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# THE SAFEST PLACE ON EARTH

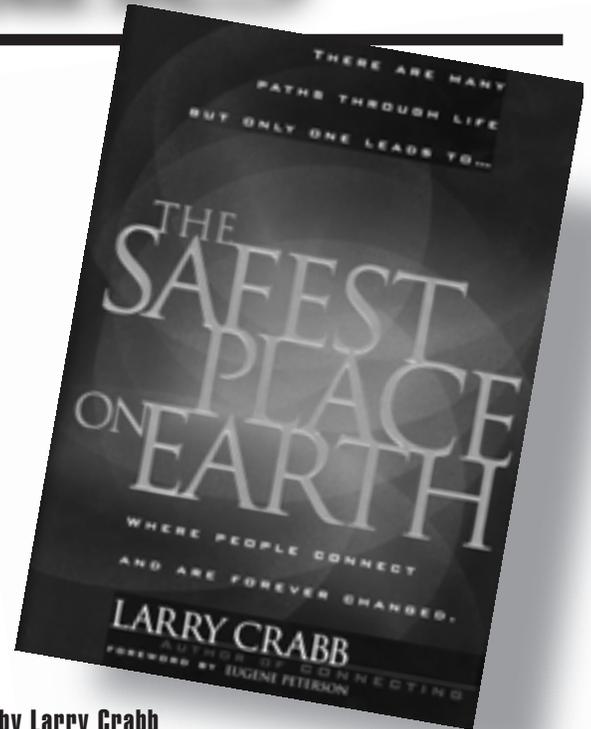
## A Quick Focus

### The Book's Purpose

- Replace a psychological understanding of human personality with a spiritual one
- Help believers understand that brokenness is the pathway to a deeper relationship with God and others
- Demonstrate how spiritual connection with others transmits God's grace and dramatically changes lives

### The Book's Message

We must go beyond psychology to spirituality, beyond managing our pain to discovering God. And that means moving into the Upper Room of our lives. This Upper Room contains God's spiritual dynamic, while the Lower Room is furnished with fleshly strategies for dealing with life. Rather than rearranging the contents of the lower level, we must abandon it and go upstairs, where God waits to meet us.



by Larry Crabb  
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Our Heavenly Father designed us to reach this upper level but not to journey there alone. For that we need community. In this safe haven we will find neither a set of programs nor a set of rules, but fellow pilgrims who accompany us along the road to God, encouraging and affirming what the Holy Spirit is doing in us. 

### Six Main Points

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# Why Care About COMMUNITY?

The path toward Christian maturity is laced with unexpected twists and turns; navigating it can be downright treacherous at times. And the difficulties we encounter can result in confusion and disappointment.

But, in God's providence, there is purpose in the pain. Confusion can result in openness and vulnerability—a readiness to listen and learn. And the upside of disappointment is hope, an understanding that God is at work in our lives and intimately concerned about us.

**"Once you grant the unconfusing and thoroughly nondisappointing fact that Christ's atonement guarantees the Spirit's ceaseless work in our lives—from conception through death and on to eternity—then disappointment brings forth better dreams, the longing for a larger hope, without which we are intolerably miserable."**

While there is power in Christian community to change lives, it is largely untapped; for some, this can be overwhelmingly disappointing. And deciphering the exact kind of relationship that can heal a soul is a daunting task, one that can easily result in a sense of confusion. Nevertheless, if we are *open* to hear the Spirit's voice, we will derive a sense of *hope* about the incredible power of spiritual community.

## A Framework for the Discussion

Most evangelicals agree on the core truths of the Christian faith (identified by C.S. Lewis as "mere Christianity"), but there is a wide spectrum of beliefs about the value of psychology and the legitimacy of counseling for people of faith.

These views form a framework and a basis for this discussion of

the healing power of safe community:

- Psychological insights may prove useful in helping people on the road to wholeness, but only special revelation is sufficient to construct a vision of what wholeness looks like and how to achieve it.
- Christians may need counseling, but that task is best completed in the context of a spiritual community.

