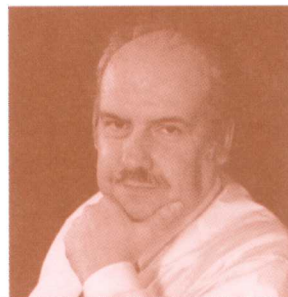


# JOURNEYING, BECOMING MORE LIKE CHRIST

Peter Holmes



**ONE OF THE FEW THINGS THAT WE CAN BE CERTAIN ABOUT THESE DAYS IS THAT THINGS ARE CHANGING. WE ARE ALL NOW LIVING IN A SOCIETY WHERE THINGS RARELY REMAIN THE SAME FOR LONG.** Consistent with this, many contemporary people want to grow, feeling they are on a journey, maturing as individuals, for instance, in their understanding of their spiritual nature relationally.

But such an attitude is not so true in the Church, where many feel they have made it, therefore do not need to journey anywhere other than to be who they already are. Change epitomises the contemporary culture we are all now part of, whereas church can often feel like a bastion of unchangeableness. One often gets the feeling that there are more rewards for not changing, for being passive and keeping a low profile. A good leader is someone who can keep things calm and in order, rather than reflecting the chaotic turmoil of the culture around.

We are also witnessing the growing psychologising of our culture. Our Western culture, the Church included, is now saturated with the 'helping professions' mindset.<sup>1</sup> We all need a therapist (at one time or another), and life is about analysing why we do things, how we can change, and what the benefits will be to our doing all of this. In contrast, within the Church we have not, on the whole, fallen for this 'talking-cure psychology' fad. Instead, we have largely shunned all of this, preferring to stay the same, not ask questions about ourselves, or navel-gaze the way the world does. We are even proud of this stance.

In some ways I may be exaggerating the case, but the contrast, with every passing year, becomes more and more stark between the values of postmodern people and immutability within the Church. With an aging church population it is no surprise we have seen another half million leave the Church over the last seven years.<sup>2</sup> Some of them will have died, while others left because of boredom and irrelevance to their otherwise exciting lives. What this is suggesting is that much of church life is increasingly out of touch with contemporary culture, and as the years pass this contrast becomes more and more stark. The two worlds are drifting apart, or are they? Are our traditions right and the world out of step, or are people doing something they have always done, something the Church also used to do at one time?

## IS CHRIST STILL THE CHANGER OF PEOPLE?

One of the side-effects of the psychologising of our society is that we are increasingly talking in the

language of psychology about truth that has in the past been part of our Christian culture. Words like 'journeying' are an ancient concept that go back to the Old Testament, where Abraham journeyed with Yahweh (Gen 12.4ff.), or Moses was schooled by him (Ex 2.11ff.). In a similar way, Paul, following his conversion, returned to Tarsus for at least 10 years, the so-called 'silent years' being schooled by Christ.

Journeying is still about personal positive change, even in our postmodern world. People want to grow. But was this not also the case within the Church? Christian discipleship was always about personal positive change in both Christ's own ministry (Mt 18.3) and in the early Church.

The early Church developed whole programmes intended to reform new converts, at both a personal and group level, changing their convictions and conduct.<sup>3</sup> Catechumens probably undertook a minimum of three years of 'training and exorcisms', before being baptised into the Christian community.<sup>4</sup> Discipleship was inevitably 'therapeutic', in the sense of bringing about positive change to the person's life. Change wasn't an optional extra, or only for those in desperate sickness or need. It was a pattern of discipleship that was foundational for the first few centuries. It was certainly a radical step for any Jew or the pagan who chose a path to follow Christ and began becoming Christian,<sup>5</sup> but it was clearly both attractive and successful, as is seen by both the numerical growth of the early Church and the boldness in martyrdom.

These models of personal positive change toward greater Christlikeness used by the early Church are similar in some ways to the psychologising process of today, except that within the Church they were Christ-centred, and in psychology it is person-centred. Bonhoeffer helps us here, by suggesting, in his 'worldliness of the Word of God' theology, that 'Wherever therapy is, theology is present. Helping which nurtures selfhood is Christian, regardless of whether or not the name of Jesus is mentioned.'<sup>6</sup>

Oden built an interesting thesis around these ideas of Bonhoeffer, noting as Bonhoeffer did that a two-sphere thinking exists in the Church and psychological therapies. But in actual fact, Christ bridged both. Bonhoeffer and Oden concluded that all knowledge and healing is Christ-centred, whether we acknowledge this or not. Again, like the journeying idea, this is something the Church is failing to claim back and recover.

