Spiritual Formation: Annotated Bibliography

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Spiritual Formation: Annotated Bibliography
Jackie L. Halstead, editor

For ministers or teachers who want to teach or preach through the Christian Year or the Revised Common Lectionary, I have found no better resource than Feasting on the Word. FOTW is a twelve-volume commentary series for the Revised Common Lectionary. Four different commentary perspectives are offered for each lectionary reading: theological, pastoral, exegetical and homiletical. In addition to the commentary series, they also offer helps for worship leaders and curriculum for Bible class teachers based on the commentary series. See www.feastingontheword.net. (Contributed by Wes Horn.)

This is a good introductory source for those who are new to the practice of silence and solitude. Barton grounds the discipline in scripture and explores the problem of noise at various levels. She gives practical tips throughout the book and ends with a guide for a day of solitude. The heart of the work, however, is the articulating of the reason behind the practice—to rest in God’s presence without the need to “do” anything. The author expresses the need in such a way that the reader feels drawn to the practice.

Bass offers a rich source for beginning our journey into the Christian disciplines. The authors she has gathered have experience in the disciplines on which they write and are able to give anecdotes as well as cautions. The chapter entitled “Saying Yes and Saying No” was particularly helpful to me with the journey of managing the frantic pace of life. It is a good tool to utilize with groups or classes.

This is my favorite book on the practice of centering prayer. Cynthia was taught by Thomas Keating, the founder of Centering Prayer, so she is close to the inner circle of the Contemplative Outreach movement. I find her works delve deep into the contemplative traditions as well as clearly teach the method and benefits of centering prayer.

The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook offers instruction on sixty-two disciplines. It touches on each discipline in a brief manner, but with enough instruction to attempt it or to whet one’s appetite. I encourage you to read through all the offerings of this book to find several that are a good fit. Each discipline is explained, followed by reflection questions and exercises. It is useful for an individual or a group.
In this work Steve Chase reflects on the role of nature in spiritual formation and offers practical exercises for engaging nature as a spiritual resource. *(Contributed by Tim Hessel-Robinson.)*

Doug Christie has been writing thoughtfully about spirituality and nature for two decades. In this remarkable work, Christie explores the intersection of Christian contemplative traditions (his first book was a groundbreaking scholarly work on the Desert Fathers) and contemporary ecological concerns. *(Contributed by Tim Hessel-Robinson.)*

DeWaal explains the Cistercian tradition as part of a larger series on Christian spiritual traditions. Cistercians began as a movement to reform the Benedictian monastic community to a purer form of Christianity. The Cistercian value the practices of silence and solitude, modification of lifestyle (simplicity), prayer, scripture, and manual labor. This book had a great impact on me as I began my contemplative journey. I am committed to the Cistercian practices and review the book occasionally to remind myself of God’s heart behind them.

If you have not read Foster’s classic text on the Christian disciplines or just have not read it in a while, I encourage you to pick it up. He gave the Protestant Christian community the gift of this treasure of ancient church practices. Foster describes the disciplines in a clear, understandable way for the uninitiated.

In *Living the Christian Year*, Bobby Gross has offered the church a helpful manual on how to incorporate the practice of the liturgical Christian year into the worship life of a congregation. In this book Gross first offers a short introduction to the Christian calendar. He then walks the reader through each season of the Christian year. He includes within each season devotional possibilities for individuals and the church. *(Contributed by Wes Horn.)*

Using the images of host, guide, teacher and midwife, Guenther illuminates both the ideas of spiritual direction and the functions of the spiritual director. In her gentle but direct style she offers a framework of spiritual direction by describing what spiritual direction is and what it is not (counseling, psychotherapy, friendship). Using the example of Jesus and others, Guenther assists the reader in connecting with ideas of the qualities of effective spiritual teachers and guides. *(Contributed by Lisa Durr.)*

This small book offers much depth in its few pages. Hall shares a foundation in the contemplative orientation and then progresses through the four movements of *lectio divina*. It is a clear and understandable explanation of the ancient practice. The book is completed with an appendix of scripture divided into themes that can be used with groups or individually.

Kimberlee Ireton’s *The Circle of Seasons* is less an introduction to the Christian calendar and more of a “how to” guide for the church. Ireton takes each season of the Christian year, links them with the
lectionary readings for that season and then offers suggestions as to how each season is relevant to the lives of individual Christians and the church community. At the end of her book she offers helpful suggestions for worship leaders who want to include the liturgical calendar into the worship life of their churches. *(Contributed by Wes Horn.)*


Upper Room publisher has a series of three guides to prayer that follow the church calendar through the year. Each chapter has a different theme and includes a liturgy for the week that in divided into scriptures for each day. Short writings on the theme of the week by classic Christian authors such as Thomas a Kempis, C.S. Lewis, Mother Teresa, and John Wesley are then included.


