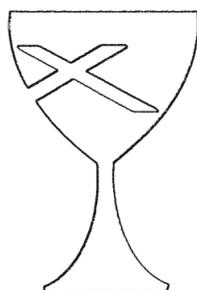


YOUR SPIRITUAL HEALTH



A Gift to you from **The Woodlands Christian Church**
Loving God, Loving Neighbor, Making Disciples
1202 N. Millbend, The Woodlands, TX 77380
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The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): is a fellowship of believers and congregations that began during a spiritual revival on the early American frontier in the early 1800's. This movement was not begun by a single individual but came about because of a desire among frontier Christians to leave behind old denominational differences and to live their faith in communities that sought to restore a simple practice of Christianity founded on the example of the New Testament. Because many denominations of the time placed high barriers to membership and excluded many people from the sacraments, Disciples emphasized membership open to all based on a simple confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and came to believe in an "open table", offering the Lord's Supper to all believers, regardless of denominational background.

What Disciples Believe

Open Communion

The Lord's Supper, or Communion, is celebrated in weekly worship and it is open to all who believe in Jesus Christ.

The Oneness of the Church

All Christians are called to be one in Christ and to seek opportunities for common witness and service

Freedom of Belief

As Disciples, we are called together around two essentials of faith: a belief in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and a belief that Christians are free to follow their conscience guided by Bible study, the Holy Spirit, and prayer. We are expected to extend that freedom to others.

Baptism by Immersion

In baptism, the old self-centered life is set aside, washed away, and a new life of trust in God begins. Although Disciples practice baptism by immersion, other baptism traditions are honored.

The Ministry of Believers

Both ministers and lay persons lead in worship, service and spiritual growth



Your Spiritual Health

At The Woodlands Christian Church we are profoundly convinced that there is a moral and spiritual crisis in the world that surrounds us. Although it is true that the people of the United States enjoy a level of prosperity, health, and leisure without precedent in history, there also seem to be an unprecedented proliferation of drug abuse, suicide, divorce, pornography, and domestic violence. Many will seek to confront these social problems from the point of view of psychology, education, politics, or medicine.

We believe that the fundamental answer to these crises is to be found in the values of the human spirit. We offer this pamphlet as an elementary manual for those who want to know what steps to take in seeking the health of their spirit—to know the process through which one can come to enjoy life, and more than that, to enjoy a life that truly is worth living. Our goal is not to convince someone to be part of our church; instead, our goal is to offer you an invitation to begin a friendship with God that will lead to wellbeing.

I. The Reality of Spiritual Needs



The spiritual side of your life is real. You can overlook and even deny that spiritual needs exist because your spirit is the abstract part of your life, the part that cannot be tested in a lab or easily quantified in a study. Spirituality has to do with meaning, with the value that one attaches to things, the importance one gives to certain ideas, with how one conceives good and evil, and with how one organizes one's world into a meaningful whole.

You have other sides of your life that make you aware of needs that are more concrete and immediate than spiritual needs. The physical need for food and water, the social need for family and/or friends, the psychological needs for coping skills or resilience are recognized by all to be essential for human wellbeing. But even though not everyone recognizes spiritual needs, when these go unfulfilled, they can end up affecting every other area of life. A person who is spiritually unhealthy is someone who cannot ultimately find meaning in their own life, a life which in their own eyes may become one that is not worth living (Ecclesiastes 2:17)

Here are some of ways in which your spiritual side expresses itself. Check to see if you have sensed any of them:

1. You desire to find meaning in what you do
2. You have a perception of what is good and what is evil.
3. You have guiding moral principles or values.
4. You sense an appreciation for beauty.
5. You observe certain moments of life with tradition or ritual (the way in which you celebrate holidays, for instance).
6. You desire immortality and/or to know that your loved ones are in a good place after death.
7. You offer or experience sacrificial or selfless love, which cannot be accounted for only on the basis of family relationship, romance, or friendship.
8. You search for communion or relationship with God

Notice that these spiritual expressions are not "natural;" they do not spring from any instinctive drive nor are they essential for your physical survival, social wellbeing, or mental health. Nonetheless, they are common to the human experience. Spiritual needs are real.

