

The Book *Steps to Christ* as a Dynamic Guide for Christian Spirituality

Harri Kuhalampi

Abstract

In Christian spirituality it is sometimes difficult to focus on what is most essential. Frequently, rather than concentrating on union with Christ, believers focus on themselves. Spiritual disciplines can too often be approached through following customs and rituals and losing sight of the goodness and grace of God. I invite my Adventist readers to pay more attention to the fundamental spiritual steps introduced by Ellen White in *Steps to Christ*. After presenting some general observations about Christian spirituality and the challenges it presents for scholars, I engage with the fundamental elements of spirituality as they are presented in *Steps to Christ*. I argue that the book's importance for Adventist spirituality is underestimated and too often dismissed as being too basic and elementary. However, I maintain that a Christian can never reach a stage in his or her spiritual development where the vital primary steps are no longer relevant or important.

The research literature paints the picture of Christian spirituality over such a wide expanse that it is easy to lose focus and miss what is essential. An additional challenge is coming from the fact that many people and groups show interest in a wide variety of forms of spirituality, Christian and otherwise. Consequently, the supply of available activities and materials is equally extensive, which makes navigating all the options a tricky business.

Many contemporary people have abandoned religion, but still claim to be spiritual. One must ask: What is spirituality if it is stripped of all the support, inspiration and direction religious communities have provided for the spiritual search since ancient times?

Perhaps surprisingly the opposite phenomenon also exists: There are Christians, including Adventists, who are religious but not spiritual. Adventist

publications frequently emphasise Adventist identity, lifestyle, and doctrine more than personal connectedness with Jesus. If the un-churched need spiritual guidance, so do those who are so busy in their religious endeavours that joy and rest do not characterise their relationship to God.

The purpose of this article is to answer two questions: Firstly, does Ellen White's book *Steps to Christ* present the core of Christian spirituality, providing direction and guidance for a person searching for a meaningful spiritual experience? The second question arises from the fact that spirituality as a modern concept was only born after White's time. Consequently, she does not use this terminology, but instead refers to a personal process of becoming more closely connected with Jesus Christ. Are the elements of Christian spirituality still introduced in *Steps to Christ* in such a way as to help modern readers to keep their spiritual focus on the essentials?

About my own outlook and approach to the topic, I want to say this: My acquaintance with *Steps to Christ* goes back at least 60 years. For my devout Lutheran grandmother, it was her dearest book. Her faith and her spiritual heritage still influence me and my thinking. I acknowledge that my perspective differs somewhat from the present general approach to Ellen White's writings, which I see as having been extensively affected by American Evangelical Fundamentalism since the 1920s. In my view, White would not be happy with this present approach, promoted by the leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist church, which places more emphasis on diligent adherence to the church's approved theological views than on personal connectedness with Christ through faith.

1. What is Christian Spirituality?

Numerous Christians, including some scholars, view spirituality as faithful obedience to God and the simple practice of the Christian teachings (Powell 2005, 5). In line with this Ralph C. Wood even writes about "[t]he dangerous vagueness of spirituality" and "the importance of piety and determined endeavours for sanctification" (Woods 2003, 92). For him, Christian spirituality is about action, in terms of a devoted following of God's will in all circumstances of life. At one time piety was regarded as a synonym for spirituality. In the application of such a methodology, the Christian would have no ambiguity about any aspect of what might be the good and correct course of action in any given situation. Yet spirituality is about relating to the transcendent

God who cannot be fully known. Our desire to better know God and His will necessarily leads to a point where there are only questions in the darkness of the unknown. Simple trust in God and in His goodness define the way forward.

Semi-Pelagian thought, where human striving for holiness plays a part in receiving God's approval, is not restricted to the past. God's commandments define basic morality, but the semi-Pelagian idea that obedience to them is the way to God's acceptance and salvation, is incorrect. I constantly come across Seventh-day Adventists who do not regard salvation as purely a gift, but rather as something achieved partly by their own efforts and their obedience to God's will.

For most Christian scholars the semi-Pelagian approaches are far too simplistic and limited. In their view spirituality is not about faultless performance in following high Christian standards or what we are able to generate in terms of piety. They abandon such an approach to spirituality as superficial and sanctimonious.

