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Spiritual direction and Baptists

by Tim Mountain

Talk about and practice of spiritual direction has been slowly growing over recent years in Baptist circles. Twenty or thirty years ago, many Baptists would have regarded such a thing as spiritual direction suspiciously. Certainly, as Kenneth Leech pointed out, ‘spiritual direction cannot be said to have played a central role in most modern Protestant traditions’.¹ It was a practice associated with Catholics or Anglo-Catholics, not nonconformists. Calling someone a ‘spiritual director’ suggested that a person would assume an authoritative place in a believer’s life—a place that rightly belongs to God. It is a distraction from the demands of an active ministry, an exercise in pious navel-gazing.

But now, not only is spiritual direction being received and offered increasingly among British Baptists, it is recognised as a valuable component of ministerial formation. In a recent report of a team of inspectors of Spurgeon’s College it was recommended that ‘the College is more intentional in alerting and enabling students to seek spiritual direction within an appropriate Baptist framework’.² The term is heard in conversations and communications by members of the BU Ministries Team; the article in a recent edition of *bmj* about the College of Baptist Ministers mentions ‘help for ministers seeking [among other things] spiritual direction’.³

Very little is published by British Baptists on spiritual direction. A couple of leaflets have been produced on behalf of the Baptist Union Retreat Group (BURG);⁴ John Rackley has written on ‘spiritual guidance’;⁵ and Ian Randall mentions spiritual direction in an article on spirituality;⁶ but I have unearthed little else of note. Therefore, I recently undertook some (MTh) research about spiritual direction as practised by accredited Baptist ministers.⁷ As part of my research, a questionnaire was circulated to those (Baptist minister) directors I could track down to ask them about their practice of and thoughts on spiritual direction. I identified 45 who self-designated as directors and sent out questionnaires to them; and 33 accredited ministers, currently serving in a range of ministries (*eg* local church pastors, chaplains, ‘retired’ ministers), returned completed questionnaires.

One of my objectives, prompted by the report on Spurgeon’s College, was to ask

what ‘an appropriate Baptist framework’ might look like. In the attempt to find a possible answer, I gave extended consideration to the practice of spiritual direction among Baptists historically and today, and reflected on the relationship of pastoral ministry to spiritual direction.

Practice of the latter, as described by ministers’ responses in the survey, seemed to be an expression of that ancient ministry that had its roots in the desert *abbas* and *ammas*, and developed as part of a rule of life in later monastic traditions, such as the Benedictines and Jesuits. It has been shunned until relatively recently by Baptists but (as I argue in the dissertation) is justifiable and valuable. (It needs to be noted that it is but one particular approach of seeking and interpreting God’s guidance for the disciple of Jesus, which, of course, occurs in a variety of other ways through the general ministry of the church and its members.) In a final section I drew the threads together to address the question of what a Baptist framework might look like. It is impossible to present all I would like to say in an article of this nature and length. Therefore, I will focus attention on why there is resurgence in the interest and practice of spiritual direction among Baptists.

What is direction?

Before going further, I need to say briefly what I mean by the term spiritual direction. There are various ways of interpreting it and contexts in which it can occur, but what I am describing here is an intentional one-with-another relationship in which one person (the director), by careful and prayerful listening and questioning over a period of time, helps another (the directee) to reflect on his or her walk with God. The true director in the relationship is the Holy Spirit, and together the human director and directee seek to develop an awareness and attentiveness to the work of the Spirit in (particularly) the life of the directee, so that her or his relationship with God might be strengthened and deepened. I would want to distinguish spiritual direction from other accompanying ministries of discipling, mentoring and counselling.

Understandably, because of possible misunderstanding, some ministers who submitted responses commented that they were cautious of, or rejected outright, the term ‘director’—preferring terms such as ‘companion’ or ‘accompanist’. However, as another suggested, the term spiritual director is ‘widely understood within the spirituality community’, which echoes Jesuits Barry & Connolly, who write that it is ‘firmly entrenched in the tradition and is more widely and spontaneously used than any other term that has been proposed to replace it’.⁸ I shall continue to use the term

‘director’ here.

So, why the growing interest and practice of spiritual direction in our denomination? Let me make some tentative suggestions as to why Baptists and their ministers are being drawn to this ministry.

Ecumenical relationships. In recent decades, a spirit of openness and humility between church leaders has broken down mistrust and led to relationships and friendships being forged across denominational boundaries. One of the outcomes of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was an increasing openness from Roman Catholics to outside influences and cross-denominational engagement. Many Protestants have also been prepared to learn from others in different church traditions. Practices previously unfamiliar to many in the Baptist tradition such as spiritual disciplines, spiritualities such as Ignatian or Celtic, and spiritual direction, have proved helpful to many. The willingness of ministers in the survey to take advantage of training courses offered by Catholic and Anglican groups, and to have non-Baptist spiritual directors, witnesses to the growing trust and cooperation between Christians across the denominations.

The retreat movement. The retreat movement has also contributed to the growing cross-denominational exposure to different ideas and practices. Through the influence of Margaret Jarman, a former President of the BU, the Baptist Union Retreat Group was formed in 1988. A number of ministers in the survey noted their involvement with BURG for some years before beginning to accompany people as a director.

Retreats are now a familiar part of Baptist life as a means of refreshment and re-engagement with God. Such a thing would have been uncommon until relatively recently, despite J. H. Shakespeare’s support for the idea of a ‘retreat movement for ministers’ in the first part of the 20th century.⁹ Although the evidence is anecdotal, increasing numbers of Baptists are taking retreats, which are usually ecumenical and may well include the opportunity to receive individual direction; the positive experience and benefits then trickle out into the wider church. Indeed, as a result of taking a retreat some years ago, I became aware of, received and also now offer, spiritual direction.

A yearning for ‘something other’. In our society not much attention is given to the ‘other’ (where the ‘other’ might be God or another person). Rather, attention is given to strategies and numbers, economics and politics, technologies and communication, leadership and power. It is now commonplace to acknowledge the existence of a societal spirituality vacuum, and people are anxious to try to fill it, occasionally by turning to the church but perhaps more often by turning to practices and thinking that

are sub- or non-Christian (eg New Age techniques, Eastern mysticism).

A spirituality vacuum may also be characteristic of many churches in our culture, including those who would like to be identified as ‘evangelical’. Even though she writes from a Reformed perspective, and is highly critical of evangelicals who are turning to things like Ignatian retreats, Celtic prayer or seeking out a spiritual director, Marian Raikes acknowledges that in talking to Christians she sensed that they were missing something necessary to meet their spiritual hunger for growth. She says that they did not find it in an evangelical spirituality that they found to be ‘too cerebral, too study-bound. And too activist, too meeting-bound’.¹⁰ Elsewhere, Tilden Edwards refers to the ‘starved half of the social activist’.¹¹ Bakke makes a different but related point:

*People are hungry for authentic spiritual companionship. Many are concerned about the crassness of the larger culture, and the fracturedness and pace of life—they desire to slow down and notice more about who they are and how to be connected with God. They are dissatisfied with what feels like a lack of significance and are seeking something more.*¹²

Many Baptists who are activist by nature (I hasten to add, not wrongly so) and busily involved in the demands of church life, might well identify with those observations. They feel out of kilter. They are dissatisfied with what our churches are and offer. They have a yearning for ‘something other’.

Spiritual direction offers an opportunity to be present with another who carefully, slowly and lovingly listens and pays attention; someone who helps the directee to delve into the deeper places of the soul, to begin to address that spiritual yearning.

Regarding ministers in particular, I know colleagues who are seeking ‘something other’, who feel pressurised by some to exercise a model of Baptist ministry that might be described as ‘evangelical activism’ to the neglect of a more contemplative approach. They resonate with the writings of people like Eugene Peterson who critiques pastoral ministry that is too hurried and over-busy, too managerial and goal-oriented, too taken up with numbers and strategies. He urges pastors to recover something of the qualities of the ‘unbusy pastor’.

Although Peterson speaks to a US audience I think his observations apply to aspects of pastoral ministry in the UK too. To place oneself under direction is one way that some ministers find to help them attend to the yearnings of the soul, to build into their walk with God some prayerful reflection with the help of another. Perhaps if Baptist ministers took more seriously the state of their souls, there might be fewer shallow ministries and burnouts.

We should not underestimate the effect that Peterson's books, along with others by writers such as Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, or Henri Nouwen, have had in the past couple of decades. Some ministers in the survey mentioned the influence that books like these had in prompting interest in spiritual direction, either those set as part of a college course or they had discovered in private reading. For many years these authors have been urging a recovery of some of the ancient ways of sustaining the Christian life and Christian ministry, including that of spiritual direction.

I believe spiritual direction as an accompanying ministry to help a disciple of Christ in his or her walk with God can prove valuable for some. As Baptists, we have much to learn from our brothers and sisters in other denominations who have been practising it for centuries, and must guard against cherry picking without understanding its roots and tradition. There are questions to ask about formation and training for spiritual directors, about accountability and supervision, about affirming and recognition of the ministry. Discussion of these is for elsewhere, as is the matter of how spiritual direction can be offered such that it is consistent with a Baptist theology of God and the church. For now, I leave the final words to one minister who wrote that spiritual direction 'is a fine art; and many within the Baptist family would benefit from it'.

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