Because the spiritual dimension of life is intensely personal, and because spirituality cannot be forced on someone but must be received by each person freely, we have a tendency to think that spirituality is entirely subjective and relative. In other words, we tend to think that "any old" belief system will do because after all "all beliefs lead to the same God." Still, it should be evident that some belief systems, some forms of spirituality, are destructive not only in the life of the person holding them but in the lives of the people coming into contact with that person. Prejudice, selfishness, greed, bitterness, unforgiveness, indifference, and hatred may all find fertile soil to grow in the life of a person whose spirituality remains unexamined or whose beliefs are inconsistent with the way they



live (Matthew 23:27-28). Nazism, the Inquisition, Islamic terrorism, and religious conflicts all over the world testify to the fact that not all fruits of human spirituality are good ones.

Think of your personal spirituality as a house or home, the structure of meaning under which you live in the world. There are aspects of your spiritual house which will be unique and different from any other person's spiritual house. For you to be at home in your house, you must be free to fit it to yourself. At the same time, however, if your house is to be a sound and a safe dwelling that will withstand the tests of time and difficult circumstances, you would do well to pay attention to its design and to the materials that go into its construction. Only a few people would be able to build a physical house from the ground up by themselves. No one can build a spiritual house in isolation from others, because spirituality is both individual **and** communal. You would do well to make sure that the foundation of your house is one that has been well-tested (Matthew 7:25-27).



At The Woodlands Christian Church our conviction is that the best foundation available for the construction of your spiritual home is to be found in the Christian Faith and in any of the churches and denominations that seek to be faithful expressions of that faith. Freedom of conscience is essential to the pursuit of spiritual health, and we not only respect but celebrate that freedom of conscience. However, any faith, even a "christian" faith, may lead not to spiritual health but to spiritual harm. A faith leading to spiritual health will not be arrogant, exclusive, tribal, or narrowly identified with a single culture, generation, political ideology, or national or academic agenda. We believe that the only faith that meets these criteria is that broad and time-tested Christian Faith. It has enabled millions to endure the crises of life and to be better people than they would have been otherwise. Therefore, the rest of this booklet will be dedicated to helping you strengthen your spiritual health upon a Christian foundation, but to do so in a way that will be helpful to you regardless of your denominational background or the church to which you belong.



II. Becoming Friends with God

You can only achieve spiritual health after you have come to be at peace with God. Harmony with God is not as easily achieved as you might think, however. Most people simply assume that they're O.K. with God on the basis of "well, I'm a pretty good person." There is a big problem with that assumption: We tend to overrate our own goodness, thinking that we are "pretty good" in comparison to other people, rather than comparing ourselves to the absolute goodness that we rightly expect to find in God. We want God to be honest, fair, merciful, righteous, and consistent, and God is. But God cannot be all those things and also wink at our "little white lies," our "cutting corners," our "well, I'm just having a bad day" (Matthew 5:19-20). These may be insignificant faults in our own eyes because we have immense powers of justifying ourselves, but every one of these faults is a direct insult to the God who, because of love for us, wants us to be our very best. Furthermore, when we think we are "pretty good," we do not actually seek to be God's friends. Instead, we settle for being acquaintances. We come to God on occasion, when we want something, when we think God may be able to give us a hand out of a crisis, or when our duty presses us to recognize God's presence (as at a wedding or a funeral). Otherwise, we don't think we need God. The result is that God is not really **our** God at all, because our true god, the one we actually give our loyalty to, is our own self (Isaiah 29:13).

By nature we are selfish. "Looking out for number one," means that I measure every opportunity, every relationship, every belief by how they make **me** feel, by how they contribute to **my** wellbeing, by how I am served by them. This self-serving and self-preserving bent that I have is *natural*, and I recognize that fact when I say, "well, after all, I'm *only* human." Being "natural" or "only human" in that sense, however, is spiritually poisonous, because a person wrapped up in self cannot experience meaning beyond the self (John 3:5-7).

Such a person may indeed be religious and "good," but the god of their religion will exist only to provide for the self, and their "goodness" towards others will have as its only objective to provide self-fulfillment. You can see why it is that the Bible states that human beings, selfish by nature, are by nature enemies of God (Romans 3:9-12,23).

