream. My dad, a baker by trade, worked endless hours, first in a New York City Italian pastry shop owned by my grandfather and later for a large baking distributor. His one overriding goal was for his children to study, graduate from college, and "make something of their lives."

My mom struggled with clinical depression and an emotionally unavailable husband. Raised under an abusive father, she suffocated under the weight of raising her four children alone. Her married life, like her childhood, was marked by sadness and loneliness.

My siblings and I emerged out of that environment scarred. We were emotionally underdeveloped and starved for affection and attention. We each left home for college, trying unsuccessfully not to look back.

From the outside our home, like so many others, appeared okay. It seemed better, at least, than most of my friends' situations. The house of cards, however, came tumbling down when I was sixteen. My older brother broke an invisible rule of our family by disobeying my father and quitting college. Even worse, he announced that Reverend and Mrs. Moon, founders of the Unification Church, were the true parents of humankind. For the next ten years he was declared dead and forbidden to return home. My parents were ashamed and crushed. They drew back from extended family and friends. The pressure and stress of his dramatic leaving exposed the large craters and holes in our family functioning. We splintered further apart.

It would take us almost two decades to begin recovering.

What is perhaps most tragic is that my dad's spirituality and loyal involvement in his church (he was the one member of our family with any spark of genuine faith) had little impact on his marriage and parenting. The way he functioned as a father, husband, and employee reflected his culture and family of origin rather than the new family of Jesus.

My family is undoubtedly different from yours. But one thing I've learned after thirty years of working closely with families is this: your family, like mine, is also marked by the consequences of the disobedience of our first parents as described in Genesis 3. Shame, secrets, lies, betrayals, relationship breakdowns, disappointments, and unresolved longings for unconditional love lie beneath the veneer of even the most respectable families.

Coming to Faith in Christ

Disillusioned and unsure of God's existence, by the age of thirteen I had left the church, convinced it was irrelevant to "real life." It was through a Christian concert in a small church and a Bible study on our university campus that, by God's grace, I became a Christian. I was nineteen. The enormity of God's love in Christ overwhelmed me. I immediately began a passionate quest to know this living Jesus who had revealed himself to me.

For the next seventeen years, I plunged headfirst into my new-found evangelical/charismatic tradition, absorbing every drop of discipleship and spirituality I could. I prayed and read Scripture. I consumed Christian books. I participated in small groups and attended church regularly. I learned about spiritual disciplines. I served eagerly with my gifts. I gave away money freely. I shared my faith with anyone who would listen.

Following college graduation, I taught high school English for one year and then worked for three years on staff with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a Christian ministry serving college students. Eventually, this led me to Princeton and Gordon-Conwell Theological seminaries, one year in Costa Rica to learn Spanish, and the planting of a multiethnic church in Queens, New York.

For those first seventeen years as a devoted follower of Christ, however, the emotional aspects of my humanity remained largely untouched. They were rarely talked about in Sunday school classes, small groups, or any church leadership settings. In fact, the phrase “emotional aspects of my humanity” seemed to belong in a professional counselor’s vocabulary, not the vocabulary of the church.

Trying Different Approaches to Discipleship

Just as my ministry leadership seemed to be reaching full swing, Geri, my wife, slowly began to protest that something was desperately wrong—wrong with me and wrong with the church. I knew she might be right so I kept trying to implement different discipleship emphases that, to a certain degree, helped me. My conversation with myself went something like this:

“More Bible study, Pete. That will change people. Their minds will be renewed. Changed lives will follow.”

“No. It is body life. Get everyone in deeper levels of community, in small groups. That will do it!”

“Pete, remember, deep change requires the power of the Spirit. That can only come through prayer. Spend more time in prayer yourself and schedule more prayer meetings at New Life. God doesn’t move unless we pray.”

“No, these are spiritual warfare issues. The reason people aren’t really changing is you are not confronting the demonic powers in and

around them. Apply Scripture and pray in Jesus' authority for people to be set free from the evil one."

"Worship. That's it. If people will only soak in the presence of God in worship, that will work."

"Remember Christ's words from Matthew 25:40. We meet Christ when we give freely to 'the least of these brothers and sisters of mine,' those sick, unknown, in prison. Get them involved in serving among the poor; they will change."

