

# STEPS

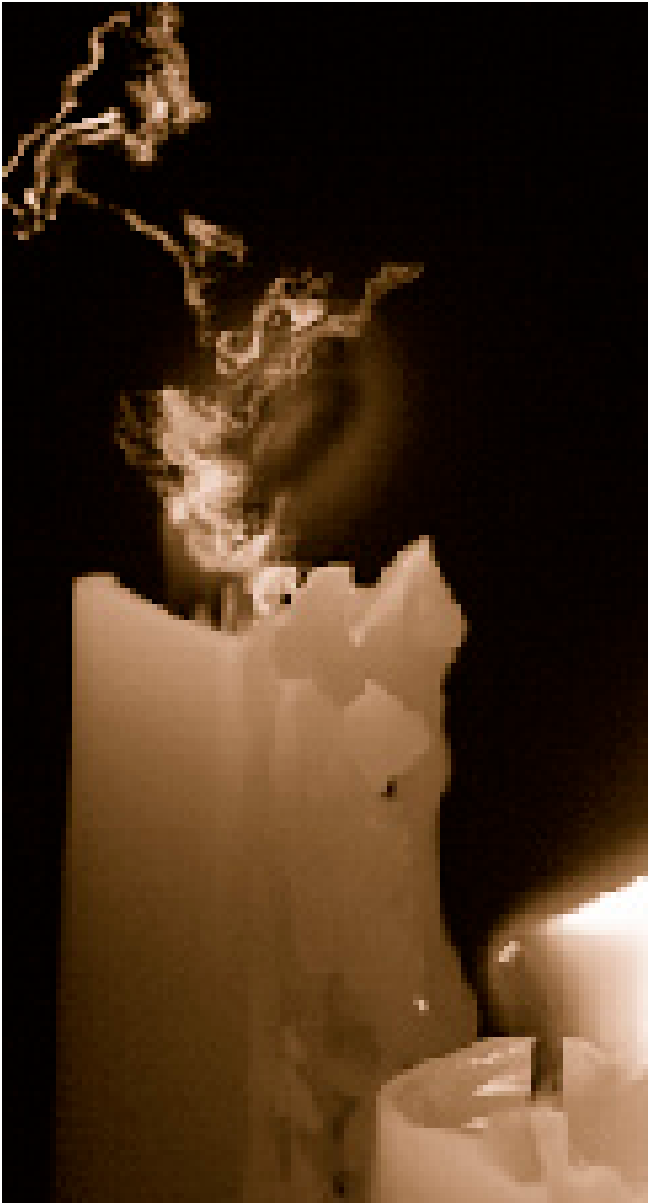
A Magazine of Hope & Healing  
for Christians in Recovery

Volume 14 Number 1



**Spiritual  
Anorexia**

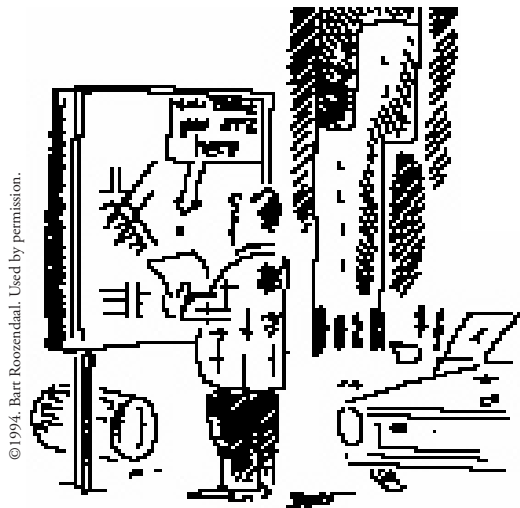
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Maybe someday we should do an issue of STEPS on varieties of healthy spirituality. That would be nice. But we are just not well enough yet to do a good job of that. Most of us in recovery find that we have acquired a number of toxic forms of spirituality. Spiritualities that are rooted in shame come naturally to us. We often find ourselves gravitating toward abusive spiritual environments because they are what we know best. The familiar, even if it is abusive, sometimes feels safer than the unknown. Fortunately, God continues to call us back to the safety, grace and trustworthiness of his enduring love for us. We hope that something in this issue of STEPS will help you to receive more deeply the love that God has for you.



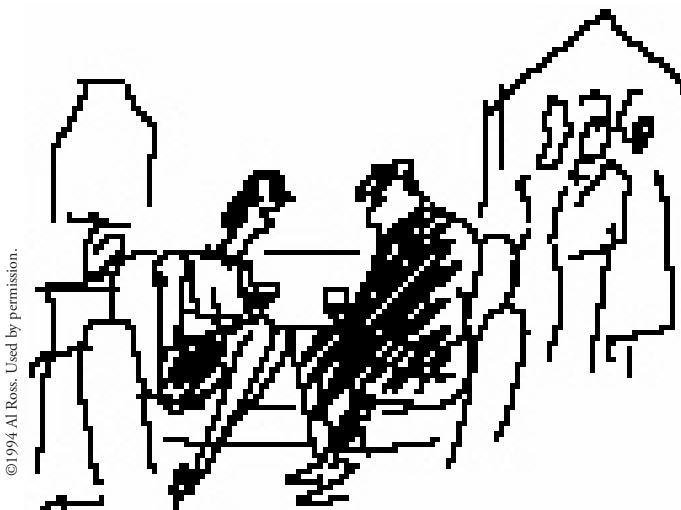
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Fred's Geographical Fix is not working out as smoothly as he had hoped.



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My therapist suggested I vacation someplace where there were no drugs, no alcohol, no sex, no food, no tobacco products, no work, no religious activities and no video games. What are my options?



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I feel like I've known you all my life too. Unfortunately, that's just one more way in which you remind me of my mother.

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## Spirituality and Recovery



It was the day following surgery to remove a constriction of my spinal cord, which impeded my ability to walk. Cautiously, I was roused and coaxed into a standing position. Despite fatigue from the surgery and the effects of pain medication, my feet gingerly found the hospital floor and started to function. They were doing some kind of cross between a slipper shuffle and actual walking. But it was enough to generate a cheer from my family and medical personnel. And I started to comprehend a hopeful reality: Mobility had been restored. *Wow! I can walk!* was the enthusiastic thought bouncing around in my brain. My gratitude to God was inexpressibly intense. Recovery had begun.

When our Father gives us these victorious moments in physical, emotional or spiritual recovery, most of us experience a deep sense of wonder and awe. The spiritual component of events like this is unmistakable. The invisible, immortal God of the universe has entered our frail lives in a profound way. Our finite lives are touched by the Infinite. We are genuinely humbled by God's grace, and we want to stay in this state of euphoric humility forever. But of course, it doesn't last.

Our recovery journeys may well include moments of such euphoric wonder, but they are as likely to include seasons of loneliness, longings, relapse and sadness. Instead of experiencing the euphoria of spiritual connection, we may experience intense feelings of abandonment. Sometimes our souls scream for the Father's interaction and we experience nothing. We want to feel God's love just like we did "back then," and instead it seems that God has forsaken us. This maddening reality—and many similar realities—can confuse us as we seek to recover and to find a growing relationship with our Higher Power.

My journey toward a meaningful relationship with God as I recover from the addictive process has been confusing. It feels daunting to me to even talk about spirituality and recovery. As a minister I have sought to speak with clarity and authority about what it means to know God. But this has complicated matters even more. The truths that the Bible apparently teaches and that I have spoken have not always been true for me, and I do not want to infect this article with that kind of hypocrisy. The principles I now share with you are a work in progress—not a tidy, abstract theological package of facts.

First, God is not in denial. I am the one in denial. Facing the truth about myself, about my behavior, about my soul and about my recovery is not easy. I never consciously decided that the best way to survive and to cope with my problems was to hide them from myself, from others and from God. But like Adam in the garden, hiding has often been the norm for me. It is shameful and painful for me to face my failures. I have therefore attempted to hide my failings from God, from my friends, from my wife, from those to whom I minister and from myself.

During most reflective moments in my Christian experi-

ence I have been able to point to areas in my life where I have previously deceived myself. As a result, I type these words knowing that in all likelihood I am still deceiving myself. God, however, is not deceived. God knows all of me. I am only gradually getting to know my reality, whereas God already knows it all. Knowing that self-deception is a part of the journey, and being open to

learning what God knows about me, are essential. Part of healthy spirituality is the gradual process of learning the things God already knows about me.

Second, I cannot control God. I have never been in any close relationship that I didn't want to control, and this fear-motivated desire to control has an impact on my relationship with God. My prayers have often been attempts to manipulate God. Yes, these futile endeavors to control were usually unconscious and unintentional, but "forcing" God to do my bidding was at the bottom of far too many of my personal prayer requests. My attempt to control God finds its way into my behavior as well. I have fooled myself into thinking that if I maintain sobriety, do certain activities and avoid other activities for long enough, surely God will be obligated to perform for me in the way I desire. Surrendering my illusion of control over God might sound simple, because it means giving up something I didn't have. But this surrender is essential to my relationship with God.