**"Psychotherapy, when seen as something other than soul care, is illegitimate."**

- We must reject a need-centered view of human nature. Our primary focus should be on our completeness in Christ, not on gaining a sense of personal significance.
- The Bible should create a foundation for counseling, but we must approach Scripture both accurately and honestly, involving the spiritual community in its application to our lives. Scripture cannot be reduced to a moralistic prescription, nor should it be used to legitimize a preconceived psychological framework.
- There is no meaningful distinction between psychological and spiritual problems. All personal problems are best dealt with in the context of a spiritual community.
- A local church can provide soul care to the extent that it offers spiritual friendship and spiritual direction. Not every church, however, fulfills these roles.

## The Power of Brokenness

Our disappointment with the status quo makes us hungry for change, but once we discover that

such change involves brokenness, we may be tempted to reconsider. The spiritual community, however, exists to support the seeker in his brokenness and to provide a safe haven in which he can experience God's restoration.

True spiritual communities understand that those who seek after God go through deep valleys where they cannot find Him. They also know that God wants us to relinquish our right to feel good in favor of focusing on Him. And they accompany us on that journey rather than trying to change its nature.

**"I have given up on healing, if healing means a repair job on what is wrong inside me that will lessen my struggles."** 

## What Spiritual Community IS and IS NOT

What is the difference between a true spiritual community and a typical group of Christians in relationship with one another? Let's begin with the real McCoy. True community is characterized by openness, by taking off the masks and becoming authentic and vulnerable before one another. This leads to a kind of intimacy we might characterize as "connecting" or "togetherness," a soulish bond which encourages us to move toward Christ.

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**SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY** continued from page 2

But how does this work in actual practice? Take the example of a meeting between a struggling Christian and his spiritually-minded friend. The first man is being sued for divorce by his wife of 14 years and stands to lose his children. Of course, the friend wants to see the marriage restored. But that goal is secondary to his primary objective, to direct his brother to God's higher purposes. For that he must enter the *Upper Room* of his life, that place where he can meet God and fulfill His purposes, regardless of the circumstances.

To do this, the friend himself must be experiencing life in the Upper Room. He must listen to his brother and accept him. And he must ask God to establish a dynamic bond between the two. When this connection takes place, divine power is released, and the sufferer is encouraged to move toward God.

**"The church is a community of people on a journey to God."**

Spiritual community does not exist to make our lives more comfortable. It is about a journey toward God, about discerning His higher purposes in our circumstances and seeking Him together. How is this different from typical Christian fellowship? Brokenness is the key, for only when we are broken do we experience God's love, and only then can we freely share it. Broken people desire community~because it offers safety. The self-sufficient, on the other hand, are threatened by such openness.

**"We need a safe place for weary pilgrims. It's time to put political campaigns and ego-driven agendas and building programs and church activities and inspiring services on the back burner. We need to dive into the unmanageable, messy world of relationships, to admit our failure, to identify our tensions, to explore our shortcomings. We need to become the answer to our Lord's prayer, that we become one the way He and the Father are one."**

Conflict is inherent in human relationships. But the broken people who live in true community have a very different response to conflict than those who are guided by the flesh. In unspiritual community conflict is handled by a series of coping mechanisms, alternative relationships which are superimposed on the conflict. In contrast, spiritual community exposes the

**"The root of all non-medical human struggle is really a spiritual problem, a disconnection from God that creates a disconnection from oneself and from others."**

selfish passions which provoked the conflict, replacing them with holy passions communicated through lives of spiritual people.

But why do these substitute relationships~congeniality, cooperation, consolation, counseling, and conformity~constitute such an entirely unspiritual response? Because they depend on the flesh, "figuring things out through whatever means are available," rather than depending on the Spirit, "listening to God through Word and Spirit."

Throughout this century the conventional wisdom has been that emotional problems are rooted in psychological disorders which require treatment by professionals. But many are now discovering that the effectiveness of such treatment depends more on the therapist's ability to relate and to care than on his insight or technique. If that is true, is not a caring spiritual community ideally equipped to meet that need?

The proponents of the human potential movement in psychology are right~the primary human motivation is self-actualization. Christians agree that this selfish urge is natural, but we must also affirm that it is bad.

God created us to see His glory and His purposes actualized, so the fact that we have a personal agenda conflicts with our very reason for existence.

This passion for self disconnects us from God. Then, when our drive for self-actualization runs headlong into that of others, we disconnect from them as well, and conflict is born. Rather than addressing the selfish passions which produced the conflict, however, we resort to impotent, flesh-driven alternatives.

