

Spiritual Intelligence

Discover Your SQ.
Deepen Your Faith.

ALAN E. NELSON



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Foreword

As a university professor I've often fantasized about a pill I could offer my students each semester to boost their intelligence. On the first day of class, I'd say something like, "After we read through the syllabus, I'd like you to each take one of these little pills I'm handing out, and we will reconvene tomorrow." They'd file into the classroom the next day, each with a higher IQ than the day before. Wouldn't it be marvelous? In my dream, the semester is filled with lively discussions and intelligent questions. I see students learning not only from me, but from each other as they bring in outside reading that wasn't even assigned. I see them digging through the library for more and more knowledge. As one insight is gleaned, it feeds the curiosity and desire for finding another. My students are passionate about learning—not to get a grade, but for the pure enjoyment of improving their minds. They wake up each morning eager to get to class. And their excitement for learning propels me to teach like never before as we share the journey of increasing our intelligence. By semester's end, I have grown a small army of intellectual giants. Can you imagine? I suppose it's every teacher's dream.

I've also had a similar secret wish about the church. Every year, I'm privileged to preach to some of the finest congregations in North America. And on countless occasions, I've shared Sunday brunch with a minister and asked, "Well, do you think I got through?" He knows exactly what I'm asking: *Did my message make a difference?* The typical response is positive and affirming—what else are you going to say to a guest in your pulpit? But I have a hunch he wonders the same thing I do as I climb onto an airplane and head back home. Did the souls of the people in the pews grow? Or was it just another routine Sunday of suiting up and going through the motions? And the more I meet with ministers, the more I'm convinced that they, in week after week of ministering to their parishioners, are wondering the same thing.

That's why I am so very excited about the book you hold in your hands. Alan Nelson has given us a tremendous tool for growing our souls. Alan has succinctly noted the ways and means for improving our spiritual understanding. And he is the first to admit that his insights are not uniquely his own; they rest on the principles Jesus taught two thousand years ago.

In *Spiritual Intelligence*, Alan has delineated the activities, insights, and skills of the people who have a higher "spiritual quotient," and how it is they bring about this growth. He has studied their moves and reveals them to us in this volume. He shows us that these people are not the spiritual elite; they are individuals like you and me who have learned to expand their capacity for God and have become more confident and competent in his ways.

If you are yearning to grow your soul as well as the souls of others; if you want to ratchet up your spiritual know-how, get ready to be challenged on one page and inspired on another. *Spiritual Intelligence* is the best book I've read in years for helping people cultivate a deep and authentic spirituality. This book has the potential to awaken the all-too-dormant life that lies within the soul of far too many churches. And

every person who is serious about improving his or her SQ should read and reread its pages.

Spiritual Intelligence is not a fantasy pill to swallow—it won't give you “three easy steps to spiritual wholeness”—but it affords articulate and meaningful answers to soul-searching questions, as well as proven practices that are sure to lead you into a deeper relationship with Jesus—an intelligent relationship that will impact who you are, what you do, and how you do it.

Les Parrott III, PhD,
Seattle Pacific University,
Author of *Becoming Soul Mates*

Introduction

From Pampers to Depends

If you're like most people, you believe you have a soul. Nearly everyone these days is interested in soul growth to some degree. Whether it's the popularity of Osteen, Ortberg, or Oprah, our culture has demonstrated an appetite for faith and spirituality. Chances are you possess at least a modest desire to develop spiritually. You may or may not have found organized religious or church events helpful. Whether you have is not necessarily pertinent to this book, but it may be to understanding why I've written it. You see, a growing number of pastors, researchers, and authors like myself have become disappointed with the results we've seen in people after years of church involvement.

The reason is not, as some might believe, too many liberal, gospel-lite preachers. Nor is it a sheer lack of motivation among those pursuing faith. Most of my observations come from the entrails of committed evangelicalism. I was reared in a very conservative Baptist church, followed by Pentecostal influence, and then I pastored congregations in the holiness

movement for over twenty years. All of these are traditions that pride themselves in applying orthodox Christianity.

In all my observations, one question has plagued me more than the rest. In spite of decades of worship services, Bible studies, ministry involvement, building campaigns, revival services, and church board meetings, why do so many Christians seem so petty, negative, cantankerous, easily offended, judgmental, critical, and grace deficient? Certainly we would think they'd be different from those "outside" the church. I have witnessed far too many church attendees behaving badly, and numerous other leaders testify to the same observations. How can so many years of involvement in faith events and programs yield such pitiful results? To be honest, this is a personal question as much as anything else. I too have had an up-and-down life of faith in spite of being raised in the church and immersed in Bible studies, prayer meetings, small groups, and professional training.