It is surprising how few of the experts on Christian spirituality emphasise the decisive role of the Holy Spirit as the essential initiating actor in a genuine spiritual experience. Robert Davis Hughes III is one such theologian, who extensively describes the work and effect of the Holy Spirit on Christian Spirituality. In his view, spirituality is never a human achievement, even though it is primarily related to human involvement and experience. Ultimately, it is always about the divine activity for us and in us. Consequently, all human engagement in spirituality occurs as a result of God's initial intervention on our behalf (Hughes 2005).

Worth mentioning are also F. LeRon Shults' ideas under the title "Transforming Pneumatology". He writes about "the relational presence of the Spirit". The divine Spirit does not only initiate spiritual life but also makes it possible for human beings to be uninterruptedly connected with the Divine (Shults 2006, 58, 60).

Antti Raunio emphasises that Christian spirituality is, first and foremost, about receiving from God. He is the giver of all good things. We cannot take any of his wonderful blessings of our own initiative. Out of his ultimate goodness He makes us partakers of his heavenly treasures. God's goodness lies at the core of His being and His love for our world is the reason we are each able to experience these divine qualities. No one can turn to God unless He first

turns to them. The starting point for spirituality is in God as a good and loving Divine being, but also as an active and willing intervener in the lives of erring human beings (Raunio 2003, 20, 25–26, 30).

Simon Chan (1998) and David B. Perrin (2007), among others of course, emphasise that knowing God constitutes the foundation for Christian spirituality. Even if this point appears to be quite elementary, it does not always receive adequate attention. It is regrettable that Christian spirituality is so easily seen as a human endeavour, though God will always have the initiative in the beginning of spiritual life as well as in its maintenance. This places the human being in a position of total dependence on God

Paradoxically, the divine gifts are also not a reward for passivity. We cannot remain inert, unreactive objects if we wish to experience God's goodness or His interaction in our lives. But here also lies the challenge for Christians searching for meaningful spirituality. How to find the balance between receiving blessings from God and still cooperating appropriately? We will deal with this problem as we examine White's ideas as portrayed in *Steps to Christ* (White 1892).

2. Psychology and Christian Spirituality

It may be helpful to further summarise some of the central ideas from the literature on Christian spirituality before we analyse White's guidelines for reaching a satisfying spiritual existence with Christ. It is interesting to note how considerably the study of spirituality has drawn from psychological research and other social sciences. William James was probably the first to apply psychological methodology in describing religious behaviour (James 1902/1982).

Several other authors on spirituality can be mentioned here, just to make the point about the human-centredness of even the most serious study of Christian spirituality. Owe Wikström, a Swedish theologian, author, and professor of psychology of religion, offers mostly psychological viewpoints and explanations for spiritual experiences (Wikström 1994). However, such descriptions are not best suited to introducing the core elements of spirituality, which is primarily a theological matter rather than a psychological one. Being united with Christ has psychological effects, but these mental consequences do not constitute the substance of spirituality.

David Fontana attempts to “help us to understand how people acquire, conceptualize and practice religion at both personal and social levels” (Fontana 1982, back page). As religion is in decline, Pat Collins attempts to create a synthesis between psychology and spirituality and to unpack the tension between them. (Collins 2006). In their book on reforming and transforming spirituality, F. LeRon Shults and Steven J. Sandage also make a useful and insightful attempt to integrate theology and psychology (Shults and Sandage, 2006).

It can, indeed, be claimed that the findings of psychological science offer relevant and beneficial perspectives to help us better understand various aspects of spiritual experience. On the other hand, it can also be persuasively argued that, in the deepest sense, the union between a believer and Christ is a mystery which cannot be explored by any scientific method. That being the case, texts by an ordinary Christian can equally well act as a guide to the essential elements of Christian spirituality as can those of theologians.

3. A Philosophical Perspective to Spirituality

Hans Julius Schneider refers to William James and Ludwig Wittgenstein as he outlines his philosophical approach to spirituality (Schneider 2006, 50–64). Referring to James in particular, Schneider considers ‘religious experience’ as the key concept defining the rudiments of spirituality. On the other hand, David Hay points out that while religious experience can be used as an abstract term, it yet refers directly to lived reality. If spirituality is something which happens in human lives, it can be studied by using scientific methods (Hay 2005, 419–441).

