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Life in the Spirit

Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective



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SPIRITUAL FORMATION THEOLOGICALLY DEFINED

The term "spiritual formation" has become popular, but since it is not a precise, technical term its actual meaning is sometimes unclear.¹ My proposal for a fairly comprehensive, reasonably succinct and theologically oriented definition is: Spiritual formation is our continuing response to the reality of God's grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith, for the sake of the world.²

Spiritual formation is an ongoing process for Christians. It is not a program or project or course that is completed in a few weeks, but rather is a lifelong journey of transformation. While there can be decisive steps forward or dramatic spiritual insights in a moment, spiritual formation addresses the gradual and progressive movement of character development and personal growth. Faith in Jesus Christ sustains a lifelong pursuit of spiritual maturity or wholeness found in him. Despite the pressures of our activist, hurried culture, this process cannot be reduced to learning personal management techniques or how to "do things for the Lord" because it is primarily a matter of cultivating an intimate relationship with the triune God. This is a continuous challenge—running the race with perseverance (Heb 12:1). For this reason, my proposed definition refers to the dynamic of our "continuing response."

The process of spiritual formation is not defined by someone's search within themselves for spiritual health, but rather by a "continuing response to the reality of God's grace." By using the term *response* I want to emphasize that spiritual formation is not self-generated. It is not our attempt to cultivate inwardness for its own sake. Spiritual formation in its best sense cannot be reduced to the results of human techniques or personal willpower, but is primarily a matter of God's own initiative and God's vital action. This definition leaves no room for the sort of well-intended semipelagianism that is so prevalent, namely, the mistaken idea that we have the ability to seek God apart from God's prior movement of grace. In theological terms, *grace* speaks of the unmerited gift of God's love and mercy toward sinners, shown supremely in

Christ's life, death and resurrection. Grace identifies God's decisive dealing with human sin through the cross of Christ, so that spiritual formation involves our reckoning seriously with the ongoing realities of human temptation and our continual struggle against corrupt desires. Rooted in a robust sense of sin and joyful confidence in the efficacy of the gospel, spiritual formation involves grace-based disciplines of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation.

My definition of spiritual formation seeks to reflect the biblical logic of divine grace that is exemplified in the truth that "we love because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). Divine action takes priority over human action. God's gift precedes and makes possible the human task of discipleship, witness and service. As Christians, our vocation is to respond in faith, trust and obedience to the good news that we have received in Christ and to welcome God's transforming power into our lives. Spiritual formation necessarily involves intentional action and commitment, yet we recognize that divine grace is not opposed to human effort, but rather is opposed to earning divine favor.²

Divine grace speaks not merely of a past reality by referring backward to an experience of salvation; grace also is a present reality that informs the current experience of the Christian life. God's grace has shaped us, is shaping us from day to day, and will shape us in the future. What are we being shaped into? The goal of spiritual formation is to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18).³ This also is our eschatological destiny as Christians, according to 1 John 3:2: "we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." Foster states that the "goal of the Christian life could be summarized as our being formed, conformed, and transformed into the image of Jesus Christ."⁴ Because being "conformed to the image of his Son" is the ultimate purpose of God's saving work through

¹This is a key theme in the writings of Dallas Willard. For example, see *The Great Omission* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), p. 61.

²None other than C. S. Lewis, that nonevangelical patron saint of evangelicals, concurs: "the church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose." C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins, 1952), p. 167.

³Richard J. Foster, "Becoming Like Christ," *Christianity Today*, February 5, 1996.

⁴I am indebted to my former colleagues at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto for their input into the eventual shape of my proposed definition.

the cross and resurrection, “becoming like Christ” means participating in the salvation accomplished by Jesus—knowing Christ in the “power of his resurrection” and in “the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” (Phil 3:10). Spiritual formation into Christlikeness therefore is an extension of the logic of the cross and is impossible apart from the reality of Christ’s atoning work. Being “conformed to Christ” or “becoming like Christ” involves embracing a “cruciform” way of life with a distinctive shape expressed in obedience to God, which is marked by self-sacrifice and humble service for the sake of others, a way that Jesus demonstrated during his earthly ministry and commended to all his followers (Mk 10:42-45; Jn 13:12-17; Phil 2:1-11).⁵

My proposed definition explains that becoming like Christ happens “through the work of the Holy Spirit.” It is God’s own work, through the Spirit, to bring about Christ’s character in us, and it is our calling to cooperate with God in this process as we share in the divine life given to us (2 Pet 1:4). For this reason Eugene Peterson writes: “Spiritual formation is primarily what the Spirit does, forming the resurrection life of Christ in us.”⁶ Participation in the life of Christ, by the Spirit, reproduces the character of Christ in his followers. The distinctive virtues of Christian faith are the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23).