Some think that God, if there is a God, must be an enemy of people: "How can a good God allow such suffering?" (Habbakuk 1:2-4) Look at this question another way, however: If there is no God or if God is not good,



then suffering is truly meaningless and there is no answer to nor hope for the person who asks “Why?” Suffering is precisely the primary reason why it is important to be spiritually healthy. It is possible to live life when it is comfortable without paying attention to spiritual reality, but we need to be spiritually healthy in order to face pain, suffering, and death. The Christian faith grapples with the mystery of suffering by declaring that in answer to human suffering God became a man, Jesus Christ, and shared human suffering to the full (Hebrews 5:7-9). We suffer because by nature we are enemies of God due to our selfishness. But even though we were His enemies, God responded to our enmity in love by sending His only Son to share fully the effects of our enmity by unjustly suffering capital punishment (1 John 4:9-10).



There is nothing that we can do, no amount of goodness that we can hope to accomplish that will enable us to quit being God’s enemies (Ephesians 2:8,9). You see, we are God’s enemies not only because we do bad things, but because *by nature* we are selfish while God *by nature* is loving (Romans 8:6-7). The only way to change from being an enemy of God into a friend of God is to throw up our hands, lay down our weapons, take out the white flag, and surrender unconditionally. Thankfully, God has provided a way for us to do this. Jesus Christ, God’s Son, has come to the world to accept the unconditional surrender of people (John 3:16-17). Through His death, Jesus provides the spiritual basis for people not only to receive amnesty from God but to be adopted by God as children

(Romans 8:15-17). You do not become a child of God by **doing** good; you become a child of God by simply accepting **adoption** as a brother of Jesus.

If you will honestly examine your life, you will see in it the effects of your natural rebellion against God. You will find unmistakable traces of your own selfishness. You will see broken relationships with those who once were your friends, tensions within your own family, and on occasion even a hatred of your own self (Romans 7:15-24). These are the signs of spiritual sickness which, if left untreated, will produce untold misery for yourself.

The good news is that you can unconditionally surrender to God by calling out to God’s Son Jesus Christ. If you will step down from being the god of your own universe and ask Him to be God in your own life, then you will open the door to a lifelong friendship with Him that will bring your spiritual reality into focus. He will bring order to the spiritual disorder in your life, and lay a spiritual foundation that will stand the test of time and circumstances. In the deepest sense, when you surrender to Jesus you make peace with God.



III. Building Spiritual Strength

If you’ve accepted God’s invitation for you to be friends through Jesus, the next step in beginning to develop spiritual health is to strengthen that friendship. You strengthen or weaken your friendship with God (and therefore strengthen or weaken your spiritual health) by what you choose to dwell upon, by the desires you choose to feed. People are shaped by what they pay most attention to. If you give your mind over to the thrill of pornography, you will be shaped by an obsession with sex. If you dwell constantly upon sports, or politics, or money, then those things will come to dominate your thinking and your personality. If you want to have a spiritually healthy life with a strong friendship with God, then ask God to turn your mind to things that are good, beautiful, significant, and constructive (Philippians 4:8).



Imagine that life is like a very intense football game. If you are to play in this football game of life, it is important that you be properly equipped, protected, and trained; otherwise, you may not only not be able to win the game, you will probably get hurt. Spiritually, God has provided protective “equipment” that enables us to build a strong friendship with God, to face life’s crises positively, and to dwell upon what is good for us (Ephesians 6:11).

A. The first piece of “spiritual protective equipment” that you can use in training your mind to dwell upon good things is regular Bible reading. Many people are turned off by the suggestion that they read the Bible. They say, “I tried reading the Bible, but it was boring and I couldn’t understand it.” They should not be surprised. If by nature we humans are enemies of God, it is not surprising that we should have difficulty



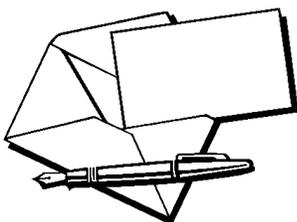
understanding and enjoying God's thoughts when we try to begin reading the Bible. Those thoughts, after all, do not reflect our selfish nature and desires (Isaiah 55:8). There are four suggestions that help those who want to read their Bibles for the purpose of strengthening their spiritual life.

