



# Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries

*Gerald L. Sittser*

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In Rome in A.D. 165, two men named Carpus and Papylius stood before the proconsul of Pergamum, charged with the crime of being Christians. Not even torture could make them deny Christ, so they were burned alive. Is my faithfulness as strong? In the fifth century, Melania the Younger and her husband, Pinian, distributed their enormous wealth to the poor and intentionally practiced the discipline of renunciation. Could living more simply deepen my trust in God? In the sixteen hundreds, Philipp Jakob Spener's love for the Word of God and his desire to help people apply the Bible to their life moved him to start "Colleges of Piety," or small groups. In what ways could commitment to community make me more like Christ?

The history of the church has shaped what our faith and practice are like today. It's tempting to think that the way we do things now is best, but history also has much to teach us about what we've forgotten. In *Water from a Deep Well*, Gerald Sittser opens to us the rich history of spirituality, letting us gaze at the practices and stories of believers from the past who had the same thirst for God that we do today. As we see their deep faith through his vibrant narratives, we may discover that old ways can bring new life to our own spirituality.

## Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries Details

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# **From Reader Review Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries for online ebook**

## **Andy Nichols says**

Short biographies of Christians through the ages. An interesting and helpful approach. I especially appreciate what Sittser says about icons.

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## **Anna says**

Currently reading and let me Maria take a peek at the book. She liked it so much that she stole it.

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## **Rheta Thola says**

Definitely an interesting read. Sittser does a good job covering church history. The book is structured so that each period of church history has a specific theme or focus of spirituality. He then pulls in different writings and stories that support that theme. It is a cross between a historical scholarly book and a topical study. I am not sure if I liked that mix, but I did enjoy the topical points that were made as things that I often never thought of before. The book includes "practices" that are meant for the reader to get a step further in understanding the spiritual theme. It also has discussion questions at the end for groups.

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## **Oliver says**

Really enjoyable - a mix of history and theology and a really practical examination of a range of Christian traditions, taking pains with real stories to reveal how these voices and traditions of the past can inform our faith and change our lives today.

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## **Adele Calhoun says**

It's not uncommon for churches to spend a lot of time strategizing for the future. Books with the latest in ministry ideas and the newest trends are de rigueur. Leaving the old behind, leaders encourage new initiatives and "new wine skins. The emphasis on "newness" is understandable. We live in a world that seems to come up with a new life saving or life changing invention on a weekly basis. The greeting "What's new?" captures the mood of both the culture and the church. But what about "What's old?" What about Christian history and how it continually shapes, impacts, teaches, warns, mentors and forms us ?

When I was in seventh grade a perspicacious history teacher asked us "How does an understanding of the past help us predict the future as well as understand the present?" That was the hardest question my young

ears had ever heard. I memorized the question on the spot and have pondered it for years.

Recently I talked with some folks who were filled with dreams and desires about how to do church in a “new way.” They would engage the world, invest in a coffee house, forgo a building, share weekly communion, and do life and church more simply. Furthermore their “new” sort of church would be authentic, informal and comfortable to post-modern people. As I listened to their exuberance I was struck with how many of their “new” ideas sprung from the deep well of Christian history. Yes, they might form a “new church.” But their new church wouldn’t spring up ex nihilo, from a cabbage patch of new ideas. Only Life gives birth to life. The Spirit of Christ midwives churches. And churches, the body of Christ in every age and culture, always come to us as inheritance, legacy and a story of Living Water. Gerald Sittser’s book, Water from a Deep Well, connects the dots between the “old” and “new” ways of being the people of God.

Sittser exposes us to a wonderful cloud of witnesses who, though different from us, have lives that speak, teach, mentor and reveal. Here is a legacy of “saints, apostles, martyrs, virgins, scholars, and ordinary people” whose vantage point on God reveals aspects of his character that we miss because of our own cultural blind spots. .

Though Sittser surveys a vast amount of Christian experience moving chronologically from New Testament church up to the present his book reads more like story than history text. We are drawn into each spiritual tradition: ascetic, monastic, sacramental, evangelical, orthodox, mystical, work place, reformed, and missional, through the voices of people who lived and found God within their unique context. We are introduced to their spiritual practices, passions and foibles. Their myriad tongues act light like a prism reflecting the luminescent beauty of an infinitely unsearchable God. As Sittser unfolds our Christian history we are left with a sense of connection and debt rather than of judgment about how they didn’t get something “right.” Who of us can get the whole of God “right.” We need each part of the body of Christ, each voice, each tradition, each excess and each correction.

