



Larry L. Lichtenwalter



For the last fifteen years Larry Lichtenwalter has been the Senior Pastor of the Village Seventh-day Adventist Church in Berrien Springs, Michigan. He holds a Ph.D. in Christian ethics and has authored *Well-Driven Nails* (ethics and spiritual themes of Ecclesiastes, 1999), *Out of the Pit*, (ethics and inspirational themes from the life of Joseph, 2000) and the forthcoming book titled *Behind the Seen* (ethics and eschatology of Esther, Spring 2001). He has done adjunct teaching at the Seminary in *Biblical Preaching, Leadership & Administration, and Church & Society* and has been a guest lecturer in ethics and worship. He has been a speaker at Camp Meetings and has been a guest speaker at workers' meetings touching on professional and/or ministerial ethics or leadership and inspirational themes. Lichtenwalter has four sons and is married to Kathie Baasch Lichtenwalter. He is interested in the relationship between eschatology and ethics and is currently working toward a book on the ethics of the Apocalypse.

Shabbat Shalom: What is the purpose of spiritual life for you?

Lichtenwalter: Spiritual life orients me to my inner private world of motives, values, attitudes, hopes, fears, failures, decisions, and joys. Who I am in relation to self, others, God. My sense of "being" and "doing." I find it quite existential in that it is very personal and immediate. But spiritual life also takes me beyond myself, who I am and the immediate, and orients me to the presence and reality of God. He makes the difference in my life. Spiritual life keeps others in my face as well. There is an ethical dimension to it. It's a three-pronged experience with the "Godward" dimension safeguarding it from being purely existential and subjective, mystical. It has substance, content. Something objective. More than just in my head. Un-

fortunately, spiritual life for some leaves out one of these dynamics—self, others, or God.

Shabbat Shalom: Why is life with God the choice for life?

Lichtenwalter: Because life without God is the choice for miserable life. Or no life at all. Life without God brings a sense of "nonbeing" even when you can see yourself in the mirror. Pinch yourself. Feel. Think. Laugh. True life can only be lived in relation to God. Life with God is to choose life.

Shabbat Shalom: Is life with God an individual choice or is God present anyway?

Lichtenwalter: God is present anyway. Whether we consciously orient our life to Him or not, God is there. He is neither inactive nor silent. He is in relation to us whether or not we are in relation to Him. Life with God as our choice moves us toward relation-

ship. Relationship, at bottom, defines the reality of life with God. It is with God. Not alongside of

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God or without Him or in front of Him.

Shabbat Shalom: Does life with God have a future?

Lichtenwalter: Of course. Because God is the One who was and is and the coming One. He is living. Forever. As long as I have breath, He is there. He promises to share the gift of life with me—forever. Life with God has a future too, because every other orientation for life is proving empty or disappointing. The realities of our postmodern world and the exigencies of contemporary society point to the need for something beyond ourselves. Something only life with God can realize.

Shabbat Shalom: Does life with God imply a particular or ideal way of life?

Lichtenwalter: It could not be otherwise, because life *with* God assumes relationship with God and two cannot walk together unless they be agreed. Life *with* God brings about moral and spiritual congruence with God. Similarity with Him in valuation, motive, and action. I look to the ways and acts of God for my point of reference. What God does is normative. What He says is truth.

Shabbat Shalom: Could you describe the elements of your life with God?

Lichtenwalter: The usual—the study of Scripture, prayer, meditation, music, worship, ministry, stewardship. Beyond these expected elements I would include things like surrender, confession, dependency, gratitude, love, and

passion. You might call these things spiritual disciplines. For me, Scripture is the voice of God speaking to my soul personally. Authentic life *with* God is both unimaginable and impossible apart from His speaking. As someone has said, Scripture is the only book that one can read where the author is always there with the reader. God speaks to me in Scripture. I speak to God in prayer. Somehow His Holy Spirit connects what's in my heart with His and there is dialogue even in prayer (Romans 8:26, 16; Jude 20).

Shabbat Shalom: What are the important ingredients of a life with God?

Lichtenwalter: From a human standpoint? Listening. Hearing. Receiving. Obeying. Scripture puts a high premium on hearing as real worship. It comes down to the orientation of one's heart. How one is in one's inner private world in relation to God. The opposite is

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stiff-necked resistance, an attitude that creates distance from God rather than relationship *with* God. To hear God is not only to catch the spiritual moral nuance of what He is communicating, but to say within one's self, "That's what I want too," and in doing so yield to Him. Letting Him be who He is, God! Letting oneself become defined by God Himself, His Word or acts or invitation.

