

The Four Spiritual Food Groups

✖ Even in the midst of difficult challenges, busy schedules and awkward moments, God wants us to enjoy our time on earth. He promised that His joy would be our strength (see Neh. 8:10); He personally participates in our lives, eager to see us face each day with grace and confidence, holding us up when the hard places on our journey threaten our ability to stand. The good news of Christ is that God has not left us alone.

Neither has He left us to figure out life on our own. Scripture provides signposts for the journey, helping us live active and balanced lives in Christ, keeping us from falling along the way and enabling us to partake of the feast of life as He intended. Just as the four basic food groups help us live a healthy physical life, so the four spiritual food groups God has defined produce an energetic, balanced faith that helps us live a vibrant spiritual life.

We need solitude with God to restore and direct us. From that comes a natural outflow of compassionate service to others. Community—challenging, supportive relationship with other believers—sustains and encourages us on the road. Contemplation renews our minds so we will live effectively. If we don't keep our spiritual equilibrium by spending solitary time with God, if we slide past the joy of serving others, if we avoid grabbing someone's arm for stability or if we fail to consider each step we take, we will fall.

SOLITUDE

Several years ago, I visited some old college friends. While they prepared dinner, I followed their three children into the family room. Three-year-old Rachel showed no interest in the Disney cartoon her siblings chose to watch. She found another

fascinating source of amusement: my face.

For 15 minutes, Rachel knelt on my lap and searched every part of my face. Her tiny hands pushed part of my cheek or jaw into strange shapes, and she giggled until it was time to try another shape. When this became dull, she traced my eyebrows and forehead with her index finger and giggled again. Nothing distracted her. Rachel was intent on studying my face.

That day, Rachel showed me what our relationship with God should look like. We need to learn to “get into God’s face,” tracing His eyebrows and squeezing His cheeks until we know what He looks like. We must not allow our attention to be diverted; instead we need to intensely gaze into the face of God.

To be balanced Christians, we must seek solitude with God. Jesus often retreated to “lonely places,” and we too must protect our “alone” time, when we can be still and know God. Too often we stay in overdrive and eventually burn out. But in solitude, we learn the value of waiting on God while resting in His presence.

SERVICE

Soon after Dorothy Day (1897-1980), co-founder of The Catholic Worker, first encountered Christ’s love, she decided to spend her life among homeless men and women, caring for the poor through soup kitchens. Her legacy of service to those on the fringes of society can be seen today in countless communities across the country. Through her intimate relationship with God, Day developed an attitude of service and nurtured it in her lifestyle.

Service kept Day from a life of self-pity and despair during difficult times, and service helps us keep our spiritual balance by causing us to look upward and then outward. When we care for the needs of others and share God’s love with them, we stand firmly in the place we’ve been called to, our feet

anchored in the hope we've discovered in Christ.

When God takes up residence in our hearts, He longs to express His compassion outwardly through us. We don't all have to live among the urban poor like Day did, but we can serve as the Father tells us to. He will direct us by His Spirit to those activities that He has preordained for us to do (see Eph. 2:10).

COMMUNITY

If service is the fruit of our fellowship with God, then community is its backdrop. Serving apart from the fellowship and encouragement of other Christians can cause us to burn out and do little good for God's kingdom. On the other hand, if we stay in a place of solitude, withdrawn from the presence and support of others, we can be overcome by the paralyzing ache of isolation and loneliness. We need people to spur us on in our faith and to help us maintain our balance on the road to abundant living.

The word community is derived from the Latin *communitas*, which means fellowship. To understand the importance of community for a balanced, vibrant life, we need to examine other words with the same root: communion, communication, commune, commute. All these words imply a joining together.

When we partake of the communion elements, we symbolically join our hearts with God's; when we communicate with friends or family, we join our speaking and listening with another's; when we think of a commune, we think of people who have forsaken the ways of the world to join their lives together. And when we commute from the suburbs to the city, we join the two "worlds" together.

Community is a coming together—but not co-existence without interaction. When sprinters are lined up for a race in a track meet, they are not in community with one another. But if the runners embrace and congratulate one another at the end of the

event, then something that looks like community begins.