It is easy to discover how inseparably even the philosophical discussion on spirituality is rooted in lived reality. C.J. Sharp addresses phenomenology as a tool to uncover some of the essential features of spirituality, but his point of reference is constantly on the actuality of the human realm (Sharp 2006, 65–80). It is only natural that lived experience is in the focus, since that is essentially what phenomenological research deals with.

There is a similar kind of realism in John Cottingham’s discussion of spirituality. He, among others, speaks about ‘the spiritual dimension’ but not as something separate from concrete religious life. For him the term does not refer to another sphere or an abstract concept (Cottingham 2005).

The philosophical perspective emphasises the fact that spirituality reaches beyond sensed experience and the visible reality. Spirituality is about an individual and mysterious connectedness with God which is so unique and deeply personal to each person that it cannot be fully defined by general philosophical arguments. The spirituality of each person has its own profile and leads to an inimitable union with God.

There are yet a few philosophical terms which might be useful as we try to understand some essential features of spirituality. Ontology is a philosophical study which has been applied by Finnish scholars to defining Luther's concept of union with Christ (Braaten and Jenson 1998). Tuomo Mannermaa argues that this union is composed of Christ's ontological presence in a believer. He writes: "Because faith involves a real union with Christ and because Christ is the divine person, the believer does indeed participate in God" (Mannermaa, 1998 32).

The question regarding ontology is significant in this context because Ellen White often uses the expression 'union with Christ'. One can even presume a certain ontological notion in the book title *Steps to Christ*.

4. Ellen White's Ideas on Christian Spirituality

Viewed from a traditional Adventist perspective, Ellen White's ideas on spirituality are assumed to lean toward a Wesleyan or Methodist approach. However, *Steps to Christ* does not yield support to that idea. Sanctification is generally regarded as the hallmark of Methodist spirituality, but contrary to what could be expected, the word is not found at all in *Steps to Christ*.

White's practical approach to spirituality in *Steps to Christ* also seems peculiar or even foreign to mainline Lutheran spiritual thinking. However, a modern Lutheran reader may welcome her down-to-earth approach as well as the way she speaks about fundamental Christian matters in everyday terms. I have noticed in several instances that Lutheran readers of *Steps to Christ* have expressed their appreciation of White's ability to deal with profound Christian issues in a down-to-earth manner.

After extensively analysing White's thinking in her late six volumes, I conclude that her approach to spirituality is holistic (Kuhalampi 2010). But the examination of *Steps to Christ* alone yields a slightly different result. In this book she concentrates only on the essential elements which compose a balanced Christian spirituality.

I see a marked difference between religion and spirituality. Religion refers to a phenomenon which can be observed and studied by using methodologies common to sociological and religious studies. Spirituality, on the other hand, is related to the internal and intimately personal aspects of meaningful experience. An exact definition of spirituality remains elusive.

That being the case, it is not justifiable to hold on to any one definition of spirituality as the starting point for an analysis of White's spiritual ideas as expressed in her book *Steps to Christ*. She does not write to lead her readers to spirituality but to a meaningful union with Christ.

5. What Qualifies a Text to Function as a Spiritual Guide?

In addition to the Bible, many kinds of devotional or religious books have been read by Christians in their search for a deeper spiritual experience. Numerous such books could be mentioned as examples, but I choose only three classic works to highlight the fact that there are no uniform criteria for the kind of texts which can successfully function as a spiritual guidebook. I mention these books because they enjoy wide appreciation, and I am well acquainted with them.

During the past one and a half millennia a great number of Christians have taken *Confessions* by St. Augustine of Hippo as their daily companion and guidebook for a deeper spiritual life (Augustine 2008). Many feel that the honesty of Augustine's account as a renowned religious figure is helpful for those struggling in their personal search for a meaningful relationship with God. Augustine's candid openness is a great solace for many struggling individuals unsatisfied with their performance as Christians.

Johann Arndt's (1555–1621) book *True Christianity* is another which has played a significant role in the spiritual formation of many Christians. The book describes the uncompromising nature of the Christian way of life. It explains the importance of a single-minded determination to belong to Christ alone. Arndt also dwells on the mystical union between the believer and Christ and provides us with a description of the life of acceptable Christian behaviour. But he does not help his readers in practical terms with how to obtain these admirable standards.