There has to be a better way to catalyze spiritual growth and significantly improve the return on our investment of religious activities and church programs. Think of the satisfaction of seeing your own life change, becoming the person you dreamed of, and having others affirm your growth. Consider the fun of journeying with a group, helping each other develop—like a *Friends* series with soul. I'm convinced that if we investigate the methods of how Jesus interacted with his key followers, we will find the secret of that success; how in three short years, he molded soulish lumps of clay into spiritually mature people who would forever change the world with his message.

Growing Up in Church

Like many American midwesterners, I grew up in church, almost literally. First Baptist in downtown Creston, Iowa, was a brick and spire building with stained-glass windows and

a pipe organ—the works. Theater seating and padded pews hadn't evolved for churches yet, so on the rare occasion that I was allowed to fall asleep during a service, I leaned on my mom's shoulder or we doubled up Dad's suit jacket as a pew pillow. Little girls' bare legs squeaked when they scooted up or back on the hard oak benches.

One muggy Sunday evening in 1964, Pastor Crown's sermon on hell, combined with the non-air-conditioned humidity of rural Iowa, convinced my five-year-old mind that I didn't want to spend eternity in Hades when I died. So at the end of the service, when we sang "Just As I Am" and the invitation was given for people to come forward to accept Jesus, I tugged at my mom's sleeve. She whispered to my dad, and he nodded. Down the aisle Mom and I walked. Afterward, Pastor Crown took me and my parents to the prayer room off to the left of the platform, where I prayed the sinner's prayer.

Every Sunday, we took a road trip, fifteen miles via country roads, to attend Sunday school and worship service. We would return home for lunch (which we called "dinner" on Sundays), feed the animals, and then drive back for evening youth group and worship service. On Wednesday, we'd return for prayer meeting followed by choir practice. There were additional revival meetings, potlucks, Easter and Christmas cantatas, and vacation Bible school. My dad wasn't a pastor, but he may as well have been. I grew up in church—enjoying most of it, enduring the rest.

So it should have been no surprise when I eventually studied for the ministry, served God as a youth pastor at a small church, worked as an associate pastor at a megachurch, and planted two congregations from scratch, moving them into their own buildings. I've now authored more than a dozen books on church leadership and spiritual growth, as well as hundreds of articles. And for a few years, I have served pastors and ministry leaders as the executive editor of a national magazine, not to mention teaching dozens of workshops

and seminary courses, and networking with national church leaders. I've bored you with my resume because after half a century of attending church and two decades of pastoring and resourcing the shepherds, I've come to a frightful conclusion: few churches know how to take you where you need to go.

I haven't given up on church. I really like pastors. My heart goes out to them. They are, except for a few bad apples, some of the most wonderful and committed people on the planet who, unfortunately, are often overworked and underappreciated. I attend a local church where my ordained wife is on staff. I enjoy networking with pastors and church leaders across the country. And my prayer is that churches will find this book to be a vibrant resource for the spiritual growth of their members. (Appendix B in the back of this book is specifically for church leaders who want to implement the methods in this book among their congregations.)

But my frustration is with the limited Christlikeness in church attendees, those who seem to transition from Pampers to Depends, with little to no maturation in between. Many of my clergy colleagues confess that the return on investment isn't nearly what they'd like it to be. The temptation is to blame the people in the seats, suggesting that if only they were more dedicated and willing to sacrifice, they'd experience the transformation we preach. We point our fingers at a secular culture, the sin nature, inadequate funds, and lousy preaching. But I think there's a more strategic problem at work here.

“Oh, Grow Up”

So why do so many good, committed, veteran churchgoers become frustrated with their spiritual growth? Why are divorce rates in the church similar to those outside? If over 80 percent of Americans say they're Christian, and a fourth of over three hundred million U.S. citizens claim to be evangeli-

cals, why does our society struggle so much with drug abuse, incarceration, violence, materialism, pornography, alcoholism, and numerous other social ills? Sociologists suggest that as few as 5 percent of a given population can change societal norms, and 16 percent constitutes a critical mass. Wouldn't you think that the 25 percent of the U.S. population who claim personal faith would make more of a difference in our cultural landscape? Why do long-term members gossip, leave their church over petty board arguments, and run their pastors out of town? What causes them to withhold their offerings when the preacher says something that irritates them, or quit a ministry because they don't get along with someone in it? Is sin so powerful that God can't significantly change us? Why isn't the gospel more transformational? Could we have missed something along the way?

I believe the answer is related to a concept I refer to as *spiritual intelligence* (SI). A few years ago, psychologist Daniel Goleman and his colleagues wrote a bestselling book called *Emotional Intelligence* (EI). While they did not originate the concept of EI, they popularized it. EI explains why some people are well-balanced, cultivate healthy relationships, and respond effectively to difficult circumstances while most people, on the other hand, are less stable, upset easily by others, and frustrate quickly when things don't go their way. The resiliency and relational health that emotional intelligence provides are powerful characteristics of people who live well. In a similar but more soulish fashion, spiritual intelligence is about a person's ability to assimilate faith—what he or she learns in Christian community, Bible study, worship, and prayer—into everyday life. In short, the fact that so few exhibit Jesus-like qualities despite decades of attending church is a matter of low SI.

The good news is that just as researchers suggest we can raise our EI quotient, most of us can improve our SI quotient as well. We do this not necessarily by finding a better church, listening to more pithy sermons, becoming more committed,

tithing or serving more, or simply trying harder. The solution is not to mimic Jesus through self-control, like a weight lifter straining under a barbell. *The key is to understand and practice the methods that Jesus used with his disciples, so that we become like him and acquire true maturity.* This isn't a book about doing church differently. It's about you.

Jesus provides a path to spiritual intelligence. We can learn his methods as we look at biblical records of how he transformed the lives of nearly a dozen men in less than three years, who in turn revolutionized history. Christian living books, Bible studies, gospel iTunes, CDs, seminars, conferences, television and radio programs, ministry websites, and over three hundred thousand churches in the U.S. offer to help us develop. But unless these tools coincide with the methods of Jesus, we'll fall short of spiritual maturity. The solution is not so much the "what" as it is the "how." SI presents a pattern, a framework for developing your own soul growth plan, based on how Jesus developed his followers.

Section I

A Spiritual Journey

It's Your Soul

Taking Responsibility for Your Own Spiritual Growth

Great news! You can grow your soul. If you're like an increasing segment in society, you're interested in developing the spiritual dimension of your life that in turn impacts every other area, such as attitudes, relationships, self-image, character, decision making, work, purpose, family, leisure, health, sex, and finances. People are looking for answers and that's exciting. Rick Warren's book on purpose sold over twenty-five million copies. Joel Osteen's books on a better life became *New York Times* bestsellers. Oprah ran a webinar on spirituality that attracted more than two million people and temporarily overloaded their system. People are motivated to discover what it takes to get to the next level spiritually.

So what is it that makes a person soul smart? While I'm not an expert on world religions, I have investigated the life of Jesus and worked for years on the principles you have in your hand, and I'm convinced you can apply the same methods Jesus used to grow the souls of his followers. What may surprise you is how different it is from how most pursue their spirituality.

What's Your Spirituality Quotient (SQ)?

As IQ is to intelligence, SQ is to spirituality. A significant disconnect exists between what most people profess to believe and how they live on a daily basis. This gap between passive and active faith disillusiones people who observe professing followers of Jesus and see little difference in how they live. Far too often, church attendance falls short in stimulating life change. Why, after so many years of hearing sermons, singing praise songs, studying the Bible, and serving, do so few reflect the qualities we read about in Jesus and expect from his followers?

Spiritual intelligence is the process leading to maturity, based on the methods of Jesus. The concept transcends the pop slogan “WWJD?” (What would Jesus do?). Four-step discipleship plans, forty-day campaigns, and sequential curriculum programs can be practical tools, but a more fundamental and flexible methodology is needed that results in a personalized, lifelong approach to growth.

People with spiritual intelligence, or a high SQ, aren't Mother Teresa clones. They are every bit themselves with unique personalities, backgrounds, pet peeves, gifts, looks, and tastes. But they exude an array of attractive characteristics, including:

- Love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, faith, goodness, and self-control, in and out of stressful situations (Gal. 4:22–23)
- Modeling spiritual teaching (Heb. 6:1–2)
- Strong faith (Matt. 17:20)
- A lifestyle consistent with faith (James 2:14–26)
- Confession of spiritual failure (Ps. 51)
- Humility in attitude and service (Phil. 2:3–11)

Who wouldn't want these qualities in their spouse, boss, employees, children, friends, neighbors, or themselves?

Who's Responsible?

Who's looking out for your spiritual growth? Who do you depend on to strengthen your faith and connect you with your Creator? Many might think of their favorite author, speaker, or religious leader. But will Rick Warren, Joel Osteen, Robert Schuller, Beth Moore, Joyce Meyer, T. D. Jakes, Max Lucado, or the pope personally advise you? What about your local priest or pastor? If you're one of a growing percentage of people attending a megachurch, there's little chance you'll have quality, individual time with the lead pastor. I know full-time staff members at these churches who've never met the senior pastor. Even in small churches, pastors are consumed with being the sole preacher, counselor, administrator, and part-time janitor.

Then there is the turnover of pastors and attendees. Experiencing the same pastor-parishioner relationship for more than three years is rare. The advice you're apt to receive in church regarding how to grow spiritually is: "Attend worship services regularly"; "Get involved in a ministry to serve others"; and "Join a small group." Sermons tend to be "one size fits many," determined by the leader or lectionary schedule. Programs and events are marketed for all to attend.

Having attended church my entire life and led in it for thirty years, I'm aware of the coming and going of people in a typical congregation. Most of a pastor's life is consumed with urgent care, counseling matters, weekend message preparation, ministry management, and staff supervision. Rarely can a part- or full-time minister invest extended energy in assisting an individual in developing his or her spiritual growth plan. It is not that we're disinterested, it's just that we're consumed with providing resources and services for an entire group. We have to think about the whole more than the parts.

For years I've seen people come and go through the revolving church door. They find a faith community, are attracted to something, and come back a few times. A certain percent

get involved in a small group, socials, Bible studies, and seminars. They grow some, but most of it is helter-skelter, hit-and-miss, random improvement. Rarely do people sit with a pastor or spiritual mentor and think through what it is they should be focusing on, what their next steps ought to be, or even how a person deepens spiritually. No athlete would ever make the Olympics with such a haphazard, willy-nilly training strategy. Commitment alone is insufficient. Good-heartedness does not result in a smart heart. You reap what you sow.

You may not be an active churchgoer. A majority in the U.S. are not, far fewer in Europe. Perhaps you don't identify yourself as a Christian because you don't buy into a specific set of beliefs or views. You appreciate Oprah, Deepak Chopra, Anthony Robbins, the Dalai Lama, or any number of other contemporary teachers. Yet you're open to learning about Jesus out of respect for his life and teachings.

We all vary in our experiences, knowledge, strengths, challenges, and weaknesses. One size won't fit all when it comes to spiritual next steps. As important as a community is to spiritual growth, groups do not develop a relationship with God. Individuals do.

Your Creator has given you the responsibility of piloting your spiritual flight. The myth is that it's a pastor's or church's job, but it's not. Their role is to provide growth opportunities. They create and distribute resources and services so that you can pick and choose items for your development, but few are specifically designed to take you where you need to go. You're responsible for your soul, and if you're a parent with a child at home, you're also in charge of helping your son or daughter grow spiritually.

While such a responsibility sounds burdensome, it can also liberate and empower. The good news is you don't have to figure it out alone. By following the methods Jesus used in helping those around him, you too can develop spiritual intelligence.

Now What?

Running an effective business requires a plan. Starting a long journey without a map or sense of direction is unwise. Health experts tell us that if we want to begin an exercise program, we must develop an idea of where we're headed and what it's going to take to accomplish our goal. So why would we pursue a spiritual journey with comparatively little planning? How do we know if we're making progress? What confirmation do we have that we're working on what we need for our next step? Most people I encounter meander through life with little conscious effort in how to mature. They rely on messages crafted for entire congregations or masses of TV viewers. Then, after so many years of this, they wonder why they're not further along.

Spiritual intelligence begins by taking responsibility for your own soul growth. In this book you will learn what is involved in an intentional development plan that is personal, grounded, and effective. In over fifty years in the church, I'm aghast that no one ever sat with me and said, "Alan, here's what you need to do to develop a lifelong process of soul growth." My hit-and-miss journey has led to numerous cul-de-sacs. I've felt like a mouse in a maze. I've been frustrated, disappointed, and sometimes even shocked with my wandering.

What you won't find here is a Bible study, a list of irrefutable laws, a church's program for discipleship, or a self-help mantra to chant. What you will discover is a methodology, a grounded set of principles that will help you grow your soul. You'll be given a set of tools to assess your spiritual development and help you take the next step on your journey of spiritual growth.

If you're a pastor, teacher, lay leader, or discipler of others, you'll gain insights into how Jesus developed his followers and how you can empower those you influence to take charge of their own growth. In fact, you'll see how *your* continued growth is crucial to helping others develop.

The Learner

Jesus chose one primary term when referring to his followers. Those who chronicled his life tell us that his first twelve students were called *disciples*. This moniker referred to anyone who followed him. “Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27). The words *disciple* and *disciples* occur over three hundred times in the New Testament.

In the ancient method of learning, students intentionally followed their mentors and teachers, gleaning from them in a variety of settings, covering a number of issues. Today, this approach seems unrealistic for most of us. People usually refer to Jesus’s followers as “Christians,” a term only used three times in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16), and “born again,” also found merely three times (John 3:3, 7; 1 Pet. 1:23). These words refer to a state of being and position, but do not emphasize the dynamic process of learning or growth to the same extent as “disciple.” Jesus seemed to feel very comfortable with the word *disciple*, as shown by his repetitive use of it. That means for us to grow our soul Jesus’s way, we must be intentional learners. Active learning is the key, not passive education or mere belief. Free will is one of your God-given qualities, but it means that only you can choose to pursue your soul growth.

A good synonym for “disciple” is “learner,” which I think comes across with a bit more meaning to our twenty-first-century ears. So we’re going to use the term *learner* as the name for those who are actively interested in pursuing the methods that Jesus used to grow souls. To be a learner implies humility. You never get it fully figured out. You continually, intentionally explore new ideas and grapple with them. In the Old Testament, God changed the name of Jacob to Israel, which literally means “God-wrestler.” The word stuck and became the name of God’s people throughout history. Apparently, God likes to wrestle. Passive intellectuals pursuing

philosophical mysteries need not apply. We're interested in transformation, maturity.

Travel Plans

We have become the most travel-intensive civilization in history. Planes, trains, buses, and automobiles take us to work, vacations, shopping centers, school, parks, entertainment, and out to eat. When we haven't had enough road time, we hop in the car for a couple hours' getaway to the mountains, ocean, or countryside. Travel has become a part of who we are. So it was with Jesus. He said, "Follow me" (Matt. 4:19; 8:22; 9:9), implying he was going somewhere. He also said, "I am the Way" (John 14:6), equating his life to a path or journey.

It is hard to deny that Jesus was the most influential person in history. We know very little about him before the age of thirty. His life from that point only lasted about three years, but in that time he was constantly on the move. Jesus did not set up shop, establish a church, or hang out the shingle for those seeking his wisdom, healing, and mentoring. Jesus took his learners on a road trip. In those months of movement, they were impacted so significantly that this tiny group of learners changed the world forever.

The concept of a journey should be an easy metaphor for us to relate to. We're on a trip, traveling through life, discovering why we're here, what we're to be doing, who we're to be doing it with, and how we can leave a legacy and prepare for eternity.

Your journey is individual. No one before or after you is like you. No matter how similar or dissimilar your days look, you and your circumstances are changing. Neighbors move in and out. Jobs come and go. Technology upgrades. People enter and exit your life as strangers, familiar faces, best friends, and loved ones. Life Avenue is a busy boulevard

of laughing, crying, worrying, hoping, paying bills, and pursuing goals.

You're not on your journey alone. Throughout history, most humans have recognized a Higher Power, Creator, Divine Intelligence. Those who deny such a deity tend to be those who've not yet found one in whom they can believe. God is on the road with you and has devised a process by which you can get to know your Creator, resulting in maturity and fulfillment. Jesus demonstrated this in the short time he worked with his small band of followers. By studying how Jesus did what he did, so often overlooked by traditional Christian teachers, you can tap into the powerful results of his methods.

Interaction Ideas:

1. What is a favorite trip you remember taking? What made it memorable?
2. What's the difference between being "responsible" for our soul growth and being able to grow our souls without the help of others?
3. Why do you think Jesus spent most of three years "on the road" instead of settling in one place?
4. What concerns you about the idea that you hold the steering wheel of your soul development, instead of delegating that responsibility to others?
5. When we say it's your responsibility to grow your soul, we don't mean you do it alone. Discuss your level of readiness to develop a soul growth plan for yourself that may involve other people.

Activity: Take a two- or three-inch ball of clay and shape it into a form that represents your spiritual condition or your readiness to grow spiritually. Share the meaning and significance of the shape. The Bible uses the story of a potter and clay to depict a person's relationship with God. Who do you think the potter is, and who/what does the clay represent? (It's more of a metaphor than an exact comparison, as clay is a non-living element.) How does the clay differ from humans, and where does personal responsibility come into the picture?