1. Make sure that you have a translation of the Bible that you can understand. Your local Christian Bookstore or almost any church can help you choose the right Bible for you from the dozens of popular translations and the many editions of the Bible in English. If you are a person who has a great deal of difficulty reading, then perhaps you need to consider listening to the Bible in an audio format.
2. Don't expect to read the Bible like a novel or a newspaper, for entertainment. Instead, read the Bible prayerfully. Before you begin your reading, ask God to speak to you through what you read. Commit yourself to take what God says seriously, even if it rubs you the wrong way. Since the Bible comes from a different culture and contains God's thoughts, don't expect to understand everything right away, but do expect that you will understand what God intends for you to understand, and that this will make a difference in your life immediately.
3. In reading the Bible, spending just a little time every day reading just a few verses at a time is better than trying to read whole sections at one sitting but on an infrequent basis.
4. Don't feel that you have to read the Bible cover to cover, beginning at the beginning and going through to the end. Instead, find a section of the Bible that is meaningful to you (perhaps with the assistance of a friend or a spiritual mentor) and dwell on that section for as long as you need to.

B. A second piece of "protective equipment" for strengthening one's spiritual life is prayer. Prayer is the time one spends communicating directly with God, speaking and listening. Each person's prayer life is unique and special because God deals with each of us on a personal basis, and speaks to each of us differently. Because of this, you should not be obligated to model your own prayer life exactly according to someone else's experience. In seeking to find the unique blend of elements that God will use to communicate with you, you might try out some of the following exercises, remembering that some, none, or all of them may help strengthen your friendship with God:



1. Silent prayer and meditation: If you are a person who likes to be alone, who enjoys silence, and who is able to concentrate well, then you may want to cultivate the practice of spending time alone talking to God and receiving impressions from your thoughts that may, with time, prove to have been sent from Him. Those who have developed a life of silent prayer and meditation have found that their prayer life can be exercised while walking, driving, or in the presence of beautiful scenery, such as a sunset or an ocean beach (Matthew 14:23).
2. Spontaneous prayer out loud: If you have trouble concentrating or are easily distracted into daydreams, your attempts to pray silently may be frustrated by the wanderings of your mind. Some people have found it helpful in praying to go into a room alone and speak their thoughts, concerns, and feelings to God in a manner similar to the way one would talk in the presence of a close friend (Matthew 6:6-7). This may feel awkward the first time you try it—start out by telling God you feel awkward. Over time you will come to find that in prayer you can express your silliest joys without God being embarrassed or making fun of you; you can admit your most private faults without God being shocked; you can vent your bitterest anger, even at God, without God being offended; and you can shed your saddest tears of grief without fearing that God cannot understand.
3. Small prayer group: Some of us have a need to say our prayers in the company of other Christians, and to have our thoughts guided by their prayers. A small prayer group (perhaps only two or three people and not more than six or seven) meeting on a regular basis can be a wonderful place to strengthen your friendship with God and to experience the power of prayer as God responds to the specific requests of the group (Matthew 18:20).
4. Use of written prayers: Some people who are new to prayer feel that they are not able to address God because they don't know how, and others feel so burned out or spiritually dry that the words won't come. For these people, who are unable to pray spontaneously to God, it is appropriate to pray written prayers which adequately supply the words they would like to speak. Virtually every faith tradition has access to beautiful written prayers. These prayers may be found in a prayer book, in the words of the hymns in a hymnbook, or in the words of the



Psalms in the Bible.

5. Journaling: Many people find it helpful to write letters to God or to put their thoughts for God in a diary or a journal. Most of us have become accustomed to saying things in a way that has been “dressed up” for people, and there is something about the exercise of writing that bypasses our social defenses and allows our very heart of hearts to come through. Those who do write a prayer journal on a daily or very regular basis are usually amazed, when looking back over their written prayers after two or three years, to find how often God visited them and answered their prayers, often unawares.

