

Chapter One

Seeking Wholeness and Balance as Feeling Christians

Once again Jesus addressed the people: 'I am the light of the world. No follower of mine shall wander in the dark; he shall have the light of life' (John 8:12).

There is no escaping the fact that we're all creatures of feeling. We feel frightened sometimes. Or lonely. Or angry. Or happy. We sometimes soar with feelings, like an eagle in flight. And we sometimes plummet into dark pits of depression, self-hatred, or self-pity. There are even times when we're emotionally burned out, and it seems we don't feel anything.

Feelings are real. They are important. They help to shape our lives, adding texture and vibrancy to what would otherwise be drab and uninteresting existences. Feelings aren't something to ignore or deny - because our lives aren't complete without them. But feelings are only feelings. And the lack of them - or the abundance of them - does not certify, one way or the other, our relationship with God.

In a nutshell, that's what this book is about - discovering how we ought to feel when we're right with God so we'll be able to enjoy all the abundance Christian living ought to display - and learning how to deal with ourselves when we don't feel that way. Jesus said that we shouldn't have to wander in the dark but should be able to have the light of life. In this He spoke, specifically, about Himself. But knowledge about Jesus has a practical, functional side. It can change our lives if we'll allow it to.

Wholeness and balance constitute the clarity of focus that gives us more ready access to the One who is the light. These things aren't always easy to achieve, but the benefits, when we experience them, are remarkable.

"I'm lost. I know I'm lost. And there's nothing I can do about it." The young man who said these words to me had just confessed that he was a homosexual. He went on to describe a life of ever-deepening depression that had led him to the point where he was seriously considering suicide. There are "gay rights" activists in the world today who would have us believe that homosexuality is merely an alternative lifestyle, who would suggest that to characterize somebody as I have this young man is to denigrate the entire homosexual community - to

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engage in “gay-bashing.” All I know is that this particular young man did not find homosexuality very “gay.” On the contrary, he felt trapped, incredibly lonely, and bitter. He didn’t see any way out of the hopelessness and despair that overwhelmed him, and he was left with nothing but a driving need to end it all in order to make the hurting stop.

I wish I could tell how I brought him back to the Lord through my remarkably insightful comments and my unparalleled compassion. We all like stories with happy endings. We all like to hear about miracles that happen in other people’s lives - so we can believe they may happen in ours too. But the truth is, I felt nearly helpless in the face of this young man’s overwhelming conviction that he could not be saved. He felt cut off from God by his lifestyle. He felt totally unacceptable to God. He felt utterly without hope. In short, his feelings were like a dark cloud that hung over him, driving him relentlessly toward an abyss that entailed eternal loss.

And I couldn’t help him.

It was a tragic moment, made all the more tragic by my inability to find for him a path out. Oh, I said some fine-sounding things and gave him my best advice (which in this case, with a dollar, would have bought him a cup of coffee). But I knew, even as I tried to help, that I didn’t really understand what he was experiencing. I felt for him, but I couldn’t feel with him. And I could tell by the look on his face that he’d heard it all before - and found my rather traditional suggestions no more convincing coming from me than from any of the others whose counsel he’d sought.

But as I thought about the agony this young man was experiencing, it also made me reflect on the way so many of us sometimes - even members of churches - have our joy of salvation undermined by doubts about our relationship with God. Oh, we’re not as far out from traditional patterns as this young man was - at least not according to the evaluations of those around us. We’re far more “acceptable” in the broad shape of our behavior. Perhaps we’re even involved with all the outward forms of religion. We attend church. We try to live in ways that are consistent with our beliefs. We’re not hiding any major secrets about our lifestyles. Others, commenting on us, would call us both believers and solid citizens. But inside, where it really counts, we seem to get little out of our religious experience.

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- The pastor preaches what seem to be well-reasoned sermons, but we find our attention wandering to our golf game or our work - or the good-looking guy/girl down the row.

- We pray, but it seems the words just bounce off the ceiling for all the inner peace they bring us.