Shabbat Shalom: Let me ask you about some aspects of a life with God. For example, how do you communicate with God?

Lichtenwalter: Any time. Anywhere. About anything. Silently. Verbally. By my *being* and *doing*. Whenever I am consciously choosing life in the context of His presence.

Shabbat Shalom: Why is study important in your spiritual life? And how do you study?

Lichtenwalter: Study brings content and objectivity to experience with God and safeguards one from mysticism and subjectivism. This is how one comes to not only know God but experience what it means to authentically live life with Him. Study brings shape to the moral and spiritual realities that can never be separated from life with God.

How do I study? Constantly. In bits and pieces. For hours at a time. Scripture is my focal point for orientation to life with God and the moral/spiritual implications of that journey. I use varied translations. I connect with the original languages of Scripture. I memorize. I pray over things I have read. I ask God to open His word to the inner private world of my spiritual moral imagination. I pray for a discerning spirit.

Shabbat Shalom: How important are aesthetic aspects—for example, art, music, literature, na-

ture—in your life with God?

Lichtenwalter: Integral. They can open the way toward deepened life with God. Art, music, and literature can also undermine my life with God. It depends on their quality and themes. Nature both provides and opens the way towards experiencing the immediacy of God. He is present in a profound way through nature. It's a natural context consistent with our earthliness. I find aesthetics causes me to look out of myself. To something larger. Beautiful. At such moments I feel awe, rest, gratitude, privilege, desire for more, a sense of not wanting to leave, I want to come at it again . . . This can be a deeply existential moment where God speaks and I am reminded that all good things, including creativity, come from Him.

Shabbat Shalom: Is diet or health also an important part of

spiritual life?

Lichtenwalter: Certainly. He has made me. He has given me principles for healthful living. I glorify him in my body, by what I eat and drink and do. Since my mind is the point of contact with Him it is incumbent for me to do everything possible to maintain my health so my mind is clearest or not preoccupied with the aftermath of whatever form of unhealthful choices I have made.

Shabbat Shalom: So far we have focused on the individual life with God, apart from the dimension of the others you have mentioned before. How do communal activities enrich your life with God? Why is worship together with other persons of value to you?

Lichtenwalter: I tell the Church family that I pastor, "The sounds of worship include the sounds of fellowship . . . we worship best when we worship together." Life with God is relational—three ways . . . I and God, I and others, God and others. In a very profoundly moral and spiritual way worship encompasses that richness.

Shabbat Shalom: How important are Christian ceremonies and festivals to your life with God?

Lichtenwalter: I often look back on the powerful turning-point experience of my own baptism. In my prayers and meditation I regularly rehearse how God opened my life to Him and our journey together through the years. It keeps my experience fresh, even after so many years. My baptism is there at the beginning. While Sabbath is one of the busiest days of my week (and life for that matter), it's incredible blessing that is precious to me personally. That's because I consciously try to envision the "rest" that God offers me during these

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moments. I need them. Keeping Sabbath is a regular experience of choice to let go of what I want to do. And concerning the Lord's Supper I take its tangible elements as points of entry into deepened fellowship with my Lord and spiritual renewal.

Shabbat Shalom: For you, then, baptism, Sabbath and the Lord's Supper are anchors of spirituality. What is the major source of morality and ethics in your life?

Lichtenwalter: God. His ways. What He has done, does, and promises to do. What He says—Scripture. He provides both content and motivation for my moral vision, orientation, and life.

Shabbat Shalom: What role does obedience play in a spiritual life?

Lichtenwalter: I believe there is an integral link between obedience and spiritual life. It's proportional in the sense that a long obedience in the same direction creates a reservoir of moral and spiritual orientation. Obedience opens the door for deepened spiritual understanding. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned. Obedience is part of that "spirituality" — it means life under the control of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is given to those who obey. He motivates and empowers obedience as well. Obedience also opens the way to experience God in a profoundly new way. We come to know God through obedience. That is the reason why ethics and life with God are inseparable. The reward for obedience is not eternal life—that's a free gift from God and received via faith—but knowing God more deeply.

Shabbat Shalom: The Greeks regarded work as unworthy of a

"good" person, and they would have rather kept busy thinking than working. How do you regard work?

Lichtenwalter: I certainly don't accept such a dichotomy between thinking and working. Thinking without work is incomplete. Work without thinking is mundane, meaningless, inefficient. Work is the context in which character is expressed and developed. Joseph gives us an example of an incredible work ethic. Paul exhorts slaves to serve their masters as if they are working for the Lord. Ultimately, work has to do with the integrity of my life with God. While thinking is praiseworthy, and more people need to think more deeply, there is dignity in the sweat of the brow. I tell my sons that work well done brings a sense of accomplishment and well-being that can not be described, only experienced.

Shabbat Shalom: Regarding performance and achievement, how do you react to the following statements: "God will provide" and "I have to work hard to get what I need"?

Lichtenwalter: Does God help those who help themselves? No! God helps those who trust in Him, claim His promises, and act in a way that is consistent with that very trust and those promises claimed.

Shabbat Shalom: Maybe the concept of rest plays a role in this performance-oriented society, as well as in our spiritual lives. What does rest mean to you?

Lichtenwalter: Rest? There is a physical part to it. There's a spiritual, emotional, and moral perspective as well. It's hard to get a handle on fully, but I know that my life with God enables rest in

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the midst of busyness, failure, and exhaustion. Sabbath, prayer, meditation, the reading of Scripture, being in nature, are each moments where God's rest is experienced within.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Rest and recreation seem to be closely linked. What is recreation for you? And how do you relate recreation to spiritual life?**

Lichtenwalter: Recreation to me is very earthy, human . . . something that links my inner private world with the reality of the world around. It brings physical and emotional wellness. As far as spiritual life . . . recreation can be worldly and erode spirituality because it leaves you tired because of its artificiality or the level of excitement that it often creates. Recreation that is earthy is consistent with spiritual life. Earthliness and spirituality are part of what it means to be a living being made from dust and the breath of life.

***Shabbat Shalom:* If there is "earthy recreation," then do you think there is something like spiritual recreation?**

Lichtenwalter: I haven't thought of it that way, but now that you ask, yes! Surely those moments when we take in an extraordinary piece of spiritual music, for example (any of the arts would do, and nature, for that matter), and our inner private world is caught up in joy or excitement because of its beauty and message and how it leaves us with a sense of well-being with God, refreshed in spirit, or with moral/spiritual equilibrium could be termed spiritual recreation. Worship in its joyful, celebrating, thanksgiving moods would be spiritually recreative. And so would a captivating spiritual book or conversation with someone on fire with a passion for God. However, I

would not want to place a dichotomy between the two. My understanding of recreation as earthly, as opposed to worldly, is consistent with spirituality because, as I have said, earthliness and spirituality are part of what it means to be a living being made from dust and the breath of life. I would call it an earthly spirituality, so to speak. In that sense any stimulus or experience, whether spiritual or earthly, that is truly recreative is consistent with our makeup. It's part of the mystery of being made in the image of God on the one hand and part of created beings on the other.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Life with God appears to be the best decision one can ever make, though there are certainly times when challenges come along. When is life with God difficult?**

Lichtenwalter: When He commands. When He convicts. When He is silent. When His will may not be all that clear and it appears I am left to sort things out on my own using principles or rules or values He has articulated. Life with God is difficult when life in general is busy to the place where your resources are being stretched to the limit. At such times you often only get a "whiff" of God. Connecting with Him deeply takes energy you don't appear to have. Sometimes life with God can get difficult when life with someone else is difficult. It doesn't have to be, and it isn't always. But it's often so, because of what you know you should be like or do and what you are doing or want to do in relation to someone else.

***Shabbat Shalom:* How are people, young and old, initiated to live a life with God?**

Lichtenwalter: The most natural way is through the life of someone who has authentic life with

God. Personal example and testimony and one's spiritual disciplines open the way for more cerebral ponderings on the part of others. There is something magnetic about it. God has intended it so. There needs to be intentional focus on the relational experience of life with God. It is more than knowledge. And more than feeling. It is experiential. You encourage people to experiment. Through prayer. Reading Scripture. Claiming the promises. Etc. "Taste and see." If it's real for you it is easier to help someone envision that it can be real for them. If it's real for you, others will likely desire it for themselves.

***Shabbat Shalom:* What would you share from your personal experience to kindle someone's interest in a life with God?**

Lichtenwalter: I would tell them that all that I am and have and have accomplished is the result of my life with God. I am what I am by the grace of God! I would take them back to my own decision moment and trace a few episodes of my journey with Him. I would share Scripture that tells of His love and character and concern and promises and invitation. I would tell them that this has been the single most important decision I have ever made in my life and that I have never regretted it. They can have life *with* God too! He is waiting. Knocking at the door. He promises that if we seek Him and search for Him with all our heart, we will find Him. He longs to walk with us through life.