Third, God is not impressed—nor is my spirituality or recovery enhanced—by what I think I know about God. Reciting creeds, hammering out distinctive doctrinal statements, and developing a seamless, logically consistent theology do not advance our connection with the Father. I have used these kinds of theological gymnastics to impress other people with my spirituality and have deceived myself in the process. How my soul visualizes, experiences and feels God is certainly as important as how much I can bend my brain to understand biblical truths about God. Right now it is enough for me to experience two simple realities in my relationship with God: God loves me and God is trustworthy. Though these realities are sometimes fleeting, I know that I do want to experience more of God on my spiritual journey. And God is evidently not as anxious about this as I am.

Christians like me get confused when the euphoric, victorious ecstasy is not the norm in our spiritual journeys. These wonderful experiences should be enjoyed for what they are. But it would be easy to get hooked on the feel-good of spiritual experiences, wouldn't it? Far more important to our spirituality is to focus on the long process of moving out of denial, surrendering our illusions of control and experiencing the embrace of a loving and trustworthy Father.

May any confusion on your journey be replaced with the hope of God's trustworthy love.

*Dale Wolery is the executive director of the Clergy Recovery Network ([www.clergyrecovery.com](http://www.clergyrecovery.com))*



Dale Wolery

# Recovery from Spiritual Anorexia

by

*Dale S. Ryan*

I remember when I first heard about people who were anorexic with respect to food. I was confused by the whole idea. Why would people refuse to eat? Why would people refuse to eat even when they were hungry? Why would people refuse to eat even when they were dying of starvation? But it does happen. Some people reject physical nurture. Sometimes, ironically, they reject it as if their lives depended on this resistance. It is as if food were the enemy. People can literally starve themselves to death in a world full of food. This made no sense to me at first.

As I now look back on those early reactions to anorexia, what impresses me most is the intensity of my interest, my fascination, with anorexia with respect to food. There was a resonance of some kind at work. A recognition. A commonality that I was unable to fully appreciate at the time. Over the years I have learned that the anorexic process is, unfortunately, not a problem limited to people who reject physical nurture, to people who refuse to eat. The underlying dynamics of anorexia, the anorexic process, is much more general than that. It's not just about food.

Just as some people reject physical nurture, others of us reject spiritual nurture. In spite of living in a world that is full of the love and grace of God, we can find ourselves starving for God's love. Why would anyone refuse the love and grace that is readily available to us? Why would we resist God, sometimes as if our lives depend on it? Why would we live as if God were the enemy? Why would we resist spiritual nurture—even to the point of spiritual death?

## Some Metaphors for Anorexia

Because anorexia in all its forms can be confusing, I find it helpful to keep in mind some visual metaphors for the dynamics of the anorexic process. What follows are three images of very young, hungry infants. These simple images have helped me understand what it feels like to be caught up in the anorexic process.

**Happy baby.** The first image is of a nine-month-old infant who is resting peacefully. I call this the happy baby image. She is starting to get hungry. She doesn't yet know she is hungry. She just gradually begins to sense that something is wrong. After a while she starts to squirm a little. Then she starts making some noises—not yet crying but just making agitated noises. Then the noises become a little more agitated and the body movements a little more dramatic. Then the noises become louder. The infant is gradually escalating her efforts to communicate her needs. If she has attentive caregivers, they are starting to problem-solve at the squirming stage. They are asking questions. Does she need her diapers changed? Is she sleepy? Does she need to eat? As the infant's efforts to communicate gradually escalate there is a corresponding escalation in the caregivers' efforts to be responsive. As a result of the child's efforts to communicate and the caregivers' attentiveness,

the need is eventually identified and the child is fed.

As adults we can still be like this. Few of us know what our needs are right away. Often we start with squirming and making noises. We gradually escalate our efforts to figure out what we need, and we communicate these needs effectively. But it still takes us some time. If we are in a community of people who are attentive to our needs, then the process eventually works. When we communicate our needs and our needs are responded to, we get fed—physically, emotionally, or spiritually—depending on the nature of our needs.

Now, it is my suspicion that very few people in recovery would say, “This happy baby image is a perfect metaphor for my life.” Very few of us experience life as a simple process of figuring out our needs, communicating them, and having them met. It would be nice if this were what our lives were like. We would be a lot happier. But most of us have found that the whole process is much more complicated than that. Many different things can get in the way of this simple, healthy communication. The next two metaphors help clarify two of the most common complications.

**King Baby.** Imagine another infant who is resting peacefully. But he is starting to get hungry. He does not yet consciously know he is hungry; he just knows something is not right. So he starts to squirm. Then he starts to make noises. These efforts to figure out what is wrong and to communicate gradually escalate. The squirming and the noises increase. Now suppose that this child's caregivers do not respond. What happens? The escalation continues. Soon you have a red-faced child who is gasping for each breath and screaming desperately. It's as if the child is saying, “There is one thing I need. And I need that one thing right now. Your needs do not matter now. It does not matter if you have been up every hour all night long for the last five nights. I still need what I need. And I need it right now or I'm going to die.”

Is it appropriate for an infant under these circumstances to respond in this way? Of course it is. It is a normal response to what is hopefully an abnormal situation. As a metaphor for us as adults this image can also be instructive. In Alcoholics Anonymous you will sometimes hear people talking about King Baby. It is the part of us that says, “I need what I need right now. Your needs don't matter. If I get the one thing I need, everything will be okay. If I don't, I am going to die.” This King Baby kind of narcissism is a common part of the experience of addiction. The red-faced, gasping for breath, screaming child who can't see anything beyond his immediate needs is a familiar metaphor for most of us who have struggled with addictions. We can see ourselves in this image. And although that red-faced, full-bodied screaming may be a helpful thing for a child, we have learned that it is part of the problem for us as adults. The adult King Baby does not get his needs met. He just gets deeper and deeper into the addictive process.

Now, I am not suggesting that addiction is *caused* in any way by how we were responded to as infants. Addiction is not caused by inattentive caregivers. Most of us spent a long time practicing how to be addicts. We spent a long time nurturing the King Baby part of us. We worked hard to get where we got. My point here is not about what causes addictions. It is about metaphors of the experience of addiction. So King Baby is not only a metaphor specifically for the anorexic process. For many of us, it is also a pretty accurate metaphor for the addictive process.

**Anorexic baby.** For our third metaphor, imagine another infant who is resting peacefully. Then she starts to squirm and make noises. Gradually, she escalates these efforts to communicate. Then she goes all the way to the red-faced, full-bodied, desperate screaming. She screams. And screams. And screams. But no one comes. So she keeps on screaming. What happens then? Eventually, after a long time, the child stops screaming. She becomes silent, perhaps from exhaustion. Perhaps she recognizes the futility of continued efforts. It is less painful to give up than to live with the pain of the hunger. It is less painful to despair than to continue feeling the unmet needs and longings.

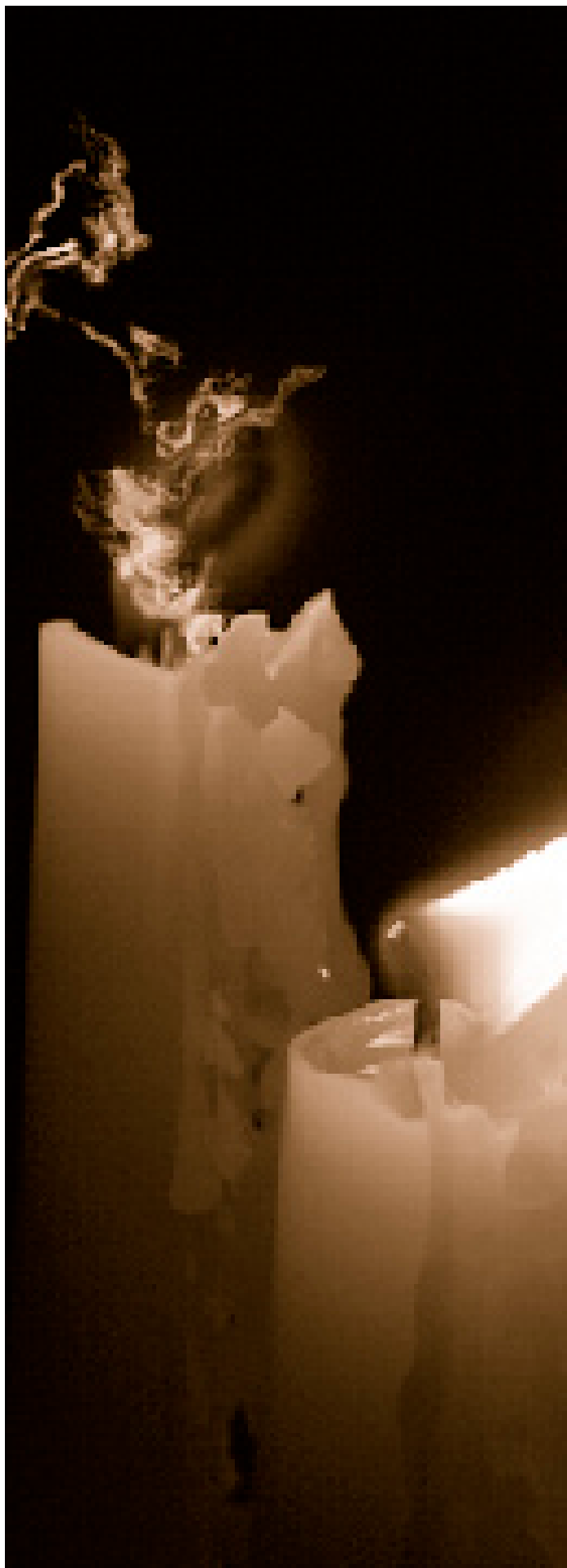
I remember several years ago watching a documentary film that included some footage shot in an orphanage in Bosnia during war time. It was a room full of perhaps 30 or 40 very young children. And the room was absolutely silent. I remember at first being amazed that an orphanage in Bosnia during a war could have a room full of such contented children. The truth, of course, is that it was not a room full of contented children. It was an orphanage that was almost completely unstaffed and that lacked even the most basic resources. It was a room full of children who had cried and cried and cried until they could no longer cry. They had exhausted themselves with crying. They had come to the end of wanting to be nourished. Why continue crying when there is no chance of getting fed? Why scream when hunger now feels normal—not like a problem to be solved but a condition of existence? It was not as I first thought, a room full of contentment. It was a room full of children who had forgotten how to want to be nourished.