This is the original work of St. John of the Cross translated into English. The first half of the book is the poetry of St. John and the latter half is commentary on the poetry. St. John wrote the commentary due to the request of his followers for further understanding. The work is in-depth and not an easy read. However, there is no substitute for the actual poetry followed by St. John’s personal thoughts on this language of God.


Kelly was a Quaker missionary and professor who had an awakening to the absurdity of the frantic pace of his life. Late in life, he came to understand God in a different way and learned to be still before him. He speaks of going deeper than the taming of the calendar—moving into the presence of God and living with God at the center of our lives. This is one of my favorite books of all time. I try to read it annually to remember who I am and whose I am.


Laird offers us one of the best books on silence and solitude on the market today. He gives a historical overview of the way the Church practiced it through the ages. He then discusses the assumptions underlying the discipline. The cover states that this is not as simply written as other books for one who is just beginning to practice silence. I view it as helpful to a beginner, but also a good study for those more experienced in the discipline.


Belden Lane has written three major works on Christian nature spirituality. This one remains my favorite. In it Lane draws widely on the history of Christian spirituality—from the Desert Fathers to the apophatic mystics to the Reformed tradition—to articulate a vibrant spirituality of wilderness. Essays on landscape in Christian history are punctuated by personal reflections on the author’s experience of accompanying his mother through illness and unto death; Lane demonstrates how inner and outer landscapes shape the experience of God. *(Contributed by Tim Hessel-Robinson.)*


Merton’s classic text on contemplative prayer is an in-depth journey into the practice and impact of this prayer. It is one to chew on and spend some time with in order to draw out all the richness. A reader comes away with an understanding of the blessings of this prayer as well as the risks of opening oneself to the living God. It is not for the light of heart but for one who is ready to encounter God with no strings attached.
This is a short book on silence, solitude, and prayer. It is deeply impactful despite its simplicity and will encourage one in commitment to taking these disciplines more seriously. It is an uplifting and easy read.

Henri Nouwen understood the spiritual life as a long journey in the same direction. He embraced accountability and community (including the discipline of spiritual direction) as means of greater and more joyful transformation. Written in the form of a spiritual direction relationship, two of his longtime disciples, Christensen and Laird, have recorded his course in spiritual direction and supplemented it with his unpublished writings to create this comprehensive work on Nouwen's thoughts on the transformative Christian life. *(Contributed by Lisa Durr.)*

The analogy of a dog worrying a bone is the used as the premise for this discussion on spiritual reading. The dog will chew on it for a time, then hide it, then come back to it and chew again. This is the manner in which Peterson advocates our interaction with scripture. Rather than reading for information, we read for transformation. God changes us as we open ourselves to the influence of the text. Peterson discusses both the process and the benefit of changing the way we read scripture.

Rohr, a Franciscan monk, challenges people to move beyond the comfort of a settled life through contemplative prayer in order to gain an understanding of themselves that is rooted in their connection to God. We find the certainty and the freedom to become all that they can be when we rest in God. Contemplation leads one to realize that God is in all things. We learn to open the space for God through this form of prayer and God gives us this gift.

Sheldrake gives a thorough yet concise survey of Christian spirituality in his accessible text. Beginning with the beginning of the church at the day of Pentecost, he takes us through the ancient church all the way to the twentieth-century events. The focus on spirituality is the unique aspect of this historical text. It highlights the relationship of God and believers through the ages. This is a journey in knowledge as well as spiritual growth.

Tickle offers prayer books for the *divine offices* or *hours.* Divine offices are the prayers offered throughout the day in the monastic communities. There are many sources on the prayer offices, but this is one of the best for the beginner as well as one well-versed in this practice. She limits her guides to three offices a day—morning, noon, and evening. Tickle offers the reader clear instruction on how to use the guide, including specifics on how to chant. I have recommended this set to many and require it of my doctoral students.

*Soul Feast* is a good introductory book for one new to the Christian disciplines. It is one of the first I recommend when asked for help with the disciplines. Thompson delineates each discipline and then shares
the practice of “putting it all together” by writing a rule of life. This is a valuable aspect of her book that sets it apart from other books on the Christian disciplines. A rule of life is a commitment to practicing the disciplines. An individual chooses the disciplines they will practice on a regular basis and includes these in their rule. She gives clear instruction for writing this rule. The reader will be drawn into the disciplines—some common (such as fasting and prayer) and some less often articulated (such as hospitality and examination of consciousness).

**Jackie L. Halstead** is currently working on a book of contemplative prayer forms. Due to demand from her retreats and presentations, she is creating a "how to" work that will guide readers as they incorporate the prayer forms into their daily walk with God (Jackie.Halstead@Lipscomb.EDU).