- We try to treat others properly (live the “golden rule”), but we don’t feel any true compassion for those around us who are hurting or in need. It’s like the old saw, “He knows the words, but he just can’t follow the tune.”

- Because we’re so busy, we don’t spend a lot of time feeling a sense of loss over this lack in our spiritual lives. It’s the sort of thing we can ignore - most of the time. Yet, there are times...

- Times when we see another Christian filled with enthusiasm and conviction, and we feel somehow deprived.

- Times when we’re caught up in a personal crisis, and we find ourselves wishing we could call out to God with a measure of certainty.

- Times when we - almost - hear the voice of God speaking to us in the midst of a special time of wonder, beauty, or joy, and we long for a deeper faith.

These, and others, are times when we find ourselves anxious and confused about our spiritual condition. And we ask ourselves: Can we be saved when we don’t feel saved? Can everything be right between us and God when it feels wrong - or just doesn’t feel at all?

Putting yourself in the picture

As you read the following pages, you may find your own feelings portrayed. You may say, “That’s me!” Or you may not. One of the major points we’ll be developing is the idea that we don’t all feel in the same way. Yet we’re all in this book. Whether in detail or in broad scope, we’re all covered. Whatever our feelings, they help to shape us, and in that shape - whatever it is - we need to find God. And our feelings have a role to play.

Feelings should fit perfectly in the whole, well-balanced life. Our feelings should contribute to our overall well-being, enriching everything else. In fact, in such a life, our ability to feel deeply and sympathetically should be an important part of our relationship with God, our intercourse with other people, and our commitment to

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whatever goals or objectives make us unique, giving us that remarkable individuality that is our distinct gift from God.

However, this isn't what happens to many of us. Instead of feelings becoming part of the solution, they're often part of the problem.

This book is about the impact our feelings have on our entire lifestyle, but particularly in terms of our relationship with God. It's about the ways feelings can help us become whole men and women, growing closer to God each day. And it's about the ways feelings can hinder wholeness in all facets of our lives, but especially in terms of our relationship with God.

Feelings - or the lack of them - are very close to everything we do. When we speak of someone being "emotional," we don't usually mean he or she is capable of a full gamut of emotional expression. What we typically mean is that he or she tends to behave in irrational ways, allowing emotion to control life, rather than be its servant. Emotional people tend to lose control of themselves, giving vent to temper tantrums, displaying broad mood swings, crying when their intentions are thwarted - or in other ways displaying an inability to function as whole persons.

When we speak of someone being "unemotional," by contrast, we often do mean he or she is incapable of a full gamut of emotional expression. We typically mean the person is a "cold fish," someone far too self-contained to participate in the normal scope of human interaction. Unemotional people tend to ignore the needs of those around them, to live without compassion or charity. Unemotional people are missing some vital component in their makeup; they have lost some important vestige of humanity.

When either of these extremes happens, a full, well-balanced life is compromised. Feelings (or the absence of them) become a hindrance to function rather than an enhancement of it.

So what we're after is balance. It is important to keep in mind, however, that there is a difference between a life lived in balance and a life lived in the middle - the so-called "safe zone."

I had a professor in college who used to lecture us burgeoning young intellectuals (or so we considered ourselves at the time) on the dangers of being satisfied with the middle of the road. "Don't live your life in the middle of the road," he'd proclaim, glaring at us through Coke-bottle eyeglasses. "That's where you get hit by traffic going in both directions! Live your life in the middle of the right side of the road!"

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He usually stared right at me when he said this sort of thing - certain, I'm sure, that I was the least likely one to grasp all the nuances of his statement. It's taken me many years to agree with some of the things he taught me, but this somewhat radical old gentleman, with his bald head and ungainly movements, had some remarkable insights. With this one, he was trying to emphasize - as I interpret it now - the importance of striving for wholeness and balance in our lives - rather than mere moderation.

Is there a difference? Yes. And it is a very important one for the person who wants to grow in his or her spiritual life.