Unfortunately, many of us recognize ourselves in this metaphor. Our lives are like this. We know what it is like to be unable to long for spiritual nourishment. We have cried for nourishment, prayed for nourishment, asked for nourishment, and our efforts have not worked. We know what it is like to have given up all hope of being fed spiritually. We can see ourselves spiritually in these silent orphans. It is, of course, a very painful image. It is a difficult metaphor to embrace. But this kind of inability to want nourishment, this inability to cry anymore, this inability to hope for nourishment is the central feature of spiritual anorexia. It might help to flesh out this metaphor a bit by looking at some characteristics of spiritual anorexia.

### **Some Characteristics of Spiritual Anorexia**

Spiritual anorexia has several characteristics. Three that we'll talk about here are resistance to nurture, a distorted self-concept, and control issues.

**Resistance to spiritual nurture.** People who are anorexic with respect to food resist physical nurture. What is confusing about this kind of anorexia is that people who live in a world full of food can starve to death. In the same way, people who struggle with spiritual anorexia are resistant to spiritual nurture. What is confusing about





spiritual anorexia is that people who live in a world full of the love and grace of God can spiritually starve to death.

It is important to remember that people struggling with anorexia do not always look anorexic. People who are anorexic with respect to food do not always look like they are starving. Similarly, people who are spiritually anorexic do not always look like they are starving spiritually. I have sometimes visited churches and thought, *This looks like a congregation full of contented people*. Only later did I realize that the congregation that seemed at first to be filled with contentment was in reality a congregation full of people who had lost any capacity to ask for or receive spiritual nurture. The wounds of trauma or some kind of abuse had led them to the conclusion that nothing better was possible for them. They had asked, prayed, prayed harder, prayed more sincerely, prayed earlier in the morning—all to no effect. And eventually they had concluded that no additional spiritual nurture was available to them. They had to make do with the little they had. When their meager spiritual rations ran out, they didn't know what to do. A kind of lethargy gradually emerged, a resignation, a passivity, a hopeless waiting for things to be different.

What resistance to spiritual nurture looks like can vary a lot from person to person. For some people, like the congregation I just mentioned, spiritual anorexia manifests itself as a kind of resignation. Having lived with spiritual deprivation for so long, we conclude that passivity and reducing our expectations is less painful than continuing to experience the longing for spiritual nurture. For other people, spiritual anorexia becomes intellectualized as various forms of atheism or agnosticism. And for other people, spiritual anorexia may manifest itself in various kinds of dissociative behaviors. For many years I would go to church on Sunday morning, sit down, and “check out.” I could not have told you later in the day what was said in the sermon or which hymns we sang or anything else about the service. That kind of dissociation was not a conscious choice I made. It was just what happened. I have no doubt that I performed this vanishing act because at some level I experienced a threat and a need to protect myself. Let me be clear: There was spiritual nurture available to me in those services. But I could not receive it. I responded as if an enormous danger were present, and I desperately tried to protect myself by disappearing spiritually, emotionally and mentally. If you talk to people who are anorexic with respect to food you will find that they often experience food as dangerous, as a kind of toxin. In a similar way, those of us who struggle with spiritual anorexia often experience religious or spiritual situations as dangerous or potentially toxic. We may see God as the problem rather than as the solution.

Another face of resistance to spiritual nurture is closely related to ministry addiction. If I have given up on finding the spiritual nurture I need, I may conclude that my job in life is not to receive from God but rather to give to God. I may focus my spirituality on giving to God in service. Is there anything wrong with serving God? No. Sometimes, however, people with spiritual anorexia—people

who are profoundly resistant to receiving spiritual nurture—try to cover up this deficit by extraordinary efforts toward spiritually nurturing others. Like any effort to give away what we have not received ourselves, this strategy for life ends poorly.

I spoke several years ago to a woman who had given many years of her life to serving the poorest of the poor. She had worked in AIDS hospices in Asia and with food distribution programs in a number of countries. I admired her. She was, for me, a model

of what the Christian life could look like. In midlife, however, she found that her life was just not working. She was deeply depressed. When we talked she expressed confusion about how her life of dedicated service had not led to the spiritual maturity she had hoped for, but rather to spiritual exhaustion, spiritual frustration and anger at God. When I asked her what it meant to her to be a Christian she said, “Well, basically, I think every Christian should find someone who has less than they have, and then it is their job to give to that person. Our job is to serve others.” As we talked it became clear that for her it was as if the whole population of the planet were lined up in a single line, with the poorest of the poor at one end and the richest of the rich at the other end. Wherever we found ourselves in this line, our job as Christians was to turn to the person next to us and give to them. This woman and I talked about that image, and I asked her, “Is there any Christian anywhere in that line whose job it is to receive?” She did not respond for quite some time. Eventually, she said, “Yes, there is one

person in the line whose job as a Christian is to receive. The very last person—the person who has less than everybody else. Their job is to receive.”

It's tragic that this dear woman, as gifted and committed as she was, believed that receiving from God was somehow spiritually dangerous and must be avoided in favor of service. It is another face of the anorexic process. She had decided early in life that no one would take care of her, no one would respond to her needs, so she would spend her life taking care of others. The result of this resistance to spiritual nurture was exhaustion, depression, anger, and spiritual anorexia.

**Distorted self-concept.** The second major characteristic of anorexia is a profoundly distorted self-concept. People who are anorexic with respect to food have very distorted physical self-concepts. If you hold up a mirror to a person who is anorexic with respect to food, they may say, “I'm fat. I'm way too big. I need to be smaller.” They say this no matter how much objective information is available to suggest that they are in fact not just smaller than normal but smaller than is physically healthy for them. Often the language used to describe their attitude toward their physical body sounds like, “If only I could disappear, then things would be as they should be” or “I don't deserve to eat. I don't deserve to live.” This will-to-disappear, to be small, to vanish, is often a sign of a linkage to early abuse. A common response to abuse in children is to feel that if they could disappear, they would not be vulnerable to being hurt again. The will-to-disappear is the way that many of

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the target.*

us attempted to protect ourselves in our dysfunctional homes. We struggled to have as low a profile as possible. Showing up on the radar screen of the family meant we were the problem, or worse, the target. This is a perfectly understandable survival-response to childhood trauma. But in adult life this same instinct can lead to severe relational and physical problems, including anorexia.

In the case of the spiritually anorexic person, you find the same kind of profoundly distorted self-concept. If you hold up a spiritual mirror to a person with spiritual anorexia, they will say something equivalent to, “It would be better if I were smaller. It would be best if I disappeared completely” or “I don’t deserve God’s love. I don’t deserve to even exist.” This conviction persists no matter how much objective information is available suggesting that they are loved by God and do not need to disappear to be safe in God’s presence. Perhaps you know someone who seems profoundly resistant to acknowledging any meaningful role for themselves in any situation. I know several very generous and kind Christians who are incapable of doing the smallest act of kindness without repeatedly emphasizing, “It’s not me; it’s Jesus.” This insistence that there be no role for “me” in life may perhaps sound like humility. But in all probability it is a humility that has been deeply distorted by the anorexic process. The passion to not be present, the fear that any reference to “me” is sinful, the deflection of any praise—these are all signs that spiritual anorexia may be at work.

Probably the best example of this how this anorexic, will-to-disappear can become confused with Christian teaching can be seen in a particular way of talking about the Christian message. Let me briefly summarize this little bit of anorexic theology: “God is holy and cannot stand to be in the presence of sin. But we are sinful. So if we were in God’s presence, we would be annihilated, because of the incompatibility of God’s holiness and our sinfulness. Fortunately, Jesus stands between us and God. As a result, God doesn’t see us. He sees Jesus.” I suspect that many readers of STEPS have heard sermons based on this schema or have been taught that this is the orthodox understanding of the Christian message. It may even be that some readers have no alternative way of understanding what God has done for us in Jesus. But I also suspect that most readers of STEPS understand at some level that the Jesus-who-helps-us-disappear is not really the kind of Higher Power who can help us in recovery. I find it very difficult to imagine a more anorexic version of the Christian message than this one. This version envisions God’s family as a profoundly dysfunctional family. The father not only can’t stand to see bad children; he will destroy them if he does see them. So, bad children need to disappear to be safe.