*Congeniality* hides conflict by creating a buffer zone between ourselves and others, then stuffs it with niceness.

*Cooperation* masks the conflict behind shared activity~without reconciling the individuals involved.

*Consolation* seeks to garner comfort by creating an "inner ring of community." We bask in belonging, while justifying a disdain for outsiders.

*Counseling* seeks to analyze underlying causes and root problems. But identifying responses to conflict neither moves a person toward Christ nor equips him for spiritual community.

**"Counselors who work with the natural energy within a person to promote healthier living are failing to take advantage of the supernatural energy the Spirit has created in their souls."**

*Conformity* uses God's principles as leverage to get us to do and to be better. Mustering up the self-discipline to heed moral principles becomes our main response to conflict. An emphasis on conformity may eclipse more valuable and sustainable means of personal growth, like personal accountability and the practice of spiritual disciplines.

We must look beyond these superficial alternatives for community. In their place, we need to develop connecting relationships in which people feel safe enough to acknowledge their brokenness. Then we can envision what the Spirit wants to do in people's lives and transmit His power from one life to another. 

# The Two Rooms:

Every life contains two compartments, an Upper Room and a Lower Room. The Lower Room contains our selfish human passions. We have arranged its contents to suit our tastes, but we do not feel whole there.

The Lower Room is furnished with: 1) a longing for positive relationships, 2) self-sufficiency, 3) a passion to minimize frustration and maximize satisfaction, and 4) a conscience which rides herd on our pursuit of happiness.

God is not present, or at least his presence is not recognized in the Lower Room. We sense that our true home is elsewhere.

**"C.S. Lewis once said that if we discover desires within us that nothing in this world can satisfy, we really should wonder if we were designed for another world. And those desires are there~God has set eternity in our hearts. Cars and sex and power and achievement are not big enough to fill the space. We long to be caught up in the things bigger than living in the Lower Room can ever provide."**

That sense of belonging can be fulfilled only in the Upper Room. The Upper Room is the new self which God bestows on the believer, a self which is energized by Christ Himself. There, in the very center of our being, the Spirit of Christ resides within us.

The Upper Room is a space created and furnished by Christ himself. There we find love in abundance. There we can enjoy fellowship without the need to figure everything out or to protect our fragility.

## UNDERSTANDING OUR STRUGGLES

The Upper Room is filled with primary things. The external world is alternately good and bad, beautiful and ugly. We still experience this world from the Upper Room, but its components acquire a secondary importance.

Most people dwell in the Lower rather than the Upper Room, and some even do so happily. But there is a growing sentiment in our culture that there must be more. When we tune in to the messages directed to our Lower Room we find that:

- We don't control our sexual appetites.
- We are open to evil spiritual influences.
- We seek our happiness apart from God, which leads to disappointment.
- We cannot relate intimately with others because jealousy, anger, and cliquish tendencies intervene.
- We become slaves to immediate gratification in spite of its long-range consequences.

By contrast, when we listen to those who point us to the Upper Room and walk with us there:

- We choose to help others rather than use them.
- We find a permanent joy which is impervious to difficulties.
- We pursue gentleness rather than fostering irritability.
- We feel secure rather than threatened by others.

We can spend our time trying to rearrange the furniture in the Lower Room, or we can simply move to the Upper Room, where our true life is

centered. To shift our focus, however, we must come face to face with the true nature of our Lower Room. This requires meditation on Scripture, heartfelt prayer, and the encouragement of spiritual community. When we see the Lower Room as the headquarters from which we assert our independence against God, we can then ask God to destroy it.

The next important step is to become part of a church, a spiritual community with which we can make our journey toward God. We must learn to engage in true relationship with others, receiving their help and acting as a channel of God's grace in their lives.

## Unmasking the Lower Room

The Lower Room is the seat of wretchedness, and only when we come to hate it can we truly escape from it. But we must first acknowledge its existence in a world where sinfulness is the norm.

The Enlightenment bequeathed to us a rosier view of human nature. The power of the Spirit to effect a supernatural inner change was supplanted by moral education, and psychological explanations for human behavior replaced spiritual ones.

The Church was influenced by this development as well, vacillating between a conforming moralism and an attempt to inspire us into goodness. But neither approach takes the Lower Room seriously. We cannot achieve spiritual community, because we have bought into a de-Christianized view of human nature, which regards our fallenness as a set of psychological problems.