The difference between balance and moderation

Christians have a tendency to be fairly conservative (and not necessarily just in the political sense). By conservative, I mean the opposite of radical. We're not risk takers. We're more interested in being safe than sorry. We really don't want to do the wrong thing, so we sometimes find ourselves trying to find the easiest, least disturbing route - when, perhaps, we should be looking for the right or best route. In short, we're willing, far too often, to settle for what keeps us out of trouble instead of striving for becoming whole men and women who have discovered true balance in our living.

Not only are Christians conservative, in the classical sense, but we also tend to be moderate people. This doesn't apply to all of us, of course. There are Christians who are anything but moderate - even some who bounce around out there on the so-called "lunatic fringe." But moderation has a long-standing appeal in Christian circles. We don't like excesses. We want things to be done decently and properly. We say things like "Do the Christian thing," which in translation means to behave responsibly or to fit in with the majority.

Moderation is a wonderful thing. I am, for example, a moderately good tennis player. That means I can go out on the court and hit most of the balls back over the net. I can play without embarrassing myself (unless my opponent happens to be more than a moderately good tennis player).

Now, I have displayed admirable moderation about my tennis. It's not an obsession to me. In fact, I don't have to do a lot to maintain this level of skill - which is good, since I don't get to play very often. Moderation serves me well, hiding my flaws behind a comforting

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facade of ordinariness. I'm middle-aged, and my chest is working its way below my waistline. Nobody expects me to be good at tennis!

So in this case, being moderate has few disadvantages.

But, for all its appeal, moderation in more fundamental matters has its weaknesses - and this is particularly true as the basis for a Christian lifestyle. Specifically, there is a difference between achieving a balance in life and achieving moderation. An alcoholic or a drug user, for example, would find the route of moderation to be the road to death. Cutting back may slow the destructive process, but that's all. If he uses, he loses. So he can't be moderate. He has to be extreme in his constant refusal to participate.

Feelings and spirituality

Nowhere is the detriment to full function more obvious, with feelings out of balance, than when we Christians confuse feelings with spirituality. This is not a theoretical issue. Instead, it is both current and prevalent. There are two common ways that Christians get caught up in misconceptions here, and each presents its own set of dangers.

- There are those who mistakenly equate feelings with spirituality. For example, some people demand a high level of emotional tension before they feel that a spiritual environment has been established. The preacher must be shouting, crying, and pleading before they feel touched. People have to be dancing in the aisles before it can be confirmed that the Spirit is present. They have to feel it before they believe it.

- At the other end of the spectrum are those who utterly mistrust emotion. If the preacher is touched by his message, they are embarrassed - or assume that he is merely performing for effect (like the preacher who wrote in his notes, "Cry here"). If people respond outwardly in a church service, from a simple "Amen" to any of dozens of other visible or verbal confirmations of emotional reaction, they feel scandalized.

Neither of these extremes reflects an understanding of the need for fully functioning human beings to incorporate an emotional reaction to events into a balanced lifestyle. Emotion is not spirituality. Yet spirituality includes emotion - as it does other key facets of life, such as reason, commitment, faith, and patience.

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In the following pages, we're going to explore the role of emotion in a life of faith. And we're going to do it, hopefully, in a balanced way - celebrating emotion where appropriate, but also making sure we're allowing it to play its appropriate role in the life of faith. We're going to examine, for example, how important "feeling saved" is. But we're also going to see why feeling is not the essence of salvation, and how it may not be displayed equally in different individuals. We're going to explore ways that being saved and feeling saved manifest themselves as two far different propositions.

The book's title, *Being Saved When You're Feeling Lost*, focuses on an extreme, of course. This is done for effect, since concepts are almost always clearer in extreme. Most people who have a vital, living relationship with God don't feel lost. But when we ask the question, Can we be saved and still feel lost? we are dealing with possibilities, not norms. Of course, we're not implying with this question that being saved and feeling lost are the only important positions along the continuum of confidence or doubt over salvation. There are several alternative propositions along the way that immediately come to mind:

1. It is possible to feel saved and be saved. This is, of course, the most desirable position. In fact, it is clearly where God wants us to be. We are what we are - we know it and can act on it. Not only is this the right posture, but it's the one from which we can be most effective. Certainty is a powerful element in life. When we have it, we can be bold and aggressive. When we don't have it, we tend to be timid and passive.