Is this the Good News? Not even close. Jesus was very clear about this. The God of whom Jesus spoke is a God who searches the horizon looking for the signs of our return. God is like a woman who lost a precious coin and who looks for it and looks for it and then lights up with joy when she finds it. Does this sound anything like a God who can’t tolerate being in the same room with you? Absolutely not. God’s face lights up with joy when he sees you! The prevalence of anorexic versions of the Christian message contributes to the problems faced by Christians who are spiritually anorexic. How can you recover from spiritual anorexia if “disappearing” is presented as the Good News? Anorexic theology is part of the problem, not part of the solution. Unless we find a more grace-full way of understanding the Good News—a more biblical way of understanding the Gospel—we find ourselves working harder and harder to disappear spiritually. And that is a pathway to spiritual death, just as working harder and harder to disappear

## Quotable Quotes

You have made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.

Saint Augustine<sup>1</sup>

“I am the LORD your God, . . .

Open your mouth wide and I will fill it. . . .

You would be fed with the finest of wheat;

with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.”

Psalms 81:10, 16

Over time, I have learned two things about my religious quest: First of all, that it is God who is seeking me, and who has myriad ways of finding me. Second, that my most substantial changes, in terms of religious conversion, come through other people. Even when I become convinced that God is absent from my life, others have a way of suddenly revealing God’s presence. When I think of how the process works, I recall the scene at Calvary, as depicted in John’s Gospel, when Jesus sees his mother standing near a disciple. “Woman,” he says to her, “here is your son. [And he says] to his disciple, ‘Here is your mother’” (John 19:26–27). It is through Jesus Christ, and the suffering Christ at that, that God seeks us out and gives us to each other.

Kathleen Norris<sup>2</sup>

We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children, and friends loved or wounded us. That’s the truth of our lives. That’s the truth I want you to claim for yourself. That’s the truth spoken by the voice that says, “You are my Beloved.”

Listening to that voice with great inner attentiveness, I hear at my center words that say: “I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother’s womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me.”

Henri Nouwen<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Saint Augustine, *Augustine’s Confessions*, trans. by R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 294.

<sup>3</sup>Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp. 36–37.



physically leads to physical death.

**Control issues.** The third common characteristic of anorexia with respect to food is the presence of complex control issues. The main issue for people who are anorexic with respect to food is often, Who controls what goes into my body? Even the language suggests that boundary violations may lie near the surface of the anorexic's insistence on control. If someone else has been in charge of what goes into my body, then I will understandably be very vigilant to protect myself from unwanted boundary violations.

In spiritual anorexia you see something very similar. I suspect there is a significant relationship between childhood spiritual abuse and the development of spiritual anorexia later in life. If you were force-fed spiritually as a child, if your personal relationship with God was not honored, if independent thought about spiritual matters was unacceptable, if what you believed was controlled by others, it would not be too surprising if as an adult you find yourself struggling with control issues related to spiritual matters. Unfortunately, many of us were raised in families where parents felt called by God to control what children believed and what children did in their spiritual lives. How much healthier we would be today if our parents had instead focused on creating an environment in which we could learn for ourselves the depth of the love and grace of God!

Another kind of control issue that is almost always a part of anorexia with respect to food is the drive to control our bodies in an impossible quest for physical perfection. The underlying belief is that one's value is directly tied to having a perfect body. Anything less than perfection leads to deep feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing. In the same way, spiritual anorexics can be driven by an impossible quest for spiritual perfection. The underlying belief is that we must be "good" (or even perfect) to come to God, that God will reject us if we are in any way short of perfect. Because a state of perfection can never be achieved, a person with this belief system never feels free to approach God to receive the caring embrace from God that is our deepest longing.

## What Doesn't Help

People with spiritual anorexia choose from a number of recovery strategies in an effort to improve their spiritual lives. Most of those strategies, however, do more harm than good. I'll discuss three strategies here: forced feeding, bingeing and shame.

**Forced feeding.** The first thing that doesn't help is forced feeding. If you force-feed someone who is anorexic with respect to food, you do not solve the problem. All you get is a food anorexic who has been force-fed. That person may be fed for the moment, but in the process you may aggravate underlying injuries. The act of force-feeding is a boundary violation and may be a reenactment of previous abusive experiences. Force-feeding usually makes things worse.

The same thing applies to spiritual anorexia. Spiritual force-feeding does not work, whether other people are trying to force-feed us or we are trying to force-feed ourselves. No amount of forcing myself to be a good Christian, to pray more, to worship more, no amount of trying harder, is going to solve this problem. The result is often a graceless, performance-based spirituality of perfectionism that only increases the struggle with anorexia.

**Bingeing.** The second thing that doesn't help food anorexics is bingeing—or addictive eating. When those with food anorexia decide to comply with all the social pressure to eat and force themselves on an eating binge, they may consume enormous amounts of food to prove to themselves and to other people that they don't really have a problem. Sometimes they alternate between seasons of bingeing and seasons of near starvation. It is clear that none of these strategies bring healing to the anorexic. They are just different faces of the same problem.

Similar nonsolutions are often tried by spiritual anorexics. We may try to solve our spiritual anorexia by going on a spiritual binge. Weary of the impact of spiritual anorexia, and full of shame over our perceived spiritual inadequacy, we may force ourselves to consume an enormous amount of spiritual nurture to prove that we don't have a problem. We may try to cure our spiritual anorexia by becoming religious addicts. If too little isn't working, we will try too much. We may go to church every time the doors are open, or we may pray longer than anybody else or earlier in the morning than anybody else. We may seek out a spiritual high—a retreat experience, a spiritual intensive or other kind of short-term fix. But spiritual bingeing—trying to take in enormous amounts of spiritual nourishment in a short period of time—does not work. For people with spiritual anorexia it just leads to increased disap-

pointment, increased resentment and increased hopelessness. It does nothing to address our root problems. Bingeing is just another version of trying, trying harder and trying our hardest. In the end it leaves us exhausted.

**Shame.** Shame is a huge issue for people struggling with food anorexia. The shame about one's body. The shame of having a problem. The shame of not being perfect. It is a long list. Strange as it may seem, we often think that shame is the solution to shame. It doesn't make any sense when you put it into words: If only I shamed myself a little bit more, maybe I would be ashamed enough to get better. While it makes no sense, it is often the first thing that occurs to us. And, of course, other people suggest this as a solution as well and increase our shame in the hope that it will somehow help. But shame is not the solution. If shame would make things better, all of us would have been better a long time ago. Shame does not help us get closer to God.

The dynamics of shame are also a central feature of the struggle for people with spiritual anorexia. People seem eager to blame us

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for our spiritual struggles. I recently saw this slogan on a church sign: “If you are feeling distant from God, guess who moved.” The subtext of this slogan is “Guess who is to blame” or “Guess who has been bad” or “Guess who should feel ashamed.” None of these messages are helpful to people struggling with spiritual anorexia. Shame does not make things better. The same is true of various “explanations” for our spiritual struggles: Maybe you haven’t prayed enough or worshiped enough; maybe you’re not sincere enough; maybe you’re just having a pity party and should get out there and help someone worse off than you. I think of this as a kind of shame chorus. We must take our first difficult steps in the recovery journey in spite of the accompanying chorus of shaming voices—voices that know what we have done wrong, that think we should have been better a long time ago, that are impatient for us to have a good testimony again. Unfortunately, most of us have worked hard for years to internalize this shame chorus. We don’t need anyone to say anything shaming for us to experience shame. Ours is the loudest voice in the chorus. But whether the shame is from others or from ourselves, it does not help. Shame does not lead to healing.

### **What Might Help**

Thankfully, there are some things that can help us in our recovery from spiritual anorexia.

**Tell the truth.** If you are undernourished spiritually, if you are so damaged spiritually that you have lost your ability to even cry out to God, then tell the truth. Tell the truth to yourself. Tell the truth to one other person. Tell the truth to God, if you can. Telling the truth is not easy. We are accustomed to trying to look good. Telling the truth doesn’t come naturally to us. I remember a staff meeting several years ago in which we were discussing something difficult. I don’t remember the specific issue, but we spent hours talking about how some people would experience a decision we were making and how other people might experience it differently. What I remember is that after several hours someone said, “Why don’t we just tell the truth?” It was a shocking suggestion. It had not occurred to us, any of us. We were working hard on “spin” and perception management and public relations. Telling the truth? What a radical idea! The conversation ended almost immediately. We knew what to do. Everything got real simple: We’ll just tell the truth, and then it’s done. We will have to live with the consequences. People may experience it in a variety of ways, but that’s not our problem.

Telling the truth is so much easier than the alternatives. Trying to manage other people’s perceptions of us is exhausting. Pretense and image management won’t fix spiritual anorexia. Until we have some capacity to experience the truth about our situation and to tell that truth, we will stay stuck in the anorexic process.