Not only do we need to appreciate the depth of our depravity, but we must also re-emphasize the priesthood

of all believers. Each of us can draw life from God and transmit it to those around us.

**"The community of God, as it journeys to God, has all the resources within its members to keep us moving."**

The Lower Room, however, is very real. The Bible calls it the *flesh*, our human personality apart from the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Many acknowledge its existence and then minimize its significance by ignoring its awfulness. This leaves us only partially broken. Partially broken people may resist fleshly temptation only to succumb to pride over their accomplishment.

What really fills our Lower Room should make us recoil in holy horror. Each of its furnishings is an utter corruption of God's view of reality. Start with a *passion for self*. We have corrupted the image of God in which He created us for community. Rather than relating by loving and giving, we expect others to love us and supply our needs.

When others don't cooperate with our selfish demands, the second furnishing, a *passion to control*, seems somehow justified. Here we corrupt God's provision of resources designed to carry out His purposes, using them instead to pursue self-sufficiency and self-indulgence.

When we ignore God and rely on ourselves, however, our existential compass no longer points north, so we develop a *passion to define*. Driven to give our lives meaning, we corrupt our life experiences by melting them down into an idol we can follow rather, than trusting our true Guide.

This leads to the final furnishing of the Lower Room, a *passion to perform*. We have corrupted God's morality into an unwanted pressure to do right rather than a gracious provision.

## There Is An Upper Room

Yes, there is something fundamentally rotten about us. But there is also something pure, noble, and godly. And the heart of spiritual community is not focusing on the Lower Room but discovering and energizing what God's Spirit is doing in the Upper Room of people's lives.

Such a focus allows others to feel safe in our presence, for they know that we delight in how God is working in them. Only in the Upper Room can we stare our depravity in the eyes and have a sense of hope rather than utter despair.

**"Within every person, something exists of inestimable value. The Bible calls it a soul."**

Spiritual community is New Covenant community. We are fellow pilgrims who relate to one another on the basis of four provisions made available by the New Covenant.

1. *A New Purity*~ When we experience God's forgiveness in Christ, we are cleansed. God now looks on us as holy, and He delights in us.
2. *A New Identity*~ Though Christians still sin, that behavior now defines how we are rather than who we are. Like those enrolled in a witness protection program, we have a new life based on a new identity.
3. *A New Inclination*~ Like a person who used to hate apple pie but now salivates at its aroma, the Holy Spirit fills us with new desires. Pleasing God becomes a question of want to rather than have to.
4. *A New Power*~ We still battle against the old inclinations. So God also gives us the capacity to follow Him, a power which is released in worship and community.

Each of these provisions of the New Covenant engenders a new passion:

1. Our *new purity* stirs the passion to worship. Worship is the reflex response of His children, for God is no longer a threatening force but a loving Father.
2. Our *new identity* is the springboard for a *passion to trust*. When we realize who we are and what we will be, we have the confidence to continue on toward God.
3. Our *new inclination* stirs a *passion to grow*. We can heed James's admonition to be joyful in trials, because we care more about what God is molding us into than the external pressures which are part of that molding process.
4. Our *new power* unleashes a *passion to obey*. Our failures lead us to brokenness, where we experience God's forgiveness and our desire to please Him grows.

When a Christian brother or sister faces a problem, his or her natural reaction is to revert to fleshly dynamics. We, as spiritual friends, however, must see the Upper Room and envision what that they could be. We then come alongside them, helping them to replace the fleshly dynamic with a spiritual one and releasing them to move toward God.

This can happen only in spiritual community, which is characterized by:

- *Safety*~ Where we can come face to face with both our glory and our shame
- *Vision*~ The capacity to perceive what God is doing in each other
- *Wisdom*~ Discerning the dynamics of the flesh as well as those of the Spirit, so that we can abandon the former and foster the latter
- *Power*~ Pouring the life of Christ into others



# Foundational Convictions CONCERNING COMMUNITY

Christians share the passionate life and energy of the Trinity. When those passions in one person connect with the same passions in another, the result is spiritual community. This is the dynamic we were meant to experience, and we have an innate longing for it. But if we want to experience it we must begin with three foundational convictions.