There are those, of course, who feel uncomfortable with the word saved because they feel it implies an unassailable spiritual condition rather than a vital relationship. For the sake of this discussion, at least, let's assume that being saved means being in relationship with God. The issue of whether we can fall out of that relationship has separated denominations for many years, yet it is more a theological debate than a practical concern. Maintaining a vital, alive relationship with God is essential for all functioning Christians. It's something we need to be working on at all times. But we're able to work on it with greater enthusiasm - and success - if we feel confident of God's love and acceptance.

2. It is possible to feel uncertain and be saved.

Many of us don't find ourselves at an extreme position on the saved/lost continuum. We don't feel lost - at least, not to the extreme as the young man I described earlier. Instead, we find ourselves

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wanting to believe we're saved, but unsure. Or we find ourselves confident at some points in our lives and more doubtful at others. And this disturbs us, because it causes us to doubt the reality of our spiritual commitment.

Uncertainty can be paralyzing. It makes us shy away from commitments and positive actions - often keeping us from the very experiences that would help to certify our confidence.

We should never settle for uncertainty. God wants more for us. Just because we're uncertain doesn't mean we're lost. But it does mean we're missing a great deal of what being a Christian can bring us. Uncertainty should be viewed as a transitional phase in our lives. It's a stop along the way to somewhere else. And that somewhere else involves a renewed boldness and confidence in God.

3. It is possible to feel uncertain and be lost. The fact that we don't know whether we're right with God doesn't mean we are - any more than it means we aren't. By way of illustration, the paranoid person feels people are out to get him. They usually aren't; but sometimes they are. If they are, this doesn't mean he's not paranoid. It just means he's a paranoid who happens to have some real enemies.

When we're uncertain about our relationship with God, the obvious course of action is to find out what our status really is. We can't chance being passive here. We need to take the steps to find scriptural answers we can depend on, along with clear patterns by which we can live our lives.

It would be remarkably tragic to have salvation eminently available to us, but to have failed to step forward and take it because we weren't sure we needed it. This, too, is a transitional position on the scale - but one we dare not allow to continue.

4. It is possible to feel saved and be lost. The Bible is very clear that there is a way that seems right to a man, but the end result is eternal loss. Feeling we're right doesn't make us right. Hitler was absolutely convinced he was right in making war on the world to promote his vision of racial purity and Germanic dominance. He tortured and murdered millions of Jews, gypsies, and other nonconforming groups to achieve this twisted vision. The fact that millions believed him and followed his vision didn't make him any more right. It just showed how persuasive a lie can become when it panders to the darker side of the human spirit.

Some of us are very effective at lying to everyone around us - so good, in fact, that we even convince ourselves. This condition is

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perhaps the most dangerous of all, because we have no way of escaping a condition we don't realize we're in. We may be involved in the church, we may be very visible in the Christian community, we may even be in a major position of leadership, respected and honored by millions - and still be living a lie.

It doesn't happen often (by which I mean it would be a mistake to question the sincerity of all Christian leaders, even when we may not agree with specific actions), but it can happen. Few tragedies are of greater magnitude, due to the potential for damage that exists because of the responsible position such a person occupies. This is a matter that cannot be allowed to lie in the dark. We need to know how we stand with God.

5. It is possible to feel lost and be lost. Some people have no interest in spiritual things. They may be fine, upstanding citizens otherwise - but have no interest in salvation. This is a matter of individual choice, which God will honor. God will never force anyone, kicking and screaming, into heaven.

However, there is an implication in the Bible that this condition - feeling lost and being lost - is not entirely bad, because if you know you're lost, you at least know you lack something. The person who knows he's lost may or may not want to be saved. If he does, there is great hope for him. If he'd like to go beyond this condition, the doors of heaven are wide open.