**Accept the problem as your own problem.** There was a long period in my life when I was convinced that my spiritual anorexia was someone else’s problem. I would go to church and be unable to receive spiritual nurture. I would conclude that something was wrong with the church. So I would go to a different church and experience the same thing. I would conclude that something was wrong with the pastor. And then a different church, and another, and another, all in the hope that I would find one healthy enough to provide me with spiritual nurture. As you can imagine, I went through a long series of churches only to find that there was no

church where I could be nurtured. I was frustrated and angry and consumed with the question, What is wrong with all these churches? The truth is that many of these churches were toxic environments in which no one could grow in the love and grace of God. Not all of them were toxic, however. There was spiritual nurture available to me. But I could not take it in. One of the slogans you sometimes hear in A.A. is, “Wherever you go, there you are.” That was precisely my situation. I was carrying my spiritual anorexia with me from church to church and being surprised that what I experienced in each place was an inability to receive spiritual nurture. Nothing changed until I started to accept the fact that my spiritual anorexia was *my* spiritual anorexia. It may be related to the spiritual abuse I experienced earlier in life, it may be made worse by other kinds of shaming experiences, it may be made worse by shame-based churches and toxic theology of various kinds. But the problem is my problem. Until we accept full personal ownership of our spiritual brokenness, we find it very difficult to make much progress in recovery. It is far too easy to spend our time and energy feeding our resentments and avoiding the hard work that needs to be done.

**Take baby steps.** The third thing that might help is taking baby steps. If God were to take one of those infants from the orphanage in Bosnia that I mentioned earlier and entrust it to your care, what would you do? The baby has forgotten how to want nurture, forgotten how to ask for nurture. I think I know what you would do. You might try all kinds of things. But eventually you would put something sweet on the tip of your finger and rub it on the baby’s lips. And if there were any response—any response at all, even the smallest sign—your face would light up with joy. You would know that recovery is possible. The slightest sign of response to nurture would be great joy. If we who are damaged and broken people know how to be good parents to children who have lost the capacity to receive nurture, how much more will our heavenly Father be a good parent to us who struggle to receive spiritual nurture? If all the spiritual nurture that we can take in right now is a little honey on the fingertip of God, God’s face lights up with joy.

What do baby steps look like? Well, they’re different for each of us. If particular spiritual disciplines are associated with the spiritual force-feeding we experienced as children, then we may need to try different spiritual disciplines for a while. Fortunately, the Christian tradition contains a rich variety of spiritual disciplines that we can try to help us get started again in spiritual growth. If Bible memorization, for example, feels like part of the problem, we can try meditating on biblical texts instead. If public worship feels like part of the problem, we can try less social forms of spiritual nurture. If doing things feels like part of the problem, we can try being still. The main thing is to try something that doesn’t lead to increased shame, and something that we don’t turn into another perfectionistic adventure.

In the long run, baby steps are easier and far more productive than all the desperate efforts that come from spiritual anorexia. But that does not mean that baby steps are easy. They can be terrifying. If I’ve been trying to control my relationship with God by being really, really good, then it will probably be pretty scary to try to be still. Taking time to “be still and know that I am God” is far more spiritually productive, but it’s anything but easy. Our anxiety may go through the roof. Feelings of being out of control may frighten us. So we need to do it in small doses. We need to do what

*Continued on back cover*

In the first installment of this series we introduced the idea that religion can “go bad.” In the second installment we talked about religious addiction. In this installment we want to discuss religious codependency. To understand religious codependency it’s important to first understand some of the basic dynamics of codependency in general.

## Codependency

The symptoms of codependency have a remarkable parallel with the symptoms of addiction, but with one important difference. Addicts’ “highs” depend on access to their drug or behavior of choice. When they have it, they are high; when they don’t, they are low. They can and do alter their moods simply by thinking about using the substance (or thinking about not using it), to the point where they can develop a preoccupation that is as mood-altering as using.

The codependent’s “drug” of choice is the addict. This means that when the addict is doing well, trying hard, making promises and showing improvement, the codependent is high. When the addict is falling short, breaking promises, being inappropriate and relapsing into old patterns, the codependent is low. In other words, the codependent’s “substance” is the addict, and the codependent can become as consumed with the actions and attitudes of the addict as the addict is with their drug of choice. And just as the addict is focused on keeping their substance in supply to ensure their ability to get high, the codependent’s focus is on keeping their substance (in this case, the positive performance of the addict) in good supply to ensure their own high. What this means, however, is that all the codependent’s efforts to “help” the addicted loved one are really for the purpose of elevating, or keeping elevated, their own mood.

## A Codependent Heritage

Codependency at its essence is an addiction to a person or to a relationship. Actually, there doesn’t have to be any substance use involved for codependency to exist. Many people are codependent long before they meet their addicted loved one.

No one, of course, is born codependent. Codependency is a learned behavior. Unfortunately, many of us learned the dynamics of codependency very early in life, in families that did not know healthier ways of relating. A simple example of the way that families encourage codependency might help.

Many years ago I (Jeff) was visiting some friends for a weekend. It was breakfast time and I was having coffee in the kitchen. I noticed a sign on the refrigerator that said, “Today Mom is . . .” Below that was the rest of the sign, which was hinged in the middle and capable of being flipped to the left or the right. When it was flipped to the left it said “sad.” When it was flipped to the right it said “happy.” So the sign said either “Today Mom is sad” or “Today Mom is happy.”

# When Religion Goes Bad

## Religious Codependency

*Third in a series by  
Jeff VanVonderen  
and  
Dale Ryan*

By itself, the sign was not particularly troubling. Maybe it was a kind of in-joke in the family. The disturbing part of this experience began, however, when the three young children entered the kitchen for breakfast. The very first thing each of them did was to look at the sign to see how Mom “was” today. I contemplated what might have gone through their minds as they dressed for breakfast and headed downstairs. Were they anxious about what the sign would say? If the sign said “sad,” would they try to think of things they might do or say to make Mom happy? If the sign said “happy,” would they spend their energy being extra careful not to do something to make Mom sad?

This mundane example illustrates the central dynamic of codependency. In the worst-case scenario, we have a mom who is putting the responsibility for her moods onto her children. She controls the behaviors of her children with the simple flip of a sign. We have children who are learning that the way for them to be happy is to keep Mom happy. Their “job” is to control and maintain their mom’s mood by acting or not acting in certain ways. Even if the worst case is not true, there are no good scenarios that result from this kind of relationship dynamic. It is the soil in which codependency grows.

## Religious Codependency

There are two basic forms of religious codependency. One kind develops in relationship to a religious addict; the other kind develops in relationship to a codependent God. Both kinds of religious codependency are fairly common. Both can be devastating to a healthy spiritual life.

### Relationships with religious addicts can lead to religious codependency.

Some time ago I received a letter from a woman describing a series of painful experiences of spiritual abuse in a small, independent church. She talked about leaders who bullied the members into religious activities by holding hostage their right standing with God based on those activities; about employees of the ministry who were underpaid, while leaders were making a comfortable living; about the absence of financial accountability; and about questioning of the leadership being equated with questioning God. The church leaders were misusing their authority by controlling and manipulating, instead of serving and equipping, the members of Christ’s body.

At one point in the letter she posed this question: “Why do 300 people allow one man to control their each and every move, even though they, at best, question it or, at worst, know it is wrong?” What a great question! Was the answer simply that the people were unaware of the problem? The letter made it clear that many in the congregation knew that things were not right. Was the answer a lack of courage? I suppose a factor could be the fear of a strong, charismatic leader; the fear of being humiliated publicly; the fear that they might lose everything for which they had invested their souls and finances; or the



fear of having a falling out with God by disagreeing with his official “representative.”

But there is another possible explanation. Could it be a matter of religious codependency by the members? Is it possible that these people had been trained to believe that one of their primary “jobs” was to keep the leader happy? Could it be that the congregation had learned that their “happiness” was dependent on the happiness of their leader? Our experience over the years with many, many Christians who have found themselves in similar situations suggests that this could certainly be the case.

If you find a leader who is a religious addict—whose mood depends not only on the amount of his or her own religious activity but also on the amount of religious activity performed by the members of the congregation—then you can be sure there are some religious codependents in the neighborhood. Religious codependents may believe that their behaviors are a simple matter of devotion to God, to God’s people and to the leadership that God has appointed, just as codependents to alcoholics often vigorously defend their behaviors. But the real motivations are often much more complex. If I feel good only when the leader feels good, if I feel bad only when the leader feels bad, it’s probably for a reason other than being “committed and dedicated.” It’s probably some form of religious codependency. This is especially true if my need to please a leader leads to compromises in my own integrity, peace, rest, and “that sense of blessing I once had.”

There is a curious phrase in Jeremiah 5:31: “The prophets prophesy lies,/the priests rule by their own authority,/and my people love it this way.”

My people love it this way? How can that be? Well, I suppose one reason could be that some people prefer to not think, and so they are happy to have someone else do all their thinking for them. It is more likely, however, that some people in religious circles are happy only when they can be in control of spiritual things, even if their authority is a figment of their religious addiction and is not from God. And for every religiously addicted leader there is almost always a group of religiously codependent followers. There are people who are happy only when their spiritual leader is happy. This is not just dedication and commitment, no matter how vigorously the dysfunction is defended.

### **Relationship with a codependent God leads to religious codependency.**

A second, related form of religious codependency results from serving a codependent God. Suppose for a moment that God has poor boundaries. Or that God spends his days in a frenzy, trying to get us to make the right choices. Or that God’s mood is completely dependent on the choices we make: happy when we make good choices, but sad when we make bad choices. Or suppose that God is full of resentments because he is always the one who has to solve the world’s problems. Or suppose that God is manipulative, trying to get things to work his way by using indirect and dishonest means. If we serve a Higher Power with any of these characteristics, we are probably in for a very troubled relationship. It is possible to serve a codependent God, but it is physically, emotionally and spiritually exhausting.