I was particularly drawn to Sittser’s generosity towards the breadth of religious experience found within the Christian tradition. Each spirituality is connected to life today through a particular word. For example, the spirituality of the martyrs is linked to the word “witness.” The spirituality of the desert fathers and mothers is explicated by the word “struggle.” Orthodox spirituality is tethered to the word “holy heroes.” “Witness,” “struggle,” “holy heroes,” “union,” “ordinariness,” “word,” “risk” are only a few of the words Sittser uses to unlock the lives of disciples very different than our own.

Do you long to be an authentic “witness?” Do you wonder how you can find God in your “ordinary” life? Do you need encouragement to face into a “struggle” rather than deny or escape it? Do you want to learn to “risk” on God rather than trust comfort and security?

Water from a Deep Well invites us to come and meet some new/old friends whose imperfect lives can shape, mentor, encourage, and open us wider to God. These disciples reach out and offer us wisdom from their lived experience. Witness the life change in Augustine the libertine turned theologian. Marvel at Antony and Francis who fled a life of comfort to make themselves radically accessible to God. Enter into the struggles of men and women who led reforms, founded mission endeavors and started new enterprises: Benedict, Teresa of Avila, Ignatius, Luther, Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, Billy Graham and others.

Each chapter ends with ways of practicing the spirituality of the tradition under discussion. The end of the book includes a series of discussion questions for every chapter.

Sittser helps us appreciate and receive the legacy and deep life giving well of spiritual experience that come to us from our Christian ancestors. His loving treatment of the diversity and uniqueness of these ancestors builds bridges of understanding. God is bigger than all else. If you are thirsty to know people who experienced God in life changing ways Sittser's book is a deep well.

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### **Jennifer Webster says**

Everyone who considers themselves a follower of Jesus Christ will be amazed to see they is so much more we can learn from church history. A valuable tool to challenge you to think deeply and grow sincerely.

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### **Matthew Green says**

For those who aren't terribly familiar with much of Christian history or those who aren't terribly familiar with various expressions of Christian spirituality, it isn't a bad place to start. Sittser does an excellent job of writing in a very easy style that captures the attention and provides a good summary of his ideas without getting bogged down in unnecessary details or technical language and concepts. His inclusion of stories of various Christians who, in his mind, exemplify the particular movements give the text a more human touch and makes it more personal rather than a mere collection of facts.

I do have a few qualms with it (I'm a pessimist, so I have qualms with almost everything), though they're all pretty minor. For those who are already fairly familiar with Christian history or spiritual movements, this isn't going to provide you with anything new. It's a rather nice overview, but there isn't a great deal of detail in any given chapter. Good for feel, not so much for depth. In addition, he never really seems to define what spirituality is, and I was left with the impression that his understanding of spirituality was a bit more broad than mine. That's not entirely a bad thing, but it would have been nice to have that laid out right at the beginning. What makes the collective willingness of the martyrs to endure torture a spiritual movement? Maybe I'm just too picky (or maybe I'm too squeamish about enduring torture!). I also recoiled a bit at some of the example people described in later chapters, seeing their more neurotic drives pushing them rather than the Holy Spirit, but Sittser acknowledges that they were perhaps too fanatical, and who's to say that God can't or doesn't use the fallen parts of our souls to accomplish good? He enjoys redeeming things, after all.

In the end, Water from a Deep Well is a pretty decent introductory text for looking into the history of spirituality. Very readable while still being informative and providing a good feel of the time as well. Even if I didn't take away anything particularly new or insightful, I enjoyed the read.

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### **Lynn says**

This book gives a history of Christian Spirituality and how it changed through the ages and the needs of the church and its people. Sittser calls the current church to examine these practices and the motives behind them and discover ways to use them today.

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### **Rob Steinbach says**

I absolutely loved this book. The combination of church history and spirituality was thoroughly intellectually and soul engaging. Gerald Sittser is a gifted writer and scholar yet down to earth and accessible in his style. Every chapter was challenging and well done.

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### **Becky Giovagnoni says**

I felt like I was reading about my ancestors. Fascinating and informative.