Awareness of spiritual need is the key to all spiritual growth. The person who feels no need is hopeless. Only if need can be stimulated, somehow, can the logjam be broken. The person who feels lost is at a pivotal crossroad. This is not a matter that can be put off for a more convenient time.

6. It is possible to feel lost and be saved. This position on the saved/lost continuum is, of course, our major concern here. Hopefully, not too many people find themselves in this condition, because it promises great frustration and the loss of great joy. It's a better position than its reverse, of course. But if you happen to be one who falls into this category - or one who doesn't know for sure, but who may fall into it due to misinformation or misdirection - what follows will be of great interest.

A fundamental truth about spirituality is that it is dynamic. This means it is changeable. Where you are today doesn't have to be where you will be in a month or a year. The process of getting from where you are to where you want to be may be more or less complicated - but

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the capability to make the change is limited only by your willingness to be changed. God can do it. He will do it. But only if you want it and commit yourself to what it takes to get you there.

Feeling lost while being saved is a situation requiring a remarkable combination of confused expectations and immature conceptualization. It doesn't just happen. Fundamental information about God, the plan of salvation, or ourselves has to be distorted for it to take place. But frankly, with the vast amount of misinformation about spirituality being communicated these days - often over the mass media - it is not surprising that some are confused. The greater miracle is that anyone gets things straight!

There is even a sense in which feeling lost when you're actually saved is positive. We should all have a measure of humility when we deal with spiritual matters. Mistrusting self is always a healthy posture, since it is so easy for us to fall into presumption in spiritual areas. However, on balance, feeling lost when you're actually saved is too extreme. Feeling lost on the basis of your own merits while feeling saved on the basis of Christ's merits is the precise position on the saved /lost continuum toward which we all need to strive.

True spirituality is a complex, many-faceted gem. It's not cut exactly the same for any two of us, and when we try to impose a rigid shape to it, particularly when it's someone else's shape, the result is too often frustrating or even destructive.

In light of this, it becomes very important for each of us to learn how to relate to God in a manner that expands rather than contracts our horizons - in a manner that takes what exists in our spiritual lives and builds on it. We need to discover just which approaches to spirituality fit us best. Not only is emotion a part of this, it can help in the process of discovery. Emotion is a powerful tool for helping us achieve a focus. It gives urgency and tenacity. But if misunderstood, emotion can also hinder the process of spiritual growth by leading us down paths that reason doesn't support.

It is possible to be saved when you feel lost. But why should we continue to feel lost when we're children of God? Why shouldn't we experience all the joy of our salvation? There is no reason why anyone should remain in this awkward, uncomfortable condition of doubt and uncertainty concerning God's attitude and acceptance. But since this is a matter of feeling, not reason, it is predictable that some of us would be confused and unsettled - since feelings are so volatile. Still, the process of dealing with this confusion, getting where we really want to

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be - with a high level of confidence in our relationship with God - is not impossible to achieve. It takes several things:

- It takes clear perceptions. And clear perceptions are not always easy to maintain, since there are so many voices around us, working to muddy things up. To benefit from the following chapters, you're going to need to keep your wits about you and open up your mind to some new ideas.

- It takes a willingness to work at monitoring your emotions. Nothing worth having ever seems to come easily. I wish I could tell you that change in your life can come without the pain of separation from familiar things. But that's just not the way it is. You may not like some of the suggestions in the following chapters, because they'll mean you have to change some things you've come to enjoy. But the long-term benefits will be well worth the effort.

- It takes a commitment to sticking to the task, regardless of what happens around you. When you start to change, people around you won't necessarily like it. You'd think it wouldn't work that way. If you're becoming more certain about your relationship with God and better able to influence your emotions - you'd think that would be a positive thing, wouldn't you? But change is threatening. Just when people know how to categorize you, you up and change! It's unsettling. But you can't be intimidated by this. Set your course and stick with it. It's the right thing to do for you - and everyone will benefit in the long run.

Achieving greater confidence in God's power and presence in our lives is something we all can do. This is something you can do. And it's not that hard, once you get the principles down and become skillful at the steps. So let's get busy!