

LIVING THE LIFE SPIRITUAL FORMATION DEFINED¹

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The language of the “spiritual” and “spirituality” has become increasingly common in our world. People are interested in spirituality and metaphysical realities. They have a hunger and thirst toward something beyond themselves. In 2005, a *Newsweek* article, “In Search of the Spiritual,” gave a glowing report, although just a glimpse, of spirituality in America. The article claimed that “Americans are looking for personal, ecstatic experiences of God.” The article also showed that even though people are interested in spirituality, their interest doesn’t necessarily reflect a particular religious affiliation. The growth in spirituality is evident in the diversity of religious expressions of faith in our culture. Christianity is no longer the predominant religion. However, people are separating their spirituality from religion. Institutional religion has become a negative phrase. Many seekers consider themselves “spiritual” but not religious.²

The term “spirituality” is used in secular and sacred settings as a way to reflect the human hunger for the transcendent, or to make meaning out of life.³ The spiritual thirst of our time has become a social phenomenon. People from all walks of life and many faiths are searching with renewed interest for a spiritual center. For some, spirituality is described as a relationship to whatever is most important in their lives; for others it is the

process of becoming positive and creative persons. These examples reflect the hunger for meaning without a necessarily transcendent being.

And it would be a mistake to think that “spirituality” is only a Christian term or that its usage is merely the prerogative of the church. The term, as reflected in our culture, is broadly understood. For example, one can talk about Jewish and Islamic spiritualities, agnostic and atheistic spiritualities. It is not surprising that given the wide range of understanding of spirituality in the public arena, it has become difficult to determine what people mean by the term “spirituality.”

The term “spirituality” is literally derived from the Latin *spiritus*, meaning “breath, life, spirit.” Thus, in the broadest sense, “spirituality” has to do with the whole of our life grounded in ultimate reality, in the spirit, and attuned to the spiritual dimension of existence—that which both animates and transcends our bodily, physical selves.⁴ To speak of something being spiritual assumes the existence of a deeper or higher reality, or the transcendent dimension of life, and then argues further that we humans can and do experience this reality in our midst and that we are drawn to both name and respond to it. Certainly as Christians we affirm that spirituality is a fundamental dimension of being human. This suggests that humans, *homo sapiens*, are distinctly spiritual beings, *homo spiritualis*; that is, human beings are capable of receiving a call, an address from a transcendent “subject,” whether that subject be understood as God, nature, an undifferentiated unity, or an aesthetic experience.⁵

Every discussion of Christian spirituality presupposes divine activity in the form of grace. For Wesleyan theologians the understanding of “prevenient grace” and for Calvinistic theologians “common grace” provide a theological explanation of this cultural phenomenon of the pursuit of higher meaning. Prevenient grace is the grace that God gives to every person, the grace that draws a person into a relationship with God if he or she responds to it. Therefore, this heightened search for spirituality in society today should not be seen as dangerous or threatening but as the wooing of the Holy Spirit. In other words, hearts are already awakening and stand in need of the proclamation of the truth of Jesus Christ and the

way to salvation. But after persons begin a relationship with God, they will need to be grown, formed, and nurtured in order that one day they will produce the “fruit” of Christian devotion.

Toward a Definition of Spiritual Formation

For some reason, the term “spiritual formation” is sometimes misunderstood. A definition is, and should be, very simple. Spiritual formation refers to the transformation of people into what C. S. Lewis calls “little Christs.” The goal is what makes Christian spirituality distinct. But it is fair to ask, what are other unique aspects of Christian spirituality as compared to a more general understanding of spirituality in our culture? In order to begin to answer these questions a broader definition of Christian spiritual formation will be explored.

The word “spirituality,” which is derived from the Latin term *spiritualitas*, and like its cognates *spiritus* and *spiritualis*, is a suitable translation of the original Greek terms *pneuma* and *pneumatikos*, which simply mean spirit. It can refer both to the spirit in humanity or to the Holy Spirit. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 2:15, maintains that “those who are spiritual [*pneumatikos*] discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else’s scrutiny” (NRSV). The spiritual person, then, the *pneumatikos*, is under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Christian spirituality refers to those who are living by the presence and power of God’s Holy Spirit, the third person of the triune God. Christian spirituality describes a particular way of responding to the Spirit of God, who reveals Jesus Christ to the world and uniquely to his followers. “Being a disciple,” or “discipleship,” is another word for Christian spirituality and focuses on the transformation of the human person into the likeness of Jesus Christ. It is the result of the cooperation of our whole lives with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, who is alive and working within the whole person—body and soul, thoughts and feelings, emotions and passions, hopes, fears, and dreams.