**DR PETER HOLMES** is a management trainer and co-founder of Christ Church Deal, Kent and *Rapha*. He holds a PhD in therapeutic discipleship (University of Birmingham).

## NOTES

1. JJ Chriss, (ed.), *Counseling and the Therapeutic State* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1999), pp. 3ff.
2. P Brierley, *Pulling out of the Nosedive: A Contemporary Picture of Church-Going* (Christian Research, 2006).
3. For an outsider's perspective of this personal change process see R MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (AD 100-400)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984). and for an insider's see A Field, *From Darkness to Light: How One Became a Christian in the Early Church* (Ben Lomond: Conciliar Press, 1997 [1978]) and TM Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: West and East Syria* (Minneapolis: Liturgical Press, 1992).
4. See Field, *From Darkness to Light*, pp. 19ff.
5. See Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple*.



## 'Helping which nurtures selfhood is Christian, regardless of whether or not the name of Jesus is mentioned'

### NOTES

6. D Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (London: Touchstone Books, 1995 [1955]), cited in TC Oden 'Theology and Therapy: A New Look at Bonhoeffer', in H Newton Maloney (ed.), *Wholeness and Holiness: Readings in the Psychology/Theology of Mental Health* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), pp. 199–222.
7. PR Holmes, *Becoming More Human: Exploring the Interface of Spirituality, Discipleship and Therapeutic Faith Community* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005).
8. PR Holmes and SB Williams, *Changed Lives: Extraordinary Stories of Ordinary People* (Milton Keynes: Authentic, 2005), and SB Williams and PR Holmes, *Letting God Heal: From Emotional Illness to Wholeness* (Milton Keynes: Authentic, 2004).
9. These, along with dates of our workshops, introductory literature and books, are all available from our office, contactable through our website, [www.ccd.xpha.net](http://www.ccd.xpha.net) or tel 01304 239621.
10. PR Holmes, 'Spirituality: Some Disciplinary Perspectives', in K Flanagan and PC Jupp (eds), *The Sociology of Spirituality* (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming).
11. CF Keil, *Commentary on II Chronicles* (Edinburgh: ET Publishers, 1872), p. 465, cited in F Brown, SR Driver and CA Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962 [1907]), p.331.
12. WT Brown, *Israel's Divine Healer* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), pp. 26ff.; Brown et al., *Lexicon*, p. 950.
13. Teresa of Jesus, *The Interior Castle or the Mansions* (London: Thomas Baker, 1906 [1577]).
14. EH Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), *passim*.
15. R Barmes, 'Psychology and Spirituality: Meeting at the Boundaries', *The Way Supplement* 69 (1990), pp. 29–42. D Benner, *Care of Souls: Revisioning Christian Nurture and Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), p. 221.
16. PE Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (2nd edn; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994 [1977]), p. 124.
17. PR Holmes, *Trinity in Human Community: Exploring Congregational Life in the Image of the Social Trinity* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006).

► Through such thinking we are helped in recovering the ideas of journeying, and of psychological healing and positive change that are Christ-centred, not just the domain of contemporary psychology. What I am suggesting is that the Church already has the framework for teaching a contemporary journey that brings about positive personal change, able to help contemporary unchurched people. It has been my personal quest to develop such ideas in the *Rapha* journey.<sup>7</sup>

From the 1960s onward I have had a growing interest in why people are unable to find intimacy with Christ. One aspect of this that has become apparent to me over the last 40 years has been that people struggle to know how to change and grow. So using the ideas of Scripture, but sometimes putting them in contemporary language, we have built a local congregation around the idea of Christ-centred journeying and the need for personal positive change.<sup>8</sup> In our own community this has been successfully working for almost a decade, for both the unchurched, and Christians who have still not found what they are looking for in Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Such a journey approach to evangelism and sanctification is not everyone's first choice, but for those who are looking for such change in their lives, and who know they cannot or should not stay the way they are, this approach can be a gift from the Lord. So for the rest of this article I would like to focus on two things: some key ideas for this 'therapeutic (salugenetic) discipleship' model and a recovery of a biblical language of positive change.

### WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS JOURNEY?

Contemporary spirituality outside the Church sees us as spiritual beings,<sup>10</sup> but within the Church there is still no mature doctrine of the human spirit. I believe this lack inhibits our visualising and practicing spirituality as a vibrant part of our Christian journey. People work especially well with visual aids and clear ideas, and the early Hebrew view of human make-up is, I believe, one such helpful tool. In Genesis (Gen 1.26–27, 2.7, etc.) human personhood is seen as both spiritual and physical, two aspects of one reality, not unlike two sides of a coin. The dust is animated by divine Spirit, creating human personhood, helping us visualise our spiritual natures.