To be balanced Christians, we must nurture relationships by sharing a common vision, bearing each other's burdens, seeking reconciliation and forgiveness, playing together and showing the world that we are His disciples. Without community, we wither away and never fully taste the joy of the fellowship of the saints. As Rom. 12:4-5 says, "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (NIV).

CONTEMPLATION

As much as a balanced Christian life demands our commitment to solitude, service and community, it is still not completely anchored without the final spiritual food group called contemplation. We can spend hours in prayer, serve at a local mission and spend time building relationships in the body of Christ—and still run the risk of leading a lopsided life. We need contemplation to keep us balanced, honest and real. But thinking is hard work, and it's all too easy to try to avoid it.

When we become contemplative—that is, when we really reflect on our ways, our motives and our purpose—we begin to display a wholeness of faith. Integrating the practice of contemplation into our lives enables us to become the people God has called us to be. We need to use our brains, and that requires nurturing an agile mind and developing a contemplative, reflective intellect that spurs us on to new places with our Maker.

But contemplation is not the same thing as acquiring information, Christian or otherwise. True biblical contemplation moves beyond information to insight, beyond knowledge to the wisdom of application and change. It is normal equipment for the normal Christian who wants to live a balanced life.

Contemplation forces us to abandon the busyness of life so we may reflect on its purpose. Contemplative time is essential for our personal growth, and our growth affects our relationships with others. Notice how the psalmist continually calls us to meditate on God's wonders, to remember His works and to consider our ways.

Jesus' constant use of parables, hard sayings and sermons challenged His listeners to think about the truth of His message. It is never a waste of time to reflect on the way, the truth and the life (see John 14:6); such reflection pushes us deeper into a relationship with our Creator and spills over into all that we do. Paul prayed for the church at Philippi that their "love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that [they might] be able to discern what is best and [might] be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:9-11).

PERFECT PEACE

Integrating these four ingredients into our lives produces an energetic, balanced faith in the midst of daily demands. We need solitude with God to restore, refresh and direct us. Out of that time comes a natural outflow of service to others.

Community, or supportive relationships with other believers, helps us reflect Christ's character and witness to the world. And contemplation of truth renews our minds so we will function effectively and honestly in this Christian life. Imagine what happens to the balanced Christian who takes seriously the words of the prophet Isaiah: "You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in You" (Is. 26:3).

Learning to love God and receive His love is an ongoing process that occurs in a multitude of ways. The four ingredients for a balanced spiritual life simply provide

helpful priorities to keep us going. They help us experience the abundant life Jesus promises us in Himself (see John 10:10).

Balance brings to our souls much-needed rest (Matt. 11:28; Heb. 4:9-11), peace (Prov. 14:30; Col. 3:15), grace (Rom. 5:17), mercy (Lam. 3:22-23) and hope, which is “an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (Heb. 6:19). These gifts keep us from turning to the left or the right, guarding our hearts along the way and infusing us with the necessary strength to “press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called [us] heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14).

BON APPETIT!

The influence of our balanced Christian lifestyle extends far beyond our own little sphere. Indeed, our righteous lives hidden in Christ not only protect us from sin’s slippery slope but also bring the sweet aroma of Christ’s good news to a world that has lost its sense of purpose.

When we fail to keep our spiritual balance in this spinning world, we run the risk of blending into the crowd rather than shining like lights in front of it. On the other hand, when we stay active and balanced in our faith, when we partake of God’s eternal feast, the rewards—for everyone—are great.

These four spiritual food groups lead us into a closer walk with the One who is always inviting us to a feast, an eternal banquet that begins today. When we accept the invitation, we come to a table so glorious and exhilarating that we are forever changed, a place where the One at the head of the table looks into our eyes, smiles and reminds us that “‘no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him’” (1 Cor. 2:9).

Jo Kadlecek *is a freelance writer and journalist who has co-authored a number of books, including Resurrecting Hope and I Call You Friend. She has taught communications and English*

courses on both secular and Christian campuses and currently resides with her husband in New York City.