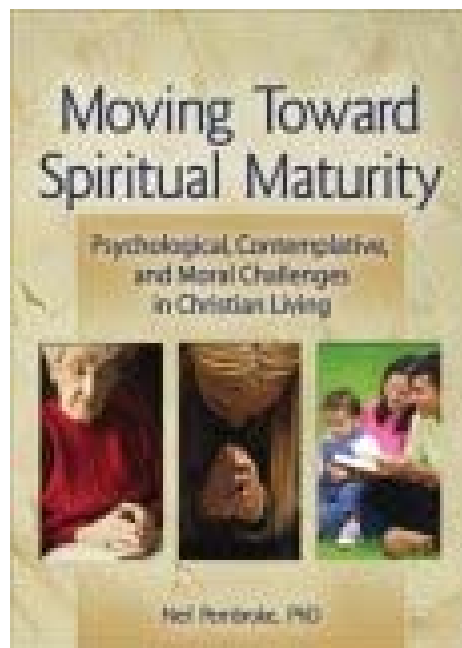


# **Moving Toward Spiritual Maturity: Psychological, Contemplative, and Moral Challenges in Christian Living**

*Neil Pembroke*, New York: The Haworth Pastoral Press,  
2007

**Reviewed by *Dr Terry Veling*, Senior Lecturer, Brisbane  
Campus, Australian Catholic University**



Dr. Neil Pembroke is a Senior Lecturer in the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics at the University of Queensland, and has published widely in the fields of pastoral theology, psychology and personal development, and spirituality.

Let me begin with a brief story. A little while ago I visited Neil and his wife, Janelle, for lunch. They had recently purchased a house that needed some restoration, and had spent the past few months undertaking extensive renovations: removing old carpets, sanding and polishing floorboards, painting, re-doing the kitchen and bathrooms, etc. They have lovingly renovated the house, respecting its original integrity, and returning it to its former glory. Just after visiting with Neil and Janelle, I began to read Neil's new book, and I had to smile to myself when I read in the Introduction, "This book is about renovation."

It seems to me that "renovation" is a perfect metaphor for Neil's book. Other similar words come to mind, such as, "rejuvenate," "bring back to life," "restore," "refresh," "make new again." In these words we can hear the spirit that infuses Neil's book. He

is writing to us, out of his years of learning and experience as a pastoral theologian, to help bring healing, renewal and restoration to our souls and our lives. He knows that as human beings, we all struggle with our weaknesses and our frailties. However, as a person of faith, Neil also knows that God's Spirit of healing is never far from any of us, that none are beyond the reach of God's saving love.

On page 107, Neil offers the following quotation from the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton:

The greatest need of our time is to clean out the enormous mass of mental and emotional rubbish that clutters our minds and makes of all political and social life a mass of illness. Without this housecleaning, we cannot begin to *see*.

A friend recently told me about a conversation he had with an alcoholic who said that he was finally "off the grog." My friend asked him how it felt to be booze-free, to which the other replied: "I really like it this way. The world is so much sharper." My friend went on to say:

What a lovely way to describe the good life, 'the world is so much sharper'. Education is about making the world so much sharper. If we can see the moments and stay with them we get more from them. We are then attending to our own lives. We are really present.

In many ways, Neil's text is trying to help us bring our lives into sharper focus, to attend to our lives and to the lives of those around us, rather than just living a numbed and unreflective existence. He writes:

We can become lost in the hurly-burly of modern life. We can submerge ourselves in a pool of chatter and small talk. We can hide from ourselves and from God by allowing ourselves to become busier and busier. The prayer of attending is about finding moments in the midst of our hectic, noisy existence to connect with God and God's redemptive love. (p. 116)

Woody Allen once quipped that 90% of humanity simply "shows up." We go about our lives almost in stunned resignation, hardly giving it a thought. In a similar way, the ancient philosopher, Socrates, said that a life lived *unreflectively* is a life lived in only half-measure. In other words, to truly live a full and worthwhile life is to *attend* to life, to be fully involved and immersed in life's great project. Otherwise, our lives are only half-lived, just touching the surface, rather than attentively present and fully engaged. The philosopher and mystic, Simone Weil, says that only the one "who is capable of attention can do this." She writes:

Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance; the love of neighbour, which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance... The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it *is* a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it.

