

STREAMS OF LIVING WATER

Essential Practices from
the Six Great Traditions of Christian Faith

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INTRODUCTION

Today, a mighty river of the Spirit is bursting forth from the hearts of people of all genders and ages. It is a **deep** river of divine intimacy, a **powerful** river of holy living, a **dancing** river of jubilation in the Spirit, and a **broad** river of unconditional love for all peoples. As Jesus says, “*Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water*” (John 7:38).

The astonishing new reality in this mighty flow of the Spirit is how sovereignly God is bringing together streams of life that have been isolated from one another for a very long time. Historically, this is understandable: Over the centuries some precious teaching or vital experience is neglected until, at the appropriate moment, a person or movement arises to correct the omission. In time, though, it forms its own structures and community life, often in isolation from other Christian communities.

This phenomenon has been repeated many times through the centuries. The result is that various streams of life have been cut off from the rest of the Christian community, depriving us all of a balance vision of life and faith.

But today, our sovereign God is drawing many streams together that heretofore have been separated from one another. It is a mighty Mississippi River, which gains strength and volume as the Ohio and Missouri Rivers and many other rivers flow into it. In our day, God is bringing together a mighty “Mississippi of the Spirit.”

In this book I have tried to name these great Traditions – streams of spiritual life if you will – and to note significant figures in each. The naming is not perfect, but I hope it will give you the major thrust of these Traditions:

1. **The Contemplative Tradition – the Prayer-Filled Life.** (*Sunday, March 9th*)
2. **The Holiness Tradition – the Virtuous Life.** (*Sunday, March 16th*)
3. **The Charismatic Tradition – the Spirit-Empowered Life.** (*Sunday, March 23rd*)
4. **The Social Justice Tradition – the Compassionate Life.** (*Sunday, March 30th*)
5. **The Evangelical Tradition – the Word-Centered Life.** (*Sunday, April 6th*)
6. **The Incarnational Tradition – the Sacramental Life.** (*Sunday, April 13th*)

These six Traditions describe various dimensions of the spiritual life. We find their emphasis throughout the teachings of Scripture. But no one models these dimensions of the spiritual life more fully than Jesus Christ. If we want to see this river of life in its most complete form, it is to Jesus that we must turn.

CHAPTER ONE

IMITATIO CHRISTI: IMITATING CHRIST

Prayer & Intimacy

Let us consider the **Contemplative Stream, or the prayer-filled life**. Nothing is more striking in Jesus' life than His intimacy with the One who Sent Him. Prayer threads its way through Jesus' life like a recurring pattern in a quilt. His teachings on prayer are matched by His continual practice of intense times of solitude.

Purity of Heart

Consider with me the **Holiness Stream, or the virtuous life**. We cannot understand the holiness and ingrained virtue in Jesus without carefully examining those forty days of temptation in the wilderness. In that single event, when He fasted from food so that He could all the more fully enter the divine feast, we see a lifetime of practiced virtue coming to the fore. We see in Jesus such deeply ingrained "holy habits" that He is always "response-able," always able to respond appropriately. This is purity of heart.

Life in the Spirit

Let's ponder together the **Charismatic Stream, or Spirit-empowered life**. Nothing is more satisfying to observe than how Jesus lived and moved in the power of the Spirit. It is a wonder to watch Jesus moving among people, exercising spiritual *charisms*, like the charism of *wisdom*, the charism of *discernment*, the charism of *miracles*, the charism of *exorcism*, and the charism of *healing*. (*A "charism" is a divinely inspired spiritual gift that God bestows upon individuals for the good of the community of faith and the advancement of the kin'dom of God upon the earth.*)

Justice & Shalom

Let's look at Jesus and the **Social Justice Stream, or the compassion life**. In His inaugural sermon, Jesus was announcing a perpetual Jubilee in the Spirit, and the social ramifications of this were profound indeed. With these opening words, Jesus delivered a war cry for social revolution.

Proclaiming the Evangel

Let's consider the **Evangelical Stream, or Word-centered life**. Jesus, the Christ, came proclaiming the Good News ("evangel" or "gospel") of the kin'dom of God and was in His very person the embodiment of this Good News. Jesus was, and is, the living Word of God enfleshed among us. *And what is this Good News?* It is, very simply, that people – *all* people – can enter into a living and abundant life with God right now, and this reality will continue on, and indeed, intensify after death. But the Evangelical Life is not just of *proclamation*, but of *demonstration*, too.

The Sacrament of Right Now

Let's think together about the **Incarnational Stream, or the sacramental life**. The wonder and glory and majesty of Christmas is that at one pinpoint in history the great God of the universe stooped to take on human form. Today, we tend to confine Jesus and His work to stained glass and high altars and silent retreats – the specifically religious or liturgical dimensions of Jesus' life. But we must remember that the majority of Jesus' life – and of ours – is found in our families and homes, our work and play, among neighbors and everyday surroundings. This tangible world is the place we most fully express the meaning of incarnational living. The sacramental living calls us to make all our waking and sleeping, all our working and playing, all our living and loving flow out from the divine wellspring. It can; Jesus points the way.

The Social Justice Tradition: Discovering the Compassionate Life

Sunday, March 9th

Jim Wallis once said, *“The Christian doctrine is one that is both about individual spirituality and a parallel commitment to social justice.”*

The purpose of Richard Foster’s book, *“STREAMS OF LIVING WATER,”* is to show how often Christians have taken something they were passionate about, overemphasized it, and separated it from the rest of the Christian faith at their own disservice. This is highlighted most clearly in the Social Justice tradition. Some Christians have all but given up on all things spiritual and personal devotion or piety for a fervent dive into social justice. In response, others have doubled down that the Christian faith is almost entirely about a personal experience, and if you are to help anyone else, it’s only to save your own soul. These two extremes (often couched in the language of Evangelicalism vs. Mainline Protestantism) fail to realize that both social justice *and* personal spirituality are two sides of the same biblical coin. After all, Jesus did say that the two greatest commandments were to love both God (personal) and neighbor (social) (Matthew 22:37-40).

All the Old Testament prophets had a social justice bent in their call to the masses. But no other prophet sounded the trumpet call of justice than Amos. He was horrified by the blatant injustices that had become so commonplace that no one seemed to notice:

“They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals – they trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that My Holy Name is profaned . . .” (Amos 2:6-8).

They were engaged in selling the poor into slavery, perverting the justice of the oppressed, engaging in illicit sexual intercourse, taking financial advantage of the helpless. All these acts of injustice exhibit a single common denominator: *the abuse of power*. A person’s power was being used to manipulate, control, and to destroy.

But there’s more:

“You who trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land. Saying, ‘We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat’” (Amos 8:4-6).

The people thought their political security and economic prosperity were signs of God’s favor upon them. But Amos thought otherwise. All their wealth and affluence were the result of the sacrilegious oppression of the poor. The people hated to close their businesses during the religious festivals and used crooked weights and measurements when they could engage in business. They manipulated the scales to work in favor of the seller, so that the poor buyers, impoverished to begin with, ended up paying more to get less. And finally, to add insult to injury, the wheat they sold in shrunken quantities and at inflated prices had “filler” in it, “the sweepings” from the threshing floor. These crooked market practices, these injustices to the weak and the poor, were an offense to God.

But there’s more:

Amos had total disdain for the Hebrew judicial process, spoke out against the crime of overcharging tenant farmers for the use of the land, and the illegal actions being used to intimidate the “innocent” and reject the valid claims of the poor. Specifically, regular bribery was denying the poor their legitimate rights – and not just now and again, but repeatedly.

No outburst was more scathing than this first-person diatribe against the people’s worship:

“I hate your festivals, and I despise your ceremonial assemblies. I do not accept your offerings or look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melodies of your harp” (Amos 5:21-23).

So what does God want from us?

“But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

THE SOCIAL JUSTICE TRADITION

Dag Hammarskjöld wrote, *“The road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.”* In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus says that our “neighbor” is our “nigh-bor” the person near us, *including any person in need.* He refused to put walls around the word “neighbor.” No national heritage, no racial origin, no ethnic background, no barriers of class or culture can separate us from our neighbor. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pushes the love of neighbor to the nth degree. He says, *“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”* (Matt. 5:44). Here comes an understanding of “neighbor” that few can handle: *our enemy is our neighbor?* This does not come naturally to us at all! The willpower to love our enemies demands a power outside of us, which is precisely why the vertical movement of God-love is so essential to the horizontal movement of fellow-people-love. Love of God makes love of neighbor possible.

The Social Justice Tradition embraces three great biblical words: *mishpat*, *hesed*, and *shalom*.

Mishpat, not coincidentally, means both *justice* and *righteousness*. It’s a morality over and above strict legal justice. We are told that God *“executes justice [mishpat] for the orphan and the widow, and . . . loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing”* (Deut. 10:18). God’s justice [*mishpat*] is for the people to *“share your bread with the hungry, / and bring the homeless poor into your house”* (Isaiah 58:5-7). This is social justice.

Hesed means “compassion,” often rendered “loving kindness” or “steadfast love.” It is the word most frequently used to describe God’s unwavering compassion for God’s people. But that kind of love is expected of us, too: *“I desire steadfast love [hesed] and not sacrifice, / the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings”* (Hosea 6:6).

Sprinkled throughout the Hebrew Scriptures are grace-filled laws of compassion [*hesed*]. The law of gleaning is a prime example. Farmers were told to leave some of their crops along the borders and the grain that fell on the ground during harvest so that the poor could gather it (Lev. 19:9-20). Likewise, vineyards and olive groves were not to be stripped bare, in order to make provisions for the needy. The law did not care to distinguish if the poor “deserved” their own poverty; the simple evidence of need was sufficient reason to provide for them.

As Micah the prophet wrote:

“God has shown you what is good and what is required of you: Act justly [mishpat] and to love mercy [hesed] and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Shalom is the great beacon of Social Justice. It doesn’t just mean *peace*, but means *wholeness*, *unity*, and *balance*. It’s the vision of a *harmonious, all-inclusive community of loving persons*. The great vision of *shalom* begins and ends our Bible: In the beginning, God brings order and harmony out of chaos; in the Revelation of John people from all the nations form a single loving community in *“the holy city, the new Jerusalem.”* (Genesis 1, Revelation 21). Here, *“they shall beat their swords into plows, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore”* (Isaiah 2:2-4). This is *shalom*. And includes the natural order as well: *“The wolf and calf become friends, the lion and the lamb shall lie down together, and a little child shall lead them”* (Isaiah 11:1-9). Under the reign of God’s *shalom* the poor are no longer oppressed by the rich because ravaging greed no longer rules.

Jeremiah the prophet once lamented the fraud and greed of his day, saying, *“They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace! Peace!’ when there is, in fact, no peace”* (Jeremiah 6:14). In essence, Jeremiah was filing a malpractice suit against religious quacks who chose to put a Band-Aid over a gaping social wound and said, *“Shalom! Shalom! All is well”* when it really wasn’t.

THE THREE ARENAS OF JUSTICE

1. The first arena in the struggle for social justice is the **personal arena**. This is critical, for we cannot work for justice and live injustice; we cannot work for peace and live war; we cannot work for racial reconciliation and live bigotry. As some would say, *“We cannot give what we don’t have.”* And whatever good we are trying to create in the world is hampered by the lack of goodness that may be inside us – for the simple fact that our work becomes hypocritical. *“What does my personal life have to do with the work of justice?” You cannot give away what you don’t have.*
2. The second arena is the **social arena**. This includes our interpersonal relationships: marriages, families, friends, neighbors and coworkers, including all who curse us and spitefully misuse us. We must choose to make peace with all people. This is the work of healing and reconciliation, of compassion and *shalom*. But there is more to this arena: It includes our larger culture: school boards, community clubs, civic organizations, city commissions, and much more. Into all these social networks we bring love and joy and peace and patience and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Here, we feed the hungry, help the helpless, reach out to the orphan, the widow, the weak, and the shoved-aside. Here, we tackle the slums, the sweatshops, and red-light districts. We look for those excluded or neglected, because of their social status, race, background, orientation, gender, age, or any number of other things. And we lobby for their acceptance and welcome and embrace into the social network. We also look to see if there are social networks that are destructive to human life – networks that manipulate and control, networks that exclude and reject. Our task, then, is to work for their transformation or their defeat. Then we look for any relationships or networks that need to be established for the health and welfare of the community – a new group to foster healthy families, perhaps, or to counter child abuse or to combat racism or heterosexism or transphobia. Whatever, wherever, whoever.

The Christian community is meant to be an alternative way of living that shows forth social life as it is meant to be lived: *communities* of love and acceptance, *fellowships* of freedom and liberation, *centers* of hope and vision, *societies* of nurture and accountability, *little pockets* of life and light so stunning that a watching world must declare, *‘See how they love one another!’*

3. The third arena is that of **institutional structures**. Yes, the demonic can be incarnated into the very structures of our society, becoming part of public policy and laws of the land. When Jesus cleansed the temple in Jerusalem, He was defeating an institutional structure that had become destructive. Here, we engage in “the cultural mandate.” Our task is to envision and work to realize a society where it is easier to do good and harder to do evil; a society with institutions and laws and public policies that provide justice for all and enhanced life for all. Where structures perpetuate poverty, we work to change them. Where structures dehumanize, we work to make them more responsive to human need. We must all struggle with these issues in the light of the principle of a consistent life ethic, whereby we approach what will be the most life-giving to all people. The weapon most useful in the institutional arena is *prophetic witness*: We are the conscience to our various institutions, most

particularly, the state. We commend the state when it provides justice for all, and we bring prophet critique when it fails. This is done in many ways. John Woolman wrote, spoke, and petitioned against the institution of slavery in both church and state. He also refused to wear dyed clothing that was the product of slave labor. Later, many Quakers engaged in civil disobedience against the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, which made it illegal to help runaway enslaved persons. We must conduct peaceful, nonviolent, but prophetic protest as the people of God. As Donald Bloesch wrote, *“The Gospel is a stick of holy dynamite in the social structure.”*

There are four strengths to this tradition:

- 1. It constantly calls us to the right ordering of society – right relationships and right living.** It envisions the social order as it was meant to be. Many people have the uneasy feeling that the work of social justice forces one to make their own life either dull or uncomfortable; or, that the only way to relax and enjoy life is to ignore it all (“Ignorance is bliss!”). But the call of social justice is to a life that, because it functions well on the personal level, makes peaceful social evolution possible on the social and institutional levels.
- 2. It forces us to put names and faces on the work of justice.** Social justice is not about forcing disharmonious people together but *learning how to live together*, not just with civility but with genuine appreciation. If we are people rich in social relationships, we are rich indeed. Whenever we develop significant friendships with those who are not like us culturally, we become broader, wiser persons. Social justice teaches that we can be infinitely diverse culturally and still live as one people. *“We are the body of Christ together, and individually members of it.”* (1 Corinthians 12:27).
- 3. It bridges personal ethics and social ethics.** We cannot faithfully read our Bibles while at the same time developing racist public policy or stripping people of their inalienable rights. God cares about whether we individual lie or tell the truth, but God also cares equally about companies or politicians running advertising campaigns claiming more than the truth. We cannot speak of love while engaging in institutional structures that perpetuate injustice. It is not enough to care for individual cases of hunger if we are part of multinational corporations whose policies continuously impoverish “Third-World” countries. If you work for them – you tolerate their policies. A Christian cannot conclude, *“It’s *their* policy, not mine.”*
- 4. It gives relevance and bite to the language of Christian love.** Too often our talk about love is sentimental and soft. Social-justice-love is toughened by the hard realities of absentee landlords, sex traffickers, drug smugglers, industrial spies, and political pettifoggers. We cannot truly love our neighbor until we are prepared to face the structural violence that is built into many of our policies and institutions.
- 5. It gives us a foundation for ecological concerns.** The *shalom* we seek extends to the earth itself. As the Apostle Paul reminds us: *“The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now”* (Romans 8:22). We have been given stewardship over the environment, and may God help us to exercise it wisely, for we are still struggling to know what it means to have a just and sustainable world.
- 6. Christian social witness continuously holds before us the relevance of the impossible ideal.** It points us to the new heaven and the new earth. It reminds us that *“God can make a way where there is no way”* (Isaiah 43:19). It keeps alive the prophetic imagination.

There are three dangers of this tradition:

Warning #1: Thinking that Social Justice is an end in itself. The needs of poverty are so immediate and the demands of justice are so great that they can consume all our energies. In the social justice world, spiritual realities are often less pressing and less visible, and thus, devalued. Social justice can feed into the secularization of the world that thinks spiritual realities are irrelevant, or even suspect. Organizations without number have begun with a wholehearted commitment to minister to both physical *and* spiritual needs, only to end up severing the spiritual aspects, leaving these organizations to be a kind of social salvation that leaves people rooted in spiritual despair and alienated from God. We must also face the fact that the state has more resources for providing social services than the Church does. And we should most certainly urge the state in just such efforts. Whereas the Church has a deeper reason for its existence and ministry.

Warning #2: Social Justice can become a strident legalism. This stream is also prone to rigidity and judgmentalism. It operates primarily on the level of action and lifestyle, so it is easy to judge people on the most superficial of outward standards: *“If you aren’t blocking traffic by protesting (like us) you are not doing enough.” “If you drive a \$50,000 vehicle, you are part of the problem.”* In an ironic twist, standards of who is in and who is out, who is right and who is wrong becomes more and more narrowly defined: *“What you believe about abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, white supremacy, while determine if you are for us or against us.”*

Warning #3: Social advocates can too closely get entangled in partisan political agendas.

Sure, our faith is political, and it must make value judgments on political concerns. But it must be handled in a way that doesn’t get coopted by partisan sway. Too cozy a relationship with any political entity will blunt our prophetic edge. It must call out the negative in every political party or office and affirm the positive in each as well. Christ’s disciples must maintain sufficient distance to speak prophetically to political agendas. In 1756, as an act of protest, all the Quakers withdrew from their position on the Pennsylvania General Assembly.

PRACTICING THE TRADITION

1. **Be open to the possibility that God wants to use us, personally, in a significant way.** History is full of ordinary people who were called to positions of influence far beyond their intentions.
2. **Get the global facts.** Drop any parochial, nationalistic worldview, and take on a new global worldview. After all, Christianity is not originally, nor solely, an American institution, nor can it be owned by or bought out by Americans. We become *global* citizens (a.k.a., citizens of the Reign of God) when we care enough to be informed about what happens to our neighbors to the north and south of us, including neighbors in Belfast, Sarajevo, Santiago, and Johannesburg.
3. **Find out who is most vulnerable in our own area.** We can become advocates for the powerless and exploited right in our own hometown.
4. **Support relief agencies in their good work both financially and through volunteer efforts.** Such agencies *need* our help.
5. **Go beyond relief and get involved politically.** Life itself is political. If we refuse to influence public policy, someone else will. And it may not be good.
6. **Contact your state representative for causes that concern you.** Write letters to state reps, call their offices, engage in petitions, take part in an economic blackout (or boycott), buy fair trade products, give good, quality foods and produce to local food pantries.
7. **Take prayer into the social arena.** Engage in a prayer vigil or service either before a major event (like election day) or following a local or national tragedy (like a school shooting). The principalities and powers of the world, incarnated in so many instructional structures, are not just “human” or “neutral,” they are evil, demonic. Prayer is the necessary work to defeat these.

Caution: Do not try to answer every cry of human need or respond to every instance of injustice. Pick and choose your battles. It would simply do in even the most passionate of advocates. If each person took up *some* task of justice, it would go a lot further than to place it all on the shoulders of any one individual (including those we elect into positions of power). We simply cannot take up every task of justice all at once. God knows that we are finite human beings and does not ask us to do more than we can bear.