C. A third piece of “protective equipment,” one that is essential if our friendship with God is to grow, is a committed friendship with a community of faith. Although God deals with each of us personally, God does not come to us in isolation from others. Being active in such a community can be difficult, frustrating, and disappointing because even people who share the same faith can be insensitive, hypocritical, and hurtful towards one another. It may seem that it would be better to have “church” at home in front of the TV set, watching the inspiring singing of a large choir and the great message of a big-name preacher. Or perhaps, if TV religion proves too impersonal, one might find it easy to attend a very large church where one could enjoy comfortable anonymity and simply come once a week on Sunday morning to watch the “show,” without getting involved with anyone.

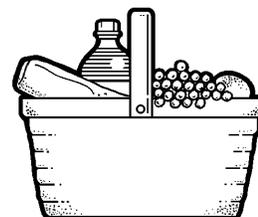


However, the deepest spiritual truth of all is that no one can learn to love God, who is (after all) unseen, without the discipline of learning to love other members of God’s family, warts and all (1John 4:20). If you are a shut-in, it is certainly not wrong to watch the religious TV shows, but make sure that you also call a local pastor or priest to have the local church visit you regularly. If you attend a very large church, then join one of their small-group meetings. Find a community where everybody knows your name (and the names of your kids and dog) and together you are seeking God. When you find this community, join it and stick with it through thick and thin. After you have been with this faith family for a while, the newness will wear off, the “honeymoon” will be over, and other churches will seem to be so much more appealing. Your faithfulness to your church family in the times when they do not inspire you, will give you a spiritual strength and depth that cannot be achieved in any other way.



D. A fourth piece of “protective equipment” that will build your friendship with God and train your mind to dwell on God is worship. Worship is simply taking time to recognize God for who God is, to remember how you came to be a part of God’s family, and to celebrate God’s ongoing involvement in your life. Worship is best done with your community of faith (a worship service), but it can also occur when you are by yourself or in other settings, such as when sitting before a fireplace on a winter evening. Worship can involve prayers, singing, silence, ritual, or spontaneous expressions of love for God. Worship can be formal or informal, reverent or exuberant, traditional or contemporary. Any one of these worship styles can serve to draw us closer to God, as long as we enter worship with the proper attitude (John 4:24). We are to come to worship as participants rather than spectators. We are to come to worship recognizing that we need God rather than believing that we are doing God a favor (Luke 18:10-14).

The occasions of worship are often called “services.” The reason for this is that in worship we come to serve God by experiencing our friendship with him together. In a similar way that I might serve my family with certain chores, family rituals, and family togetherness, each worship “service” accomplishes certain tasks that maintain and strengthen our relationship to God and each other. Worship is not always about “meeting my own spiritual needs.” There may be times when you have a feeling that worship in your own church is “dead,” and that you are not excited about it. If, however,



these elements of “service” are present, then your worship is probably complete:

1. Adoration. When you tell God how much He means to you, how great He is, you are adoring Him. God shows His love to us by sacrificing Himself and forgiving us; we show our love for Him by appreciating Him.
2. Public Bible Reading. Much of the Bible was written for the purpose of being read in public. When the Bible is read in a worship service, the very words of God are heard by the people of faith.
3. Explanation of the Bible. In worship the Bible should not only be read but explained. It

was written many centuries ago, but it continues to be relevant to our lives together. When a preacher or a Bible study leader helps the Bible become relevant to us today, God's words are renewed and brought to life in our situation.

4. Confession. Because we have been enemies of God by nature, not a single week goes by that we don't offend Him with our selfishness. At least once a week in worship we need a time "to make things right" with our Creator, confessing what we have done to hurt God and others, and being forgiven by God.
5. Intercession. God wants the spiritual family to come bringing the issues they are facing. When you pray for someone else, you are performing intercession. The prayers of the community can make a big difference in the lives of every person they pray for.
6. Yielding to God. Because we have a tendency to allow our selfishness to reassert itself, making ourselves "god" of our own lives again, we need to regularly yield ourselves to God. In worship there should be a moment when you say to God, "I invite You, the ruler of the universe, to be the ruler of my life again."
7. Benediction. During a given week, you face many challenges, dangers, and difficulties. You need assurance that God will be with you, and that you will be given strength and wisdom for every situation. At some moment in worship you should be given that assurance, which is benediction—someone speaking a good word over you.