Thus a *definition of Christian spiritual formation first begins with a focus on being “formed” and “transformed.”* The human person is being transformed (always present tense) into the “image and likeness of Christ.”

The concept of spiritual formation is derived from Galatians 4:19 where Paul writes, “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is *formed* in you” (emphasis added). Paul uses the word *morphoō* (form), closely related to *metamorphoō* (transform)—and it refers to a metamorphosis, if you will, of the essential nature, not mere outward form. Paul is praying that the inward nature of the Galatian believers would become so like Christ that one could say that Christ has been *formed* in them. They would be more like Christ’s humanity, not divine, not a Savior themselves, but they would have real Christlike character and behavior.⁶ Thus, according to Galatians 4:19 spiritual formation can be defined as, “the whole person in relationship with God, within the community of believers, growing in Christlikeness, reflected in a Spirit-directed, disciplined lifestyle, and demonstrated in redemptive action in our world.”⁷

Spiritual formation then is the outworking of the grace of God in the changed hearts and actions of human beings. Robert Mulholland says, “Spiritual formation is a process of *being conformed* to the image of Christ, a journey into becoming persons of compassion, persons who forgive, persons who care deeply for others and the world.”⁸ We cannot “conform ourselves” to the image of Christ, but God is the one who conforms and transforms us by the power of the Spirit. Spiritual formation refers to the process of shaping our “spirit” and giving it a definite character. It means the formation of our spirit in conformity with the Spirit of Christ.

Dallas Willard defines spiritual formation as “the process whereby the inmost being of the individual (the heart, will, or spirit) take on the quality or character of Jesus Himself.”⁹ It is a process that happens to everyone if he or she keeps in step with the Spirit. The most despicable as well as the most admirable of persons can be spiritually formed after their new birth. Spiritual formation is about pilgrims on a pilgrimage, Christians on a journey to become more like Jesus.

The story of the Exodus illustrates this process. Just as the people of Israel were led out toward freedom, spiritual formation leads us out toward freedom in Christ. This leading out is not directionless but aims at

the promised land of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is here. The journey of spiritual formation aims at growth in grace toward Christian maturity. To use words from our own tradition, this is none other than sanctifying grace. This will be explored further in chapter 5.

A second aspect of Christian spiritual formation focuses on our human participation with God. It is important to note that it is not what we do that transforms us, but it is through our participation in the “means of grace” (see chapter 7) that we receive transforming, molding, indeed the sanctifying grace from God, and thus we are changed. James Wilhoit defines spiritual formation by including both the human and divine aspect of this change: “Spiritual formation is the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰ Wilhoit’s focus on “intentional processes” is a way to distinguish it from the broad sense in which spiritual formation could refer to all cultural forces, activities, and experiences that shape people’s spiritual lives.¹¹ For Wilhoit spiritual formational practices are intentional and deliberate actions whereby a person is opened to being transformed in the image of Christ. Historically the church has discovered that certain inward disciplines, devotional skills and exercises, as well as outward acts of Christian service keep us in the presence of Christ where the Holy Spirit has an opportunity to do his work as he goes about transforming us “from glory to glory.” Thus spiritual formation in the Wesleyan tradition is undergirded by a Wesleyan theology of grace: God and the person act “synergistically” (dynamically together). God’s transforming grace freely flows to those who actively receive it.

Third, a definition of Christian spiritual formation emphasizes it as a lifelong process that takes place in the context of community. Much of Western Christianity views salvation and spiritual formation as a personal, even private, affair. We come by it naturally, because most of our forms of government and economic structures focus on individualistic rights and impulses. In ancient biblical times, with a more “collectivist” form of social organization, the overriding significance of the community was taken for granted.¹² In other words, one’s very identity was based on the com-

munity to which he or she belonged. Today, however, influenced by the present-day values of society, even the Western *church* has become fragmented and individualistic; this makes spiritual formation more difficult. Christian faith is often practiced void of the community. This would have been unthinkable for the writers of Scripture and the early Christians. The Christian life is intended to be lived in community, where worship, fellowship, small groups, and service are practiced. It is in this context of spiritual relationships that spiritual formation takes place, in and through the community. This will be detailed in later chapters of this book, particularly chapters 8 and 9. For now it is important to emphasize that spiritual formation must be communal and take place in the context of the life of the church.¹³ The church gives the individual purpose. The church represents a community in anticipation of the fullness of God's kingdom here in the midst of history. The church is a community that anticipates, proclaims, and celebrates this kingdom.¹⁴ A one-citizen kingdom is never what God intended. This kingdom is also never ending. The spiritual relationships we form in the church are intended to be enduring, even eternal.