"No, Pete, you need people who hear God in an exceptional way and have prophetic insight. They will finally break the unseen chains around people."

"Enough, Pete. People don't really understand the grace of God in the gospel. Our standing before God is based on Jesus' record and performance, not our own. It is his righteousness, not ours! Pound it into their heads every day, as Luther said, and they'll change!"

There is biblical truth in each of these perspectives. I believe all of them have a place in our spiritual journey and development. You, no doubt, have experienced God and his presence through one or more of these in your walk with Christ.

The problem, however, is that you inevitably find, as I did, something is still missing. In fact, the spirituality of most current discipleship models often only adds an additional protective layer against people growing up emotionally. When people have authentic spiritual experiences—such as worship, prayer, Bible studies, and fellowship—they mistakenly believe they are doing fine, even if their relational life is fractured and their interior world is disordered. Their apparent "progress" then provides a spiritual reason for not doing the hard work of maturing.

They are deceived.

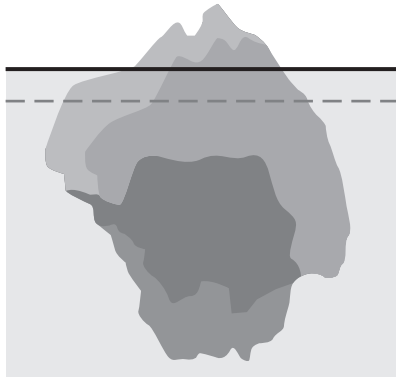
I know. I lived that way for almost seventeen years. Because of

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the spiritual growth in certain areas of my life and in those around me, I ignored the glaring signs of emotional immaturity that were everywhere in and around me.

In our more honest moments, most of us will admit that, much like an iceberg, we are made up of deep layers that exist well beneath our day-to-day awareness. As the following illustration shows, only about 10 percent of an iceberg is visible. This 10 percent represents the ways we conduct ourselves and the changes we make that others can see. We are nicer people, more respectful. We attend church and participate regularly. We “clean up our lives” somewhat by addressing any issues with alcohol and drugs to foul language to illicit behavior and beyond. We begin to pray and share Christ with others.

Iceberg Model What Lies Beneath the Surface



But the roots of who we are continue unchanged and unmoved.

Contemporary spiritual formation and discipleship models address some of that 90 percent below the surface. The problem is that a large portion (see below the dotted line) remains untouched by Jesus Christ until there is a serious engagement with what I call “emotionally healthy spirituality.”

Getting My Attention through Pain

Three things finally dragged me, kicking and screaming, to open up to the notion of emotionally healthy spirituality.

First, I was not experiencing the joy or contentment Scripture promises us in Christ. I was unhappy, frustrated, overworked, and harried. God had brought me into the Christian life with the offer, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30), an invitation to a free and abundant life. But I wasn’t feeling it.

A yoke, in ancient Palestine, was made of wood, handmade to fit perfectly to the neck and shoulders of oxen and prevent chafing or cutting. In the same way, Jesus’ assurance of a “light, easy yoke” can be translated as follows: “I have crafted a life for you, a yoke for you to wear that perfectly fits who you are. It is light and easy, I promise.” The reality, however, is that after many years as an active Christian, I felt exhausted and in need of a break. My life was lived more out of reaction to what other people did or might do or what they thought or might think about me. I knew in my head we were to live to please God. Living like that was another matter. Jesus’ yoke felt burdensome.

Second, I was angry, bitter, and depressed. For five years I had attempted to do the work of two or three people. We had two services in English in the morning and one in the afternoon in Spanish. I preached at all of them. When my associate in our afternoon Spanish congregation left the church with two hundred of the two hundred and fifty members to start his own church, I found myself hating him. I tried, without success, to forgive him.

I experienced the growing tension of a double life—preaching love and forgiveness on Sundays and cursing alone in my car on Mondays. The gap between my beliefs and my experience now revealed itself with terrifying clarity.

Third, Geri was lonely, tired of functioning as a single mom with

our four daughters. She wanted more from our marriage and grew frustrated enough to confront me. She had finally come to a place where she would not accept my excuses, delays, or avoidant behavior. She had nothing else to lose.