I was struck with a similar passage in Neil's text, when he writes:

In the Bible we have a picture of compassion according to which a person is in such deep solidarity with the pain of another that she takes that pain into herself. She receives the other in her suffering and distress in her inmost space (the heart or the womb). It is, then, as if she hosts the suffering person. (p. 123)

Neil's book is concerned with attention to oneself, attention to God, and attention to our neighbour. He calls these the three "windows" of the spiritual life, and his book is a gentle, pastoral, yet challenging guide into these three crucial areas of Christian living.

Throughout the book, Neil is never "preachy" or moralistic. He has a well-honed sense of the pastor's role as a shepherd – a gentle guide – and as a healer. On every page of Neil's book, one senses that the task is "to build up," to "edify," to "heal" and to "restore" – not simply to criticize or to "tear down." And even if some tearing-down is required in our lives, it is always for the sake of a renewed life, a life restored, a life healed by God's love.

"I have come for those who are sick," Jesus said (Matt. 9:12). I have come as one "who serves" (Lk 22:27). According to its Latin roots, to give service – *ministratio* – is the "application or ministration of remedies." Theology, in this sense, is a healing discipline, and Neil's book is not only a guide for helping us live restored lives, it is also a guide for helping us become people of healing and reconciliation in the world or, as Neil says, "to cooperate with God's project of healing, reconciliation and justice" (p. 2).

Neil's book reminds us that theology is a healing activity. It is healing because it seeks to help those *in its care* realize that we need not be condemned to hatred; love is possible. We need not be condemned to cycles of violence; forgiveness is possible. We need not be condemned to conflict and division; understanding is possible.

There is a biblical feel to Neil's book. He speaks, for example, of the various "sub-selves" in our psychological lives that clamour for our attention in often distorted ways. I couldn't help but think of the gospel references to the "demons" that take up residence in our souls. We need a measure of honesty and courage, Neil says, "to cast off our defenses and neurotic needs. Our repressions, conflicts, and defense mechanisms cause us to distort inner and outer reality. They lead us to project our prejudices, failings, fears, and expectations onto others and the world around us" (p. 14).

Neil talks of a battle between goodness and evil that plays itself out in our lives. It is chastening to realize, that as much as I can be a bearer of goodness in the world, I can also be an instigator of conflict and division. Of these two inclinations – toward evil and toward goodness – my own Catholic tradition continually affirms that our desire for Goodness is stronger and outweighs our propensity toward evil. In other words, our ability to bring healing into the world outweighs our ability to bring hatred and division.

However, and this is what Neil's book so prudently reminds me, this is something we have *to learn*. It is not immediately apparent that human beings are drawn by God

toward goodness. Rather, this “desire” is a task or a condition that we have to learn. We need to learn that we are actually *good* people. We need to continually reflect upon the *goodness* in which we are created so that we can more “naturally” align ourselves with this goodness and this grace, so that we can *become* more fully human. And this is what Neil’s book is about. While it is deeply spiritual, it is not pietistic. Rather, it is seeking to help us realize Jesus’ promise to bring “life” – “life to the full.”

The point, therefore, is to bring healing and restoration to the divisions and conflicts that lie within us and between us, and that affect us all. It is these divisions that determine our fault before each other and before God. They injure life; they gather like demons; and they smell like death. Yet we can rise above this inhumanity. We can be brought back to life, to love and friendship, to the sweet fragrance of human fraternity. St. Paul writes to the Colossians:

You have been brought back to life with Christ . . . and now the life you have is hidden with Christ in God . . .