As a third example of a classic guidebook to deeper spiritual experience I introduce Thomas Wilcox's small booklet *Choice Drop of Honey from the Rock Christ*. Wilcox (1549–1608) was a British Puritan clergyman who is not widely

known in Britain but who has had a huge impact on many Christians in Finland. The pamphlet portrays Christ as the only hope for sinner and saint alike. Hence one's full attention must be on Jesus all the time and in all circumstances.

It is not possible to make comparisons between the different spiritual guidebooks based on the impact they have made. As their contents also differ widely, one may conclude that a wide range of devotional or even theological texts have potential for enhancing spiritual life. Nevertheless, the ideas presented in a devotional book can also be analysed and evaluated. An assessment of a spiritual guidebook can be made by using, for example, the following questions as the criteria:

1. Is the language easy to understand by any reader?
2. Based on the text, is it possible to conclude that the writer is competent in the field?
3. What can the reader gain from the text?
4. For whom can the text yield rewards or benefits?
5. Does the book present a good theological understanding of God, humans, and the nature of the divine-human relationship?

Some of these questions have already been partially answered above, but a closer look at the content of *Steps to Christ* will shed further light on the quality of the book.

6. Analyzing "Steps to Christ"

6.1 God's Love as a Solid Foundation

White begins *Steps to Christ* with a most profound statement: "Nature and revelation alike testify of God's love. Our Father in heaven is the source of life, of wisdom, and of joy. Look at the wonderful and beautiful things of nature" (White 1983, 9). By identifying God at the beginning as good, loving, and generous, and by describing his benevolent attitude toward humanity, White lays a solid foundation for Christian spirituality. She invites her readers to consider God as infinitely good and as the giver of good gifts. Consequently, this defines the human counterparts as constant receivers. Spirituality requires trust in the goodness of the giver and an openness to receiving whatever God offers.

White's small book invites her modern readers to establish their ontological position when she says: "Through faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ the

sons of Adam may become the sons of God. By assuming human nature, Christ elevates humanity. Fallen men are placed where, through connection with Christ, they may indeed become worthy of the name 'sons of God'" (White 1983, 15).

When White here speaks about being and becoming, she is, in fact, presenting ontological points of view. These viewpoints emphasise that it is not most important how the believer feels or what they do. White's Christian spirituality is rooted in the ontological assumption that a believer is united with Christ by their faith. Faith is focused on Christ, and it also produces inseparable oneness with Christ. What a believer experiences within, i.e., at the level of the human spirit, is a consequence of what has happened without, through the life and ministry of Christ.

It seems obvious that spiritual connectedness to Christ is, indeed, the focal point of White's approach to Christian spirituality. This connectedness to Christ can be experienced as a reality by fully trusting that everything has already been accomplished by His life and ministry. This idea invites believers to a state of peaceful trust and to a complete relief from all expectations that they must work to achieve acceptance in God's sight.

6.2 Confronting One's Dismal Reality

Augustine's *Confessions* bears a similarity to the way in which White insists on facing the reality of sin and accepting one's personal burden of guilt i.e., taking responsibility for one's past actions. Only by accepting the bleak reality is there a way forward. "It is impossible for us, of ourselves, to escape from the pit of sin in which we are sunken" (White 1983, 18).

White's text reminds her readers that spirituality does not bring only pleasant and positive experiences. For most people, confession is a demanding and confusing task. However, White sees confession as a way forward and even as a procedure leading to further closeness with Christ. She writes about confession: "With His own merits, Christ has bridged the gulf which sin had made, so that the ministering angels can hold communion with man. Christ connects fallen man in his weakness and helplessness with the Source of infinite power" (White 1983, 20) Her radical view of human sinfulness makes possible her equally radical position on God's grace. She introduces a spirituality which does not attempt to do away with this tension.

Among those who appreciate Ellen White's writings, there are many who assume that *Steps to Christ* is a book aimed only at non-Christians or seekers of elementary spirituality. It is sad to see how lightly many mature Christians bypass her ideas about confession and repentance, assuming that these matters are no longer part of our daily spiritual activity. In fact, none of the issues discussed in the book are merely elementary, aimed only at novices to the religious life.

Those Christians who make daily use of this book as their spiritual guide are, however, not offended by the fact that White speaks to sinners, because they readily include themselves in that category. Particularly those who appreciate Luther's theological emphasis *simul iustus et peccator* (at the same time righteous and sinner) find White's approach easy to agree with. White offers positive prospects specifically for those who find within themselves an incurable propensity for sin. "You cannot atone for your past sins; you cannot change your heart and make yourself holy. But God promises to do all this for you through Christ" (White 1983, 51). Her spiritual programme offers comfort, joy, meaning, hope, strength, value, and every kind of blessing but it also bears a connection to the miserable reality of human weakness.