If we were raised in an environment where codependency was common, we may gravitate to a “God” of this kind. This form of religious codependency is typically learned early in life. As young children many of us were taught that God’s mood was dependent on our behavior. If we did certain things, God was happy. If we did other things, God was sad. We were, apparently, powerful enough to be in

charge of God’s mood! Now, does it make sense for a six- or seven-year-old child to be in charge of God’s mood? Clearly not. And what does it say about God? Does God have such poor boundaries that his mood will swing in response to my behavior? In spite of how little sense this makes, this distorted image of God leads many of us to tip-toe through our Christian lives, trying to do everything possible to prevent God from having a negative mood-swing. Because, after all, you know what happens if we do something that puts God in a bad mood. We are in deep trouble and are going to pay the price one way or another. We need to get up in the morning and look to see what God’s little flip sign says today. Is it “Today God is happy,” or “Today God is sad”? If the answer to that question determines the things we have to try harder to do, or not do, in his name today, we can be pretty sure that some element of religious codependency is involved.

Most Christians, of course, understand that their relationship with God involves dependency. We depend upon God for our needs, for our identity, for life itself. This is not a problem that needs to be solved. We are dependent on God. Unfortunately, however, many Christians have a difficult time distinguishing between a healthy dependence on God and an unhealthy dependence, or codependency. And that inability to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy relationships is the vulnerability that makes religious codependency possible.

### **Moving Beyond Religious Codependency**

If you find yourself stuck in religious codependency, here are a few ways to move forward. First, if your higher power is a religious addict or a codependent god, fire him. These gods do not deserve your worship or service. They have become what the Bible calls idols. You don’t negotiate with idols. You don’t compromise or make deals. You don’t hope for improvement in the future. Instead, you clean house. That’s what has to happen first: house-cleaning of all idolatrous attachments. Easy to say but difficult to do.

Second, get help. Most of us can’t make the necessary changes by ourselves. Religious codependency usually has very deep roots; most of us learned it very early. That means that the changes we need to make must not be superficial changes. They require major surgery. For example, we need to develop healthy boundaries in our relationship with God. If that sounds strange, or just plain wrong, well, that’s a hint of how deep the problem goes and how deep the healing needs to be. That means it’s important to find a therapist, sponsor, pastor or friend who understands these issues. This also is easy to say but sometimes difficult to do.

Third, expect the healing process to take some time. It will take time to find the resources you need. It will take time to become the kind of person who is capable of being honest about these issues. It will take time to grieve over the losses, betrayals and neglect that have helped cultivate the codependency.

Last, and perhaps most important, believe that recovery from religious codependency is possible. Codependency is learned behavior. That means it can be unlearned. It’s not easy to unlearn it. But it is possible, because God also wants a healthy, noncompulsive relationship with us. And that is good news.

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# Step Work

## Step Four: Breaking Up Your Fallow Ground

by Rev. Charles G. Finney

*Charles Finney is the best-known (and one of the more controversial) American evangelists of the 19th century. This excerpt is taken from a sermon he delivered in 1835 to the congregation of the Chatham Chapel in New York City—a hundred years before the formation of Alcoholics Anonymous. It was entitled “How to Promote A Revival.” The language is, of course, dated; you can tell it is 168 years old. But Finney’s approach to self-examination is one of the most obvious precursors of the fourth step of Alcoholics Anonymous, and some of his insights are still helpful. We encourage you to try not to get stuck in the specifics (Finney thinks reading novels is robbing God of your time!) but to take this as a reminder that the fourth step is a distinctively Christian spiritual discipline with a long history, of which Finney is a part.*

If you mean to break up the fallow ground of your hearts, you must begin by looking at your hearts: examine and note the state of your minds, and see where you are. Many never seem to think about this. They pay no attention to their own hearts, and never know whether they are doing well in religion or not; whether they are gaining ground or going back; whether they are fruitful, or lying waste. Now you must draw off your attention from other things, and look into this. Make a business of it. Do not be in a hurry. Examine thoroughly the state of your hearts, and see where you are: whether you are walking with God every day, or with the devil; whether you are serving God or serving the devil most; whether you are under the dominion of the prince of darkness, or of the Lord Jesus Christ.

To do all this, you must set yourself to work to consider your sins. You must examine yourselves. And by this I do not mean that you must stop and look directly within to see what is the present state of your feelings. This is the very way to put a stop to all feeling. That is just as absurd as it would be for a man to shut his eyes on the lamp, and try to turn his eyes inward to find whether there was any image painted on the retina. The man complains that he does not see anything! And why? Because he has turned his eyes away from the objects of sight. The truth is, our moral feelings are as much an object of consciousness as our senses. And the way to find them out is to go on acting, and employing our minds. Then we can tell our moral feelings by consciousness, just as I could tell my natural feelings by consciousness if I should put my hand in the fire.

Self-examination consists in looking at your lives, in considering your actions, in calling up the past, and learning its true character. Look back over your past history. Take up your individual sins one by one, and look at them. I do not mean that you should just cast a glance at your past life, and see that it has been full of sins, and then go to God and make a sort of general confession, and ask for pardon. That is not the way. You must take them up one by one. It will be a good thing to take a pen and paper, and as you go over them, and write them down as they occur to you. Go over them as carefully as a merchant goes over his books; and as often as a sin

comes before your memory, add it to the list. General confessions of sin will never do. Your sins were committed one by one; and as far as you can come at them, they ought to be reviewed and repented of one by one. Now begin, and take up first what are commonly, but improperly, called Sins of Omission.

**1. Ingratitude.** Take this sin, for instance, and write down under that head all the instances you can remember wherein you have received favours from God for which you have never exercised gratitude. How many cases can you remember? Some remarkable providence, some wonderful turn of events, that saved you from ruin. Set down the instances of God’s goodness to you when you were in sin, before your conversion, for which you have never been half thankful enough; and the numerous mercies you have received since. How long the catalogue of instances, where your ingratitude has been so black that you are forced to hide your face in confusion! Go on your knees and confess them one by one to God, and ask forgiveness. The very act of confession, by the laws of suggestion, will bring up others to your memory. Put down these. Go over them three or four times in this way, and see what an astonishing number of mercies there are for which you have never thanked God.

**2. Want of love to God.** Think how grieved and alarmed you would be if you discovered any flagging of affection for you in your wife, husband, or children; if you saw another engrossing their hearts, and thoughts, and time. Perhaps in such a case you would wellnigh die with a just and virtuous jealousy. Now, God calls Himself a jealous God; and have you not given your heart to other loves and infinitely offended Him?

**3. Neglect of the Bible.** Put down the cases when for perhaps weeks, or longer, God’s Word was not a pleasure. Some people, indeed, read over whole chapters in such a way that they could not tell what they had been reading. If so, no wonder that your life is spent at random, and that your religion is such a miserable failure.

**4. Unbelief.** Recall the instances in which you have virtu-



ally charged the God of truth with lying, by your unbelief of His express promises and declarations. God has promised to give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him. Now, have you believed this? Have you expected Him to answer? Have you not virtually said in your hearts, when you prayed for the Holy Spirit: “I do not believe that I shall receive”? If you have not believed nor expected to receive the blessing which God has expressly promised, you have charged Him with lying.

**5. Neglect of prayer.** Think of the times when you have neglected secret prayer, family prayer, and prayer-meetings; or have prayed in such a way as more grievously to offend God than to have omitted it altogether.

**6. Neglect of the means of grace.** When you have suffered trifling excuses to prevent your attending meetings, have neglected and poured contempt upon the means of salvation, merely from disrelish of spiritual duties.

**7. The manner in which you have performed those duties.** That is, with want of feeling and want of faith, in a worldly frame of mind, so that your words were nothing but the mere chattering of a wretch who did not deserve that God should feel the least care for him. When you have fallen down upon your knees and “said your prayers” in such an unfeeling and careless manner that if you had been put under oath five minutes after you could not have said for what you had been praying.

**8. Want of love for the souls of your fellow-men.** Look round upon your friends and relatives, and remember how little compassion you have felt for them. You have stood by and seen them going straight to hell, and it seems as though you did not care if they did go. How many days have there been, in which you did not make their condition the subject of a single fervent prayer, or evince an ardent desire for their salvation?

**9. Want of care for the heathen.** Perhaps you have not cared enough for them to attempt to learn their condition; perhaps not even to take a missionary magazine. Look at this, and see how much you really care for the heathen, and set down honestly the real amount of your feelings for them, and your desire for their salvation. Measure your desire for their salvation by the self-denial you practice, in giving of your substance to send them the Gospel. Do you deny yourself even the hurtful superfluities of life, such as tea, coffee, and tobacco? Do you retrench your style of living, and scruple not to subject yourself to any inconvenience to save them? Do you daily pray for them in private? Are you laying by something to put into the treasury of the Lord when you go up to pray? If you are not doing these things, and if your soul is not agonised for the poor benighted heathen, why are you such a hypocrite as to pretend to be a Christian? Why, your profession is an insult to Jesus Christ!

**10. Neglect of family duties.** Think how you have lived before your family, how you have prayed, what an example you have set

before them. What direct efforts do you habitually make for their spiritual good? What duty have you not neglected?

**11. Neglect of social duties.**

**12. Neglect of watchfulness over your own life.** In how many instances you have hurried over your private duties, and have neither taken yourself to task, nor honestly made up your accounts with God; how often have you entirely neglected to watch your conduct, and, having been off your guard, have sinned before the world, and before the Church, and before God!

**13. Neglect to watch over your brethren.**

How often have you broken your covenant that you would watch over them in the Lord! How little do you know or care about the state of their souls! And yet you are under a solemn oath to watch over them. What have you done to make yourself acquainted with them? In how many of them have you interested yourself, to know their spiritual state? Go over the list, and wherever you find there has been a neglect, write it down. How many times have you seen your brethren growing cold in religion, and have not spoken to them about it? You have seen them beginning to neglect one duty after another, and you did not reprove them, in a brotherly way. You have seen them falling into sin, and you let them go on. And yet you pretend to love them. What a hypocrite! Would you see your wife or child going into disgrace, or into the fire, and hold your peace? No, you would not. What do you think of yourself, then, to pretend to love

Christians, and to love Christ, while you can see them going into disgrace, and say nothing to them?

**14. Neglect of self-denial.** There are many professors who are willing to do almost anything in religion, that does not require self-denial. But when they are required to do anything that requires them to deny themselves—oh, that is too much! They think they are doing a great deal for God, and doing about as much as He ought in reason to ask, if they are only doing what they can do just as well as not; but they are not willing to deny themselves any comfort or convenience whatever for the sake of serving the Lord. They will not willingly suffer reproach for the name of Christ. Nor will they deny themselves the luxuries of life, to save a world from hell. So far are they from remembering that self-denial is a condition of discipleship that they do not know what self-denial is. They never have really denied themselves a riband or a pin for Christ and the Gospel. Oh, how soon such professors will be in hell! Some are giving of their abundance, and are giving much, and are ready to complain that others do not give more, when, in truth, they do not themselves give anything that they need, anything that they could enjoy if they kept it. They only give of their surplus wealth; and perhaps that poor woman who puts in her mite, has exercised more self-denial than they have in giving thousands.

*Break up  
your fallow ground:  
for it is time  
to seek the LORD,  
till he  
come and  
rain righteousness  
upon you.  
Hos. 10:12*

From these we now turn to Sins of Commission.

**1. Worldly mindedness.** What has been the state of your heart in regard to your worldly possessions? Have you looked at them as really yours—as if you had a right to dispose of them as your own, according to your own will? If you have, write that down. If you have loved property, and sought after it for its own sake, or to gratify lust or ambition, or a worldly spirit, or to lay it up for your families, you have sinned, and must repent.

**2. Pride.** Recollect all the instances you can, in which you have detected yourself in the exercise of pride. Vanity is a particular form of pride. How many times have you detected yourself in consulting vanity about your dress and appearance? How many times have you thought more, and taken more pains, and spent more time about decorating your body to go to Church, than you have about preparing your mind for the worship of God? You have gone caring more as to how you appeared outwardly in the sight of mortal man, than how your soul appeared in the sight of the heart-searching God. You have, in fact, set up yourself to be worshipped by them, rather than prepared to worship God yourself. You sought to divide the worship of God's house, to draw off the attention of God's people to look at your pretty appearance. It is in vain to pretend now, that you do not care anything about having people look at you. Be honest about it. Would you take all this pains about your looks if every person were blind?

**3. Envy.** Look at the cases in which you were envious of those whom you thought were above you in any respect. Or perhaps you have envied those who have been more talented or more useful than yourself. Have you not so envied some, that you have been pained to hear them praised? It has been more agreeable to you to dwell upon their faults than upon their virtues, upon their failures than upon their success. Be honest with yourself...

**4. Censoriousness.** Instances in which you have had a bitter spirit, and spoken of Christians in a manner devoid of charity and love. Charity requires you always to hope the best the case will admit, and to put the best construction upon any ambiguous conduct.

**5. Slander.** The times you have spoken behind people's backs of the faults, real or supposed, of members of the Church or others, unnecessarily, or without good reason. This is slander. You need not lie to be guilty of slander: to tell the truth with the design to injure is to slander.

**6. Levity.** How often have you trifled before God as you would not have dared to trifle in the presence of an earthly sovereign? You have either been an atheist, and forgotten that there was a God, or have had less respect for Him, and His presence, than you would have had for an earthly judge.

**7. Lying.** Understand now what lying is. Any species of designed deception. If the deception be not designed, it is not lying. But if you design to make an impression contrary to the naked truth, you lie. Put down all those cases you can recollect. Do not call them by any soft name. God calls them LIES, and charges you with LYING, and you had better charge yourself correctly. How innumerable are the falsehoods perpetrated every day in business, and in social intercourse, by words, and looks, and actions, designed to make an impression on others, for selfish reasons that is contrary

to the truth!

**8. Cheating.** Set down all the cases in which you have dealt with an individual, and done to him that which you would not like to have done to you. That is cheating. God has laid down a rule in the case: "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." That is the rule. And if you have not done so you are a cheat. Mind, the rule is not that you should do "what you might reasonably expect them to do to you": for that is a rule which would admit of every degree of wickedness. But it is: "As ye would they should do to you."

**9. Hypocrisy.** For instance, in your prayers and confessions to God. Set down the instances in which you have prayed for things you did not really want. And the evidence is, that when you have done praying, you could not tell for what you had prayed. How many times have you confessed sins that you did not mean to break off, and when you had no solemn purpose not to repeat them? Yes, have confessed sins when you knew you as much as expected to go and repeat them, as you expected to live.

**10. Robbing God.** Think of the instances in which you have misspent your time, squandering the hours which God gave you to serve Him and save souls, in vain amusements or foolish conversation, in reading novels or doing nothing; cases where you have misapplied your talents and powers of mind; where you have squandered money on your lusts, or spent it for things which you did not need, and which did not contribute to your health, comfort, or usefulness. Perhaps some of you have laid out God's money for tobacco. I will not speak of intoxicating drink, for I presume there is no professor of religion here that would drink it, and I hope there is not one that uses that filthy poison, tobacco. Think of a professor of religion using God's money to poison himself with tobacco!

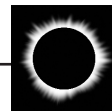
**11. Bad temper.** Perhaps you have abused your wife, or your children, or your family, or servants, or neighbours. Write it all down.

**12. Hindering others from being useful.** Perhaps you have weakened their influence by insinuations against them. You have not only robbed God of your own talents, but tied the hands of somebody else. What a wicked servant is he who not only loiters himself but hinders the rest! This is done sometimes by taking their time needlessly; sometimes by destroying Christian confidence in them. Thus you have played into the hands of Satan, and not only showed yourself an idle vagabond, but prevented others from working.

If you find you have committed a fault against an individual, and that individual is within your reach, go and confess it immediately, and get that out of the way. If the individual you have injured is too far off for you to go and see him, sit down and write him a letter and confess the injury. If you have defrauded anybody, send the money, the full amount and the interest.

Go thoroughly to work in all this. Go now. Do not put it off; that will only make the matter worse. Confess to God those sins that have been committed against God, and to man those sins that have been committed against man. Do not think of getting off by going round the stumbling-blocks. Take them up out of the

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## Recovery from Doubt: Experiencing God

by Barbara Milligan

By the time I was 12 or so, I was a committed Christian. But despite my personal commitment to Jesus and my involvement in a church community, I began to have some basic doubts about God. I was haunted by questions like, Am I really saved? Does God really love me? Is there really a God, and did Jesus really die for me, or did somebody make all this up? I asked Jesus into my heart over and over, just in case I wasn't sincere enough the previous time. I kept hoping that the next Bible study, the next church youth camp, the next Sunday sermon would set me free from my doubts.

My childhood church was evangelical, which means that the emphasis was on Jesus as revealed in the Bible, the Word of God. That still sounds good to me, but a common belief in my church was that Jesus reveals himself only through Scripture, except sometimes through starry skies and redwood trees. Doubt was not an acceptable part of being a Christian in that environment, so I never shared my doubts with anyone. I didn't want to be told, "My dear, you need assurance. And I can settle that for you once and for all. It says right here in 1 John 1:9, 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'\* You see? You're saved. So don't give the devil a foothold by doubting."

Now, I believed 1 John 1:9 and similar verses. I memorized them. I meditated on them. I quoted them to other people. And I firmly believed (and still do) that the Word of God is as powerful as a two-edged sword and that God could speak to me and transform me through that Word. God had already done that through some passages of the Bible. But as much as I wanted to trust God, my painful experiences with authority figures had made me fearful. So my doubts remained.

That was many years ago, and although I still sometimes have lapses in trusting God, I'm no longer haunted by doubts. What made them go away? Well, it didn't happen all at once. In fact, for me, it took years; I was in my thirties when I realized the doubts were gone. And contrary to what I'd been searching for, the solution was not in a compelling, intellectual argument or presentation. It was not in finding the answers to my questions. What helped me the most was experiencing God's real presence.

During those years of doubting, I experienced God being with me in many ways. I remember the dark nights of crying out to God when I was lonely or afraid, and the warmth of God's presence that often came to me within minutes. I remember sensing that God was leading me as I decided to move 400 miles from my childhood home without a job or a place to live. I remember God beginning to heal my emotional wounds, freeing me from some codependent patterns and helping me develop healthy boundaries. And I remember many of God's personal, daily gifts to me—a hummingbird in flight, staring into my face from two feet away, or an encouraging conversation with someone I trusted, or a glimpse of something good that God was doing in a situation that had tied my stomach into knots.

I remember one Christian friend in high school who had a life-

long impact on me. She knew lots of Scripture but never used it to try to fix me or "assure" me. Instead, she lived Scripture. She listened to me. She responded with compassion. She affirmed me. I know Jesus was in her, using her to draw me closer to him and to trust my experience of him. I felt loved, accepted, respected, valued, comforted, nurtured, strengthened. Later I met other supportive friends, communities of believers, who taught me how much we all need each other to survive.

I also remember how God made many Bible passages come alive for me in the midst of my doubts. For example, I identified with the man who told Jesus, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). That story told me that Jesus wanted me to be honest about my doubts. And that I could ask him to help me with them.

Despite my doubts, God met me in all those ways, and more. Over and over, I was invited to experience God. I experienced God's presence, God's guidance, God's compassion, God's comfort, God's nurturing, God's strength, God's love and many more aspects of God's character. I experienced God through nature, through other people, through circumstances, through words and pictures and impressions, and increasingly often through the Bible.

God used those experiences to gradually vanquish my doubts. My unhealed wounds from the past had caused me to doubt God, while my conscious mind wanted to trust God. And because my doubts were on a feeling level, not on a thinking level, God addressed them emotionally, not intellectually. Hearing, reading, and thinking about God's love for me, and all that Jesus had done to demonstrate God's love, did not diminish the doubts. I needed to experience God's love for me before the doubts would subside. And as I began to experience God's love, my heart began to open to the living truths of the Bible.

My experiences of God during those years of doubting taught me a few things about God. The Bible clearly communicates all these truths, but they're meant for us to experience as well as to think about. "Taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8) is one of the ways that David talks about experiencing God. Tasting is not primarily an intellectual exercise; it's an experience. Here are some things we can discover when we taste, or experience, God:

- **God is kind.** I was taught this at church, as many of us were, and my conscious mind believed it. So then why was I often surprised when God did kind things for me or spoke gentle, respectful words to my soul? Those of us who grew up with critical authority figures tend to brace ourselves for shame, put-downs, guilt, mistrust, impossible demands, performance reviews, and other harsh treatment from God. But that is not God's way. God surprises us with kindness.
- **God's love has no strings attached.** God's love has no "if" clause ("I will love you if you please me" or "I will love you if I feel like it"). God's love is not a smothering love ("I love you because you make me feel good"). And God's love is not a controlling love ("I love you

\*King James Version.

because you are my property"). God simply loves us—unconditionally, eternally.

• ***God wants us even more than we want God.*** In the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), Jesus compares God to the father who unashamedly hitches up his garment and runs to meet the lost son. Jesus says that while the son was still a long way off, "his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (v. 20). We may find this illustration of God's affection too intimate, too threatening. But God invites us to come a little closer and to experience God's compassion.

• ***God is more gracious to us than we are toward ourselves.*** We have high expectations of ourselves, and we tend to judge ourselves harshly. We fear failure, we reprimand ourselves when we fail, and we might even punish ourselves for failing. But God knows our limits even better than we do. And when we fail, God does not scold us or shame us. God always has grace for us, no matter how many times we fail.

• ***God is trustworthy.*** God never gives up on us, never rejects us, never leaves us. These things are especially difficult for us to believe if we didn't grow up in an environment of trust. But God understands our mistrust and invites us to discover, through experience, how trustworthy God is.

• ***God delights in giving to us.*** It's God's nature to give. Unfortunately, most of us aren't very good at receiving. We find it hard even to receive from God, unless it's mainly for the purpose of serving someone else. But when we slow down, pay attention to what God might be doing in us and around us, and receive the good gifts God is offering us—especially God's love for us—we become healthier human beings. We become human beings who know we're loved. And then we're prepared to serve others out of love.

• ***We can tell God exactly how we feel.*** God can handle our doubts, our fears, our anger, our disappointment, our anxiety, our sadness. Unlike some people we may have known and trusted, God doesn't turn away from us or tell us to go away until we get a better attitude. Instead, God invites us to share all our feelings with him, including the unpleasant ones. If we find this hard to do, we can browse the Psalms for helpful scripts. Psalms 13, 31, and 69 are good examples, and there are many more.

• ***God wants to heal our wounds.*** It took me quite a few years to let this truth sink in, but God is always patient. While we may want our emotional wounds to be healed, we may avoid the healing process. We fear the pain we'll experience as we expose wounds that we buried long ago, or we fear God's responses to those wounds. However, God understands all our fears. And as we take them to God, one fear at a time, God slowly and thoroughly drives out our fears while healing our wounds.

The Bible is full of stories about how people have experienced a loving God. And the Bible is full of invitations for us to experience this God. Fortunately for us, God does most of the work. Our part is to ask God to make us willing to have our wounds and fears revealed to us so that God can heal us. Our part is to ask for eyes to see and a heart to receive God's loving gifts to us each day so that we can experience and truly know this One who loves each of us beyond the telling.

*Barbara Milligan is the associate editor of STEPS magazine.*

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way. In breaking up your fallow ground, you must remove every obstruction. Things may be left that you think little things, and you may wonder why you do not feel as you wish to feel in religion, when the reason is that your proud and carnal mind has covered up something which God required you to confess and remove. Break up all the ground and turn it over. Do not "balk" it, as the farmers say; do not turn aside for little difficulties; drive the plough right through them, beam deep, and turn the ground up, so that it may all be mellow and soft, and fit to receive the seed and bear fruit "an hundredfold."

When you have gone over your whole history in this way, thoroughly, if you will then go over the ground the second time, and give your solemn and fixed attention to it, you will find that the things you have put down will suggest other things of which you have been guilty, connected with them, or near them. Then go over it a third time, and you will recollect other things connected with these. And you will find in the end that you can remember an amount of history, and particular actions, even in this life, which you did not think you would remember in eternity. Unless you take up your sins in this way, and consider them in detail, one by one, you can form no idea of the amount of them. You should go over the list as thoroughly, and as carefully, and as solemnly, as you would if you were just preparing yourself for the Judgment.

As you go over the catalogue of your sins, be sure to resolve upon present and entire reformation. Wherever you find anything wrong, resolve at once, in the strength of God, to sin no more in that way. It will be of no benefit to examine yourself, unless you determine to amend in every particular that which you find wrong in heart, temper, or conduct.

If you find, as you go on with this duty, that your mind is still all dark, cast about you, and you will find there is some reason for the Spirit of God to depart from you. You have not been faithful and thorough.... You need not expect that God will work a miracle for you to break up your fallow ground. It is to be done by means. Fasten your attention to the subject of your sins. You cannot look at your sins long and thoroughly, and see how bad they are, without feeling, and feeling deeply. Experience fully proves the benefit of going over our history in this way. Set yourself to find you can pray. You never will have the Spirit of God dwelling in you till you have unravelled this whole mystery of iniquity, and spread out your sins before God. Let there be this deep work of repentance and full confession, this breaking down before God, and you will have as much of the spirit of prayer as your body can bear up under. The reason why so few Christians know anything about the spirit of prayer is because they never would take the pains to examine themselves properly, and so never knew what it was to have their hearts all broken up in this way.

Charles G. Finney, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library* ([www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org))



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can be done. If we find ourselves lapsing into doing such a good job at being still that God must be pleased, then we need to tell the truth about that. Acknowledge the problem. Ask for help. And move on. We are not going to "get this right." The best we can hope for is to

learn from our mistakes. Writing "Progress, not perfection" on a bunch of 3" x 5" cards and putting them everywhere can help. Reminding ourselves regularly that God accepts our limited faith and our spiritual poverty can also help.

### **The God Who Loves to Feed His People**

Spiritual anorexia is a form of spiritual poverty. It is a *dis-ease* rooted in terrible distortions of our self-concept and of our concept of God. We have believed that we are not good enough, that we are bad and that we are without value. We have believed God to be rejecting, demanding and even abusive. The thought of being cared for and nurtured by God may seem too good to be true.

It takes time, but we can eventually learn that God loves us. The history of world religions is full of examples in which people are supposed to feed God. For people of biblical faith, the emphasis has always been exactly the opposite: God loves to feed us. Think about the manna in the wilderness. Think about the loaves and fishes that Jesus turned into an abundance. Think about the Eucharist, in which God feeds us with spiritual food. Think of all the stories Jesus told that end with a feast. "Come, all you who are hungry and thirsty," says God, "and you will receive spiritual nourishment."

My prayer is that God will give you the courage, spiritual humility and patience to receive a little nurture from God today.

May your roots sink deeply in the soil of God's love.

*Dale Ryan is the editor of STEPS and the executive director of the NACR.*

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**May the words of my mouth  
and the meditation of my heart  
be pleasing in your sight,  
O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.**  
*(Psalm 19:14, New International Version)*

*The power in me exceeds the fear in front of me.*

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