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# SIMPLIFY YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES FOR THE OVERWHELMED

Donald S. Whitney



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ISBN 1-57683-345-3

Cover design by Ray Moore

Creative Team: Nanci McAlister, Greg Clouse, Amy Spencer, Laura Spray, Pat Miller

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Whitney, Donald S.

Simplify your spiritual life : spiritual disciplines for the overwhelmed / Donald S. Whitney.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-57683-345-3

1. Spiritual life--Christianity. 2. Simplicity--Religious aspects--Christianity. I. Title.

BV4647.S48W49 2003

248.4--dc21

2003002394

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 / 07 06 05 04 03

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## CONTENTS

Foreword . . . . .	9
Acknowledgments . . . . .	11
Introduction . . . . .	13
SIMPLIFYING AND FIRST PRINCIPLES	
Simplify Your Spiritual Life . . . . .	16
Verify Before You Simplify . . . . .	18
Know the Good News of Christian Spirituality . . . . .	20
Rest Your Soul in “the Simplicity and Purity of Devotion to Christ” . . . . .	22
Practice True Spirituality . . . . .	24
Know Why You Simplify . . . . .	26
Remember, It’s About Jesus . . . . .	27
Take Up Your Cross Daily and Follow Jesus . . . . .	29
Root Your Spirituality in Scripture . . . . .	31
Embrace a Trinitarian Spirituality . . . . .	33
Experience Congregational Spirituality . . . . .	35
Don’t Mistake Simplicity for Heaven . . . . .	37
Simplify Your Spiritual Life Without Misconceptions . . . . .	39
Beware of Simplifying . . . . .	41
Beware of Progress . . . . .	43
Do All to the Glory of God . . . . .	45
SIMPLIFYING AND THE TRUTH	
Rely on the Authority and Guidance of Scripture . . . . .	48
Ask Often, “What Does the Bible Say?” . . . . .	50
Go to the Scriptures for Patience, Comfort, and Hope . . . . .	52
Use a Bible Reading Plan . . . . .	54
Establish Bible Reading Routines . . . . .	56
Connect Spirit with Truth . . . . .	58
Spontaneously Sing Psalms . . . . .	60
Read <i>and</i> Meditate . . . . .	62
Meditate on Scripture and Life . . . . .	64
Meditate for Light and Heat . . . . .	66
Meditate and Apply . . . . .	68
Ask the Philippians 4:8 Questions . . . . .	70
Ask the Joseph Hall Questions . . . . .	72

## SIMPLIFYING AND PRAYER

Ask, and You Will Receive Something Good . . . . .	76
Don't Always Pray the Same Prayer . . . . .	78
Pray Scripture . . . . .	80
Pray the Prayers of Others . . . . .	82
Take a Prayer Walk . . . . .	84
Pray Without Filler . . . . .	86
Have a Real Prayer Closet . . . . .	87
Pray Through Today's Plans . . . . .	89
Use Prayer Prompts . . . . .	91

## SIMPLIFYING AND YOUR JOURNAL

Keep a Simple Journal . . . . .	94
Practice Random Acts of Journaling . . . . .	96
Probe Your Soul with Questions . . . . .	98
Use Journal Prompts, Part 1 . . . . .	100
Use Journal Prompts, Part 2 . . . . .	102
Journal with a Fountain Pen . . . . .	104

## SIMPLIFYING AND YOUR MIND

Avoid Spiritual Anesthesia . . . . .	108
Turn It Off! . . . . .	109
Read One Page Per Day . . . . .	111
Collect Great Questions . . . . .	113
Walk with the Wise . . . . .	115
Imitate Spiritual Heroes . . . . .	117
Repeat the Truth . . . . .	119
See Everything As an Illustration of Biblical Truth . . . . .	121
Think Much About Heaven . . . . .	123

## SIMPLIFYING AND YOUR HEART

Sanctify Your Sufferings As Spirituality . . . . .	126
Kill Your Sins . . . . .	128
Sing Your Spirituality . . . . .	130
Clarify Your Ambition . . . . .	132
Minimize Electronic Spirituality, Part 1 . . . . .	134
Build the Wealth of Simplicity with Contentment . . . . .	136
Learn to Be Content . . . . .	138
Learn to Be Content with Christ . . . . .	140