6.3 *The Role of the Human Will in Spirituality*

The role of the human will and its capacity has emerged in theological debate throughout the Christian era. In that context White's statements are quite interesting, as she writes for example:

What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can choose to serve Him. You can give Him your will; He will then work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure. Thus your whole nature will be brought under the control of the Spirit of Christ; your affections will be centered upon Him, your thoughts will be in harmony with Him (White 1983, 47).

For purposes of our present discussion, we may bypass the theological debate regarding the will, as its theological or philosophical aspects are not relevant here. However, the role of the will occurs occasionally within the dialogue

about spirituality. Surprisingly, some Lutheran theologians describing their prerequisites for spirituality, also address the issue of the will. Antti Raunio suggests that the surrender of the will to God is a relevant part of one's spiritual journey. He speaks about the process of being united with the will of God. However, the surrender of one's own will to the will of God does not happen unless Christ dwells in the human heart. Raunio suggests that this does not happen instantly, but it is a lifelong process (Raunio 2003, 154).

Instead of the term 'surrender of the will', White uses the term consecration. Whatever word is used, the idea of surrender or consecration may be foreign to the modern reader. For a devoted Christian, these terms may be meaningful, but not for a secular reader. This is a point which underlines the fact that *Steps to Christ* should be carefully studied particularly by those familiar with such language.

For a non-native English speaker White's language is awkward, but it may be impenetrable also for a native. I find it intriguing to compare the several translations of *Steps to Christ* into Finnish. As far as the surrender of the will is concerned, I can see a transition of nuance in how White's original language has been expressed in Finnish.¹ To my knowledge there are also some popularised English versions. In my view, the original text is not clear or easy to understand for a modern reader. However, great care must be taken in updating the text to correspond to the needs of a 21st century reader. Whatever word is used, the concept of the surrender of the will to God is not an easy one to comprehend in our modern age.

The issue of the surrender of the will to God emphasises the point that the book *Steps to Christ* is a spiritual guidebook for those familiar with religious terminology, rather than for a modern secular person in the street. The book can fit in with mainline Protestant thinking, but for a modern, increasingly secularised readership, it requires careful updating.

Steps to Christ shows submission to God's will as a privilege and an opportunity. It issues an invitation to involvement in an active, happy participation with God's saving work, which also brings rewards to the believer.

Where there is not only a belief in God's word, but a submission of the will to Him; where the heart is yielded to Him, the affections fixed

¹I have compared three different Finnish translations of *Steps to Christ* published in 1915, 1967 and 1995.

upon Him, there is faith – faith that works by love and purifies the soul. Through this faith the heart is renewed in the image of God (White 1983, 63).

6.4 Cooperation with God as an Aspect of White's Christian Spirituality

The idea of cooperation is clearly present throughout *Steps to Christ*. However, it is important to clarify whether White introduces synergy as a way to salvation or defines cooperation as a result of salvation by the grace of God.

First, pay attention to what she says: "He who is trying to become holy by his own works in keeping the law, is attempting an impossibility. All that man can do without Christ is polluted with selfishness and sin. It is the grace of Christ alone, through faith, that can make us holy" (White, 1983, 60). This quote clearly shows that White does not promote cooperation as a method for reaching holiness or salvation. This is a significant observation, as there are Adventists who regard morally correct behaviour and a devoted Christian lifestyle as holiness, while, in fact, White teaches that true holiness can only be received from God, who alone is holy.

Secondly, White does not regard the human counterpart as a passive object in the spiritual relationship. Spirituality is about receiving God's good gifts, but this takes place through human participation and activity.

God might have committed the message of the gospel, and all the work of loving ministry, to the heavenly angels. He might have employed other means for accomplishing His purpose. But in His infinite love He chose to make us co-workers with Himself, with Christ and the angels, that we might share the blessing, the joy, the spiritual uplifting, which results from this unselfish ministry (White 1983, 79).