E. The final piece of 'spiritual protective equipment' that we would like to offer you in this booklet is one that can be called Spiritual Self-Discipline. These are practical, concrete exercises that you bring into your life on a regular basis to beat down your own selfishness and to put God in God's rightful place, which is at the center of your life. Spiritual Self-Discipline is where you "put your money where your mouth is," the little daily spiritual practices that help you to make sure that the way you live is the same as what you believe.



First, a word of caution about these exercises. There is a tendency on our part to measure everyone else by the spiritual exercise plan we have set up for ourselves. We make our own Spiritual Self-Discipline into hard and fast rules for ourselves, and the result is spiritual pride (Matthew 23:4-7). We begin to think that because we pray three times a day we are a better person and closer to God than someone who doesn't. The result is that the beneficial effect of the exercises themselves is lost. Too many people fall into the deadly spiritual trap of substituting rules, practices, rituals, and routines for an actual friendship with God. So, ask the simple question of the spiritual practices you have: Are these actually helping me get close and stay close to God? And remember, your friendship with God does not depend on the good things you **do**, but on simply accepting the gift of God's friendship on a daily basis.

As you develop your own personal program of Spiritual Self-Discipline, what kinds of exercises can help? Remember, the objective of these exercises is to cut short your own selfishness and to affirm God's oversight of every area of your life. These are some things that many members of God's family have found helpful:

- Praying before meals
- Listening to faith-inspiring music or messages on tape or radio
- Setting aside a particular time each day for prayer and Bible reading
- Giving a certain percentage of your income to your church or to charitable causes in order to affirm God's control of your finances. The amount you give (10% of your income is the amount the Bible speaks of) should be enough for you to actually miss. It should "hurt"—otherwise it is meaningless
- Abstaining from food (or from certain kinds of food) for a certain period of time for the purpose of adding a certain urgency to prayer or demonstrating to yourself that your friendship with God is more important to you than feeding bodily desires
- Offering a certain amount of time every week to do volunteer work
- Turning a hobby or a craft to a spiritual purpose—such as depicting spiritual principles through art, or turning a musical talent to the worship of God

There are many other examples of spiritual exercises that could be offered. You can find other ideas from the spiritual tradition of your own church.



IV. Jesus

There is an old song that for generations has been taught to children:

*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so
Little ones to him belong, they are weak, but he is strong*

Jesus is the human face of the Love of God. Jesus is God Himself sharing all that it means to be human: every happiness and every sorrow, every relaxation and every labor, every solemnity and every smile, every relief and every pain.

You see, God loves you so very much that He was willing to become human through His Son Jesus, so that you would never feel that God couldn't understand. God loved you so much that He was willing to not step in when people killed His own Son, so that you would never feel that God could not forgive you. God's love to you in Jesus is a free gift that you cannot deserve but only accept. Please do accept it and then invite God to make the love of Jesus obvious through you. In this way you will find spiritual health.



DEAR GOD, I WANT THE SPIRITUAL HEALTH THAT COMES FROM LIVING EVERY DAY IN FRIENDSHIP WITH YOU. I RECOGNIZE THAT, BECAUSE OF MY SELFISHNESS I HAVE BEEN YOUR ENEMY, BUT NOW I SURRENDER MYSELF TO YOU BECAUSE OF THE SACRIFICE THAT JESUS MADE ON MY BEHALF BY HIS DEATH. I ASK YOU TO TRULY BE GOD IN MY LIFE. I ALSO ASK YOU TO EQUIP ME, WITH EVERY SPIRITUAL EXERCISE THAT WILL KEEP ME CLOSE TO YOU. I PRAY THIS IN THE NAME OF YOUR SON, JESUS CHRIST. AMEN.



If this is the first time in your life that you have sincerely prayed a prayer like this one, you might want to make a special remembrance of the moment at which you made your peace with God.

Date on which I surrendered to God and allowed Jesus Christ to take control of my life:

Signed:
