

“When I was a graduate student at Harvard (1947-1951), I often went to Sunday morning services at Old Cambridge Baptist Church to hear Samuel Miller. He offered inspiration and hope, and his sermons were perceptive, original in their insights, and sometimes charmingly poetic. More than half a century later, I am still grateful for having heard and learned from him.

Now, thanks to Larry Williams— himself an inspirational Baptist minister— we have a collection of Samuel Miller’s “Spiritual Writings.” Not only are these available as they were written or delivered, but arranged and presented in a way that leads one to look for “topics” and keeps one alert with interest and with hope that one’s soul might be in fact ‘untied.’”

*Edwin G. Wilson
Provost Emeritus
Wake Forest University*

“Larry Williams’ pastoral sensitivities have guided him to craft a selection of words that offer wisdom and blessing to all who seek to minister with their whole self. These writings are like light through a stained glass window: beauty comes alive in a new way, and so does faith.”

Meg Hess, Life Coach and twice interim pastor of Old Cambridge Baptist Church in Harvard Square where Samuel Miller served as pastor

“We all need soul friends, wise companions on the journey of faith. Through this book, Samuel Miller has become one of mine. Miller offers just the gentle, honest, and inspiring wisdom we need to help us flourish in a life with God. This is a book to be savored. Anyone who cares about the spiritual life owes Larry Williams a debt of gratitude for making the wisdom of Samuel Miller accessible to new generations hungering for things of the Spirit.”

L. Roger Owens, Associate Professor of Christian Spirituality and Ministry, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and author of numerous books on spirituality, including Abba Give Me a Word

“Samuel Miller writes like a spiritual teacher of the twenty-first century, with the depth of a mystic of a past century. What a gift Larry Williams has given us in this selection of Miller’s writings, as well as in these glimpses of Miller’s humble and playful spirit from those who knew him personally.”

Stephanie Ford, Minister of Christian Foundation at Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, NC. She formerly served for ten years as Associate Professor of Christian Spirituality at Earlham School of Religion.

“In a day and age where the cultivation of the soul shaped by the witness of Christ and the work of the Spirit is often overlooked yet sorely needed, *Untie Your Soul* is a welcome resource. Larry Williams has developed a keen awareness of what constitutes healthy and authentic spirituality in a long career as a pastor, campus minister, author, and spiritual director. This work is truly his gift to those who are open to receive the blessings in store from reading and contemplating these great writings of Samuel Miller.”

L. Jack Glasgow Jr., Pastor of Zebulon (N.C.) Baptist Church and author of Seeing with Jesus

To Zelma

An Invitation

...untie your soul,
give it room to breathe,
let it play,
Do not be ashamed of it.

It is the child of the eternal
and
destined for greater things
than you dream.

Samuel H. Miller
The Life of the Soul

UNTIE
YOUR
SOUL

REDISCOVERING
THE SPIRITUAL WRITINGS OF
SAMUEL H. MILLER

SELECTED AND EDITED BY
LARRY C. WILLIAMS
FOREWORD BY E. GLENN HINSON

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FOREWORD

E. GLENN HINSON

I've spent much of my career trying to show that we Baptists need to recover the spirituality of our forebears—the quest to deepen our relationship with God—that our trek through history has worn away. Perhaps you will share with me the thrill of finding in this fine selection of the spiritual writings of Samuel Miller, minister of the Old Cambridge (MA) Baptist Church from 1934 to 1959 and dean of Harvard Divinity School from 1959 until his death in 1968, a superlative expression of what I think Baptist spirituality should be.

Miller had a contextual advantage that we who have lived, ministered, and taught in different environments have not enjoyed. He carried out his ministry in a setting that birthed Baptists—a Puritan environment. My studies have convinced me that the Puritans inherited and fostered a *contemplative* spirituality focused on God as the one to whom we should be attentive in everything we do. Puritans developed that desire in part as heirs of John Calvin, but both Calvin and the Puritans owed their understanding and aspiration to generations of Christian contemplatives, whom, thanks to Pope John XXIII's "new Pentecost," Baptists and other Protestants have an opportunity to rediscover.