Late one evening, as I was sitting on our bed reading, she entered the room and calmly informed me: “Pete, I’d be happier single than married to you. I am getting off this roller coaster. I love you but refuse to live this way anymore. I have waited. . . . I have tried talking to you. You aren’t listening. I can’t change you. That is up to you. But I am getting on with my life.”

She was resolute: “Oh, yes, by the way, the church you pastor? I quit. Your leadership isn’t worth following.”

For a brief moment, I understood why people murder those they love. She had exposed my nakedness. A part of me wanted to strangle her. Mostly I felt deeply ashamed. It was almost too much for my weak ego to bear.

Nonetheless, this was probably the most loving thing Geri has done for me in our entire marriage. While she could not articulate it yet at that point, she realized something vital: emotional health and spiritual maturity are inseparable. It is not possible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.

While I sincerely loved Jesus Christ and believed many truths about him, I was an emotional infant unwilling to look at my immaturity.

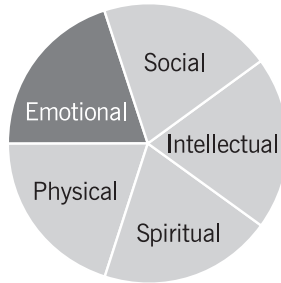
Geri’s leaving the church pushed me over the brink to look beneath the surface of my iceberg to depths that were, until this time, too frightening to consider. Pain has an amazing ability to open us to new truth and to get us moving. I finally acknowledged the painful truth that huge areas of my life (or iceberg, if you prefer) remained untouched by Jesus Christ. My biblical knowledge, leadership position, seminary training, experience, and skills had not changed that embarrassing reality.

I was engaged in what I now characterize as “emotionally unhealthy spirituality.” I was the senior pastor of a church, but I longed to escape and join the ranks of church leavers.

Respecting Your Full Humanity

God made us as whole people, in his image (Genesis 1:27). That image includes physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and social dimensions. Take a look at the following illustration:

Different Parts/Components of Who We Are



Ignoring any aspect of who we are as men and women made in God’s image always results in destructive consequences—in our relationship with God, with others, and with ourselves. If you meet someone, for example, who is mentally or physically challenged, his or her lack of mental or physical development is readily apparent. An autistic child in a crowded playground standing alone for hours without interacting with other children stands out.

Emotional underdevelopment, however, is not so obvious when we first meet people. Over time, as we become involved with them, that reality becomes readily apparent.

I had ignored the “emotional component” in my seeking of God for seventeen years. The spiritual-discipleship approaches of the churches and ministries that had shaped me did not have the language, theology,

or training to help me in this area. It didn't matter how many books I read or seminars I attended in the other areas—physical, social, intellectual, spiritual. It didn't matter how many years passed, whether seventeen or another thirty. I would remain an emotional infant until this was exposed and transformed through Jesus Christ. The spiritual foundation upon which I had built my life (and had taught others) was cracked. There was no hiding it from those closest to me.

When I finally discovered the link between emotional maturity and spiritual maturity, a Copernican revolution began for me and there was no going back. And I don't use the word *revolution* lightly. The spiritual pathway described in this book is radical. It cuts to the root of everything about our lives, including our entire approach to following Jesus.

Making the link between emotional and spiritual maturity transformed my personal journey with Christ, my marriage, parenting, and, ultimately, New Life Fellowship Church. If you accept the invitation to embark on this path, it will do the same for you. And only a revolution in the way we follow Jesus will bring about the profound and lasting change we long for in our lives. Without that kind of change, we're likely to find ourselves trapped in a spiritual rut similar to the one Jay, one of our church members, once described to me: "I was a Christian for twenty-two years. But instead of being a twenty-two-year-old Christian, I was a one-year-old Christian twenty-two times! I just kept doing the same things over and over and over again."

Diagnosing the Problem: The Top Ten Symptoms of Emotionally Unhealthy Spirituality

What exactly are the indicators, or symptoms, of an emotionally unhealthy spirituality? Before we explore the pathway that leads

us out of our ruts and into a healthy spirituality, it is essential to clearly identify the primary symptoms of emotionally *unhealthy* spirituality—the patterns of thought and behavior that dig the ruts in the first place and then wreak havoc in our personal lives and our churches.