1. *Spiritual community is the Spirit's doing.* We prefer to reduce spirituality to a programmable formula involving an interplay of known psychological phenomena. But prayerful waiting on God and yielding to His designs should be our approach instead. And that begins with prayer.

**"When spiritual formation permits itself to be dominated by behavioral sciences, it is inevitably secularized and individualized with occasional prayerful nods upwards for help in self-actualization. Narcissus on his knees."** ~Eugene Peterson

2) *We best promote holiness in others by pursuing it in ourselves.* That's because in spiritual community we transmit energy from one person to another, an energy which provokes spiritual passion in others.

3) *Having a safe environment in which we can discover the source of our desires will make us aware of our hunger for God.* The spiritual community must be a place where we can trace these desires back to God and meet Him in our Upper Room.

**"Every bad desire is a corruption of good desire. And every good desire is a meager expression of our deepest desire: to know God."**



## The Role of MYSTICISM

What one person does for another in spiritual community is a mystical, not a managerial, process. Spiritual community occurs when two Christians personally connect and God supernaturally energizes the reality of the New Covenant provisions from one life to the other. It is essentially an inscrutable phenomenon.

Though we cannot explain the workings of spiritual community, we can note the people God typically employs in it~people characterized by spiritual passions. When we assimilate the provisions of the New Covenant, we discover this new set of passions for relating to God and to others:

- *The passion to celebrate.* Regardless of the circumstances of others' lives, we see them in Christ and delight in them. This frees them and releases in them the same passion for worship we experience.
- *The passion to envision.* Knowing that God is working in others just as He is in us moves us to envision how God wants to shape them.
- *The passion to discern.* When we value holiness above comfort and therefore grow in Christ, we are able to discern the energy emanating from the Lower and Upper Rooms of others and are in a position to help them.
- *The passion to empower.* The power of the New Covenant makes us want to worship and obey God and likewise infect others.

Spiritual community, then, provides soul care by releasing our passions into the life of another. We cannot annihilate the Lower Room, nor does it serve any purpose to rearrange its furniture. What we can do, however, is enter into the Upper Room of others' lives and stir up the passions residing there. When people focus on these desires, those of the Lower Room will seem weak.

Real community is possible, as is the change which results from it, but only when the community is truly spiritual~not managerial. Managers are aware of the power of the gospel but nevertheless attain their goals by application of their own resources, reducing the process to a controllable science. Spiritual community, however, cannot be managed, because it is an activity of the Spirit, who cannot be managed. To participate we must abandon our managerial ways and become mystics.

**"Mysticism is the felt arousal of spiritual passions within the regenerate heart, passions that can have no existence apart from a Spirit~revealed knowledge of truth and the promptings of the same Spirit to enjoy that truth."**

Mysticism does not demean rational truth. It is firmly rooted in it. Mysticism does not require some kind of paranormal orientation. It is equally accessible to all believers.

Our response to relational conflict illustrates the need for a mystical approach. When faced with conflict, do we look inside ourselves? Manipulate the relationship? Try to feel better about the situation? Sense a pressure to behave wisely or well? All of these reactions are normal, but they are not good. They come from the Lower Room and represent our attempts to manage our way through life.

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**MYSTICISM** continued from page 6

Only if we abandon management and turn to mysticism will we see with the Spirit's eyes. Only then will we truly celebrate others, even in the midst of conflict. Only then

can true community emerge. But how does this transformation from manager to mystic take place? God has created us to be more than scholars, more than moralists, more

than counselors~He created us for intimate relationship with Him and with others.



## Developing SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

Spiritual community is a dangerous place to be, even if it is the safest place on earth. The honesty and openness required by spiritual community bring us face to face with some harsh realities we'd rather not face. And sometimes it teases us with a taste of goodness only to dash our hopes when relationships go sour. We can even end up envying those happy-go-lucky folks who keep a healthy distance between themselves and the rest of the world.

Those who have tasted the sweetness of spiritual community cannot easily go back to less. Yet there will be doubts about whether or not it's all some sort of dream. In fact, as we journey together toward God there will be times of crisis, moments in which we are faced with three options:

- *Go crazy* trying to make community work.
- *Go back* in the face of limited return on a great personal risk.
- *Go on*, recognizing that earthly community will always be flawed and that we may only achieve it with a few people, excited to discover the joy that such relationships can bring.