My own reexamination of our Baptist-Puritan heritage in spirituality took a rather curious circuit by way of the ecumenical era inspired by happenings in the Roman Catholic Church during the 1960s. In 1960 I took my first church history students at Southern Seminary to the Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Kentucky. Seventy-five students and I went to learn about the Middle Ages, but we got a bonus: Thomas Merton was our host. He dispelled distorted assumptions we brought with us and helped me to see that he as a Cistercian monk and I as a Baptist minister and professor were bound by a common thread. Through these meetings, writings he shared with me, and seminars in his hermitage, a light gradually clicked on in my mind: Merton's tradition and my Baptist tradition in spirituality weren't far apart.

What struck me forcefully as I read *Untie Your Soul* was the extent to which Miller's spiritual perceptions coincided with the

insights I have gained from a years-long study of the rich contemplative insights found in the writings of Merton and in the history of Christian spirituality. They reminded me of manuals Merton put together to form novices at Gethsemani. He was the novice master at the abbey from 1955 until he moved into his hermitage in 1965. A week after I took the first group to Gethsemani in 1960, he sent me a bundle of the handbooks in which he had gathered the insights of the saints through the centuries around different themes. I perused them, but at the time I was not prepared to see how they could benefit Baptist seminarians.

As Larry Williams has arranged them, Miller's meditations focus on the formation of "the soul." The brief meditations are rich and engaging. They would serve well as a manual of spiritual formation or for daily devotional use. I can imagine a Sunday school class meditating on them week by week for a year, or a serious seeker using them for daily meditation. Although this may seem a strange way to preface this wonderful collection, I would like to peruse with you some of the riches of *Untie Your Soul*.

Just like the author of Genesis, Miller doesn't give us a neat description of what the "soul" is. It's obviously a mysterious something, "flowing between the banks of human clay" and born "out of thoughts and deeds and the mere shadow of thoughts and deeds, out of pain and hope and fear and desire...out of the will of God, mysteriously, wondrously, with the wings of an inevitable destiny known only in God's dreaming."¹ Whew! What a profound, dynamic way to conceptualize who we are, not just as being but as becoming! It immediately arouses within us a yearning to know how we progress from where we are to that "inevitable destiny known only in God's dreaming." What does it take for the soul to come to be and to become what it is in God's sight?

This wonderful assembly of selections from Miller's spiritual writings by Williams answers that question for us. It will not do justice to the beauty and depth and breadth of the selections merely to point out that it could serve as a manual of spiritual formation, although it will inevitably do that. More precisely, it puts before the reader a banquet of rich and nourishing foods that help souls become what they can become through a vital engagement with God.

The first two sets of meditations share profound insight about the life and the training of the soul. The soul exists for God. It is dynamic, though some souls are stillborn. Jesus made ruthless demands of the soul, and

Miller outlines steps to bring it to maturity and accentuates certain spiritual disciplines, such as Bible reading and prayer, that facilitate its maturation. Yet he advises us to stop riding the brakes of the heart and to “untie the soul,” letting it live its own life.

The training of the soul requires preparation and should not be entered into lightly. We should take pains and recognize that the soul is not separated from the body. Openness is essential, for there is always an element of unclarity. All too many live below their capacity, which is why openness is critical. We should be available to the past, knowing that there is no line between past and present. We should start where we are and live the dream buried within us. There are no shortcuts. What matters is not technique but who we are. We should focus on ourselves, going down to the hidden center, what it means to be human.

Merton conceived things in slightly different words but came out at essentially the same place: “By virtue of the hidden presence of the Spirit in our inmost self, we need only to deliver ourselves from preoccupation with our external, selfish, and illusory self in order to find God within us.”²

The rest of the meditations bring the same kind of depth to consideration of the soul in relationship to our humanity, God, prayer, worship, faith, love, and peace. Miller elucidates in beautiful imagery and with deep insight how we should conceive each of these. As regards our humanity, we aspire to become a new kind of creature, considering ourselves always with awareness of mystery. We will pay attention to what is near at hand and, like Jesus himself, use imagination. Imagination will trigger confession of sin. The most essential facet of our humanity is love. We need to love something, to put love into concrete action. Love defines who we are. We are what we love. Ultimately, each of us needs to find our own sanctuary.

We live in a world in flight from God. If God is to be real in life, we must confront our illusions: that God is only one more thing among many, that God is far away, and that revelation guarantees absolute knowledge. We must recognize, rather, that God is already at work and open our blind eyes to God with us. God is dynamic, reaching out to us long before we know it. It is true that we have trouble finding God, but instead of giving up or engaging in frantic search, we must wait for moments that come without warning. Waiting is not doing nothing; what is required is to ready yourself. God is humbler than you think. We find God in the

commonplace, and God will keep you as if you were the only partner God has in the whole universe.

Prayer is, of course, our way of engaging God. It is a living dialogue. It is our path to saintliness, which means to be all that a human being can be. Our age needs saints, a new kind of saint. Saintliness requires tending the plant and tilling the ground through prayer. When we pray, we should recognize that our world is intricately woven together. Prayer changes things in such a world. If we are more responsive to such an interknitted world, God can be more responsive to us. The great prayer is simply, “Bring me near to Thee.” To be honest, we resist this encounter. Yet there is a remedy in repentance, the light that heals us. Prayer is in essence seeking God.

I am intrigued that this Baptist minister underscored what I had learned from Merton, that is, the grace of contemplation. Contemplative prayer seeks the vision of God. Inseparably tied to it is prayer of meditation, especially on the acts of Christ and the psalms. Prayer leads to action. Out of praying comes great deeds. If we pray in a great manner, it will make us saints. We will never be more alive than when we pray, for we are ultimately rooted in God.

Worship is corporate prayer. Vital worship requires preparation, focusing attention on God. We do not want to end up like the five maidens who carried lamps but ran out of fuel and had no light. What creates such a dilemma? Miller cites four factors: lack of a sense of wonder and mystery, restricted vision, individualism, and pride. Worship should celebrate “the divine depth in life.” It should carry us beyond pleasantness to mystery and awe. In worship we gain a sense of God’s mysterious power. To achieve this, we rely inevitably on symbols. Symbols remind us of the mystery they represent. Christianity features the cross as its “symbol of spiritual surplus.” Beyond our self-giving we look for eternal joy.

Spiritual life is predicated on faith. A faith that is dynamic. Faith begins in uncertainty. Although it involves our understanding, it requires, above all, the giving of ourselves to One who is beyond our comprehension. In faith we acknowledge a realm greater than ourselves. To believe requires openness. It plunges us into the depths. It begins with a single, significant spiritual awakening. At the heart of faith is our response to the revelation of God in and through Jesus Christ. It is a matter of “believing in” rather than “believing that.” To believe means to put ourselves at God’s disposal. Authentic faith necessitates long training.

Love, one of life's great mysteries, is at the heart of the spiritual life. Love equips us to understand others and not to take possession of them. Sadly, there are walls that bar the way to love: superstitions or illusions, self-centeredness, giving little but desiring everything, and pride—the death of love. Through genuine love we can trust. It supplies the power to unite souls. It accepts others just as they are, not forcing them into one's own mold. Love enables one to see the soul-worth of another. We look on others with the eyes of Jesus. Love is revelation. All art is love. Love liberates the self. It has the power to unite us with others. Through love we discover other lives dearer than our own. Love finds within the self the desire to sacrifice and forgive just as Jesus did. Because God is love, there is a mysterious solidarity in our universe. We love all of God's creation.

Peace is another essential in the spiritual life. In everyday life we proceed from strenuousness to strain. When faith enters, we relax and take hands off. Jesus teaches us, as he did Mary and Martha, to focus on “the one thing needful” (Luke 10:41 RSV). Life flows through us, and we discover an intrinsic power in such peace. We learn to wait on the Lord. We can enjoy life rather than fight against it. We learn to trust. By forgetting ourselves, we become who we really are. We find peace even in tribulation. In peace lies true freedom. By the grace of God we are at home.

A great introduction to the spiritual life in today's world! We are indebted to you, Larry Williams, for letting Samuel Miller teach us once more.

NOTE

¹ Samuel Howard Miller, *The Life of the Soul* (Harper & Brothers, 1951), 12-13.

² Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience*, ed. William H. Shannon ((San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 47.

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I am always impressed when an author says that this book would not have been possible without a certain person. “My, what a gift!” Now I can truly say, “This book would not have been possible without Jennifer Smith.” My, what a gift! She was my typist. She was also an encourager, a computer expert, a theologian, and in the process became a very good friend. Jennifer, thank you from the bottom of my heart!

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I am very grateful to Glenn Hinson for a wonderful Foreword. It adds a great deal to the understanding of Miller’s contributions to the area of spirituality.

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When the archives of HarperCollins were closed because of COVID-19, we turned to Samuel Miller's granddaughters, Jodie Johannessen, Meredith Miller and Gail Belman for help. I am very thankful to them for granting permission for the use of excerpts from their grandfather's writings. I am sure that he would be pleased to know that they became part of the team that made his spiritual writings available to present-day readers.

Finally, the book is dedicated "To Zelma." If I started putting adjectives by her name, I wouldn't know where to stop. Zelma, I want to thank you for being my main partner in this project and for being my partner in marriage for fifty-six years. In those years your love has shown me more of the love of God than I could ever have imagined possible.

Larry Williams

PREFACE

I sat on the back pew of our colonial-style seminary chapel and heard a sermon by Samuel H. Miller that I have never forgotten. I don't remember much of the content, but I do remember the picture he painted of a woman's brown high-top shoes. She stared longingly at the sea, waiting for her husband to return safely. The image of those high-top shoes, representing to me the common life and faithful love, has stuck in my mind and soul for fifty-nine years.

As a pastor, near the end of my sermon preparation, I would go to *The Great Realities* to see what Samuel Miller had to say about my subject. Often there would be a quote that was just right. Sometimes he deepened what I was trying to say. At still other times, to my chagrin, he took me in an entirely different direction.

Twelve years ago, I began a project of putting together excerpts from his first three books—*The Life of the Soul* (1951), *The Life of the Church* (1953), and *The Great Realities* (1955)—that I hoped would become a collection of spiritual meditations. It all began one day as I was reading from *The Great Realities* and thought to myself that almost every paragraph was loaded with meaning. I felt the need to lift nuggets out and make them available for people who had read Miller in the past and had forgotten his books. And I felt the need to bring forth this deep, honest spirituality for those who had never heard of Samuel Miller.

If I never sold a copy of the book, I thought, the project would be worth the effort for my own faith journey. As you can see, Samuel Miller has deepened and broadened my ways of thinking, believing, and loving. He has shown me vistas and led me to depths that I didn't know existed. He has helped me discover “treasures in earthen vessels” (2 Cor 4:7 RSV). He has taken me to the great abyss, at the edge of life and death, and given me a glimpse of the eternal that still brings tears to my eyes. In short, he has become my spiritual guide.

I have been holding on to this collection of spiritual writings by Samuel Miller long enough. It is time to set them free. They have a life of their own. They are timeless. They are filled with deep truth, the kind of truth that can set us free. Now with great joy and expectancy, I release them—
to do their own work, in their own way.