In short order, here are the top ten symptoms of emotionally *unhealthy* spirituality:

1. Using God to run from God
2. Ignoring anger, sadness, and fear
3. Dying to the wrong things
4. Denying the impact of the past on the present
5. Dividing life into “secular” and “sacred” compartments
6. Doing *for* God instead of being *with* God
7. Spiritualizing away conflict
8. Covering over brokenness, weakness, and failure
9. Living without limits
10. Judging other people’s spiritual journey

1. Using God to Run from God

Few killer viruses are more difficult to discern than this one. On the surface, all appears to be healthy and working well, but it’s not. This virus hides behind hours and hours spent reading one Christian book after another . . . engaging in endless Christian responsibilities outside the home . . . all that extra time devoted to prayer and Bible study. You might wonder how such things could be anything but good for the soul. Such Christian activities become detrimental when we use them in an unconscious attempt to escape pain.

In my case, using God to run from God happens when I create a great deal of “God-activity” in order to avoid difficult areas in my life God wants to change. I know I’m in trouble when I . . .

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- Do God's work to satisfy me, not him
- Do things in God's name he never asked me to do
- Pray about God doing my will, not about me surrendering to his will
- Demonstrate "Christian behaviors" so significant people think well of me
- Focus on certain theological points out of concern for my fears and unresolved emotional issues rather than out of concern for God's truth
- Use biblical truth to judge and devalue others
- Exaggerate my accomplishments for God to subtly compete with others
- Make pronouncements like, "The Lord told me I should do this," when the truth is, "I *think* the Lord told me to do this"
- Use Scripture to justify the sinful parts of my family relationships, cultural values, and national policies, instead of evaluating them under God's lordship
- Hide behind God talk, deflecting the spotlight from my inner cracks, and become defensive about my failures
- Apply biblical truths selectively to avoid anything that would require making significant life changes

How about an example? John uses God to validate his strong opinions on issues ranging from the appropriate length of women's skirts in church to political candidates to gender roles to his inability to negotiate issues with fellow non-Christian managers at work. He does not listen to or check out the innumerable assumptions he makes about others. He quickly jumps to conclusions. His friends, family, and coworkers find him unsafe and condescending.

John then goes on to convince himself he is doing God's work by misapplying selected verses of Scripture. "Of course that person hates

me,” he says to himself. “All those who desire to be godly will suffer persecution.” Ultimately, however, he is using God to run from God.

2. Ignoring Anger, Sadness, and Fear

Many Christians believe wholeheartedly that anger, sadness, and fear are sins to be avoided. When we feel these emotions, we’re sure it’s an indication that something is wrong with our spiritual life. Anger is dangerous and unloving toward others. Sadness indicates a lack of faith in the promises of God; depression surely reveals a life outside the will of God! And fear? The Bible is filled with commands to “not be anxious about anything” and “do not fear” (Philippians 4:6 and Isaiah 41:10).

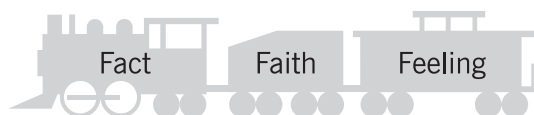
So what do we do? We inflate ourselves with a false confidence to make those feelings go away. We quote Scripture, pray Scripture, and memorize Scripture—anything to keep ourselves from being overwhelmed by those feelings!

Like most Christians, I was taught that almost all feelings are unreliable and not to be trusted. They go up and down and are the last thing we should be attending to in our spiritual lives. It is true that some Christians live in the extreme of following their feelings in an unhealthy, unbiblical way. It is more common, however, to encounter Christians who do not believe they have permission to admit their feelings or express them openly. This applies especially to such “difficult” feelings as fear, sadness, shame, anger, hurt, and pain. And yet, how can we listen to what God is saying and evaluate what is going on inside when we cut ourselves off from our emotions?

To feel is to be human. To minimize or deny what we feel is a distortion of what it means to be image bearers of God. To the degree that we are unable to express our emotions, we remain impaired in our ability to love God, others, and ourselves well. Why? Because our feelings are a component of what it means to be made in the image

of God. To cut them out of our spirituality is to slice off an essential part of our humanity.

To support what I mistakenly believed about God and my feelings I misapplied the following illustration:¹



Used by permission.

