

The Ten Top Symptoms of Emotionally Unhealthy Spirituality

by Pete Scazzero

Jay, one of our church members, recently shared with 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."

Angela, in explaining why she had not attended church for over five years, asked me privately, "Why is it that so many Christians make such lousy human beings?"

The following are the top ten symptoms indicating if I am suffering from a bad case of emotionally *unhealthy* spirituality.

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. But it's not. In my case, using God to run from God is when I create a great deal of "God-activity" and ignore difficult areas in my life God wants to change. Some examples:

- * I use God to run from God when I do God's work to satisfy me, not him
- * I use God to run from God when I do things in his name he never asked me to do
- * I use God to run from God when my prayers are really about God doing my will, not my surrendering to his
- * I use God to run from God when I demonstrate "Christian behaviors" so significant people think well of me

2. Ignoring the Ungodly Emotions of Anger, Sadness, and Fear

Many of us Christians believe wholeheartedly that anger, sadness, and worry are sins to be avoided. They indicate something is wrong with our spiritual life. 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 the more "difficult" feelings of fear, sadness, shame, anger, hurt, and pain. When taken in its entirety the practical implications of such an imbalanced, narrow, biblical belief system are enormous. It leads to a devaluing and repression of the emotional aspect of our humanity that is also made in the image of God. Sadly, some of

our Christian beliefs and expectations today 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

True, Jesus did say: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his 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.

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 described for us in Scripture.

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 water them. Often these desires and passions are invitations from God, gifts from him. Yet somehow we feel guilty unwrapping those presents.

. 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 freely as we follow him.

4. Denying the Past's Impact 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 (see John 3:3). The apostle Paul describes this way: "The old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

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 well as God designed.

5. Dividing Our Lives into "Secular" and "Sacred" Compartments

It is so easy to compartmentalize God to "Christian activities" around church and our spiritual disciplines without thinking of him in our marriages, the disciplining of our children, the spending of our money, our recreation, or even our studying 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
- * twenty-six percent of the "higher-commitment" evangelicals and forty-six percent of the "lower-commitment" evangelicals think premarital sex is acceptable ⁴

Ron Sider, in his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 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

6. Doing for God Instead of Being with God

Being productive and getting things done are high priorities in our 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.

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, 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.

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 the belief that smoothing over disagreements or "sweeping them under the rug" is to follow Jesus continues to be one of the most destructive myths alive in the church today. 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 where conflicts are resolved in a mature, healthy way. Most simply bury our tensions and move on.

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 away" conflict.

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.

The Bible does not spin the flaws and weaknesses of its heroes. Abraham lied. Hosea's wife was a prostitute. Peter rebuked God! Noah got drunk. Jonah was a racist. Jacob lied. 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.

9. Living without Limits

The core spiritual issue here relates to our limits and our humanity. We are not God. We cannot serve every one in need. We are human.

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 (see Philippians 2:4). We are called to lay down our lives for others (see 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

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."

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."

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 my brother's eye (see Matthew 7:1-5).

The Revolutionary Antidote

The pathway to unleash the transformative power of Jesus to heal our spiritual lives can be found in the joining of emotional health and contemplative spirituality. In the next newsletter we will talk about why both are absolutely necessary for us to become as a church and as individuals all God intends.

Taken from Chapter 2 of *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Nelson, 2006).