

REVIEW: THOMAS, GARY. SACRED PATHWAYS: DISCOVER YOUR SOUL'S PATH TO GOD (REVISED EDITION). GRAND RAPIDS: ZONDERVAN, 2010.

This interesting book is an exploration of the idea that as individuals we have spiritual temperaments in the same way that we have individual personalities. Thomas asserts that by understanding our spiritual temperament we can understand how we best relate to God and so develop new (“theologically neutral”) ways of drawing near to Him. In short, says Thomas, God wants your worship, according to the way he has made you.

Thomas defines a “sacred pathway” as the way in which people draw near to God. Most people have more than one pathway but most naturally have a certain preferred way of relating to God. Drawing on Myers-Briggs personality theory Thomas distinguishes 9 different spiritual temperaments and preferential ways that people worship and engage with God:

1. Naturalists. Naturalists seek God by surrounding themselves with all he has made – when they are outdoors, their hearts soar to worship God.
2. Sensates. For sensates, their 5 senses are the most effective inroad to their hearts – they want to be lost in the awe, beauty, and splendour of God, and usually achieve this by filling worship with sights, sounds and smells that overwhelm them.
3. Traditionalists. Traditionalists usually connect best with God through rituals, symbols, sacraments, structure and sacrifice. Frequently they enjoy regular church attendance, tithing, keeping the Sabbath *etc.*
4. Ascetics. Ascetics love God through solitude and simplicity. They typically love to be freed from liturgy, the trappings of religion, the noise of the outside world, pictures, music *etc.* They love to pray alone, in silence and simplicity.
5. Activists. Activists serve a God of justice, and usually define worship as standing against evil in all its forms and calling people to repent. They typically adopt either social or evangelistic causes, waging a type of war against injustice.
6. Caregivers. Caregivers prefer to love God by loving others, as their faith is built up by interacting with other people in service.
7. Enthusiasts. Loving God with mystery and celebration. Enthusiasts are inspired by joyful celebration. They don't want to simply know concepts, but want to experience them, to feel them, and to be moved by them.

8. Contemplatives. Contemplatives adore God and often refer to Him as their lover. Their focus is not necessarily on serving God or doing his will, but on loving God with the purest, deepest and brightest love imaginable.
9. Intellectuals. Intellectuals need their minds to be stirred before their hearts come truly alive. For them, “faith” is something to be understood as much as experienced. They often feel closest to God when they first understand something new about him.

My spiritual temperament is (off-the-chart!) Intellectual. So naturally I loved reflecting on Thomas’s particular approach to categorising, sorting and making sense of the God/human connection. But people’s experience of God does not always fall neatly into a box, even if that box is as broadly defined as ‘temperament’. In my view, Thomas’ categories are best treated as a useful tool, one of many which can be used in building a robust and well-rounded faith.

I always feel nervous when we examine the Creation with a view to understanding the Creator. At best, the conclusions we can draw are incomplete. Although Thomas seeks to give examples of figures in the Bible who manifest the particular temperament he is describing, I regularly found these descriptions to be a bit of a stretch. I am not a writer, nor do I understand the research, heartache and nuanced complexities of writing a book. But as a ‘lay reader’, it often felt that Thomas was trying to make the Biblical characters fit the spiritual temperaments narrative, rather than allowing them to stand in the Biblical narrative. For me, these examples were the least persuasive element of Thomas’ argument. I felt his theory would have been just as strong without the biblical examples. The theory is useful in its own right, just as Myer-Briggs theory is useful without seeking credibility by reference to Scripture.

Finally, some might be concerned that such a categorical approach to worship might encourage that scourge of community harmony – extreme individualism. Individualism at the *expense* of the group. But Thomas is at pains to point out that there is a limit to the individual approach to spirituality, and that it is neither wise nor scriptural to pursue God apart from the community of faith. I think the great strength of Thomas’ approach is that it promotes understanding between people who relate to God very differently, and provides a concrete way in which the body of Christ can be unified in our diversity. In my view, Thomas’s framework is not all that different to Paul’s description of the body being comprised of very different parts functioning together to make a whole.

Thomas' framework is a very helpful tool in both understanding our own spiritual journey and the spiritual lives of those who relate to God very differently. I would recommend this book to anyone who is looking to 'go deeper' in their relationship with God, is seeking to explore new ways of relating to God, or to anyone who is struggling to build group unity in the diversity of Christian expressions of faith.

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