Thirdly, this quotation indicates that spirituality is not an isolated entity, but instead, an integral part of Christian involvement in ministry and mission. Through that involvement a believer receives spiritual rewards. Rather than speaking about cooperation, it would be more appropriate to speak about active and dynamic participation in God's world. Through our voluntary involvement we receive the Divine rewards from which God wants us to benefit.

6.5 Union with Christ as the Essence of Spirituality

Spiritual guidebooks primarily offer advice on what to do. However, that is not their only purpose. Doctrinal insights and theological claims are equally

useful for spiritual growth. A certain amount of theoretical knowledge is necessary, because there is a common human need to understand what is happening and what are the preconditions for a change in one's religious standing. This is addressed in the first part of the following passage:

Since we are sinful, unholy, we cannot perfectly obey the holy law. We have no righteousness of our own with which to meet the claims of the law of God. But Christ has made a way of escape for us. He lived on earth amid trials and temptations such as we have to meet. He lived a sinless life. He died for us, and now He offers to take our sins and give us His righteousness. If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ's character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned (White 1983, 62–63).

In the latter part of the passage, White asks her reader to encounter Christ personally and to surrender to him. It is not possible to have a more personal and more meaningful contact with Christ! White describes here how a person is fully accepted and received by God. This means a dramatic change in the person's standing as he or she is "accounted righteous".

White does not use the actual expression 'union with Christ', but that idea is clearly in the background of her arguments. It is significant to keep in mind that White does not write as a theologian but as a spiritual guide. Yet it is obvious that the righteousness of Christ offered to a sinner cannot be separated from Christ himself. Acceptance takes place "for His sake". For White, justification is not a matter of heavenly accounting or a judicial act. Only a personal connectedness can be meaningful from the point of view of spiritual experience.

The idea of union with Christ is more obvious in some other passages, such as in this one:

But even here Christians may have the joy of communion with Christ; they may have the light of His love, the perpetual comfort of His presence. Every step in life may bring us closer to Jesus, may give us a deeper experience of His love, and may bring us one step nearer to the blessed home of peace (White 1983, 125).

6.6 *Spiritual Praxis*

Many Lutheran readers of *Steps to Christ* have been surprised by its practicality. White repeatedly encourages her readers to do something or to accept active involvement. God is presented as a vigorous initiator for the good of human beings, someone who expects them to respond equally enthusiastically and to assume the role of a dynamic counterpart. In the context of Christian spirituality, it should not be a surprise that human activity and praxis are encouraged. White's down-to-earth style is refreshing. Despite her old-fashioned language, she is straightforward and concrete in her presentation.

What White writes about prayer does not feel outdated. For her, prayer is a privilege, and she does not suggest any expressions to use, or how to put into words the inner thoughts and needs which one wants to bring to God. Her definition of prayer is an encouragement to an honest and frank approach to God: "Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend.... Prayer does not bring God down to us but brings us up to Him" (White 1983, 93).

In my pastoral ministry I have met several individuals who are embarrassed by how they repeatedly come to God with minute worries. They feel that they are disturbing God with issues they should just deal with themselves. I have often been able to refer to the following ideas expressed by White, with the result that the perplexed person has found comfort and encouragement.

Keep your wants, your joys, your sorrows, your cares, and your fears before God. You cannot burden Him; you cannot weary Him. He who numbers the hairs of your head is not indifferent to the wants of His children. "The Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy." James 5:11. His heart of love is touched by our sorrows and even by our utterances of them. Take to Him everything that perplexes the mind. Nothing is too great for Him to bear, for He holds up worlds, He rules over all the affairs of the universe. Nothing that in any way concerns our peace is too small for Him to notice. There is no chapter in our experience too dark for Him to read; there is no perplexity too difficult for Him to unravel. No calamity can befall the least of His children, no anxiety harass the soul, no joy cheer, no sincere prayer escape the lips, of which our heavenly Father is unobservant, or in which He takes no immediate interest (White 1983, 100).

There are several more passages about prayer which would have deserved attention and comment. However, the following sentence combines several

central themes of White's thinking: what can be achieved by a close union with God, how unique a spiritual relationship with God can be and how God's love is directed toward the individual: "The relations between God and each soul are as distinct and full as though there were not another soul upon the earth to share His watchcare, not another soul for whom He gave His beloved Son" (White 1983, 100).

Steps to Christ also offers interesting insights into meditation as well as a peaceful, joyful, and balanced spiritual existence. These are issues which further underline the fact that the book deals with Christian spirituality, and that the writer is sufficiently familiar with the topic.