For those committed to the third option, this model for developing community may prove helpful. Spiritual community is, according to Henri Nouwen, "a safe place to hit bottom." But bottoming out, becoming broken, is not an attractive notion, unless you can experience it in safety. We are terrified to be

broken, and being broken can be terrifying.

But the darkness which engulfs us in brokenness is restricted to the Lower Room. When we recognize that fact, the subtle light of the Upper Room beckons to us. Then our Father, along with our brothers and sisters, pours into us the life of Christ, and we understand true joy. Then we want to pray, and our prayers become expressions of communion rather than simple petitions. Then the words of Scripture become pregnant with passion, and we delight in God.

We also turn to others without our former selfish agenda. We see our old passions from the Lower Room for what they are, and they lose their luster and their power over us. As we relate to others, focusing on their potential, we delight in them, and spiritual community happens.

There is no shortcut, no alternative route to community, except through brokenness. And we will allow ourselves to be broken only in that safest place on earth. How then, can we create such a haven?

Spiritual community can happen only in smaller groups of no more than 10 or 15. Though larger bodies may worship and serve together, they lack the required intimacy. Spiritual community cannot be manufactured on command. It is a miracle which is experienced as we wait on the Lord. And it begins with prayer, with expectant waiting.

To experience spiritual community we must embrace these foundational convictions:

1. We cannot manage growth; it is something that happens to humble people.
2. Training is not as important as godly character.
3. Our desires are arrows that point the way to God.

True spiritual community is founded upon God's truth. When we understand the provisions of the New Covenant and add to that prayer and personal preparation, God is set to trigger a chain reaction, drawing our hearts toward Him and toward each other.

As God draws us together, we participate in a three-part process which culminates in spiritual community. First, we *enter* each other's lives with celebration and acceptance. We embody brokenness, and that radiates strength to others. We are open about our own weaknesses, reacting not with self-pity but with hope. And we are respectfully curious about the lives of others.

Next, we *see* what others could become and what God is already doing to get them to that point. We envision potential in them and discern when to expose what's wrong and when to stir up the right passions.

Finally, we *touch* others with the power of Christ. This may take the form of rebuke, advice, levity, Scripture, etc. It is not intentionally clever, but others intuitively recognize that it represents the voice of the Spirit.

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## How Does God Want To Use You?

Before your next small group meeting, take some time to visualize each member. How can you be that broken but strong, vulnerable but hopeful, curious but respectful figure in each life? Pray that you will be a safe person for each.

Consider how God uniquely uses you to bring out goodness in others. Next, focus on the uniqueness of those in the group. If every member of the group were to become more Christlike, what wonderful consequences would ensue?

Pray for each person individually. As you pray ask what passions God has stirred within you. How might He want you to pour the life of Christ into the people in your group?

## Relating in Spiritual Community

Just how do we relate to one another in the context of spiritual community? There are two principal roles. The first is that of a *spiritual friend*. Spiritual friendship is a peer relationship in which another person walks along with you on your journey. That person celebrates God's work in you and believes in your potential. His goal is to pour the life of Christ into you.

Sometimes, however, you need more direction than such friendship can afford. You then turn to *spiritual directors*, people of wisdom who can uncover your self-deception and offer you God's perspective on life.

This is soul care and it is the rightful province of the spiritually mature.

The term "director" does not imply an authority to boss people around or arrange their lives for them. We need people who have traveled farther along in this journey to come alongside us. They do not manage our lives, for they are mystics—people who pray and who experience God.

The church should be recognizing such people and designating them as spiritual directors. But unfortunately, we have professionalized this matter of soul care. Pastors deal with the spiritual part, leaving counselors to deal with the psychological problems. But this distinction is artificial; psychological problems are essentially spiritual problems. They cannot be diagnosed and treated, for they are not matters of neuroses and psychoses but rather of souls disconnected from God.

The church must understand why it's here.

**"Its purpose is to draw people into Christ, to mirror Christ to one another, to show Christ to others by the way we live."**

This can occur only in a community of people on a journey toward God who are willing to become truly involved in the lives of others. Unfortunately, however, few Christians have even a spiritual friend, much less a spiritual director.

That can change, however. Those of us who feel the Spirit's conviction in this matter must become that community. And it all starts with prayer. 



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