OK, OK, I ADMIT IT... A few years ago, I’d have viewed an article like this with an odious mix of dumb suspicion and glum boredom. I mean who gets excited about such terminally dreary concepts as *Spiritual Formation*, *Religious Rules* and sustainable *Rhythms of Life*? Normal people don’t bother with this stuff. Leave it to monks, Henri Nouwen groupies and the lady who smells of disinfectant in the local SPCK bookstore.

And yet here I am firmly in the Henri Nouwen fan-club, yearning for greater spiritual depth and getting excited about Rhythms and Rules of Life. The lady in SPCK was, it seems, onto something all along. This generation, against all the odds, is scouring the past for expressions of Christian spirituality that relate directly to the trials of contemporary life and offer hope to us as flawed personalities, dazzled by this wonderful yet fallen world.

An increasing numbers of us (individuals, communities, and even secular programs for personal development) have begun to develop our own Rules of Life as a strategy for fostering intentional change and growth.

If creeds are *what* we believe and Christ is *why* we believe, a Rule is *how* we seek to live out that faith, day-to-day as a disciple in the power of the Holy Spirit.

**INTO THE DEEP...**

"Perhaps somewhere in the subterranean chambers of your life," writes Richard Foster, "you have heard the call to deeper, fuller living. You have become weary of frothy experiences and shallow teaching. Every now and then you have caught glimpses, hints of something more than you have known. Inwardly you long to launch out into the deep."

For those longing to launch out into the deep waters of God, Rules of Life have always provided the way ahead. It's as elementary to the spiritual life as learning the A-B-C is to growing up:

A Rule enables us to develop a faith that is authentic and consistent with our convictions. Mountain-top experiences will never transform our characters without daily discipline, covenant community, and a set of personal values.
EG: The Rule of the Celtic Northumbria Community is a simple and profound covenant to availability and vulnerability, which they describe as “an ethic for Christians and other aliens in a strange land.”

A Rule of Life can be a COMPASS in confusing times…

Balanced

A Rule enables us to develop a balanced, sustainable, and enjoyable rhythm of life. By mapping out the different dimensions of our faith in a few simple principles and practices, we are better able to balance the multiple demands of our diaries, in a life that is well lived and not driven by inner insecurity and outer expectation.

EG: The Benedictine Rule of St Benedict (right) emphasises the daily balance between work, rest, and prayer lived out in community.

If we are to stay faithful in the long haul, without blowing up or burning out, a Rule of Life may well be the METRONOME we need to keep us moving forward “in step with the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25).

Centred

A Rule enables us to centre our lives on Christ. It calls us back continually to the place of prayer and worship as the life-giving spring from which everything else flows. A Rule can cut across the self-complicating tendency of Christianity, keeping us grounded in Christ’s simple presence.

EG: St. Francis (right) gave us the key to his Franciscan Order when he wrote: “Every day I find so much sweetness and consolation in meditating upon the memory of the humble witness of the Son of God, that should I live till the end of the world, there would be little need of my hearing or meditating upon anything further in the scriptures.”

[Legend of Perugia, 99]

A Rule is a PLUMB LINE measuring everything we say, think, or do against the example of Jesus.

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ROCK & RULE

The word rule conjures up images of school and dreary regulations. But when we describe a Rule of Life, the word also carries its other meaning of a straight edge for measuring and drawing lines. In
this sense, a Rule of Life is an instrument that enables us to keep boundaries and to measure our
spiritual progress. Rules do not have to be legalistic. In fact, they can express and encourage a
deepening relationship with God.

When my wife Samie (right) was first pregnant, the doctor gave her a long list of foods
and activities she should avoid, exercises she should do, supplements she should take,
and check-ups she should attend. She diligently followed every rule. Why? Because she
loved the child she was carrying and wanted him born healthy and happy. These rules
were not oppressive to her—they were life-giving!

St. Benedict of Nursia, living in the sixth century in Italy, wrote
one of the most famous and far reaching Rules of all time, which
remains the joyful heartbeat of the Benedictine Order to this day.
He described it as “a little rule for beginners” and emphasized
balance, gentleness with ourselves and others, and the importance
of community (see right).

Pete Ward one of the pioneers of the first 24-7 Boiler Room, points
out that a Rule does not provide us with any greater righteousness
in the eyes of our Creator God, but that it does “bring us into a
deeper relationship with Christ our Saviour, and with each other.”

Many of the men and women God has used most powerfully over the last two thousand years in
every Christian tradition have lived according to a Rule of Life. Sometimes their Rule was not
explicit, but more often, it was set out carefully and followed diligently. Some of these saints
developed their own Rules, while others pledged themselves to existing Orders and communities.

Rules have been the heartbeat of life for many of those we esteem the most:

- for saints from St. Francis of Assisi to Mother Teresa,
- for great leaders from John Wesley to William Booth,
- for great preachers from Charles Finney to Billy Graham,
- for mystics from Teresa of Avilla to Thomas Merton,
- for theologians from Augustine to Bonhoeffer.

All these people (and countless others in every walk of life) came to a critical moment in their lives
when they chose to make a covenant, to follow a spiritual Rule of Life that would serve them as a
compass, a metronome, and a plumb line for every other thing they did from that day onwards.

In the light of such an impressive list of advocates, it is surprising that so few Evangelicals and
Charismatics currently practice this powerful tool for personal growth and a deeper walk with Jesus.