I thought my spiritual life should head down the tracks beginning with the engine called “fact,” which is what God said in Scripture. If I felt angry, for example, I needed to start with fact: “What are you angry about, Pete? So this person lied to you and cheated you. God is on the throne. Jesus was lied to and cheated too. So stop the anger.”

After considering the fact of God’s truth, I then considered my faith—the issue of my will. Did I choose to place my faith in the fact of God’s Word? Or did I follow my feelings and “fleshly” inclinations, which were not to be trusted?

At the end of the train was the caboose and what was to be trusted least—my feelings. “Under no circumstances, Pete, rely on your feelings. The heart is sinful and desperately wicked. Who can understand it [see Jeremiah 17:9]? This will only lead you astray into sin.”

When taken in its entirety, the practical implications of such an imbalanced and narrow belief system are, as we shall see later, enormous—a devaluing and repression of what it means to be both human and made in the image of God. Sadly, some of our misguided Christian beliefs and expectations have, as Thomas Merton wrote, “merely deadened our humanity, instead of setting it free to develop richly, in all its capacities, under the influence of grace.”²

3. Dying to the Wrong Things

As Iraneus said many centuries ago, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”

True, Jesus did say, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). But when we apply this verse rigidly, without qualification from the rest of Scripture, it leads to the very opposite of what God intends. It results in a narrow, faulty theology that says, “The more miserable you are, the more you suffer, the more God loves you. Disregard your unique personhood; it has no place in God’s kingdom.”

We are to die to the sinful parts of who we are—such as defensiveness, detachment from others, arrogance, stubbornness, hypocrisy, judgmentalism, a lack of vulnerability—as well as the more obvious sins: Do not murder. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Speak the truth (Exodus 20:13–16 and Ephesians 4:25).

We are not called by God to die to the “good” parts of who we are. God never asked us to die to the healthy desires and pleasures of life—to friendships, joy, art, music, beauty, recreation, laughter, and nature. God plants desires in our hearts so we will nurture and enjoy them. Often these desires and passions are invitations from God, gifts from him. Yet somehow we feel guilty unwrapping these presents.

When I ask people, “Tell me about your wishes, hopes, and dreams,” they are often speechless.

“Why do you ask?” they respond. “Isn’t my only wish, hope, and dream supposed to be to serve Jesus?”

Not exactly. God never asks us to annihilate the self. We are not to become “non-persons” when we become Christians. The very opposite is true. God intends our deeper, truer self, which he created, to blossom as we follow him. God has endowed each of us with certain essential qualities that reflect and express him in a unique way. In fact, an essential part of the sanctification process—becoming more like

Jesus—is allowing the Holy Spirit to strip away the false constructs we have accumulated so our true selves in Christ can emerge.

4. Denying the Impact of the Past on the Present

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, whether as a child, teenager, or adult, we are, in the dramatic language of the Bible, born again (John 3:3). The apostle Paul describes it this way: “The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

These two verses and their meanings, however, are sometimes misunderstood. Yes, it is true that when we come to Christ, our sins are wiped away and we are given a new name, a new identity, a new future, a new life. It is truly a miracle. We are declared righteous before God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (Philippians 3:9–10). The eternal, holy God of the universe is no longer our judge but our Father. That is the great news of the gospel. But we need to understand this does not mean that our past won’t continue to influence us in different ways. For years, I was under the delusion that because I accepted Jesus, my old life was no longer in me. My past before Christ was painful. I wanted to forget it. I never wanted to look back. Life was so much better now that Jesus was with me.

I thought I was free.

Geri, after nine years of marriage, knew better. I will never forget the first time we made a genogram—a diagram outlining some of the patterns of our families. Our counselor at the time took about an hour to ask probing questions about the interactions between members of both of our families, to write two or three adjectives to describe our parents and their relationships.

When the counselor finished, he simply asked us, “Do you see any similarities between your marriage and your parents’?”

We both sat there dumbfounded.

We were evangelical Christians. We were committed and stable.

Our priorities and life choices were very different from that of our parents'. Yet, underneath the surface, our marriage bore a striking resemblance to that of our parents'. Gender roles; the handling of anger and conflict and shame; how we defined success; our view of family, children, recreation, pleasure, sexuality, grieving; and our relationships with friends had all been shaped by our families of origin and our cultures.