The wisdom of the church over two millennia is that this sort of transformation of heart, mind and spirit is not something that can be pursued satisfactorily by individuals in isolation. Spiritual formation involves personal spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, confession, fasting and biblical meditation as well as corporate participation in the congregation’s shared life of worship, fellowship and teaching. The ecclesial practices of prayer and the Lord’s Supper (or Eucharist) have a special prominence among the “means of grace” that God has appointed to strengthen our faith. For this reason, my proposed definition asserts

that spiritual formation takes place “in the community of faith.” Christians belong to one another as members of Christ’s body, which becomes the communal context for mutual encouragement, mentoring and accountability in the journey toward Christlikeness. This commitment runs contrary to the highly individualistic and functionalist tendencies of contemporary North American culture.

My definition concludes with the affirmation that the necessary result of spiritual formation is active participation in serving God and sharing in God’s work in the world.⁷ The phrase, “for the sake of the world,” reminds us that personal growth or spiritual depth involves not merely loving God, but loving our neighbors as ourselves (Lk 10:27). As people who are sent out into the world as witnesses to Christ (Jn 20:21), the mark of a genuine spiritual formation is our capacity to reflect Christ as “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Mt 5:13-14). Growth into the likeness of Christ accompanies our participation in Christ’s mission to the world, in the power of the Spirit. Spiritual formation at its best involves a reciprocal dynamic between gathering and scattering, contemplation and action, silence and speech, being and doing, receiving and giving. Outward-focused spiritual disciplines such as hospitality and “works of mercy” complement inward-focused disciplines. In the words of Elizabeth O’Connor, “just as we are committed to being on an inward journey for all of time, so we are committed to being on an outward journey, so that the inner and the outer become related to one another and one has meaning for the other and helps to make the other possible.”⁸

My definition seeks to be fairly comprehensive, but above all it seeks to frame a God-centered way of speaking about spiritual formation as an alternative to ways of understanding spirituality that simply search for personal meaning or inner peace on one’s own terms. There is much truth in the observation made by Eugene Peterson: “The great weakness

⁵Cf. Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

⁶Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 237.

⁷Becoming like Christ as the purpose of God for the people of God—including becoming like Christ in his mission—was the theme of John R. W. Stott’s final sermon before his retirement from public ministry in July 2007. See <www.langhampartnership.org/2007/08/06/john-stott-address-at-keswick/>.

⁸Elizabeth O’Connor, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 28.

of North American spirituality is that it is all about us: fulfilling our potential, getting in on the blessings of God, expanding our influence, finding our gifts, getting a handle on principles by which we can get an edge on the competition. And the more there is of us, the less there is of God."⁹ Contemporary discussion of spiritual formation as well as focused efforts in various settings to nurture mature Christian faithfulness, especially among evangelicals, should be able to find "more of God" through deeper biblical, theological and historical roots.

CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL CHALLENGES

One way to frame some contemporary challenges facing evangelicals is to reflect on some chief characteristics of the evangelical movement in general. David Bebbington's oft-used quadrilateral identifies central evangelical convictions and attitudes.¹⁰ My proposal is that each of these four qualities points toward both strengths and weaknesses in the evangelical engagement with spiritual formation.

Biblicism. Evangelicals affirm the supreme authority of Scripture and generally hold the Bible in very high esteem. As John Stott says, "We evangelicals are first and foremost Bible people."¹¹ Perhaps the ecumenical charism of evangelicals is expository preaching and Bible study. A strength here is that evangelical churches and individuals are likely to be strongly interested in the biblical foundations for spiritual formation. Evangelicals typically ask, "What is the biblical basis for this contemporary emphasis on spiritual formation?" Clearly, the formational value of the standard evangelical practice of daily Bible reading is not to be underestimated nor taken for granted. A potential limitation is that typical patterns of evangelical engagement with Scripture can easily devolve into an information-oriented rationalism wherein the Bible is "word processed" in a mechanical way, rather than being ab-

⁹Peterson, *Christ Plays*, p. 335.

¹⁰David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 2-17. For a nuanced revision of Bebbington's quadrilateral, see Timothy Larsen, "Defining and Locating Evangelicalism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1-14.

¹¹John Stott, *Evangelical Truth* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 65.