7. Conclusions

Based on her lifelong experience as a believer in Jesus, Ellen White was competent to write about the fundamental elements of Christian spirituality. In her book *Steps to Christ*, she presents the core issues of spiritual existence, all of which must be present at every stage of Christian life, and which cannot be replaced by anything else. She lays the basis on which other religious activities can be added.

I hope that my observations help to show that *Steps to Christ* does, in fact, offer useful and inspiring perceptions about Christian spirituality. White's text may also enhance spirituality and be rewarding for devotional use. The fact that she was a deeply spiritual person can hardly be challenged. But she was not a theologian. This is not by any means to be seen as a negative evaluation of her. People are Christians based on personal spirituality and not because of their orthodoxy. A true Christian identity is a result of spirituality, i.e., connectedness with the living Christ. It is not a product of commitment to a set of doctrinal positions.

Individual sentences or passages are easily noticed, while more general, broader lines of thought may not receive sufficient attention. If that is a pitfall when dealing with a small book such as *Steps to Christ*, the risk is even greater when we consider the whole body of Ellen White's writings. My extensive study of her writings has revealed how a handful of statements on some topic may draw attention, while there are dozens of other passages on the same subject, which go unnoticed, even though they provide a different and sometimes even directly opposite point of view.

Harri Kuhalampi

There is, of course, a certain charm to the original language of *Steps to Christ*, because it was written 140 years ago. Still, it may be justified to select a committee of experts to carefully update the text to make it more understandable for a young, modern reader. Spirituality needs to be better understood, but more urgently, people today need relevant guidelines for their spiritual search.

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Zusammenfassung

Sich auf das Wesentliche zu fokussieren, ist in der christlichen Spiritualität manchmal schwierig. Anstatt sich auf die Einheit mit Christus zu konzentrieren, fokussieren sich die Gläubigen häufig auf sich selbst. Der Zugang zu geistlichen Disziplinen kann allzu oft im Befolgen von Gebräuchen und Ritualen bestehen, wobei man die Güte und Gnade Gottes aus den Augen verliert. Ich lade meine adventistischen Leser ein, den grundlegenden geistlichen Schritten mehr Aufmerksamkeit zu schenken, die Ellen White in ihrem Buch *Der Weg zu Christus* vorstellt. Nach einer Darlegung von allgemeinen Beobachtungen über christliche Spiritualität und den damit verbundenen Herausforderungen für Forschende beschäftige ich mich mit den grundlegenden Elementen der Spiritualität aus *Der Weg zu Christus*. Die Bedeutung dieses Buches ist bisher für die adventistische Spiritualität unterschätzt und zu oft als zu einfach und elementar abgetan worden. Meines Erachtens kann ein Christ niemals ein Stadium in seiner geistlichen Entwicklung erreichen, in dem die grundlegenden ersten Schritte nicht mehr relevant oder wichtig sind.

Résumé

Dans la spiritualité chrétienne, il est parfois difficile de se concentrer sur l'essentiel. Souvent, au lieu de se concentrer sur l'union avec le Christ, les croyants se concentrent sur eux-mêmes. Les disciplines spirituelles peuvent trop souvent être abordées en suivant des coutumes et des rituels et en perdant de vue la bonté et la grâce de Dieu. J'invite mes lecteurs adventistes à prêter plus d'attention aux étapes spirituelles fondamentales introduites par Ellen White dans *Vers Jésus* (Steps to Christ). Après avoir présenté quelques observations générales sur la spiritualité chrétienne et les défis qu'elle pose aux chercheurs, j'aborde les éléments fondamentaux de la spiritualité tels qu'ils sont présentés dans Steps to Christ. Je soutiens que l'importance du livre pour la spiritualité adventiste est sous-estimée et trop souvent rejetée comme étant trop basique et élémentaire. Cependant, je maintiens qu'un chrétien ne peut jamais atteindre un stade de son développement spirituel où les étapes primaires vitales ne sont plus pertinentes ou importantes.

Harri Kuhalampi, Ph.D. (University of Helsinki), served as pastor and missionary in Finland, Sweden, and Pakistan. Now retired, he serves the Finnish Evangelical-Lutheran congregation in Costa Blanca, Spain. His main academic interest is in the area of spirituality. E-mail: kuhalampi@luukku.com