Sitting in that counselor's office that day, embarrassed by the state of our marriage, we learned a lesson we would never forget: even though we had been committed Christians for almost twenty years, our ways of relating mirrored much more our family of origin than the way God intended for his new family in Christ.

The work of growing in Christ (what theologians call *sanctification*) does not mean we don't go back to the past as we press ahead to what God has for us. It actually demands we go back in order to break free from unhealthy and destructive patterns that prevent us from loving ourselves and others as God designed.

5. Dividing Life into "Secular" and "Sacred" Compartments

Human beings have an uncanny ability to live compartmentalized, double lives.

Frank attends church and sings about God's love. On the way home he pronounces the death penalty over another driver. For Frank, Sunday church is for God. Monday to Saturday is for work.

Jane yells at her husband, berating him for his lack of spiritual leadership with the children. He walks away deflated and crushed. She walks away convinced she has fought valiantly in God's name.

Ken has a disciplined devotional time with God each day before going to work, but then does not think of God's presence with him all through the day at work or when he returns home to be with his wife and children.

Judith cries during songs about the love and grace of God at her church. But she regularly complains and blames others for the difficulties and trials in her life.

It is so easy to compartmentalize God, relegating him to “Christian activities” around church and our spiritual disciplines without thinking of him in the way we navigate our marriages, discipline our children, spend our money, enjoy our recreation, or even study for exams. According to Gallup polls and sociologists, one of the greatest scandals of our day is that “evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered and sexually immoral as the world in general.”³ The statistics are devastating:

- Church members divorce their spouses as often as their secular neighbors.
- Church members beat their wives as often as their neighbors.
- Church members’ giving patterns indicate they are almost as materialistic as non-Christians.
- White evangelicals are the most likely people to object to neighbors of another race.
- Of the “higher-commitment” evangelicals, a rapidly growing number of young people think cohabitation is acceptable prior to marriage.⁴

Ron Sider, in his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, summarizes the level of our compartmentalization: “Whether the issue is marriage and sexuality or money and care for the poor, evangelicals today are living scandalously unbiblical lives. . . . The data suggest that in many crucial areas evangelicals are not living any differently from their unbelieving neighbors.”⁵ But you don’t need a lot of statistics to know how true this is. Just ask Angela, a new member of our congregation whose question to me also explained why she had dropped

out of church for five years: “Why is it that so many Christians make such lousy human beings?”

The consequences of this on our witness to Jesus Christ are incalculable, both for ourselves and the world around us. We miss out on the genuine joy of life with Jesus Christ that he promises (John 15:11). And the watching world shakes its head, incredulous that we can be so blind we can’t see the large gap between our words and our everyday lives.

6. Doing for God Instead of Being with God

Being productive and getting things done are high priorities in Western culture. Praying and enjoying God’s presence for no other reason than to delight in him was a luxury, I was told, that we could take pleasure in once we got to heaven. For now, there was too much to be done. People were lost. The world was in deep trouble. And God had entrusted us with the good news of the gospel.

For most of my Christian life, I wondered if monks were truly Christian. Their lifestyle seemed escapist. Surely they were not in the will of God. What were they doing to spread the gospel in a world dying without Christ? What about all the sheep who were lost and without direction? Didn’t they know the laborers are few (Matthew 9:37)?

The messages were clear:

- Doing lots of work for God is a sure sign of a growing spirituality.
- It is all up to you. And you’ll never finish while you’re alive on earth.
- God can’t move unless you pray.
- You are responsible to share Christ around you at all times or people will go to hell.
- Things will fall apart if you don’t persevere and hold things together.

Are all these things wrong? No. But work *for* God that is not nourished by a deep interior life *with* God will eventually be contaminated by other things such as ego, power, needing approval of and from others, and buying into the wrong ideas of success and the mistaken belief that we can't fail. When we work for God because of these things, our experience of the gospel often falls off center. We become "human doings" not "human beings." Our experiential sense of worth and validation gradually shifts from God's unconditional love for us in Christ to our works and performance. The joy of Christ gradually disappears. Our activity for God can only properly flow from a life *with* God.

We cannot give what we do not possess. Doing for God in a way that is proportionate to our being with God is the only pathway to a pure heart and seeing God (Matthew 5:8).