You have stripped off your old behaviour with your old self, and you have put on a new self which will progress towards true knowledge the more it is renewed in the image of its creator . . .

You are God’s saints; he loves you, and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive each other . . . be thankful.

(Colossians 3:1-3; 9-10; 12-13)

Bear with one another. Carry each other. Forgive each other and be thankful. This is the “light burden” of Christ (Matt 11:28), unlike all our vain efforts at self-justification and self-defence that continually weigh us down. A constant refrain throughout Neil’s book is that we need to be continually on guard against that voice that says, “I am what I achieve.” He says that the modern quest to be self-grounded, self-actualized human beings is one of our most prevalent and serious modern heresies. We will never find our identity simply by focussing on our selves as the source and measure of all things, because who we are is innately *vocational*, called into relationship with each other, with creation, and with God.

While reading Neil’s book, I also happened to be reading some the fourth-century sayings of the desert fathers and mothers. It may seem odd to say, yet this is perhaps high praise for Neil’s work, that I found a similar spirit running throughout these two texts. The sayings of the desert fathers are often misunderstood as the sayings of aesthetes who withdrew to the desert in some sort of heroic monastic existence. To the contrary, as many commentators have noted, their lives and their sayings are intimately – excruciatingly – concerned with their own inner struggles and their relations to their neighbour. Like the rabbis of old, these monks knew that the meaning of the scriptures was primarily concerned with the *way one should live*.

The *Sayings* are typically framed in the context of a dialogue between a monk and an elder: “Abba, give me a word.” The meaning of the word, however, is never left to pure speculation, but is always tied to the question of how one should live: “Abba, what should I do?” They wanted to know what they were to *do*, how they were to *act*.

Like the sentiments I kept finding in Neil's book, they sought not so much ideas about the spiritual life narrowly conceived, but rather a new way to live.

These monks were amazingly sensitive to the all-too-common propensity for human beings to prop themselves up through self-justification, while at the same time exercising knowledge and judgment of others. "We know that we all possess knowledge," St Paul says, but "knowledge puffs up." Everybody knows that the proud and the all-knowing wreak the most havoc in the world. In contrast, "love builds up" (1 Cor 8:1). The desert fathers and mothers fled the world of knowledge, trying instead to live a new life "hidden in Christ." We have, for example, these sayings from Abba Poemen (also called the Shepherd):

A brother questioned Abba Poemen saying, "If I see my brother committing a sin, is it right to conceal it? The old man said to him, "At the moment when we hide our brother's fault, God hides our own, and at the moment when we reveal our brother's fault, God reveals ours too." (Benedicta Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 147)

A brother questioned Abba Poeman saying, "If I see a brother whom I have heard is a sinner, I do not want to take him into my cell, but when I see a good brother I am happy to be with him." The old man said, "If you do a little good to the good brother, do twice as much for the other. For he is sick." (148)

Some old men came to see Abba Poemen and said to him, "When we see brothers who are dozing at the *synaxis* [divine assembly] shall we rouse them so that they will be watchful?" He said to them, "For my part, when I see a brother who is dozing, I put his head on my knees and let him rest." (151).

Let me conclude with a saying from Abba Neil:

As we live and move through the daily round we are connected with a myriad of faces, gestures, words, sights, sounds, values, and ideologies. In attending to this heavily populated world we are confronted with the primordial wrestling of light and shadow. Here we are blessed with goodness, love, and justice; there we are assaulted by evil, aggression, and egoism. Prayerfully, from the quiet inner centre, we ask: "Loving God, how do you want me to engage with this world that I see, hear, and touch?" (pp. 115-16)

Like the desert fathers and mothers, this is the question that runs continually throughout Neil's book. And there is perhaps no better question for us to ask ourselves continually throughout the course of our lives, while always remembering, as Neil says, that "God's agent of spiritual renovation is the Spirit, and the Spirit blows where she wills. (p.1)

\*\*\*\*\*