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### **Paul says**

This is an excellent, highly readable, introduction to the history of Christian Spirituality. Gerald Sittser surveys the best contributions that Christians have made in living out their faith over the centuries since Jesus walked the earth. Chapters are arranged chronologically. Each one focuses on the dominant expression of faith during a particular period of history, drawing from the lives of well selected representatives, and ends with a very good discussion of how present day Christians may benefit from the examples set by their spiritual forebears. The author is well aware of the excesses and errors which also characterized each period, but he doesn't dwell on them. This book is written to help Christians see what is valuable from each tradition. *"Abusus non tollit usus."* Failures and abuses do not nullify the value of these traditions, says the author. This is a fresh and inspiring look at the legacy others have left us. I highly recommend it.

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### **Jason Kanz says**

Water From a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality From Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries (2007, IVP) by Gerald Sittser was an excellent book, but perhaps a bit difficult to classify. It is part church history, part Christian spirituality, and part practical living. In engaging prose, Sittser explores the history of Christianity, stopping along the way to reflect on what lessons we have learned from those who have gone before. He effectively shows different movements over the history of the church: the witness of the early Christian martyrs, the belonging of early Christian community, the struggle of the desert saints, the rhythm of the monastics, the holy heroes celebrated in the eastern church through biography and iconography, the importance of the sacraments during the Gothic period, the importance of ordinariness among medieval lay people, the importance of the Word to the reformers, the centrality of conversion to evangelicals, and the essence of risk to pioneer missionaries. As you can imagine this book is sweeping and ecumenical in its scope. Though Sittser highlights components that featured centrally in different movements of the church, there is no doubt overlap.

Sittser wisely not only identifies the positives that modern Christians can learn from each of these periods or modes of spirituality, but also points to their potential risks and abuses. For example, during certain movements of the church, it was considered more spiritual to abstain from sexual relations, and some couples would make vows of chastity within their marriages. Broadly, it seems that any of these approaches,

taken to the extreme, lead to rather significant legalism, which Sittser explicitly shows.

There is material here to challenge all. There are things here that will resonate deeply with most Christians and things that may unsettle them. Regardless, there is much for all to learn.

On the second to last page, Sittser wrote, "The church as a community, however, is capable of advancing the cause of the kingdom, if only just a little. Through sheer numbers alone that 'little' can amount to 'much.' There are well over 150 million Christians in America (out of some two billion in the world), though of course not all are serious about their faith. What if just one third of those--50 million--began in modest ways to live more earnestly and deliberately for the kingdom? What if these believers consecrated their lives to God, began to practice spiritual discipline and committed themselves to serve God's kingdom? Just one hundred extra dollars a year would provide 5 billion dollars to help fight AIDS in Africa and battle sex trafficking in Asia. Just one hundred extra hours a year (only two a week!) would provide 5 billion volunteer hours to man soup kitchens in cities and pound nails for Habitat for Humanity. Just ten letters a year would send five hundred million pieces of mail to Washington to lobby for worthy causes. What if ordinary Christians used a little less water every day, consumed less energy and ate healthier food, recycled more conscientiously, purchased fair trade products, rode buses more often, and invested in just one cause outside their normal routine? Churches move slowly, just like glaciers, which is why activists become so impatient. But when they do change, they can become as powerful as an advancing glacier that sweeps away everything in its path. In the end, slow, incremental, concrete change might be the most effective kind" (page 294).

Read this book. I promise you won't agree with everything, but you will benefit.

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### **Frances says**

An overview of different manifestations of Christian spirituality in a positive vain. A reminder that nothing is 100% good but that does not mean that good things didn't come out of it.

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### **Dennis Henn says**

An overview of the expression of faith Christianity has assumed the past two thousand years. Very accessible to all readers, Siitser includes discussion questions, Scripture and projects to further our experience in Christian spirituality. Though he acknowledges the weaknesses inherent in each phase of Christianity, his goal is to show the strengths and, thereby, broaden our receptivity to the various streams offered through the Desert Fathers, the monastics, the evangelicals, the Mystics, the Reformation, the missionaries, and the early church. I particularly enjoyed the many brief bio sketches included in each chapter.

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### **Kaleb says**

A great succinct and linear history of the different traditions in Christianity following from the early martyrs to modern pioneer missionaries.

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