7. Spiritualizing Away Conflict

Nobody likes conflict. Yet conflict is everywhere—from law courts to workplaces to classrooms to neighborhoods to marriages to parenting our children to close friendships to when someone has spoken or acted toward you inappropriately. But perhaps one of the most destructive myths alive in the Christian community today is the belief that smoothing over disagreements or "sweeping them under the rug" is part of what it means to follow Jesus. For this reason, churches, small groups, ministry teams, denominations, and communities continue to experience the pain of unresolved conflicts.

Very, very few of us come from families in which conflicts are resolved in a mature, healthy way. Most of us simply bury our tensions and move on. When I became a Christian I also became the great "peace-maker." I did anything to keep unity and love flowing in the church as well as in my marriage and family. I saw conflict as something that had to be fixed as quickly as possible. Like radioactive waste from a nuclear power plant, if not contained, I feared it might unleash terrible damage.

So I did what most Christians do: I lied a lot, both to myself and others.

What do you do when faced with the tension and mess of disagreements? Some of us may be guilty of one or more of the following:

- Say one thing to people's faces and then another behind their backs
- Make promises we have no intention of keeping
- Blame
- Attack
- Give people the silent treatment
- Become sarcastic
- Give in because we are afraid of not being liked
- "Leak" our anger by sending an email containing a not-so-subtle criticism
- Tell only half the truth because we can't bear to hurt a friend's feelings
- Say yes when we mean no
- Avoid and withdraw and cut off
- Find an outside person with whom we can share in order to ease our anxiety

Jesus shows us that healthy Christians do not avoid conflict. His life was filled with it! He was in regular conflict with the religious leaders, the crowds, the disciples—even his own family. Out of a desire to bring true peace, Jesus disrupted the false peace all around him. He refused to spiritualize conflict avoidance.

8. Covering Over Brokenness, Weakness, and Failure

The pressure to present an image of ourselves as strong and spiritually "together" hovers over most of us. We feel guilty for not measuring

up, for not making the grade. We forget that not one of us is perfect and that we are all sinners. We forget that David, one of God's most beloved friends, committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband. Talk about a scandal! How many of us would not have erased that from the history books forever lest the name of God be disgraced?

David did not. Instead, he used his absolute power as king to ensure the details of his colossal failure were published in the history books for all future generations! In fact, David wrote a song about his failure to be sung in Israel's worship services and to be published in their worship manual, the psalms. (Hopefully, he asked Bathsheba's permission first!) David knew, "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

Another of God's great men, the apostle Paul, wrote about God not answering his prayers and about his "thorn in [the] flesh." He thanked God for his brokenness, reminding his readers that Christ's power "is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). How many Christians do you know who would do such a thing today?

The Bible does not spin the flaws and weaknesses of its heroes. Moses was a murderer. Hosea's wife was a prostitute. Peter rebuked God! Noah got drunk. Jonah was a racist. Jacob was a liar. John Mark deserted Paul. Elijah burned out. Jeremiah was depressed and suicidal. Thomas doubted. Moses had a temper. Timothy had ulcers. And all these people send the same message: that every human being on earth, regardless of their gifts and strengths, is weak, vulnerable, and dependent on God and others.

For years I would observe unusually gifted people perform in extraordinary ways—whether in the arts, sports, leadership, politics, business, academics, parenting, or church—and wonder if somehow they had escaped the brokenness that plagues the rest of us. Now I know they hadn't. We are all deeply flawed and broken. There are no exceptions.

9. Living Without Limits

I was taught that good Christians constantly give and tend to the needs of others. I wasn't supposed to say no to opportunities to help or to requests for help because that would be selfish.

Some Christians are selfish. They believe in God and Jesus Christ, but live their lives as if God doesn't exist. They don't think or care about loving and serving others outside of their families and friends. That is a tragedy.

I meet many more Christians, however, who carry around guilt for never doing enough. "Pete, I spent two hours on the phone listening to him and it still wasn't enough," a friend recently complained to me. "It makes me want to run away."

This guilt often leads to discouragement. And this discouragement often leads Christians to disengagement and isolation from "needy people" because they don't know what else to do.

The core spiritual issue here relates to our limits and our humanity. We are not God. We cannot serve everyone in need. We are human. When Paul said, "I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13), the context was that of learning to be content in all circumstances. The strength he received from Christ was not the strength to change, deny, or defy his circumstances; it was the strength to be content in the midst of them, to surrender to God's loving will for him (Philippians 4:11–13).

Jesus modeled this for us as a human being—fully God yet fully human. He did not heal every sick person in Palestine. He did not raise every dead person. He did not feed all the hungry beggars or set up job development centers for the poor of Jerusalem.

He didn't do it, and we shouldn't feel we have to. But somehow we do. Why don't we take appropriate care of ourselves? Why are so many Christians, along with the rest of our culture, frantic, exhausted, overloaded, and hurried?

Few Christians make the connection between love of self and love of others. Sadly, many believe that taking care of themselves is a sin, a “psychologizing” of the gospel taken from our self-centered culture. I believed that myself for years.

It is true we are called to consider others more important than ourselves (Philippians 2:3). We are called to lay down our lives for others (1 John 3:16). But remember, you first need a “self” to lay down.

As Parker Palmer said, “Self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give it the care it requires, we do it not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch.”⁶

10. Judging Other People’s Spiritual Journey

“The monk,” said one of the Desert Fathers, “must die to his neighbor and never judge him at all in any way whatever.” He continued: “If you are occupied with your own faults, you have no time to see those of your neighbor.”⁷

I was taught it was my responsibility to correct people in error or in sin and to always counsel people who were mixed up spiritually. I therefore felt guilty if I saw something questionable and did nothing to point it out. But I felt even guiltier when I was supposed to fix someone’s problem and had to admit “I don’t know how” or “I don’t know what to say.” Wasn’t I commanded to be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in me (1 Peter 3:15)?

Of course, many of us have no trouble at all dispensing advice or pointing out wrongdoing. We spend so much time at it that we end up self-deceived, thinking we have much to give and therefore little to receive from others. After all, we’re the ones who are right, aren’t we? This often leads to an inability to receive from ordinary, less mature people than ourselves. We only receive from experts or professionals.

This has always been one of the greatest dangers in Christianity. It becomes “us versus them.” In Jesus’ day there was the superior “in group” of Pharisees who obeyed God’s commands. And there was the inferior “out group” of sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes.

Sadly, we often turn our differences into moral superiority or virtues. I see it all the time. We judge people for their music (too soft or too loud). We judge them for dressing up or dressing down, for the movies they watch and the cars they buy. We create never-ending groups to subtly categorize people:

- “Those artists and musicians. They are so flaky.”
- “Those engineers. They are so cerebral. They’re cold as fish.”
- “Men are idiots. They’re socially infantile.”
- “Women are overly sensitive and emotional.”
- “The rich are self-indulgent and selfish.”
- “The poor are lazy.”

We judge the Presbyterians for being too structured. We judge the Pentecostals for lacking structure. We judge Episcopalians for their candles and their written prayers. We judge Roman Catholics for their view of the Lord’s Supper and Orthodox Christians from the Eastern part of the world for their strange culture and love for icons.

By failing to let others be themselves before God and move at their own pace, we inevitably project onto them our own discomfort with their choice to live life differently than we do. We end up eliminating them in our minds, trying to make others like us, abandoning them altogether or falling into a “Who cares?” indifference toward them. In some ways the silence of unconcern can be more deadly than hate. Like Jesus said, unless I first take the log out of my own eye, knowing that I have huge blind spots, I am dangerous. I must see the extensive damage sin has done to every part of who I am—emotion, intellect,

body, will, and spirit—before I can attempt to remove the speck from the eye of another (Matthew 7:1–5).

The Revolutionary Antidote

The pathway to unleashing the transformative power of Jesus to heal our spiritual lives is found in the joining of emotional health and contemplative spirituality. (See Appendix B for a definition of emotional health and contemplative spirituality and why both are needed).

Now let me invite you to come with me for an exciting journey on the seven pathways of emotionally healthy spirituality. We will begin by looking at the essential first step of knowing yourself so that you may know God.

God, when I consider this chapter, the only thing I can say is, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Thank you that I stand before you in the righteousness of Jesus, in his perfect record and performance, not my own. I ask that you would not simply heal the symptoms of what is not right in my life, but that you would surgically remove all that is in me that does not belong to you. As I think about what I have read, Lord, pour light over the things that are hidden. May I see clearly as you hold me tenderly. In Jesus’ name, amen.