This Hebrew approach suggests a balance in the two aspects of our one nature, rather than suggesting a

spiritually good 'core' to human nature, as the Greeks saw it. Both body and spirit are in need of greater wholeness. It also sets humanity apart from all other species. There is an implicit deep value suggested in our being in God's image, having spirit-body uniqueness. This in turn suggests we can all be greater than who we now are, so encouraging us to seek out the blockages and the tarnished image of God in us all.

Another idea is that of God's interest in our becoming more whole. In Exodus 15.26 the Hebrew semantic field of 'heal' (*rapha*, or *rp*) is normally translated heal, cure or physician. The traditional use of these verses in many Christian circles is to claim it as God wishing to instantly heal someone. Although I am not denying such healing takes place in the contemporary Church, I have concluded his invitation in this *Rapha* context is far more specific, and far more remarkable. The use of the word (*rp*) is explained by the fact that 'sin was regarded as a spiritual disease so that *rp*' is to be understood as healing of the soul (as Ps 41.3) or the transgression (Hos 14.4; Jer 3.22).<sup>11</sup> 'To patch or sew together, to unite or make whole', usually explained as mending or stitching together a piece of torn cloth.<sup>12</sup> God is saying to Israel they can be whole if they live his way, by listening to his voice and acting on it.

Another idea is that of our spiritual nature can be seen as a house. An idea that is both biblical (Ps 127.1, Lk 11.24–26, 2 Tim 2.20–22, Heb. 3.6, etc.) and part of Church tradition.<sup>13</sup> We all have a spiritual house given to us by the Lord. At conversion or commitment to Christ we enter the hallway with Christ, but the whole house is locked up with all doors closed but all windows open. Our journey with Christ is to enter each room, clean it out with the Lord, close the windows to all predators, and begin to enjoy its occupancy, Christ living in and with us. Each room will be an area of our lives that we have not yet owned, either its sin or baggage. Some could be named 'father' or 'mother', 'abuse', 'self-harm', 'revenge' or 'pride'.

Most aspects of the journey as we are developing it focus on the recovery of simple biblical ideas and practices. For instance, the emphasis on sin and baggage allows the person to begin to see themselves in a more realistic light, more as God might see them.

### RECOVERING A BIBLICAL LANGUAGE OF POSITIVE CHANGE

One of the most contentious words in the Church is sin. Others are avarice, pride, idolatry, hate, contrition, repentance, suffering, sacrifice, arrogance and eternal

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hope.<sup>14</sup> Each is pregnant with a rich Christian tradition and its theology, carrying a view of human nature that I believe is key to both healing and wholeness for contemporary people. These concepts, often in simpler language are welcomed within our own community as a way of 'being more real'.

I do not advocate taking biblical words and ideas and substituting them for psychological ones. This cannot and should not be done. Modern psychology examines us not as God sees us, but as others or we ourselves see us. Therefore, sin has been largely replaced by pathology, forgiveness by insight, grace with unconditional acceptance, sanctification with growth, and holiness and its wholeness with healing.<sup>15</sup>

Psychological therapies see sickness in some of us, whereas God sees a spiritual disease called sin in all of us. So in our ministry we focus on Christ's view of all the disorder in our lives, seeing our unwillingness to change as sin and baggage. Consequently, our goal is not to return someone to their normal level of 'healing', as Freud and others strive for,<sup>16</sup> but instead to seek transformation into Christ, a begetting of wholeness of personhood.

The background to such an idea is that none of us are born Christlike, neither do we automatically become more Christlike when we get converted. Nor do any of us become more like Christ without the need to change in positive ways. This change in the early Church was seen as discipleship, whereas today some of it can be described psychologically, and some theologically.

### CONCLUSION

The recovery of the Church's birthright in these areas, in giving contemporary people a journey to grow into Christ, is not in its mimicking those outside the Church. Instead, the Western Church needs to recover a range of ideas to help it help those seeking to grow or mature as people. But what I am suggesting is not a solitary private journey, but a relational one,<sup>17</sup> ideally taking place within a faith community that loves generously, and has abundant capacity to absorb the sin and baggage of people's pasts. This, we are discovering, is irresistible to contemporary people. ■