## SIMPLIFYING AND YOUR TIME

Discipline Yourself . . . . .	144
Discipline Yourself . . . Without Legalism . . . . .	146
Practice Spiritual Multi-tasking . . . . .	148
Remind Yourself . . . . .	150

Remove One Thing, Organize One Thing . . . . .	152
File It, for the Sake of Your Soul . . . . .	153
Recognize the Spirituality of Work . . . . .	155
Do What You Can . . . . .	157
Remember the Physicality of Spirituality . . . . .	159
Take a Nap . . . . .	161
Do Nothing—and Do It to the Glory of God . . . . .	163
Live Biblically on the Lord's Day . . . . .	165
Delight in the Lord's Day . . . . .	167
Start Your Week by Stopping . . . . .	169
Schedule Margin on the Lord's Day . . . . .	171

## SIMPLIFYING AND OTHERS

Simplify Family Worship . . . . .	174
Leave a Spiritual Inheritance . . . . .	176
Read Books to Your Family That Stimulate Spirituality . . . . .	178
Sing the Table Blessing . . . . .	180
Ask People How You Can Pray for Them . . . . .	182
Prepare for Evangelism with a Simple Outline . . . . .	184
Serve Effectively . . . . .	186
Invent a Ministry . . . . .	188
Seek True Fellowship, Not Mere Socializing . . . . .	190
Cultivate <i>Koinonia</i> . . . . .	192
Cultivate <i>Koinonia</i> in the Church . . . . .	194
Fellowship Face to Face, Part 1 . . . . .	196
Fellowship Face to Face, Part 2 . . . . .	198
Minimize Electronic Spirituality, Part 2 . . . . .	200
Discussion Guide . . . . .	202
Notes . . . . .	203
About the Author . . . . .	207

*For my descendants,  
physical and spiritual,  
present and future.*

*“This will be written for the generation to come,  
That a people yet to be created may praise the LORD.”  
Psalm 102:18*

## FOREWORD

Do more and more with less and less—and do it faster and faster. This is the oft-heard management strategy in our profusely overloaded age. But what would Jesus think? Can you imagine Him flying past the blind beggar, sweat dripping off His brow, yelling at His lagging disciples because they were twenty minutes late for the Jericho prayer breakfast? How would He respond if cell phones went off within the assembled crowds at the Sermon on the Mount? Jesus had little tolerance for clutter or complexity. Simply put, He would not be distracted from His mission.

Jesus loved people and He loved truth. There was an unyielding simplicity about His approach, yet the result was freeing rather than onerous. His simplicity was all about focus. “One thing is needful . . .” are the words we remember.

Jesus practiced disciplines like solitude, prayer, and Sabbath because He sought the things above rather than the unfocused distractions of the world He came to save. And even though He was disciplined and focused, He was winsome to those with spiritual need. He served. He healed. He taught. He showed compassion. People saw, and responded to His simple message.

“Every age has its own characteristics,” wrote pastor and author A. W. Tozer. “Right now we are in an age of religious complexity. The simplicity which is in Christ is rarely found among us.” Against this problem, *Simplify Your Spiritual Life* confronts the clutter, complexities, and distractions of our age and brings us back to the simplicity of the kingdom of God. Don Whitney first bulldozes the often jumbled landscape of our spiritual condition and then presents Jesus before us front and center.

This book is not about an unsustainable perfection or an oppressive legalism but instead about the kind of simple devotion that sets us free. It is about the practical day-to-day of the Christian devotional walk, lived in such a way that intimacy with Christ can

shine through. It is a much welcomed book about intentional living and the rediscovery of disciplines that have skipped generations but now are dusted off and brought back into the light for such a muddled time as this.

Richard A. Swenson, M.D.

Author of *Margin* and *The Overload Syndrome*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ  
for you all . . .” (Romans 1:8)*

Heartfelt thanks to . . .

- Caffy and Laurelen for your longsuffering, patience, and support in the completion of this book. I love you.
- Those who prayed for me. I received more assurances of prayer during this project than with anything else I’ve written. The Lord answered.
- Mindy Rose for all your practical help, which you always do so well and willingly.
- Nanci McAlister for your encouragement and support from the very beginning of this project.
- Susan Verstraete for your unselfish ministry with [www.SpiritualDisciplines.org](http://www.SpiritualDisciplines.org) and in particular your help in promoting the book there.
- Amy Spencer for your diligence with details.
- Greg Clouse for your concern for the author as well as for the book.
- The many others who deserve appreciation for their contributions to this book.

*“For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister” (Hebrews 6:10).*

## INTRODUCTION

The world is more complex than ever, and it becomes more so by the nanosecond. As a result, almost everyone eventually feels the need to simplify. For many people, simplifying means nothing more than “doing less.” But simplifying is not so much about doing fewer things as it is about doing the *right* things.

This distinction is even more important when it comes to simplifying the spiritual part of life. For even the “ideal” simple spiritual life (whatever that is) will still be a busy one. Like Jesus and the apostle Paul, anyone devoted to loving God and people will lead a full and active life. But such a life will also be more focused, fruitful, and satisfying because it emphasizes the right priorities. So, while this book does have much to say about doing less, it says more about doing the right things, and doing them with the right motive.

Moreover, *Simplify Your Spiritual Life* is not, strictly speaking, a philosophy or theology of simplifying. While some of that is here, presenting the arguments for simplifying isn't the primary purpose of this book. These brief chapters are for people already convinced of their need to simplify where they can. In particular, this book is for those who want hope and help to start simplifying their *spiritual* lives.

I do not want to give the impression that I think everyone should do everything suggested in these pages. To do that would almost certainly result in further *complicating* your life. Rather, here is a field of ideas in which you can mentally meander, stopping to pick only those that will simplify your spiritual life.

As anyone who knows me well can testify, I write not as an expert, but as a fellow struggler in the need to simplify. Much of what's here has been forged by necessity as I've attempted to keep from being crushed by the weight of my own sense of overload. May the Lord use the fruit of this effort to refresh and strengthen your soul, and to keep you in “the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3, NASB).





## SIMPLIFY YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

DOES YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE SOMETIMES SEEM MORE LIKE A BURDEN than a blessing? Does your spirituality seem to exhaust you as often as it refreshes you? Have your spiritual practices become “just another thing to do” in an already overcrowded, stress-filled schedule? If so, then you need to simplify your spiritual life.

We should expect part of true spirituality to exhaust us, for it exists not merely for our own edification, but to serve the glory and purposes of God. Jesus’ spiritual labors occasionally so fatigued Him that He could remain asleep in an open boat in the middle of a lake during a life-threatening storm (see Luke 8:22-25). Likewise, the apostle Paul knew the depletion of inner resources that results from the willingness to “spend and be spent” for the sake of the souls of others (2 Corinthians 12:15). All aspects of externalized spirituality—serving people’s needs, doing good works, taking the gospel to the spiritually lost, working in church ministries—expend the reserves of both body and soul.

There’s a problem, though, when the inflow of spiritual renewal doesn’t replenish the outflow of spiritual ministry. Our spiritual life should be *the* source of inner *re*creation and restoration because it is the way we most directly experience the Lord Himself in daily life. Through our spiritual disciplines (rightly motivated and practiced) come many of the most refreshing blessings of knowing Christ.

An example of how the spiritual disciplines can be an ongoing means of reinvigorating the soul is depicted in Psalm 1:2-3. Frequent meditation on (and not just reading of) God’s Word so continually refreshes the meditator that “he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper.”

However, as everything else in our lives becomes more complex, so can our spirituality. As one writer observed, “The pattern of over-involvement, clutter, and busyness that is a part of our lives at home and at work will follow us into our spiritual lives unless we are vigilant.”<sup>1</sup> With increasing prosperity and technology come increasing opportunities and options—even in our spiritual practices—that weren’t available a short time ago. For instance, instead of simply sitting in a comfortable chair by a sunny window with our Bible, journal, and pen, now we can

- receive devotional readings sent daily by automatic email.
- read the Bible in several of the many translations we possess, including those on our computer.
- make journal entries on the computer by keyboard or voice-recognition software, inserting interesting graphics along with the text.
- develop our devotional experience with worship-enhancing audio and/or video.

But it all needs to be done faster than ever before because of the strangling demands on our time.

The growing frustrations of hurry and complexity affect the practice not only of our personal spiritual disciplines, but also of our congregational spiritual disciplines (the ones we practice with other Christians). There’s less time for church involvement than previously, and yet there are more church activities to choose from. We’re so far behind in so many things that sometimes we wonder if what we receive from church is worth the overwhelming effort just to get there.

In some ways we’re doing more than ever spiritually, but enjoying and profiting from it less. Many areas of our lives are productive and prosperous, yet we’ve never felt so spiritually withered. Our calendars are full, but our souls are empty.

The time has come to evaluate whether what we are doing in our spiritual lives is taking us where we want to go. There is hope. Read on.



## VERIFY BEFORE YOU SIMPLIFY

THE PLACE TO START SIMPLIFYING THE SPIRITUAL LIFE IS TO MAKE SURE you have one.

Jesus frequently challenged the spiritual presumptions of His hearers. He did this constantly with an influential group of men known as the Pharisees. Because of the unusual depth of their interest in and commitment to the things of God (especially Bible study and memorization, prayer, and fasting), they and everyone else were sure that if anyone was right with God, it was these dedicated Pharisees. Jesus once devoted an entire parable to warn against the danger of the spiritual presumption of the Pharisees and people like them (see Luke 18:9-14).

The apostle Paul — who was once a Pharisee himself — likewise warned people about assuming that everything was okay between themselves and God. It was to a group of people who had shown great zeal as followers of Jesus that he wrote, “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves” (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Paul once wrote the following to a group of people he himself believed to have spiritual life: “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). While physically alive, they had been spiritually dead. But, thanks be to God, “He made alive” by grace through faith in Jesus those who had been spiritually dead. When these people were spiritually dead, they probably thought they were spiritually alive. They would have imagined that they could have gotten as much out of the practices of Christian spirituality as anyone — provided they had any interest in them. And isn't that what most people think today?

However, the Bible says that until a person is given the Holy Spirit, he “does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they

are foolishness to him” (1 Corinthians 2:14). No one has spiritual life who does not have the Spirit of God. And only those who know Jesus Christ through repentance and faith have the Spirit of God.

So the reason some feel frustrated about their spirituality is because they're assuming life and health when in actuality they're spiritual corpses. Upon what do you base *your* assurance that the Holy Spirit dwells in you and that you have eternal spiritual life? Do you know the biblical marks of the presence of the Holy Spirit (as in John 16:8-10,14 and Galatians 5:22-23) and the signs of God-given spiritual life (as in the letter of 1 John)? Can you see these in your life?

Be sure to verify your spiritual life before you try to simplify it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Don Whitney has been Associate Professor of Spiritual Formation (the first such position in the six Southern Baptist seminaries) at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, since 1995.

Don grew up in Osceola, Arkansas, where he came to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He was active in sports throughout high school and college, and worked in the radio station his dad managed. After graduating from Arkansas State University, Don planned to finish law school and pursue a career in sportscasting. While at the University of Arkansas School of Law, he sensed God's call to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. He then enrolled at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, graduating with a Master of Divinity degree in 1979. In 1987 Don completed a Doctor of Ministry degree at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.

Before coming to Midwestern, Don was pastor of Glenfield Baptist Church in Glen Ellyn, Illinois (a Chicago suburb), for almost fifteen years.

He is the author of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (NavPress, 1991), which has a companion discussion guide. He has also written *How Can I Be Sure I'm a Christian?* (NavPress, 1994), *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church* (Moody Press, 1996), and *Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health* (NavPress, 2001).

Don's wife, Caffy, ministers from their home in Kansas City as a women's Bible study teacher, an artist, and a freelance illustrator. The Whitneys are parents of a daughter, Lauren Christiana.

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