Thus it is also important to note, as suggested above, that spiritual formation is a lifelong process. At no point are we to disconnect from the community. And at no point are we to stop making progress. Many in the field of spiritual and faith formation use the metaphor of a journey to describe the life of faith.¹⁵ Hagber and Guelich state, "A journey involves process, action, movement, change, experiences, stops and starts, variety, humdrum and surprises. . . . Whereas a trip focuses primarily on a destination, a journey has significance when seen as a whole."¹⁶

James Fowler has developed a paradigm he calls "stages of faith" as a way to look at our faith journeys. Just as a child grows through stages of physical development and growth, so we grow spiritually. This is not a quick process. The idea of spiritual formation as a continuous progression is counter to our instant-gratification-driven society.

The path toward ever-maturing spiritual formation includes joy and success as well as struggle and disappointment. Writers throughout the history of Christianity have given much attention to struggle and suffer-

ing, comparing it to the suffering of Christ and suggesting it is a necessary aspect of growth and maturity. Many Christians today believe faith necessarily brings ease and comfort. Such Christians will eventually find themselves disillusioned. Christians are not insulated from real life. But Scripture does tell us that God can use life's struggles to work in us perseverance, character, and hope. Robert Mulholland says that "life *itself* is a process of spiritual development. The only choice we have is whether that growth moves us toward wholeness in Christ or toward an increasingly dehumanized and destructive mode of being."¹⁷

The Christian journey, therefore, is an intentional and continual commitment to a lifelong process of growth toward wholeness in Christ. It is the process of "grow[ing] up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15 ESV), until we "attain to . . . mature [personhood], to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (v. 13 ESV). It is for this purpose that God is present and active in every moment of our lives.¹⁸

Fourth, spiritual formation includes the nurturing of self in relationship to others. While it is very important to note that the goal of spiritual formation is to make us like Christ, indeed, "little Christs," we are not designed to be clones of one another. We are all created to be in relationship with God. But these relationships will be as different as there are different persons. Unlike other forms of religion where the goal is to completely lose any self-differentiation and become at one with some cosmic sea or some seamless state of mind void of personal identity, Christianity calls all persons to become who God has called them to uniquely be. To follow Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, we believe that God gives different gifts to us. God does not intend us all to be ears or eyes in the body of Christ. We are to work interdependently, but unless we are being our unique self and doing our unique part, the body will not function. Our relationship with God does not sacrifice our uniqueness; rather it allows us to become more fully who God created us to be. Spiritual formation then includes the development of our own unique gifts, personalities, talents, and abilities. As we fully give ourselves over to God, God enables us to become more

fully ourselves. It is our belief that God's intention for spiritual development intertwines activities where care of self is not in opposition to our relationship with God, and one another. Chapters 10 to 15 will help us explore this reality further.

A definition of spiritual formation then includes a focus on the inner transformation of the human person into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This transformation takes place when humans participate with God's grace and not against it. Living in step with the Spirit in trust and obedience is the key. There are practices done in solitude that are crucial to the nurture of our relationship with God. Spiritual formation is also a communal activity. Church matters. In a church community more avenues of God's grace are available, such as worship, shared prayer, group Bible study, small groups, and Holy Communion. (For examples, see chapter 9.) As we grow and care about the growth of others, it becomes possible to bear fruit. Spiritual formation is about being like Christ but also about allowing God to make us into the unique persons he has called us to be. Spiritually transformed, ultimately we are to serve as Christ served the church and the world.

Other chapters (chapters 16–20) focus on particular groups of people. Spiritual formation in families, youth groups, colleges, and other cultural contexts will also be explored. The aim of this book is to be informational but most certainly to be formational, even transformational. May God use these chapters to draw readers into deeper relationship with Christ through his Spirit.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways are we to apply the four aspects of spiritual formation?
2. What is my role in the process of spiritual formation? What role does God play in my spiritual formation?
3. Since spiritual formation takes place in community, what are some examples of community that foster spiritual growth?

4. What is distinct about Christian spiritual formation?

Suggestions for Further Reading

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